

Guidance for principals

Supporting a deliberate and structured approach to implementation

September 2026

Principals play an important role in the successful implementation of evidence-based teaching practices. This practice resource provides implementation leadership tips from principals for principals that are backed by research.

About this practice resource

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 resource features advice from 3 principals who are using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation as part of the Learning Partner project:



Candice Morphet

Principal of Fern Bay Public School on Worimi land in the Port Stephens area.



Aleisha Connellan

Principal of Our Lady of the Way School – a Catholic primary school on Kabi Kabi and Turrbal land near Brisbane.



Nadene Harvey

Principal of Whitebridge High School on Awabakal land near Newcastle.

This resource shares tips from these principals alongside key ideas from implementation research. It highlights the most relevant information for principals, complementing the detailed [practical guidance](#) available for school implementation teams.

Key points

This practice resource outlines 8 practical tips for implementation leadership. These tips are grouped into 3 themes (Table 1).

Table 1: Themes and tips for implementation leadership

Theme	Tips
<u>The process</u> For successful implementation, principals are deliberate, structured and active in ‘how’ they lead the implementation process.	1. Understand and use key implementation concepts to build on existing school improvement efforts. 2. Go slow in the early stages to sustain change in the later stages. 3. Get involved in key implementation activities.
<u>The practice</u> For successful implementation, principals advocate for and are clear on ‘what’ is being implemented.	4. Communicate the benefits of the practice your school is implementing and how it aligns with school priorities. 5. Be clear and specific on the changes you want to see in classrooms.
<u>People and prioritisation</u> For successful implementation, principals empower staff to lead and make implementation a priority.	6. Establish an implementation team with defined roles. 7. Foster a culture of trust and collaboration. 8. Prioritise implementation by providing the time, resources and systems it needs.

In addition to these tips, [Appendix A](#) includes questions you can ask your implementation team to support successful implementation.

Tips for implementation leadership

School leadership is a key factor in effective implementation. Greater engagement from leaders in implementation is associated with stronger implementation outcomes.¹ When principals aren’t involved in implementation, staff may not value the practice and the practice is less likely to be implemented as intended.²

While implementation efforts are supported by principals’ existing school improvement expertise, they also require specific implementation leadership. This section outlines 8 practical tips for principals leading implementation efforts.

On the process

For successful implementation, principals are deliberate, structured and active in ‘how’ they lead implementation.



Tip 1: Understand and use key implementation concepts to build on existing school improvement efforts

When I first learnt about taking a deliberate and structured approach to implementation, we thought we were already doing a lot of it and were ready to jump in. But when we started working through it, we realised that to enable our school to be successful with implementation, we needed to explicitly teach implementation to our implementation team. We needed to break it down and think about what would enable our team to recognise the process we were trying to go through.

— Nadene Harvey, Principal, Whitebridge High School

When evidence-based teaching practices are implemented well, they lead to better outcomes for all students.³ AERO has drawn on key concepts from implementation science research to create a deliberate and structured approach to implementation (Figure 1).⁴

Figure 1: Visual representation of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation

