

# Collaborative Continuous Improvement Practices

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## Abstract

Research about organizational improvement has come from several disciplines—business management, organizational sociology, communications, and education. Across these fields, much of the research involves case studies of effective organizations (e.g., Collins, 2001; Johnson, 1996). Review of these case studies suggests several commonalities among organizations that have been effective at making systemic improvement through the collaborative continuous improvement practices that engage organizations and other stakeholders. Among these common practices are (a) cultivating a shared vision, (b) focusing on agreed upon set of goals, (c) using evidence-based theory to practice, (d) developing and maintaining alliances, (e) fostering the on-going use of data, and (f) deploying a strategy for scaling-up the work. Because of the supposed benefits of collaborative improvement, state education agencies and other funders encourage and incentivize these types of initiatives (Blanton & Pugach, 2007; Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2014; Fixsen, et al., (2013)).

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**Keywords:** Continuous improvement; collaborative practices; large-scale educational reforms.

## Collaborative continuous improvement practices

The complexities of providing quality education for school age children can best be realized through collaboration between practitioners. This same ideology has infiltrated Education Preparation Programs (EPP) encouraging the emphasis on collaborative methodologies of program design, development, implementation, and evaluation. An added advantage to collaborative practices stems from statewide support for such endeavors. This context presents a huge challenge for many EPP trying to refocus their efforts for Preschool- Graduate (P-20) collaboration emphasizing core values held by both Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) and their Preschool to grade 12 (P-12) partners. Such collaborative efforts need to be sustained. The push for educators to collaborate at all levels of education preschool to undergraduate levels (P-20) has created effective communication pathways for many institutions at various geographic locations.

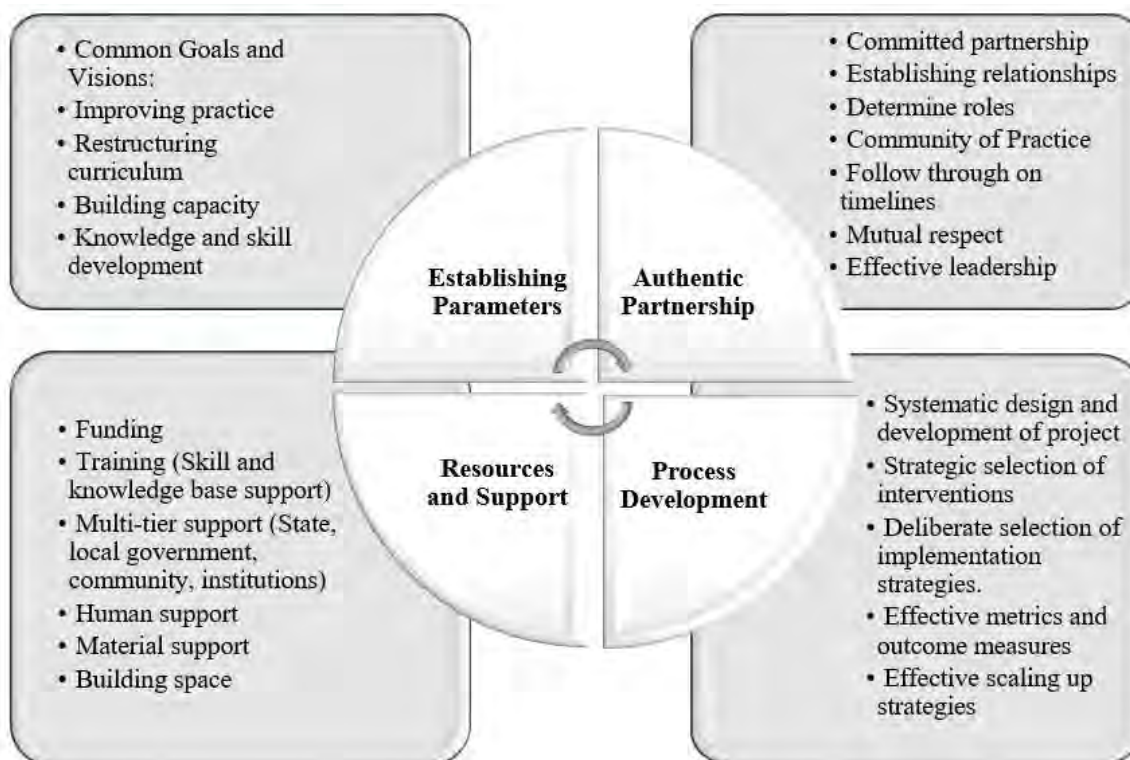
Collaborative Continuous Improvement Practices (CCIP) build on models similar to other large-scale improvement practices that prioritize implementation of educational reforms on a large scale.

