



Engaging Educators to Strengthen School Improvement

Prepared for the Pennsylvania Department of Education

This brief provides an overview of the actions taken by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and its partners to strengthen school improvement supports throughout the state.

There is a substantive evidence base identifying the conditions and practices that are most critical for improved teaching and learning for all students¹. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has approached its efforts to strengthen school improvement by focusing on these critical conditions and practices and on improving school and district capacity to diagnose and address the root causes of school performance challenges. Through training and supporting a cadre of school improvement facilitators who work regionally with schools and districts, PDE is increasing the efficiency and efficacy of school improvement efforts most likely to lead to and sustain improvement over time.

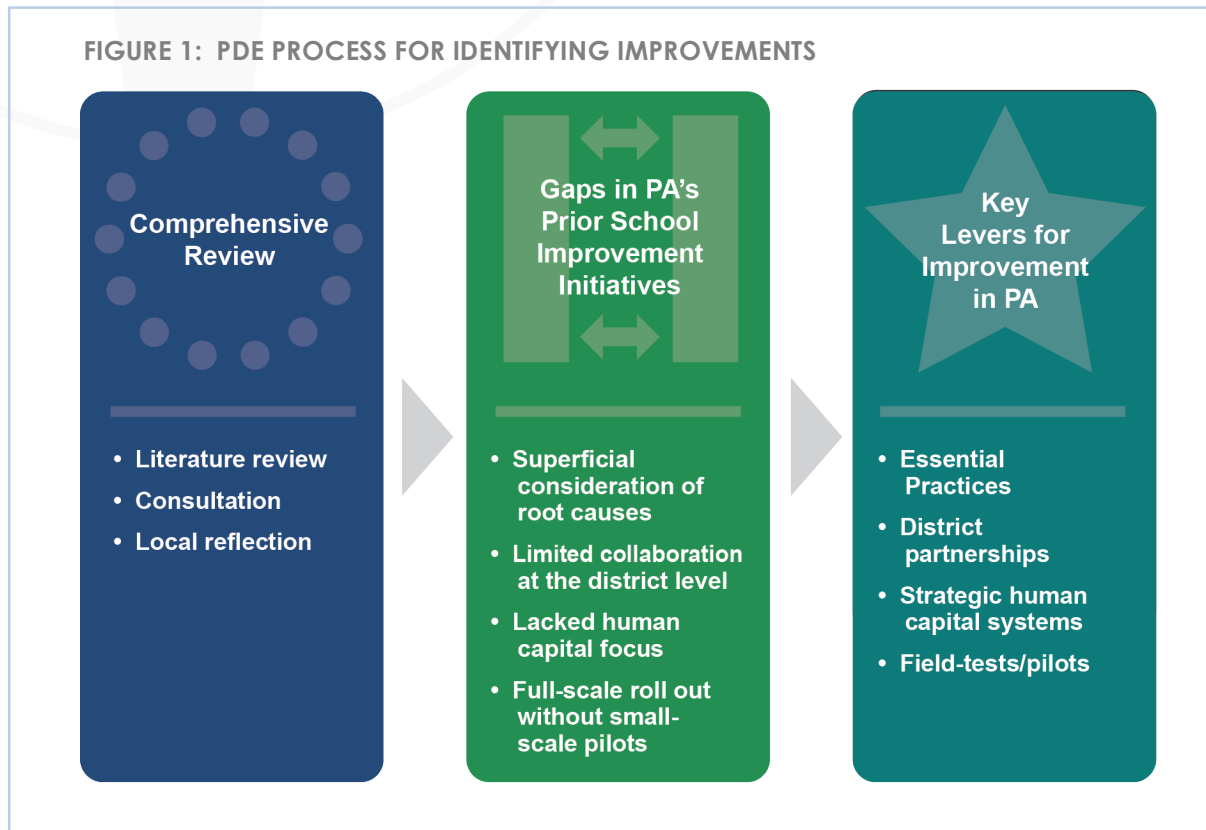
A Pilot Approach to Supporting School Improvement

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to develop systems for identifying and supporting its lowest performing public schools, or Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools. PDE has taken a strategic approach to this work. As Figure 1, below, describes, in early 2018, PDE conducted a comprehensive review of research and promising practices from other states; gathered feedback from local education agencies and other stakeholders to identify gaps in prior school improvement initiatives; and then focused its efforts on four key levers for improving its processes. One key lever identified was to pilot refined school improvement processes and tools on a small scale. Once research-based refinements were

¹ See, for example: Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools* [IES Practice Guide] (NCEE 2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

made to the tools, including rubrics and facilitator guides, PDE launched a 19-school, three-district pilot to test the redesigned processes and tools with educators prior to larger scale rollout and implementation of statewide strategies. The pilot districts—Pittsburgh Public Schools, Juniata County School District, and Allentown School District—were selected from across the state and represent a variety of different characteristics including size, urbanicity, student demographics, and other contextual factors related to underperforming schools.

