

Leading implementation

# Context first: Tailoring implementation to each school setting

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**Evidence-based teaching practices are more likely to embed in a school when the implementation process is tailored to context. This practice guide explains what tailoring to context involves and features implementation stories from diverse school settings.**

## About this practice guide

Drawing on key findings and guidance from implementation research, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has developed a [deliberate and structured approach](#) to support successful implementation in Australian schools. This approach has been refined and tested through our work alongside primary and secondary schools in the [Learning Partner project](#).

This practice guide features the experiences of 3 schools that have participated in the Learning Partner project. Their experiences illustrate how the key ideas of a deliberate and structured approach can be applied to take account of local needs.

This guide has been developed for school leaders and implementation teams seeking to understand what evidence-informed implementation looks like across different contexts, to inform their own ideas for tailoring implementation.

### Tip

As this practice guide refers to specific components of AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation, we recommend first familiarising yourself with this approach through one of these resources:

- 10-to-15-minute microcourse, [Achieving Lasting Change](#), which includes an animation, short video montages and interactive activities
- 12-page written explainer, [Taking an Evidence-Informed Approach to Implementation](#)
- [Implementation for Impact: A Deliberate and Structured Approach](#) module, which provides a 45-minute overview in the form of a slide deck with voice recordings.



## Understanding and responding to context

This section outlines:

- why tailoring implementation to context matters
- ways of thinking about your own context
- how and when to adjust implementation to match your context.

### The importance of tailoring implementation to context

Implementation is **not one-size-fits-all**, but a flexible process that should be adapted to local contexts and needs.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Insufficient consideration of school context is a common reason implementation efforts falter.<sup>4</sup>

In a [deliberate and structured approach](#), context forms the 'where' of implementation. It influences both the choice of evidence-based teaching practice your school will implement (the 'what'), and the implementation processes you'll use (the 'how') ([Figure 1](#)). This includes helping you decide when to start an implementation effort, when to speed up or slow down, who should be involved and where to focus your energy. How you respond to your unique situation will ultimately affect the success of your implementation efforts.

**Figure 1:** Where school context fits in a deliberate and structured approach to implementation

## Understanding your implementation context

Many factors influence your context and, in turn, affect how your implementation team can plan for implementation.<sup>5,6</sup> These factors are a mix of obvious and less obvious factors (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Factors that influence your implementation context

| Factor                                                      | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Your <b>school profile</b>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sector</li> <li>• School type (e.g., primary or secondary)</li> <li>• Location</li> <li>• Student profile</li> <li>• Staff and student backgrounds</li> </ul>                                                 |
| The <b>history</b> of implementation efforts at your school | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whether there have been a lot of recent changes</li> <li>• What has previously worked well</li> <li>• What hasn't previously worked</li> </ul>                                                                |
| Your <b>wider community</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing considerations</li> <li>• Competing priorities and events happening in the community</li> <li>• Community expectations of your school</li> </ul>                                                       |
| Your <b>leadership profile</b>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many leaders you have</li> <li>• Leader capabilities</li> <li>• Leader time commitments</li> </ul>                                                                                                        |
| <b>Staff profile</b>                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staffing structures and employment arrangements (e.g., whether many staff are part-time)</li> <li>• How many staff already have expertise in or enthusiasm for the practice</li> </ul>                        |
| <b>School culture</b>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How much shared responsibility, trust and collaboration already exists between leaders, between teachers and between leaders and teachers</li> <li>• Staff acceptability of modelling and coaching</li> </ul> |

| Factor                                                                                    | Examples                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Available time</b> for implementation team meetings and professional learning sessions | Regular meeting or professional learning time already in place                                                               |
| <b>Resourcing</b>                                                                         | Resourcing for releasing teachers from class (e.g., to watch a modelled lesson) or for any new equipment                     |
| <b>System support</b>                                                                     | Support from your education department or diocese for both the practice being implemented and for the implementation process |

## Responding to your implementation context

Understanding your context is just the start. The real work is being thoughtful about how and when to adjust your implementation efforts based on your context.

