

Leading Through Learning in Practice

Partners in School Innovation

June 2022





Introduction

Partners in School Innovation (Partners) is a school support organization that seeks to “transform teaching and learning...so that every student thrives.” Since 1993, Partners has worked with 25 schools and districts nationally, reaching over 1 million students. The organization intentionally seeks out and supports the most challenged public systems in the country, adapting its model to meet schools and districts where they are and, over time, building adult capacity to lead, teach, and learn in the service of educational equity.

Over the last 3 decades, Partners has seen great success, with a consistent quality of work that has allowed most partner schools to outperform peer institutions by substantial margins—particularly among Black, Latino, and multilingual students. For example, over a multiyear effort with Dr. Tanner G. Duckrey Public School in Philadelphia, Partners supported a robust school transformation effort that produced growth in both predictive indicators (e.g., adult uptake of improvement mindsets and behaviors) and lagging student outcomes. Results from the annual Pennsylvania System of School Assessment indicates that the partnership had a strong positive effect on student learning: from 2016 to 2019, the percentage of students scoring at the highest proficiency levels on the English language arts and mathematics assessments doubled, while the percentage scoring in the lowest performance band decreased by 17 and 14 percent, respectively. The results at Duckrey are emblematic of the impact Partners has had in dozens of other schools and districts nationally.

What is Partners’s secret? How has the organization effectively and consistently served students, schools, and districts in some of the most challenging public education contexts in the country?

In short: Partners operates as a true learning organization, allowing it to be responsive to the context of each new district, school, and student it serves and nimble in the face of environmental and institutional changes. Leaders have, since the organization’s inception, prioritized building and fostering an internal culture and learning systems that support constant, ongoing improvement at the organizational and individual levels.



Across all four Playbook drivers, Partners's leaders model effective learning-leadership.

Driver A: Strategy as Learning

Partners's leaders have fostered a deeply embedded learning culture, implemented a shared improvement methodology, and developed an infrastructure of collaborative learning systems that, in tandem, let the organization identify and harness challenges in service of ongoing institutional and individual development.

Driver B: Stakeholder Participation

Partners's leaders consistently look beyond their immediate leadership team and draw in the expertise of the actors most proximate to various challenges, within and beyond the boundaries of the organization. In so doing, the organization has developed internal and external learning and support strategies that are responsive to local context and needs.

Driver C: Measurement

Partners' leaders have developed learning-driven data structures and tools that allow the organization to rigorously assess the impact of organizational strategy and leadership and frontline practice across diverse internal and partner contexts.

Driver D: Knowledge Management

Partners's leaders invite and provide scaffolds for democratic contribution to knowledge production, accelerating collective learning and improvement.





A Learning Opportunity: Growth & Scale



Over the last decade, Partners experienced tremendous growth. After spending its first 20 years focused exclusively on the Bay Area, Partners expanded its work to six new states, doubling the number of districts supported. Through these shifts, the organization supported 32,000 teachers in 2022, up from 15,000 in 2012. In response, the organization expanded its menu of programs and its staff.

These shifts compelled the organization to contend with a number of emergent challenges, including how to:

- Evolve its partnership strategy and programs to meet the needs of a growing and more diverse set of districts;
- Generate learning systems that could harness and make use of knowledge generated from a greatly expanded set of learning opportunities; and
- Onboard and develop novice staff to ensure the organization continues to maintain its high-quality standards and program coherence.

Sustainably addressing these challenges required the national leadership team to focus doggedly on one question:

How can we evolve our existing learning systems and set the conditions to continually and systematically build our capacity as an organization as we grow?

The Foundation: Organizational Culture, Structures & Learning Systems

Partners's long-standing and carefully designed organizational culture, structure, and routines devoted to organizational learning and improvement laid a strong foundation for the national team to identify and begin answering this question.

Culture

Partners's culture is grounded in a deep belief in the capacity of all people—children and adults alike—to learn, improve, and spur transformative change. In line with this value, everyone in the organization is expected to behave as a learner. Ultimately, Partners aims to ensure that all staff are “eating their own cooking,” echoing in their practice the improvement principles, mindsets, and behaviors they help actors in partner schools and districts embed in their systems.



Driver A: Strategy as Learning

How have Partners' leaders adapted the organization's shared learning methodology, ROCI, to their own context?

The organization's improvement methodology, [Results-Oriented Cycles of Inquiry](#) (ROCI), provides boundaries and a shared language for its internal learning culture. ROCI is a cycle of five steps— (1) partner, (2) set goals, (3) plan, (4) act, and (5) assess, reflect, and adjust—that anchor improvement work at all layers of the organization in shared goals and habits. Leaders explicitly train staff on and roughly align organizational practice to the methodology's steps, but they have positioned ROCI not as a rigid series of technical procedures but as a mindset defined by a set of beliefs, including that:

- Improvement is a cyclical endeavor grounded in an assessment of current practice against a collective vision of the behaviors necessary to make progress toward shared goals;
- Transformative change is, at base, relational, requiring coordination and robust contribution from stakeholders across all layers of a given system;
- Effective learning requires consistent pauses for data-driven, collaborative reflection; and
- Both failure and success, when examined, beget learning.