PDE provided these districts and schools with resources and targeted funding to partner in the transition to the new school improvement framework under ESSA. PDE also trained facilitators from the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) to coach the pilot districts and schools using the new improvement process. Finally, PDE sought feedback from the educators in the pilot. **This approach to meaningfully engaging with educators gave teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders an important voice in shaping the process so that the state’s tools and procedures are responsive to their individual needs.**



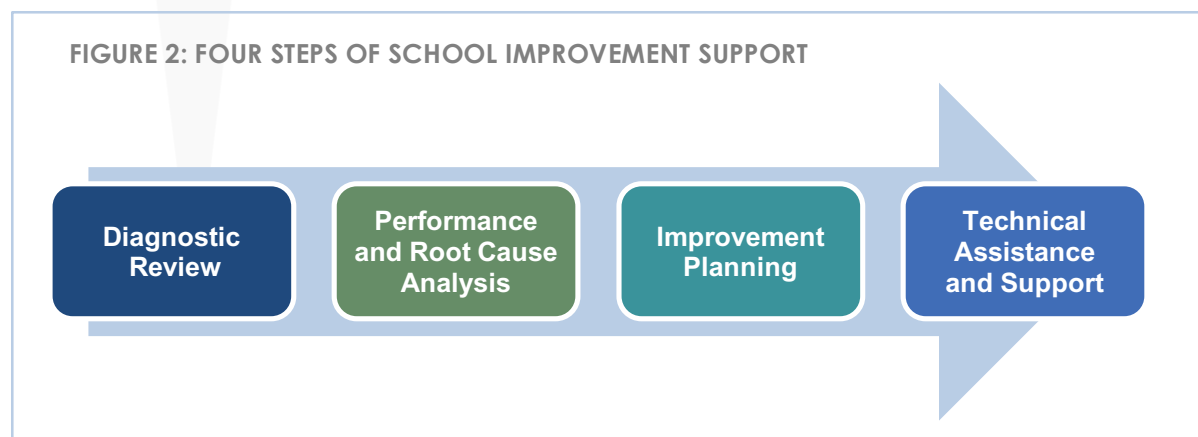
Partnering to Collect Feedback

The Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC), a federally-funded technical assistance center that supports states in the region with state-led educational improvement efforts, partnered with PDE to collect and consider this formative evaluative data. First, MACC collected feedback from the PaTTAN facilitators trained by PDE. MACC conducted a set of focus groups with the school improvement facilitators regarding their training, the tools provided to them by PDE, additional skills they felt would improve their effectiveness with districts, as well as their perceptions of how schools responded to each component of the process.

MACC then conducted focus groups with district administrators, school principals, and teachers from each of the three pilot districts to collect feedback about the refined tools, processes, and support from facilitators for their school improvement planning efforts. As described below, PDE made changes to the school improvement process and supports they provided based on findings from these focus groups, in preparation for a statewide rollout in the 2018–2019 school year.

System Improvements Informed by School and District Feedback

School improvement facilitators guided pilot schools through a four-phase process shown in Figure 2, below, which includes a structured protocol for identifying school and district challenges and strengths (Diagnostic Review); Performance and Root Cause Analysis using the Pennsylvania Essential Practices for School Improvement Rubric; Improvement Planning alongside district and school staff; and Technical Assistance and Support to guide implementation of priority improvement strategies. The Essential Practices Rubric defines and helps schools self-assess their challenges and strengths in the critical practices in each of the four core conditions evident in successful schools: (1) Empower Leadership, (2) Focus on Continuous Improvement of Instruction, (3) Provide Student-Centered Support Systems, and (4) Foster Quality Professional Learning. Feedback from stakeholders primarily addressed the Diagnostic Review, use of the Essential Practices Rubric, and recommendations for ways to streamline the “look-fors” that act as guideposts to help schools assess areas of need.



