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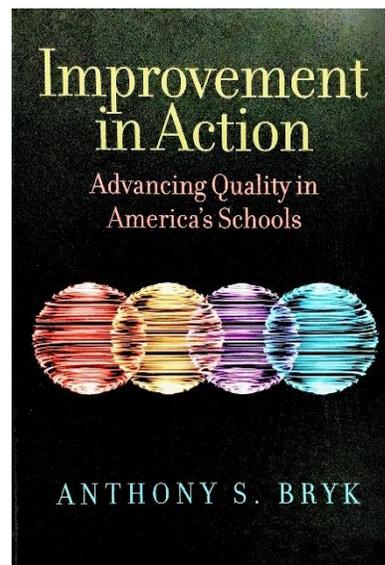
**Bryk, A. S. (2020). *Improvement in action: Advancing quality in America's schools*. Harvard Education Press.**

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**Reviewed by Clifford Davis, Jr.  
University of West Georgia  
United States**

America's public schools have been navigating uncharted waters for the past two years. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools to focus on critical operational issues, such as effective communication and the scheduling of in-person and virtual learning as well as hybrid instruction. As a result, educators have had little time to consider methods for improving the academic experience for students. However, with the end of the pandemic in sight, school leaders are again reflecting on school improvements (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021; Nielsen, 2021).



Bryk's 2020 *Improvement in Action: Advancing Quality in America's Schools* is a timely and relevant book for educators seeking to improve their schools by producing optimal student and teacher outcomes or deepen their general understanding of school improvement. The book provides educators, particularly those at the secondary level, concrete descriptions of the actions other educators have taken to increase the effectiveness of their schools by improving both students' and teachers' performances. It also advances a call for action by imploring educational leaders to reflect on school improvement, avoid standardized approaches to solving complex academic problems, and collaborate across entire organizational structures to find solutions.

The book's author, Anthony Bryk, has been involved in school improvement for more than 30 years. He is a former professor of urban education at the University of Chicago and was the Spencer Chair of Organizational Studies at the School of Education and the Graduate School of Business at Stanford. He has also served as the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Bryk has a wealth of knowledge to share with his audience and has authored a number of other works on the science of improvement, including *Trust in Schools* (2002) and *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (2010).

In 2015, Bryk, with co-authors Louis Gomez, Alicia Grunow, and Paul LeMahieu, argued for a new approach to school improvement in *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. They recommend that educators learn rapidly and implement thoroughly, instead of implementing quickly and learning slowly. In brief, there are no universal solutions or quick fixes to address the educational problems currently facing our schools. The authors contend that, to address these challenges, educators must collaborate across organizational boundaries and engage in continuous disciplined inquiry. They urge educators who desire improved student and teacher outcomes to analyze problems in greater depth by answering two questions:

1. How can our educational organization continuously improve on what it does?
2. How can educators accelerate learning improvements?

Bryk's *Improvement in Action*, the focus of this review, is essentially a sequel to *Learning to Improve*. It provides readers with six case studies of educational organizations—namely, the Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), New Visions for Public Schools, Summit Public Schools, High Tech High, the National Writing Project, and the School District of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin—that encountered numerous challenges when attempting to improve student and teacher outcomes and describes the steps they then took to produce optimal results. In all six cases, the educators asked themselves how they could improve their organizations, accelerate learning, and share the lessons they learned while addressing the relevant issues.

The case study of Fresno (Chapter 1) addresses the district's need to improve its graduation rate and post-secondary attendance. The New Visions for Public Schools example (Chapter 2) describes how a charter school network accepted the challenge of reducing chronic absenteeism and improving the accumulation of credits to improve graduation rates in turn. The Summit Public Schools case (Chapter 3) recounts a charter school network's effort to move away from a traditional high school structure to one in which students had more choices in their work and could progress at their own pace. The High Tech High (Chapter 4) discussion is an example of a network of schools that sought to improve students' outcomes in order to achieve their goal of college success for all students; this was attempted through a more informed way of using data to identify and solve problems. The National Writing Project (Chapter 5) provides an example of how

researchers and school practitioners partnered to provide teachers of writing with support in implementing the Common Core State Standards for Writing. Finally, the case of the School District of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin (Chapter 6) describes the evolution of a culture of continuous improvement within a specific school system.

Although each case study of improvement is unique, four similarities can be observed across the groups. First, the educators concerned examined the available data to truly understand how their systems operated. Then, they used existing research and external expertise to improve their understanding of how their systems worked and identify the necessary changes. Thirdly, they continuously monitored the progress of their improvement efforts and developed a hub or network to support these efforts (for example, by creating new staff positions and organizational roles). Lastly, all improvements were only possible with stable leadership and supportive governance.

