

Building a Culture of Data

More than reports: A foundation for empowered teams

A culture of data is more than a set of reports or tools. It is the shared belief that information can empower people to make better decisions that support every learner. When a learning community builds this kind of culture, teams use data to uncover inequities, track progress toward a shared vision, and improve experiences in real time.

A strong culture of data is built on three ideas.

- It centers equity and learner experience
- It supports a shared vision for what the community wants for its students
- It builds habits of inquiry that help people reflect and act on what works

District leaders play a powerful role in setting expectations, modeling curiosity, and building conditions that help schools and teams use data with confidence. When district and school leaders align around the same purpose, the culture becomes clearer and easier to sustain. Through strategic implementation of data and analytics across the organization, all staff members are engaged and empowered with skills, tools, and learning opportunities, eventually developing analytical habits that become an intrinsic part of the organization's DNA.

A healthy culture of data takes shape when people across the system trust the process, understand the purpose, and see how the information they collect connects to real improvement. It is systems work that requires clarity, collaboration, and time. Ultimately, a thriving data culture empowers stakeholders to ask better questions, challenge assumptions, and come up with innovative evidence-based solutions toward achieving the ecosystem's mission and goals.

Mindset Shifts for Leaders

Culture building starts from the top, with leaders willing to pursue strategic data initiatives that will shift how everyone in the organization and the ecosystem works and to clearly communicate the necessary integration of data and analytics into every aspect of the work, fostering a sense of empowerment, curiosity, and accountability. The value of data and evidence-based decision-making must be clearly conveyed, celebrating wins in the effective use of data in achieving desired results. District and school leaders set the tone by adopting mindsets that help others learn and grow.

- Move from isolated work toward cross team collaboration
- Move from compliance reporting toward learning and improvement
- Move from inaccessible information toward timely and relevant data that is shared and easy to use

When leaders model **curiosity** and **openness**, teams begin to treat data as a tool to support growth rather than a source of evaluation or fear.

Essential Components for Building a Culture of Data

Five components support a strong culture of data across a district. They work together and build on one another. Sustainability surrounds all five and is addressed later in this framework.

SUSTAINABILITY				
1. Shared Vision	2. Results Framework	3. Tools and Training	4. Continuous Quality Improvement	5. Sensemaking and Storytelling
Keeps teams oriented toward what matters most	Provides a shared way to see and track progress	Ensures people have the tools and confidence to navigate with data	Creates space to learn, adjust, and improve over time	Helps teams interpret data and make meaning together
SUSTAINABILITY				

1. Shared Vision

Description

A shared vision describes what the learning community wants for its students and guides decisions across the district. It reflects the aspirations of families, educators, and students. It creates clarity about what student success looks like and how the system will support that success.

In a personalized and competency-based ecosystem, the shared vision brings coherence. It helps teams align priorities, understand expectations, and see how their work contributes to the larger mission. The learning community’s shared vision encapsulates the hopes and aspirations of individuals and stakeholder groups, serving as a north star that points the way to actionable paths that are co-designed and co-owned.

Example

Portrait of a Learner or Portrait of a Graduate: A vision that names the knowledge and skills the community wants for all students.

Questions to Ask

- Whose voices helped shape our shared vision and whose voices are missing?
- How does the shared vision show up in decisions across the system?
- Do all teams know how their work connects to the shared vision?

2. Results Framework

Description

A results framework creates a shared language for describing progress. It helps teams understand how resources connect to actions, how actions connect to results, and how results connect to long term goals. It brings clarity to what success looks like and how the system will measure progress over time.

