

Discussion paper

Implementing evidence-based practices in early childhood education and care – 2026

Insights from AERO's partnerships with services

September 2026



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.

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Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Owners and 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.

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full term
ACECQA	Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority
CFIR	Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research
ECEC	early childhood education and care
EOI	expression of interest
EYLF V2.0	Early Years Learning Framework V2.0
SISTER	School Implementation Strategies, Translating ERIC Resources
SMART	specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound

Taking a deliberate and structured approach to implementing evidence-based practice builds teacher and educator capability and supports improved outcomes for children. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is continuing to partner with services to understand implementation of evidence-based practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This is the second in a series of insights papers where we share what we are learning about promising approaches to implementation of evidence-based practices through the ECEC Learning Partner project.

Background

Since 2023, AERO has been working alongside ECEC services to increase our understanding of effective implementation of evidence-based practices in ECEC. This insights paper shares our learning from the 2025 iteration of the ECEC Learning Partner project. AERO partnered with services across New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia to learn about using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation to deepen the evidence-based practice of assessment for learning.

Drawing on data from monitoring and evaluation processes involving Implementation Coordinators (service leaders), head office support staff and AERO Implementation Consultants, this paper highlights the following insights:

- Stages of implementation matter:
 - Stages of implementation frame key priorities.
 - Stages of implementation provide a shared vocabulary.
 - Stages of implementation support pacing.
- Choice of implementation strategies matter:
 - Implementation planning provides and maintains direction.
 - Professional learning equips leaders and teams.
 - Regular consultation supports implementation momentum.
- Leadership matters for implementation:
 - Educational leadership is a way of being.
 - Collaborative leadership supports implementation progress.
 - Leadership external to the service can be an enabler.

This is also the first time AERO has worked with Exceeding-rated services. We offer some of our early insights into implementation for exceeding-rated services based on their involvement in the Learning Partner project. These insights offer evidence-informed perspectives for leaders seeking to strengthen the implementation of evidence-based practices in their services.

The ECEC Learning Partner project

The ECEC Learning Partner project started in 2023. Since then, it has had yearly iterations. This project is a partnership between AERO and a small cohort of ECEC services across Australia. To date, AERO has partnered with 36 services of different types, sizes, provider types and jurisdictions.

The ECEC Learning Partner project has 4 main objectives:

- learn about promising approaches to implementing evidence-based practices
- use an evidence-informed approach to provide support and guidance, with the aim of improving practice and ultimately demonstrating impact
- generate examples of what effective implementation might look like
- build credibility by working alongside teachers, educators and leaders to better understand and share insights into implementation.

This paper provides insights from the 2025 iteration of the project.

The evidence-based practice

Research conducted by AERO and the Queensland Brain Institute at the University of Queensland shows the [link between service quality and child development](#). The quality areas identified in the National Quality Standard (NQS) as most strongly associated with learning and development outcomes were:

- [Quality Area 1 – Educational Program and Practice](#)
- [Quality Area 3 – Physical Environment](#)
- [Quality Area 5 – Relationships with children](#) (Rankin et al., 2024).

Assessment for learning is the evidence-based practice of focus for the ECEC Learning Partner project. Assessment for learning is identified within Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice, Standard 1.3 Assessment and planning (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2026). By building educator and teacher capability in assessment for learning, it contributes to their ability to respond to children's learning and development, consequently improving outcomes for children.

The [Early Years Learning Framework V2.0](#) (EYLF V2.0) defines assessment for learning as:

when information about what children know, can do and understand is gathered and analysed to inform pedagogy and planning (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p. 25).

Assessment for learning is also highlighted within the EYLF V2.0 Principles and Practices and is identified as an integral component of the EYLF V2.0 Planning Cycle.

AERO's Implementation Consultants provided services with [AERO's Early Childhood Learning Trajectories](#) to support them in deepening their assessment for learning practice. These resources are designed to help teachers and educators understand how children learn and develop across 5 domains from birth to the year before full-time schooling:

- [executive functions](#)
- [language and communication](#)
- [social and emotional learning](#)
- [mathematical thinking](#)
- [physical development](#).

They also detail teaching and learning strategies teachers and educators can use to support children's learning and development across each of these domains.

Learning Partner services

We invited ECEC services to submit an expression of interest (EOI) to be considered for a place in the Learning Partner project in 2025. This EOI was shared across social media platforms and through stakeholder network groups.

Criteria for inclusion

To be included in the 2025 Learning Partner project, services needed to:

- be a long day care service
- be rated as 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' the National Quality Standard²
- have identified assessment as a focus area in their Quality Improvement Plan and/or service goal for the year
- nominate 2 Implementation Coordinators (service leaders) – typically the Educational Leader and a service leader who may be the Director, a teacher or an educator – to attend all AERO-led sessions and lead the implementation activities within the service
- not be due for assessment and rating for at least 12 months
- not have committed to any other significant external projects or competing priorities for the 10-month period of the Learning Partner project.

The final 2 criteria are based on our experiences with past cohorts. We have found that services that take on several projects or are preparing to undergo the assessment and rating process are less likely to complete the year or have difficulty in keeping up-to-date with the workload for the project.

1 You can find more information about the [assessment and quality rating process](#) on ACECQA's website.

2 Services with a 'Meeting' rating form the largest number of services in the sector at 70% in 2025. Twenty one per cent were rated at 'Exceeding' (ACECQA, 2025). This was the first cohort of services in the Learning Partner project with Exceeding ratings. We wanted to explore any potential differences in implementation support required and further learn about the appropriateness and feasibility of our approach to implementation.

Head office support

During the EOI, 2 different medium service providers expressed an interest in participating through a small cohort of services supported by head office support staff. This presented an opportunity for AERO to explore and learn about implementation across multiple services with the same provider and better understand how to facilitate implementation at scale. AERO requested that head office support staff participate alongside the Implementation Coordinators for all AERO-led sessions. They were also expected to support the participating services through their usual support structures. This allowed AERO to understand how involvement from head office support staff can contribute to implementation.

The partnering services

The final 2025 ECEC Learning Partner project cohort consisted of services both inside and outside metropolitan areas. This included 18 centre-based long day care services in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. Two services withdrew in the first quarter, and another 2 services withdrew in the fourth quarter due to operational changes. The project concluded with 14 services:

- 6 with an Exceeding rating
- 8 with a Meeting rating
- 3 belonging to a medium service provider in Western Australia
- 2 belonged to a medium service provider in Victoria.

A total of 3 head office support staff and 38 Implementation Coordinators were involved for the entire duration of the project.

AERO Implementation Consultants

We assigned each service an AERO Implementation Consultant. These consultants partnered with service leaders (and head office support staff) throughout 2025 and provided light-touch support in the first 6 months of 2026. Based on our learnings from the previous cohorts, AERO Implementation Consultants continued to work directly with 2 nominated Implementation Coordinators (service leaders) from each service, providing advice and guidance on using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. The AERO Implementation Consultants also engaged separately with head office support staff involved in the project where needed. This included sharing specific challenges faced by their service leaders or outstanding actions head office support staff needed to follow-up with their services.

Delivery approach

In 2025, the Learning Partner project transitioned to a largely online approach. This was because it was difficult to bring services together in person for professional learning and check-ins on a regular basis due to workforce issues. We were also interested in understanding the feasibility and acceptability of self-study modules to support future iterations of the project and provide suitable resources to the sector that would support implementation.

