

Action Guide for Educators: Consistency

As we learned in *The Opportunity Makers*, trajectory-changing schools deliver consistently good instruction and minimize the variation between classrooms. This guide helps educators build consistency through rigorous content, data-driven collaboration, and regular reinforcement. It is designed for school-based teams, including teachers, school leaders, and other instructional staff.

The Case for Consistency

In the seven schools studied in *The Opportunity Makers*, the average lesson we observed in trajectory-changing schools was rated good or strong in 9 out of 10 classrooms, and very few lessons were poor. Across all classrooms, the steady accumulation of good lessons—not unattainably perfect ones—sets trajectory-changing schools apart. Schools build consistency in three interrelated ways:

- **Consistent Content:** All students do the same grade-level work with different supports. Students at all learning levels work on worthy, grade-appropriate content, with support to access it if needed. Schools have an adopted curriculum in math and reading, and most teachers use it most of the time.
- **Consistent Collaboration:** Teachers work in structured teams to improve instruction. Professional learning communities analyze student data, identify ways to meet student needs, and apply strategies in class the next day. It's a continuous, school-wide improvement loop.
- **Consistent Reinforcement:** Instructional leaders maintain a simple, shared focus. Leaders name foundational instructional practices, reinforce them with simple routines, and monitor them consistently.

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 instruction.** Schools should work to understand how students experience instruction by collecting student input and auditing classrooms with an instructional framework or data-gathering tool. From there, schools can identify areas for growth.
- **Choose a focus area.** Consistent content, collaboration, and reinforcement build on each other. Grade-level content is the fastest, most effective way to set a consistent floor for quality instruction. From there, schools can focus on addressing variation among classrooms.
- **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 Instruction

When assessing instruction, we often jump straight to classroom observations. Observations are necessary and valuable, but observations alone cannot capture the experiences of the students in our classrooms. In addition to observations, we recommend collecting direct input from young people. Schools can choose one or more of the following approaches to deepen their understanding of instruction.

Conduct student surveys.

We recommend collecting direct input from students to understand the starting state of instruction. Schools can ask students four items from [TNTP’s Insight Survey](#).

- My teacher expects that I will succeed, even on challenging assignments.
- My teachers take time to make sure I understand what we are learning in class.
- I have to really think about my math assignments, not just use problem-solving tricks.
- My teachers expect me to be able to explain my thinking in writing.

For a more comprehensive assessment, schools can consider using the full [Insight Survey](#), which collects student and caregiver input on academic expectations, as well as teacher and leader perceptions.

Conduct student focus groups.

To dig deeper into trends, schools can run student focus groups and spend time in class with students. Focus groups allow leaders to ask more specific questions and students to share opinions and examples. For example, surveys can tell you that students feel supported by their school; focus groups can tell you why.

Focus groups do not need to include every student or cover every topic. Instead, schools can interview smaller, representative groups of students and focus on trends raised in the student surveys. In research for *The Opportunity Makers*, we asked students to reflect on their academic goals, in-school and out-of-school support, and school experiences (like their favorite lesson or a time their teacher helped them learn).

Resource:

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

Observe and assess current instruction.

To understand the current level of quality and variation between classrooms, use a common tool to assess instruction. Schools should assess both lesson **quality** (How many lessons are poor, good, and great?) and **variance** (What is the spread of poor, good, and great?). There are several ways to achieve this:

- Use TNTP’s [classroom observation protocol](#). TNTP used a modified version of this rubric to observe the classrooms in *The Opportunity Makers* that included additional domains for bilingual instruction (e.g., language scaffolds), culturally sustaining practices (e.g., identity affirming), scaffolds, and feedback to students.
- Use an instructional walk-through tool that gauges evidence-based instruction, access to grade-level content, and student work analysis. Avoid using tools that are only designed to measure teacher input, not grade-level content or student work. The student work analysis should link to the observation tool by specifically asking:
 - Is the student work aligned with classroom instruction?
 - Does the student work meet the demands of the grade-level standards?

- Do students meet the demands of the assignment?

