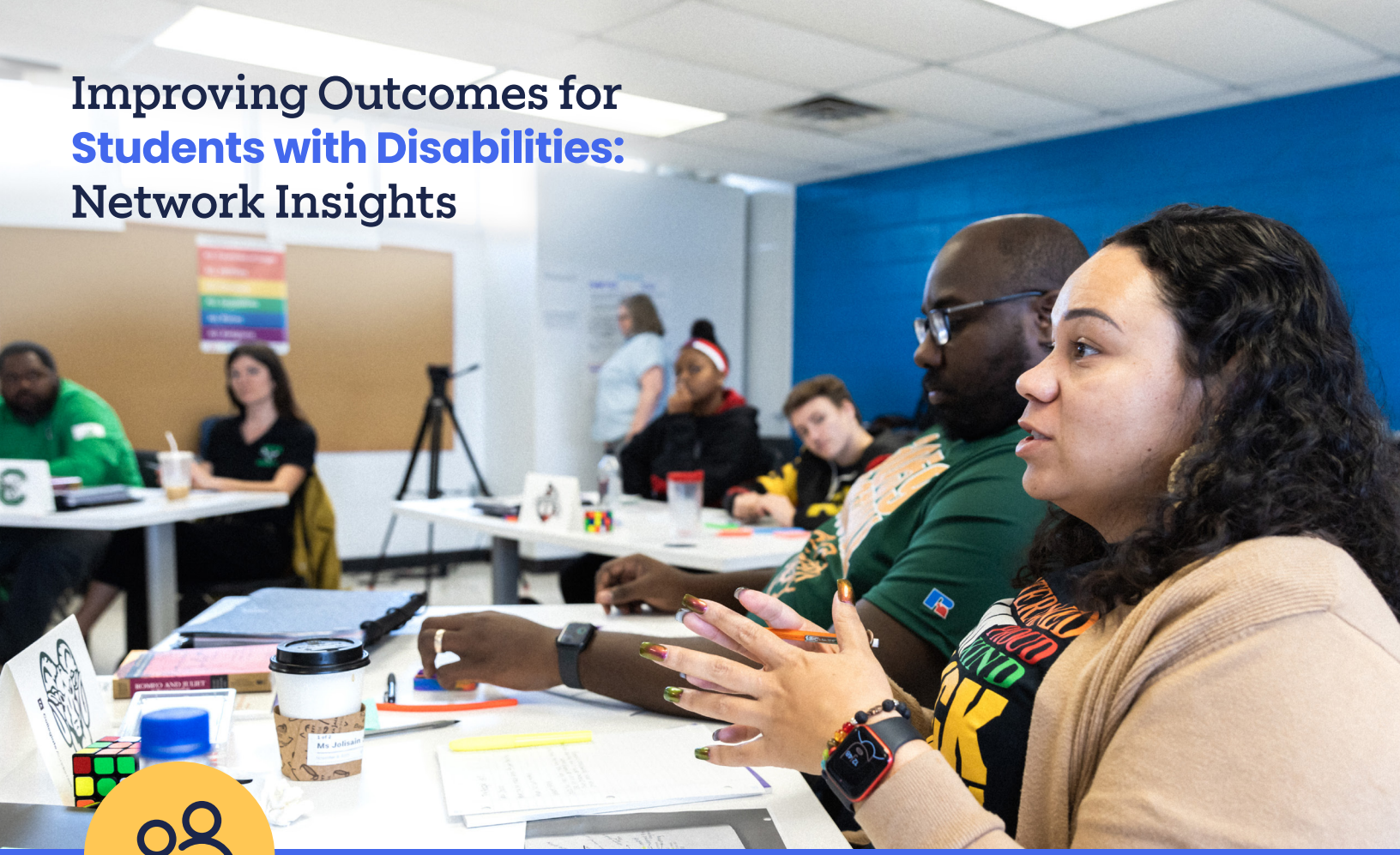
Improving Outcomes for
Students with Disabilities:
Network Insights



Brief 3:

Champions for Change: Two Essential Roles for an Effective Improvement Team

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April 2024

Introduction

This is the third 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

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
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/.

