

# Student Engagement and Attendance Center

## Planning Tool for Youth Engagement

### Authors

Tracy Long, Katie Castillo,  
Angie Whistler, Megan Gildin

**Westat**<sup>®</sup> **insight**



June 9, 2023

### Disclaimer

This resource was developed by Westat Insight (formerly Insight Policy Research) and American Institutes for Research under Contract GS-10F-0136X with the U.S. Department of Education. The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education or endorsement by the federal government.

### Suggested citation

Long, T., Castillo, K., Whistler, A., Gildin, M. (2023) *Planning Tool for Youth Engagement*. Student Engagement and Attendance Center

## Planning Tool for Youth Engagement

---

Youth engagement is emerging as a promising practice to reduce chronic absenteeism, and working collaboratively with students to improve attendance has been linked to beneficial outcomes for students, educators, and families. When youth have a meaningful role and feel connected to their school community, they feel a sense of responsibility to their peers and learning environment and are motivated to show up consistently.<sup>1</sup> Youth engagement helps foster social and emotional skills and provides opportunities for youth to connect with their community through meaningful engagement with people of all ages and backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> This tool is designed to help state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), and other educators work as a team to move toward practices with high authenticity for youth engagement—practices that leverage relationships with youth and seek to engage meaningfully with them. By using a continuous improvement process, teams at local, district, and state levels will collaboratively assess current youth engagement practices, identify gaps, determine improvement practices that align with characteristics of authentic engagement, and prioritize practices to implement. Teams will then create an actionable plan to monitor and adjust practices for continuous improvement with the goal of effectively engaging a diverse range of youth and leveraging their lived experiences to improve school engagement and attendance supports and outcomes. Youth engagement is a process, and this tool represents steps for teams to take throughout this process (see figure 1). We hope that teams will see this as a living, iterative document and return to it repeatedly.

---

<sup>1</sup> Emdin, C. (2017). *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. New York: Penguin Random House, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019). *A Framework for Effectively Partnering With Young People*. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-framework-for-effectively-partnering-with-young-people>.

## Planning for Youth Engagement

Moving toward authentic engagement ensures youth are treated as partners in supporting students and the school community. Adults and students share the responsibility in this partnership. This approach to youth engagement becomes part of the sustainable core practices of the attendance policies and supports currently in place. Rather than plan *for* youth, teams will plan *with* them, using the strengths and perspectives of the youth in the school community and building relationships with them that are asset based, collaborative, interactive, and built on mutual trust. Throughout this process, the team will examine current youth engagement practices to determine where they fall on the continuum of authentic engagement, ranging from low to high authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Authenticity in this context means moving from simply having youth participate to engaging them as leaders and partners. Table 1 illustrates differences between low- and high-authenticity youth engagement components. Teams can use this table to help with self-reflection on current youth engagement practices.

**Table 1. Youth engagement components with low and high authenticity**

| Low authenticity  | High authenticity   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Young people as invited participants</li> <li>■ Adult-defined activities or structures</li> <li>■ Short-term or one-time youth involvement</li> <li>■ Youth limited to commenting on strategies and plans that are already developed</li> <li>■ Young people’s lack of decisionmaking power when providing input</li> <li>■ Feedback from young people inconsistently collected or inadequately heard</li> <li>■ No follow-up for youth regarding outcomes of decisions</li> <li>■ Adults jumping in to “rescue” when mistakes are made</li> <li>■ Youth access limited to those who have intimate knowledge of the issue being addressed</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Young people as partners or leaders</li> <li>■ Young people’s ability to decide how they want to be engaged and how they want to design structures and activities</li> <li>■ Young people with a voice and decisionmaking power</li> <li>■ Ongoing opportunities for feedback that is heard and valued to help drive decisionmaking</li> <li>■ Emphasis that mistakes are part of learning</li> <li>■ Relevancy to youth context and experience</li> <li>■ Hands-on, active learning and skill building, connection to resources and communities</li> <li>■ Physical and psychological safety</li> <li>■ Supportive relationships</li> <li>■ Opportunities for belonging and meaningful inclusion—students feeling safe, supported, and valued</li> <li>■ Positive social norms               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support for efficacy and mattering</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

<sup>3</sup> Mapp, K.L., & Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*. Carnegie Corporation of New York. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/embracing-new-normal-toward-more-liberatory-approach-family-engagement/>; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2012). *Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships* (Issue Brief #3). Retrieved from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/JCYOI-AuthenticYouthEngagement-2012.pdf>; Students Commission of Canada. (n.d.) Youth Engagement Toolkit. Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health. Retrieved from [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/eecd\\_YETOOL\\_E.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/eecd_YETOOL_E.pdf).

