PUTTING EVIDENCE TO WORK:
A SCHOOL'S GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation theme - Professional development

In 2018, the EEF published *Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation*, a guide for schools on how to implement their plans and interventions with the best chance of success. The guide is designed around a stage-by-stage approach to implementation.

These supplementary summaries draw together recommendations relating to specific themes across those stages—this one focuses on the role of Professional Development (PD). The emphasis here is on how PD can help implement programmes and practices in schools. Other aspects of professional development, such as the role of PD in the personal and career development of teachers, are not covered.

EEF are planning to create a dedicated guidance report on Professional Development, which will delve deeper into the evidence base.

Recommendations

Recommendations relating to professional development in *Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation*:

   a. Treat professional development as one part of a package of implementation strategies

   b. Effective professional development includes both initial training as well as high-quality follow-on coaching

   c. Introduce new skills, knowledge and strategies with explicit up-front training

   d. Reinforce initial training with expert follow-on support within school

   e. Use highly skilled coaches

   f. Carefully structure and monitor peer-to-peer collaboration

   g. Professional development activities should be appropriately spaced and aligned—avoid one-off inputs

   h. Ensure a tight focus on pupil outcomes by supporting staff to apply general pedagogy to specific subject domains

a. Treat professional development as one part of a package of implementation strategies

Regardless of the objective and content of a new intervention—be that introducing new instructional methods, building subject knowledge, or changing aspects of assessment or school organisation—the process of implementation requires not only organisational, but also individual, changes in behaviour. To achieve these changes in behaviour, effective implementation is almost always supported by high-quality training and professional development.

At the same time, schools and programme developers have a tendency to default to professional development as the principal implementation strategy, without thinking carefully about how it works alongside other implementation activities. The emerging evidence suggests a combination of implementation strategies is likely to be effective; hence, aim for a blend of activities that reinforce each other and are sequenced appropriately.[1] For example, identifying local champions can be a useful way of generating wider motivation for training and professional development. Table 1 in *Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation* provides some examples of different implementation strategies.

b. Effective professional development includes both initial training as well as high-quality follow-on coaching

In *Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation* we break professional development down into two distinct activities: up-front training and follow-on coaching. Training is used to describe initial activities to develop an understanding of the theory and rationale behind the new approach and introduce the necessary skills, knowledge, and strategies. This training usually starts before an intervention is used in the school, hence is situated in the 'Prepare' phase of the guide.

Coaching refers to a range of different types of follow-on support that almost always takes place within the school setting after changes to practices have begun. It involves working with skilled coaches or mentors (either internal or external) who provide ongoing modelling, feedback, and support to help apply the ideas and skills developed in initial training to practical behaviours. As such, coaching is situated in the 'Deliver' section of the implementation guide (these assignments should be viewed as a rough guide, rather than rigid boundaries).

A common mistake in implementing new programmes and practices is only providing up-front training, with little or no continuous instructional support. We know that schools can often focus on training staff without providing appropriate follow-on support, due to constraints of time and capacity.

c. Introduce new skills, knowledge and strategies with explicit up-front training

A large body of evidence, including from evaluations funded by the EEF, shows the benefit of high-quality, up-front training for teachers.[2,3,4,5]

Schools should aim to factor in a number of common features of effective up-front training when introducing new programmes or practices:[2]

- Create opportunities for staff to reflect on their existing beliefs and practices, and challenge them in a non-threatening manner.

- Make training interactive, with active learning through observation, meaningful discussion and reflection, demonstration of skills, deliberate practice, and feedback.

- Focus both on generic and subject-specific pedagogy. Provide structured support to help staff apply general pedagogical strategies to specific subject areas. For example, an up-front training session on a generic pedagogy, such as formative assessment, would be followed by time in subject groups, or phase groups, to discuss the implications for that specific context.

- Use a range of media and delivery approaches, including video, to demonstrate skills and exemplify good practice.[4]

When developing or attending training, ensure it focuses on developing the key intended behaviours and activities for the intervention i.e. 'active ingredients' (further information on active ingredients is available in the thematic summary on Active Ingredients and Fidelity).

d. Reinforce initial training with expert follow-on support within school

While up-front training is important in developing a conceptual understanding of a new approach, crucially, training alone is unlikely to be sufficient to yield changes in practice. Often, it is only when follow-on support is added to training in the form of expert coaching or mentoring, that teachers are able to apply their conceptual understanding to practical classroom behaviours.[3,4,6,7,8]

An increasing body of evidence demonstrates the impact of coaching on improving implementation and learning outcomes.[3,8] Nevertheless, coaching varies in its effectiveness, depending on how it facilitates professional learning.[7]

A number of activities emerge as being useful which schools should seek to factor into their post-training support:

- Create opportunities for explicit discussions around how to apply new ideas and strategies to classroom practice and adapt existing practices.

- Model the delivery of new skills and strategies.

