



THE KEY TO EDUCATION IMPROVEMENTS THAT LAST:

*Continuous Improvement
and Evaluation*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educational systems are under constant pressure to demonstrate meaningful, sustainable improvement. While many initiatives aim for transformation, few have the structure, coherence, and feedback loops necessary to drive lasting change. This paper presents a framework that integrates continuous improvement (CI) and evaluation as mutually reinforcing systems to ensure that educational strategies are grounded in evidence, adaptable to local context, and aligned with long-term goals.

We argue that effective school and system improvement requires both a clear vision and the ability to measure progress toward that vision. Continuous improvement provides the structure for iterative, evidence-based change, while evaluation supplies the necessary feedback to determine whether those changes are working, and what to do next.

At the heart of this framework are two core components:

- **Six Guiding Principles** that support equitable, coherent, and sustainable CI efforts. These principles include engaging diverse partners, organizing for change, building robust data systems, implementing governance structures, embedding evaluation early, and supporting professional learning.
- **Ten Pillars of Continuous Improvement**, presented as structured, interconnected steps that guide schools and systems from identifying a problem to measuring the effectiveness of their response and refining their efforts.

Together, these components form the foundation and structure of a "CI bridge," a visual metaphor used throughout the paper to describe the relationships among design, implementation, and evaluation.

Figure 1. The Continuous Improvement Bridge

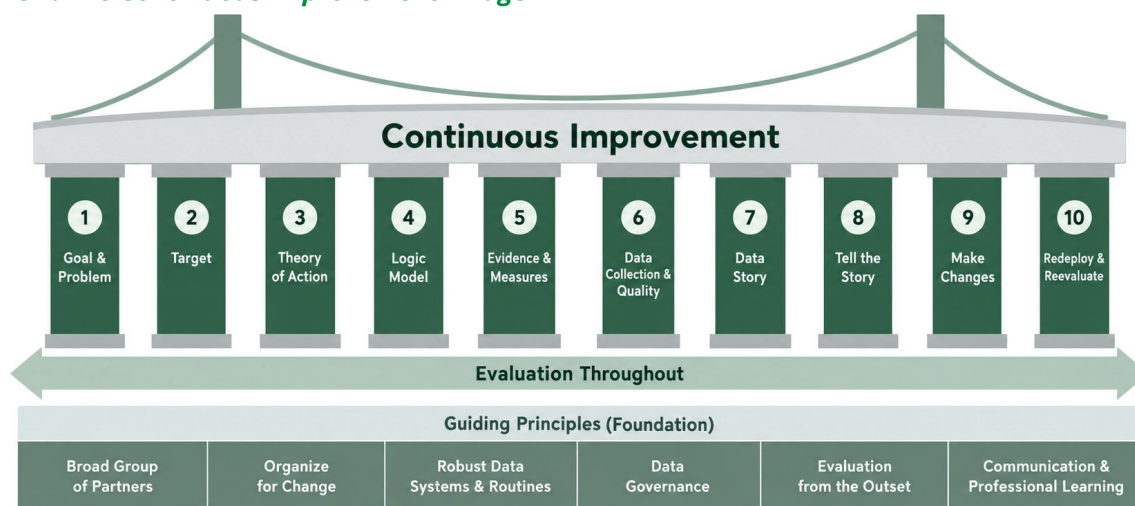


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We show how evaluation is not a separate compliance function but an embedded practice that supports every step of the CI process. By aligning with the Program Evaluation Standards (PES; Yarbrough, et al., 2011) and incorporating real-time feedback, systems can better monitor effectiveness, course-correct when needed, and ensure that interventions are responsive and meaningful.

This framework is brought to life through illustrative examples that represent common program features and improvement scenarios that demonstrate how state and local education agencies could use the CI plus evaluation approach to improve literacy outcomes, support math instruction, and build local capacity for change.

The paper concludes with a set of recommendations and a practical 10-step guide for embedding evaluation across the CI cycle, offering tools and strategies to support sustained system improvement.

Key takeaways in the paper include the following:

- CI and evaluation must be integrated from the start to ensure educational change is grounded, strategic, and adaptive.
- Systems need both the structural supports (data, governance, routines) and cultural conditions (trust, learning orientation, inclusive leadership) to sustain improvement.
- Evaluation is not the end of the process; It's part of the process that keeps things moving and improving.

Evaluation is not a separate compliance function but an embedded practice that supports every step of the CI process.

This paper serves as both a call to action and a practical resource for education leaders seeking to move beyond compliance and toward transformation. By building systems that learn, adapt, and improve continuously, we can better serve all students and communities.

INTRODUCTION

In our current educational landscape, continuous improvement (CI) is more important than ever for supporting student success, refining instructional practices, and addressing systemic challenges. CI was an idea that emerged in the 1950s from the world of corporate manufacturing as a way to improve products and services. Other sectors quickly spotted its potential in evolving systems for the better; its ideas took hold in K-12 education as an approach making schools work better for the students we serve. To improve schools, we need systematic ways of knowing whether and how our proposed solutions are actually working, and how to change them so they're effective. In this paper, we propose that two powerful processes—continuous improvement and program evaluation—work in tandem to bring about school improvement.

This emphasis on CI arises from the need to adapt to diverse student needs, respond to changing educational contexts, and to mitigate persistent inequities. By embedding CI practices, educators and leaders can make data-informed adjustments that improve outcomes and create resilient systems better equipped to meet the demands of today's dynamic learning environments (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Fullan, 2016). Continuous improvement requires an integrated approach that relies on meaningful information and evidence-based strategies enacted systematically and coherently.

Continuous improvement can be applied as a systematic, iterative process used to refine educational practices, programs, and systems. Continuous school improvement acts as a bridge that connects short-term strategies with long-term educational goals, providing a pathway to lasting school and system success. This bridge is supported by 10 essential pillars, which are critical to building and sustaining effective improvement processes. These pillars provide a structured pathway, with steps that often build on one another while allowing teams to revisit earlier decisions as new evidence, learning, and contextual changes emerge. Although the steps are presented in a logical progression, continuous improvement is iterative rather than strictly linear. Each step, from specifying the problem to redeploying and reevaluating interventions, is intended to be actionable, evidence-based, and supported by guiding principles (D'Brot, 2022a).

Table 1. 10 Essential Pillars Supporting Continuous Improvement

1. Specify the Goal and Problem Statement	2. Identify the Target
3. Develop the Theory of Action	4. Build Out the Program Logic Model
5. Connect Evidence (Measures) to the Program Logic	6. Collect Data and Determine Evidence Quality
7. Analyze and Build a Data Story	8. Tell the Story
9. Make Changes	10. Redeploy and Reevaluate

As illustrated by the CI bridge, these pillars serve as touchpoints throughout the framework, guiding schools and districts (local education agencies, or LEAs) through their improvement journey. We offer a visual below that describes this idea.

Figure 2. The Continuous Improvement Bridge

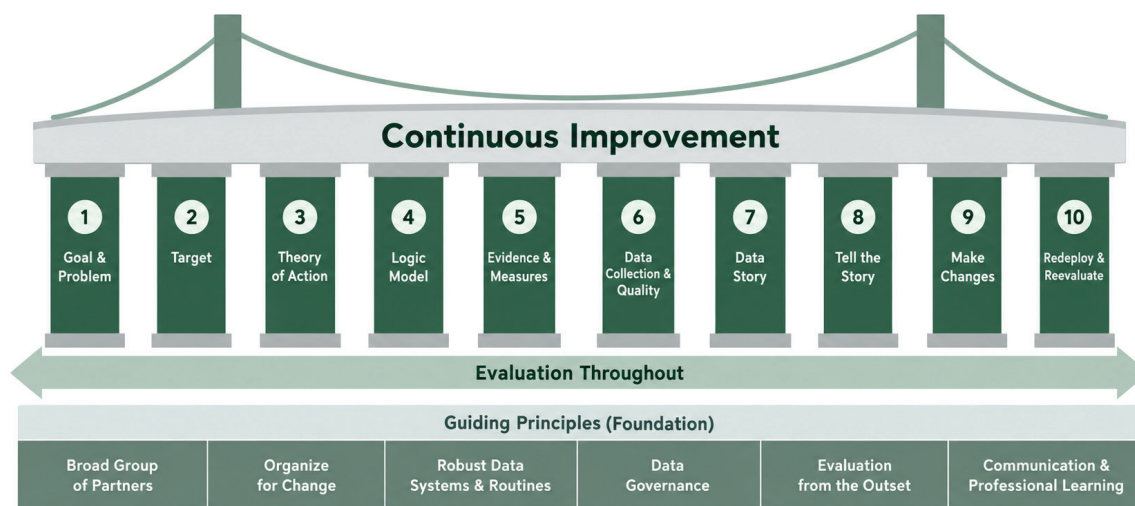


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However, the strength of this bridge depends on the foundation upon which these pillars stand. Before going into detail about the 10 steps, we begin by describing six guiding principles for creating and sustaining continuous improvement processes. This foundation helps create the conditions for CI efforts to be sustainable and impactful. These principles include:

- 1. Engaging a Broad Group of Partners:** Involving diverse voices fosters shared ownership and alignment with community needs.
- 2. Organizing for Change:** Establishing roles, routines, and a culture of learning creates the conditions necessary for lasting improvement.
- 3. Building Robust Data Systems and Routines:** Reliable, integrated data systems provide insights essential for informed decision-making.
- 4. Implementing Data Governance Structures:** Clear governance practices safeguard data quality, integrity, and accessibility.
- 5. Embedding Evaluation from the Outset:** Continuous assessment ensures CI initiatives remain adaptable, evidence-based, and accountable.
- 6. Strengthening Communication and Professional Learning:** Clear communication and ongoing professional development empower educators to interpret data and refine practices effectively.

These guiding principles form a solid foundation, helping designers and practitioners implement the 10 steps (pillars) effectively and systematically, resulting in a robust CI system. However, if these foundational elements are weak or inconsistent, the pillars may become unstable, revealing gaps that hinder progress.

Evaluation plays a critical role in maintaining the integrity of the foundational principles and the pillars they support. In the context of a CI framework, we define evaluation as a mechanism for generating feedback, supporting decision-making, and producing evidence about effectiveness at each CI step. By examining how each step aligns with the guiding principles and assessing their effectiveness, evaluation ensures that the CI bridge remains strong. It acts as a continual check, identifying areas for improvement and reinforcing the overall structure to sustain meaningful change.

As you progress through the paper, you will see how the foundational principles and these pillars (the 10 steps) are interconnected and how evaluation ensures the CI bridge remains stable and effective, leading to long-term school improvement.

Structure of the Paper

The following sections will introduce the guiding principles that form the foundation for the continuous improvement (CI) process, highlighting their role in creating sustainable and effective CI systems. We will then explore how these principles support the 10-step CI framework, which serves as the pillars that uphold the CI bridge and guide schools and LEAs through their improvement journey. Illustrative examples will be provided to demonstrate how these concepts can be applied in educational contexts. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) based on our extensive experience, offering actionable steps for building and refining CI systems that drive meaningful educational outcomes.

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

A well-functioning continuous improvement (CI) system must be built on guiding principles that ensure sustainability, coherence, and responsiveness to evolving educational needs. These principles provide the foundation for implementing the 10-step CI process with stability and integrity, preventing gaps and inconsistencies in improvement efforts. By fostering a culture of data-informed decision-making, collaboration, and adaptability, these principles help schools and LEAs establish resilient systems that evolve alongside changing conditions, ensuring long-term impact and meaningful educational progress.

An inclusive approach to planning builds collective ownership and helps ensure that changes reflect the community values.

These principles also reflect the importance of engaging the people who design, implement, experience, and use the results of improvement efforts. Participatory and utilization-focused approaches to evaluation emphasize meaningful involvement of intended users as a way to strengthen the relevance, use, and learning that emerge from evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Patton, 2008).

Principle 1: Involve a Broad Group of Partners

Engaging a diverse range of partners—policymakers, educators, administrators, families, community members, and students—ensures that the CI process is informed by multiple perspectives and priorities. An inclusive approach to planning builds collective ownership and helps ensure that changes reflect the community values (Patton, 2008).

Partners at each level of the educational system play a critical role in ensuring that evaluation and CI practices are aligned with educational goals, integrated with CI efforts, and responsive to the needs of educators, students, and the broader community.

State Education Agencies. State Education Agencies (SEAs) are pivotal in promoting and supporting evaluation within a continuous improvement (CI) framework, primarily by shaping the broader infrastructure that supports effective evaluation and decision-making and not by setting evaluation standards.

SEAs establish learning standards and develop statewide assessment systems to monitor student performance relative to those standards. They also build and maintain data systems for tracking progress toward state educational goals and holding schools and LEAs accountable for performance. When well implemented, these systems identify underperforming schools and LEAs, monitor performance trends, and signal where additional support is needed.

Additionally, SEAs develop and disseminate universally accessible resources and guidance to ensure that all local LEAs implement programs and practices aligned with state priorities. Through these levers—standards, assessments, data systems, and capacity-building—SEAs can foster a culture of continuous improvement and help ensure that local evaluation practices are coherent, evidence-based, and directed toward meaningful outcomes.

Local Education Agencies. LEAs and schools are on the front lines of implementing continuous improvement (CI). A critically important part of this work is integrating meaningful evaluation practices into the broader CI process. LEAs are responsible for adapting state guidance to address local context and needs, ensuring that evaluation and data use are coherent and aligned with broader CI goals.

LEAs must also ensure that the data collected through evaluation inform instructional decisions, program adjustments and resource allocation. In addition, they play a crucial role in engaging educators, students, and families in the evaluation process. By involving these partners, LEAs can ensure that evaluations are relevant, meaningful, and supported by the community. Finally, they are responsible for providing ongoing training and support to educators, helping them build the skills needed to interpret and act on evaluation findings in service of CI.

Educators and School Leaders. Educators and school leaders are primary data users, making their involvement in CI essential. Their role includes participating in the design and implementation of evaluations and using multiple sources of data to support CI (e.g., using data to reflect on their practices, identify areas for improvement, and make instructional decisions that enhance student learning).

Educators and school leaders are primary data users, making their involvement in CI essential.

Educators are also key players in fostering a culture of continuous improvement within their schools. By modeling data-informed decision-making and encouraging collaboration among colleagues, they can help create an environment where evaluation is valuable for professional growth and student success.

Parents and Community Members. Parents and community members are essential voices in the CI process. Their involvement ensures that the perspectives and priorities of the broader community are considered in the design and implementation of evaluations. Engaging parents and community members can also enhance transparency and accountability, as they provide valuable feedback on the relevance and impact of educational initiatives. It is also critical to differentiate between those community members responsible for defining policy and legislation, such as state boards of education or legislative bodies, and that they may need tailored information and resources.

Moreover, when parents and community members are informed and involved in the CI process, they are more likely to support the resulting decisions and initiatives. This support fosters a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes.

Students. Students should also be included in CI. As the educational systems end users, students bring unique perspectives on the effectiveness of teaching methods, curriculum design, and school culture, helping educators identify what works and what needs adjustment. Moreover, actively involving students in the change process facilitates student agency, which is a key skill for 21st century learning and durable skill development. The nature of the focal problem and its relevance to students should guide leaders' decisions about how to include them in meaningful ways.

Students bring unique perspectives on the effectiveness of teaching methods, curriculum design, and school culture.

External Partners. Externally-based content experts and research methodologists bring important perspectives to continuous improvement. Content experts can offer unique perspectives that emerge from evidence-based research and third-party evaluations, and from working across a variety of contexts. Research and evaluation methodologists have specialized skills such as data analysis and reporting that may not be available within the school community. External partners can also serve as critical friends. They can question assumptions and offer different points of view, often without being perceived as pushing a particular agenda. Their contributions help ensure that potential solutions are grounded in evidence-based practices.

