Ayer Elementary School's Resilient Conditions for Improvement: Pivoting Amid COVID-19

Hayin Kimner, Malati Gopal, and Lynn Rocha-Salazar

The educators of Ayer Elementary in Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) began their continuous improvement journey in 2016. The stability of their underlying organizational conditions to engage in improvement work—a shared purpose, mutual trust, structures and resources that foster collaborative work, and preparation and mobilization of improvement capabilities[1]— was put to the test as their focus pivoted in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This practice brief describes ways in which Ayer Elementary continued to invest in short- and long-term improvement practices to strengthen student engagement within the new learning environment of distance learning and in anticipation of strengthening staff capacity for when students return to school.

California's new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools as well as opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders have had to pivot their priorities drastically to meet the changing and diverse needs of their school communities. These shifts have provided opportunities for schools and districts to lean on their existing improvement processes and attend to the organizational conditions that enable and sustain real change within schools.

Research on the underlying organizational conditions that foster continuous improvement can inform how schools develop the capacities needed to adapt to the challenges they will face in the 2020–21 year. These four organizational building blocks of system capacity for continuous improvement, even amid a pandemic context, include: (a) shared purpose, (b) culture of mutual trust, (c) structures and resources that foster collaborative work, and (d) preparation and mobilization of improvement capacities.[2]

For schools like Ayer Elementary in Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), the stability of their underlying organizational conditions was put to the test as their focus on continuous improvement pivoted in response to COVID-19. **This brief describes how Ayer Elementary continued to strengthen its improvement readiness**[3] **and invest in short- and long-term improvement practices to strengthen student engagement within both the *new learning environment of distance learning* and in anticipation of *strengthening the capacity of staff for when students return to school*.**

Ayer Elementary: Innovation, Motivation and Continuity

Ayer Elementary is one of 66 K–6 schools in FUSD—the third largest district in the state. Ayer serves approximately 704 students, whose racial and economic demographics are largely representative of the district as a whole: 59 percent Latinx, 21 percent Asian American, 13.4 percent Black, and 4 percent White. Ninety percent qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch, 24 percent are designated as English learners, and 16 percent are identified as students with disabilities.[4] In terms of academics, in 2018–19, 29 percent of students met or exceeded state standards in both English language arts and math on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP).

Lynn Rocha-Salazar, principal at the school since 2006, was frustrated by the combination of "initiative fatigue" and the seemingly persistent inability to disrupt student outcome disparities despite diligent and intentional work. In the spring of 2016, she was invited to participate in a districtwide improvement learning community, and in 2018, she assembled a school team to attend a Carnegie Summit on Improvement in Education. With this introduction to improvement science, she realized that improvement was about systems change, not about one single person or initiative, and she reoriented her leadership to support her staff to focus on what they were able to accomplish using the principles of improvement. She reflects:

> I don't have a problem with accountability. We owe our parents and we owe our community to get results and to show them where we're at. But as an organization, when you are only using one metric of high-stakes test results, you are leaving out a whole lot of people that are in the trenches trying to move and do good work. The beauty of improvement is that it has created some energy, momentum, and enthusiasm in ways that makes "leaning into the red" possible. (Personal communication, July 15, 2020.)

Since that time, Ayer has used improvement science to improve math achievement for Black and Latinx students as well as to address student engagement to reduce the number of Black student suspensions.

Laying the Groundwork for Improvement: Elevating Relationships

Ayer's improvement journey began during a tumultuous 2017–18 academic year. Teachers were unprepared to address various types of student misbehaviors and students were being referred to the office in unprecedented numbers. Staff were exasperated and dissatisfied with the status quo and wanted to figure out how to make sustainable change. As staff and leadership came together to learn more about improvement science, they identified "student disengagement" as the specific problem they wanted to address.

The Ayer learning community[5] started by using basic improvement protocols such as fishbone diagrams[6] and "5 Whys"[7] to try to understand the root cause of student disengagement. At first, teachers brainstormed largely student-centered challenges, for example: students have mental health issues, unstable home lives, anger issues, lack of self/social awareness. These initial conversations helped to establish new working norms and relationships across traditionally siloed staff but still reflected a one-dimensional understanding of the causes of student disengagement.