These common actions identified by Bryk in *Improvement in Action* are consistent with those observed by other researchers in the field of improvement. For example, Hassel and Hassel (2009) reviewed dozens of studies related to turnaround situations implemented within differently sized non-profit organizations across various healthcare companies and government agencies as well as within for-profit organizations in numerous industries. Although these institutions were non-educational, Hassel and Hassel claimed their results were relevant for districts and schools because chronically challenging situations, such as declining metrics and resistance to adjusting to changing environments (and the actions taken to reverse them), were consistent across venues.

A prominent theme in this book is that educational institutions must form partnerships to genuinely improve. K-12 and higher education institutions cannot make significant improvements when working in isolation; practitioners and researchers must work together. In an excellent example of such a collaboration, Bryk describes how the FUSD accepted the challenge of ensuring its graduates were prepared for college. While working toward this goal, the FUSD's leaders realized they needed support from a higher education institution; therefore, they partnered with the University of California, Merced. As a result, the two educational entities created a practice-improvement partnership called "Equity and Access," which provided the FUSD with the research and expertise to support its improving efforts.

A second key theme is that improvement is not something that a school engages in once a year; rather, it should be integrated in the school's culture. As Bryk notes:

Improvement is not an endpoint; it is a journey. As a team moves down the path, they engage a learning-to-improve spirit: we can do better. The drive to get better and to continue to become the best at getting better—this is the ethos and the ethic of living continuous improvement. (p. 44)

When I began my first principalship in the mid-1990s, many school leaders considered the school improvement process to be nothing more than a state requirement. Once the school had completed the process and submitted its improvement plan to the state, the matter was forgotten until the next plan needed to be submitted. However, as a new principal, I understood that the science of improvement is continuous. I appreciate Bryk's efforts to demonstrate both the evolution of school quality assessment as it has become more improvement-centered and the changes that have occurred in how educators think about school improvement.

A third theme of this book is coherence. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), coherence consists of a shared understanding of the purpose and nature of work: "There is only one way to achieve greater coherence, and that is through purposeful action and interaction, working on capacity, clarity, precision of practice, transparency, monitoring of progress and continuous correction" (p. 2). In other words, coherence results when the people in an organization share a unified focus and purpose in their work; it must be in their minds and actions, both individually and collectively.

Clearly, such coherence is not easy to achieve; like improvement, it is not an endpoint but a journey. Bryk suggests that all educators must have insight into the factors that shape their work, such as structures, systems, and processes, as this allows them to combine various forms of expertise to solve school-related problems. Such insight is vital for organizational improvement, and all educators must be involved in the problem-solving process for the desired outcomes to be reached. Of course, coherence is challenging to achieve when educators are overworked and not unified.

The greatest strength of this book is the case study format, which provides educators with examples of real-life problems, potentially similar to their own, that have been encountered by other educational organizations. The stories bridge theory and practice, enabling readers to conceptualize how the science of school improvement could be implemented in their own institutions. Although each case study could stand alone, the collection demonstrates how different teams applied the same principles or concepts to achieve similar positive results. Furthermore, Bryk assists the reader in understanding the need to examine educational problems comprehensively and conduct root-cause analyses to understand the nature of each problem. He uses analogies and figures to contextualize the educators' problems. For example, he characterizes FUSD's low matriculation rate and consequent low enrollment in postsecondary institutions as a "leaky pipeline" (p. 25). Indeed, when the FUSD educators conducted a root-cause analysis of this problem, they discovered that students were slipping through the cracks at various points in their school careers.

A limitation of this book is that the author focuses almost exclusively on the secondary level. While the principles presented in these useful case studies could also be applied to elementary- and middle-school levels, the lack of more cases specific to those grade levels decreases the book's relevance to a broader audience. In particular, it might have been helpful for

Bryk to include one case study of a problem that elementary-level educators face, such as many of its students not being proficient in reading by the end of the third grade.

In sum, *Improvement in Action* is an excellent resource for educators, school leaders, and researchers who want to improve the quality of America's K-12 schools—be they public, private, or charter. Perhaps most importantly, its author invites school leaders to see school improvement as a tool that can have positive effects on students' and teachers' lives instead of a mere compliance process.

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## About the Reviewer

**Clifford Davis, Jr.**, Ed.D., serves as an assistant professor of educational leadership, teaching courses on educational law, school improvement, and instructional leadership at the University of West Georgia. He has held many teaching and leadership roles, including serving as a principal, a director of secondary education, and the chief of staff of a large urban school district. His research interests include accountability and school improvement.





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