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Principle 2: Organize for Change

Establishing the right conditions for CI involves setting up structures and routines that facilitate change and adaptation within the organization. This includes creating leadership roles, teams, and networks that champion CI efforts and establishing protocols for regular reflection and evaluation of CI progress. Organizing for change also means cultivating a learning-oriented environment that encourages collaboration, experimentation, and iterative problem-solving (Kotter, 2012; Elmore, 2004). Ensuring the CI framework is responsive requires that organizational structures are adapted to meet changing demands.

For example, consider an SEA implementing a statewide literacy improvement initiative. The SEA establishes a Continuous Improvement Leadership Team made up of state officials, LEA leaders, and instructional coaches responsible for the initiative. Within this structure, regional support teams are created to provide direct assistance to LEAs, ensuring alignment with state goals while allowing flexibility for local adaptations. Each LEA designates a Continuous Improvement Coordinator, who leads school-based teams in implementing evidence-based literacy strategies, analyzing data and refining interventions.

To embed routines that drive sustained progress, the SEA supports quarterly CI check-ins, where LEA teams report on implementation efforts, share successes and challenges and receive targeted feedback. These meetings create structured reflection points, ensuring ongoing assessment of CI progress. Additionally, collaborative learning networks are established across LEAs, fostering peer-to-peer learning and knowledge-sharing about effective literacy interventions. The SEA also develops implementation playbooks that provide clear protocols for data use, intervention selection, and adaptation strategies.

By embedding leadership roles, structured teams, and ongoing reflection, this example demonstrates how organizing for change creates a sustainable, adaptive CI system that fosters collaboration, accountability, and responsiveness to evolving educational needs.

Principle 3: Develop Robust Data Systems and Routines

Data systems form the operational backbone of CI systems, enabling schools, LEAs, and states to collect, analyze and utilize data efficiently. They ensure that improvement efforts are informed, strategic, and responsive to the needs of students, educators, and the broader community. Table 2 provides a brief overview of data system features to support continuous improvement.

Data systems that support continuous improvement should operate across the entire educational system. They must enable users to:

- monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies, programs and practices,
- identify systemic barriers to student success, and
- guide changes that improve the overall learning environment.

Examples include evaluations of curricular programs and practices, policy impact studies, and organizational reviews. An example of a data system might look something like this:

Typically, an SEA's data system collects data on student attendance, academic performance, school climate, and teacher professional development. This allows the SEA data systems analyst to identify schools that are struggling or that show indications of performance decline and may benefit from targeted support; for example to address high absenteeism rates or low academic performance in one or more subgroups. The SEA partners with these schools to implement targeted interventions, such as attendance intervention programs and teacher professional development workshops, to address the underlying issues. The school and LEA then partner to identify important leading or learning condition indicators that inform incremental progress. Additionally, they use the continuous improvement steps to iteratively address issues that influence student absenteeism and, eventually, academic performance.

Table 2. Overview of Continuous Improvement Data Systems

Data or Component	Key Feature	Use
Longitudinal data	Tracks student data over time to monitor trends and assess interventions	- Identifies trends in growth or decline across groups of students - Identifies gaps in subgroup trends - Evaluates long-term effectiveness
Common linking variables	Standardized data points for integrating and analyzing data across systems	- Facilitates connections among data sets using unique identifiers - Ensures data consistency and comparability
Common measures	Standardized tests and metrics for reliable comparisons and analysis	- Supports benchmarking - Enables comparisons across students and schools - Could include behavioral and social-emotional metrics
Data sharing and governance	Frameworks for secure, compliant data sharing and usage	- Defines ownership and access - Establishes data-sharing agreements - Helps safeguard privacy and confidentiality
Comprehensive data collection	Collects diverse data types for a holistic view of performance	- Integrates multiple data sources - Supports targeted interventions
Timely data access and reporting	Provides current data visualizations and automated reports for informed decision-making	- Enhances decision-making efficiency - Reduces manual analysis

Principle 4: Establish Data Governance Structures

Governance structures are critical to managing data quality, security and accessibility. This principle entails developing policies that define data ownership, access, and sharing protocols across levels and departments within the education system. Governance structures must also incorporate quality control measures to maintain data accuracy and trustworthiness. As CI systems evolve, governance practices must be regularly evaluated and adjusted to respond to new data demands, legal requirements, and user needs (Data Quality Campaign, 2014; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2019).

For example, an SEA implementing a new early warning data system establishes data governance policies that clearly define who can access student performance data, how data are securely stored and the protocols for sharing information across LEAs. To maintain accuracy and trust, the SEA creates a Data Governance Council composed of IT specialists, LEA data managers and legal advisors who conduct annual audits to ensure compliance with privacy laws and evaluate whether data-sharing agreements align with evolving policy and research needs.

Principle 5: Embed Evaluation from the Outset

Embedding evaluation from the beginning ensures that CI processes are designed with measurable outcomes and guided by clear indicators of success. Early integration allows schools and LEAs to establish baselines, monitor progress and make real-time adjustments toward established goals.

Rather than treating evaluation as a one-time post-hoc event, this approach positions evaluation as a flexible and iterative process that informs CI within each pillar, or step, and as a holistic process over time. By making evaluation a foundational element, educational systems can remain responsive to emerging challenges, continually refine their strategies based on evidence and sustain improvements in student outcomes. This type of embedded evaluation process reinforces accountability, adaptability and a commitment to evidence-based practices as essential to CI success (Guskey, 2000; Scriven, 1991).

Principle 6: Strengthen Communication and Professional Learning

Continuous improvement depends on people being able to understand, interpret, and act on the information generated throughout the improvement process. Clear communication helps ensure that goals, evidence, decisions, and changes are understood by the people responsible for designing, implementing, and supporting the work. Because different audiences may need different kinds of information, communication should be intentional, timely, and tailored to how the information will be used.

Professional learning is equally important. Educators and leaders need opportunities to strengthen their ability to interpret evidence, reflect on implementation, and make informed adjustments. This may include developing skills related to data use, evaluation, implementation, or the specific practices being introduced. Professional learning should therefore be connected to the improvement effort itself rather than treated as a separate activity (Learning Forward, 2022).

Continuous improvement depends on people being able to understand, interpret, and act on the information generated throughout the improvement process.

Together, communication and professional learning help create the shared understanding and capacity necessary for continuous improvement. As new evidence emerges and programs evolve, systems should revisit both what people need to know and what support they need to act effectively.

THE PILLARS OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Before expanding on evaluation's role in continuous improvement (CI), we first present the 10 steps of CI, separated into stages.

The CI process is a structured, step-by-step approach designed to guide schools and LEAs through sustainable improvement efforts. These 10 steps form the pillars of the CI bridge, supporting schools in moving from problem identification to successful outcomes (D'Brot, 2022b). However, it is important to recognize that these steps do not operate in isolation; they are grounded in evaluation—a continuous and integrated component that runs through each step, ensuring that actions taken are effective, aligned, and evidence-based (See Scriven, 1991). These pillars are

introduced in the previous section and revisited in a later section, The Role of Evaluation Across the 10 Steps of Continuous Improvement.

The following section details the 10 steps of the CI process and illustrates how evaluation is integrated to ensure that improvement efforts remain focused, effective, and aligned with overarching educational goals. Additionally, evaluation considerations are embedded throughout. These steps are divided into the three stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation (D'Brot, 2022a).

Stage 1: Planning and Goal Setting

Every strong continuous improvement (CI) effort starts by asking the right questions and building a clear path forward. This stage is about more than setting goals. It requires anchoring improvement work in evidence, clarity, and purpose. By investing the time to define problems, identify key targets, and map out the connections between actions and outcomes, schools and districts lay the groundwork for sustainable and meaningful change.

