

WHITE PAPER

From survive to thrive: Why partnership is essential for school improvement



In every school and district, large and small, leaders strive to narrow the gap between a vision for their system and its current reality. Progress is hard-earned and even tougher to maintain. The daily grind of addressing unfinished learning, complying with state and federal policy, keeping students safe and families engaged—all while supporting a maxed-out teacher workforce through an enduring pandemic or other challenges that arise each year—is enough to test the mettle of the most seasoned administrators.

Yet leaders across education refuse to merely *survive*. They are driven to create the culture and conditions in which the social, emotional, and academic development of all students can *thrive*.

Whether a school is thriving or performing below its expectations and goals, a significant, well-planned investment in school improvement can produce remarkable results. School improvement holds the potential to help leaders create space—amidst managing everyday challenges—to make fundamental and enduring positive changes to their school culture, the quality of instruction that students receive, and students’ overall well-being—including their academic outcomes.

What is school improvement?

School improvement is a focused, sustained effort to create a set of organizational conditions in which educators have the resources and support they need to help ensure the social, emotional, and academic well-being and success of every student.

In this paper, we want to explore a few key ideas about the reality of school improvement. Think of these as guiding principles to help advance your thinking about the best ways to drive sustainable change:

- **School improvement done right isn’t just effective—it’s transformative.**
- **Despite the best intentions, most school improvement initiatives fall short.**
- **When problems are complex, surface-level solutions won’t suffice.**
- **Effective change agents embrace thought partnership and coaching.**
- **The time to act on school improvement is right now.**

The current landscape and the path ahead

According to a [growing body of research](#), improved organizational conditions in schools are clearly linked to better outcomes for schools and students alike. But while the case for school improvement is strong, success remains elusive for many of the well-meaning school and district leaders who launch initiatives in this area. Indeed, the unfortunate reality is that most school improvement initiatives fall short of intended outcomes. This guide will help explain why that’s the case, why schools and districts should nonetheless not be deterred from this critical work, and what school improvement looks like when it’s set up for success.

Quite possibly, the stakes have never been higher. Decades of inequities in education, compounded by the [disproportionate impact of the pandemic](#) on underserved students, have culminated in a new sense of urgency for school systems to make foundational changes. Stubborn problems require radical solutions. And the bigger the change that's needed, the harder it will be for systems to go it alone.

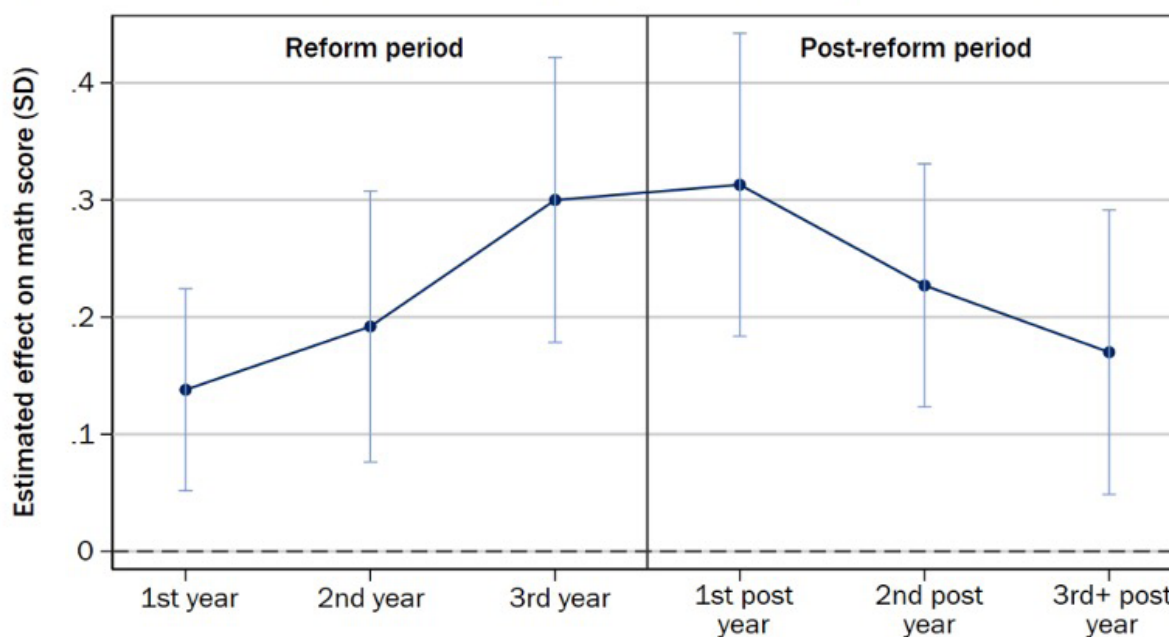
As you explore this paper, we invite you to think about the **advantages of partnership** in this kind of work. Imagine an engaged thought partner by your side, bringing an impartial, research-informed perspective to bear in helping you identify not only the challenges you face, but also the inherent strengths of your system and how those can best be leveraged.

