



Exploring “Learning to Improve: The Research behind the Vision for School Improvement” (60 minutes)



A supporting resource for [A Vision for School Improvement: Applying the Framework for Great Schools](#)
Step 2: Assess needs and establish goals.

OVERVIEW

Through reading and discussion, this session will familiarize participants with the research that led to the development of [A Vision for School Improvement: Applying the Framework for Great Schools](#). It will also provide an opportunity to discuss connections between the research findings and the work of their school community and implications for moving forward.

OBJECTIVE

Participants will deepen understanding of improvement science and its role in [A Vision for School Improvement: Applying the Framework for Great Schools](#), and consider the connections and implications for their work.

MATERIALS

- [Research brief: *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*](#)
- [Graphic organizer](#) (optional and attached)

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What is improvement science, and how is it different from traditional forms of problem solving and research in education?
- How are the improvement principles described in the research similar to or different from past and current work?
- How can collective learning help organize efforts to tackle the problems I face in my school community’s work?

FACILITATION NOTES

1. Introduction and framing (2 minutes)

- Welcome participants and review the objective and guiding questions of the activity.
- Explain that participants will explore the research brief by:
 - Analyzing the key findings of the research into school improvement.
 - Considering the implications these findings for our understanding of our past and current work.

2. Reflecting on past work (5 minutes)

- Ask participants to reflect (using their graphic organizer) on their school community and its approach to addressing its largest challenges, as well as its approach to using research.
- Invite participants to share their reflections in pairs.

3. Sharing the research brief (3 minutes)

- Introduce participants to the research brief, utilizing the following talking points:

- We as educators recognize that not all schools are identical, and improvement efforts should fit a school's particular context and challenges. In order to guide NYC schools in their work to improve student achievement, we are always looking to research that provides clarity into *what* successful schools do to improve and *how* they do it. The following brief describes important research into these questions.
- The research we are going to read about describes the lessons from improvement science and outlines the six principles that have enabled education organizations to learn to overcome difficult and complex problems.

4. Part A: Reading the research brief (10 minutes)

- Ask participants to independently read the research brief, using the corresponding questions on their graphic organizers to guide their reading:
 1. What are the goals of improvement research? How is it different from traditional approaches to education research and/or improvement?
 2. What resonates with you?
- After participants have finished reading and responding to the questions, invite them to share out.

5. Part B: Deepening understanding of the six improvement principles (20 minutes)

- Ask participants to form groups of two or three. Ask them to read and discuss the guiding questions for each of the six principles, basing their conversation on their understanding of the reading as well as their personal experience. Invite them to use the graphic organizer to make notes. (Alternatively, groups may tackle three of the six principles, and then exchange thoughts with another group that looked at the other questions.)
 1. The authors of the book describe two distinct types of improvement efforts: those that are problem-focused and those that are solution-focused. What is the difference, and what are the benefits of being problem-focused?
 2. Much of the research and administration of education focuses on averages as the key indicators of success. How might a shift in focus toward the variation that exists between students, classes, schools, etc., help develop our understanding of what works?
 3. Given the limited time and resources available to educators to engage in improvement efforts, how might a deep understanding of the system that produces current outcomes help set priorities?
 4. How are locally designed and collected measures of progress different from existing end-of-year data? How might creating and measuring specific indicators of progress help improvement efforts?
 5. How are cycles of inquiry different from other types of improvement efforts? What do you think the authors mean by “learn fast, fail fast, and improve fast”?
 6. How can common language and protocols for addressing shared problems help accelerate learning in schools? Imagine networks of schools engaged in solving a common problem. How might the lessons they share differ from other research-based approaches that come from Central or academia?
- Ask participants to share any insights or interesting ideas with the whole group. Allow for a conversation to take place around the ideas. If doubts or questions come up, invite the group to think about how to answer them. When all six principles have been discussed, ask the participants to return to their small groups and ask them to discuss the following question:
 - How do the six improvement principles support each other? How might the absence of one undermine the impact of another?
- After participants have had a couple minutes to discuss, invite them to share out.