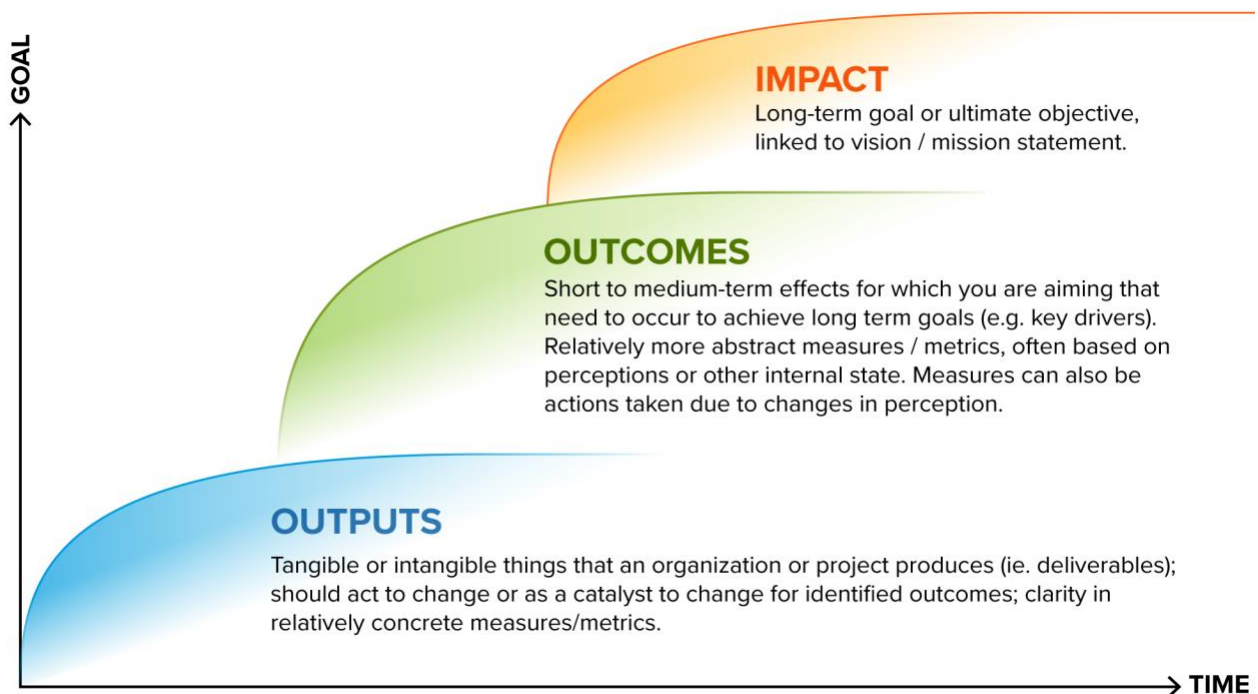
A strong results framework helps districts:

- Set clear expectations for short term and long term results
- Connect strategies to measurable indicators
- Identify early signs of progress and sustain progress

Because the framework is co-designed, it becomes a tool for coherence and alignment across departments and schools. Ultimately, the results framework will not only provide a map of the work but will serve as a guide for what success looks like from different stakeholder perspectives.

Example

Results Framework Map: A visual that shows the connection between inputs, outputs, and outcomes.



Questions to Ask

- Do we share the same understanding and expectation of outputs, outcomes, and impact?
- What early indicators (leading indicators) help us understand whether we are on track?
- How does the results framework help us coordinate work across teams?

3. Tools and Training

Description

Tools and training help ensure that people across the system know how to access data, interpret it, and use it to inform decisions. Both technical tools and human learning matter. Tools only work as intended when people are empowered to have the skills to use them with confidence.

Tools may include

- Multi-perspective (filter-enabled) data visualization dashboards
- Continuous improvement approaches and tools (e.g. control charts, fishbone diagrams, etc.)
- Data collection tools to gauge learner experience, including surveys, classroom observation protocols, etc.
- Approach for triangulating different streams of data, both quantitative and qualitative
- Facilitation guide for sensemaking conversations

Training may include

- Data literacy primer
- Facilitation of cross-team sensemaking conversations
- Interpretation of data and triangulation
- Evidence-based action planning process

The goal is to help every person build confidence with data and develop mainstream routines across the system.

Example

Continuous Quality Improvement Toolkit: capability-building approaches and tools to implement a culture of data collection, reflection, evidence-based decision making, and sustainable change management (e.g. PDSA cycle information posters, control chart data logs, action planning chart, etc.).

Questions to Ask

- Do people have the tools they need, and do they know how to use them?
- Where do we see gaps in data literacy across roles and what approach is needed to address them?
- What routines help us build shared habits for using data and how can we sustain them over time?

4. Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

A System of Feedback

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) is an effective system of feedback that serves as a guiding compass in the journey toward an organization’s mission and goals. A CQI approach is grounded in tools and approaches that connect goals, measures, and collected data, and is driven by incremental change ideas that move processes and efforts forward. The most common method is the **Plan Do Study Act cycle (PDSA)** which helps teams try small changes, study the impact, and adjust. In this process, individuals and stakeholder groups can reflect upon and use the relevant data from diverse data sources and begin to understand how different levels of data can ultimately impact individual learners in classrooms.

CQI helps teams:

- Move from assumptions to evidence
- Use small tests to learn in real time
- Connect system level goals to classroom practice

It builds a habit of learning that supports long term improvement. The results framework process and the CQI system of feedback can bring coherence to an emerging data culture that equitably centers the learners at its core.



Example

A school team tests a change idea: A school team may try a new strategy to support student attendance. After a short period, the team studies the results and decides whether to adapt, adopt, or abandon the idea.

