



HANOVER
RESEARCH

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Prepared for the Nebraska Department of Education

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) is in the process of updating and refining its accreditation process and associated Accreditation Rule. To support this effort, NDE is interested in understanding how educational leaders and administrators across the state understand and use the principles of Continuous Improvement (CI) and Continuous Needs Assessment (CNA). In addition, what materials and resources are used to understand priorities and needs related to school quality? NDE will use these results to ensure a greater and intentional focus on communicating the key components of CI and to better communicate the benefits of CI and CNA to all stakeholders.



- ✓ Explore how educational leaders perceive, define, and implement Continuous Improvement and Continuous Needs Assessment



- ✓ Identify the tools and resources used by educational leaders to inform school improvement decision making



- ✓ Explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators related to the accreditation process and the tools available to meet those requirements

METHODOLOGY



Hanover Research conducted **15 interviews** with District Superintendents, School Principals, Educational Service Unit (ESU) and District Instructional and Staff Development Leaders from across the state of Nebraska.

The 15 participants self selected to be interviewed out of an NDE supplied list of 27 educators. These participants wanted to be interviewed and to inform this study, and these research findings should be interpreted with that understanding.

Note: Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

**To protect participant confidentiality, no attributions will accompany interview excerpts. Quotations were lightly edited for readability.*

A row of colorful backpacks hanging on a rack against a brick wall in a school hallway. The backpacks are in various colors including blue, black, and red. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day. A dark green semi-transparent banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text 'KEY FINDINGS' in white, bold, uppercase letters.

KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDINGS - DATA BASED DECISION MAKING



The Nebraska educational leaders interviewed all pointed to their continued use of data to inform decision making and practice, both in their own work and with their teams of educators.



A theme in every interview was the confidence participants felt in their own data literacy combined with an active desire to improve their use of data.



Participants draw on a number of different data sources, both quantitative and qualitative, to identify the most accurate conclusions and to strategically plan for improved student achievement.

KEY FINDINGS - CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AS EDUCATION PRACTICE



All interviewees expressed confidence in their understanding of the Continuous Improvement Process and their use of data to strategically inform educational decisions and choices.



Participants understand that Continuous Improvement is itself a process of strategic planning, and they approach Continuous Improvement through data-based decision making and planning.



Participants see a direct alignment between CI and MTSS and view these initiatives as working in tandem.

KEY FINDINGS - CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT TOOLS AND PRACTICES



When reflecting on the tools and resources they use to analyze data, participants frequently cite the work of Victoria Bernhardt and the use of data analytics tools like eduCLIMBER.



Larger, more well-resourced districts use rely on their own tools, procedures, and district professionals to support CI whereas smaller and rural districts rely more heavily on the training, advice, tools, and resources from the NDE.



Participants overwhelmingly praised the support they receive from NDE, no matter their level of need and engagement.

KEY FINDINGS: COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION



Collaboration, within and across all levels, is viewed as foundational for participants in understanding and achieving CI goals and outcomes.



Interviewees note that explaining the relevance and importance of CI as well as executing strategic plans with fidelity requires intentional communication and information sharing with all stakeholders.

KEY FINDINGS - SCHOOL SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT: VISION



When asked what they believe is an “adequate measure of success for school improvement,” participants consistently highlight the proficiency and growth of student achievement outcomes.



Participants shared an understanding that quality CI implementation is a precursor for achieving shared educational goals and for preparing students for academic success and post-secondary achievement.

KEY FINDINGS - SCHOOL SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Inconsistent and messy data was cited as a barrier to fully understanding longitudinal student achievement, identifying performance gaps, and implementing future strategic planning.



Some participants expressed a desire for clear and consistent guidelines from NDE on the CI process. Most participants understand the nature and need for this change but claim it also makes their work more difficult.



One suggestion is for “NDE to be a ‘convener of problems of practice.’ It would be really useful if there could be some summits around specific topics that the NDE would like schools to make more progress on.”

KEY FINDINGS - SCHOOL SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



When diagnosing the needs of their school, district, ESU, or region, most participants find the NDE needs assessment system useful and moving in a positive direction, but some participants questioned the overall validity of the CNA process.



While all participants are actively using student and school data in their work, some leaders were cautious that the mental health, well-being, and creativity of staff and students can be overshadowed by the burdens of (over)testing and constant review.

DATA BASED DECISION MAKING



Data. I mean, really. Data. Either it's hard data from test scores, it's perceptual data from staff, from community, parents, students, whatever. But we really try to focus on what does the data tell us?