6. Part C: Connecting the research brief to work in schools (15 minutes)

- Inform the participants that the next step will be connecting the improvement principles to their past and current work. Read them this quote from the book:

“This strategy draws on a natural human instinct. Much practical learning occurs every day in schools. Individual teachers learn when they introduce a new practice in their classroom and then carefully evaluate the resulting student work. Likewise, individual schools learn as staff to examine data together on the effectiveness of current practices and tests improvement ideas against the evidence of changes in student work.” – Bryk et al., p. 8

- In response to the quote, ask participants to think about similarities between the methods described in the research brief and examples from their own experience in schools. Remind them that their examples do not need to be formal policies, but can be informal actions by individuals. Ask them to share with the larger group.
- Ask participants to think about how their school community differs from the description in the research brief in both large and small ways. Invite them to discuss the following question in small groups:
 - Imagine a school community like yours that successfully engages in improvement efforts as described in the research brief. What would that school community look like? In what ways could your school community benefit from adopting these practices?
- Ask participants to look back at the six principles, and ask them if any of the six seem easier or harder to embrace. Discuss as a whole group, and follow up by asking if different stakeholders in their school community would answer this question differently.
 - Ask participants to brainstorm some changes to the roles of individuals in their schools that would be necessary in order to adopt the methods in the research brief.

7. Identifying next steps and available resources (5 minutes)

- Ask participants to identify and share one next step they will take connected to the elements of the *Framework for Great Schools* to support student success (in pairs, or in the whole group).
- Remind participants of the supporting resources and activities available on the [Vision for School Improvement](#) website:
 - [Exploring the Framework for Great Schools](#)
 - [Exploring “A Vision for School Improvement: Applying the Framework for Great Schools”](#)
 - [Research brief on the research behind the Framework for Great Schools](#)
 - [Alignment across the NYCDOE: Linking Each Element of the Framework for Great Schools with NYCDOE Measures and Resources](#)
 - [Looking at Current Practice toward a Shared Understanding of the Framework for Great Schools with Your Community](#)

Graphic Organizer for Activity: Exploring “Learning to Improve: The Research behind the Vision for School Improvement”

Pre-reading Reflection

How does your school community address the challenges it faces? What kinds of improvement efforts have been tried?

How does your school community use research in their day-to-day work? How does it use research in its long-term planning?

Part A: Reading the Research Brief

What are the goals of improvement research? How is it different from traditional approaches to education research and/or improvement?

What resonates with you?

Part B: Deepening Understanding of the Six Improvement Principles

1. The authors of the book describe two distinct types of improvement efforts: those that are problem-focused and those that are solution-focused. What is the difference, and what are the benefits of being problem-focused?
2. Much of the research and administration of education focuses on averages as the key indicators of success. How might a shift in focus toward the variation that exists between students, classes, schools, etc., help develop our understanding of what works?
3. Given the limited time and resources available to educators to engage in improvement efforts, how might a deep understanding of the system that produces current outcomes help set priorities?

4. How are locally designed and collected measures of progress different from existing end-of-year data? How might creating and measuring specific indicators of progress help improvement efforts?
5. How are cycles of inquiry different from other types of improvement efforts? What do you think the authors mean by “learn fast, fail fast, and improve fast”?
6. How can common language and protocols for addressing shared problems help accelerate learning in schools? Imagine networks of schools engaged in solving a common problem. How might the lessons they share differ from other research-based approaches that come from Central or academia?

How do the six improvement principles support each other? How might the absence of one undermine the impact of another?

Part C: Connecting the Research Brief to Work in Schools

“This strategy draws on a natural human instinct. Much practical learning occurs every day in schools. Individual teachers learn when they introduce a new practice in their classroom and then carefully evaluate the resulting student work. Likewise, individual schools learn as staff to examine data together on the effectiveness of current practices and tests improvement ideas against the evidence of changes in student work.” – Bryk et al., p. 8

What are some similarities between the methods described in the research brief and examples from your own experience in schools?

Imagine a school community like yours that successfully engages in improvement efforts as described in the research brief. What would that school community look like? In what ways could your school community benefit from adopting these practices?

What changes to the roles of individuals in their schools that would be necessary in order to adopt the methods in the research brief?