Creating Clarity of Focus 2

Educators have the power to positively transform the lives of students. To do so requires clarity of focus so that improvement efforts overcome the root causes of student equity issues. Closing the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist within our schools is a foundational civil rights issue in the United States, and school systems that place equity at the heart of every decision are *student centered* rather than focused on the needs of adults. Now, more than ever, it is essential for educators to use this equity lens for defining what to do and, more importantly, why to do it. To have a more perfect union, it is imperative that we continually ask whether the decisions made in classrooms, school buildings, and board rooms will overcome or reinforce the prevailing student inequities.

To this point, Chris, when serving as superintendent of the Long Beach, would be asked two questions on a regular basis: "What was the 'North Star' that kept him and the district grounded in the work at hand?" and "What was the secret to the success of Long Beach in closing student achievement and opportunity gaps?" Every time the answer was that each classroom needed to be good enough for our own children and that all schools embraced the Long Beach mission statement of *supporting the personal and intellectual success of every student every day*. If these belief statements became the driving force of all educators in their daily work, then all students would be prepared for the college and career of their choice. Clarity of focus exists only if in fact there exists a common purpose and agreed-upon outcomes that guide the daily work of teachers and leaders within and among school sites.

To bring the Long Beach mission statement to fruition required a set of goals and objectives grounded in achieving equitable outcomes for all students. A strategic plan was developed with input from all

> Clarity of focus exists only if in fact there exists a common purpose and agreed-upon outcomes that guide the daily work of teachers and leaders within and among school sites.

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stakeholders to create a collective commitment among students, parents, staff, higher education partners, and business leaders. This aspirational vision focused district efforts on addressing the closure of student achievement and opportunity gaps within all Long Beach schools. To ensure the strategic plan was treated as a living document, there were ongoing modifications based on recurring data and emerging problems of practice as well as a comprehensive update every 5 years. This was critical for focusing direction of the system and creating internal accountability for equitable growth in student learning as defined by the following goals:

> **Goal 1:** *Ensure equitable opportunities for every student.*
>
> **Goal 2:** *Provide a safe, welcoming, respectful, and rigorous learning environment for every member of the school community.*
>
> **Goal 3:** *Promote academic growth for every student.*
>
> **Goal 4:** *Establish college and career readiness for every student.*
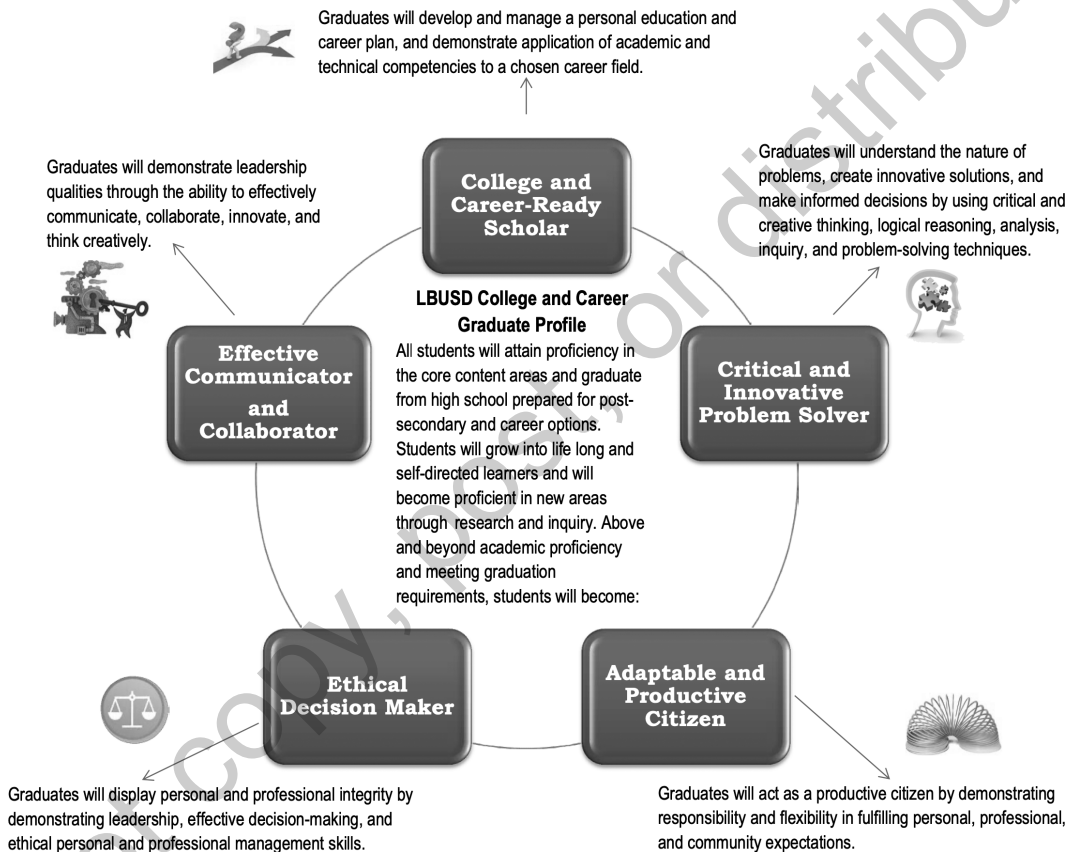>
> **Goal 5:** *Support effective communication throughout the district.*

A strategic plan developed by all stakeholders won't realize a more equitable learning experience for students. In other words, clarity of focus is not enough, and there needs to be a way to enact an agreed-upon purpose and common outcomes for student learning. To enhance and personalize the learning experiences of students, staff, and parents, a process must be employed that develops collective efficacy through collaborative inquiry. This process needs to be equity driven, leverage the expertise among school sites and district personnel, focus on the academic and social-emotional needs of students, and be grounded in continuous improvement cycles with clear next steps moving forward. And teachers, site staff, and school administrators have to be supported by district leaders to become equity warriors who can effectively do this difficult work.

