

LESSONS IN CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

# Insights, Resources & Tools from Education Organizations



RELEASED SPRING 2023



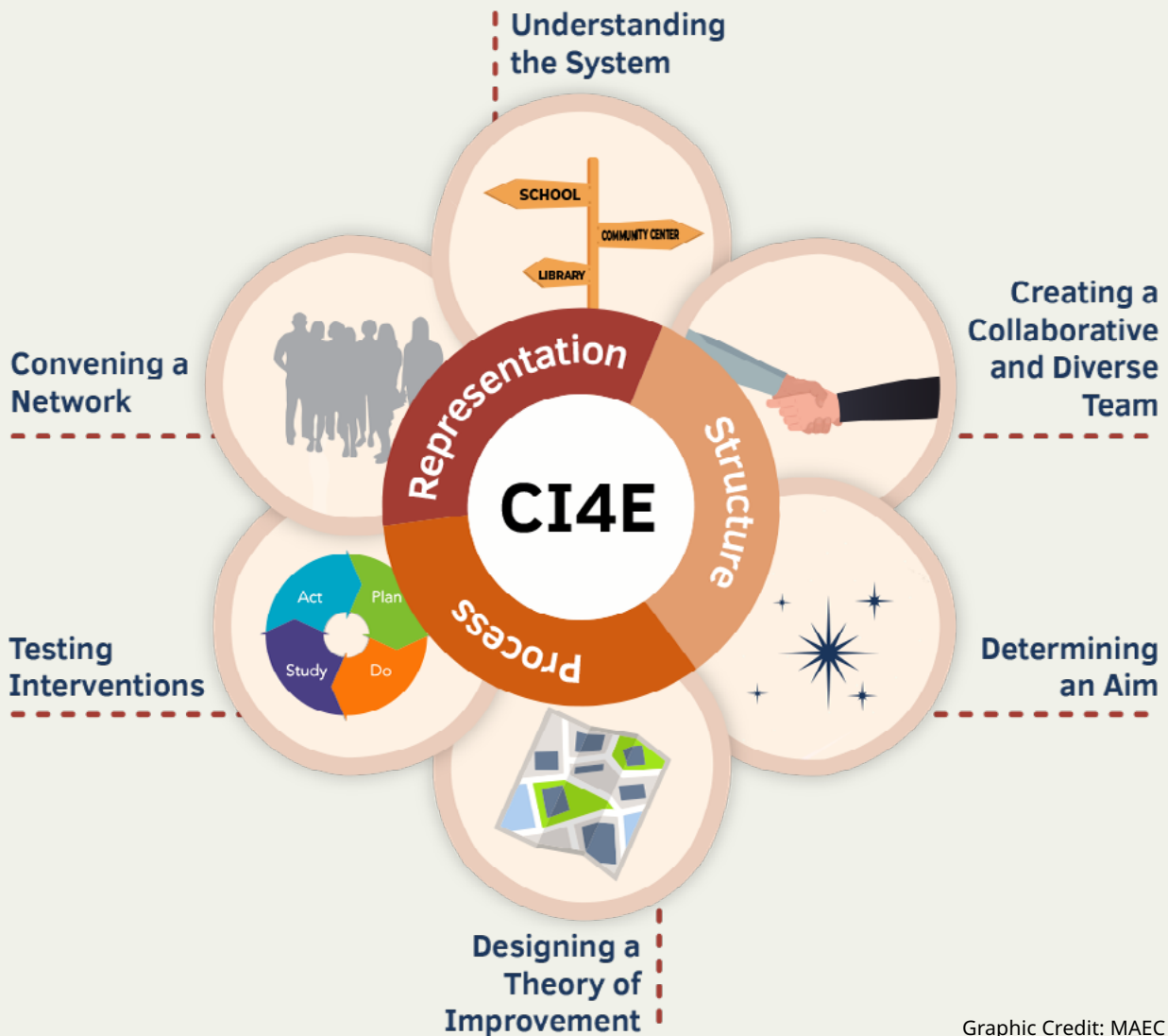
## INTRODUCTION

Continuous improvement is at the center of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s domestic K-12 public education strategy: the notion that consistent, incremental, measurable progress can hasten broader systemic change in our nation’s schools. Executing this simple idea is surprisingly hard, particularly in a public schooling context; it requires building new muscles, some of which haven’t been flexed in the schools sector.

