

# CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

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# INTRODUCTION

Educators, policymakers, philanthropists, and others have worked for decades to improve education by implementing new policies and practices to better serve students. But the desired improvement has been elusive – more sporadic (and anecdotal) than systemic. Success can be difficult to sustain, and what works in one school may not work on the campus down the street.

Research-based initiatives should drive what happens in classrooms and schools. However, too often we see that new education initiatives fade away or have mixed results over time. Commonly, the “what” – the new program or initiative – gets most of the attention. But “how” that change will happen gets too little focus.

## *Why? What is missing?*

Our recent research with four district partners revealed certain conditions that need to be in place for practice and policy change to occur. While our research is specific to Principal Talent Management (PTM), what we describe as the practices and policies for recruiting, supporting, and retaining effective principals, we believe these conditions may also apply to other efforts to improve schools for students and families.

## CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

### 1. Leadership Conditions

The superintendent is visibly committed to the project.

Resources (people and time) are allocated to the work.

The school board is neutral or supportive regarding the project.

### 3. Cultural Conditions

The team has a sense of humility about the need to improve and values outside expertise.

The team regularly shows an eagerness to problem solve.

The team values continuous improvement over a checklist of accomplishments.

### 2. Capacity Conditions

A key deputy with decision-making authority leads the implementation.

The implementation team is deliberately cross-functional in composition and includes the key stakeholder (principals in our project).

The roles most central to the work and proposed change are identified and elevated. (In our project, this is the principal supervisors, who not only directly support principals but also serve as critical conduits between central offices and campuses.)

### 4. Performance Conditions

The team sets and uses meaningful goals to prioritize work.

The team uses both data and calculated risk to inform strategy. They avoid getting stuck when strong data is not available.

The team uses meeting time effectively to drive action.

## WHY PRINCIPAL TALENT MANAGEMENT?

Recruiting, supporting, and retaining effective principals is key to improving schools because of the role strong principals play in school quality.<sup>1,2</sup> They lead instruction, manage teachers, welcome parents and the community to campus, and handle the overall morale, culture, and operations of the school.<sup>3,4,5,6,7</sup> Research links quality principals to improvements in areas like teacher retention and satisfaction, climate, student attendance, and student achievement.<sup>8,9,10,11,12</sup> None of this is surprising. People like to work for great bosses who help everyone get better together.

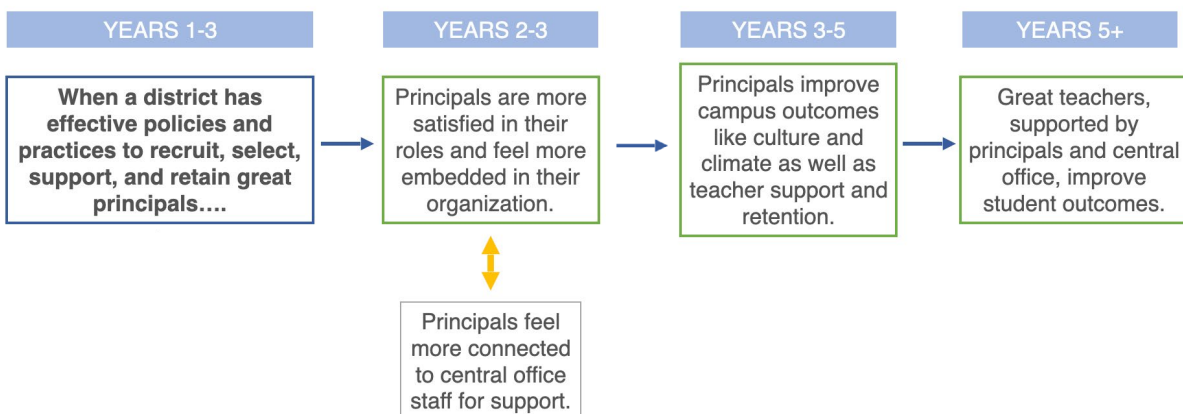
Why does PTM matter for students? Recent research highlights the importance of using PTM strategies to improve schools. Six districts that improved or implemented comprehensive PTM strategies through [The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative](#) created positive outcomes for principals, schools, and students.<sup>13</sup> For example, principals placed after the new talent management systems were established outperformed their peers in comparison schools. Also, they were more likely to remain in their jobs longer. And students in those principals' schools performed better than students in comparison schools.

## THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

To test our [PTM Framework](#), we developed the School Leadership Initiative (SLI). We created a cohort of four school districts from across the country and focused on helping them improve their PTM practices and policies. The SLI has two goals: 1) Support the cohort districts in creating a stronger pool of effective principals who will stay in their schools longer, and 2) Learn with our cohort and then share our findings with districts and educators across the country.

Our theory of change is anchored in this notion: If districts improve how they develop, support, and retain principals, students will ultimately benefit.

*Figure 1. District Cohort Theory of Change*



## Effective Implementation

As in other complex human organizations, change in school districts can be difficult.<sup>14,15</sup> We know this from research, and we know it from our own experience in the field. Change management and organizational behavior typically get substantive attention in business, yet we rarely support educators in the critical work of change (beyond offering some platitudes about teamwork and perhaps an [inspirational poster](#) in the hallway). We rarely hear talk around why new education initiatives face implementation challenges, yet we make enormous investments of resources (people, money, and time) in new ideas. This focus on implementation is even more important given the approximately \$190 billion from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund heading to states and districts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. This a staggering investment, designed to be allocated quickly. The implementation stakes are higher than ever.

We built the [Effective Implementation \(EI\) Framework](#) to help address this implementation challenge in this research project. We included content, coaching, and tools related to the EI Framework components in our program design along with PTM. Our work with the districts included equal measures of PTM and EI content and expertise throughout.

## The Cohort Districts

The four participating districts are located around the country (two in the Southwest, one in the East, and one in the West). The districts have between 60,000 and 90,000 students, and they each employ 60 to 150 principals. In all the districts, at least 40% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches, and least 10% are classified as English Language Learners (ELL). Table 1 shows the general demographics of each district. We gave the districts letter designations to protect anonymity.