To this end, Long Beach developed the collaborative inquiry visit (CIV) that engaged teachers, support staff, and administrators to be the driving force for enhancing student learning. The CIV process paired schools with similar problems of practice to visit each other's sites three times a year for classroom observations and review of formative and summative data that clarified next steps for closing student achievement and opportunity gaps. At the high school level, the CIVs also included *quarterly visits* to assist with ensuring all students were college and career ready upon graduation based on the outcomes in

the LBUSD graduate profile denoted in Figure 2.1. School sites routinely reviewed the graduate profile to identify areas of student growth and progress toward demonstrating these skill sets. This ensured that the CIVs were connected to common criteria of student success.

Figure 2.1   LBUSD Graduate Profile

Graduates will develop and manage a personal education and career plan, and demonstrate application of academic and technical competencies to a chosen career field.

Graduates will demonstrate leadership qualities through the ability to effectively communicate, collaborate, innovate, and think creatively.

Graduates will understand the nature of problems, create innovative solutions, and make informed decisions by using critical and creative thinking, logical reasoning, analysis, inquiry, and problem-solving techniques.

College and Career-Ready Scholar

Effective Communicator and Collaborator

Critical and Innovative Problem Solver

LBUSD College and Career Graduate Profile
All students will attain proficiency in the core content areas and graduate from high school prepared for post-secondary and career options. Students will grow into life long and self-directed learners and will become proficient in new areas through research and inquiry. Above and beyond academic proficiency and meeting graduation requirements, students will become:

Ethical Decision Maker

Adaptable and Productive Citizen

Graduates will display personal and professional integrity by demonstrating leadership, effective decision-making, and ethical personal and professional management skills.

Graduates will act as a productive citizen by demonstrating responsibility and flexibility in fulfilling personal, professional, and community expectations.

Source: Long Beach Unified School District.

During these 3- to 4-hour quarterly visits, department heads, members of the school instructional leadership team (ILT), school administrators, and student leaders met with the superintendent and other central office administrators to review formative and summative data in relation to school progress. The student attributes within the LBUSD graduate profile were used to bring clarity as to whether all students were demonstrating progress and personal growth toward achieving these critical skill sets. Both the CIV and quarterly visit processes were

built upon an equity model that focused on closing achievement and opportunity gaps through the shared leadership of all participants. These continuous improvement cycles were a time to collaboratively address problems of practice, identify best practices, and clarify next steps for moving forward the most critical work of each school site.

The Long Beach schools truly became laboratories of innovation focused on how best to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of all students. And because there were clear next steps to be taken before the next visit, everyone felt accountable to attend to areas of improvement, student interventions, and staff professional learning. School sites took ownership of the individualized learning needs of students and staff in a more professional manner than if the central office had mandated how to address improvement efforts. And because central office leaders participated as valued members of these continuous improvement cycles, the Long Beach system was better positioned to support school improvement efforts in the quest for excellence for all students.

The purpose of sharing this example is to frame a critical question: "How do school leaders and teachers create clarity of focus that guides the ongoing process of improving practices and student learning outcomes?" We know that when school sites collectively define the desired impact of teaching on student learning at the classroom desk, a coherent path of school improvement emerges that gradually results in achieving site and district goals for student learning growth (Westover, 2019). But this path of progress varies among schools within a school district, and understanding the causes of this variance in focusing school improvement efforts is critical for realizing growth in learning for all students. We have gained many insights over the past two decades and now understand the level of influence on focusing direction that is caused by the variability of school climate, culture, capacity, and coherence within and among school sites. Clarity of focus cannot be created without attending to these root causes of variance and overcoming the inherent problems of practice.

Problems of Practice and Promising Practices

Have you ever attended a professional learning venue wherein a school or district leader presented a visual, told a success story, or shared a resource that moved participants to take action by replicating what was learned? I call this the "beacon of light" method, which instills a

false sense of hope that success can be achieved by following the same steps as others. What most don't realize is that to fully understand how these leaders achieved their success requires a deeper analysis of the changes in climate, culture, capacity, and coherence that took place over time. Climate is how you feel about the work, whereas culture is how you take action. Capacity is confidence in your ability to do the work, whereas coherence is a shared depth of understanding that creates meaning for doing the work. And although those attending the professional learning venue may have a positive attitude and a desire to take action, there will certainly be dissonance when shared with school staff not in attendance. The greatest challenge with creating clarity of focus is that it cannot be attained by learning from others, rather it requires a collaborative inquiry process that engages school staff in collectively defining the most critical work at hand.

> Clarity of focus requires a collaborative inquiry process that engages school staff in collectively defining the most critical work at hand.

This begins to illustrate the problems of practice that occur among school sites in their efforts to create clarity of focus. Three general categories frame the challenges most often experienced among school leaders and teachers: compliance, prescription, and fragmentation. When setting direction to move forward as a school site, there can be a compliance orientation caused by groupthink or what is known as a herd mentality. This occurs when there is acceptance of or conformity with the majority viewpoint, such as when schools simply comply with district goals or student learning priorities without much criticality or forethought. In reality it is safer and easier to conform than it is to question the validity of an already established vision. The common phrase "Don't rock the boat" comes to mind when considering why this tendency is often seen among school leaders or teachers who don't want to be seen as a disrupter or outlier.

In sharp contrast, prescription can become the mode of operation when school sites have strong convictions for a predefined path moving forward. The prevailing desire to have command and control of both the school focus and action steps promotes an authoritative, top-down approach to focusing direction. Fine-grained details are micro-managed in an effort to ensure the already known path moving forward is followed by all without any distractions to get off course. We would call this a "fall-in-line" mentality that can breed dissent and resentment among school staff.

If compliance is conformity, and prescription is control, then fragmentation is "everyone for themselves." At face value, a fragmented school appears to be moving in a unified direction, but the reality is that behind the scenes there are ulterior motives and hidden agendas.

These are seen as factions of staff members play along to get along but are actually protecting their own interests. There is a distinction between words and actions. In a fragmented school there is a sense that we're in this together based on words, but when observing behaviors and actions, another story is playing out. This would be akin to the adage of protecting the status quo and resisting a change in focus or direction that is in contrast to individual beliefs and values.

