

# From Plan to Practice: Embedding Systems Change in Sustainable Improvement



## SAY WHAT?

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**This month, we're exploring sustainable improvement planning through the lens of systems change.**

### **What are we currently learning and seeing in the field?**

In districts across the country, the conversation has moved beyond isolated school improvement efforts to system-wide coherence and sustainable change. We're seeing that, while many plans start with promise, the absence of systemic structures often undermines their long-term viability. At CEC, we are learning that true sustainability requires the system, not just individual leaders, to shift how it operates. This includes redefining how schools use data, how leaders are developed, and how improvement efforts are embedded across the calendar year, not just in moments of crisis or compliance.

Districts making the most headway are those intentionally building improvement into the fabric of their systems—ensuring that data conversations, leadership behaviors, and monitoring processes are not one-off events but part of the organization's ongoing rhythm. When systems are aligned, improvement planning ceases to be an initiative and instead becomes an operating principle.

### **Why is this important right now?**



The urgency for durable, equity-driven improvement has never been greater. Many schools are facing instructional recovery challenges, educator turnover, and accountability pressure. These challenges have exposed the brittleness of systems that rely heavily on a few strong leaders or external supports. Now is the time to invest in structural and cultural shifts that support resilience, because sustainability is not about doing more, but about doing better with what the system owns and stewards.

We're seeing that districts that commit to systemic redesign—especially in how they develop shared visions, manage data cycles, and coach leadership—are far more likely to maintain momentum even as conditions change. In short, systems change is the stabilizing force that carries improvement through leadership transitions, staffing challenges, and shifting priorities.



## What kinds of systems change are needed to support sustainable improvement planning?

### 1. From Compliance to Culture:

Too often, improvement planning is driven by external mandates rather than internal aspirations. Systems must move from seeing planning as a compliance task to embracing it as a culture-building activity. This begins with developing a shared vision that lives across leadership teams and into schools. Districts that ground planning in their own "why" are far more likely to see coherence in action plans and sustained engagement from stakeholders.



### 2. From Events to Rhythms:

Sustainable improvement depends on a shift from episodic check-ins to recurring, meaningful cycles of analysis and refinement. Systems need to embed data-informed routines into the natural rhythm of leadership work. This includes monthly continuous improvement meetings, mid-year and end-of-year retreats, and regular data reviews tied directly to action plans. These rhythms reinforce that improvement is not a destination but a habit.



### 3. From Individual Leaders to Leadership Systems:

Building leadership capacity at scale is a linchpin of sustainability. Systems change means not relying on one champion or principal, but creating conditions where improvement leadership is distributed and supported. This includes coaching not only for superintendents and principals, but also for team leads, instructional coaches, and data facilitators. It also means cultivating cross-role collaboration between district and school teams to drive coherent action.



## NOW WHAT?

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### What should system leaders be thinking about as they reflect on or engage in this work?

System leaders should ask: How are we organizing ourselves to support improvement as an ongoing practice, not an annual event? This includes examining whether leadership time is structured to focus on plan execution, whether data tools are usable and visible to the people closest to implementation, and whether feedback loops are formalized across levels.

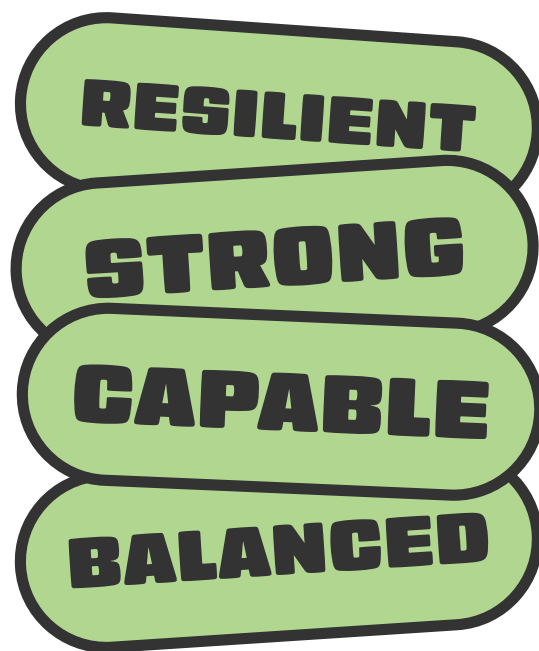
Leaders should also consider the equity implications of their system design. Are improvement structures enabling all schools to access the same level of support? Are we creating conditions where diverse voices—students, families, and frontline educators—shape the continuous improvement process?

Finally, leaders need to interrogate their ownership model. The most successful districts we work with no longer rely solely on external experts to steer their improvement. Instead, they partner with support providers like CEC to build their own internal muscle for leadership development, data use, and strategic planning facilitation.

### If we get this right...

If districts fully embrace systems change in support of sustainable improvement, we will see school systems that are more resilient, responsive, and results-driven over time. Improvement will not rest on a heroic few but will be embedded in the organization's structures, language, and culture. Plans will be implemented with greater fidelity, adjusted with greater precision, and owned with greater confidence.

And most importantly, students—especially those furthest from opportunity—will benefit from systems that are designed to keep getting better for them, year after year.



*Blog Authored by Crystal Conley*

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**CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE**

**SYSTEM  
CONTEXT**



PEOPLE

STRUCTURES



CULTURE



POLICIES



DATA



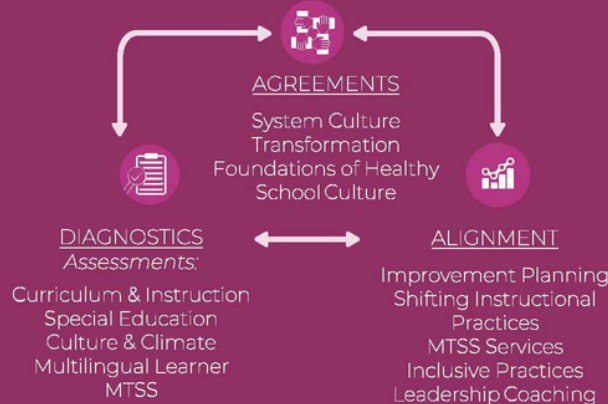
RESOURCES



COMMUNICATION



**CAPACITY BUILDING INPUTS**



**MEASURABLE OUTCOMES**



**LONG-TERM OUTCOME:**

*Increased system capacity to orchestrate equitable, inclusive transformation to reach intended outcomes through large-scale organizational change.*

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When stakeholders work together around shared agreements...the unthinkable is possible. CEC's focus on the **System Agreements** in school reform efforts aim to realign the adult culture and dynamics. We know when systems cultivate healthy, values-based relationships within each school and classroom measurable outcomes are more likely. People matter. And people working together really matters in schools. Developing a strong adult culture as a foundation of a change agenda is what makes CEC stand apart.

CEC uses **System Alignment** to create collective efficacy on the agreed upon improvement aims of a school or district. Our tools and processes are designed to empower those closest to the issues to own the work. Our change management approach intentionally paces improvement through attainable short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. It is the "secret sauce" of school improvement.

We invite you to explore the role our **Logic Model** might play in your system's large-scale improvement. Our website includes [FREE](#) resources that might be helpful in opening up dialogue with key stakeholders. Let's work together to turn ideas into action, so we can all see what's possible for our schools.

