

IMPROVING *Schools Initiative*

A multi-year project to demonstrate how lower-performing schools can improve student outcomes

FINAL EVALUATION BRIEF



RESEARCH

INSTLL

Brett Lane, President

Chris Unger, Senior Partner

ABOUT INSTLL

The Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning (INSTLL, LLC) is an education research and consulting firm that works with educational organizations, state education agencies, districts, and schools to promote meaningful improvements to our system of public education.

INSTLL works to support the development and spread of innovative ideas to improve public education by cultivating strategic leadership and learning, supporting the construction of a policy environment conducive to innovation and successful implementation of powerful ideas, and engaging in meaningful evaluations of the various strategies and interventions employed to support teaching and learning. More info at www.instll.com.

PRODUCTION

EdVestors

Marinell Rousmaniere, Senior Vice President for Strategic Initiatives

Janet Anderson, Executive Vice President

Laura Perille, President & CEO

ABOUT EDVESTORS

EdVestors' mission is to increase the number of schools in Boston delivering dramatically improved education outcomes for all students. With a combination of strategic philanthropy, education expertise and implementation support, we work at the classroom, school, and system levels to help schools create the conditions for improvement. In partnership with our donors, we act as a seed funder for school improvement; develop & demonstrate best practices across schools; and coordinate major public-private partnerships to achieve city-wide impact in targeted focus areas — currently middle grades math and K-12 arts education, with new work developing in career technical education.

DESIGN

Katherine McInerney

PRINTING

Kendall Press



In the summer of 2012, EdVestors, a Boston-based school improvement organization, began a partnership with three Boston elementary schools with lower academic performance in support of their school improvement efforts. Initially designed to be a three-year partnership, the Improving Schools Initiative was undertaken to explore the feasibility of an alternative approach to supporting improvement in Level 3 schools that do not have access to (and may not require) the turnaround approaches available to Priority, or Level 4 schools.¹

Through this work, which continued through the 2015-16 school year, INSTLL had an opportunity to examine how an external partner, in this case EdVestors, and districts can proactively work with such schools to pursue successful improvement efforts and move out of the lowest performing 20 percent of schools. Throughout the multi-year effort, EdVestors met quarterly with INSTLL as an external research and thought partner to discuss the progress of the work. Information gathered during these quarterly “Strategy Sessions,” in addition to an annual one-day site visit to each school and review of teacher survey data (including the 5Essentials survey administered by the University of Chicago), provided a wealth of data that was used to inform ongoing program improvement and to document the overall impact of EdVestors’ engagement with the schools.

The nature of our collaborative research provides information about how the EdVestors’ team refined their thinking about the work as it developed over time, as well as documentation of what happened in each school. To this point, this Research Brief can inform districts and external partners, thinking about what it takes to support and scale up improvement efforts, with particular attention to leadership, instruction, and changes in adult attitudes and behaviors as factors that are crucially important for schools to pay attention to as they work to improve instruction and increase student achievement.

In this Research Brief we:

- » Describe the **Theory of Action** and **Approach** used by EdVestors and what happened in the three schools involved in the partnership.
- » Share our **Central Takeaway** from this effort regarding the complexity of engaging in successful and sustainable school improvement in urban districts.
- » Provide a set of **Key Insights** about school improvement in urban settings, including the role of whole-school improvement partners working with districts and schools. These insights and learning have implications for districts, states, and external partners working with districts.
- » Encapsulate the **Lessons Learned** through this work, through EdVestors’ lens, framed as suggestions for how external providers, districts, and schools can better work together to accelerate improvement efforts.

The experience and the lessons learned through this collaborative and formative research partnership provide useful information for states, districts, and external partners also working on how to collectively improve the educational outcomes of the many thousands of students in schools that we know, based on research and practical experience, can and should be achieving at higher levels academically.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brett Lane".

Brett Lane
President, INSTLL

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Unger".

Chris Unger
Senior Partner, INSTLL

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, EdVestors, a non-profit organization focused on driving significant and substantive improvement in public schools, initiated multi-year partnerships with three lower-performing public elementary schools in Boston to refine and demonstrate a systems-based approach to school improvement. Merging lessons learned and best practices from its annual School on the Move Prize² with national research on school improvement,³ the Improving Schools Initiative aimed to demonstrate how lower-performing schools can, with targeted and tactical support from an external provider, dramatically improve student achievement and do so within existing district systems and structures. For many of the lowest performing 20 percent of schools (identified as Level 3 schools in Massachusetts), more intensive “turnaround” interventions are not practically feasible or even an available option, yet in reality these schools do need to make significant improvements if students are truly to be ready to succeed in college and the workforce.



