ECTA *Center*

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center

A Guide to
the Implementation Process:
Stages, Steps and Activities

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March 25, 2014

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

*"**Implementation**: The process of moving an idea from concept to reality"*
(Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)

Improving child and family outcomes is a cornerstone of early childhood education and in particular the IDEA Part C and Part B, Section 619 Preschool programs. To improve outcomes, an evidence-based practice or innovation must be selected and the process of implementing that practice or innovation must be effective. Implementation science is the study of the processes needed to bring new practices into widespread use.

Changing policies or guidelines, providing information and training alone are not adequate to bring about sustainable changes in practice. To adopt evidence-based practices, the implementation process must also address the organizational supports which are necessary to initiate and sustain the practices with fidelity. Through carefully planned implementation, the adoption of any new practices builds the system's capacity for change.

The stages described in the guide include: 1) exploration, 2) installation, 3) initial implementation, 4) full implementation, and 5) expansion and scale-up. Each stage has specific steps and associated activities. While the stages, steps and activities suggest a linear sequence of events, in actual implementation there is often a more dynamic flow to the work. Some stages or steps may be occurring simultaneously and the work often circles back to revisit earlier stages. Implementation drivers such as technical leadership and adaptive leadership, organizational supports and personnel development mechanisms must align with and support the new practices.

This guide is based on a review of the literature of implementation science (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005) and the collective experiences of federally funded national centers in conducting state-wide system change initiatives. These centers include the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC, now the ECTA Center), Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI), Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL), National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) and the State Implementation of Scaling-Up Evidence-based Practices (SISEP).

Note: Implementation science terminology used in the document is defined in an online glossary. All glossary terms are highlighted and linked to this glossary the first time used.

An online version of this guide and glossary are available at:
http://www.ectacenter.org/implementprocess/implementprocess.asp

References

Fixsen, D.L., Naoom, S.F., Blase, K.A., Friedman, R.M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication 231). Downloadable at http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf

Halle, T., Metz, A. & Martinez-Beck, I. (Eds.), (2013). Applying implementation science in early childhood programs and systems. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

Metz, A. & Bartley, L. (2013). Active implementation frameworks for program success: How to use implementation science to improve outcomes for children. *Zero to Three*, March 2012.

National Centers

- ECTA Center http://ectacenter.org/
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/
- National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/
- State Implementation of Scaling-Up Evidence-based Practices (SISEP) http://sisep.fpg.unc.edu/
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI) http://www.challengingbehavior.org/

Planning for Change

Change is complex and dynamic. It involves moving or transforming from something familiar to something new. Change can be broad, affecting multiple practices or aspects of the program, or it might be narrow, affecting fewer practices. Regardless of the scale, change is a dynamic active and on-going process, rather than a single event.

There are many reasons for programs or agencies to engage in a change process. Some of these may include:

- A newly defined vision or direction
- A crisis
- A new mandate
- Data that supports a change is needed
- New information and/or research
- Old ways are not getting the needed or desired outcomes
- New leadership bringing different practices

The push to change can come from any level of the organization. Regardless of where the initial push comes from, it is essential that a change effort is carefully planned. It is important that program and agency leaders first examine the current organizational and political climate to assess readiness to both begin and sustain implementation and scaling up (or expansion) of new practices or an innovation.

This examination should include:

- Identification of key stakeholders who share the interest and need for change
- Assessment of the degree to which these stakeholders perceive the issue or need to be a priority
- Willingness of leadership from multiple agencies and programs to support the change process over a period of time
- Identification of a leadership team responsible for the oversight of necessary aspects of the change process over time
- Desire to engage in discussions and gather information about potential solutions to identified needs
- Knowledge of implementation science and its application to the change process

It is important to recognize that, planning and engaging in the implementation of any new innovation, evidence-based practice, or cluster of practices takes time, energy and resources. The change process can be understood and organized using defined steps and subsequent activities that are needed to move a concept into reality. These steps and activities are outlined in the following document, "A Guide to the Implementation Process: Stages, Steps and Activities".

Stage 1: Exploration

The goals of the exploration stage are to identify the need for change, determine what innovation or set of practices are likely to meet that need, and to decide whether or not to move ahead with the implementation process. This stage, and all other stages, are guided by a State Leadership Team.

The State Leadership Team (SLT) should include cross- sector representation of agencies and programs impacted by the proposed initiative. The composition, vision and mission of this initial team may change over time as they go through the stages and steps.