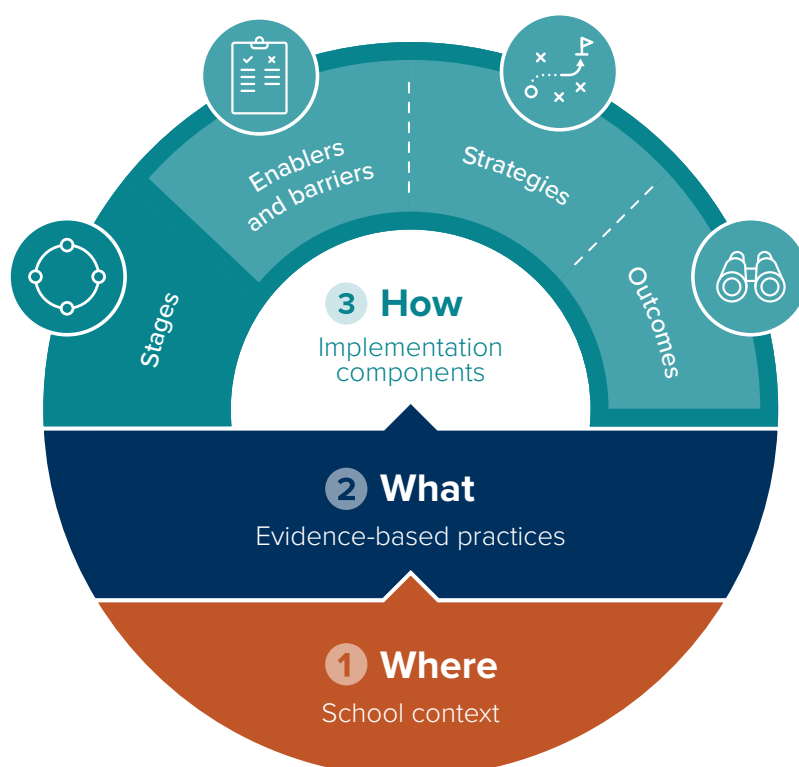


Table 2 outlines how you can use the components of a deliberate and structured approach to support implementation in an evidence-informed way.

Table 2: Components of a deliberate and structured approach and how they can be used

Component	You can guide implementation efforts in an evidence-informed way by ...
 Using a staged approach	Making sure implementation is appropriately paced over time rather than being treated as a ‘one-off’. Using stages will help you know exactly where your school is within the implementation process and support planning for what’s next.
 Addressing enablers and barriers	Going beyond naming common challenges with implementation (e.g., lack of time) and instead empower staff to: • systematically identify enablers and barriers • prioritise among these factors • respond to the most important ones to ‘clear the way’.
 Using key implementation strategies	Encouraging implementation teams to go beyond often-used, isolated strategies (like one-off professional learning sessions). Instead, teams can combine and sequence these strategies with other core implementation strategies (like developing an implementation plan and providing modelling and coaching).
 Monitoring implementation outcomes	Using indicators of implementation progress like acceptability (whether staff value the practice) and fidelity (whether teachers are using the practice as intended) alongside summative student outcomes. These implementation outcomes will help you to know in advance whether your implementation effort is likely to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes, and to make adjustments if needed.

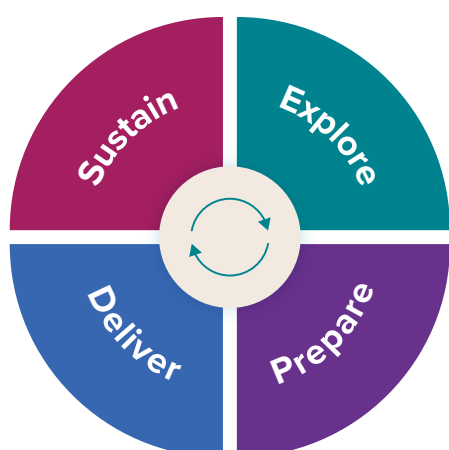
**Tip 2: Go slow early to sustain change later**

At first, we wanted to just jump in and implement the practices. But we realised how important it was to really break down our implementation plan and take a really structured approach if we were going to be successful.

— Nadene Harvey, Principal, Whitebridge High School

Implementation ideally takes place in stages. Each stage includes some key activities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Key activities in each implementation stage

**Explore**

A school implementation team identifies a specific challenge they want to address and an evidence-based teaching practice that can help to address it.

Prepare

The implementation team develops a detailed plan and begins to address priority barriers.

Deliver

Professional learning cycles (including knowledge-building sessions, planning support, modelling and coaching) are used to strengthen teachers' use of the practice in classrooms.

Sustain

The practice becomes embedded throughout the school.

Going slowly in the earlier stages of implementation will help lay the foundations for sustained change. For example, this could involve taking time to build a shared understanding of your implementation goal (what evidence-based teaching practice your school will implement, with whom and why). It could also involve working with your implementation team to develop an implementation plan (a working document that outlines how you will achieve your goal).

A common pitfall faced by principals when leading implementation of an evidence-based teaching practice is feeling pressure to move quickly to teacher professional learning and rushing through the Explore and Prepare stages to reach this point. In the short term, this may make it feel like you're progressing quickly. In the longer term, you may face unexpected barriers to implementation, staff may not be fully on board and it may be difficult to embed and sustain the practice.



Tip 3: Get involved in key implementation activities

It's really important that staff see you're 100% invested in the implementation plan and in the whole process. You need to make time to go to the knowledge-building sessions and get into classrooms. Make mistakes in front of your staff so they see that you're learning and you're part of the process too. Once your staff see that you're on board, it's a lot easier for them to come on board as well, because they know you value it.