Why many school improvement efforts fall short

Despite the promise of school improvement to help schools break out of longstanding patterns of underperformance, many improvement efforts wither on the vine, fail to muster the needed support, or fall short of their intended long-term goals. For example, [according to a 2020 study](#) from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, the effects of improvement programs funded by School Improvement Grants (SIGs) on math scores in grades 3–8 returned to pre-implementation levels within three years of the completion of the program.

There are several reasons sustainable impact is so challenging, and understanding a few common pitfalls is the first step in ensuring that your own efforts don't meet a similar fate.

Figure 1. Estimated SIG turnaround program effects in grade 3-8 math



Source: Sun, M., Kennedy A., and Loeb, S. (2020). The longitudinal effects of school effects of school improvement grants. (EdWorkingPaper: 20-177)

The current system incentivizes quick wins and short-term solutions. When school systems have an urgent need to show progress in students' academic growth and outcomes, they often look for solutions that address the problems head-on, producing the biggest and quickest bang for their buck. For example, schools grappling with low reading scores might take the logical step of adding a supplemental online reading intervention program. There is value in this kind of additional support, but it's merely a first step. The root causes of learning challenges are complex, requiring a more holistic set of solutions. Short-term solutions may yield good results for a while, but schools are likely to eventually find themselves back at square one if their improvement plans don't address underlying challenges as well or if they lack built-in processes to ensure that the plans are sustained over time.

We add more and more programs without focusing on implementation. Kids have many needs, and it's common to see well-meaning educators—and policymakers—searching for just the right program or initiative to meet each of these needs. But to achieve real, sustained improvement, schools should try to do a few things well—and focus on effective implementation—rather than doing many things at a surface level. When schools keep adding programs or initiatives in the absence of a cohesive strategy of how they work together, the risk of [burnout, frustration, and disengagement](#) grows.

We overlook the role of school leaders. Many school improvement efforts are built around teacher knowledge and skill development, but we must not forget the critical role that principals can and should play in these efforts. [Research shows](#) that investing in principals leads to significant gains on a variety of measures, from student learning and attendance to teacher satisfaction and retention.

Too many leaders go it alone. For better or worse, school administrators are used to working by themselves. While they may value the autonomy that comes with leadership positions, they also have to deal with isolation, loneliness, and intense exposure to [criticism and pressure](#). And while many administrators work alongside mentors, coaches, and peers earlier in their careers, these relationships—and the valuable perspectives they bring—tend to dwindle over time. To be sure, there are plenty of leaders who are content to lead as a “team of one.” But most are likely to find that being part of a [professional learning community](#) makes them even better at and more satisfied by their work.

In the context of school improvement specifically, solitary leadership can be problematic because of the blind spots that prevent even the smartest individuals from seeing the entirety of the landscape in front of them. Without collaboration, feedback, and support, leaders might launch improvement plans without the diverse perspectives needed to foster a sense of shared ownership. In particular, effective leaders value teacher voices and bring them into the decision-making process.

Too often, the onus for school improvement is placed only at the school level. With intense focus on specific schools that need help, district leaders may overlook examining how their policies, practices, and processes contribute to school conditions. For example, districts routinely placing inexperienced teachers in schools with the most students facing poverty are unlikely

to see improved student outcomes in those schools. In a 2010 study on the central office transformations in New York City, Atlanta, and Oakland, California, University of Washington researchers concluded that [“district-wide improvements in teaching won’t happen without leadership from central office staff members working in partnership with schools.”](#) Minus careful examination of district policies and practices, as well as direct and meaningful support for school leaders, improvement efforts are unlikely to reach their potential.

