A six-phase process for school improvement and innovation

By Kristin Rouleau

Too often, my colleagues and I have met dispirited teachers and school leaders who did everything they were asked (or required) to do by local, state, and federal mandates, got early results . . . and then the progress stalled. They got stuck on a performance plateau.

To help them get unstuck, we've used research, evidence, and analysis to create a new "inside out" approach to school improvement that—rather than being yet another externally directed "outside-in" program—is centered on leveraging a school's existing bright spots, collective expertise, and professional curiosity. We call it Curiosity Works™.

This article is a summary adaptation of content from McREL's recent white paper and guidebook on the Curiosity Works school improvement process. To learn more, visit mcrel.org/curiosityworks.

Curiosity Works has six main phases which are summarized here in roughly chronological order, but we don't prescribe it as a "program" to be followed in lockstep. Perhaps the most significant way that this process differs from the more common top-down, outside-in improvement initiatives is that we embrace the reality that the precise path forward is unlikely to be identical for any two schools. At its heart, Curiosity Works is a guide for your school leadership team's self-directed journey.

Throughout this journey, your school team will progress through four stages of improvement:

- ***Adopting better routines*** to increase the quality of teaching and learning
- ***Ensuring greater consistency*** from classroom to classroom in using the better routines
- ***Developing collegial expertise*** among teachers, supporting their learning from one another and adapting best practices in their classrooms to more precisely meet the needs of their students
- ***Fostering shared innovation*** by trying new practices in rapid-cycle innovation processes to see what works best, and sharing what's been learned among all team members

Phase 1: Get ready—commit to shared values, moral purpose, and vision

In our research on high-performing schools, McREL has found that school organizational culture is the "secret sauce" of performance. And a key component of a great school culture is having a set of shared values, moral purpose, and vision that guide your school staff's professional dialogue, reflection, and decision making.

Values are the written and unwritten rules that guide your school's behaviors. They answer these critical questions:

- How do we behave, especially when no one is looking?
- What behaviors have we cultivated over time that distinguish us from other schools?
- What do we value so much that we're willing to make sacrifices for it?

Moral purpose is the *why* behind what you do. Basically, when schools succeed it's because staff gel around a common purpose, sharing a clear understanding of the big, important reasons they are in education and what they are hoping to achieve. We advise school leaders to build "purposeful" communities, starting with articulating shared outcomes that matter to everyone.

Vision is a concise statement that captures your school's aspirations for the future. Don't spend forever wordsmithing because vision statements can and should change over time. But do give it thought. The best vision statements are often simple statements that capture big ideas that seem just a bit beyond your reach, yet flow naturally from your moral purpose. The simpler, the better.

Identifying your school's values, moral purpose, and vision must be a collaborative effort, with your leadership team engaging in reflection and conversation, and forming consensus. Leadership teams that have committed to a set of shared values, purpose, and vision are ready for Phases 2–6.

