

Common Principles of Effective Practice (CPEP) and Implementation:
A Framework for Integrating Initiatives and Sustaining Evidence-based Practices

Stages of Implementation

What are the stages of implementation?

Change at the classroom, school, district or state level does not occur all at once. Research suggests it can take from two to four years to fully and successfully operationalize an evidence-based program, practice, or educational innovation. The stages of implementation include:

- Exploration and Adoption
- Program Installation
- Initial Implementation
- Full Operation
- Innovation / Refinement
- Sustainability

Why are stages of implementation important?

- Awareness that implementation occurs in stages underscores an understanding that change is a process (not an event).
- When we pay attention to the stages of implementation we can better:
- Match our activities to that stage and increase the likelihood of moving successfully through the stage and on to the next stage.
- Prepare for the activities and challenges that we will face in the next stage.
- We are more likely to have people willingly join us in the change journey if we match our activities to the stage of implementation we are in and if we take into account the stage of engagement of key individuals as well.
- When we behave as though we are in one stage (e.g., Full Operation) and are really in another (e.g., Initial Implementation) we can create tension, feelings of incompetence, fear and frustration. Signs of so called, “resistance” may actually be a signal for us to reassess our activities to see if they truly match the perceived stage of implementation.
- Attending to each of the stages of implementation increases likelihood of sustained implementation of educational practices.

Key elements for each stage of implementation are listed below.

Exploration and Adoption

The purpose of exploration is to assess alignment of the proposed educational innovation among student needs, parent preferences, the new practice or innovation requirements, potential impact, and resources at the classroom, school, district and state levels. In addition, potential facilitators and barriers to implementation are assessed related to funding, staffing, data requirements, and administrative educational system supports. The result of the Exploration and Adoption stage is an informed decision to proceed or not. When the decision is to adopt the evidence-based practice or innovation, this stage culminates in a clear implementation plan with tasks and time lines to facilitate the Installation and Initial Implementation of the program. There may be interlocking plans at the school, district and state level depending on the scale of the proposed implementation effort.

Program Installation

After a decision is made to begin implementing a new educational practice or innovation, there are tasks that need to be accomplished before the change in classroom or school-wide practice can begin. These activities define the Installation Stage of implementation. Resources are being consumed in active preparation for actually doing things differently in keeping with the tenets of the new practice, program, or innovation. Structural supports necessary to initiate the new practice or innovation are put in place. These include ensuring the availability of funding streams, acquiring materials, appropriate and ongoing professional development strategies, and policy or procedure development as well as creating or refining data systems, and outcome expectations. These activities and their associated “start-up costs” are necessary first steps to begin any new educational endeavor at the classroom, school, or district level.

Initial Implementation

During the Initial Implementation Stage, the compelling forces of fear of change, inertia, and investment in the status quo combine with the inherently difficult and complex work of implementing something new. The overarching goal is to survive this awkward stage when expectations are high but new skills and appropriate support systems are still fragile and developing. Hand in hand with survival is the ability to learn from mistakes and develop system solutions when appropriate rather than allowing problems to re-emerge and re-occur. This stage is characterized by the use of rapid-cycle problem-solving teams, tracking process-related data (e.g., are we engaging in the practice or program as it was intended to be implemented?), and unwavering support from leadership that acknowledges challenges but displays confidence and competence in solving problems.

Full Operation

Full implementation of an evidence-based educational program or innovation can occur once the new learning becomes integrated into classroom, school, district and state practices, policies and procedures. Over time, the evidence-based program or innovation becomes “accepted practice” and a new meaning of “education as usual” takes its place in the education system. Full implementation requires a shift in thinking from “Well, now we are done!” to an understanding that full implementation requires ongoing support and vigilance related to fidelity and outcomes.

Innovation/Refinement

Innovation and refinement are most functional after Full Operation of the evidence-based practice or program has been achieved. Care must be taken not to “innovate away” the effective components of the program or practice in an effort to improve the “fit” with the current environment. Instead, the educational supports and environment must be changed to create a hospitable environment for the new way of work. Innovations and refinements should be considered when: a) process and outcome data indicate improvements are needed; b) when the innovation or refinement is aligned with the core educational values and vision; and c) when the professional development and organizational supports can be aligned and sustained to promote the improved version of the practice or program. Innovation is not a response to a challenging environment that does not support effective practice. Innovation is an operationalized change that can be sustained over time and across educators and results in increased benefits for students.

Sustainability

Sustainability is not a discrete stage. Rather, it is a consideration in every stage of implementation. Throughout the process there is recognition that new practices and innovations need to be sustained in subsequent years. Students, teachers, principals, district and state leaders, funding streams, and educational requirements change. New social problems arise; community standards change; partners come and go. External systems change with some frequency, political alliances are only temporary, and champions move on to other causes. Through it all, the educational implementation leaders and staff, together with parents and community partners, must be aware of the changes in influence factors and adjust without losing the effective components of the (no longer so) new program or practices. The goal is the long-term survival and continued effectiveness of the new instructional, behavioral or system improvement process in the context of a changing world.

What are indicators of successful use of the stages of implementation?

Each stage of implementation has a required set of core activities regardless of the educational practice or program (the “what”) that is under consideration. Overall indicators of successfully using stages of implementation are the forward movement of implementing the new program, practice, or initiative with fidelity and positive outcomes for students. Oftentimes, an extensive list of benchmarks and activities by stage is developed by leadership and implementation teams.

What are some potential systems change requirements that must be considered?

- Project initiation work (e.g., decision-making processes and timelines, action plans) must include adequate time for planning, discussion and thoughtful decision-making. Legitimizing time spent in purposeful and productive planning can make the difference between success and failure.
- Data must be collected from the beginning of any new initiative, from the Initial Implementation stage through Full Operation. We need to be accountable for achieving measureable benchmarks along the journey, and we need to take a hard look at both the process (fidelity) data and the outcome data we are achieving for program and practices throughout the implementation stages.

- It is important that a summative judgment about the value and worth of the innovation should not be made prematurely. Often projects or practices are abandoned in the Initial Implementation stage when everyone is learning something new. Poor outcomes due to a lack of implementation need to be addressed differently than poor outcomes of a fully implemented program or practice. Poor quality implementation may require addressing issues related to confidence, competence, and systemic support in order to improve fidelity and process data. In contrast, poor outcomes that result from a well-implemented program require a careful examination of the “fit” of the innovation with the needs of students.

To what extent are stages separate or distinct and do they operate in a linear manner?

The stages of implementation are not discrete with clear stopping and starting points. The “end” of one stage overlaps with the beginning of the next stage. Some stages never end. For example, leadership and implementation teams at any level (school, district, state) need to be aware that there are always new people entering the education arena (e.g., new principals and teachers, new district and state-level staff, parents new to the school). New individuals must be given the opportunity to understand the history of the change, the rationales for the new initiative, and the role they have in maintaining and improving the intervention. In essence, an abbreviated “exploration and buy-in” process is needed so that everyone is on a level playing field and understands the educational innovation (the “what”) as well as the implementation and sustainability strategies (the “how”). Similarly, as noted above, sustainability is part of every stage. And while it is hoped that change always equals progress, it is not necessarily so. For example, if teacher turnover is high, then it is important to recognize that the initiative has returned to the Initial Implementation Stage and more attention to building competence and confidence of teachers will be required.

References

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