

Creating Consistency and Coherence through Continuous Improvement

Educators are familiar with continuous improvement. Teachers are constantly assessing needs of students, implementing strategies to better support them, and making adjustments as context or student needs change. Continuous improvement happens in the classroom; it also happens among teacher teams, within school sites, at a district level, or even among educational stakeholders and communities.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is pleased to share a [process for continuous improvement](#) that can be used within any context or level of the preK-12 education system.

Why are we building this process?

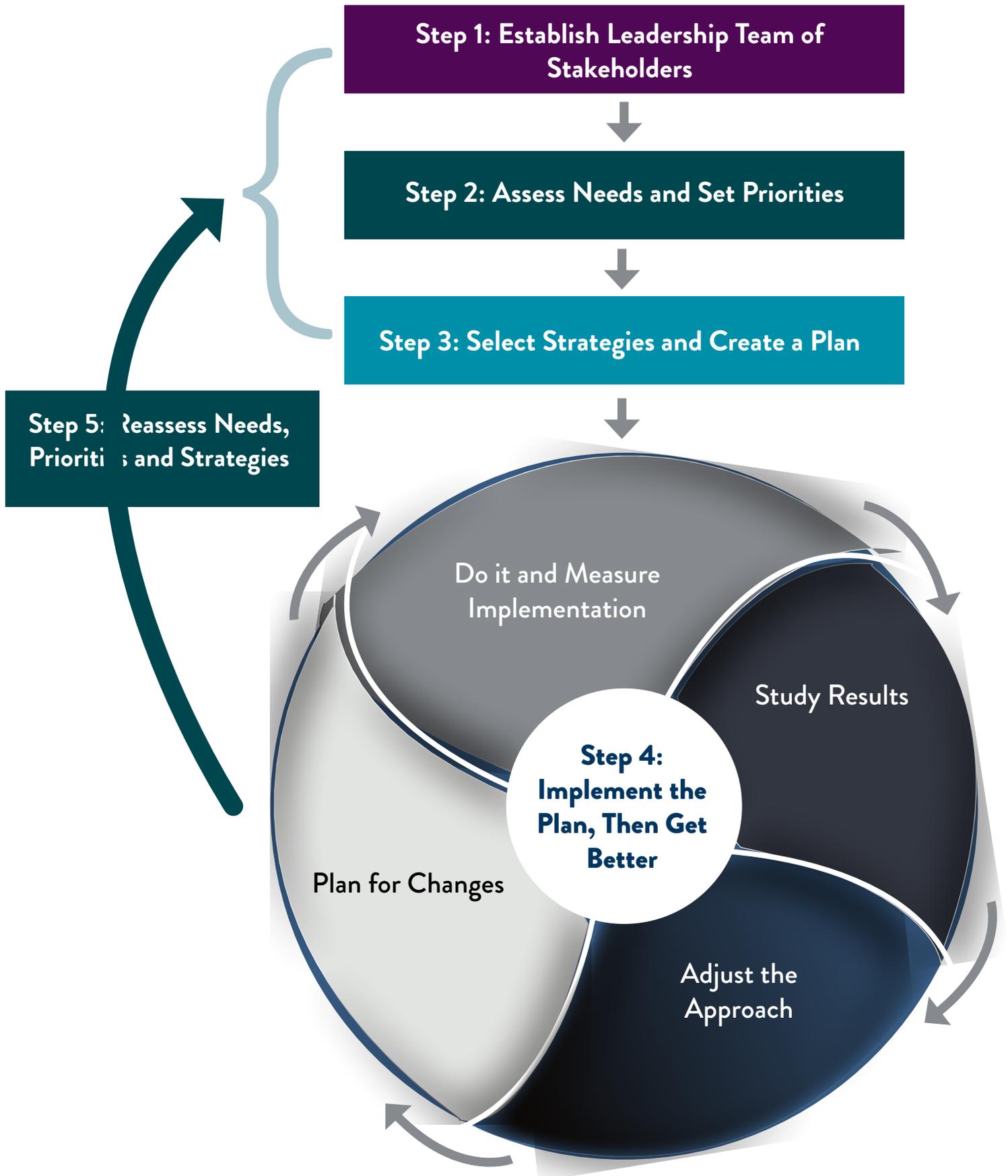
1. **To encourage coherence and connections.** Schools and districts are bombarded with multiple plans, grants, and legislative mandates. At the heart of this work, there is a focus on the same components of continuous improvement. Even with specific requirements and unique contexts, there is an opportunity to better connect local plans as well as the support MDE provides to move towards more coherence and alignment.
2. **To shift mindsets.** This work is focused on understanding where we are and getting better. When approaching the work with a growth mindset, ongoing improvement and relationships are made. An explicit commitment to equity, demonstrated through action, is one of the key components in this work.
3. **To stay focused on the “how”.** Continuous improvement is a process for “how” we do the work. Regardless of grant parameters, legislative mandates or program requirements, the process for continuous improvement is the same.