*Table 1. Key District Demographics*

District	Number of Students	Free & Reduced Lunch	English Language Learners	Minority	Principal Average Tenure (years)	Current Superintendent Tenure (years)
A	80,000	50%	30%	70%	10	< 3
B	60,000	40%	10%	50%	3	< 3
C	90,000	80%	30%	90%	7	> 3
D	70,000	60%	30%	50%	5	> 3

*Note: The demographic data are rounded to protect district confidentiality. For purposes of this report, a minority student is one who is either African American/Black, Hispanic American, Asian American, or Native American.*

### Initial selection criteria:

- Superintendent and board support for the project.
- A willingness to commit a team of 10-15 district leaders and principals to travel to meetings and work on this project during school hours throughout the year.
- A “readiness” to do the work, meaning that the district hadn’t yet begun in-depth PTM work, but had started some work in at least one of PTM Framework’s component areas (i.e. a compensation study and updated leadership framework).

- No obvious signs of major dysfunction that could hinder the work, such as a school board in turmoil, a newsworthy scandal, high turnover rates, or the like.
- Districts that were urban or suburban with at least 50,000 students.

We invited 70 districts, based on recommendations from experts around the country, to apply to the cohort. The program team conducted site visits to six finalists. Four districts were ultimately invited to join the cohort. The George W. Bush Institute is not a grant-making foundation, so no grant money was provided to the participating districts. All district travel expenses, materials, and dedicated expert resources were paid for by the Bush Institute. The districts' investment was time.

### *Selected districts commitments to participate:*

- Send a team of 10-15 team members to three convenings per year for three years.
- Set implementation goals around PTM and work with a technical advisor to make progress toward those goals between convenings.
- Participate in research during the project and for at least two years afterward.
- Sign data-sharing agreements that allow the research team to collect data each year.

## The Intervention

The program design is anchored in three key elements:

- Nine convenings of all four district teams (three per year for three years) that delivered PTM and EI content, provided facilitated worktime, and featured guest experts along with the program team. See Appendix A for a sample agenda.
- Dedicated (and experienced) district advisors serving as coaches and advisors for each team.
- An annual diagnostic process to measure progress on both the PTM and EI Frameworks (codified in a detailed lengthy report for each district built from its own data). See Appendix B for a redacted sample.

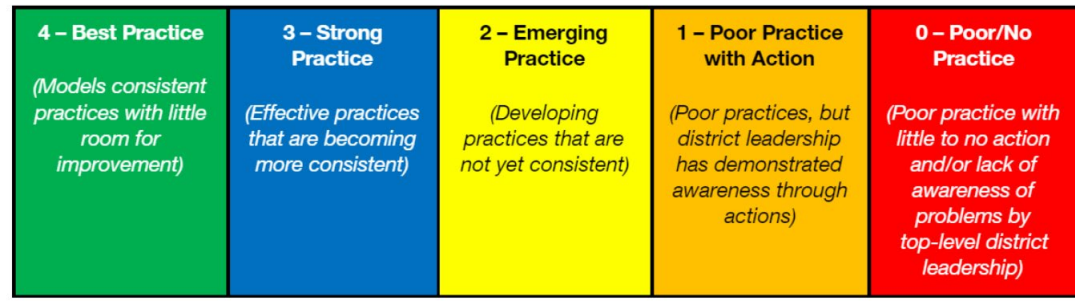
### The Diagnostic

Each fall, an evaluation team collected data using surveys, interviews, and focus groups of principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and some central office staff. The interviewers used a structured guide aligned to a closed-coding framework and tailored to each interviewee's job role. The team also collected related artifacts. Data were coded according to the PTM and EI Frameworks. This was a largely qualitative process; the survey scores were viewed descriptively (e.g., looking at means and comparing them to previous years as well as across districts).

A team of raters were trained and normed on a five-point rubric that aligned to the frameworks, where a score of zero indicated that the district had no or poor practice in a component area and a score of four meant that a district received a rating of best practice. At least three raters scored all components for each district, and scores were normed in a norming call. The districts received a detailed report that included their scores with a narrative featuring salient evidence and recommendations about how the district could improve its scores over the next year.

Figure 2 details the scoring rubric for the diagnostic process.

Figure 2. Diagnostic Scoring Rubric



We scored the districts at the component level and the indicator level. We used those scores as qualitative data to show the progress each district made annually. This allowed us to see variation in implementation over time.

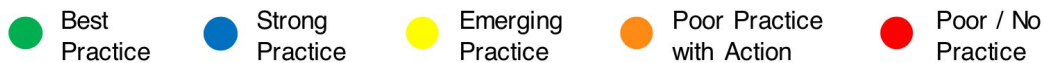
## District Progress

Not surprisingly, there was variation between the districts, which allowed us to compare district practices to identify conditions that enhanced implementation. While all four districts made progress throughout the four years in the program, Districts C and D made more progress than Districts A and B.

District A had mostly “emerging practice” ratings at the end of Year 3, and District B had only one component area in “strong practice.” Districts A and B had more scores that varied year over year, sometimes progressing one year only to fall behind again in the next. Districts C and D mostly made steady positive progress in PTM over time.

Figure 3. PTM Progress

Component \ District	Year 0 (Fall 2017)				Year 1 (Fall 2018)				Year 2 (Fall 2019)				Year 3 (Fall 2020)			
	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
1. Pipeline Development	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
2. Recruitment and Selection	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3. Professional Learning	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
4. Performance Evaluation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
5. Compensation and Incentives	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
6. Principal Supervisors	*Not measured				●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
7. Working Environment	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
8. Coherence	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●



We hypothesized that district teams that made more progress on PTM would also have higher scores on EI components taught in the program. This proved true. District D had strong practice in almost every component area of EI, while District C had strong practice in three of the five areas. Neither District A nor B had “strong practice” in any EI component area, as Figure 4 shows.

Figure 4: EI Progress

Component \ District	Year 2 (Fall 2019)				Year 3 (Fall 2020)			
	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
1. Initiate Change	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Strong Practice	Strong Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Strong Practice	Strong Practice
2. Engage Stakeholders	Poor Practice with Action	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice
3. Build Capacity	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Strong Practice	Strong Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Strong Practice	Strong Practice
4. Set Goals and Create Plan	Poor Practice with Action	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Poor Practice with Action	Emerging Practice	Strong Practice	Strong Practice
5. Execute, Reflect, and Improve	Poor Practice with Action	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Poor Practice with Action	Emerging Practice	Emerging Practice	Strong Practice

*\*The EI Framework underwent a substantial revision and validation process with experts between Years 1 and 2.*

- Best Practice
- Strong Practice
- Emerging Practice
- Poor Practice with Action
- Poor / No Practice

To systematically examine the conditions that enhanced effective implementation, we compared the practices in Districts A and B (the “emerging districts”) to practices in Districts C and D (the “strong districts”). We reviewed data from the diagnostic and relied on our own observations. We used a qualitative approach by creating a coding scheme aligned to our frameworks, coding the diagnostic and observational data and grouping findings into themes.



# THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

We found four sets of conditions that enhanced or supported implementation in the districts.

## 1. Leadership Conditions

Strong districts exhibited three leadership conditions: visible, committed leadership; resources allocated to the work; and school board support.

### *Visible, committed leadership*

In strong districts, the superintendents did the following:

- Spoke publicly about the work in ways that showed how it tied to the districts' overarching goal.
- Signaled to their leadership teams and others in the district that the work was a priority and that those doing it had full support from the superintendent's office.
- Strategically attended working meetings or program sessions to be available for feedback from the team without micromanaging the work.
- Remained informed about the work.

The teams took these actions as permission to prioritize the work. According to one interviewee in District D, "Once we learned and understood that our superintendent supported the work we were trying to do, we felt like we could dive in with both feet. I felt supported." One interviewee in District C said, "It's coming directly from our chief who reports to our superintendent. So it comes from them just sending out the message that this is what we are here for. This is our role. And then, even in principal meetings, in various principal communications, just re-emphasizing that again. That it's our job to be here to support you and help make things easier for you and you as a principal."

Superintendents in emerging districts were not as consistent in these practices. Neither spent time publicly tying the PTM work to the district goals, and they were not as up to date on the work as strong district superintendents. This resulted in a lack of vision. In District A, one interviewee said, "We need to develop a focus because it is just kind of all out there." And, similarly, a District B interviewee said, "I really don't feel like I have a solid answer for what the exact vision is for the district."

### *Resources allocated*

Strong districts consistently allocated the following resources of time, people, and money to this work:

- Funding to support additional positions, such as much-needed new principal supervisors; technology or software when needed, such as new evaluation software; and training of key personnel to build capacity.
- A willingness to move tasks and assignments from PTM team members' portfolios so that they had time to work on implementation.
- In-district coverage so that the PTM team could travel to (or participate virtually in) the program's convenings.

In strong districts, superintendents were willing to take a deep look at budgets to determine how to fund new positions or resources needed for this work. This meant making difficult choices to eliminate other budget items. One district relied on a grant to fund some of the positions specific to this work, and, when the grant ended, the superintendent found money to continue those key positions. Another worked with

community foundations that were willing to provide extra funding to support positions in the district long term.

Emerging districts also committed resources to the work, but the commitment was inconsistent. For example, one district hired additional staff, but it was not enough to cover the work. And, to find the funding for those additional positions, contractors had to be cut. Unfortunately, the work of those contractors fell to the already overworked team, so the net result was no additional capacity. Also, the PTM teams in the emerging districts had the most difficult time attending convenings. In one district, only a limited number of team members could travel for some of the convenings. In another, the team could travel but was consistently interrupted by urgent calls from the superintendent. These districts did invest in various trainings to build capacity, but they were generally one-time, one-off investments that did not translate into practice changes in the districts.

### *Board support*

In strong districts, the board was a supportive bystander of the work:

- Aware of the work from the onset and regularly briefed on progress, updates, and decisions.
- Visibly neutral or supportive of the efforts and changes.
- Enabled the superintendent and leadership to make decisions, lead the implementation, and was open to recommendations.

Contrary to our initial hypothesis, the board did not play an active role in the strong or emerging districts' implementation. However, in strong districts, the superintendent appropriately updated the board, and, in turn, the board trusted the superintendent and their team to make the right decisions at the right time. One interviewee in District D said, "The superintendent does most of the board of education interfacing and education and collaborative efforts, and I agree with that. I think that's the way it should be. There is trust there."

## **2. Capacity Conditions**

Our interview data showed there is always more work to be done in a district than talent available to get it done, but the stronger districts more effectively used the talent they had to drive implementation. The following capacity conditions enhanced their implementation: having a key deputy to lead and oversee the work, understanding and effectively utilizing the important role of the principal supervisor, and having broad representation of district stakeholders involved as the work was implemented.

### *Key deputy to lead*

In the strong districts, the first thing the superintendent did after being accepted into the cohort was to appoint a very high-level deputy to oversee the project. This deputy was responsible for the following:

- Initiating the work and setting the PTM vision (with the superintendent).
- Establishing the PTM team and ensuring the right people were engaged.
- Being a liaison between internal teams, external contacts, and leadership.
- Owning the PTM work and progress as a core responsibility of the deputy's district role.

This smoothed over implementation for a variety of reasons. First, it signaled to other staff in the district that this work was a priority of the superintendent's. Second, it helped speed the decision-making process for the PTM team. The deputy was able to make many decisions on the spot and had a direct line to the

superintendent for any decision that needed their feedback. Also, the deputy was able to step in and provide influence and cover when departments or high-level staff members were resistant to the initiative. In both strong districts, the deputy was savvy to other work happening in the district; as a result, the deputy could help the team prioritize and integrate the PTM implementation work into other areas. One interviewee in District D said, "The advantage is (the deputy's) knowledge, (their) work with other groups, and (their) work with the superintendent. (They) are able to scan for what is going to be a problem for us. (They) know better who is going to agree with what or not. I'd say this work has been effective because of (the deputy's) role in it."

This step was not taken in emerging districts. In District A, for example, a more junior person was responsible for the work. This staffer needed to manage up to more senior colleagues, which became a consistent struggle. This person also had no way to directly report to the superintendent or senior leadership. As a result, the work was often deprioritized, leaving team uncertain how to proceed and unclear about what members were and were not allowed to do.

### *The role of the principal supervisor*

Strong districts recognized early the important role of the principal supervisor. They did this in the following ways:

- Giving principal supervisors autonomy to lead the PTM work.
- Providing principal supervisors with time and space to dedicate to PTM work.
- Elevating and refining the role.
- Identifying opportunities to train and equip principal supervisors.
- Allowing the principal supervisors to serve as connectors between the implementation, the central office, and principals.

Teams that boldly embraced and redefined the principal supervisor role accelerated their implementation and moved closer to their vision. Previous research shows that implementation is aided by linking resources at the central office to the school sites.<sup>16,17</sup> Our study confirmed this and found that principal supervisors acted as the "glue" between school sites and the central office and between departments within the central office.