In this paper, I describe frameworks for large-scale collaborative models, as well as the key elements of collaborative practices between IHEs and stakeholders from P-12 schools, state support teams, and various state departments. In this paper I also describes the conditions that motivate various institutions to develop effective partnership with stakeholders at their local schools. I delve into describing effective collaborative processes, including team-based approaches for implementing educational reforms. Finally, I highlight recommendations for future research in this area.

## Collaborative initiatives

Collaborative initiatives are evident and considered effective in many states (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; McNulty & Besser, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Wahlstrom, et al., 2010; Wahlstrom, & Louis, 2008; Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2008; Schmoker, 2006; Davis, 2008; Gallimore, et al., 2009; Seashore, et al., 2010). Collaborative initiatives are more effective than single unit initiatives because of the wealth of knowledge and skills, shared resources, opportunities for large scale research and impact assessments. Many state departments seem to be encouraging initiatives and projects that involve partners working together for regional and or state benefits (See the works of CEEDAR). In my work experiences both in Ohio and Texas, I have had the pleasure of experiencing such collaborative initiative, both at a state level (Ohio) and at a systems level (Texas).

There are common characteristics that can be found in most collaborative initiative. There is a sense of having a common goal or vision that will need to be advanced. The stakeholders seem to be authentic given that they have a shared vested interest in the project. Most large-scale collaborative initiatives have a funding source for the project. These could be state funded or federally funded. The outcomes of the projects aimed to be scaled up especially if they are considered initial pilots or models for other institutions (IHEs, schools, or state department). Implementation is expected to be large scale. Figure 1 is a model for most large-scale collaborative initiatives. The figure describes four essential components of a large-scale collaborative model including specific actions or activities that occur at each level.



**Figure 1:** Collaborative Continuous Improvement Practices Framework for Large-scale Collaborative Models: Essential features of a large-scale collaborative model.

## Comprehensive school reform

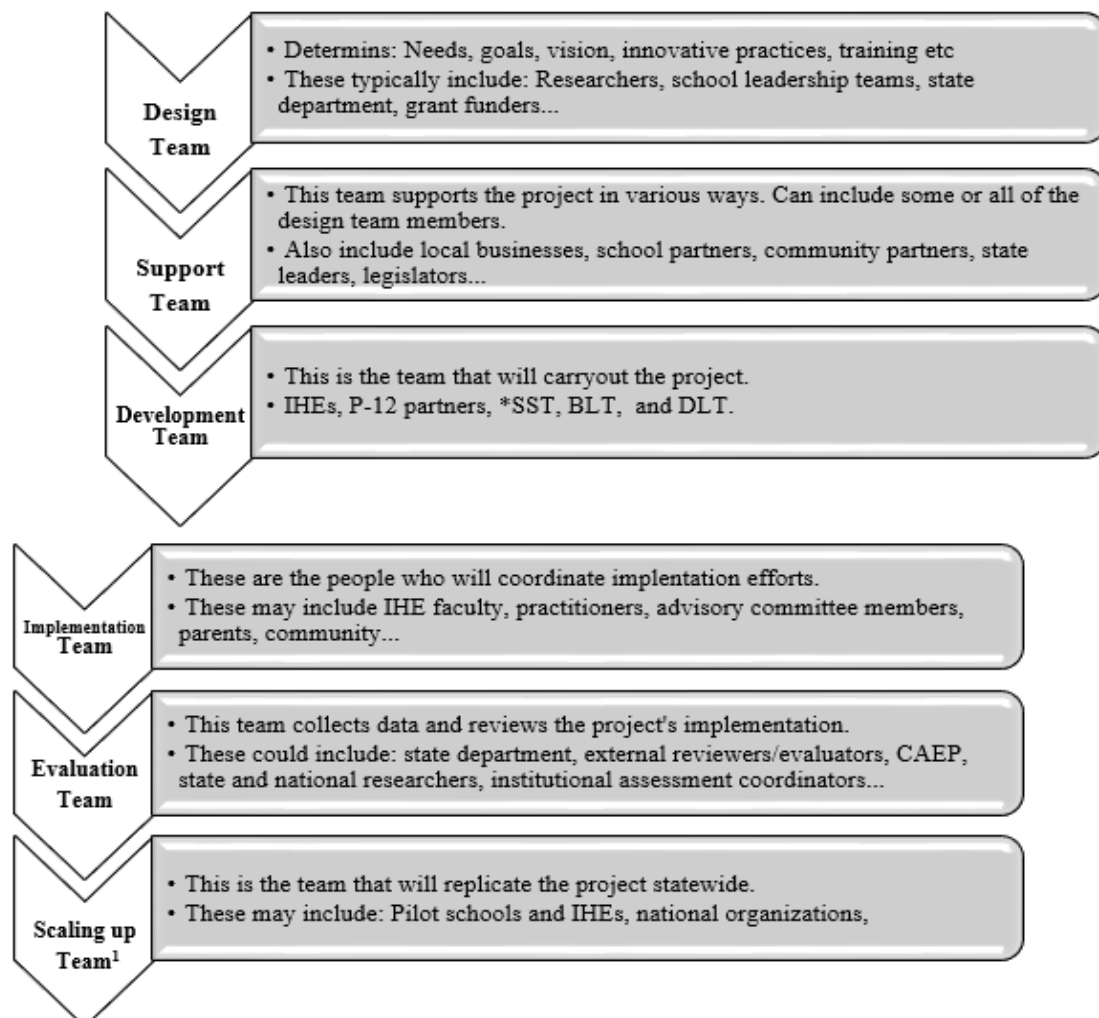
Large scale educational reform initiatives are developed to facilitate the implementation of reforms that have been identified as beneficial to education as a whole and result in positive student outcome. Frameworks for large-scale collaborative models, for example, Comprehensive school reform (CSR), are among the waves of improvement efforts that radiated from the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, a landmark indictment of U.S. public schools (Ochieng-Sande, 2013; Staresina, 2004). The basic principle of CSR is that instead of a fragmented approach to addressing achievement issues, schools must overhaul their systems from top to bottom (Staresina, 2004). CSR improvements encompassed everything from curriculum to school management and their implementation is large-scale (Vernez, et al., 2006). Some of the most recent educational reforms have stemmed out of the No Child Left Behind reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act. These reforms include Race to the Top, Closing the Achievement gap, and Standards and Accountability.

