



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT MAP

A **system improvement map** is an analytic tool that represents learnings from investigating the problem and system about the different organizational levels and key organizational subsystems (e.g., human resources, finance, instruction) relevant to solving the identified problem.¹

A system improvement map is a visual snapshot that represents a collective understanding of the system and helps a group identify areas of improvement and questions for further investigation. It encourages individuals to zoom out to see the entire system and notice interactions between different structures, processes, and norms in the system. It can also help teams identify places within the system where breakdowns could be occurring and where changes to work processes could be introduced and tested for effectiveness.

KEY SYSTEM ELEMENTS

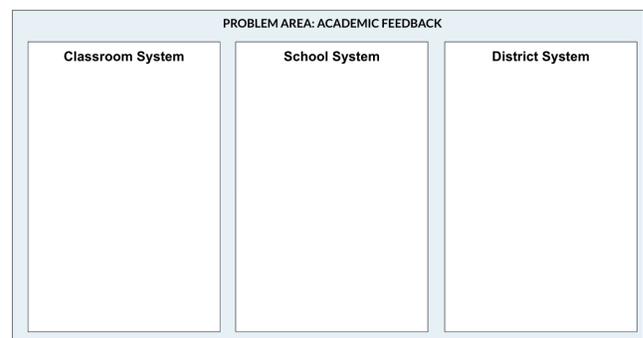
When visualizing a system and representing it in a system improvement map, it is helpful to consider the key elements of most systems – structures, processes, and norms.

- **Structures:** May include organizational policies and departments or other groupings in an organization; as well as the physical design of a space or product, technological elements, and the overarching architecture of available software (e.g., learning management system, communication platform, attendance tracking program, etc.)
- **Processes:** A system's workflow – how things are accomplished, what steps are taken and in what order
- **Norms:** Written and unwritten rules that govern the behavior of members of the system

HOW TO CREATE A SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT MAP

STEP 1: Prior to creating a system improvement map, determine a problem or challenge area and investigate potential root causes. Based on the root causes identified, **select key organizational levels** at which different processes, structures, and norms related to the problem operate to include on the map.

In this example, the problem area selected was academic feedback – how grades get determined, feedback occurs to students and families, and communication occurs (or does not occur) when warning signals about possible course failure start to emerge. The team highlighted three organizational levels for their map: the classroom (teacher-student) system where grades are created and communication and intervention occurs; and the school and district levels, which may have policies and practices related to grading, communication, and interventions that impact course completion and failures.²



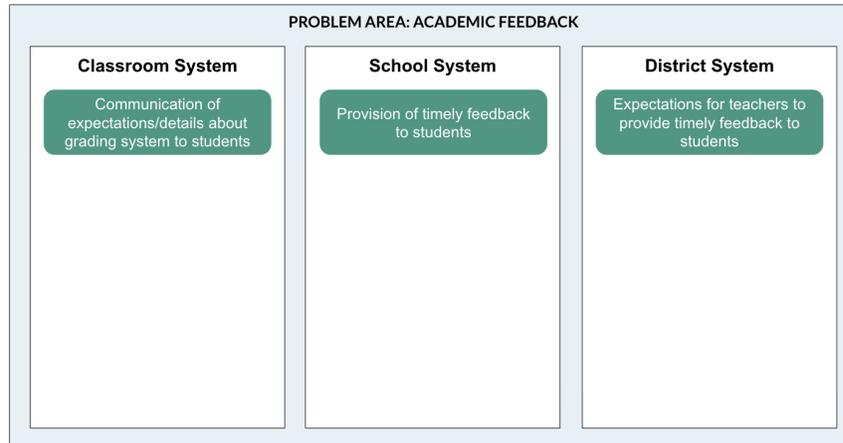
¹ Adapted from: Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

² Adapted from: Martha MacIver and Bob Balfanz (2021). *Continuous Improvement in High Schools: Helping More Students Succeed*. Harvard Education Press.



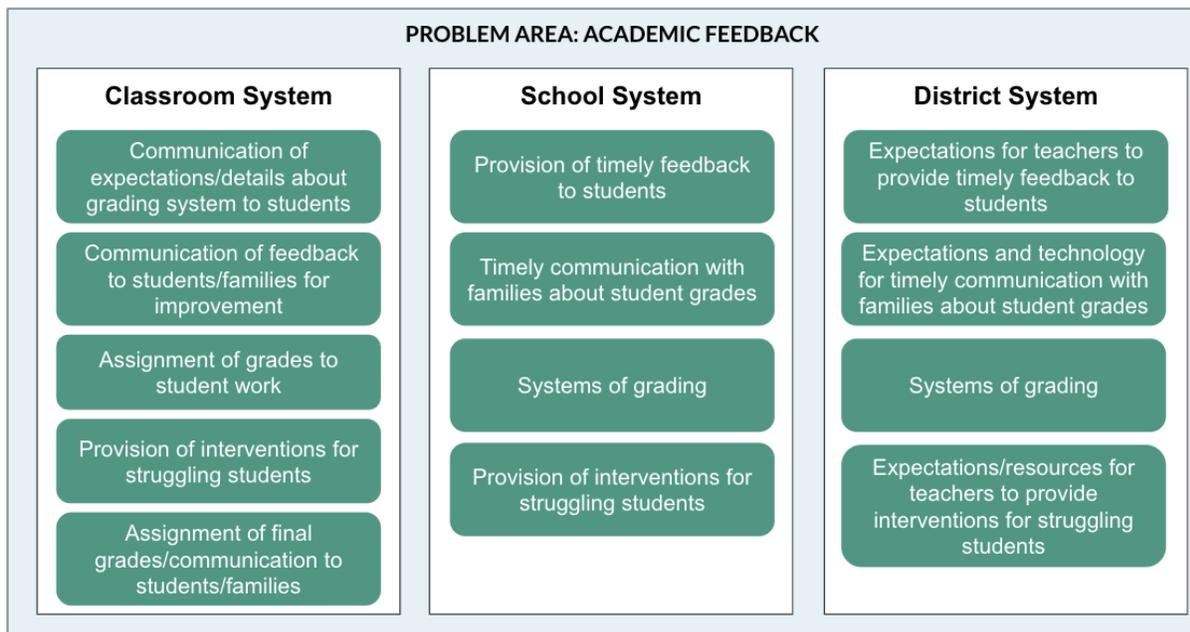
STEP 2: At each organizational level, **identify the processes, structures and norms that influence the problem.** Add these elements to the system improvement map. Consider where there is likely to be wide variation in quality or outcomes and evidence from root cause analysis. Also, look for common challenges that might be seen across organizational levels (related policies, structures and norms).

This team identified the process by which individual teachers communicate with students and parents about academic performance as a process that varied significantly in different classrooms. They also identified similar processes around communication with families at the school and district levels as related challenges.



STEP 3: Identify any **additional key processes, structures, or norms** that are relevant to the problem across organizational levels to continue building the map.

In the completed example of a system improvement map below, another process within the classroom system identified was the assignment of grades to student work. At both the classroom and school levels, processes related to how interventions are provided for struggling students were also identified.



STEP 4: Review and **analyze map to identify potential areas for improvement or where to investigate further**, paying close attention to interdependent processes, structures, and norms impacting the problem where changes might be tested for effectiveness. The map may also be a tool to help identify places where those involved with the improvement effort have the most agency to effect change.