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The Case for Implementation Support Practitioners in Education

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Introduction

Excitement is brewing for radical change in education. In a time when many are bemoaning the difficulties we are facing, others are developing creative new ways to reimagine education and design transformational systemic changes to support teachers and ultimately realize our best outcomes for ALL children. Amid the COVID pandemic, Hugh Vasquez, national advocate and speaker for education challenged a return to "business as usual" in educating our children (Vasquez, 2020). He asserts that the system as it was before COVID was clearly not working for many children - particularly those most marginalized - and the pandemic laid bare the system's flaws. His invitation is to use the opportunity to create a new education system based on what we know works.

This sort of system transformation is impossible without leveraging implementation science to actualize the change. Dr. Kurt Hatch, Professor of Practice and Faculty Director of the University of Washington Tacoma's Education Administration program reminds us that "*in education we are famous for almost implementing things.*" As a former school principal, he realized that investing in effective implementation strategies and supports was the key to successful outcomes. Ineffective or partial implementation likely leads to poor results and potentially even creates or perpetuates harmful practices. Less than full implementation often calls into question the effectiveness of the practice, support, or intervention, even resulting in abandoning the effort and moving on - yet again - to something new. Many educators can relate to this lather-rinse-repeat cycle of innovations in education. To disrupt this cycle, the Active Implementation Frameworks (AIFs) ensure that systems and structures are in place and held accountable to support teachers' full and effective use of selected practices. Leading the use of the AIFs are implementation teams who take responsibility for change and ensure it sustains over time. The implementation support practitioner (ISP) guides, facilitates, supports, and assists those teams along the way.

ISPs might be called implementation coaches, specialists, training and technical assistance coordinators, consultants, etc. Regardless of their title, they play a critical role in the full uptake and sustainability of educational strategies. ISPs work with partners to co-design, continuously improve, navigate barriers and challenges, and sustain changes to increase the likelihood of producing significant outcomes through the full implementation of an initiative. Specifically, ISPs are professionals who support implementation and build implementation capacity in human service organizations and systems (Metz et al., 2021). Supporting implementation practices requires a set of specific skills and competencies. Additionally, a need has been recognized to identify the principles and core competencies required to provide effective support and engage in implementation practice to develop and improve training programs and standards. Ultimately, by doing so, a workforce is created that is capable of integrating implementation research into implementation practice to improve community outcomes.

The National Implementation Research Network, in collaboration with the Center for Effective Services and the European Implementation Collaborative, engaged in a research-based process to identify the guiding principles, skills, and competencies needed to build the capacity of practitioners and communities to effectively use interventions/approaches and evidence to improve outcomes. The various processes and methods used included an initial literature and document review, including gray literature, vetting with individuals providing implementation support, an integrative systematic review (Albers et al., 2021), and a content validation survey with international intermediary organizations (Metz et al., 2021). From this process emerged a set of six guiding principles and three domains of 15 competencies defined in an Implementation Support Practitioner Profile (Metz et al., 2020; see **Figure 1**). The three domains identified included co-creation and engagement, ongoing improvement, and sustaining change. Each domain consists of four to six competencies. The domain of **co-creation**

Figure 1: Implementation Support Practitioner Principles & Competencies

Co-Creation and Engagement

Ongoing Improvement

Sustaining Change
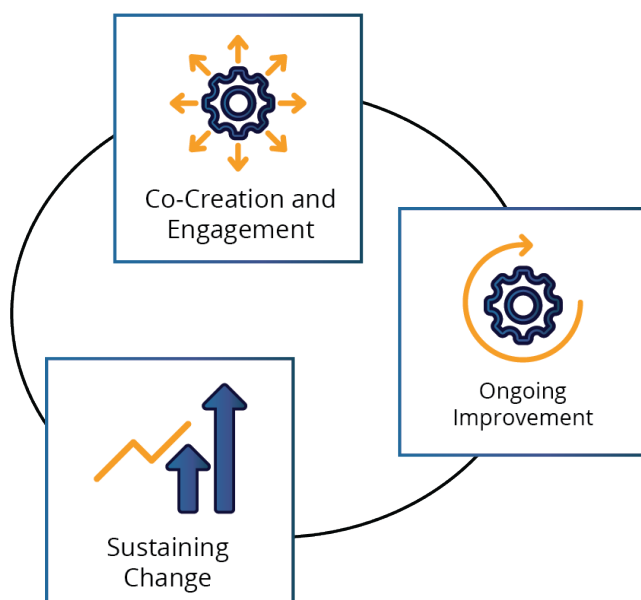
Competencies for supporting implementation of evidence-informed policies, programs, and practices.

