



MEETING THE PROMISE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Insights from the AdvancED Continuous Improvement System and Observations of Effective Schools

BY MARK A. ELGART, ED.D.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The concept of continuous improvement has been part of the lexicon of school improvement for decades. From state accountability systems and district and school improvement plans to teacher and classroom protocols, continuous improvement practices have been replicated at varying levels of scale throughout our educational system. Yet, all evidence suggests this universally-acknowledged practice has failed to live up to its promise. This is particularly true in high-poverty schools where the ZIP code remains as strong a predictor of student success as it was a half-century ago, before school improvement became a key focus of policymakers and educators.

A new whitepaper by Mark Elgart, founding president and CEO of AdvancED, provides a research-based overview of continuous improvement. First, he outlines the history of continuous improvement as a discipline and explains some of the reasons why, despite the common use of continuous improvement language and practices, school and system efforts often fall short. Then, he describes the key components of an effective continuous improvement process in a school setting and introduces the AdvancED Continuous Improvement System, including its research-based elements and processes. Finally, he describes how AdvancED's work conducting external Engagement Reviews in more than 34,000 schools and systems across the country and observations of more than 250,000 classrooms demonstrates strong relationships between effective continuous improvement practices and high performance.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for school improvement, this research offers insights into what successful schools do well and where all schools, even the highest performing ones, need to improve.

Why Continuous Improvement Systems Fail

While the principles of continuous improvement are well known, there is no doubt too many schools and systems have failed to improve.

Among the key challenges:

Compliance is not continuous improvement. Although the current approach to school improvement often uses the language of continuous improvement, it too often results in voluminous improvement plans containing long lists of goals, objectives and strategies. This often overwhelms the capacity of staff, students and stakeholders to bring about real change.

Real continuous improvement takes time. Requirements to demonstrate evidence of annual progress often encourage schools to repeatedly change course for short term gains at the expense of sustainable improvement over longer periods of time.

Narrow measures fail to capture change. A single test score or school grade cannot represent the complexities of effective change management. Narrow measures result in narrow strategies focused on improving those specific measures rather than broad efforts to improve a school's culture or climate.

An adult first mentality. Schools understandably focus on what their leaders and teachers must do to improve student achievement. But, too often, the emphasis on actions and outcomes guides leaders to overlook root causes and the process changes required to address them. Instead, emphasis is placed on monitoring the end result— student achievement as narrowly measured by assessments. While it is important to understand if students are learning, it is difficult to change that outcome without a deeper understanding of **how** they are learning— and whether every student's needs are being met.

Overlooking school culture as a driver of improvement. Culture cannot be detailed in a plan or legislated through policy, yet it is a key factor in school quality that often is not adequately addressed in traditional improvement plans.

Policy magnifies pitfalls. Policymakers often prefer a lengthy,

well-documented plan to the more intangible continuous improvement process. Additionally, they tend to emphasize accountability and consistent growth as measured by test scores. This has exacerbated the pressure on schools and their leaders and resulted in a narrow focus on short-term strategies that rapidly improve limited measures of outcomes. Research has repeatedly shown this approach fails while a focus on continuous improvement greatly enhances potential impact and student achievement.

What Effective Continuous Improvement Systems Do

Continuous improvement is more than the development of a plan. AdvancED defines continuous improvement as “an embedded behavior rooted in a school's culture that constantly focuses on conditions, processes, and practices to improve teaching and learning.” To that end, effective continuous improvement systems are not a templated, check-the-box approach to school improvement. Instead, they emphasize the learner's experience, engage stakeholders, and use data collection and analysis to inform both planning and execution.

Effective continuous improvement systems allow schools and their leaders to:

- **Identify and focus on what matters most for improvement.** Even schools with similar levels of performance or student demographics may require vastly different approaches— instructional strategies, best practices, a leader's judgement or culture change.
- **Address all the factors affecting performance.** Engaging stakeholders and examining a wide range of factors, including leadership, resource allocation, teaching and learning, and student engagement, shifts the lens from specific outcomes to the multiple factors that contribute to them.
- **Provide organizing principles for improving performance.** A holistic understanding of the root causes of issues makes it easier to identify which have the greatest ramifications and require the most attention. This allows schools to avoid unnecessary distractions and avoid applying shallow

approaches as a result to numerous “solutions”.