To circumvent these prevailing problems of practices, there are more promising practices that schools can consider for creating clarity of focus. Michael Fullan has noted that focusing direction is a key driver for coherence making: shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work and how it affects the results desired for student achievement (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). To reframe these insights, promising practices focus the collective efforts of school leaders and teachers with clearly defining the work with the greatest potential for achieving equitable growth in student learning. The key phrase here is "collective efforts clearly define the work that will maximize the impact on student learning." Schools that engage in collaborative inquiry informed by the following key questions will be more successful with shaping a common vision and structured process for co-leading improvement efforts.

1. How can a *moral imperative for improving student learning* be shaped as staff share personal experiences, beliefs, and values in defining the most critical work for the school?

2. How can staff input and feedback establish agreed-upon *structures and processes for collaborative decision-making* that will inform school-wide priorities and action steps?

3. How can staff engage in authentic and vulnerable conversations about *confidence in the ability of individuals and teams* to successfully implement school improvement efforts?

4. How can staff come to recognize that *creating shared meaning and depth of understanding for the work at hand* is an ongoing process wherein the school continuously adapts and adjusts to meet the learning needs of all students?

These four questions have been garnered over many years working with schools that have demonstrated consistent forward motion and high levels of staff engagement in creating clarity of focus. There is a stark difference between consistent forward motion with clarity of focus versus

the previously noted challenges experienced by schools that have gone down the path of compliance, prescription, or fragmentation. What should stand out most from these guiding questions is the collaborative inquiry stance taken by school leaders and teachers in the collective pursuit of achieving equitable growth in student learning. What matters most for schools is not defining goals or priorities for student achievement but rather collectively shaping a shared vision and action steps to realize success for all students.

District and School Story

A week had passed since district leaders and school principals of Anywhere School District convened to share site action plans focused on the district priorities of literacy and critical thinking. Jacob Westfall, principal of Somewhere School, had been able to schedule follow-up meetings with a few principals to discuss improvement strategies in more detail. His primary purpose was to gain insights that could assist him with coordinating next steps with his staff. Erin McFarland had agreed to join Jacob on these visits, and she was eager to understand how each school was taking action to improve the agreed-upon student learning priorities. They had determined it was best to visit schools based on the four themes observed during the principal meeting" compliant, rogue, fragmented, and focused.

First up was the school led by the newest principal in the district that fit into the compliant category. Upon entering the school it was clear that the school was fully aligned with the district goals and priorities because the office was decorated with visuals depicting the district vision. In fact, the principal was sure to bring this to Erin's attention so that she saw his solidarity for the common good. Most of the conversations about the school action plan circled back to whether it met the expectations of the district. This thinking became even more evident when teachers passing by were asked about the school action plan. There was an overwhelming response from school staff that referred to district priorities with little mention of school site needs. There was almost a sense of comfort among staff that a focus for student learning was already defined, and many had asked Erin about the next steps moving

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forward. Upon leaving the school both Jacob and Erin had the same sense that the school had gladly conformed to district expectations but that there was an unhealthy reliance on the district for defining next steps without much consideration for learning needs of students at the school site. The calm and relaxed atmosphere almost felt apathetic and without a sense of passion or desire to improve.

The next school was led by the most senior principal in the district, who fit into the rogue category. The visit almost felt fully planned out as Erin and Jacob were greeted by the office staff with an offering of water and snacks, and the conference room for the meeting was boldly branded with school accolades, recognitions, and press releases. Upon entering the conference room, the principal subtly pointed out several of the awards that she was most proud of receiving. The meeting started out oddly because the principal did not seem to know the purpose and quickly began to note the ongoing great work of the staff with little mention of the district priorities of literacy and critical thinking. When Jacob inquired as to how these priorities were being addressed, the principal's response was framed in how the school was further along, had already addressed these areas, and was now moving into a different phase of work. The staff also expressed their work with a similar sense of arrogance and overconfidence that mostly related back to the numerous accolades from the community. Erin wondered if the school had done a deep dive into evidence of student literacy and critical thinking skills. It seemed that school autonomy and identity were more important than student learning needs.

Before arriving at the third school site, Jacob and Erin had a brief conversation about the principal being the third site administrator in the last 5 years to lead the school. The staff was difficult to manage. This was the primary reason the school had been labeled as fragmented. After sitting in the lobby for 15 minutes, the principal showed up apologizing that an unexpected emergency had come up. When pressed by Erin, the principal shared that the staff was not happy with the tardy policy, and so the administrative team was ensuring that all students entered classrooms on time. This was taking up quite a bit of administrators' time

as they escorted tardy students into their classrooms, not to mention dealing with discipline follow-up for students who were consistently tardy. Jacob inquired as to the role of staff in reducing student tardiness, and the principal's coy response was simply that it was mixed and varied. As the conversation shifted to the site action plan, the theme of "mixed and varied" continued because the priorities of literacy and critical thinking were not equally embraced by staff with divergent thinking among departments. Although there was recognition that students lacked literacy and critical thinking skills, there were different opinions as to whether these priorities applied to all teachers and each department. Literacy was seen by many staff as the role of English teachers. And critical thinking was embraced by honors teachers but was not by those who taught regular classes. Rather than creating an action plan for the school, it appeared that the more important conversation among staff was whether all felt it was their responsibility to support student literacy and critical thinking. The meeting ended with the principal asking Erin and Jacob for feedback and ideas on how to move the school forward as a collective; it seemed that every time there was agreement on what to do, there was a lack of action among the staff. It felt to the principal that this disunity provided many staff with a reason not to move forward with improving student learning. Jacob's only comment to the principal was that there clearly was more happening behind the scenes than was known by the principal.