DATA USE

“ I think that the use of a needs assessment or a self-assessment is a really great starting point, just kind of reflecting on that current reality, and it's going to start to highlight some of those areas that aren't the strengths. I know that Nebraska, we have the CNA 2.0, and it's a really great tool that gets pretty in-depth, but also really helps to develop those action plans and what are some specific steps that schools can take as they set those goals once they look at that data.

The Nebraska educational leaders interviewed all pointed to their continued use of data to inform decision making and practice, both in their own work and with their communities of educators. They understand that data analysis and benchmarking are important factors in driving school and student success.



“ In our buildings, we do curriculum logs to make sure that we're implementing our curriculum as it was intended to be implemented and using our high-quality resources the way that they were intended. We also meet with principals to do data rounds. So, we're pulling and looking at individual school data and making sure that what they're doing is getting them the results that they want, providing the supports that they need.

DATA LITERACY AND CONFIDENCE

A theme in every interview was the confidence participants felt in their own data literacy combined with an active desire to improve their use of data. Some participants shared that not all of their colleagues were so data literate or saw its value. It was an expressed goal to communicate the importance of data literacy and the importance of the CI process.



“ Sometimes I feel like there's uncertainty within our administrative team about the importance of continuous improvement. And so I guess that's my job in trying to help them understand the need for it.

“ *I don't feel uncertain about the concepts. I feel like there's a lot of education that has to happen with all of our stakeholders around the why, behind the process building coherence, and around the definitions, around what does this really look and sound like? Everybody comes from different experiences, and they hear different words, so common language is really important. So, I would say probably our challenges are in building that strong coherence and making sure everybody has that common vision and common understanding.*

MULTIPLE DATA SOURCES

“ Whether we're talking about NSCAS growth or NWEA, MAP, DIBELS, MTSS data, disciplinary data from PowerSchool, attendance data. There's so much there. You talk at grade level with each classroom, they've got performance data for students and kids, whether those be on screeners or graded items. Data is just so all-encompassing that depending on the building level that we're mentioning or overall system-wide, obviously, assessment is a big one. And I would say that's where we focus outside of perceptual data school improvement, we really focus at classroom on various assessment data.

To draw the most accurate conclusions and to strategically plan to improve student achievement, participants draw on a number of different data sources, both quantitative and qualitative.



“ We use Acadience [Learning] to measure the basic literacy skills of our K-5 students. We also use MAP Growth as another piece. We look at student referrals and attendance data. We also utilize a universal social-emotional screener with our students to identify needs in those particular areas. And then, as I mentioned, perceptual data from stakeholder surveys from students, staff, and community.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AS EDUCATION PRACTICE



I think MTSS is continuous improvement. There's really not a separation of the two. I think it's again, being able to collect the data, being able to organize the data, being able to analyze the data, that helps make decisions with moving forward in our continuous improvement process.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AS A CONCEPT

All interviewees expressed confidence in their understanding of the Continuous Improvement Process and their use of data to strategically inform their educational decisions. Further, they see little difference in the approach to CI across levels - ESUs, districts, and schools.



“I would say continuous improvement is schools collecting and utilizing various data sources to make informed decisions to improve learning opportunities for their students. Setting those goals, using that data, making a plan, committing to learning, and coming back to reflect on that frequently.”

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Participants agree that Continuous Improvement is itself a part and process of strategic planning. All participants indicated they approach Continuous Improvement through data-based decision making and planning. Using data digs, staff meetings, and best practices research, participants navigate the CI process to support plans to improve school proficiency, growth, and culture.



“ We are data driven and values informed. If we have to make a decision, the question is always ‘what's the evidence and how does it align with our values’?

“ At a district level, as an Admin team, we talk together about the needs of our district. We have a school improvement team that meets every other week to discuss agendas, items of importance, action items, but also matters that may come before us, that come to our team via other members of our staff that may have a suggestion, may look at an area of inefficiency where we can improve or even from survey results. But it does start at the top with the leadership. Our administrator team has a large role in making sure we're covering what needs covered. Our School Improvement team has given us valuable input. And myself being a member of both, I try to coordinate both of those efforts.

ALIGNMENT OF CI AND MTSS

“ MTSS, I just feel like, just fits exactly into the continuous improvement. It's not two separate things. Really, looking at that as one. One thing that we've really made an effort to do is really help schools with their teaming process and their structure and making sure that teams -- instead of having a separate CI team, MTSS team, ICLD team, and PBIS team -- really bringing that into one because we're all working towards the same goals, right?”

