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Overcoming Challenges for Successful College Improvement Planning: Insights from Principals of Colleges of Education in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how principals overcome challenges through collaboration and stakeholder engagement to achieve successful college improvement planning. The study utilized the interpretivist research paradigm and the qualitative research approach. All eight principals from Colleges of Education (CoEs) under the mentorship of the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, were purposively selected. Data were obtained using semi-structured interviews. The study established trustworthiness through confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. The ethical considerations involved informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and data encryption. Data analyzed thematically revealed that challenges faced by principals in college improvement planning include limited resources, resistance to change by staff, bureaucratic constraints, excessive administrative responsibilities, lack of a strong college culture, limited stakeholder engagement, and unclear performance indicators. Principals believed that attaining successful college improvement planning depended on genuine stakeholder engagement, open communication channels, participatory decision making, adaptability, and resilience. A key recommendation is that the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission and the Ministry of Education should establish clear national policies and guidelines, including monitoring and evaluation systems, that make it a prerequisite for all CoEs to involve stakeholders in achieving successful college improvement planning.

INTRODUCTION

School improvement has become a top priority for improving student outcomes and meeting societal needs in today's rapidly changing educational landscape (Peurach *et al.*, 2019; Pont, 2020). Colleges of Education (CoEs) are important parts of national education systems and significantly influence how future teachers are trained and developed. College principals are at the center of this effort because their leadership and strategic choices have immense influence on the quality and effectiveness of education. Emerging trends such as increased diversity, technological advancement, and the need for inclusive education call for new, collaborative leadership to create supportive learning environments (Burbules *et al.*, 2020). According to Kitch (2024), collaborative leadership involves working closely with all team members or stakeholders, regardless of their title or role, and valuing each member's contributions equally to reach shared decisions. Thus, collaborative leadership is a management strategy where people collaborate across teams, organizations, and systems to make decisions and reach common objectives. It focuses on open dialogue, shared accountability, and inclusivity, setting it apart from traditional top-down leadership approaches. By utilizing the varied perspectives and skills within a group, collaborative leadership encourages innovation, builds trust, and increases engagement. College principals who embrace a collaborative leadership style actively encourage team members to share information openly, to foster a culture of transparency and knowledge exchange.

Consequently, principals who encourage collaborative leadership emphasize cooperation, open communication, and collective problem solving. This helps everyone in the team feel responsible for working together to achieve their college goals (Dinler, 2024). These ideas are the basis for successful college improvement planning initiatives. College improvement planning refers to the proposed and organized efforts to enhance the conditions for teaching and learning in a college, enabling specific educational goals to be reached more quickly (Madani, 2019; Schildkamp, 2019). This idea involves issues such as encouraging a leadership style that includes everyone, making the learning environment more supportive, and getting everyone involved in the process of making things better (Leithwood, 2021). Effective College Improvement Planning (CIP) is a cornerstone of institutional growth, academic quality enhancement, and long-term sustainability in higher education (Filho *et al.*, 2018). Principals serve as vision-setters, motivators, and coordinators of diverse stakeholders, overseeing not only administrative functions but also engaging in strategic leadership, resource mobilization, and fostering a collaborative culture (Fullan, 2023). In competitive and resource-constrained educational environments, a principal's ability to design and implement effective improvement plans is crucial for institutions to meet their strategic objectives rather than merely struggle to maintain basic performance levels (Verano *et al.*, 2024). College improvement planning serves as an institutional roadmap, defining priorities, allocating resources, and

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establishing benchmarks for performance monitoring (Anyidoho & Ogina, 2024). Despite its theoretical importance, the real-world implementation of CIP is often fraught with challenges. Principals must balance competing stakeholder expectations, navigate policy shifts, and contend with entrenched cultural and structural barriers (Tamadoni *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, these challenges are intensified in contexts where resources are limited and external pressures from accreditation bodies, government agencies, and community expectations place additional demands on leadership (Tamadoni *et al.*, 2021; UNESCO, 2015).

Leadership frameworks such as transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership provide conceptual pathways for guiding effective planning (Bush, 2020; Nadeem, 2024). However, the practical application of these models varies widely, influenced by institutional culture, leadership capacity, and stakeholder engagement (Osobajo *et al.*, 2023). In many instances, improvement plans falter due to insufficient buy-in from faculty and staff, limited professional development opportunities, and inadequate data for informing evidence-based decision-making (Louis *et al.*, 2010).

A recurring theme in the literature is the pivotal role of collaboration in ensuring that improvement plans achieve their intended outcomes (Louis *et al.*, 2010; Lee & Patel, 2020). Thus, collaborative planning strengthens stakeholder ownership, aligns goals, and enhances institutional adaptability during periods of change (Gillen, 2024). Despite this recognition, there remains a paucity of qualitative research exploring how principals foster collaboration while managing the systemic constraints and operational complexities inherent in educational leadership. Existing studies often offer prescriptive models without fully capturing the adaptive, context-specific strategies that leaders employ in practice. This seeks to uncover how principals navigate these complex institutional landscapes, surmount barriers, and cultivate stakeholder collaboration to achieve sustained improvement. By focusing on the lived experiences of principals rather than abstract frameworks, this research addresses a notable gap in the literature. It aims to identify actionable strategies that drive planning success.