Compounding the challenge of implementation is the fact that American public schools exist within a complicated, multi-century history of race and poverty colliding with public policy. Because of those interactions, if equity<sup>1</sup> is not embedded in this kind of work, leveraging the proven lessons of improvement methods will either perpetuate or even exacerbate current inequities in our K-12 education system.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation defines “equity” as: Practices and policies that are just, transparent, consistent and responsive to unjust contexts, and where access, opportunity, resources, and outcomes are not predicted or determined by one’s race, ethnicity, gender, income status, or other forms of identity. (Adapted from DEI Center of Excellence)



Graphic Credit: MAEC

To accelerate the broader sector’s adoption of not just continuous improvement, but also the tools and equity mindsets underlying the practice, the Foundation has made a series of significant investments. One of those investments includes a group of “Model Design and Initiation” (MDI) grants, which have been deployed in three separate cohorts.

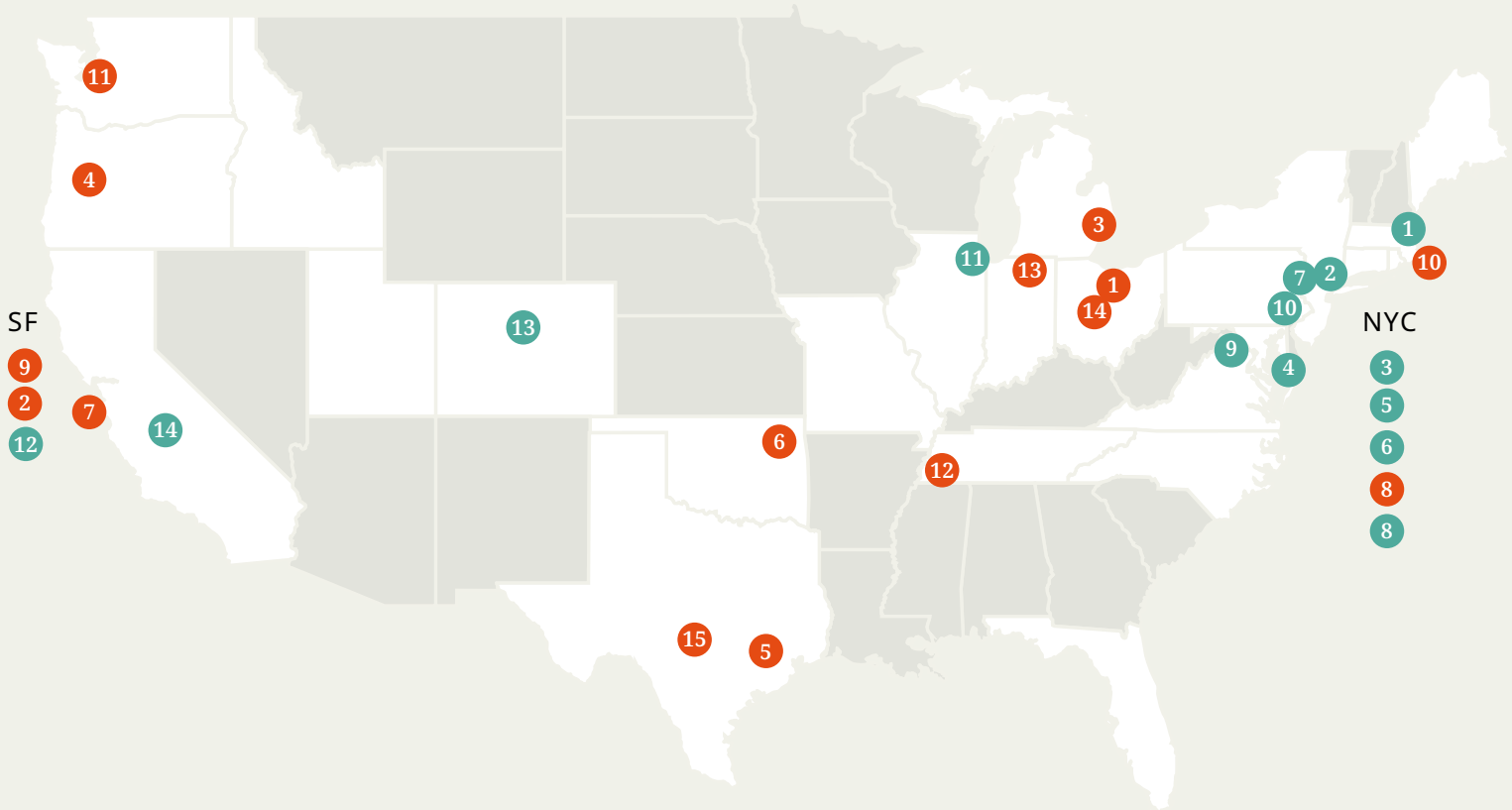
Groups that received MDI grants are “continuous improvement curious;” while they may not yet have the core tenets of improvement methods written in their organizations’ genetic codes, they are taking active steps to apply these approaches