We rely too heavily on student outcome data. It goes without saying that improving academic outcomes for students is paramount. But when student data is the sole catalyst and the primary input for driving improvement efforts, an outsized piece of the puzzle is missing. Under the old adage “what gets measured gets managed,” having reliable, measurable insights into the structures and processes of schools and systems, as well as the behavior and relational dynamics of the adults in those systems, helps appropriately focus improvement efforts at the school and system level. Student outcome data shows us the end result. Data on how schools function helps uncover the root causes of school performance. This is where the adults in the systems have the most agency and ability to drive change—by listening to students as well as each other—to create stronger, more supportive schools that empower all community members to thrive, especially students.

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We view systems from a deficit perspective. How we frame our problems has a lot to do with how well we’re positioned to solve them. While much improvement has been made in avoiding deficit mindsets with students and individuals, it’s still a work in progress when it comes to schools and systems. It may sound like semantics, but there’s a big difference between “Why are we failing?” and “What’s preventing us from succeeding?” School leaders can be so focused on their organizational challenges that they sometimes overlook what’s going well. There’s more to this distinction than positive self-talk. Strengths and successes can not only be recognized and celebrated, but also analyzed and leveraged to drive progress.

School improvement at its best

The pitfalls we’ve just covered are as common as they are avoidable. Before we get into solutions and strategies, let’s take a quick look at the ideal state we see in environments where school improvement is working well. The work will look a little different in every setting, but generally speaking, in a system with a well-planned, evidence-based approach to school improvement, we see strategies that don’t depend on the talents of a single leader. Rather, we see a durable set of **systems, processes, protocols, and practices** that are co-created, broadly owned, implemented in an inclusive manner, and sustained over time as they’re passed down to new leaders and staff.

In putting these elements in place, school leaders are striving for more than short-term wins as measured in students’ academic growth or outcomes. They understand that when faced with

disappointing outcome data, they need an analysis that reaches far below the surface, illuminating root causes at the system level. They take a [holistic approach to school improvement](#) that's centered on the need to create sustainable conditions that lay a strong foundation for better student outcomes. And in creating these conditions, leaders create a stronger school culture that prizes collective responsibility and accountability.

Culture and climate are more than buzzwords: they're the ground upon which school improvement is built. Investing in a school's [culture and climate](#) and in school improvement are one and the same, producing dividends that could be paid well into the future—even after the leader who began the process has moved on.

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NWEA and 5Essentials: Getting to the heart of the matter

At NWEA®, school improvement isn't a product that can be plucked off a shelf. It's a paradigm and a powerful process for driving change. What we offer, in partnership with UChicago Impact®, is a comprehensive approach to school improvement that draws from a system's existing strengths, casts a wide net in the search for diverse experiences and perspectives, and keeps an intense focus on the organizational conditions that are needed to produce better student outcomes.

At the heart of this approach are the 5Essentials®, a research-based framework from UChicago Impact that rests atop five pillars:

1. **Effective Leaders**
2. **Collaborative Teachers**
3. **Involved Families**
4. **Supportive Environment**
5. **Ambitious Instruction**

The strength of 5Essentials comes from an evidence-based **survey** and a **conceptual framework** that have been validated, refined, and studied for more than two decades. In its 2020 report [“Supporting School Improvement: Early Findings from a Reexamination of the 5Essentials Survey,”](#) the UChicago Consortium on Student Research confirmed that improvements in the 5Essentials were associated with a variety of positive results, including gains in student attendance, graduation rates, teacher retention, and—of course—academic achievement.

You'll recall our warnings about the blind spots of school leaders who attempt a fact-finding mission or improvement initiative on their own. That's why the 5Essentials process is designed to capture perspectives from diverse stakeholders—including teachers, students, and their families—illuminating the school's organizational strengths and obstacles and revealing sentiments about the climate and culture. The survey process sets the stage for a democratized improvement effort

that activates a broad base of leadership, so that the results of the process are owned by the school community rather than being credited to (or blamed on!) a single individual. Districts using this survey process can take part in professional learning workshops tailored to the needs of each district, helping leaders translate survey insights into actionable improvement plans.