All AERO-led professional learning sessions and self-study modules were provided online. AERO Implementation Consultants also provided advice and guidance. This was mostly online through Microsoft Teams, with one to 2 in-person visits during the year. The online elements included:



6 facilitated online professional learning sessions in clusters of no more than 6 services using a ‘train the trainer’ model to equip Implementation Coordinators to plan, lead and monitor the implementation within their services



4 self-study professional learning modules providing flexibility for Implementation Coordinators to learn at their own pace and time about planning for, leading and monitoring implementation. Each module consisted of 3 to 4 parts (taking approximately 15 minutes each to complete, not including reflection time) so the content could be completed in parts or in a single sitting. An accompanying workbook facilitated reflections throughout the module. Implementation Coordinators and head office support staff could also choose to work through the modules together or individually.



6 one-to-one check-in consultations with each service to provide context-specific advice and support to Implementation Coordinators and discuss implementation progress

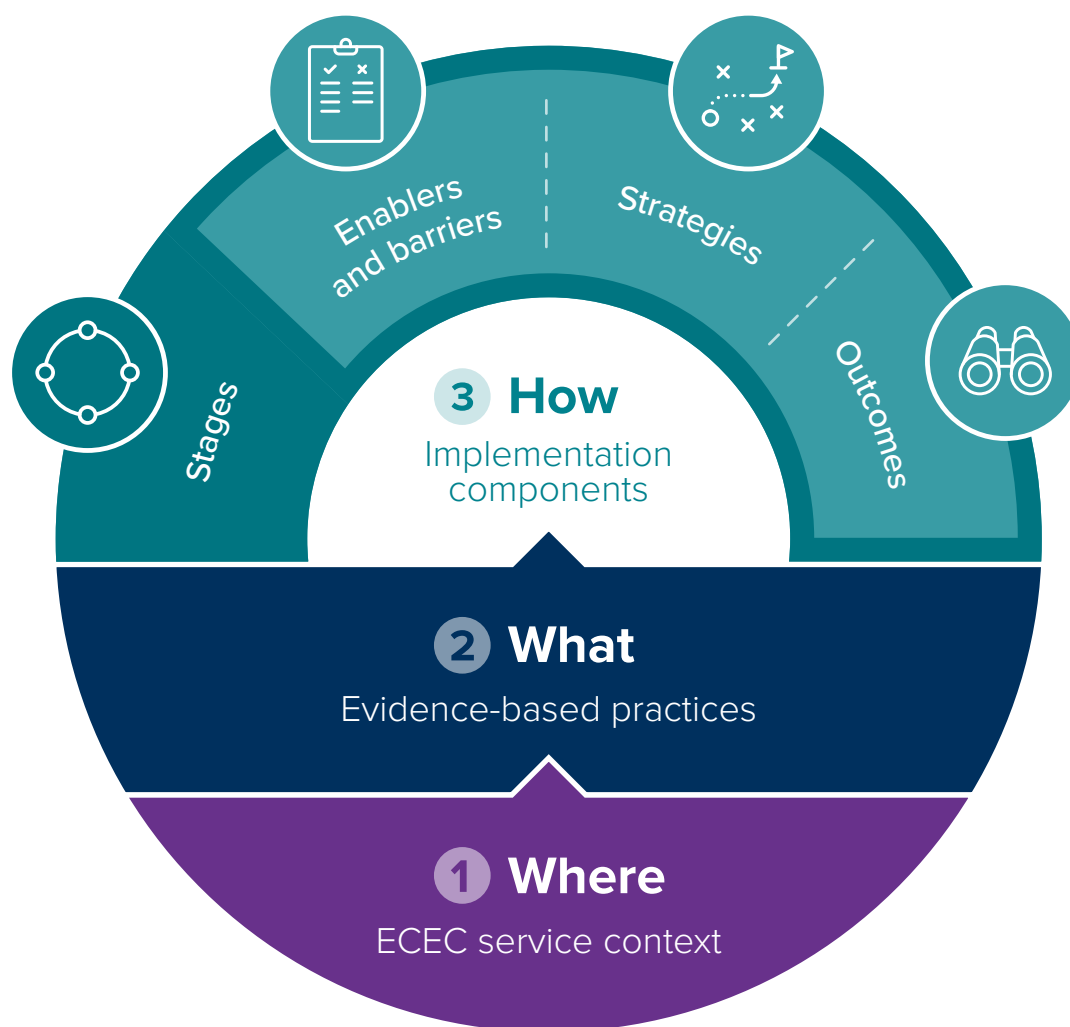


4 facilitated mini-cluster check-in sessions in clusters of no more than 3 services to learn about, reflect and share experiences about the implementation work in their services. Services from the same service provider or of similar profiles were grouped together, creating opportunities for Implementation Coordinators to network across services.

Insights from the 2025 ECEC Learning Partner project

AERO’s approach to implementation in the Learning Partner project is drawn from implementation research and frameworks. This includes careful consideration of how the approach might be delivered to support ECEC services in engaging in effective implementation (Soukakou et al., 2024). AERO has also used the experiences of participating services to adapt and strengthen the design of the Learning Partner project since it began in 2023.

At the beginning of 2025, participating services were brought together for an initial session that introduced Implementation Coordinators to AERO’s deliberate and structured approach to implementation. Implementation Coordinators were asked first and foremost to consider the ‘why’ – Why do they want their teams to engage in this implementation? They then learnt about the ‘where’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of implementation. (See [Figure 1](#), and refer to our [first insights paper](#) for more details).

Figure 1: AERO's approach to implementation**1****Tailor implementation of evidence-based practices to the specific ECEC setting**

What does our ECEC service context mean for the 'what' and 'how' of implementation?

Choose practices to implement that are backed by rigorous research

What is the rigour and relevance of the research underpinning the practices?

2**Engage in a structured and phased approach to implementation**

Where are we up to?

Identify and act on what's helping and hindering implementation

What's helping? What's getting in the way?

Select and use implementation strategies

What strategies will we use to support implementation success?

Establish and monitor implementation outcomes

Are we implementing successfully?

The ‘how’ of implementation is framed around 4 key components:

- stages of implementation
- enablers and barrier
- implementation strategies
- implementation outcomes.

Our monitoring and evaluation of previous cohorts indicated that ECEC services are unfamiliar with the ‘how’ of implementation. As a result, with each iteration of the project, we increased the number of times Implementation Coordinators revisited the key implementation components (the ‘how’). We also built in additional time to unpack these components within the professional learning sessions, modules and check-ins. In 2025, we revisited the components of implementation at least once per quarter during the check-ins, professional learning sessions and modules.

We conduct monitoring and evaluation throughout the life of the project. This included collecting data from Implementation Coordinators, head office staff and AERO’s Implementation Consultants through:

- reflections during check-in sessions
- professional learning sessions and follow-up tasks
- completion of modules and associated tasks
- participation in the mid- and end-year surveys
- participation in end-year interviews for Implementation Coordinators and head office support staff
- participation in mid- and end-year interviews for AERO Implementation Consultants.

We analysed the monitoring and evaluation data to identify key themes, patterns and areas for ongoing improvement. We used the findings to inform this insights paper.