EdVestors' Theory of Action

The Improving Schools Initiative theory of action is based on locally-identified best practices documented through EdVestors' 10-year School on the Move Prize, bolstered by national research on school improvement.⁴ At its core, the theory of action holds that schools will have the capacity to significantly improve student achievement if they:

- » *are given the opportunity to develop a data-driven and focused improvement plan that includes input from the entire staff.*

- » *receive targeted and intensive support towards implementing that plan with depth and fidelity and changing adult practices (as reflected in the five key practices of effective schools).*

See Appendix B for more details on EdVestors' Theory of Action

FIVE KEY PRACTICES of effective schools⁵

The five key practices of effective schools provided the foundation for much of the work, especially with respect to anticipated changes in adult discourse and behavior.

**STRONG
LEADERSHIP
& SHARED
OWNERSHIP**

Distributed leadership grounded in shared accountability between administrators and teachers toward a goal of instructional excellence and increased student achievement.

**MEANINGFUL
TEACHER
COLLABORATION**

The involvement of teams of teachers in analysis of data and related decisions regarding curriculum, instructional practice, and student supports, as well as sufficient time for teachers to plan collaboratively.

**ACADEMIC
RIGOR &
STUDENT
SUPPORT**

A student-centered approach balancing high academic and behavioral expectations with integrated academic and developmental supports tailored to student needs.

**EFFECTIVE
USE OF DATA**

Intentional systems to use data to drive decisions about curriculum, instruction, and interventions.

**FAMILY &
COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT**

A school climate that is welcoming and engaging for students and families, supported by strategic partnerships aligned to school improvement goals.



WHAT HAPPENED IN THE SCHOOLS?

During the three-year partnership, EdVestors engaged each school in a deliberate, inclusive, and data-based planning process leading to the development of priority-driven improvement plans and then provided customized resources, coaching, and implementation support designed to support each school in its targeted improvement efforts.

Through the planning process, each school identified and then subsequently organized their improvement efforts around a short list of key priorities and took action to implement plans in response to these priorities. Improvement efforts indeed led to changes in how teams were organized, how teachers used diagnostic and formative assessment data, and increased efforts to improve instructional practices, most notably around the provision of tiered instruction for students. Overall, schools worked deliberately to implement their plans, and EdVestors provided ongoing tactical support, aligned resources, and weekly coaching. While one school made some significant gains in improving student achievement, the other two schools experienced mixed success in reaping the benefits of their efforts. (See Appendix A for details on each school's academic outcomes).

The disconnect between inputs (e.g., the considerable effort expended by the leaders and teachers in each school and EdVestors' support) and outcomes surfaces a challenge that many schools likely face as they engage in school improvement. The challenge, simply stated, is how to ensure that planning, resources, and "school improvement activities" result in meaningful improvement.

In each school, it is clear that teachers were engaged in new and different activities, such as more intensive analysis and use of assessment data and developing systems of tiered instructional support. And teachers were using teaming structures to engage in collaborative work, much of which involved data to improve instruction. However, what we found is that although new structures and systems were introduced in each school and developed through a collaborative planning process, meaningful changes in mindset and instructional practices were limited in some schools and, as a result, there was mixed improvement in student achievement across the schools. The evidence

Although new structures and systems were introduced in each school and developed through a collaborative planning process, meaningful changes in mindset and instructional practices were limited in some schools and, as a result, there was mixed improvement in student achievement across the schools.

suggests that an important ingredient, or catalyst, involves necessary shifts in the dispositions of leaders—the ways that principals and administrators interact with and support the school community—and in teachers' mindsets that together enable the school community to maximize its use of school improvement structures and to implement research-based instructional practices that improve student achievement.

This study shines a light on an inherent complexity to school improvement work—especially so in urban districts—that influences the ability of schools and external partners to work together to successfully increase student achievement. The complexity of school improvement revolves around the various and often competing ways that school leaders, teachers, and external partners, such as EdVestors, understand what the work of school improvement entails (in the school and in classrooms) and the capacity—the existing skills, dispositions, and resources—that the school has and can use to undertake a significant change effort. Each school has a distinctive culture and context that serves as a prism and filters how leaders and teachers understand and make sense of the messages and support that they receive. External partners must pay careful attention to how a school's leaders and teachers understand and make sense of external supports, so that external assistance is meaningfully used by the school, leading to mutually desired changes in structures, systems, and mindsets which in turn lead to improved academic outcomes.