What is the process?

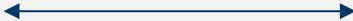
<p>Step 1: Establish a Leadership Team</p> <p><i>Who will be involved in the process? How will we engage them meaningfully?</i></p>
<p>Step 2: Assess Needs And Set Priorities</p> <p><i>Where are we now? How did we get where we are? Where do we want to be?</i></p>
<p>Step 3: Select Strategies and Create a Plan</p> <p><i>How are we going to get to where we want to be? How will we inform implementation?</i></p>
<p>Step 4: Implement the Plan and Get Better</p> <p><i>How's it going, and what's next?</i></p>
<p>Step 5: Reassess Needs, Priorities and Strategies</p> <p><i>Should we reassess our team, needs, and strategies?</i></p>

Below is a visual representation of the five-step process included in our *Continuous Improvement Framework*.

A PreK-12 Continuous Improvement Process



Key Component	Status Quo	Commitment to Continuous Improvement	Self-Assessment and Notes
Leadership	<p>Top-down leadership focuses on completing requirements.</p> <p>Areas of emphasis often change as leaders change, and there is less opportunity for sustainable improvement.</p>	<p>Leaders create safe, inclusive spaces that identify, acknowledge, and enable shared decision-making focused on students.</p> <p>Leadership team members emphasize equitable practices, implementation and ways to meaningfully involve community members.</p>	<p>SQ CI</p> 
Partnerships with Stakeholders	<p>Leaders create one-way partnerships with parents, community, and businesses to raise money and access resources.</p> <p>Partnerships focus on informing stakeholders and consulting with stakeholders.</p>	<p>Leaders embrace and encourage two-way beneficial partnerships with stakeholders as a means of implementing a shared vision.</p> <p>District and school partners are representative of the diversity of the community.</p> <p>Partnerships focus on collaborating with stakeholders and empowering stakeholders.</p>	<p>SQ CI</p> 
Evidence and Data Analysis	<p>Teams identify students' backgrounds and communities as reasons for poor results (for example, our results are not very good because our population lives in poverty).</p> <p>Teams use only student achievement results to complete their needs assessments and determine gaps.</p> <p>Teams focus solely on meeting accountability requirements instead of focusing on growth for all students.</p>	<p>Multiple data sources (demographic, perception, student achievement, program, and fidelity) are used to be strategic in efforts to provide an equitable education for each student.</p> <p>A needs assessment helps the leadership team determine areas of inequity and barriers to positive outcomes for students.</p> <p>Data are used to inform decisions on a regular basis and include student outcomes, quality of adult practice and the conditions under which students learn.</p>	<p>SQ CI</p> 

Key Component	Status Quo	Commitment to Continuous Improvement	Self-Assessment and Notes
<p>Professional Learning</p>	<p>Professional learning is a “one size fits all” activity. All staff receive the same training and this often creates less change than needed.</p> <p>Staff continue to do the same thing over and over again, hoping for better results.</p> <p>Local context is not considered when selecting the “next best thing” in professional learning.</p>	<p>Leaders ensure training and coaching support ongoing learning and reflection on adult practices.</p> <p>Professional learning supports strategies in the plan, is culturally relevant and is differentiated based on the needs and experiences of staff and students.</p> <p>Time is dedicated for collaborative teams to review, discuss and determine options for improving student learning.</p>	<p>SQ CI</p> 
<p>Implementation of Standards and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support</p>	<p>Implementation of standards-based educational systems and multi-tiered systems of support are not monitored regularly.</p> <p>Instruction, assessment, and curriculum are not intentionally aligned with standards and refined based on student needs.</p> <p>Core instruction and increasingly rigorous interventions are not designed based on students’ mastery of rigorous standards.</p>	<p>Ensuring all students succeed on rigorous standards is central to strategic planning and continuous improvement.</p> <p>Strategies in the plan are focused on multi-tiered systems of supports for students and academic standards.</p> <p>The implementation of multi-tiered systems of support is assessed regularly, and results inform strategic planning.</p> <p>Collaborative teams design instruction, assessments, and curriculum based on academic standards and student needs.</p>	<p>SQ CI</p> 

Continuous Improvement Model Questions and Tasks

These model questions and tasks focus on “how” we do the work; the process is not specifically describing the “what”. For this reason, these questions and tasks can be applied across many unique contexts and programs within the PreK-12 education system. Regardless of the specific program, grant requirement, or legislative mandate, teams can use this process for “how” they go about the work.

Teams can use these guiding questions for collaborative reflection as well as the tasks to support action planning. Teams could also expand on these questions or tasks to ensure they are customized for the specific context the team is working in.

Step 1: Establish a Leadership Team

Who will be involved in the process? How will we engage them meaningfully?

It is important to have a team in place to lead and guide the work along. A variety of perspectives and backgrounds should be represented on the team, including someone with decision-making authority. Clarity on how the team functions and operates is essential as well as an explicit understanding of its relationships with other teams. This is the beginning of the [Exploration Stage of Active Implementation](#).

