

Strategies to enhance schools' readiness for change

Learnings from the Getting it Right from the Start project

August 2024



This snapshot explores strategies schools can use to enhance their readiness to implement new programs. It is a collaboration between the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and the Centre for Community and Child Health at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, and forms part of the Getting it Right from the Start project.

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AERO acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

The Centre for Community Child Health acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

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Contents

List of abbreviations	4
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Introduction	5
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What schools are doing to support or increase staff's readiness for change	7
Theme 1: Ensure buy-in from the school community and external stakeholders	7
Theme 2: Invest in training programs and support systems	9
Theme 3: Accept that change takes time and that readiness for change is dynamic	10

Addressing barriers to change	11
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Conclusion	11
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References	12
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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full text
GIRFTS	Getting it Right from the Start
ISP	Implementation Support Partner
RTI	Response to intervention
MTSS	Multi-tiered system of supports

Introduction

Readiness for change can be defined as an organisation, or an individual, being prepared to act and respond to change when it occurs. Recent definitions of readiness include psychological components (such as attitudes and beliefs) and structural components (such as organisational capacity and resources) (Weiner et al., 2020).

A school's readiness for change is considered one of the factors that affects the implementation of a new program in an education setting (Humphrey et al., 2016; Oterkiil & Ertesvåg, 2012). Higher levels of readiness are associated with higher levels of fidelity when implementing new programs in schools (Bast, 2020; Schelvis, 2016). Considering that education contexts have finite resources that may vary each year, schools that support readiness for change may be rewarded with better implementation outcomes even within limited resources.

Our previous research snapshot, [Variations in Schools' Readiness for Change](#) (Scott et al., 2023), assessed readiness for change in 9 schools that were commencing the [Getting it Right from the Start \(GIRFTS\) project](#). The constructs that define readiness for change at commencement include:

- buy-in
- peer support
- leadership support
- perception of need
- tolerable stress level
- tolerable workload level
- self-efficacy
- access to resources
- openness to change
- tolerable effort level.

Getting it Right from the Start

GIRFTS is a research study that aims to implement a response to intervention (RTI) framework in early primary school (Foundation and Grade 1) to improve oral language and reading. RTI is a multi-tiered conceptual framework that supports student learning through delivery of high-quality classroom instruction, early identification of students with additional learning needs and early intervention.¹

This first snapshot showed that each school had a unique readiness for change profile, and that workload and stress were perceived to be the greatest barriers to change.

Low levels of readiness for change constructs can present a barrier to change. For example, low levels of school staff buy-in can hinder implementation of a new program because staff do not 'see the point', and are, therefore, unwilling to change their practice. Similarly, where there is a lack of leadership support for a new project, implementation can suffer as resources required for the new project are not allocated and other priorities use staff's limited time, effort and motivation.

¹ 'RTI' and 'multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)' are often used interchangeably but there are some important differences between them. RTI focuses on academic outcomes for students. MTSS expands RTI and includes providing supports for the behavioural, social and emotional needs of students in addition to academics.

Therefore, increasing and maintaining schools' readiness for change has the potential to mitigate the negative impact of low readiness for change.

Strategies in the research literature that are reported to increase schools' readiness for change can be broadly classified into 6 themes (see Table 1) and can influence multiple constructs.

Table 1: Strategies in the literature reported to increase schools' readiness for change

Strategy	Action
Ensure buy-in from the school community and external stakeholders	Ensure the school community and external stakeholders perceive and accept the value of the change and the positive impact it will have on students (Dulaney et al., 2013; Kingston et al., 2018).
Ensure the school community knows what the change process will involve	Communicate with the school community about the new program throughout the change process, including what the change involves for community members and what a successfully implemented change will look like (McKnight & Glennie, 2019; Sharples et al., 2019).
Invest in training programs and support systems	Support staff with developing and sustaining the skills and knowledge needed to implement the new program (Barcelona et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2006).
Establish an implementation team	Establish an implementation team that will lead, support and celebrate the implementation of the new program (Fixen et al., 2013; Kingston et al., 2018; Sharples et al., 2019).
Collect and utilise readiness for change data during the implementation process	Regularly collect and utilise data about readiness for change and its associated barriers and facilitators (McKnight & Glennie, 2019; Sharples et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2006).
Accept that change takes time and that readiness for change is dynamic	Accept that full implementation of a new program will take 2 to 4 years, and that readiness for change will fluctuate during that time (Scaccia et al., 2015; Sharples et al., 2019).