Two Critical Roles on the Improvement Team

Effectively implementing continuous improvement within a complex system requires two key roles: a well-positioned champion to advance the work and a data lead to ensure changes are leading to improvements.

Continuous improvement within complex systems such as CMOs requires a team working together toward a common goal. *Systems Change to Support Students with Disabilities* [PDF. 12 pages] summarizes our key lessons learned for identifying the right team. *Get Ready, Stay Ready: Will and Capacity Checks Along the Improvement Journey* [PDF, 15 pages] describes the will, skills, and capacity needed within the team throughout the improvement journey, including project launch and expansion. This brief describes two critical roles within the team:

Key Terms

Continuous improvement: An iterative, disciplined framework where new practices are rapidly and repeatedly tested in the field.

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

An improvement lead: An effective leader of the improvement team needs sufficient time to lead the team, influence within the network, some physical presence at the school sites, and participatory leadership skills.

Data lead: An effective data lead provides insights about how to measure changes in practice and outcomes and how to collect and analyze necessary data. The data lead ensures that the team routinely uses data to check whether changes enacted with teachers and students are in fact leading to improvements.

The power and characteristics of an improvement champion

Each CMO improvement team had a formally identified improvement lead. The improvement lead held primary responsibility for coordinating and facilitating the improvement work in the CMO, including organizing team meetings, communicating to staff and leaders outside the team, and ensuring the team developed timelines and associated action steps. Over the course of the 3-year NIC, many CMOs experienced turnover in this role. From observing almost two dozen improvement leads, we noticed that progress of the improvement work often seemed to depend on the improvement lead's behaviors and practices—specifically, whether the improvement lead exhibited behaviors and practices associated with "implementation champions" In the implementation science literature. Bonawitz et al. 2020 outlines influence, ownership, physical presence at the point of change, grit, persuasiveness, and participative leadership style as key characteristics of effective champions.[2]

Below, we discuss the organizational support, aspects of the position, and leaderships skills that enabled improvement leads to be effective champions.

Organizational support. Improvement Leads needed the capacity to dedicate sufficient time and energy to the improvement work. This required recognition within the CMO that the **individual in this role should have the organizational support to focus on the responsibilities of the role**. Across the NIC, some improvement leads were overwhelmingly assigned to support the improvement work, whereas others held dual roles. The CMOs with improvement leads focused solely or primarily on the improvement work completed, on average, more iterative cycles of testing change ideas. Improvement Leads struggled when other responsibilities perpetually consumed their time.

Improvement leads were more effective champions when they had clear **support from a Project Sponsor**, someone more administratively senior than them who can be a liaison between the improvement team and network-level leaders.

[2] Bonawitz, K., Wetmore, M., Heisler, M., Dalton, V. K., Damschroder, L. J., Forman, J., Allan, K. R., & Moniz, M. H. (2020). Champions in context: Which attributes matter for change efforts in healthcare?. *Implementation Science, 15*(1), 1–10.

Position and presence. Improvement Leads can come from different roles or parts of their organizations. However, leads were more effective when they had a **network-level position**, as opposed to a school-site position, because it provided network-level influence and perspective. These leads were better positioned to consistently convene network and school-level leaders to articulate an accurate and compelling problem statement, set an ambitious and achievable aim, identify key drivers for improvement, and allocate resources—including staff time—for developing and testing changes in practice and structures. Improvement Leads at the network level benefited from being at least well aware of—if not involved in setting—other networks' priorities. This enabled them to strategize about how to link the improvement work with the other priorities.