The ROCI model also serves as an annual road map for partnerships, during which a sixth step—close and renew—is added. This last step focuses on either closing a relationship with care or reflecting on and renewing a shared vision with partners before relaunching the annual cycle. This last step is a critical element of Partners's grounding in change management.



Driver A: Strategy as Learning

How have Partners' leaders supported the development of a "flat" and collaborative learning culture?

When they join the organization, staff commit to applying ROCI not just to their individual, team, and partner development efforts but also to organizational improvement. Leaders make clear that all staff, particularly those most proximate to ground-level practice, have valuable expertise and insight to offer and are empowered—and expected—to identify problems and independently shepherd change efforts to address them.

To this end, leaders see collaboration across traditional silos (e.g., across positional hierarchies, teams) as a core driver of accelerated improvement. Leaders at all levels of the organization strive to embody the humility and vulnerability necessary for collaborative learning by seeking input from staff, being transparent about their own learning efforts, and publicly modeling a learning stance and productive responses

to feedback. The impact of this effort is clear in conversations with cross-functional groups of staff: Frontline practitioners are as comfortable sharing critiques of the organization and uncertainty about their own practice in front of positional supervisors as they are with peers.

On the whole, the Partners culture is intentionally disruptive of the ingrained mindsets and behaviors that education workers are conditioned to enact in traditional systems, which tend to be hierarchical, siloed, competitive, and accountability driven. Staff report that new hires often experience a profound culture shock that resets and continues to shape their orientation to learning and improvement throughout their tenure at the organization.

“You’re giving over agency to the learner to help define [their needs as learners]. The most powerful thing you can do in school transformation...is both give power to and hold adults in the system accountable for their own learning.” —Chris Thorn, *Chief of Program and Partnerships*

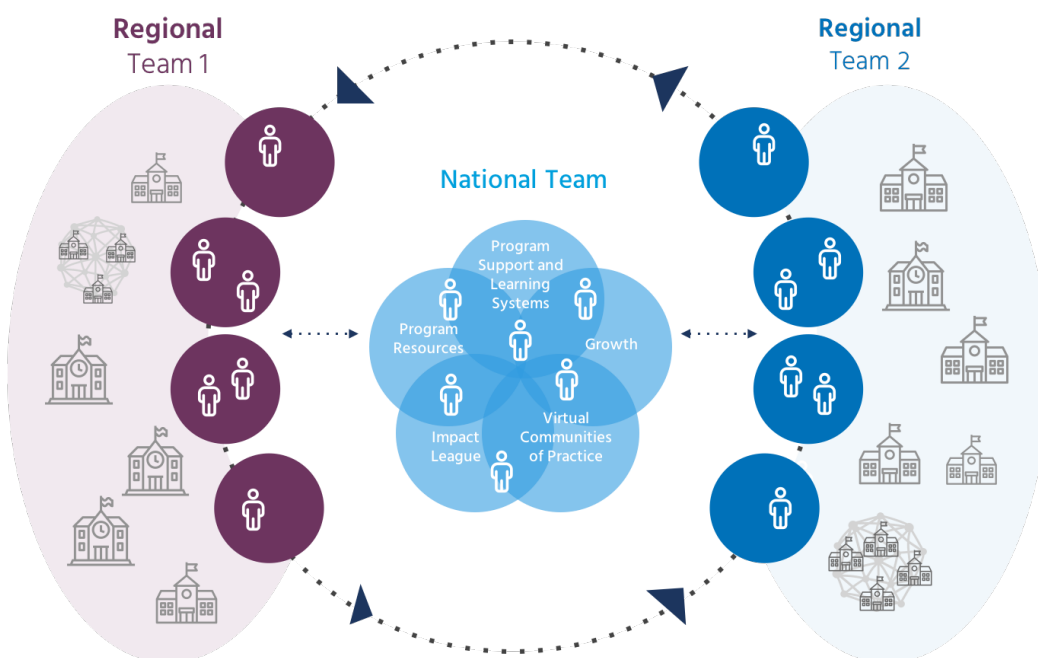
Driver A: Strategy as Learning

In what ways is Partners’s organizational structure conducive to accelerated learning and improvement?
How might you apply similar principles in your own system?

Teaming Structures

Partners’s organizational structures are designed to operationalize these cultural values. Structurally, Partners leaders loosely organize staff into two teams:

Figure 1. Partners Staffing Structure



- The organization's hub is its national team. Led by the chief executive, financial, and program and partnerships officers, the national office is composed of five overlapping project subteams, which, in tandem, develop organizational strategy, coordinate and support programing, manage development and organizational finance efforts, and facilitate internal learning and improvement. Notably, most of the national team has direct experience implementing the Partners support model in schools and districts, with some central leaders sitting in roles that actively straddle national and regional work.
- The school and district implementation teams consist of two regional teams deployed nationally to lead local partnerships with districts and schools. Each regional team is led by a senior director who manages a cohort of directors and frontline staff ("implementers"). Staffing on regional teams is flexible—as new partnerships arise, new leaders may be promoted, and staff are deployed to different regions.