The improvement specialist supported teachers in testing some of their assumptions by asking teachers to conduct empathy interviews of the students whom they felt were the most challenging. In doing so, teachers needed to reorient themselves to understand the problem from the perspective of the student. Analyzing the empathy interviews as a group allowed teachers not only to identify common themes expressed by students but also to identify concerns associated with their own practices.

As these conversations progressed, teachers and staff became more comfortable sharing and assessing their practices, challenges, and failures, and together they tracked classroom discipline instances and rates of referral. This data review revealed there was a lack of consistency across classrooms, with some teachers accounting for the majority of referrals. Disciplinary action tended to be more punitive than restorative, and consequences were prone to subjectivity and unconscious racial biases. Having created a safe community to speak frankly about these disparities, staff were able to acknowledge their own habits and unconscious biases that influenced the discipline process and outcomes.

In contrast to the initial assumption that engagement was a problem that *students* needed to fix, the team posited a new theory of change: if *teachers* could build stronger relationships with their students, they would better understand and respond to what students were communicating (through their behaviors), which would result in fewer office referrals and suspensions. Teachers developed and tested new strategies aligned to the theory of change. For example, teachers were asked to connect with one "challenging" student (e.g., someone they had previously referred to the office several times) for 2 minutes each day for 10 consecutive school days to get to know the child. At the end of the 10 days, teachers then responded to two questions: (a) What did you learn about the student and (b) in learning more about your student, what did you learn about yourself and your practice? The reflection and subsequent conversations helped teachers look inwards to examine their perceptions and actions, and whether they were unconsciously contributing to disparate disciplinary outcomes. After 8 weeks of these conversations, for the first time, in December 2019, the number of referrals and suspensions were not disproportionate by student race/ethnicity.

Over the following year, Ayer leaders and staff continued to build an organizational culture that sought to better understand the experiences and perspectives of the students and families they served. Ayer's commitment to building strong teacher–student relationships would continue to be a priority in their improvement efforts.

The Improvement Stress-Test of COVID-19

Like most districts across the state, FUSD closed physical access to schools on March 16, 2020. Initially, no one predicted how extensive the closures would be, yet FUSD and Ayer quickly mobilized. By March 19, FUSD had posted daily lesson plans by grade level.[8] The district also established meal distribution sites where families could access weekly learning packets, particularly helpful for those families that did not have access to adequate technology. FUSD began distributing tablet computers by the end of the month and offered learning resources and call centers for parents in order to help them support their child's distance learning. On March 27, FUSD reached a "Teach-Learn-Connect" labor agreement with the Fresno Teachers Association and shortly thereafter launched professional learning resources for staff, to support the transition to distance learning technology platforms. School closures were extended to the end of the school year on April 1.

Within Ayer, it was a priority for Rocha-Salazar that distance instruction would not mean that Ayer staff were working separately. Initially, teachers primarily discussed the merits of various tools and technologies. Soon, the dialogue pivoted to teachers sharing their challenges with building, strengthening, and sustaining relationships with students virtually and with engaging them across academic, social, and emotional domains. As time went on, staff observed that students were not engaging, either due to insufficient technology or to lack of personal connection and motivation. While there was an increase in distance learning participation after laptops were distributed, attendance continued to lag below 50 percent. Staff recognized that even amid the new crisis, their problem of practice—student disengagement—was just as, if not more, relevant.

The mobilization of Ayer staff to focus on meaningful connections with students was a testament to the lessons learned, muscle memory, and collaborative trust that had grown out of the school's improvement journey. To that end, the pandemic crisis was a moment for Ayer's community to marshal the relationships, trust, and vulnerability most needed in times of crisis.

Enabling Condition: Shared Purpose

Like most other schools, Ayer Elementary was not equipped for effective distance learning. The abruptness of students being sent home without a formal plan immediately revealed inequities due to uneven access to technology and a constant state of uncertainty for students, families, and teachers. Teachers immediately voiced concern that their students might not be

effectively engaged with learning activities. During the principal's two virtual "coffee hours," parents shared that the teaching tools and other technology platforms provided by the district and school were confusing and especially problematic for those families that had more than one distance learner at home.