Questions to Ask

- What change ideas are we testing right now?
- What data will help us understand the impact?
- How do we share learning from plan→do→study→act cycles across teams?

5. Sensemaking and Storytelling

Sensemaking is the process of looking at data together, noticing what stands out, and exploring what the information might mean. Storytelling helps people connect data to lived experiences. Both are needed for effective decision making.

Good sensemaking invites curiosity, reflection, innovation, and courage. It encourages teams to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and understand the deeper story behind the information. Storytelling brings context and meaning to the numbers.

Example

Data Conversation Protocol: A simple structure that guides teams to look at different sources of data, notice patterns, wonder about data relationships, and identify next steps. An important aspect of this conversation is triangulation, how different sources, types of data, and different perspectives can either shore up or debunk evidence and insights that surface from the data.

Questions to Ask

- What story is the data telling and what else might be true?
- Whose perspective is reflected and whose is missing?
- What assumptions might we be making?

Sustainability

A sustainable culture of data is not an initiative that begins and ends. It is a long-term way of working that grows stronger when the system has clear structures, shared responsibility, and steady reflection. In a sustainable culture, the shared vision stays visible and meaningful. Teams return to it often to guide decisions and to remind one another why the work matters.

Sustainability depends on the everyday choices the district makes about how it organizes and prioritizes the work. Strategies like regular improvement cycles and simple routines for reflecting on progress help keep the work alive. These strategies allow teams to respond to new insights and adjust as the needs of the community shift over time.

Clear structures also support sustainability. When roles, routines, and decision-making processes are well defined, the culture does not rely on one individual or one department. Distributed leadership creates space for many people to contribute, which deepens commitment and helps the work continue even when staffing changes.

Thoughtful funding choices strengthen sustainability as well. When districts combine different funding sources, they create greater stability and reduce the risk that progress will stall if one source becomes unavailable. Funding supports the tools, training, and time needed for steady improvement.

Sustainability becomes most visible when the work is shared. New staff members understand how data is used because expectations are woven into daily practice. Families and students see how information guides decisions that support learning. Over time, ownership spreads across the ecosystem and people feel trusted to explore information, ask questions, and reflect on what they are learning.

A sustainable culture of data relies on people more than tools. As individuals build confidence and continue to learn, the district becomes more resilient and better able to adapt. This is what allows the culture to grow, deepen, and stay focused on what supports students most.

Who Sustains the Data Culture

Sustainability depends on shared responsibility across the entire system.

- **District leaders** set direction and model habits
- **School leaders** create supportive conditions for inquiry
- **Teachers and staff** engage with information and reflect on practice
- **Families** share context and help interpret what data means for students
- **Students** build agency by understanding their own data and setting goals

When everyone participates, the culture becomes stronger and more resilient.

Sustainability Across the Five Components

Component	Sustainability Lens or Action	Who Is Involved
Shared Vision	Each member of the learning community can articulate the shared vision and their role in the vision; the learning community holds themselves and each other accountable for the outcomes of the shared vision	District leaders, principals, teachers, classified staff, families & caregivers, students
Results Framework	Keep metrics/measures aligned to goals, review and calibrate them as strategies evolve	District teams, principals, central office staff, other stakeholders
Tools and Training	Build long term capacity and alignment through recurring training and onboarding routines	Teachers, school leaders, district professional learning staff
Continuous Quality Improvement	Embed plan→do→study→act cycles into regular meetings to support progress tracking and learning	School teams, district departments, teacher leaders, students
Sensemaking and Storytelling	Create structures and routines for sharing insights and stories across the system	All staff, learners, families, other stakeholders

Conclusion

A sustainable data-driven culture needs an open and nurturing environment in which diverse individuals and perspectives are valued for what they bring to the table as an organization committedly pursues its mission and goals. A shared vision is essential for learning communities to align personalized, competency-based education with equitable outcomes for every student. This degree of shared purpose and ownership requires inclusive visioning processes involving families, educators, students, and community partners who build ownership and coherence across the system. In turn, through the results framework process, learning communities can commit to a process that actualizes their shared vision through aligned expectations on required resources and resulting outputs, outcomes, and impact that speak directly to their stated mission and goals.

Building a culture of data is a long-term commitment that requires clarity, collaboration and steady leadership. When district and school leaders support shared vision, clear frameworks, thoughtful tools, improvement habits, and meaningful sensemaking, the system becomes better equipped to support every learner.

A strong culture of data helps people ask better questions, reflect with honesty, and take actions that improve student experience. Over time, these habits build a more equitable and aligned district where data supports growth for everyone.



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