1. **Specify the Vision.** Articulate a vision based on an understanding of the current context. This step may require collaboration with external evaluators or data specialists who can provide expertise in root cause analysis and baseline data analysis. Evaluation plays a critical role at this stage by using baseline data to verify that the problem statement is evidence-based, well-targeted, and aligned with broader educational goals.
2. **Identify the Target.** Pinpoint the specific group or area that the improvement efforts will focus on. Evaluation methods help analyze demographics, performance trends, or system characteristics to ensure the identified target is clearly aligned with the defined problem and improvement goals. Later in this paper, we highlight an illustrative example that exemplifies how clearly identifying and monitoring a target group strengthens intervention efforts (see Example 1: Improving Literacy Outcomes in a Rural District).
3. **Set a Goal and Develop the Theory of Action.** Outline the strategic approach needed to achieve the defined goals, detailing expected outcomes and the activities required to reach them. Developing a theory of action benefits from collaboration with program designers and evaluation experts to ensure the strategies are evidence-based and logically connected. Evaluation reinforces this step by verifying that planned activities align with research and contribute directly to the intended outcomes (D'Brot, 2022a; Marion, Lyons, & D'Brot, 2016).
4. **Build Out the Program Logic Model.** Develop a detailed logic model that connects activities, resources, and expected outcomes, ensuring the program is designed coherently. Evaluation plays a critical role by validating the logical connections within the model, ensuring that resources, activities, and outputs are structured in ways that support the overarching theory of action (Kellogg, 2004).

Every strong continuous improvement effort starts by asking the right questions and building a clear path forward.

Stage 2: Implementation and Evidence Collection

This stage centers on the execution of the plan, ensuring that the necessary data and evidence are collected to evaluate progress and outcomes effectively. There are two steps that are included in implementation and evidence collection.

5. **Connect Evidence (Measures) to the Program Logic.** Identify the appropriate measures and data points that will be used to track the program's progress and outcomes, ensuring they align with the logic model. Collaborating with external measurement experts or data scientists may be essential for selecting appropriate and validated measures, especially if specialized assessments or data collection tools are needed. Evaluation identifies appropriate measures and validates their alignment with the program logic. It ensures that the chosen evidence accurately reflects the key activities and outcomes, establishing a robust measurement system to track progress (Kellogg, 2004).
6. **Collect Data and Determine Evidence Quality.** Implement the data collection process, focusing on ensuring that the evidence gathered is high quality, consistent, and relevant to the program's goals. Schools and LEAs may need to partner with research organizations or external evaluators to collect and analyze data effectively, particularly when the data collection involves complex or large-scale efforts. Evaluation processes are crucial at this stage to assess the completeness, consistency, practicality, and impact of collected data. Evaluators check for coherence and quality, ensuring that the data accurately reflects program activities and outcomes.

Stage 3: Evaluation, Adjustment and Reiteration

This stage emphasizes the evaluation of the collected data, the communication of results, and the iterative refinement of the program to achieve the desired outcomes. There are four stages included in the evaluation, adjustment, and reiteration stage.

7. **Analyze and Build a Data Story.** Analyze the collected data to identify patterns, trends, and connections that build a comprehensive narrative about the program's impact. Partnering with data analysts or evaluation experts may be necessary to ensure that data is analyzed correctly and that the findings are synthesized into an actionable and clear story. Evaluation methods are used to connect the dots between activities, evidence, and the larger theory of action. Evaluation helps identify patterns and variations, providing insights into why certain outcomes occur and verifying whether they align with the program's intended impact.
8. **Tell the Story.** Communicate the results effectively to different audiences, ensuring that the data story is clear and actionable. Schools and LEAs may choose to work with communication specialists or evaluators who can tailor the messaging for various audiences, such as policymakers, educators, and the community. Evaluation ensures that communication about results is clear, accurate, and tailored to different audiences. It assesses the relevance of the information being communicated and verifies that the story told reflects the data accurately, supporting transparency and informed decision-making.
9. **Make Changes.** Use the evaluation findings to adjust the program, refining strategies based on what has worked and what needs improvement. In this phase, it might be necessary to collaborate with program designers or intervention specialists who can guide the refinement process and suggest evidence-based modifications. Evaluation is embedded in this step to determine which activities or steps were most effective and which need adjustment. Through

evaluation, educators can identify areas for refinement and focus efforts on interventions with the most potential for impact.

10. **Redeploy and Reevaluate.** Implement the revised program and conduct further evaluation to determine if the changes are effective, establishing an ongoing cycle of improvement.

Continued collaboration with evaluators or partners who understand the program is beneficial to ensure that the redeployment and reevaluation phases are conducted systematically and build on previous learnings. Evaluation is central to this final step, providing a systematic approach to assess the changes made and their effectiveness. By redeploying the program and conducting another evaluation cycle, educators can ensure that improvements are sustained and further refined based on evidence.

EVALUATION AS A CORNERSTONE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Evaluation is the cornerstone of effective continuous improvement (CI) systems. While previous sections have outlined the structural components and processes necessary for building a robust CI system, evaluation practices provide the critical feedback needed to measure impact, guide decision-making, and refine educational strategies. Evaluation serves as the mechanism through which educational agencies determine whether their efforts are achieving the desired outcomes and where adjustments may be necessary.

Evaluation helps ensure that CI systems are dynamic, evidence-based, and responsive to the evolving needs of students and schools.

In CI systems, evaluation acts as an embedded mechanism for assessing alignment, efficacy, and impact. Rather than being a standalone process, evaluation integrates into each stage of the 10-step CI process, providing essential feedback that supports adaptive and informed decision-making. Through iterative assessment and real-time feedback, evaluation strengthens CI by ensuring that interventions are both effective and responsive to evolving educational needs.

Evaluation Overview

In this section, we explore the essential role that evaluation practices play within the CI framework. By systematically assessing the effectiveness of interventions and initiatives, evaluation helps ensure that CI systems are dynamic, evidence-based, and responsive to the evolving needs of students and schools. Drawing connections to the guiding principles and the 10-step CI process, we illustrate how evaluation integrates with and enhances each phase of the improvement cycle.

Evaluation practices go beyond simple data collection; they involve carefully planned strategies that align with the broader goals of CI efforts. These strategies include formative evaluations that provide ongoing feedback, summative evaluations that measure program outcomes, and collaborative approaches that engage key partners and users at every stage. When aligned with the CI framework, evaluation practices create a culture of accountability and continuous learning, driving sustainable, long-term improvement.

The Program Evaluation Standards (PES; Yarbrough et al., 2011) offer a framework to ensure that evaluations are credible, fair, and provide valuable information for decision-making. The PES include 30 standards, grouped into (1) Utility, (2) Feasibility, (3) Propriety, (4) Accuracy, and (5) Accountability. The PES should be a reference and provide the foundation for how one should embed evaluation as a systematic process in continuous improvement efforts. Please refer to Appendix A for a brief description of the PES and the Joint Committee for Standards in Educational Evaluation (JCSEE, 2018) Evaluator's Checklist. Additionally, any evaluation should be connected to the original theory of action to help identify key progress markers for success.

Key Dimensions of Embedded Evaluation

The following section provides a comprehensive look at how we can approach evaluation for continuous improvement while supporting the guiding principle *Embed Evaluation from the Outset*. By understanding and implementing these practices, state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) can build evaluation systems that not only measure success but also inform meaningful, data-informed improvements.

In continuous improvement (CI) systems, evaluation is more than a tool for measuring outcomes; it is an active, integrated process that informs each stage of improvement, from planning through implementation and refinement. As a dynamic subset of the principle *Embed Evaluation from the Outset*, evaluation serves as a continuous feedback mechanism that ensures CI efforts are both effective and adaptable to evolving educational needs. This approach positions evaluation as a foundational, ongoing practice that strengthens CI efforts and creates a responsive system attuned to real-time insights and long-term goals.

Continuous assessment allows for real-time adjustments to strategies, promoting flexibility and responsiveness to emerging trends.

In order to think about how we can apply evaluation methods to the continuous improvement process, we offer four key dimensions of embedded evaluation, followed by describing the role of evaluation across the 10 steps of continuous improvement.