What schools are doing to support or increase staff's readiness for change

This research snapshot highlights some real-life examples from the GIRFTS study and outlines strategies schools can use to increase their readiness for change. School staff (teachers and leaders) and implementation support partners (ISPs)² provided examples of strategies that increased school readiness for change during focus groups and interviews conducted 12 to 15 months after the GIRFTS project commenced in their school communities. This snapshot focuses on 3 key strategies that school staff and ISPs reported focusing on to increase readiness during the initial stages of implementation of GIRFTS. They are:

- ensuring buy-in from the school community and external stakeholders
- investing in training programs and support systems
- accepting that change takes time, and that readiness for change is dynamic.

Theme 1: Ensure buy-in from the school community and external stakeholders

Ensure the school community and external stakeholders perceive and accept the value of the change and the positive impact it will have on students.

A high level of program buy-in can positively influence readiness for change, implementation, motivation and behaviour change (Kingston et al., 2018). It can also create a sense of urgency to implement the new program (Zimmerman, 2006). Increasing buy-in can support school community members to see the value of the new program and reduce resistance to change (Dulaney et al., 2013). Furthermore, a high level of commitment from stakeholders and community members who can provide the resources to implement the program is more likely to result in the school being able to acquire resources from those sources (Dulaney et al., 2013; Kingston et al., 2018).

In the GIRFTS study, participants reported using the following readiness for change strategies to ensure buy-in:

- prioritising and aligning the change with existing school plans and processes

It's just working really well at the moment that everybody across leadership is driving that instead of having conflicting priorities or things that they're going to work on. I mean ... they're still focusing on maths across the school, but they're recognising how that fits into RTI and that what it needs is for everybody to change ... It's just whole of leadership involvement. — ISP 1

... not having other things going on in terms of strategic directions so that this can be the focus ... the prep team or the junior team isn't getting pulled and having to do multiple things. — ISP 1

² ISPs are professionals who are provided as part of the project to support schools in their implementation of the RTI framework. Each school is assigned one ISP. ISPs work one day a week with schools for the duration of the study.

- incorporating reflective practice to allow staff to review the early successes of the program – this can motivate staff to continue to implement the program as they recognise and value the outcomes the program has provided to their students

It's also motivating – you feel like pointing out that there's actually change and ... benefits. ... you might go, 'Well, we've still got a long way to go, but these are all the changes that we have made, and ... that is really positive.' — ISP 1

I think the school's really benefited from coming back and reviewing what they're doing ... at the start of the project, we were doing this in [the] space of phonics and phonological awareness and fluency, etc. ... and then what? ... what have we added into the mix in terms of our kit bag or our new skills and so-on in those areas as well? — ISP 2

- involving leadership to ensure they understand the early successes and benefits of the program and can act to remove barriers staff may be facing

I see that real contrast between ... where you have the person who's a literacy leader, and in the [assistant principal] role, and things just flow ... versus where you've got the literacy coordinator ... who isn't the [assistant principal], who ... has to keep going back requesting resources. — ISP 2

And [principal] has been in classrooms, and she can see the results. She's been very aware of how teachers have been feeling and what their workload's been like, but she's now seeing that the staff have taken it on board and [are] feeling so much more at ease with what they're doing because they're seeing some really good results. — School 1

- leadership protecting staff from external pressures and/or additional expectations so that staff feel supported to continue to implement the program.

But I think that was our conflict at the beginning ... what if someone walks in and says, 'No' ... It was scary at first, but once we started seeing the results, the boss said, 'Don't worry about it' [laughs]. — School 2

I feel like if you asked [principal] that question, it would be different because she has had people in the department say, 'What are you doing? You shouldn't be doing this.' ... So yeah, I don't feel like we've had any resistance, but then if you ask [principal], there has been. But just not that we're aware of. — School 1

Theme 2: Invest in training programs and support systems

Support staff with developing and sustaining the skills and knowledge needed to implement the new program.

Investing in training programs and support systems can increase teacher self-efficacy, which can motivate teachers to be ready for change by encouraging them to embrace new ideas and try new teaching strategies (Zimmerman, 2006). When all staff have the knowledge and skills to implement the change, they can support and guide each other through the process (Barcelona et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2006).

