

# THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Improving Together



**Discussion guide for the April 2023 issue of**  
*The Learning Professional*

**T**his guide will help you and your teams take a deep dive into the April 2023 issue of *The Learning Professional* on the theme of Improving Together. It examines how educators can collaboratively engage in continuous improvement approaches that shift educator practices to help students thrive.

## Goals

By reading the issue and using this guide, you and your teams will:

- Consider the importance of incorporating diverse voices and perspectives into school improvement efforts;
- Examine your current and potential strategies for incorporating students' and teachers' voices;
- Reflect on the role coaching can play in inclusive school improvement efforts;
- Engage in level- and role-specific discussions about strategy and best practices; and
- Collaborate on planning and next steps.

## Overview

When educators work collaboratively to improve their practice, they build their capacity to achieve equitable and excellent outcomes for all students. But where do you focus your efforts, and how do you start? Continuous improvement methods, which are widely used in medicine and other fields, provide a way to think strategically about needs and potential changes; processes for identifying, implementing, and monitoring changes; and methods for tracking impacts and making necessary adjustments.

The articles in the "Improving Together" issue of *The Learning Professional* provide real-world examples of continuous improvement practices and the professional learning strategies systems use to develop and implement them. These strategies reflect core components of high-quality professional learning and all 11 of Learning Forward's [Standards for Professional Learning](#).

The initiatives highlighted in the issue are grounded in the belief that one-size-fits-all approaches rarely fit all, and that local context matters. The issue's authors are all part of the Networks for School Improvement Community of Practice, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and they recognize and honor the wisdom of multiple stakeholders, especially teachers and students, in designing and implementing change.

## How to use this guide

This discussion guide focuses on how to incorporate multiple voices into improvement work, with a spotlight on teacher leadership, student voice, and coaching relationships. Each of the three sections is anchored in a set of articles and includes reflection questions for school- and district-level leaders and staff.

You may wish to send this guide, or portions of it, to your team members to help everyone engage in the activities. Alternatively, you may wish to use it as a facilitation guide and walk your team through the activities yourself. We invite you to share the learning opportunities however they work best for you.

## Tap into teacher leadership.

The improvement solutions that work best for students are ones that marry research with the wisdom and experience of the educators who know their students' talents, interests, and needs. Teachers are essential contributors to change processes.



### 1. Read the following articles about teacher voice and leadership:

- [“Teacher voice drives improvement in Baltimore”](#) by Zachary Jaffe and Amiee Winchester.
- [“Teacher leaders make change ideas stick”](#) by Sara DeMartino, Glenn Nolly, and Anthony Petrosky.
- [“6 principles to foster voice and belonging”](#) (online exclusive) by Paola Deliz Félix Encarnación, Mary Halling, Andrea Carter, and Stephanie Wu.

### 2. Reflection questions for school-level staff:

- Root cause analysis is a valuable way to identify what is causing a problem of practice, which in turn points the way to solutions. How are teachers at your school involved in identifying root causes and developing change ideas? If they are not yet involved, how could you involve them?
- The authors of these three articles share multiple avenues for eliciting teacher voice in improvement efforts, including teacher fellowships, working with a respected teacher leader, and increasing direct communication with school leaders. Which approaches in these articles resonated with you?
- Does your school’s current approach to using data to create feedback loops feel useful to you? How could it be more useful?

### 3. Reflection questions for district-level staff:

- Teachers are often closest to the problems that pose barriers for student learning, and their perspectives are therefore essential. How are you currently involving teachers in identifying root causes of problems of practice?
- What opportunities might you be missing to tap into the expertise of teacher leaders, like Brad Dominy in the DeMartino et al. article? How can you change that?
- Continuous improvement must be a collaborative process to be successful. Finding time for teacher collaboration can be challenging with the constraints of scheduling. How can you foster opportunities for teachers to collaborate with one another at each stage of improvement cycles?

### 4. Collaborative activity:

Working across roles and levels, think about how teacher perspectives are currently incorporated into your school or district strategic planning and continuous improvement efforts. Map out where teachers are currently involved, where they are not, and where you see untapped opportunities. Represent this visually, for example, with sticky notes on the strategic plan or with a hand-drawn map of improvement. Identify three concrete points on the map to increase teacher voice in improvement initiatives.

### 5. Plan for next steps:

Through a collaborative process with administrators, teachers, and other staff, create a plan for district or school leaders to solicit teacher feedback on improvement plans and initiatives on an ongoing basis. You might also create a protocol to use when strategic decisions are made (e.g., during the superintendent's cabinet meetings) to consider whether and how teachers' perspectives have been incorporated.