- 1. Establishing Evaluation at the Planning Stage.** Effective evaluation begins by defining clear, measurable goals and aligning them with both program objectives and the guiding principles of CI. From the outset, evaluation plans should incorporate a range of indicators that align with the overall theory of action, providing a structured approach to assess progress, effectiveness, and alignment with targeted outcomes. This alignment ensures that evaluation is not an afterthought but an essential element in the initial design and strategic planning of CI initiatives.
- 2. Embedding Evaluation in Implementation: Continuous and Formative Feedback.** During implementation, evaluation functions as an active feedback loop that provides formative insights into program effectiveness. Continuous assessment allows for real-time adjustments to strategies, promoting flexibility and responsiveness to emerging trends. By using formative evaluation practices, schools and LEAs can iteratively refine practices based on data, ensuring interventions remain aligned with improvement goals and responsive to the needs of students and educators.

3. **Evaluating Outcomes: Summative Feedback and Measuring Impact.** At the conclusion of each CI cycle, summative evaluation provides a comprehensive assessment of whether intended outcomes were achieved. Summative assessments measure program effectiveness and allow leaders to make data-informed decisions about scaling, modifying, or discontinuing initiatives based on their impact. This phase of evaluation solidifies the alignment between intended goals and actual outcomes, offering a basis for evidence-driven decision-making and prioritizing future efforts.
4. **Sustaining Improvement: The Cycle of Redeployment and Reevaluation.** Embedded evaluation culminates in a continuous improvement loop, where lessons learned from each CI cycle are redeployed to inform subsequent initiatives. This cycle of redeployment and reevaluation allows systems to evolve and adapt over time, reinforcing the CI framework's capacity for sustained impact. By embedding evaluation as a regular practice, schools and LEAs ensure that their improvement processes remain iterative, evidence-based, and responsive to changing needs.

Creating a Culture of Evaluation within Continuous Improvement Systems

To embed evaluation effectively, CI systems must cultivate a culture that values continuous learning, data literacy, and evidence-informed decisions. Professional development focused on data interpretation and utilization enables educators to engage with evaluation results meaningfully, fostering a culture of reflective practice and accountability. Clear communication of evaluation findings across all levels of the educational system also supports transparency, ensuring that evaluation remains an accessible and valued component of the CI process.

By embedding evaluation from the outset as a flexible, iterative, and aligned component of CI systems, educational agencies can ensure that improvement efforts are evidence-based and continuously refined. This approach transforms evaluation from a one-time assessment to an integrated, dynamic process that both informs and strengthens each phase of CI. With evaluation functioning as a foundational element of continuous improvement, educational systems can adaptively respond to challenges, meet the evolving needs of students, and sustain meaningful, long-term improvement.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION ACROSS THE 10 STEPS OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In continuous improvement (CI) systems, evaluation functions as a dynamic feedback mechanism, integrated into each stage of improvement to guide decision-making, measure impact, and enable ongoing adjustments. Aligned as a subset of the fifth guiding principle, *Embed Evaluation from the Outset*, evaluation serves as a core process that underpins the 10-step CI framework. This embedded approach transforms evaluation into a continuous and iterative practice, reinforcing each CI step and ensuring sustained improvement aligned with educational goals. Below, we describe the role of evaluation aligned to each stage of the continuous improvement process.

Table 3. The Role of Evaluation Across the 10 Steps of Continuous Improvement

Step	The Role of Evaluation
1. Specify the goal and problem statement	At this foundational stage, evaluation is used to assess baseline data and clarify the problem statement. Evaluation tools, such as root cause analysis and data diagnostics, help ensure that the identified problem is grounded in evidence and aligned with broader goals. This step establishes an evaluative mindset that frames the problem through a data-informed lens, setting a clear direction for improvement efforts.
2. Identify the target	Evaluation helps specify the characteristics and needs of the target group by analyzing demographic data, historical performance trends, and other relevant indicators. This data-informed focus allows CI teams to verify that the targeted population aligns with the problem and goals, ensuring that interventions are tailored and specific to the needs of the intended group.
3. Develop the theory of action	Evaluation strengthens the theory of action by linking planned activities with evidence-based practices. Evaluators assess whether the proposed strategies are likely to yield the desired outcomes, considering past successes and relevant research. By examining the assumptions and connections within the theory of action, evaluation can help assess whether the approach is logical, feasible, and supported by available evidence.
4. Build out the program logic model	Evaluation can strengthen a detailed program logic model by examining the connections among inputs, activities, and expected outcomes. Each component of the logic model is assessed to ensure coherence and alignment with the overall theory of action, creating a structured roadmap for tracking progress and outcomes throughout the CI process.
5. Connect evidence (measures) to the program logic	Evaluators play a key role in identifying appropriate measures and data sources that align with the program logic model. This includes selecting indicators that reliably reflect each stage of the logic model, ensuring that the evidence gathered provides meaningful insights into both the process and outcomes of CI efforts.
6. Collect data and determine evidence quality	During data collection, evaluation protocols are implemented to maintain consistency, reliability, and validity of the data. Evaluators assess the quality of the data collected, verifying its alignment with program goals and ensuring that it accurately represents conditions and progress. Regular data audits and quality checks reinforce the integrity of the evidence base.
7. Analyze and build a data story	Evaluation supports data analysis by applying systematic methods to identify patterns, trends, and insights. Evaluators help build a narrative that connects evidence to the theory of action, contextualizing results to provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact. This analysis phase ensures that data interpretation remains objective, accurate, and relevant to decision-making.

Step	The Role of Evaluation
8. Tell the story	In this step, evaluation focuses on communicating results effectively to diverse audiences. Evaluation ensures that the story is not only accurate but also tailored to meet the needs of various partners, such as educators, administrators, and families. Clear and actionable reporting, supported by evaluation insights, promotes transparency and partner engagement in the CI process.
9. Make changes	Evaluation findings guide adjustments and refinements by identifying which strategies are effective and which require modification. This formative feedback loop allows educators to make informed decisions about changes to practice, ensuring that the CI process remains adaptive and responsive to emerging insights.
10. Redeploy and reevaluate	In the final step, evaluation provides a framework for redeployment and iterative assessment. By conducting another cycle of evaluation after redeployment, educators can gauge the effectiveness of changes made and determine whether further refinements are necessary. This ongoing evaluative process reinforces the CI system's capacity for continuous learning and adaptation, driving sustained improvement over time.

Strategies and Evaluative Approaches

To ensure that each of the 10 steps in the CI process is both effective and sustainable, it is essential to embed key features of evaluation throughout. These features—such as logic models, implementation plans, and structured data collection protocols—serve as foundational tools that not only enhance the clarity and precision of each step but also provide the mechanisms necessary for systematic assessment and feedback. By integrating these features, educational leaders and practitioners can maintain a clear vision of their objectives, track progress reliably, and make informed adjustments. The following section explores these critical elements in detail, illustrating where they may be particularly useful within the CI process. Although some tools align especially closely with particular steps, they are not confined to those steps and may be developed, used, and revisited throughout an improvement cycle.

Theories of Action (TOA). While we have described the need for a TOA, it's important to understand how TOAs can be used. A TOA connects actions to outcomes, outlining how specific activities lead to desired results. It sets the stage for evaluation by defining goals, purposes, and intended outcomes (Marion, Lyons, & D'Brot, 2016). A TOA particularly supports CI Step 1 (Specify the Goal and Problem Statement) and Step 3 (Develop the Theory of Action), helping refine and focus the initial stages and strengthen alignment between goals and activities.

Logic Models. Logic models, for instance, offer a roadmap for connecting resources, activities, and outcomes (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). They translate the TOA into specific actions, specifying inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. They provide a detailed roadmap, making each step in the CI process transparent and measurable. Logic models particularly support CI Step 4 (Build Out the Program Logic Model) and Step 5 (Connect Evidence to the Program Logic), enhancing clarity and coherence and allowing for systematic tracking of implementation and outcomes.

Implementation Plans. An implementation plan provides a practical framework for executing the strategy detailed in the logic model, including task assignments, timelines, and resource allocations. This plan ensures accountability and timely completion of tasks. Implementation plans help establish structured processes for executing and monitoring improvements (Fixsen et al., 2005). Implementation plans operationalize the logic model by translating intended activities into responsibilities, timelines, resources, and routines. As implementation unfolds, these plans can support evidence collection, monitoring, analysis, and subsequent refinement across multiple CI steps.

