# INVOLVING EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

UNDERSTANDING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In order to effectively involve external stakeholders (i.e., families and community members) in school improvement efforts, district and school leaders in Utah must first understand the facets of the state's continuous improvement cycle. [1] Educational leaders should also be familiar with the broader science around school improvement in order to effectively introduce improvement initiatives to district and school staff, students' families, and the wider community. [2] Without the prerequisite knowledge of investigating problems of practice, finding potential solutions to those problems, and evaluating the short- and long-term effects of chosen solutions relative to the problem, district and school leaders will be unable to execute any school improvement cycle successfully, let alone engage external stakeholders in the process.[3]

Utah's Continuous Improvement Cycle
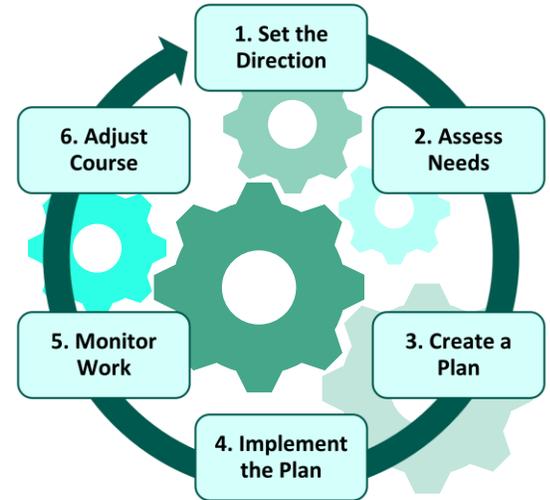
Source: Utah State Board of Education[4]

Generally, districts and schools need to follow the continuous improvement or school turnaround guidelines outlined by the federal government and their state education agency, though there is often flexibility embedded in these guidelines.[5] In Utah, the Utah Continuous Improvement Cycle represents "the centerpiece of Utah's approach" to school improvement.[6] Importantly, this continuous improvement cycle emphasizes the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement published by the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd (located **here**): turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift.[7]

The Six Core Principles of Educational Improvement

MAKE THE WORK PROBLEM-SPECIFIC AND USER-CENTERED	SEE THE SYSTEM THAT PRODUCES THE CURRENT OUTCOMES
Districts and schools should focus on problems of practice and desired improvements. They should also empower school staff and other stakeholders in developing and implementing solutions that may apply to these problems or improvement areas.	Districts and schools should seek to understand school and community dynamics that generate specific outcomes. Understanding existing conditions and processes will help them understand what areas of school operations should be changed.
ANCHOR PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT IN DISCIPLINED INQUIRY	**PERFORMANCE VARIATION IS THE CORE PROBLEM TO ADDRESS**
Districts and schools should engage in repeated cycles of "Plan, Do, Study, Act" to test hypotheses around improvements. They should investigate problems, implement and study solutions, and tinker with chosen solutions as necessary.	Districts and schools must determine what strategies work for which populations of students and under what conditions. Likewise, districts and schools should scale processes while acknowledging that some challenges require specialized expertise.
SCHOOLS CANNOT IMPROVE AT SCALE WITHOUT DATA	**ACCELERATE IMPROVEMENTS VIA NETWORKED COMMUNITIES**
Changes must be measured to determine impact. Districts and schools should use measurable indicators of key outcomes and processes and available data to determine if changes represent improvement, maintain the status quo, or have adverse impacts.	Districts and schools should connect with expert practitioners and external partners to support ongoing improvement efforts. External perspectives and technical assistance help generate innovation, improve problem-solving, and expand improvement capacity.

Source: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Medium[8]

Key Questions to Coordinate Improvement Efforts

- ❓ What do educators need to know about improvement? What do they need to be able to do?
- ❓ What do families and communities need to know about improvement? What do they need to be able to do?
- ❓ What are some important talking points or common messages to share with all stakeholder audiences?
- ❓ How can logistical information and data relevant to school improvement be presented clearly and transparently to staff, families, and community members?
- ❓ What feedback or input is being sought from each audience? Are there specific audiences that should be prioritized in a given cycle of improvement?
- ❓ Which communication methods are best for each audience to solicit the desired feedback or input?
- ❓ Are there any potential problems with outreach, logistics, or other dynamics we should anticipate?
- ❓ How will we strengthen relationships between educators, families, and communities to drive improvement?
- ❓ How can we build the knowledge and skills of educators, families, and communities to support improvements?

