Research Brief:

Cognia's Continuous Improvement Framework

Cognia® is dedicated to inspiring providers and enabling them to advance pathways of opportunities for all learners. A key component in the advancement of learning is ongoing school improvement. All schools can improve, just as all learners can deepen the achievement of their full potential. Cognia supports and facilitates school improvement through a continuous improvement framework. As described in this brief, this approach enables educators and leaders to engage in a clear and research-based process while attending to their unique context and needs.

A framework for continuous improvement

Continuous improvement has long been practiced in industries such as healthcare, business, and manufacturing. However, a clear and agreed-upon definition of continuous improvement, particularly as it is applied to education systems, is not widely available. Continuous improvement describes a cycle in which key players focus on a specific problem of practice and engage in change practices in an iterative and data-informed manner (Byrk et al., 2015; Shakman et al., 2020). There are core principles associated with continuous improvement that define and differentiate its formative process from other improvement approaches, including the belief that sustainable change:

Cognia's Continuous Improvement Process

- Takes time and involves collective effort and commitment.

- Is context-specific and requires regular adaptation, data collection and examination, and learning.

- Can be achieved through a series of smaller changes that along with ongoing evidence collection can culminate in a larger change (Shakman et al., 2020).

Cognia's model of Continuous Improvement (CI) supports schools in a process-driven and context-informed journey to improve teaching, learning, and organizational effectiveness.

Powerful envisioning

The first phase of CI is envisioning. During this phase, leaders and educators work collaboratively to examine data, discern trends, identify influential factors, and attend to potential future states. Key objectives of this phase are the gathering and analyzing of data and evidence, the promotion of systems-level thinking, and the ability to see a system holistically. Envisioning thereby enables more

informed and effective prioritization of goals. Research shows that systems-thinking in school organizations is critical to allowing educators and leaders to learn together and that this particular skill is often underdeveloped (Byrk et al., 2015; Norqvist & Ärlestig, 2021). Envisioning couples the strengthening of this skill with practices based on scenario planning; another method for strategic thinking (Shoemaker, 2015). CI facilitates educators and leaders gathering and examining data to deeply understand their current reality, utilize data-driven and scenario-planning tactics to explore the future, and apply gained information in a systems-thinking manner to identify priorities.

In order to increase the power of envisioning, Cognia's network of schools may access quality tools and instruments to gather data and evidence related to their practices and outcomes. This includes formative evidence-gathering instruments for learner engagement, educator practice, school culture, and stakeholder perceptions. Educators and leaders may then examine their evidence from across these sources alongside Cognia's Performance Standards, a set of research-based and practitioner-informed standards that describe quality and effective practices. This collaborative, analytical process is designed to identify areas of strength and celebration, as well as discern opportunities for growth and improvement.

Effective planning

Once strategic themes and problems of practice have been identified, educators and leaders can engage in effective and efficient planning. Rather than addressing every possible opportunity for improvement, they may instead focus their efforts and thereby increase the likelihood of success in addressing specific goals in an actionable and measurable manner. Too many improvement priorities may diminish sustainable change (Keating et al., 1999; Kovach & Ingle, 2020), therefore, CI works to narrow and focus improvement plans. As stakeholder involvement and buy-in play a critical role in the associated success of a plan (Byrk et al., 2015; Jordan et al., 2016; Okul & Nyonje, 2020; Quay & Lockwood, 2019), this phase also incorporates significant collaboration and coalition-building. Planning builds upon program evaluation research and yields a theory of action and logic model (i.e., "strategy map"). By providing guidance and templates to support discourse on intended outcomes, key measures, assumptions, and necessary actions or initiatives, planning sets the stage

for improvement activities as well as the mechanisms by which to monitor and measure success.

Cognia provides resources and support to schools and districts to facilitate effective planning. Trained experts are available to provide unbiased, practice-informed, and standards-driven reviews that pinpoint areas of relative strength and opportunity. Customizable coaching and consultation are also available to help identify priorities, engage stakeholders, and chart a path forward. Given the major role of collective ownership and responsibility in planning and execution (Jordan et al., 2016; Okul & Nyonje, 2020), Cognia's tools such as perception surveys and culture monitoring platforms aid in the ongoing identification and measurement of focused improvement priorities and enactment. Cognia provides frameworks and templates designed to capture collective decisions to aid in clear communication and a consistent understanding of goals, objectives, and strategies.

Intentional implementing

Implementation is the process of turning plans into actions. It is what connects research- and evidence-based practices with their intended, positive outcomes (Odom, 2014). Understanding the critical factors, conditions, and barriers that influence successful implementation is often referred to as implementation science (Forman et al., 2013; Nordstrum et al., 2017). Past beliefs around implementation often focused on standardized, consistent, and carefully prescribed actions. However, increasing research on implementation science coupled with the experience and feedback of educators and leaders pivots this thinking away from implementation as immovable and fixed to context-dependent and evolving (Forman et al., 2013; Mehta et al., 2022). As such, it is important when implementing plans that collaboration and shared responsibility are prioritized, as well as ongoing data gathering and adaptation (Jordan et al., 2016; Odom, 2014). Therefore, implementing is focused on three subphases: designing a plan, assigning and communicating responsibilities, and enacting progress monitoring.

Engaging in continuous improvement is inherently nonlinear and must attend to the unique context and needs of the system in question.