**Figure 1. Youth engagement planning process**



To make sustained systematic improvements to youth engagement practices, there must be infrastructure support that removes barriers to progress. The Dual-Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2)<sup>4</sup> provides guidance on the goals and conditions that are necessary for effective family engagement. One element in this framework, as represented in table 2, identifies three organizational conditions that can help foster changes in practices. Before starting the planning process, consider these key conditions and whether they are in place in your organization in support of your engagement efforts. Highlight where an aligned infrastructure is in place for supporting high authenticity for youth engagement and where additional supports might be needed.

**Table 2. Organizations conditions from Dual-Capacity Framework for Family School Partnerships (Version 2)**

| Organizational conditions  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Systemic: embraced by leadership</li> <li>■ Integrated: embedded in all structures and systems</li> <li>■ Sustained: supported with resources and policies<sup>5</sup></li> </ul> |



### Resources

- Process conditions, organizational conditions, goals, and outcomes, as identified in [Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement](#) from Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Moving toward positioning youth as partners, as outlined in [Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnership](#) from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative
- Key features of youth engagement, as detailed in the [Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health Youth Engagement Toolkit](#) created by the Student Commission of Canada

<sup>4</sup> Mapp, K.L., & Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*. Carnegie Corporation of New York. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/embracing-new-normal-toward-more-liberatory-approach-family-engagement/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

**Step 1. Set your goals and build your team.** This step helps determine the level (e.g., SEA, LEA, school) at which the youth engagement practices will focus. Use the guiding questions to help facilitate this conversation with an internal team or existing committee that focuses on attendance. After identifying the focus level, build a broader team by selecting internal and external collaborators who are most affected by attendance issues and whose perspectives, lived experiences, and resources can support improvements to student attendance. Note these collaborators in table 3. After you determine key parties, engage them in co-designing this work, modeling the types of partnerships that contribute to more authentic practices for youth engagement in steps 2–7.



### Guiding Questions

*While building the team, keep the following questions in mind:*

- ★ What is the level of focus (e.g., SEA, LEA, school)?
- ★ What is the goal for engagement?
- ★ Who are the key partners to engage on attendance issues at this level?
- ★ Where are gaps in engagement?



### Resource

- [Effective Communications for Stakeholder Engagement Checklist](#) from U.S. Department of Education

## Big-Picture Goal

We would like to collaborate with youth to \_\_\_\_\_ (goal/desired outcome).

**Figure 2. Example of collaborators**



Note: LEA = local education agencies



**Step 2.a. Assess current practices.** In this step, the team will document current engagement practices and their intended outcomes in table 4. Assess each practice by referring to the youth engagement components with low and high levels of authenticity in table 1. For each practice, be as specific as possible with the intended outcomes and identifying elements of low and high authenticity to ensure the team can effectively determine where this practice falls on the continuum of authenticity. Next, discuss and decide which practices to keep, improve, or eliminate. Use any available data to help inform the team’s decision, including team members’ diverse perspectives and feedback from youth who are engaged through current practices.



**As a team, consider these questions:**

- ★ What are the current practices for engaging youth?
- ★ Why are these current practices in place? What are the intended outcomes of each current practice on family engagement?
- ★ What are the target audience and engagement technique for each practice?
- ★ How would the team rate each practice’s authenticity on a continuum of low to high? How does the team know which practices have high authenticity and which have low authenticity? Could the team make changes in this practice to move it further towards high authenticity on the continuum?
- ★ Who else is the team partnering with? How does their authentic engagement differ from the current practice?
- ★ What action (keep, improve, eliminate) does the team recommend for each practice?
- ★ What is the priority for each practice?



**Step 2.b. Assess gaps.** Use table 5 to reflect on your current engagement practices. Describe the practice, identify any gaps in authentic engagement, and list any current collaborators within this practice. You can refer to table 1 on page 2 of this tool to reflect on how gaps might be closed through implementing engagement practices with high authenticity. Once table 5 is complete, the next steps will guide the team to address any identified gaps.



**As a team, reflect on each question to identify gaps:**

- ★ What attendance needs are addressed through current practices? What needs are not addressed?
- ★ Which youth are engaged through current practices? Which are not engaged?
- ★ Where do we see highly authentic engagement in our practices? Where is engagement lower?
- ★ How do we know this information?

