Engaging Schools to Improve Ninth-Grade Outcomes: CORE's Approach

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Busy educators are often faced with a dilemma—staying up to date with evidence-based practices and initiatives that support their professional growth while combating a constant barrage of superficial ideas from other contexts. Continuous improvement approaches to change offer methods for testing new ideas and adapting them to local contexts. If seen as add-ons to educators' roles, however, these approaches are unlikely to yield deep engagement and sustained improvement. This practice brief explains the CORE Districts' five-driver model, a modified approach that deepened educators' ownership of the work and positioned schools to sustain improvement over time.

California's accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.

Introduction

In 2018, CORE Districts[1] received a Networks for School Improvement Grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Using this grant, CORE Districts (hereafter CORE) launched an improvement network called the Breakthrough Success Community (BTSC), which focused on helping high schools improve the proportion of students on track to graduate prepared for college and career. CORE launched three cohorts of BTSC schools in April 2019, April 2020, and September 2021, and the community currently includes 36 schools from ten urban districts (six of the CORE districts and five schools from four other districts).

BTSC focuses on ninth grade based on evidence that shows (a) many students struggle with the transition to high school and fall through the cracks in ninth grade, and (b) if schools are redesigned to support students through this transition, schools can increase the proportion of students who graduate prepared for college and career.[2] CORE named five "drivers," or components critical to a successful ninth-grade experience: ninth-grade transition, adult teaming, strong adult–student relationships, school scheduling practices, and grading practices.

Although work around these focus areas had supported improved student outcomes in other places, BTSC faced steep challenges with helping educators in BTSC schools adjust their own practices in ways that improved outcomes in their contexts.

CORE's approach to supporting schools to improve in the five driver areas is most heavily influenced by two approaches to continuous improvement: the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Breakthrough Collaborative model and improvement science.[3] Although CORE modified the Breakthrough Collaborative model to fit the nature and context of BTSC work, the model's influence can be seen in CORE's creation of "change packages" that provide evidence-based guidance to school teams about ideas they should test in each driver to improve outcomes. Improvement science is also infused in BTSC in the tools and processes CORE uses to support schools with testing ideas from the change package.

Although BTSC had established the five drivers at its inception, in the initial years of its work with Cohorts 1 and 2, CORE presented the drivers sequentially, with the expectation that schools would start with one driver (supportive ninth-grade transition) and add work on other drivers over time (adult teaming and strong student–adult relationships were the second and third drivers introduced). CORE asked each school to name a team lead and provided an improvement coach from CORE,[4] who coached the lead and team on how to improve based on general guidance about possible changes to try in each driver area.

During the 2021–22 school year, CORE introduced a new approach to support schools with improving on-track rates, which we call the "five-driver model." The model included the following components:

- **Revised team structure:** Each team was expected to identify a team lead as well as five "driver champions" to lead the work on each of the drivers.

- **Revised CORE coach roles:** Five of CORE's BTSC coaches were named to be "content leads," one for each of the drivers, and a sixth coach was charged with supporting the improvement team leads. The content leads developed Key Actions Checklists, which listed recommended driver-specific actions and change ideas to test during the upcoming period as well as key leadership tasks (for the team lead). At community "learning sessions" (virtual or online events for BTSC held three times during the year), the content leads each led a session for their driver champions/team leads outlining the Key Actions Checklist for the upcoming period. These coaches also retained their roles supporting schools.

BTSC's Five Drivers

Transition from eighth to ninth grade
Support students in the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade

Adult teaming
Use strengths-based and data-driven conversations about specified students/student groups among educators working directly with students to improve student outcomes

Student–adult relationships
Develop appropriate trusting relationships among adults and students that support academic and social-emotional growth

Master scheduling
Ensure that student and teacher schedules allow for successful completion of A–G courses

Grading
Establish equitable grading practices that accurately describe student proficiency

- **Work on all drivers:** With support from the CORE coach, CORE expected improvement teams to use the Key Actions Checklists to make steady progress on all five drivers, recognizing that two of them (ninth-grade transition and master scheduling) were more active at specific times during the school year.