"Being a learning organization is like, there's a lot of asking and not a lot of telling."

— Jae Fusco, Supervising Improvement Partner

At first glance, this structure could be interpreted as a traditional hierarchy, with national leaders dictating organizational agenda, goals, and strategy to regional teams. In practice, however, Partners uses a distributed leadership model wherein the national team behaves more like a network hub than a traditional central office. Leaders understand that to be successful working in and across complex, ever-changing national education contexts, the organization must be dynamic, responsive, and flexible. Practically, this means that all staff—especially the regional teams most proximate to partnership work on the ground—must have autonomy in their local practice and influence on the organization's shared strategy.

To this end, national leaders continually revise organizational teaming structures, shifting to meet the unique demands of each moment. At the national level, leaders regularly ask temporary, cross-team, and cross-region working groups to attend to emergent problems of practice. Leaders provide support for these efforts—asking questions, furnishing resources, offering advice, and stepping in to help make tricky decisions as needed—but ultimately try to get out of the way to let proximate staff lead improvement. In recent years, national leaders have tried to increase transparency and more strongly integrate frontline voice into formal strategic decision-making

structures by establishing rotating roles filled by elected implementers on several national planning teams. This commitment to shared leadership allows the organization to be nimble in quickly identifying and responding to environmental challenges and ground-level issues.

Learning Systems

Finally, to ground the various improvement efforts at each layer of the organization, Partners uses a robust infrastructure of internal learning systems based dually in ROCI and an explicit commitment to race, class, culture, and power (RCCP) equity work. Compared with peer organizations, Partners's national leaders have always carved out and protected an unusual amount of time for structured learning activities, devoting a day and a half each week to structured, cross-functional learning and inquiry. Learning does not stop there, of course. Given the organization's learning-driven culture, it's common for individuals and teams to devote additional time to formal and informal improvement activity. The structure of these systems have evolved over time, but Partners's unyielding commitment to maintaining consistent learning routines sets them up to manage organizational improvement so capably.

“But from the jump at the organization, one of the things our founder pushed for really hard was protecting learning time, in part because we can’t continuously improve our work for our clients if we’re not doing some of that ourselves.”

—John Zachary, Design Partner

Adapting to Growth

With this strong cultural and structural grounding in improvement, Partners was well equipped to identify and address various challenges related to growth. But as the organization scaled, the national team recognized that its learning systems, while robust, needed updating. A sustainable response to the persistent challenges of new staff, novel support models, and fresh partnership contexts would require more organized, aligned, and systematic learning across the organization.



Partners’s improvement efforts were gradual and nonlinear, but the work coalesced around several key initiatives: updates to (a) the organization’s baseline partner strategy, (b) learning routines, and (c) onboarding and staff development programs, with each effort drawing on Partners’s strengths across the Playbook’s four drivers.



Refreshing the Partnership Implementation Approach

As Partners expanded its services to meet demonstrated needs in the field—namely, a gap in affordable, high-quality support offerings—it adapted its long-established approach to front-line partnerships. Over nearly three decades, the organization had honed a successful ROCI-based strategy and suite of tools that spurred strong outcomes across their partnerships with schools and districts, but expansion into novel contexts using several new service models and a growing cohort of novice staff would require a significant revaluation of that approach.

Partners’ initial strategy had been designed around the [Intensive](#), a high-dosage model that embeds a Partners improvement coach into a school for 3.5 days a week. Over the years, leaders and frontline staff had collaboratively developed and refined a suite of strategy documents and tools: a shared Theory of Action template, a Program Implementation Tracker (PIT), a School Transformation Review (STR) rubric, a Change Agent Framework (CAF) rubric, and a Professional Learning Plan template. Together, they functioned as a theory of improvement for the model, ensuring that the organization’s programming remained aligned across partnerships. The PIT, in particular, had shaped frontline practice, offering a comprehensive timeline and high-level checklist of ROCI-aligned implementation tasks designed to encourage improvement and transformational change in partner systems.

<u>Theory of Action (examples A & B)</u>	Articulates the high-leverage changes that could improve student outcomes, particularly for students of color and English language learners
<u>Program Implementation Tracker (PIT)</u>	Outlines and tracks the enactment of the baseline actions Partners staff implement during partnerships with schools and districts
<u>School Transformation Review (STR) Rubric</u>	Captures the institutional outcomes partnerships are expected to produce
<u>Change Agent Framework (CAF) Rubric</u>	Identifies the shifts in mindset and behavioral outcomes partnerships are expected to foster in school leaders and staff
<u>Professional Learning Plan (PLP) Template</u>	Acts as an action plan that gets adjusted in each ROI cycle as teams reflect on progress toward goals and plan for how to meet current needs

Driver A: Strategy as Learning

What “andon” structures allowed Partners’s leaders to quickly identify and mobilize around challenges with the Program Implementation Tracker (PIT)?