Statement of the Problem

While there is consensus on the critical role of collaboration in College Improvement Planning (CIP) and its impact on institutional development, a significant gap exists in understanding the strategic practices principals use to overcome challenges and foster collaboration in real-world educational contexts. Many principals face barriers such as limited resources, resistance to change, and inadequate stakeholder engagement, which can impede effective CIP (Louis *et al.*, 2010). Most existing research focuses on formal planning structures, performance metrics, and policy alignment, often neglecting the social, organizational, and political dynamics that influence planning processes (Zhang *et al.*,

2023). Specifically, there is insufficient exploration of the adaptive strategies principals use to balance strategic leadership with relationship-building among faculty, staff, governing boards, and external partners, especially under resource constraints and bureaucratic pressures (Bush, 2020; Lee & Patel, 2020).

Studies on educational leadership and improvement planning in Ghana have primarily concentrated on basic and secondary schools or the effect of school leadership on the academic performance in senior high schools, resulting in a lack of focus on Colleges of Education (CoEs), which possess unique governance frameworks (Afram *et al.*, 2024; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021; Salifu & Kala, 2024). This study is therefore unique as it focuses on CoEs, which perform specialized functions in training professional teachers and face specific challenges in governance, accountability, and resource management.

It is not easy to implement improvement plans into desired outcomes (Harris *et al.*, 2006). However, international studies, especially from Western and Asian contexts, provide insights (Harris & Jones, 2017; Chapman *et al.*, 2020). These insights may not be entirely applicable to Ghana's CoEs, indicating existing gaps in these colleges. Even though some studies in Ghana have investigated the effects of transformational leadership (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng, 2023), there is a limited understanding of the leadership of CoE principals within the GTEC regulatory framework. The implication is the substantial deficits in context-specific research about improvement planning, leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, and qualitative accounts of lived experiences of principals in CoEs, which are crucial for intellectual discourse and refining CoE improvement strategies.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will contribute to educational leadership by integrating theory, practice, policy, and methodology. The findings will expand leadership discussions by incorporating the lived experiences of principals, providing contextually grounded understandings for college improvement planning. Practically, the findings will provide college principals with evidence-based approaches for collaborative planning, policy design, training, and capacity-building. In terms of policy, the findings will guide policymakers in encouraging stakeholder orientation, improving resources, and initiating collaborative policies. From a methodological perspective, using a robust qualitative approach, including in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, will augment quantitative research and provide a reproducible basis for examining leadership in complex educational settings, offering valuable insights for scholars exploring similar organizational dynamics.

Research Questions

1. What challenges do principals encounter in implementing improvement plans, and how do they overcome these challenges?

2. What stakeholder engagement and collaboration strategies could help address the challenges to achieving successful college improvement planning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study utilizes Transformational Leadership Theory to explore how principals inspire and guide teams toward institutional improvements through collaboration. This theory suggests that successful leaders go beyond simple transactional interactions, emphasizing idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration to inspire their teams (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Yammarino, 2013). Hence, transformational leadership aligns organizational objectives with the personal motivations of its followers, fostering innovation and offering tailored support.

Transformational leadership improves student outcomes and teacher effectiveness, creating positive school environments (Leithwood, 2021). It is important in times of change because it motivates staff and encourages new ideas (Khan *et al.*, 2020). This approach brings together the goals of individuals and organizations, thereby fostering collaboration (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). In college improvement, principals demonstrate ethics and trust (Northouse, 2021), cultivate vision, foster creativity (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009), and offer personalized support to enhance engagement (Afsar *et al.*, 2021).

The transformational leadership framework aims to examine how principals foster collaboration and overcome barriers in improvement planning. It empowers individuals and groups, making it ideal for studying stakeholder engagement (Eliophotou Menon, 2014). Empirical research supports the effectiveness of transformational leadership in fostering collaborative cultures and enhancing educational performance (Alzoraiqi *et al.*, 2024; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Transformational leadership theory's focus on change and innovation is essential for understanding leadership in dynamic educational contexts (Bou *et al.*, 2025). The study aims to reveal how the principals can lead communities toward sustained college improvement, forming a foundation for practical strategies. In the evolving field of educational leadership, understanding how leadership styles affect institutional outcomes is vital. This conceptual review explores transformational leadership's role in fostering collaboration and navigating challenges in college improvement. By examining key concepts and theoretical insights, the conceptual review aims to clarify effective leadership constructs, informing practice and guiding future research in higher education contexts.