In this insights paper, we have focused on the following insights:

- Stages of implementation matter:
 - Stages of implementation frame key priorities.
 - Stages of implementation provide a shared vocabulary.
 - Stages of implementation support pacing.
- Choice of implementation strategies matter:
 - Implementation planning provides and maintains direction.
 - Professional learning equips leaders and teams.
 - Regular consultation supports implementation momentum.
- Leadership matters for implementation:
 - Educational leadership is a way of being.
 - Collaborative leadership supports implementation progress.
 - Leadership external to the service can be an enabler.

With each insight, we have also provided some possible actions for services to consider how they can apply this learning when implementing an evidence-based practice.

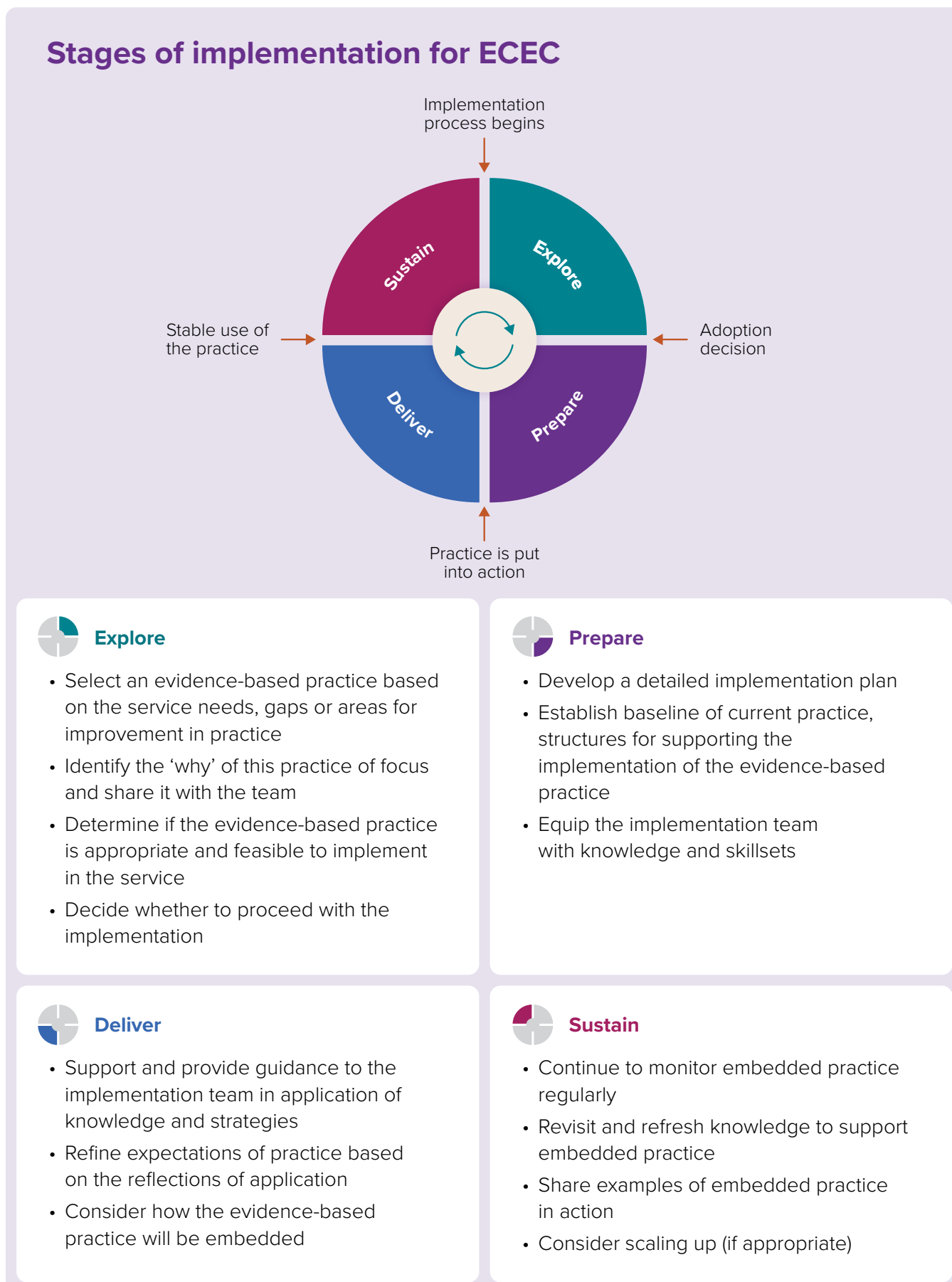
This is the first year we have included Exceeding services in the Learning Partner project. We finish by sharing a note on some insights into our engagement with Meeting- and Exceeding-rated services. We did find through our monitoring and evaluation efforts that Meeting-rated services self-reported greater overall knowledge growth.

Insight 1: Stages of implementation matter

A deliberate and structured approach to implementation involves using stages that build on each other (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017; Meyers et al., 2012; Saldana et al., 2012). AERO's approach to implementation draws on Evidence for Learning (E4L)'s 4 stages of implementation (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019):

- **Explore** – Services identify the evidence-based practice they would like to focus on based on their services' needs.
- **Prepare** – Services make plans for a structured implementation process and become equipped to work towards the goal identified within those plans.
- **Deliver** – The implementation team actions the evidence-based practice based on their identified goal.
- **Sustain** – The evidence-based practice becomes embedded in the service.

[Figure 2](#) summarises the key activities in each of these stages.

Figure 2: Stages of implementation for ECEC

Source: 'Figure 1' in [Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation](#) by E4L (2019, p. 8), licensed under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence. Adapted with permission, including recreating in AERO branding and adapting the activities.

These key activities provide a reference point when identifying the priorities and actions needed to steadily progress towards the next stage of implementation. However, the movement between stages is not always linear. There are instances where services can straddle 2 stages at the same time or go back and forth between stages. For example, a service might be at the Deliver stage, but once teachers and educators start putting the practice into action, they discover some gaps in learning. This might lead them back to the Prepare stage to further upskill to address these gaps in understanding. Deciding when to move between stages was done through regular monitoring, where AERO's Implementation Consultants supported Implementation Coordinators to reflect on what their team was doing and compared it to the key tasks for each stage.

At the end of 2025, most services were in the Deliver stage, aiming to reach the Sustain stage by the middle of 2026. Learning about the stages of implementation helped Implementation Coordinators understand and lead implementation in their services by enabling intent, articulation and pacing. These 3 key insights are explained further in the following sections.

Stages of implementation frame key priorities

The AERO-led professional learning sessions and modules were designed to include key activities related to each stage of implementation. This supported Implementation Coordinators in their engagement with teachers and educators at various times of the year.

In the Prepare stage, Implementation Coordinators began implementation planning. They projected how they expected implementation to progress through the stages during the year. Each quarter, Implementation Coordinators reviewed their projections and adjusted their plans according to progress made so far. Once they identified the stage of implementation their service was at, this determined their priorities and the services' actions for the next quarter.

Implementation Coordinators shared how this process helped them focus more on their intention for implementation:

It was good to have a process [stages of implementation] that forced us to see exactly where we were, where everyone was ... this made it more intentional.

— Implementation Coordinator, S4

The stages [of implementation] ... has given me the steps and is keeping me a bit more focused on what I'm meant to be doing. Because sometimes I need something to give me focus – because I can sometimes go off track ...

— Implementation Coordinator, S11

Using the stages of implementation to reflect on implementation progress also enabled Implementation Coordinators to understand the non-linear nature of the stages, as well as how their service could be in 2 stages at the same time. An Implementation Coordinator reflected:

The stages do not have a predetermined timeframe. It is possible to be in multiple stages at once as well as switch back and forth between stages.

