School Improvement & Redesign

Built On a Foundation of Knowing What Works

No two school districts, or schools within a district, are alike, so their paths to improvement will differ also. While some schools are focused on achieving or sustaining compliance, others are ready to grow and innovate but need the thought space and support to pursue that path. In order to lift up struggling schools or help stagnant schools improve, there first needs to be a thorough exploration of their systems and processes in order to develop some short-term and long-term plans for improvement.

Ultimately successful school improvement and redesign focuses on **leadership** and **learning**.

LEADERSHIP: School improvement efforts must engage all leaders to build systems and processes. With excellent leadership, we ensure that our work permeates every level, everyone feels connected and safe, and the new norms are sustainable. **Leadership cannot be held by the school leader alone, it must be found everywhere.**

LEARNING: Learning new, evidenced-based knowledge and skill requires space, scaffolding, and pyschological safety and requires the use of high-quality mateirals and research-proven approaches. **Learning is not just for students, but also for adults.**

In order to ensure sustainable improvement for students, districts with schools designated as "in need of improvement" must focus on immediate, compliance-driven mandates while simultaneously investing in leadership and learning practices that lead to long-term, sustainable improvements. Only by guiding school leaders methodically through a purposefully designed process will leaders ensure that practices are built to transform schools while at the same time move schools out of compliance.

Three Key Commitments

Against many challenges, a number of districts and schools have posted measurable gains and significant successes. So, what is the difference between these and other schools?

In order to better understand how successful school improvement works, we surveyed the support teams at 20 schools – schools that were successfully released from their state's accountability list. Evidence indicates that these schools and districts that made three key commitments to consistently achieved positive results.

COMMITMENT I	COMMITMENT II	COMMITMENT III
School teams committed themselves to focus intently on aspects of student success, whether through increased rigor, more academic support, restorative practices, or relevant learning.	**School teams committed to developing a professional, collaborative learning environment with a focus on student and staff learning.**	**School teams committed themselves to holding one another accountable**, whether through content circles, walk throughs, increased teacher collaboration, or co-teaching.

COMMITMENT I REFLECTIONS

▶ "Their commitment to ensuring a high-quality education for students with disabilities translated to an intentional, laser-like focus on the students with disabilities student group and increasing their access to high-quality classroom instruction through a co-teaching model."

▶ "The school leader and teacher leadership team committed to strengthening the academic support provided to students to ensure that every student is regularly engaged in learning that is relevant to them. They created a comprehensive and intentional plan to create a welcoming environment ensuring all students' cultures and cultural experiences are evident in both instructional and social activities. This has been a three-year process examining classroom and library resources, instructional materials and inclusive social activities."

COMMITMENT II REFLECTIONS

▶ "Collaborative team meetings were established for reviewing student learning data through common formative assessments with a plan to respond to students who are not yet mastering the content. Further, sharing of instructional practices within the meetings, in turn, aligned instruction across grade levels and created a system of teachers accepting accountability for learning of all students."

"The school committed to developing instructional practices to advance student engagement and higher order thinking through formal Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a vehicle for teachers to focus on engaging and authentic learning was the greatest outcome within this commitment to professional learning and working collaboratively as foundations for success."

COMMITMENT III REFLECTIONS

▶ "The building leadership concentrated on providing professional learning and support to develop concentric circles of teachers who lifted each other's understanding and expertise. This translated to a focus on high-leverage improvement strategies around use of standards-based learning targets and a prioritization of opportunities for teachers to collaborate and meaningfully practice effective instructional strategies."

▶ "A commitment to strengthening our rigorous and cohesive ELA curriculum raised the bar on what was taught, as this was the first time that rigor and relevance were embedded in the instructional expectations. It was a game changer, and new resources, questions, tasks, assessments, and engagement strategies were implemented, improving the level of pedagogy throughout the school."

These schools took committed, targeted action that delivered tangible results.

And yet, many schools and districts make commitments in good faith for change and improvement, and they get stuck at various points, sometimes never getting beyond the desire for improvement and change.

What was the difference between these commitments and results?