Dinler (2024) argued that educational institutions continue to face persistent challenges that hinder improvement planning initiatives. This is corroborated by Nwisagbo *et al.* (2025), who state that institutions often face difficulties such as limited resources, bureaucratic constraints, and resistance to change, which complicate improvement

efforts. Contemporary studies underscore the complexity of navigating these issues in various educational contexts. For instance, Zickafoose *et al.* (2024) found that scarcity of financial and human resources remains a significant barrier to implementing practical improvements, often resulting in stalled initiatives or compromised educational quality.

Muhdiarta (2025) asserted that bureaucratic inertia hinders adaptability, noting that rigid institutional frameworks and procedures can stifle innovation and responsiveness in strategic planning processes. Again, principals' excessive administrative responsibilities detract them from focusing on pedagogical or instructional leadership (Bell & Smith, 2021; Niesche *et al.*, 2023; Woelert, 2023). Other studies have shown that bureaucratic structures, with their strict rules and hierarchical approvals (Wermke *et al.*, 2022), as well as concerns about accountability and limited or partial autonomy (Kim & Weiner, 2022), hinder principals' ability to make decisions and respond quickly, which constrains their leadership effectiveness in situations of emergency. These experiences of juggling multiple roles (educator, manager, and mediator) explain the unsustainable pressures on college principals.

Dinler's (2024) study established that the absence of a strong organizational culture was one of the most significant challenges reported by participants, aligning with previous research (Lee & Louis, 2019; Yurkofsky *et al.*, 2020) that effective school improvement planning requires transforming the existing culture to foster a shared commitment to progress. Arguably, entrenched habits and fragmented identities within educational institutions highlight the difficulties of initiating cultural change in environments resistant to reform (Dinler, 2024).

Resistance to change from faculty and staff is another daunting challenge in improving planning in educational institutions. According to Yilmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2013), such resistance is frequently rooted in fears over job security and increased workloads, highlighting the necessity of transparent communication and inclusive decision-making to mitigate these concerns. Similarly, Dinler (2024) commented that resistance often stemmed from entrenched beliefs and a reluctance to adapt to new practices, confirming observations from prior studies (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022; Wehn & Almomani, 2019) that successful change relies on stakeholders' trust and confidence in the new systems.

Shifting policy environments create significant challenges. Constant changes in education policies and regulations can obstruct progress, pushing leaders to adopt flexible strategies that allow swift adjustments to goals and resource allocation. This calls for a leadership approach centered on agility, resilience, and proactive problem-solving. Such a leadership approach should foster a culture of continuous learning, promote flexibility in decision-making, and encourage collaboration among stakeholders. Further, the integration of technology in educational settings, as highlighted by Mhlongo *et al.* (2023), presents

both opportunities and challenges, requiring strategic investments and professional development to harness its potential effectively.

These empirical findings highlight the need for adaptive, dynamic, and inclusive leadership strategies in college improvement planning to navigate and overcome these multifaceted challenges effectively (Maduforo *et al.*, 2024). By understanding and addressing these issues, educational leaders can better position their institutions for sustained improvement and success. This is why Bou *et al.* (2025) intimated that transformational leaders could address the challenges in college improvement planning by fostering innovation and resilience among staff, paving the way for sustained improvement.

Collaborative planning and stakeholder engagement are crucial for successful college improvement initiatives, as they ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among participants. Recent empirical studies highlight the importance of these processes in educational leadership. For example, Yamoah and Quansah (2023) found that schools employing collaborative planning frameworks experienced higher levels of stakeholder satisfaction and more effective implementation of improvement strategies. The study emphasized the value of creating inclusive planning teams that engage faculty, students, administrative staff, and community partners early in the decision-making process.

Lopez and Bauyot (2025) found that authentic stakeholder engagement promotes creativity and flexibility by including diverse participants in the planning process. Collaborative leadership, which includes everyone in the decision-making process, makes schools better places to work and learn. It also helps teachers do their jobs better, get more involved, and improve student outcomes (Krasniqi, 2021). Incorporating diverse perspectives improves the quality of planning and fosters institutional commitment (Eliophotou Menon, 2014). Transformational strategies also make it easier for people to work together, which builds commitment and accountability (Louis *et al.*, 2010). These methods work together to help schools make long-lasting, substantial improvements.

Al-Thani (2025) showed that open lines of communication facilitate collaborative planning by ensuring everyone is working toward the same goals. Digital collaboration tools also make it easier for people to work together and keep planning going (Obodozie & Nwabufo, 2024). Transformational leadership is also essential for getting people involved. Jinga *et al.* (2024) discovered that transformational leaders inspire, motivate, and cultivate shared visions, thereby empowering stakeholders. Their research substantiates a positive correlation between transformational leadership practices and effective stakeholder engagement in improvement processes.

