

CA LMI

California Labor Management Initiative



Building Partnerships to Create Great Public Schools

A Guide to Building a System of Collaborative Problem Solving

This is a unique moment in time. The pandemic has mandated the closure of school buildings while the responsibility of educating our children continues. It has starkly revealed systemic inequities that we knew existed but had not fully acknowledged in how we operated. Most of us have been humbled by the fact that we want to change how we do things, but are overwhelmed by the tasks. Or perhaps we haven't known where or how to start, or how to move our big ideas to implementation.

If the above describes you and your education community, this simple guide for building a system for adaptive problem solving is for you. And it's not an oxymoron. There are no right or wrong answers. Start at the beginning, if you can, by identifying the problem you are seeking to solve. But often, that isn't where you are when you realize you need to (or are directed to) make change. Most likely, you will have to figure out where you are in the process to move the change you are seeking to accomplish.

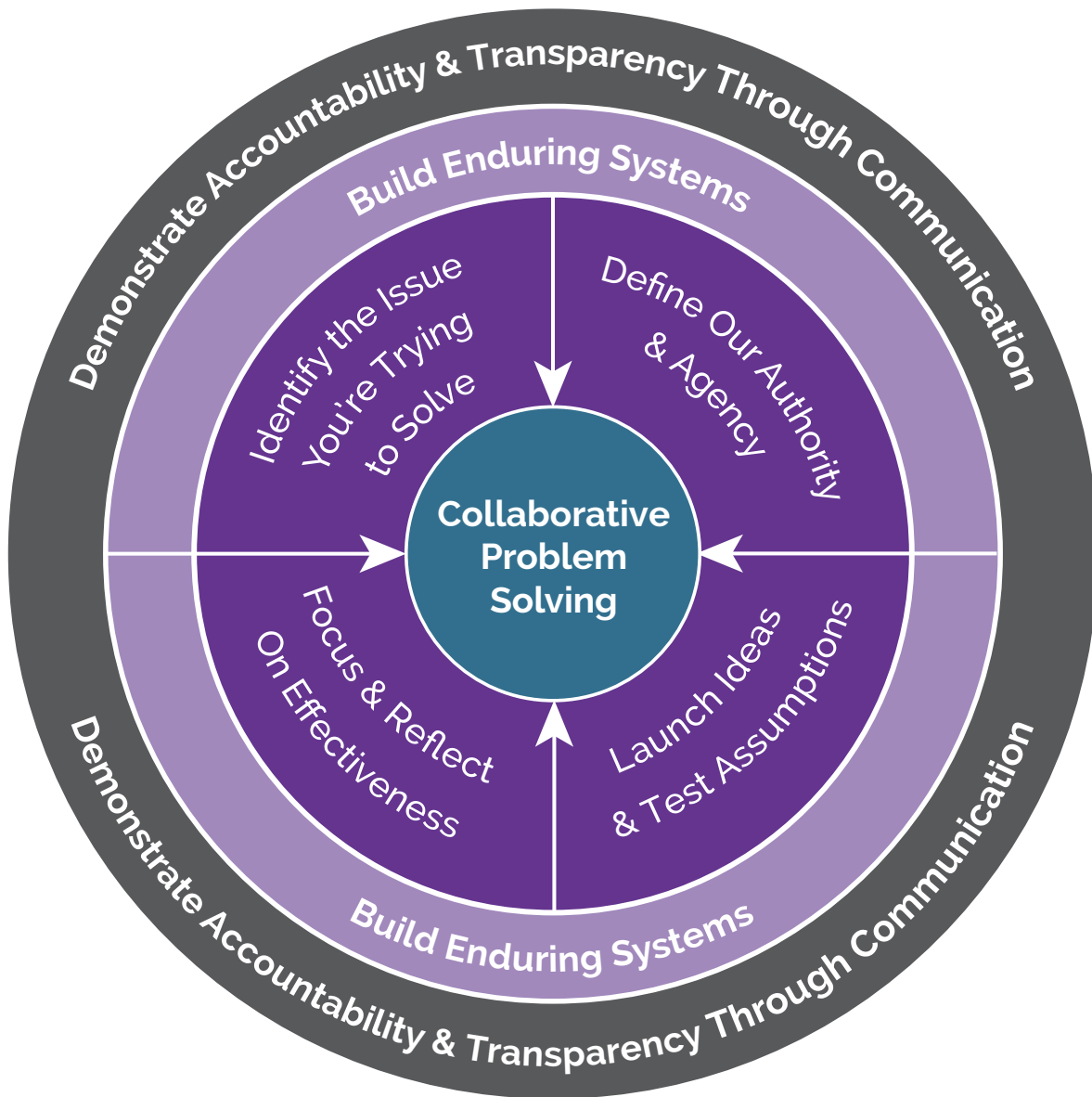
This guide is different than others you may have seen. The steps will be familiar and consistent with planning