This relies on knowing which aspects of implementation *should* be tailored. Table 2 outlines examples of what tailoring to context does and doesn't involve for the 'where', 'what' and 'how' of a deliberate and structured approach. A key point is that tailoring to context still uses all the components of a deliberate and structured approach, but involves applying these components in ways that best meet the needs of your school.

**Table 2:** What tailoring to context means and doesn't mean

| ✓ Tailoring to context means ...                                                                                                                                                            | ✗ Tailoring to context <i>doesn't</i> mean ...                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1 Where</b>                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| ✓ Using school <b>data</b> and listening to <b>different perspectives</b> to more deeply understand context <sup>7</sup>                                                                    | ✗ Relying on the <b>perspectives of a few</b> staff or only the implementation team                                                                                                          |
| ✓ Expecting that context often <b>changes</b> , so you regularly make adjustments                                                                                                           | ✗ <b>Assuming</b> context is stable throughout an implementation effort, or that factors that were relevant for one implementation effort will be the same for another implementation effort |
| <b>2 What</b>                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| ✓ Ensuring the <b>core elements</b> of the evidence-based teaching practice are retained, while understanding the practice could look different across classrooms, subjects and year levels | ✗ <b>Changing the core elements</b> of the practice being implemented, as this may limit the effectiveness of the practice                                                                   |

| ✓ Tailoring to context means ...                                                                                                                                                                                                       | ✗ Tailoring to context <i>doesn't</i> mean ...                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3 How                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Implementing at a pace that suits your context</li> <li>✓ Moving between <b>stages</b> as needed (e.g., spending more time in a particular stage or returning to an earlier stage)</li> </ul> | ✗ Following the same pace as <b>other schools</b> in your network, even if this doesn't work for your school |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | ✗ Planning an implementation <b>schedule</b> and sticking to it, no matter what                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | ✗ Treating implementation as a <b>checklist of sequential steps</b>                                          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Identifying and acting on priority <b>enablers and barriers</b> that are unique to each implementation effort</li> </ul>                                                                      | ✗ <b>Assuming</b> you know what your key enablers and barriers are                                           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Selecting implementation <b>strategies</b> that are appropriate for your school and carrying them out feasibly (e.g., in terms of timing, resourcing and staff involved)</li> </ul>           | ✗ Offering the <b>same level of support</b> to every teacher, regardless of need                             |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | ✗ Sticking to the <b>exact same</b> implementation strategies for every implementation effort                |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ For implementation <b>outcomes</b>, regularly considering what's feasible and acceptable in your context, and tracking fidelity to help make decisions about pacing and support</li> </ul>    | ✗ <b>Assuming</b> an implementation effort is on track without actually checking this along the way          |

### Tip: Being responsive to changes over time

Context **changes** over time.<sup>8</sup> For example, there may be key staffing changes, school priorities may shift and staff perceptions of modelling and coaching may change.

Implementation teams need to be responsive to these changes. You can regularly consider context by, for example:

- protecting time in regular **implementation team meetings** to reflect on teacher perceptions of the practice and how teaching teams are using the practice. This will help your implementation team respond to changing needs early and decide whether implementation plans need to be adapted.
- revisiting **enablers and barriers** by running a staff session or survey at designated points to check for shifts
- updating your school **implementation plan** as and when plans change.



## School stories

This section shares the experiences of 3 Australian schools (all in the [Deliver stage of implementation](#)) that are each tailoring implementation processes to work towards their implementation goal.<sup>9</sup>

We've included schools in this later stage of implementation to provide more examples of how implementation can be tailored.



Aleisha Connellan  
Principal



Carla Riles  
Primary Learning  
Leader

### Our Lady of the Way School, Kabi Kabi and Turrbal land, Queensland



#### Where

Our Lady of the Way School is a **Catholic primary school** located north of Brisbane. Our school has **246 students**, with 7% identifying as First Nations and 18% who speak English as an additional language. Most of our school community is in the middle 2 quartiles for social and educational advantage.

