

Action Guide for Educators: Coherence

As we learned in [The Opportunity Makers](#), trajectory-changing schools ensure all efforts fit together. This guide helps school leaders build a unified instructional program and set priorities that are clear to all members of the school community, including teachers, students, and caregivers.

The Case for Coherence

Trajectory-changing schools ensure that every piece of the school's instructional program—curriculum, materials, interventions, and assessments—is thoughtfully designed and explicitly linked. Once they have the right instructional pieces in place, leaders ensure that staff, students, and caregivers understand how it all fits together and the role they play. Schools build coherence in three interrelated areas:

- **Coherence in Class:** Students start with Tier 1 content in both classwork and interventions. The schools strongest in coherence use the same materials and curriculum for both core classes and intervention, giving students more repetition with challenging material.
- **Coherence at School:** Leaders clear space for teachers to focus. They continuously articulate and reinforce their focus and remove obstacles that get in the way. Everyone understands what they're working toward and is prepared to do their part.
- **Coherence at Home:** Caregivers know where students stand and how to help. They know exactly where their children stand academically and how to help.

As a result, students' experiences are logical, unified, and geared toward grade-level content. Every part of their day fits together like interlocking puzzle pieces. Everything they learn in one class helps with the next. Everything they practice at home helps at school. They know what to expect and how to succeed.

Where to Start

Rather than launching one-off initiatives, school leaders must start an ongoing improvement cycle that leads to sustained change. This guide is built on the four-part improvement cycle we saw in trajectory-changing schools:

- **Assess the student's experience of instructional coherence.** Leaders should work to understand which school conditions support coherence by taking a self-assessment and collecting input from students and caregivers. From there, schools can identify areas for growth.
- **Choose a focus area.** Coherence across classes, across the school, and at home all build on each other. Schools should start by ensuring that all learning spaces are aligned with grade-level learning. From there, schools can work on implementing the instructional program well.
- **Pick a catalyzing practice.** Each section suggests several small practices that reinforce the focus area, along with tools from trajectory-changing schools. We recommend adopting one or two practices at a time and using them consistently to build new habits.
- **Measure progress and adapt.** Schools should start small, monitor their progress, and adapt as they go. They can lean into practices that work and drop the ones that don't. As one focus area is woven into the fabric of the school, leaders can pick another and start the cycle over again.

Below, we offer a process to follow and practical tools to use. **It's meant to be a springboard, not a checklist.** Educators should choose what's relevant to their school community and adapt as needed.

Assess the Student’s Experience of Instructional Coherence

Reflect on current conditions.

We recommend that leaders review TNTP’s [Instructional Coherence Guide](#) and take the [Conditions for Coherence: Self-Assessment](#) to analyze the current conditions that promote coherence. This self-reflection does not determine whether a system is coherent at a moment in time, but it prompts reflections on six domains that support coherence:

- Vision of excellent instruction and the student experience;
- High-quality instructional resources;
- Equity-centered policies and practices;
- Organizational and people management;
- Workforce recruitment, development, and support; and
- Authentic community and stakeholder engagement.

Resources

[Instructional Coherence Guide](#) and [Conditions for Coherence: Self-Assessment](#) (TNTP)

Collect input from students and caregivers.

To dig deeper into trends, schools can survey students and caregivers, conduct focus groups, and spend time in class with students. Surveys allow you to collect broader input; focus groups allow you to ask more specific questions and students to share opinions and examples. For example, surveys can tell you that students understand how the coursework connects across classes; focus groups can tell you why.

Sample survey items for students:

- I know what I need to do to be successful in my classes.
- All my teachers expect I will succeed, even on challenging assignments.
- My teachers show us how the work we are doing connects to my real life.
- The extra support I get in small groups helps me to be ready for the lessons my teacher teaches to the whole class.

Sample survey items for caregivers:

- My child’s school has let me know how to support my child’s learning at home.
- My child’s school has let me know what my child should be learning at grade level.
- My child’s teachers have let me know whether my child is performing above, at, or below grade level.

Resources

[Student Experience Focus Group Protocol](#) and [Caregiver Experience Focus Group Protocol](#) (TNTP)

3. Communicate priorities for coherence.

Schools should set an explicit goal to create coherence. Communicate the priorities for coherence to school staff, students, families, and community members. Name areas of strength and growth based on the student and caregiver input and assessment of current practices.

Coherence in Class

To create a coherent experience for students, quality Tier 1 content should be the anchor for all learning spaces. Intervention support should directly align to the work happening in the core classroom.

Catalyzing Practice: Plan Tier 1 and intervention together.

Create structures for teachers to plan for Tier 1 and intervention time as interconnected components rather than isolated blocks. Directly connecting Tier 1 and intervention helps students transition seamlessly between the two, building their confidence. To understand your starting state, you can ask the reflection questions in [Planning for Coherence Across Learning Spaces](#).

- **Use the same materials and curriculum.** Whenever possible, draw from the same materials and curriculum in both Tier 1 and intervention. Most curriculum materials embed additional lessons, resources, and readings to support student access to grade-level content. Set the expectation that these resources are the first stop to provide additional support to students.
- **Pre-teach Tier 1 content.** Create opportunities for students who need extra support to preview their Tier 1 instructional concepts in smaller group settings before seeing them in class. This allows students to work through misconceptions proactively, build the necessary vocabulary, and spend additional time with grade-level materials.
- **Create collaboration between Tier 1 and intervention teachers.** Prioritize regular co-planning meetings for teachers across learning spaces. Allocate time and create systems that allow teachers to share lessons plans and student performance data across Tier 1 and intervention.