The SLT ensures that the perspectives of key stakeholders from every level of the service system are included as a part of a needs assessment of the current service delivery system. All available data describing current challenges and need for change should be gathered and shared with stakeholders. Stakeholders help build a common understanding of the current status and the desired changes in practices and outcomes. They are included in exploring potential practices or innovations to determine how well they fit with the mission, values, desired outcomes and resources of the agency/program.

During the exploration stage, an important consideration for the State Leadership Team is whether they can commit to a multi-year implementation process. If the decision is to proceed with implementation, then building public awareness and widespread support for the change is crucial.

Step 1: Establish a State Leadership Team (SLT) to guide exploration

a. Include representatives from each of the key agencies/programs with the authority to make decisions and expend resources (or an individual with easy access to that decision-maker).
b. Select staff whose responsibilities will allow them to undertake this initiative over several years and.
c. Select staff with expertise about the implementation process as well as potential innovations or practices that fit identified needs.
d. SLT defines their roles and responsibilities.

Step 2: The SLT convenes a stakeholder group for needs assessment and system analysis

a. Determine appropriate stakeholders including state agency personnel, TA personnel and pre-service personnel, regional and/or program administrators, providers/teachers and parents.
b. Clarify stakeholder group's purpose, responsibilities and projected timeline for involvement.
c. Articulate the purpose and rationale for change, including any supporting data.
d. Review infrastructure and current practices, including issues, concerns, and strengths from the perspectives of all stakeholders.
e. Identify the concerns and problems at all levels of the service system (e.g., state, regional, local services to children and families) the state is trying to address.
f. Identify desired outcomes and changes for each level of the system.
g. Review or realign the system's mission and values to fit with desired outcomes and new vision for a change in practices.

Step 3: Stakeholders explore the feasibility and "fit" of potential innovations and practices

    a. Explore the core features, functions and benefits of potential innovation(s) or set of practices.
    b. Review the research and evidence base for the innovation or practices.
    c. Gather information from other states, programs and consultants, experienced with implementing the potential innovation(s) and practices.
    d. Analyze requirements of the implementation process and potential impact of adoption on system resources.

Step 4: The SLT decides on practices/innovation and whether or not to proceed

    a. Review all perspectives and information gathered.
    b. Establish criteria for selecting the innovation or practices to adopt.
    c. Consider which innovation can best address the identified needs, has evidence of producing desired outcomes, and aligns with the service system's mission, values and resources.
    d. Decide and recommend to final decision makers, which innovation or set of practices are most promising and whether or not to proceed with implementation.

Step 5: The SLT secures agency and cross-agency leadership support

    a. Identify administrators and decision makers whose buy-in will be needed to assure necessary support and resources for implementation and sustainability.
    b. Use multiple strategies to help key individuals become champions who will promote the new practices or innovation.
    c. Develop a plan for the involvement and continued support of these individuals.

Outcomes of Exploration

- A State Leadership Team has been established to oversee the initiative.
- A stakeholder group has explored the need for change and the fit of potential new practices or innovation.
- An innovation or set of practices was selected which addresses the need and is likely to result in desired outcomes.
- The service system and current practices were analyzed to determine necessary changes in infrastructure, and training, technical assistance and coaching.
- The decision was made to proceed with the implementation initiative and move into installation.
- Necessary agency or cross agency leadership has committed to supporting the implementation of selected practices over multiple years.

Stage 2: Installation

The goal of the installation stage is to build system capacity which will support the implementation of the new practices at selected sites. Building system capacity requires examining and strengthening the system components and quality features also called implementation drivers, necessary to assure success.

Another important installation activity is developing a written implementation plan, which addresses expansion and sustainability. Most of the work of this stage is typically done or supervised by the State Leadership Team (SLT).

During this stage initial implementation sites are selected and Implementation Teams are formed at each site. Implementation Teams oversee the implementation process, build communication and feedback loops, prepare trainers /coaches and develop a site plan for putting the new practice in place.

Step 1: The SLT finalizes membership and responsibilities

a. Ensure that the State Leadership Team has the capacity, resources and commitment to oversee the implementation process for two - five years.
b. Establish an orientation for all members that include vision, mission, roles and responsibilities, ground rules and structures for voting and communication.
c. Determine the structures and mechanisms for ongoing stakeholder input.