But as Partners rolled out two new [network-based models](#), frontline staff leveraged the organization’s learning systems and feedback pipelines to raise concerns that the PIT was misaligned with the reality of work on the ground. In practice, the lower-dose models presented new time and resource constraints that were forcing implementers to pick and choose which PIT tasks to prioritize. As teams and staff with varying levels of experience opted to enact different elements of the strategy, programming across regions became increasingly inconsistent. Implementers had always been empowered to adapt the partnership strategy to meet the needs of each school and district partner, but variance in practice was becoming so significant that learning facilitators on the national leadership team found themselves struggling to effectively facilitate collaborative improvement.

The national team interrogated this issue in their team learning spaces and quickly recognized that they were facing a knowledge-management challenge. The organization’s veteran implementers had an intuitive sense of which PIT practices were drivers of important school transformation outcomes, but a cohort of more novice implementers hadn’t yet built a deep understanding of the strategy. Without a way to explicitly capture and methodically share the insight held by experienced staff, programming across regions would continue to diverge. Partners may not have learned this at all if not for the robust feedback structures and staffing design that incorporated the experiences of veteran implementers, many of whom had both national and frontline support responsibilities.

“Chris actually empowered me to pull a team together to revamp the PIT...And there was something about the way he did it, where he knew my team had a marginalized voice in how that tool was structured...So there’s something about a humbleness to leverage the experience of people, to learn from it.” —Uchenna Lewis, *Supervising Improvement Partner*

In response, Chris Thorn, the organization’s chief of program and partnerships, tasked a temporary, cross-functional working group with updating the PIT. In line with Partners’s core value of centering proximate voices, Thorn first tapped Uchenna Lewis—a frontline implementer who had raised concerns about the strategy—to lead a team through an initial redesign process. After 4 months of collaborative work to refine the strategy, Lewis’s team produced a new version of the PIT.

Driver C: Measurement

How did Partners’s attention to building a diverse data set help build a nuanced understanding of the implementation of the revised PIT?

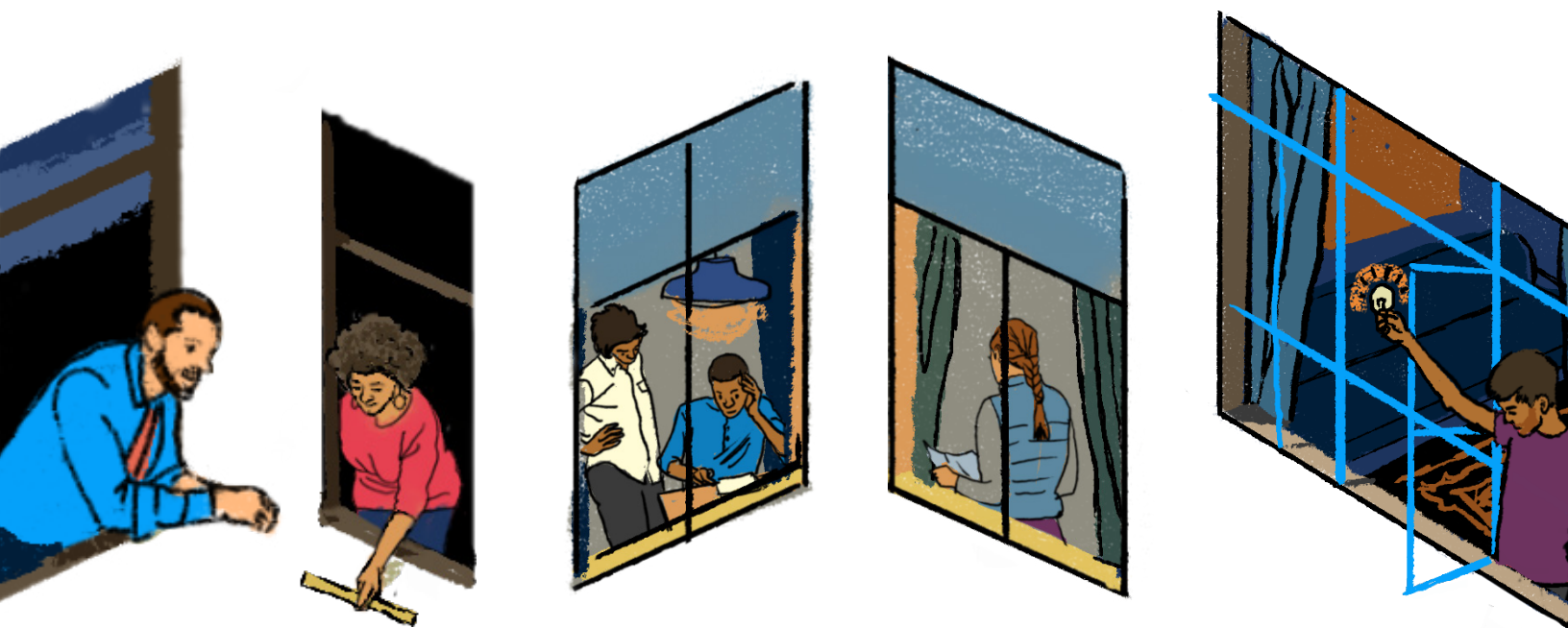
The organization’s developmental evaluator, Sarah May, then took the reins on the project, monitoring the implementation of the new strategy across partnership contexts. As the new PIT was rolled out, May led a functionally diverse team of national and frontline staff with expertise in data systems, evaluation, implementation, and program design as they:

- Hosted a series of monthly data dives and feedback sessions and combed through historical data collected through end-of-year theory-of-impact processes to learn which practices implementors had found most relevant in their partnerships;

- Compared program implementation data with the results of yearly school transformation reviews (one of the organization’s primary outcome measures) to identify key drivers of success; and
- Synthesized external research on effective improvement science practices with the ROCI cycle steps the PIT was aligned to.

Through this multiphase process, the working group rigorously consolidated the tacit learning accumulated by veteran implementers and captured it on the organization’s central PIT document. The team highlighted as very important practices (VIPs) the line items their analysis identified as key drivers of success, and it differentiated the tasks relevant to each of the organization’s support models.





Driver B: Stakeholder Participation

How did Partners's leaders leverage stakeholder participation structures to improve the PIT and their broader organizational strategy? What cultural attributes made this work possible?

The updated PIT document — known internally as the VI-PIT — is now part of the backbone of Partners' learning systems, bringing greater alignment to various improvement efforts. On the ground, the VI-PIT provides stronger guidance for implementers using the organization's various models and helps increase coherence across regional partnerships. Critically, the learning here is not complete. As frontline staff continue to implement the VI-PIT, the national team is closely monitoring its implementation and collecting data to support ongoing refinement.

Driver A: Strategy as Learning

How did Partners's leader improve their internal learning routines and structures to coordinate accelerated learning across the organization?

Strengthening and Aligning Internal Learning Routines

The national team also worked to bring greater intentionality and alignment to the organization's learning systems and routines. Partners had always protected a significant portion of staff time for collective learning, but as the organization grew, leaders on the national team noted a number of ways to refine the schedule, structure, and design of learning sessions, especially in light of the organization's growth. Partners's existing knowledge-management systems and communication infrastructure, while robust, lacked the systems necessary to capture, consolidate, spread, and apply critical learning across a larger, increasingly complex organization. As a result, exciting local insights often remained siloed on regional teams, contributing to increasingly varied approaches to partnership nationally and missed opportunities for collective improvement. National leaders saw an opportunity to apply a more intentional learning arc to the organization's collaborative learning spaces and create stronger pipelines for communication and learning across regions and teams.



Table 2. Partners in School Innovation Learning Spaces

Learning Space	Facilitator	Participants	Purpose	Cadence
Team Meetings	Each team's supervisor	Team staff	Collaborate around challenges specific to partnership contexts or team tasks	~ Weekly
Data Dive	Developmental evaluator	All implementation staff, national team invited	Review data across teams to surface trends, highlight effective practices or challenge areas, and calibrate on the meaning and quality of VI-PIT items	Monthly
Gates Cross-Regional Collaboration	Chief of program and partnerships	Staff working on Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-sponsored networks	Support collaboration and learning across teams implementing network models	Monthly
Approach Essentials	Design partner	New staff; staff in need of support on specific implementation tasks	Ongoing development sessions on the foundations of Partners' approach	Monthly
Race, Culture, Class & Power Learning Space	BIPOC supervising improvement partner with BIPOC and White cofacilitators	All staff	Protected time for learning and discussion related to Race, Culture, Class & Power equity work, including a "theory to practice" component that allows staff to practice antiracist partnership practices	Monthly
Whole Group Learning and Coaching PLCs	Design partner	All implementation staff, national team invited	Support learning related to the technical aspects of partnership implementation, including coaching	Monthly
National Fridays	National operations and program staff	All staff	Support learning related to general skills (e.g., project management, summarizing partnership work for funders, etc.)	Monthly

To this end, John Zachary, a Design Partner on the national team, led an effort to develop a more intentional scope and sequence for internal learning, aligning each month's schedule of learning sessions to a common program priority. The refreshed VI-PIT tool was a helpful organizing mechanism in this regard because it provided a shared timeline of priorities across the year. For example, in October, when VI-PIT line

items related to coaching are top of mind in most partnerships, the national team focuses learning sessions around various dimensions of that competency: for example, Approach Essentials meetings on the basics of coaching, whole-group learning on goal setting with coachees, and data dives that track progress on VI-PIT coaching items.