Other large-scale models can be seen in initiatives such as response to intervention initiatives (RtI), and positive behavior and intervention support models (PBIS) school wide reform initiatives ((Horner et al., 2009; Hughes, & Dexter, 2011; McIntosh, Filter, Bennett, Ryan, & Sugai, 2010; Ochieng-Sande, 2013; Sugai, Horner, & McIntosh, 2008). Every stage of the design process involves a group of stakeholders who will ensure the educational reform, including each design phase is

implemented with fidelity. It is essential that members of the design team have efficient means of communication, and the necessary resources they need to see the reform effort through to its inception. Faithfully implementing a CSR model according to the developer's design is challenging (Vernez, et al., 2006). It often requires educators throughout the school to rethink their practices, actively change many of them, and sustain the changes over time, a process that requires leadership, know-how, teacher buy-in, additional resources, time for teachers set aside from other school duties, persistence, and compatibility with state and district standards and policies (Vernez, et al., 2006).

## Team-based approaches

State based initiatives are encouraged to use a team-based approach for project implementation and practitioner support. This approach supports the creation of several tiers of leaders from the state department down to the school level. Using this team approach, many of the state-wide educational reforms are designed and implemented by these teams. A team approach, which is a collaborative approach, is effective because projects get done faster, and has a lot more buy-in than national or state designed projects, mandates, or educational reforms (Ochieng-Sande, 2013). Figure 2 is an example of the team-based approach; a conceptual model that focuses on teaming as an effective method for project development and implementation.



**Figure 2:** Systematic Collaborative Reform Process: CCIPs use this team-based approach to design and implement educational initiatives and reforms.

\*SST: State Support Team, BLT: Building Level Team, DLT: District Level Team

<sup>1</sup> Scaling up can be defined as the process by which researchers or educators initially implement interventions on a small scale, validate them, and then implement them more widely in real-world conditions (Odom, 2009).

In is important to note that Collaborative Continuous Improvement Practices (CCIP) build on models similar to these large-scale initiatives that prioritize implementation of educational reforms on a large scale, but also draws from prior and more recent innovative theories and frameworks that emphasize partnership and group creativity.

## Conceptual framework

CCIP is founded on specific theories and frameworks. In addition to building on the CSRs models, CCIP framework is grounded on the convergence of the theory of change (ToC), improvement and implementation science (LeMahieu, Edwards, & Gomez, 2015; Hannan, Russell, & Takahashi 2015), and investment theory of creativity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991, 1995).