- **Set clear goals.** A deeper understanding of issues and solutions allows schools and their leaders to articulate specific and understandable goals that focus school and community stakeholders on a common strategy or action.
- **Create a mindset of improvement at all institutions.** While low-performing schools must improve, even the highest-performing ones may have small subgroups of underserved students hidden by the averages. And every school has students who are performing adequately but who could excel.

A full description of the components of the AdvancED Continuous Improvement System is found in Part II of this report.

The AdvancED School Quality Factors: Evidence of Success

As part of its role as a provider of continuous improvement and accreditation services to more than 34,000 schools and school systems across the United States and 70 countries, AdvancED observes and analyzes at least 5,000 institutions every year. Conducted by highly trained external review teams, these school-based analyses are summarized in our Index of Education Quality® (IEQ®), which correlates seven essential factors with overall school quality, as measured by the impact of teaching and learning, leadership capacity and the use of resources to support student learning.

Called the AdvancED School Quality Factors, the seven key research-based criteria for driving improvement through conditions, processes and actions are:

- Clear direction
- Healthy culture
- High expectations
- Impact of instruction
- Resource management

- Efficacy of engagement
- Implementation capacity

Each criteria and the supporting research is described in more detail starting on page 6 of the whitepaper.

Schools that underwent external review for the purpose of accreditation provide important insights. Data derived from the ratings of schools in the AdvancED network during the 2015-16 school year, as well as ongoing classroom observations point to the ways in which continuous improvement practices lead to more effective schools.

Clear direction. Engaging all stakeholders in common goals is a hallmark of effective continuous improvement. Among the schools rated by AdvancED in 2015-16, the lowest-performing (as identified by their overall IEQ scores) demonstrated little agreement among staff that schools are focused on student success. Conversely, the highest-performing schools had unusually strong agreement— more than 4.5 on a 5-point scale— that student success is a clear priority.

Healthy culture. An environment in which the entire school community— students and adults alike— is actively engaged, feels empowered to effect positive change and enjoys congenial and supportive relationships is vital for success. Schools that received low ratings in culture had significantly lower measures of overall school performance on the IEQ than those that fostered a healthy school culture (scores of 262 vs. 297 on a 400-point scale, respectively).

High expectations. The belief that all learners have the potential to achieve is a key factor in driving success and can have a significant impact on overall school performance. When comparing student perceptions of high expectations among AdvancED’s network of STEM Certified schools, which set high standards for student performance, and the non-STEM schools in our network, we found the STEM Certified Schools ranked significantly higher in setting an environment of high expectations (3.1 vs. 2.7 on a 4-point classroom observation scale). The STEM Certified schools also significantly outmatched

their non-STEM counterparts in other areas measured by AdvancED's classroom observation tool, including indicators of access to technology, student engagement in rigorous coursework, and student collaboration.

Impact of instruction. On average, schools exhibiting higher levels of student collaboration during instructional time also tended to score in the highest quartiles of overall school performance. Two-thirds of schools in the top quartile of student collaboration, as measured by classroom observations, also were in the top quartile of overall IEQ results during the 2015-16 school year.

One important finding is that even the highest-performing schools struggle in certain important areas.

Among our 2015-16 IEQ results:

- One out of five high-quality schools had difficulty consistently establishing high expectations for all students.
- One-quarter of these schools also struggled to create classroom opportunities for students to take risks in learning.
- Nearly 30 percent of high-achieving schools still had classrooms that ranked in the bottom half of all classrooms across the AdvancED network. The measure for low performance includes requiring students to ask and respond to questions requiring higher-order thinking, such as applying, evaluating, and synthesizing information.
- More than a quarter of high-quality schools had difficulty providing students with opportunities to respond to questions that asked or quizzed them about their individual progress or learning.
- Nearly 30 percent of high-achieving schools included classrooms that struggled with providing students opportunities to review or improve work based on feedback from the teachers. The same was true when considering whether students were "provided additional/alternative instruction and feedback at the appropriate level of challenge for her/his needs."

Resource management. All schools face the challenge of

limited resources, requiring prioritization instead of endless improvement plans. AdvancED found high correlation among three key areas of resource management and school quality: (1) instructional time and resources to support goals and priorities; (2) sufficient resources and materials to meet school needs; and (3) a variety of information resources to support student learning. In our research, high- and low-performing schools saw between 35-41 percent differences in these measures of resource management.

