MARSHALL CoLab
COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR LASTING CHANGE

Hope is Not a Plan:

Scaling Classroom Interventions to Dramatically Improve Student Outcomes

Issue Brief

Introduction

Imagine being part of a school community where students thrive, teachers feel valued and professionally challenged, leaders provide conditions that support success in every classroom, caregivers endorse and advocate for the school community — and these effects are sustained over time. To make this vision a reality, it is critical to scale effective practices.

Innovation captures the spotlight, but scaling is the key to equity. By ensuring that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, have access to effective instruction, scaling helps address long-standing disparities in our schools. Scaling also empowers teachers with strategies that are proven to work and creates efficiencies in the use of time and resources.

What it Means to "Scale" a Practice

Scaling is often used interchangeably with the constructs of spread or diffusion — but there is a critical distinction. Scaling is the intentional effort to broaden the delivery of an effective practice with the intention of reaching a wider range of the target audience. *Diffusion* refers to the spread of something, often through informal or unplanned means. It happens organically through shared experiences, social connections, and word of mouth.

Coburn (2003) argued that scaling is more complex than just spreading, or broadening the use of effective practices. Spread — expanding the reach of an effective practice — is just one element of the scaling process in addition to the elements of depth, sustainability, and shift in reform ownership. *Depth* refers to "deep and consequential change," meaning shifts have occurred within beliefs and actions of individuals as well as organizations. Sustainability is the ongoing use of an effective practice over time, which maintains the effects of the practice. Finally, a shift in ownership requires the implementing organization to take accountability for necessary supports to enable the use of an effective practice and obtain its intended impacts.

> "By ensuring that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, have access to effective instruction, scaling helps address long-standing disparities in our schools."

Put simply, scaling requires change from the individual implementer level to the organization level. Scaling takes intentional and active strategies, such as developing organizational capacity; generating and communicating strong evidence for the practice; harmonizing and aligning with other priorities and efforts; supporting and building the competency of staff, leaders, and other supporters; advocating with community partners; brokering with key leaders and policy makers; changing policies and procedures — and the list goes on.

Given that it takes a multi-faceted approach involving people and processes at each level of a system, scaling effective practices has long been a struggle in education. Schools often face challenges, including:

- lack of buy-in from educators who may not feel like their contextual knowledge of their students and classroom or instructional expertise are respected;
- inadequate data systems or inability to use data to adapt the practice systematically, as well as monitor and adjust scaling efforts;
- lack of time for training;
- lack of staff foundational skills;
- failure to plan for sustaining successful practices, or failure of organizations to enact policies that support scaling of practices; and
- limited capacity of organizations to support scaling.

(Suhrheinrich et al, 2020; Horner, et al., 2017; Fagan et al, 2019; Asera et al, 2013).

In sum, time, money, coordination, context, and alignment are just a few of the variables that influence or impact the ability of our educational agencies to take a practice to scale.

Overcoming Hurdles to Scale

To address the struggle of scaling, Langley and colleagues (2009) developed a framework to support decision-making on readiness for spreading — and ultimately scaling — based on Roger's diffusion's work. First, several conditions are necessary:

1. The effective practice being scaled is connected to a strategic objective or goal of the school.

2. A diverse and competent team is in place to guide and be accountable for the work.

3. Evidence for the practice's effectiveness has been generated within the implementing context (i.e., tested in different settings with different people and producing expected outcomes).