to their work. Since the program’s inception in 2019, the Foundation has supported close to 30 organizations through MDI investments.

In October of 2022 the MDI grantees came together to share promising practices, push their peers’ thinking, and build relationships. Much of the work these organizations are undertaking is “in progress,” and the onset of their efforts coincided with the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. While global events may have added wrinkles to implementation, the MDI grantees are on their way to achieving exciting results.

# MDI headquarters

STATES WITH MDIs



## MDI Cohort 2

- 1 Battelle for Kids
- 2 Californians for Justice
- 3 Center for Powerful Public Schools
- 4 Inflexion
- 5 EMERGE Fellowship
- 6 Impact Tulsa
- 7 New Teacher Center
- 8 NYC Outward Bound Schools
- 9 Pivot Learning Partners
- 10 Providence Public Schools
- 11 Puget Sound Educational Service District
- 12 Shelby County Schools
- 13 South Bend Empowerment Zone
- 14 United Schools Network
- 15 UP Partnership

## MDI Cohort 1

- 1 Mass Insight
- 2 Newark Trust for Education
- 3 Student Leadership Network
- 4 MAEC
- 5 Teaching Matters
- 6 Internationals Network
- 7 Philadelphia Education Fund
- 8 TNTP
- 9 United Way
- 10 Building 21
- 11 AUSL
- 12 SF-CES
- 13 Colorado Education Initiative
- 14 Tulare County office of Education

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# MDI Showcase Participants

[The Academy for Urban School Leadership](#)

[Battelle for Kids](#)

[Californians for Justice](#)

[Center for Leadership & Educational Equity](#)

[Center for Powerful Public Schools](#)

[Center for Supportive Schools](#)

[Colorado Education Initiative](#)

[Inflexion](#)

[Internationals Network](#)

[MAEC](#)

[Newark Trust for Education](#)

[New Teacher Center](#)

[NYC Outward Bound Schools](#)

[Northwest Regional Educational Service District](#)

[Philadelphia Education Fund](#)

[Pivot Learning Partners](#)

[Puget Sound Educational Service District](#)

[Memphis Shelby County Schools](#)

[Student Leadership Network](#)

[TNTP](#)

The 2022 MDI Showcase was an important step for both the grantees and the Foundation. These organizations have had to innovate and build their capacity to lead improvement networks, while simultaneously weathering the collateral consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coming together as a community of like-minded organizations offered a poignant reminder that the hard work continues, and that none of us is facing these educational headwinds alone.

While it's impossible to capture and propagate all of the learnings from engaging such an extensive

network of grantees, we created this report to summarize some major takeaways from this Showcase.

While each organization in the MDI community takes its own, unique approach to advancing the work of continuous improvement, some common themes across these organizations have emerged. This report summarizes some of those themes, while also highlighting specific promising practices that further illuminate the topline takeaways.