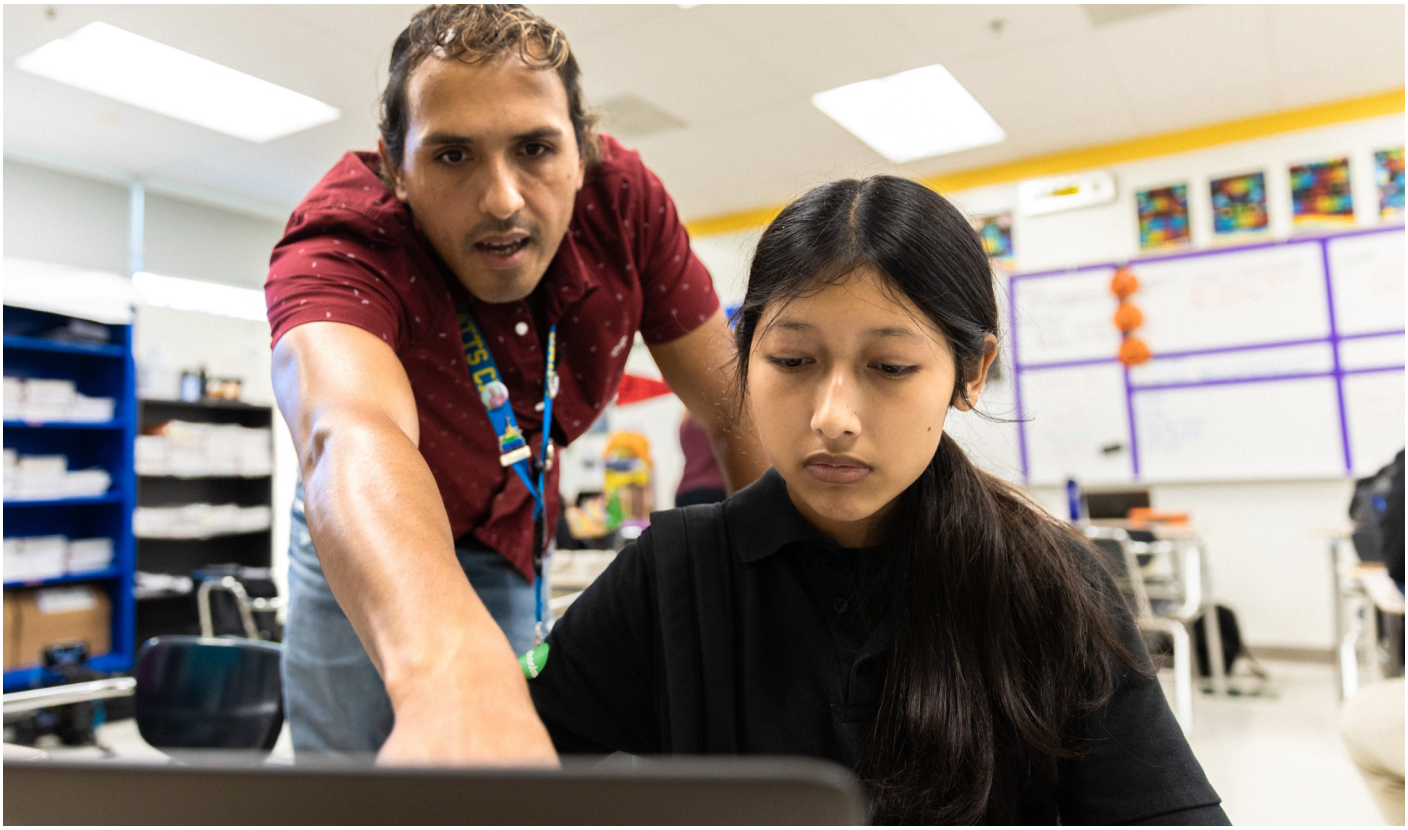
> *[Our improvement lead] was the Director of Special education, and in that role she was coaching teachers … she had access to our special education teachers who are on the ground on the daily basis with our kids, but she was also in a position where **she had access to some of the bigger decision makers** … she was in meetings with the organizational level leadership team who was discussing organization-wide changes and making bigger decisions on behalf of the organization.*
>
> **Janette Rodriguez-Pack**, Chief Academic Officer, STEM Preparatory Schools

In addition to a network-level position, effective champions had **some physical presence at school sites, the point of change**. They needed trusting relationships and time with staff who worked directly with students with disabilities, including general education and special education teachers, and with site leaders at the participating schools. Nurturing that trust and learning from and alongside school and classroom-level educators required that improvement leads spend time in these schools throughout the improvement journey, including when developing change ideas and during the testing process.

