Improving Outcomes for
Students with Disabilities:
Network Insights

Brief 5:

Get Ready, Stay Ready: Will and Capacity Checks Along the Improvement Journey

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Introduction

This is the last in a series of five 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
View Brief 4 [PDF, 15 pages]

Brief 5:
Get Ready, Stay Ready: Will and Capacity Checks Along the Improvement Journey

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[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/.

The Critical Components of **Readiness**

"Readiness" is often defined as being either willing or able to do something; however, when it comes to continuous improvement in school contexts, it's a bit more complicated than that. Although willingness is certainly a critical component to improvement work, a concerted effort is needed to determine whether a team, the system it works within, and the people who will ultimately be responsible for implementation have the skills, knowledge, and capacity to advance and sustain improvements. Furthermore, when we attempt to make changes to and within a complex system for the purpose of undoing persistent inequities, checking for readiness can't be a one-and-done exercise. Teams work over months and years to deliberately and incrementally bring about improvement. First they test relatively small ideas, and then they spread and scale them so those initially small changes can have broader, sustained impact. This process requires readiness checks at key points in the improvement process and at multiple levels of the system.

Knowing if our system is ready to take on this kind of change can seem daunting. What can improvement teams do to ensure that they and their systems are ready to take the major steps in an improvement journey? How do teams achieve the kind of objective and "meta" thinking that allow them to know where they are and how they are doing? How do teams develop the ability to see across a complicated system, especially one where staff and leadership turnover are frequent, to find useful change levers or to identify potential barriers? There are no easy answers to how to determine a system's readiness for change, especially when that change implies a significant shift in priorities (see Centering Students with Disabilities to Create Powerful Change [PDF, 15 pages]), but some of the tools and processes used during the Networked Improvement Community (NIC) Pilot to check for readiness (both will and ability) can be used by improvement teams to maintain that "meta" stance as they work to improve outcomes for students in their school(s) and programs, whether teams are working with external support providers or on their own.

> ### Key Terms
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> **Change idea:** A specific, actionable idea for improving a process or outcome.

During the 3-year NIC, the CMOs and technical support teams learned a number of lessons about readiness and used various tools and processes to assess both team and system readiness. The key learnings about readiness fall into the following three areas:

Improvement team readiness. The **initial readiness** of the team responsible for planning and coordinating implementation of the change work is based primarily on the team's understanding of its system and the problems it seeks to address; as the team implements its plans, **ongoing checks** of team knowledge, skills, and bandwidth support ongoing readiness for each phase of implementation and help **identify areas of need** for the team to address.

Readiness of change ideas. The planning phase of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles is where the **initial readiness** of a change idea for effective testing is determined, and the thoroughness of the plan can dictate how much learning can occur in subsequent phases. Once a change idea is found to be promising, the team must then **consider its readiness to be spread and scaled** more broadly within its system and determine **where and what adjustments are needed**.

Readiness of the system. Context matters, and taking steps to understand a school system's **initial readiness to undertake** equity-driven change and to identify opportunities within that system is worth the effort; **continuing to monitor** the ability of the system to support effective implementation allows improvement teams to identify both **opportunities to leverage and barriers to address**.

Improvement team readiness: going slow to go fast

> *We were going to study all the little things that we did and that was just not something we were familiar with before. We know now that it's a really powerful way to do the work and a really powerful change agent for us as far as seeing the growth for our students.*

Glynis Shulters, Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools

Planning for implementation

As discussed in *Systems Change to Support Students with Disabilities* [PDF, 12 pages] and *Champions for Change: Two Essential Roles for an Effective Improvement Team* [PDF, 12 pages], the improvement team leads the change work within a school system, and getting the right people in the right roles is a critical step in beginning an improvement effort. Ideally, all members identified have expressed the will to achieve equity for the priority students—in the charter management organization (CMO) NIC, students with disabilities—and to work to identify and implement the most effective practices for meeting priority students' needs. But beyond will, team members' capacity—i.e., their knowledge, skills, and resources—and their understanding of their system are also critical aspects of the team's readiness to engage in the work. NIC teams found that slowing down early on in order to thoroughly review data and to deepen their understanding of the challenges to equity within their systems gave them the sure footing they needed to engage nimbly in change work over the next 2 years.