— Implementation Coordinator, SP32

It took time for some Implementation Coordinators to understand the significance of the stages of implementation. At the end-year interview, a head office support staff member shared her reflections about the shift in her own understanding of the stages of implementation:

When we think about next year, we want to look back at the implementation stages and think about what that looks like moving forward ... at the beginning, it was just like ‘Oh, it’s hard to understand’, but then with each stage we would build on the knowledge that we already had and the activities in between helped us to solidify and consolidate some of that learning.

— Head Office Support, SS12

Stages of implementation provide a shared vocabulary

Comparing responses from the mid- and end-year surveys highlighted a shift in Implementation Coordinators’ understandings of the stages of implementation. This was evident in their explanations. Answers for the mid-year survey were brief, and most only listed the stages. When responding to the end-year survey, Implementation Coordinators not only listed the stages of implementation, but also provided descriptions of each stage based on their understandings of the key activities and their experiences working in those stages. Implementation Coordinators were also able to speak about, provide understanding of and share their service’s implementation progress during interviews.

The stages of implementation became the shared vocabulary between AERO Implementation Consultants and Implementation Coordinators when discussing implementation progress. They enabled them to discuss implementation progress without having to include lengthy descriptions of what was happening in their services. This also assisted AERO Implementation Consultants to decide on the relevant support based on the progress. An AERO Implementation Consultant reflected at the mid-year interview:

We are only at the halfway point [of the project] and the services are only in Prepare and moving out of Explore [stage of implementation] ... But I can see a build in confidence, and a build in understanding ...

— AERO Implementation Consultant, C3

During the project, some of the Implementation Coordinators were asked to share their implementation progress with other stakeholders, such as their area managers, head office pedagogical leads or board members of their organisations. Being able to speak about the implementation progress using the 4 stages of implementation gave Implementation Coordinators the ability to focus on the main activities to highlight and share. Towards the end of the year, Implementation Coordinators started to realise that the stages of implementation can not only be applied as a concept, but that the vocabulary can be used to describe, document and track progress. An Implementation Coordinator acknowledged this during the end-year interview:

I think we can apply this concept anywhere – just learning about implementation generally, like the Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain – I think that's regarding any kind of implementation, right? Anything that you might want to implement going forward, not just this concept, anything.

— Implementation Coordinator, S8

Stages of implementation support pacing

Implementation Coordinators shared how introducing changes in their service usually happened at a fast pace when they had led practice change previously. Services often describe 'jumping' into a change without using a deliberate and structured approach, anticipating that staff would be able to effect the change in a short period of time and keep moving forward.

However, using the stages of implementation encouraged Implementation Coordinators to slow down and pace the work. For example, one of the services that had projected in their plan to be in the Deliver stage by quarter 2, soon realised teachers and educators still needed time to deepen their knowledge and understandings of the Early Childhood Learning Trajectories. As a result, they adjusted their projected timelines and extended their time in the Prepare stage to give the team more time to familiarise themselves with the content before applying this knowledge to their practice. They focused on conducting professional learning with teachers and educators about the Early Childhood Learning Trajectories.

A head office support staff member reflected on the difference between her experiences during the Learning Partner project and previous attempts at practice change:

For me, I would have spent a short period of time in the Explore stage and even shorter period of time in the Prepare stage, and moved quickly into Deliver, with the Sustain coming later. I have come to understand the importance of each stage of implementation to achieve successful embedding of the practices and use of the tools, and the subsequent maintaining and sustaining of the work itself. Each stage is an important precursor to the next and supports longevity and sustainability.

— Head Office Support, SS49

Consistently, since the first cohort of services in 2023, we have heard comments about how slowly Implementation Coordinators felt the implementation activities were happening at the beginning of the partnership and how that understanding shifted towards the end. This was also described by the Implementation Coordinators in the 2025 cohort:

Initially, we were all just wanting to get straight into it and just go, go, go while the enthusiasm was up there. And I think now it's when you get to the end of the project and you realise – well, you've actually got to go through all of those steps to make it successful. Thinking that you don't have to rush through things.

— Implementation Coordinator, S5

One Implementation Coordinator reflected on how adopting a stage-based approach ensures implementation is paced so that the practice change has a better chance of 'sticking' over time:

You implement things and you go really well at it for a while and then it kind of drops off. So, I think it's that thing of – you take the time to implement it well and then it stands the test of time. That's probably the thing that stood out most to me.

— Implementation Coordinator, S10



Possible actions

- Take time to understand the stages of implementation and the key activities in each of those stages.
- Monitor your progress using the stages of implementation as a reference point and determine your priorities based on the stage.
- Be open to slowing down where necessary – circling back to a previous stage or remaining in the same stage for a longer period of time.
- Practise using the stages when sharing and discussing your implementation progress with colleagues, leadership and other stakeholders.

Insight 2: Choice of implementation strategies matter

Implementation strategies are another component in the ‘how’ of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. To support implementation success, AERO identified 6 key implementation strategies services can focus on. These strategies were adapted from the School Implementation Strategies, Translating ERIC Resources (SISTER) (Waltz et al., 2019). SISTER highlights 75 implementation strategies across 9 domains (e.g., adapt and tailor to context, train and educate stakeholders). Context matters and can drive implementation success (Weiland et al., 2026), so strategies were considered in terms of relevance to the ECEC service context.

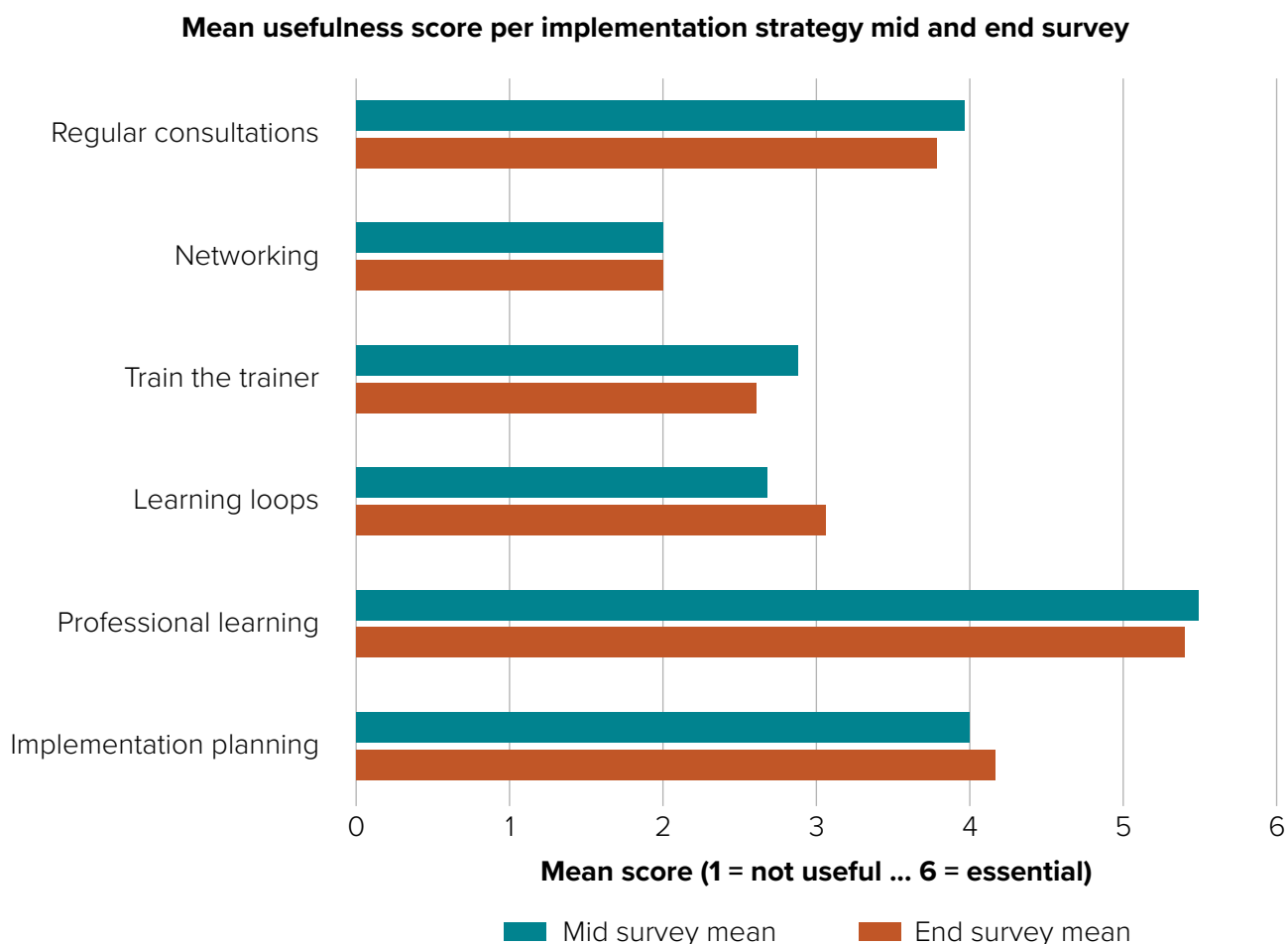
The 6 implementation strategies selected for the Learning Partner project are identified in Table 1.

