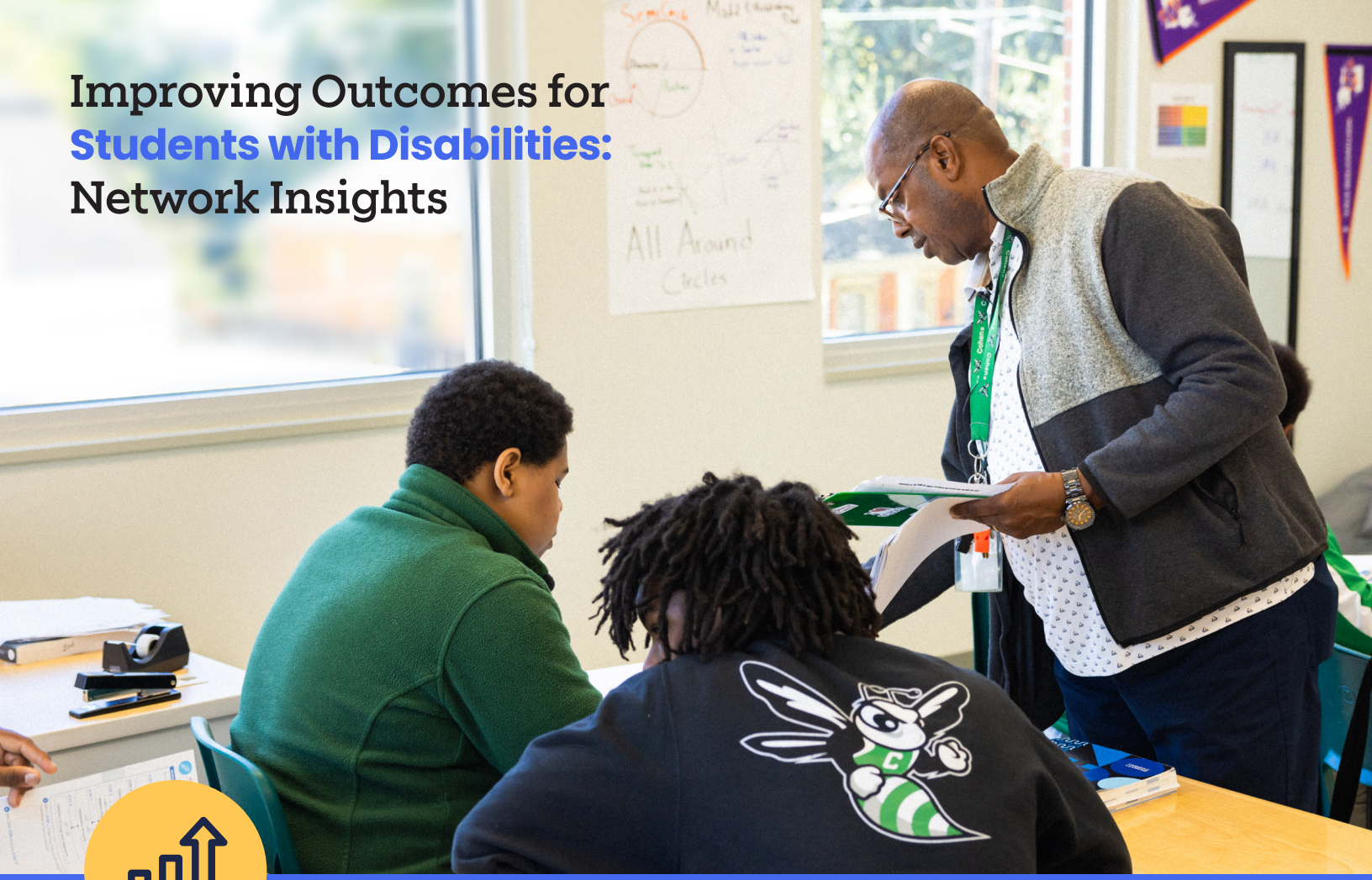
Improving Outcomes for
Students with Disabilities:
Network Insights



Brief 4:

Continuous Quality Commitment: Iterative Learning Cycles to Meet System Challenges

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Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of research briefs and related videos sharing best practices and lessons learned to help educators and policymakers create schools that support students with disabilities (SWDs). These briefs focus on using the principles of improvement science—a systematic method of ongoing testing and learning, i.e., continuous improvement—to better serve SWDs. These principles define continuous improvement as problem-focused; centered on students; iterative; disciplined; data- and evidence-based; and connected across schools, central offices, and other networks.[1]

These lessons emerged through a 3-year Networked Improvement Community (NIC) focused on 10 charter management organizations (CMOs) working to create dramatic gains for SWDs who are Black, Latina/o, and/or experiencing poverty. Over 3 years, we interviewed CMO team members responsible for improvement efforts and collected data about implementation efforts and student outcomes. Although the research briefs are based on findings in the charter sector, the lessons learned are applicable to any school.

