Learning and Practicing School Improvement:
Summary of 2018-19 Research in the CORE Districts

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Continuous improvement is being embraced in California as the path for improving student outcomes. In 2018-19, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) researchers undertook a third year of study of the *CORE Districts'* continuous improvement work. This brief summarizes the main lessons presented in four reports stemming from that research, which respectively highlight what we learned from the continuous improvement work overall, and what can be learned from exemplary practices in two districts and one school profiled in case studies. The results suggest that the field should provide better opportunities for educators to learn continuous improvement and focus more on supporting the organizational conditions (e.g., adult learning needs, leadership practices, structures and processes, and culture) that allow organizations to sustain improvement over time.

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Introduction

Continuous improvement is increasingly being embraced by state policymakers, educators, and researchers in California as the path for improving student outcomes. The California Department of Education, for example, uses the term continuous improvement 22 times in the state plan to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In addition, county offices of education and networks statewide are working to build capacity in continuous improvement with the goal of helping districts and schools change the way they operate. Despite the interest in continuous improvement, and a strong empirical foundation outside of education, many questions remain about how this approach can be leveraged in California to achieve higher levels of achievement for our state's 6.2 million students.

In 2018-19, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) researchers undertook a third year of studying the CORE Improvement Community (CIC) efforts towards continuous improvement involving the eight member districts (Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Francisco, and Santa Ana Unified School Districts). The research focused on two main questions on support for learning within the *CORE Districts* and statewide:

1. What do we know about how to support educators in learning continuous improvement?

2. What conditions support continuous improvement in districts and schools?

To answer these questions, the research team used a combination of interviews, observations of events, and analyses of artifacts, and produced four reports, which form the basis of this brief.[1] In this brief we categorize the lessons that emerged from this set of reports into four main groups, discussing those topics and listing the lessons that are described in greater detail in each of the reports.

What Do We Know About How to Support Educators in Learning Continuous Improvement?

When we describe continuous improvement, we are referring to approaches to reform that see performance gaps as being produced by systems that have flawed processes; these approaches offer methodologies for supporting continuous cycles of learning that engage frontline workers because of their expertise in the organization's central work; the approaches also spread learning throughout the organization or network.[2] Although continuous improvement is a relatively recent arrival to the education sector, its sphere of influence is large and growing, especially in California, where it is baked into the state's current approach to accountability.[3] The educational problems

people are hoping to solve with these approaches have persisted over time, resisting many prior efforts at reform. Continuous improvement, however, is not a silver bullet for solving educational problems. It requires educators to learn complex technical skills and figure out how to successfully apply them in contexts with rich interpersonal demands and complex organizational dynamics.

The lessons we learned during 2018-19 suggest caution for California, where the demand for expertise in continuous improvement has outstripped the supply of people who can teach it based on their own track records of success. As an applied set of complex technical and leadership skills, continuous improvement is hard for people to teach well, unless they have personal experience using the methodology. We found that:

- Integrating continuous improvement processes into the existing norms of schools is complex work; approaches to teaching it need to include cycles of practice and feedback to help educators apply complicated ideas in their own contexts.

- Participating in a series of workshops rarely provides people the depth of knowledge necessary to lead or teach continuous improvement.

- Improvement teams need access to content area expertise as well as continuous improvement expertise.

- A range of district resources can provide a foundation that enables schools to take up continuous improvement approaches in some depth.

Overall, our research found multiple exemplary practices that offer promise for supporting people to learn continuous improvement. It also suggests that different approaches to building improvement capability might be optimal depending on the context.

What Conditions Support Continuous Improvement in Districts and Schools?

Creating a continuous improvement district or school requires grappling with a paradox; educational organizations are trying to build improvement capacity to improve outcomes and, at the same time, they struggle to effectively use continuous improvement processes unless they have already attained a certain level of organizational function. We believe that continuous improvement processes can be used in any educational organization, but some organizations might want to use continuous improvement approaches to improve their basic functioning either prior to or concurrently with taking on other improvement projects.

We used our three in-depth case studies to home in on how two districts and one school supported continuous improvement, as well as to look across all eight districts to highlight common themes. While we saw some differences in these lessons and their implications based on whether we looked at the district versus school level, there were enough similarities that we present the lessons regardless of organizational level. We grouped the lessons learned into three categories: organizational approach, leadership, and structures and processes.

Student-Focused Organizations that Chart a Steady Course

Over the years, many authors have put forth ideas about what characterizes high-functioning educational organizations. Two that seem particularly relevant to continuous improvement are those put forth by Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Project (PELP)[4] and by Michal Fullan and Joanne Quinn,[5] both of which focus on organizational coherence. The PELP Coherence Framework shows instruction at the center of educational organizations, surrounded by concentric circles of the organization's theory of change and strategy. It highlights how different organizational elements can either support or hinder improvement. Fullan and Quinn's Coherence Framework focuses on how an organization needs to function to build "a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions individually and especially collectively." Both frameworks resonated as we studied continuous improvement efforts in the CORE districts and looked to see how organizations either enhanced or hindered improvement efforts. Our data suggest specific practices used by organizations that successfully support improvement:

- Take deliberate steps to build a culture conducive to continuous improvement.