Table 3. Snapshot of Learning Systems Scope and Sequence for 2021-22

<u>Month</u>	<u>Focus (and VI-PIT Focus if applicable)</u>	<u>Data Dives</u>	<u>Approach Essentials</u>	<u>Whole-Group Learning</u>	<u>Coaching PLC</u>
<u>August/September</u>	<u>Cycle 1: Set Goals + Plan</u> <u>(1.1.1, 2.1.1, 2.1.3, 2.1.4, 3.1.1)</u>	<u>September: Introduce VI-PIT goals and calibrate on SMART goals</u>	<u>August 27: ROCI and Theory of Action (including On Track w/ TOA)</u>	<u>September 3: Goal Setting, TOA, On-Track Data</u> <u>September 10: PLP and Action Plans</u>	<u>TBD, input likely to come from EA Coaching for Equity</u>
<u>October</u>	<u>Cycle 1: Plan—Coaching</u> <u>(2.2.3, 3.2.4)</u>	<u>Review VI-PIT coaching items & complete the coachee list</u>	<u>October 1: Intro to Coaching</u>	<u>October 8: CAF goals + goal setting with coachees</u>	<u>TBD, input likely to come from EA Coaching for Equity</u>

Driver D: Knowledge Management

How did improvements to internal learning structures facilitate stronger democratic knowledge generation, consolidation, capture, and sharing? What are the benefits?

In this same vein, national leaders reorganized the schedule of learning sessions to ensure that each organization's core priorities, particularly their race, culture, class, and power (RCCP) work, receives equal due. With an expanding portfolio of support offerings and a growing staff team with varying levels of experience, learning sessions had quickly become overloaded with content. Through the feedback surveys

embedded in each learning session, national facilitators had learned that staff found this especially challenging when asked to quickly pivot between topics without adequate processing time or an opportunity to apply their learning; for example, shifting from intensive RCCP work to more technical workshops on partnership tasks. Building on a longtime push from former Oakland regional director Tovi Scruggs-Hussein to

more robustly center racial equity work, the national team restructured the monthly learning calendar, bookmarking each Friday for a discrete type of learning, while more intentionally threading RCCP work through every session.

The national team supplemented these learning sessions with a repository, the Known Good library, that captures vetted resources aligned to each program priority. In an organization where frontline staff have the autonomy to develop bespoke resources for each partnership, the sheer number of available tools and templates available for sharing and staff use can be overwhelming. Through the Known Good library, staff can curate “greatest hit” resources (e.g., content modules—facilitator’s agenda, resources, background readings—learning sequences, templates, protocols) that are demonstrably effective across various contexts and aligned with the organization’s equity principles. It is critical to underline that this library does not function as the type of standalone repository that often sits unused in large organizations: Partners leverage knowledge brokers—the various national leaders, regional supervisors, and frontline staff who lead learning sessions—to help make the resources in the repository discoverable. The Known Good library is as much about making expertise visible as it is about the objects themselves.

Driver B: Stakeholder Participation

How have Partners’s learning redesign efforts supported system stakeholders in working and learning across lines of difference?

The move to more strongly align learning sessions around a common agenda opened avenues for the national leadership team to foster stronger communication and collaboration across the organization. Leaders increased the total number of learning sessions devoted to cross-team, cross-functional inquiry, adding to each month’s learning schedule (1) network-specific fishbowl meetings, (2) cross-team data dives

facilitated by national staff, and (3) two additional Fridays of cross-organizational learning sessions. In 2021, the organization began using [Mighty Networks](#)—a digital networking platform that regional teams use with partner schools and districts—to supplement these synchronous learning spaces. This increased emphasis on collaborative learning is still a work in progress, but it has helped identify and scale innovative ground-level practice, maintain consistency across the organization’s national portfolio, and ensure that ground-level practice and organizational strategy decisions inform one another.

It’s worth emphasizing again that Partners’s strong extant learning culture and structures directly facilitated these improvements. Because national leaders led and participated in learning routines alongside frontline staff, they had ample time and space to reflect on—and experience firsthand—issues with the design of those systems as the organization grew. Further, robust feedback mechanisms paired with the organization’s “[warm demander](#)” learning culture allowed national leaders access to the type of consistent, constructive feedback from staff needed to refine learning systems piece by piece. Finally, like all other Partners personnel, leaders were acculturated to a constant push for improvement and felt responsibility to name and work alongside others to address challenges as they became apparent, even when those issues were large, systemic, or unrelated to the core responsibilities of their role. This culture allowed the team to gradually advance what became significant improvements to their internal learning routines.

“We’ve been thinking about onboarding not being just for new staff, but instead about making sure that we’re creating consistency around the basics of our approach across the organization.” —John Zachary, Design Partner





Driver A: Strategy as Learning

How do Partners's onboarding and ongoing development structures encourage an "ever-better" culture across the organization?