ToC which is generally used in many funded projects to map out a link between the project developer's initiative and desirable outcomes. The initiative usually includes the available resources, activities, and products with long term and short-term goals described. Systems that use ToC begin by identifying the desired long-term and short-term goals including some basic assumptions, and then work their way backward from these to identify all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place for the goals to be achieved. This is done by not only leveraging partnership between educator preparation programs and P-12 school partners, but including all stakeholders including parents, state departments and regional education agencies.

Investment theory of creativity is a confluence theory according to which creative individuals are described as those who are willing and able to “buy low and sell high” in the realm of ideas (Sternberg, 2006). According to the investment theory of creativity, there are six resources for creativity: intelligence, knowledge, intellectual styles, personality, motivation, and environment (Zhang, & Sternberg, 2011). The investment theory of creativity in this case is looked at in the context of the collective or the collaborative. The CCIP postulates that these six resources for creativity can be realized as a collective to rapid improvements in the field of education.

Implementation science uses a research approach to implement what is proposed as effective into routine practice and or policy while evaluating its effectiveness and planning a scaled-up implementation of the initiative (LeMahieu, Edwards, & Gomez, 2015). Evaluation is done throughout the process from the development stage all through to the implementation stage. A sister approach is Improvement science (LeMahieu, Edwards, & Gomez, 2015). which is used to accelerate how a field advances by using a disciplined inquiry to drive improvement. It is a methodology for using disciplined inquiry to solve a specific problem of practice by deploying rapid tests of change to guide the development, revision and continued fine-tuning of new tools, processes, work roles and relationships (*Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teachers*). Along the same lines, Improvement science is explicitly designed to accelerate learning-by-doing. It's a more user-centered and problem-centered approach to improving teaching and learning. It offers a framework for data-driven explorations of practice while integrating change into complex systems (Hannan, Russell, & Takahashi 2015).

Both are a contrast to the pilot approach that was used in the CSR models, where an initiative must be seen to be effective before large-scale implementation. Since improvement research is an iterative process often extending over considerable periods of time, it is also referred to as “**continuous improvement**”. The role and responsibilities of the stakeholders shift to being more of an innovator, designer, researcher, and so on as the team collectively generate improvements in practice.

## Ohio's Model for Effective Inclusive Practices

There are several key ingredients that make for good collaboration. In this instance, collaboration will be seen at in the context of statewide partnership and alliances for capacity building, effective teacher preparation, and overall student improvement. I highlight the following

concepts as essential elements necessary for statewide collaboration. In understanding the concept of CCIP, The Deans Compact is showcased as the exemplar in the Ohio's Model for Effective Inclusive Practices (OMEIP) model.

## **1. Establishing Parameters**

### ***Documentation of Shared Values:***

The excellence of The Deans Compact rests in part in the shared values of its members and partners. The shared values are evident in partner selection, curricular development, research endeavors, and the greater good of training high quality teachers. It is also crucial to understand the importance of identifying, collecting, analyzing, and effectively using relevant data to identify greatest problems to be addressed (OLAC, 2013). Many of the IHE have integrated evidence-based practices (EBP), highly effective practices (HEP) and high leverage practices (HLP) (CEC 2013; Hardman, 2009) within university courses. The purpose for this kind of integration is so that all the EPPs statewide can develop and implement superior quality program.

The Compact serves as an advisory group to state leaders from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) (Office for Exceptional Children) and the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) ([ohiodenscompact.org](http://ohiodenscompact.org)). A shared mission of the Deans Compact, ODE and ODHE is to restructure and revamp teacher preparation and personnel development in Ohio ([ohiodenscompact.org](http://ohiodenscompact.org)). An articulated common objective helps stakeholders identify fundamental targets and the process of realizing those targets.

### ***Development of philosophical and operational interdepartmental and inter-institutional goals:***

A necessary ingredient for any collaborative effort is having a common goal or set of goals. Departments within IHEs tend to work independent of each other. With the work of The Deans Compact, departments are forced to work together for the benefit of their students. These departments could be at the school level, at the university level, or at the state level. The ultimate goal is for school age students to receive the best possible educational experience that will guarantee their success at their individual potential. Though philosophical and pedagogical approaches may differ, operationalizing a single overarching philosophy, that is mutually agreed upon is essential to bridging the theoretical divide between departments. It is essential that when faculty work together they are integrating content with meaningful experiences, essential life skills, appropriate dispositions, and professional code of ethics.

Similarly, general education teachers and special education teachers are encouraged to partner and work together to benefit all students. It is essential that both teachers are accorded time to consult and collaborate (Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2002).

### ***Development of effective collaborative instructional practices***

Course articulation agreements have existed in Ohio for years.