Interestingly, principal supervisors were mentioned in over 90% of all interviews across all districts, which was more than any other role, including the superintendent. The role is unique because the principal supervisor holds authority within the district, navigates and mediates between the central office and school sites, and navigates among departments within the central office. According to one principal supervisor, "What we experience is a lack of continuity from different departments that support the campus principal. What I have personally seen is that when you sit in this chair, there's a different view in how we run a school than what some of the departments see. There's a disconnect from the various departments to campus. There is a reality check on various policies and/or practices." Strong districts used the role of the principal supervisor to provide that "reality check" and to make sure that all understood the needs of the school sites. That helped smooth implementation of PTM policies.

In elevating this position, one district even made principal supervisors reapply for their jobs after redefining the role. This was noted positively in the interview data. One principal from District C said, "I feel that the role has been developed intentionally, and it's really made a big impact on me. They are a thought partner, a coach. I feel like it's so much more productive than it used to be." Also, throughout the principal supervisor interviews, there were no negative mentions of this process. Most described the reapplication as "rigorous." One said, "I have faith that the people selected were really talented."

In addition to significant distractions in the emerging districts, principal supervisors did not feel that they had the authority or support to really take on the PTM work. When doubts existed about the work, and whether it would last, it was difficult for team members to put their full effort into it. A principal supervisor in District B explained, "Not knowing whether this (PTM work) is going to be given a thumbs up or a thumbs down can be frustrating and often blocks our efforts."

### ***Broad representation, including principals***

Strong districts built implementation teams that had broad representation but cohesively worked together. They did this in the following ways:

- Including representation from multiple departments, such as human resources, leadership, academics, professional learning, and others.
- Leveraging principals, the beneficiary of the work, to prioritize their perspective and feedback and build buy-in.
- Working together as a team (e.g., shared work plans, assigned roles and responsibilities, open communication, inclusive meetings, etc.) across departments and PTM workstreams.

Strong districts used their PTM implementation teams effectively to increase productivity and take action. One key role on the team was that of principals. Since principals were the beneficiaries of the PTM work, they served as a sounding board and provided early feedback on ideas and plans. And they were able to help get other principals on board with ideas in some cases.

Emerging districts also had some representation on their teams, and both emerging teams included principals. However, siloed work persisted. According to an interviewee in District A, "Because we have all these silos, I wouldn't even say that all district leadership even knows what's being rolled out." And the team members struggled to understand their roles on the team, as well as how their role or department fit into the broader implementation picture. For example, one interviewee in District A said, "They don't know what part they need to be doing, and so if they don't know what they are supposed to be doing, they're also then not developing a system." Work and assigned tasks frequently fell through the cracks and got pushed off. In District B, team members changed out frequently because of turnover, which slowed the work.

## **3. Cultural Conditions**

Strong districts exhibited three cultural conditions: a sense of humility (coupled with an embrace of the district advisor), an eagerness to problem solve, and a valuation of continuous improvement.

### ***Humility***

In strong districts, evidence of humility was seen throughout the interview data. They did this in the following ways:

- Showing an awareness of the district's gaps and a willingness to learn from others (from the superintendent on down).
- Seeking and accepting input from external experts and internal stakeholders from the central office to individual classrooms.
- Admitting mistakes and spotlighting successes on the team and others.

Assistance relationships, in which a novice is paired with an expert for the purposes of learning, can support districts' culture and create "learning organizations," research shows.<sup>18</sup> In the PTM implementation, the district advisors personified the assistance relationship. The district advisors were critical thought partners for strong districts, which humbly took advantage of the advisors' expertise to grow their own capacity. For example, the superintendent in District C said, "We all come to this with our biases, and I have mine. I want an internal and external partner to help check us and hold us accountable for bad decisions. We have more improvement to go." In emerging districts, interviewees tended to list accomplishments with no awareness of gaps or areas of improvement. District advisors took more of a lead role in emerging districts, working to set up meetings and tracking actions to make sure they were completed. Strong districts, on the other hand, sought out the advice of the district advisors, but led the work themselves.

Not only did the district advisors help build the content knowledge of the project team, but they also helped the districts stay focused on the work. One project team member described how they worked with their district advisor: "Normally, when [our district advisor] comes, every subcommittee sets a deadline on what we need to do.... And she brings us all together like, 'Where are we with the work?'"

An interviewee from another district said, "This ... has been transformational for our district. We have had critical conversations that were necessary. It was great for [our district advisor] to be there [to] help navigate, and it's given us a focus that has been really good for us."

### *Eagerness to problem solve*

Strong districts showed an urgency and eagerness to address PTM components and goals, while emerging districts struggled to get beyond identifying the problem. Strong districts did this in the following ways:

- Having a clear understanding of the problem, a vision for what was possible, and clarity about why change was essential to supporting student outcomes.
- Focusing on measurable change over anecdotal or incidental success.
- Persisting through ambiguous and complex problems whose solutions have the potential for significant positive impact on students.

### *Valuation of continuous improvement*

Strong districts had a culture of deep, embedded daily improvement-focused practice. They did this in the following ways:

- Creating systems to reflect on data and progress to goals regularly and transparently.
- Replicating what is working and stopping what is not.
- Adjusting along the way by seeking out and incorporating new strategies as needed (while maintaining a focus on feasibility).

In strong districts, interviewees would ask their interviewers questions like, "Do you know anyone who does that well?" The strong district teams were always eager to learn more and get better at what they were implementing. As a matter of fact, the District C superintendent interrupted one interview to brainstorm with the interviewers, "So let's just talk that out for a minute if you have time... what if we..."

Interviews from emerging districts read differently. While frustrations emerged, these were largely from principal and aspiring principal focus groups who were on the receiving end of many PTM policies and

practices. Interview transcripts of those on the PTM team, however, mostly listed accomplishments, particularly in Year 2 and Year 3. When any frustration was brought up, it was explained away and the conversation moved on. For example, one interview transcript reads as follows:<sup>19</sup>

**District team member:** “We updated our evaluation system, so now we have multiple measures, and we have put a lot of work into that. We are revising the language. Right now, it’s kind of organic, and we’re collecting data. For professional learning, we’ve worked hard on the model that the program taught us at the convening. We tell principals all about it. And we got a grant to help train our principal supervisors.”

**Interviewer:** “And I think last year you were going to set up principal supervisor training? How did that go?”

**District team member:** “Well, we’re kind of waiting to schedule. We just want to be sure we are clear on their roles and responsibilities and things like that. Our superintendent is really supportive, we’re all just so busy trying to figure out what makes sense.... The other thing we are doing is that we’re going to start holding informational sessions for assistant principals...”