KEY INSIGHTS:

School improvement in urban settings

- » *Prioritized and focused improvement efforts are necessary but not sufficient.*
- » *A focus on instruction and shared understanding of rigorous and high-quality instruction can't be underestimated.*
- » *Leadership capacity is the foundation of a collective improvement effort.*

KEY INSIGHTS:

Role of external whole school reform partners in supporting school improvement

- » *Managing change in a complex system is complicated; anticipate change as part of the work.*
- » *Clarifying and revising expectations and roles are important; perception matters.*
- » *Balancing adaptive and prescriptive approaches to instructional improvement is crucial; knowledge of what rigorous instruction means and requires is key.*

KEY INSIGHT 1: URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Prioritized and focused improvement efforts are necessary but not sufficient.

The three schools stated that it was incredibly beneficial to bring the school community together to collectively review their data and to identify and focus on a core set of improvement priorities. The annual 3-day summer institutes organized by EdVestors provided schools with time and space to collectively review data and identify the focus of their improvement efforts and the actions that would be taken to pursue those efforts. By year 2 and even more so in year 3, it was clear that schools were owning their priorities, working to implement most of the strategies in their priorities, and examining the impact of their work.

KEY INSIGHT 1: URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A focus on instruction and shared understanding of rigorous and high-quality instruction can't be underestimated.

From day one, it was clear that improving instructional

practices would be a critical part of each school's improvement efforts. Each school developed priorities that focused on one or more aspects of instruction (literacy, writing, or mathematics) and implemented strategies and professional development to improve instructional practice. However, what was not clear at the onset of the work was the degree of "instructional lift" needed across the schools to mobilize better instruction and the willingness of each school community to closely examine and change instructional practices.

As the work progressed in each school, it became clear that the foundation needed to improve instruction was having a deep and collective knowledge of high quality and rigorous instruction. Focusing efforts on improving the instructional core requires a deep and organizationally embedded understanding of high-quality and rigorous instruction. In schools striving to improve, leaders—principals, assistant principals, and other instructional leaders—must first know precisely what high-quality and rigorous instruction is and then be able to lead, model, and support the entire school community towards deep understanding and implementation of this level of instruction across the school and for all students. When there is an ambiguous vision for what good instruction means across the school and instructional expectations lack specificity, focused efforts to improve

instruction may actually lead to less rigorous instruction and a lack of instructional coherence across grades and content areas.

The lesson here is that it is important to not underestimate the amount of work and effort that may be needed to improve the instructional core. First and foremost, it is crucial that school leaders and teachers realize and own the need to improve instruction—that there is shared ownership of students’ learning and how core instruction can support students. And then, it is equally important that the principal has the wherewithal (and in some cases, the autonomy) to mobilize efforts to dramatically improve instruction, through the appropriate targeting of resources, using data to target tiered instruction to students and managing staff and schedules so that instructional improvements can take hold. This may prove particularly difficult in urban schools where districts themselves have neither identified or clearly communicated and supported a consistent, shared, or entirely robust vision of high-quality instruction nor provided principals with explicit autonomy to make school-based curricular or instructional modifications.

precisely, each principal’s disposition—the ways they were inclined to interact with and support the school community— influenced their ability to successfully balance efforts to improve instruction while cultivating and maintaining the relational trust that is necessary for the school, as an organization, to drive improvement efforts forward.

