

From the Columbus Business First:

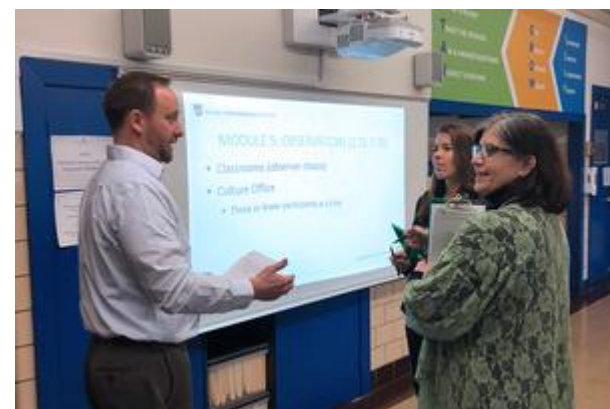
<https://www.bizjournals.com/columbus/news/2019/08/16/social-entrepreneur-school-performance-institute.html>

Social Entrepreneur: School Performance Institute brings focus on experimentation, results to education reform

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School Performance Institute launched as the learning and improvement arm of the nonprofit United Schools Network. Its core purpose is to study and spread school design and improvement best practices to high poverty schools. It combines what it has learned from more than 120 school visits across the country with United Schools' experience running four high-performing K-8 charter schools in Franklinton and the Near East Side: United Preparatory Academy for elementary school students and Columbus Collegiate Academy for middle school.

These schools regularly demonstrate outstanding results. The four year graduation rate for students in high poverty schools is typically little more than 50 percent. By contrast, 95 percent of United Schools' students graduate from high school and 75 percent enter college. The percentage meeting the third grade reading guarantee is 11.6 percentage points above the Columbus Public Schools' average.



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School Performance Institute founder John Dues says a focus on experimentation and results is key to education reform.

I talked with [John Dues](#) to learn what has been the key to the better outcomes for their students.

How do you balance between tried and true approaches to education and the experimentation inherent in School Performance Institute? One of the core values of SPI is think small, start small. Big breakthroughs most often flow from the ground up. In education, we often do the opposite; that is, rapid, large-scale, top-down change under conditions least likely to produce success. Instead of go fast and big, and learn slowly, SPI innovates using small tests in small settings like a single classroom or working with a single student.

What is the greatest lesson that has driven SPI? It's an idea we call 'get proximate.' Our golden rule is to observe and consult the people on the ground who know the most about the problem of educating high-poverty students. It is very difficult if not impossible to find bright spots without being proximate to the work. Too many education reforms come from people who haven't spent much time in schools. Failing to fully appreciate the significance of context is one of the primary reasons good ideas fail.

We approach issues of context as the foundation for solving every critical problem.

What do you consider to be the source of SPI's success? 'Improvement science' describes our system of focusing on student challenges, identifying interventions, and evaluating each new intervention before adopting it for school-wide use. We focus on finding the root cause of the underperformance of a single student. We then design and test a series of interventions. We evaluate against what we expected, then either adopt the intervention, adapt it based on what we observed, or abandon the intervention as unsuccessful.

We adopt only when an innovation has proved to produce improved outcomes. All teachers use the same interventions until we identify an innovation that is successful. Then all teachers will adopt the new intervention.

For example, in our work with one 8th grader, we developed a formula for improvement that combines a few different improvement tools to diagnose the root cause for his off-track standing and then designed and tested interventions tagged directly to those root causes. This successfully got him back on track before he

matriculated to high school. We then used the same formula with other 8th graders at his school and are now spreading that work to a second school this upcoming school year.

Where do you want SPI to be in five years? Our vision is for SPI to be an institute that has fundamentally changed the way schools think about and approach improvement work. Approaches cannot be cut and pasted. Improvement science is customized to the school, classroom and student. The first step in this process is to work with school-based improvement teams to build this capacity.

These ideas run counter to our sector's accountability driven culture where test scores are used to evaluate a staff member. Our approach evaluates a process or technique so we know what leads to student success or failure and we can improve that process.

What advice would you give to other social entrepreneurs? Define your 'flywheel' and stick with it. The flywheel principle is centered on the idea of building momentum in your organization by continual discipline, focus and implementation to move the whole organization forward in the same productive way day after day, year after year. In so doing, each little step forward adds to the momentum that steadily advances your organization.

Over time this relentless focus increasingly drives your organization forward through a virtuous cycle of discipline and effort. At SPI, our flywheel is centered on ensuring high-quality results at our schools, building a strong team, improving outcomes at schools, and enhancing our reputation as an improvement adviser.

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