Table 1: Implementation strategies used in the Learning Partner project

Implementation strategy	Description
Implementation planning	Developing a plan that consists of the: • implementation goal • implementation team • enablers and barriers • projection and tracking of implementation progress • implementation strategies.
Professional learning	A series of sessions and modules spanning the course of the year with content knowledge about the evidence-based practice, key components of implementation and the skills needed lead and support implementation in the service.
Regular consultations	Monthly conversations either with each service or in smaller groups (2 to 3 services) to provide tailored implementation support relevant to each service’s unique context, implementation focus and progress.
Train the trainer	The professional learning sessions incorporate opportunities to experience, practise and acquire the needed knowledge and understandings prior to conducting the activities with team.
Learning loops	The reflective process after conducting implementation activities with the team to harvest the key learnings and insights about self, the group and individuals in the group. These learnings and insights serve to inform planning and approaching future implementation activities and support.
Networking	Platforms created during professional learning sessions and check-ins to hear from and share perspectives and reflections about leading, support and facilitating implementation with others leading implementation from different contexts.

Figure 3 shows implementation strategy usefulness ranked by Implementation Coordinators at both mid- and end-year points in the survey.

Figure 3: Implementation strategy usefulness



Regular consultations, professional learning and implementation planning rated the highest to support implementation at both mid- and end-year for the Learning Partner project. These 3 strategies are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Implementation planning provides and maintains direction

The strategy of implementation planning was ranked as one of the top 3 useful strategies both at the mid- and end-year survey by Implementation Coordinators (Figure 3). When comparing the mid- and end-year survey results for implementation planning, there was a slight change in the ranking. The strategy was ranked as more important than regular consultations (second in usefulness). Implementation Coordinators shifted their view on the importance of implementation planning over time as they came to understand how planning supported implementation success.

Figure 4: Professional conversation cycle (PAP)

Source: Figure 2 in *Guide to Effective Professional Development in Early Childhood Education* by E4L. (2023, p. 16). Adapted with permission, including condensing steps and adapting requirements in each step.

Implementation planning required Implementation Coordinators to develop a detailed implementation plan. These consisted of:

- goals
- the staff involved
- enablers and barriers
- strategies that will be used.

They served as a guide for understanding, planning and monitoring implementation work.

AERO Implementation Consultants spent the first 2 months of the partnership with Implementation Coordinators focusing on implementation planning. Determining the goal for implementing the evidence-based practice of assessment for learning took time as it required both Implementation Coordinators to agree and ensure the goal was specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound (SMART). Often, Implementation Coordinators held different roles in the service and were coming from different perspectives about what they wanted the team to achieve:

It has been a model to work together – She (the other nominated Implementation Coordinator) has her own goals. My goal is more educator-focused. Her goal is more operational ... However, we are working together so we [need to] have the same [implementation] goals.

— Implementation Coordinator, S2

To support Implementation Coordinators in identifying a goal(s) for their service, Implementation Consultants asked them to consider why the deepening of assessment for learning would make a difference in their service. Taking into consideration their team's current practices and understandings, they then decided on the aspect of assessment for learning (written, verbal, processes, confidence) to focus on using one of the Early Childhood Learning Trajectories' domains of learning (executive functions, social and emotional learning, language and communication, mathematical thinking, and physical development). Even though assessment for learning is already familiar to ECEC services, the national snapshot shows assessment as an area for improvement (ACECQA, 2025).

The process of goal setting challenged the Implementation Coordinators to look critically at their existing practices:

I think I'm just being a bit more focused and intentional. We do a really great job but I know how much of our time and attention is focused on the social, emotional and language. So just actually stepping back and going, 'That's super important, of course it is, but what else? Let's have a look at how we're doing working in this (assessment for learning) space.'

— Implementation Coordinator, S4

Implementation planning was new for most of the Implementation Coordinators. A head office support staff member shared their previous experiences with implementation and how adopting a more structured approach to planning would benefit her ways of working towards practice change:

I generally work in a much more free-flowing, ad hoc and adaptable way so this structured approach to implementation was a different way of working for me. Whilst, admittedly, I found it challenging at first, I can really see the benefits in being more organised and purposeful. This will help us achieve our expected goals and keep us on track for success – albeit a little slower than we hoped ...

— Head Office Support, SS4

Professional learning equips leaders and teams

Research shows that in-service professional learning promotes high-quality pedagogical practices when it is well organised, targeted, has clear goals and provides people with support to try out and practise the skills needed for new ways of working (Muir et al., 2025; Savage et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). The professional learning offered throughout the Learning Partner project was structured, iterative, offered throughout the year and supported through cycles of reflection, coaching and time for rehearsal.

When we started the Learning Partner project in 2023, AERO led professional learning sessions for the service leaders and their teams concurrently. Through our monitoring and evaluation, we realised professional learning needs to be targeted differently for the Implementation Coordinator than the broader staff team. We shifted our approach to focus the AERO-led sessions on equipping Implementation Coordinators to lead professional learning sessions with their own teams.

These sessions focus on the key components of implementation and skillsets to facilitate and support implementation, together with knowledge about the evidence-based practice. The professional learning sessions Implementation Coordinators were required to lead with their teams were mainly focused on the evidence-based practice.

In the 2025 iteration of the Learning Partner project, professional learning occurred in 2 different contexts:

- AERO-led professional learning for Implementation Coordinators
- Implementation Coordinators-led professional learning for service teams.