The briefs explore:

Brief 1:
Systems Change to Support Students with Disabilities
View Brief 1 [PDF, 12 pages]

Brief 2:
Centering Students with Disabilities to Create Powerful Change
View Brief 2 [PDF, 15 pages]

Brief 3:
Champions for Change: Two Essential Roles for an Effective Improvement Team
View Brief 3 [PDF, 12 pages]

Brief 4:
Continuous Quality Commitment: Iterative Learning Cycles to Meet System Challenges

Brief 5:
Get Ready, Stay Ready: Will and Capacity Checks Along the Improvement Journey
View Brief 5 [PDF, 15 pages]

[1]Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Six Core Principles of Improvement. Retrieved from https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-work/improvement-in-education/six-core-principles-improvement/.

Continuous Quality Improvement

Teams enacting continuous quality improvement (CQI) in schools have the power to change systems[2] in service of students with disabilities when the improvement work is of high quality. CQI is an iterative, disciplined framework where teams rapidly and repeatedly test new practices (often called "change ideas") in the field. This type of collective improvement work requires the teams designing and leading the effort—known as "improvement teams"[3]—to commit to a new way of working rather than traditional approaches of "one and done." The traditional approach often assumes that a one-time change can be powerful with little evidence of success or sustained implementation. Instead, in CQI, improvement teams work together to robustly identify areas in need of improvement, systematically test change ideas, implement those change ideas consistently with fidelity, and analyze ongoing evidence of impact. Accordingly, CMOs choosing to engage in CQI as a way of better serving students with disabilities need to learn new ways of identifying high-leverage changes that can powerfully support student success.

Although various forms of CQI approaches exist, they are all grounded in a consistent set of principles and practices. In this brief, we highlight three specific practices, common across different forms of CQI, that CMOs in the NIC used in their CQI work:

Key Terms

Change idea: A specific, actionable idea for improving a process or outcome.

Improvement team: The team designing and leading a continuous improvement effort.

Continuous and sustained testing: Iteratively testing change ideas through ongoing, repeated cycles is essential to learning about which practices best serve students and maintaining momentum in the improvement work.

Ongoing use of data: Routinizing the use of data is essential to ensuring that changes first enacted with small groups of teachers and students are meaningfully reducing barriers to student success.

Learning from failures as much as successes: Testing new practices will regularly result in both failures and successes. Learning from failures is as much a part of the CQI process as identifying and scaling successful ideas.

[2]See Systems Change to Support Students with Disabilities for more information about how continuous quality improvement can support systems change.

[3]See Champions for Change: Two Essential Roles for an Effective Improvement Team for more information about what improvement teams are and how they work together.

Continuous and sustained testing

> *When you let people participate in the design process, you find that they often have ingenious ideas about what would really help them. And it's not a one-time thing; it's an iterative process."*
>
> **Melinda Gates**

Rapid testing cycles of new ideas are key to CQI; these cycles differentiate CQI from other frameworks organizations might use to improve. This approach to testing new ideas before use rather than rushing to immediately implement them at scale increases the chances that new practices are well-suited for their settings, adapted for people's particular needs, and sustainable. Here are several ways that CMOs in the NIC effectively used data in their improvement teams.

- **Iterative testing results in better tools and practice.** Any school's or CMO's first experience with a new tool or practice is rarely going to fully realize its potential. Change ideas need to be tested to understand which parts are working well, which can be improved, and which can be dropped entirely. The cyclic testing process with ongoing feedback and iterative improvement results in more-effective and more-powerful results for teachers and their students with disabilities. Collegiate Academies devoted much of their time to developing new progress monitoring tools for their teachers working most closely with their students with disabilities, and the improvement team found the iterative testing process essential to developing effective tools.