# Common Themes Among MDI Grantees

In the rest of this report, we will explore each of these themes, some of which overlap with each other. Each successive section describes a theme in greater detail, while providing:

- **Promising Practices** - real work that current grantees are undertaking related to the theme.
- **Toolboxes** - artifacts to support other organizations deploying related practices.

## Student Voice & Agency:

The Essential Ingredient in Sustainable Improvement

## Educator Agency:

Putting Teachers in the Driver's Seat While Scaffolding Growth Mindsets

## Simplicity:

Making Improvement Science More User Friendly

## Structure:

Data, Routines & Systems Create the Conditions for Success

## Time:

Organizing Work Within the Day, for the Long Haul, and in Phases

## Professional Learning:

Creating Space for Educators to Get Better, Together

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# Student Voice & Agency:

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*Make time to really listen to what young people are saying. It's not enough to just do a survey, that's not the point. Unless you use the tools of listening and empathy interviews to get past the surface, it's not worth doing.*

— CALIFORNIANS FOR JUSTICE

Students are often the most knowledgeable stakeholders in a school. Understanding their needs, insights, and beliefs is critical. Unfortunately, using student voice in the improvement process tends to be the exception, not the rule. There are various foundational

## Promising Practice: Empathy interviews

The empathy interview has been one of the primary tools of human-centered design for the last generation. The empathy interview is a simple tool; a clever rebranding of good old-fashioned careful listening. Empathy interviews are structured, one-on-one conversations that allow for the deep exploration of a topic, which, when done with humility, can lead to transformational shifts in how interviewer and interviewee alike understand a complex topic.

## The Essential Ingredient in Sustainable Improvement

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*What students have to say matters greatly. Teachers reflecting and talking with each other about how student agency shows up is critical to our learning, and theirs.*

-BATTELLE FOR KIDS

challenges driving this gap, including the power dynamics that exist between educators and children. Despite these and other barriers, MDI grantees are finding new, creative ways to make student input a central part of the process of school improvement, rather than a “nice to have.”

Empathy interviews allow educators to make targeted, specific, open-ended “asks” of young people who might otherwise be marginalized by improvement work. The qualitative information gleaned from implementing these tools can serve as important supporting evidence for existing data, or provide a challenging new framework that opens new doors of discovery. Organizations that use empathy interviews stress that you can't just do them once and call it a day; schools and support organizations must create regular opportunities to solicit real input.



## Promising Practice: Student Agency Learning Walks

Prioritizing student voice and agency means being able to recognize when that agency is showing up in instructional practice, and when it's not. A learning walk is a great way for teachers to work together to look at classrooms, student work, student behaviors, and teacher actions. Like any kind of classroom observation, a few

critical details can be the difference between a successful venture and a false-start. Peers should enter a learning walk with a constructive mindset, and not an evaluative one. Educators should build a shared language before and after observation, so that reflection after-the-fact is actionable and rooted in factual experiences.

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### STUDENT VOICE TOOLBOX

**Center for Powerful Public Schools**  
[Empathy Interview Guide](#)

**Battelle for Kids**  
[Empathy Interview Protocol](#)

**Californians for Justice**  
[Empathy Interview Toolkit](#)

**Californians for Justice**  
[Student Voice Continuum](#)

**Battelle for Kids**  
[Student Agency Learning Walk](#)

**AUSL [Graduate Portrait:](#)**  
**Co-Created With Students**



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# Educator Agency:

## Putting Teachers in the Driver’s Seat While Scaffolding Growth Mindsets

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*If we want educators to solve a problem together, they need to see themselves in, and play a role in, defining that problem*

— TNTP

Continuous improvement requires active participation by everyone involved. In the best cases, individuals in all roles at a school—from the principal to the crossing guards— have a stake in the process. That said, there is no group whose participation matters more than teachers themselves. If teachers do not see themselves and their professional growth at the

center of continuous improvement, no amount of incentivizing and cajoling will convince them otherwise. Agency starts with the self, certainly, but there are things that schools, systems, and support organizations can do to either accelerate, or hamper, the sense that educators are in the driver’s seat for school improvement.

