

The Initiative Overload Problem



Why Districts Need Fewer Priorities, Not More

Summer gives educators a moment to catch their breath before the pace of a new school year begins. But fall calendars fill up fast. Meetings, professional learning, and a fresh round of initiatives are already waiting in the wings.

District leadership teams ask the same question every summer: “What are we focusing on next year?” It is an important question. But there may be a better one:

“What are we willing to stop doing?”

It brings to mind a memorable line from Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, when Wonka says, “We have so much time and so little to do. Wait a minute. Strike that. Reverse it.”

Most of us would agree with the corrected version. There is never enough time. But before adding another initiative this fall, it is worth sitting with the original statement for a moment. Maybe the issue is not how much time we have. Maybe it is how many things we have decided to do with it.

Districts often assume the answer is to squeeze more in. But the better question may be whether they should be doing fewer things with the time they already have. Most districts do not struggle because they lack good ideas. They struggle because they have too many. More priorities often means less progress.

Too Many Good Ideas, Competing for the Same Time

Nearly every educational initiative has a worthy purpose. Common ones show up in nearly every district’s strategic plan: improving literacy and numeracy, strengthening instructional practice, rolling out a new state initiative, supporting student wellness, and deepening family engagement.

On their own, each one makes sense. The trouble starts when too many become priorities at once, all competing for the same limited resources: time, attention, energy, and leadership capacity.

Teachers do not experience these efforts as separate strategic priorities. They experience them as one more meeting, one more training, one more implementation expectation. It is not that educators resist improvement. It is that they are running on initiative overload.

The Clarity Test

Imagine asking every person in your district, classroom teachers, custodians, principals, and central office staff alike, the exact same question:

“What are the three most important things our district is focused on this year?”

How consistent would the answers be?

High performing organizations rarely run on dozens of competing priorities. They run on a small number of clearly communicated commitments that everyone, at every level, can name.

From Clarity to Results



Without clarity, even the most well intentioned people in an organization end up pulling in different directions. They are working hard, but not always working together.

Fewer Initiatives. Better Implementation.

Research on implementation is consistent on this point: successful change depends less on choosing the perfect initiative and more on implementing a manageable number of priorities well. Building organizational capacity, supporting staff, and sustaining the work over time matter more than continually introducing something new.

Teachers know the difference between an initiative that becomes “the flavor of the month” and one that leadership sticks with year after year. When a district stays focused long enough for a practice to take root, staff confidence grows, implementation gets stronger, and students feel the difference.

Two Approaches to Change

The Crowded Approach	The Focused Approach
<i>Seven new initiatives launched at once</i>	Three priorities, chosen with intention
<i>Professional learning spread thin across topics</i>	Professional learning aligned to shared goals
<i>Staff guess which efforts matter most</i>	Staff can name the top priorities by heart
<i>Initiatives compete for the same time</i>	Initiatives reinforce one another
<i>Momentum resets each year</i>	Momentum builds year over year

Before Launching Something New

The harder leadership challenge is not deciding what to add each year. It is deciding what not to add. Before your next planning meeting, try sitting with these questions as a team.

1	What initiatives are we still asking staff to implement that no longer need attention?
2	What could we stop doing?
3	Which initiatives overlap?
4	If we introduced one new priority, what existing priority would we intentionally remove?
5	Which initiative would have the greatest impact on improving student outcomes?
6	Does every professional learning session connect directly to our strategic goals?

A Different Way to Start the Year

Imagine opening this school year with a different message to your staff:

“We are not introducing seven new initiatives. We are going to get exceptionally good at the three that matter most.”

That message communicates confidence. It builds trust. And most importantly, it shows respect for educators’ time and expertise, the two things districts can least afford to waste. Maybe Willy Wonka had it backward. Or maybe he was onto something. District leaders do not need more time. They need fewer priorities.

The goal is not to do more this school year. The goal is to do what matters most, and do it exceptionally well.

**SYSTEM
CONTEXT**



STRUCTURES



CULTURE



POLICIES



DATA



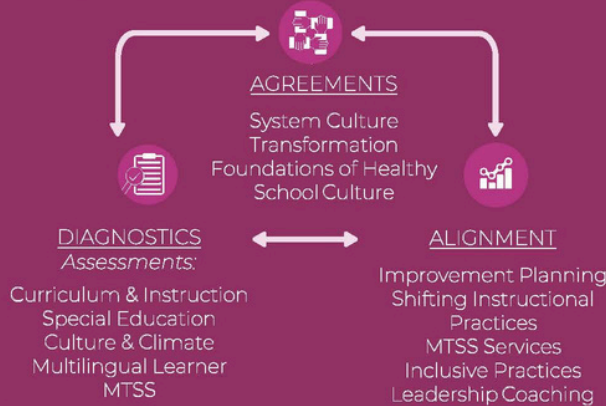
RESOURCES



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.

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.