Guiding Questions	Tasks
Who will develop the team?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assign a team lead or facilitator.
What stakeholder perspectives should be represented on the team?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify stakeholders to join the team.• Recruit team members and build the team.
How will the leadership team function?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine schedules, norms, roles and responsibilities.• Prioritize equity’s role in the planning process.

Step 2: Assess Needs and Set Priorities

Where are we now? How did we get where we are? Where do we want to be?

A needs assessments helps determine the needs, or gaps, between where we are and where we want to be. It is important to use a variety of data – not just student outcome data – to determine needs. As part of this, it is particularly important to consider data in the context of a standards-based educational system and multi-tiered systems of support as well as data that shines a bright light on disparities between student groups. A thorough and structured data analysis process will lead to identified root causes – or the “why” behind the data – and the prioritization of needs.

Guiding Questions	Tasks
What data should we examine?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List available data sources in the different categories of data. • Identify any data that are required for the needs assessment by programs or policies. • Choose additional data to examine. • Collect and organize data for the team to analyze.
What do the data say and what questions do they raise?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow a structured process to analyze the data. • Pose additional questions the data raise and additional data to review.
What needs and priorities came from the data analysis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine root causes and needs. • Prioritize needs. • Consider possible measures and goals for the plan.

Step 3: Select Strategies and Create a Plan

How are we going to get to where we want to be? How will we inform implementation?

Clearly-defined strategies that tie back to the prioritized needs help reach the articulated goals for student success. The strategies should have an evidence base, and it is important to explicitly define what will be implemented so it can be communicated and taught. Once a strategy is chosen, the team moves to the [Installation Stage](#) to create supports needed. A clear plan for training, coaching, and monitoring of implementation is also critical to successful implementation.

Guiding Questions	Tasks
What are we already doing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventory current initiatives and their impacts. • Determine how existing strategies are supporting our priorities and if not, what gaps exist.
What strategies will fill gaps between needs and current initiatives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify potential strategies to address needs. • Select the strategies that will be implemented in the plan.
What are the core components of each selected strategy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operationalize strategies by defining core components.
What needs to happen to implement strategies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess potential barriers and the capacity to implement strategies. • Identify training and coaching needs and develop action steps to support staff. • Identify how strategies support equity and will not have unintended consequences for groups of students. • Create the plan for implementation. • Identify resources needed for implementation and sources for resources. • Determine how the strategies and plan will be communicated to staff and stakeholders.
What are our goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop goals that tie back to the needs assessment and are based on the strategies selected.
How will we monitor and communicate goals, implementation and results?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide on a process to collect data on how well strategies are being implemented and their impacts. • Plan for who needs to review data and receive regular updates on plan implementation and how that will happen. • Find ways to celebrate.

Step 4: Implement the Plan and Get Better

How's it going, and what's next?

This begins the [Initial Implementation Stage](#). A well-implemented plan takes perseverance and patience. It is important to follow through and stick to the plan. Active implementation takes repetition in collecting implementation data, studying results, and making adjustments. It is an ongoing plan-do-study-adjust cycle. Success may not be evident immediately, but given time, the changes in adult behavior should impact student outcomes. Once this happens, the plan moves to the [Full Implementation Stage](#) when the focus is on sustainability.

Guiding Questions	Tasks
What are we doing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• DO what the plan says and collect evidence to inform implementation.
How well are we doing what we said we would? Who is benefiting, who isn't, and how do we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• STUDY the results of implementing the plan.
What lessons are we learning? What are our next steps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ADJUST implementation of the plan.
How will we carry out our next steps and our next PLAN-DO-STUDY-ADJUST cycles?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• PLAN to make and support changes.• PLAN for collecting and reviewing data to further inform implementation.

Step 5: Reassess Team, Needs, and Strategies

How do we determine if we need to reassess our team, needs and strategies?

Re-visiting the leadership team, needs, priorities, and strategies occurs when context changes. This could include changes in staff, shifts in student enrollment, turnover of leadership, lack of impact on student outcomes, or changes in policy or legislative requirements. This could temporarily move the team back to the [Exploration Stage](#) to rethink choices or the [Installation Stage](#) to build supports. The timeframe for re-assessing steps 1-3 will depend on the unique context of the work. For instance, a district-level team may revisit steps 1-3 on an annual or multi-year basis, while a teacher-led team may revisit these steps on a six week cycle.

Guiding Questions	Tasks
How have our needs and priorities changed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the membership of the leadership team. • Complete the needs assessment at regular intervals (such as twice a year, annually, every three years, as appropriate).
What are the impacts of implementation of our current plan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review implementation progress of current strategies. • Assess progress towards goals. • Identify other unpredicted results and unintended consequences on student groups.
Do we need to develop a new plan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify strategies to keep, strategies to discontinue, and strategies to refine. • Revisit the tasks in steps 1-3 as needed to review data regularly and address new needs.