Centering with these beliefs:
Be Empathetic,
Be Curious,
Be Committed,
 Embrace Cross-disciplinary Approaches,
Use Critical Thinking

and engagement is defined as promoting and facilitating the active involvement of partners within the implementation process, resulting in contextualized service models, approaches, and practices. It includes the competencies of co-learning, brokering, addressing power differentials, co-design, and the tailoring of support. The domain of **ongoing improvement** is defined as the skills necessary to support organizational learning as a core value of the implementation setting and the use of quantitative and qualitative feedback throughout the implementation process to monitor and guide improvements to the implementation strategies as well as the delivery of the evidence-based practices for learning. The skills within this domain include assessing needs and assets; understanding context; applying and integrating implementation frameworks, strategies, and approaches; facilitation; communication; and conducting improvement cycles. The final domain of **sustaining change** refers to supporting the ongoing use of the programs by helping communities develop a shared vision and mutual accountability and facilitating existing relationships, problem-solving, and resource sharing. The key competencies within this domain include growing and sustaining relationships, developing teams, building capacity, and cultivating leaders and champions. Why are ISPs so critical? How does their work affect change?

Two of the National Implementation Research Network's (NIRN) State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices (SISEP) Center partners share their stories.

About Wisconsin & Its Implementation Efforts

Wisconsin's public education system comprises 426 school districts and encompasses the continuum of small, rural districts to large, urban systems. The state's education landscape also includes twelve regional cooperative educational service agencies (CESAs). Seeking opportunities to address some of the largest opportunity gaps in the country, Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has partnered with SISEP since 2016 in order to strengthen implementation capacity from capitol to classroom.

The DPI's partnership with SISEP has built the capacity of several staff at the state and regional levels who now function as ISPs. Their roles, in turn, have led to dedicated opportunities to build the capacity of additional staff across the DPI and with numerous CESA-based IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) discretionary project teams that provide regional support to districts and schools across the state. As a result, significant readiness has been established, and many stage-based implementation activities are underway. Several of those project teams are now using regional and district capacity assessments to engage in implementation action planning that deliberately develops project infrastructure, such as training and coaching plans and systems of data to support rapid cycles of improvement. Further, ISPs have been tasked with co-creating an initiative inventory, relative to the supports provided by DPI to federally identified districts and schools, to make recommendations to executive leadership on improving upon

these efforts, especially focused on the implementation frameworks that ensure sustainability.

Notably, the impact of regional capacity among project staff directly influences implementation and improvement efforts in districts and schools. In one particular region, CESA staff involved in an implementation-focused project built their capacity to such an extent that it directly supported their ability to effectively utilize ISP competencies with another project. Subsequently, a recent improvement monitoring meeting with a federally identified district in that region illustrated the use of the implementation frameworks in required improvement efforts. Communication protocols, effective teaming structures, data systems to inform decision-making, clearly defined and operationalized teacher practices, and the development of training and coaching systems to support teacher practice all contribute to a solid implementation infrastructure and sustainable ways of work for this district.

The DPI's Implementation Zone (IZ) initiative depends heavily upon the ISP competencies as well. Functioning as a learning lab for projects with specific instructional practice areas of focus (i.e., Early Reading, Inclusive Communities), the IZ establishes an incubator for a way of work grounded in the implementation frameworks. Led by both state and regional ISPs, the IZ is working to transform a slice of the system from DPI through our CESAs to a small cohort of districts and their schools and classrooms so that we can learn what it takes to support the full and effective use of instructional practices. Ultimately, we're using the IZ to demonstrate how we avoid the barriers and missed opportunities typical of many other

initiatives, such as not clearly defining and operationalizing practices, lacking strategy when selecting first adopters, failing to establish effective linked teaming structures, building professional development systems that don't include both training and coaching or making decisions only based on student outcome data rather than being informed by systems of data that include relevant and multiple types of implementation data.

Using the IZ's early reading project as an example, ISPs are intentionally ensuring those opportunities are not missed. In the exploration stage, we convened a group of teachers to develop a practice profile that clearly defines and operationalizes teacher practice for two components of early reading (using text collections to build knowledge and explicit/systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction). Our state-level implementation team has been developing a decision-support data system with a particular focus on implementation data to support rapid cycles of improvement. While the DPI has previously developed significant [resources around coaching and coaching data](#), we are currently focused on data needs relative to training and fidelity. Wisconsin is currently in the installation stage with this work as we look toward developing strategic mutual selection criteria and a rigorous mutual selection process to identify district partners later this year. As districts are selected, the IZ will provide training and coaching to teachers on selected early reading practices, inclusive teaming structures, and intensive implementation support to district and school teams. Like the broader implementation efforts underway in WI described earlier, in the IZ, we're deliberately leveraging the ISP competencies to transform the system. Building practice profiles is dependent upon

aspects of co-design and facilitation. The mutual selection process to identify partner districts and install effective teams depends upon building, growing, and sustaining relationships. Developing comprehensive training and coaching systems requires ISPs to deploy strategies that build capacity. Establishing a decision support data system that includes outcome, capacity, fidelity, and programmatic data ensures structures are in place to support improvement cycles.

Systems transformation doesn't just happen; we must make it happen. Rather than practitioners toiling away on site-based islands, with a few heroes and pockets of excellence among them, imagine the collective power of implementation teams and ISPs intentionally building the capacity of the system for sustaining and scaling the use of effective practices. What new future would that create? Imagine an equitable one with less isolation and burnout among administrators and teachers, more trust and collegial relationships between teachers and leaders, more effective use of resources, and - most importantly - students benefiting from effective practices and achieving the intended outcomes. Imagine.