In the GIRFTS study, participants reported using the following readiness for change strategies that invest in training and support:

- support training initiatives, as well as protected meeting times, that give staff the opportunity to reflect and evaluate their implementation

So, we made a commitment at the beginning of this year that every fortnight we would meet as a team after school. That was really powerful ... Because it was there that we could unpack any misconceptions ... really understand why we were doing things. We could look at data and see growth in the children's skills. — School 3

And we're fortunate that our boss gives us common planning time ... It's worked well here, because we've got that ability to discuss everything we do, what worked well, what hasn't, what we can change. — School 2

- strategically select training that builds knowledge and skills over time

[Professional learning about synthetic phonics] really complemented the training that we did in the MiniLit ... it confirmed for me that MiniLit was the right intervention for us and for the purpose of what we were doing. — School 5

Being able to give them something that was as structured as Little Learners was probably ... the best way to start for them, because it gave them that guide to ... say, 'This is the way we're going to go.' ... after 6 months... we were able to safely say, 'Okay, but we've identified now that we've missed a few things in here, so let's up the ante, let's change what we're doing and bring this in so that we can still keep improving on the skills that these kids are learning.' — School 1

- provide implementation staff who focus on the program's implementation goals while providing support and time for reflection, allowing teachers to focus on program delivery in classrooms.

Having that [ISP] support there and saying, 'Well, hang on, let's have a look at this. What can we be doing in that area, and let's pick up on that' just gives you that strength to be able to keep going with it. — School 1

This term we've finally got a substantive [assistant principal]. We've just had so much change [and] disharmony ... [ISP] has been the only constant this year for us and she's just been phenomenal. She's been someone who's pushed us to continue on this journey. She's been someone who has listened, offered advice ... You know, it would have been so easy to throw it by the wayside when we were up to [principal] number 3 but we didn't and she's like, 'We've got to keep going', so she's just been absolutely phenomenal. — School 4

Theme 3: Accept that change takes time and that readiness for change is dynamic

Accept that full implementation of a new program will take 2 to 4 years, and that readiness for change will fluctuate during that time.

It's important to recognise that a school community's level of readiness for change will shift during the implementation process (Scaccia et al., 2015). While readiness for change can be developed and built, it can also diminish and fade away (Sharples et al., 2019). Changes to the school context, including the loss of staff, change to champions and resources, and competing new programs are some of the factors that can impact readiness for change during the implementation process (Sharples et al., 2019).

In the GIRFTS study, participants reported using the following readiness for change strategies to reflect that change takes time:

- acknowledging that becoming ready for change is a process – there may be some initial apprehension, with a need for 'tough conversations'

I'm sure there was some apprehension, particularly with the teachers that have been teaching for quite some time because the content was completely different to how we've been teaching before. But they took it on board ... it was becoming part of their teaching practice. — School 1

... when one person, in particular, was like, 'I'm just going to be honest with you, I haven't done it and I'm not doing it.' And I said, 'Tell me more about that.' And it was not because she didn't want to do it – it's because she didn't understand it. But once I said, 'So, you don't understand what we're doing?' she said, 'No'. I said, 'Great, let's start from there.' — School 3

- maintaining consistency and support for the new program by providing training and support for new staff members.

And [implementation is] driven by the teachers – if they're driving it and even if a new staff member does come on board, they get [professional development] and supported so that they become familiar with the way we do things. — School 5

We're excited for whoever we get in our team next year, to bring [them] along on the ride.
— School 6

Addressing barriers to change

The first research snapshot identified workload³ and stress⁴ as the greatest barriers to change as schools started the GIRFTS study. Many of the strategies schools outlined in this snapshot are likely to reduce the impact of these barriers. For example, strategically selecting training programs that build self-efficacy can help staff feel more prepared and confident about change, which reduces concerns about workload and associated stress levels (as illustrated by the quote from School 1 in Theme 2: *Invest in training programs and support systems*). A similarly positive effect might occur, such as a reduction in stress, when staff are reassured that leadership supports implementation. This is the case even in the presence of external pressures and/or additional expectations, provided staff believe leadership will protect them from those pressures.

Active and strategic effort to enhance readiness for change, using the strategies outlined in this snapshot, has the potential to mitigate the impact of some of these barriers to change and increase the likelihood of successful implementation of new projects.

Conclusion

This snapshot provides an overview of strategies that schools participating in the GIRFTS study have used to support and/or increase staff readiness for change. These strategies target a combination of the constructs shown to impact readiness for change (for example, buy-in, leadership support, perception of need, tolerable workload and tolerable stress). Given that a higher level of readiness for change is associated with greater fidelity of implementation, schools that use strategies to enhance their staff's readiness for change may be more likely to successfully implement new programs.

³ Workload is an individual's perception of the amount of work that is expected or that they have been assigned.

⁴ Stress is an emotional and physical response that an individual feels when they experience something new or unexpected or when they feel they have little control over the situation.

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