## Promising Practice: Distributed Leadership Structures

The traditional school leadership structure— wherein a single administrator establishes priorities for an entire faculty—is not hospitable to continuous improvement practices. Improvement and inquiry require educators to set meaningful goals for their own practice and professional growth, in collaboration with their peers. None of that can happen in a top-down,

purely hierarchical leadership structure. Educators need to have the power to make decisions, offer feedback to their peers, and share information back with administrative leadership teams. That can happen through the creation of standing committees, professional learning communities, or decentralized decision-making structures.



## Promising Practice: The “Five Whys” Protocol

The “Five Whys” Protocol is an important way to deconstruct problems and encourage agency all at once. While the tool enjoys broad usage among design thinkers and improvement experts, there are significant opportunities to encourage broader adoption across K-12 education. The protocol is built on the idea that you can get to the root cause of a problem by asking “Why?” five

times, following the logic deeper and deeper until, at last, you get to the bottom of things. Educators are accustomed to outsiders entering their schools and offering solutions, which makes it fairly revolutionary to ask educators to participate in the process of diagnosing problems, which itself is a critical antecedent to systemic change.

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### EDUCATOR AGENCY TOOLBOX

**Puget Sound ESD**  
[Kings County Promise Leadership Structure](#)

**TNTP’s**  
[“Five Whys” Protocol](#)

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# Simplicity:

## Making Improvement Science More User Friendly

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*Schools had five goals last year, and that was way too many; this year they have one or two, which is more achievable*

— MEMPHIS SHELBY COUNTY (TN) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Continuous improvement has played a central role in refining and executing complex, human-centered processes in countless sectors, from public health to automobile manufacturing. Education has yet to adopt this approach, perhaps because of the unnecessary complexity of the language, tools, and tactics of the field of “improvement science.” The domain has its own

jargon, which can be alienating to newcomers, while the tools supporting core practices emerged from sectors with only a superficial relationship to public schooling. Organizations in the MDI network have pointed to this complexity as a barrier; and they’re not just griping about it, they’re doing creative things in response.

### Promising Practice: Simple Templates for Inquiry Cycles

The “inquiry cycle” is at the heart of improvement. Daily or weekly cycles are the driving force behind changing habits and practices at an individual practitioner level, while longer cycles, rooted in theories of action, drive sustainable multi-year change.

An “inquiry cycle,” though, is really just shorthand for “getting together with your peers to identify a challenge, then testing solutions to see what works.” To demystify the inquiry process,

many organizations have created templates for educators to use as they embark on these inquiry projects. Battelle for Kids’s “Change-o-Matic” is a template that educators can use to engage in “plan, do, study, act” processes, which happen on a shorter cycle. Memphis Shelby County Public Schools created a template that their schools can use to draft schoolwide “theories of action,” which describe longer, sometimes multi-year, cycles.



## Promising Practice: Graphic Organizers for Collaborative Work

Continuous improvement requires collective action, but many teachers are used to operating behind closed doors. As such, continuous improvement requires building new habits of collaboration and communication. One way to simplify the act of collaboration is with graphic organizers and note catchers, which can provide

structure to otherwise unstructured group time. There is a fine line between “chit-chat” and “constructive conversation with clear next steps.” A solid “note catching” protocol can ensure that a powerful conversation has legs after everyone leaves the room.

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### SIMPLICITY TOOLBOX

**Battelle for Kids**  
[Change-o-Matic](#)

**Memphis Shelby County Schools**  
[Theory of Action Template](#)

**Pivot Learning Partners**  
[“Note Catchers”](#)

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# Structure:

## Data, Routines & Systems Create the Conditions for Success

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*When you work in multi-partner arrangements, where the context is complicated, even making little decisions can be a big win, because they teach you something about how to collectively come to agreement.*

— PUGET SOUND ESD

Leaders across the MDI network noted that improvement work is impossible without rigorous data, structures, and routines and that, if we're being honest with ourselves, those things tend to be inadequate in K-12 public schools. While some structures we need are complex, like multi-site improvement networks, many are quite simple and involve the strategic deployment of existing collaborative time. MDI grantees also noted that having systems for knowledge management and dissemination are critical, as spreading improvement efforts beyond the earliest adopters requires conscious deployment mechanisms.