- Build commitment and trust around a student-focused organizational vision through focusing on a small number of consistent goals, intentionally moving slowly to work towards them, and involving all adults in the system.

- Prioritize people and focus resources on finding and keeping skilled personnel, especially teachers, whose roles directly influence student outcomes.

- Continuously work to support classroom practice by clarifying instructional purpose and building coherence across systems.

- Understand that scaling good ideas is not just about spreading effective practices but also deepening understanding of implementation. Engaging in continuous improvement means grappling with ongoing dilemmas of time, resources, and focus.

These lessons collectively describe facets of how organizations support improvement.

Leadership Approaches that Foster Continuous Improvement

Central to organizational success is the role of formal leaders. A central assumption of continuous improvement, however, is that those doing the day-to-day work of the organization are uniquely positioned to understand how to improve organizational outcomes. This inherently elevates the importance of teachers' knowledge and engagement in improvement work. Because some form of teacher leadership is central for success, continuous improvement requires positional leaders to take on a role as lead learners who create safe spaces for others to learn and foster teacher ownership and agency. We found that:

- Leaders' commitment to improvement projects and their leadership approach can create a culture that nurtures continuous improvement.

- The way leaders introduce and practice continuous improvement can make it safe to publicly discuss failures and can build teacher ownership of improvement.

- Effective leaders intentionally support improved instructional practice by creating and maintaining shared learning opportunities across their organization.

- Leaders can build an improvement culture that creates a strong sense of urgency and teacher agency, which helps teachers focus on addressing systemic inequities.

Furthermore, while many entities in the state are focused on teaching approaches to continuous improvement, we see an insufficient focus on preparing both administrative and teacher leaders to take on their roles in ways that support continuous improvement.

Structures and Processes to Share Knowledge and Build Coherence

Structures and processes to share information across organizational units do not inherently create continuous improvement, but they are foundational components that can support or hinder its progress. We identified key structures and processes that helped build the organizational coherence to support continuous improvement:

- Using data to identify areas of needed reform and build data systems to provide more accurate analytic feedback on districtwide and school-specific initiatives.

- Providing teachers with differentiated support, coaching, and opportunities to be instructional leaders. A complement to learning structures and processes is the expectation that everyone is or will become an instructional leader, with deep knowledge of pedagogy and the ability to facilitate both student and adult learning.

- Developing information channels that flow top-down, bottom-up, and laterally throughout the organization to foster coherence.

While structures and processes are necessary for improvement, they are insufficient without the other features discussed above.

Conclusion

Our data suggest that to achieve success, districts and schools can no longer think of continuous improvement as simply another reform initiative to do in addition to conducting business as usual. Instead, realizing the potential of continuous improvement will require an overhaul of how California districts are managed, how district leaders work, and how districts invest in developing their staff. The four reports produced through this project discuss each of these findings in more detail and raise questions for policymakers and practitioners looking to foster continuous improvement.

Author Biographies

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Endnotes

[1] The reports can be found at:
https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/learning-and-practicing-continuous-improvement-lessons-core-districts,
https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/leadership-supports-continuous-improvement-case-ayer-elementary
https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/bridging-knowing-doing-gap-continuous-improvement-case-long-beach-unified-school-district
https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/student-centered-culture-improvement-case-garden-grove-unified-school-district

[2] Grunow, A., and Park, S. (2019, April). Towards a common vision of continuous improvement. [Presentation]. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.* Toronto, Canada.

[3] Grunow, A., Hough, H., Park, S., Willis, J., & Krausen, K. (2018). *Towards a common vision of continuous improvement for California.* Getting Down to Facts II. Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

[4] Harvard University, Public Education Leadership Project (n.d.). *Coherence Framework.* Retrieved from https://pelp.fas.harvard.edu/book/coherence-framework

[5] Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2015). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems.* Corwin Press.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

Founded in 1983, PACE

- Publishes policy briefs, research reports, and working papers that address key policy issues in California's education system.
- Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California.
- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

Related Publications

Gallagher, H. A. & Cottingham, B. W. (2019). _Learning and Practicing Continuous Improvement: Lessons from the CORE Districts._ Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Kennedy, K. & Gallagher, H. A. (2019). _Leadership that Supports Continuous Improvement: The Case of Ayer Elementary._ Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Park, V. (2019). _Bridging the Knowing-Doing Gap for Continuous Improvement: The Case of Long Beach Unified School District._ Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Cottingham, B. W., Gong, A., & Gallagher, H. A. (2019). _A Student-Centered Culture of Improvement: The Case of Garden Grove Unified School District._ Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

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