## Listen to student voices.

**S**tudents are the ultimate consumers and beneficiaries of education. But despite the common refrain, “It’s all about the students,” students’ perspectives are often missing from improvement efforts and from school practices and policies in general. Uchenna Lewis and colleagues write, “The biggest challenge to incorporating student voice has almost nothing to do with students’ actual voices. Those are loud and clear. The challenge has to do with our eyes and ears.”



### 1. Read the following articles about student voice:

- [“When we listen to students, we improve our schools,”](#) by Uchenna Lewis, Amanda Faulkner, and Jesse Roe.
- [“Practical measures make data timely and useful,”](#) by Andrew Brannegan and Sola Takahashi.
- [“Student voice data accelerates teaching and learning,”](#) by Sarah Gripshover, Lilia Diaz de Lewis, Erin Ashoka and Dave Paunesku.

### 2. Reflection questions for school-level staff:

- Reflecting on the quote above from the Lewis et al. article, why is it challenging for adults’ eyes and ears to hear and see students’ perspectives? What prevents us from listening to students’ voices?
- What simple, practical measures can you use to collect student perspectives on their learning experiences as part of your daily work? How can you present that information to the community in an easily understandable way, as in the Brannegan and Takahashi article?
- How will you use the feedback you gather to make changes to students’ learning experiences? Why is it important to do so?

### 3. Reflection questions for district-level staff:

- Lewis and colleagues point out that, “If students think they’re sharing their views, but that you’re not doing anything with the information, that’s probably worse than never having asked them anything in the first place.” What are some of the problems that could arise if educators don’t put student feedback into practice? How can you communicate that to educators throughout your system?
- Gripshover and colleagues write that most schools collect student perspective data but that teachers “don’t often get the right support to act on student feedback effectively,” which can lead to the problems referred to in the previous question. What kind of support do educators in your system need to act on student feedback? How can you provide it?
- Lewis and colleagues talk about the importance of building habits and routines so that collecting and using student voice becomes an ongoing part of how things are done. How can you help establish those habits and routines?

### 4. Collaborative activity:

With your team, use the tool, “How to learn and improve with student feedback,” on p. 71, created by Gripshover and colleagues at PERTS. Based on your responses to the questions, identify resources that could help you with next steps. These may include resources from Elevate as well as other sources.

### 5. Plan for next steps:

Using your professional learning calendar, staff meeting calendar, or strategic plan, map out how you will develop and implement plans to incorporate student voice over the next six months. Create specific timelines, milestones, and accountability structures. You might consider incorporating student feedback into each of your upcoming meetings to model the importance of listening to student perspectives and keep this goal top of mind for your teams.

## Leverage coaching to elevate multiple perspectives.

Instructional coaches are most successful when they have authentic, meaningful relationships with teachers. With those relationships as a foundation, coaches can play key roles in teacher empowerment, leadership development, and improvements in practice, all of which are key aspects of continuous improvement. They are also well-positioned to elicit teacher voice.



### 1. Read the following articles about coaching:

- ["Coaching empowers teachers to lead for equity"](#) by Courtney Smith.
- ["Coaches support literacy across subject areas"](#) by Dominique Bradley, Matthew Welch and Alicia Garcia.

### 2. Reflection questions for coaches:

- Smith writes, "Just as we encourage our students to bring their experiences, cultures, languages, and gifts to the classroom, we must create spaces for teacher leaders to bring their own flavor to their leadership and take risks." What does that look like in your coaching?
- Why is it important to engage teachers in defining target problems of practice?
- Network coaches in New York City (see Smith article) espouse the goal many coaches have to "coach ourselves out of a job." Do you share this goal, and why or why not? If so, how does it relate to elevating teachers' voices in improvement?

### 3. Reflection questions for school and district staff (other than coaches):

- How can coaches in your school or system help create a systemic approach to incorporating diverse voices in developing and implementing change ideas?
- What role can coaches in your school or system play in helping teachers develop leadership for continuous improvement?
- How are you tracking the impact of your change ideas from multiple perspectives, or how could you track them if you have not yet started? What role can coaches play in collecting and processing teachers' perspectives?

### 4. Collaborative activity:

Consider Long Beach Network for School Improvement's effort to incorporate literacy across the curriculum, with a focus on the role of coaching in that process (see the Bradley et al. article). Using your district and school strategic plan or school improvement plan, identify a goal you are currently working to address. What is the role of coaches in this work? Consider how coaches can elicit and share the voices of teachers and students with leadership and how they can facilitate collaboration across levels. Discuss what support and opportunities coaches need to take such leadership roles in continuous improvement. What do you have in place, and what do you need to change?

### 5. Plan for next steps:

Plan for upcoming school- and districtwide coaches' meetings to include time to discuss how coaches are eliciting teacher feedback and perspectives on specific change initiatives. Plan how that information will be shared with school and district administrators who are not present.



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