DRIVING CONTINUOUS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TOOLKIT

Toolkit 6 in the Utah Educational Leadership Toolkit Series

Prepared for Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic (ULEAD) Education

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In this toolkit, Hanover Research and ULEAD explore strategies and resources that current and aspiring school principals can utilize to meet the criteria outlined in Strand 6: School Improvement of the Utah State Standards for Educational Leadership.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit provides guidance and resources to support current and aspiring school principals in developing their personal capacity for leadership and meeting the criteria outlined in the **Utah State Standards for Educational Leadership** (located **here**). Specifically, this toolkit is designed to develop current and aspiring principals' skills and knowledge related to **Strand 6: School Improvement**.

Utah's Educational Leadership Strand 6: School Improvement

Strand 1: Visionary Leadership	Strand 2: Teaching and Learning	Strand 3: Management for Learning	Strand 4: Community Engagement	Strand 5: Ethical Leadership	**Strand 6: School Improvement**	Strand 7: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement and foster a professional community of teachers and staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 6.1: Develop licensed faculty's and staff members' professional knowledge, skills, and practice through a variety of opportunities for learning and growth, guided by understanding of professional and adult learning and development.

Standard 6.2: Deliver actionable feedback about instruction and other professional practice through comprehensive systems of evaluation and supervisory practices that support development of licensed faculty's knowledge, skills, and practice as described in the Utah Effective Educator Standards.

Standard 6.3: Engage faculty and staff in systematic processes of sustainable and continuous school and classroom improvement.

Standard 6.4: Lead licensed faculty and staff (as appropriate) in evaluating competing initiatives in order to determine a course of action to support and achieve identified organizational goals.

Standard 6.5: Create and sustain an environment friendly to inquiry, experimentation, and innovation aligned with continuous improvement goals.

Standard 6.6: Develop and promote leadership capacity among teachers and staff.

Source: Utah State Board of Education[1]

Research shows that—aside from teachers—**school principals are the most influential school-based factor in promoting student achievement.**[2] Specifically, research finds that principals account for a quarter—on average—of their school's overall impacts on student achievement outcomes. Likewise, research observes that differences in student achievement up to 20 percentage points may occur when a school has an "above-average principal" rather than an "average principal."[3]

Effective principals are integral to their school's success.[4] Research shows that effective principals positively impact the mission and vision of their schools and student and staff outcomes.[5] In particular, effective principals are more likely to retain qualified and effective teachers, which helps drive student achievement.[6] More broadly, research shows that "it takes multiple in-school factors coming together to significantly improve student achievement on a larger scale" and "that principals are in a unique position to bring those factors together."[7] The impact of having an effective principal is greater in schools facing more challenges. Researchers find "no documented instances[…]where troubled schools are turned around if they do not have a talented leader."[8]

Indeed, it is accurately and "widely believed that a good principal is the key to a successful school" given the many roles they fill: instructional leader, staff evaluator, lead disciplinarian, overseer of daily operations, school representative to families and the community, and more.[9] Principals are integral to all aspects of their school's operations, from the quality of the teachers to the instructional strategies used with students to the overall school climate.[10]

As such, principals require an array of knowledge and skills to act as effective change agents, instructional leaders, and personnel managers.[11] This **Driving Continuous School Improvement Toolkit**—and the six accompanying toolkits in the *Utah Educational Leadership Toolkit Series*—support Utah's current and aspiring principals in meeting the demands of the Utah State Standards for Educational Leadership to successfully:[12]

- Shape a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
- Create a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
- Cultivate leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
- Improve instruction so teachers can teach at their best and students can learn at their utmost; and
- Manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Why Utah's Schools Need Strong and Effective Principals

> " *Everyone remembers a teacher that inspired them. How many people remember their principals? Principals ensure that schools are open, that teachers are receiving the support they need, and that classrooms are environments that will help all students learn.*
>
> *The strongest model for schools is one in which principals are creative, innovative instructional leaders. They find opportunities for teachers to lead. They support teachers in their growth and create a safe space for adults to take risks in their learning. As educators look at what builds a great school, they need to look at the principal. Who is at the helm? What vision have they set for their communities? How have they developed an environment that fosters learning and creativity?*
>
> ***Students need great teachers, and teachers need great leaders. One can't exist without the other.*** *Principals bring in opportunities for their communities. They find resources where there weren't any before. They connect families. They find places for children to thrive both in and outside of the classroom.* "

Source: U.S. Department of Education[13]

OVERVIEW

This toolkit:

- ✓ Describes the broader **principles of improvement science** and potential areas of school operations which can be targeted via ongoing improvement efforts;
- ✓ Outlines **Utah's published process for continuous school improvement** and the **major functional domains** upon which the cycle focuses;
- ✓ Reviews best practices and policy guidance for **conducting needs assessments** to determine **problems of practice** and areas of development given current levels of school performance; and
- ✓ Promotes strategies to **encourage innovation by teachers and other school staff** around the **application of evidence-based practices** to address problems of practice.

AUDIENCE

This toolkit is designed to support current and aspiring school principals across the state of Utah in meeting the criteria outlined in the Utah State Standards for Educational Leadership, particularly in relation to **Strand 6: School Improvement.**

COMMIT TO ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS

UNDERSTAND IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE

School performance encompasses every student outcome, personnel action, policy lever, or return on school resources. In fact, a school's overall performance depends upon the totality of its inputs, outputs, and stakeholders and the interactions between them.[14] Likewise, school and district accountability relies on an examination of various input, process, and outcome variables to ensure that educational institutions attain and progress toward outlined strategic goals and address community priorities.[15] It is this multitude of performance categories, combined with the ever-evolving education landscape (e.g., student demographics, legislative mandates, workforce demands) that give rise to the notion that "school improvement is an endless journey."[16]