The last principal to be visited had come from outside the district 2 years ago and seemed to lead from behind the scenes. Erin had not remembered visiting the school last year, and although Jacob knew the principal, he had not had any conversations that would give him a pulse on the progress of the school. But the principal's action plan was well designed and had clear and focused action steps. The principal was waiting outside of the school and offered to walk classrooms with Erin and Jacob before meeting in the conference room. Teachers were open to pausing instruction, talking about what students were doing and responding to questions. The theme of literacy and critical thinking was evident, and although there were different ideas among teachers, there were many consistencies with instructional

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strategies and student supports. Upon entering the conference room, the principal shared copies of the site action plan and noted that she thought that walking classrooms and talking to teachers would be more beneficial. Erin, being skeptical, asked whether the teachers knew about the visit. The principal said no and that teachers' willingness to share their work was because they had become comfortable with classroom walkthroughs and sharing ideas during staff meetings. Jacob asked how the school action plan was created and was surprised to learn that a core group of teachers had been given release time to write the plan, share the draft with staff, and finalize the plan based on feedback. What stood out most to Jacob and Erin was that the principal, upon arriving at the school 2 years ago, told the staff that her goal was to develop the expertise among teachers in the school so that when she eventually left, the school would be stronger than when she arrived. It appeared that the staff had taken her comments to heart and were comfortable leading the work with her support.

Jacob's school was close by for a short debriefing of what was learned from each school. On the conference room whiteboard was already written the titles of conformity, rogue, fragmented, and focused. Erin erased the word "focused" and wrote the word "coherent" in its place, noting that the last school was not only focused but had coherence among the staff. And Jacob erased the word "rogue" and wrote the word "prescriptive" because his feeling was that the principal and the teachers spoken to were rigid in thinking and uncompromising in beliefs and actions. Erin emphasized the need to capture insights to help her think through how to support divergent schools to move the work forward, whereas Jacob noted that he wanted to identify what was behind the climate and culture of the schools visited. Erin wrote an essential question on the whiteboard: "What aspects of school climate and culture most affect schools with defining student learning priorities and moving the work forward?" After an hour of dialog and charting ideas, the chart in Figure 2.2 was written on the whiteboard. Each took a picture of the chart and agreed to meet again after further analyzing and making sense of the information.

Figure 2.2   Key Indicators of School Climate and Culture

ARCHETYPE	CLIMATE	CULTURE	IMPACT	QUESTIONS
Compliant	A desire to be seen as supporting the vision set forth by the school district	Wanting guidance from the district to plan action steps moving forward	Lack of urgency to change practices and improve student learning	Why is the school not seeking their own solutions based on student learning needs?
Prescriptive	A strong belief that the school knows what to do, how to do it, and does not need any support	A rigid mindset and lack of openness to deviate from the predefined school plan and actions	Overconfidence in action steps due to the inability or unwillingness to question thinking	What evidence does the school have that validates they are on track?
Fragmented	A lack of unity stemming from individuals wanting to maintain their sense of autonomy	Bringing forth problems that prevent staff from making decisions to move forward	Protecting the status quo, which has allowed staff to be independent with their work	Why does the staff resist working together to learn how to improve student learning?
Coherent	A feeling of staff empowerment for making decisions that guide school improvements	A willingness to work together, share ideas, and learn from others	An inquiry process led by staff that promotes informed decision-making	What led staff to embrace a culture of collaboration and co-learning?

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Creating a Strategic Focus for Equitable Student Growth

The story of Anywhere School District and Somewhere School may resonate with educators as the themes of compliance, prescription, fragmentation, and coherence certainly exist among schools within every district. Without a structured process for clarifying student learning priorities, school climate and culture can circumvent efforts of site leaders and teachers to focus direction. Shifting the questions listed in Figure 2.2 into statements brings forth the underlying conditions needed to move schools forward. These core tenets can assist schools with shaping a common mindset and structured process for creating clarity of focus.

- Seek to understand the learning needs of all students in every classroom.

- Identify viable sources of student learning evidence for informed decision-making.

- Work together to overcome the most common challenges of teaching and learning.

- Engage in agile co-learning and productive collaboration to promote collaborative inquiry.

Richard Elmore coined a famous phrase that has greatly influenced how we have come to know the impact of teaching on student learning; task predicts performance (City et al., 2009). The implication is that understanding student learning needs is best achieved through close examination of learning tasks at the student desk. Although there is value in analyzing student progress and performance on interim and annual assessments, these measures do not represent the authentic learning experiences that play out as students engage in learning within classrooms. If student learning challenges are to be resolved, adjustments need to affect how students engage in rigorous and complex tasks as part of daily instruction. The focus of improvement efforts should be where teaching and learning challenges originate: at the student desk.

If task predicts student performance, then what are the indicators of student learning? In *Districts on the Move* we described "visible evidence of student learning" as the key cognitive strategies for students to apply content knowledge. The intent was to shift the indicators of learning from students *showing what they know* to students

demonstrating what they can do. Higher-order thinking, close and analytical reading, precise use of rigorous academic language, evidence-based arguments, structured collaborative conversations, and evidence-based writing are the transferable skills that make learning visible. A critical question for consideration is: "Which key cognitive skills are most essential for students to successfully complete rigorous and complex learning tasks?" By asking this question, the collaborative inquiry process of prioritizing student learning needs becomes more focused on the indicators of student success. The specificity and precision that accompany the analysis of student learning tasks result in a deeper understanding of the strengths and constraints among students as learning unfolds at the classroom desk.

A critical step for clarifying student learning needs is to understand the relationship between lag outcomes, lead metrics, and student success indicators. Lag outcomes are annual measures of student performance, whereas lead metrics are quarterly or trimester assessments that monitor student growth in relation to the lag outcome. And student success indicators are the key cognitive skills that students apply when completing rigorous and complex tasks within a specific learning progression. In this way, students apply close and analytical reading skills to complete learning tasks as part of 3-week learning progressions. The improvement of student literacy skills is monitored by an interim assessment at the conclusion of 9 to 12 weeks. At year-end, a summative assessment measures the annual growth of student literacy skills.