- Encourage staff to deliberately practice specific skills and apply what they have learnt by experimenting back in the classroom.

- Structure in time for reflection on the success of experimentation and what can be improved next time.

- Observe classroom practice and provide regular and actionable feedback on performance and implementation.

- Provide ongoing moral support and encouragement.

As these coaching activities require dynamic and frequent interactions with teachers, they almost always take place within the school. Ongoing instructional support requires school leaders to carefully plan how these activities are integrated into the overall professional development programme (see **f** below).

e. Use highly skilled coaches

If coaching is used to provide follow-on support, ensure the coaches are highly skilled. Less effective coaches adopt a more didactic model where they simply tell teachers what to do, passively observe practice, and evaluate staff performance against a set observation rubric.[7] More effective coaches:

- Offer support in a constructive, collaborative manner;

- Help teachers take control of their professional development, while at the same time providing appropriate challenge; and

- Have the trust and confidence of teachers and regularly engage with school leaders.

Coaching support can be provided either by internal staff or external specialists, with successful examples of both approaches emerging in EEF-funded evaluations of promising programmes.[5] More research is needed on the skills and experience of successful coaches; however, it appears that having significant experience in working with teachers (more than five years), and expertise across multiple areas—specialist pedagogical knowledge, adult learning, feedback, monitoring, and so on—are likely to be important.[2,7,8]

f. Carefully structure and monitor peer-to-peer collaboration

Another important form of follow-on support is peer-to-peer collaboration, in the form of approaches like professional learning communities. Here, the evidence is more mixed, with some forms of collaboration not appearing to add value to implementation and student outcomes.[2] This suggests schools should think precisely about the content of such groups and the nature and purpose of the work they are engaged in.

The features of effective peer-to-peer collaboration are still contested. A collegial problem-solving approach is

recommended, that mirrors the features of effective coaching and mentoring (see d and e above). There should be clear objectives, structured content and processes, and a tight focus on improving pupil outcomes.[2] Loosely defined and unstructured collaborations are unlikely to work. Coaches and mentors—either internal or external—can play a valuable role here in guiding, monitoring, and refining the work of collaborative groups.[7,8]

g. Professional development activities should be appropriately spaced and aligned—avoid one-off inputs

Overall, the evidence suggests that professional development should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Stand-alone INSET days are unlikely to change and sustain new practices. There needs to be appropriate timing of initial training, follow-on support, and consolidation activities to fit both the school cycle and the iterative nature of adult learning.[2]

The content of professional development activities should also be aligned and purposeful, so that individual learning activities collectively reinforce one another and revisit the same messages. For example, in-school coaching activities should build on, and reflect, the ideas and strategies that are introduced in initial training.

Inevitably, this all takes time, with most effective professional development lasting at least two terms, and often longer. Hence, school leaders and programme developers need to design interventions that allow for frequent and meaningful engagement, and move away from a model of one-day, one-off training.[2] The aim is to build a system of professional development that encourages ongoing learning and application to practice.

h. Ensure a tight focus on pupil outcomes by supporting staff to apply general pedagogy to specific subject domains

Professional development activities are unlikely to be successful without ensuring there is both high-quality content and a sharp focus on pupil outcomes. Many of the EEF's most promising projects are precise in terms of the teaching practices they are introducing, and provide explicit support to help teachers apply general pedagogy to specific subject domains i.e. pedagogical content knowledge.[5]

Additional Resources

Department for Education's (DfE) standards for Teacher Professional Development

In July 2016, the Department for Education published a new Standard for Teaching Professional Development for all schools in England. The standard is designed to help teachers and schools understand the features of effective PD, support the development of PD plans, and hold stakeholders to account for their role in the process.

The Standard describes five key headline ideas:

1. Professional development should have a focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes.
2. Professional development should be underpinned by robust evidence and expertise.
3. Professional development should include collaboration and expert challenge.
4. Professional development programmes should be sustained over time.
   And all this is underpinned by, and requires that:
5. Professional development must be prioritised by school leadership.

The Standard sets out a description of what effective professional development looks like from the perspective of school leaders, teachers and external providers/experts, based on the premise that effective professional development occurs when these three groups act in unison. The full implementation guide for the standard is available at: https://assets.publishing. service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/ attachment_data/file/537031/160712_-_PD_Expert_Group_ Guidance.pdf

Research Schools' Leading Learning course

A number of schools in the Research School Network are able to help schools develop an evidence-informed approach to PD, through a course called Leading Learning. This programme provides a comprehensive overview of some of the most important research evidence in education, so that school leaders can devise a high impact PD programme (topics include metacognition, memory and mindset). It guides delegates through a process of designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating PD, based around current school priorities. Details of Research Schools that are currently delivering Leading Learning can be found by contacting Stuart Mathers— stuart.mathers@eefoundation.org.uk

References

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This resource supports the *Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation* guidance report.