Educators in the pilot provided feedback, described below, about several elements in the process.

1. Thoughtful Facilitation of School and District Inquiry

On the whole, school and district pilot participants reported they benefitted from the process and were appreciative of the facilitator's neutral role as a guide for candid and important discussions. During the pilot phase, the facilitators themselves maintained regular engagement with PDE and appreciated the training and check-ins with other facilitators as an opportunity to engage in cross-state learning and to share strategies that were working well at the school level. Due to the condensed timeline of pilot activities, facilitators and the district participants reported challenges with scheduling times to get into the schools and freeing up teachers and

school leaders for planning sessions. Districts struggled to secure substitute teachers and to have consistent attendance at sessions with the facilitators.

Facilitators stated that the inquiry process enabled participants to “think deeper and ask better questions,” and that their support helped school and district teams consider what they are doing well.

2. Use of a Comprehensive Rubric and Other Data Sources to Self-Assess

The Essential Practices Rubric proved to be a comprehensive instrument that generated rich discussions about schools' implementation of the critical practices. Participants reported variability in how the facilitators approached the use of data during the pilot, pointing to a need to norm the data sources and inquiry processes. Likewise, district and school teams reported that facilitators took different approaches to prepare them for the Analysis step. This reflects an opportunity to standardize the orientation and training provided for the school improvement facilitators, as well as to clarify the process written in the materials. Some pilot participants expressed that having more time to digest the Rubric (e.g., looking through and considering practices in advance) and to consider additional data sources or ratings in advance of meetings with facilitators would have been helpful. Some also recommended pulling out the section containing examples of practices—the “look-fors”—and turning it into a supplementary guide. This would help educators consider the extent to which the conditions and practices are evident (on a scale of not yet evident, emerging, operational, and exemplary).

3. Alignment with Existing Improvement Activities

Pilot participants recommended aligning the school improvement process with existing district and school initiatives as a way to increase buy-in and usefulness of the support. Specifically, some participants requested more intentional alignment in the timing of the Essential Practices assessment with other activities within the district and school, such as the Instructional Review process. School participants stated that the purpose of the school improvement process should be clearly articulated and explained at the beginning. Finally, participants also suggested that facilitators be trained in how to use this process to specifically focus on issues of equity, which are core to educators' everyday work to support students.

Statewide Rollout of the School Improvement Planning Process

Lessons learned from the pilot will inform the statewide rollout of the refined school improvement planning process to CSI schools in the fall of 2018. Participating schools will include the lowest performing five percent of Title I schools, as well as any high school (not just Title I) with a combined four- and five-year graduation rate at or below 67 percent. Ultimately, supports will extend to Title I schools with chronically low-performing student groups.

The full-scale rollout of school improvement strategies will reflect the following revisions to the process supported by PDE:

Enhanced Facilitator Recruitment and Support

- Screen facilitators for prior experience
- Supplement training with additional, focused sessions
- Create a comprehensive facilitator toolkit
- Conduct bi-weekly check-ins between facilitators and PDE leadership
- Host a formal orientation for districts and schools
- Engage local education agencies in the selection and matching of facilitators

Expansion of the Diagnostic Review

- Include a deep dive into quantitative and qualitative data
- Organize the review in a manner that more efficiently facilitates the self-assessment
- Provide more robust facilitation of data analysis, including broader, more comprehensive sources of evidence

Revision of the Essential Practices Rubric

- Adjust the sequence of conditions to elevate the focus on Continuous Improvement of Instruction
- Expand possible sources of evidence to include student assessment data, behavior data, and other data sources collected in PA
- Convene a work group to review the performance descriptors to ensure clarity and consistency with global performance level labels

Development of a Portfolio Approach for the Needs Assessment

- Break the supplemental components of the Essential Practices Rubric into separate components using a portfolio approach:
 - Create a tool for documenting the key observations that emerge from a more comprehensive review of data in the Diagnostic Review phase
 - Streamline the list of “look-fors” to include the most salient evidence of “operational” implementation for each practice

Conclusion: Shared Ownership to Increase Impact

Empowering a variety of stakeholders in the school community to have a voice in the school improvement process fostered collaboration and shared responsibility, and furthermore resulted in priorities and action plans that districts were invested in. Principals and other building leaders offered specific strategies used to refine and enhance the tools and processes, which will help increase the impact of this work for schools across the state.