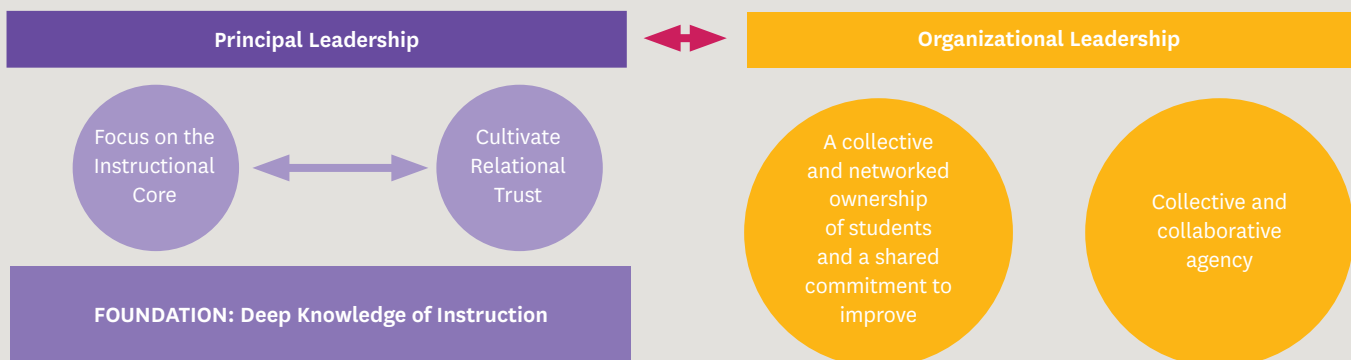
Leadership also has an important organizational dimension, to the extent that organizational leadership provides the catalyst for collective and collaborative agency of improvement throughout the school community. A hard to measure but often-cited characteristic of effective schools is adults’ collective responsibility for all students and a ubiquitous belief, amongst teachers, that they can directly impact their students’ achievement no matter the circumstances. This might be best put in the following way: highly effective schools do not excuse students’ achievement based on their environment or context or assume that their capacity to achieve is limited by their circumstances. Instead, each teacher believes that they can individually, collectively, and as a school make a significant impact on the achievement of their students.

KEY INSIGHT 3: URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Leadership capacity is the foundation of a collective improvement effort.

In the three schools, principal leadership influenced nearly all aspects of each schools’ improvement efforts, for example, how teachers examined and used data (or saw data as relevant and accurate), the extent to which grade-level teams collaborated on lesson planning or used tiered interventions for students, and the implementation of student behavioral management systems and practices, to name just a few. More

However, any number of challenges (e.g., leadership continuity, a lack of a shared understanding of and commitment to instructional quality, and student behavior) can quickly undermine teachers’ sense of agency to make a difference in the outcomes of their students. This is why principal and organizational leadership remains crucial to successful school improvement efforts, so that schools develop the organizational capacity that can withstand changes in principal staffing or other external challenges.



KEY INSIGHT 1: EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Managing change in a complex system is complicated; anticipate change as part of the work.

Simply said, a lot is always going on in districts and schools that, if not attended to, will get in the way of even the most deliberate and strategic improvement effort. Crafting a clear and flexible memorandum of understanding among the district, the external partner (or partners), and the school is crucial to ensure alignment and coordination of improvement efforts and to minimize the impact of (un)anticipated shifts in district or state policies. For instance, between 2012 and 2016 Boston Public Schools underwent significant changes in leadership (including the Superintendent), shifted its curriculum, and implemented a new state-wide educator evaluation system.

The point here is not to try to eliminate all changes and “noise” sometimes typical in an urban district, but rather to simply acknowledge that such “noise” is a byproduct of many urban school systems and state education systems and to recognize how to adapt to and work through such events — organizational and circumstantial.

KEY INSIGHT 2: EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Clarifying and revising expectations and roles are important; perception matters.

EdVestors put considerable effort into building strong relationships with each school’s leaders and teachers and setting clear expectations for how EdVestors would interact with and support each school. Despite these efforts, principals and teachers tended to construct their own understanding of the Improving Schools Initiative and the role of EdVestors in their improvement efforts. An equal challenge was that EdVestors didn’t always know what expectations needed to be clarified proactively. The different ways those individuals in the school “made sense” of the work influenced how leaders and teachers understood their own perceived role in the work, as recipients of support or as active agents of change, and the extent to which leaders and teachers were receptive to EdVestors’ support.

The lesson here is that it is important that external providers

— and districts — understand how a school’s culture mediates the school’s perception of, and receptivity to, the support and resources that external organizations offer and provide. Setting clear expectations and roles are important, but perhaps just as important is the ability to quickly ascertain when roles and expectations need to be revisited, and to do so expeditiously with an agreed-upon end goal in mind.

KEY INSIGHT 3: EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Balancing adaptive and prescriptive approaches to instructional improvement is crucial; knowledge of what rigorous instruction means and requires is key.

A central tenet of EdVestors’ theory of action is the importance of the entire school community collectively reviewing multiple types of data and identifying a core set of improvement priorities owned and supported by all. The theory of action presumes that schools, with some support, can identify the right priorities and strategies in response to their data analysis, and that once priorities and strategies are identified, schools can effectively implement these strategies and use the identified resources. The EdVestors approach to instructional change is adaptive, in that EdVestors did not prescribe a specific instructional model; rather, EdVestors supported each school in developing their own priorities and strategies and in implementing systems and structures to enhance teacher collaboration, use of data, and distributed leadership. Each school developed their own priorities and strategies for improving instruction, with minimal direct input from EdVestors on the use of a particular instructional approach, model, or set of key instructional practices or strategies.