## 4. Performance Conditions

The final theme that emerged was team performance during implementation. The diagnostic scores revealed that districts which had the most PTM growth also had the most growth on EI. Strong districts exhibited three performance conditions: set and used meaningful goals to prioritize work, used data and calculated risk to inform strategy, and used meeting time effectively.

### *Set and used meaningful goals to prioritize work*

Strong districts had teams that were able to set, articulate, and stick to goals, and they had confidence that they could achieve them. They did this in the following ways:

- Established goals aligned to the vision and desired outcomes.
- Set goals that are both urgent and feasible.
- Prioritized (and reprioritized) goals by considering impact and timing.
- Communicated goals and progress, particularly quick wins, to all stakeholders.
  - Understood their current state of performance, including both gaps and areas of success as well as the root causes for the current state.
  - Used the current state assessment to guide planning and goal setting.
  - Created high-quality implementation plans informed by their data that showcases an urgency and a sense of possibility (but recognizes potential risks and includes mitigation plans).

### *Used data and calculated risk to inform strategy*

Strong districts embraced their diagnostic data as an opportunity to learn and improve. At the same time, they were not surprised by their results as they were largely aware of their own areas of success and growth, given their ongoing feedback and reflection efforts. In District D, they surveyed each department to “make action steps of what to improve, and they celebrate the good feedback that was received.”

## *Used meeting time effectively*

Strong districts utilized meeting practices that promoted quality and efficiency. They did this in the following ways:

- Meetings had clear objectives, reliable schedules, and critical participants.
- Meetings involved facilitators, timekeepers, and/or other roles.
- Meetings relied on team norms and utilized protocols and agendas.
- Meetings resulted in a list of clear actionable next steps that included specific tasks, owners, and deadlines that were followed up on at the next meeting.
- Teams had structures in place to promote frequent collaboration including document management systems, subcommittees, shared project plans, etc.

Strong districts had meetings that were productive, and they learned how to break the implementation team into subgroups to get more done. Their time together was respected and was used to make decisions and move work forward. One interviewee in District D described that their meetings do a “good job of providing enough time for discussion but also keeping us moving.”

Emerging districts struggled to use meeting time efficiently, often not following the agenda, erupting in side conversations, or disrespecting norms. One emerging district consistently overpacked its agendas, focusing on reporting instead of discussion, and often concluded meetings without accountable next steps. One interviewee in District A described the district’s meetings as “not collaborative in a way that translates into action.”

## **A Note on COVID-19**

It is important to note that COVID-19 began in Year 3 of the program. While this study was not meant to address the pandemic specifically, it was top of mind during the data analysis process, given the considerable impact on districts around the country. Early findings indicate that the pandemic may have emphasized district strengths and weaknesses that were present before it. For example, if the district had strong, visible leadership in prior years, that remained. Alternatively, if a district struggled to set and maintain goals, that was emphasized during the COVID-19 crisis. More work needs to be done to study the effects of the pandemic on implementation.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRICTS (AND THEIR PARTNERS AND FUNDERS), POLICYMAKERS, AND RESEARCHERS

We believe these four sets of conditions (leadership, capacity, cultural, and performance) are necessary when implementing a new idea, practice, policy, or initiative in school districts. And we believe that practitioners, funders, policymakers, and researchers should pay attention to the conditions when investing in or otherwise prioritizing resources for something new. Without a specific focus on implementation, we risk wasting valuable money and time, and, most critically, we will not deliver on our collective promise to help all students learn and succeed.

## Practice Implications

For districts (and those that work with them frequently), these conditions can be used as a readiness assessment ahead of launching new work. In some cases, additional work and/or capacity building is needed before beginning large-scale implementation. Or it may be best to initiate a pilot or proof of concept effort first, with guardrails in place that align to the conditions. Districts that realize that they do not meet these conditions while in the middle of a large-scale implementation effort should take time to pause, reflect, and adjust. Districts, and their partners, should focus on building effective implementation skills in their district staff.

Doesn't that delay important work? We are not suggesting that districts must plan and plan and plan before acting. We are saying that to ignore implementation will almost guarantee that the desired impact will not be achieved. That should not surprise us, and it is time for the field to acknowledge and address this reality.

Table 2 offers a way to apply these conditions in a district. The left column describes each condition in more detail. The right proposes some critical questions that district leaders, partners, and funders could ask to determine if the district is ready to launch a new initiative. If these questions can be answered, the district is probably in a good place to implement change. If not, that likely indicates where some preimplementation work will provide the biggest payoff.



**Table 2. Critical Questions for District Readiness**

Conditions	Critical Questions
<h3 style="color: #008080;">Leadership</h3>	
<p>Implementation is enhanced when the superintendent is visibly committed to the work and has the trust of a committed school board. The superintendent talks publicly about the work and ties it to district goals. Resources are allocated to the work and the superintendent stays informed about it. The superintendent has a good relationship with the school board and keeps members updated appropriately.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the superintendent committed to the work, and willing to be the public face of the work?</li> <li>• How does the work tie to existing district goals? Is the tie clear and strong?</li> <li>• Does the superintendent have a good working relationship with the board and have the autonomy to make critical resource allocation decisions?</li> <li>• What communication channels does the superintendent have to message the work internally and externally, and how frequently and effectively are they being used?</li> </ul>
<h3 style="color: #008080;">Capacity</h3>	
<p>Implementation is enhanced when districts use their talents effectively to lead and support the work being implemented. A key deputy who has a direct line to the superintendent and the authority to make decisions should be involved in the work. Principal supervisors are critical to any implementation work that impacts the schools. Broad representation from multiple departments, including principals, should be on the implementation team.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a deputy who has direct access to the superintendent and authority to make decisions available for this project?</li> <li>• Does the implementation team include members from multiple departments in the district? Consider departments that may affect or be affected by the work or departments that could become barriers to the work if not involved.</li> <li>• Are a representative number of principals available to commit time to the work? Are there ways to support them in their buildings so they can dedicate attention to the work?</li> <li>• Can principal supervisors commit to the work, and understand how their role could enhance implementation?</li> </ul>
<h3 style="color: #008080;">Culture</h3>	
<p>Implementation is enhanced when district cultures are defined by humility, innovation, and continuous improvement. This is apparent when implementation teams are aware of their gaps, willing to try new approaches, and use data and external expertise to continuously improve.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the district have a culture of humility, and are leaders and others willing to admit gaps or mistakes in the spirit of improving?</li> <li>• Does the district focus on goals and measurement? Is there a tolerance risk?</li> <li>• Is there a culture of learning in the districts?</li> </ul>
<h3 style="color: #008080;">Performance</h3>	
<p>Learning is enhanced when district teams take action and stay focused. They have clarity and confidence around the goals they set, but they are also willing and able to take calculated risks. They use data to monitor progress and improve.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the district have a culture of using data to learn about root causes and possible next steps?</li> <li>• Does the district have a track record for setting goals and taking action?</li> <li>• Does the district have a track record of utilizing effective implementation techniques?</li> <li>• Is the district leadership team willing to take calculated risks and pilot new ideas?</li> </ul>