**For each gap, ask the following questions:**

- ★ What current practices could be improved or adapted to fill these gaps? What resources (e.g., organizational or policy supports, time, staffing materials) are needed to make these improvements?
- ★ What new practices are needed?
- ★ Which collaborators should be included?

**Table 5. Gap analysis**

| Gap in practice   | Gap in authentic engagement  | Currently involved collaborators  |
|---|--|---|
| <p><i>Example: We ask our students to take a school climate survey that includes information on engagement and safety, factors that influence their attendance, but we do not share the data with students or engage students in problem solving.</i></p> | <p><i>Example: We share school climate data publicly but would like to create opportunities to review the data with youth and make decisions about data-informed next steps.</i></p> | <p><i>Example: District staff, school leaders and educators, students, families</i></p> |
|   |  |   |
|   |  |   |
|   |  |   |
|   |  |   |
|   |  |   |
|   |  |   |
|   |  |   |

**Step 3. Choose practices to improve or gaps to fill.** Select a set of practices to improve or identify gaps in existing engagement practices that your team will address with new practices. Describe the factors that might affect the decision to prioritize a certain practice or gap.

Use the data you created in step 2 as your team collaborates on the following:

- Select practices your team labeled "improve" in table 4 or gaps your team captured in table 5. List these practices or gaps in table 6.
- Rank these practices or gaps in order of priority and potential impact on improving attendance policies, supports, and outcomes.
- Determine which practices align best with the area of focus and target audience for authentic engagement and which are most likely to lead to highly authentic engagement practices.
- Based on the teams' diverse experiences, consider which practices seem most likely to be effective in improving youth engagement in student attendance policies, supports, and outcomes.



**Consider these questions when deciding which practices or gaps to prioritize:**

- ★ Which practices are most aligned with the team's goals?
- ★ Which practices are most likely to engage a diverse range of youth?
- ★ Which practices are most likely to address the attendance needs of a diverse range of youth?
- ★ Which practices would be best supported by existing organizational conditions?
- ★ Which practices would require different organizational conditions?

**Table 6. Priority practices**

| Practice/gap   | Key factors to consider for prioritization  |
|--|---|
| <i>Example: Use of school climate survey results</i> | <i>Example: We think looking at the school climate data with youth is important because the data are predictors of attendance and can be improved relatively quickly. We can look at social identity group responses in our school climate data to ensure we understand diverse student perspectives.</i> |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |
|  |   |

**Step 4. Brainstorm possibilities.** Work together as a team to think of possibilities and new ideas to engage youth in improving student attendance policies, supports, and outcomes. Reflect on the extent to which each new idea incorporates highly authentic engagement practices and harnesses existing strengths in organizational conditions (see table 2). After developing a list of ideas in the brainstorming space, assess the fit and feasibility to implement each practice.

***Fit** is defined as how well the program or practice aligns with the implementing site and target populations' perceptions of strengths and needs, values, culture, and history, other initiatives and priorities, and internal capacity resources available for implementation.*

***Feasibility** is defined as how well the program or practice can be integrated into the implementing site based on how operationalized the program or practice is, the supports available at the site to support implementation, and the strength and availability of research data.<sup>6</sup>*

**Take the following actions during this step:**

- Focus on how you can improve the current practices or add new practices to fill gaps, depending on what you prioritized in step 3.
- Encourage an open exchange of ideas—even if an idea is not the right fit, it could inspire further ideas in other members of the team.
- Get creative and use the diverse perspectives of the team to expand beyond current efforts.



**Resource**

- ➔ [Hexagon discussion and analysis tool](#) from National Implementation Research Network

