

Continuous Improvement Guide for Board Members



Introduction

Successful improvement initiatives require clear, compelling visions that resonate with all stakeholders. Research on continuous improvement emphasizes that improvement efforts work best when they bring together diverse perspectives and build shared understanding across the community (Wilcox et al., 2026).

This guide is designed to help School Board Members understand and use processes and tools of collaborative continuous improvement.

Six Essential Questions for Your Board

1. What is the specific problem we're trying to solve, and for whom?

Why this matters: Improvement science emphasizes starting with a clear problem of practice that matters to your community. Your vision should name the challenge explicitly and identify who is most affected.

Consider:

- What does the problem look like in our district's specific context?
- Which students or community members experience this problem most acutely?
- What evidence do we have that this problem exists and persists in our schools?

Outcome: A clear, empathetic problem or challenge statement that stakeholders recognize from their own experience.

2. What is our theory of improvement—how do we believe change will happen?

Why this matters: Research on school improvement shows that effective improvement efforts require explicit theories connecting improvement initiatives to expected outcomes. Stakeholders need to understand not just what you'll do, but why you believe it will work.

Consider:

- What are the root causes driving this problem in our district?

- What changes do we hypothesize (based ideally on research) will address these root causes?
- What assumptions are we making about what will give us the outcomes we seek, and how will we test the impact of changes we make?

Outcome: A driver diagram or clear causal logic that explains your improvement strategy in accessible language (e.g. if we do X we expect Y and to do this we will try Z).

3. How will we know if we're making progress?

Why this matters: Continuous improvement requires cycles of inquiry connected directly to improvement goals (in contrast to accountability system goals). Your vision should include how the community will see and understand progress over time.

Consider:

- What leading indicators (those we can collect and analyze in the short term) will show us we're on the right track?
- How frequently will we share data among the Board and with the broader community?
- What will success look like in six months (leading indicators)? Two-five years? (lagging indicators)

Outcome: A progress monitoring system with specific, understandable leading and lagging indicators that matter to your community.

4. Who needs to be involved, and what roles will they play?

Why this matters: Research on educational improvement emphasizes that those closest to the work must be engaged as partners in the improvement process. Your vision should clarify how different stakeholders will contribute.

Consider:

- Which teachers, staff, students, family and community members have essential knowledge about what we seek to improve?
- How will we create genuine opportunities for participation in sense-making and co-design of improvement plans?

- What is the Board's role versus district administrators' and school leaders' roles in supporting teachers, staff, students, and families in sharing progress and needs related to improvement goals?
- What structures (e.g protocols, scheduled events) will enable ongoing feedback loops?

Outcome: A stakeholder engagement plan that positions a variety of stakeholders as collaborative problem-solvers, not passive recipients, with clear governance roles.

5. How does this improvement work connect to our values, beliefs and larger aspirations?

Why this matters: Your improvement vision must connect to what your community cares about most deeply. This motivational and moral dimension mobilizes sustained effort and builds collective will.

Consider:

- How does solving this problem or addressing this challenge advance equity and opportunity in our district?
- What values and beliefs guide our approach to our improvement planning?
- What larger vision for our school(s) does this work serve?
- How does this work align with our district's strategic plan and stated mission?
- How do we as a Board model our values and beliefs for others in our actions?

Outcome: A compelling narrative that links improvement work to shared values, beliefs, and aspirations.

Bringing It Together: Crafting Your Board's Improvement Vision Statement

After working through these questions with district leadership and ideally gathering information about problems/challenges from a diverse array of stakeholders, develop a concise vision statement (1-2 paragraphs) that:

- Names the problem and affected community members
- Articulates your theory of how change will happen

- Describes how you'll measure progress
- Clarifies stakeholder roles and responsibilities, including Board governance responsibilities
- Connects to shared values, beliefs, and larger district goals

Communication principle: Test your vision statement with diverse stakeholders—including teachers, families, students, and community members. Can they see themselves in it? Does it inspire action while maintaining realistic expectations about the improvement journey ahead?

Key Research Foundations (and recommended book club reading)

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better.* Harvard Education Press.

- Foundational text on improvement science in education
- <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/publications/learning-to-improve/>

Penuel, W. R., Farrell, C. C., Allen, A. R., Toyama, Y., & Coburn, C. E. (2018). What Research District Leaders Find Useful. *Educational Policy*, 32(4), 540-568.

- Examines how leaders use research in improvement work
- <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904816673580>

Wilcox, K., Zumpe, E., & Eddy-Spicer, D. H. (Eds.). (2026). Teaching and learning for collaborative continuous improvement in education: Challenges and possibilities across the educational system. Myers Education Press

- Examines how educators, researchers, policymakers, and professional learning organizations can teach and learn collaborative continuous improvement methods across diverse educational settings, while addressing challenges related to audience, purpose, and instructional delivery.
- <https://myersedpress.presswarehouse.com/browse/book/9781975508234/Teaching-and-Learning-for-Collaborative-Continuous-Improvement-in-Education>

Remember: Your plan is not static. As a Board, use improvement cycles to refine how you articulate your work as you learn from implementation and stakeholder feedback. Your role is to provide governance, leadership support, and accountability while ensuring the improvement work stays connected to community needs and values.