The evidence and experience from EdVestors’ work mirrors a body of research on whole-school reform highlighting the importance of a coherent instructional guidance system.⁶ The research suggests that adaptive approaches to instructional improvement are less likely to lead to instructional change in schools that do not already have a strong understanding of what a rigorous and research-based instructional model/approach looks like and means in practice. Without a certain threshold of knowledge (of what high-quality, consistent, and aligned instruction looks like and means within and across grades), the mere implementation of adaptive processes and tools, such as collaborative priority setting, developing plans,

and teacher use of data and teaming, are unlikely to lead to instructional improvement.

Empowering a community to develop a focused improvement plan and work to implement self-identified strategies feels and sounds like the right thing to do. But a question arose: if a school is struggling to move achievement forward, can one assume that the community can figure out new practices that move all of their students' achievement forward with just a bit more support and not direct guidance?

This final observation regarding the importance of having a rigorous and coherent instructional program or approach represents a thread that runs throughout this work and begs the question as to the degree to which external providers (or districts) should act upon the assumption that empowering school leadership and the school community to decide upon and pursue their strategies of improvement leads to improvement, or if there are particular circumstances when partners might be more explicit regarding the specific tools and practices to be used in schools, and in how resources are allocated.

LESSONS LEARNED

What might have been done differently?

Posing “lessons learned” is an exercise in reflecting upon what EdVestors might have done differently in partnership with the schools, knowing what they know now about this work and with a deeper appreciation of the complexities of partnering with schools in an urban setting. INSTLL and EdVestors provide six summary lessons that we offer to the broader audience of districts, schools, and external partners engaging in this important work. In hindsight, EdVestors could have:

- » Prioritized the singular importance of instruction and efforts to improve school-level and classroom instruction, as first among equals.
- » Clarified and made more explicit, in their own thinking and then collaboratively working with the leaders and teachers in each school, that “improving instruction” might require dramatic, rather than incremental, shifts in teachers’ instructional practices.

- » Worked more closely with the leaders in each school from the onset of the work, to jointly determine the role and purpose of EdVestors’ team in working with principals and teachers, so as to minimize any potential ambiguity regarding EdVestors’ interactions with teachers, in and outside of classrooms.
- » More strategically collaborated with each principal at the beginning of the work, to understand how (and why) each leader operated in certain ways in his or her school and the leadership dispositions of each principal, leading to customized ways of supporting each leader in their work.
- » Taken a more explicit and focused approach in supporting principals to balance their efforts to strengthen the instructional core while building or maintaining relational trust among teachers and between the principal and teachers.
- » Identified tools, in addition to the 5E survey, that would collect base-line data on school climate and culture and instructional practices in the classroom.

Closing Thoughts

Each school leader, teacher, and staff member in these schools desired to make a difference in the learning of each student. And EdVestors undertook to implement a theoretically sound theory of action and did so with a high degree of fidelity. Yet the schools experienced different outcomes.

Our key insights and lessons learned serve as our own reflection on how to do this work better and more collaboratively with districts and schools, as well as provide additional and nuanced (but perhaps not new) information that can contribute to ongoing efforts to improve our K-12 system of public education.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In Massachusetts, Level 3 schools are the lowest performing 20 percent of schools and Level 4 schools are the lowest performing 5 percent of schools.
- 2 The School on the Move Prize has been awarded in the Boston Public Schools by EdVestors since 2006. The prestigious annual \$100,000 prize couples rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis of individual school improvement rates with best practice research documenting the winning schools' improvement strategies. Prize case studies are conducted by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy.
- 3 Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- 4 Bryk et al 2010.
- 5 Rennie Center for Education Policy & Research (2010). *Charting the Course: Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*. Boston: EdVestors.

Bryk et al 2010.
- 6 Cohen, D. K., Peurach, D.J., Glazer, J. L., Gates, K. E., & Goldin, S. (2014) *Improvement by design*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Datnow, A., Borman, G. D., Stringfield, S., Overman, L. T., & Castellano, M. (2003). Comprehensive school reform in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts: Implementation and outcomes from a four-year study. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(2), 143-170.

May, H., & Supovitz, J. A., (2006). Capturing the cumulative effects of school reform: An 11-year study of the impacts of America's Choice on student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 28(3) 231-257.