These have ensured seamless transitions between all public and private IHEs. One example is the *Transfer Articulation Agreements (TAGs)* courses whose learning outcomes are collectively developed for key content educational courses. Because of the binding nature of these TAGs, students are able to transfer course credit from one two-year or four-year institution to another. More importantly, institutions have been able to give credit for courses completed at other institutions without having to dig for evidence that the course is as rigorous as it should be. The benefits of developing these TAGs have been the collaboration between several IHEs in developing common educational learning outcomes (ELOs) through a shared set of goals and expectations.

Similarly, the Deans Compact have encouraged the development of dual license programs that focus on core standards (CAEP standards) without making the programs too large to be completed in four years. This requires major restructuring of programs and collaborative efforts to see it through. Key components in the restructured programs must address innovative inclusive practices that meet the needs of marginalized school age students.

## **2. Authentic Partnership**

### ***Formation of Academic Alliances:***

The formation of an academic alliance means faculty from colleges/universities and faculty from schools who teach the same academic disciplines collaborating to identify critical subject-matter knowledge, core concepts, and pedagogical strategies that promote student learning in their specific subject area. Academic alliances can go beyond classroom- university alliances to cross department alliances, regional alliances and state alliances. In this same token The Deans Compact has created opportunities for IHEs across the state to work collaboratively to develop high quality EPP. In the same token, faculty have worked across programs to develop robust dual license programs that attract more future teachers. Similarly, stronger alliances between university faculty and P-12 partners have resulted in creation of rich clinical experiences for teacher candidates through Year Long Clinical Models in Southeast Ohio, Professional Development Schools, and Co-Teaching experience developed and implemented through collaborative academic alliances. Through the work of the Deans Compact, many IHEs and their partners have focused on the critical need for immersive and extensive fieldworks as a measure of quality in teacher preparation.

Beyond the IHEs and school/community partners, the Deans Compact has partnered with CEEDAR to share resources and funds of knowledge on implementing inclusive practices.

### ***Emphasis on building capacities through regular meetings and periodic consultation:***

A product of collaboration through the Deans Compact has been the increase in capacity building between schools and IHEs. The Deans compact uses these meetings and professional development for their partners, for dissemination of information, for collaboration on state specific needs, and for updates on development and implementation of innovative practices. All stakeholders get to hear about policy changes, accountability requirements, innovative practices for schools, IHEs and statewide implementations, state department requirements/update, and various professional organization presentations. The Deans Compact has an annual conference and quarterly meetings. Periodic collaboration is done through telephone collaboration to facilitate sharing of updates, discussion on ongoing projects, and planning for upcoming meetings.

## **3. Resources and Support**

### ***Robust membership and representation***

Effective collaborative initiatives need to ensure their constituents are well represented to ensure needs are addressed. The Deans Compact's membership consists of deans and heads of department, faculty from various educational departments, state department of education representatives, regional educational representatives, superintendents, principals, professional association representatives, teachers, and community representatives. As are evident multiple constituencies are consulted to gain support for much needed improvements. By acquiring support from different constituents, the work of the Deans Compact becomes meaningful, relevant and authentic to all stakeholders who work with children, especially those who aim to improve the quality of education for exceptional children.

### ***Emphasis on Partnership Grant Programs:***

Through the Ohio Deans Compact on Exceptional Children, collaboration has been encouraged through partnership grants. These partnership grants are written collaboratively by IHE partnering with other IHE, IHE partnering with PK-12 schools/districts, or multiple IHEs partnering with Multiple PK-12 partners, their regional support teams and other agencies within the state. At the center of all the partnering are state departments who support the great work done by all stakeholders. The Deans Compact focuses on identify institutions that exemplify collaboration and shared learning among Ohio's IHEs. The Deans Compact looks for evidence of collective and cross-departmental collaborative approaches, and partnerships with community and local businesses and supports these initiatives through simultaneous renewal grants.

## **4. Process Development**

### ***Evaluation and review of innovative practices***

Continuous review and evaluation are the cornerstone for effective practices. It is essential that any project is assessed for its effectiveness. The Deans Compact provides support for research, demonstrations and evaluations of the IG projects. IHEs and their partners are able to demonstrate products resulting from the funding provided during regular quarterly meetings and conferences. Research is done on the simultaneous grant initiatives that are used to increase knowledge and skills as well as for capacity building.

Each IG recipient is required to have an external evaluator who also reports the works of the grantees to the Deans Compact. These reports by the external evaluators describe the process and timelines for the project, what has been accomplished, challenges identified and implementation efforts.