To put these sources of learning evidence into context, consider how a coach would provide feedback to an athlete while standing on the finish line of a 100-yard dash, 5K run, or marathon. Under which scenario would insights best be gained to inform that athlete of key improvements? Clearly the shorter distance allows for more precise observations and more specific feedback. This analogy is validated by the research of Robert Marzano (2006) in *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work*, which noted a significant difference in effect size with improving student learning from reviewing classroom learning tasks (.80) versus analyzing summative assessments (.34).

Let's come full circle as to how schools can clarify the common problems of practice among students that are barriers to realizing equitable growth in learning; establish guiding principles that promote a climate of co-learning and culture of collaborative inquiry; seek to understand the challenges that students experience when completing

rigorous and complex tasks in classrooms by focusing on student success indicators—key cognitive strategies for applying content knowledge—make clear linkages among learning tasks, lead metrics, and lag outcomes to develop shared understanding as to how "task predicts performance"; and adopt a root cause analysis process that closely analyzes student learning strengths and constraints to clearly define the focus of school-wide improvement efforts.

Clearly Delineating Improvement Strategies

Creating clarity of focus would be analogous to spotting an iceberg floating in the distance and then discerning how best to navigate a course moving forward. The location of the iceberg is known; however, there is much uncertainty as to its size and shape with 90% of the iceberg's volume looming beneath the waterline. The implication is that having clarity of focus is the faint starting point for clearly delineating improvement strategies that guide the collective efforts of school leaders and teachers. Clarity of focus can create a false sense of confidence because school priorities can be seen as a beacon of light for navigating a path moving forward. This would be akin to establishing literacy as a school priority that focuses efforts on improving close and analytical reading skills of all students. The "what" is clear, whereas the "how" is uncertain. This sounds a lot like the iceberg has been spotted, but there is no certainty with navigating the path ahead.

> The key to moving forward is understanding the causal pathway that links school priorities with student success indicators, high-yield instructional practices, and evidence of learning to clearly delineate improvement strategies.

The key to moving forward is understanding the causal pathway that links school priorities with student success indicators, high-yield instructional practices, and evidence of student learning to clearly delineate improvement strategies. This takes the form of a school implementation plan that clearly delineates the action steps for moving forward school-wide improvement efforts. Six key questions guide the collective efforts of site leaders and teachers.

1. What are the school-wide priorities and desired growth for student learning?

2. Which student success indicators will best inform the design of student tasks and learning progressions?

3. Which high-yield pedagogical practices will have the greatest impact on improving learning for all students?

4. How will evidence of learning inform both timely student feedback and adjustments of student learning supports?

5. What structures, processes, and supports are needed to develop collective expertise through agile co-learning and productive collaboration?

6. What timeframes should guide our collective efforts with engaging students in short cycles of instruction and improving upon teaching and learning practices?

Each of these questions will take a school down a path of inquiry as the strengths and constraints inherent to school climate, culture, capacity, and coherence will be brought to the surface. In using these questions over the past several years to assist school districts with strategically planning and leading improvement efforts, variances that exist within and among schools are always revealed. For example, in some school districts the concept of student success indicators and high-yield pedagogical practices are not openly discussed, which raises concerns among district and site leaders that a shared depth of understanding does not exist among school staff. This implies a lack of coherence within and among schools in the district. In addition, not all schools have a climate of co-learning or a collaborative culture that is foundational for robust and productive conversations. And the varying capacity among school staff for engaging students in high-quality teaching and learning is perceived as a barrier for achieving consensus with what to do and how to do it. But aren't these the exact reasons why schools should collectively seek answers to these questions and clearly delineate improvement strategies to move the work forward together? We can draw the conclusion that school districts assess readiness for leading improvement efforts based on the state of school climate, culture, capacity, and coherence. This "current state" thinking can promote the prevalence of the status quo and resistance to change moving forward that is based on the premise of waiting for the right conditions before engaging in improvement efforts when in reality the path moving forward is dependent upon shaping a common mindset and establishing a structured process for collaborative decision-making. School leaders and teachers who approach leading improvement efforts through a collaborative inquiry stance will be more successful with navigating the complexities of transforming climate, developing culture, building capacity, and creating coherence.

Guiding Short Cycles of Collaborative Inquiry

A phenomenon called "goal displacement" has been described by Fullan (2015) wherein the process of developing capacity and commitment for improving student learning becomes displaced by creating a plan for taking action. In other words, completing the plan becomes the goal in and of itself. A reason for this displacement is that school plans are often perceived as static, yearlong, and not to be deviated from once finalized. This is further exasperated by the fact that plans are often not written for the school but to comply with external requirements of the district office or to meet state-level mandates. And once written, the likelihood is very low that school plans will serve as a guide for site improvement efforts.

A shift in mindset is needed from that of creating a yearlong plan to clearly delineating action steps that guide improvement efforts for 9 to 12 weeks. This implies that at the conclusion of each time period, school leaders and teachers reflect on progress and impact, refine improvement strategies, and move forward with more clarity for achieving growth in student learning. And most importantly, this iterative approach promotes a collaborative inquiry process because there is an emphasis on taking action to learn what most affects student learning, understand how and why it works, and share key insights to inform the actions of others moving forward. Such an approach requires schools to "pivot" every 9 to 12 weeks, which is significantly different than maintaining the same focus for the school year. Essentially it forces schools to embrace change and lead an agile improvement process.

The shift from creating a yearlong plan with annual goals for growth in student learning to that of guiding an agile improvement process with short cycles of collaborative inquiry can be a challenging task for schools and districts alike. This relates back to the prevailing conditions of compliance, prescription, and fragmentation. There is a tendency to provide school sites with planning templates to be completed in a prescribed manner, which are intended to serve as a guide for yearlong improvement efforts. The problem is that a yearlong plan created for the purpose of compliance and completed in a regimented manner does not create ownership or internal accountability for the work at hand. In contrast, action plans that extend over a 9- to 12-week period have more precision and specificity and require monitoring of progress and assessing impact to refine action

steps for the next inquiry cycle. Simple, short improvement cycles can best be considered to be "learning cycles." In the same manner that classroom teachers adapt and adjust instructional strategies daily and weekly to better meet the learning needs of students when teaching a 3-week unit of study, school sites should reframe the work as 9- to 12-week improvement cycles that require adjustments in real time and carry forward lessons learned. In doing so, with each short cycle of collaborative inquiry, the school site creates more clarity, develops more precision, and improves capacity to achieve equitable growth in student learning.

