

# Enacting Continuous Improvement

## — OVERVIEW OF KEY CONCEPTS —

### What is continuous improvement?

Continuous improvement is a disciplined and ongoing approach to improving student outcomes and sustaining “persistently higher levels of performance.” Key principles behind how a continuous improvement approach can lead to positive changes in outcomes for students:



It's about  
systems



Focuses on the  
processes  
to improve outcomes



Encourages learning  
through  
disciplined  
methodology



Values the expertise  
of the  
“front line”

### How is it different from “business as usual”?

Continuous improvement provides a structure for educators to identify problems, design interventions specific to those problems, learn from trying them out in context, and evaluate their effectiveness before scaling up the intervention. Accordingly, continuous improvement is more than a slogan or aspiration; it represents a distinct theory of action about how to make progress and, as such, focuses on distinct mechanisms. To fully take up a continuous improvement approach requires taking up this underlying theory of action.

#### *Distinguishing Features of a Continuous Improvement Approach*

ASSUMPTION	DESCRIPTION
Systems produce outcomes.	Continuous improvement assumes that it is the system and not individuals that produces current outcomes and accordingly focuses attention on system design and operation.
Efforts focus on key processes.	Improvement efforts focus on the processes that produce the outcomes as opposed to focusing exclusive attention on the outcomes themselves.
Progress requires collective learning and discovery.	Improvement efforts are structured to encourage workers throughout the organization to engage in collective learning about their practice. Data and problem-solving methodologies are used to make assumptions about cause and effect explicit, and to test ideas in practice.
Frontline workers are uniquely situated to learn how to get ideas to work	Those directly responsible for implementation of a practice (e.g., classroom teachers) are actively involved in learning how to get that practice to work in context. Their unique knowledge of the day-to-day work is a form of expertise necessary for effective improvement.
As effective practices are discovered they are spread throughout the organization.	As effective practices are discovered they are spread and become standard work for the organization. These practices are continually updated and adapted to context through local experimentation.

## What are all of the different names that people use to describe “continuous improvement”?

A variety of continuous improvement methodologies and approaches are currently used in education, each articulating a set of tools, principles, and social practices. These include:

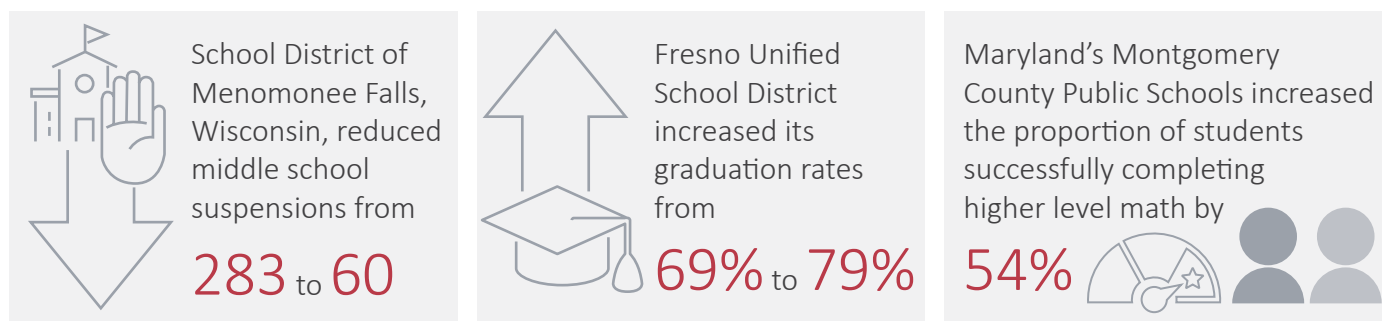
- Improvement science
- Design-Based Implementation Research (DBIR)
- Deliverology
- Quality improvement
- Lean/Six Sigma
- Implementation Science
- Networked Improvement Communities (NICs)
- Appreciative Inquiry.

The specific methodology is not as important as choosing one. Having a common improvement methodology creates a common language and enables building expertise with the practical tools of improvement over time.

## How do I know continuous improvement works?

### What are some examples?

Continuous improvement is a well-established approach that has been used in multiple sectors to drive improvement. In education:



## What do people in continuous improvement organization do (differently)?

Continuous improvement engages multiple stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, operational staff, parents, students) in disciplined problem-solving to discover, implement, and spread evidenced-based changes that work locally to improve student outcomes.

## What is the role of data in continuous improvement?

Data use for improvement entails a cycle of collecting and interpreting data, constructing ideas on potential solutions to observed problems, making appropriate modifications to current practice, and monitoring and researching whether changes resulted in improvement. In its basic form, this iterative cycle transforms data into usable knowledge and thus makes it actionable.