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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Radically Excellent School Improvement*.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS UNPACKED

Without continual growth and progress,  
such words as improvement, achievement,  
and success have no meaning.

~ Ben Franklin

### FIX THIS, CHANGE THAT

Ben sure had it right that without a focus on growth and progress, everything else is meaningless.

How many meetings have educators been in when this type of statement is uttered in the ethos?: “Our student assessment scores are bad, and we need to fix them.” As if declaring it will magically reveal the land of absolute solutions. Instead, educators lower their heads, avoid eye contact, or look around the room searching for some external factor(s) to point to as the reason for the current state of affairs. Predictably this approach is guaranteed to fall short every single time. So, what approach does work? First, words like *bad* and *fix* should immediately be banned from the schools’ lexicon. Second, help people understand what story the data is telling. Finally, get very clear on what a radically excellent school improvement process is—and what it is not.

### WHAT ARE WE IMPROVING ANYWAY?

At the district level, a highly effective school improvement process [plan] should have a clearly articulated vision of aspiration and balanced reality based on data. It should be comprised of a tightly coordinated set of

interdependencies across the organization, departments, and schools in a unified fashion. The goals should inform each school's plan by a cascading set of common expectations and structures so that effective practices can be implemented inside every classroom. Finally, shared accountability is the standard throughout the organization so that everyone can see themselves as being integral to the process and having ownership for every student.

This dynamic process is meant to keep people focused on the right efforts, but what often happens is that the plan falters after the first few steps. Take for example, the Janesville School District in Wisconsin. During a presentation at the What's Right in Education Gallery Walk in 2021, the leaders described the process used by their district and at each of their twenty-one schools. They described the six-step process (Diagnose, Plan, Implement, Monitor, Adjust, Reflect) and admitted "While [the] schools were great at the first three steps, . . . they struggled with revisiting their plan and monitoring progress to adjust throughout the year. Previously, plans were at least 20 pages long. Often, they sat in a folder unopened until the end of the year." The speakers went on to say that because each school used a different template, communication, collaboration, and implementation barriers occurred. These types of barriers are common across districts, and so using a common template is recommended to help with both form and function.

## WHEN WE KNOW BETTER, WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO BETTER

An effective school improvement process will value interdependency as *the way* for catalyzing equity within and across the system. Moreover, interdependency will be understood to be the unifying foundation that will align and embed the work of the school improvement process. For example, the Human Resources Department could have a shared role with Teaching and Learning regarding the competencies needed to meet the needs of the students in the district. This could include working together on interview questions and the professional development calendar, as well as working with the collective bargaining units to ensure aligned understanding and agreement. This type of interdependency can create the opportunity for meeting the needs of the full continuum of students, including students with disabilities, through a set of strength-based principles, supports, resources, and practices. This dynamic and embedded process can also help meet the legal and ethical responsibilities for ensuring the higher *Andrew F.* (1982) standard.