For a more comprehensive assessment of consistent instruction and other trajectory-changing focus areas, schools can consider [engaging TNTP](#) as a thought partner.

Reflect on current school practices.

All schools should have already taken TNTP's [Baseline Assessment](#). Now, use the assessment data, observation data, and student input to reflect on how existing school policies and practices enhance or detract from consistency. Note the strengths and gaps in consistent content, collaboration, and reinforcement. Suggested reflection questions include:

- **Consistent content:** When do students have access to grade-level content? When do they not? How is the use of consistent grade-level materials and their impact on student learning measured and monitored?
- **Consistent collaboration:** What collaborative structures are currently in place? Are they focused on student learning and adjusting instruction? Which structures prompt discussions about student learning? How can collaborative structures become more student-centered?
- **Consistent reinforcement:** What practices are we monitoring for consistency across classrooms, and which need additional monitoring, either daily or weekly? How do we ensure that monitoring leads to instructional improvement? How do we support teachers in making progress toward goals?

Use this reflection to select an initial focus for consistency. When in doubt, invest first in rigorous content and build to the other areas.

5. Communicate priorities for consistency

Schools should set an explicit goal to create consistency and to reduce the extent to which the quality of instruction varies between classrooms. Communicate the priorities for consistency to school staff, students, families, and community members. Name areas of strength and growth based on the student input, observation data, and assessment of current practices.

Consistent Content

All students must have access to consistent, grade-level learning opportunities. There are three options to increase access to grade-level work, listed from most effective to least effective:

- Catalyzing Practice 1: Adopt and implement high-quality instructional materials (preferred);
- Catalyzing Practice 2: Anchor practice and coaching in a shared instructional tool; or
- Catalyzing Practice 3: Adopt, monitor, and support one core instructional practice.

The best starting point is to provide high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) through a quality curriculum. In this scenario, a district or school has an adopted curriculum or can adopt one.

High-quality instructional materials provide access to grade-level work and are key to creating a consistent content experience across classrooms. However, not all districts or schools have an adopted curriculum or can adopt a new one right now. Instead, they may provide pacing guides for specific standards or recommend resources for teachers to use, which are distinct from high-quality instructional materials and do not provide consistent access to grade-level content across classrooms. In this situation, we recommend that schools use Catalyzing Practices 2 or 3 to increase access to grade-level learning opportunities.

Catalyzing Practice 1: Adopt and implement a high-quality curriculum.

Nationwide, less than 20 percent of the materials currently used in classrooms nationwide align to grade-level standards,¹ reducing the opportunity for students to do grade-level work. High-quality instructional materials are content-rich, standards-aligned, and anchored in research best practices.² When these materials are used well, they create more consistent content across classrooms and allow teachers to focus on how they're teaching rather than what they're teaching.

For schools that can adopt a quality curriculum in priority subject areas, strong implementation is key. As national studies have shown, successful adoption must be approached as an ongoing change effort supported by professional learning and coaching.³ The goal is not that all teachers apply a set of materials with strict fidelity. Rather, it is that teachers and leaders have the knowledge and capacity to apply the materials in a way that creates a more equitable learning experience for students.

Catalyzing Practice 2: Anchor practice and coaching in a shared instructional tool.

This is our recommended approach for schools and systems that are not in a place to adopt or implement a high-quality curriculum now. Instead, they can use an evidence-based instructional observation tool to set a baseline for instruction and provide coaching and support aligned to growth on the rubric.

An observation tool should include indicators that assess these areas:

- **The learning ecosystem:** The extent to which all students are viewed as assets in the culture of their learning environment; their experiences, languages, and backgrounds are respected and reflected throughout the classroom.
- **High-quality content:** The extent to which students are provided scaffolded opportunities to engage with grade-level, standards-aligned content.
- **High-quality instruction:** The extent to which educators use research and evidence-based pedagogical approaches in the observed content area.
- **Student ownership:** The extent to which students are responsible for doing the thinking and speaking/writing in the classroom and are provided the necessary scaffolds to do so.