Research underscores the importance of principals as collaborative leaders who facilitate participatory decision-making (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023). The inclusion of diverse perspectives often leads to more robust planning

outcomes and a stronger institutional buy-in (Eliophotou Menon, 2014). Principals employing transformational strategies can create a conducive environment for such collaboration, enhancing commitment and accountability (Louis *et al.*, 2010). These findings underscore the critical role of collaborative planning and stakeholder engagement in crafting effective college improvement plans. By leveraging diverse insights and fostering inclusive participation, college principals can facilitate more innovative and sustainable improvement initiatives. Principals can make college improvement planning (CIP) better by getting everyone involved and making them feel like they own it. Stakeholders feel more responsible and committed to the success of projects when they are involved in planning and decision-making. This participation boosts motivation, engagement, and teamwork in making changes (Haile & Mekonnen, 2024; Saka-Helmhout *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, inclusive participation allows principals to identify underlying issues, resource deficiencies, and institutional requirements. Principals create projects that are both new and long-lasting by getting input from a variety of groups. Koh *et al.* (2023) stressed that being responsive like this keeps initiatives very important.

Principals are important for making college improvement planning (CIP) work because they help students be flexible and strong. Institutions can prepare for and deal with change better when they include a variety of points of view. This makes them more resilient. Koh *et al.* (2023) stressed that sustainable improvement requires adapting to changing conditions and feedback, and that inclusive participation is the basis for ongoing adaptation. Principals can also make CIP better by being open and responsible leaders. They build trust and show that everyone is welcome by including stakeholders in the decision-making process. Hadziahmetovic and Salihovic (2022) observed that transparent leadership fosters empowerment and guarantees that leadership reflects the community's collective interests.

While transformational leadership and collaborative planning are extensively examined, there is a paucity of empirical research investigating the lived experiences of principals in the context of college improvement. Further research is required to examine the adaptability of transformational leadership across diverse cultural and institutional contexts (Steinmann *et al.*, 2018). Because cultural values and organizational structures affect how well leaders do their jobs, strategies must be able to adapt to different situations (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023; Akpare *et al.*, 2019). This study investigates principals' use of collaborative planning and stakeholder engagement to address challenges, offering insights for institutional advancement and efficient collaboration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was based on an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes interpreting the understanding participants

attribute to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm provided a framework to investigate how principals of Ghanaian Colleges of Education (CoEs) perceive and tackle institutional and sociocultural challenges in the context of improvement planning. It also helped to get deeper insights that go beyond what quantitative methods usually show (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). A qualitative methodology was employed, utilizing a phenomenological framework to investigate the lived experiences of CoE principals. Phenomenology is appropriate for examining how individuals interpret their realities and respond to circumstances (Kirisici-Sarikaya & Fayda-Kinik, 2024). In this context, it facilitated a comprehensive examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of principals' perceptions, strategies, and execution of college improvement planning.

Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants, guaranteeing representation from all eight CoE principals. This method was suitable as it concentrated on individuals directly involved in institutional leadership and enhancement initiatives, resulting in substantial, contextually pertinent data (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, providing a balance of consistency and flexibility. The interview guide ensured consistency among participants while facilitating follow-up questions to reveal distinct methodologies and obstacles. This approach is especially adept at extracting comprehensive lived experiences and insights into decision-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With permission, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. To protect privacy, the names of participants were removed.

Thematic analysis adhered to the six-step approach described by Creswell and Creswell (2018): familiarization with the data, formulation of initial codes, categorization of codes into themes, evaluation of themes, definition and designation of themes, and composition of the final report. The analysis was guided by research questions, pertinent literature, theoretical frameworks, and reflexivity, incorporating participants' direct quotes to accurately represent their viewpoints (Ahmed *et al.*, 2025). The study adhered to recognized ethical standards. All participants gave their informed consent and were assured that the information they provided would be kept private and that they were free to opt out of the study at any time. Data security was ensured by storing recordings and transcripts, with only the researcher having access to them. To ensure methodological rigor, the study employed criteria such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking and data comparison with other studies helped make the study more credible. An audit trail of the research process helped keep dependability high. Providing detailed descriptions of the research context helped with transferability, while reflexivity and peer debriefing aided in confirmability. These steps made sure that the study was valid and reliable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes and discusses findings on challenges faced by principals in CIP, as well as strategies for successful implementation. Emerging themes organize analyses and discussions, describing the difficulties faced and the solutions used to address the challenges. The analyses and discussion emphasize the importance of collaboration and stakeholder engagement as essential strategies to overcome challenges and ensure successful improvement efforts.

Challenges Faced in College Improvement Planning

Principals of CoEs are crucial for institutional growth through improvement planning, yet they encounter numerous internal and external challenges. Limited resources, staff resistance, bureaucratic bottlenecks, heavy administrative workloads, a weak organizational culture, and a lack of stakeholder involvement are the key problems experienced. These impediments make it difficult to plan and execute, slowing progress toward long-lasting reforms. It is important to understand these challenges because they reflect the complex realities principals encounter, transforming strategic visions into successful college development.

Limited Resources

Principals claimed that having insufficient financial, human, and material resources is a significant obstacle to making good improvement plans. Limited budgets made it difficult to start new projects, train staff, hire new staff, and obtain technological support, which made it demanding to turn dreams into long-term changes. These problems got worse because of external factors like low enrollment and inadequate public funding. Additionally, insufficient resources for funding infrastructure, teaching and learning, and technology made it more challenging to implement strategic plans. Some principals reported that these resource limitations are a significant factor in attaining goals.