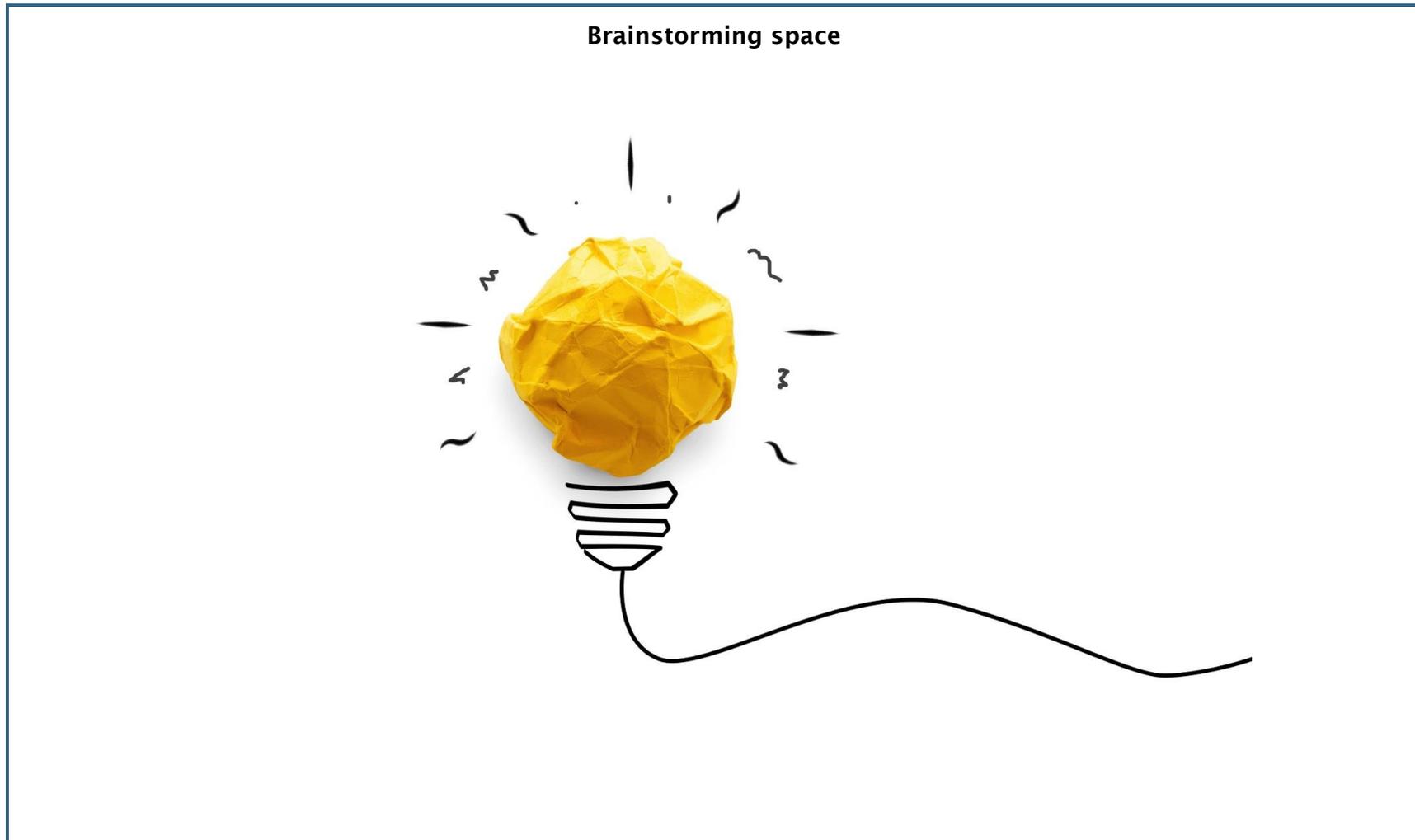


**Brainstorm the following questions:**

- ★ What practices have other organizations or SEAs, LEAs, or schools used to generate authentic engagement? How could the team adopt or adapt those practices?
- ★ What strategies have engaged youth in other areas of education, outside of attendance? What would the team need to adapt those strategies for attendance?
- ★ What resources and evidence-based practices exist for authentically engaging youth? How could the team adopt or adapt those practices for the context?

<sup>6</sup> Metz, A., & Louison, L. (2018). *The Hexagon Tool: Exploring Context*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. Retrieved from <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/hexagon-exploration-tool>.

Other options for taking detailed notes from your team discussion include brain mapping, flowcharts, web-based brainstorming platforms, or any brainstorming technique that works best for your team.



**Step 5. Identify practices.** Work as a team to consider each new or adapted practice brainstormed in step 4. Using table 7, list the practices and their intended outcomes, compare the practices with the authentic engagement practices in table 1, and note specific engagement components. Next, identify the current organizational conditions that might support or hinder the practices, and describe the practices' fit and feasibility. While many types of goals and outcomes are possible, it is common for goals to focus on building capabilities (e.g., skills and knowledge), improving connections between partners, creating networks, facilitating a shift in beliefs or values, and, finally, boosting the confidence of those involved.<sup>7</sup>



### Ask the following questions for each practice:

- ★ What are the intended outcomes of the new practice?
- ★ What potential unintended outcomes should the team keep in mind? How can the team protect against these unintended outcomes?
- ★ How does the new practice improve on current practices with low authenticity? What components of the new practice build high authenticity?
- ★ How will the team ensure these practices with high authenticity are realistic and sustainable?
- ★ What current organizational conditions (e.g., leadership, systems and structures, resources) can facilitate implementing the new practice? What organizational conditions might act as barriers?
- ★ How well does the new practice align with the community's strengths, needs, values, culture, and history?<sup>1</sup>
- ★ How well does the new practice align with other existing initiatives and priorities?
- ★ How well defined is the practice? What elements would still need to be defined before implementation?
- ★ What supports are available for implementation?
- ★ What is the evidence base for this practice?