— Candice Morphet, Principal, Fern Bay Public School

Implementation is more likely to be successful when principals are seen engaging with key implementation activities, even if they're unlikely to be leading day-to-day implementation work (e.g., by running professional learning cycles).

For example, you can directly support implementation activities by:

- helping to set a **clear goal** that's aligned with school priorities when your implementation team is developing an implementation plan (see Tip 4)
- attending some meetings of your **implementation team** to make decisions that require school leader approval (e.g., decisions about resourcing), keep up-to-date with the implementation effort, help troubleshoot any issues and generally show your support for the implementation team
- attending at least some of the **knowledge-building sessions** with teachers to build your understanding of the practice, set expectations and build staff buy-in
- engaging with staff on **enablers and barriers** and helping to address key barriers.

On the practice

For successful implementation, principals advocate for and are clear on what is being implemented and why it's being implemented.



Tip 4: Understand the benefits of the practice your school is implementing and communicate how it aligns with school priorities

You have to start with having your own clarity about the change you want to see by looking into the research yourself. Every teacher wants to see success in their classroom. Start by building your own understanding of why the practice matters for your students, and then communicate this to your staff. When staff can see how a new practice can work with their own students – that's when you get the buy-in.

— Candice Morphet, Principal, Fern Bay Public School

As key influencers of staff opinion, principals can motivate staff by sharing the rationale for the practice being implemented and highlighting the difference it will make for students.⁵ For example, you can communicate:

- the evidence underpinning and benefits of a new practice compared to current practice⁶
- how the practice is likely to address students' needs and help them succeed⁷
- how the practice aligns with school goals, current improvement initiatives and broader improvement plans
- how the practice is aligned with your vision for your students, staff and school.

By communicating the *why*, as well as the *what*, you can foster staff buy-in.



Tip 5: Be clear and specific on the changes you want to see in classrooms

We knew from our context that some of our pain points were around our routines and whole-school transitions. We had to ask: 'What is this going to look like? How are we going to get there?' We did quite a bit of work around this and what our expectations were.

One thing we did was to develop an engagement routines checklist of 'When we come into your classroom, this is what we're looking for.' The checklist is used during coaching sessions as well as leadership walkthroughs. We really built teacher clarity this way.

— Aleisha Connellan, Principal, Our Lady of the Way School

To support implementation, principals should know the practice elements being implemented and what these elements will look like in classrooms. Practice elements are the core features – or 'non-negotiables' – of an evidence-based teaching practice. For example, a core practice element of explicit instruction is monitoring progress, which includes techniques like frequently checking for understanding.

Being able to articulate the core practice elements of an evidence-based teaching practice is different from being able to *model* the practice. While it's beneficial if you can model a new practice, it's not essential. It's more important for you to understand and communicate what the new practice will look like in classrooms. This will allow you to:

- communicate clear expectations to staff
- monitor if staff are using the practices as intended
- highlight positive examples of the evidence-based teaching practice in use across your school
- know when to celebrate progress.⁸

On people and prioritising

For successful implementation, principals equip staff with the knowledge and resources they need to lead and make implementation a priority.



Tip 6: Establish an implementation team with defined roles

Your implementation team is the success or failure of the entire initiative. They're the people who are driving implementation. The choice of who we had in our implementation team was very strategic.

I have 77 classroom teachers in my school, so when I'm trying to drive an initiative where I want 77 teachers to buy in and implement new practices in the classroom, it has to be led by staff who teachers trust. You need staff who other teachers see as being experts in their work.

If I didn't have the right people in my implementation team, we'd be nowhere near as confident in terms of the progress we've made.

— Nadene Harvey, Principal, Whitebridge High School

For implementation efforts to be sustained, principals must enable staff to lead implementation on their behalf. An effective implementation team with the right membership, processes and accountabilities is a significant enabler for successful implementation.⁹

Each member of your implementation team should have a specific role and fulfill specific functions. Ensuring members have clear roles helps to protect implementation efforts from the challenges associated with staff turnover, helps to spread the workload associated with implementation and ensures staff know who to go to for questions and support.



Tip 7: Foster a culture of trust and collaboration

Don't underestimate the power of relationships in implementation. In a small school, implementation lives or dies on trust. You need your staff to be able to come to you and say 'Okay, I'm struggling here, can you help me?' If you don't have that, implementation is going to fall apart really quickly.