Potential Indicators of School Performance

CATEGORY	INDICATORS
Inputs	▪ Financial (e.g., expenditures per student) ▪ Personnel (e.g., student-teacher ratio) ▪ Facilities, equipment, and materials ▪ School policy/law ▪ Student demographics and attributes
Processes	▪ Curriculum and instruction ▪ Implementation of policies ▪ Diverse educational opportunities ▪ Parent involvement ▪ Leadership (e.g., planning, style)
Outcomes	▪ Student achievement and accomplishments ▪ Stakeholder attitudes and perceptions ▪ Student and staff attendance ▪ Student retention and dropout rates ▪ School safety and discipline

Source: National Education Association[17]

Principals should acknowledge the wide spectrum of areas in which school improvement may occur. Importantly, the accepted notion "of an effective school includes not only promoting students' achievement and attainment but also such features as providing a safe learning environment and encouraging the development of civic responsibility."[18] Multiple factors influence students' education, and principals should recognize that school improvement efforts can address any number of challenges to students' wellbeing.[19]

Foundations of Improvement Science

> *Improvement science is a problem-solving approach centered on continuous inquiry and learning. Change ideas are tested in rapid cycles, resulting in efficient and useful feedback to inform system improvements. A core principle of improvement science is that **a system's performance is a result of its design and operation, not simply a result of individuals' efforts within the system.** Building from this foundation, improvement science helps organizations build a shared understanding about how their systems work, where breakdowns occur, and what actions can be taken to improve overall performance.*

Source: Regional Educational Laboratory West, Institute of Education Sciences[20]

Though many things influence school operations and student outcomes, **principals need to distill school improvement efforts down to a manageable list of priorities to maintain feasibility and avoid competition between priorities.**[21] Therefore, in guiding their schools through continuous cycles of improvement, principals should focus their attention and efforts on those elements of school operations (e.g., school climate) and staff actions (e.g., high expectations of students) that exert the greatest influence on student outcomes.[22] Relatedly, principals and their schools can explore strategies and actions that will help them in achieving and sustaining commonly cited attributes of effective schools (e.g., effective curriculum and instruction, robust student and family support systems).[23]

Federal guidelines focus on four main categories of school improvement:[24]

- **Improved Student Academic Achievement**: Indicators include interim assessments, standardized state test scores, and college readiness indicators.
- **Improved Instructional Quality**: Indicators include the percentage of students taught by highly effective teachers, instructional minutes, and students enrolled in advanced courses.
- **Increased Participation in School**: Indicators include student attendance, teacher attendance, dropout rates, and participation on state assessments.
- **Improved School Climate**: Indicators include discipline incidents, truancy, and levels of student, parent, and teacher satisfaction.

Evidence-Based Correlates of Effective Schools

CORRELATE	DESCRIPTION
Clear School Mission	In the effective school, there is a clearly articulated school mission through which the staff shares an understanding of and commitment to instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability. Staff accept responsibility for students' learning of the school's essential curricular goals.
High Expectations	In the effective school, there is a climate of expectation in which the staff believe and demonstrate that all students can attain mastery of the essential content and school skills. The staff also believe that they have the capability to help all students achieve that mastery.
Instructional Leadership	In the effective school, the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates that mission to the staff, families, and students. The principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program.
Progress Monitoring	In the effective school, student academic progress is measured frequently. A variety of assessment procedures are used. The results of the assessments help improve individual student performance and the instructional program.
Opportunity to Learn	In the effective school, teachers allocate a significant amount of classroom time to instruction in the essential content and skills. For a high percentage of this time, students are engaged in whole class or large group, teacher-directed, planned learning activities.
Safe and Orderly Climate	In the effective school, there is an orderly, purposeful, businesslike atmosphere which is free from the threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive and is conducive to teaching and learning.
Home-School Relations	In the effective school, families understand and support the school's basic mission and are given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school to achieve that mission.

Source: Association for Effective Schools, Inc.[25]

Principals should also familiarize themselves with the broader science of school improvement so that they can effectively "introduce, manage, and learn from their improvement efforts."[26] Ill-prepared principals can result in the execution of disjointed or ineffective improvement efforts. Consequently, possessing foundational knowledge on looking at problems of practice, addressing those problems with evidence-based strategies, and evaluating the impacts of implemented actions is necessary to execute a successful cycle of school improvement.[27] Principals can then target school improvement planning and the execution of outlined plans in an efficient manner that addresses priority areas and defines viable paths to implement relevant action items.[28]

The Six Core Principles of Educational Improvement

MAKE THE WORK PROBLEM-SPECIFIC AND USER-CENTERED	PERFORMANCE VARIATION IS THE CORE PROBLEM TO ADDRESS
Principals should focus on problems of practice and desired improvements. They should also empower school staff and other stakeholders in developing and implementing solutions that may apply to these problems or improvement areas.	Schools must determine what strategies work for which populations of students and under what conditions. Likewise, schools should scale processes while acknowledging that some challenges require specialized expertise.
SEE THE SYSTEM THAT PRODUCES THE CURRENT OUTCOMES	SCHOOLS CANNOT IMPROVE AT SCALE WITHOUT DATA
Principals should seek to understand school and community dynamics that generate specific outcomes. Understanding existing conditions and processes will help them understand what areas of school operations should be changed.	Changes must be measured to determine impact. Schools should use measurable indicators of key outcomes and processes and available data to determine if changes represent improvement, maintain the status quo, or have adverse impacts.
ANCHOR PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT IN DISCIPLINED INQUIRY	ACCELERATE IMPROVEMENTS VIA NETWORKED COMMUNITIES
Schools should engage in repeated cycles of "Plan, Do, Study, Act" to test hypotheses around improvements. They should investigate problems, implement and study solutions, and tinker with chosen solutions as necessary.	Principals should connect with expert practitioners and external partners to support ongoing improvement efforts. External perspectives and technical assistance help generate innovation and improve problem-solving.