4. Executive leadership is sponsoring the work by monitoring progress, promoting the work of the team, and resolving barriers.
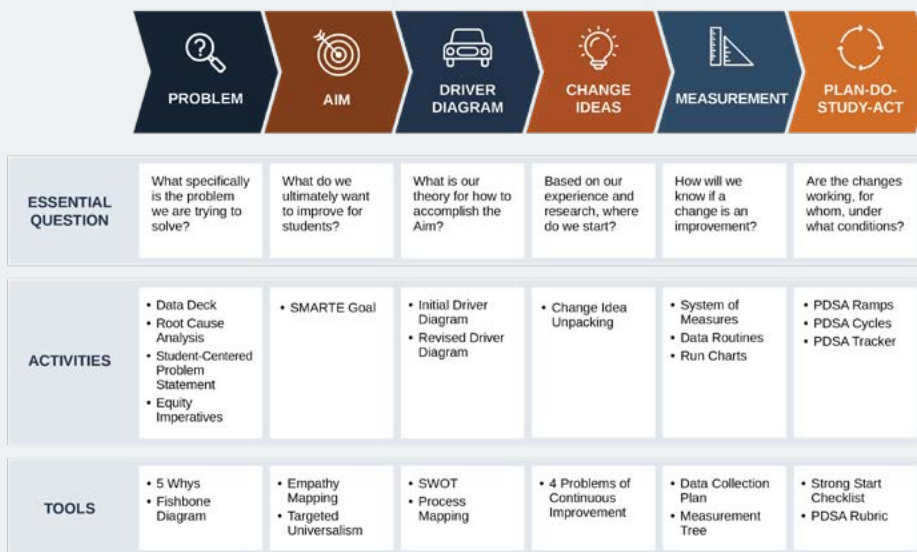
With these conditions in place, Langley and colleagues articulated five factors to determine readiness of the practices to be scaled. Teams can consider these factors when making the decision to scale or not to scale:

- **Relative advantage** – Does our data indicate the change (e.g., the practice) is better than what we have historically done?
- **Compatibility** – Does the practice fit well with our school culture and our community's values, experiences, assets, and needs?
- **Simplicity** – Is the practice relatively easy for people to do or use? Is it going to take significant or little effort?
- **Trialability** – Is the practice testable? Can we abandon it, if needed, without huge risk?
- **Observability** – Can we see and measure the use of the idea in practice?

After addressing these questions, teams can make informed decisions regarding the practice's readiness for scale and use the information to guide their planning for scale, including the leveraging of an education agency's social and communication systems, as well as measurement and feedback systems. Let's look at how teams from a networked improvement community used these questions to guide their efforts to dramatically improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

The Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities (NIC)

The NIC launched in the 2019-2020 school year, bringing together 10 public charter organizations across the United States with a shared aim to dramatically improve the learning experiences, outcomes, and environments of Black and Latino students with disabilities experiencing poverty. At the conclusion of year 2 of the effort, district teams had defined priorities and engaged in early implementation of their changes, often in a small number of settings. Eager to replicate their successes in additional contexts and at a wider scale, teams across the NIC were preparing to spread and scale their efforts. They also needed guidance on how to determine their readiness and plan for sustainable spread and scale.

	PROBLEM	AIM	DRIVER DIAGRAM	CHANGE IDEAS	MEASUREMENT	PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT
ESSENTIAL QUESTION	What specifically is the problem we are trying to solve?	What do we ultimately want to improve for students?	What is our theory for how to accomplish the Aim?	Based on our experience and research, where do we start?	How will we know if a change is an improvement?	Are the changes working, for whom, under what conditions?
ACTIVITIES	• Data Deck • Root Cause Analysis • Student-Centered Problem Statement • Equity Imperatives	• SMARTE Goal	• Initial Driver Diagram • Revised Driver Diagram	• Change Idea Unpacking	• System of Measures • Data Routines • Run Charts	• PDSA Ramps • PDSA Cycles • PDSA Tracker
TOOLS	• 5 Whys • Fishbone Diagram	• Empathy Mapping • Targeted Universalism	• SWOT • Process Mapping	• 4 Problems of Continuous Improvement	• Data Collection Plan • Measurement Tree	• Strong Start Checklist • PDSA Rubric

Applying Spread and Scale to Improvement

NIC progress data indicated campuses and districts were eager to spread and scale their change efforts, yet there was a high degree of variation in their readiness to do so. Some schools had reliably tested a practice across multiple classrooms and had collected data that the change was leading to improvements, while others had tested a change for a limited amount of time or with one or two people and were looking to spread it campus-wide.

It was clear that school teams needed a research-backed framework to evaluate their readiness to scale their interventions. After reviewing the literature and available tools, as well as engaging stakeholders to understand their priorities and pain points, we developed our own tool to guide teams to the impact they desired. The tool leaned largely on the frameworks from *The Improvement Guide* and Coburn, and established guiding questions and frameworks for teams to use to assess readiness. Broken down into components, it prompts teams to:

- identify the change idea that has the greatest potential for impact;
- assess their readiness for the spread of that change, specifically examining to what extent it has been successfully implemented and shown to have the desired effect; and
- create a plan for the spread of the practice, both in terms of the worthiness of its spread and the needs of their context.