Resource:

[Classroom Observation Protocols](#) (TNTP)

¹ See EdReports. (2020). *The State of Instructional Materials Market: 2019 Report*; and *COVID-19 Planning Resources to Support the Use of High-Quality Instructional Materials*.

<https://www.edreports.org/resources/article/covid-19-planning-resources-to-support-the-use-of-high-quality-instructional-materials>

² Learning First. (2018). *What We Teach Matters*. <https://learningfirst.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/What-we-teach-matters-FINAL-for-publication-15-Nov.pdf>

³ Kaufman, J. H., Doan, S., Prado Tuma, A., Woo, A., Henry, D., & Lawrence, R. A. (2020). *How Instructional Materials are Used and Supported in U.S. K–12 Classrooms: Findings from the 2019 American Instructional Resources Survey*. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License.

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-1.html

Catalyzing Practice 3: Adopt, monitor, and support one anchor instructional practice.

When curriculum and instructional tools aren't an option, start here. Select one core instructional practice to implement consistently (such as "students will write daily in all subjects") and track your progress. This approach provides a small-scale impact. However, it can help with basic movement toward academic outcomes and goals.

In Action: Center City Public Charter Schools, Brightwood PK3-8 | Washington, D.C.

Center City PCS Brightwood played the long game on curriculum adoption. When the network adopted a high-quality math curriculum in 2016, school leaders assumed it would take three years for teachers to fully internalize it. They set staff expectations accordingly: The switch would be bumpy, but they'd see the full potential of the curriculum once students had been using it since kindergarten.

At first, Brightwood invested in professional development to ensure that teachers were making the best choices when customizing lessons. The learning curve was steep. Students took a while to learn the new methods. Teachers, in response, cut back on student work time and tweaked the lessons to make them easier, not yet confident that students could meet the higher bar.

Principal Westerman knew it was critical that all students were exposed to high-quality grade-level instruction. He used observations and coaching to change teachers' mindsets and to reinforce that students were up to the challenge. He'd ask: "What are you choosing to leave in and take out? Are you taking out the right things? How can we teach it as is, with support for kids to do what the curriculum is asking?" Over time, teachers raised the bar and released more thinking to the students.

Playing the long game has paid off. Over the past eight years, with a strong curriculum as the foundation, Brightwood has built an outstanding level of consistency in math. In 2023, 93 percent of math lessons observed in *The Opportunity Makers* were rated "strong" and 7 percent were "good." Not a single one was rated "poor."

Consistent Collaboration

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are the driving force to make grade-level learning a daily reality. Anchored in the right data and content, PLCs can catalyze weekly cycles of instructional improvement.

Catalyzing Practice 1: Focus PLCs on effective collaboration.

Most schools have PLCs in some form, but not all drive effective collaboration or improve instruction. At trajectory-changing schools, PLCs focus on teachers understanding the content and students engaging with their learning through academically challenging content. Trajectory-changing schools do this intentionally by shifting practice to execute a change in the student experience. While we suggest starting points for structure and process below, the intentional collaboration matters more than the exact protocol.

Choose a structure. A collaboration team consists of the “teacher of record” and all teachers and support staff that are involved in the students' education, not strictly exclusive to academics. This could include special education teachers, emergent bilingual teachers, and counselors.

- **Grade-level team collaboration:** Typically used for grade levels that are departmentalized. Staff collaborate around a grade level of students that they all teach.
- **Content team collaboration:** Typically used for self-contained classrooms or content areas across grade levels (grade 6–8 math). Staff collaborate on content but do not share students.

Choose a frequency. PLCs should meet weekly (preferred) or every other week. To introduce a new PLC structure, choose a frequency that aligns with current structures for a smooth transition.

Determine the focus: What will the discussion of the PLC center on? Use your approach for rigorous content (above section) to guide this decision.

- **HQIM:** Depending on the point in implementation, consider a focus on intellectual preparation and building up to student work analysis and reflection (see the guides below).
- **Instructional tool:** The PLC focuses on the intervention determined from the instructional tool.
- **Anchor practice:** The PLC focuses on the use of the anchor practice and student outcomes.

Catalyzing Practice 2: Focus data meetings on concrete action.