Source: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Medium[29]

LEVERAGE UTAH'S CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT CYCLE

Per the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), local education agencies must "develop and implement an evidence-based comprehensive support and improvement plan to improve student outcomes in identified schools in 'partnership with stakeholders (including principals and other local leaders, teachers, and parents).'"[30] Relatedly, state education agencies increasingly view effective school leadership as necessary for local efforts around continuous school improvement.[31] As such, principals need to be knowledgeable about core characteristics and indicators of effective schools, as well as state and local guidance on school improvement.[32]

LEARN MORE

Watch the videos linked below to learn more about school improvement:

- **"Continuous Improvement in a Nutshell"** – Education Week
- **"Culture of Continuous Improvement Key to Evolving Practices"** – American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
- **"School Leaders and School Improvement"** – New Leaders and Mathematica

While numerous school improvement models exist, **principals should be aware of statewide or district-level improvement goals, as well as articulated strategies to achieve those goals.**[33] This knowledge is vital if principals wish to guide targeted improvements in those domains that their state or district prioritize and that the local community defines as areas of need.[34] Similarly, such an awareness will help principals understand any formal recommendations or mandates that must be considered as a part of the school improvement process.[35] Nevertheless, principals should ensure that the particular contexts of their school are considered in tandem with state and district priorities.[36]

The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) emphasizes a continuous improvement cycle that leverages the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement published by the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd.[37] Indeed, USBE highlights this framework as "the centerpiece of Utah's approach" to school improvement.[38]

The state ESSA plan also requires that USBE classify struggling schools in need of improvement within two categories:[39]

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)**: Schools that are in the lowest-performing 5% of Title I schools and high schools with a graduation rate of 67% or lower; and
- **Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)**: Schools with consistently under-performing student groups (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing economic disadvantages).

Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement

PRACTICE	PRACTICE DESCRIPTION
Domain 1: Turnaround Leadership	
Prioritize Improvement and Communicate Its Urgency	▪ Set the strategic direction for turnaround and establish clear policies, structures, and expectations for constituents to work toward ambitious improvement goals ▪ Articulate a commitment to turning around the lowest-performing schools and advocate fiercely across audiences for these schools ▪ Closely monitor, discuss, report, and act upon the progress of schools undertaking rapid improvement
Monitor Short- and Long-Term Goals	▪ Develop goals informed by assessments of recent performance and identify practices to realize a clear turnaround vision of significantly improved student learning ▪ Establish milestones for gauging progress; continually update timelines and tasks to maintain the pace needed to accomplish meaningful goals quickly ▪ Respond to regular feedback on progress toward milestones and make timely changes in policy, programs, and personnel to get on track to achieve desired results ▪ Capitalize on initial turnaround successes and momentum to shift the focus from change itself to incorporating and establishing effective organizational processes, structures, and interactions that contribute to continuous organizational improvement
Customize and Target Support to Meet Needs	▪ Provide customized, targeted, and timely support for turnaround efforts ▪ Align support to ensure coherence and integration with other necessary initiatives; eliminate unnecessary initiatives ▪ Regularly monitor progress to identify support needs and then act quickly and competently to address those needs
Domain 2: Talent Development	
Recruit, Develop, Retain, and Sustain Talent	▪ Proactively plan for recruiting and developing talent with turnaround-specific competencies to quickly fill the vacancies which will inevitably occur ▪ Use multiple sources of data to match candidate skills and competencies to school needs, prioritizing the highest need schools ▪ Institute succession planning activities by creating in-house district preparation programs designed to foster and generate turnaround competencies to develop future turnaround leaders and teachers
Target Professional Learning Opportunities	▪ Offer high-quality, individualized, and responsive professional learning opportunities designed to build the capacity needed for rapid school improvement ▪ Offer regular opportunities for job-embedded learning including coaching, mentoring, and observation (e.g., peer observations) ▪ Leverage and maximize the effectiveness of high-performing teachers, coaches, and leaders by using them as models and peer coaches
Set Clear Performance Expectations	▪ Create and share expectations for a level of professional performance by every role in the system ▪ Develop and implement performance-management processes that include clear means for monitoring progress, flexibility to rapidly respond to professional learning needs, and opportunities to revise milestones as needed

PRACTICE	PRACTICE DESCRIPTION
Domain 3: Instructional Transformation	
Diagnose and Respond to Student Learning Needs	▪ Diagnose student learning needs and use those needs to drive instructional decisions ▪ Incorporate effective student supports and instructional interventions ▪ Use fluid, rapid assessment and adjustment of instructional grouping and delivery to adapt to student learning needs
Provide Rigorous Evidence-Based Instruction	▪ Set high academic standards and ensure access to rigorous standards-based curricula ▪ Provide supports to ensure evidence is used in instructional planning and facilitation of student learning ▪ As gaps are identified in the curriculum or instructional delivery, develop plans to strengthen these key components
Remove Barriers and Provide Opportunities	▪ Systematically identify barriers to student learning to enhance opportunities for students who demonstrate early mastery ▪ Partner with community-based organizations (e.g., health and wellness organizations, youth organizations) to support students in overcoming obstacles and developing the personal competencies that propel success in school and life
Domain 4: Culture Shift	
Build a Strong Community Intensely Focused on Student Learning	▪ Celebrate successes—starting with quick wins early in the turnaround process—of students, family, teachers, and leaders; early success promotes an expectation for further success and engenders confidence in the competence of colleagues ▪ Provide explicit expectations and support for each person's role (i.e., expected behaviors) both in the turnaround and in student progress. ▪ Create opportunities for members of the school community to come together to discuss, explore, and reflect on student learning ▪ Champion high expectations (of self and others), embed them in everyday practice and language, and reinforce them through shared accountability and follow-through on strategies for dramatically improving student outcomes
Solicit and Act Upon Stakeholder Input	▪ Collective perceptions—held by school personnel, students, families, and the community—about the degree to which their school climate is or is not positive are gathered and used to gauge climate-related work to be done by a school ▪ Stakeholder perceptions are considered when identifying priorities and improving the underlying conditions that contribute to school climate issues ▪ Acknowledge and respond to constructive feedback, suggestions, and criticism
Engage Students and Families in Pursuing Education Goals	▪ Intentionally build students' personal competencies to pursue goals, persist with tasks, appraise their progress, hone learning strategies, and direct their own learning to further enhance their capacity to learn and succeed ▪ Provide students with opportunities to connect their learning in school with their interests and aspirations ▪ Meaningfully engage families in students' learning, progress, interests, and goals

