



## PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Improvement problems are born out of a recognition that there is a gap between current performance and aspirations. As you start to investigate your system, you will need to answer the question – *What is the specific problem we need to address?* A carefully defined, specific problem statement can help to focus a team's work and communicate its value to stakeholders.

When crafting a problem statement, it is important to:

- Be specific and concrete. To the extent it's possible, identify and quantify the gap in outcomes.
- Avoid solutionitis. Your problem should not contain an implied solution!
- Stay user-centered. Who does this problem most impact? Engage those closest to the problem in defining the most pressing aspect(s) of the problem to address.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PROBLEM STATEMENTS

A well-articulated problem statement **identifies and quantifies the gap** in outcomes or performance that you believe needs to be improved and are committed to addressing. The problem statement should be specific about **who is impacted by the problem** (teachers, students, etc.) and **where the problem occurs** (organizational level, subject, grade, etc.). It is typically a **succinct statement** (1-2 sentences) and **includes operational definitions** of terms.

### Example Problem Statements:

Less than half of Community College students get a diploma within 6 years.

70% of community college students that place into developmental math never receive college math credit.

Literacy achievement is currently far below expectations with just 14% of 8th grade students and 17% of 10th grade students districtwide Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on the state assessment, with results even lower for African American and Latino students.

## CONSIDERATIONS IN SCOPING THE PROBLEM

When refining a problem statement, consider the following:

- 1. Problem has defined parameters**
  - a. For whom does this problem manifest?
  - b. What is the system or process producing this problem?
  - c. Who has direct influence on making changes in this system or process?
- 2. Problem is measurable**
  - a. What are your success measures for this problem? Are those measures of success compelling to those experiencing the problem day-to-day?
  - b. What are the gaps between aspirations and current performance?
- 3. Problem is aligned with organizational priorities**
  - a. Why is addressing this problem a priority to your school/organization?
  - b. Where is there will and motivation for improvement among your colleagues?