Formative and Summative Evaluation. Formative evaluations offer ongoing feedback to improve processes mid-cycle, while summative evaluations assess program effectiveness at the end (Guskey, 2000; Scriven, 1991). Together, these evaluations promote adaptability and ensure alignment with goals. Formative and summative evaluation can inform decisions throughout the CI cycle. Formative evaluation supports ongoing learning and adjustment during implementation, while summative evaluation supports judgments about outcomes and effectiveness at defined points in the improvement process.

Data Collection Protocols. Protocols specify the procedures for data gathering, ensuring quality, reliability, and consistency in evaluation practices. This foundation is essential for data integrity, especially when results guide critical decisions (Patton, 2011). Data collection protocols are particularly important in CI Step 6 (Collect Data and Determine Evidence Quality), while also supporting the quality of evidence used throughout subsequent steps.

Formative evaluation supports ongoing learning and adjustment during implementation, while summative evaluation supports judgments about outcomes and effectiveness at defined points in the improvement process.

Monitoring and Tracking Progress. Progress tracking uses quantitative and qualitative metrics to gauge whether activities are on course to achieve the intended outcomes. This allows for adjustments before issues become more significant. Monitoring and tracking progress are especially relevant to CI Step 7 (Analyze and Build a Data Story), while providing information that can prompt adjustments throughout implementation.

Feedback Loops. Feedback mechanisms facilitate ongoing dialogue between evaluators, program implementers, and partners, ensuring that evaluation results are used to make informed adjustments (Scriven, 1991). Feedback loops are especially important to CI Step 9 (Make Changes), but operate throughout the CI process by helping teams interpret evidence, make adjustments, and revisit earlier assumptions when needed.

These components provide a comprehensive foundation to support continuous improvement by embedding structured, strategic evaluation practices at every stage. Each feature is designed to align with the guiding principles, ensuring that evaluation is systematically integrated, adaptive, and responsive to CI needs.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The following illustrative examples are intended to show how continuous improvement, the 10-step CI process, and embedded evaluation practices can work together in educational settings. These examples are not descriptions of specific real-world initiatives; rather, they synthesize common program features and improvement scenarios to demonstrate how the guiding principles, CI steps, and evaluation practices might interact in practice. By organizing these examples according to the CI framework and aligning them with earlier sections, we provide a comprehensive view of how these components function cohesively in practice.

Example 1: Evaluation in Action - Improving Literacy Outcomes in a Rural LEA

Consider a rural LEA in which local educators seek to implement a new literacy program to improve reading skills among early elementary students. The program's evaluation was designed to assess the implementation process and the program's impact on student outcomes.

Approach:

- The evaluation team worked closely with teachers to develop a set of formative assessments aligned with the literacy program's goals and curriculum. These assessments were used to monitor student progress and provide immediate feedback to teachers.
- The evaluation also included a series of partner and user surveys and focus groups to gather qualitative data on the program's implementation and identify barriers to success.
- Summative assessments were administered at the end of the school year to measure overall improvements in student reading levels and were used to corroborate performance on progress monitoring assessments.

Table 4. CI Framework and Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle	Principle in Action
Involving a Broad Group of Constituents	The LEA engaged a diverse group, including teachers, families, literacy specialists, and community members, to shape and evaluate the literacy program. This inclusive approach fostered shared ownership, ensuring the program reflected local needs and built community trust.
Organizing for Change	Leadership roles were defined to support program implementation and evaluation. Teachers received training on the formative assessment practices, and regular team meetings were held to review progress, creating an adaptive environment that encouraged collaborative problem-solving.
Developing Robust Data Systems and Routines	A data system was developed to track student progress over time, integrating formative assessment scores, teacher feedback, and attendance data. These multiple data sources provided a comprehensive view of literacy development, allowing for real-time decision-making.
Establishing Data Governance Structures	Data governance protocols were established to define data access and quality control, ensuring reliable, consistent information. This clarity supported accurate analysis and reporting of the program's impact on literacy outcomes.

Guiding Principle	Principle in Action
Embed Evaluation from the Outset	Evaluation was embedded at the program's beginning, with formative assessments guiding instruction and summative assessments used to evaluate program impact at year-end. The ongoing feedback loop allowed for continuous program refinement.
Strengthen Communication and Professional Learning	Teachers participated in ongoing training sessions, and real-time data dashboards provided interactive feedback. This focus on professional learning empowered educators to interpret data and adapt instructional practices effectively.

Evaluation Practices:

- **Formative Assessment Processes:** Formative assessments offered ongoing feedback, allowing teachers to make immediate instructional adjustments to address specific literacy needs. This iterative process supported continuous improvement by enabling data-informed, real-time instructional shifts.
- **Summative Evaluation:** Summative assessments were administered at the end of the year, providing an overall measure of program effectiveness and corroborating the gains observed through formative assessments. This summative evaluation provided evidence about the effectiveness of the approach and informed decisions about whether the program should be continued, refined, or expanded.
- **Engaging Key Partners:** The LEA engaged teachers, literacy experts, and families in the evaluation process to ensure shared ownership and alignment with community needs. This collaborative approach enhanced buy-in and helped refine the program based on direct feedback from participants.

Illustrative Results and Decisions:

- In this example, formative assessment information revealed that students were making steady progress in essential literacy skills, allowing teachers to adjust their instruction in real time to address specific areas of need.
- Qualitative feedback identifies a need for additional professional learning, leading to the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers, leading to the introduction of additional training sessions focused on effective literacy instruction.
- In this example, summative assessment results indicate improved reading proficiency among participating students, supporting a decision to expand the literacy program LEA-wide.

Example 2: Collaboration and Capacity Building - Enhancing Evaluation Practices in a Statewide Initiative

Consider a statewide initiative to improve mathematics instruction in which the SEA develops and implements an efficacy evaluation.¹ The collaboration focused on building local capacity for

¹ This example is intended to highlight the evaluation framework, not the initiative, as the evaluation would be initiative-agnostic.

evaluation and ensuring that the data collected was used to inform continuous improvement efforts.

Approach:

- The SEA provided LEAs with a standardized evaluation framework that included quantitative and qualitative measures. This framework was designed to align with the state's educational goals and ensure LEA coherence.
- The SEA and its partners offered professional development workshops for LEA staff, focusing on data collection methods, analysis techniques, and interpreting evaluation findings.
- LEAs received ongoing support through regular check-ins and collaborative evaluation meetings, where collaborators could share insights and discuss the implications of the evaluation results.

Table 5. CI Framework and Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle	Principle in Action
Involving a Broad Group of Constituents	The SEA actively engaged LEAs, school administrators, and teachers in the evaluation planning process. By involving a diverse group of partners, the SEA ensured that evaluation strategies were responsive to local needs and aligned with state-level goals.
Organizing for Change	The SEA structured collaborative routines, establishing professional development networks and regular communication channels to support continuous improvement efforts. This infrastructure created a sustainable approach for LEAs to implement data-informed changes, aligning with CI Step 3 (Develop the Theory of Action) by establishing foundational structures for improvement.
Developing Robust Data Systems and Routines	A standardized data collection and reporting system allowed LEAs to analyze their data consistently and align it with state metrics. This approach also supported CI Step 6 (Collect Data and Determine Evidence Quality) by providing reliable data to inform decisions and track improvement efforts.
Establishing Data Governance Structures	The SEA introduced secure data-sharing protocols and clear policies on data ownership and access, which promoted trust and ensured data consistency across the state. This principle aligned with CI Step 5 (Connect Evidence to the Program Logic) by facilitating the use of evidence in ways that adhere to data governance standards.
Embed Evaluation from the Outset	Evaluation was embedded in the initial design of the program, including both formative and summative assessments to ensure that progress could be tracked and analyzed. This approach aligned with CI Step 10 (Redeploy and Reevaluate) by incorporating ongoing evaluation to measure outcomes and adjust practices accordingly.
Strengthen Communication and Professional Learning	The SEA prioritized communication with LEAs, delivering transparent results, and providing ongoing training on data literacy. These practices aligned with CI Step 8 (Tell the Story) and Step 9 (Make Changes), ensuring partners could interpret and act on findings effectively.