Step 2: The SLT develops a communication plan for statewide buy-in

a. Identify audiences (e.g., professional groups, families and parent groups, referral sources, collaborating agencies, funders, legislators, practitioners) who need to understand and support the new practices.
b. Determine the "messages", materials, and formats appropriate for each audience.
c. Describe core features and components of the new practice(s), the evidence base and expected outcomes.
d. Identify potential opposition, reasons for opposition and the team response.
e. Use multiple communication strategies and feedback loops to evaluate the impact of the messages.
f. Include ways to use your stakeholders and champions to promote the new practice(s).

Step 3: The SLT establishes Implementation Sites and Teams

a. Consider the characteristics of personnel and organizational structures most likely to support successful implementation.
b. Use selection criteria to choose initial Implementation Sites.
c. Sign written agreements that specify both site and State Leadership Team responsibilities with the selected sites.
d. Form an Implementation Team at each site to develop their plan, oversee all activities and timelines and participate in communication loops with the State Leadership Team.
e. Include representation on the Implementation Team of administrators and direct service staff, parent leaders and others who are or will become experts on both the implementation process and the new practice(s)
f. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of team members and their long term commitment to implementation and sustainability.
g. Ensure the Implementation Team has the resources, information and skills necessary to lead the change effort.

Step 4: The SLT develops system supports and infrastructure changes

     a. Make necessary changes to administrative structures (<mark>organizational drivers</mark>) such as contracts, interagency agreements, general supervision, oversight, policies, procedures, guidance and forms to support new practices.

     b. Determine and make changes needed in staffing and staff responsibilities.

     c. Find and align the fiscal resources to cover start-up costs, administrative structure costs, professional development mechanisms, training materials and any new service delivery costs.

Step 5: The SLT improves data systems, evaluation and monitoring

     a. Determine the data needed to monitor and evaluate key aspects of the implementation process, such as communication and feedback loops, professional development activities and functioning of state and local teams.

     b. Determine data needed to evaluate intervention effectiveness including performance assessment, fidelity and the emergence of desired outcomes.

     c. Determine the data needed by teams, trainers, coaches, practitioners and any other individuals for decision-making.

     d. Determine the capacity of the current data system and make additions and improvements.

Step 6: The SLT builds Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) capacity; begins training

     a. Determine and develop T&TA procedures, activities, and materials.

     b. Assure availability of the human resources needed to develop and conduct T&TA at initial sites.

     c. Determine, develop or adapt measures of fidelity.

     d. Develop an evaluation plan to understand the effectiveness and outcomes of T&TA activities.

     e. Conduct orientation and informational training(s) statewide for all potential early implementers.

     f. Conduct "train the trainer" and "train the coach" activities.

Step 7: The SLT finalizes a written plan

     a. Develop a written Implementation Plan that addresses:
- communication and dissemination,
- training and technical assistance,
- planned improvements in organizational structures, data and system supports
- all evaluation activities; and
- activities that address expansion (scale-up) and sustainability.

     b. Identify and engage external expertise and additional resources as needed to support the implementation plan.

     c. Develop a progress monitoring and evaluation schedule that ensures the Implementation, Plan is regularly reviewed, updated and improved.

     d. Determined mechanisms for keeping stakeholders and the field apprised of progress.

Outcomes of Installation:

- A State Leadership Team has committed to guide the implementation process.
- With stakeholders input, concise descriptive materials were made available to assure regular communication, and support for the new initiative.
- System capacity, including communication structures, T&TA, data systems, and infrastructure changes, has been strengthened to support implementation and <mark>scale up</mark>.
- The written Implementation Plan is "in use" by the SLT and shared with stakeholders.

Stage 3: Initial Implementation

The goal of initial implementation is to put the new practices in place at selected implementation sites. Site level Implementation Teams guide the implementation process, review data, make decisions and provide feedback to the State Leadership Team, on successes and challenges.

The state provides training and coaching to the site Implementation Teams, who in turn support practitioners. Practitioners in the sites are trained and begin to use the practices or innovation. Coaching is provided to enhance the fidelity of use of the practices. The Implementation Sites set up mechanisms to collect evaluation data and provide feedback to the State Leadership Team.

