



Center for
Education Services

Successfully Tackling School Improvement:

A Practical Framework to Inspire
Continuous Improvement



About the RTI Center for Education Services

The RTI Center for Education Services partners with educators to promote thriving learning environments that facilitate success for all students. From the classroom to the boardroom, our work focuses on four areas that we believe are levers for change in education: strengthening instruction, developing leaders, improving organizational operations, and facilitating collaborative networks.

Education has a monumental and compounding impact throughout a person's life by opening doors and broadening opportunities. At the societal level, education affects the economic vitality of communities, states, and nations. We partner with educators who understand and act on the trends and practices that create possibilities for learners at all levels.

We're partnering with K-12 educators to challenge the status quo by providing job-embedded support tailored to meet the needs of these educators. We apply a passionate, professional, and no-nonsense approach to drive meaningful solutions that are both actionable and sustainable. Technical assistance is always customized to best meet the unique needs of each context.

Our staff members endeavor to turn knowledge into practice through rigorous research and hands-on implementation support. Every education project benefits from an integrated approach that offers access to the breadth of content expertise, staff experience, and research insight that differentiates us from our competitors.

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Section 1:

Defining School Improvement

Schools across America create school improvement plans to enhance the educational experience for their students. However, mandating that a plan be established does not ensure that it is created with fidelity or that it identifies the main areas needing improvement.¹ Additionally, for schools deemed low performing, the process and need for results are heightened, sometimes requiring schools to transform the learning environment for students completely in a short time. Therefore, school leaders have a daunting task of determining the main challenges to student success, devising a plan, and facilitating change to improve the learning conditions for students. Transformational school improvement is achievable, but it requires a clear plan focused on continuous improvement and sustainable change measures to ensure continuous success.

Miles et al.² define school improvement as a systematic, sustained effort to improve the internal conditions of one or more schools, including the learning environment and other relevant internal conditions. Hopkins et al.³ define school improvement as a method for bringing about educational reform that improves student outcomes while also bolstering the school's ability to handle change. Although these definitions are familiar, and educational leaders have been working on school improvement for the majority of this century, the extent to which it has improved young people's opportunities and outcomes is unclear.



Section 2:

School Improvement Strategies

Researchers have created multiple initiatives or guides to areas of change that school's should focus on for school improvement and reform. School improvement does not happen by chance but rather by making a conscious and systematic effort to foster an atmosphere that encourages taking risks and collaborative learning. Although school leaders play a critical role in establishing these conditions, school improvement is ultimately a group effort that is primarily focused on establishing a professional learning community where teachers and students grow and learn together.⁵ To make these changes, researchers have provided suggested focus areas for reform that school leaders may utilize when examining needed improvements at their schools.

Focus Areas for Reform

Table 1 lists several focus areas for school reform that can be helpful to consider. In addition to these, school leaders should address the following questions:

- How do you determine the challenge you need to focus on to improve?
- What steps do you use to address the challenge?
- How do you sustain the solution once the challenge has been addressed?⁹



Table 1. Focus Areas for Reform

SOURCE	FOCUS AREAS
<p>Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop common school norms, values, and shared beliefs. • Create a school climate of good collegial and personal relations. • Foster a sense of school belonging or connection. • Develop smaller learning communities within large school environments. • Design task and work structures to foster engagement and student autonomy. • Design authority and management structures that allow for choice and control. • Provide opportunities for all students to be recognized and rewarded. • Provide grouping arrangements that foster student interaction. • Focus evaluation practices on progress and improvement. • Manage time use to facilitate changes in the school’s culture and organization.
<p>Hopkins & Levin⁷</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum • Accountability • Governance • Market Forces • Status of Teachers
<p>The Center on School Turnaround at WestEd⁸</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Domains of Rapid Improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Turnaround Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency. ◦ Monitor short- and long-term goals. ◦ Customize and target support to meet needs. – Talent Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Recruit, develop, retain, and sustain talent. ◦ Target professional learning opportunities. ◦ Set clear performance expectations. – Instructional Transformation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Diagnose and respond to student learning needs. ◦ Provide rigorous evidence-based instruction. ◦ Remove barriers and provide opportunities. – Culture Shift <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Build a culture focused on student learning and effort. ◦ Solicit and act upon stakeholder input. ◦ Engage students and families in pursuing education goals.
<p>School Structures - RTI Education Leadership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Leadership • School Culture & Climate • Teaching & Learning • Staff & Student Agency • Home & Community Partnerships