tools and continuous quality improvement. You will see things that remind you of the LCAP process and at the same time, are recognizable as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) activities. Although you know these steps, you may not be focused on how to weave in and out of them and/or how to infuse them into everything that you do. Further, you have probably not yet incorporated into each of these stages a labor-management lens that will lead to improved communication, equity, and trust throughout your organization or labor-management team.

In the following guide, we explore the four stages of collaborative problem solving as well as two intersecting system elements, communication and sustainability. First, we identify "Big Ideas" that we associate with each stage of the work. Then, we offer questions for teams to consider that focus on the Big Ideas. Finally, we offer questions that individuals can use to drive the work consistent with the Big Ideas. There are countless questions that could be used to drive the work at each step and you should feel comfortable and empowered to develop questions that could move your team.



For more information, visit www.cdefoundation.org



We see each of the six stages above as a unique moment in the movement of your work as a leader or catalyst, and in your work as a member of a team or group. Each stage can, and should be, revisited as frequently as necessary to do the work of collaborative problem solving. Stages connect to statewide standards as indicated. Each of the four stages can be enhanced by connecting them to the system elements of communications and sustainability.

[California Professional Standards](#) (CA Dept. of Education)

[Connection to California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders](#) (CPSEL)

[Connection to California Academic Standards](#)

(MPS) = Math Practice Standard
(SEP) = Science & Engineering Practice
(ELA) = English/Language Arts, Speaking and Listening Standards

STAGE 1: Identify the Issue you are Trying to Solve/Resolve

Stage 1 is about identifying priorities and making strategic choices about what to focus on. This stage is also an opportunity to rethink how priorities are set and by whom. We are mindful of the need for more inclusion of different voices and diversity of perspectives, as well as the need for focusing on issues that are truly relevant. This may mean breaking up a large goal into smaller pieces, which may be easier to implement. As such, this stage can be a helpful way to set the stage for a richer kind of collaborative conversation and one with a better chance of making an impact.

BIG IDEAS

- » Be strategic, intentional, and coherent about priorities.
- » Clarify what makes our priorities relevant and impactful
- » Ensure that our priorities reflect the diversity of our community
- » Align allocation of resources (human and fiscal) with priorities.
- » Decide whether this is a systemic issue (root cause) or a symptom of a problem or issue.

Guiding Questions

For Teams

- How many existing priorities reflect “you must do this” versus “this is a priority because it will have a significant impact on students and/or staff?”
- Can we remove items from our priority list and reduce stress if we communicate better across the organization or school?
- Do our priorities build on something that is already known or understood within the organization?
- Do these priorities reflect concerns and content that will directly impact most or many people in the organization?
- Do these priorities align with the goals and priorities of our strategic plan, LCAP and other pre-existing planning tools, or should something be changed?
- How much diversity of perspective was present during discussion of priorities? Did this generate many different ideas and opinions?
- Were the groups/stakeholders who will be impacted by these priorities represented in the process and discussions that establish them (including classified staff, students, parents, etc.)
- Is there capacity and buy-in to move this work forward?
- Has the group considered the equity issues that may be connected to the topic?

For Individual Leaders

- Where do I see the greatest need for change?
- Where do I see low-hanging fruit and opportunity for impact?
- Do I think the existing priorities will lead to the greatest impact? If not, is it possible to pivot to more impactful priorities or reduce the priority of some existing work without derailing it?
- What data or information is missing from the conversation? How can I move it into the conversation?
- Is an equity lens applied to this or most decision making? Who else is an equity focused member of the team to collaborate with?
- Have I made the case to include typically marginalized voices (classified staff, students, parents, community)?

