DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TEAMS:

A Practical Implementation Guide for Systems



KANSAS STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

IES Institute of Education Sciences

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Introduction

Who

This guide is designed for Kansas school system leaders and district leadership teams (DLTs) working toward implementing their action plan.

What

This guide shares select evidence-based implementation strategies to support DLTs. The strategies, drawn from implementation science, were selected to help Kansas systems form, develop, and refine the makeup and operating principles of their DLTs. It can also help DLTs carry out key tasks and processes as part of their system improvement efforts, including conducting thorough, accurate needs assessments and engaging in deliberate Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles.

How

Strategic Levers

Focus Area	Key Action
The team	**Strengthen and refine the DLT** to support effective implementation.
The data	**Conduct a thorough needs assessment** as a team before developing your system's action plan.
The plan	**Engage in deliberate PDSA cycles** as a team throughout the implementation of your system's action plan.

The guide addresses three strategic levers that can help DLTs develop and implement their action plan.

Implementation Teams

Implementation teams are the foundation of any successful implementation process. Members are core internal stakeholders who oversee and perform key implementation functions. Implementation science—the study of methods that help put research and proven practices into everyday use to guide improvement efforts—emphasizes the critical importance of implementation teams in ensuring that programs and initiatives achieve and sustain their long-term goals.

In the Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) 2.0 model, a system's DLT functions as its implementation team and is responsible for conducting several activities correlated with effective implementation (listed in the box below). While this guide is intended for system-level teams, these activities can be replicated at the school level by school leaders and teams seeking to implement new programs.

Common activities for implementation teams[1]

- Conduct a needs assessment to evaluate the fit and feasibility of potential new programs or practices.
- Define what is being implemented and identify necessary adaptations or changes for the context.
- Establish support for staff members implementing the intervention, program or practice.
- Provide a process for measuring and improving fidelity.
- Conduct regular PDSA cycles to foster continuous improvement.
- Ensure the intervention, program or practice achieves and sustains its goals.

Anchor point: Because DLTs already engage in many of the same activities typically performed by implementation teams, key teaming principles from implementation science could also strengthen DLTs.

1 Collaborative for Implementation Practice and National Implementation Research Network, *Implementation Teams: Best Practices and Tools to Establish Implementation Teams* (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021), https://www.implementationpractice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/NIRN-Practice-Guide-Implementation-Teams_7.29.21.pdf.

IMPLEMENTATION TEAMS

Profile of a Strong Implementation Team

Strong implementation teams create the conditions for initiatives to be adopted, implemented with fidelity, improved over time, and sustained. Successful change requires more than a clear vision and a detailed plan. A skilled and organized implementation team can move an initiative from planning to impact.

Team Features

Small and Skilled

- Strong teams have the skills, understanding, and expertise related to the implementation initiative.
- Strong teams may be relatively small; the size depends on the system's context.
- Research recommends including 6–10 members on a well-rounded implementation team.
- Smaller systems and organizations may have as few as 3 team members.

Defined Leadership

- Strong teams define leadership roles clearly.
- Co-leaders can help avoid the "solo hero" model and share responsibilities.
- Leaders convene the team regularly and guide the work.
- Leaders make key decisions and seek additional input if the team reaches an obstacle or impasse

Balance of Perspectives

- Strong teams include a balance of perspectives to avoid top-heavy decisionmaking. Perspectives may come from district administrators, principals, teachers, and other school staff.
- Shared vision and commitment.
- Strong teams intentionally establish a shared vision and commitment for their work together.
- Strong teams develop a guiding document collaboratively to steer their work.
- This team charter helps establish:
  - A vision
  - Objectives
  - Communication protocols and norms
  - A meeting schedule

Source: See footnote 1.

IMPLEMENTATION TEAMS

Team Functions

Strong implementation teams include members who collaboratively support key team functions. Key team functions include planning, building infrastructure for implementation, problem-solving, communication, and collecting and analyzing data. These functions are pivotal for effective implementation of the fundamentals and structures within systems' action plans.



Planning

- Conducting a thorough needs assessment
- Action planning and aligning system functions



Building Infrastructure for Implementation

- Installing and sustaining infrastructure and supports (training, coaching, fidelity, data systems, etc.) that help enable instructional practices to achieve standards



Problem-Solving

- Solving problems and building sustainability
- Addressing challenges and barriers



Communication

- Communicating with stakeholders and engaging in readiness activities



Collecting and Analyzing Data

- Using data to drive team decisions, monitor fidelity, and make adjustments

Anchor point: Strong implementation teams intentionally select members who take on key team functions.

Source: See footnote 1.

IMPLEMENTATION TEAMS

Team Roles and Responsibilities

Strong implementation teams clarify roles and responsibilities within the team. Research shows that role clarity is a critical predictor of success, sustainability, and scalability for implementation. When teams are unclear about key members' roles and responsibilities, the implementation process often stalls or fails. Not all members need an explicitly named role, but establishing key roles can help provide the team with structure and precision.[2]

Leadership

- The team leaders guide the work and navigate decision points.
- The co-leadership strategy can help avoid the "solo hero" model and foster balance.