The Path of Progress for Foothill Elementary School

Foothill Elementary School located in Corona, California, is one of 29 elementary schools within Corona-Norco USD. The school serves a student population of 40% socioeconomic disadvantaged, 13% English learners, and 20% special education students. Foothill Elementary began its journey toward becoming a school on the move in 2017 at a time when site-level improvement efforts were being leveraged to shape district-wide coherence. Over a 3-year period, the Foothill staff of 35 teachers and two site administrators demonstrated a resilient commitment to creating clarity of focus, cultivating shared leadership, developing collective expertise, and leading continuous improvement.

At the onset, the school could be described as fragmented yet having a collaborative culture and a collective commitment to improve learning for all students. In retrospect, Foothill would fall into the category of believers because there was a positive climate and culture; however, the school lacked the collective capacity to navigate the ongoing process of creating coherence. Dr. Joni Howard, having been principal at Foothill for 3 years, knew that the staff was ready to move forward together and needed a structured process to guide their collective efforts. The initial approach was to develop the school into a professional learning community. It was evident though that the staff perceived this as a structural change with predefined steps rather than a robust capacity-building strategy. In moving forward, the strength of the school climate and culture would need to be leveraged to focus improvement efforts on developing capacity and creating coherence.

The emphasis during the 2017–2018 school year was focusing direction of school improvement efforts by engaging in collaborative inquiry.

A team of teachers representing each grade level convened with site administrators to co-design a school implementation plan, and through this inquiry process, the root causes of teaching and learning challenges were identified. The staff had been struggling with understanding best use of a new ELA adoption and the integration of multiple assessment tools to guide recurring cycles of instruction. In effect, teachers were shifting instruction to align with curricular resources and student assessments rather than focusing efforts on a few learning priorities and key student success indicators. To focus school improvement efforts, the following was initially adopted by the school to receive input and feedback from grade-level teams and move forward based on a collective vision of student success.

School Focus: Equip all students to effectively communicate and collaborate by analyzing, problem-solving, reasoning, justifying, and critiquing others using rigorous and precise content area academic language.

Student Success Indicators: Access, interpret, and analyze grade-level content; communicate and justify with evidence; collaborate in pairs or groups to problem solve and critique the reasoning of others.

Instructional Strategies: Model and scaffold close reading of grade-level texts; use sentence and conversation starters to support arguments with evidence; model strategies for effective pair and group work for successful completion of tasks that require justifying, reasoning, and critiquing others with evidence.

By the end of the first year, the staff began to realize that improvement efforts were more impactful when 3- to 4-week instructional cycles were guided by a school focus, student success indicators, and high-yield instructional strategies. And as teacher teams reflected on student progress and key learnings at the conclusion of each instructional cycle, this structured process for informed decision-making was developing the confidence and capacity of teachers to improve student learning. Rather than focusing efforts on planning effective use of curricular resources and assessment tools, the school was shifting to developing precision of pedagogy based on evidence of impact on student learning growth. At this point in time, the principal offered to expand the team to include two members from each grade level

so that structured time could be provided for deeper collaborative inquiry. The result was a commitment from each grade-level pair to serve as lead learners, help shape school improvement efforts, and support grade-level collaborative inquiry processes.

As the work progressed into the 2018–2019 school year, the momentum created by the teacher leaders guiding improvement efforts allowed for candid feedback as to the progress of each grade level. This led to a deeper root cause analysis process to discern the problems of practice among students that were preventing growth in learning for all students. The emphasis on close reading of grade-level information brought to the forefront that the analysis of student writing would provide better insights into student learning needs. Grade-level teams agreed to analyze student writing products at the conclusion of 3- to 4-week instructional cycles. The teams identified several school-wide trends and patterns in their feedback: students struggled when completing rigorous and complex tasks in pairs or groups because there was too much reliance on teacher modeling and direct instruction; students were not able to use evidence effectively when justifying, reasoning, or supporting thinking; and students were not writing coherent paragraphs that clearly communicated a response to a claim. The staff recognized that overcoming these student skill gaps would require stronger vertical articulation and adoption of a formal 4-week collaborative inquiry cycle focused on improving teaching and learning. As the year progressed, one teacher's comment was insightful: "I assumed that the school focus and student success indicators would remain consistent all year, but we continue to refine our instructional priorities, teaching practices, and student supports. At first I was frustrated by these ongoing adjustments and then realized that we are continuously updating our school implementation plan to better meet the learning needs of all students."

Sustainability is the true test of improvement efforts primarily because school climate and culture are in a constant state of flux as staff beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors change in relation to the work at hand. Maintaining momentum requires that site leaders and teachers continuously reinforce school priorities, student success indicators, and collaborative inquiry processes. Prior to the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year, Joni Howard had asked the grade-level leaders if the school improvement process was stable enough to have other teachers step in with the leading of improvement efforts. There was consensus that expanding leadership roles among staff would

strengthen school climate and culture to sustain improvement efforts and that maintaining an emphasis on three critical success factors would be essential: creating a strategic focus for equitable student growth, clearly delineating improvement strategies, and shaping improvement efforts through collaborative inquiry.

The Path of Progress for Edison Elementary School

After having served as principal at several school sites in Long Beach, Juan Gutierrez came to Edison Elementary shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. He immediately recognized the positive mindsets and collective efficacy that existed among an experienced staff. Because of the remote teaching and virtual collaboration that ensued after his arrival, Juan was not yet able to engage staff in the way he had done with past school sites. So what follows are lessons learned from his previous school sites, which will most certainly play out at Edison Elementary upon return to a normal teaching and learning environment.