Links to CA Educational Standards – modeling our standards

- Embrace diverse perspectives and craft consensus about the vision and goals (CPSEL 1B.1)
- Work with local leaders to assess, analyze, and anticipate emerging trends and initiatives and their impact on education (CPSEL 6A.5).
- Incorporate information about family and community expectations and needs into decision-making and activities (CPSEL 4B.1)
- Communicate the vision so that the staff and school community understand it and use it for decision-making (CPSEL 1B.2)
- Ask questions and define problems (SEP 1)
- Attend to precision (MPS 4)

STAGE 2: Define Our Authority & Agency

Stage 2 is a critically important time to be precise and clarify what we are doing collaboratively. Our discussions must consider both the scope (how big and bold) and urgency (how fast and far-reaching) of our proposed actions. This stage is also a time to normalize collaboration, setting norms for how the group will operate and defining expectations for working together. Because there is hierarchy in our organizations, sometimes mandated by law, sometimes by tradition, this is a good point to consider whether some decisions can be shared or transferred to others. In any event, it is important to be clear about which opportunities are for decision making and which opportunities are for input. Regardless, some team members will need reassurance that their voice matters, as well as clear opportunities to provide suggestions and input at this stage. In sum, Stage 2 sets the stage for group interactions and buy-in and the development of new leaders.

BIG IDEAS

- » Balance the need for decisiveness with need for inclusion and accountability
- » Clarify authority and urgency to act
- » Acknowledge and address power dynamics; the importance of leveling the playing field for all
- » Raise up new voices and perspectives

Guiding Questions

For Teams

- Is it clear what is within our group's or team's purview to decide upon? Do we understand where we have autonomy and/or discretion?
- Is there an articulable rationale for where decisions are being made? Are there opportunities for distributing decision-making across the organization?
- Who else needs to be involved or informed in this decision?
- Have we created conditions that encourage input from everyone on the team?
- Is there sufficient psychological safety to ensure that people speak up and voice their ideas and opinions regardless of positional authority?
- Have we established norms for collaboration that promote both trust and precision in team settings?
- Have we empowered someone to facilitate and "enforce" norms for collaboration?

For Individual Leaders

- Are there voices missing from the table?
- How can I increase visibility and trust of missing voices?
- How can I build relations with those in power/those not in power so other voices can carry more weight?
- How can I help my union/management team feel more comfortable becoming more transparent?
- How can I help my union/management team share power?
- How can I help generate support for the work even if I did not support this priority or focus?

Links to CA Educational Standards – modeling our standards

- Set clear working agreements that support sharing problems, practices, and results within a safe and supportive environment (CPSEL 3B.3)
- Build shared accountability to achieve the vision by distributing leadership roles and responsibilities among staff and community (CPSEL 1B.3)
- Address achievement and opportunity disparities between groups, with attention to those with special needs; cultural, racial, and linguistic differences; and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (CPSEL 1A.3).
- Treat all stakeholder groups with fairness and respect, and work to bring consensus on key issues that affect student learning and well-being (CPSEL 4B.3)
- Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively (ELA.SL.1)
- Identify personal and institutional biases and remove barriers that derive from economic, social-emotional, racial, linguistic, cultural, physical, gender-based, or other sources of educational disadvantage

STAGE 3: Launch Ideas and Test Assumptions

Stage 3 is about implementing a plan or carrying out the work in front of you. Because our work is complex, it is necessarily adaptive. No plans are carried out exactly as envisioned. Therefore, Stage 3 requires consideration of delegation and trust that your colleagues will implement plans as best they can, taking into account their own situation and dynamic work environment. As such, Stage 3 challenges us to consider how best to use the natural differences of local context to test and experiment with our ideas and assumptions about our work. Multiple, similar experiments provide the basis for us to learn from different implementation pathways and solutions. Simple work plans can help with clarifying tasks, pacing work and assessing outcomes.

BIG IDEAS

- » Trust people to do the work
- » Acknowledge that there are multiple ways to do the work
- » Accept the difference between fidelity to process vs. fidelity to outcome
- » Build upon and acknowledge what already exists in proposing a new course of action

Guiding Questions

For Teams

- Are there clear roles, responsibilities, and timelines to guide delegation of work?
- Have we acknowledged and informed the team that implementation can and should adapt to local context?
- Have we considered opportunities for testing multiple, related ideas in lieu of a “one size fits all” type of implementation?
- Are the desired outcomes clear? Does everyone understand how we are defining success?
- To what extent has doing the work nurtured and fostered trust among team members?
- Have we used this moment to generate curiosity about solving problems?
- Have we used this moment to show coherence between doing the work and modeling good learning practices?
- How might we align this process with our LCAP development, SPSA, or other site planning tools?
- Have we identified barriers to access or other equity considerations?