Champion

- Champions help drive the day-to-day change process by building stakeholder buy-in, supporting staff as needed, and bridging gaps among key staff.
- They are internal members of the organization with interest and commitment to implementing change.
- They should be enthusiastic, dynamic, energetic, personable, and persistent.
- Champions can be anyone within the system, regardless of position.
- Teams can select co-champions to share responsibilities and build capacity internally.

Data Lead

- The data lead oversees the acquisition and management of data related to the action plan.
- They ensure data are used to guide real-time adjustments and decisions.

Other Potential Roles

Facilitator

- Drafts agendas, focuses on specific decisions, distributes materials.

Recorder

- Captures notes, documents explicit decisions, shares meeting notes with the team.

Anchor point: Establishing key roles and responsibilities gives implementation teams clarity and structure and ultimately supports effective implementation.

2 Dean L. Fixsen, Sandra F. Naoom, Karen A. Blase, Robert M. Friedman and Frances Wallace, *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network, 2005), https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf.

IMPLEMENTATION TEAMS

Implementation Team Questionnaire

This questionnaire can be used to reflect on the current makeup and activities of your DLT. It can also help leaders intentionally develop and structure new teams.



Do you have a small, designated, and committed team?



Does your team have the skills, perspectives, and expertise to support implementation of the action plan?



Does your team have an identified leader or co-leaders?



Have you considered assigning team members to other specific roles (such as champion, data lead, facilitator, or recorder, for example)?



Do team members have expertise in the selected fundamentals or structures to support implementation?



Does your team meet regularly? Are standing meetings scheduled for the entire year?



Is your team prepared to conduct a detailed needs assessment and engage in ongoing PDSA cycles?

Needs Assessment

A needs assessment is a process for identifying strengths, areas for improvement, and the factors that contribute to those strengths and opportunities.[3] It involves gathering input from stakeholders and exploring data to identify opportunities for growth and the opportunities' root causes.[4] DLTs should conduct needs assessments before deciding on new programs or initiatives. Conducting a comprehensive needs assessment as a team is pivotal to developing your system's action plan.[5]

Quick planning guide for comprehensive needs assessments

Prepare

Consider your purpose, the people you will involve, and your process.

- Why are you conducting the needs assessment?
- What are your goals?
- Will the needs assessment examine the system broadly or focus on a set of issues or schools?
- Who will be involved in the needs assessment?
  - School staff
  - District staff
  - Students and their families
  - Other community members
- How will stakeholders be involved?
  - Conduct the needs assessment
  - Providing data
  - Interpreting findings
- How does your plan consider staff capacity and available time?
- How can you balance your learning goals with the realistic capacity of staff involved?

3 John Corbett and Sam Redding, *Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement: A Tactical Guide* (Council of Chief State School Officers and WestEd, 2017), https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2020/10/needsassessment-final.pdf.

4 U.S. Department of Education, Non-Regulatory Guidance: *Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023), https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/fund/grant/about/discretionary/2023-non-regulatory-guidance-evidence.pdf.

5 This guidance refers to a comprehensive, system-level needs assessment ***process***. The Building Needs Assessment (required by Kansas legislation) is a required ***part*** of that process but not a comprehensive needs assessment process by itself.

Collect Data

Gather quantitative and qualitative data.

- What data will you collect?
  - Student data, such as assessment scores, attendance, student perspectives, and graduation rates
  - Teacher and school staff data, such as retention, job satisfaction and other perspectives on their work and the school, and performance ratings
  - District staff data, such as retention, job satisfaction and other perspectives on their work and the district
  - Contextual data, such as perspectives on climate and culture, policies, and practices
- How can you use quantitative data, such as assessment scores, and qualitative data, such as interviews, to understand the needs?
- How will you analyze your findings so they are easy to digest?

Make Meaning

Interpret the data you have collected and explore root causes.

- How and with whom will you share and gather input on the findings?
- With whom will you identify underlying root causes of identified needs?
- How do the outcomes and perspectives compare with the system's priorities and performance goals?

Prioritize

Identify the needs you are best positioned to address.

- Which needs stand out as being best understood?
- Which needs stand out as being within your control?
- If addressed, which needs may have the greatest impact?

Sources:

- Christina Cuiccio and Mary Husby-Slater, *Needs Assessment Guidebook: Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessments* (State Support Network, 2018), https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2020/10/needsassessmentguidebook-508_003.pdf;
- U.S. Department of Education, *Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016), https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseseinvestment.pdf.

Continuous Improvement: Plan, Do, Study, Act

Strong DLTs help prepare systems to engage in PDSA cycles throughout the implementation process. These cycles allow systems to make strategic adjustments to address barriers and challenges. As an iterative model for school improvement, PDSA cycles help teams think critically about programs or initiatives and plan for improvements that will lead to better outcomes. DLTs should repeat the cycle's four steps throughout the implementation process.[6]

Plan

During the planning stage, the implementation team uses multiple data points to identify challenges, desired outcomes, necessary changes, and methods to measure progress.