Evaluation Practices:

- **Collaborative Evaluation Processes:** The SEA worked closely with LEAs to co-design evaluation frameworks, ensuring that the data collected were relevant and meaningful at both state and local levels
- **Formative and Summative Evaluations:** The SEA integrated formative evaluations to provide ongoing feedback and summative evaluations to assess the program’s overall impact on student math performance.
- **Continuous Feedback Loops:** LEAs and schools held regular evaluation meetings to interpret data and make adjustments throughout the school year.

Illustrative Results and Decisions:

- In this example, the professional development workshops strengthen the evaluation capacity of LEA staff, enabling them to conduct more rigorous and meaningful evaluations of local initiatives.
- The standardized evaluation framework supports more comparable data collection across LEAs, allowing information to be aggregated into a more comprehensive picture of implementation and outcomes.
- The collaboration among the SEA, LEAs, and their partners supports a stronger culture of continuous improvement, with users applying evaluation evidence to refine strategies and improve monitoring of mathematics instruction.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Implementing continuous improvement (CI) systems, robust data infrastructures, and comprehensive evaluation practices presents significant challenges that can hinder progress if not addressed proactively. Educational agencies must navigate resource constraints, resistance to evaluation, and complexities in maintaining data quality while ensuring that CI frameworks remain sustainable and adaptable. To support long-term improvement, SEAs, LEAs, and schools must anticipate these obstacles and develop targeted strategies that reinforce the integrity of their CI systems. Drawing on insights from the illustrative examples and applications, Table 6 outlines key challenges and corresponding solutions to help educational leaders build resilient, data-informed decision-making processes that foster meaningful and sustained improvement.

Table 6. Common challenges and potential solutions associated with evaluation and CI

Common Challenges	Potential Considerations for SEAs and LEAs
Resource Constraints: Conducting thorough evaluations requires time, expertise, and funding, which may be available only sometimes in educational settings.	Building Evaluation Capacity: Consider investing in building evaluation capacity at all levels of the educational system. This includes providing professional development for educators and administrators, developing partnerships with external evaluation experts, and allocating sufficient resources to support evaluation efforts.

Common Challenges	Potential Considerations for SEAs and LEAs
Data Quality Issues: Poor data quality often stems from inconsistent data collection processes or a lack of standardized measures. These challenges undermine the credibility of evaluation findings and can lead to misguided decisions.	Improving Data Quality: Consider implementing standardized data collection processes and invest in training for data collection professionals. Regular audits of data quality can also help identify and address any inconsistencies.
Preconceived Notions: Leaders and policymakers often strongly believe in achieving successful school turnaround and improvement. However, specific programs and practices in some contexts may not work well in others. Preconceived biases about what works or should work can often make it challenging to remain open and objective about what the data indicate about the program's (or intervention's) effectiveness in a given context.	Promote a Culture of Inquiry: Encourage leaders and educators to question their assumptions and remain open to the evidence provided by evaluation data. This can be supported by creating evaluation norms, using external facilitators, inviting diverse groups to engage in the inquiry process, and conducting scenario planning or sensitivity analyses. Creating a space where evidence challenges preconceptions can help education leaders remain open to adopting or adapting a change or intervention.
Resistance to Evaluation: Educators and administrators may resist evaluation, viewing it as an added burden or fearing negative findings could have repercussions. This resistance can hinder the implementation of evaluation practices and limit their effectiveness.	Cultivating a Culture of Continuous Improvement: Overcoming resistance to evaluation requires cultivating a culture where evaluation is seen as a learning and growth tool rather than a punitive measure. This can be achieved through clear communication about the purpose and benefits of evaluation and by involving partners in the evaluation process.
Lack of Evaluation Capacity: Many educational institutions may need more internal capacity to conduct rigorous evaluations. This includes more trained personnel with the skills to design, implement, and interpret evaluations. Although sufficient personnel resources may exist, they may not have the knowledge or experience to conduct evaluations.	Leveraging Technology: Technology can significantly help overcome resource constraints and data quality challenges. For example, automated data collection and analysis tools can reduce the burden on staff and improve data accuracy and consistency. Additionally, technology can facilitate the dissemination of evaluation findings, making them more accessible and actionable for all partners and users.

USING THE PILLARS TO SUPPORT PROGRAM EVALUATION

Infusing program evaluation from the outset is crucial to ensuring continuous improvement (CI) efforts are meaningful, evidence-based, and aligned with intended outcomes. Evaluation, as defined by Scriven (1991) and Guskey (2000), involves both judgment and evidence, requiring a structured approach to assess the merit and effectiveness of initiatives. By embedding evaluation within CI from the start, organizations can systematically assess progress, refine strategies, and ensure that decision-making is guided by rigorous, well-organized evidence—much like assembling a puzzle with clear edges and structured components (D'Brot, 2019).

Once you have organized your program, you can evaluate using the 10 steps in Table 7 below (see also D'Brot, 2022b). Please note that these steps are a simplified description of the pillars we have discussed throughout this paper. At this stage, they serve as a helpful guide to infusing program evaluation into your system.

Table 7. 10-Step Guide to Incorporating Program Evaluation Into Program Design, Implementation, and Connecting Large-Scale Data (D'Brot, 2022b)

Step	Considerations
1. Specify the goal and problem statement.	If well defined, the goal and problem statement will help determine the program or intervention needed using root cause analysis.
2. Identify the target.	Who is the group that we are targeting? Specificity is key as it will help narrow the scope of the program.
3. Develop the theory of action.	Detail the program's intended outcomes for the audience and the components that will lead to them. Theories of action tend to be higher-level but will help build the logic model.
4. Build out the program logic model.	The logic model will help identify each activity along the chain of the theory of action and its associated resources, outputs, and outcomes.
5. Connect evidence (measures) to the program logic.	How will we measure inputs, outputs, and outcomes? What evidence connects to what outcome(s)? We need to define evidence that helps us prove what we think we know about a program.
6. Collect data and determine evidence quality.	Are data (1) Complete, (2) Consistent, (3) Practical, (4) Impactful, and (5) Coherent? How do data relate to program activities? High-quality evidence can help us evaluate whether intermediate steps work (see D'Brot et al., 2022).
7. Analyze and build a data story.	Connect the dots between the activities, evidence, and larger theory of action. Rely on local plan-do-study-act cycles and study variation to answer the question: Why is this occurring?
8. Tell the story.	Document and communicate the results. Vary communication content and style for those internal to the program (e.g., users) and those external to the program (e.g., funders).
9. Make changes.	Adjust the program or initiative to improve the approach to the problem. Consider which intermediate activities or steps were the most difficult.

Step	Considerations
10. Redeploy and reevaluate.	Once changes are made to the program or initiative, redeploy the program and begin evaluating the program again.

Evaluation principles and practices are essential components of educational improvement. However, they are ineffective without understanding the role of partners and how to establish a plan of action. By providing systematic, data-informed insights into the effectiveness of educational initiatives, evaluations ensure that CI efforts are aligned with educational goals and responsive to the needs of all partners and users. The successful implementation of evaluation practices requires the active involvement of SEAs, LEAs, educators, parents, and community members, each of whom plays a critical role in ensuring that evaluations are meaningful, actionable, and integrated into the broader CI framework.

The illustrative examples presented in this section show how evaluation practices can support decision-making, refinement, and learning within continuous improvement efforts. Whether through targeted literacy programs or statewide initiatives, evaluations provide the evidence needed to inform decision-making, refine strategies, and enhance student learning. Moving forward, educational leaders must continue to prioritize evaluation practices, investing in the capacity-building and collaboration necessary to sustain continuous improvement efforts and achieve lasting success.