> *We had a first iteration of this tool and our teachers had something to react against, which was, we appreciate the idea that this would do all this work for us, but it's so opaque, it's hard to use. What we'd prefer is just a way to see our students and the standards that they do and don't know, and then we'll take it from there. … And so when we built the second round … we really tried to strip it down to almost nothing except names of students and their data, and then* ***that's when we really started to see those results.***
>
> **Aiden Kelly**, Chief Academic Officer, Collegiate Academies

- **Identifying unexpected challenges and adapting to them.** Even effective change ideas can run into unexpected challenges during the testing process. Identifying these challenges and adaptively responding to them is a key part of the CQI process. For example, STEM Prep tested a new gradebook distribution tool to help teachers promptly identify students with disabilities who may be falling behind and require additional support. Although the tool was highly effective, teachers struggled to use it consistently because of the time it took. The tool needed to be seamless and more efficient for teachers so they could use it with greater regularity.

> *One of the main issues was that the heavy lift and work of doing the copying and pasting from different Excel spreadsheets and from different platforms was falling on the teachers. So the teachers were spending a lot of time pulling data from different platforms and putting them into a common tracker, and that was really laborious. ... We found ways to make this process more efficient for them through doing some of that hard work for them on the front end so that they could spend more time analyzing data and planning around it.* ***Once we lifted that technical burden from them, we were able to go deeper into that adaptive challenge****, which was really to look at that data and make some discoveries in that data.*
>
> **Jeanette Rodriguez Pack**, Chief Academic Officer, STEM Prep Schools

- **Identify and uplift "bright spots" for greater engagement.** Schools and CMOs often look externally for promising practices to test, such as seeking out consultants, new curricula, or new assessments to bring in-house. Many improvement teams in the NIC found that there were "bright spots" already in their schools. Some teachers of students with disabilities were doing strong work and achieving results beyond other classrooms and schools. One administrator at Green Dot described how she identified those teachers and practices:

> *Who are those people in your building that are excited to try something new that maybe are already doing something really great in their classroom but you want to know more about why all your classrooms don't look like this one? Learn more from that person.* ***Learn more from the teacher in your building that is doing some really amazing things that you wish you were seeing in every classroom.***
>
> **Glynis Shulters,** Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools

Ongoing use of data

> *Work can empower the leaders who are charged with doing the improvement work. One of the ways they can do that is setting up regular schedules where they're checking in on a frequent basis, looking at data together, problem solving together, and ensuring that the work is being carried forward."*
>
> **Jeanette Rodriguez Pack**, Chief Academic Officer, STEM Prep Schools

Using data is at the core of any CQI framework. Improvement teams use data in several critical ways: thoroughly understanding the problem the team is trying to solve, learning qualitatively and quantitatively about how teachers and students experience their classrooms, and measuring improvement at multiple times to identify successful change ideas. Here are several ways that CMOs in the NIC effectively used data in their improvement teams.

- **Thoroughly understanding the problem to be solved.** CQI is a disciplined process that involves using data to understand the current situation before brainstorming what may help solve the problem. In doing so, improvement teams develop shared, data-driven understandings of what the problem is, which makes it easier to identify areas ripe for improvement and lets teams enact change ideas with more consistency. Green Dot found that taking a slower, more evidence-based approach to understanding the pain points their students with disabilities were experiencing yielded major benefits in testing out new practices.

> *There was some resistance on our end with certain things that felt unfamiliar to us. Spending months analyzing a problem without throwing solutions at it was definitely an odd situation for us. ... Why that's super powerful for us is when you get really nuanced and learn exactly how things should be going and* ***understanding what works and what doesn't work,*** *you get that fidelity in a way that you don't get when you just try to launch something to lots of people.*
>
> **Glynis Shulters**, Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools

- **Examining outcome data over time.** Constantly assessing and reassessing the success of a change idea using outcome data is the best way to determine whether it is successful. Outcome data relate to a meaningful benchmark of success and can include (for example) student grades (course grades, assignment grades, etc.), student attendance, or teacher content knowledge. Moreover, using consistent outcome data over time creates a shared understanding around which change ideas are successful and allows for greater communication across schools. Summit's consistent use of outcome data in the improvement team's CQI work enabled strong coordination around successful change ideas between the different schools participating in the NIC.