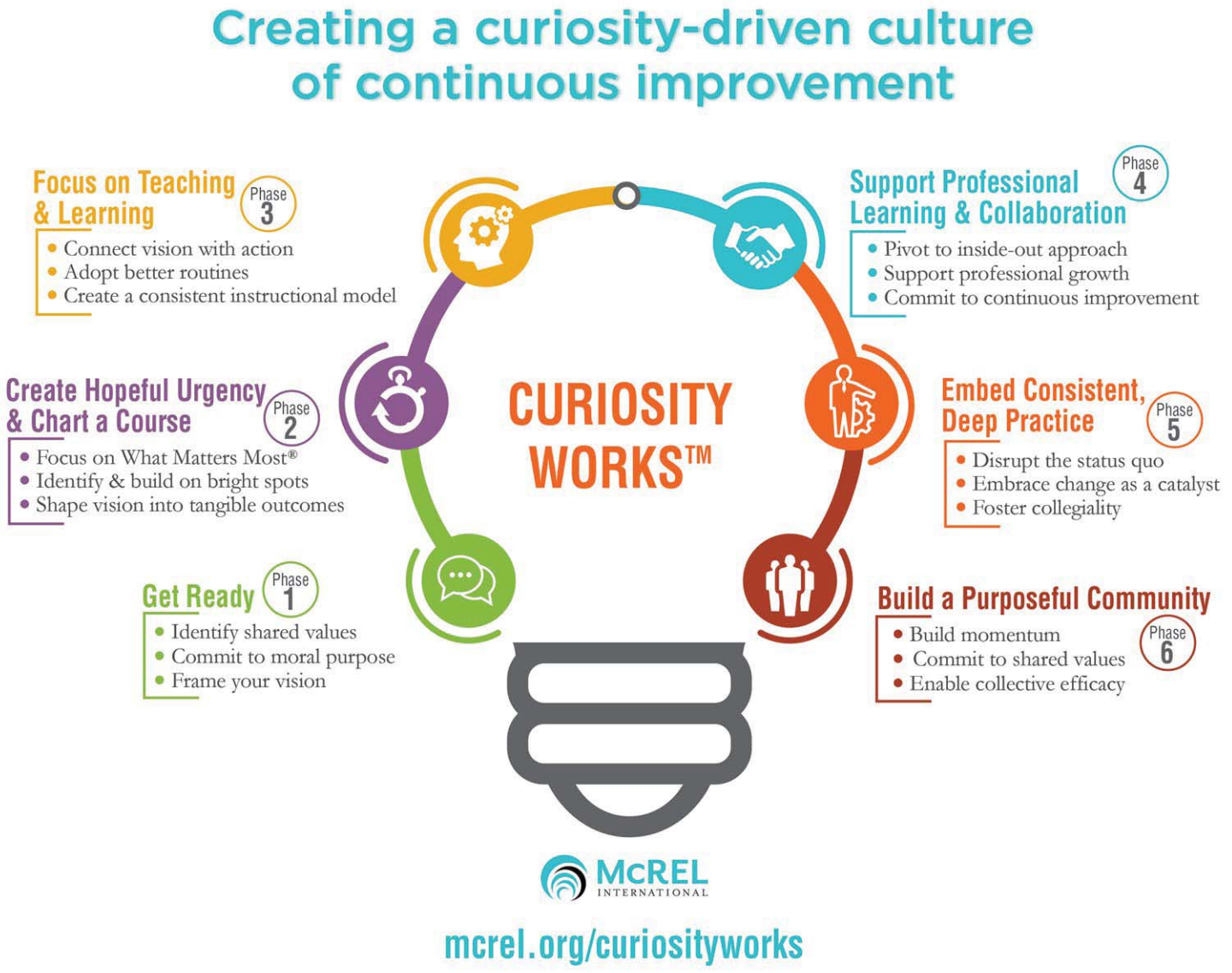
Phase 2: Create hopeful urgency and chart a course

What are we doing right . . . and what must we do better?

McREL's Balanced Leadership® research and analysis finds that effective school leaders inspire people to accept challenges that may seem initially beyond their reach, and describe change as an opportunity to move everyone toward a better future (Goodwin, Cameron, & Hein, 2015).

To get there, you need to look honestly and openly at your school—both your challenges and strengths—and agree on what to maintain and what to discard. This doesn't mean frightening everyone into thinking the sky is falling. Rather, it's creating a sense of urgency and making the status quo no longer acceptable. People who can envision the difference between the current reality and a preferred future are more willing to accept change for improvement, especially if they can identify bright spots in their school's data and practices to illustrate what is possible.

Where, then, to focus? That's a key question for many schools. Too many school improvement plans call upon people to do too many things at once and, as a result, they are often overwhelmed or unsure of where to focus, and end up doing nothing well. So, resist the urge to try and solve all your school's issues at once. Instead, select just one area of the What Matters Most®



framework listed below, which McREL's research (Goodwin, 2013) indicates make the biggest difference for students, and focus your improvement actions there.

- Guarantee challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction
- Ensure curricular pathways to success
- Provide whole-child student supports
- Create high-performance school cultures
- Develop data-driven, high-reliability systems

With a good understanding of where you want your school to be, it's time to start getting there.