Section 3:

Obstacles to Improvement and Mitigation Strategies

Much effort and time is involved in the improvement planning and implementation process. Why do so many plans fail to improve outcomes for students, teachers, and communities? Schools spend hours planning around goals and strategies for school improvement; however, the day-to-day operations of school life can undermine implementation of even the best plans. School improvement plans break down between planning and implementation for various reasons, from failure to engage stakeholders to initiative fatigue. Successful school improvement requires an understanding of how to mitigate common obstacles.





Obstacle 1: Lack of Systems and Processes

Schools may lack systems and processes to support implementation. The resources to build an improvement plan are plentiful, but few educators have received any formal training in developing the systems required to implement, monitor, and react to improvement plan activities.¹⁰ Systems are the embedded ways of how things work together and provide the structure for procedures to be carried out and followed through. A high-functioning educational system is built around the idea of deliberate, ongoing improvement, and it is important to emphasize the word “system.” In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear asserts that “we do not rise to the level of our goals because we fall to the level of our systems.”¹¹

All stakeholders must understand systems for improvement in order to function within the structure. Some refer to systems within education as frameworks or non-negotiables. Structures are the arranged parts of something complex. Consider the school’s master schedule as a structure where planning periods are arranged to provide common planning for professional learning communities (PLCs). This is an example of how the schedule is organized to provide opportunities for structuring time to accomplish common planning. This can also be seen as a non-negotiable within the system.





A part of the school improvement process is to identify where a school lacks systems or processes. To support the identification process, systems thinking supports school leaders by looking at how the smaller components support the greater work to ensure that systems function successfully.¹² For example, different components are involved in fostering an effective school environment. School leaders need to access the smaller components or school structures like those listed in Table 2 to identify areas that need improvement. From there, this component can be improved to support the success of the whole system.

Table 2. Effective School Structures

<p>School Leadership</p>	<p>How is systems thinking applied? (data, finance, instruction) How are school resources allocated and aligned for school improvement?</p>
<p>School Culture & Climate</p>	<p>What mechanisms are utilized to develop a culture of high expectations? What data sources are used to determine culture and climate?</p>
<p>Teaching & Learning</p>	<p>How is teaching and learning a collaborative experience?</p>
<p>Staff & Student Agency</p>	<p>What systems exist for staff and students to advocate for school improvement? How is the school building capacity for school improvement?</p>
<p>Home & Community Partnerships</p>	<p>How does the school engage the home and community to attain academic goals?</p>



