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TransformED NI:
Transforming Teaching and Learning



Effective Implementation:

Great Ideas Can't Transform Schools on their Own

InnerDrive



EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

By InnerDrive

WHY & WHAT

We're not short of new ideas and flashy interventions in education, but what we often lack is a systematic way of implementing them. Leaders can be so infatuated with their personal passions and pushed by an unrelenting pace of internal busyness and external volatility that projects get rushed into action. The first clue to successful implementation lies in its definition as a 'process of putting a plan, idea or design into action'; leaders often fail at the first hurdle by viewing implementation as a single event.

Get implementation right and change happens efficiently and effectively but when leaders fail to implement well, they often experience the following:

- Mis-allocated and wasted resources
- Missed deadlines
- Staff cynicism and burnout
- Operational friction and duplicated efforts
- Reputational damage

The sequential steps of successful implementation have been studied informally for centuries and more formally when we started to explore the operational execution of medicines, industrial workflows and agricultural innovations. In the 1970s, public policy researchers coined the phrase 'implementation gap' to describe why government programmes failed because of poor planning and this led to the emergence of implementation science. Notable contributions within education include Michael Fullan's extensive work on educational change (1982), Durlak & DuPre's 2008 meta-analysis of school prevention programmes, and the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) guide to school implementation (2019).

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SYSTEMATIC IMPLEMENTATION

Despite the varied approaches to implementation and the different frameworks that have been produced by theorists and followed by organisations, most broadly align around the following stages, which in turn provide a useful roadmap for leaders.

Explore & Assess

The purpose of this initial stage is to determine whether leaders are looking at the right problem and if that problem can be feasibly fixed. Leaders should begin by collaboratively conducting a robust readiness audit, assessing resource levels, workload capacity and the social / emotional foundations. Leaders must also evaluate how closely the goal and plans align with existing values, beliefs and stakeholder needs. During this stage leaders need to avoid the 'shiny object syndrome', (blind selection of the latest new innovation) or forcing change without involving frontline staff. The value of doing nothing should also be considered.

Prepare & Adapt

The purpose of this next stage is to build the operational infrastructure, workforce expertise and cultural foundations required for effective change and make any necessary tweaks to ensure a good contextual fit. Leaders need to work with the evidence to identify the active ingredients of the intervention (what needs to be protected) as well as the more flexible components that can be altered at a leadership or frontline level. A sustained programme of professional development must be delivered to secure the required understanding and self-efficacy and a guiding coalition of staff created to become frontline champions. During this stage leaders need to avoid falling into a 'train and hope' mentality when it comes to staff development, over modifying strategies and ignoring any logistical and operational bottlenecks or barriers that might occur.

Execute & Monitor

The goal of this stage is to purposefully and progressively roll out the project, ensure that it is being enacted with fidelity and use real-time performance data to make any course corrections. Leaders should ideally start with a soft launch or pilot project to test processes and uncover friction in a controlled, low-stake environment. Once

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launched, leaders need to balance checking for fidelity with leaving space for innovation and adaptation and remain focused on ensuring the active ingredients remain untainted. During this stage leaders also need to utilise a range of feedback mechanisms to review progress and celebrate good practice. When this stage goes wrong, leaders evaluate prematurely, base their judgements on poor proxies and vanity metrics, get paralysed by too much data and use monitoring as a punitive performance management tool rather than a bright spot locator.

Embed & Sustain

The purpose of the final stage is to transition what might have been promising practice into permanent performance and the new normal, ensuring that any progress can survive changing priorities and staff turnover. Lots of leaders have sadly lost interest by this stage, which is why it stands as one of the weakest parts of most implementation processes. To be successful, leaders need to update and align job descriptions, remove functional friction and ensure that standard operating standards support the ongoing success of the strategy. Time, energy and financial budgets need to be secured for the future, and training needs to be designed and delivered to ensure that expertise continues to develop and new joiners are quickly up to speed. To protect against failure, leaders need to resist declaring victory too early, be brave enough to de-implement redundant or competing initiatives and continue to review and refine practice in response to frontline feedback.

FINAL THOUGHTS

If succeeding in the property market is all about location, location, location then successful school improvement is about execution, execution, execution. Leaders must invest considerable time and energy into the design and delivery of their project implementation process. By purposefully pausing in the exploration stage, leaders can start to bridge the implementation gap by ensuring that they are addressing the right problem. This stage could even highlight whether there was a fixable problem in the first place. Once in prep mode, leaders must commit to expertise development, resource acquisition and infrastructure strengthening to minimise friction and maximise staff well-being. Pilot projects and progressive roll outs are great next steps and leaders must retain an ear to the ground so that early issues can be caught and resolved. Finally, leaders must save some energy and enthusiasm for the slow-grind of sustainable success, ensuring that any promising practice becomes permanent.

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Durlak, J. A., & DuPre, E. P. (2008). Implementation matters: A review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. American Journal of Community Psychology, 41(3–4), 327–350.

Fullan, M. (2015). The new meaning of educational change (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Sharples, J., Albers, B., Fraser, A., & Pass, S. (2019). Putting evidence to work: A school's guide to implementation (2nd ed.). Education Endowment Foundation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature (NIRN, 2005) nirn.fpg.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf

Stakeholder engagement (GOV, 2024) projectdelivery.gov.uk/teal-book/home/part-e-planning-and-control/chapter-26-stakeholder-engagement/

Books

Deliverology 101: A Field Guide For Educational Leaders (Barber et al, 2010) Deliverology-101-Field-Educational-Leaders-ebook

Change Starts Here (Leaning & Lerner, 2025) Change-Starts-Here-Everything-School

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