Reframing Onboarding and Ongoing Development

In line with the broader improvements to learning systems, the Partners national leadership team reframed their approach to onboarding and ongoing training. As a growing organization, Partners had to scale their staff, with new hires at times making up nearly a quarter of the organization's regional personnel. At the same time, the organization's hiring schedule had grown less consistent, with new staff onboarding at different points throughout the year, rather than in a single cohort at the start of the academic calendar.

Without a centralized, consistent curriculum for onboarding, regional leaders found it increasingly difficult to ensure that all staff received comprehensive training on the basics of the Partners' approach. And while the organization had implemented a stopgap solution—an apprenticeship model that deployed experienced staff to partnerships alongside novice implementers—the national team recognized the hazards of placing the onus of development entirely on managers.





Driver D: Knowledge Management

In what ways do Partner's ongoing development efforts contribute to knowledge spread and application?
How might similar practices manifest in your own system?

To meet this challenge and bring greater consistency to training efforts across the organization, national leaders collaborated with staff to develop an onboarding template and curriculum aligned to the learning system's scope and sequence. During their first month, new hires now progress through a traditional suite of onboarding sessions, including asynchronous welcome webinars, virtual meet-and-greets, and workshops on ROCI and the Partners implementation approach. New staff then begin participating in monthly Approach Essentials learning sessions— synchronous modules that cover each of Partners's foundational implementation practices (e.g., coaching, goal setting).

In line with Partners's cultural values, these sessions are not designed as pedantic professional development on an inflexible partnership rulebook. Instead, they are, in spirit and format, aligned to and infused with ROCI principles. As staff are introduced to the principles and frameworks that define and bring cohesion to the Partners approach, they are simultaneously prompted to practice the reflective mindsets and skills that will allow them to learn, generate new insight about these practices, and work collaboratively to improve them. And because Approach Essentials topics are now temporally aligned with the content covered across the organization's broader schedule

“When a person comes into our org, they’re wrapped in this support bubble. It is a lot. It’s a big investment that the organization makes in supporting people in that way.” —Uchenna Lewis, Supervising Improvement Partner

of learning sessions, novice staff are more quickly equipped to substantively contribute to collective learning efforts.

Notably, Approach Essentials sessions are not exclusively targeted to new hires: any staff who, with their supervisors, identify that they need supplemental support on a core implementation topic can join the sessions that will best meet their needs. Functionally, the Approach Essentials meeting space creates an affinity group for learners, protecting space and time for collaborative reflection and personal development. At the same time, the space helps capture institutional knowledge: each Approach Essentials session is recorded and archived with aligned materials in a central repository that staff can access asynchronously.



Table 4. Knowledge Repositories and Platforms

Repository or Platform	Description	Aligned Brokerage Space
Mighty Networks	Social media platform designed to support staff in sharing with others the novel learning and insight emerging from their day-to-day work. The platform also supports Partners’s alumni network of former staff and both former and clients as a community of practice.	Cross-team collaboration sessions (e.g., data dives, whole-group learning sessions)
Known Good Library	Repository that captures practices and “greatest hits” resources that have been vetted by leaders, determined to be resonant with the organization’s values, and demonstrated to be effective in practice	Whole-group learning sessions
Approach Essentials Repository	Repository that catalogs development modules related to core program priorities and improvement methodology	Approach Essentials sessions; supervisors

In Summary

Partners' attention to building a strong internal learning culture and system of learning routines prepared it to effectively navigate the challenges of organizational growth. Efforts to refresh internal learning systems and tools have helped the organization more robustly apply to its own internal practice the improvement mindsets and routines it strives to embed in partner schools. Strong collaboration between national leaders and frontline staff has supported the development of a partnership strategy that helps tie the organization's learning systems to shared goals and practices. Further, Partners has been able to more efficiently and consistently capture and scale "known good" practices across

internal teams, increasing consistency in national offerings and supporting the individual development of both new and long-term staff. As this case demonstrates, even in a strong learning organization like Partners, efforts to develop and maintain effective improvement systems are rarely simple or seamless. The urgency of daily, ground-level triage is no less acute for Partners staff than in any other school-support organization, and national leaders have not always found a neat balance between support for frontline work, organizational growth, and ongoing improvement to internal learning systems.



But a number of leadership practices and principles have set the organization apart and allowed it to effectively take on the challenges of scale.

Driver A: Strategy as Learning

As the organization has scaled, the Partners national leadership team has leveraged a strong collaborative learning culture, improvement methodology, and existing learning infrastructure to identify and address gaps in their internal improvement systems. Most important, Partners leaders have consistently applied to their own practice the core improvement principles they expect frontline staff and partner schools and districts to use, building—and constantly improving—systems and routines that activate and apply the expertise of those most proximate to ground-level challenges to organizational strategy and design.

Driver B: Stakeholder Participation

Partners leaders have fostered an organizational culture and developed robust structures that invite ground-level staff to participate in the development of organizational strategy. This has allowed the organization to build learning systems that are sustainable and responsive to the challenges of scale felt most acutely by ground-level staff.