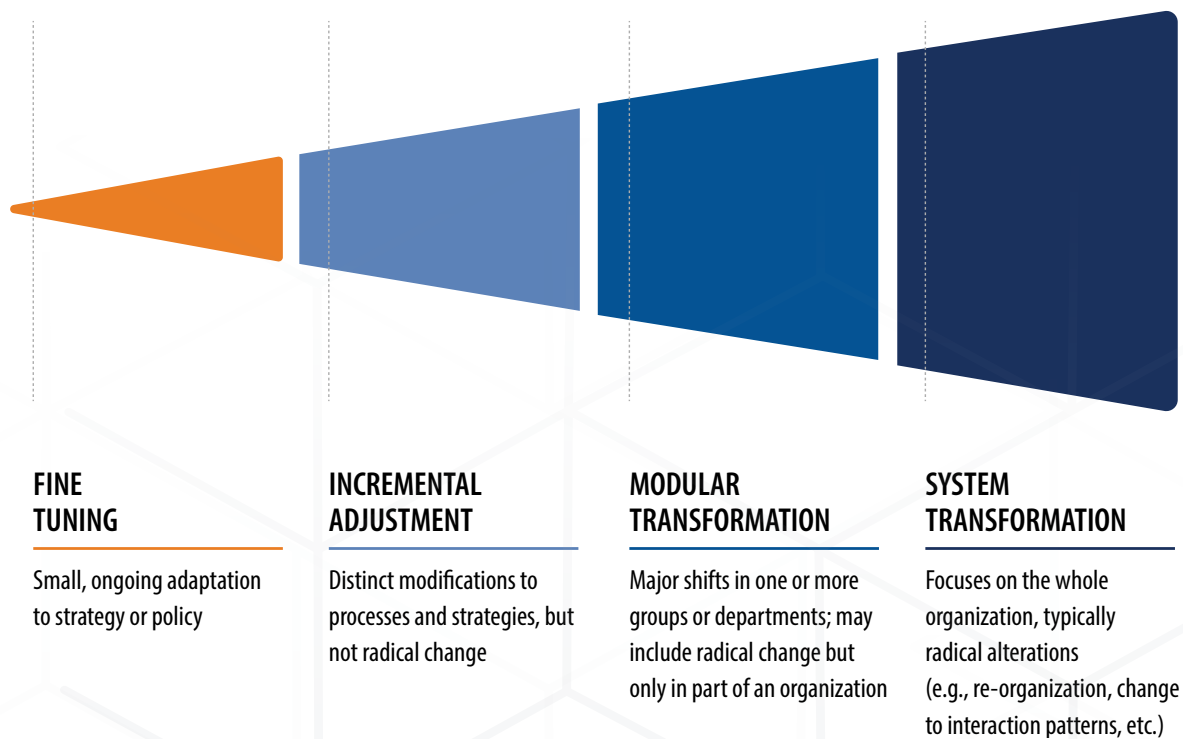
Obstacle 2: Managing for Change


Understanding change management is crucial. Many plans call for new strategies for improvement that require new adult behaviors. Understanding how to implement change to ensure success requires leaders to understand human dynamics. Change in schools is different and difficult given the dynamics of the education system. Ways to mitigate barriers associated with change include working within a teaming structure, identifying the type of change, and selecting specific change strategies aligned to the type of change.

When managing change, the school leader will need to explore a few dynamics of the change to implement improvement within the school. Determining whether the change is cultural (reinforcing trust, commitment, and capability) or structural (focused on systems, structures, and processes) can help the leader determine the appropriate strategies to get the team's buy-in with the planning and implementation process. Once the school leader knows which type of change is needed, structures can be put in place to create a foundation for change.¹³

When determining the timeline for change, it is helpful for leaders to examine the transformation that needs to take place to execute the change. Four levels of effort can determine the scale of the change: fine tuning, incremental adjustment, modular transformation, and system transformation (Figure 1).¹⁴

Figure 1. Four Levels of Effort to Determine Scale of Change





Determining the type of change necessary will give the school leader an idea when creating the plan whether it will be a short-term goal that can be achieved in months and completed internally among the leadership team or a long-term goal that will inspire large structural changes and include support from within and outside of the school. Determining the type of change will also help the team determine three key components that are a part of the planning process for change:

- 1 Determine how the change can be broken up into smaller components for teams to find incremental success.
- 2 Include professional learning in the change plan to allow teachers to implement the change with confidence.
- 3 Give teachers time to reflect on their practices connect practices to the benefits for the larger system and students.¹⁵





Obstacle 3: Alignment of Resources

When viewed as interconnected, fiscal resources, personnel, and time provide an opportunity for stronger alignment to goal success. Alignment of human resources for growing professional capacity streamlines school improvement planning and identifies time commitments for professional learning. For example, aligning a professional development calendar with strategies and actions in a school improvement plan sounds simple; however, if not intentionally mapped out and effectively communicated, this can leave staff wondering why and how this professional development will impact improvement. These opportunities have budgetary implications; whether contracting for services or providing leave time for teachers to attend professional learning sessions, these implications should always be considered and aligned to school improvement plan strategies, so they are more likely to be implemented effectively and with fidelity.

The IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University created the following list of resources schools should prioritize:

- **Personnel:** Coaches, specialists, teachers, etc.
- **Materials:** Curriculum, software, culturally relevant resources, etc.
- **Funding:** State funding, grants, school fundraisers, etc.
- **Time:** Planning, professional learning communities, training, etc.
- **Facilities:** Available classrooms, labs, etc.
- **Technical Assistance:** Instructional support, technology support, etc.
- **Training:** Professional development, workshops, etc.¹⁶

Strategically aligning resources to ensure that school improvement plans are meaningful tools to accomplish improvements is monumental and the cornerstone action for demonstrating what matters most. When all resources are aligned, improvement efforts are more likely to have sustainable and positive impacts. Intentional allocation and alignment of resources communicates a message of cohesion and commitment of resources to goal accomplishment.



Section 4:

A Framework for School Improvement

Researchers have been studying school improvement for years, devising plans for how changes need to occur. Miles, Eckholm, and Vandenburghe² identified three phases of change for school improvement: Initiation, Implementation, and Institutionalization.



Initiation

The first stage of the change process is **INITIATION**. The majority of the time, individuals facilitating and leading change pay great attention to the innovation's launch because they understand that how anything starts has an impact on how it ends. But starting an effort is just the first step. Although the first phase demands special attention, leaders simultaneously plan for all three periods. Leaders involve educators in the change-planning process by talking about how the innovation will impact both teachers and students. Leaders modify existing processes to support the innovation and specify the outcomes in terms of student success while planning an innovation.²

Implementation

The second stage of the change process is **IMPLEMENTATION**. Leaders concentrate on what is required to put the innovation into practice by planning for and supporting execution after the institutionalization vision is clear and consistent. To achieve the desired objectives, leaders must establish clear and consistent expectations for implementation with regularity, consistency, and correctness. An innovation can only be perpetuated if it has been fully adopted. Leaders keep an eye on implementation, evaluate the precision and frequency of the intervention, and offer the required assistance to improve it. Because of an overemphasis on the beginning phase and an absence of attention to implementation and institutionalization, many innovations in education fail. Whether change is institutionalized is determined by the acts of leaders.²

Institutionalization

The third stage of the change process is **INSTITUTIONALIZATION**, when an innovation becomes standard practice in terms of its frequency, consistency, accuracy, and outcomes. Members of the organization use the change at least on a routine basis and have addressed significant implementation-related problems, such as those involving resources, time, and materials.

Actions that support institutionalization include

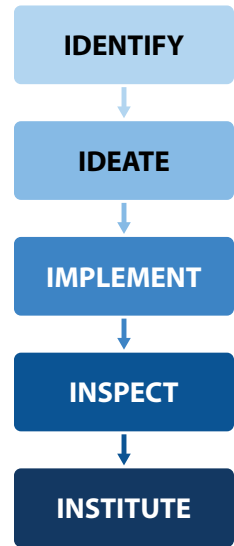
- developing constancy of purpose through maintaining commitment to implementation over time;
- creating a safe environment where assumptions may be questioned and explored, and implementation and success will not be hampered by dissonance, interruption, or dissatisfaction; and
- revealing the reality of the situation to encourage efforts for ongoing improvement.²

Section 5:

i5 School Improvement Framework

To help schools get through these three stages to improve the educational environment for students, school leaders need to facilitate change by breaking down the improvement process even more. To do this, leaders can use the i5 School Improvement Process.

RTI International's i5 School Improvement Process suggests educators consider five steps to devising and executing a plan for continuous improvement: Identify, Ideate, Implement, Inspect, and Institute. The initial steps are linear and need to be progressed through in order, but the final step requires a cycle that promotes sustainability.



Step 1: Identify

The team must identify a problem to solve by analyzing data specific to the school or an area for reform.