### ***Scaling up effective practices***

A good collaborative initiative should always plan to scale up its practice and increase implementation of effective innovative practices beyond its initial assemblage. Efforts to scale up the works of the Deans Compact are ongoing statewide and literature from the works of the Deans Compact is shared at various conferences to enable implementation at institutions in other states. More information about the scaling-up efforts are discussed in the next sections.

## **Implications for CCIPs**

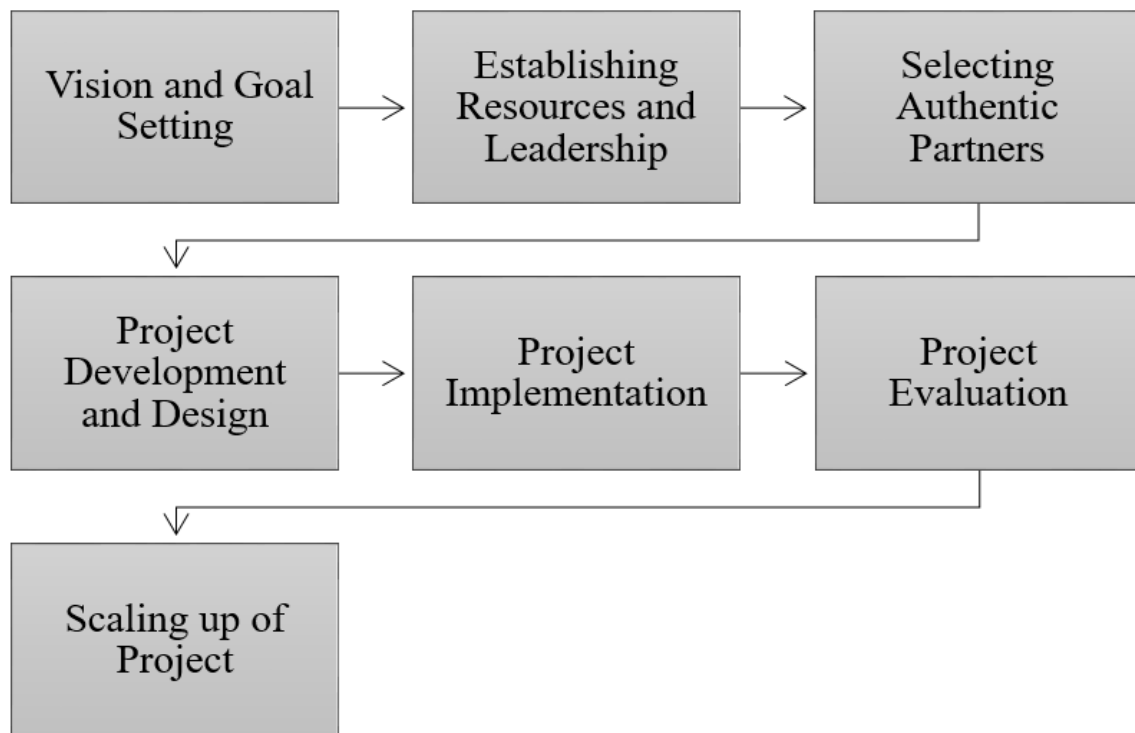
The works of the Deans Compact has resulted in more institutions offering dual licenses programs and giving preservice teachers options to graduate with two teaching licenses. The benefits of this is two-fold; a teacher candidate can work with all students including exceptional children in an inclusive general education classroom, and a teacher can work exclusively with exceptional children providing much needed special education services.

Moreover, the Deans Compact added a “*policy committee*” to examine licensure requirements and make recommendations to the team and the state department a future in which inclusive education prevails (cedar.education.ufl.edu). The restructuring of the teacher and leader licenses to include licensure structures that would accommodate dual qualification that are necessary for realizing inclusive practices.

The Deans Compact provided opportunities for IHEs and their partners to be privy to numerous experts who have shared many research-based Collaborative Frameworks, Active Implementation Frameworks, Global Implementation Specialist Model, and Scaling-up Evidence based Practices Frameworks (Duda & Wilson 2015; Fixsen, et al., 2009; Metz, Louison, Ward, & Burke, (2017); NCEO, 2012).

IHEs and their partners have had opportunities to share their individual works at regional, state and national conferences. So far, the Deans Compact efforts have followed the Effective Collaboration Process seen in Figure 3 until the implementation stage. Many of the IHE implementing their dual license programs and P-12 partner projects are collecting data to use later to evaluating their programs. The excellent work that has been done so far by the Deans Compact has been presented at numerous conferences (CEC, AACTE, National Co-Teaching Conference, AMLE, PDS conference, etc.).