Participants see a direct alignment between CI and MTSS and viewed these initiatives as working in tandem. All participants mentioned a familiarity with MTSS and most indicated they were fully utilizing MTSS to address their CI plan.



“ We spent some time calibrating our continuous improvement support. We proposed that continuous improvement is the plate, and all of the other initiatives in the school should fit on that plate somewhere, but it's not one more thing. But during our conversation, we said, is MTSS the plate? And does continuous improvement fit on the MTSS plate? And what we ultimately decided was that continuous improvement was the plate for us, and that MTSS is a component of it.”

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT TOOLS AND PRACTICES



We have data protocols. I know we've used Victoria Bernhardt's book, which NDE also recommends. So, we use some data tools from there, Data Into Action, Daniel Venables work. We've done some work with him. And so, we actually have some data protocols that we have used, and we build those into our PLCs, so they're actually part of the PLC process, and we try to keep those fairly consistent

DATA ANALYSIS TOOLS

“ NWEA and MAPS really gives us a pretty good guide in terms of helping to see benchmarks. NSCAS growth, is working and becoming better, and really almost we're very close, probably next school year of having good scores. As term proficiency levels, DIBELS is fantastic in doing the same thing. And when it comes to MTSS, that's an opportunity for us to look at tiered kids and see where they fall based on a lot of those other indicators

When reflecting on the tools and resources they use to analyze data, participants frequently cited the work of Victoria Bernhardt and the use of data analytics tools like eduCLIMBER, when the district can afford them.



“ *Within our organization, we have a continuous improvement plan that we help schools utilize. And it's got huge data charts that we can use. We have different examples of electronic storage units. I have some schools that use ... Schoolzilla is one of them. eduCLIMBER is another platform that some schools are using. I know that they're kind of pricey, so I would say most of my rural schools are just utilizing our continuous improvement plan that just has those data charts, and then we just kind of support them as we dig through that and analyze.*

DIFFERING USE OF NDE RESOURCES

The size, location, and resources of a district largely determine whether participants access and use NDE resources or third-party resources. Larger, more well-resourced districts had many of their own tools, procedures, and district professionals in place to work on CI whereas smaller and more rural districts relied more on the training, advice, tools, and resources of the NDE.



“Besides just kind of the format of the frameworks for continuous improvement, I think that's just kind of our guideline on our external visit here in March, what are they going to be looking for in a format that, in some ways, is kind of checking off the box? What is helpful in that view is that it does give you some guidelines and things that schools should have that is good practice.”

“We're the third-largest school district in the state, and so we have people and processes and resources that probably drive our things or our process more than what we would get from the state. I will say that the continuous improvement process, the teams that will go out, that will come in and observe and reflect, that's a process at the state level that has been very, very helpful. But when it comes to other tools - I'll be completely honest - I don't go to the website that often to do that just because I think we have our own internal processes”

POSITIVE RESPONSES TO NDE SUPPORT

Participants overwhelmingly praised the support they received from NDE, no matter their level of need and engagement.



“ We use a lot of the tools that the state provides such as the continuous improvement handbooks, the continuous improvement action plans, access to continuous improvement webinars, continuous improvement-- the staff, the accreditation staff are great to work with at NDE.

“ *I think the NDE is going in a great direction. They're trying to provide an accreditation model that has links in it that really are CI links and not accreditation links. They really are there to help with the continuous improvement process.*

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION



Each of our districts are primarily in the driver's seat of their own destiny. Each of them has a continuous improvement team comprised of administrators and educators, and I think they collaborate really well to make district-level decisions.

COLLABORATION

“In my opinion, I think that continuous improvement should definitely be led through a team effort, through shared leadership, not a singular person, not just one administrator or just the admin team. I truly think that you have to have those teacher leaders that are a part of it, district leadership team, and then school-level leadership teams that are representative of the different departments and have the right people sitting at the table to kind of pull all the voices from the school.”

Collaboration, whether internally in schools, districts, and ESUs, or between these levels, or with the NDE directly, is foundational to participants for identifying, understanding, and achieving the goals and outcomes.



“I just want to stress that it is a real collaborative effort through that feedback cycle of administration, district, teachers, our paraprofessionals, all having input into that work and how we come to those collective decisions.”

COMMUNICATION

Explaining the relevance and importance of CI in supporting the execution of strategic plans with fidelity requires intentional communication and information sharing.