We have many good ideas in our improvement plan, but the truth is, we lack the financial resources to implement them. Even basic infrastructure and teaching materials are lacking, which makes it very difficult to move forward [CP8, Field Interview, 2025].

One of the biggest challenges we face is inadequate funding. Sometimes we are asked to deliver on ambitious targets, but without the human and material resources to support those initiatives, the plans remain only on paper [CP1, Field Interview, 2025].

Our college struggles with resource constraints. From technology to staff capacity and physical infrastructure, the shortage makes it difficult to translate our strategic goals into tangible actions. It feels like we are constantly stretching limited means to cover pressing needs [CP4, Field Interview, 2025].

Principals' views make it clear that inadequate funding is an obstacle to making good college improvement plans. Even though they have well-thought-out plans, these plans

could not be put into action because of their insufficient resources. This means that initiatives are only on paper (Singh, 2024; Amadi & Nwogu, 2023). This finding is consistent with evidence indicating that inadequate resources hinder educational advancement, equity, and institutional viability (Glover & Levačić, 2020). Persistent shortages in infrastructure and teaching resources also lower morale, hinder innovation, and impede reforms (Glewwe *et al.*, 2016).

Resistance to Change from Staff

Efforts to implement improvement plans often encounter resistance from staff, especially tutors, partly due to a lack of awareness, insufficient buy-in, or doubts about reforms. Other reasons for resistance include entrenched routines, fear of uncertainty, and disbelief about the practicability of proposed changes. Some staff may be reluctant to abandon familiar practices, fearing uncertainty or increased workload. This resistance impedes the adoption of new strategies and undermines overall progress.

Whenever we introduce new initiatives, some tutors see them as extra work rather than growth opportunities, which makes them reluctant to participate fully. This undermines the collective process [CP5, Field Interview, 2025].

People are used to doing things the same way for years, so when you talk about new approaches, there is fear and a lack of enthusiasm. [CP7, Field Interview, 2025]

The biggest challenge is getting staff to genuinely understand, support, and actively participate in the improvement process. Without the support of the staff, even the best plans struggle to succeed. Convincing them that the new direction will benefit the college takes much time [CP3, Field Interview, 2025].

Staff resistance to new initiatives is a common challenge in education. Principals observe that some tutors view new projects as extra work, hindering collective progress. Research confirms that faculty often see changes as burdensome, especially with limited resources (Körkkö *et al.*, 2024). Comfort with established routines and fear of the unknown reduce enthusiasm for innovation (Furxhi, 2021). This fear can block meaningful change (Rosenberg, 2023). Staff buy-in is crucial; without it, plans may fail. Thus, successful change requires early involvement, clear communication, and trust-building through dialogue (Alika & Omoyebagbe, 2025).

Bureaucratic Constraints

Principals report navigating complex bureaucratic structures involving local, institutional, and state-level governance. Stringent policies, cumbersome procedures, and regulatory requirements can restrict their autonomy and flexibility, slow the pace of change and make implementation difficult. Mandates from governing bodies occasionally conflict with local priorities, adding further obstacles. For instance, the hierarchical and highly centralized nature of the education system creates

bureaucratic delays in decision-making and resource allocation. Principals often find their autonomy curtailed by rigid procedures and prolonged approval processes, undermining the timely implementation of plans.

The bureaucratic procedures are overwhelming. By the time approvals come from the authorities, the timelines for our planned activities have already passed, forcing us to abandon or scale them down [CP6, Field Interview, 2025].

Sometimes it feels like our hands are tied. Every decision must go through numerous layers of approval, making innovation and timely implementation almost impossible [CP2, Field Interview, 2025].

We want to be proactive in driving improvements, but the rigid bureaucratic structures slow us down. The system does not give principals enough autonomy to act quickly on urgent needs [CP8, Field Interview, 2025].

Principals stressed that too many bureaucratic steps slow down or stop planned activities, stifling innovation and limiting their freedom to meet urgent needs. Studies indicate that bureaucracy adversely affects school climate, teacher dedication, and organizational efficiency (Shaikh & Şentürk, 2023). Such rigidity alienates tutors, stifles creativity, and diverts attention from instructional priorities, limiting schools' capacity to address diverse student needs and implement enhancements effectively (Alanoğlu & Demirtaş, 2021). Again, rigid bureaucratic structures, including hierarchical approvals, strict rules (Wermke *et al.*, 2022), accountability pressures, and limited autonomy (Kim & Weiner, 2022), restrict principals' ability to make timely decisions and respond effectively, thereby hindering their leadership effectiveness in urgent situations.