While various improvement team members will bring specialized knowledge to the work, such as using data to inform decision-making and knowledge of effective instructional practices to meet students' specific needs, there is some shared knowledge it is important for team members to develop: knowledge of the problem they are trying to address. Even when an improvement team has a fairly strong idea about where it wants to focus its work—for example, in one CMO, they knew that students with disabilities were having trouble accessing advanced STEM curriculum in high school—taking time to closely review data and processes

in the system helps the team see the underlying structures that interfere with desired outcomes. In this case, the CMO identified that barriers to STEM courses in high school existed as early as grade 6, thereby helping team members align on where to focus their improvement efforts.

> **We really needed to take some time to really understand the problem** *a little bit deeper. … Spending months analyzing a problem without throwing solutions at it was definitely an odd situation for us.*
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> **Glynis Shulters**, Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools

The team's capacity to perform continuous quality improvement (CQI) should also be considered. Many of the practices of CQI can be learned by doing; however, as the team engages in implementation and cycles of improvement, these practices take some effort to learn, and it is important that team members have adequate time and institutional support to develop their skills and knowledge. A significant investment of time in the early months of a change effort—during which the improvement team can meet regularly to review data and identify the problem, develop its aim and initial strategy, and begin practicing the elements of CQI with initial change ideas—will likely result in strong practices and alignment that can carry the team forward for multiple years.

> Part of readiness is ensuring that those implementing new strategies will have the time and resources to learn and put them into practice. Strive Prep's Improvement Team found that, despite focal school teachers expressing interest in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategy, they were finding it difficult to have adequate time to learn and implement the strategies. So Jen Bisha, the Improvement Lead, worked with the site principal to incorporate UDL training into the school's regular professional development schedule so that it wouldn't feel like "one more thing" being asked of teachers and, as the Improvement Lead said, the new strategy was "baked into the fabric of the school."

During implementation

While the early stages of an improvement team's development contribute greatly to its readiness to lead and foster equity-driven systems change, it is important to continue attending to the team's readiness throughout an improvement effort. Adopting a way to assess the team's commitment and capacity at regular intervals will provide the team with important knowledge about its ongoing readiness to lead implementation.

To assess the ongoing readiness of improvement teams, the NIC used a tool called the Improvement Capacity Assessment (ICA) and engaged in a reflective assessment process twice per school year. The assessment took place in two steps: first, a self-assessment of team knowledge and practices by the improvement lead (while an external technical assistance provider assessed the team on the same measures and scale); and second, a joint discussion of the two sets of results, with particular attention paid to scoring disparities. This process allowed the improvement team to reflect on its practices and identify areas for growth. It also allowed teams to see their readiness in the form of specific data, reminding them of the capacity they had developed and potentially inspiring them to continue their work. The ICA is available for other teams to use, but teams can also identify their own key measures of knowledge and effective practices; the key is to use the same measures over time to allow the teams to see trends in their data. Scheduling regular reviews of a team's effectiveness and its impact toward developing a culture of improvement focused on equity moves us away from guessing about how our work is going to giving us actual means for monitoring the health of our efforts.

> *Readiness comes from understanding that you need those who are making decisions when they're working with kids one-to-one on an everyday basis to really be ready to start the work and to monitor the work. We need to monitor [ourselves] in order to implement, and* **we need to really think about what's working and what's not working**.

Dr. Susanna Campo, Improvement Team member, Green Dot Public Schools

Ongoing improvement team readiness assessments are especially important as team membership inevitably changes over time, sometimes due to a shift in the problem of practice (for example, from Multi-Tiered Systems of Support [MTSS] improvements to strengthening co-teaching), and sometimes as a result of staffing and leadership changes. In addition to assessing and reflecting on team capacity, when improvement team membership changes or expands, it is important to be mindful of how to onboard new members to the improvement work. NIC leaders learned that making sure that new improvement team members had regularly scheduled one-on-ones on their calendars throughout the onboarding period as well as opportunities to connect frequently with other improvement team members ensured that new team members could become well versed in the strategies being implemented and get quickly up to speed on implementation.

Change idea readiness:
Does the seed have potential?

Early implementation

To some degree, the entire PDSA approach to change implementation is about readiness—i.e., ensuring that an idea is truly ready to yield results. The PDSA model is designed to help teams determine exactly that, and as discussed in *Continuous Quality Commitment: Iterative Learning Cycles to Meet System Challenges* [PDF, 15 pages], repeated, iterative tests of a single change idea yield more and more information about what is working and why— or, sometimes more importantly, what is not working and why. As several CMO improvement team members observed, the time that goes into change testing pays off later because it provides the team insight into not just what works but specifically why it works, and that level of understanding helps ensure that an idea is ready for further implementation.

