RESEARCH BRIEF

The Missing Half of Instructional Improvement

Why seeing what needs to improve is different from building the capacity to change it

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01 Nearly 60 hours, and still not enough

There is a familiar explanation for why instructional improvement is hard: school leaders are busy. That is true. But the national trend contains a more surprising story.

Across five comparable NCES survey years spanning nearly two decades, public school principals reported average workweeks clustered between 58 and 59 hours. The line barely moves.[1]

PRINCIPAL WORKWEEK, AVERAGE HOURS

58–59

hours per week, every survey year from 2003–04 to 2020–21

2003-04	59.0
2007-08	58.4
2011-12	58.1
2015-16	58.6
2020-21	58.3

The survey series changed names from SASS to NTPS, but these figures all report the average weekly hours public school principals spent on school-related activities, including work before and after school and on weekends.

THE QUESTION

If school leaders are already giving schools nearly 60 hours every week, is asking them to do more really an improvement strategy?

For me, that finding changes the starting point. The issue is not whether principals care enough or work hard enough. They are already giving the work an extraordinary amount of time. The better question is what our improvement processes ask people to

do with the time, attention, and capacity they actually have.

That same respect has to extend to teachers. Schools are full of people working hard to make learning better. The mystery is why all of that effort does not consistently become changed classroom practice.

02 Everyone is already doing something

Walk into almost any school and you will find improvement activity everywhere.

- Teachers attend professional learning, plan lessons, study student work, and try new strategies.
- Principals and assistant principals conduct observations and walkthroughs.
- Instructional coaches model, facilitate, question, and support.
- PLCs meet. Data teams meet. Leadership teams meet.
- Schools analyze assessments, review dashboards, adopt frameworks, consult research, and write improvement plans.

None of those things is a sign that schools are doing something wrong. In fact, many of them are necessary. You cannot respond to a problem you cannot see. You cannot learn a practice you have never encountered. You cannot collaborate if there is no protected time to meet.

THE MYSTERY

The question is not why educators aren't doing enough. It is why all of that activity doesn't consistently become changed classroom practice.

The difference between activity and change

Across years of teaching, coaching, facilitating professional learning, and walking classrooms, I have seen schools name an instructional challenge with impressive clarity. I have also returned later and seen the same challenge again.

That observation is not empirical research. It is a professional pattern that made the research more interesting to me. Why can a school accurately identify a problem, invest time around it, and still struggle to make a new practice feel normal?

> ***The evidence suggests that we may be blending together two different jobs: identifying what needs attention, and building the conditions in which people can actually change what they do.***

Seeing helps us decide where to focus. Changing requires a different kind of work.

03 We have learned to see

Schools now have many ways to make teaching and learning visible: assessments, student work, dashboards, walkthroughs, formal observations, instructional frameworks, surveys, progress monitoring, research summaries, and improvement plans.

That visibility matters. Good information can help leaders notice patterns that would otherwise remain anecdotal. It can help teams challenge assumptions, identify students who are not being served well, and focus professional attention.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

We have become very good at seeing what needs attention. But seeing something and changing something are different jobs.

Think about a thermometer

A thermometer can tell us that a child has a fever. That information is valuable. We would not want to make decisions without it. But no one expects the thermometer to treat the fever.

Instructional information works the same way. A walkthrough can reveal a pattern. Assessment data can reveal a gap. A framework can help us name a practice. Research can point us toward approaches with evidence behind them.

All of that helps us see. None of it, by itself, performs the human work of change.

The clue inside the walkthrough research

A longitudinal study based on full-day observations of approximately 100 urban principals over three school years found that broad "instructional" time did not predict achievement growth. Some specific activities, such as teacher coaching, evaluation, and developing the educational program, were positively associated with gains. Informal walkthrough time showed a negative association, and the researchers' additional evidence suggested that walkthroughs were often not connected to a broader improvement strategy.[2]

> ***That does not mean walkthroughs are bad. It means a walkthrough should not be asked to do a job it cannot do on its own.***

04 Seeing isn't changing

Once you notice the distinction, it appears everywhere.

WHAT THE STRUCTURE CAN DO	WHAT STILL HAS TO HAPPEN
Walkthrough makes a pattern visible	Decide what the pattern means and what people will do next
Feedback provides information about performance	Help the learner use that information productively
PD builds knowledge, common language, models, and motivation	Turn learning into repeated classroom use
PLC creates time and structure for collaboration	Use that time to examine practice, learn, test, and adjust
Research identifies approaches with evidence	Create the local conditions required to implement them
Data shows a result or trend	Connect the evidence to a specific response

Feedback is a good example of why the distinction matters

A classic meta-analysis of 607 effect sizes and 23,663 observations found that feedback interventions improved performance on average. But more than one-third of the interventions actually decreased performance. The effect depended in part on where feedback directed attention, toward the task and learning, or away from it.[3]

The lesson is not to stop giving feedback. The lesson is that feedback is not a magic ingredient. The quality, focus, timing, relationship, and next opportunity to act all matter.

