

Why Do We Need Data

Data is all around us!

Data can:

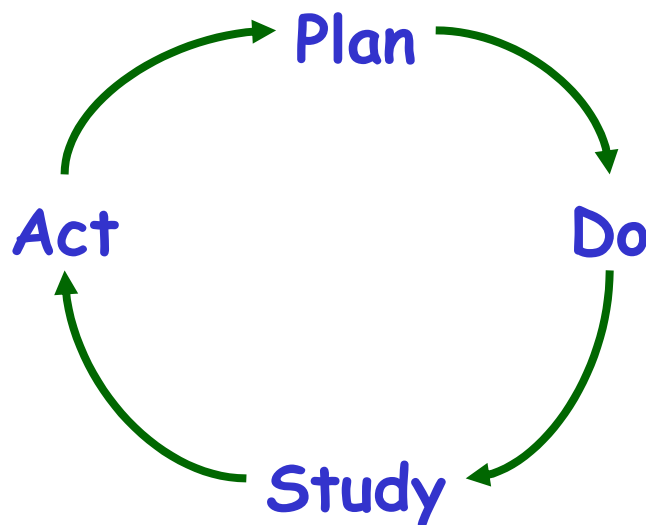
- Confirm problems or issues
- Change how we deliver programs, allocate resources, and decide what programs we offer
- Validate what we already know
- Encourage inquiry and further exploration of issues
- Question what we assume is working or not working
- Provide reliable information for accountability issues
- Guide continuous improvement
- Build a community of lifelong learners

The Continuous Improvement Cycle

Effective program improvement processes are cyclical and continuous, with no clear beginning or end. The plan-do-study-act cycle for school improvement is shown in Figure 1. Originally an early version of this cycle was developed by Dr. Walter Shewhart (1939), and it provided a foundation for much of the work by corporate management expert W. Edwards Deming (see Rinehart, 1993). This cycle contains four major activities:

- Plan: Develop a plan for improvement
- Do: Implement the plan
- Study: Evaluate the impact according to specific criteria
- Act: Adjust strategies to better meet criteria

Figure 1
Continuous Improvement Cycle



In spite of good intentions, not every intervention will be successful for every child. At times, efforts may not lead to the results you anticipated. But with rigorous measurement of your program or service you learn what interventions are working and for whom they are working. With this information, you can adjust your practices, renew your plans, and try again. You can work to *continuously* improve.

Data are the key to continuous improvement. When you “plan,” you must use data to provide insight and a focus for your goals. Data patterns reveal strengths and weaknesses in the system and provide excellent direction. When you “do,” you collect data that will tell you the impact of your strategies. Through collaborative reflection, you “study” the feedback offered by your data and begin to understand when to stay the course and when to make changes. Then you “act” to refine your strategies. Eventually, the whole cycle begins again.