Excessive Administrative Responsibilities

Principals indicated that it is extremely difficult for principals, mid-level leaders, and faculty to plan for improvements because they have much administrative work to do. Compliance, budgeting, reporting, scheduling, and facility oversight are all tasks that place significant stress on time, leaving staff members fatigued and with little room for new ideas or reflection. Consequently, strategic priorities like improving the curriculum, mentoring, and long-term planning are put on hold. This makes learning less effective, reduces impact on professional development, and slows progress toward meaningful and sustainable improvements at the college. Some perspectives of the principals are captured in these statements:

As principals, we are buried in paperwork, reports, and compliance requirements, leaving very little time to focus on strategic improvement planning [CP2, Field Interview, 2025].

Much of my energy is consumed by routine administrative tasks. Sometimes I feel more like a clerk than a leader, driving change [CP5, Field Interview, 2025].

The administrative workload is overwhelming. By the time I finish with daily demands, there is hardly any room

to concentrate on long-term goals [CP1, Field Interview, 2025].

The principals' responses underscore the overwhelming administrative workload they face, which severely limits their ability to focus on strategic improvement planning. Much of their time is consumed by routine paperwork, compliance requirements, and reports, leaving them feeling more like clerks than visionary leaders driving change. This excessive administrative burden is reflected in recent studies (Niesche *et al.*, 2023), which note that a vast majority of principals describe their workload as challenging or unsustainable, with significant negative impacts on their mental and physical health (National Principals' Forum, 2025). The extensive demands detract from principals' capacity to concentrate on long-term goals, contributing to burnout and attrition.

Lack of Strong College Culture

A weak or fragmented college culture, characterized by limited collaboration, low morale, and inconsistent values, undermines cohesive action and makes it challenging to mobilize staff around a shared vision for improvement. The absence of a cohesive culture undermines commitment to collective goals and slows reform processes. When colleges lack clear vision, collective values, or supportive professional communities, efforts to mobilize staff and sustain change are often fragmented and inconsistent. Professional development and cultural transformation require ongoing commitment, which can be challenging to build without shared purpose. The principals shared the following remarks:

One of our biggest challenges is that we do not yet have a strong college culture that binds staff and students together; everyone seems to be working in isolation rather than towards a shared identity [CP1, Field Interview, 2025].

Unlike well-established institutions, our college lacks traditions and practices that create a sense of belonging. This makes it difficult to build unity and pride among both tutors and students [CP7, Field Interview, 2025].

Without a strong college culture, it becomes hard to sustain improvement efforts. People come in, do their work, and leave, but there is no collective spirit that drives us as one college community [CP3, Field Interview, 2025].

A strong institutional culture is vital for unity, belonging, and sustained improvement in education. Without a shared culture, staff and students often work in isolation rather than toward a collective identity. Culture provides values, norms, and traditions that bind members and foster collaboration (Schein, 2017). Unlike established institutions with traditions, colleges lacking such practices struggle to build pride and loyalty, weakening community spirit (Wijethilake *et al.*, 2021). Without cohesion, improvement is hard to sustain, as roles become isolated tasks. A positive culture enhances motivation, commitment, and effectiveness (Bentsalo *et al.*, 2025) and investing in traditions and shared values is essential.

Limited Stakeholder Engagement

A significant challenge principals face in improvement planning is the limited involvement of key stakeholders, including local communities, alumni, governing councils, and policymakers. When initiatives are developed without broad participation, they often lack legitimacy, ownership, and the collective commitment necessary for success. This exclusion weakens accountability and overlooks opportunities for resource mobilization, advocacy, and diverse perspectives that could enrich planning. Consequently, improvement strategies risk ignoring critical needs and cultural dynamics, making them less sustainable. Without inclusive engagement, college improvement plans may become top-down directives that struggle to achieve long-term institutional growth and meaningful organizational transformation. Principals expressed their views as follows:

Our improvement plans often struggle because key stakeholders, such as parents, alumni, and community leaders, are not actively involved. Decisions are made at the top, but we miss the input of those who matter most [CP4, Field Interview, 2025].

We invite stakeholders to planning meetings, but the turnout is usually low. Without their participation, we end up implementing initiatives that do not fully reflect the needs of the wider college community [CP6, Field Interview, 2025].

The lack of consistent engagement from stakeholders makes it difficult to build collective ownership of our vision. When they are not involved, sustaining improvement efforts becomes almost impossible [CP1, Field Interview, 2025].

The principals' reflections reveal stakeholder disengagement as a critical barrier to effective improvement planning. One noted that "decisions are taken at the top, but we miss the input of those who matter most," reflecting top-down approaches that marginalize parents, alumni, and community leaders. Research stresses that participatory engagement enhances ownership and relevance in reforms (Epstein, 2018; Fullan, 2023). Low participation in meetings often results in initiatives that are misaligned with community needs, undermining legitimacy (Cohen & Weik, 2017). Again, without involvement, sustaining college efforts becomes almost impossible, reinforcing evidence that collaboration is essential for long-term reforms (Bryson *et al.*, 2021).

