Implementing improvement initiatives

Evidence-based, learner-centred, and workload-aware

Stuart Kime, John Hattie, Ed Wright, Carolina Kuepper-Tetzel, John Tomsett, Morgan Polikoff

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Evidence Based Education

Evidence Based Education combines years of experience in teaching and school leadership, in conducting research into educational leadership and evaluation, and in policy advice to the UK Government's Department for Education.

This rare combination allows us to take an objective view on effective uses of evidence in education, while also developing pragmatic, thought-provoking training and tools, designed for the complex professional lives of teachers and school leaders (lives we have lived).

Confederation of School Trusts

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England, advocating for, connecting, and supporting executive and governance leaders. Our members are responsible for the education of more than 3.5m young people.

Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

Introduction

We live in turbulent times. Times in which we all seek secure, unchanging 'anchors' that help us serve the learners in our schools and trusts in ways that help them - and their teachers – to grow and flourish. With so much uncertainty in our lives, deepening our understanding of evidence-based, learner-centred and workload-aware implementation practices can help teachers and leaders breathe a little more deeply and plan for the long-term, secure in the knowledge that they are focusing their time, effort, money and energy on the things most likely to help learners and teachers flourish.

Research evidence can rarely prescribe what trust leaders or teachers should do; it can, however, provide strong 'best bets' to inform your plans and actions. It can – and should – provide the theory underpinning the excellence in classrooms, leadership meetings, governing bodies and trust-level policy-making discussions.

At Evidence Based Education, we seek to help teachers flourish. We summarise, translate and share the 'best bets' from research and practice. We advocate for a culture in which education professionals normalise the use of high-quality evidence in decision-making, a culture in which it would be considered simply wrong for those of us working in education not to have sound knowledge of rigorous and relevant research evidence; evidence which points to the likely effects of a proposed action or decision.

Professor Dr Stuart Kime
Co-founder and Director of Education, Evidence Based Education

What evidence is there for trust-led school improvement?

A 2023 CST inquiry aimed to identify a definitive model for trust-led school improvement, but found this impossible due to:

- a lack of shared definitions and understanding of improvement models across Trusts, and
- a limited evidence base specifically on how trusts effectively improve schools, despite evidence of their positive impact.

To address the identified issues, CST shifted focus to developing a shared framework for trust-led school improvement. This framework, detailed in *The DNA of trust-led school improvement* provides key considerations for improvement models, drawing from diverse sectors. The term 'trust-led' emphasises the unique potential of groups of schools under single governance to achieve scalable improvement, without prescribing specific models.

Trusts can use the CST framework for reflection and discussion, comparing their existing models to its twelve components for insights. It can also guide trusts in creating new models. The model further facilitates sector-wide knowledge building by providing a shared framework for explaining and illustrating trust-led improvement practices, enabling research and service alignment.

The CST conceptual model fits the components into three strands, forming a triple helix:

- Curate clear goals
- Build capability and capacity
- Implement improvement initiatives.

It outlines how trusts enact improvement, not what to improve. This allows flexibility for various improvement focuses, like developing teaching across a trust, to be integrated into the model's components, ensuring a holistic approach.

About this paper

In this paper, we draw on research evidence and practical insights to focus on one part of the CST conceptual model: Implement improvement initiatives. In doing so, our aim is to provide prompts that help trust leaders reflect on how they enact improvement, rather than what to improve, with specific reference to the number one priority: developing high-quality teaching so that every learner has a great teacher.