The principal sets the vision for school-wide systems and the sustainability of high-impact practices. The intention is to create a positive school climate and culture focused on achieving equitable growth in student learning. This is achieved by being visible, developing trust, and nurturing relationships with staff in a way that empowers teacher leaders to become lead learners. The development of personal and social capital among staff promotes a willingness to push each other toward improving practices and student learning results.

It is important to plan with teachers using data to design school-wide professional learning and create clearly delineated strategies that guide school improvement efforts. The key is to structure collaboration time as teaching–learning cycles that extend over recurring 4- to 6-week periods of time. These improvement cycles are driven by the creation of student learning goals and the subsequent implementation informed by evidence of student learning. Over time, the teaching–learning cycles move toward a lesson study model led by teacher teams.

It takes time, effort, and coaching to help a staff become capable and confident and to understand the possibilities that exist for improving student learning. In this regard, it is essential to identify teacher leaders who can serve as grade-level leaders and members of the instructional leadership team. By developing these lead learners who build the capacity of others, principals can instill within the staff a common

belief in their collective ability to maximize the impact of teaching on student learning. Building staff confidence by engaging in robust collaborative inquiry cycles is critical because it builds the capacity of teachers to refine and sustain improvement efforts.

Tips and Tools for Taking Action

Creating clarity of focus is the first step in the ongoing journey of achieving equitable growth in student learning. School sites that have established a strategic focus with clearly delineated improvement strategies guided by short improvement cycles are best positioned to continuously improve practices and student learning results. Creating clarity of focus may seem like a simple task, but it is not the same as defining student learning outcomes, identifying high-yield instructional strategies, or monitoring evidence of student learning. These are superficial improvement strategies that do not engage a school site in the deep work of overcoming the problems of practice at the center of prevailing student equity issues. In fact, schools have become so accustomed to "improvement trifecta" (writing student learning goals, being trained on research-based strategies, and analyzing assessment data) that it almost requires an intervention to correct years of ineffective improvement processes. To right these wrongs, a school district or site should consider the following tips for creating clarity of focus.

Guiding Principles

Many school districts and sites will begin the improvement process by identifying a student learning goal, such as achieving 5 percent growth on the annual, state-wide assessment of English language arts. This in itself does not create clarity because there is uncertainty as to whether this is a measurement of district, school, or classroom growth in student learning. Is the desired academic growth for all students or specific student groups? Does it apply to every teacher or only those who support underserved or underperforming students? If it is annual growth, then how much growth should be achieved by the end of a quarter or trimester? There are too many questions and too much uncertainty.

Guiding principles on the other hand inform the daily actions of leaders and teachers as they engage in the work of improving practices and student learning results. In Long Beach, such guiding principles were noted as ensuring equitable opportunities for every student; providing a safe, welcoming, respectful and rigorous learning environment for every member of the school community; and promoting

academic growth for every student. Rather than establishing an arbitrary student learning outcome, guiding principles create agreements for engaging in the work at hand and a moral purpose as to what the work is to accomplish. Goals change over time, whereas guiding principles withstand the test of time.

Student Learning Priorities

We had established based on the work of Richard Elmore that tasks predict performance, the implication being that growth in student learning is predicated upon the rigor and complexity of learning tasks occurring within classrooms on a daily basis. Schools and districts miss the mark when setting annual growth targets for student learning growth, when in fact, the focus should be improving teaching and learning at the student desk. A better approach is to define the key cognitive skills that students have not yet demonstrated as part of daily instruction, which if improved, will result in marked growth in student learning outcomes. These had been delineated as close and analytical reading, precise use of rigorous academic language, structured student collaboration and discourse, evidence-based arguments, and evidence-based writing. Key cognitive skills need to be analyzed through artifacts produced by students in the completion of rigorous and complex learning tasks. The two questions for consideration are: "What key cognitive skills are students not demonstrating as part of the completion of rigorous and complex learning tasks?" and "How can teaching and learning be improved so that all students demonstrate the ability to effectively use these key cognitive skills as part of daily classroom instruction?"

In this manner we are shifting away from establishing an annual growth target to focusing teaching and learning on ensuring all students are capable of using the key cognitive skills most critical for achieving academic growth. This can be achieved only by connecting lag outcomes to lead measures and student success indicators. This plays out as teachers and leaders create clear linkages among annual state assessments, local diagnostic or benchmark assessments, and classroom learning tasks. If we do want to achieve a 5 percent annual growth in English language arts, then evidence of student learning needs to be gleaned from local assessments to pinpoint student needs with even more clarity realized by reviewing student work products from classroom learning tasks. As a result, a school site will establish a student learning priority such as close and analytical reading or evidence-based arguments, which become a focus of daily learning tasks.

Student progress is then monitored by local assessments, and ultimately, learning growth is measured by the annual state assessment.

Short-Term Actionable Plan

Once student learning priorities are established, a school site needs to craft an actionable plan that spans over a 9- to 12-week period of time. This is contrary to the customary process of writing a year-long plan for school improvement. Such annual plans typically are connected to funding allocations, adopted programs, and overarching improvement strategies and, therefore, lack the precision and specificity needed to guide short cycles of teaching and learning that develop precision of pedagogy. The benefit of a short-term action plan is the inherent understanding that at the conclusion of an agreed-upon period of time, such as 9 to 12 weeks, student learning progress and the impact of teaching on student learning will be analyzed to refine action steps moving forward. Chris had referenced that in Long Beach the collaborative inquiry visits were connected to site-based improvement plans, and at the conclusion of each inquiry cycle, schools would pivot to adjust and adapt instructional practices and supports to better meet student learning needs.

Creating a short-term action plan is a simple process that has layers of complexity. A sequence of questions is referenced for engaging school staff in the planning process. These questions are designed to engage the site principal and school leadership team in the creation of a one-page action plan to guide school improvement efforts over a 9- to 12-week period of time. And when completed, the school leadership team should share the plan with all staff to receive feedback, capture insights, and further refine action steps, after which, the plan should serve as a common guide for all teachers and teams to engage in the continuous improvement of teaching and learning over the agreed-upon timeframe. At the conclusion of the inquiry cycle, teams of teachers should be prepared to share student progress, the impact on student learning, and next steps moving forward.