Leadership skills: Bonawitz et al., 2020, include **grit, persuasiveness, and a participative leadership style** (e.g., involving colleagues in decision-making on how to embed new initiatives and practices, welcoming feedback, and building a learning climate) as key characteristics of effective champions. Improvement Leads who oversaw successful improvement work **displayed these leadership characteristics, and in some cases, they developed or strengthened them with coaching**. For example, an improvement lead who started out feeling anxious and unsure about their meeting facilitation skills, initially relying on a technical

assistance provider to facilitate, received specific coaching in meeting design and facilitation. Within a few months, the improvement lead confidently organized and facilitated large team meetings, effectively structuring them to elicit the diverse perspectives and expertise of the members. Another improvement lead worked closely with their Project Sponsor to tailor communication to different interested groups in ways that resonated with those groups (an important aspect of persuasiveness).

Improvement team members routinely cited **strong organization from and regular communication with their improvement leads as essential to conducting the improvement work**. Improvement leads organized and facilitated regularly scheduled meetings, which gave team members opportunities to adjust the improvement work to meet emergent needs of the participating school team members and network staff. These meetings also increased team members' understanding of how their contributions (e.g., designing a new administrative tool to support coteaching and co-planning scheduling) would be used in practice. Team structures were most effective when improvement leads were responsive to team members' needs and shifted routines to accommodate them.



Importance and characteristics of a strong data lead

Continuous Quality Commitment: Iterative Learning Cycles to Meet System Challenges [PDF, 15 pages] outlined how improvement teams can accomplish continuous quality improvement work by working 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. It described ongoing use data as a critical component of each stage of that work. Recognizing this, CMO improvement teams had a formally identified data lead. Data leads were primarily responsible for serving as the interface between the improvement team and CMO's data systems, providing data needed for ongoing measurement, and helping to interpret the data.

Below, we describe characteristics we observed in effective data leads.

Organizational support. Data leads who had **opportunities to work closely with the improvement lead and other members of the team** were more successful in their role. They needed the support of their organization to be **able to dedicate ongoing time to role**, including to access training and coaching opportunities related to continuous improvement from technical assistance providers. In addition to attending regular improvement team meetings, the data leads spent time strategizing with the improvement leads about measurement systems and setting up structures and routines for regular and systematic data reviews for the team. Across the NIC, data leads reported spending 5% to 25% of their time on the improvement work.

> ***When choosing a data lead, you have to remember you're not really doing data work, you are doing change work. Data is needed, but strategy is essential.***
>
> **Jay Feldman**, Senior Researcher, RTI International

Position and presence. The data lead role was exclusively **filled by someone at the network level**, overwhelmingly by members of an existing CMO team focused on data analysis and processing. Some data leads were in more senior positions (e.g., manager or director) than others (e.g., analyst). **Improvement teams that had a more senior-level data lead tended make more progress on their goals.** Those data leads were more likely to display the measurement and data skills described later in this section.

Data leads were particularly helpful to their teams when they **either understood or worked to better understand the school and classroom practices being implemented**. By regularly participating in improvement team meetings and otherwise talking with their colleagues who were developing and testing changes, data leads were better able guide their team in deciding what to measure and in collecting, analyzing, and reviewing data to support continuous improvement.

> *Our data lead is in every single meeting, whether or not we're talking about data and how they can lean in and support because **they need to have a very strong understanding of what we're trying to accomplish on the ground level in order to fully understand how data supports it**. ... They were continuously helping us figure out what the specific data is that we were trying to capture for the goals that we needed to measure through the improvement work.*
>
> **Janette Rodriguez-Pack**, Chief Academic Officer, STEM Preparatory Schools

> *Our data lead is a master of getting proximate to the work ... **she has done a really excellent job of helping the improvement team figure out what it was we wanted to measure**, [and] she has such a strong understanding of instruction and our model for instruction. And she was able to push us on questions around like, well, is what you truly want to measure this part of the model or this part of the model? And which data points will best help you monitor improvements that you're seeing there? She would bring us tools and design data tools at our grade level team meetings and showed up on campus to do that.*
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> **Sharon Johnson**, Senior Director of Specialized Programs, Summit Public Schools