> **We tried to be really intentional about the thinking that we did on the network team** *before we sent it to our schools. ... Have we put our best thinking, our most concise thinking in this thing before we send it to schools? Because if we have to spend three more hours on this thing, but save all of our teachers five minutes each, that trade is fantastic for us.*

Aidan Kelly, Project Sponsor, Collegiate Academies

Later implementation

Once a change idea seems to be reliably delivering promising results in its initial context, the team must determine whether the idea is worthy of and ready for application beyond those initial tests. The NIC CMOs used a tool called the Spread Planning Tool. This allowed improvement teams to carefully consider the readiness of a change idea considered to be promising in terms of potential impact and determine whether it was ready for broader implementation beyond the initial test sites. The tool asks a series of flowchart-type questions about the change idea. If the team is confident that they have enough evidence that the change idea works reliably when tested in other settings, they then reflect on several aspects of the idea that may affect its success in broader

implementation, such as the change idea's compatibility with school and community values or its relative simplicity of use. The team can then use this information to determine what can be done to address any concerns before attempting to scale the practice.

Considering the "spreadability" of an innovative practice could be a very vulnerable review for some teams since they may have invested a lot of effort in developing the change practice, and sometimes the viability of taking an idea to scale is low. Using a tool that allows the team to systematically reflect on the strengths of or challenges around a particular change idea can provide some emotional distance that makes it easier to see whether an idea is truly ready for broader implementation.

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> ***It's been really nice to use different tools*** *… around how to know when we're ready to spread or scale. I think too often we [say] … we saw great results, let's run and give it to everybody [without] making sure all your enabling conditions are available. Do we have the resources? … Do we have data? Do we have the time and the motivation and the energy to launch this work forward?*
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> **Glynis Shulters**, Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools

At Green Dot Public Schools, the success that focal schools saw as a result of using the student work analysis practice that was developed during the pilot created demand at many other sites. However, the improvement team members knew from their spread planning analysis that they only had the time and resources to fully implement the practice at two to three sites. The large demand, however, created an opportunity for the team to test how much of the teacher training and support in the current intervention model were critical for success. The team has engaged several additional sites to implement a version of the practice with a modified training and support component, and the team will be able to compare results from these sites with those receiving the current "full support" model and determine whether a modified, less resource-intensive version can be just as successful.

System readiness: firm foundations, flexible frameworks

Beyond the readiness of the team and the change practices themselves, another area where readiness should be reviewed and monitored is the system itself. In a school system, "system" refers to everything that goes into delivering education—and not just at school sites, but at the administrative level as well. The previous section discussed change idea readiness for spread and scale, and typically that means spreading or scaling a promising practice from classrooms or a school site to other locations within a school system or network. But critical to the potential success of that broader implementation is the readiness of other parts of the system to support wider and ongoing implementation. That means the improvement team needs to look at the available resources, support systems, and reporting structures that will be critical to supporting implementation. It also means understanding the mindsets of those who will be responsible for implementation.

Planning for implementation

Context matters, and taking steps to understand a school system's **initial readiness to undertake** equity-driven change and to identify where, within that system, there may be fertile ground for change can help teams avoid some of the barriers that can easily derail change efforts.

Before engaging in implementation, improvement team members will want to invest time understanding the system where they are attempting to make changes. "See the system" is one of the Carnegie Foundation's six core principles of improvement[2] because, in their words, "it is hard to improve what you do not fully understand." Not only does that mean considering the current will, skill, and capacity of the sites and teams who will likely be involved in the improvement work, but it also means thinking through the existing processes and structures that may be leveraged or affected. What site meetings currently occur? Who is not included but could be? What would the impacts be, positive or negative, of changing these structures? Another important area to review is current data management practices. What information is currently being used to track the specific performance and experiences of students with disabilities? Who "owns" that data? Who has access to it? Many of the CMOs and focal schools in the

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[2]Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (Eds.). (2015). *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better.* Harvard University Press.

NIC had multiple levels of data about students with disabilities; the central offices maintained some systems, but there were case management data that were maintained locally at the sites, often by one person. Knowing beforehand where the different "pockets" of data were and how they were managed helped improvement teams know what could be readily monitored and what information gaps would need filling as implementation began.

