The Principal's Primer

Research-Based Supports for Early Learning Classrooms

This newsletter is the first in the series of 2019-2020 bi-monthly newsletters designed specifically for Principals and Assistant Principals with early learning classrooms on their campus. In an effort to strengthen your understanding of instructional strategies and developmentally appropriate perspectives, the Children's Learning Institute is pleased to provide you with the latest research, best practices, resources for supporting early learning on your campus, and innovations in technology that support collaborative leadership. Past issues can be viewed in the Newsletter Archive on CLI Engage. If you are not currently a subscriber, sign up to receive the next issue in December.

October 2019

In this issue:

Continuous Improvement:
- The Cycle
- Analyze Data Stage

Happy National Principals Month!

We salute you for your hard work and commitment to teachers, children and families and congratulate you as we recognize Principals Month in October!

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement models have been shown by research to be effective in supporting professional growth in industries as varied as healthcare, aviation, and of course, education.

Continuous improvement in education is a professional development model that acknowledges people grow as professionals when they have clear goals in mind, repeated opportunities for practicing those goals, and ways to reflect upon the success of their practice. Continuous improvement models in some educational institutions focus more on strategic plans that describe a general long-term vision of strategy, but often do not detail the process of refinement for individual teacher improvement.

For teachers to improve their teaching, they need to learn something new. Many professional development activities do not result in new learning. Professional development should involve engaging in a professional activity that changes the status quo behavior in a lasting way.

Continuous improvement in support of teacher growth does not have a start and end point, but rather is a process and a long-term commitment on the part of the school to ongoing learning, flexibility, adaptation, innovation, risk-taking, and change.

This continuous improvement model focuses on a small, realistic number of goals for teachers to practice at a time. Goals are prioritized based on the needs interpreted from available data. This limited scope allows professionals to put highly focused energy into improving specific parts of their practice for a period of time. Over time, incremental gains in skills accumulate to become high-quality teaching practices.

Continuous improvement is incredibly important for educators in the classroom given what we know about their role in supporting children's learning. Studies have shown that teacher competency outweighs standards, curriculum, policies, and regulations when it comes to advancing skills for children. In fact, high-quality teacher-child interactions are the strongest school-based influence on child outcomes.

The continuous improvement cycle is the period of time the professional spends preparing for and practicing a specific set of goals. While stages in the cycle vary across continuous improvement models, four important features are:

1. Analyzing data
2. Planning for improvement
3. Practicing
4. Using reflection throughout the cycle
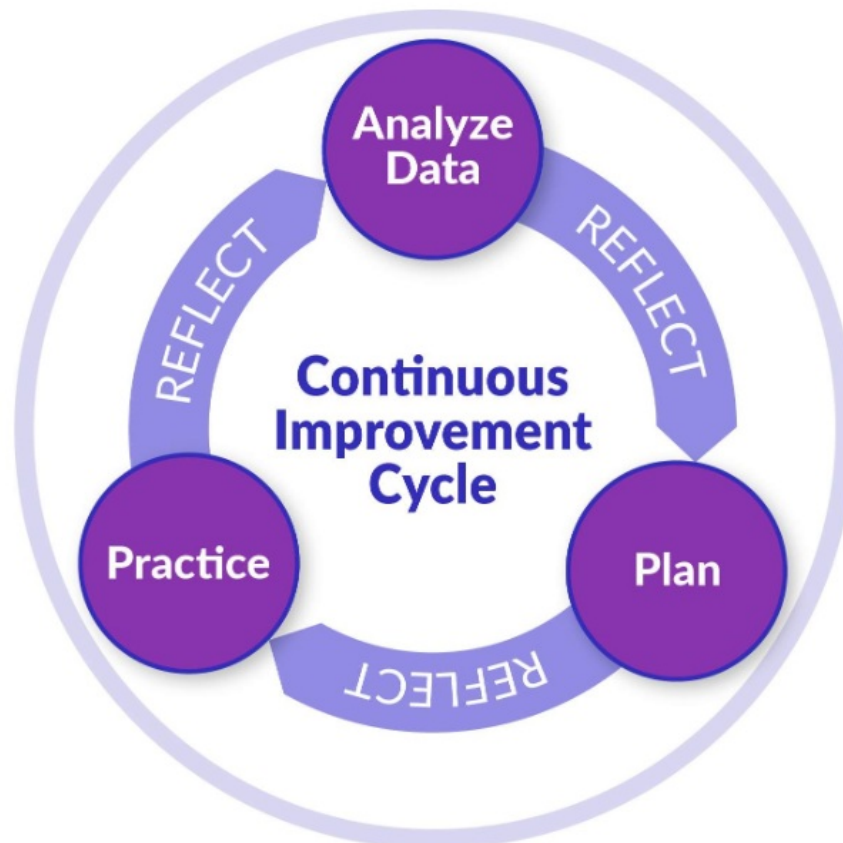
Analyze Student Data