Rowan, B., & Miller, R. J. (2007). Organizational strategies for promoting instructional change: Implementation dynamics in school working with comprehensive school reform providers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(2), 252-297.

Sykes, G. & Wilson, S. M. (2016). Can Policy (Re)form Instruction. In D. H. Gitomer & C. A. Bell (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (pp. 851 – 916). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

APPENDIX A: Snapshot of School Demographic and Academic Performance

Demographics. Out of an initial set of 17 elementary schools in Boston Public Schools with similar demographics and designated as Level 3 on the state’s accountability system, EdVestors solicited applications and ultimately selected three

schools to partner with, beginning in the 2012-13 school year. Demographic information for the three schools (all elementary schools) is listed below as well as the aggregate demographic composition of the 14 comparison schools.

2011-2012 Demographics	Low Income	African American	Hispanic	White	Special Education	LEP
School A Elementary	63%	26%	59%	2%	13%	53%
School B Elementary	77%	30%	48%	16%	18%	27%
School C Elementary	67%	35%	35%	18%	19%	33%
Average of 3 EdVestors Schools	68%	31%	44%	13%	17%	37%
Comparison Schools (n=13)	79%	40%	42%	8%	16%	32%

Comparison Schools = Level 3 schools in Boston Public Schools invited to apply for ISI, as of 2011-12

Methodology. A comparative interrupted time series design (CITS) was used to examine the impact of the Improving Schools Initiative on changes in student achievement. A CITS design begins by estimating the baseline trend in academic achievement for the three EdVestors’ schools prior to participating in the Initiative (referred to as partner schools) and a set of comparison schools. Next, we measure the amount by which academic achievement deviates from the baseline for the three years the partner schools were in the Initiative, and for comparison schools over the same period of time. First, we want to know whether each partner school improved student achievement relative to its own baseline. And second, we want to know how each partner school’s achievement trajectory compares to the trajectory of the aggregate comparison schools. We used Massachusetts’ Composite Performance Index (CPI), a 100-point index that incorporates all student results into a single index as the primary data source for our analysis. By comparing the performance trends of partner schools to the performance of similar schools across the district, we control for system-wide increases in student achievement that may be the result of district- or state-wide policies and improvement efforts, rather than school-specific interventions.

Academic Performance. The following charts display the 3-year aggregate increase in the Composite Performance Index (CPI) in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics from the baseline (an average of the 2011 and 2012 assessment years) to the 2015 assessment, for each school and the comparison schools.

Over three years, School A made significant gains in ELA and math, outperforming the comparison schools for all students and among high need students. Through 2015, School A had met their targets for all student groups and successfully moved from Level 3 to Level 1 in the state’s accountability system. School B showed some gains in ELA and math for all students but only in math for high needs students. School C experienced minimal gains in ELA and math. In contrast to School A, neither School B nor School C met performance goals in 2015 and continued as Level 3 schools.

Chart 1a. Annual change in Composite Performance Index CPI from baseline (2011 and 2012 average) to 2015, English Language Arts