Phase 3: Focus on teaching and learning

How will we help people transform professional practice? A natural place to start is with a model for instruction that integrates cognitive science on how to develop deep knowledge and skills with research on effective classroom instruction strategies (such as Classroom Instruction that Works):

Attention	Students use cues, questions, and advance organizers to access their prior knowledge and spark curiosity.
	Students set personalized learning objectives connected to larger learning goals.
Focus	Students acquire new knowledge through discovery or direct instruction aided by nonlinguistic representations and note-taking strategies.
	Students reflect on and process learning with similarities and differences, cooperative learning, and summarization.
Consolidation	Students engage in reflective independent practice, supported with checks for understanding and feedback.
	Students integrate, extend, and apply their new knowledge through problem solving, inquiry and investigation, and exploration of "big questions."

You'll notice that we've framed each stage of the process in terms of student learning—what happens in students' brains as they learn. This is quite intentional as it's where the action really occurs in a classroom. Also it's easier for teachers to make the shift to more personalized learning strategies when they focus on learning instead of just instruction.

Phase 4: Support professional learning and collaboration

The next step is to engage teachers in professional learning needed to achieve growth in your focus area, and provide supports needed to adopt new routines with consistency, develop expertise, or create new innovations.

Our Curiosity Works approach favors a peer coaching model of professional learning, in which teachers collaboratively identify and address problems of practice in their own classrooms or focus on a schoolwide problem of practice. While peer coaching can occur with two or more teachers, we advocate a triad model in which three teachers rotate among three roles: coach, coachee, and observer. Key to the relationship is that all three teachers are involved in determining the focus for coaching and feedback.

With a clear focus and a theory of action for improvement, these triad peer-coaching teams can own their own learning.

Phase 5: Embed consistent, deep practice

As schools improve and innovate, they encounter both technical problems and adaptive challenges. A technical problem is one that can be solved with existing know-how and solutions: people know what to do and just need to do it. Solving technical problems is basically a management issue: set expectations, provide timelines, give instructions.

An adaptive challenge, on the other hand, requires solutions that lie outside of current know-how and modes of operating. Addressing an adaptive challenge requires collaboration, creativity, experimentation, and a different style of leadership that knows how to manage change processes.

Early on, schools can make significant gains by addressing technical problems like enacting a curriculum in every classroom, establishing and enforcing behavior expectations, and using high-stakes testing. However, research reveals that school systems which rely only on technical solutions eventually see plateaus (Fullan, 2001; Hopkins & Craig, 2011; Barber & Mourshed, 2007). At this point, many schools and school systems get stuck; they keep trying to apply the technical solutions that worked in the past to what have become adaptive challenges.

To tackle adaptive challenges, it helps to have a purposeful community, one with collective efficacy.

Phase 6: Build a purposeful community

A purposeful school community is "one with the collective efficacy and capability to develop and use assets to accomplish goals that matter to all community members through agreed upon processes" (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 99). Key characteristics of a purposeful community include:

- Having a shared sense of purpose and identified outcomes that matter (see Phases 1 and 2)

- Having agreed-upon processes for instruction, coaching, and other school processes (see Phases 3 and 4)
- Using all available assets, leaving no bright spot unexplored or resource untapped
- Having collective efficacy, a widespread belief among individual school staff that they—individually and as a team—can make a difference for students

Collective efficacy has the potential to be a game changer. Research has found it to be a strong predictor of student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Goddard et al., 2000, 2004, 2007), even when accounting for differences in student background and prior achievement. That is, a faculty of teachers with a strong sense of collective efficacy is more likely to produce positive student outcomes than a faculty without these shared beliefs (Goddard et al., 2015).

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Certainly, this is just a summary of the major mileposts in our recommended school improvement journey. For more details and resources, check out www.mcrel.org/curiosityworks.

No school is likely to be able to move through all six phases in a single school year. Just one phase could be the major focus for an entire semester or year.

Also keep in mind that change is often a messy process, and it can feel at times like you're taking two steps forward and one step back. The important thing is that you keep moving toward your vision.

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