For Individual Leaders

- How can I model delegation and distributed leadership?
- Am I able to see or acknowledge how work plans can and should be adaptive?
- How might I encourage others to experiment with similar (but different) approaches to implementation?
- How can I model and communicate curiosity and an “experimentation” mindset?
- How might I facilitate discussions about outcomes and success metrics to clarify expectations and enhance team-building?
- What can I do to nurture and foster trust among team members as part of implementation?
- Am I modeling ownership of my work?

Links to CA Educational Standards – modeling our standards

- Cultivate multiple learning opportunities and support systems that build on assets and address needs (CPSEL 1A.2)
- Strengthen staff trust, shared responsibility, and leadership by instituting structures and processes that promote collaborative inquiry and problem solving (CPSEL 2A.4)
- Plan and carry out investigations (SEP 3)
- Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them (MPS 1)
- Use appropriate tools strategically (MPS 6)

STAGE 4: Focus and Reflect on Effectiveness

Stage 4 is about reflecting on our progress and taking time to learn from the work we have implemented. In the process of focusing on effectiveness, we have opportunities to both hone our precision (what we are collaborating on) and build trust (how we collaborate) through group and team discussions. If we have given our projects and initiatives the time they need to be meaningful, and we have been inclusive in seeking comments and observations, we will have a rich store of “data” to reflect upon in a spirit of inquiry and collaborative learning. Both the process of these reflections and their content are meaningful as we distill “lessons learned” that serve us now and into the future. Throughout we have strengthened shared accountability with objective tools to track our work, as well as the psychological safety to avoid blame or judgment.

BIG IDEAS

- » Hone precision, while building trust
- » Be curious, not judgmental
- » Focus on outcomes not outputs
- » Reframe the assessment mindset as suggestion for change not judgement of the present

Guiding Questions

For Teams

- How might we cultivate a culture of curiosity and inquiry rather than judgement and reaction?
- Are we focused on effectiveness (doing the right things) or efficiency (doing things right)?
- Have we considered the impact of the work (on students and families) above and beyond its immediate result?
- Have we structured reflection to allow time and space for “lessons learned” to emerge?
- Have we considered how communication of goals, training and planning with staff affected our outcomes?
- Are there minor adjustments or refinements we can make?
- What are the implications of our reflection for district/school goals or vision? Which aspects of reflection need to be part of longer-term sustainability discussions?
- Have we considered equity impacts in our implementation?

For Individual Leaders

- How can I model curiosity and inquiry as part of my leadership style/approach? How might I encourage more curiosity and inquiry in team or group interactions?
- Have I created or used opportunities for team/group discussions to consider outcomes and impact, rather than the immediate output?
- How might I provide examples of the difference between efficiency and effectiveness that are relevant to my team or group?
- What are the best levers or opportunities for lifting up discussions about impact on end-users (i.e., children, youth, and families)?
- Have I created or used opportunities for team/group interaction to reflect on lessons learned? To plan forward based on data and/or reflection?
- Have I supported a quality roll-out and implementation of the work?

Links to CA Educational Standards – modeling our standards

- Include all stakeholders in a process of continuous improvement (reflection, revision, and modification) based on the systematic review of evidence and progress (CPSEL 1C.1)
- Guide staff and the community in regular disaggregation and analysis of local and state student assessment results and program data (CPSEL 2C.2)
- Use information from a variety of sources to guide program and professional learning planning, implementation, and revisions (CPSEL 2C.3)
- Use a variety of strategies to lead others in safely examining personal assumptions and respectfully challenge beliefs that negatively affect improving teaching and learning for all students (CPSEL 5C.2)
- Analyze and interpret data (SEP 4)
- Engage in argument from evidence (SEP 7)
- Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others (MPS 3)

Demonstrate Accountability and Transparency Through Communication

The ways we communicate should reinforce the overarching need for authentic, ongoing collaboration that helps build trust and supports equity. **Therefore, this section is centered on using communication tools and strategies to demonstrate accountability and build trust within and across work teams and collaborative groups.** We consciously prioritize messages and choose forums to showcase our learning about effectiveness so that other groups, and the organization as a whole, are influenced by and benefit from our experience. We look to an interactive dialogue and exchange of ideas, mindful of the need for encouraging respect and guarding the psychological safety of participants. We embrace the fact that communication is the glue that both informs and nurtures professional working relationships.