Source: Center on School Turnaround, WestEd[40]

Principals should keep these domains at the forefront of any deliberations, planning, and targeted actions that occur within ongoing cycles of improvement at their respective schools. Specifically, principals should guide their school communities in examining current levels of performance within each of the four domains to determine problems of practice. Schools can then address problems with any of these domains with evidence-based strategies that support the attainment of related objectives.[41]

Principals should begin every school improvement cycle by leading relevant stakeholders in setting a direction for that cycle. This group should, at a minimum, consider the school's mission, the district's and school's strategic goals, and any related performance measures.[42] This ensures that school improvement efforts emphasize those areas of policy and practice that the school community assigns significance.[43] Because visions of success and community priorities differ between schools (even those in the same district), principals must carefully orient improvement efforts.[44]

Next, principals should lead their schools in conducting a needs assessment, which is a procedure "to gather and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data to 'identify gaps between the current status of the school and its vision of where it wants to be, relative to key indicators or focus areas.'"[46] This stage helps schools examine trends in performance using available data and isolate problems of practice related to the chosen direction.[47] At the same time, needs assessments assist schools in identifying root causes for performance trends and outcomes, which guides planning and implementation of targeted strategies in later stages of the continuous improvement cycle.[48]

Utah's Continuous Improvement Cycle
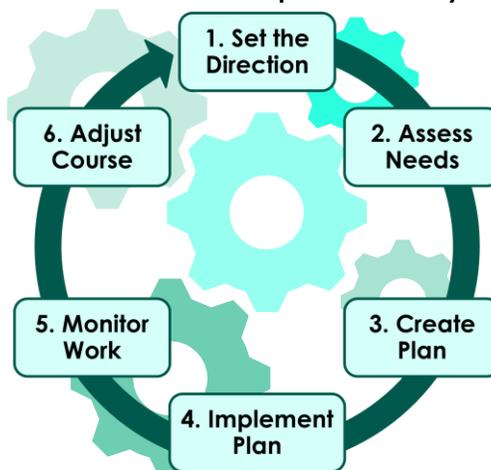

Source: Utah State Board of Education[46]

Once needs are assessed, principals should convene other stakeholder leaders (e.g., lead teachers, parent representatives) to create a plan to address the root causes of existing problems of practice. These plans should outline evidence-based strategies the school will use to address the problem, milestones for reaching intended goals, and a schedule for implementing strategies and reaching milestones.[49] All outlined "[g]oals should be specific, measurable, and based on data," and all planned actions "should be specific [and] clearly articulated [and should] identify resources necessary to achieve goals."[50] After the completion of planning, principals can guide their school in implementing the action items, strategies, and policy changes according to the timeline recorded in the plan.[51]

Throughout the implementation of the school improvement plan, principals should lead ongoing monitoring of processes and outcomes related to the plan.[52] Close monitoring allows the school community to determine whether it is achieving milestones and making adequate progress toward final goals.[53] Likewise, schools that collect data during the implementation process can determine what components of the plan are being implemented with fidelity and where additional supports or modifications may be required.[54]

Finally, because the school improvement cycle is a continuous process, principals and their schools will periodically need to adjust course or begin new iterations of the cycle. For example, if a school does not reach certain milestones, principals will need to guide the school community in selecting new strategies or improving implementation procedures for currently-used strategies to attain missed milestones.[55] Comparatively, if a school successfully achieves outlined goals, the principal should commence a new iteration of the improvement cycle centered on a fresh direction, set of needs, and implementation plan.[56]

To successfully helm school improvement efforts, **principals need to ask both basic and complex questions about how the process will work in theory and in actuality.**[57] Specifically, principals will want to work with collaborating school stakeholders to achieve consensus during all phases of the

school improvement cycle, necessitating an honest and transparent evaluation of current school performance.[58] As a means to support meaningful reflection on school improvement—particularly as it relates to the Four Domains for Rapid Improvement—the **"Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement Reflection Guide"** on pp. 13-15 lists a repository of questions that principals can answer independently or in conjunction with a team of school stakeholders. By answering the listed questions, principals facilitate "a strategic orientation that deliberately orchestrates people, programs, and extant resources toward an integrated, sustained, and coherent program of improvement."[59]

Additional Resources on the Utah Continuous Improvement Cycle

USBE publishes an extensive handbook (Resource #1) to guide the state's educators through the continuous improvement cycle and to provide tools that schools can use throughout the process (e.g., sample parent notification letters, evidence collection sheets for the Four Domains for Rapid Improvement). In addition, USBE provides a number of documents related to school improvement and turnaround more generally on its website (Resource #2).

Relatedly, WestEd's Center on School Turnaround publishes a wealth of material on the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement. These materials include: a description of each domain with explanations of associated practices and reflective questions related to each domain—published in concert with the National Implementation Research Network at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (Resource #3); an implementation framework for using the four domains to drive school improvements (Resource #4); and a record of indicators of effective practice for each domain (Resource #5). All of the aforementioned resources are linked via the associated icons below.

Resource #1: "Utah System of Support for School Improvement"	➦
Resource #2: "Title I, Part A: School Improvement and School Turnaround"	➦
Resource #3: "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework"	➦
Resource #4: "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: An Implementation Framework"	➦
Resource #5: "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: Indicators of Effective Practice"	➦

Source: Multiple[60]

Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement Reflection Guide

<u>Directions</u>: Principals can use the following questions to direct their personal reflections and thought processes—as well as those of collaborating stakeholders—on various aspects of school improvement related to the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement. These questions will help principals articulate their perspectives and solidify their positions about school improvement. They will also help principals establish a firm foundation from which to guide other school leaders, personnel, and stakeholders through repeated cycles of school improvement.