CCIP approach be can be applied more generally to education. Just like the *Call to Action-Bringing the Teaching Profession Back* by Michael Fullan and Andy Hargraves (2016), it is time to build a culture of capital. It is important to make collaborative professionalism (Fullan & Hargraves 2016) as well as collaborative solution finding the centerpiece of any reform strategy. Whether it is a state or national coalition, or even a system coalition, all stakeholders must be at the table for effective reform to take place.



**Figure 3:** Effective Collaborative Processes: This model shows a typical process for collaborative project design and implementation.

They also advocate for taking a bold and broad yet also specific and explicit stance on competencies and outcomes (Fullan & Hargraves 2016). Values, skills, and competencies for students and for teachers must be defined, fostered in practice, and assessed in terms of progress. By endeavoring in an inclusive practice of education to ensure equity of access, especially for exceptional children, OMEIP ensures EPPs are preparing teachers who qualify to work with all students and not just one discipline or content area. The collaborators brainstorm ideas of how to ensure teacher candidates graduate in programs that prepare them to obtain dual licenses.

Finally, Fullan & Hargraves (2016) advocate for reform efforts to get involved beyond region, state, or country. As these reform efforts are taking place, observe education trends outside of your educational purview. It is important to reach out to and learn from other systems and strategies (Fullan & Hargraves 2016) and partner with other collaborative organizations (Such as The Deans Compact, RYHT, US Prep etc.) to ensure you are all implementing and scaling up effective evidence-based practices. By emphasizing a community of practice "climate of learning" approach, stakeholders can be encouraged to work together?

It is important to note that all these plans, and implementation of changes in practice are aimed at an overall improvement in student learning outcomes. When EPPs and their partners identify effective practices for preparing teachers through ToC and Improvement/ implementation science, the direct outcome will be positive learning outcomes for all students.

### Replication in other states

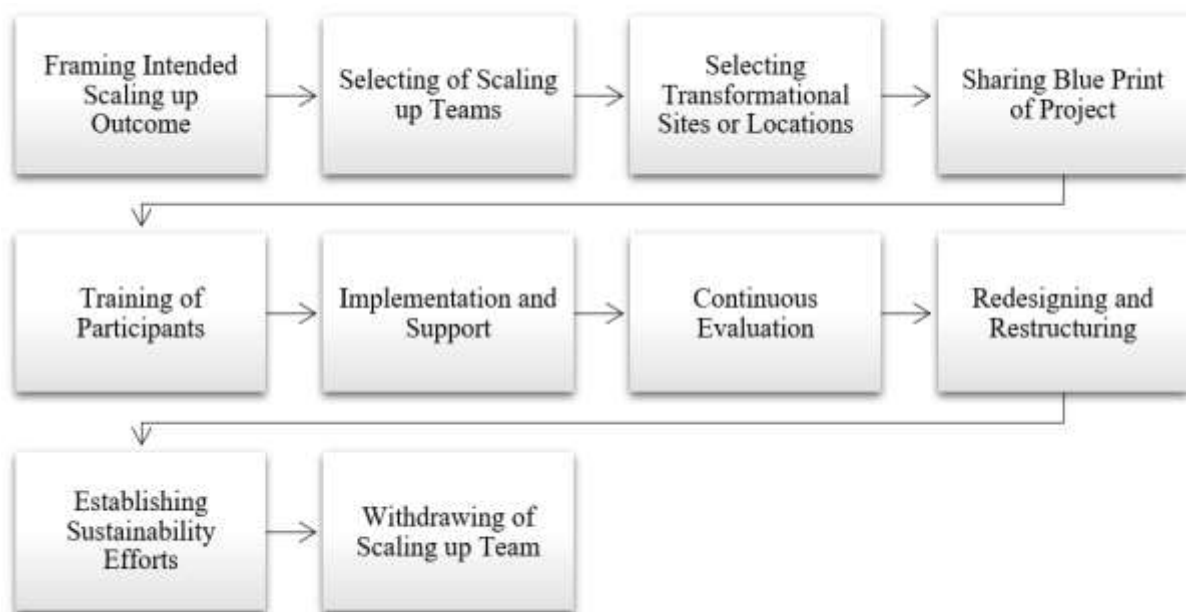
Currently there is no commonly accepted definition of scaling or scaling up in human services or other fields (Fixsen, et al., 2009). Nevertheless, any effort made to share and or replicate the works of the Deans Compact will be considered scaling up efforts.



