



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Prepared for Virginia Department of Education

K-12 Info-Briefs

Continuous School Improvement

Continuous school improvement offers a framework for planning, measuring, and evaluating school improvement efforts. While there are various definitions of continuous improvement, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) explains that “continuous improvement refers to a school’s, and/or a division’s ongoing commitment to quality improvement efforts that are evidence-based, integrated into the daily work of individuals, contextualized within a system, and iterative.”¹

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides school leaders with modules describing Virginia’s Continuous School Improvement Planning process. The first module, “Module 1: Developing a Continuous Improvement Process” describes the VDOE’s CSI cycle and provides a checklist for implementing Virginia’s Continuous Improvement Process.

Continuous school improvement (CSI) typically incorporates a cyclical problem-solving methodology that enables districts and schools to test and then refine strategies based on initial results. This cyclical process allows CSI to support both rapid and longer-term change.² While educational organizations have historically been slow to adopt CSI models, likely due to organizational and structural barriers to implementation, with the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, school districts have increasingly included references to “continuous improvement” in their ESSA plans.³ Noting it’s cyclical nature, an article in *Education Week* similarly defined continuous school improvement as follows:⁴

Continuous school improvement is a cyclical process intended to help groups of people in a system—from a class to a school district or even a network of many districts—set goals, identify ways to improve, and evaluate change.

The American Society for Quality (ASQ) describes Continuous Improvement (CI) as “the ongoing improvement of products, services, or processes through incremental and breakthrough improvements.”⁵ The approach is grounded in the belief that “improvement is not something that starts and stops, but it is something that requires an organizational or professional commitment to an ongoing process of learning, self-reflection, adaptation, and growth.”⁶ Although various organizations adopt multiple definitions of CSI, research on CSI identifies the elements shown below as common across definitions of CSI.

Figure A: Common Elements of Continuous Improvement

Taking a Systems Perspective	Being Process Oriented	Using a Disciplined Methodology to Solve Problems	Engaging the "Front Line"
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Continuous improvement assumes that it is the system and not individuals that produces current outcomes and accordingly focuses attention on system design and operation. It also assumes that systems can be reengineered to address inequities in educational outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Improvement efforts focus on the processes that produce the outcomes as opposed to focusing exclusive attention on the outcomes themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Assumptions about cause and effect are made explicit and tested in practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Those directly responsible for implementation (e.g., classroom teachers) are actively involved in experimentation.

Source: Policy Analysis for California Education⁷