You have to take the time to listen to staff concerns, acknowledge workload, and value their professional judgement so that you can create the psychological safety needed for change to stick.

— Candice Morphet, Principal, Fern Bay Public School

Implementation relies on effective working relationships, collaboration and trust between those involved in implementation. This makes cultivating trust with staff a critical skill for principals.¹⁰

You can build trust with staff by helping them to feel safe, valued and supported,¹¹ and by equipping them to lead.¹² In the context of implementation, this means:

- being transparent about the reasoning behind implementing the evidence-based teaching practice and how it aligns with your school goals and vision (see [Tip 4](#))
- establishing an implementation team with a common purpose, shared norms and members with diverse perspectives on and experiences of implementation (see [Tip 6](#))
- in terms of professional learning cycles, emphasising that modelling and coaching rely on collaboration and trust^{13,14}
- valuing reflections from staff (e.g., on enablers and barriers) alongside other sources of data (see [Tip 1](#)).



Tip 8: Prioritise implementation by providing the time, resources and systems it needs

It's no use trying to do everything at once. We focused on one priority, and got it right. Explicit teaching is the practice we're implementing. We have an implementation plan which aligns with our Explicit Improvement Agenda, and we have our implementation team to support this work. Having that really clear roadmap and allowing the people doing the work the space to do it has been really important.

— Aleisha Connellan, Principal, Our Lady of the Way School

Principals are best placed to provide the time, resources and systems needed for implementation. For example, you have the authority to:

- prioritise the implementation effort in broader school improvement plans
- strategically allocate funding to free up resources for implementation (e.g., so that staff have time release to participate in modelling and coaching)
- support some timetable adjustments (e.g., to allow implementation team members to meet regularly)
- dedicate some staff meeting time to knowledge-building sessions
- support the collection and review of data to inform how the implementation effort is progressing.

Providing the necessary time, resources and systems may require creativity in reallocating resources or adjusting existing structures. It may also involve pruning competing initiatives – i.e., doing less of what's less likely to have impact. Ultimately, 'making room' for successful implementation will increase the likelihood that the teaching practice becomes embedded and improves outcomes for your students.

For more guidance

AERO has published a [collection of practical resources](#) for schools using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. This resource collection includes an interactive tool that outlines key activities and links to practical resources for each stage of implementation.

While aimed at school implementation teams, principals may find the following resources useful:



For an **overview** of a deliberate and structured approach, complete the 10-to-15-minute microcourse, [Achieving Lasting Change](#).



To reflect on your school's **preparedness to start** an implementation effort and then decide next steps, read the practice resource, [How Ready are We?](#)



To help set an **implementation goal** and identify core elements of the practice being implemented, read the practice guide, [Developing a School Implementation Plan](#).



To support leading implementation through a **school implementation team**, watch the 5-minute video, [Building and Operating an Effective Implementation Team at Mount Hutton Public School](#).

Appendix A: Questions to ask your implementation team

As a principal, you play an essential role in supporting and resourcing implementation in your school. You also empower staff to lead implementation through implementation teams, while keeping them accountable for successful implementation.

Table A1 lists questions you can ask your implementation team throughout your implementation effort, grouped by the components of a deliberate and structured approach.

Table A1: Questions to ask your implementation team

Component	Questions
 Using a staged approach	• What implementation stage are we currently in? • What implementation activities have we completed so far? What activities are upcoming? • Do we need to slow down? • How do we ultimately plan to sustain the use of the evidence-based teaching practice in our school?
 Addressing enablers and barriers	• What priority enablers and barriers have we identified? • How are we addressing priority barriers? What role would you like me to play in this? • How are we leveraging priority enablers? What role would you like me to play in this?
 Using key implementation strategies	• What implementation strategies are we using? • How would you like me to support these strategies? • As an implementation team: - How do you understand your roles and responsibilities for implementation? - Do you have enough protected time to focus on this implementation work? - How can I help you maintain focus on implementation when other priorities get in the way? • For our implementation plan: - Is our plan sufficiently detailed? - Are we regularly updating our plan?
 Monitoring implementation outcomes	• How are we monitoring implementation outcomes? • Which implementation outcomes are on track? • Which implementation outcomes need attention?

Endnotes

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