Recently, we've built a stable leadership team with refined leadership structures and responsibilities. This has allowed us to develop a clear strategic direction for our school and carefully consider how our implementation goal will contribute to our whole-school focus of improving teaching practices and student outcomes in reading and spelling. **Half of our classroom teachers are new** to our school this year, and 3 are recent graduates. All of our 14 teachers will be involved with our implementation effort over time, but we'll work incrementally with specific groups (starting with Prep, Year 1, Year 5 and Year 5/6). Our leaders and teachers are generally **open to change** and there is a sense of excitement about implementing new evidence-based teaching practices, which has been amplified by the energy new staff have brought to our school.



#### What

Early in the Explore stage, our leaders identified that evidence-based teaching practices for literacy were not consistently evident across classrooms, lesson plans and unit documentation. We were finding that differences in teacher practice were leading to varied levels of student achievement in reading, writing and spelling. As a priority, our leaders and teachers identified that we needed to **teach reading and spelling more explicitly and systematically**, and move away from the heavy use of activities such as small group rotations and student-led learning.

Our implementation team engaged with research on explicit teaching and recognised that it can be broken down into **key practices** like establishing rules and learning routines, using learning intentions and success criteria and clear explanations, models and demonstrations. Within these practices, we worked with teachers to agree on what specific teaching techniques should look like and documented these in our modelling and coaching checklists. Tailoring these checklists with teachers also contributed to increased buy-in, as teachers reported feeling more ownership over the process.



## How

We're currently in the **Deliver** stage, having worked through the Explore and Prepare stages in Semester 2 last year. Key activities in those early stages included building our implementation team with 5 core members, drafting our implementation plan, supporting staff to feel invested in the implementation effort, and identifying coaches with the necessary skills, capabilities and practice expertise. As we had many new staff, we started our second year of implementation by **returning to our key focuses** from our first year of implementation. Repeating key professional learning cycles allowed existing staff to revisit prior learning and refine their practices, and new staff to build their knowledge and skills in key practices and teaching techniques.

We run an enablers and barriers activity 3 times a year with all participating staff and combine this with reflections on implementation outcomes. Since starting our implementation effort, we've seen a positive trend in the **acceptability** of explicit teaching. Most staff recognise using explicit teaching will improve their practice and lift student outcomes. However, early this year we identified some staff concerns about the **feasibility** of the implementation process and confusion about how staff could use the practice with greater **fidelity**. Staff were uncertain about what supports and resources may be available to help them, and some were concerned the implementation effort was about evaluating their performance.

In response, our implementation team has been working to **clearly communicate how we'll support staff**, including by improving professional learning cycles. Our coaches are focusing on building relationships and we've emphasised that modelling and coaching are designed to be collaborative and supportive. We're encouraging teachers to record themselves during lessons, review these recordings with their coaches to identify strengths and areas of improvement, and monitor their progress over time. Our implementation team also tracks outcomes like fidelity through routine classroom observations, feedback from coaches and teacher self-reports. So far, this data is showing that learning routines are being used more frequently and purposefully, with increased teacher confidence and self-efficacy.

### Our key takeaway

Taking a deliberate and structured approach to implementation has allowed us to adapt our use of implementation strategies and the pace of implementation to meet the changing needs of our school community and address factors like staff turnover.



Image: Our Lady of the Way School

## Tighes Hill Public School, Awabakal land, New South Wales



Andrew Hilton  
Principal



Jody Edwards  
Assistant Principal,  
Curriculum and Instruction



### Where

Tighes Hill Public School is a **government primary school** in Newcastle. Our school has **358 students**, including 6% who identify as First Nations, and a further 17% who speak English as an additional language. Nearly three-quarters of our students come from families in the top 2 quartiles for social and educational advantage.

All 30 of our teaching staff are part of our implementation effort. Most teachers are long-term staff, with over 10 years of experience working at our school. We welcomed a **new principal** prior to commencing implementation, who joined a stable leadership team of 3 Stage-level Assistant Principals and an Assistant Principal, Curriculum and Instruction (AP, C&I). Student outcomes were stable, but we saw the capacity to improve outcomes, particularly for students who experience difficulties or differences in processing information or who need extension.



### What

Before starting implementation, our AP, C&I had already been completing professional learning through our Department on cognitive load theory and explicit teaching. We also recognised a big shift in our state towards explicit teaching and were finding there was often a gap between current classroom practice and what quality explicit teaching looks like.