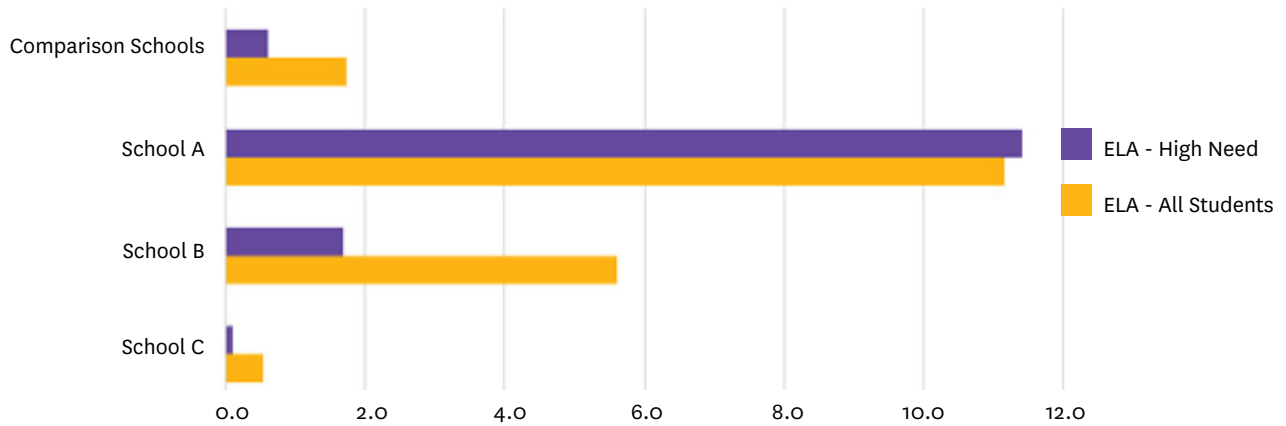
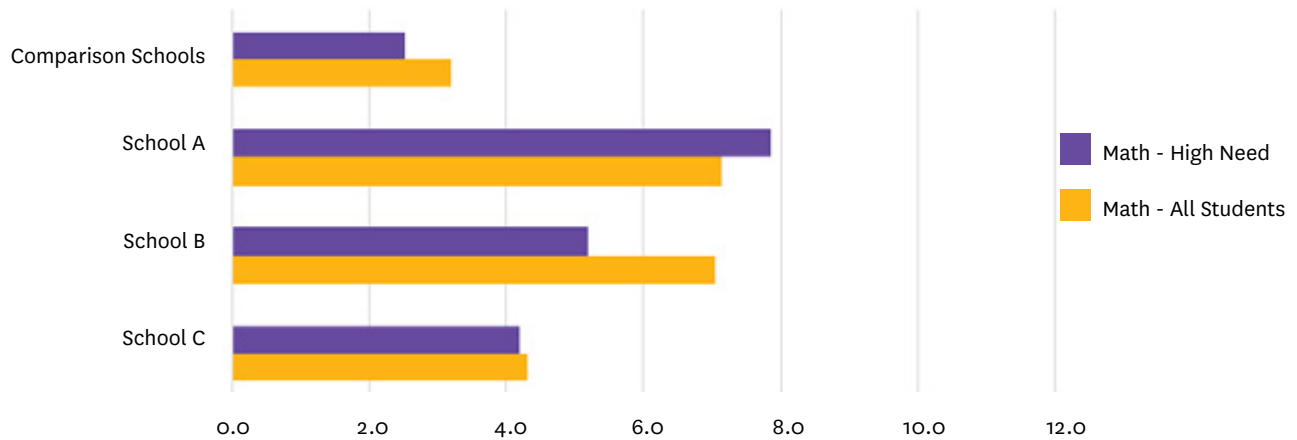


Chart 1b. Annual change in Composite Performance Index CPI from baseline (2011 and 2012 average) to 2015, Mathematics



The charts show the increase in CPI points over the three-year period of EdVestors’ partnership with schools in contrast to the comparison schools. On average, to meet state targets, schools need to improve by 3 CPI points per year, or 8-9 points over the three-year period. While 2 of the 3 schools

showed gains compared to the comparison schools for all students and high needs students in both ELA and math, and the remaining school showed some modest gains in math, only School A made significant enough gains to move from Level 3 to Level 1 in the state accountability system.