Resources

For guidance on implementation, please refer to the following resources:

[Action Guide for Educators: Consistency](#) (TNTP). See sections on consistent content and collaboration.

[Grade-Level Planning Meeting Guide](#), adapted from New Heights Academy Charter. See planning meeting protocols with both Tier 1 and intervention teachers present.

Coherence at School

In trajectory-changing schools, everyone in the school community understands what they're working toward and the roles they play.

Catalyzing Practice 1: Set one or two school-wide priorities.

Set just one or two clear, specific priorities for the school year. All members of the school community—including educators, students, and caregivers—should understand the year's priorities and how they are expected to contribute. Choosing to elevate one or two priorities means deprioritizing many others. To clear space for sustained attention on the top priorities, develop a plan for each deprioritized area that keeps the work moving forward with fewer resources.

Catalyzing Practice 2: Spend most of the time on those priorities.

Focus areas come to life in the way leaders set and reinforce daily priorities. Most teacher and leader time should be spent working on and discussing those one or two priorities. Teachers and leaders should have narrow goals that align to the focus areas and concrete actions to take. Everyone should know exactly what is expected, how to execute it, and how they will be held accountable.

This seems straightforward in theory but often falters in action, given the many competing demands of running a school. Leaders' ability to prioritize is what often what sets trajectory-changing schools apart.

Catalyzing Practice 3: Stop initiatives and activities that do not align with school goals.

To create space for teachers to focus, look for ways to do less. School leaders should actively look for ways to reduce duplicated or distracting initiatives. For example, new training might be valuable, but if it

pulls time away from the core school priority, it jeopardizes coherence. While state or school improvement requirements are often non-negotiable, there may be ways that schools can meet the spirit of the requirements in a way that supports school priorities.

Resource

[Goals and Priorities Audit \(TNTP\)](#)

In Action: Elementary Case Study

PK–5 | Florida

This is not one of the trajectory-changing schools studied in The Opportunity Makers.

In the fall of 2021, a Florida elementary school engaged in a school turnaround to dramatically improve student achievement results. The principal knew that the school team needed to focus only on the strategies that mattered most: effective implementation of the district’s high-quality instructional materials and a commitment to weekly observation and feedback cycles.

At the beginning of the year, the principal shared those priorities with his manager, the district’s director of transformation and school improvement. In his check-ins with his manager, he identified district meetings or mandates that threatened to distract him or his teachers from those two priorities.

For example, the principal showed his manager that district principal meetings were cutting into his time for observation and feedback with his team and into time set aside for lesson internalization. The principal also requested that his teachers be exempt from the districtwide professional learning initiative that year on improving teacher clarity, pointing out that his teachers needed to focus on lesson internalization and would likely not be able to juggle improvement in both areas at the same time.

Because the principal and his manager were both creative and flexible in their thinking, they were able to clear the field for teachers and leaders to be able to focus their time and attention on what matters most—and it paid off. In 2022, the elementary school grew nine points on its School Report Card score, reflecting significant growth in student learning.

Coherence at Home

Trajectory-changing schools do not leave the investment and involvement of caregivers to chance. They ensure caregivers are not only informed but also actively involved in their children’s education.

Catalyzing Practice 1: Make explicit commitments with caregivers to support student learning.

Trajectory-changing schools codify shared expectations and commitments. They prioritize clear, open communication about students’ progress and challenges, ensuring caregivers are not only informed but also actively involved in their children’s education.

Consider drafting a set of written expectations that educators and caregivers can agree to and revisit throughout the year. This could look like caregivers and educators signing a shared agreement on everyone’s role in student success. It could also look like standing agenda items for check-ins at caregiver-teacher conferences or other family engagement touchpoints.

Catalyzing Practice 2: Ground caregiver interactions in student work and data.

Caregivers should have an objective, accurate understanding of where their children stand and what they need to make progress. This should include transparent, easy-to-read updates on students' academic progress, including students' performance relative to grade-level expectations and individual growth goals. Schools should use student work and data to drive check-ins, including caregiver-teacher conferences and informal updates on student progress. One way to ensure that students' voices are elevated is to encourage and prepare students to lead these check-ins with their families.

Catalyzing Practice 3: Equip caregivers with simple ways to practice at home.

Trajectory-changing schools draw on caregivers' knowledge of their children, build their involvement, and make it easy for caregivers to support their children's learning in the most meaningful ways. In caregiver-teacher conferences, schools can ask caregivers to come to the meeting with hopes for their student and solicit caregiver input on goals for the student and intervention strategies. When students are behind, educators should set a concrete action plan to help them catch up that includes accessible activities (like shared reading exercises) that caregivers can do with students at home.

Resource

[Caregiver Engagement Meeting Guide](#), adapted from Van Buskirk Elementary

About TNTP

As a leading education nonprofit, TNTP works side by side with educators, system leaders, and communities across 39 states and more than 6,000 districts nationwide to reach ambitious goals for student success. Our vision pushes beyond school walls, catalyzing cross-sector collaboration to create pathways for young people to achieve academic, economic, and social mobility. Read more at tntp.org/makers-connect

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