DOMAIN #1: TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP

- What are your school turnaround goals?
- How do you define success regarding meeting school turnaround goals?
- What structures or processes are in place to assess whether improvement efforts are successful? Who will be held accountable for creating timelines and updating the team regarding continuous progress?
- How will progress on data-referenced goals be monitored, tracked, and communicated?
- What measures will be monitored to identify successes and challenges in student outcomes for school turnaround?
- Who will be held accountable at each level to monitor and report changes in student outcomes?
- Who will determine what interim assessments will be administered and analyzed?
- Who will be held accountable for analyzing and reporting the results of the interim assessments?
- How will the results of the interim assessments be reported to everyone involved?
- What tools, systems, and structures need to be established in order to give turnaround school leaders adequate decision-making authority and autonomy?
- How will you publicly advocate for your school and its turnaround process? What steps need to be established for this advocacy process, and who will be held accountable?
- What is your plan for engaging parents and other community stakeholders in your school's turnaround process?
- How do you define flexibility, and how will you offer it to turnaround leadership?
- What tools, systems, and structures are needed in order to provide flexibility to turnaround leadership?
- How will data be used to customize support for improvement efforts?
- How will you consider the sustainability of improvement efforts from the start?

DOMAIN #2: TALENT DEVELOPMENT

- Do you use turnaround competencies for the identification of leaders and/or teachers for low–performing schools? If so, what are the turnaround competencies for teachers and/or leaders in your context?

- If you do not use competencies, how will you identify the skills and aptitudes needed for turnaround leaders and/or teachers? What resources are available?

- What tools, systems, and structures need to be established for leaders to maintain a balance of support with accountability at all levels? Do the tools, systems, and structures need to vary depending on the operational level?

- How will you develop a teacher and leader pipeline? What tools, systems, and structures need to be established in order to make this pipeline sustainable?

- Who will be responsible for identifying the hiring needs of turnaround schools?

- How will you create consensus and understanding of teacher placements and assignments? What will you use to match school needs with teacher and leader competencies?

- What are the professional learning needs of turnaround leadership and staff? What steps must be accomplished to fulfill those needs?

- How will high-performing teachers be leveraged to expand their positive influence outside of their own classrooms?

- Who will be responsible for providing and leading the professional learning opportunities and experiences for turnaround leadership and staff? How can you ensure that professional learning will be rapid, responsive, and customized?

- Who will be held accountable for setting clear performance expectations for staff? How will they determine those expectations? How will staff be assessed or held accountable for achieving those performance expectations?

DOMAIN #3: INSTRUCTION TRANSFORMATION

- How will teachers diagnose each individual student's learning needs? What tools, systems, and structures need to be established?

- How could fluid grouping of students be implemented and supported?

- How will alignment of instruction with standards be facilitated?

- What are possible barriers to student learning, and how can each level of the system work to remove those academic and non-academic barriers?

- How will teachers guide and track the progress of each student? What tools, systems, and structures need to be established?

- Who will establish these tools, systems, and structures?

- What learning benchmarks will teachers use to guide and track student progress?

- What types of early warning systems will identify students who may be falling behind? Who will be held accountable for establishing early warning systems?

DOMAIN #3: INSTRUCTION TRANSFORMATION

- What interventions are used to help students who are falling behind? How might those be adjusted or changed? Who will be included in the team to adjust or change those interventions?

- How can funds be leveraged to provide additional academic supports, extended learning opportunities, credit recovery programs, and virtual courses? Are there stakeholders who would be willing to financially support these programs?

- How do teachers challenge students that are exceeding their current level of schooling? What types of programs does your school offer?

- What types of higher-level assessments and courses has your school offered in the past, and have they worked well to challenge gifted or advanced students? What can schools do differently to challenge gifted or advanced students?

- How do teachers give students authentic experiences, in order to connect their interests with real-world applications?

- How does your school involve community members and stakeholders in offering internships, career exploration, and service-learning opportunities? Who will be held accountable for helping make these connections for your students?

DOMAIN #4: CULTURE SHIFT

- How will you work with your turnaround school leaders and teachers to acknowledge and include their ideas in creating a culture that values effort, respect, and academic achievement?

- How will you invite parents and community members to engage in meaningful dialogue? How will you include their ideas in your process for creating a culture that values effort, respect, and academic achievement?

- How will you include members of the community in your turnaround efforts? How will you encourage them to participate in the turnaround process?

- How will you communicate the progress of your turnaround efforts? Who will be held accountable for this communication at each level? How will the path be made clear to everyone?

- How will you solicit input from stakeholders regarding their perceptions about your school? What tools need to be created in order to solicit that input? Who will be held accountable in developing and distributing those tools?

- What will you need to do to adjust perceptions about your school, if negative, from your stakeholders? How will you show them your school's progress?

- How will you share assessment results explanations with your families? What will need to be in place to ensure that all families have access to this information? How will you assist families in educational planning?

Source: Center on School Turnaround, WestEd[61]

IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS SCHOOL NEEDS

CONDUCT REGULAR NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

As a baseline to continuous school improvement, principals must possess an awareness of the current state of their school as well as a concept of the desired state of their school.[62] This requires principals to articulate a clear vision and goals—in consultation with key stakeholders—as a means of expressing the ideal state of school operations and student outcomes.[63] While principals' and other stakeholders' visions for their schools may be lofty and aspirational, they provide tremendous insight in declaring a school's "core organizational values, its long-term objectives, or what it hopes its students will learn or be capable of doing" as a result of their educational experience.[64] Essentially, a shared

> **LEARN MORE**
> Watch the videos linked below to learn more about needs assessments:
> - **"Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement"** – Council of Chief State School Officers and Center on School Turnaround, WestEd
> - **"The Comprehensive Needs Assessment Process"** – Center on School Turnaround, WestEd

vision around school performance provides an initial benchmark for what a school hopes to achieve and establishes context for current performance.[65] Relatedly, principals should consider their school's and the larger district's strategic goals as markers to orient their examination of current school performance relative to target performance.[66] By focusing on the "ends" of their school's work, principals can better explore the "means" for achieving the "ends."[67]

