

Why the Final 90 Days Matter More Than Most School Leaders Think

SAY WHAT?

The final 90 days of a school year are usually treated like cleanup time. Finish the work. Survive the calendar. Make it to summer. But for schools that want next year to begin with more clarity, coherence, and momentum, this stretch should be treated as design time.

This is when schools have the clearest view of what is working, where systems are breaking down, and what needs to be tightened before a new year begins. That is why the most impactful work in this 90-day window is not building longer plans. It is making a few smart decisions that improve coherence, strengthen adult practice, and set up a cleaner launch for next year.

SO WHAT?

1. Find the friction before you build the plan

Most schools start spring planning by asking what they want to do next year. A better question is: *What is making good work harder right now?* Where are staff getting mixed messages? Where are students experiencing inconsistency? What structures are too loose, too unclear, or too heavy to sustain?

That reflection should not happen in isolation. It should be grounded in the school improvement plan and the district improvement plan so leaders are not creating new priorities on the side of the real work. The point is to identify where current practice is helping move those plans forward and where friction, confusion, or inconsistency is getting in the way. That is how schools maintain focus, protect coherence, and avoid adding disconnected initiatives that compete with existing goals.

That matters because coherence is not just a nice organizational trait. It directly shapes whether teachers can act on priorities with confidence. RAND's (2024) work on instructional systems found that more coherent systems supported teacher confidence, while incoherence triggered frustration and anxiety.

Before schools add anything new, they should identify what is creating drag in the current system and how that drag is affecting implementation of the priorities already named in their school and district plans.

2. Decide what will be tight and what will be loose

Schools lose momentum when everything is a priority and nothing is truly clear. The last 90 days should be used to define the few things that must be consistent next year across classrooms, teams, or buildings, while also naming where flexibility makes sense. That is how schools reduce initiative overload without becoming overly rigid.

Research on instructional systems points to the importance of aligned guidance across elements like curriculum, collaboration, professional learning, and assessment. When those parts do not reinforce one another, people end up interpreting priorities on their own. Strong schools do not just name priorities. They define how those priorities will show up in practice.

3. Focus on adult practice before student outcomes

Schools often spend spring naming what they want students to do differently next year. That matters, but it is not the highest-leverage starting point.

The stronger move is to define what adults need to do more consistently to make those student outcomes possible. If the goal is stronger attendance, schools should not wait for next year to react. Attendance Works (2025) recommends a tiered approach that starts with prevention and schoolwide support, then adds targeted and intensive responses based on student need. High chronic absence is often a signal that universal conditions need attention, not just individual students.



The same logic applies across improvement efforts. Better student outcomes depend on clearer adult routines, earlier response systems, and more consistent practice. They also depend on leaders being willing to reflect on their own role in the success of the work. Administrators should ask: How well did I monitor implementation? Where did I provide clear support? Where did I fail to follow through? Where was accountability too weak, too inconsistent, or too unclear?

Improvement does not happen just because a strategy was named. It happens when leaders actively create the conditions for success through monitoring, support, follow-up, and accountability. If school leaders want stronger results next year, they have to examine not only staff practice, but also their own leadership moves that either strengthened or weakened implementation.

4. Build the routines that will carry the work

A new year does not improve because people are more motivated in August. It improves when the structures are better.

Before summer, schools should decide how key teams will work next year: what data they will bring, what questions they will study, what decisions they are responsible for, and how leaders will support follow-through



The Institute of Education Sciences (2020) has emphasized that improvement requires more than intent. It depends on time, structures, routines, leadership support, and disciplined cycles of learning and adjustment.

A full calendar is not an improvement strategy. A functioning routine is.

5. Design learning around implementation, not exposure

Many schools still treat professional learning as an event. Introduce the idea in August, share the slides, and hope it sticks.

That approach rarely changes practice.

If next year's priorities matter, schools should use the spring to decide how staff will learn the work, practice it, get feedback, and refine it over time. Professional learning only becomes powerful when it is connected to actual implementation, not just awareness.

This is another place where continuous improvement matters. IES describes improvement as an ongoing process of testing, learning, and refining, not a one-time rollout.

If the learning plan ends with the presentation, the implementation plan is probably in trouble.

6. Overprepare the first 30 days

Schools do not need every detail of next year locked by summer. But they do need a strong opening.

The first month should be planned with unusual clarity: staff messages, team routines, early student support checks, attendance review points, and leader look-fors. Schools that launch well usually know exactly what they are trying to establish early, and they do not leave it to chance.



Teams need clear routines for studying performance, testing changes, and learning from results. That work is strongest when the structures are defined before the pressure of the new year begins.

7. Send people into summer with clarity

Before staff leave, they should know what is staying, what is changing, what is being simplified, and what support will be in place next year.

That clarity matters more than most schools realize. People can handle hard work. What wears them down is hard work inside unclear systems.

NOW WHAT? _____

When schools use this 90-day window well, they reduce friction, tighten expectations, strengthen routines, and create better conditions for adults and students alike.

Research on coherence and continuous improvement points in the same direction: aligned systems and disciplined routines make better implementation more likely.

Next year's success does not begin at the summer institute or the first day of school.

It begins now.



PROBLEM STATEMENT:

Lack of coherence and shared ownership limits the quality of improvement and innovation in educational settings

**SYSTEM
CONTEXT**



STRUCTURES



CULTURE

POLICIES



DATA

RESOURCES



COMMUNICATION



CAPACITY BUILDING INPUTS



MEASURABLE OUTCOMES



← **Continuous Improvement Cycle: Tools, Methods, Processes** →

LONG-TERM OUTCOME:

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

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[1] 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 **Change 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.