Cognia coaches are experienced in identifying, understanding, and adapting to local needs and contexts. Implementation is critically dependent on the interaction with factors and variables present in the school or district system (Mehta et al., 2022; Okul & Nyonje, 2020). In addition to coaching and support, CI provides templates and roadmaps for educators and leaders to anticipate influential factors, document their plans and journey, and gather ongoing evidence on the degree of success in meeting desired outcomes. Cognia's observation instruments focused on formative feedback regarding educator practice and effective learning environments can further be leveraged during this phase to monitor implementation and prompt appropriate adjustments.
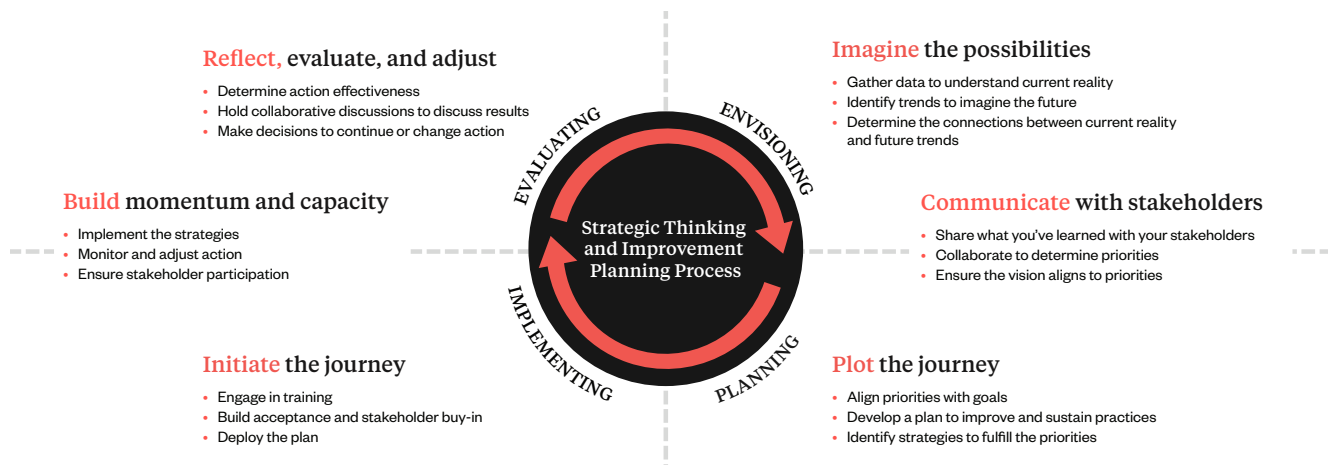
Meaningful evaluating

One cannot improve what is not measured (Byrk et al., 2015). The fourth phase of CI is not the final phase, as it serves both as a checkpoint for progress on current improvement goals and priorities, as well as a lead-in for the next iteration of envisioning. Evaluating enables educators and leaders to use the body of evidence they have gathered from all other phases, particularly in implementing, and turn such data and information into conclusions about the strengths and opportunities presented by the work. In which areas were intended outcomes met? In which areas do we need to adjust and how? Evaluation is most powerful when coalescing data and information from multiple measures (Byrk et al., 2015; Shakman et al. 2020). This includes responsible reporting of data, triangulation of data and information from multiple sources, and sufficient data literacy to support accurate connections and conclusions. The gathering of data is only as valuable as its ability to be interpreted and applied in a manner that is relevant,

meaningful, and useful in practice.

In order to strengthen a multi-measured approach to evaluation, Cognia encourages the triangulation of data gathered across CI. Inclusion of previously described data may be used collectively to inform the degree to which outcomes have been met. Importantly, an evaluation must be well-aligned with the intended goals of the respective plans and implementation (Byrk et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2013; Shakman et al. 2020), therefore not all available data may be relevant for use. Still, CI encourages the use of a variety of data that examines both system outputs and inputs, gathered across activities such as third-party reviews and internal observations, alongside the Cognia Standards to reevaluate areas of opportunity and identify desired improvement.

A process, not an event

Continuous improvement provides an overarching approach to improvement activities with demonstrated success across industries, including education. Importantly, continuous improvement is process-driven, not event-driven, as improvement takes time, requires in-the-moment adjustments and monitoring, and fuels larger-scale change through a series of smaller improvements. Engaging in continuous improvement is inherently nonlinear and must attend to the unique context and needs of the system in question. Cognia's approach to continuous improvement (i.e., CI) has been designed to serve such individuality while also providing evidence-based guidance, resources, tools, and expertise to support educators and leaders in navigating their improvement efforts.

Reflect, evaluate, and adjust
- Determine action effectiveness
- Hold collaborative discussions to discuss results
- Make decisions to continue or change action

Imagine the possibilities
- Gather data to understand current reality
- Identify trends to imagine the future
- Determine the connections between current reality and future trends

Build momentum and capacity
- Implement the strategies
- Monitor and adjust action
- Ensure stakeholder participation

Communicate with stakeholders
- Share what you've learned with your stakeholders
- Collaborate to determine priorities
- Ensure the vision aligns to priorities

EVALUATING · ENVISIONING · IMPLEMENTING · PLANNING

Strategic Thinking and Improvement Planning Process

Initiate the journey
- Engage in training
- Build acceptance and stakeholder buy-in
- Deploy the plan

Plot the journey
- Align priorities with goals
- Develop a plan to improve and sustain practices
- Identify strategies to fulfill the priorities

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