

Reflections on Scaling Instructional Improvement That Lasts

H. Alix Gallagher, Leah Faw, and Benjamin W. Cottingham

The PACE practice brief [*How Districts Scale Instructional Improvement That Lasts*](#) examines why many well-intentioned instructional improvement efforts stall, fragment, or fade—and what district leaders can do differently to ensure that improvement reaches all schools and classrooms, and is sustained over time. Based on evidence from multiple districts, a clear message emerges: **Lasting instructional improvement depends on how district leaders engage their systems, not just on the quality of individual initiatives or the commitment of educators.**

This document examines the main themes from the practice brief and their implications for district leaders. We see these ideas not as prescriptions but rather as principles to reflect on and to address in ways appropriate to local context.

1

Scaling improvement across a district requires ongoing district-level work.

Principals and teachers are essential to improving instruction in their schools, but their influence is necessarily bounded by their roles. Perhaps because the district office can feel far from the classroom, we see district leaders underconceptualizing their roles in driving instructional improvement. When districts rely primarily on schools to spread improvement, the result is often uneven quality, fragile implementation, and dependence on individual leaders.

Implication

District leaders are the only actors positioned to take responsibility for consistency and coherence across schools. When improvement does not reach all sites, this is less a school-level failure than a signal that district systems are not yet aligned to support scale.

2

Instructional leadership cannot be fully delegated.

Senior district leaders often sponsor improvement efforts but delegate day-to-day leadership to others. Evidence from this research suggests that when senior leaders disengage, improvement loses momentum—not because others lack skill or commitment, but because mid-level district leaders lack sufficient authority over priorities, time, and resources. Visible engagement of senior leaders also communicates symbolically that an effort is an important district priority.

Implication

Instructional improvement requires sustained, visible involvement from senior leaders over multiple years. Symbolic support is insufficient without structural action.

3

Scaling requires using authority, not just influence.

Many districts rely on voluntary participation, early adopters, or informal teacher networks to spread new practices. These approaches generate energy, but they rarely produce systemwide change.

Implication

In addition to thinking about how to build grassroots support, district leaders must be willing to use their authority to embed instructional priorities into required routines—such as pacing guides, professional learning time, principal meetings, and walkthroughs—so that improvement becomes the default rather than an option.

4

Prioritization is essential—and difficult.

Districts face many real and competing demands. However, evidence shows that when there are too many priorities, instructional improvement suffers because it requires sustained time and effort. If teachers and principals experience initiative overload, they are unable to devote sufficient attention to the hard work of improving teaching and learning.

Implication

Senior leaders are uniquely responsible for making hard choices about what *not* to prioritize. Focus over time is a prerequisite for depth, ownership, and results.

5

Systems—not individuals—are the main mechanism of spread.

Improvement scales when it is built into how a district operates: how time is used, how materials are organized, how learning is supported, and how practice is monitored. New structures are sometimes necessary, but existing ones are often the most powerful levers.

Implication

A critical leadership move is to analyze existing systems before launching new initiatives and ask how those systems can be repurposed to support instructional goals. System structures should be revisited over time with adjustments made as needed.

6

Monitoring is for learning, not compliance.

As improvement scales, uneven implementation is inevitable, especially when teachers are trying new practices. Districts that succeed treat monitoring as a way to understand variation and adapt supports rather than as a tool for evaluation or accountability alone.

Implication

Leaders need feedback loops that allow information to flow from classrooms to the district office, enabling continuous adjustment.

In Sum

This research suggests that the core work of district leadership is coherence building: aligning priorities, structures, roles, and routines so that good instruction becomes “the way we do things here.” Teachers and principals are essential partners in this work—but only district leaders can design and sustain the systems that allow instructional improvement to reach every classroom and to last.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank California Education Partners for welcoming us to their public events, inviting us to internal planning sessions, and granting us access to their internal documents. We are also grateful for the time and insights that Ed Partners staff and educators in Ed Partners districts shared with us. This brief, like all PACE publications, has been thoroughly reviewed for factual accuracy and research integrity. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy of the brief’s contents.