

Round up a Culture of Continual Improvement
And Put the Legend of Silver Bullets and Other Shiny Objects in the Past

Dr. Brian Coppess

March, 2023

Crawford 108

Western Colorado University

1 Western Way

Gunnison, CO 81230

(970) 943-2135

bcoppess@western.edu

Job descriptions and state standards that describe the skills expected of school principals consistently include language like “change agent” and “ability to lead and facilitate change.” For many aspiring school leaders, it is a source of great pride to be able to position themselves as “change agents”. Many people, though, especially teachers, do not like change and do not value the change agent principal at all. Nearly every veteran teacher can tell a story about a principal they worked for some time during their career who was hired because the optimistic leader seemingly had the silver bullet that would fix the staff, the students, the parents, and everything else that ailed their school.

People who are cautious about change have too often discovered that, in education, there is almost never a silver bullet. In fact, immediate solutions to challenging school problems are rare. The most perceptive and effective school leaders almost never expect a quick fix or boast that they can produce one.

In nearly every plan to address a new or existing challenge in a school, the practice of continual/continuous improvement (CI) offers a better method and outcome than abrupt transformational change. The serendipitous convenience of this assertion is that CI processes are less disruptive than sweeping change and are already common place in many schools.

“Continuous improvement is an ongoing, long-term approach to improve processes, products, and services” (Cousins, 2021, p. 1). A “long-term approach” can be frustrating to those who are used to the swift action and immediate fix promises of typical change agents. Practicing CI, however, reveals that faith in a silver bullet usually leads to endless new

initiatives, inadequate training, and insufficient, short-lived gains (Sparks, 2018). CI teaches leaders to think in terms of the whole system and to focus on improving processes. Now is a prudent time to examine the misconception that change is unavoidable. Preparation programs should begin to formally train educators in CI and how to analyze and improve the processes of existing programs devoted to helping all students learn and self-actualize.

In an era when educational innovation is channeled by federal regulations and state policies, the emphasis on refining processes according to Cousin's definition of CI is expedient for the visionary school leader. Instead of pushing another "shiny object" on the teaching staff, innovative principals must focus on improving existing, and often mandated, programs. Fittingly, wonderful examples of CI like the individual education plans that are developed for students who qualify for special services are firmly in place in all public schools; your special education professionals are experts in CI.

Since the processes special education professionals use to support the gradual and incremental learning of the most academically and physically challenged students align directly with CI methods, special education is a valuable model for advancing CI in other departments in your school. Special education teachers can be helpful for training the rest of your staff in Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA), a most frequently used CI tool, simply by explaining and demonstrating what they do: Plan – Develop interventions and collect and review data to identify a disability; Do - Design and implement an action plan based on the data that was analyzed; Study - Progress monitor and analyze the new data to determine if the plan is working (is learning taking place?); Act – Based on the new data, start a new cycle of improvement by revising instruction (the original plan) according to if learning is taking place or not.

Getting Started

CI is not a silver bullet, and it is not intended to result in an immediate fix. Staff would recognize immediately an abrupt implementation of CI as the episodic change they have experienced in the past, which has almost always failed to solve problems or accomplish improvement goals. Fortunately, there are many ways to “till the soil” to launch a culture of CI in your school. The following ideas (in no particular order) are useful for enacting a culture of CI at your school. Importantly, you should be purposeful, strategic, and gradual in building a CI culture; improvement happens in small increments:

- Recruit your special education professionals early and show them how CI aligns with what they are already doing. When special education teachers recognize how their work aligns almost perfectly with CI, they can be practical advocates for training the staff and for helping you develop a culture of CI throughout the building. If staff express concerns that CI is the next new thing or another shiny object, your special education professionals can validate how their work has always aligned with improvement and CI processes.
- Read existing literature on CI. CI is prominent in business and other enterprises. For example, there are abundant resources available about how health care uses CI to ensure ongoing, quality improvement. Staff will be able to recognize the connection of CI with health care providers through the surveys they are regularly asked to complete after a doctor or hospital visit.
- Have a conversation with your teachers about silver bullets and quick fixes in education, and give them a chance to discuss how they feel about change for the sake of change.