> "In education, we tend to want to spread and scale quickly before we know what works and before we are certain that it can work in different contexts."

First introduced at the NIC's Fall 2022 Convening, the **spread and scale tool** was presented as a guiding framework and resource to plan for long-term impact of their efforts. We recognized that school teams needed direct instruction on what spread and scale was and how to plan for it, as well as adaptive coaching to integrate their plans into their organizational priorities.

Yet initial reactions toward the tool and concept were mixed. Some teams were grateful for the guidance and motivated to use the framework immediately, while others were skeptical. Educators were eager to swiftly expand the reach of promising practices; after all, the COVID-19 pandemic had only deepened inequities for students. They saw the framework as an unnecessary stop sign on the road to wider implementation. There was a natural tension between practitioners who wanted to make changes for the students in front of them and network leadership who were concerned about the risk of failing by moving too fast.

Looking back at this moment, Green Dot California's Chief Academic Officer Leilani Abulon shares, "In education, we tend to want to spread and scale quickly before we know what works and before we are certain that it can work in different contexts. Through participation in the NIC, I learned a lot about the benefits of starting small and learning quickly to better inform our plans for spread and scale."

Small group instruction at Collegiate Academies Walter L. Cohen High School

Scale in Practice: Collegiate Academies

In collaboration with the NIC, Collegiate Academies in New Orleans developed a data system to track progress toward graduation requirements of diverse learners. Initially prototyped and tested in collaboration with classroom and school leaders, the data tracker tool and the systems designed for its use have been scaled across all campuses.

IDENTIFYING THE CHANGE IDEA

To support their diverse learners, Collegiate Academies wanted teachers to access and apply student data routinely in a cycle of teach, assess, re-teach, and re-assess. Their existing data tool presented significant barriers for educators who could not efficiently access data or easily understand students' levels of mastery. The Collegiate team decided to create an improved data tool for teachers and instructional coaches to use at scale across the organization. Their approach included a staged rollout that moved from initial testing to refinement to a purposeful spread and scale plan.

DETERMINING READINESS TO SPREAD

After diagnosing the existing tool's shortcomings with a small group of teachers, the team mocked up a new data workbook and tested it in a variety of contexts. First, they piloted the tool to work out the compatibility barriers between data systems. Then, they expanded the trial with a set of teachers.

Feedback from teachers at one campus helped the team understand what worked and what needed to be changed to make the tool easier to use and more effective than the existing systems. Once refined and supported by early evidence of impact for students, Collegiate launched the tracker with a select group of assistant principals and staff members. The launch group began fully using the tool in the last quarter of the 2021-2022 school year and gathered sufficient data for the team to confirm the change was working and leading to the desired improvement for students.

STEP 3: PLANNING FOR SPREAD

Relative Advantage: Does our data indicate this change is better than what we have historically done?

Yes. The existing data tool was powerful, but not intuitive or adaptable, and its interface was often hard to use once they are trained.

Compatibility: Does the change idea fit well with our school culture and our community's values, experiences, and needs?

Yes. As an organization (Collegiate) our culture is deeply rooted in data-driven decision-making. Teachers already use data to make instructional decisions. We have a shared understanding that the more they're able to target data to a specific thing (e.g., standards), the better decisions they can make.

Simplicity: Is the change idea relatively easy for people to do or use? Is it going to take significant or little effort?

Mostly yes. We have solved a large number of usability and data import issues in the beta version of the tracker. Staff report that the tool is easy to use once they have received training and gained experience with it. However, some of our team members need additional support to navigate the multiple tabs and views in the tool. We know we need to keep training and supporting teachers to learn how to use this.

Trialability: Is the change testable? Can we abandon it, if needed, without huge risk?

Yes. The tracker is a new tool that uses data imported from existing systems. We have already tested it across a set of schools and stakeholders and can continue to collect data on user testing. If it does not work, abandoning the tracker would simply require teachers to revert to existing processes.

Observability: Can we see and measure the use of the idea in practice?

Yes. We can track how frequently and reliably it is used, as well as what impact targeted teaching decisions are having on student outcomes. We can also observe teachers and coaches using the tools and use targeted empathy interviews to understand how it's working in practice.