## THE ROOT OF THE ROOT

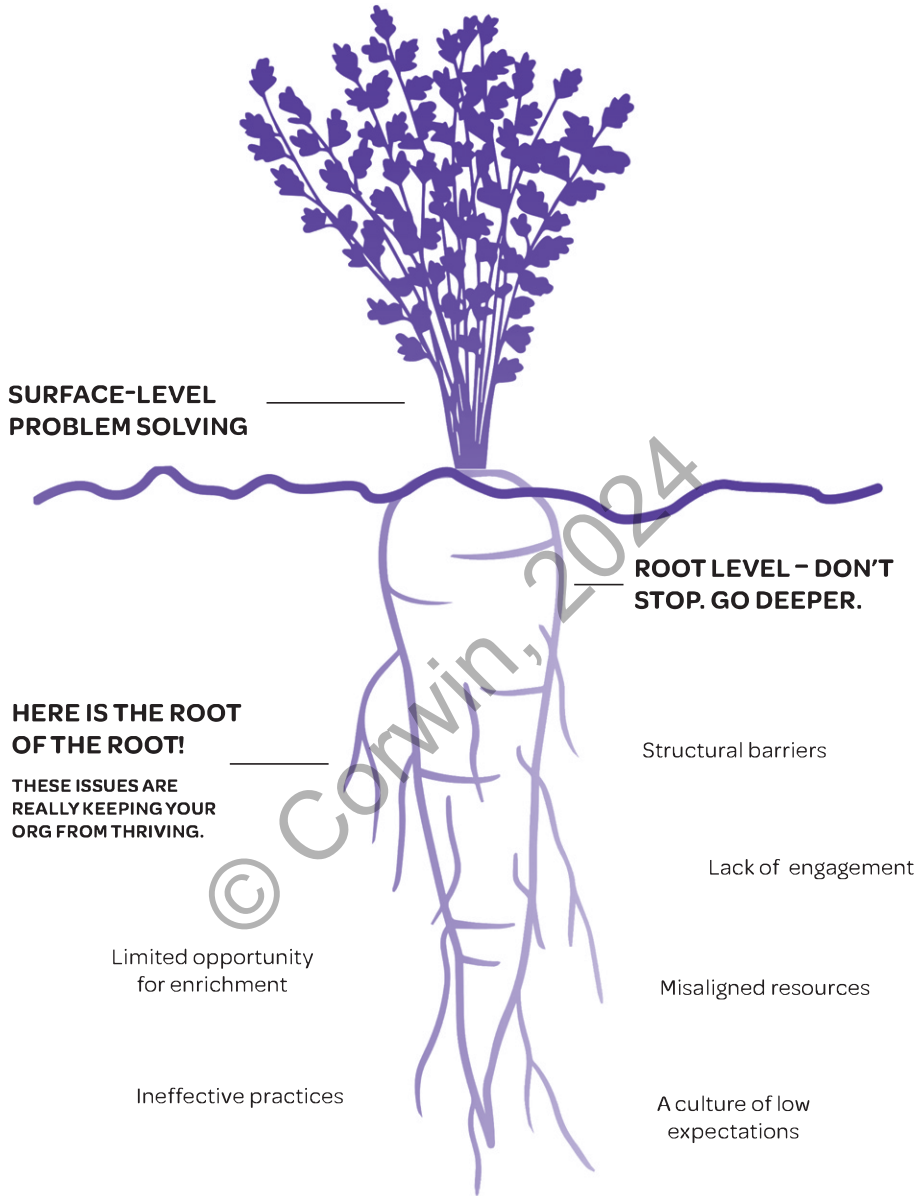
I have encountered various iterations of school improvement plans throughout my work with districts and state departments. Some have been conflated with strategic plans while others have been divorced from the work of education all together. I have also observed educators giving more deference to the template than the data used to inform the foci of the actual plan. Please don't make this mistake. Instead, keep a relentless focus on what matters.

To help teams get to the “root of the root” cause(s) that will inform their school improvement process, an equity analysis must be conducted. This analysis will get to the deep sources of the causal evidence that can lead toward or away from improving outcomes for every student. The Equity Audit is a that type of analysis. It is a quantitative and qualitative data gathering tool that can be used at the district and school level at the beginning of the process and also used as a dynamic monitoring tool. Remember that it is only through monitoring and adjustment that progress and growth are realized. The data gathering tool and accompanying guiding questions are included as an Appendix at the back of this book.

## HOW TO

So how does a district or school get to the root of the root? The answer is straightforward, but it will demand courage by asking tough questions and by accepting the truths that are revealed. Resist the temptation to identify the cause during the first round of analysis. Instead go deeper with the analysis. Challenge the team from using the phrase, “The student. . .” to assign the reasons (causes) for the achievement results. Instead, have the team members ask this pivotal question, “How are the adults across the system and the practices within the classroom accounting for the data?” Using a carrot to illustrate this point, people might be satisfied when they pull up the root vegetable and never consider what contributed to it being delicious. So let's go deeper and find out. There was a whole network of roots deep below that supported the development of the carrot and even some that stunted its growth. The soil had the correct nutrients. There was sufficient water to quench the main roots as well as the ancillary root system, and a high-quality source of sunlight that fostered the conversion of sun to energy. All these factors enabled the carrot to thrive and grow. It is this level of analysis that members of the school improvement team should commit to perform so that a responsive and nimble improvement process can be reimaged and engineered. The root of the root figure (see [Figure 1.1](#)) illustrates the level of analysis needed to comprehensively align resources and interdependencies within and across the organization so that a cohesive process can be relentlessly designed, implemented, and used to grow students.