These shifts were a powerful innovation in CORE's program approach, making it easier for teams to engage in the hard work of improving on-track rates in schools during the 2021–22 school year.

How the Five-Driver Model Built Traction for Improvement Work in BTSC Schools

Starting with the inception of BTSC in spring 2019 and continuing through spring 2022, PACE collected qualitative data on the community by observing events (135 hours) and interviewing CORE staff and school-based BTSC team members (272 interviews). Our data collection period was marked by the intense disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, which challenged school communities and pushed BTSC work from in person to virtual and then back to in person. The communities that BTSC schools serve are typically high poverty. The challenges that the pandemic posed to these communities, and therefore to educators and fellow staff in these schools, cannot be underestimated. Even with COVID-19 as an underlying reality, we still saw CORE's work with schools gain traction—that is, make progress from initiating work to developing promising momentum that could impact student outcomes at scale—in many schools.

Interviews with educators in BTSC schools and CORE coaches show that the five-driver model created more opportunities for educators to engage in BTSC in ways that fit their individual roles and their schools' contexts. The interaction between revised CORE coach roles and revised school improvement team structures as well as the ability to work on all drivers created an opportunity for school teams and coaches to feel more ownership over their work. One team leader described the five-driver model: "[It] really distributes the knowledge and the responsibility, and our team has really stepped up. All of [the driver champs] have stepped up and taken parts of it. That's been working great." School team members felt a deeper sense of responsibility for the school's improvement work, which enabled teams and coaches to collaborate effectively towards reaching goals for student outcomes using research-based practices. Educators' and coaches' comments suggest that the five-driver model helped the work gain momentum in BTSC schools in four ways, which can be seen as design principles for engaging educators in authentic improvement work.

Create clear roles that facilitate multiple people engaging productively. The five-driver model was especially helpful for defining roles for improvement team members. Defined lanes of work allowed teams to sustain work on multiple drivers at a time. This aspect of the five-driver model was compared to previous years by one team lead:

> *Compared to last year or previous years—another thing we really like and appreciate and helps us in the new structure—is everybody has really specific roles; versus there were times in the previous years where we felt like we were in it and we're doing the work, but it was like a box of kittens, just all rolling around, playing in the sandbox.*

The five-driver model helped this team and their lead move from an unclear progression of work to more distinct roles that they believed led to more purposeful action.

Connect to individuals' existing responsibilities and school structures. When the five-driver model helped to increase the traction of improvement work at a site, it was seen as an extension of work already being done at both the individual and the school level.

- **Individual level:** As one improvement team lead put it: "What [the five-driver model] did was it gave that person … the opportunity to see where their work and the BTSC work blend, versus BTSC being something else they were doing on top of their standard job." The five-driver model helped team members connect to a specific driver based on their interests, roles, and/or responsibilities, and take ownership of part of the school's continuous improvement work.

- **School level:** A team lead connected how the BTSC model helped to improve the existing structure of professional learning communities (PLCs): "PLCs provide us a vehicle where we can incorporate some of these improvement-science techniques and something like a PDSA [Plan-Do-Study-Act] cycle. [The] PDSA system, it's another reframing of what you're supposed to do … during PLC. … It's just making it more specific." The team lead saw the PDSA cycle connected to a change idea within the Key Actions Checklist as an already important aspect of what their learning community should be doing. Therefore, the model helped to hold them accountable to such a structure.

Adapt the program to local context without compromising important features of the reform. The take-up and ultimate scaling of new initiatives within schools requires a good fit between the initiative and the school context.[5] The Key Actions Checklists created a clear picture of the shifts BTSC asked schools to make, even as coaches differentiated how they used Kthe Checklists to help schools engage in BTSC in a principled way that made sense in their local context. For example, if schools seemed overwhelmed at the thought of attempting substantial reform given the contextual challenges of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, coaches would suggest specific change ideas from the checklists that schools could try. In other schools, coaches showed the entirety of the checklists to their teams and supported driver champions to move forward on multiple fronts. Additionally, the Key Actions Checklists typically suggested multiple change ideas that schools could try as they worked in a particular driver, which offered flexibility in how schools took on the tasks in each driver. Regardless of how coaches and teams used the Key Actions Checklists, CORE presented them as a tool to clarify possible starting points and next steps as opposed to a compliance-oriented list of tasks that teams were required to accomplish. The five-driver model also created flexibility for what teams chose to prioritize at any given time, sequencing the emphases based on what the broader school was ready to address. For example, if teams believed that grading was too politically sensitive a topic to take on broadly, they could convene a book study group to learn more about grading while prioritizing testing and scaling of reforms in another driver.