Based on where you are, what are your priorities and next steps to build toward spread?

Consider what you will do, where, on what timeline, by whom. How will you document and measure it?

Plan communication loops — who needs to be informed? Provide feedback? Make decisions?

The first priority is to finalize the beta version of the data tracking tool, ironing out the known bugs and data-import obstacles and streamlining the tool's structure. That will be done by May. Then we will deliver summer training to teachers using fake data, so that by the start of the school year, everyone is comfortable and ready to hit the ground running.

The beta version will have widespread use by teachers throughout the fall. The team will collect feedback in multiple rounds in order to make updates to the beta version.

We'll measure and document the impact on students, frequency and reliability of teachers' use, the effectiveness and efficiency of user training, and we'll try to understand at the end of the fall semester who it is still not working for and why.

This work will primarily be done by Aidan (our Project Sponsor) until we are able to train and distribute leadership of this project to the Academics Team.

PLANNING FOR SCALE

With confidence that the data dashboard was working as desired and led to positive results for students, the Collegiate team shifted their focus to planning for spread and scale. Considering the factors of spread, they recognized a need to lean into compatibility of the change in their school systems and plan for observability so they could monitor how the practice was spreading and problem-solve barriers as they arose.

To build ownership and capacity for the change, Collegiate planned to train leaders first, followed by a broader staff and new-hire training in the fall. Using simulated data, educators learned how to populate the tracker and use it effectively. Collegiate Academies then spent a semester getting feedback from users at regular intervals through surveys and interviews, which helped their development teams troubleshoot issues and enhance the simplicity and compatibility of the tool.

For example, the training team learned that many teachers did not know how to create their own filters in Google Sheets. As a result, the team created filters in advance for teachers and designed training to increase current and future staff capacity to use Google Sheets independently. This adaptation of the tool, paired with coaching support on the tool's use, enabled the team to identify and remove barriers to spread that ultimately enabled it to be implemented at scale.

EMPOWERING LASTING CHANGE

Collegiate Academies now has a robust data tool that is integrated into lesson planning and coaching structures across campuses and has successfully scaled to all site teams. Using the lessons learned, the team continues to refine training plans to onboard new staff and has created systems that ensure the sustainability of the practice at the organizational level.

Driving Sustainable Improvement

The **Spread Planning Tool** developed by the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities can be used by teachers and administrators to determine whether a classroom practice or intervention is ready to move from a pilot to school or district-wide implementation. Drawing on research about effective organizational change generally — as well as the specific features and constraints of schools — the tool presents a framework and a shared language to support effective planning for sustainable improvement.

Our experience as leaders of the NIC taught us that developing the skill and capacity to analyze readiness for spread is like strengthening a muscle: the more repetitions educators put in, the easier it becomes. As educators adopt a shared mindset about the importance of planning for spread, the process becomes ingrained in the culture of the school.

Yet as we also learned, educators may be initially skeptical of spread planning — either because they don't see value in the process or believe that it will delay the implementation of promising practices. There are several steps improvement leaders can take to make the most of this tool:

- **Lower the stakes** — Start with a change idea that doesn't need to be implemented immediately so teams have the time and space to collect data and determine readiness.
- **Engage diverse teams** — Make sure a variety of perspectives and roles are represented to support spread planning.
- **Communicate the benefits** — Review past implementation efforts that fell short so that teams can understand how spread planning can strengthen the process.

Achieving our shared vision for effective schools that meet the needs of diverse learners requires taking effective practices to scale. With a deliberate and thoughtful approach, school teams can apply research-based principles of spread planning to their work and help to achieve equitable access to learning communities where teachers and students thrive.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the support of the many partners who have contributed to this work.

About Marshall CoLab

Marshall CoLab is dedicated to improving teaching and learning for students furthest from opportunity. We bring together communities of educators, instructional coaches, and experts to co-develop and implement evidence-based practices and make them available to all schools.

Using the tools of continuous improvement — the science of getting better at getting better — we support educators along the path from theory to transformation to achieve lasting change. Our IGNITE Network is a coalition of schools committed to making dramatic gains in the experiences, environments, and outcomes for students at the intersection of race, class, and ability. Over two years, these schools will implement and refine practices that lead to positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Learn more **here**.