## Policy Implications

How can policymakers support stronger implementation? Without requiring mandates, officials at the local, state, and federal level can assemble resources and convene experts to help districts as they grow their own capacity. In some cases, districts are reinventing the wheel each time they start to implement something new or get a new leader. State agencies and service centers can build their own implementation capacity as part of an effort to focus on improvement over compliance.

Also, policymakers should consider the conditions of leadership, capacity, culture, and performance when creating mandates that require considerable implementation efforts. Directives to change – or new initiatives – that come down to districts and campuses without implementation support and/or direct connection to goals bring with them a big risk of failure. The new idea or intervention will likely be a struggle if implementation support is left to chance. The pain of a failing implementation may also turn educators off the new idea or program, even if it is of high quality. In other words, unsupported implementation can sink even the strongest ideas.

Policymakers should determine which tools they can use to motivate and support districts to align with the conditions of leadership, capacity, cultural, and performance before implementation starts. That may include drafting rules around a preimplementation phase to begin before required implementation starts – and incentivizing the use of pilots or smaller-scale proof-of-concept implementations. This study reinforces the idea that we should expect variation in implementation, and policies should be designed to take that into account. Context matters, and districts could reasonably follow these conditions with some variation given their unique strengths and challenges. Measurement and evaluation strategies should be adjusted to take this into account as well, so that we better understand what works.

Finally, policymakers should determine how and when district leaders build up their effective implementation skills. While some of these competencies are taught in graduate education programs, their applications are rarely robust or practical. How might credentialing and professional learning for administrators change if candidates used implementation case studies to build capacity of system leaders? How might leadership frameworks change if implementation skill was prioritized?

## Research Implications

While the literature was helpful in framing this study, and literature on implementation in general has shifted over time to look at variation, more specificity would be helpful for practitioners. Theory is a helpful place to start – and it is critical in understanding what works, but we found that our districts needed theory plus practical concretes. That meant we sourced everything from principal supervisor job descriptions to school leadership talent pipeline maps to sample agendas for cross-functional teams to share with our teams in an informal “tool on demand” process. Team members wanted to talk through strategies on how to incorporate a recalcitrant colleague into the implementation effort. They wanted to practice how to succinctly update their superintendents or other senior leaders about both successes and challenges. Educators are clamoring for practical tools, and we, as a field, too often deliver theoretical jargon.

This case study compared four districts after they had conducted implementation work for four years. It was too soon to use traditional quantitative outcomes to evaluate the work, but following this work over the long term would be beneficial. It would show us how implementation continues to vary over time, particularly as people transition in and out and new initiatives are introduced.

Finally, further research on the specific PTM policies and their role in the overarching talent management system would be helpful in guiding districts to focus their efforts. For example, does implementing practices and policies on recruitment and selection matter more than policies on compensation and incentives?

Educating students is complex work and has very high stakes, given the importance of a quality education to a young person's future. Doing well by students should guide all adult decision-making. But while we are optimists, we are not naïve enough to believe that that applies universally. A district's context and history play a critical role in implementation. We believe that a culture missing one or more of the four conditions of leadership, capacity, culture, and performance will struggle to improve. But districts that focus on strong implementation, and the conditions that support it, are actively resisting the pull of the status quo. It is a vote by the adults to do right by the students in their charge.

# APPENDIX A. SAMPLE CONVENING AGENDA



## Virtual School Leadership Initiative Convening October 28 – 30, 2020

### **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28**

- 12:00 P.M. – 1:00 P.M. CT      **OPTIONAL Session A**  
*Via Zoom*
- 1:30 P.M. – 4:00 P.M. CT      **Welcome / Expert Consultancy Session / Wrap Up**  
*Via Zoom*

### **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2020**

- 8:30 A.M. – 9:20 A.M. CT      **Session with President and Mrs. Bush**  
*Via Zoom*
- 9:30 A.M. – 12:00 P.M. CT      **Principal Talent Management (PTM) Session**  
*Via Zoom*
- 12:15 P.M. – 1:15 P.M. CT      **Superintendent Only Session / Lunch Break**  
*Via Zoom*
- 1:30 P.M. – 4:00 P.M. CT      **Effective Implementation (EI) Session**  
*Via Zoom*

### **FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2020**

- 8:00 A.M. – 10:00 A.M. CT      **Facilitated Work Time: District A / District C**  
*Via Zoom*
- 10:00 A.M. – 10:30 A.M. CT      **Closing Session**  
*Via Zoom*
- 10:30 A.M. – 12:30 P.M. CT      **Facilitated Work Time: District B / District D**  
*Via Zoom*

## APPENDIX B. EXCERPT OF A DIAGNOSTIC REPORT

PTM Component 4: Performance Evaluation			
Year 0 Score: 1	Year 1 Score: 1	Year 2 Score: 2	Year 3 Score: 3

### Model Practice

Districts with model performance evaluation practices set clear and transparent standards and competencies against which school leadership performance is assessed. These standards are tightly and clearly aligned with research (see coherence indicators) as well as with other components of PTM. There is a common understanding of what standards look like in practice, such that all principal supervisors and principals can easily understand and agree on what constitutes proficient practice for each competency (i.e., there is strong inter-rater reliability). Evaluations include multiple measures that are valid, reliable, and respected by principals. Districts with model evaluation practices have well-trained assessors (i.e., principal supervisors) who conduct their assessment via an iterative and transparent process. Their process is perceived by principals as appropriate and useful. Districts with model practices utilize the results of performance evaluations to drive the professional learning support they provide to principals.