The urgency around the need to connect with students and families quickly lent itself to a shared purpose: to prioritize student engagement and belonging as central to distance learning efforts. Leaders and staff were able to hold this focus—and the perspectives of students, families, and teachers—as key touchstones for all of their work.

Enabling Condition: Culture of Mutual Trust

The preestablished culture of mutual trust and constructive solidarity was instrumental for Ayer's collaborative approach to developing and testing distance learning strategies. Ayer staff collaborated in grade-level teams to develop engaging and rigorous materials that did not depend on the expertise or tech savviness of any one particular team member. As an example of the trust that staff had built among one another and site leadership, one teacher wrote in an email to her colleagues:

> I just sat through a Microsoft Teams session, and I was completely overwhelmed. The chat from that class continues to ping endlessly as I write this, and I have no idea how to turn [it] off. I am signed up for *flipgrid*—I have no clue if that will be something I need for [my class], but I am willing to learn what it is. I am happy to learn new things, but I need to get good at one thing at a time. Please know, although this message may sound chaotic and discombobulated, I am hanging on tight by the new knowledge I am obtaining from my ongoing virtual Growth Mindset class. I can, and I will, but I am courageous enough to say that I need help because I just don't know all this ... yet. (Personal communication, April 1, 2020.)

Rocha-Salazar saw that the "reply-all culture" to request help, provide feedback, and strengthen instruction was important to acknowledge and celebrate. Starting on March 18—only 2 days after schools were closed—she launched "Ayer's Fifty Days of Fabulous," an internal campaign to highlight teaching innovation and encourage new learning, recognize promising practices, and sustain staff morale. On days when student online attendance was low, Rocha-Salazar reminded teachers that their efforts should not be judged solely by attendance, and that the process was a valuable resource for the Ayer community as they moved through and beyond the crisis.

Enabling Condition: Structures and Resources that Foster Collaborative Work

Rocha-Salazar recognized that, in spite of physical distancing and the complicated realities facing staff, it was essential to maintain the norms and schedules of collaborative work. Teachers facilitated online conversations—preserving the regular meeting times of their preCOVID-19 schedules—in grade-level meetings, staff meetings, and professional learning opportunities. They openly shared concerns about students and framed conversations around what it meant to be culturally responsive during this unprecedented time. When teachers discussed lack of parent engagement, they encouraged one another to use empathy interviews with parents to challenge their assumptions and better understand the realities of their families. Ayer's vice-principal facilitated the school's climate/culture team—an existing group that grew out of the district's Multi-Tiered System of Supports initiative—which was well-aligned to further support Ayer's improvement work around student engagement and behavior.

Ayer's leadership and staff credit having dedicated time to work with colleagues as making a significant difference. In contrast, other schools within the district struggled to institute or preserve "noninstructional" meetings or professional development opportunities, especially those that were perceived as counter to FUSD's labor agreement with regards to distance learning. For Ayer, however, these structures, practices, and values of collaboration had been ingrained in the school culture—COVID-19 made these practices even more essential to holding the school community together.

Enabling Condition: Preparation and Mobilization of Improvement Capabilities

School closure brought about opportunities for Ayer staff and leadership to apply the methods of continuous improvement. Rocha-Salazar leveraged the urgency that teachers expressed about connecting with students to broaden the work of improvement science at Ayer. Teachers were already informally testing a variety of strategies to get students and parents to respond to outreach attempts. As intermediate grade teachers were already familiar with a Plan, Do, Study, Act-cycle (PDSA), they taught primary teachers how to apply the PDSA improvement protocol as a systematic process to capture the tests they were already running. By week six of school closure, all of Ayer's teachers from preK to sixth grade were running, documenting, and sharing tests—such as the effectiveness of different types of reminder applications and technology platforms and other distance learning activities and strategies.