Source: California Department of Education[13]

COMMUNICATING ABOUT IMPROVEMENT

Districts and schools must support students, families, and communities in understanding the motivating reasons and performance dynamics driving a given cycle of school improvement to increase the chances of success. [9] Effective communication via multiple methods (e.g., email, websites, public forums) is essential to family and community engagement in and comprehension of improvement efforts. [10] Such communication efforts should be "open and honest[…]even if [they are] uncomfortable" so that families and community members understand the current challenges that are behind a district's or school's improvement efforts.[11] This is especially important, given the breadth of potential challenges that could be addressed via school improvement.[12]

District and school performance extend across all student outcomes, personnel actions, policy levels, and returns on resources. Thus, an institution's overall performance represents the totality of its performance in each of these areas, resulting from a complex interplay of the inputs and outputs of educational operations and stakeholder interactions.[14] Notably, the factors that can be addressed via school improvement actions extend across four primary areas: students' academic achievement (e.g., standardized test scores); instructional quality (e.g., percentage of highly-effective teachers); participation in school activities (e.g., attendance); and school climate (e.g., disciplinary incidents).[15]

Potential Indicators of School Performance

CATEGORY	INDICATORS	
Inputs	■ Financial (e.g., expenditures per student) ■ Personnel (e.g., student-teacher ratio) ■ Facilities, equipment, and materials	■ School policy/law ■ Student demographics and attributes
Processes	■ Curriculum and instruction ■ Implementation of policies ■ Diverse educational opportunities	■ Family involvement ■ Leadership (e.g., planning, style)
Outcomes	■ Student achievement and accomplishments ■ Stakeholder attitudes and perceptions ■ Student and staff attendance	■ Student retention and dropout rates ■ School safety and discipline

Source: National Education Association[16]

District and school leaders must determine what problems of practice a given cycle of improvement will address and how those problems will be tackled. They should then communicate this information to families, community members, and staff.[17] Essentially, districts and schools should clearly state the specific performance outcomes (e.g., low math scores) or gaps (e.g., lower language arts scores by students receiving free and reduced-price lunch) they wish to improve, the actions that specific stakeholder groups will take to support improvements, and the anticipated results of those actions. [18] Current challenges should be clear to internal and external stakeholders, and districts and schools should explain how those stakeholders will act to combat existing obstacles and support improvements.[19]

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Communicating the "What," "Why," and "How" to External Stakeholders

THE "WHAT"	THE "WHY"	THE "HOW"
Districts and schools should articulate what achievement outcomes and opportunity or excellence gaps they hope to address via a given round of school improvement to clarify the scope of those improvement efforts.	Districts and schools should explain their reasoning for focusing on the "what." Educational leaders should outline the logic behind targeting a specific outcome or gap and why doing so benefits students.	Districts and schools should be transparent about the strategies and timetable they will use to drive improvements. Communication must also address the role of families and communities in school improvement.

Source: Ed Direction, Cicero Institute[20]

SOLICITING STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN AND PARTICIPATION

Importantly, the involvement of all school stakeholders—including families and community members—constitutes a key component of school improvement practices deployed by state and local education agencies.[21] Successful collaboration with students' families, community-based organizations, and local citizens can yield a number of benefits for schools and the students they serve by strengthening the system of available supports for student learning and development.[22] Indeed, research convincingly determines that "[p]arent, family, and community involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement."[23]

Creating a strong district and school community that equips families and community partners to engage in the strenuous work of school improvement requires a clear focus on building support, fostering responsibility and accountability, and establishing mechanisms of exchange for services, resources, and expertise.[24] Likewise, districts and schools should include families and community members in planning and executing improvement efforts in tangible ways to promote connections to local schools, foster collective responsibility for student success, and account for stakeholders' diverse perspectives. School improvement often requires major changes to organizational structures, academic offerings, and instructional practices, so keeping families and community members informed of these changes, involved in the decisions about changes, and active in implementing changes can limit resistance and minimize the potential for organized opposition.[25] Meaningful parent engagement "in their child's learning, progress, interests, and long-term goals" is also a designated practice within the culture shift domain of the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement central to the Utah Continuous Improvement Cycle.[26]

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Spotlight Strategy: Gaining Support for School Improvement from Key Influencers

Explanation: School improvement efforts must have the support of key influencers to be successful. Indeed, achieving dramatic change in a low-performing school requires stakeholders to acknowledge previous shortcomings and invest in a new vision for excellence. Some members of the school community—including families and teachers—may be reluctant to support turnaround efforts due to negative past experiences or fear of change. Successful districts and schools identify key influencers (e.g., trusted teachers, family members, influential community members) and enlist their help to build support and decrease opposition to specific school improvement strategies.

Example Usage: One principal entered his new job informed by research and driven by a theory that parents could create a demand for lasting change. He was bothered at how easily the rapid success of so many school turnaround efforts faltered when the charismatic leader departed. He believed that parents were the key, and that if parents demanded quality education for their children, the school's improvement would not dissipate when he left. He noticed that parent demand had a great influence on higher-performing schools. So, through parent engagement classes, he taught parents how to engage with the school and how to hold the school accountable. This principal viewed this effort as so crucial to his turnaround effort that he defined it as his first and highest priority: engaging parents to set the culture and climate of the school. After multiple parent engagement efforts, the school culture and student achievement improved.

