



School-university partnerships foster lasting change in Mississippi

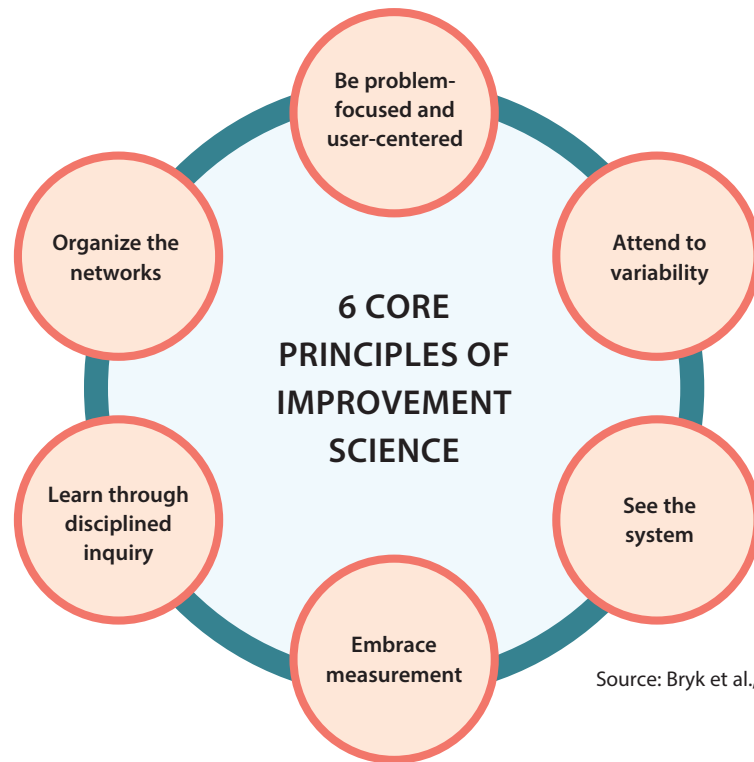
BY MANUELITO BIAG, DENISE A. SOARES, DAVID ROCK, BRADLEY ROBERSON, AND MARY BRAMLETT

When a dedicated teacher returns from a professional learning session brimming with new ideas and strategies, their enthusiasm can quickly fade if they don't have the support and resources needed to implement these ideas.

Professional learning in isolation often leads to frustration and missed opportunities. As outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) and the U.S. Department of Education's definition of high-quality professional development (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), professional learning

must be sustained over time to lead to changes in educators' practices.

Building bridges among education stakeholders, such as districts, universities, and community partners, is an important but underused strategy for creating professional learning that is both sustainable and impactful. Intentional bridge building can



Source: Bryk et al., 2015.

transform professional learning from a series of disconnected experiences into a continuous, collaborative effort supported by diverse perspectives and resources. Working together, stakeholders can fill gaps in expertise and capacity, such as personnel, time, and funding, and build a culture in which professional learning is seen as a shared responsibility.

The National Center for School-University Partnerships, headquartered at the University of Mississippi, has embraced improvement science as a core strategy in its bridge-building work. Improvement science provides a structured, evidence-based approach to solving problems of practice and achieving sustainable improvements. This article outlines how the center applies improvement science principles to build sustainable professional learning partnerships and shares examples of this work in action.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF IMPROVEMENT

The center's approach to professional learning is grounded in the six core principles of improvement, adopted from the work of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Bryk et al., 2015).

Make the work problem-specific and user-centered. Professional learning begins by anchoring efforts around specific problems of practice that educators face daily, ensuring that initiatives are relevant and context-sensitive to their needs. For example, the center collaborates with educators to identify shared challenges, such as enhancing learning outcomes among students living with disabilities, as focal points for improvement.

Variation in performance is the core problem to address. Professional learning strategies must account for local variations to be effective across

diverse settings. The center emphasizes using root cause analysis tools such as cause-and-effect diagrams to uncover why performance differs across schools or classrooms, ensuring that solutions address local conditions rather than applying one-size-fits-all fixes. By focusing on the specific needs and challenges of each context, the center creates professional learning experiences that are more likely to succeed and sustain.

See the system that produces the current outcomes. Improvement science emphasizes understanding the systems that drive current outcomes. By mapping processes and engaging stakeholders at all levels, the center ensures that professional learning initiatives address underlying issues rather than symptoms, creating pathways to long-term, systemic change.

We cannot improve at scale what

ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

The National Center for School-University Partnerships fosters a collaborative and inclusive community that empowers educators, leaders, and institutions to advance equity, access, and high-quality learning experiences for all students.

We pursue five strategic priorities: build partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure equitable education, strengthen educational improvement leadership through robust training and career development, establish collaborative scientific learning communities to address shared challenges, advance an improvement-oriented research agenda, and identify and elevate exemplary improvement models and practices in education.

Through these efforts, we aim to create lasting impact and drive continuous improvement in schools and school systems.

we cannot measure. Measurement is central to improvement. The center uses real-time data collection to track the impact of professional learning efforts and adjust strategies based on evidence. Ongoing assessment allows for adjustments to be made as needed, ensuring that professional learning remains effective and impactful.

Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. The center builds professional learning through plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles to ensure that improvements are based on evidence. PDSA cycles are a structured, iterative process for testing and refining changes. They involve planning a change, implementing it on a small scale, studying the results, and acting on what is learned to inform the next cycle. This practice fosters a culture of disciplined experimentation, where educators continuously refine their approaches.

Accelerate improvements through networked communities.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of improvement science. The center facilitates networked communities, educators and administrators can share insights, learn from each other, and scale successful practices across different contexts. This approach accelerates improvement and ensures that successful practices are shared and adopted widely.

These principles provide a framework for the center's initiatives, ensuring that professional learning is actionable, flexible, and designed for real-world impact.

PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

One example of the center's work is the partnership between the University of Mississippi and the Oxford School District in Mississippi. This collaboration exemplifies the power of bridge building in fostering sustainable professional learning.

The partnership began with a problem-specific focus: reducing

chronic absenteeism. By engaging families and seeing the system behind absenteeism, university student teachers worked with families to improve communication and engagement. This effort led to measurable declines in absenteeism rates among elementary and high school students.

Building on this success, the partnership expanded to professional learning initiatives, focused on anchoring practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. For instance, the Oxford Early Childhood Center leveraged improvement science principles to enhance reading outcomes for 4-year-old students.

The administration tested a change idea: empowering teacher assistants to provide instructional support through structured, small-group lessons. Initially implemented in two classrooms, the approach demonstrated significant improvements in reading outcomes and has since been scaled districtwide.

Breakthrough Collaborative Structure (1 Year)

Training and onboarding



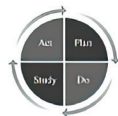
Disseminate learning (e.g., change package)



ACTION PERIOD



ACTION PERIOD



ACTION PERIOD



ACTION PERIOD

IN-PERSON CONVENING

ONLINE CONVENING

ONLINE CONVENING

ONLINE CONVENING

IN-PERSON CONVENING

This partnership highlights how collaborative networks and iterative testing foster shared ownership of professional learning, align efforts across stakeholders, and produce sustainable results.

SCALING SUCCESS THROUGH NETWORKED COMMUNITIES

The center also facilitates a collaborative learning model that brings together multiple stakeholders to tackle systemic challenges. Established by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (2003), the Breakthrough Series collaborative model applies improvement science principles through PDSA cycles, action periods, and regular coaching calls.

For example, one collaborative that focused on chronic absenteeism co-constructed a theory of improvement anchored in five drivers: creating a positive learning environment, enhancing family engagement, implementing early warning

data systems, providing targeted interventions, and strengthening community partnerships.

This theory addresses absenteeism as a systemic issue, emphasizing the principle to see the system that produces the current outcomes rather than attributing it solely to individual student behavior. Guided by these drivers, districts tested change ideas through PDSA cycles. By measuring improvement in attendance rates and refining strategies collaboratively, the districts achieved measurable success in reducing absenteeism.

A range of evidence-based actions supported each driver. These included developing chronic absenteeism protocols, using historical and current attendance data to identify trends, and emphasizing attendance incentives during holiday breaks. These actions reflect the importance of addressing variation in performance across schools and tailoring interventions to their unique contexts.

For instance, two districts tested and implemented distinct strategies, demonstrating the principle to anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. One district focused on creating chronic absenteeism teams at each school site. These teams analyzed attendance data to identify students at risk and designed targeted interventions, such as personalized outreach to families of students with six or more absences.

The district also established consistent communication channels between schools and families to proactively address barriers to attendance. By simplifying protocols to align with school-site contexts and using quarterly data collection cycles, the district ensured interventions were both manageable and effective. Their structured, data-driven approach fostered collaboration and shared routines, contributing to notable improvements in students' attendance.

Meanwhile, another district

emphasized individualized goal setting and community engagement to address absenteeism. Teachers and staff worked closely with students to set attendance goals and provided regular support through adult-student mentorship.

This district also emphasized communication with families, using proactive messaging to reinforce the importance of attendance and ensure support was available for overcoming barriers. By aligning interventions with data insights, the district was able to create targeted solutions that matched the specific needs of their students.

The collaborative efforts among these districts highlight the importance of accelerating improvements through networked communities as they shared insights and supported one another throughout the process. This mutual learning environment fostered the refinement of strategies and encouraged innovation, enabling districts to scale successful practices and achieve meaningful reductions in chronic absenteeism.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Building bridges in professional learning is about more than creating connections. It's about fostering

collaboration, aligning efforts, and creating sustainable support networks that drive meaningful improvements in education. By focusing on specific problems of practice, addressing variation in performance, and understanding the systems that produce current outcomes, we can ensure that professional learning efforts are targeted and effective.

With a commitment to measuring progress, engaging in disciplined inquiry through iterative cycles, and leveraging networked communities, the National Center for School-University Partnerships demonstrates how improvement science can transform professional learning into a powerful force for lasting change.

We invite education leaders to join us in applying these principles to build bridges within their own contexts. By identifying key stakeholders, fostering collaborative groups, and aligning professional learning efforts across systems, we can collectively enhance professional learning and improve outcomes for educators and students alike.

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