Professional learning featured strongly throughout the partnership (occurring at least once a month). This is potentially why Implementation Coordinators consistently ranked professional learning as the most useful strategy in both the mid-and end-of-year survey ([Figure 3](#)).

AERO-led professional learning for Implementation Coordinators

Implementation Coordinators were asked to share existing professional learning practices in their service to help AERO Implementation Consultants better understand their unique service contexts. Implementation Coordinators generally spoke about professional learning for their staff teams and making operational accommodations to ensure their teams could attend but said little about professional learning for themselves. Participation in the Learning Partner project was not only about uplifting the staff teams' practice, but also a form of professional learning for the Implementation Coordinators:

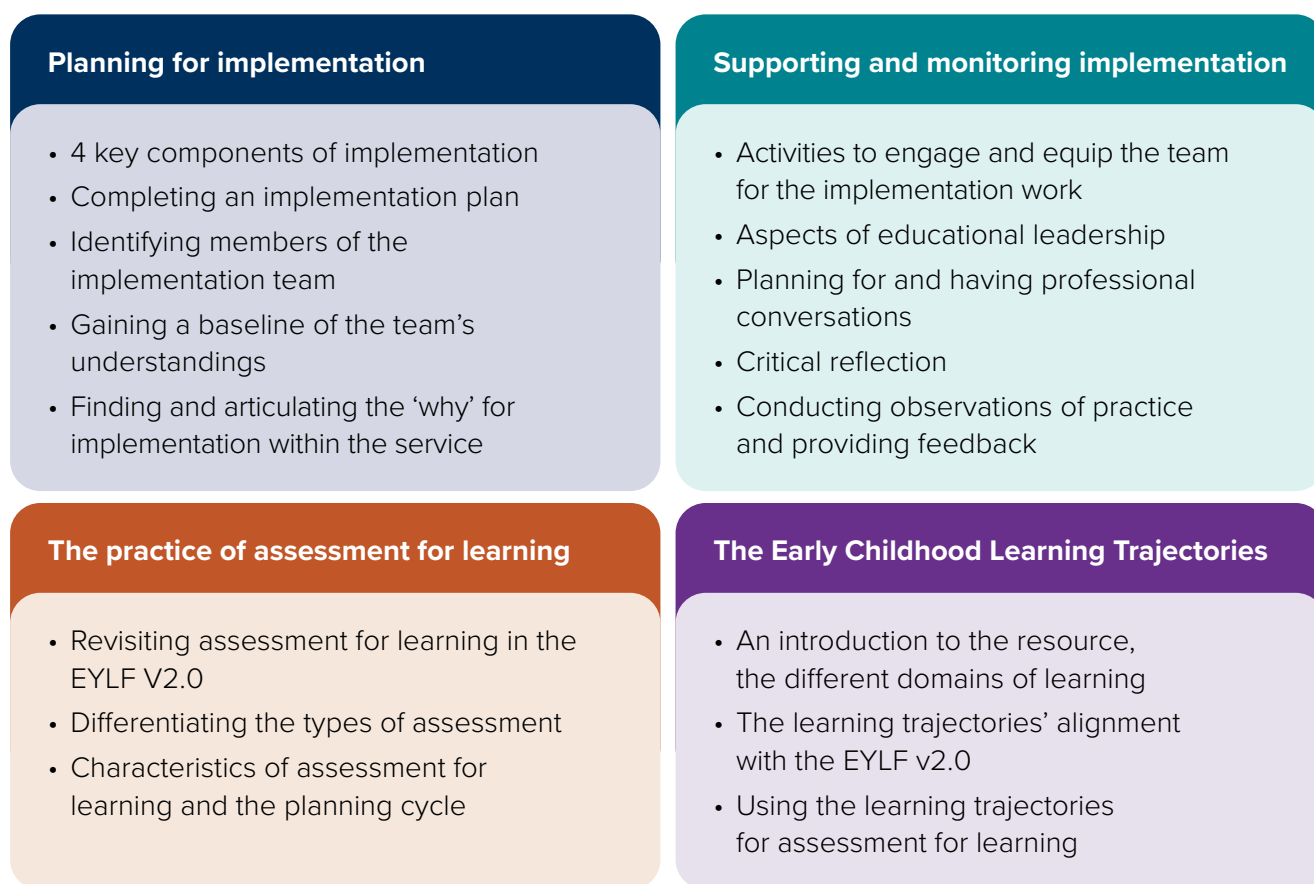
Sometimes they [Implementation Coordinators] do realise that they are leaders, but they sometimes do everything for the team, and they forget about their own growth and their own learning. So those tasks are providing them that opportunity to go back and then think through their leadership as well – how they support their teams.

— AERO Implementation Consultant, C1

The experience to go through [the assigned tasks] with AERO during the sessions ... empowers (and) builds my professional development, to develop our skills as leaders.

— Implementation Coordinator, S2

AERO-led professional learning for Implementation Coordinators was provided as facilitated online sessions and self-study modules. [Figure 5](#) summaries the content these sessions and self-study modules covered.

Figure 5: AERO-led professional learning session and module content

This professional learning ensured Implementation Coordinators were not only equipped with the needed knowledge and frameworks, but also the skillsets and resources required to plan for, support, facilitate and monitor implementation in their services.

The AERO-led online professional learning sessions and self-study modules had a train the trainer component where Implementation Coordinators received content knowledge and engaged in activities that strengthened their knowledge about the practice, the learning trajectories and their leadership skills. Frequently, these activities were given to Implementation Coordinators as follow-up tasks – or activities they would conduct with their teams to equip them to enact the practice change in their classrooms:

They [Implementation Coordinators] actually really need to be deeply across the learning trajectories because it is a train the trainer model and they are then responsible for working with their teams to get them to that same level of knowledge. So, it's deepening their practice to go in and really understand documents before they then try and support their team's understandings – not just 'Here, you need to read this and do this.'

— Implementation Consultant, C3

I felt the professional learning was useful to show ways to support us in sharing [the content knowledge] with our teams.

— Implementation Coordinator, SS38

Implementation Coordinators-led professional learning for service teams

Implementation Coordinators conducted the follow-up task activities with their teams after each professional learning session. These professional learning activities were aimed at unpacking and deepening their team's knowledge and understanding of assessment for learning and the learning trajectories. Even though Implementation Coordinators did not have to develop the content or resources for these activities, they still had to adapt, prepare, organise and plan for the context these activities would be carried out in.

After conducting these professional learning activities with their teams, Implementation Coordinators were expected to engage in learning loops. This involved reflecting on their team's response and engagement with the content shared during the session, as well as the insights it provided them about their team's understandings and potential readiness to incorporate their learning into existing practices. This also presented an opportunity for Implementation Coordinators to gain awareness of their own facilitation and organisation of the activities, identifying strategies that worked or needed to be adjusted.

Learning loops were introduced to Implementation Coordinators as the process of planning, doing and reviewing. The intent of learning loops was to ensure the activities (what) and how they have been conducting them with their teams are working – or attaining the best outcome possible (Bélanger et al., 2025). Implementation Coordinators were provided with prompting questions to support their reflections on the entire 'plan, do, review' process. While a few commented on the repetitive nature of these learning loops, others found it to be a valuable strategy:

We realised that a lot of the time we don't actually close the circle or close the loop on something. So, we have a discussion, we talk about change, we don't come back and follow it up. And it's forced through the activities now – so you have to implement something and then you have to reflect on it.