Unclear Metrics and Success Indicators

Effective improvement planning hinges on setting transparent goals and clear metrics. Principals often struggle to define realistic and measurable success because they lack frameworks to translate policy into actionable targets. Poorly defined or inconsistently communicated goals cause staff to lose sight of their contributions to the college's strategy, resulting in ambiguity and lower accountability. The absence of strong performance indicators hinders progress tracking, recognition, and

strategic adjustments. Without a shared understanding of desired outcomes, improvement initiatives risk fragmentation and diminished impact, leaving colleges unable to build sustained momentum or drive meaningful, lasting change. Principals' insights are exemplified in the following statements:

We are often told to improve performance, but without clear benchmarks or indicators, it is not easy to measure whether we are genuinely making progress or not [CP3, Field Interview, 2025].

Our college has strategies on paper, but the absence of defined success indicators makes it hard to track results or hold anyone accountable for outcomes [CP8, Field Interview, 2025].

Without clear metrics, improvement becomes subjective; what one person sees as success may be viewed differently by another, which creates confusion and inconsistency [CP4, Field Interview, 2025].

The absence of clear benchmarks and indicators in educational institutions undermines meaningful improvement. Being urged to "improve performance" without defined targets makes progress measurement unclear and complicated. Performance indicators ensure improvement is demonstrable (Nunes *et al.*, 2024). Without clear metrics, improvement becomes subjective, creating inconsistencies in evaluation and weakening institutional growth (Mannheim, 2023). As such, when colleges adopt strategies without success indicators, accountability decreases as no objective framework exists to evaluate results. This suggests that defined indicators foster transparency, accountability, and shared understanding, ensuring sustainable progress through measurable outcomes.

These themes reflect the complex and multifaceted challenges principals of CoEs face in ensuring effective improvement planning. Both external factors, such as bureaucracy, limited resources, weak stakeholder engagement, and internal issues, such as resistance to change, poor organizational culture, and heavy administrative demands, shape these challenges. Improvement planning is not just technical but contextual, requiring strategic vision, inclusive decision-making, and investment in support systems. Without collaboration, trust, and adequate resources, sustaining college improvement initiatives remains difficult.

Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration Strategies for Successful CIP

A successful college improvement plan (CIP) needs both visionary leadership and active participation from all stakeholders. Principals set the overall direction, but working together in a meaningful way turns plans into actions that last. Getting stakeholders involved improves decision-making, builds trust, and makes people more responsible. Progress is possible even when there are problems, such as balancing different interests, if there is constant feedback, flexibility, and shared responsibility. Ultimately, involving stakeholders ensures that CIP

remains useful, relevant, and enduring, which is crucial for long-term college success.

Genuine Stakeholder Engagement

Principals stressed that the involvement of all stakeholders is needed for a successful CIP. In CoEs, this involves engaging faculty, students, parents, alumni, and community partners in making plans and setting goals. Stakeholders are regarded as collaborators whose insights enhance the process, guaranteeing the consideration of varied perspectives and genuine needs. Working together like this builds trust, openness, and shared ownership, making people more committed to the goals of the institution and increasing the likelihood that projects will last. The following verbatim accounts highlight principals' understandings of the issue:

When principals truly involve stakeholders, college plans will not only be supported by all but also owned by all. This ownership makes the implementation process far more effective [CP7, Field Interview, 2025].

Involving stakeholders builds trust and commitment, and without it, plans for improvement tend to lack the necessary drive to succeed. Therefore, getting stakeholders involved at every step will make things easier, since people are more likely to support decisions, they helped make [CP5, Field Interview, 2025].

If we engage stakeholders well, we will find real problems that we would not see from the administrative level alone [CP2, Field Interview, 2025].

Principals stressed that involving all stakeholders is very important for college improvement plans. Involving stakeholders helps them feel like they own the project, trust each other, and share a commitment, making implementation more effective. Research shows that participatory decision-making makes people more responsible and helps projects last longer because people support projects, they helped shape (Bush, 2020; Fullan, 2023). Additionally, meaningful engagement provides insights into genuine issues often neglected at the administrative level, ensuring that plans accommodate diverse needs and circumstances. So, getting stakeholders involved is important for making institutional development more inclusive and effective (Schein, 2017).

Open Communication Channels Among Stakeholders

Principals stressed that for CIP to work, open communication is necessary to encourage teamwork and long-term success. They noted that clear, timely information keeps everyone on the same page, reduces false information, and encourages people to get involved. Principals discussed the importance of having ongoing, easy-to-access ways to give and receive feedback, such as meetings, newsletters, digital platforms, and forums, in addition to occasional updates. This kind of openness builds trust, accountability, and confidence in leadership. It also makes it easier to implement policies and helps colleges continue to improve. Evidence of principals'

perspectives is captured in the following quotations: With clear communication channels, stakeholders will understand their roles, leading to smoother collaboration in setting priorities [CP1, Field Interview, 2025]. Open communication will help eliminate unnecessary suspicion during college planning. When stakeholders have access to accurate information, they feel included, and this builds trust that the planning process is transparent and fair [CP3, Field Interview, 2025]. Through regular meetings, feedback sessions, and digital platforms, we can create a culture where stakeholders can freely share ideas. This open communication will improve our planning by making it more inclusive and reflective of the actual needs of the college [CP4, Field Interview, 2025]. Effective college improvement planning depends on open communication because it ensures that everyone knows their role, making it easier to work together to set priorities (Bryson *et al.*, 2021). Bush (2020) says that open communication lowers suspicion, builds trust, and makes people feel like they belong, which makes the planning process fair and open to everyone. Meetings, feedback sessions, and digital tools help create an open culture where a variety of voices can be heard, leading to plans that better meet the needs of the college (Fullan, 2023).