WHAT THIS CHANGES

Information can be accurate and still be incomplete as an improvement strategy.

That is why "we observed it," "we discussed it," or "we gave feedback" cannot be the final measure of whether instructional improvement occurred.

05 What happened after the PD?

Professional learning is one of the clearest places to see the difference between delivering a learning experience and producing professional change.

A full-day district session can be excellent. A school-based workshop can be relevant, practical, engaging, and exactly what teachers needed. A facilitator can receive outstanding evaluations. Teachers can leave energized and confident.

THE DISTINCTION

A professional learning day can end at 4:00. Professional change cannot.

For more than two decades, Thomas Guskey has argued that professional development evaluation involves different levels of evidence: participant reactions, participant learning, organizational support and change, participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes.[4]

That distinction is deceptively powerful because it reminds us that every measure answers a different question.

EVIDENCE ABOUT THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE	EVIDENCE ABOUT THE CHANGE THAT FOLLOWED
Attendance	Teachers attempted the practice
Satisfaction and relevance	The practice appeared in classroom use
Facilitator quality	Teachers received useful support while trying it
Knowledge gained	Practice became more skillful or consistent
Confidence and intention	Teachers sustained, adapted, or integrated the practice
Perceived usefulness	Something became different for students

Attendance matters. Satisfaction matters. Confidence matters. Knowledge matters. They simply do not, by themselves, establish sustained classroom behavior change.

> ***When we invest a full day in professional learning, what evidence will tell us three weeks later that anything changed?***

06 How far did the learning travel?

A simple way to think about professional learning is to follow it farther downstream. This is not a proprietary framework. It is just a practical way to remember that learning and use are not the same outcome.

01 EXPERIENCED IT

02 UNDERSTOOD IT

03 TRIED IT

04 REFINED IT

05 USED IT CONSISTENTLY

06 **Changed the student experience**

A 2017 Learning Policy Institute review of 35 methodologically rigorous studies linked effective professional development to recurring features such as content focus, active learning, collaboration, models of effective practice, coaching or expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration.[5]

Notice how many of those features happen after someone has simply heard the idea. Teachers need opportunities to work with the practice: to see it, design it, try it, receive input, think about what happened, and return to it.

The same pattern keeps appearing

WALKTHROUGH ***What happened afterward?***

DATA MEETING ***What happened afterward?***

PLC ***What happened afterward?***

RESEARCH ***What happened afterward?***

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ***What happened afterward?***

Once that question becomes a habit, the improvement conversation changes. We stop counting only activities and begin tracing what those activities caused people to do differently.

07 The work nobody gets to skip

The space between "we know what needs attention" and "this is becoming normal practice" is not empty. It is filled with human work.

Across professional learning, feedback, team learning, and implementation research, several needs repeat. The exact combination will vary by the practice and the school, but the pattern is remarkably practical.

CLARITY	People need a concrete picture of what they are trying to do differently.
EXAMPLES	Complex practice is easier to learn when people can see what quality looks like.
PRACTICE	Understanding an idea is different from performing it in a live classroom.
FEEDBACK	People need information they can use to decide what to try next.
COLLABORATION	Professional learning can deepen when colleagues examine practice rather than simply coordinate tasks.
REFLECTION	Teams need time to make sense of what happened instead of rushing immediately to the next initiative.
REPETITION	A first attempt is rarely the final version of a complex professional behavior.

ADAPTATION	The practice has to work with real students, real schedules, and real constraints.
TRUST	Learning is harder when people cannot safely acknowledge that something is not working yet.
FOCUS	Competing priorities divide attention and make follow-through harder.

Research on well-developed professional learning communities also reinforces the point: the value is not simply that educators meet. A review of 11 PLC studies found positive effects in well-developed PLCs, while also noting that much of the literature relied on self-reported impact and that stronger evidence of changes in teaching and student learning was more limited.[6]

THE MISSING WORK

The space between knowing and changing is filled with work. That work requires capacity.

08 Research doesn't walk into the classroom

Education is right to ask, "What does the research say?" We should keep asking it. Evidence protects us from choosing practices simply because they are fashionable, familiar, or well marketed.

But there is a second question that matters just as much.

What will it take for the people in this building to actually do it?

A practice can have a strong evidence base and still require teachers to understand it, see what it looks like, try it with their students, receive support, adapt it, and use it often enough for it to become dependable.

Implementation research makes this point clearly. Durlak and DuPre reviewed more than 500 quantitative studies and found strong empirical support that implementation level affects program outcomes. They also identified numerous contextual factors tied to organizations, providers, training, technical assistance, and the surrounding environment.[7]

RESEARCH PLUS IMPLEMENTATION

Research can tell us that something has worked under particular conditions. It cannot walk into our classrooms and recreate those conditions for us.