Most schools look at data to monitor student performance. At trajectory-changing schools, these meetings are frequent, focused, and action-oriented. While data review may happen as part of the PLC structure, teachers may also discuss data individually with leaders and coaches.

In all formats, data is collected and analyzed every one to two weeks so that insights can be applied immediately in the classroom. Participants identify and discuss students in need of additional support, aim to understand their unique needs and challenges, discuss interventions, and develop a concrete game plan.

Resources:

[Lesson Preparation in Professional Learning Communities Guide](#), adapted from Van Buskirk Elementary
[Grade-Level Planning Meeting Guide](#), adapted from New Heights Academy Charter
[Summative Assessment Data Reflection Guide](#), adapted from CE Rose PK–8
[Use of Shared Student Data Guide](#), adapted from Trousedale Elementary

Consistent Reinforcement

Once rigorous content and effective collaboration are in place, schools uphold baseline expectations in all classrooms. As one trajectory-changing school leader put it, “You can’t expect what you don’t inspect.”

Catalyzing Practice 1: Establish or codify foundational expectations.

Trajectory-changing schools explicitly name foundational expectations for what should happen in class. This doesn’t have to be prescriptive. However, codifying baseline expectations helps orient newer teachers and lets all teachers know what to expect from observations and coaching. This could look like having written expectations and guidance available for educators at the beginning of the school year, then revisiting the expectations alongside outcomes throughout the year. This includes:

- **Rigorous content:** What should rigorous content look like? What will leaders be looking for in observations and coaching sessions?

- **Conversations:** What should conversations cover in the PLC and in the classroom? Name the topics and agenda items that should be discussed during PLCs. This should include a mindset for how teachers engage with each other and with and about students. Does this align to your expectations for student belonging?
- **Deliverables:** What deliverables will leaders focus on? If you're focused on increasing student ownership, you might check that the teacher prepared questions or look for the student ownership component of the lesson during observations. This should align to the expectations for rigorous content and your PLC structure.
- **Outcomes:** What can teachers expect from leaders? What feedback and support might they get? How should they see this impact on their instruction, their goals, and student goals?

Catalyzing Practice 2: Establish a regular observation and coaching cycle.

Observations should ensure that the desired practices for content and collaboration are happening with fidelity. Leaders should look for opportunities to reinforce the desired practices and stress progress over perfection. Observations should be baked into leaders' calendars.

However, it's also important to balance observations with coaching. Coaching, not evaluating, is the primary catalyst for change. Following observations, leaders should determine the priority coaching step to support grade-level learning opportunities. This doesn't have to be overly complicated or time-consuming, just focused on the priority practices. Leaders monitor and reinforce priorities in three ways:

- **Leader walk-throughs:** This is the traditional observation and feedback cycle. Schedule your observations to capture the content or practices you're focused on.
 - If you see the initiative meeting expectations in practice, name it and share praise. You do *not* always need to have a "growth area." If they did what was asked, this is great!
 - If you do not see it, address it on the spot. If it warrants more than a quick note or comment, schedule time for a more in-depth coaching conversation.
 - If you see a trend, like several teachers not meeting expectations, make the note that the initiative didn't roll out well and that you may need to adjust your messaging or coaching.
- **Student work analysis:** Pull student work that is representative of the campus' focus area. Here's our recommendation when reviewing student work.
 - If you see evidence of the focus area and students meeting expectations, no additional work is needed; continue to pull student work during walk-throughs as part of your coaching cycle.
 - If you do not see evidence of the focus area, schedule a classroom walk-through to identify what's not sticking for teachers or students. Have teachers review student responses. What misconceptions do students have? Plan to address the content again, with scaffolds as needed.
- **Professional learning communities:** Bring insights from both the walk-throughs and the student work analysis back to the PLC, which is the engine for ongoing improvement.
 - If you see the desired practices in walk-throughs and student work, name and reinforce that in the PLC meetings so that all teachers adopt best practices.
 - If you do not see it, use student work analysis to prompt a conversation on what's not yet working, and generate collective actions steps for change.

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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