“We are at the school by their invitation, and so we want to ensure that we have working relationships with them, that they trust us. And so, decisions I make are to ensure that our schools understand that we have expertise, that we are there for their best interest, and also that we customize our services to them.”

“A lot of it is just making sure you're clear and concise with your communication and sharing updates and making sure people have access to the information that they need, access to the tools that they need. I think that's one of the biggest things when asked about how do we share information, it's making sure everyone has access to the information and making sure that it's communicated several times. It can't just be communicated once and hope it's expected to sink in. I think repetition and access.”

SCHOOL SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT: VISION



Progressive growth. I think that as long as you are seeing growth of some sort, that's a success and should be celebrated, whether that's on academic achievement scores, if we're looking at culture and climate, an improvement on those perceptual surveys, or an improvement around social-emotional behavioral learning.

PROFICIENCY AND GROWTH

“Sustain student success. We won't know we've reached deep implementation until we see that. And we see 85 to 90 percent of our students reading proficiently, proficient in math, and I'm seeing that continue through and seeing students graduate, going into different career pathways or schools after that.

“Something to be said about proficiency. Having lots and lots of kids who are proficient at the content is wonderful. But I think there's a lot to be said about growth.

When asked what they believed an “adequate measure of success for school improvement” would be, participants consistently highlighted the proficiency and growth of student achievement outcomes.



“Are you growing? Are you working towards progress in meeting your goals? You might not meet them in a year, but are you working towards that? Are you getting closer to meeting that goal? Are you, like I said, getting a little bit better today than you were yesterday?”

VISION

“ *Continuous improvement is really based on making sure that our students are learning what they need to know and be able to be successful in the real-world post-education, so it's diploma plus one. When we think about that, we are really targeting on ensuring that all of our students have access to high-quality instruction. And this has to happen through systemic process. So, when we think about school improvement, we really focused on a multi-tiered system of support. What's the quality of Tier I instruction that's happening across all of our buildings? What access and supports are there to ensure all students have those opportunities and access and supports in place? We have a district-wide systematic process that we engage in continuous school improvement processes.*



Participants envision a quality CI implementation as a precursor for student success and their goals for preparing their students for not only immediate academic success but also in their future lives after graduation.



“ *Having good structures put in place to help all students be successful in all areas: social-emotional, behavior, academic, and really looking at those processes that are put in place. And do you have a multi-tiered layer of support in place for all of those aspects for all of your students?*

SCHOOL SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Consistency, right now. I'm going to say consistency across the board. One, because of all the testing, COVID, all those things. But then at some of the schools, just consistency with the teacher, among grade level teachers. Even if I'm the only fifth grade teacher, if I don't understand the standards well, then I might not be assessing exactly what needs to be assessed or at the depth that I need it. If I'm trying to hurry through the materials to get to something else, I think that becomes a hurdle in the data, because it's probably not complete.

INCONSISTENT DATA

Inconsistent and messy data, often the only data available, was cited as a barrier to understanding longitudinal student achievement and implementing future strategic planning.



- “ The last few years have been really hard because we've gone from high accountability to, "Oh, backing off because of all the things we've been through," which was great at the time. We needed it. But that has also created some challenges with having continuity of data sources.
- “ It's really hard with our outcome data right now, just because it's not consistent. And so it's hard to say where kids are when our new NSCAS didn't have cut scores, and it is a pilot. It's just messy. And messy data doesn't always have a true picture of what's happening.

“ *Challenges probably would be consistency, especially, like I said, in a district of our size, principals who are so good - I mean, we have such tremendous principals - but they all like to track their data a little differently. And so, they've created their own spreadsheets of what they want to track. And while that is very useful for them and they love the way that they collect their own data, it is sometimes hard to ensure high integrity of that data and that the data they're looking at is clean data or good data. I think clean data is just a hard one in general. There are so many reasons why sometimes it's hard to interpret what you're looking at.*

CHALLENGE: NEED FOR CLEAR AND SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

Participants expressed a desire for clear and consistent guidelines from NDE on the CI process. Most participants understand the nature and the need for this change but also see it as making their work more difficult.



“ I think our concerns are mostly more at the state level and how do we continue to navigate the changes, because there's been very little continuity that from that.