Orienting the Continuous Cycle of School Improvement Around Organizational Goals

> " *Any journey begins with just one step, but without a clear picture of the destination, that step is likely to be in the wrong direction. The journey to school improvement and student achievement is no different. Everyone involved—administrators, teachers, students, parents, and members of the community—need to develop a focused image of the goal and create a map that will lead them there together. This concept, known as shared vision, fosters success because everyone becomes part of the process, understanding and believing in their role in the day-to-day pursuits of helping students learn in productive ways.* "

Source: SEDL Letter[68]

Principals must understand that maintaining an awareness of school needs and current performance levels is essential to inventory those areas in which a school performs well and those in which it struggles. This awareness can be achieved through regular needs assessments whereby the principal and other stakeholders systematically gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data "to identify strengths and weaknesses within the context and constraints of the organization and dig deeper into root causes."[69] Similarly, a well-executed needs assessment provides insight into the root causes of specific performance trends and outcomes, thereby "enabl[ing] informed decision-making based on rich context and evidence[…from] within the system to understand which solutions are likely to work for whom and under what conditions."[70]

Principals Action Plan for ESSA

The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research and the National Association of Elementary School Principals publish an interactive guide (linked via the icon below) to assist principals with implementing policies and procedures that align with ESSA mandates and support " a well-rounded and complete education" for students.

One key area in which this tool can support principals is regarding needs assessments and associated follow-up actions for school improvement. Specifically, it provides principals with talking points around needs assessments and reviews ESSA provisions related to needs assessments.

Source: Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, American Institutes for Research, and National Association of Elementary School Principals[78]

In particular, needs assessments support principals in identifying discrepancies between the current state of school performance and the target state as defined in the school's vision and strategic goals.[71] Needs assessments help schools gather important information in specific areas of school performance, such as curriculum and instruction, school climate, and family and community engagement.[72] However, to maintain the integrity of the needs assessment process, principals should focus needs assessments on specific issues, procedures, or outcomes related to the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement.[73] Principals—in collaboration with other school and stakeholder leaders—must outline a clear set of goals for needs assessments and determine what aspects of school performance will be measured in relation to those goals and how they will be measured.[74]

Importantly, principals must engage stakeholders (e.g., district leaders, school staff, families) in outlining a trajectory for the needs assessment. Doing so facilitates data collection and builds support for improvement initiatives that arise from the needs assessment.[76] This action also helps to ensure that action planning is confined to those needs which are considered the highest priorities by the larger school community. Notably, USBE recommends that no more than three or four items be prioritized in any cycle of school improvement and advises schools to distill needs down from the initial needs assessment to the action phase (e.g., start with 14 needs, prioritize five to seven needs for the assessment, and select three to four needs to address via targeted actions).[77]

In completing needs assessments, principals and their collaborators should carefully select and use those quantitative methods (e.g., statistical analysis) and qualitative methods (e.g., interviews) that will best measure performance relative to needs assessment goals.[78] At the same time, schools should collect "multiple data types mapped against specific issues of guiding questions," orienting the needs assessment.[79] By collecting a broad base of quantitative and qualitative data for a few specific—and measurable—goals, schools improve the quality of their improvement planning and execution.[80]

Data to Collect and Examine During Needs Assessments

INPUT DATA	OUTPUT DATA	DEMOGRAPHIC/CONTEXTUAL DATA
Input data describe resources intended to support achievement. This category includes information related to improvement plans, curriculum materials and supplies, training, resource allocation, and intervention programs.	Output data refer to information that illustrates outcomes or results. This category includes student and teacher attendance, student achievement, program reviews, classroom observations, behavior referrals, and so forth.	Demographic or contextual data provide information on factors that the school may not have the power to change but may affect performance. This category includes student demographics, economic trends, and enrollment patterns.

Source: State Support Network, U.S. Department of Education[81]

To support Utah's principals in collecting and examining such data, the "Utah System of Support for School Improvement" handbook published by USBE contains many resources, including data collection sheets, rubrics, interview and focus group questions, and surveys (see pp. 31-103 of the document located **here**).[82] Principals may also use the **"Designing Your Needs Assessment Worksheet"** located on the next page to support planning and execution of needs assessments.

ENCOURAGE INNOVATION AND TARGETED ACTION TO ADDRESS NEEDS

Principals must guide their schools in identifying and using those strategies that are best suited to addressing outlined school priorities and problems of practice as determined via the needs assessment. In particular, principals should lead schoolwide while promoting independent investigations of evidence-based strategies to tackle existing areas of improvement.[83] Such exploration will support the school community in organizing and implementing school improvement plans that, at a minimum, have a clear research basis and a reasonable chance of achieving positive outcomes.[84] Essentially, using evidence-based practices increases the likelihood of goal achievement and minimizes the risk of wasted time and resources.[85]

An Equation for Success

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES $+$ **EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION** $=$ **GOOD OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS**

Source: Utah State Board of Education[86]

As a key aspect of innovation and targeted action for school improvement, principals must understand that their school's success depends on the cumulative success of each individual staff member. Thus, an important function of the principal's role in school improvement is "guid[ing] staff through the minefield of opinions to find 'what works best,' based on expert research."[87] Principals should avoid school improvement by fiat (i.e., dictating the individual actions and responsibilities of school staff and other stakeholders). Rather, principals should encourage school staff and other stakeholders to participate actively in the improvement cycle by scrutinizing available data around problems of practice and brainstorming potential solutions.[88] Continuous school improvement demands that "the entire staff take action," necessitating that principals "develop a shared commitment and expansion of leadership capacity among all staff."[89]

Specifically, principals will want to leverage the "collective knowledge of faculty[, staff,] and leaders in [their] school" as a means of identifying ways to address areas of need.[90] To this end, principals will want to function as "servant leaders" who support teachers and other school staff in investigating school performance, resolving challenges, and collaborating to expand professional knowledge.[91] Considered via a different lens, principals should seek to establish a culture of professional inquiry and innovation around identified school needs, as well as broader elements of school operations, curriculum and instruction, and student supports.[92]

Plan, Do, Study, Act Process

STEP	DESCRIPTION
Plan	Schools should identify needs, gather evidence to better understand needs, craft an instructional focus, and engage in professional learning to improve teacher and leader knowledge and skills.
Do	Schools should encourage and implement changes in teacher practice intended to improve student learning in the area of the instructional focus.
Study	Schools should gather teacher and student evidence to learn to what degree the instructional change is having the intended effect on students of greatest need.
Act	Schools should refine instructional changes to further improve student learning.

