

One Great Teacher Isn't a System

Almost everyone can name a teacher who changed their life. For me, it was my high school biology teacher. He helped me feel capable as a learner and inspired me to become a teacher.

But I cannot say that confidence grew steadily throughout my years in school. I struggled as a student and did not feel that my schooling built strong independence or academic confidence. One remarkable teacher made a lasting difference for me. *I wonder what my experience might have been if that sense of possibility had been built across the years.*

Students experience school as a journey. Educators often see only a few years of it.

A student may learn to organize their thinking in third grade, then encounter a different thinking organizer in fourth grade with no connection to what they learned before. They complete both tasks, but may never become confident enough to choose and use a strategy on their own. That learning cycle often continues with unintended gaps and fragments.

Schools cannot control every experience a child has. They can, however, be intentional about building greater coherence across classrooms, teams, and buildings.

This requires staff to do more than use the same standards or high-quality instructional materials. As [RAND researchers](#) caution, “simply adopting standards-aligned materials may be insufficient for improving coherence.” Together, school teams need to:



Define what student success looks like. What should students understand and be able to do, beyond completing a lesson or an assignment? Share these attributes both across the same grade and vertically across adjacent grades.



Map how important skill capabilities develop over time across grades. Where are students introduced to a skill, where do they revisit it, and how should they use it with increasing independence? Make sure these are appropriately assessed and tracked over time.



Examine gaps between intention and experience. Student work and classroom observations can reveal where an expected capability is not yet developing. Intervene quickly to shore up gaps before they become too large.



Agree on essential teaching practices. Teams can identify what students should consistently experience while leaving room for teachers to respond to the learners in front of them. Research on [effective professional development](#) points to the value of collaboration, models of practice, feedback, and sustained opportunities to learn.



Test, learn, and adjust together. Teacher teams can look at whether their agreements are improving student learning across classrooms, rather than assuming that using the same materials means the same learning is taking place. [REL West's guidance on inquiry cycles](#) offers one way to examine evidence and test changes together.

This work gives schools a way to move effective practice beyond one classroom. Each year can build on the last, giving students more opportunities to develop competence, confidence, and independence.

At **Catalyst for Educational Change**, we work alongside school and district teams to identify what is working, examine where students' experiences vary, and build shared practices that can last beyond one classroom or one school year.

I will always be grateful for my biology teacher. ***My hope is that students can count on a school journey that builds those qualities year after year, not on the chance of encountering one great teacher who changes everything.***

Where in your students' journey does strong practice build from year to year, and where might the connection be missing? If your team is ready to examine that question together, CEC can help you begin.

Citations:

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- Regional Educational Laboratory West. (2019). Using inquiry cycles in PLCs to improve instruction. Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/resource-library/resource/fact-sheetinfographicfaq/using-inquiry-cycles-plcs-improve-instruction>
- Wang, E. L., Schweig, J., Kaufman, J. H., Opfer, V. D., & Berglund, T. (2023). Coherence in English language arts and mathematics instructional systems across the United States. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2168-1.html

**SYSTEM
CONTEXT**



PEOPLE

STRUCTURES



CULTURE

POLICIES



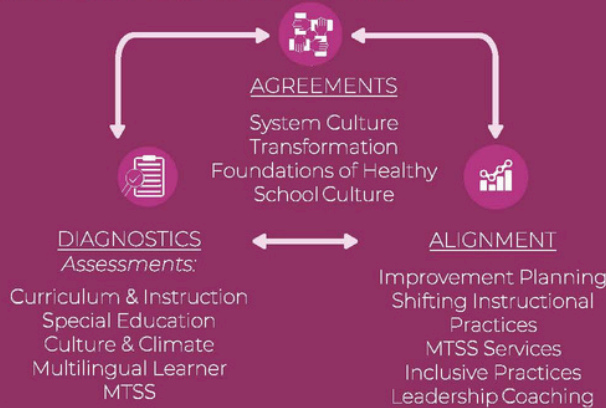
DATA

RESOURCES



COMMUNICATION

CAPACITY BUILDING INPUTS



MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

SHORT-TERM	
SYSTEM IMPACT	PEOPLE IMPACT
Decision-Making	New Knowledge or Skills
Policy Changes	Attitude Shifts
Resource Flow	Common Language
	Adapting Practice
MID-TERM	
Sustaining Practice	Strengthened Culture
Improved Alignment	Empowered Educators

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.