Conclusion

The continuous improvement journey that the Ayer community embarked on 3 years prior set the stage for the school's most significant improvement challenge yet: COVID-19. Ayer educators continue to employ continuous improvement practices in their work—not for the sake of improvement per se, but because it provides their strongest set of tools to proactively manage collective uncertainty. What initially began as a teacher conversation about "student disengagement" has evolved into essential cultural and practice shifts as teachers support one another through the unchartered waters of the pandemic, and focus on their goals of student-centered, relationship-centered teaching.

In order to continue strengthening and sustaining their work, Principal Rocha-Salazar recognizes that her leadership role is to protect and deepen the stability of Ayer's underlying improvement conditions: shared purpose, mutual trust, structures and resources that foster collaborative work, and preparing and mobilizing improvement capacities. These conditions are foundational to Ayer Elementary's ability to provide their students with equitable and meaningful learning experiences—both in times of short-term crisis and long-term recovery.

Concluding Thoughts from Principal Rocha-Salazar

As the Ayer community prepares to return to schooling, we understand the myriad student needs (e.g., learning loss, social-emotional needs) that will present on Day 1. With so many variables over which teachers and staff have no control, we are committed to focusing on what we do know. As a school site leader, I firmly believe that there is no better time to identify the specific problems we will need to solve together, reflect on the strategies that we will implement, and measure to see if those efforts are actually an improvement. For the Ayer community, this means:

- **maintaining a clear focus on equity** and how students experience learning;
- **intentionally maintaining safe and nurturing professional spaces** to examine individual and collective practice and belief systems;
- **creating embedded leadership spaces for teachers** to share their stories and learning outcomes, so that they can support and learn from one another; and
- **infusing improvement practices throughout the school**, including the habits, patterns, and systems of the school (e.g., on-boarding, professional learning, and school leadership).

Ayer's improvement priorities are reflections of its enabling conditions for improvement. Teachers, staff, and school leaders are prepared to come together—even virtually—to reflect on our past efforts, declare revised common goals, and work together to serve our students. The principles and practices of improvement science will propel our community forward.

Endnotes

[1] See Myung, J., & Kimner, H. (2020, September). *Continuous improvement in schools in the COVID-19 context: A summary brief* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/ publications/enabling-conditions-and-capacities-continuous-improvement; Myung, J., Krausen, K., Kimner, H., & Donahue, C. (2020, September). *Enabling conditions and capacities for continuous improvement: A framework for measuring and supporting progress towards the goals of the Statewide System of Support* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/ enabling-conditions-and-capacities-continuous-improvement

[2] Myung et al., 2020.

[3] For a more in-depth discussion of Ayer Elementary's improvement journey, see Kennedy, K., & Gallagher, H. A. (2019, October). *Leadership that supports continuous improvement: The case of Ayer Elementary* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/ publications/leadership-supports-continuous-improvement-case-ayer-elementary

[4] California Department of Education. (2019). *Ayer Elementary School accountability report card reported using data from the 2018–19 school year.* sarconline.org/SarcPdfs/Temp/10621666101091.pdf

[5] This learning community comprised six teachers, principal, vice principal, and three district staff: an improvement facilitator, restorative practices (RP) counselor, and culture climate manager.

[6] ASQ. (n.d.). *Fishbone diagram.* asq.org/quality-resources/fishbone

[7] Mindtools. (n.d.). 5 whys: Getting to the root of a problem quickly. mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_5W.htm

[8] Fresno Unified School District. (n.d.). Distance learning support for educators. fresnounified.org/learningguides - educators

About the Authors

Hayin Kimner is an educational practitioner, researcher, and policy advocate with a focus on community school systems and partnerships.

Malati Gopal is an administrative analyst and improvement specialist/coach at Fresno Unified School District.

Lynn Rocha-Salazar is a school leader and coach committed to educational improvement in service of students at Ayer Elementary School in Fresno Unified School District.

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Related Publications

Kennedy, K., & Gallagher, A. (2019, October). *Leadership that supports continuous improvement: The case of Ayer Elementary* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Myung, J., & Kimner, H. (2020, September). *Continuous improvement in schools in the COVID-19 context: A summary brief* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Myung, J., Krausen, K., Kimner, H., & Donahue, C. (2020, September). *Enabling conditions and capacities for continuous improvement: A framework for measuring and supporting progress towards the goals of the Statewide System of Support* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

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