



## Impact Story: Strengthening Instructional Systems and School Culture for All Learners in Palau

The Republic of Palau—*Beluu er a Palau* (“Land of Palau”) in the Indigenous language of *Tekoi er a Belau* (Palauan)—is a sovereign country in free association with the United States. Palau is in the southwest corner of Micronesia, approximately 400 miles east of the Philippines with a population of approx. 18,000. Palau is made up of over 300 islands (8 of which are inhabited), which are divided into 16 states. Palauan and English are the official languages, with 8 additional minority languages spoken across the states. The Palau public school system is comprised of 17 elementary schools (K–8) and one high school, many of which are rural and remote.

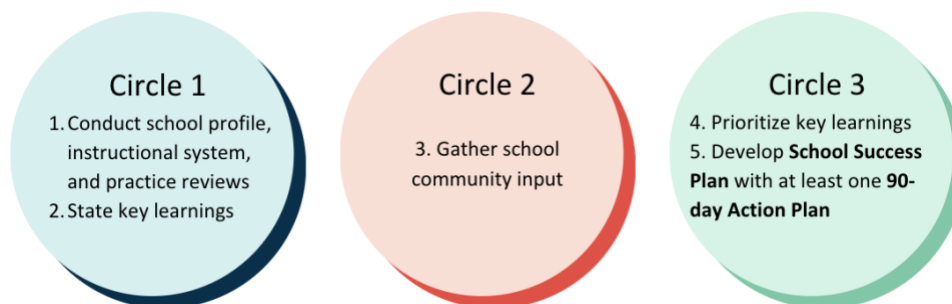
Region 18 Comprehensive Center (R18CC), in partnership with Academic Development Institute (ADI), has been building the capacity of the Palau Ministry of Education (PMOE) to use student-centered instructional practices for school improvement. The Transformational Instruction project grew out of the PMOE’s strong interest in personalizing learning for all students so that they have the greatest opportunity to succeed in school.

R18CC decided to use ADI’s transformational instruction model—“Circles of Success”—to help the PMOE work towards their goal of improving instructional systems in and across their schools. They chose the Circles of Success model because it includes many different groups in the change-making process and can be customized to meet specific SEA needs. The Circles model guides school leadership and then faculty through three phases of reflection, planning, and change-making in a process that requires ongoing examination and revision.

### Action Planning Using “Circles of Success”

In Year 1 of the Comprehensive Center (CC) program (2019–2020), R18CC began the first phase of Circles of Success. This phase focused on training PMOE staff to hold a series of conversations with five school leadership teams, made up of principals, education specialists, and teacher leaders from these schools: G. B. Harris, Koror, Meyuns, and Airai Elementary Schools and Palau High School. These teams were designated to work with the five schools chosen to pilot changes in instructional practice. The purpose of these meetings was to conduct a “deep dive” into the state of each school’s data, evidence-based and effective practices, and instructional system.

During the second phase of the Circles process, R18CC trained the leadership teams to work with educators in the pilot schools to put together high-level findings from the school data and then use those findings to create 90-Day Action Plans. The 90-Day Action Plans focused on the priorities and realistic objectives for immediate change in each school. These plans must be approved by the PMOE but can be changed by schools as needed based on data.



By the year’s end, **leadership teams reported a firm understanding of the fundamental principles, practices, and strategies of instructional transformation**, and were able to use this knowledge to guide schools in the reflection and planning process. *“We were able to analyze our school and prioritize our needs. We were able to create steps to address and plan for implementation, even with the barriers in place. The mindset shifted”* (Education Specialist).



In Year 3 (2021–2022), R18CC project team traveled to Palau to train principals, teachers, and other staff in Cohort I schools on how to apply the Big Four strategies within their 90-Day Action Plans: (a) effective instructional systems and evidence-based practices; (b) designing effective lessons; (c) using data to make decisions; and (d) personalized learning. Each school’s 90-Day Action Plan asked teachers to make changes in one of these areas.

### Initial Outcomes of Putting “Action Plans” to Work

The project picked up momentum once the schools started putting their plans to work and so far, the results have been very encouraging. Leadership teams described the ***teachers in the schools as active and invested in the instructional changes*** because of how they had been included in the Circles of Success and 90-Day Action planning process. *“...the teachers are the owner of the whole plan, not just the principals and not us...it’s their plan...Everybody has a part in it...So, it’s becoming a practice...that’s very positive and a great change”* (Leadership Team Member).



*PMOE educators engaged during a training session (photo by Cobi Jones)*

Beyond observable changes in teacher attitudes, ***Cohort I schools began using data in new and different ways***. For example, during one classroom observation, an education specialist noticed that the teacher did not start the lesson immediately, but instead went around the room, speaking with several students who had clearly misunderstood their homework. The teacher wanted to make sure everyone was ready to move forward before she began. The Specialist went on to explain why this observation stood out to her: *“That is using data to start her lesson, and that’s really good. It’s a simple thing, but it’s big impact. It shows me that they’re reviewing and they’re looking at the data constantly”* (Education Specialist/Teacher).