Figure 1.1 • *The root of the root*



Source: Casi Hall Creative, LLC.

Here are the general steps of a root of the root analysis:

1. Collect the data for each condition of the Equity Audit.
2. Analyze what the causal data indicates.
3. Identify the root cause(s).
4. Don't stop! Ask deeper questions about the cause(s) for the causal data.
5. Identify the structural antecedents of the deeper causal data.
6. Identify one or two high-leverage actions that will address the antecedent causal data.

## EXAMPLE

The following example illustrates how to conduct a root of the root analysis for the improvement process.

### Academic Data of English Learner (EL) and Students With Disabilities (SWD)

- 76% of students limited or basic in reading
- 82% of students limited or basic in math
- Discipline referrals include a high number of cell phone use infractions
- High number of student absences for EL and SWD

### Root Cause(s)

- There is a culture of low expectations
- Limited opportunity for enrichment
- Lack of student engagement

### Root of the Root Cause(s)

- Remediation is the focus rather than acceleration
- Ability grouping is the structural policy and practice
- Lack of collaboration among teachers and related services for codesigning engaging lessons using relevant materials
- Lack of a nimble system of support

## ANALYSIS

It may be tempting to say it is the students' fault for the low achievement data. They don't show up, they are on their cell phones during instruction, they are "EL and SWD." Resist this misplaced assumption. Instead, persist in examining

why students aren't in class or why they are on their phones. Do students have the requisite skills? Students who don't possess the requisite background knowledge can lead to lack of engagement, being checked out inside or outside the classroom. Does *every single person* in the organization have high expectations for every student regardless of background or circumstance? If there is a culture of low expectations, especially for students furthest away from access and opportunity, then student growth will remain stagnant, and gaps will widen. Are there policies (structural antecedents) in place that are creating unrealistic constraints for providing high quality instruction? If pacing guides take precedence over meeting the basic needs of students, then there will be no sustainable improvement. By using the data from the Equity Audit, the district or school can identify the root of the root causes so that the right focused actions and supports can be implemented, monitored, and adjusted in real time.

## THE FIVE CONDITIONS

The best way to get to those deeper root of the root causes is by using an equity audit such as the one provided at the back of this book. The purpose of the Equity Audit is to examine the level of implementation across the five conditions for creating a comprehensive school improvement process.

The five conditions for creating a comprehensive, equity-focused district and school improvement process include the following descriptions:

1. General and Social Characteristics

The purpose of this condition is to understand the district as a whole. It provides a meaningful way to understand the context. It provides a connected understanding of who the students are and the educators who are responsible for ensuring learning.

2. Students

The purpose is to measure the conditions under which students have access to high-quality educational and socioemotional instruction and supports. It examines the degree to which a high-quality, rigorous curriculum and a system of support is implemented within the classroom and across disciplines.

3. Practices

The purpose of this condition is to understand the adult competencies related to the practices of teaching and learning, as well as socioemotional, cultural, and linguistic competencies to address opportunity gaps. It

identifies the effective practices that benefit all students, including students with disabilities.

#### 4. Resources

The purpose of this condition is to assess the human, fiscal, and material resources that support students, families, teachers, school, and district. It assesses the degree of aligned resources across and within the district and school(s).

#### 5. Governance

The purpose of this condition is to determine the alignment of governance across and within the system that support the development of teacher, principal, and district leadership.

*Source:* Equity Audit © included in the Appendix

Now it's your turn. Utilize the resources available across the district and within each department to complete the equity audit. Use the steps of the root of the root analysis to identify the true causes and structural inequities so that specific high-leverage actions can be taken. The results will serve as the foundations of your radically excellent school improvement process.

### Turning Ideas Into Action

- Ask each member of the improvement team, to write down what's holding their school back from making radical improvement? Remember, the term *radical* is meant to convey ambitious improvement and a tireless focus for ensuring every student grows, thrives, and achieves.
- Commit to completing the Equity Audit. After completing the *General and Social Characteristics* condition, the team can go to its school's most pressing condition or simply complete it in order.
- Conduct a root of the root analysis of the data collected for each condition. Look for emergent trends across conditions.
- Identify two high-leverage actions that can focus the district and school improvement process on the right causal data. This data will be monitored and adjusted using real-time data on a routine basis and documented within a clear and dynamic improvement template.