Feedback loops and improvement cycles between the Implementation Teams and the State Leadership Team are used to quickly solve problems and determine if adjustments are needed to activities, benchmarks or system supports. Feedback is used to revise the written plans when necessary. During Initial Implementation the new practices are at least partially in place in the initial Implementation Sites. As outlined in the communication plan, leaders, stakeholders and the field are kept apprised of progress and important changes.

Step 1: State TA providers train and coach Implementation Site personnel

a. The Implementation Team at each site appoints a leader and schedules regular meetings.
b. States TA providers build confidence and competence of site Implementation teams through on-going training, coaching and guidance.
c. The Implementation Teams, with assistance from State TA providers, train, and support practitioners.
d. The Implementation teams evaluate activities and use data for making decisions and incorporating changes in on-going training and support.

Step 2: Implementation teams support practitioners and monitor the use of new practices

a. Practitioners begin to use the practices.
b. The Implementation Teams provide on-going coaching to assure practice fidelity.
c. The Implementation Teams measure implementation fidelity by regularly conducting performance assessments, using observations and fidelity tools.
d. Implementation Teams regularly review information about the implementation process, practice fidelity, participant satisfaction, costs, and emerging outcomes to share with State Leadership Team.

Step 3: The SLT and Implementation Teams use feedback loops and improvement cycles to adjust organizational supports

a. Use feedback loops and improvement cycles to quickly resolve barriers and identify additional supports needed at local, regional and state levels.
b. Revise policies, procedures, guidance and forms to support the new practices.
c. Adapt fiscal policies and fiscal procedures to support and sustain the new practices.
d. Adjust administrative structures and personnel as necessary at state, regional and local levels.

Step 4: The SLT and Implementation Teams evaluate fidelity, and emerging outcomes

    a. Use data from the fidelity measures to make adaptations in training and support.

    b. Provide continuous feedback to practitioners related to the fidelity of their practice.

    c. Evaluate activities according to the evaluation plan, with particular attention to the implementation process, practice fidelity, participant satisfaction, costs, emerging benefits and outcomes.

    d. Review and adapt written Implementation Plans to prepare for full implementation.

Outcomes of Initial Implementation

- Implementation Team, supported by state TA providers, provided oversight to activities at all sites.
- Practices were implemented, and training and coaching assured increasing levels of fidelity.
- Data were used to inform all aspects of implementation.
- Systemic changes and organizational supports were added to support the practices.
- Training and coaching were adapted and strengthened according to evaluation results.
- Implementation of new practices began to show expected results.
- Evaluation of sites provided information to assist in ==expansion== and scaling up to full implementation.

Stage 4: Full Implementation

The goals of full implementation are to assure practices are used with high fidelity, and are achieving expected outcomes at all initial sites. With a focus on both fidelity and sustainability, all professional development and organizational structures are fully functioning and work together to support practitioners.

Orientation activities provide necessary training and support to newly hired practitioners and leaders so they can use and sustain the new practices. Evaluation activities continue to monitor fidelity and outcomes of practice, so that "drift" (movement away from fidelity) in practices is quickly identified and addressed.

In addition to sustaining high fidelity practices in the initial Implementation Sites, the State Leadership Team (SLT) focuses on beginning scale up and sustainability activities outlined in the Implementation Plan.

Step 1: Site Implementation Teams maintain T&TA supports

    a. Recruitment and selection policies are used to hire staff with competencies to match desired practices.

    b. All new staff, including administration, practitioners and Implementation Team members are oriented to their roles and trained in new practices.

    c.   On-going training of new staff and "booster" training occurs as needed.

    d. Regular supervision and performance assessment occurs for practice fidelity.

    e. Coaching occurs regularly for new staff and experienced staff to sustain practice fidelity.

Step 2: The SLT and Implementation Teams ensure that data systems, policies, procedures and funding are integrated and functioning

    a. Monitoring, support systems and reporting processes are in place and used regularly.
    b. Feedback Loops and Improvement Cycles are used for continuous improvement and sustainability of practice.
    c. Reliable data systems are in place and provide information about the specific processes, practices and outcomes.
    d. Data and other information are frequently used by practitioners, coaches and supervisors to improve performance.
    e. Policies, procedures and budgets at relevant state, regional and local levels are adjusted as needed to support practice.

Step 3: Implementation Teams regularly use performance assessment

    a. Staff conducting performance assessments are well trained and receive supportive supervision as well.
    b. Staff performance is evaluated for fidelity of the practices.
    c. Multiple sources of information (self-assessment, observation, supervision, peer reports, video clips, team meetings, etc.) are used.
    d. Staff understand that the performance assessment process and fidelity measures are the basis of feedback and improvement.
    e. Feedback is provided in a helpful and timely manner.