The Deans Compact continues its vision of meeting the critical need of improving EPP so that highly qualified teachers offer all children the appropriate education they deserve (Seashore, et al.2010). The excellent work of the Deans Compact needs to be replicated by states who have similar needs and have a yearning to implement effective collaborative practices across their states.

Ohio has been an Intensive Technical Assistance Partner of CEEDAR since 2014 (cedar.education.ufl.edu). The collaborative efforts between the Deans Compact, Kent State University, University of Cincinnati, University of Dayton and CEEDAR is an example of shared the work for overall student improvement. In the article by Fullan (2009), he reiterates how everyone agrees that high quality teachers are critical, and that leaders and teachers working together focusing on student learning and achievement is essential. However, there are sharp differences concerning the policies and strategies for reaching these outcomes.

Given the current systems and leadership structures in Ohio, the state can develop implementation efforts to scale up the works of the Deans Compact to effect educationally and socially significant outcomes for the children of Ohio (See Figure 4). This systematic structure of scaling up the works of the Deans Compact could result in wider implementation of these projects (Klinger, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). IHEs have an obligation to demonstrate how they will sustain the projects they have developed. In the same token, these partnerships at the local level can implement small scale replication of their projects. It is necessary that each project developer develops a strategy for sustaining the project (Sindelar, et al., 2006).



**Figure 4:** Scaling-up Process: This model demonstrates the process of scaling-up a project.

The task of the Deans Compact would be to begin by framing the scaling up outcome. This would include making accessible the various Blue Prints of the restructure programs. The Deans Compact would then select leadership teams and locations for scaling up the project. Training is essential so that the projects are implemented with fidelity at the various sites. During implementation, continuous evaluation should take place so that the scaling up team can decide whether to redesign or restructure the project. Sustainability efforts should be put in place before the scaling up team exits.

Beyond the works in Ohio, similar collaborative continuous improvement processes exist in other states. One such example includes the works of the Carnegie Foundation in collaboration with “*Raise Your Hand Texas (RYHT) Foundation*”. This partnership between RYHT and 11 educator preparation programs in Texas aims to improve teacher education by bolstering the teacher-

candidate pipeline and deepening the clinical experience which is an essential component of teacher preparation. shared problems as a networked improvement community.

## Summary

CCIPs can be used to initiate statewide educational reforms through systematic and systemic development, implementation and monitoring. The implications of the Deans Compact work are far reaching that is why “Ohio’s work to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and other marginalized learners is supported by a statewide system of support (SSoS) that is both systemic in nature and statewide in scope” (Compact Synopsis #3, p 7). Even though collaborative efforts are primarily sustained through grant funding, all stakeholders are encouraged to develop independent sustainability strategies at the local level. Furthermore, replication is encouraged beyond the partners to other local schools and IHEs.

Educators interested in talent development and those who encourage creativity with students at any levels can identify many of the collaborative practices found in the CCIP to collaboratively engage in change to enhance the field of education. EPPs and their partners will need to identify what they both value to determine authenticity in their partnership before they begin to formulate a ToC that would be effective for positive student outcome (both at IHE and school level).

At the local level each institution will need to use the investment theory of creativity, to acknowledge individual intelligences and creativity, and ability to creatively contribute to practice and policies of student learning.

Finally, what should continue as an integral part of the continuous process is the continued engagement through communities of practice. Professional development should not be limited to presenters presenting workshops or teachers and professors attending conferences. Active research and intellectual engagements through communities of practice is not only advantageous to the professionals, but ultimately a benefit for all our students.

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## About the Author

Dr. Beverly Sande is an Assistant Professor and Director of Panther Teaching Academy at Prairie View A & M University. She has worked as an educator for over 24 years. She is a licensed educator in South Carolina, Ohio and Texas. In her capacity as an educator she has held several leadership positions: Department chair, Program Coordinator, and Chair Faculty Senate.

Dr. Sande's research focuses of comprehensive educational reforms, collaborative partnerships, large-scale implementations and scaling up of interventions and culturally responsive state-wide reforms. She has written articles and book chapters that focus of large-scale / comprehensive reforms. She presents research and best practices at various renowned conferences. She has provided professional development through workshops across many states. She has worked with colleagues on grant funded projects since 2014 as a principal investigator, co-principal investigator, and external evaluator. She has conducted project analysis and evaluation for various other projects.

Dr. Sande is a member of several professional organizations as well as serving in several committees. As a member, she is engaged in the works of her profession championing highly effective practices. Professional organizations come with various obligations including voting and service, both of which she fully engages.

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