Source: Center on School Turnaround, WestEd[27]

Practices to Solicit and Act on Internal and External Stakeholder Input

COALESCE AROUND ISSUES	ENSURE RELEVANT PARTICIPATION	WORK TOGETHER
At the District Level		
▪ Administer a diagnostic instrument to solicit feedback from staff, families, students, and community members early in the school improvement process, with periodic follow-up to assess perceptions of the school and turnaround effort ▪ Provide training for school leaders on assessing stakeholder perceptions and acting on what they learn	▪ Support schools in engaging stakeholders to build a shared vision ▪ Provide opportunities for schools to see how they can contribute to a district vision that supports them in achieving their own goals while working toward broader district goals ▪ Make sure feedback mechanisms are user-friendly and free of jargon	▪ Be consistent in establishing cross-school dialogue and learning ▪ Use the alignment of foundational tools to provide deeper learning opportunities across turnaround sites
At the School Level		
▪ Learn what constituents think about school improvement via surveys, forums, and focus groups ▪ Share and act on what is learned ▪ Take constituent input into account when making decisions ▪ Consistently demonstrate that all voices are heard	▪ Attend to diverse perspectives and be intentional about reaching out to supporters and critics ▪ Establish routines for interacting with stakeholders ▪ Create opportunities for stakeholders to take on new roles	▪ Pay attention to supporters of the turnaround effort and detractors from the effort ▪ Interact with both supporters and detractors regularly to understand better what may drive and constrain change

Source: Center on School Turnaround and National Center for Systemic Improvement, WestEd[28]

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Family and community engagement must be a priority inherent in school improvement, and districts and school leaders should create an infrastructure to support engagement in multiple forms. In addition to communicating proactively with external stakeholders using traditional and nontraditional methods, districts and schools should also invite and respond to feedback from families and community members. Importantly, families and community members should have opportunities to comment on decisions related to school improvement before they are made.[29] Opportunities should also exist for families and community members to take an active role in improving student outcomes and school operations.[30]

Strategies for Engaging Families and Community Members in School Improvement

- Establish social networks between families and community members to spur collective action around improvement
- Provide parents, guardians, and community members with leadership opportunities via committee membership and participation in working groups
- Train family and community members to participate effectively within assumed leadership opportunities
- Offer family classes on important academic and developmental topics (e.g., supporting literacy at home, advocating for one's children)
- Encourage families to support their children at home in various ways (e.g., homework help, discussing school)
- Encourage families and community members to engage with the school in various ways (e.g., parent-teacher communication, attendance at forums on improvement)

- Communicate with families and community members about school improvement on a routine basis
- Support staff in establishing and maintaining working relationships with families and community members
- Reinforce that district and school staff, families, and community members should hold high expectations of students and the school system
- Teach families and community members to analyze data
- Be transparent about district and school performance in all areas, especially those related to strategic goals
- Create a welcoming climate that respects diversity and invites family and community participation
- Express a sincere and honest desire to work with families and communities around school improvement

Source: Multiple[31]

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ADDITIONAL READING

The following reports and resources delve further into some of the topics discussed in this document and can provide additional context to support district and school leaders in better understanding school improvement and how to involve external stakeholders in turnaround efforts.

RESOURCE	PUBLISHING ORGANIZATION	SHORTENED URL (with embedded hyperlink)	QR CODE
"Examples of Actions Taken by Principals Trying to Lead Turnaround"[32]	Center on School Turnaround, WestEd	https://qrgo.page.link/ix6N2	
"Expanded Measures of School Performance"[33]	RAND Corporation	https://qrgo.page.link/m4Xqi	
"Family Engagement Toolkit: Continuous Improvement Through an Equity Lens"[34]	California Department of Education	https://qrgo.page.link/tLx8k	
"Five Criteria for Effective Stakeholder Engagement in Education"[35]	Thoughtexchange	https://qrgo.page.link/juw36	
"Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework"[36]	Center on School Turnaround, WestEd	https://qrgo.page.link/1ZVYE	
"Handbook on Family and Community Engagement"[37]	School Community Network, Academic Development Institute	https://qrgo.page.link/YZj8m	

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RESOURCE	PUBLISHING ORGANIZATION	SHORTENED URL (with embedded hyperlink)	QR CODE
"How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Improve Student Achievement and Influence School Reform: Literature Review"[38]	American Institutes for Research and Nellie Mae Education Foundation	https://qrgo.page.link/HzrEe	
"Shifting School Culture to Spark Rapid Improvement"[39]	Center on School Turnaround, WestEd	https://qrgo.page.link/jGdJc	
"Strategies for Community Engagement in School Turnaround"[40]	Reform Support Network	https://qrgo.page.link/3gDzq	
"The Engagement Playbook: A Toolkit for Engaging Stakeholders Around the Four Domains of Rapid School Improvement"[41]	Center on School Turnaround and National Center for Systemic Improvement, WestEd	https://qrgo.page.link/FSjFW	
"Unlocking Potential: A Tool to Support Ongoing, Meaningful Engagement with Stakeholders"[42]	Oregon Department of Education	https://qrgo.page.link/iYrtr	
"Utah System of Support for School Improvement"[43]	Utah State Board of Education	https://qrgo.page.link/yrpxt	

Source: The QR Code Generator[44]

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