<sup>7</sup> Mapp, K.L., & Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*. Carnegie Corporation of New York. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/embracing-new-normal-toward-more-liberatory-approach-family-engagement/>.

**Table 7. New practice exploration**

| New practice | Intended outcome | Authentic engagement components | Current organizational conditions | Fit and feasibility |
|--------------|------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
|              |                  |                                 |                                   |                     |
|              |                  |                                 |                                   |                     |
|              |                  |                                 |                                   |                     |
|              |                  |                                 |                                   |                     |
|              |                  |                                 |                                   |                     |
|              |                  |                                 |                                   |                     |

**Step 6.a. Create goals.** In this step, your team will develop goals for each practice described in step 5, identify the important collaborators, and determine any additional resources needed. In table 8, focus on writing goals that are SMARTIE: strategic, measurable, ambitious, realistic, time-bound, inclusive, and equitable.<sup>8</sup> For each practice, your team could create a single, comprehensive SMARTIE goal or several goals, depending on the complexity of implementing the practice.



**Resource**

- ➔ [SMARTIE goal overview](#) from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- ➔ [SMARTIE goal planning template](#) from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

**Table 8. Goals for new practices**

| New practice to implement  | SMARTIE goal<br>(specific, measurable, attainable,<br>relevant, time-bound, inclusive, and equitable)  |
|--|--|
| <i>Example: Analyze school climate survey using disaggregated social identity group data</i> | <i>Example: Within 3 weeks of receiving school climate survey data, convene working group, including diverse youth members, to look at disaggregated school climate survey data by social identity groups and highlight gaps in relationship, safety, and sense-of-belonging measures.</i> |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

<sup>8</sup> The Management Center. (2021). *SMARTIE Goals Worksheet*. Retrieved from <https://www.managementcenter.org/resources/smartie-goals-worksheet/>.

**Step 6.b. Create an action plan.** After documenting the new practices and developing SMARTIE goals, begin creating an action plan in table 9 for each new practice the team has decided to implement. Outline an action step, the responsible parties, and the resources needed to accomplish the goal. Finally, set a timeframe and due date for the action step.

**As your team creates the action plan, consider the following:**

- Make sure each step is actionable, necessary, and realistic based on your team’s capacity.
- Assign teams or specific individuals for each task, keeping their availability in mind to ensure the goal stays on track.
- Determine a timeframe for your implementation that includes review dates, key milestones, and the final completion date. Build in extra time in case setbacks occur or if the team adds tasks (e.g., gather perspectives from more collaborators).

**Table 9. Action plan**

| Action step | People responsible | Resources needed | Timeframe | Due date |
|-------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|----------|
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |
|             |                    |                  |           |          |

**Step 7. Implement and monitor; revise as needed.** The key to implementing new practices is planning for success. Teams can achieve success by consciously collecting data, monitoring implementation and impacts, and revising as needed. When done correctly, this process can become a continuous improvement loop. Use table 10 to record the practices monitored, data collected to measure progress, any impacts observed, and the data collection date.

**Figure 3. Continuous improvement process**



**Ask the following question during implementation:**

- ★ What data sources can the team use to monitor implementation?
- ★ What data can the team collect to determine each new practice’s effectiveness, authentic engagement level, and impact?
- ★ What are the intended outcomes of each practice your team identified in table 7?
- ★ What unintended outcomes are possible? What data might the team collect to monitor for unintended outcomes?
- ★ When will each practice be implemented? When will the data become available?
- ★ How often will the team collect and review data?

**Table 10. Implementation monitoring plan**

| Practice | Data | Impact | Date |
|----------|------|--------|------|
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |
|          |      |        |      |

Employing a continuous improvement process to collaboratively assess, design, and implement practices that align with the components of authentic engagement, teams will be able to use this tool at the local, district, and state levels to help assess and identify current youth engagement practices. Effectively engaging a diverse range of students and leveraging their lived experiences, collaborators will be able to improve school engagement and attendance supports and outcomes. Youth engagement is a process, and this tool represents steps teams can take throughout this process. We hope teams will see this as a living, iterative document and return to it repeatedly.