They might enjoy reviewing a history of initiatives that have been pushed upon them.

When the timing is right, communicate to them that it might be time to quit pursuing shiny objects in favor of practices that ensure ongoing, continual improvement. If your staff is as weary of “the next new thing,” as many staffs are, you might get a standing ovation.

- After some foundational work to help staff begin thinking about CI, give your group a chance to identify and analyze existing programming and how CI is informally embedded in processes throughout the district:
 - Since the word improvement is included in a comprehensive school improvement plan or a universal improvement plan, many will recognize how both follow the constructs of CI.
 - Staff who use interventions like MTSS and RtI might point out that those and other intervention programs endorse CI.
 - Depending on the quality of the building or district and relevant budget and strategic planning efforts, staff may recognize the role of budget in strategic planning and how both budget and strategic planning are Plan-Do-Study-Act processes (PDSAs)
 - Ask your activity directors and athletic coaches to compare how they review film and prepare for events to PDSA.
- Practice writing quality SMART goals:
 - Specific
 - Measurable

- Ongoing - You never really attain a continual improvement goal; instead, you analyze the improvement, celebrate, and start a new PDSA cycle. Begin writing SMORT goals instead of SMART goals.
- Relevant
- Timebound – Since CI is ongoing improvement, making measurable progress over the course cycles of improvement (however many it takes) takes precedence over timebound goals. If improvement is taking place, the importance of timelines and deadlines diminishes.

Well-planned and well-written SMORT goals are the foundation for the ongoing improvement of your school.

- Conduct a staff activity that allows them to consider where to begin improvement. Use this activity to have the staff practice and present their own SMORT goals and PDSA. Be prepared to discuss and improve the SMORT goals and the PDSA, and require staff to clearly define the problem so the PDSA is addressing the right “problatunity” (problem + opportunity)(Langford, 2008, p. 2).
- Look into organizations devoted to the advancement of CI including The Deming Institute, Lean Six Sigma Institute, and the Baldrige Foundation Institute for Performance Excellence. Langford International (David Langford) and Shipley and Associates are two companies that are dedicated specifically to introducing CI to education and schools. All of these CI institutions have websites with more information about CI and programs to help you get started. Once you have “tilled the soil” and

gradually introduced your staff to CI, many will see the benefits of CI over abrupt change. It is now time to offer opportunities for formal training.

- Screen new hires for their understanding of CI or their interest in learning about it and being part of a culture of CI.

As an organic culture of CI becomes established in your building, it will replace the shiny object and the expectation that the principal has immediate solutions to all the problems. Instead, teachers will participate in reflective conversations intended to clearly define problems, apply PDSA, and contribute to the development of specific, measurable action plans.

Improvement happens in small increments. Till the soil of the existing culture. Get started, but go slow. With practice, the wisdom of CI will soon guide the thinking and behavior of everyone in your school. Previously daunting tasks like student management and teacher evaluation will become improvement processes for principals, teachers, and students, and new initiatives that used to fail because of the immediacy and disruption of change will be introduced gradually including data to justify improvement and a reason to celebrate.

References

Cousins, M. (2021). Change management vs continuous improvement: Which is best for you?

Triaster. Retrieved June 27, 2022 from <https://blog.triaster.co.uk/blog/change-management-vs-continuous-improvement-which-is-the-best-for-your->

business#:~:text=Generally%20speaking%2C%20continuous%20improvement%20looks, take%2Dup%20is%20greatly%20improved.

Langford, D. (2008). Tool time for education. Langford International: Molt, Montana.

Sparks, S. (2018). Tinkering toward better schools. Education week. February, 2018. Retrieved August 3, 2022 from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/tinkering-toward-better-schools/2018/02>

Dr. Brian Coppess has fifteen years of experience as a high school assistant principal and principal. Currently he is an assistant professor and Director of Principal Licensure at Western Colorado University in Gunnison, CO where he teaches aspiring principals about compassionate leadership and building cultures of continual improvement. He can be reached at bcoppess@western.edu.