— Implementation Coordinator, S3

While we had identified 'train the trainer' and 'learning loops' as separate implementation strategies to professional learning ([Figure 3](#)), they were intricately tied into the professional learning sessions.

Regular consultations support implementation momentum

In the ECEC context, 'consultations' are more commonly known as 'professional conversations'. These types of conversations are an expected part of the educational leadership role³ (ACECQA, 2026b) and are also identified in the NQS Quality Area 7 – Governance and leadership to support teachers and educators' professional growth.

Regular consultations occurred in 3 different contexts during the Learning Partner project:

- led by AERO
- among Implementation Coordinators from the same service
- led by Implementation Coordinators.

³ The Educational Leader is a legislated role responsible for continuous improvement in educational programs, pedagogy and practice (ACECQA, 2026b).

Data from monitoring and evaluation showed that regular consultations supported implementation momentum. Implementation literature identifies regular consultations as key to strengthening fidelity (Cramer et al., 2023). Participants also identified regular consultations as one of the top 3 strategies for supporting implementation at both the mid- and end-year surveys ([Figure 3](#)).

Regular consultations led by AERO

AERO Implementation Consultants conducted AERO-led regular consultations with Implementation Coordinators. They happened as online one-to-one check-ins (each service), online mini-cluster check-ins (up to 3 services, with services from the same service provider grouped together) and in-person visits (each service). Each of these check-ins had agenda items where the AERO Implementation Consultant would engage with the Implementation Coordinators in conversations about:

- implementation progress in their services,
- reflections on their learnings, activities and conversations conducted with their implementation team
- successes and challenges faced.

An Implementation Coordinator reflected on the benefit of having external support for implementation:

The one on ones with [AERO Implementation Consultant] where we could actually talk about our experience and our challenges and our questions – How do we do that or why? Having that support, having that coaching ourselves – yes, we’re busy like everybody, but we had the commitment to do it. But we needed that outside support to get it done.

— Implementation Coordinator, S9

The online mini-cluster check-ins provided a platform for Implementation Coordinators to share and hear about implementation experiences from Implementation Coordinators at other services:

The opportunities that we had together with other services – that was really helpful. The service didn’t feel like they were working in isolation. Being part of the professional learning with others across Australia – when we’re put in the breakout rooms, you could hear how things were going for other people. When you’re with others you’re like, ‘Oh, you’ve had the similar challenge and this is something you tried’. We’re learning from other services.

— Head Office Support, SS12

All of the regular AERO-led check-ins in 2025 were held online. However, we recognise the significant difference in-person visits and engagements can make to establishing relationships with Implementation Coordinators based on our previous cohorts. This was reaffirmed with this cohort. AERO Implementation Consultants made one to two visits to each service throughout the year.

Regular consultations between Implementation Coordinators from the same service

Implementation Coordinators were expected to engage in regular conversations together about the implementation process in their services. This included a joint response or collective work. We saw this regular touchpoint between the Implementation Coordinators not only as opportunities for collaboration, but critical in contributing to implementation progress. The regularity of these conversations varied depending on existing operating structures of the service, as well as the roles and responsibilities for each Implementation Coordinator. Services with head office support reported that their support staff member was also involved in some of their regular conversations.

Regular consultations led by Implementation Coordinators

Some services had more formal structures in place for facilitating regular conversations with members of their implementation team. Other services had to consider how to create space and find time for these regular conversations:

We do a lot through staff meetings with those activities, those one-on-one conversations. We've got trainees and having those conversations with the educators as well – where they're at and just checking-in all the time and say, 'How are you going?' because everyone always needs their feedback and that's sort of how we all progress moving forward.

— Implementation Coordinator, S7

Implementation Coordinators' experience of holding regular consultation with members of their implementation team varied depending on their role in their service. AERO Implementation Consultants introduced them to a frame for these professional conversations to ensure they were focused and productive ([Figure 4](#)).

For Implementation Coordinators who were new to engaging in these conversations with their teams, this expectation not only challenged them but also gave them newfound insights into the value of such conversations:

Those activities were personally challenging, pushing me outside my comfort zone. I'm not the Educational Leader, so I'm not often having formal professional conversations, but I'm really glad I did that. And that was great. That's something I've done informally, but certainly probably saw the benefit of perhaps being more prepared.

— Implementation Coordinator, S4

Implementation Coordinators who were familiar with leading professional conversations also found the frame beneficial for ensuring these conversations stayed focused on implementation. It shifted the conversations, encouraging shared accountability and active contribution from members of the implementation team:

I think those conversations – even though I did have conversations [previously], those templates kept me more focused on what I'm meant to be doing. Making the educators more responsible. Okay, they can actually share information – they just know it isn't just me telling them what to do. It was making them also a bit more responsible ... rather than me telling them what to do.

— Implementation Coordinator, S11

Implementation Coordinators experienced the benefits of making a shift from ad hoc, casual, professional conversations to more formalised and planned conversations. An Implementation Coordinator shared their observations on this change:

Staff are becoming more articulate in having conversations about their practice and more confident. I can hear staff becoming more confident in even having those conversations about that [implementation] and their practice.

— Implementation Coordinator, S9



Possible actions

- Set aside time for implementation planning before embarking on practice change. Start with your 'why', set goals and identify enablers and barriers and the strategies you will use to progress and monitor implementation.
- Plan for and facilitate professional learning opportunities specifically for service leaders and service leadership.
- Plan for regular opportunities to engage your team and/or each other in professional conversations to support and progress practice change. This can be done one to one, in small groups or during staff meetings. Make sure these regular opportunities are feasible and sustainable over time. For example, while well intentioned, planning to have weekly one to ones for a staff team of 20 is not feasible or sustainable.

Insight 3: Leadership matters for implementation

One thread that remained consistent through our monitoring and evaluation efforts was that leadership has an impact on the success of implementation. Implementation literature highlights the importance of leadership – both as individuals and collectively – in setting the climate for the service team’s readiness for involvement in an implementation process and their willingness and openness to change (Bleses et al., 2023; Ciren et al., 2023). It also highlights the relationship between leadership styles and successful implementation outcomes (Rachmian et al., 2025). This reinforces the learnings and experiences outlined in our first insights paper, as well as a consideration in the delivery approach identified for this iteration of the Learning Partner project.

Leadership is a key enabler for implementation. Ensuring buy-in from Implementation Coordinators is critical as they are responsible for setting the tone and leading implementation work.

Educational leadership is a way of being

Under the NQF, there is a requirement for the role of Educational Leader (ACECQA, 2026a), however insights in this paper identified that educational leadership extends beyond the designated role. Implementation Coordinators consisted of both educational leaders and service leaders (e.g., directors, coordinators). Most service leaders identified that their daily responsibilities were generally administrative and management based.

When asked to reflect on their roles and responsibilities in the service using the organisational tasks listed during the professional learning sessions, all Implementation Coordinators agreed they had a role in educational leadership and, therefore, practice change. They could now see that this was not solely the responsibility of the Educational Leader, but rather, a part of leadership where leaders’ values, engagements with others and decision-making about how the staff team is led will have an impact on practice.

The Learning Partner project draws on [ACECQA’s Educational Leader resource](#) (ACECQA, 2026b). When services move into the Deliver stage, the content of the AERO-led professional learning sessions shifts to the organisational tasks listed in the Educational Leader resource that contribute to facilitating and supporting implementation. This included looking closer at the following organisational tasks:

- *observing* educators’ and teachers’ practice to monitor implementation
- *collaborating* with other service leaders to plan for, progress and support implementation
- *mentoring and/or supporting* the team in the implementation of evidence-based practices
- *planning* for ways to engage and equip the team in implementing evidence-based practices (ACECQA, 2026b).

