



Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching

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IMPROVING FOR IMPACT AND EQUITY: VOICES OF THE IMPROVER COMMUNITY

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Educators and communities today are working to address an array of deeply rooted systemic challenges as they pursue their commitment to support every student to learn and thrive. There is real urgency to address the barriers to providing an equitable and excellent education in order for every learner to see a brighter future. A growing group in the field of education — in schools and districts, colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations and state agencies — are taking on these challenges with passion and energy. Working locally and collaborating widely, they are bringing disciplined continuous improvement and improvement science practices to bear in the service of transforming education systems and what those systems enable the students they serve to achieve.

With all that the field of education faces, it is more important now than ever to understand how equity challenges are being addressed and the ways of working that are contributing to real progress on outcomes that educators and communities deeply care about. In the spring of 2023, we at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching set out to gather stories from people who identify as using continuous improvement and improvement science in their work across the field of education. Our purpose was to enable the improvement community, collectively, to begin to make sense of where the community is today and what it needs going forward in order to continue getting better at getting better.

More than 300 people offered reflections about their experiences and their work through a survey, interviews, user-generated video reflections, or focus group conversations. Representing a wide range of roles in education as well as years of experience with continuous improvement practices, they shared stories about the challenges they are using improvement science to address, how their work has changed through using improvement, and why they continue to turn to improvement science to

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reach their goals. People were also invited to share reflections about what has enabled their work, and to look ahead to what might support more widespread use of improvement.

As we listened to and read what participants contributed, a shared improver identity emerged. Through all of the differences of context and focus that people described, we identified strong themes in what was important to them in their work. What follows is a summary of those key themes, each illustrated by a representative quote from the data that was collected. There are many more voices included in the full report that illustrate the commonalities and variation in responses. What participants elevated also sparked our own reflections about what might be needed to strengthen this emerging field, which we summarize following the quotes.

Improvers are working on a diverse set of systemic challenges.

Improvement science is being used to make progress on solving a wide range of problems. Literacy outcomes, attendance or chronic absenteeism, and student discipline or suspension were the most common challenges that were specifically named, with math outcomes and graduation rates or students' progress towards being on-track to graduate identified only slightly less frequently. The following quotes illustrate the broad problem areas improvers are focused on addressing:

- **Improvers are focused on academic outcomes:** “We are working to improve educational outcomes, specifically for students of color and multilingual learners. At the moment, we are focused exclusively on improving outcomes for high school mathematics.”
— Program Manager, public school district
- **Improvers are focused on equity challenges:** “We seek to identify, interrupt and transform inequities facing our least-reached students. We seek to interrogate bias and connect it to our practices and our impact on students and families.”
— Executive Director, non-profit organization
- **Improvers seek to transform organizations through improvement:** “Currently, we are using Improvement Science to improve our systems for coaching and feedback; however, in a larger sense, we are using IS to establish and/or improve the systems that make a school function at a high level: coaching/feedback, instruction, engagement, PLCs, etc.”
— Consultant, state education agency

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Improvers celebrate impact on outcomes, on people, and on systems.

When invited to share what they had accomplished through their improvement work, participants described positive impacts on aims and outcomes, increased capability for continuous improvement, and changes in ways that they work with others. More than 90% of survey respondents identified achievements in two or more of those areas. As participants summarized their accomplishments in their own words, common areas of accomplishment emerged, including:

- **Student academic outcomes and experiences:** “Our efforts to utilize improvement science to address the experiential and performance disparities that exist for black and brown boys within our schools has led to shifts and improvements in students’ experiences. The most significant improvements have come from the adult to student relationships and students’ sense of belonging in schools.”
— Senior Leader, non-profit organization
- **How people work together:** “The increased collaboration with colleagues around this work has been the most powerful impact to our system. We have created the conditions for conversations to happen across divisions, schools, grade bands, and roles.... This work has elevated teacher voice and increased communication between educators and the leadership in their buildings.”
— Coach/Instructional Coordinator, public school district
- **How data is used:** “ Teachers in our network have made data-based changes to their practice and learned from each others’ successful ideas. They are using data that centers student voice.”
— Researcher
- **Organizational culture:** “...[T]he ways in which my colleagues think about and talk about our work has changed significantly. We are becoming more adept at recognizing our solutionitis and working to identify the problems first.”
— Central Office Administrator, public school district
- **The systems where it is used:** “[We] Revamped the school quality (improvement) process for a large district to become more about quality and less about compliance.”
— District Administrator

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What improvement looks like in practice

The tools, methods, and dispositions of improvement science stand in contrast to conventional knowing, doing and problem solving in education. To understand what improvement work looks like in that context, we invited project participants to share how and why they use improvement in their work. Although we did not specifically seek to understand the role of the six improvement principles in practice, in our efforts to summarize we recognized shifts in language, culture, and practice that had resonance with those principles. The following themes emerged about how improvement shapes the actions and guides understandings of those who practice it:

- **Improvement is disciplined:** “Improvement science tools help provide structure to the work involved in exploring complex problems/challenges, and every challenge in schools is a complex one. They also help us see past our assumptions/gut feelings about an issue and get to the heart of what might really be getting in the way of success.”
— Instructional Coach, public school district
- **Improvement is results-oriented:** “I use it because we can see change. We can see what’s working and not leave it up to chance.”
— Director, non-profit organization
- **Improvement centers different stakeholders:** “My team aims to improve our educational system, improvement science allows us to do that in a deliberate and sustainable way that involves those impacted by changes to play key roles in the development, design, implementation and potential adoption of changes.”
— Professor
- **Improvement is systemic:** “We don’t want to just impact a team or a site. So in the last year or so , we’ve been really focusing in on how we can really impact that system, the whole system, the district system. [With improvement science], it’s not just the approach that [is] sustainable , but the systems themselves are sustainable. Really, what we see are the fundamentals that we want to help improve so that they can continue improving those and going deeper after we’re gone.”
— Focus Group Participant

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- **Improvement is collaborative:** “We have found that focusing on small changes that seem manageable for educators has allowed for bigger changes to take place as time goes on. Improvement science has given our network a way to collaborate, reflect and share what is working, focusing in a meaningful way.”
— Coach, non-profit organization
- **Improvement is transformative for individuals:** “I am willing to try things quickly and then learn from them. I used to think you needed to spend forever planning before execution but now I am more willing to take risks and then pause, reflect and adjust to meet the needs of clients and students.”
— Coach, non-profit organization
- **Improvement is empowering and requires perseverance:** “I have seen how the methods can deeply empower teachers -- the methodology causes shifts in self-perception and modes of engagement with one’s own work and learning. This can spark a transformation in self-understanding that is beneficial beyond the targeted area of improvement.”
— Program Coordinator, private school

Improvers’ challenges and needs

Participants in the focus groups and survey were invited to share what they believed enabled and hindered their abilities to accomplish what they have with their use of improvement science, as well as what more would support their work and make the use of improvement science and continuous improvement more common in education. Across the responses we heard improvers articulate a set of challenges and needs that, if met, would strengthen and grow improvement practice in education, including:

- **The future of improvement demands commitment.** Buy-in and commitment to reimagine roles and ways of working over time were repeatedly identified as enabling success with improvement. “[What enabled our work was] Being brave, willingness and ability to gather outside of work hours.”
— Coach, public school district.

“Commitment to the long haul [made the accomplishment possible].”
— Senior leader, nonprofit organization

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- **The future of improvement needs to grow top-down and bottom-up.** Ensuring that teachers were “part of the change process” that introduces improvement and integrates it into current initiatives was seen as vital, as was support from leaders. “Leaders must believe in it; cultural shifting is required for organizational shift.”
— District administrator
- **The future of improvement requires education-specific materials and matter.** To support broader use, participants wished for improvement to be integrated into educator preparation, as well as for examples that did not require translation from another field. “[We need] Models for how to integrate improvement into the regular business of school”
— Researcher
- **The future of improvement requires widespread dissemination of proof points and data solutions:** “Part of [the challenge] is we don’t have the data infrastructure ... for a lot of places to do [improvement science]. I think access to data, the ability to ask the right learning questions, create the right data displays, and have people be able to understand and interpret the data in order to be able to tease apart some of the things that [arise] is a huge stumbling block. On so many different levels, our systems are not equipped to be able to capitalize or use data in the way that is necessary in order to drive really meaningful improvement.”
— Focus group participant
- **The future of improvement needs community:** “I think this this idea of professional learning communities and affinity groups to get people together around common problems of practice and have and sort of accelerate the learning could be a model for this community because there is still a lot to learn and and we are sort of doing it in pockets and sharing once a year.”
— Focus group participant

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Opportunities we hear for the future

In this project, we heard multiple headlines and stories about people's experiences with using improvement science, what they find challenging and rewarding, and why they remain committed to using it. As we reflected on the set of stories shared through this project, we saw learning challenges for improvement science in education that invite action. In particular, recognizing the limitations in the racial and geographic diversity of those that participated in this project, we must strive for more inclusivity and diversity as we continue to understand how improvement is practiced and experienced. We also see opportunities to deepen understanding of how to effectively advance equity using improvement, to strengthen collaboration between research, policy, and practice, and to create social learning structures to strengthen ties among improvers.

As part of the community of improvers, we at Carnegie are committed to elevating and crafting with others more stories of continuously improving that translate into transforming systems and getting the results we know young people deserve. We look forward to continuing the learning journey together.



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