1. What are the school-wide priorities and desired growth for student learning?

2. Which student success indicators will best inform the design of student tasks and learning progressions?

3. Which high-yield pedagogical practices will have the greatest impact on improving learning for all students?

4. How will evidence of learning inform both timely student
    feedback and adjustments of student learning supports?

5. What structures, processes, and supports are needed to develop
    collective expertise through agile co-learning and productive
    collaboration?

6. What timeframes should guide our collective efforts with engaging
    students in short cycles of instruction and improving upon
    teaching and learning practices?

Collaborative Inquiry Cycles

Having an actionable plan is not the outcome, rather it is the starting
point from which school sites focus the collective efforts of staff as
they engage in an agile improvement process. Improvement efforts
are driven by recurring collaborative inquiry cycles that consist of four
phases: analyze, design, implement, and refine. Analyze evidence of
student learning to clearly define the problems of practice that are
barriers to student learning growth. Design improvement strategies
and identify evidence of learning for monitoring student progress and
the impact of teaching on student learning growth. Implement the
improvement strategies, and make adjustments along the way based
on the evidence of impact on student learning. Refine improvement
strategies by analyzing evidence to clarify what works best and why
so that improvement efforts can be improved upon moving forward.
Repeat the process as part of recurring 3- to 4-week teaching and
learning cycles, the goal being that two to three collaborative inquiry
cycles can be completed within the timeframe delineated in the school
action plan: 9 to 12 weeks. In doing so, teachers and leaders within
a school site will gain key insights as to the specific learning needs of
students and how to effectively use high-impact instructional prac-
tices. As the year unfolds, school sites will gain clarity and develop the
capacity to become "laboratories of innovation" in pursuit of equita-
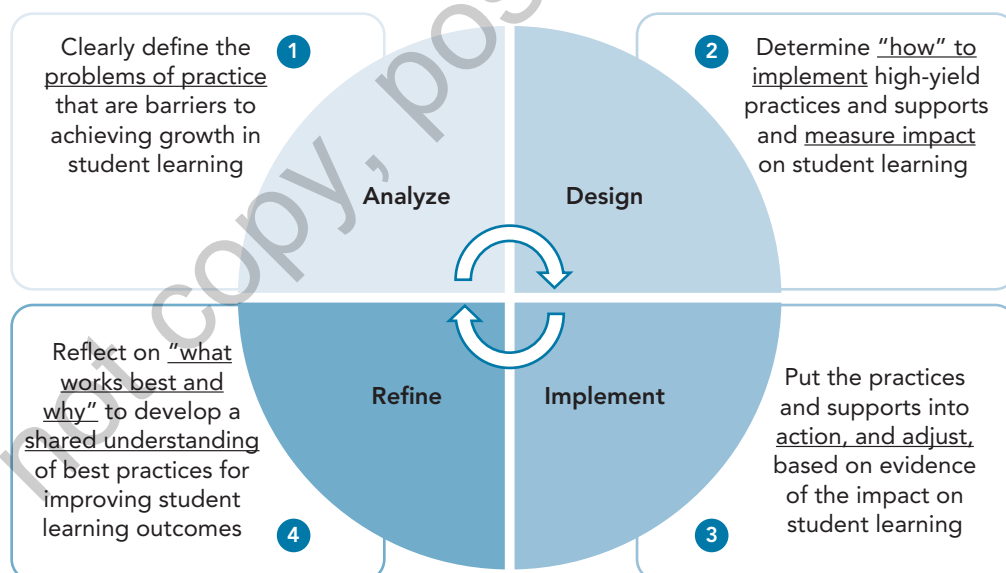ble growth in student learning.

Taking Action

In working with more than 500 school sites in the process of cre-
ating clarity of focus, Jay and the team at InnovateEd have found

that two tools are most impactful for guiding school improvement efforts: a collaborative inquiry model (Figure 2.3) and a school action plan template (Figure 2.4). By simply authoring, implementing, and continually updating a short-term action plan using an agreed-upon collaborative inquiry process, school sites over time come to have the clarity of focus and precision of practice needed to achieve the desired growth in student learning. The site principal and teacher leaders of the school leadership team should author the action plan and engage the staff in recurring collaborative inquiry cycles to improve teaching and learning. District leaders should work in collaboration with school sites as co-learners and co-leaders of school improvement efforts. The result will be a sense of empowerment and confidence among school staff in navigating a coherent path to achieve equitable growth in student learning.

Figure 2.3   The Collaborative Inquiry Cycle

1. Clearly define the <u>problems of practice</u> that are barriers to achieving growth in student learning

2. Determine <u>"how" to implement</u> high-yield practices and supports and <u>measure impact</u> on student learning

3. Put the practices and supports into <u>action, and adjust,</u> based on evidence of the impact on student learning

4. Reflect on <u>"what works best and why"</u> to develop a <u>shared understanding</u> of best practices for improving student learning outcomes

Analyze — Design — Implement — Refine

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Figure 2.4   School Action Plan Template

Focus: Which school-wide priorities aligned with district goals will guide the improvement of student learning results?

Outcomes: What measurable outcomes of student progress will define the success of school improvement efforts?

STUDENT SUCCESS INDICATORS	INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS	SCHOOL-WIDE SUPPORT SYSTEMS	EVIDENCE OF LEARNING	IMPLEMENTATION TIMEFRAME
Which academic skills and behaviors are most critical for all students to complete rigorous and complex tasks and to achieve equitable growth in student learning?	Which high-yield strategies and supports will have the greatest impact on developing these critical student skills, and how best can school site practices be implemented to maximize impact?	How will school leaders and teachers collectively engage in job-embedded professional learning that builds capacity to implement high-yield practices informed by the evidence of student learning growth?	How will student learning evidence be monitored and measured to inform timely adjustments of classroom and school-wide support systems for teaching and learning?	What timeframes will guide collaborative inquiry cycles that focus, monitor, and refine school-wide action steps and drive the continuous improvement of staff practices and student learning results?

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