Measurement and data skills. The most-effective data leads either started out or became **familiar with principles of using data for improvement and demonstrated strategic thinking about how to implement and measure change work.** They helped their teammates develop an evidence-based mindset, pushing them to not just rely on anecdotes, but to plan for and undertake rigorous and systematic measurement. Only rigorous and systemic measurement could provide clear and unbiased evidence that changes were being implemented as intended and were leading to improvements.

> *Our conversations as our team now that **we have an exceptional data person has been really squashing assumptions**. There's been a lot of opportunities where campuses felt like they were doing something really well and our data liaison has said, well actually that's not going as well as you think it is in that teacher's classroom. And that has really driven people to be more accountable for the things that they say they are going to do and making sure that those are actually happening with fidelity and consistency and the support that maybe those classroom teachers need more of.*
>
> **Bianca Severino,** Senior Director of Student Services, Noble Network of Charter Schools

Effective data leads helped their team **develop routines and protocols for reviewing data, including by proposing effective data visualizations** that the team could update regularly. One effective data lead described needing to help her teammates focus on looking at the same measures over time, rather than continually asking to see additional data disaggregated in many different ways. The data lead explained, "We need to look at the same things over and over again … otherwise you're just going to go down a rabbit hole, you're not going to have any next steps, and then you're going to do the same thing for the next meeting."

An improvement teammate from another CMO described the value of their data lead in developing data dashboard and regularly facilitating data conversations:

> *"**[It's] been a major game changer for us in creating some unique dashboards** … [our data lead] is facilitating our conversations when we get together as a group and talk about where our students are at with their test scores and where they need to be. … [The data lead] will go ahead and scrub all data and view all dashboards before coming into any meeting. … His curiosity made it so that he wanted to know all the greater context of the things that we were doing in order to go ahead and think more greatly about the data that we were collecting, asking us questions and making sure that we weren't forgetting about something."*
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> **Bianca Severino,** Senior Director of Student Services, Noble Network of Charter Schools

Conclusion

Effectively implementing continuous improvement within school systems requires collaboration and contributions from staff at various levels of the system and with diverse skills and perspectives working as team toward a common goal. Teams were more successful when they had both a strong lead who functioned as an effective champion of the work and a team member who could help the team robustly measure changes in practice and outcomes. As highlighted above:

- Teams needed organizational support for Improvement Leads and data leads to allow them to dedicate substantial and ongoing time to the role.
- Both roles were best filled by network-level staff who had opportunities to work directly with staff at participating schools.
- To be an effective champion, improvement leads needed to possess (or develop) leadership skills such as meeting facilitation and persuasive communication. They also needed the support of an engaged Project Sponsor.
- To be an effective in their roles, data leads needed to
    - either understand or work to better understand the school and classroom practices being implemented,
    - help their team think strategically about how measure the change work, and
    - develop routines and protocols for reviewing data, including by proposing effective data visualization.

Individuals who step into the improvement lead and data lead position do not necessarily need to start out with all of the skills listed in this brief for those roles. We observed Improvement Leads and Data leads grow extensively in their role with the help of trainings and coaching and from technical assistant providers, and via opportunities to network with colleagues in other CMOs in the NIC who had their same roles.

CMO descriptions

Noble Network of Charter Schools

Chicago, IL | **18** schools | **12,000** students

Noble Network of Charter Schools is a charter network of 18 schools and 12,000 students in Chicago, Illinois. Noble's aim was to ensure that students with an IEP met or exceeded their initial expected Lexile growth target, as measured by Achieve 3000 LevelSet. Noble focused on establishing a comprehensive system of professional learning that helps all educators teach adolescent reading strategies/skills in their classrooms across all content areas. In addition, Noble implemented evidence-based reading interventions to ensure that teachers are making necessary and timely adjustments that ultimately lead to independent reading growth.

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.