Because there are many learning areas important for instruction, it can be overwhelming to know where to start targeting goals for improvement. Data, particularly student data, is a highly objective tool for narrowing down teacher's goals to a few key strategies at a

time. Using assessment data as a starting place for targeting their professional growth is win-win. The teacher will have a clear path for goal setting, and will work towards providing the best quality of instruction in the areas in which students most need quality support.

It is also important to consider other types of information, such as which learning areas are important to the campus or district for goal setting. Consider which goal areas are of general interest and which ones are identified needs based on reliable data. For example, a district might set a general goal for improvement in STEM instruction because the education field recognizes its importance, and it may also set a goal specifically for math instruction because of low scores on third grade standardized tests in math. While the first goal is still important, the second goal is data-based and therefore may take higher priority in the goal setting plan.

Likewise, the teacher may have an interest in refining her math instruction, but previous observations might indicate that she has room for improvement in teaching letter sounds. Both are important, so taking a closer look at child data will help you determine which area is the most pressing need for the students in the classroom.

Campuses that promote analyzing, and in turn using student data regularly to inform instruction, have in place a data culture that relies on data to inform decision making at the classroom level.

Create a blameless data culture so that everyone is working together to look at the data and collaborate for change.

To better understand of the data produced within the pre-K and kindergarten assessment tools on CLI Engage, let us take a look at what the reports reveal.

In the classrooms, you have likely completed wave one for beginning of the year **CIRCLE Progress Monitoring (C-PM)** for pre-K or the **Texas Kindergarten Entry Assessment (TX-KEA)**, which is essentially wave one of kindergarten progress monitoring. These assessment systems are designed as user-friendly, online tools that allows the teacher to assess a child's progress in a particular skill area almost instantly. It is a valid and reliable instrument that is fair, and is age and developmentally appropriate.

The assessment itself should take the least amount of time. More importantly is how to look at the results and determine next steps. The results among other outcomes can identify two things. One, it can determine whether the instructional plans or curriculum were effective for most of the students. Two, it identifies students that are not proficient in the assessed skill areas and need more targeted intervention.

Children identified as at-risk may receive more frequent, more intensive, and/or different types of instruction, often in small groups. This involves: identifying each student's current progress, creating goals for their learning that include targeted strategies in areas that are indicated below benchmark, continual monitoring, and providing individual responsive scaffolding.

Both informal assessment and ongoing progress monitoring determine whether the interventions and increased instructional support is working.

The C-PM and KEA assessments provide small group results with direct links to targeted strategies in the digital online **CIRCLE Activity Collection**. These activities include exemplar videos demonstrating the activity with annotations directing the viewer to why and how to use, as well as scripted modeled lessons with guided practice and scaffolding suggestions.

Reports can be generated at the district, campus, class, and individual student levels. District and campus leadership can view reports to: set goals for meeting benchmarks over time; monitor progress by skill area; compare across students, classes, and schools to determine what differentiates gains; and use to target district-level professional learning goals.

Teachers can look at patterns to guide their instructional planning to: identify broad-based instructional needs, identify students that need small group instruction or tiered intervention supports, and check progress at each wave to evaluate the approach.

This collaborative analysis, monitoring, and planning then directly supports the teacher's increased understanding of child skill development and responsiveness. It further increases efficacy and satisfaction with teaching by changing expectations and beliefs about student needs and abilities.

Creating a culture where continuous professional learning is highly valued is the key to improving child outcomes.

In the next issue we will take a closer look at another stage in the continuous improvement cycle: **planning for improvement** to increase teaching competencies.

CLI Engage is part of the Children's Learning Institute at UTHealth
www.cliengage.org