These school teams had a side-by-side partnership. This work is hard, requiring both time and focus, all, while the day-to-day work of a school or district is underway. A thought-partner and accountability-partner can make a tremendous impact, providing process support, learning opportunities, and leadership development. A partner can accurately gather diagnostics, taking a full view of the structures, practices, and systems of each district or school and then, 'knowing what works in schools', precisely map out the path forward. School teams and leaders need exceptionally skilled support working with them side-by-side, providing professional learning opportunities for staff, and helping ensure fidelity of implementation, including co-teaching and training. The best partners know the research and the fundamentals and are able to integrate them successfully in the school or district's unique culture and program.

As evidence that this systems-based approach works, districts of various sizes in one state who have been partnered with Education Elements/PLC Associates consultants for a two- to three-year period have all received the positive news of being released from the accountability list.
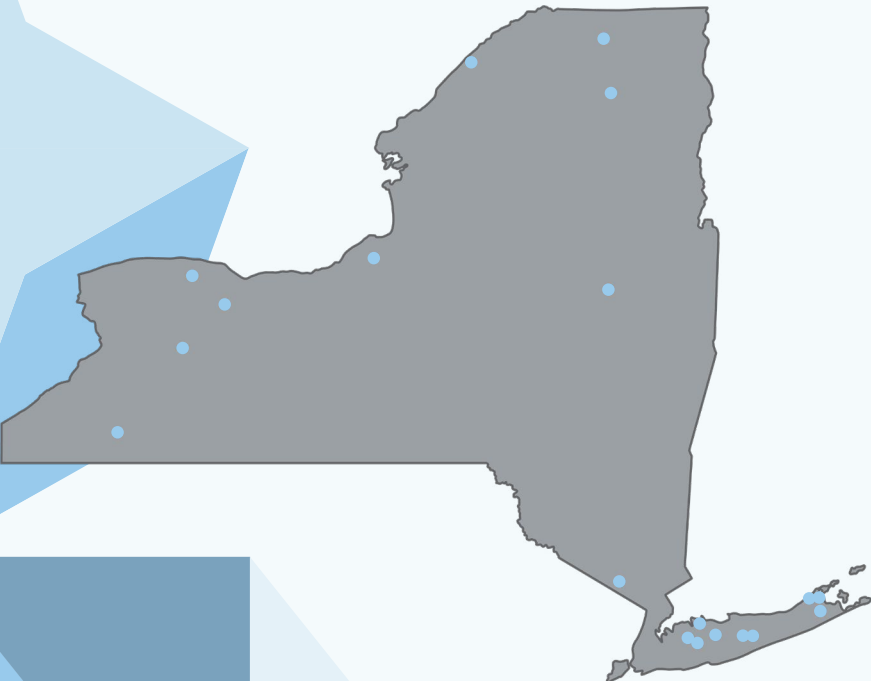
- Patchogue-Medford Union Free School District
- Holley Central School District
- Malone Central School District
- Shelter Island Union Free School District
- Bridgehampton Union Free School District
- Suffern Central School District
- Brentwood Union Free School District
- Fulton City School District
- Huntington Union Free School District
- Mayfield Central School District
- Hicksville Union Free School District
- Saranac Lake Central School District
- Ogdensburg City School District
- Farmingdale Union Free School District
- Salamanca City School District
- South Country Central School District
- Southold Union Free School District
- Wheatland-Chili School District
- Warsaw Central School District

When reflecting on their successful support of these schools, the consultants overwhelmingly responded that the following are essential steps to school improvement:

Essential Steps to School Improvement
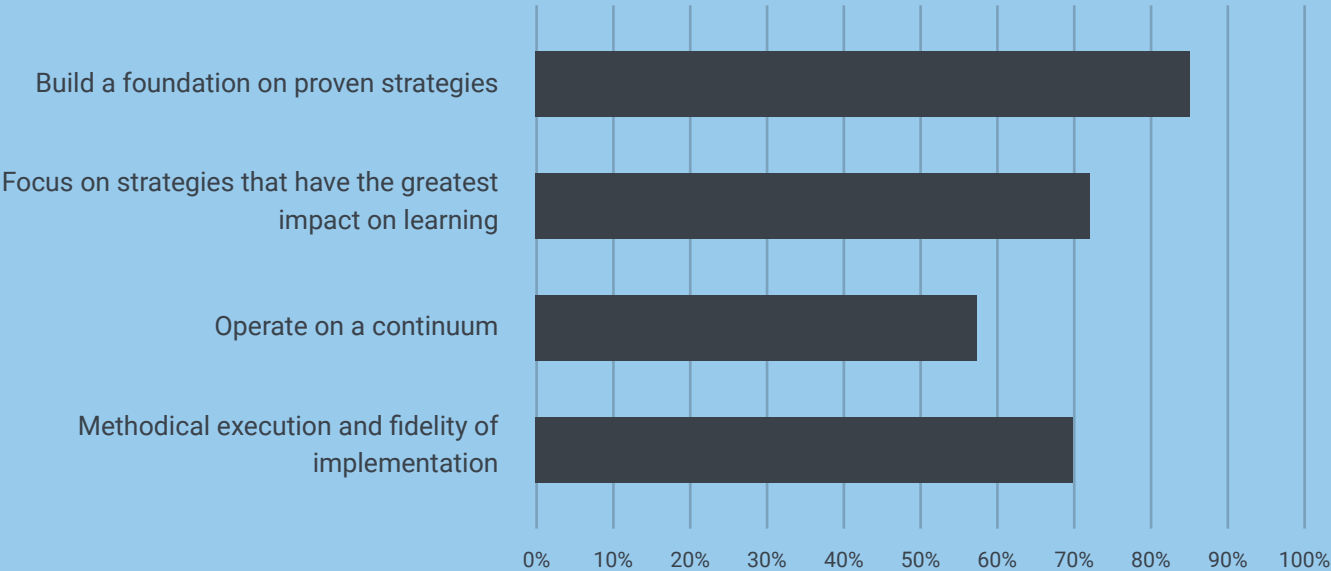
Together, these steps will ensure that improvement efforts are grounded in evidence-based practices that are focused, implemented with fidelity, and sustained over time.

From Compliance to Innovation

Who are the people best positioned to identify issues, develop solutions, and implement sustainable change? While the responsibility and authority to "lead" typically falls on school leaders and administrators, there are also "leaders" operating daily as teachers and even students in our school districts. School improvement and redesign efforts must engage all leaders to build systems and processes. Responsive leaders are able to encourage and build capacity for adaptability and innovation in their staff during times of change. They create psychological safety in their staff to try new things without fear of failure. This allows for new approaches of instruction, teaming, and learning to happen on campuses. With excellent leadership, the drive for growth permeates every level, everyone feels connected, and new norms are more likely to be implemented successfully and sustainably.

Whether a district is fully focused on compliance at all schools or is at a transition point with some compliant schools looking to innovate, the process of identifying, planning, and implementing improvements and growth work is the same. Taking a modular approach to school improvement that is purposefully designed for results, successful partners work side-by-side with school leaders and staff on their school improvement journey, assuring smooth implementation throughout, all the while building internal capacity so that schools have the structures, practices, and systems to predictably achieve and sustain successful outcomes.
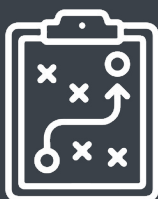
Purposefully Designed for Results

DIAGNOSE
Ask self-reflection questions, collect data, and uncover needs across school communities

PLAN
Identify root causes and select the right strategies to draft School Improvement Plan(s)

IMPLEMENT
Execute the strategies that will drive change, including professional learning with support

SUSTAIN
Monitor and iterate the plan based on the newest data and information

DIAGNOSE

To start the work of school improvement and redesign, school and district leaders need to hold a shared understanding of the current state of their school/district including the strengths and challenges in place. Teams need to examine current data, as well as anecdotal evidence gained through data analysis, focus groups, and surveys. Importantly, it is essential that they engage in critical self-reflection to assess readiness, uncover needs, identify potential challenges, and set goals.

Nine Critical Self-Reflection Questions to guide leaders in their School Improvement process

1. How do we define improvement, and what specific outcomes are we seeking to achieve? In other words, what are the aspirations for learners? Have we chosen the right goal(s) or vision? How might we create the most impactful learning experiences?

2. What data do we currently have about our school or district's strengths and weaknesses, and how are we using this information to inform our improvement efforts? Have we dug into the data and revealed what's been the challenge to making change?

3. What is our school or district's culture, and how might this impact our improvement work? Are we creating the enabling conditions to shift the paradigm in our school, resulting in real, sustainable change?

4. What existing resources, personnel, and structures can we leverage to support our improvement efforts, and where might we need to invest in additional resources?

