



Defining Continuous Improvement in Education

by J. Jay Marino, Ed.D.

The term continuous improvement or CI is often very loosely defined in educational circles. If we can't define it, then how can we measure it? I believe CI is a philosophy, an approach and a paradigm shift—rather than a program or a set of instructional materials to purchase. CI is designed to instill a positive and collaborative school climate and an enthusiastic, participatory learning environment focusing on being better tomorrow than we are today. CI is about understanding that being good is never good enough and that the biggest room in the house is the room for improvement.

The goal of CI is to engage every student through empowerment, ownership, responsibility, and accountability for his or her own learning. This is accomplished by creating a customer-focused environment that involves students in the implementation of observable (and measurable) components of the CI classroom such as:

Classroom ground rules: Students participate in the creation of classroom

expectations that all agree to follow to accomplish the mission of the classroom.

Classroom mission statements: Students collaboratively create a mission statement that focuses the learning for the year and gets everyone “on the same page” for learning.

Classroom SMART goals: SMART stands for specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time bound. Students participate in goal setting that puts a laser-like focus on instruction.

Classroom data centers: Once goals have been created in student-friendly language, it is important that students participate in the collection and monitoring of progress toward the goals. The data center is the collection point to monitor academic progress.

Individual student data folders: To connect every learner to the classroom goals, students maintain a data folder that tracks and measures their individual progress toward their goals.

Classroom meetings: Effective classrooms take time to reflect on how CI is progressing. This forum provides students with opportunities to problem solve and modify the classroom system to obtain maximum results.

Student-led conferences: In a student-centered classroom, students are expected to be able to articulate their own progress of learning demonstrated through the review of their data folder. Students (instead of the teacher) facilitate the conference with parents.



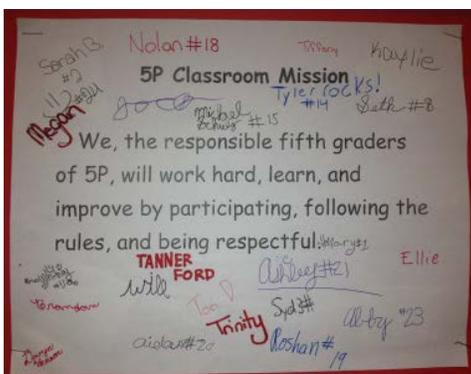
A school-wide data center displays and monitors school-wide expectations and progress toward school goals.

Quality tools and PDSA in the classroom: Twenty-first century learners prepare for creative problem solving in the world ahead by learning and applying quality tools and the plan-do-study-act cycle of CI.

Students play a unique role in CI-driven systems. They are not only served by the system, but also are active workers and participants in the system. Learning is focused on what's most important and students are able to monitor their performance and readily observe their academic/instructional progress. Consequently, students become more receptive to learning when they are active participants and learn powerful 21st century skills that will prepare them for the world ahead.

About the Author

J. Jay Marino, Ed.D. is the superintendent of schools in the Dunlap Community Unit School District 323 in Dunlap, IL. He also serves as an international consultant assisting American and European school organizations in their continuous improvement efforts. Learn more at <http://www.jaymarino.me> or contact Marino via email at continuous_improvement@jaymarino.me.



A classroom mission builds accountability and ownership in students.