Step 4: The SLT and Implementation Teams use feedback and data to sustain fidelity

    a. Data are reviewed to make administrative changes as needed.
    b. SLT and Implementation Teams frequently use communication strategies and feedback loops to receive and provide information.
    c. State, regional and local administrators are actively engaged in reducing any administrative barriers that arise.
    d. Improvement cycles are used with a focus on sustainability.

Step 5: The SLT and Site Implementation Teams ensure on-going sustainability of structures and practices

    a. Continue to provide administrative, organizational and fiscal support.
    b. Continue to provide technical assistance and coaching for maintaining fidelity.
    c. Maintain relationships and provide materials to higher education and professional organizations to impact pre-service education and licensing requirements.
    d. Continue to promote buy-in and to expand support base.

Outcomes of Full Implementation

- The practices have been successfully implemented at all initial sites with fidelity.
- The outcomes were measured and showed intended results.
- Training, TA and coaching are effective in helping all staff implement practices with fidelity.
- Systemic issues were resolved and the system has the capacity to support the practices.

Stage 5: *Expansion/Scale-up*

The goal of expansion or scale-up is to increase the number of sites using the practices with fidelity. During Expansion/scale-up the State Leadership Team (SLT) plans and provides an expanded infrastructure. This could include providing appropriate policy and funding; increasing numbers of trainers and coaches; and expanding data systems to support the increased number of new sites. At state-wide implementation, the new practices and supporting organizational structures are institutionalized and become standard practice within the state.

With each new site, the stages of exploration, installation, and implementation begin anew. The SLT plans for these stages at each new site while maintaining and sustaining high fidelity implementation in previous sites.

Implementation in the new sites may be quicker than with the initial implementers as much has been learned from the experiences of the initial sites. Sites that are implementing with fidelity can serve as mentors to new sites. State level organizational structures have been adjusted to achieve successful implementation at the initial sites and this should help the new sites as well. The SLT and Implementation Teams continue to focus on sustainability over time at all sites.

Step 1: Initial Implementation Sites assist the SLT in expansion

   a. The SLT shares data with stakeholders and policy makers celebrating success and builds support for scale-up.
   b. The Implementation Sites continue to provide data on outcomes.
   c. The initial Implementation Sites get ready to provide technical assistance and demonstrate the use of practices for new sites.
   d. Lessons learned are incorporated into the written Implementation Plan.

Step 2: The SLT selects new sites and provides necessary supports

   a. The SLT selects the next set of implementation sites, using established criteria.
   b. The Implementation Plan and lessons learned from initial sites are used to support each new site through their implementation process.
   c. The State Leadership Team establishes feedback loops, training, coaching, and organizational structures to support the practices at new sites.

Step 3: New sites begin their implementation process

   a. New Implementation Teams lead the implementation process at new sites.
   b. A site level stakeholder group conducts a needs assessment to determine the "fit" of new practices with current ways of working to identify needed changes.
   c. Adequate numbers of trainers and coaches are available to support the new sites and help build their internal capacity.
   d. Training and coaching are provided to implement new practices with fidelity.
   e. SLT and Implementation Teams use feedback loops and continuous improvement cycles to address problems and barriers.
   f. Organizational structures at state and site levels are adjusted as needed to support new practices.
   g. The SLT and Implementation Teams use data to ensure that the sites reach fidelity and achieve desired outcomes.

Step 4: The SLT establishes mechanisms for sustaining fidelity of practices.

    a. Communication and support mechanisms (shared web sites, learning communities, regular meetings) are developed for administrators, Implementation Teams and practitioners.

    b. Practices are reflected in early childhood standards, and pre-service and in-service education.

    c. Regular T&TA and coaching are maintained for all sites and targeted T&TA and coaching address any decline in outcomes or drift.

    d. Evaluations of fidelity and achievement of outcomes are built into on-going monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms.

Outcomes of Expansion and Scale up

- The state systematically expanded and supported all new sites.
- On-going T&TA, coaching and supervision activities sustained fidelity of practice.
- On-going monitoring and targeted TA assured continuous improvement.
- Children and families benefited from state–wide implementation of new practices.