5. How can we engage all partners, including students, families, and community members, in our improvement efforts?

6. How do we plan to monitor and measure our progress towards our improvement goals? How do these goals align with our progress towards the state indicators?

7. How can we ensure that our improvement efforts are equitable and address the needs of all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved or marginalized?

8. How do we plan to sustain our improvement efforts over time, and what structures or processes can we put in place to ensure ongoing progress?

9. How will we communicate our improvement efforts and progress to all stakeholders, including students, families, and community members?

Answering these questions can help school and district leaders to identify strengths and weaknesses in their current practices and structures, develop a shared understanding of improvement goals, and create a roadmap for moving forward. It is **essential to engage in ongoing self-reflection throughout the improvement process** to ensure that efforts remain focused and effective.

When there is clarity around current structures, practices, and systems, leaders can acknowledge what is working and should be expanded or maintained, and what needs to be improved or changed. It will be time to plan the steps to improvement.

PLAN

After a self-reflection process, and after the collection and analysis of data and community input, leaders need to identify the root causes of underperformance in order to determine improvement goals and select the right strategies and interventions that will deliver measurable success. In addition, they must establish criteria and measures for understanding progress, determining outcomes, and confirming success along with clear distribution of roles, responsibilities, and related accountability. In short, they need a detailed school improvement plan for both the short- and long-term.

It is essential, when developing a school improvement plan, to determine the extent to which the plan is **built on well-vetted, research-based strategies** and interventions. By relying on evidence-based practices, schools can avoid reinventing the wheel and instead focus on implementing proven strategies that are likely to improve student outcomes.

Leverage experts who have implemented these evidenced-based strategies. Include strong instructional leaders and technical assistance providers who can help to make real-time connections between what is happening at the school and what works.

School improvement efforts require a deep focus on the most critical strategies that are likely to have the greatest impact on student learning. These may include but are not limted to using engaging and effective instructional strategies, increasing rigor in classrooms, providing protected time for teachers to collaborate, using data to inform decisions, and giving effective feedback. To determine the right strategies, specific to a given school or district, leaders should review past practices to examine what has worked.

And if a particular strategy has been in place for a reasonable amount of time and has not produced measurable results, it is time to abandon that approach and consider more effective alternatives.

It is critical to be courageous in selecting the right evidenced-based approaches. Schools should not continue to use a particular strategy simply because it is familiar or comfortable. To achieve true transformation, **school leaders must be willing to let go of practices that are not working** and adopt new strategies that are more likely to produce positive results. This is challenging because leaders and teachers often revert back to what they know, to what they have been doing. It's often a significant restraining force in moving school improvement forward and why having ongoing, outside support can help teams to get through.

Outside partners can help leaders build on a foundation of proven strategies and focus on strategies that have the greatest impact on learning. Knowing the research in depth, they are skilled at integrating high-impact, evidence-based strategies into comprehensive plans, as well as determining when to move away from those that are not delivering.

IMPLEMENT

Improving schools is a complex process that requires intentional and sustained effort. It is one thing to have a plan, but that plan is only as strong as its implementation.

Effective school improvement efforts **begin with a clear understanding of the school's vision** and goals and a plan for how to achieve them. Schools must build internal momentum around the changes. This comes by articulating a vision – reasons why a particular set of changes are needed – and getting buy-in. Fidelity of implementation begins with an operating theory of action and a clear understanding of who, what, and how you will support that vision. Schools must involve all teams and individuals that work within the organization and establish clear expectations around the improvement process. Then, it requires ways to measure the impact of these changes on school improvement and make adjustments in process, as necessary. And, it requires focus.

Schools in pressing need of change should have a simplified focus on the most critical factors for school improvement – leadership and learning. These two factors are foundational for any other change, whether that be culture, staffing, or systems. If strong, clear leadership is not in place, any efforts elsewhere will be short-lived

and ineffective. Then, as schools improve and begin to transform, approaches to leadership, cycles of improvement and monitoring, as well as instruction and instructional models will shift. For instance, leadership and expertise may become more distributed; continuous improvement may start as shorter cycles and lengthen over time; learning may initially focus on building in more learning time (extended year, after school, tutoring, blocks) and reviewing key instructional techniques (checking for understanding, wait time), shifting towards a robust adult learning culture.