We chose to initially focus on improving **maths** instruction because our student academic data pointed to maths as a priority and we already had access to high-quality maths curriculum materials (making implementation more feasible).

We decided to start our implementation effort with **'review' practices** – i.e., regular, short and well-paced daily maths review activities that included routines for whole-class participation and frequent checks for understanding. We felt that starting with reviews – which sit in a contained segment of a lesson – would help teachers see that change was realistic and allow them to experience early success. We then began to focus on aspects of explicit teaching, like using **learning objectives and success criteria** for new learning.



## How

We're now entering our second year of implementation, and are focused on preparing and delivering new professional learning cycles in the **Deliver** stage. For some practice elements (including daily maths review activities), we're in the **Sustain** stage and use some refresher knowledge-building sessions and occasional coaching to ensure these stay part of classroom practice.

We ran an initial enablers and barriers activity with all our teaching staff during the Prepare stage. A **key enabler** was that most teachers felt positively about explicit teaching and accepted it is effective for introducing new learning, which gave us confidence to begin focusing more on the specifics of the practice. The activity raised some **specific barriers** that we were quickly able to address (e.g., ensuring every student could access a mini whiteboard, marker and eraser for daily reviews). It also highlighted some ways we could build on our existing culture of learning walks when using **classroom observations and coaching** in professional learning cycles.

Our **implementation team** has 9 members (including 4 coaches and staff from each stage level), and we meet monthly. When reviewing our existing approach to professional learning, we realised lots of time and resources were being spent on having whole-staff collaborative days once a term. We decided this time could be **repurposed** and used more effectively as weekly time allocated to implementation activities, and drafted our implementation plan to reflect this. This repurposed time has given our leaders and coaches more capacity to work regularly with teachers on planning support, modelling and coaching, and to check implementation progress.

Our implementation team monitors acceptability and fidelity through **routine classroom observations**, and by **reviewing lesson plans** and materials developed during collaborative planning support time. This allows us to make informed and timely decisions about next steps and ensure our implementation approach keeps up with our changing needs.

### Our key takeaway

Having our coaches and leaders step into classrooms to model practices has been really important. We haven't had much budget for modelling and coaching, but have still managed to do these by arranging our collaboration time more efficiently. Our staff are confident in how classroom observations can improve their practice and help us monitor our overall implementation effort.



Image: Tighes Hill Public School additional implementation team members, from left to right: Ella Bennett, Kerrie Armstrong, Rebecca Welsh and Lex McPherson.

## Maffra Secondary College, Gunaikurnai land, Victoria



Jennifer Roep  
Principal



Marie Clark  
Assistant Principal



### Where

Maffra Secondary College is a **regional school** about 220 km east of Melbourne. Our school has **558 students**, including 5% who identify as First Nations and a further 5% who speak English as an additional language. More than half of our students come from communities experiencing lower levels of social and educational advantage.

All 43 of our teaching staff are participating in our implementation effort. These staff are **highly experienced**, with most having at least 10 years' classroom experience and most having also experienced multiple changes across their careers relating to curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Before beginning our implementation effort, we were actively reviewing our instructional model, aligning it with the new Victorian Teaching and Learning model 2.0 (VTLM 2.0). We already had a **stable leadership team** and a clear school direction. However, we needed to spend more time as a leadership team understanding how we could truly embed and sustain evidence-based teaching practices from the VTLM 2.0. Since starting our implementation effort, our leadership team has maintained an active role in implementation and become a core part of our **implementation team** (which has 4 members). We now share a common goal for how we can improve practices at our school.



### What

When deciding which evidence-based teaching practice to implement, we looked at research and analysed student academic and behavioural data. We decided that focusing on **explicit teaching** would likely lead to improved student outcomes and learning experiences across our school. This also aligned with our new school strategic plan, and with broader guidance and support from our Department.

While we considered piloting implementation with a smaller group of teachers (e.g., one domain or year level), we decided it was important for all our students to experience consistency of routines and practices at a similar time. However, we recognised that developing **consistency of practice** across subject and year levels would require careful planning and coordination. We therefore focused on breaking explicit teaching into **manageable chunks** that could be introduced to staff one at a time. Each chunk includes specific teaching techniques that are applicable across all our subjects.