Efficacy of engagement. Effective continuous improvement efforts engage stakeholders both inside and outside of the building, including parents and other community members. During the 2014-15 school year, high-performing schools (with an IEQ rating of 300 or greater) more frequently received high scores in parent surveys that identified ways in which schools provided parents opportunities to be engaged. The majority of highly-rated schools also excelled in engaging parents and other stakeholders in activities, such as field trips and career days, and in reporting student progress to parents.

Student engagement. Focusing excessively on adult behaviors is a key way continuous improvement efforts become misdirected. AdvancED data shows a positive relationship between classroom observation that captures learner engagement and overall school quality as measured by the IEQ. The more opportunities students have to be owners of their learning, collaborate with other students and engage in activities requiring movement, voice, and thinking, the higher the school's overall rating tends to be.

Implementation capacity. Monitoring implementation is a vital part of continuous improvement efforts. Furthermore, data from faculty surveys administered as part of the accreditation process found schools that appear to struggle in this area have substantially lower overall school quality ratings than those where leaders excel in monitoring continuous improvement data (scores of 261 vs. 297 on the IEQ's 400-point scale, respectively).

Implications for Stakeholders

The timing is advantageous for policymakers and educators to embrace a deeper understanding of continuous improvement. The end of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era in American education provides us with a real opportunity to move beyond narrow approaches to school improvement focused solely on student test results. NCLB's successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), offers state education leaders the opportunity to build new accountability and improvement systems from the ground up in ways that provide schools more flexibility to improve without eliminating ambitious goals of improving learning outcomes, and thus opportunities, for all students.

Some elements of the law are likely to enhance results. Chief among them, a reinvanized emphasis on multiple measures of student learning and school climate as states develop new accountability systems. The law also emphasizes continuous improvement in developing supports and interventions. However, much work remains to ensure effective continuous improvement systems become deeply embedded practice in schools across the country.

Developing effective continuous improvement systems requires contributions from all stakeholders in a school, its community and the broader educational system supporting them both.

Among them:

- **School leaders** must seek out and include all stakeholders when identifying key problems and solutions. Stakeholder involvement is a necessary component of developing traditional school improvement plans, but effective continuous improvement requires stakeholders taking on additional, ongoing responsibilities once the plan is drafted.
- **Educators** must take the time to understand and embrace their school's improvement priorities and help monitor progress toward these goals. A key premise of continuous improvement is that teachers have as much of a role in monitoring and adjusting their own instructional changes as school leaders do in setting the overall strategic direction and overseeing its implementation.
- **Parents and community members** must participate in and support schools on their continuous improvement journeys. Just as the root causes and best practices vary from school to school, each school community brings different resources to the table— from financial and volunteer support to career connections and mentoring.
- **Students** must become more actively engaged learners and provide feedback to teachers and school leadership. Our research shows engaged students and active learning environments are correlated with high quality schools. The best way to ensure instructional efforts meet the needs of every student is to ask them.
- **Governing authorities and boards** must provide resources and support school leaders as they move away from compliance and checklists. That means continuing to hold schools and their leaders accountable to high academic standards, but it also means supporting them and, at times, providing political cover in the face of slow but steady improvement. The emphasis on student growth and broader measures of college and career readiness found in many states' draft ESSA plans may provide promising ways of balancing those factors in next-generation accountability systems, but they will have to be supported by state and district leaders.



AdvancED® is the largest community of education professionals in the world. We are a non-profit, non-partisan organization that conducts rigorous, on-site external Engagement Reviews of Pre-K-12 schools and school systems to ensure all learners realize their full potential. While our expertise is grounded in more than one hundred years of work in school accreditation, AdvancED is far from a typical accrediting agency. Our goal is not to certify schools are good enough. Rather, our commitment is to help schools improve. Combining the knowledge and expertise of a research institute, the skills of a management consulting firm and the passion of a grassroots movement for educational change, we serve as a trusted partner to more than 34,000 schools and school systems— employing more than four million educators and enrolling more than 20 million students— across the United States and 70 other nations. The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) and the Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC) are accreditation divisions of AdvancED. For more information, please visit www.advanc-ed.org.