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*All of this stuff is really great, but let's see if these routines are strong enough that I keep using them once we hit testing season.*

— ANONYMOUS EDUCATOR, AS REPORTED TO  
BATTELLE FOR KIDS

When creating structures and systems, context matters a great deal, as there are countless layers of government, civic infrastructure, and community factors that affect each school community. In the best cases, all of these disparate entities are rowing in the same direction: families and communities are supportive of educational objectives, and there is explicit acknowledgment that achieving measurable improvement, through cycles of inquiry, is the critical pathway to achieving breakthrough academic results. Unfortunately, that's not always the case, and alignment usually requires active work.



## **Promising Practice:** **Student Dashboards Linked to Strategic Goals**

While data is important, it's even more important to look at the right data, at the right times, with a plan for how to use that data. MDI grantees talked a lot about making sure that they don't just build a culture where data is valued, but that they build a coherent set of structures and practices around the examination of data on a regular basis.

One way to do that is with a data dashboard that is linked to longitudinal goals, like college success and persistence. The Student Leadership Network built a tool like that where anyone in the network, at any time, can look at real time data on young people's progress towards their ultimate goals.

## **Promising Practice:** **Digital Platforms for Toolkit Sharing**

Schools and educators have a lot of common needs, which tend to pop up on predictable annual cycles: hiring, retention, coaching regimes, and professional development, to name a few. Despite massive advances in the availability and variety of educational resources, it can be hard to separate the "signal" from the "noise" when it comes to professional tools.

Inflexion created a digital platform called "Portico" for the educators in its network, which serves as a hub for professional learning. The platform contains resources, the ability to collaborate with other educators to refine those resources, and a place to discuss practice. The tool incorporates the spirit of collaboration, which is essential to improvement work.

## Promising Practice: SMS Communication is King

Effective, systematized communication with families is challenging in a public schooling context. Parents often work multiple jobs, making in-person meetings difficult to schedule. In communities with high concentrations of non-native English speakers, language barriers create an additional hurdle to effective dialogue. Whatever the context, though, it seems that some communications channels are better than others. Memphis Shelby County Public

Schools experienced an enormous increase in engagement when they switched from emailing parents as a default mechanism, to using the WhatsApp SMS messaging platform. WhatsApp works all over the world, and doesn't require having a domestic US phone number, which is important to families that move frequently between and among countries.

## Promising Practice: Advisory Groups

It's easy to solicit feedback from a community on an episodic basis, but getting ongoing input from stakeholders requires attention to detail, repetition, and a framework for engagement. The New Teacher Center built a series of these bodies to support the development of their improvement strategies. Their Equity Commission, for example, included experts from the broader

education policy community, while their Student Advisory Panel included the voices of young people. The Puget Sound ESD, as part of the King County Promise initiative, took a similar approach, building a Youth Advisory Committee and an external Fundraising & Sustainability Committee, in addition to its basic improvement network structures.

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## STRUCTURE TOOLBOX

**Inflexion**  
[“Portico” platform](#)

**Student Leadership Network**  
[College Outcome Dashboard](#)

**Memphis Shelby County**  
[WhatsApp Protocol](#)

**The New Teacher Center**  
[Equity Commission](#)

**Puget Sound ESD**  
[Leadership Structure](#)

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# Time:

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*Be explicit about what implementation looks, feels, and sounds like at each stage, and engage teams in defining that at the local level.*

— CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP AND  
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Like anything else, improvement takes time. At a macro level, sustainable improvement requires the stitching together of multiple weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual inquiry cycles. While people who engage in improvement work often notice immediate changes in their work habits, leading and lagging indicators of student progress don't materialize overnight. Beyond those macro