Making the work problem specific promotes stakeholder engagement. During the identify stage, the improvement team should consider developing a detailed diagnosis of root causes. This crucial step should not be overlooked, as it is common for educators to propose solutions without identifying the actual root cause.

Step 2: Ideate

The team must ideate or form an idea or image of what success will look like once the changes are implemented.

This part of the process provides the improvement team the opportunity to clarify a collective vision for what the changes look and feel like. Root cause analysis provides a focus for the team to begin ideating, determining not just what works, but for whom and in what context. During this stage, the team begins with the end in mind, listing what the problem will look like once it is solved. From there, the team creates action steps that will lead to the desired outcome once the plan is fully implemented. Finally, the team assesses the plan of action steps to ensure they can lead to change. To do this, teams can use 10 of White and Smith's 17 Indicators for School Improvement Assessment¹⁷:

- 1 Comprehensive**—All goals are linked to identified concerns, causes, and data.
- 2 Specific Goals**—Targeted students and subgroups, targeted standards
- 3 Timely Goals**—All goals identify a specific window of time when the assessment will be administered.
- 4 Research-Based Strategies**—All strategies/solutions address standards-based research strategies.
- 5 Master Plan Design**—Action steps consistently describe how solutions will be implemented.
- 6 Professional Development Gaps**—All program implementations are supported by specific action steps for professional development.
- 7 Parental Involvement**—Evidence of frequent parent communication regarding standards, best practices, and grading
- 8 Monitoring Plan**—Steps are monitored explicitly to describe what people are doing to assess progress toward goal attainment and how often (1 = less than monthly; 2 = monthly or more; 3 = weekly).
- 9 Evaluation Process**—measures selected allow planned outcomes to be compared with achieved outcomes; evaluation plan explicitly describes how action will be taken as a result of the evaluation plan;
- 10 Other Required Elements of a SIP**—does the SIP contain elements as required by the district and state.

If these indicators are present, the team moves to the next stage in the process. If not, the team makes the necessary modifications to their plan before implementation.

Step 3: Implement

The team must implement the action steps to inspire change.

Once the action steps are identified, implementation means putting the plan for change into action. The action steps should have leaders who will ensure that the steps are being completed and progress is being documented.

Step 4: Inspect

The team must inspect the plan because we cannot improve what we cannot measure.

If the action steps are leading in the direction of solving the problem identified, the team must stay the course. If it is not promoting positive change, the team needs to make the necessary adjustments or add needed steps. The team should also celebrate steps toward improvement. Celebrating supports team morale and adds to the momentum and progress of achieving the change.

Step 5: Institute

The team must institute what systems or structures need to be curated to ensure sustainability of the improvement. This improvement process aligns to the patterns found in similar frameworks such as the Plan-Do-Study-Act.



However, a critical missing element is to monitor the change continuously to ensure sustainability. Often, schools achieve change, only to stop the actions that led to the change a short time after it is achieved. This step required the team to create a plan for how they will sustain the change after it is achieved. The plan will need to include an assessment of the goal to see if it is still being met. If not, then the team must determine what modifications need to be made to ensure the goals fidelity. If the goal is being met, they will continue completing the steps that helped them initially achieve the goal. This monitoring process needs to happen on a scheduled basis once the problem has been solved.



Section 6:

Conclusion

Leaders must go into the change process with their eyes open, understanding the pitfalls that can be present when trying to make sustainable institutional changes. School improvement requires the appropriate identification of the challenges to student achievement, clear goals that will lead to improved student outcomes, and a method of sustainability once the desired outcome has been achieved. Selecting an improvement framework like RTI's i5 School Improvement Process is pivotal and will allow a team to work collaboratively to solve problems that are impacting the educational well-being of students. The school improvement process has a greater chance of improving student outcomes when implementing a framework that supports the alignment of resources to goals. Continuous improvement is a journey for a team; therefore, dedication to learning, growing, and changing together is crucial to promote collective accountability for the outcomes produced.



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