Source: Phi Delta Kappan[97]

Designing Your Needs Assessment Worksheet

Directions: Using the worksheet below, principals and their collaborators can refine the scope of their school needs assessment and outline the data collection methods they intend to deploy. This worksheet can also assist in the assignment of roles and responsibilities for specific stakeholders or stakeholder groups supporting the needs assessment.

WHAT ELEMENTS OF SCHOOL PERFORMANCE DO YOU INTEND TO FOCUS ON DURING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

❑ Contextual variables

___ Demographics (___ Student ___ Community ___ Staff ___ Other)

___ District policies and supports (___ Operations ___ Infrastructure and resources)

❑ Student variables

___ Student outcomes/performance (___ Assessments ___ Graduation rates ___ Other)

___ Accountability metrics (___ Goal attainment ___ State assessments)

___ Student engagement (___ Attendance ___ Behavior ___ Other)

___ Student opportunities (___ Enrollment in special programs ___ Extracurriculars)

___ Equity of access to quality instruction

❑ Personnel

___ Hiring and retention (___ Turnover ___ Unfilled positions)

___ Staff performance (___ Personnel evaluations ___ Attendance)

___ Professional practice (___ Professional learning ___ Curriculum and instruction)

❑ Climate and culture (___ Stakeholder engagement ___ Student and adult perceptions)

❑ Vendor/partner practices and outcomes

WHAT DATA COLLECTION METHODS DO YOU ANTICIPATE USING DURING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

❑ Compilation of state-level data

❑ Compilation of district-level data

❑ Compilation of school-level data

❑ Surveys or questionnaires of stakeholders

❑ Interviews with stakeholders

❑ Focus groups with stakeholders

❑ Observations of school practices

❑ External review by a partner/vendor

WHAT PARTIES WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

❑ Establishment of design requirements and goals:_____

❑ Development of tools and processes:_____

❑ Formalization of needs assessment plan:_____

❑ Data collection:_____

❑ Data analysis:_____

❑ Dissemination of findings:_____

Source: Council of Chief State School Officers and Center on School Turnaround, WestEd[93]

School improvement requires that principals develop a shared understanding among faculty, staff, and other stakeholders of:[94]

- Why continuous school improvement is essential;
- What new and emerging skills and knowledge requirements are needed to drive improvement; and
- How to bring about improvement by learning from successful practices that have worked in other settings, as indicated by research.

Principals can prime their schools for improvement by setting organizational conditions that demand shared stakeholder accountability and celebrate innovation, experimentation, and problem-solving.[96] Clear signals must be sent by principals that they and the teachers, support staff, and administrative personnel at their school are all accountable for student achievement and school outcomes. Relatedly, principals need to set expectations that all school personnel consistently access and examine data points related to their specific job functions and the particular outcomes of those responsibilities.[97] Importantly, principals can utilize professional learning techniques like teacher action research (TAR) and professional learning communities (PLCs) with their school's instructional and support staff to standardize examination of available data, incubate potential solutions for problems of practice, and inform improvement actions.[98]

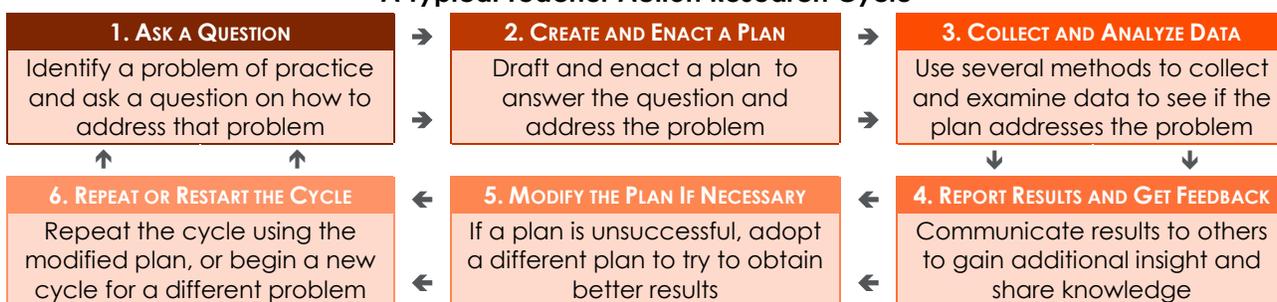### A Culture of Improvement and Innovation

> " *Culture trumps strategy. **Successful schools create a culture that supports improvement before they attempt to implement change.** Without a strong cultural foundation, the proposed solution can be mistaken for the problem. In other words, knowing why the school must change should always come before deciding how to change. The nation's most rapidly improving schools build understanding about the need for change before taking steps toward improvement. Schools that falter, on the other hand, often fail to gain buy-in.* "

Source: International Center for Leadership in Education[99]

In implementing such professional learning strategies at scale, principals must respect and encourage the knowledge and efforts of their staff and empower them to take risks and try new approaches to improve their own and the larger school's performance.[100] Likewise, principals must encourage their staff to act and develop their professional capacities based on data to best drive ongoing school improvement.[101] To these ends, principals can:[102]

- Allocate time for teachers and other staff to collaborate around problems of practice, identify and experiment with solutions, and report the findings of their experimentation;
- Plan programs (e.g., seminars, job-embedded coaching) to expose school staff to new knowledge and strategies to support their ongoing action research and collaborative work;
- Advocate for S.M.A.R.T. (i.e., specific, measurable, attainable/actionable, results-focused, and time-bound) goal-setting; and
- Establish feedback mechanisms—both by supervisors and peers—to inform ongoing improvements to professional practices and school functions.