BIG IDEAS

- » Shift from one-way to multi-dimensional communication
- » Lift up communication as an essential element of collaboration; improving communication is central to power-sharing
- » Prevent communication from becoming a proxy for inequity and mistrust
- » Sustain communication with frequency and regular forums and platforms for it to occur

Guiding Questions

For Teams

- Are we prepared to showcase our results and reflections, even if they are not flattering?
- Which audiences would benefit from seeing our process, results and hearing our reflections?
- Can we prioritize our learning (and who is presenting) to meet the needs of different audiences and/or stakeholders?
- How might our communication style or presentation encourage dialogue and discussion versus simply a presentation of findings?
- How can we move from a “need to know” culture to a “we are all in this together” culture?
- To what extent has our communication strategy enhanced the credibility of our team or approach? Psychological safety of teams?
- Are we thoughtful about our words and questions, making sure that we ask the questions we truly want to know the answers to and using words that are engaging and understandable to all stakeholders?
- Have we made our equity considerations transparent?

For Individual Leaders

- Does our communication reinforce a collaborative mindset?
- How can I contribute to building a culture of greater transparency?
- Am I stepping into or away from the statements of others?
- How can I help build communication highways instead of communication bulletins?
- How might I ensure that my team or group has a meaningful discussion about the multiple audiences that might benefit from hearing about our work?
- Have I identified the best forums and opportunities for presenting our learning and experience?
- Have I facilitated discussions on priorities in light of our experience and learning?
- Can I explain how and why priorities changed or were refined?
- How can I help the organization manage being vulnerable? Build a culture of respectful and civil dialogue? Create a culture of psychological safety?

Links to CA Educational Standards – modeling our standards

- Engage staff in professional learning and formative assessments with specific feedback for continuous growth (CPSEL 3D.4)
- Solicit input from and communicate regularly with all parents and families in ways that are accessible and understandable (CPSEL 4A.4)
- Obtain, evaluate, and communicate information (SEP 8)
- Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience (ELA.SL.4)
- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally (ELA.SL.2)

Build Enduring Systems

This section is where we consider the implications of our collaborative learning for system-wide changes. We consciously step back from the specifics of our work and ask how best to use our learning to improve the systems in which we operate. These could involve relatively small but important changes in how we work together, as well as revisions to organizational policies that have long histories. We ask how we might scale or replicate the best learning throughout our organization. Most importantly, we ask ourselves how best to refine or revamp what and how we work together to better meet the needs of our core constituency – public school students and families and the people who make it happen, our staff.

BIG IDEAS

- » Understand that simple process changes can have big impact
- » Connect initiatives and plans through alignment to mission and vision
- » Consider dissemination and replication of efforts
- » Return to the mission if lost; Remember it's about the students!

Guiding Questions

For Teams

- What small practice (or modification) might your team promote that would have a big impact?
 - how we structure meeting agendas
 - how we document team decisions
 - how we train and develop staff
- Are there lessons from our implementation that have implications for the larger organization?
- Is there a “best practice” that can be generalized?
- Does our experience warrant a change or refinement of policy? How does this align with Board policy? With contractual agreements?
- How do we modify our interactions with one another going forward to build trust in the system?
- How have we addressed a clear need of students or families? A need of educators directly interacting with students and families?
- Have we built the infrastructure to document decisions made during the process to ensure shared agreement, prevent misunderstandings and train others?
- Is there a transition plan to engage new leaders in continuing the work?

For Individual Leaders

- What can I do to train others in the new practices being adopted?
- How can I communicate support for the new or modified practice?
- What connections can I make or ideas do I have for aligning the practice with existing practices or policies?
- Can I show how a change will benefit either students and families or the staff tasked with serving students and families?
- Have I made these connections clear to others in the organization, particularly those with decision-making power?
- How might I advocate for a specific policy change that could be adopted across the organization and sustain new ways of operating?
- How can I help “de-personalize” practices so they become part of our systems (or ways of operating) and less conflated with individuals or subsets of the organization?
- Have I done what is possible and necessary to sustain useful practices?

Links to CA Educational Standards – modeling our standards

- Reflect on areas for improvement and take responsibility for change and growth (CPSEL 5A.2)
- Continuously improve cultural proficiency skills and competency in curriculum, instruction, and assessment for all learners (CPSEL 5A.4)
- Sustain personal motivation, commitment, energy, and health by balancing professional and personal responsibilities (CPSEL 5A.5)
- Look for and make use of structure (MPS 7)
- Construct explanations and design solutions (SEP 6)
- Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning (MPS 8)