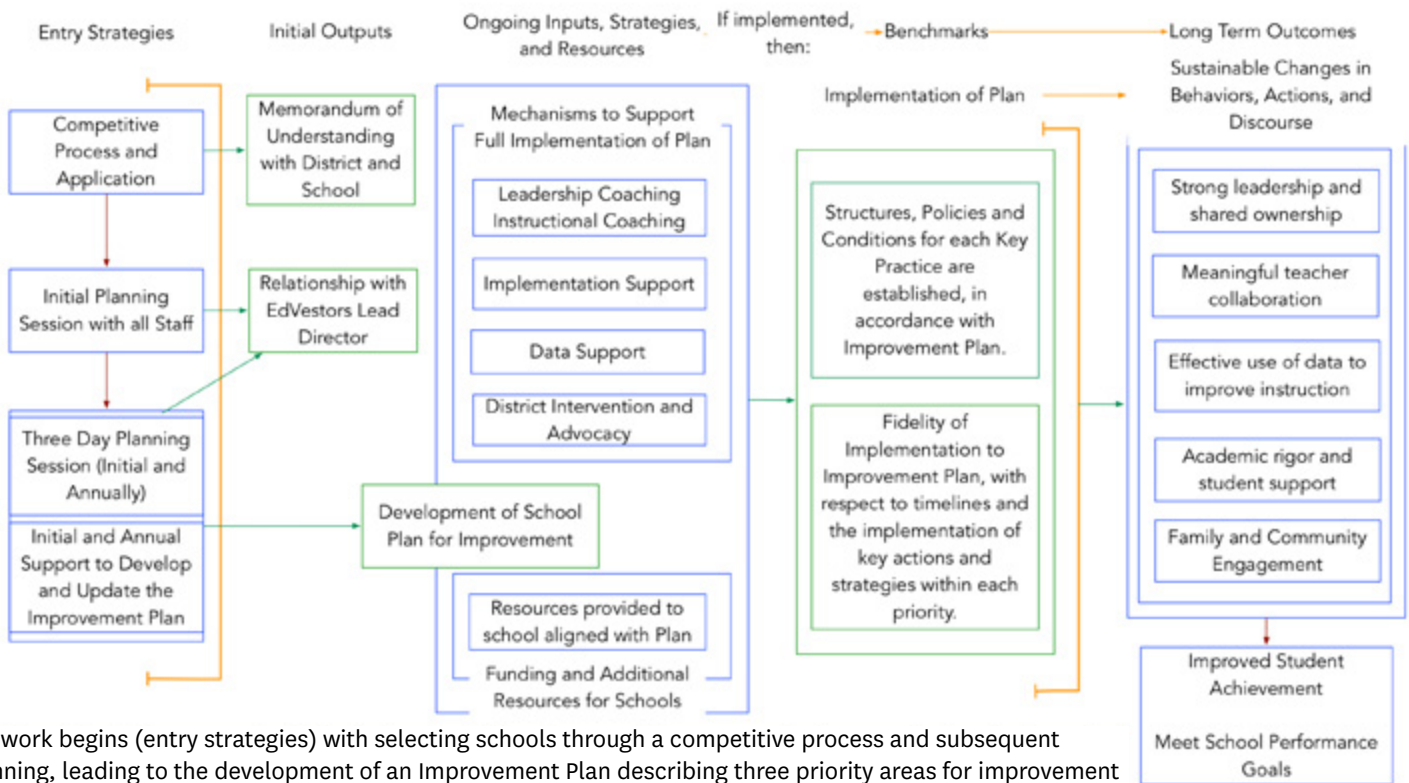
APPENDIX B: The Improving Schools Initiative Theory of Action and Approach to School Improvement

At the onset of this work, EdVestors crafted a detailed logic model describing the specific assistance (e.g., professional development, planning and implementation support, resources) to be provided to the three identified partner schools and the expected outcomes as a result of those actions and assistance. The full logic model (below) provides extensive detail on EdVestors’ design framework including elements of initial engagement and support activities, ongoing implementation support, the key structures and policies necessary for successful implementation, and expected changes in adult behaviors and practices organized around five key practices of improving schools.

EDVESTORS’ THEORY OF ACTION IN BRIEF

Schools that develop a widely shared and focused improvement plan and receive targeted and intensive support towards: (a) implementing that plan with depth and fidelity and (b) embedding the 5 key practices of effective schools in the behaviors and actions of leaders and teachers, will develop the capacity to engage in strategic and continuous improvement and significantly improve student achievement.

EdVestors’ Theory of Action: The Improving Schools Initiative Logic Model



The work begins (entry strategies) with selecting schools through a competitive process and subsequent planning, leading to the development of an Improvement Plan describing three priority areas for improvement and an Action Plan. As the plan is developed, EdVestors cultivates a relationship with the school to support ongoing work over the course of the engagement. A key aspect of planning is the full involvement of all stakeholders at the school. Four mechanisms to support implementation, in combination with targeted resources and tactical support, are intended to support the school in implementing its plan, measured by benchmarks, customized for each school and linked to the five key practices. Through the implementation of the Improvement Plan, it is expected that school leaders and teachers will undergo changes in behaviors, actions, and discourse, to be measured as long-term outcomes. The implementation of the plan and cultivation of the five key practices will lead to improved instruction and improvement in students’ academic achievement, measured by state accountability tests.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the product of two exceptionally formative and collaborative partnerships: first and foremost, among EdVestors and the leaders and teachers of each school, who invited EdVestors to work with them and to be part of a joint effort to improve and increase student achievement for all students. We are grateful to each school for being open to this level of inquiry and analysis and inviting both EdVestors and INSTLL to be a part of this important work. Second, we are thankful for the partnership between EdVestors and INSTLL, the school improvement partner and the external evaluators of the Improving Schools Initiative. We hope this approach to collaborative evaluation design can be a model for how external school partners engage in their own sense-making of what is working and what isn't, and how evaluators can help them improve over the course of program implementation while also capturing insights and lessons learned at a project's conclusion.