## Promising Practice: Micro-Protocols

Finding time for activities in schools is complicated, not just because educators are strapped for time, but also because humans don't have a great handle on how long activities should take. Collaboration doesn't have to take a lot of time, though, and micro-protocols can play a role in breaking important activities into chunks small

## Organizing Work Within the Day, for the Long Haul, and in Phases

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*Teachers need TIME to do this work, and without leadership buy-in, you'll never get that time.*

— PUGET SOUND ESD

concerns, at a more granular level, educators need time to collaborate, not just once in a while, but ideally multiple times per week. Finding time for this kind of work can be a chore, particularly amidst the unforgiving schedules of classroom teachers, which have only become more taxing amidst rampant burnout and teacher shortages.

enough to accomplish within a school day. For example, the Northwest Regional Educational Service District has created a "Student Success Talk" protocol which allows you to talk about an individual student's needs, using real data, in about ten minutes.



## Promising Practice: Leverage Existing Structures

Most schools already have some mechanisms through which educators collaborate, whether they be leadership teams, administrative meetings, or professional learning communities. Given that, MDI grantees noted that leveraging these structures to realize additional time was critical. If teachers are already meeting in a

professional learning community, it is possible to carve out some of that time to engage in improvement activities, even if that just means finding fifteen minutes at a meeting to discuss data.

## Promising Practice: Define Phases

When implementing a new idea or a program, it's easy to get hung up on what it looks like to achieve the ideal. No matter how strong a strategy may be, however, it never looks pretty during the earliest days of implementation, when folks are just getting the hang of it. As such, it's helpful to have a roadmap outlining what it looks

like to be at different stages of adoption. The NYC Outward Bound Schools, for example, have created a template that describes what different elements of their model should look like during different phases of development.

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## TIME TOOLBOX

**Northwest Regional  
Educational Service District**  
[Student Success Talks Protocol](#)

**Northwest Regional  
Educational Service District**  
[Stoplight Tool](#)

**NYC Outward Bound Schools**  
[Stages of Implementation](#)

**Center for Leadership and  
Educational Equity**  
[“Starting Small” Chapter](#)

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# Professional Learning:

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*We talk a lot about the technical skills necessary to do continuous improvement in schools, but biases and beliefs get in the way of doing anything technical.*

— THE NEW TEACHER CENTER

In order to foster effective adult learning and sustained practice change, schools in MDI networks have embraced generative, human-centered self-improvement and professional growth. In this approach, peers collaborate to identify and test their own interventions in real time. Alongside meaningful collaboration,

## Promising Practice: Coaching for Improvement

A number of MDI organizations noted that normalizing the process of continuous improvement coaching was central to the realization of big goals. Coaching, unlike management or supervision, relies on lateral relationships, rooted in the mutual pursuit of professional growth and student outcomes. Building a culture of coaching, wherein educators

## Create Space for Educators to Get Better, Together

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*Any goal we have has to have high quality professional learning to go with it.*

— COLORADO EDUCATION INITIATIVE

coaching is central to the work of continuous improvement. Organizations that want to build an improvement mindset should deploy coaches to support the classroom level implementation of practices that were identified through collaborative goal-setting processes.

can actually toggle between being a coach and coachee, is essential to improvement work.

Coaching for improvement requires not just deep attention to classroom instruction, but also the structures necessary for collaboration. While many schools have habits related to instructional coaching, many of the MDI organizations

deploy coaches to support improvement cycles themselves: in grade-level team meetings, among administrators, or in concert with professional learning communities.

Coaching for real improvement also means being open to the idea of having one's practice critiqued. Unfortunately, school personnel—

classroom teachers in particular—often conflate constructive feedback with the anxiety-producing notion of “evaluation.” Coaching in a continuous improvement context means decoupling these ideas, to achieve the level of psychological safety necessary to conduct deep personal work.