### Current Practice and Recommendations

Based on diagnostic data collected over the last year, we assigned District D an overall rating of 3 (Strong Practice) in the area of principal performance evaluation. This is an active focus area for the district. The team has developed a School Leadership Framework and begun work to align the principal evaluation system to it. Principal supervisors have been more intentional about goal setting (tied to the evaluation) with principals and are referring to these goals during visits throughout the year.

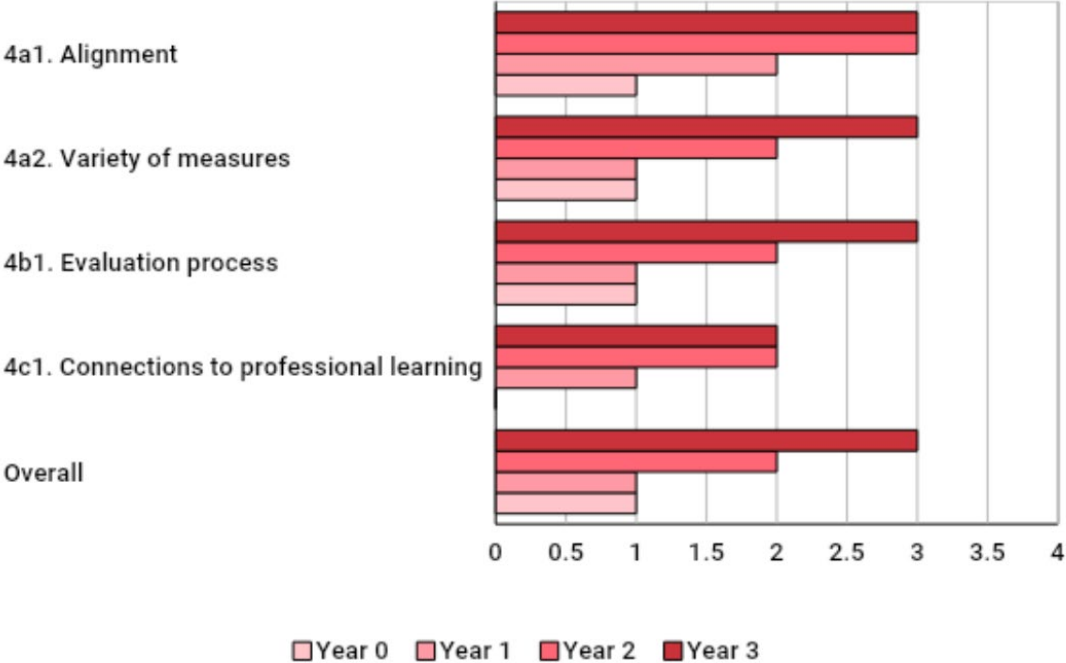
The district has also adopted a new evaluation tool to simplify the previous process that involved two tools. Measures for the evaluation include supervisor observations, artifacts, and a single measure of student achievement, but the team has worked to improve lines of evidence for each standard. Supervisors do some norming and calibration, and all supervisors had their principals do a self evaluation so that principals better understood the tool. Evaluation is not yet tightly tied to professional learning.

To further strengthen performance evaluation in District D, we recommend that the district do the following:

1. Continue the strong focus on the evaluation system, especially once crisis planning for the pandemic lessens.
2. Establish a process for regular calibration among the principal supervisors.
3. Consider additional measures to include in the principal performance evaluation, such as climate, student engagement, and student academic growth metrics that are consistent across principals.
4. Similar to the recommendation in the “Professional Learning” section above, the district should work to closely tie performance evaluation data with the types of professional learning being offered (both group-based and individualized) to principals.

The chart below illustrates the district’s current performance across key aspects of performance evaluation.

Figure 5. Performance Evaluation Indicator Scores by Year



Below is an example of an indicator of PTM Component 4: Performance Evaluation.

4b. Evaluation process				
4b1. Evaluation process		(Year 0 Score: 1) (Year 1 Score: 1) (Year 2 Score: 2)		
4 – Best Practice	3 – Strong Practice	2 – Emerging Practice	1 – Poor Practice with Action	0 – Poor/No Practice
<i>Evaluation is regular, iterative, and transparent. Evaluation is conducted by supervisors who are well trained and normed. The cadence and results are reportedly appropriate and useful.</i>	<i>Evaluation is regular, iterative, transparent, and conducted by supervisors who are trained and normed.</i>	<i>Evaluation occurs somewhat iteratively and according to a somewhat transparent plan. Supervisors have some training on the rubric.</i>	<i>Evaluation is not iterative or transparent. Supervisors have little or no training on the rubric.</i>	<i>Poor practice with little to no action and/or lack of awareness of problems by top-level district leadership.</i>
<p><b>Relevant Evidence:</b></p> <p><b>Score change from last year.</b> District leaders have taken strong steps in improving the principal evaluation process. Eighty-one percent of principals agree that the principal evaluation process is useful to principals (significantly higher than last year's 63%). Ninety-one percent of principals agree that the process is transparent and fair. They are both important improvements over time. Like last year, there is a well-defined performance evaluation process, and principal supervisors have worked to increase the number of meetings about the evaluation and to make them more authentic. Across all interviewees, there are almost all positive things to say. Principals, principal supervisors, and others understand and can describe the process consistently. All mention monthly meetings that are tied to the principal standards. While much of the district meetings (in fall 2020) were taken up with crisis planning related to COVID-19, there was still a strong effort to keep at least some of the monthly meeting time focused on improvement. Principal supervisors have done some norming so there is more reliability across the ratings; some admit more could be done here. As stated above, the more experienced and/or capable principals may not be getting as much out of the process as others, but they still find it useful.</p> <p>To improve this practice, more work needs to be done to keep up the momentum so that principals start to value the efforts that are being made, especially during the pandemic. In addition, more norming should be done to ensure that all principals are experiencing the same process. Finally, be sure that principal supervisors are able and willing to give direct, critical feedback for improvement, particularly to higher performing principals, where feedback may be more nuanced.</p>				

## EI Component 5: Execute, Reflect, and Improve

Year 0 Score: N/A

Year 1 Score: N/A

Year 2 Score: 2

Year 3 Score: 3

### Model Practice

Leaders avoid planning paralysis and instead execute high-quality implementation plans with urgency and a sense of possibility. They have a bias to action, but they value time to pause, reflect, and adjust.

Quick wins are achieved when possible to help build momentum. Teams achieve their goals on time – or adjust their goals with evidence when warranted. Teams have a sense of accountability and expect consequences if goals are unmet or changes are unexplained.