A crucial point: this is **collaborative work**. The NWEA approach to school improvement is grounded in conversation and relationship. We are true partners, working side by side with school leaders to support and equip them with the resources and tactics they need to lead with confidence, compassion, and impact. With this support in place, leaders can make an accurate and complete analysis of their systemic strengths and challenges—the information they need in order to identify and deliver the best remedy.

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Empowering leaders with coaching and support

As many school leaders can attest, “it’s lonely at the top” is less a cliché than a fact of life. From the 1980 scholarly article [“The Loneliness of Educational Leadership”](#) to the recently published essay [“Leading Through the Pandemic: Is School Leader Loneliness Increasing Under COVID?”](#) many observers have noted the prevalence—and endurance—of this problem.

School leaders may value their autonomy but feel isolated in their work, as we mentioned earlier. And when leaders have to go it alone, they lack the benefit of learning from another’s experiences or bouncing ideas around with a trusted peer. That’s why collaboration is a key part of NWEA’s school improvement offering, and it’s why we feel strongly that coaching belongs at the center of a school system’s leadership culture.

Principals can have coaches? In fact, they can and should—and [research supports the notion](#) that coaching is beneficial for school leaders. Coaching is a routine and expected feature of many professions, sports being the most obvious example. Teams have an insatiable appetite for excellence when it comes to their star players, and they invest accordingly in the ongoing development of those players. At NWEA, we believe that the coaching ethos so common in sports can be exported to school improvement work with great results. The more support change agents receive, the greater their impact will be.

While terms like thought partner or peer advisor may feel more comfortable to some, the role of a coach is different in a few important ways. A coaching relationship requires a deeper commitment from both parties, as well as two-way accountability. It’s a more formalized structure built to help leaders perform their best. NWEA coaches develop lasting, positive relationships with school leaders based on trust and mutual respect, partnering to cultivate mindsets and thought processes that foster continuous improvement.

If not now, when?

Consider our present moment. Following years of [stagnant or declining achievement](#) and persistent inequities in US education, a pandemic struck that impacted the teacher-student connection and [deepened those inequities](#). At the same time, the exponential growth of information sources has made it harder and harder to compete for kids’ attention.

While many schools have found a way to excel and thrive, some leaders would describe their situations as daunting. Challenges include low morale, staffing issues, and lumbering old systems that are set up to serve students en masse rather than as the individuals we know them to be. In such an environment, crisis can feel like a daily reality, and the prospect of meaningful, systemic improvement may seem remote. But even for schools that are objectively doing well, school improvement is a powerful way to systematize their successes while collaboratively tackling obstacles and nurturing a culture of continuous evolution and progress.

Many educators feel we’ve reached a tipping point where the failures of the past can no longer be ignored—where profound change is needed in order to remedy those failures, meet the challenges of our moment, and give schools a fighting chance to build a better future. School improvement can help drive this needed change not by cataloging a school’s shortcomings, but

by leveraging strengths, overcoming trepidation, and putting schools and their leaders on track for real, enduring transformation.

It's this type of approach that NWEA, in partnership with UChicago Impact, is proud to bring to the school improvement space. Building on our decades of experience with assessment solutions and instructional support, we apply UChicago Impact's evidence-based 5Essentials Framework to identify and maximize the use of the organizational conditions necessary for the transformational changes in education that we all want to see.

It's a partnership rooted in our shared commitment to help students, educators, and school communities thrive. Call it the missing piece, the secret ingredient, or just NWEA School Improvement Services—the research, coaching, and expertise district leaders need to bring visions of fundamental positive change to life.

What's your vision for the future?
See how we can help at [NWEA.org/school-improvement](https://nwea.org/school-improvement).



NWEA is a not-for-profit organization that supports students and educators worldwide by providing assessment solutions, insightful reports, professional learning offerings, and research services. Visit [NWEA.org](https://nwea.org) to find out how NWEA can partner with you to help all kids learn.

UChicago Impact is a not-for-profit organization that provides educators with research-based supports that position them to use research and actionable data to improve practices that promote positive student outcomes. Visit uchicagoimpact.org to learn more about UChicago Impact and its work.

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