

## WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS AND EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW



*All photos courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action.*

## “CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT” COMES TO CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS

**California is shifting to a transparent, evidence-based, collaborative approach to accountability to help schools perform better at every level.**

In just a few years, California has rolled out a series of major upgrades to public education designed to help all students – no matter where they live – reach their full potential and graduate ready for success in college, careers, and life. These changes include:

- Higher academic standards for all students; modern, adaptive assessments that measure progress;
- A student-centered Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) that targets additional funding to students who need it most;
- And, a new approach to accountability that focuses on helping every school and district in the state make **“continuous improvement”** on behalf of all students.

### What is Continuous Improvement?



The term “continuous improvement” is often used to describe an ongoing effort over time that

leads to higher levels of performance. The concept originated among those studying management and effective organizations in different sectors.

When applied to education, continuous improvement operates from the fundamental premise that local school leaders, educators and their communities are in the best position to drive real educational improvement. Accordingly, its success relies on everyone in the education system – locally, regionally and statewide – taking greater collective responsibility for the success of all students and schools. The California School Dashboard and Statewide System of Support are the latest tools introduced to help implement this approach.

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According to Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), distinguishing features of a **continuous improvement** approach in schools include:

- **Focusing attention on system design and operation** (having a “system perspective”)
- **Focusing on processes that produce outcomes** as opposed to focusing exclusive attention on the outcomes themselves (“process oriented”)
- **Using the scientific method to solve problems** by making assumptions about cause and effect and testing them in practice, and
- **Engaging those directly responsible for implementation** (e.g., classroom teachers) in experimentation.

### Why it Matters for Students and Schools

California’s new continuous improvement approach considers multiple measures of student and school performance that contribute to success. This new approach is also more locally driven, and gives educators, school leaders, parents, students and communities more opportunities to plan and work together to identify and meet the unique needs of their students. This is a shift from the prior systems of school accountability which were viewed as prescriptive, punitive, and narrowly focused on test scores.

Innovation and the use of evidence-based methods to improve results for students are key elements. In a continuously improving education system, school and district leaders learn from experience by carefully measuring the effectiveness of different policies and practices. They support the natural motivation of students, educators, parents and others; share

best and promising practices; cultivate a culture of reflection and learning; encourage innovation; and make changes based on what is learned.

### Continuous Improvement Calls for Changes in School Culture and Process

A school culture that is designed to achieve **continuous improvement** differs from those typical of other accountability approaches. Distinguishing characteristics of a continuous improvement culture are:

- Collective responsibility for outcomes
- Learning from failure
- Transparency
- Humility
- Curiosity
- Discipline

**The continuous improvement process is generally built around cycles of action and reflection.** In practice, continuous improvement cycles take different forms, but tend to have the same key elements, organized in a repeating cycle. These include:

- Setting goals (using data)
- Creating an action plan or intervention
- Implementing or acting on the plan
- Assessing the results (using data)
- Reflecting and adjusting plans, and
- Investing in leadership practices that build and sustain a continuous improvement culture.

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### Continuous Improvement Means Taking Collective Responsibility for Local Student Success



Ultimately, delivering on the promise that a **continuous improvement** approach will create

higher levels of performance for all students can only be achieved by schools that have transformed into continuous improvement organizations that are committed, top-to-bottom, to the approach.

This requires greater investment in tools and resources, and a focus on building the capacity of everyone involved in education – from students, teachers, school staff, school boards, parents and administrators, to county offices of education, the state Department of Education and every local community – to provide the learning experiences and supports students need.

For more information, see “Continuous Improvement in Practice,” a report by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and WestEd at [edpolicyinca.org/publications/continuous-improvement-in-practice](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/continuous-improvement-in-practice)

*“The theory of change behind **continuous improvement** is that school systems must become learning organizations that constantly test interventions designed to address systemic problems and then learn to determine whether these changes bring about improvements.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Working Together for High-Quality Education

This information is provided by the California Alliance for Continuous Improvement, a coalition whose members represent the full spectrum of the state, including teachers, administrators, parents, students, business, community advocates, school board members, researchers, philanthropy, institutions of higher education, and others.

The Alliance is committed to a vision for California of providing a high quality education for every student in every school and in every part of the state. The Alliance is a project of the Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation.

To learn more about the Alliance, visit [cdefoundation.org/cde\\_programs/alliance-for-continuous-improvement/](https://cdefoundation.org/cde_programs/alliance-for-continuous-improvement/)



**Californians Dedicated  
to Education Foundation**

<sup>1</sup> “Exploring Improvement Science in Education: Promoting College Access in Fresno USD,” by Jorge Aguilar, Michelle Nayfack and Susan Bush-Mecenas