Help educators gain evidence of effectiveness before attempts to spread change throughout a system. A key tenet of improvement science that schools often struggle to apply is the idea that new ideas should be tested at a small scale to work out kinks before attempting widespread implementation. Given traditions of top-down reform, educators often do not have a vision for what it might look like to test a new idea on a small scale as the first step to implementing change. BTSC's Key Actions Checklists, especially as coaches used them in coaching schools, reframed the idea of small initial tests, helping participants see testing as a way to try a manageable piece of a complex reform. One lead described both the benefit of starting small as well as the dissonance this has with larger education norms:

I feel like so often, we feel like we have to fix everything and solve everything … because we want everybody to do well. … Trying to look at, "Okay, what's something small we can try," it feels more manageable and I think people weren't overwhelmed and I think they would leave our meetings [thinking] "When I can try that?" … then coming back and saying, … "I think I could tell my colleagues that it's not going to take a ton of time. Here's how I worked it out." … Intuitively, it makes sense to have to start small, but I don't feel that's usually how we do things in education.

Contrary to traditional change management in education, the five-driver model enabled this team to select a manageable part of the reform for testing to determine its viability at their school. The team simultaneously gathered evidence of the change idea's effectiveness in their local context to use when asking colleagues to make the change during subsequent stages of the reform.

Implications for Districts and County Offices of Education

Districts, County Offices of Education, and technical assistance providers often find themselves trying to get schools to adopt new practices that could improve student outcomes. Even if there is broad acknowledgement that current outcomes are not meeting system goals, it can be hard for reform to get underway in meaningful ways. The adaptations CORE made to BTSC by creating the five-driver model made it easier for busy high school improvement team members to build momentum for substantive improvements by:

- creating clear roles for team members;
- connecting work to individuals' responsibilities and existing school structures;
- facilitating adaptations of the work to the school context while preserving key features of the reform; and
- getting educators to test new approaches, figure out how to implement them well in the local context, and collect evidence of impact in the local context prior to attempting widespread implementation.

These promising practices could be applied by others seeking to mitigate the whiplash of superficial reform that prevents meaningful school and district improvement.

Endnotes

[1] CORE Districts is a nonprofit organization working to improve student outcomes by leveraging collaboration across eight of California's largest school districts: Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Santa Ana.

[2] Phillips, E. K. (2019). *The make-or-break year: Solving the dropout crisis one ninth grader at a time.* The New Press.

[3] Institute for Healthcare Improvement. (2003). *The Breakthrough Series: IHI's collaborative model for achieving breakthrough improvement* [White paper]. ihi.org/resources/Pages/IHIWhitePapers/TheBreakthroughSeriesIHIsCollaborativeModelforAchievingBreakthroughImprovement.aspx; Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better. Harvard Education Press.

[4] For schools not located in the eight CORE districts, an improvement coach was provided from the local County Office of Education.

[5] Gallagher, H. A., Faw, L., Jordan, D., O'Meara, K., & Cottingham, B. W. (in press). Constructing a good fit: Improvement team leads' perspectives on fitting improvement work to their sites. In Anderson, E. (Ed.), *Continuous improvement: A leadership process for school improvement.*

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Related Publications

Cottingham, B. W., O'Meara, K., & Gallagher, H. A. (2022, March). *Early indicators of systemic improvement: A case study of two high-poverty school districts* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gallagher, H. A., Cottingham, B. W., & O'Meara, K. (2022, July). *Generating traction with continuous improvement: Lessons from two learning networks* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gallagher, H. A., Cottingham, B. W., Park, V., Gong, A., and Kennedy, K. (2019). *Learning and practicing school improvement: Summary of 2018–19 CORE-PACE research in the CORE Districts* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

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