

# LEARNING AND PRACTICING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:

## LESSONS FROM THE CORE DISTRICTS

The CORE Districts' continuous improvement work launched in 2016 with an aim to improve the mathematics achievement of African American and Latinx students in grades 4-8. Since then, CORE has created multiple entry points for educators to build an understanding of how to achieve better student outcomes through a continuous improvement approach. In 2018-19, researchers at Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) undertook a third year of study of the work. PACE sought to answer two major questions:

- 1 What do we know about how to support educators in learning continuous improvement?
- 2 What conditions support continuous improvement in districts and schools?

### CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT



Systems produce outcomes



Change efforts focus on key processes



Progress requires continual learning and discovery



As effective practices are discovered, they are spread throughout the organization



Frontline workers are uniquely situated to learn how to get ideas to work

*Data suggest that to achieve success, districts and schools can no longer think of continuous improvement as an initiative to do in addition to conducting business as usual.*

### KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Taking up continuous improvement processes is complex
- 2 Workshops rarely provides depth of knowledge for continuous improvement
- 3 Teams need content area and continuous improvement expertise
- 4 Creating a continuous improvement organization requires leadership
- 5 Districts can take deliberate steps to build a continuous improvement culture
- 6 Structures and processes do not create continuous improvement, but they are foundational

*Overall, what we learned in 2018-19 gives us hope that California districts and schools can use continuous improvement to steadily improve student outcomes. As we looked across all eight districts, however, we came to believe that realizing the potential of continuous improvement will require an overhaul of how many California districts are run, how district leaders work and how districts invest in developing their staff.*

# What Case Studies Tell Us About Systems Improvement

PACE produced 3 case studies from its examination of continuous improvement in Long Beach Unified School District, Garden Grove Unified School District and at Ayer Elementary in Fresno Unified School District.

## Where systems were succeeding in continuously improving student outcomes PACE found:

- An overall focus on supporting teachers to learn effective instructional practices
- Coherence, created by a stable focus and multi-directional communication
- A culture tolerant of failure that produced learning
- Use of data to set big goals and monitor progress towards those goals
- Districts and schools use continuous improvement as an approach to doing their ongoing work instead of as a separate reform initiative.



### Long Beach Unified School District

Long Beach Unified School District works to build a shared vision of high-quality instruction and organizes itself to support teachers in moving closer to realizing that vision in their classrooms.

*“The story of continuous improvement journey at LBUSD is one of deep support for student and adult learning with integrated structures and processes to support instructional growth, coaching, and leadership throughout all levels.”*

### Garden Grove Unified School District

Garden Grove Unified School District’s approach is to build the coherence necessary for supporting a culture of consistent improvement across the system.

*“The central focus is operationalized into Garden Grove Unified three goals, two of which have been in place for almost 20 years with a third being added 5 years ago....The strong moral imperative to make decisions that best serve students is a fundamental part of the district culture.”*

### Fresno Unified School District

Ayer Elementary School in Fresno Unified School District is using outside resources to build its improvement capacity and the principal and administrators at the school enact their leadership to build teacher agency and ownership for improvement.

*“Variation in outcomes based on race is almost ubiquitous in American schools and there are many explanations available to explain this variation. What is unusual is how teachers at Ayer arrived at a place of collective efficacy for improving the outcomes of groups of students who had been least well-served by the school.”*