## How

Now in our second year of implementing explicit teaching, our school is usually in the **Deliver** stage. We still need to return to the **Prepare** stage before each new professional learning cycle, though, to make sure our implementation team builds our own practice expertise before introducing techniques to our wider staff.

So far, we've run one enablers and barriers activity with all staff. It highlighted that a strong leadership and staff culture, and **existing structures for professional learning** (including coaching), were some of our key enablers. Having a **statewide focus** on explicit teaching also supported our implementation focus. For barriers, the activity highlighted that some staff had **varying perceptions** about explicit teaching that didn't always align with the evidence. This prompted us to slow down to spend more time building a shared understanding of why we should focus on explicit teaching and to make sure staff could see explicit teaching in action.

We've used a number of implementation strategies, including professional learning cycles. While our existing coaching structure was a key enabler, we needed to plan how to use coaching more effectively as part of professional learning cycles. For example, we hadn't used modelling in previous implementation efforts. To incorporate modelling, we developed a bank of pre-recorded videos, scheduled time for staff to see explicit teaching modelled in lessons and arranged for some lesson observations at another school in our network. To ensure all staff could receive coaching, we built a **coaching team with 12 staff** representing different domains (including 2 lead coaches who are also on our implementation team). We then allocated teachers to coaches based on their curriculum expertise.

We've been tracking fidelity of explicit teaching through **student surveys** asking students to reflect on the practices used by their teachers, and classroom observations using **modelling and coaching checklists**. Our coaches regularly share their informal observations about how implementation is tracking with our implementation team, who use these observations to make decisions about whether more planning support, modelling or coaching is needed before moving to the next professional learning cycle.

### Our key takeaway

Sometimes we've needed to focus on less to achieve more. We've really made implementation a priority by aligning it with our broader school focus, and letting go of lower impact initiatives. As a school, we're now clear on how our implementation effort contributes to our strategic plan and what we want to achieve as a school community.



Image: Maffra Secondary College teacher Judd Newton.

## Endnotes

- 1 Nilsen, P., & Bernhardsson, S. (2019). Context matters in implementation science: A scoping review of determinant frameworks that describe contextual determinants for implementation outcomes. *BMC Health Services Research*, 19(1), Article 189. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4015-3>
- 2 Koh, G. A., & Askeil-Williams, H. (2021). Sustainable school-improvement in complex adaptive systems: A scoping review. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 281–314. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3246>
- 3 Abdo, M., Goh, E., Hateley-Browne, J., Wong, J., Bajaj, A., & Mildon, R. (2021). *What works for 'what works' centres: Learnings from system-level efforts to cultivate evidence informed practice*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and Australian Education Research Organisation. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/research/research-reports/what-works-what-works-centres>
- 4 Moore, D., Proctor, R., Benham-Clarke, S., Gains, H., Melendez-Torres, G. J., Axford, N., Rogers, M., Anderson, R., Hall, D., Hawkins, J., Berry, V., Forbes, C., & Lloyd, J. (2024). *Review of evidence on implementation in education*. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/implementation-in-education>
- 5 Damschroder, L. J., Aron, D. C., Keith, R. E., Kirsh, S. R., Alexander, J. A., & Lowery, J. C. (2009). Fostering implementation of health services research findings into practice: A consolidated framework for advancing implementation science. *Implementation Science*, 4, Article 50. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-4-50>
- 6 Moore, G., Campbell, M., Copeland, L., Craig, P., Movsisyan, A., Hoddinott, P., Littlecott, H., O'Cathain, A., Pfadenhauer, L., Rehfuss, E., Segrott, J., Hawe, P., Kee, F., Couturiaux, D., Hallingberg, B., & Evans, R. (2021). Adapting interventions to new contexts: The ADAPT guidance. *BMJ*, 374, Article 1679. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1679>
- 7 Damschroder et al., 2009
- 8 Moore et al., 2021
- 9 Student demographic data included in these school examples is based on 2025 data available from the [My School website](#).