# AIR: American Institutes for Research logoCatalyzing Rapid Improvement in Chronically Underperforming Districts

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State System of Support and
Center for District and School Accountability

Lessons From Seven Districts Participating in Massachusetts’ Accelerated Improvement Plan Process

## Introduction

In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) began implementing an Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process as a new approach to catalyze rapid change in seven districts with a long history of underperformance. An external evaluation conducted three years after the AIP process began examined the implementation and impact of the AIP process in these diverse districts, which ranged in size from 1,000 students to more than 12,000 students.

Although student outcomes had not yet improved at the time of the evaluation, some districts reported improvements in teaching practices and increases in district capacity to drive improvement without intensive support from ESE. For example, teachers reported increasing their use of data-based decision making and differentiation in classroom instruction, and school and district leaders indicated feeling more able to develop targeted improvement strategies and use data to monitor the implementation of specific strategies. In fact, several stakeholders interviewed who had experience with other district improvement initiatives felt the AIP process was more effective than similar initiatives, and some pointed specifically to the increased focus of the district plan as the primary reason they believe the process to be more effective than others.

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Data collected through interviews and focus groups with key district- and school-level stakeholders as part of the evaluation revealed several promising practices being employed by districts during the plan development, implementation, and monitoring phases of the AIP process that may contribute to the variation in the effectiveness described and observed by stakeholders. This brief summarizes promising practices as a means of informing and improving district-level improvement processes underway in Massachusetts and other states.

# Approach

Key Components of AIP Process

**Accelerated Improvement Plan:** Districtwide improvement plan that focuses on three or four key objectives to quickly target the instructional core, along with specific strategies to meet the objectives.

**Plan Manager:** Individual or team assigned to the district by ESE who provides intensive support to district- and school-level staff for planning, implementation, and capacity building related to the district’s improvement plan.

**Plan Monitor:** Individual assigned to the district by ESE who participates in regular conversations with district leaders about AIP benchmarks and observes key district activities related to the AIP. The individual also is responsible for public reporting to the district’s school committee two to four times per year.

# Two ESE offices share responsibility for overseeing the AIP process—the State System of Support and the Center for District and School Accountability—reflecting ESE’s philosophy that assistance and accountability are most effective when provided in a synchronized manner. ESE staff from these two offices designed the AIP process to include three key components: an accelerated improvement plan, intense implementation support provided by a plan manager, and frequent public monitoring by a plan monitor.

# The goals of the AIP process are to help underperforming districts: (1) develop and implement systems, structures, and practices that improve teaching and learning for all students; and (2) implement a cycle of inquiry at the district level to continuously reflect on and modify improvement strategies.

In spring and summer 2014, American Institutes for Research (AIR) collected information from key stakeholders in all seven AIP districts to better understand how the AIP process was being implemented and to evaluate its impact on district capacity, teaching practices, and student outcomes to date. For more information about the study and complete findings, see the [full report](http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2015/02AIP-Evaluation.pdf) available on the ESE website.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Promising Practices for Accelerated District Improvement

Results from the evaluation indicate that the impact of the AIP process thus far has varied across participating districts. In light of this information, AIR identified a few promising practices employed by one or more AIP districts at each key phase in the process (plan development, implementation, and monitoring). These promising practices go beyond the [standard expectations for AIP implementation](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/default.html)[[2]](#footnote-2) and have the potential to increase the effectiveness of the AIP process, as well as other similar districtwide improvement initiatives.

### Plan Development

* Gather **wide input** on root causes for underperformance and key areas for improvement. Some districts involved a wide range of key stakeholders, including principals, teachers, school committee members, district leaders, plan manager, and ESE staff, in the improvement plan development process. Bringing together a range of individuals ensures ownership of and commitment to key strategies for improvement at the district, school, and classroom levels. One district leader invited over 100 people to weigh in on the district’s improvement plan, explaining “when these changes happen…at the top of the organization and nobody understands or is part of the process, the whole change becomes ineffective.” Involving stakeholders early on also builds capacity for maintaining a focused improvement plan after ESE external support and monitoring is removed, because participants gain firsthand experience developing a focused plan and measurable benchmarks and goals.
* **Dedicate qualified individuals** to focus and facilitate the planning and implementation.
Some districts used qualified, dedicated external partners (e.g., plan managers) during the plan development process to mentor district staff. A qualified, experienced individual from outside the district brings a fresh perspective and can help critically examine the current state of a district’s strengths and opportunities as well as challenges and barriers. Dedicated facilitators also can push the team to stay focused in the midst of competing priorities. For example, one district worked with the plan manager to conduct a “review of what present systems and structures were in place” and “knowledge around what needs to be in place to support high-quality instruction and learning,” an undertaking that district staff alone could not handle.