Participatory Decision-Making

Principals stressed that participatory decision-making involves all stakeholders in the college in making decisions about policies, strategies, and priorities for college improvement. It goes beyond just asking for advice; it encourages collaboration, shared responsibility, and commitment, making it more likely that the plan will succeed. This approach, in the principals' view, gives faculty, students, and partners in CoEs the justification to shape governance, learning, and resource utilization. Principals underscored the need for inclusive and sustainable strategies that promote acceptance of change and strengthen long-term college development. The views of the principals are reflected in the following excerpts: When people make decisions together, college improvement planning will improve because they are more likely to stick with what they helped to shape [CP6, Field Interview, 2025]. Our strategies will be more valuable and realistic if we include important people like tutors, students, and even the community in important decisions [CP5, Field Interview, 2025]. Participatory decision-making lessens resistance because it makes everyone feel like their point of view was considered [CP1, Field Interview, 2025]. Participatory decision-making improves CIP by stimulating collective ownership, responsibility, and resilience. Collaboration among tutors, students, and community members in planning increases the likelihood of implementation support, hence diminishing opposition and conflict (Bush, 2020). This collaborative process ensures that policies are pragmatic and address the needs

of diverse individuals, as varying perspectives contribute to better decision-making (Fullan, 2023). Research shows that inclusive governance builds trust, makes organizations more legitimate, and encourages long-term change (Schein, 2017). Accordingly, participatory approaches are necessary for CoEs to make long-lasting and meaningful changes.

Adaptability and Resilience

Adaptability and resilience are vital factors in ensuring the successful execution of college growth strategies. Principals recognized that the dynamic nature of the educational setting, shaped by financial constraints, legislative changes, and societal demands, necessitates that institutions uphold adaptation and resilience. Colleges can better change their priorities, address problems, and continue moving toward long-term goals, even when things are uncertain, by encouraging staff and students to be flexible and by building systems that can handle stress. The principals articulated their perspectives through the following illustrative statements:

The educational landscape is constantly changing, so the success of our improvement plans rests on how quickly we adapt. When staff and students adapt to change, our improvement plans will remain practical, effective, and relevant to new demands [CP3, Field Interview, 2025].

In college improvement planning, challenges with finance, policy, and society are inevitable. However, when our staff, stakeholders, and systems remain resilient, it helps sustain momentum and keeps the college focused on its long-term goals. Irrespective of the difficulties [CP8, Field Interview, 2025].

Effective planning is not about a perfect proposal but about flexibility and resilience. When we embrace change, we can turn obstacles into opportunities for growth [CP2, Field Interview, 2025].

In a changing educational environment, planning for college improvement must be flexible and strong. Institutions that can adapt to changes in policies, finances, and societal needs can turn problems into chances to grow (Fullan, 2020). Research indicates that resilient organizations preserve momentum by remaining concentrated on long-term objectives despite obstacles (Zadok *et al.*, 2024). Accepting adaptability keeps improvement plans useful, relevant, and practical, which helps colleges deal with uncertainty while promoting long-term growth (Bush, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that principals face numerous challenges in College Improvement Planning (CIP), such as inadequate resources, staff resistance, bureaucratic bottlenecks, excessive administrative workloads, weak institutional culture, limited stakeholder participation, and the absence of clear performance indicators. Despite these constraints, effective improvement planning depends on inclusive stakeholder engagement, transparent communication, participatory decision-

making, adaptability, and resilience. These factors foster collaboration, ownership, and sustainable progress in college development efforts.

Recommendations

1. Principals should establish structures, such as advisory boards and consultative committees, to involve tutors, students, alumni, and communities in college improvement planning. Thus, colleges should move away from top-down leadership and adopt collaborative approaches that promote inclusiveness and shared accountability.

2. Colleges should invest in regular professional development workshops to enhance teamwork, negotiation, communication, and conflict resolution skills among staff and stakeholders. Open communication channels should support these workshops to build trust and transparency.

3. Principals must also adopt adaptive leadership styles to address resource shortages and policy changes effectively.

4. At the national level, GTEC and the Ministry of Education should develop a framework mandating stakeholder participation in CIP, backed by monitoring and evaluation systems and incentive-based funding.

5. The GTEC and Ministry of Education should undertake leadership capacity-building initiatives and strengthen strategic partnerships with NGOs and private organizations to enhance innovation, resource mobilization, and long-term institutional resilience.

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