Leaders have systems in place to measure progress by collecting data and checking in with those closest to the implementation. District leaders consistently use progress monitoring to define and analyze both bright spots and issue areas. Leaders identify and share learnings about what is working – or not – with stakeholders.

District leaders use their reflection process to identify high-return improvements that make sense to implement in their context. They also stop doing what is not working. District leaders adjust their implementation plan when new information becomes available. Ongoing cycles of continuous improvement become deeply ingrained in the district. Stakeholders expect – and rely on – this methodology to guide their work.

### Current Practice and Recommendations

Based on diagnostic data collected over the last year, we assigned District D an overall rating of 3 (Strong Practice) in the area of executing, reflecting, and improving. A majority of the district cohort team reports a sense of urgency when implementing initiatives, and, by and large, team members are motivated to take action. Departmental effectiveness surveys have been a powerful tool that the district has developed, allowing leaders to reflect and learn. The next step will be to take identified improvement goals and turn them into strategies to achieve these. Most stakeholders, principals, APs, and district leaders report that the district focuses on quick wins to build momentum. A large majority of the district cohort team reports achieving their goals, which builds on already strong perceptions over the past two years. In addition, the district cohort team adjusts the implementation plan as needed. Lastly, more district leaders and principals continue to perceive institutionalization of practices and policies year over year, and there are broad perceptions that the PTM work will continue to be prioritized and improved.

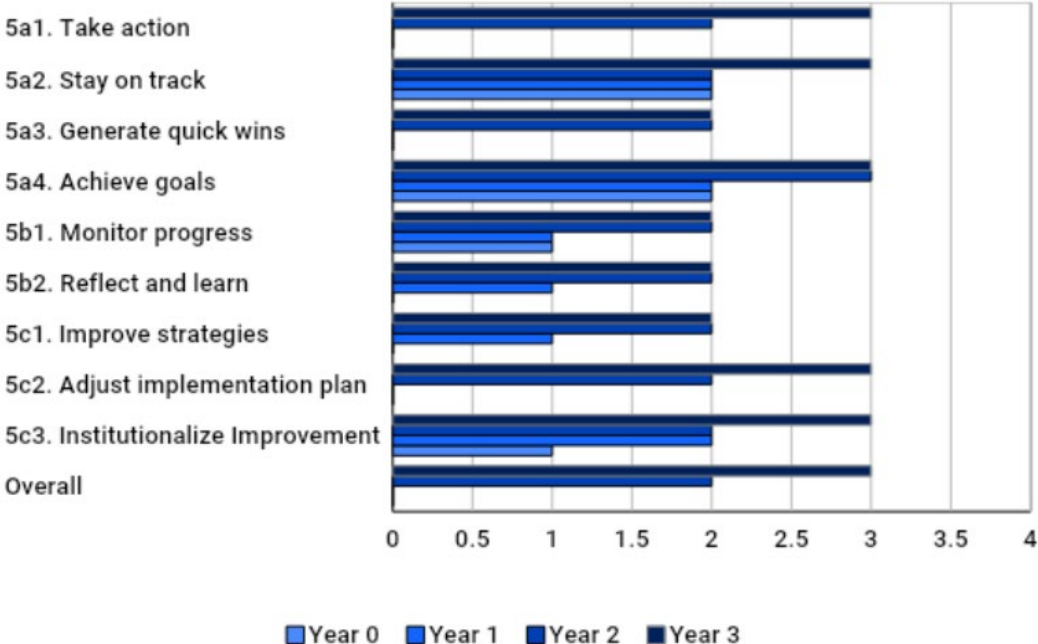
To further strengthen this component, we recommend that the district do the following:

1. Build on and continue to iterate the departmental feedback surveys. Tie the learnings and identification of improvement goals to improvement strategies. Ensure that this progress monitoring, reflection and learning, and improvement cycle is clearly and consistently communicated to stakeholders.
2. Incorporate onboarding of new stakeholders, particularly district leaders who may be new to the district or new to the PTM work, into implementation planning.



The chart below illustrates the district’s current performance across key aspects of continuously improving.

Figure 6. Execute, Reflect, and Improve Indicator Scores by Year



Below is an example of an indicator of EI Component 5: Execute, Reflect, and Improve.

<b>5a. Achieve goals</b>				
<b>5a1. Take action</b>				
<i>(Year 0 Score: N/A) (Year 1 Score: N/A) (Year 2 Score: 2)</i>				
<b>4 – Best Practice</b>	<b>3 – Strong Practice</b>	<b>2 – Emerging Practice</b>	<b>1 – Poor Practice with Action</b>	<b>0 – Poor/No Practice</b>
<i>District leaders avoid planning paralysis and execute on high-quality implementation plans with urgency and a sense of possibility. They take action but pause when they feel reflection, revision, or correction is/are necessary.</i>	<i>District leaders often avoid planning paralysis. They typically execute on high-quality implementation plans. They take action but may not always pause when they feel reflection, revision, or correction is/are necessary.</i>	<i>District leaders sometimes balance planning and execution. They may not typically pause their work to reflect on actual versus desired progress or impact.</i>	<i>District leaders are often stuck in planning paralysis and rarely execute on high-quality implementation plans and reflect when necessary.</i>	<i>Poor practice with little to no action and/or lack of awareness of problems by top-level district leadership.</i>
<p><b>Relevant Evidence:</b>  <b>Score change from last year.</b> All of the district cohort team members agree that district leaders have a sense of urgency, as well as possibility, when implementing initiatives, which is higher than the district average of 84% and higher than the 83% reported a year ago. Furthermore, 89% of the district cohort team agree that district leaders effectively reflect, revise, and correct when implementing initiatives, which is above the district average of 83% and well above the 50% reported a year ago. It is exciting to witness these large year-over-year increases; moreover, the cohort team is increasingly relying on data to drive planning and implementation. The team is developing feedback surveys for each district department whereby the data is shared with district leaders, and "then they make action steps of what to improve, and they celebrate the good feedback that was received."</p> <p>To improve this practice, the district should continue to leverage its implementation plan while formalizing a reflection process for the data being collected from the department feedback surveys. Since the district cohort team is strong in its execution of the plan, one way to effectively prioritize reflection may be to incorporate reflection activities into the plan itself. Additionally, the district is at a critical phase to set bigger goals and take faster steps. The district should carefully utilize backward mapping to plan for and execute these goals with urgency.</p>				

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