Once the improvement team has developed a driver diagram or logic model to determine the key areas for implementing change, engage others outside the team who have knowledge of various parts of the system to review the project plan and provide feedback on whether the plan seems likely to result in the desired changes. Where do they see gaps in the model? What barriers may have been overlooked that those with more detailed knowledge of a particular part of the system may have insight into? While the plans are meant to be iterative and are, as many Improvement Science practitioners say, "possibly wrong and definitely incomplete," there is value in trying to find the most gaping holes prior to implementation. Furthermore, an equity-centered improvement strategy depends upon the broader community understanding and being able to provide input about the plan. Their review may reveal not only gaps in the plan but synchronistic opportunities that the improvement team wouldn't have otherwise been aware of.

> *Even though it was the pandemic and there [were] a lot of competing priorities, we didn't decrease the world of people we tried to engage or ask for feedback...* **We try to be really intentional about the size of the asks, but we still try to engage everybody who touches this work***.*

Aidan Kelly, Project Sponsor, Collegiate Academies

During Implementation

The NIC used several tools to understand system readiness, including the District Capacity Assessment (DCA), the Fidelity Implementation Tool (FIT), and staff surveys. The DCA assesses the capacity of a district or CMO to facilitate school-level implementation of an effective innovation—an "effective innovation" being a set of operational practices used to achieve defined outcomes, such as co-teaching or MTSS. The DCA was administered to improvement teams to measure their school system's readiness to effectively support the implementation of the adopted practices. Since the DCA looks specifically at how the system will

support those defined practices by having teams engage in a facilitated review of system resources and supports for implementation, a certain degree of readiness for engaging in the DCA process is needed among an improvement team for the DCA to yield useful information.

School-level readiness for implementation was assessed in part through the implementation of the FIT. The FIT is a school-level assessment, administered by trained external experts, to examine the extent to which schools were implementing practices that promote equity and excellence for all. For the NIC, the FIT was administered twice per school year to each of the focal schools to look for growth in areas such as inclusive policy structures and practice. The results from these assessments can provide improvement teams with key information about areas of strength and need within the schools where change is being implemented.

While the original impetus for developing a survey of **instructional staff** at the focal schools was to look for changes in mindset over the course of the evaluation, the NIC also recognized that such a survey could provide useful information to improvement teams about the readiness of their staff to adopt the equity-based practices they sought to implement. A taskforce of improvement team members from several CMOs and members of the evaluation team worked together to identify the priority constructs to measure (such as staff's sense of self-efficacy for instruction and attitudes about inclusion) and to review survey items from previously validated instruments. The resulting survey provided information to the NIC on how confident staff felt about their own and their site leaders' ability to meet the needs of all of their students. While the results from such a survey are not a guarantor of staff readiness to successfully implement instruction and supports that center the needs of students with disabilities, it can potentially identify gaps in staff readiness and serve as a kind of "heat map" on issues of self-efficacy and capacity.

> **One of the implementation drivers assessed by the DCA is organization, including facilitative administration—i.e., the internal processes, policies, regulations, and structures over which an improvement team has some control. At one CMO, where the DCA revealed that an area of concern, the improvement team worked with network leaders to streamline some of the reporting structures and oversight responsibilities related to students with disabilities. The improvement team also saw the need to build the capacity of principals to engage in more transformational leadership for students who are furthest from opportunity.**

Conclusion

While readiness for equity-driven systems change work requires the improvement team to diligently engage in ongoing monitoring of both the system and itself, in no way does being "ready" imply achieving some ideal state before work can proceed. On the contrary, CQI is based in two fundamental assumptions: there is always room for growth, and "good enough" is a great place to start from. However, teams that commit to systematic review of data on their own performance and the performance of the system they seek to improve throughout their improvement journey will likely set themselves up to work more efficiently and effectively and may be able to bring about more sustainable impact.

While the NIC members had the benefit of technical assistance providers to give them external perspective on their work and their level of readiness for taking their ideas to the next stages of implementation, many of the tools that members used are available to teams whether they have external partners or not. Furthermore, we found that the more the NIC members engaged in self-reflection and took time to conduct internal reviews with their own teams, the more ready they felt to spread and scale their practices beyond the focal schools

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.

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.