That is not a weakness of research. It is the nature of implementation.

> ***The map can be excellent. We still have to walk the road.***

A more useful question for leadership teams

When a team says, "This strategy is research-based," add one more sentence: what conditions will help our teachers actually use it well?

That one question changes how we think about professional learning, coaching, time, feedback, trust, competing priorities, and the evidence we collect during implementation, not just after it.

09 The missing half

This is the distinction I believe instructional leaders need to see more clearly.

SEE	CHANGE
Identify	Learn
Measure	Try
Observe	Practice
Analyze	Receive feedback
Research	Reflect
Diagnose	Adapt
Repeat	Sustain

Schools are not missing the change side entirely. Strong coaches, thoughtful PLCs, excellent leaders, and effective professional learning already do much of this work.

The concern is more specific: our systems can become very sophisticated at the first half, collecting, analyzing, documenting, and naming, while assuming the second half will somehow follow.

THE CORE IDEA

Both halves matter. The problem begins when we expect the first half to perform the work of the second.

That is why another dashboard, another framework, another training day, or another observation protocol cannot be judged only by how much information it gives us. We also have to ask what it helps people do with what they now know.

The goal is not to add another layer of work. It is to make the work educators are already doing more likely to travel all the way into practice.

10 Students are the reason

Even implementation is not the destination. Students are.

A school can complete walkthroughs, hold PLC meetings, deliver professional learning, implement a framework, and generate reports, and still need to ask the question that matters most.

What became different for students?

If we improve questioning, are students explaining more? If we improve discourse, are students reasoning with one another rather than only responding to the teacher? If we improve formative assessment, are teachers and students actually using evidence to make different decisions?

If we say we want deeper thinking, are students doing more of the thinking: analyzing, reasoning, explaining, questioning, connecting, defending, and creating?

KEEP THE DESTINATION VISIBLE

Walkthroughs, PD, PLCs, research, coaching, data, and technology are tools. The destination is a different student experience.

REALITY CHECK

The instructional improvement reality check

Questions worth asking before adding another instructional improvement initiative

1. After we identify a classroom pattern, what happens next?
2. Can teachers describe what the practice we are working on actually looks and sounds like?
3. Where do teachers get to see examples, try the practice, receive useful feedback, and adjust?
4. When we invest a day in professional learning, what evidence will we look for three weeks later?
5. Are we measuring the quality of the learning experience, or the quality of the change that followed it?
6. When our PLC meets again, are we discussing the same problem, or examining what changed since the last conversation?
7. How do we know whether a practice was actually implemented before deciding whether it worked?
8. What happens when the first attempt does not work?

9 Does our improvement process depend on administrators finding time they do not realistically have?

10 If this work succeeds, what should become different for students, and how will we know?

Are we getting better at identifying what needs to change, or getting better at changing it?

What happens after we know?

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11 Endnotes and sources

1 Principal workweek trend. National Center for Education Statistics, SASS and NTPS principal questionnaires.

2003–04 SASS: 59.0 hours per week. 2007–08 SASS: 58.4. 2011–12 SASS: 58.1. 2015–16 NTPS: 58.6. 2020–21 NTPS: 58.3.

2 Grissom, J. A., Loeb, S., and Master, B. (2013). Effective Instructional Time Use for School Leaders: Longitudinal Evidence From Observations of Principals. Educational Researcher, 42(8), 433–444.

3 Kluger, A. N., and DeNisi, A. (1996). The Effects of Feedback Interventions on Performance: A Historical Review, a Meta-Analysis, and a Preliminary Feedback Intervention Theory. Psychological Bulletin, 119(2), 254–284.

4 Guskey, T. R. (2000). Evaluating Professional Development. Corwin Press.

See also Guskey (2002), "Does It Make a Difference? Evaluating Professional Development," Educational Leadership, 59(6), 45–51.

5 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., and Gardner, M. (2017). Effective Teacher Professional Development. Learning Policy Institute.

6 Vescio, V., Ross, D., and Adams, A. (2008). A Review of Research on the Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practice and Student Learning. Teaching and Teacher Education, 24(1), 80–91.

7 Durlak, J. A., and DuPre, E. P. (2008). Implementation Matters: A Review of Research on the Influence of Implementation on Program Outcomes and the Factors Affecting Implementation. American Journal of Community Psychology, 41, 327–350.

Research note

The brief intentionally avoids claims that the available evidence cannot support. It does not claim that principal work hours have steadily increased, that walkthroughs or professional development are inherently ineffective, that all schools evaluate professional learning only

through satisfaction surveys, or that implementation is the sole explanation for instructional outcomes. The purpose is narrower: to distinguish information about practice from the additional work required to change practice.