*“I see a lot of the teachers now are into reading data and trying to improve their instruction... It’s not like before... I see a lot of instruction being modified, being improved...They’re using data, and, to me, it’s a big improvement”.*

*- School Leadership Team Member*

The PMOE has also noticed ***changes in instructional delivery***. Teachers have started tailoring classroom practices to meet individual student needs, making regular data collection a part of their teaching plans, using new technology in their teaching, and creating new rules and expectations for students to follow to improve how their classrooms function. For example, one teacher described the benefit of setting rules for everyday activities that can disrupt learning, such as using the restroom and sharpening pencils. Before putting these rules in place, their ***students***



would just go use the restroom one after another” causing them to “miss [the] class lecture or get behind on their studies”. Giving the students boundaries, according to the teacher, has made “great impact on students’ success”.

## Valued-Added Impacts

Beyond putting their 90-Day Action Plans to work in schools, the PMOE saw positive changes in some unexpected and surprising areas. For starters, PMOE stakeholders have already noticed **improvements in communication and relationships within their school communities**, between principals, specialists, and teachers, as well as between teachers and students. One leadership team member described how this “good communication that’s going on between the teachers, the specialist, and the principal” has helped their schools and given them “ownership so they share ideas, not just to dictate that this is the idea that everyone is going to follow” (Education Specialist/Teacher).

At the level of the Central Office, **PMOE leadership members began an outreach program** whereby they visit schools several times a year to observe teachers and offer instructional coaching. The PMOE has since used the information from these observations to **restructure whole school complexes to personalize learning for students**, splitting the various levels of schools into departments and adjusting schedules so that teachers were assigned subjects based on their strengths. According to PMOE leadership, this reorganization has worked well and made their school system more productive. Other major changes in how data are used at the Central Office level include the **use of statewide assessment data to create performance and assessment goals** in place of report card grades, which PMOE leadership acknowledged “are subjective” and not revealing of “the skills our kids need”.

The 90-Day Action Planning process has also positively impacted the PMOE’s overall strategic planning. While revising their 90-Day Action Plans in Year 3, for instance, Cohort I schools were able to work with R18CC to **combine their multiple existing plans into a single, Schoolwide Action Plan**. In doing so, the PMOE **used 90-Day Action Plan data to develop their Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation application**. The PMOE also recently decided to **include their Special Education program in the school improvement planning process**.

## Approaches for Sustainable Change

The PMOE gives great credit to R18CC for these major shifts in practice. Its staff were described as real experts who are highly involved, caring, responsive to PMOE needs, and flexible in how they deliver services. R18CC’s understanding of Palau’s history, culture, and unique educational environment was said to be especially relevant to their successes so far. Additionally, R18CC’s collaborative relationship with the REL Pacific was noted as helpful for coordinating the professional learning services the PMOE needs to meet their school system goals.

R18CC’s personalized approach to capacity building also kept the PMOE committed to the project when major problems came up. Like so many SEAs, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the progress of the Transformational Instruction project in Palau. At the start of 2020, the PMOE had to redirect its attention and resources to emergency management protocols and distance education programs, while at the same time switching to online work themselves. Furthermore, the Palau state government was in the middle of appointing a new Minister of Education to oversee the PMOE; this made some project participants unsure about the project’s future.

R18CC was able to work with the PMOE through these challenges with easy-to-access training that was supported by monthly work meetings and personalized coaching with school teams. Furthermore, R18CC set the PMOE up with opportunities to learn about school improvement from other experts in the field and in the company of colleagues across the region (e.g., webinars and networking forums). R18CC held in-person trainings when possible, allowing for small-group, tailored learning, which is an important approach to meeting the needs of such a diverse group of schools. R18CC provided school teams with an activity calendar to follow when scheduling monthly CC meetings was a challenge. R18CC also designed an online warehouse to store all project resources in one place.



## Next Steps

In Year 4 (2022–2023), the Transformational Instruction project entered its second phase of bringing on board a new cohort of seven schools to the “Circles of Success” process: Aimeliik, Ngaraard, Ngarchelong, Ngardmau, Ngeremlengui, Melekeok, and Peleliu Elementary Schools. These schools have started training with R18CC to create their first 90-Day Action Plan, while Cohort I school leadership teams continue to receive monthly coaching on how to support and monitor their schools as they carry out their Action Plans. Cohort I schools have also started developing their 3-Year Plans, the goal of which is to move from action planning in the short term to mapping out longer term goals and targets for school improvement.

The results of this project so far suggest that the PMOE is starting to undergo what the transformational instruction process calls a “culture shift”. R18CC is excited for how changes at the individual, school, and Central Office-level will continue to move the PMOE towards a renewed, student-centered, data-driven instructional system.

## Resource Page

Academic Development Institute. Transformational Academy. <http://www.adi.org/transform/>

Layland, A., Sanchez, E., and Evensen, S. (2022, February 4). Building coherence for student success. Region 18 Comprehensive Center. <https://region18cc.org/blog-updates/building-coherence-for-student-success/>

Palau Ministry of Education (2022). ACS WASC Visiting Committee Report (excerpt).

Sanchez, E., and Evensen, S., Layland, A., Garland J., and Patris, B. (2023, January 11). Strengthening school improvement in Palau through the Circles of Success mode. Region 18 Comprehensive Center. <https://region18cc.org/blog-updates/strengthening-school-improvement-in-palau-through-the-circle-of-success-model/>