

TRANSCRIPT

The Promise of Improvement Science: One District's Vision

Audio Interview

LENAY DUNN

This is Lenay Dunn, from the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West). I'm here with Sola Takahashi, also from REL West, and Steve Holmes who's the Superintendent of Sunnyside Unified School District in Arizona to talk about Improvement Science.

So welcome, both of you.

STEVE HOLMES

Thank you.

SOLA TAKAHASHI

Thanks.

LENAY DUNN

Sola, can you give us a brief overview of Improvement Science and how it can be used in education?

SOLA TAKAHASHI

So, Improvement Science is a methodology for tackling complex problems in systems.

One of the really core principles of Improvement Science is this idea that it is a system that produces the outcomes that we see, and it's not about just individuals working harder. Right?

We really have to identify the norms, and structures, and processes that are producing the results that we're seeing.

There's one framework in particular that I want to just talk briefly about, and that's called "The Model for Improvement." It's: What are you trying to accomplish? What changes are you going to introduce to try to accomplish this aim? and, How will you know if these changes are, in fact, improvements?

And the improvement team—the people who are engaged in the work of tackling this particular problem—they come around the table to really agree on the responses to these three questions.

And that in turn connects to these inquiry cycles called PDSA cycles. PDSA stands for Plan, Do, Study, Act.

And it is through these sequence of PDSA cycles that the improvement team really develops confidence around particular change ideas with ultimately the goal of scaling and spreading those effective change ideas to the larger system.

LENAY DUNN

So, the goal is not just making things better on average, but really across classrooms, across schools, and over time, maintaining positive outcomes.

Steve, what drew you to Improvement Science, and what kinds of problems did you want it to help you solve?

STEVE HOLMES

I was definitely intrigued by the idea of really testing this idea of Improvement Science in an area that we really felt needed to be addressed, which was third grade literacy and just early literacy in general.

We've been a school district that's been at the lower end of performance for decades, and so a lot of the work and the engagement of the work and trying to improve performance resulted in the implementation of multiple programs—layers of programs that quite frankly resulted in minimal growth over time.

As a result of that we continue to layer more and more expectations of our teachers to implement more and more programs. But we have not, in my opinion, taken the time to acknowledge the learning that has to happen for us to have sustainable change in an organization.

LENAY DUNN

Can you talk a little bit about how you see Improvement Science specifically working and fitting into that overall vision that you have at your district and how it's integrated with other work that you're doing?

STEVE HOLMES

It resonated well with the theory of action that I had established over time, what I really believed were the leverage for change and improvement and creating a learning organization.

By developing a coherence framework, it allowed us to acknowledge the complexities of the system and acknowledge that it's not a purely linear pathway to improving performance.

As we begin to message the importance of the classroom teacher and acknowledging their expertise, I think this allows us now to overlay this framework into a manageable piece that really relates to being end-user driven and acknowledging that work and helping teachers to have a process by which they actually solve problems on their own quickly, so that they can

actually learn from those experiences and either change or continue to go deeper in both their own learning and the learning of students.

LENAY DUNN

So, what at this point—I know it's early on, but perhaps you have some insights into what's been really promising about this work so far?

STEVE HOLMES

There are some—Great things are happening in each of our schools that we have yet to capitalize on because it's being done by a few select individuals in the school who have knowledge and skills that go untapped because there's not a really good process by which we unveil those things that may be working for them that can be scalable.

SOLA TAKAHASHI

If I had to call out one thing as being really particularly promising to me about this work, it is really about the collective professional agency that develops among teachers, and principals, and school and district staff who engage in this work.

That sense of agency that I see among educators who engage in this work has been really powerful to me, and I think goes towards building that culture of learning that Steve is talking about.

LENAY DUNN

I just want to thank both of you as partners in this work; Sola for bringing your deep expertise in Improvement Science and Steve as the leader in your district bringing clear vision and coherence to the work.

STEVE HOLMES

Thank you.

SOLA TAKAHASHI

Yeah, I'm thrilled to be a part of this work.

LENAY DUNN

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