It is essential to monitor the degree to which the plan is implemented with fidelity across the school. This includes examining whether structures and instructional practices are in place and whether they are being fully implemented across all elements of the school. For example, data cycles may include collecting information at the school level, but if the information is not shared with grade level or content area teams, they cannot leverage it to make data-driven decisions and improve student outcomes.

Throughout implementation, it is important to build momentum and motivate people to do the work. This will result in a continuous development of internal capacity within the district/school, which is needed to ensure sustainability of change in the long term.

SUSTAIN

Sustained change in school improvement and instruction is not a result of adding a new technology or curriculum or ideas; it is a combination of these resources and investments in people that change beliefs, practices, systems, and habits.

Most school improvement plans are monitored and measured based on student outcome data, which is a lagging indicator, often delayed by years. **Learning from real-time data provides the opportunity to make pivots along the way**, guiding sustainable school improvement efforts.

School transformations that sustain over time generally share a clear and consistent vision that motivates, uses evidenced based tactics, and learn and iterate to overcome resistors. As schools improve, they can continue to expand their focus to other transformational investments in adult learning culture, staffing, and systems and instructional models. That is, as schools improve, approaches to leadership and expertise may shift to become more distributed, continuous improvement cycles may start as shorter cycles and lengthen over time.

By taking the time to collect relevant data from key stakeholders, and reviewing the strategic plan against this data, leaders are setting up their school or district for successful improvement strategies. These steps help to reorient the school community towards working on areas where there is more need for progress and away from those areas that are already on target. They are essential in the work to improve and achieve positive educational experiences for all students and educators.

Success Stories

ALDINE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
City

With technical assistance provided by Education Elements, the Hall Success Academy leadership team planned for a school-wide implementation of blended learning to transform the culture and learning environment. After only one year of providing its students with a more personalized education and improving its reputation, this school moved from a D/F to a C-rated campus. Aldine ISD applied for six more schools to participate in this work, a testament to the positive impact.

FULTON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT
City

After working with school leaders and developing a coherence model for aligning all work and building capacity, all schools in this district moved off the accountability list in a record 18 months.

HONEOYE FALLS-LIMA CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Suburban

According to the superintendent, this district was designated, in consecutive years, as a leader among "the fastest gap-closing schools in the state." These results were attributed largely to the transformation of the systems facilitated by PLC School Improvement process and the development of comprehensive school and district plans.

CANISTEO-GREENWOOD CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Rural

This district was placed back in good standing after two intensive years of work with the PLC School Improvement process. Not only did schools and the district move into good standing, the Superintendent reported moving from the academic bottom within the region, to second-highest math scores in the region.

Education Elements is a national education consulting firm with a mission to shape a more equitable and just future by changing how people design for each student's potential. Our School Improvement and Redesign process has been proven to be consistently effective. **For over 30 years**, through our partner PLC Associates, **our school improvement process has moved dozens of schools off the accountability list**. Education Elements and PLC Associates are Scholarus Learning companies.

Conclusion

Improving and redesigning schools is complex and challenging work. While efforts have been made for decades with mixed success, the work must continue. It's time for new efforts built on a foundation of strategies and processes that are evidence- and research-based and proven to work. We must constantly strive to create environments that are equitable, inclusive, and focused on student success. Successful school improvement is built on commitment to leadership, with opportunities for leadership development, and commitment to creating opportunities for learning at all levels, not students alone. By using the four steps purposefully designed for results outlined in this paper – diagnose, plan, implement, and sustain – leaders can create more meaningful, sustainable change in their schools.

It's time to take on this school improvement challenge. By confronting often-overlooked issues with a guided, focused approach, we can create schools that truly serve all students and prepare them for success in college, career, and life.

Penny Ciaburri is a Vice President & General Manager at Scholarus Learning. She developed the PLC School Improvement Process, used at Education Elements, to ensure that teachers, school and district leaders would be able to consistently and successfully apply research-based best practices. She is an educator with decades of experience in schools. This past year, more than 20 districts, and more than 50 schools - in partnership with her - were able to exit school improvement status.

Emory Roethel is a Senior Director of Operations at Scholarus Learning. He has successfully worked with dozens of schools through the PLC School Improvement Process. He is a former principal, district leader, and an adjunct professor. And, he is completely committed to working with schools and organizations to achieve results.