A Typical Teacher Action Research Cycle

1. ASK A QUESTION	2. CREATE AND ENACT A PLAN	3. COLLECT AND ANALYZE DATA
Identify a problem of practice and ask a question on how to address that problem	Draft and enact a plan to answer the question and address the problem	Use several methods to collect and examine data to see if the plan addresses the problem

6. REPEAT OR RESTART THE CYCLE	5. MODIFY THE PLAN IF NECESSARY	4. REPORT RESULTS AND GET FEEDBACK
Repeat the cycle using the modified plan, or begin a new cycle for a different problem	If a plan is unsuccessful, adopt a different plan to try to obtain better results	Communicate results to others to gain additional insight and share knowledge

Source: International Reading Association, Nokia Corporation, and Pearson Foundation[103]

Action Items for Successful Professional Learning Communities

1. Embrace the premise that the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels, and enlist staff in examining every existing practice, program, and procedure to ensure it aligns with that purpose.

2. Organize staff into meaningful collaborative teams that take collective responsibility for student learning and work interdependently to achieve shared goals for which members are mutually accountable.

3. Call on teams to establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum for each unit that clarifies the essential learning for all students, agree on pacing guidelines, and develop and administer common formative assessments to monitor each student's learning at the end of each unit.

4. Use the evidence of student learning to identify:
- Students who need additional time and support to become proficient;
- Students who need enrichment and extension of their learning;
- Teachers who help students achieve at high levels so team members can examine their practices;
- Teachers who struggle to help students become proficient so team members can assist in addressing the problem; and
- Skills or concepts that no teacher can help students achieve at the intended level so the team can expand its learning beyond its members to become more effective in teaching those skills or concepts.

5. Create a coordinated intervention plan that ensures students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, precise, and systematic.

Source: Educational Leadership[104]

While principals should allow their staff latitude in choosing those practices with which they wish to experiment, **principals must provide firm guidance specifying the use of evidence-based strategies that apply within existing school contexts or to the specific problems of practice being addressed.**[105] In essence, principals will want to encourage their staff to identify "reasonable evidence to suggest that a particular program, activity, or strategy could be successful in meeting a particular student need" or improving a specific area of school performance.[106] This means directing teachers and other school staff to understand the levels of evidence outlined by ESSA and consider them when selecting strategies to focus on in PLCs, as part of TAR, or in conjunction with broader exercises around continuous school improvement.[107]

The **"Evidence-Based Practices Cheat Sheet"** (on page 23) provides an overview of the four categories of evidence contained within ESSA. Addressed characteristics include the sample size for studies examining a given strategy, the effects of strategies, and whether studies for specific strategies meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Evidence Standards. Please note that a full explanation of standards and procedures the WWC uses to review studies is available **here**.[108]

Online Learning Modules on Evidence-Based Practices

The IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University publishes a three-part module series for educators focusing on evidence-based practices, which are linked via the icons below. The first module (Resource #1) explores the process of identifying and selecting evidence-based practices for use in school settings. The second module (Resource #2) reviews how to implement evidence-based practices with fidelity, and the third and final module (Resource #3) discusses procedures for evaluating the effects of implemented practices.

Resource #1: "Evidence-Based Practices (Part 1): Identifying and Selecting a Practice or Program"	↗
Resource #2: "Evidence-Based Practices (Part 2): Implementing a Practice or Program with Fidelity"	↗
Resource #3: "Evidence-Based Practices (Part 3): Evaluating Learner Outcomes and Fidelity"	↗

Source: IRIS Center, Vanderbilt University[109]

Evidence-Based Practices Cheat Sheet

<u>Directions</u>: Principals can use the table below to support their own and their staff's explorations into evidence-based practices to address problems of practice and drive ongoing school improvements. Specifically, the table will familiarize educators with the four evidence levels for interventions and educational practices defined in ESSA to improve their ability to scrutinize research and evidence bases for specific strategies.

	STRONG EVIDENCE	**MODERATE EVIDENCE**	**PROMISING EVIDENCE**	**DEMONSTRATES A RATIONALE**
STUDY DESIGN	Experimental study	Quasi-experimental study	Correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias	Provides a well-specified logic model informed by research or evaluation
WWC STANDARD	Meets WWC Evidence Standards without reservations (or is of equivalent quality)	Meets WWC Evidence Standards with or without reservations (or is of equivalent quality)	---	---
FAVORABLE EFFECTS	Shows a statistically significant and positive (i.e., favorable) effect of the intervention on a student outcome or other relevant outcome	Shows a statistically significant and positive (i.e., favorable) effect of the intervention on a student outcome or other relevant outcome	Shows a statistically significant and positive (i.e., favorable) effect of the intervention on a student outcome or other relevant outcome	Relevant research or an evaluation that suggests that the intervention is likely to improve a student outcome or other relevant outcome
OTHER EFFECTS	Is not overridden by statistically significant and negative (i.e., unfavorable) evidence from other findings in studies that meet WWC Evidence Standards with or without reservations (or are of equivalent quality)	Is not overridden by statistically significant and negative (i.e., unfavorable) evidence from other findings in studies that meet WWC Evidence Standards with or without reservations (or are of equivalent quality)	Is not overridden by statistically significant and negative (i.e., unfavorable) evidence from other findings in studies that meet WWC Evidence Standards with or without reservations (or are of equivalent quality)	An effort to study the effects of the intervention, ideally producing promising evidence or higher, will happen as part of the intervention or is underway elsewhere
SAMPLE SIZE AND OVERLAP	Includes a large sample and a multi-site sample, overlapping with populations and settings proposed to receive the intervention	Includes a large sample and a multisite sample, overlapping with populations or settings proposed to receive the intervention	---	---

Source: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education[110]

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