About the SMART Center & the Training and Technical Assistance Team

The Training and Technical Assistance Core (TAC) at the University of Washington's School Mental Health Assessment, Research and Training (SMART) Center based in Seattle, Washington, supports states, regions, districts, schools, educators, policymakers, and school mental health professionals across the implementation cascade to develop, deliver, and evaluate effective school mental health practices within a Multi-tiered System of Supports framework. The case for mental health in schools and better interconnection between mental health and education systems is supported by a recent rates utilization study that demonstrated schools as the most common place students receive mental health supports, followed closely by outpatient settings (Duong, Bruns, et al., 2020). The SMART TAC team grounds our approach to training and TA in implementation research and practice in the design and delivery of implementation supports in educational and mental/behavioral health settings in the Northwest Region of the United States (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington).

The SMART TAC team comprises staff and consulting partners with various educational and mental/behavioral health experiences. The team includes former and current school leaders, school social workers, school counselors, classroom teachers, school psychologists, special educators, district administrators, family members, and behavior specialists to form a multi/interdisciplinary team of ISPs. Having an array of team members that mirror district, school, and community roles allows our team to better understand and support complexities related to implementation from different perspectives. Through a variety of federal education and mental health grants, state and local agency contracts, donor-sponsored projects, and legislation-mandated activities, our team provides universal, targeted, or intensive support. We work with our partners to co-design a scope and sequence of training, technical assistance, consultation, facilitation, and evaluation to meet their needs.

Example of the ISP Role in Supporting Teaming Structuring in Education

Implementation at the district and school levels should be team-driven with shared leadership instead of hero or champion models. A recent trend we've observed with the increased needs, funding, legislation, and initiatives for social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health support is the growing number of district and school teams that seem to have related goals. Having too many teams can run the risk of being siloed, disconnected, or unaligned to a cohesive approach guided by the district strategic plan and school improvement plans. It can lead to confusion about how the many initiatives fit together. Dr. Steve Goodman says, *"We often train educators in many different things and then expect them to do the alignment and integration."* Making sense of multiple initiatives and effectively communicating them is the responsibility of state, regional, district, and school implementation teams to ensure implementers aren't left to figure that out independently. ISPs at the SMART Center provide assistance in creating a process to help with teaming structures, representation, roles and responsibilities, and communication protocols at all levels.

The following steps are part of a common approach used to help facilitate an effective, efficient, and cohesive set of implementation teams in districts and schools and how ISP competencies can be leveraged to support implementation.

Step
Map out existing district and building teams and their various dimensions, purposes, and alignment to a district strategic plan and school improvement plan

How to leverage ISP competencies

Co-Creation and Engagement

Co-learning
- It's key for ISPs to understand the district strategic plan and the school improvement plans as well as district and state education policies and overarching community assets, needs, and goals to support systems change efforts.

Ongoing Improvement

Assessing Needs and Assets
- Taking stock of who is doing what and what is going well and identifying redundancies, duplication, or gaps is an important initial activity to streamline teams. Mapping out teams at a district and building level can include information such as staff involved, purpose/intended outcomes, measures to determine progress, and connection to a district strategic plan and school improvement plan.

Step
Facilitate discussions about combining, modifying, or eliminating teams and clarify the role and function of the team(s)

How to leverage ISP competencies

Brokering
Co-Creation and Engagement
- ISPs can help with the identification of efforts that might be unaligned, incohesive or occurring in a parallel fashion.

Facilitation
Ongoing Improvement
- ISPs can identify approaches to engage participants in decision-making to solve implementation challenges that may arise when determining how existing teams should continue or not.

Step
Ensure diverse representation and voices of students, families, and community partners on teams

How to leverage ISP competencies

Brokering
Co-Creation and Engagement
- ISPs can be an important connector when assisting teams in assessing their teaming status and expanding membership. ISPs can provide examples, guidance, and encouragement as teams expand their membership.

Step
Establish a common set of effective teaming structures, routines and procedures, including implementation and de-implementation of supports, strategies, practices and interventions; using resources; and anchoring action planning to valid fidelity and capacity measures and outcome data

How to leverage ISP competencies

Conducting Improvement Cycles
Ongoing Improvement
- ISPs assist teams in understanding steps towards creating and maintaining operating procedures, structures, and routines to work efficiently, effectively, and equitably to solve problems. ISPs can introduce the use of the Hexagon Tool to support decision making.

In these examples from our partners in Wisconsin and Washington, it is evident that ISPs play a critical role in driving systems transformation in education. With their deep understanding of educational systems, their expertise in the adoption and execution of implementation strategies, and their ability to navigate complex challenges, ISPs are indispensable in ensuring the successful implementation of educational initiatives. Through their meticulous planning, effective collaboration with stakeholders, and continuous monitoring and evaluation, they are able to identify barriers and facilitate solutions to support the sustainability of those initiatives. Their formal and technical knowledge, combined with their interpersonal skills, allows them to bridge the gap between policy and practice, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for students, educators, and the entire education system. When it comes to driving educational reform and improvement, the presence and expertise of implementation specialists cannot be emphasized enough.

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