Driver C: Measurement

Partners leaders have fostered a data-driven culture and monitoring structures that have allowed the organization to rigorously track the impact of changes in strategy across diverse partnership contexts and constantly improve practice.

Driver D: Knowledge Management

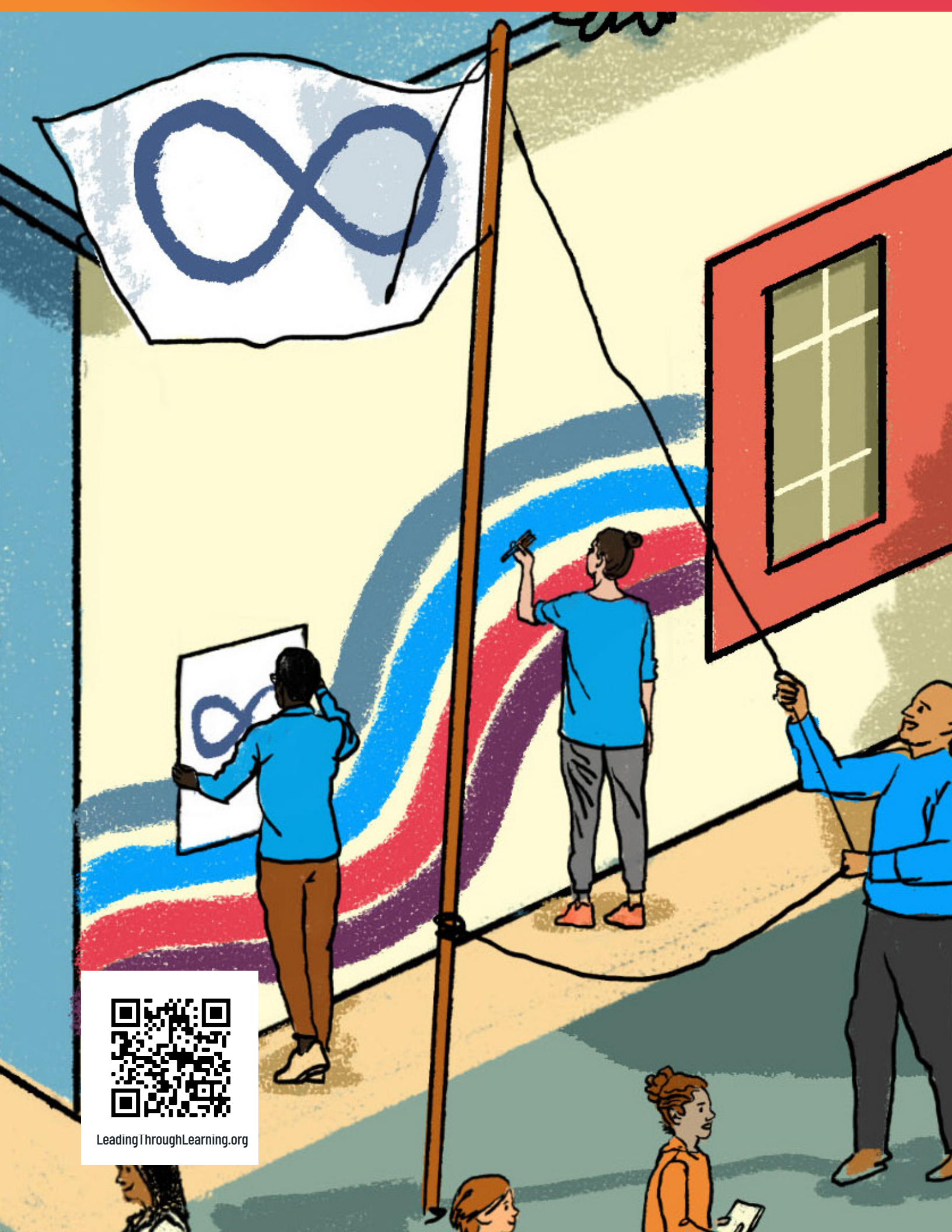
Partners leaders encourage all staff to democratically contribute to knowledge production. By breaking down structural silos and improving their systems to capture, spread, and synthesize expertise and learning across the organization, Partners has been prepared to quickly identify challenges and responsively adapt organizational strategy and practice to meet the demands of a changing landscape.

Best of all, this learning story is incomplete. By the time you read this case, it will already be out of date. Across each topic discussed, Partners has plans for improvement: ongoing learning around its core partnership strategy, further alignment of the organization's learning and knowledge-management systems, more robust efforts to connect teams operating in diverse partnership contexts, and improvement

to the internal onboarding and development efforts. Over time, Partners will continue to leverage its robust improvement culture and thoughtfully designed learning systems to identify and learn from the inevitable challenges of a constantly changing educational landscape, adapting over time to meet and best them







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