“ At the state level, things have been fairly fluid. I think with bringing in new staff into the department has its benefits, for sure. Losing people who've been in the department for a long time, it seems like there's been kind of a revolving door that has made it hard to feel like we're really moving in a specific direction. **So, a little bit more, I'm not sure what the right word is, consistency or stability at the department level I think would be helpful.** And even though the airplane has been built, being built in flight for the last 10 years, it is always kind of frustrating that we never land. I wish we could at least land sometime and maybe refuel and maybe get everything, kind of take a breather. I think it's taken its toll on educators statewide. But then there's been so much change in state assessment that baseline data and progress are really not the things that we're talking about anymore. **But it's been difficult to really determine that we are making progress when there's constant change.**

RECOMMENDATION: NDE ORGANIZED PROBLEM SOLVING

“ One thing that I would say that might be helpful is if the **NDE could be a convener of problems of practice**. We can do it on our own, **but it would be really useful if there could be some summits around specific topics that the NDE would like schools to make more progress on.**

For example, if there were a meeting in Omaha or Lincoln that was specific to transitions and specific to the 8th to 9th grade transition, if we had some not abstract, not graduation rate, but specific topics that everyone is struggling with, and we had 10 to 15 districts just come and do some brainstorming around, "What are you doing? What does your data show?" We can do that. We can call each other. We see each other at conferences, **but to have the NDE take the lead on that and almost do an introduction of the research - here's what research says works - and then allow us some guiding questions or time.**

I think there's five or six topics that would fit into AQuESTT, their model within the domains, that they could be the convener and the organizer of some really specific topics. **And then we could send the right person. Like who's the person in our district with the most knowledge of what's working or not working for our 9th graders?** And we could ask other districts, "What data do you pull? How often do you do X, Y, Z for 9th graders?" That would be super fun and helpful.

CHALLENGE: ACCURATE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

“ I would probably say of the entire process, needs assessments are just in general a beast. There are so many different factors. And I think as we help schools, especially with, like, root cause analysis, there are so many factors for even students who have the same what I'll call symptom, right?

Let's say they're failing multiple classes. The reason can be different. And so, I think schools and as a district, we struggle sometimes to really pinpoint what is the root cause that we're trying to solve, because there's so many. So, I would say those needs assessments are really powerful, but there's just so much data.

When diagnosing the needs of their school, district, ESU, or region, most participants found the NDE needs assessments useful and moving in a positive direction, but some participants questioned the validity of the CNA process.



“ Their timing is hard. We actually start our processes in the spring for the following year because principals want to meet with their teams. We do an academic summit with all schools in June. And we do a Leadership Institute in June. So that's our launch for the next year. They don't really start their needs analysis or needs assessment until after their data comes out, which is in the fall. That's too late. We're already enrolling.

THE HUMAN ASPECT OF EDUCATION

Though all participants were actively using student and school data in their work, some leaders were cautious that the mental health, well-being and creativity of staff and students is overshadowed by the burdens of (over) testing and constant review.



“ There's a lack of trust in the student achievement data that's coming their way. The majority of our schools have been very strong in MAP, and some of them are still clinging to it because they feel as though that's the only reliable data they have. And others feel like that's over-testing their kids and are concerned. So huge challenges

“ With school improvement, it becomes more of a numbers game than a people game. And I guess always understanding that these are people and kids and human beings that you're working with, and I think I try to keep that in mind with my staff in terms of continuous improvement isn't-- don't do things that are so burdensome to staff that they're not happy and they're not doing the best that they can do. Don't do things where their teacher creativity sometimes gets shut off.

PARTICIPANTS

The following participants chose to be named in this report.

Joe Wanning - Director of Curriculum and Learning – Umo'ho'n Nation Public Schools

Jim Widdifield – Superintendent – Minden Public Schools

Marci Ostemeyer – Director of Professional Development – ESU7

Megan Dufek – MTSS Coordinator – ESU 8

Nathan Livingston – Principal and Data Representative – Gordon-Rushville HS & SD

Lawrence Tunks – Director of Learning – Hastings Public Schools

Brooke Gebers – Region 3 Support Lead – NeMTSS

Dr. Kelly Georgius – Professional Development – ESU 2

Dr. Toni Palmer – Chief of Leadership and Learning – Grand Island Public Schools

Dr. Sarah Salem – Director of Continuous Improvement and Professional Learning – Lincoln Public Schools

Kellen Conroy – Teaching and Learning Specialist – ESU 1

Jen Madison – Teaching and Learning Director – ESU 4

Andy DeFreece – Director of Elementary and Early Childhood Education – Millard Public Schools

Jeff McQuistan – Staff Development Director – ESU 17



Thank you.

CONTACT

David King

Director, K-12 Research & Professional Services

E: dking@hanoverresearch.com

P: 202.831.0064

🌐 hanoverresearch.com