Do

The team conducts the activities in the plan to test proposed changes in action.

Study

After carrying out the plan, the team examines data collected by their identified measurement methods to study what happened and assess progress.

Act

The team makes subsequent changes to the next iteration of the plan and begins the PDSA cycle again.



Anchor point: Strong DLTs are well-equipped to conduct PDSA cycles intentionally and thoroughly as part of the implementation process.

6 National Implementation Research Network, PDSA Cycles: Improvement and Implementation (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Oct. 15, 2024), https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/blog/pdsa-cycles-improvement-and-implementation/

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Appendices

Appendix A. District Leadership Team Implementation Teaming and Planning Template

You can use and tailor this template to set the course for your work as a district leadership team (DLT). The items addressed here can help your team establish its vision, goals, and approach.

DLT Members

Consider documenting the DLT members' roles, contact information, and preferences. As you document your team's composition, consider the following questions:

- Has your team established the roles you need for success?
- Does your current team have the skills, perspectives, and expertise to support the action plan implementation?
- Do team members have expertise in the selected fundamentals or structures to support implementation?

Role	Name	Title	Contact information (Preferred Method)
Co-leader			
Co-leader			
Champion			
Data Lead			
Facilitator			
Recorder			
Additional Members:			

APPENDICES

Your Team's Vision for Your Work Together

Overarching Vision

What does the team seek to accomplish?

Key Deliverables and Milestones

What deliverables and milestones will the team work toward?

Communication Structures

With your team, consider the following questions to determine the structures you will put in place to ensure consistent, useful communication. Document your decisions throughout this process.

How Will the DLT Meet?

When and where will you meet?

Who will schedule meetings, prepare agendas and lead meetings?

How Will the DLT Communicate Internally?

How will the team communicate between meetings? Consider team members' preferred communication methods.

Consider the preferred communication methods of your team members. What will your ad hoc communications look like?

APPENDICES

How Will the DLT Communicate With External Stakeholders?

Stakeholder Group	Purpose of Communication	Communication Channels	Communication Lead
Families	Gather input during the needs assessment; share priorities in the action plan	Focus groups; quarterly newsletter; Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings; end-of-year update on findings from collected data	Data lead for data collection and reporting; co-leads for PTA and newsletter communications

Who will the DLT communicate with?	Why are you communicating with them?	Which communication channels will you use?	Who will lead the communication?
Kansas State Department of Education	Share progress, seek guidance, align implementation efforts with state priorities	Email, virtual meetings, conferences, required reporting	Co-leads
School staff	Build understanding, gather feedback, support implementation	Staff meetings, email updates, professional learning sessions	Champion and co-leads
Students and families	Gather input, communicate priorities and share progress updates	Surveys, focus groups, newsletters, PTA meetings, website updates	Data lead and co-leads
Community members	Build awareness and support, gather community perspectives	Community forums, newsletters, district website, social media	Co-leads
Other stakeholder group			

Sources:

- See footnote 1 of the main text.
- Karen Earl and Julie Wagstaff, *Communication: An Essential Component Within Implementation (State Implementation and Scaling-Up of Evidence-Based Practices Center*, June 30, 2025), https://sisep.fpg.unc.edu/blog/communication-an-essential-component-within-implementation/.

APPENDICES

Appendix B. Implementation Resources

Content summary	Resource type	Citation/link
A short introduction to implementation science	Article	Duda, M. A., and B. A. Wilson. Implementation Science 101: A Brief Overview. Perspectives on Language and Literacy, 44(4), 11-19, 2018. https://nrctyj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Implementation-Science-101_-A-Brief-Overview--Perspectives-on-Language--Fall-2018.pdf
An interactive platform with information and guidance on implementation science	Website	National Implementation Research Network and State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center. AI Hub. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/
A resource with best practices and tools for implementation teams	Article	National Implementation Research Network and Collaborative for Implementation Practice. Implementation Teams: Best Practices and Tools to Establish Implementation Teams: A Guide for Implementation Support Practitioners. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and UNC School of Social Work, 2021. https://cippro.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CIP-Practice-Guide-Implementation-Teams_10.27.22.pdf
Ten episodes discussing various components of implementation science	Podcast	National Implementation Research Network and State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center. Implementation Science at Work. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://impact.fpg.unc.edu/implementation-science-at-work/
A series of implementation science resources and tools	Website	State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center. SISEP. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://sisep.fpg.unc.edu/

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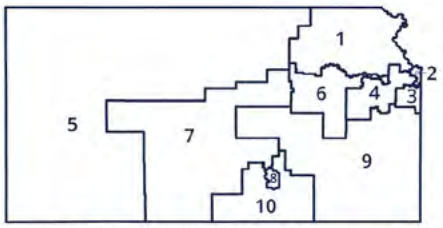


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