SUMMARY: ENACTING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Here, we summarize the key points and practical guidance provided throughout the paper. The integration of guiding principles, structured CI processes, and evaluation practices creates a comprehensive framework for achieving meaningful and sustained improvements in education. Below are the key recommendations for readers:

- **Drive the Work Using Guiding Principles:** The guiding principles outlined earlier provide the foundation for building and sustaining integrated CI systems. These principles ensure that every action taken contributes to a unified, system-wide effort that drives educational improvement.
- **Reaffirming the Importance of Evaluation:** Evaluation practices are essential to maintaining the integrity of CI systems. They act as a feedback loop that informs continuous refinement and alignment, ensuring that interventions and strategies are evidence-based and effective.
- **Key Takeaways for Users and Practitioners:**
 - Establish and align CI systems and evaluation practices to create a cohesive and integrated approach to improvement.
 - Ensure coherence across system levels to promote consistency and shared accountability.
 - Use evaluation data as a continuous feedback mechanism to guide decision-making, adjust strategies, and drive sustainable improvement.

By integrating CI systems with embedded evaluation practices, SEAs and LEAs can create educational systems that are not only responsive and adaptive but also grounded in reliable data and evidence. This comprehensive framework supports educational leaders in making strategic, informed decisions that foster student success, promote equity, and ensure long-term growth.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the essential components of a continuous improvement system, emphasizing the importance of guiding principles, a structured 10-step process, and evaluation practices. Together, these elements form an integrated framework that supports sustainable and impactful educational improvement.

The guiding principles serve as the foundation of the CI system, ensuring that each step is grounded in a stable and evidence-based approach. These principles emphasize broad participation, organizing for change, robust data systems and routines, clear data governance, evaluation from the outset, and sustained communication and professional learning. Together, they create the conditions necessary for a strong and resilient CI framework and provide the infrastructure that supports the broader improvement process.

Building on this foundation, the 10 steps (pillars) of CI provide a structured and interconnected pathway that connects short-term actions to long-term goals. From specifying the problem to reevaluating interventions, these steps guide educators and leaders through a clear and actionable improvement journey. Each step is designed to be iterative and interconnected, reinforcing the idea that continuous improvement is not a linear process but a dynamic cycle that adapts to emerging needs.

Evaluation practices are essential for ensuring the integrity and impact of CI efforts. Evaluation acts as a continuous check, providing evidence about whether each step of the improvement process aligns with the guiding principles and contributes to the intended outcomes. By embedding formative and summative evaluation strategies within the CI framework, schools and LEAs can gather insights that drive meaningful adjustments and ensure long-term success.

When synthesized, these components form a cohesive and coherent CI system that connects short-term strategies with long-term goals. The guiding principles provide the stability needed for each of the 10 steps to be implemented effectively, while robust data systems and evaluation practices supply the evidence and feedback necessary to refine and sustain improvement efforts.

Ultimately, this integrated approach underscores the value of the 10-step framework as the backbone of continuous improvement. It highlights the importance of a well-rounded data system and the need for ongoing evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of educational interventions. By maintaining a clear and coherent CI structure, educators and decision-makers can confidently navigate the complexities of educational improvement, driving positive outcomes for students and systems alike.

APPENDIX A:

PROGRAM EVALUATION STANDARDS CHECKLIST

Program Evaluation Checklist

From the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation

The Program Evaluation Standards “identify and define evaluation questions and guide evaluators and evaluation users in the pursuit of evaluation quality” (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). The Standards include 30 statements that define five dimensions of program evaluation quality: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and evaluation accountability. Each standard has a name and is expressed in a statement, which is then explained in more detail in The Program Evaluation Standards book (Yarbrough et al., 2011). The standards’ names and statements are reproduced in checklist form by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation [JCSEE original text].

The purpose of this checklist version of the Standards is to provide evaluation practitioners, clients, users, and students with an accessible overview of the Standards. We encourage users to read The Program Evaluation Standards in full, and then use this checklist as a quick reference.

Utility Standards

The utility standards are intended to increase the extent to which program stakeholders [JCSEE original text] find evaluation processes and products valuable in meeting their needs.

- **U1 Evaluator Credibility:** Evaluations should be conducted by qualified people who establish and maintain credibility in the evaluation context.
- **U2 Attention to Stakeholders:** Evaluations should devote attention to the full range of individuals and groups invested in the program and affected by its evaluation.
- **U3 Negotiated Purposes:** Evaluation purposes should be identified and continually negotiated based on the needs of stakeholders.
- **U4 Explicit Values:** Evaluations should clarify and specify the individual and cultural values underpinning purposes, processes, and judgments.
- **U5 Relevant Information:** Evaluation information should serve the identified and emergent needs of stakeholders.
- **U6 Meaningful Processes and Products:** Evaluations should construct activities, descriptions, and judgments in ways that encourage participants to rediscover, reinterpret, or revise their understandings and behaviors.
- **U7 Timely and Appropriate Communicating and Reporting:** Evaluations should attend to the continuing information needs of their multiple audiences.
- **U8 Concern for Consequences and Influence:** Evaluations should promote responsible and adaptive use while guarding against unintended negative consequences and misuse.

Feasibility Standards

The Feasibility standards are intended to increase evaluation effectiveness and efficiency.

- **F1 Project Management:** Evaluations should use effective project management strategies.
- **F2 Practical Procedures:** Evaluation procedures should be practical and responsive to the way the program operates.
- **F3 Contextual Viability:** Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups.
- **F4 Resource Use:** Evaluations should use resources effectively and efficiently.

Propriety Standards

The propriety standards support what is proper, fair, legal, right and just in evaluations.

- **P1 Responsive and Inclusive Orientation:** Evaluations should be responsive to stakeholders and their communities.
- **P2 Formal Agreements:** Evaluation agreements should be negotiated to make obligations explicit and take into account the needs, expectations, and cultural contexts of clients and other stakeholders.
- **P3 Human Rights and Respect:** Evaluations should be designed and conducted to protect human and legal rights and maintain the dignity of participants and other stakeholders.
- **P4 Clarity and Fairness:** Evaluations should be understandable and fair in addressing stakeholder needs and purposes.
- **P5 Transparency and Disclosure:** Evaluations should provide complete descriptions of findings, limitations, and conclusions to all stakeholders, unless doing so would violate legal and propriety obligations.
- **P6 Conflicts of Interests:** Evaluations should openly and honestly identify and address real or perceived conflicts of interests that may compromise the evaluation.
- **P7 Fiscal Responsibility:** Evaluations should account for all expended resources and comply with sound fiscal procedures and processes.

Accuracy Standards

The accuracy standards are intended to increase the dependability and truthfulness of evaluation representations, propositions, and findings, especially those that support interpretations and judgments about quality.

- **A1 Justified Conclusions and Decisions:** Evaluation conclusions and decisions should be explicitly justified in the cultures and contexts where they have consequences.
- **A2 Valid Information:** Evaluation information should serve the intended purposes and support valid interpretations.

- **A3 Reliable Information:** Evaluation procedures should yield sufficiently dependable and consistent information for the intended uses.
- **A4 Explicit Program and Context Descriptions:** Evaluations should document programs and their contexts with appropriate detail and scope for the evaluation purposes.
- **A5 Information Management:** Evaluations should employ systematic information collection, review, verification, and storage methods.
- **A6 Sound Designs and Analyses:** Evaluations should employ technically adequate designs and analyses that are appropriate for the evaluation purposes.
- **A7 Explicit Evaluation Reasoning:** Evaluation reasoning leading from information and analyses to findings, interpretations, conclusions, and judgments should be clearly and completely documented. **A8 Communication and Reporting:** Evaluation communications should have adequate scope and guard against misconceptions, biases, distortions, and errors.

Evaluation Accountability Standards

The evaluation accountability standards encourage adequate documentation of evaluations and a metaevaluative perspective focused on improvement and accountability for evaluation processes and products.

- **E1 Evaluation Documentation:** Evaluations should fully document their negotiated purposes and implemented designs, procedures, data, and outcomes.
- **E2 Internal Metaevaluation:** Evaluators should use these and other applicable standards to examine the accountability of the evaluation design, procedures employed, information collected, and outcomes.
- **E3 External Metaevaluation:** Program evaluation sponsors, clients, evaluators, and other stakeholders should encourage the conduct of external metaevaluations using these and other applicable standards.

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