An Implementation Coordinator (who was not an Educational Leader) recalled the professional learning content that focused on educational leadership that led her to rethink how she enacted aspects of educational leadership in her role:

There was this whole module on that – everybody has a role in educational leadership and you're all educational leaders – and that transformed a lot of people's thinking. That it goes beyond just having a specific role [to] what is your part in it and how are you spending time doing different things. You've seen practice change because the way they are thinking has changed.

— Implementation Coordinator, S3

Implementation Coordinators experienced the importance of educational leadership when engaging with the 4 key components of implementation. Understanding the importance of enacting educational leadership supported the steady movement through the stages:

It became more around building leadership practices. Because implementation has to come from the leaders and the strategies that leaders do, it would be pretty much what we've been focusing on for quite a long time now – how we can observe, how we can mentor, how we are able to transfer the knowledge to a practical manner.

—Implementation Coordinator, S6

Collaborative leadership supports implementation progress

Collaborative leadership is a critical element for practice change (Ciren et al., 2023; Gibbs, 2025). Learning how to leverage the collaboration between leaders can often make the 'load' of implementation more sustainable (Harju, 2023). Part of AERO Implementation Consultants' role was to facilitate leadership collaboration between Implementation Coordinators from each service, drawing on their strengths and existing responsibilities and structures. As mentioned previously, Implementation Coordinators held different roles in the service – for example, they may be service directors, educational leaders, room leaders, some are in-ratio, others are not. This meant that the implementation support provided to the team and the ongoing engagements with the team led by the Implementation Coordinators varied. An Implementation Coordinator was reminded to lean into her fellow Implementation Coordinator in the service instead of just assuming all the responsibilities for supporting the implementation team on her own:

... feedback from the consultant ... it's not a one-person job – it's collaborative. She's like, 'If you're doing the informal (conversations) ones, just make sure there's someone doing the formal ones.' So yeah, it was also self-reflection as a person as well – you can have the tendency to be like, 'Oh, I have to do this and that.' But, actually, no, it's not all on one person.

— Implementation Coordinator, S8

Leadership external to the service can be an enabler

The head office support staff who joined this iteration of the Learning Partner project held different roles, but all supported a group of services in their pedagogical practices. Despite having access to a head office support staff member, Implementation Coordinators still held the main responsibility for ensuring practices were maintained and improved in services. These head office support staff were additional support rather than the face of practice change.

In this iteration of the project, head office support staff had the opportunity to observe and learn alongside the service leaders they were supporting. They were also expected to be a part of all the professional learning sessions and check-ins. An AERO Implementation Consultant commented on the advantage of services having an additional layer of support for implementation:

Having that additional person is something that's definitely played a part in being able to continue the progression. I mean there's always going to be a challenge in terms of the consistency of completion of tasks by leaders because that can be varied and not always on track ...

—Implementation Consultant, C2

During the project, these head office support staff followed up on the implementation progress or content knowledge with the Implementation Coordinators as part of their existing support to their services. A head office support staff member reflected on her observations of how the Implementation Coordinators were empowered to take the lead in practice change after the partnership concluded:

It's been valuable for me watching the centre director and the educational leader in their growth – and in their way of thinking about planning for next year, they're really using the implementation process and thinking about how they support their service next year. That leadership growth is so important – these are the leaders of the service. That's been big.

— Head Office Support, SS12



Possible actions

- Reflect on service leaders' existing roles and responsibilities to consider how the organisational tasks of educational leadership are held by individuals, how that can be leveraged and identify areas for capability building.
- Engage, involve or nominate multiple individuals (leaders) when planning for implementation (practice change) and draw on individuals' strengths to progress and facilitate implementation.
- Consider how implementation support can be integrated into existing structures provided to services by head office support staff.

Early insights into Meeting and Exceeding services and implementation

This iteration of the Learning Partner project was the first time we invited Exceeding-rated services to participate. Prior to this, we wanted to understand a deliberate and structured approach to implementation with cohorts of services that all held Meeting ratings. We held the assumptions that they would all have similar foundational knowledge and be starting from similar capability, which would assist us in building the program over time.

In the early stages of this iteration of the project, we noted some broad differences between the 2025 cohort of services rated Meeting and Exceeding when we gathered information from Implementation Coordinators about their service's context that would facilitate the implementation process:

- In Exceeding services, the majority of Implementation Coordinators were full-time out-of-ratio (89% of the cohort), compared to Meeting services (40% of the cohort).
- The likelihood of existing structures or platforms for regular professional conversations and professional learning already existing is higher in Exceeding services compared to Meeting services.

Implementation Coordinators from Exceeding services entered the project with higher self-reported, baseline knowledge of and skills in using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. Most were already at moderately high. Implementation Coordinators from Meeting services showed more variation in starting points. By the end-year survey, Implementation Coordinators from Meeting services showed greater overall self-reported knowledge growth, with several moving from average to moderately high or higher, though 3 showed no movement. We did not observe this pattern with the Exceeding-rated services. This could suggest the project's structured implementation support had greatest impact for services at earlier stages of practice development, while Exceeding-rated services largely consolidated an existing strong knowledge base rather than building new knowledge from a lower base.



Summary and what's next for ECEC implementation at AERO

When working with a cohort of ECEC services in 2025 to deepen the evidence-based practice assessment for learning, AERO introduced service leaders to AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation. This paper has provided the following insights from this work:

- Stages of implementation matter:
 - Stages of implementation frame key priorities.
 - Stages of implementation provide a shared vocabulary.
 - Stages of implementation support pacing.
- Choice of implementation strategies matter:
 - Implementation planning provides and maintains direction.
 - Professional learning equips leaders and teams.
 - Regular consultations support implementation momentum.
- Leadership matters for implementation:
 - Educational leadership is a way of being.
 - Collaborative leadership supports implementation progress.
 - Leadership external to the service can be an enabler.

These insights showed the importance of the stages of implementation, implementation strategies and leadership when implementing practice change. Through the Learning Partner project, service leaders learnt and experienced the process of using a planned and deliberate approach to implementation that they can apply to future implementation. Two Implementation Coordinators reflected:

I am learning to use a structured approach to implement it with a new group of educators and teachers ... noticing and learning the benefits of this approach, which I can say, it will support my leadership skills as Educational Leader in the near future.

— Implementation Coordinator, SS30

I've implemented many new programs and have good skills, but this is a first for this implementation model and I'm finding it good.

—Implementation Coordinator, SS14

Our partnerships with services are continuing in 2026 with a new cohort of services. This will enable AERO to continue to grow our understandings of how a deliberate and structured approach can be used for implementing evidence-based practices in ECEC, as well as the implementation support required for implementation progress. In 2026, the Learning Partner project design is:

- continuing to explore any implementation variations between Meeting and Exceeding services
- increasing the number of self-study modules to provide more self-paced and flexible professional learning
- continuing to include head office and/or service provider-assigned staff in supporting implementation at a service level.

AERO is focused on evaluating and sharing further insights from the 2026 iteration of the ECEC Learning Partner project to increase the understanding of and support needed for sustainable evidence-based practice change in ECEC services.

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