> ***The data just allowed us to make the collaboration across our focal schools between education specialists more organic and practical for them. … [It was] a game changer for ensuring that whatever data we are using as program people who want to make changes quickly for kids, that what we're actually looking at is: 'Is what we're doing actually reflected in outcomes? Is what we're doing actually improving results? Or is it just a fun project?***
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> **Sharon Johnson,** Senior Director of Specialized Programs, Summit Public Schools

- **Examining process and implementation data.** School staff are generally quite comfortable with looking at improvements in outcomes over time, such as whether students are meeting specific learning targets. CQI requires examining not just outcomes but also processes and whether processes are being enacted as intended. Process data, also often referred to as implementation data, relate to whether change ideas are being enacted as intended and can include (for example) how many students are completing a new universal screening tool or whether teachers are consistently using a new instructional strategy in their lessons. Green Dot learned the critical importance of examining process data as part of their co-planning process. Through examining the specific planning activities teachers were engaged in, the Green Dot improvement team sustainably improved instruction in ways that resulted in greater student success.

> ***We had pretty regularly become accustomed to looking at outcome data. How are students with disabilities in this math class, for example, performing relative to their general education peers? But what we started to look at in addition to that was implementation data. Are teachers in the co-planning setting using the student work analysis protocol properly? Do they understand what steps to take or how to measure gaps using that process? And what does their planning look like? … What this meant for us was the number of D's and F's in co-taught classes started to reduce over time … [and these teachers] also had lower rates of D's and F's in their non co-taught classes."***
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> **Leilani Abulan,** Chief Programs Officer, Green Dot Public Schools

Learning from failures as much as successes

> *I have not failed 10,000 times. I've just found 10,000 ways that will not work."*
>
> **Thomas Edison**

Authentic testing of new ideas and new practices requires being open to discovering that some ideas will work well in your schools and classrooms and other ideas will not. When discovering that a change idea is not improving situations or may even be exacerbating the very problem it was intended to address, effective improvement teams will celebrate the opportunity to learn what didn't work and why. Then, teams will use these lessons to begin work on a new change idea that may better meet the needs of their students with disabilities. Here are two ways that CMOs in the NIC effectively learned from failure.

- **Identifying promising change ideas.** Improvement teams most frequently engage in CQI approaches because they've previously failed to create sustainable improvements in their schools and CMOs. Although these past attempts at improvement may not have created the desired levels of success, these "failed attempts" can still lead to powerful lessons and identify specific areas in need of focused attention. Mastery Charter Schools' postsecondary transition team effectively used past attempts at supporting students in postsecondary planning and success to inform their NIC improvement work.

> *"We looked at our existing system of support for all of our students with disabilities and realized that we had some pretty big holes in our transition model. We weren't prepared to support them in their 12th grade year. We weren't doing strong advising. We had no way to track them if they were prepared to leave us, and then once they left us ... we had very limited opportunities for students not going into two- and four-year colleges.* ***There's a multitude of additional pathways students, all students, especially students with disabilities can take after high school.*** *We settled on targeting those four areas for our project, and through the three years, we were able to really grow in each area."*
>
> **Elizabeth Farruggia,** Deputy Chief of Specialized Services, Mastery Charter Schools

- **Abandoning change ideas that weren't working.** Not all change ideas are going to be successful. Data and participant feedback are critical for understanding which ideas aren't leading to improvement and why, allowing improvement teams to refocus their efforts. Summit learned this lesson in their co-planning work. In their first testing cycle, co-planning time between general education teachers and education specialists focused on lesson planning and differentiation, which was highly effective. However, in later testing cycles, co-planning time focused on reviewing individual students' progress and planning individual instructional moves for those specific students. Teachers didn't find this type of co-planning nearly as valuable. Accordingly, Summit refocused its efforts on lesson planning.

Conclusion

High-quality CQI work in improvement teams can be impactful when done well through the use of regular iterative testing, ongoing data review, and lessons from both failures and successes. As highlighted above, some specific practices can support improvement teams in this work:

- Adapting change ideas throughout the testing process in response to data and challenges
- Collecting and analyzing a variety of data, including both process and outcome data
- Developing a profound, shared understanding of the problem the improvement work is trying to address
- Abandoning change ideas that aren't working

CQI work is challenging. The above quotes and vignettes may appear simple and straightforward, yet the learning processes the improvement teams worked through to develop their insights took significant time, effort, and critical reflection. Our goal with this brief is to honor the hard work of the improvement teams over the 3 years of the NIC and to uplift the lessons they learned through CQI.