*Because of the AIP, one principal now believes that “you have to make a plan, you can’t just wing it, and you have to look at the data to make a plan. What teachers [and principals] perceive to be true…is not always the way it is.”*

### Implementation

* Focus on **clear communication** of goals, strategies, and expectations. Districts that reported making progress clearly communicated expectations for district- and school-level staff early and often regarding implementation of the improvement plan. One district leader noted, for example, that it was “critical” that principals clearly understood the AIP because “they were primarily the people who had to represent the plan at the school.” The plan manager in this district had principals practice explaining, “This is the what, the why, and the how in terms of what [the AIP] means at the school level” to confirm principals’ understanding and to ensure the message would be clearly and consistently communicated across all schools. In another district, the superintendent shared the AIP goals with all teachers on the first day of school and has since visited each school individually to talk with teachers about the AIP.
* Foster **school-level ownership** of the improvement plan and strategies. The most effective districts ensured that principals were invested and supported so that they could take ownership of implementation. For example, one district now requires principals to prepare a weekly staff memo that addresses expected instructional shifts, and two districts now use regular principal meetings primarily to discuss specific strategies and initiatives included in the AIP and to provide professional development related to those strategies.
* Provide **targeted support** to meet principal and teacher needs. Some districts have begun to provide appropriate supports (e.g., resources and professional development) to help staff meet the improvement plan expectations. Many districts added common planning time to school schedules to address new instructional expectations, and some districts provided training to enhance school level data-use practices. Some districts also began using principal meetings to focus on specific AIP strategies, such as using data systems to assess and support learning. One principal said that having “focused use of the time around the topics in the AIP” was most valuable in supporting the principal’s implementation efforts.

*In one district, principals’ meetings now include open discussions of data from all participating schools, a distinct departure from what principals described as the more “private” and “competitive” uses of data in the past. Principals now review data as a group, collaborating on common problems and sharing “what works.”*

### Monitoring

* Seek out **external feedback** on improvement efforts and progress. The AIP process uses an independent observer (e.g., plan monitor) who can challenge the district with tough questions about progress and evidence of progress, provide objective outside perspective, provide feedback and constructive criticism, and act as a sounding board for discussing challenges. One plan monitor said, “I have been there [the district] every month and asked them…questions every month so they know…they are going to be responsible for writing a plan and for getting that plan implemented.” The most effective districts fully leveraged their plan monitor as a resource—not an adversary—who could help them gather and show evidence of progress and think about how to address areas in need of further improvement. One monitor described the “close and trusting relationship” he had formed with district staff.
* Ensure **transparency** throughout process. Effective districts focused on creating transparency by regularly reflecting on and communicating progress to key stakeholders. Some of these districts involved the district’s school committee, in particular, as an active partner in monitoring progress with respect to the AIP. Two districts organized full-day retreats for the superintendent and school committee members to jointly discuss and focus on the AIP, and the superintendent from another district invited school committee members to participate in school learning walks. Staff in several districts reported that since beginning the AIP process, their respective school committees have become better able to communicate with school-level stakeholders and have begun to collaborate and work together toward common goals. One district administrator described using the public goals and increased accountability of the AIP to “drive the culture toward higher expectations” among all stakeholders, including parents and community members.

Across the promising practices, two key themes emerged as critical to ensuring improvement efforts are effective and long-lasting: (1) At every stage of the process, stakeholders **collaborated on and developed a plan to implement a lasting system of improvement** that extended from the district level to schools and classrooms; and (2) Districts established **practices to support continuous cycles of inquiry and improvement and provided relevant resources,** allowing educators in these districts to actively support student success.

1. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2015/02AIP-Evaluation.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/default.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)