## **Promising Practice:** **Deploying New Instructional Practices Through Inquiry Cycles**

One of the hallmarks of strong continuous improvement work is the extent to which new practices emerge from collaboration, and not through top-down dissemination. When educators come together to discuss practice, they identify areas for improvement, research new practices to test out together, and then create mechanisms for tracking what works. The Internationals

Network shared a process they used to examine writing practices across a network of schools. That process included looking at student work, prompts to support the discussions about that work, guidance for how to adjust practice based on those discussions, and an ongoing structure for following-up on those adjustments after the fact.

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## **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TOOLBOX**

**Internationals Network**  
[Writing Supports Protocol](#)

**Inflexion**  
[Portico Platform “Crowdsource” Feature](#)



## What's Next

Beyond the promising practices described in the above sections, MDI grantees identified some new ideas that, once implemented, may open new horizons for inquiry and exploration.

### **Student Voice & Agency:** **Youth Participation in PLCs**

Practitioners in the MDI network are excited about the notion of including students in professional learning communities. While almost all of the MDI organizations leverage the “PLC” format to both conduct professional learning and facilitate distributed leadership, few of those groups currently include the ongoing participation of students. Making student participation a regular

feature of PLCs is a powerful idea for ensuring that student voice is an embedded part of strategy decisions in a school. Including students in PLCs opens significant questions: How are students chosen? How do we ensure that the voices of the most marginalized kids are included? Is there a democratic process for picking representation?

## **Conditions:** **Systems Influence and Alignment**

Organizations in the MDI network represent a range of operational categories, but most are nonprofits that provide services to schools and systems. This kind of arrangement has its benefits, as operating outside of government provides greater flexibility. Not to mention, schools often are more forthcoming about their challenges when dealing with outsiders, and

not their bosses in the district or state. That said, existing outside of the system can make it challenging to influence the operating conditions that rely on public policy and legislation. As MDI grantees think about growth, and propagating their improvement networks beyond their infancy, figuring out how to influence these systems and align with their priorities will be critical.

## **Time:** **Stopping Things is Easier than Starting Things**

If it seems hard to add new things to a school's or an educator's practice, try asking them to stop doing something. Educational habits build over time, and many schools and classrooms resemble an archeological site, where the initiatives of the past continue to collect metaphorical dust. MDI grantees talked about needing to make continuous improvement work systematic, but

that often requires schools and teachers to stop doing other things that aren't aligned to current priorities. To achieve systematic deployment of improvement science strategies, MDI grantees will have to become comfortable encouraging schools and educators to jettison things that aren't aligned to improvement approaches.

## **Educator Agency:** **Transferring Coaching Responsibility to Schools**

As the work of MDI grantees matures, organizations are thinking about how to embed the work of improvement coaching at the school level. While most of the organizations in the network deploy coaches to their partner schools, the next horizon in their work is transferring the knowledge, responsibilities, and capacities for coaching to the schools themselves. No matter

how intensively an external coach works with a school team, those individuals will never be as woven into the culture of a school as their own faculty members. Teacher leaders and administrators are ideal candidates for taking on the continuous improvement coaching role at individual sites.



# Conclusion

As is evident from the depth and breadth of the work being conducted by MDI grantees, there is a great deal to celebrate as we think about leveraging continuous improvement strategies as an engine for dramatic transformation in American public schools. After a generation of policy characterized by uneven implementation of change ideas, we hope that more and more educators can embrace the lessons in this report to put their own schools on a path to an educator-powered dramatic transformation.

At the heart of this work is, as always, people: the staff and leadership of the MDI organizations, the educators in the schools they serve, the young people they support in their rise to meet new challenges, and the communities and families who serve as bedrocks of support.

In conducting this work together as a broader network and sharing practices to become stronger, the MDI network is modeling the

deepest principles of improvement science. They are not just preaching the gospel of continuous improvement to the systems and schools that they serve, but also living those principles everyday in their work with their colleagues and peers.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is proud to support this work, and we will continue to feature promising and breakthrough practices through [CatalystEd's Learning Lab](#). We know that what works in one context won't necessarily work everywhere, but we believe educators can learn a great deal from the work of these pioneers in the field.

As we continue to learn to improve as a Foundation, we want to share those learnings with the millions of people who work everyday to make our schools a warm, rich, challenging place for young people to thrive.