CMO descriptions

Collegiate Academies

New Orleans, LA | **5** schools | **3,000** students

Collegiate Academies is a charter network of five schools and 3,000 students in New Orleans, Louisiana. Collegiate's aim was to have 60% or more of students with individualized education plans (IEPs) who were eligible for alternative mastery criteria (April Dunn) master (Approaching Basic +) LEAP and/or April Dunn plans in core classes. Collegiate focused on co-planning and co-teaching, as well as ensuring that network and school-based leaders in both academics and special education were aligned on co-teaching practices and specially designed instruction. Collegiate focused on co-teaching because they saw this as a way to improve the outcomes of students with disabilities on rigorous, grade-level, and college preparatory content within an inclusive setting.

Green Dot Public Schools

Los Angeles, CA | **18** schools | **9,945** students

Green Dot Public Schools is a charter network of 18 schools and 9,945 students in Los Angeles, California. Green Dot's aims were (1) to increase choices about college, leadership, and life by increasing the percentage of students with disabilities passing every class with a C or better from 29% to 50% at Watts and from 12% to 30% at Mae Jemison, and (2) to increase the 2+ years growth rate in reading from 20% to 40% for students with disabilities. Their problem of practice focused on establishing strong Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) structures and improving instruction at Tier 1 (universal), Tier 2 (additional), and Tier 3 (Intensified). They used the Student Work Analysis Protocol to identify and plan for high-leverage co-teaching models, interventions, and accommodations based on student-specific data. Additionally, they improved reading instruction by implementing an Oral Reading Fluency intervention and the Wilson Reading System.

Mastery Schools

Philadelphia, PA & Camden, NJ | **24** schools | **14,000** students

Mastery Schools is a charter network of 24 schools and 14,000 students located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Camden, New Jersey. Mastery had two aims. The first aim was to increase attendance rates to at least 90% and decrease the percentage of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities suspended 1 or more days. For this aim, they focused on developing a student-to-student mentorship to increase sense of belonging, established a teacher reflection protocol when a student referral occurs to develop teacher mindset and counteract unintentional bias, modified their discipline response plan so that it uses suspensions as last resort to reduce system policy barriers, and increased the quality of the evidence-based practice of behavioral feedback by implementing training, coaching, and technology enhancements.

Mastery's second aim was to increase postsecondary engagement (education, work force, military, job training) for students with disabilities. For this aim, they focused on developing inclusive school-wide postsecondary tracking systems for monitoring progress towards short-term and long-term goals, improved student-centered advising with multiple pathways with aligned requirements and team structures to help students meet these new requirements. Mastery also developed and implemented a senior seminar class aligned to multiple pathways, partnered with outside agencies to provide 91 seats in dual enrollment placements aligned to the multiple pathways, and developed and implemented a summer program to help graduating 12th graders transition from high school to their postsecondary placement.

STEM Preparatory Schools

Los Angeles, CA | **3** schools | **1,000** students

STEM Preparatory Schools is a charter network of three schools and 1,000 students in Los Angeles, California. STEM Prep's Aim focused on improving the math proficiency and math/STEM identity development for students with disabilities. STEM Prep paired a grading data tool with a guided action planning protocol for teachers to monitor student progress toward learning targets and plan specific teacher actions and interventions to support students with their content mastery (as measured by grades).

Summit Public Schools

California & Washington

12 schools

4,000 students

Summit Public Schools is a charter network of 12 schools and 4,000 students in California and Washington. Summit's aim was to ensure that all students with disabilities would end the year on track to master English and math grade-level content. Summit focused on strengthening their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) by leveraging flexible targeted tiered instructional groups, ongoing instructional planning collaboration cycles between general education and education specialists, and a site-based Diverse Learning Team structure to improve data-informed instructional practices for both general and special education teachers.

Acknowledgment

About the Pilot Community

The Networked Improvement Community (NIC) for Students with Disabilities was a pilot community of 10 charter management organizations serving diverse student populations across the country. Collectively, these CMOs serve more than 75,000 students. With support from technical assistance providers Marshall Street Initiatives, SWiFT Education Center, and research organizations NIRN, RTI International, and SRI International, our goal was to systematically improve the way we serve students with disabilities and bring these solutions back to school systems everywhere.

This work was made possible by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, guided by the belief that every life has equal value and everyone deserves to live a healthy and productive life.