Members of EBE's Advisory Board were invited to respond independently to the question: "What advice would you give someone in a school or college who is planning to implement a new initiative?"
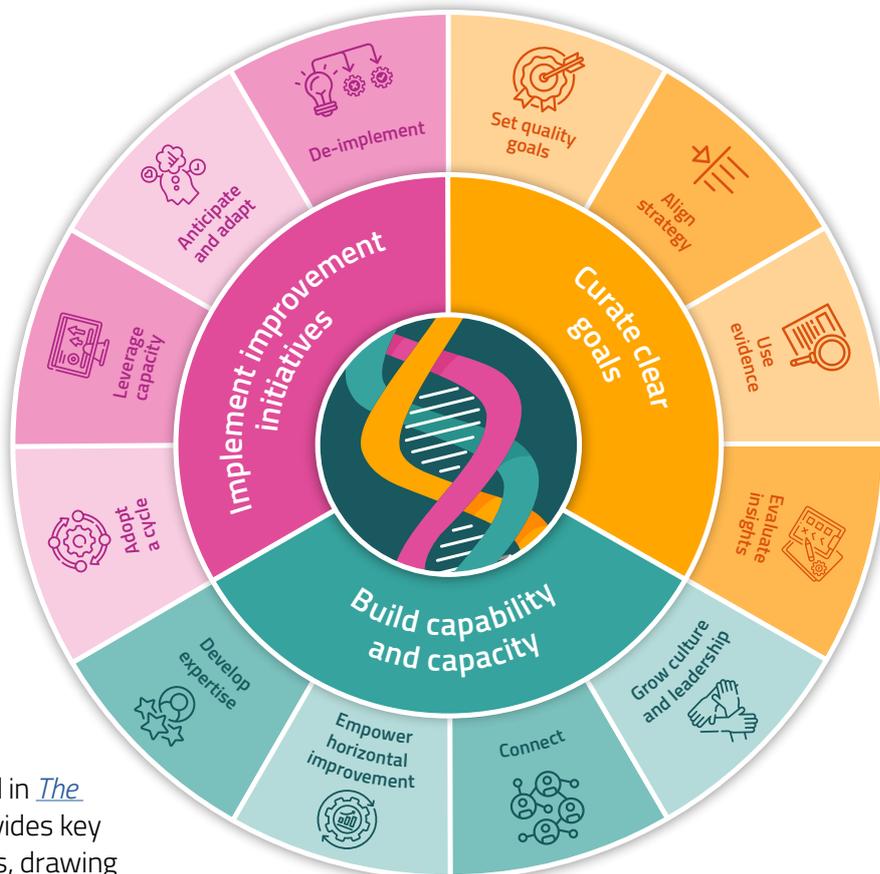
While their responses were written independently of one another, you will find this group of school leaders and researchers speaking with a remarkably consistent voice. At the end of each section, you'll find a short commentary from EBE's Co-founder and Director of Education Professor Dr Stuart Kime, designed to contextualise the advice from our experts into practical responses using the Great Teaching Toolkit.

Implementation is an iterative process, not a 'fire and forget' event. The advice here echoes this sentiment, and offers some practical examples and suggestions for anyone thinking about implementing improvement initiatives. We hope you find it useful.

About Evidence Based Education

EBE exists to help those who teach become even more effective than they already are. Our work is evidence-based, learner-centred, and workload-aware.

The Great Teaching Toolkit (GTT) is the mechanism by which we are achieving this aim. Available 24/7, it helps trusts create and sustain a highly effective professional learning culture across the diverse contexts of their schools. It helps teachers at all stages of their careers to take responsibility for their own professional learning, to grow and share their expertise, drawing on the practice of others and high-quality research evidence.

The GTT is the only teacher development programme to feature:

- A complete, evidence-based curriculum + training + feedback and monitoring tools to build teacher expertise, all in one place
- Evidence-based tools to help leaders gain a deep understanding of teaching quality
- Evidence-based tools to help leaders and teachers set and monitor focused actions to drive teaching quality improvement with clear milestones
- Resources to support coaching and mentoring
- Student voice tools that ensure every learner's voice is heard

The GTT is used in early years, primary, secondary, and further education, as well as special schools and international schools to ensure that teacher development is evidence-based, learner-centred, and workload-aware.

What advice would you give to someone in a school or college who is planning to implement a new program or initiative?
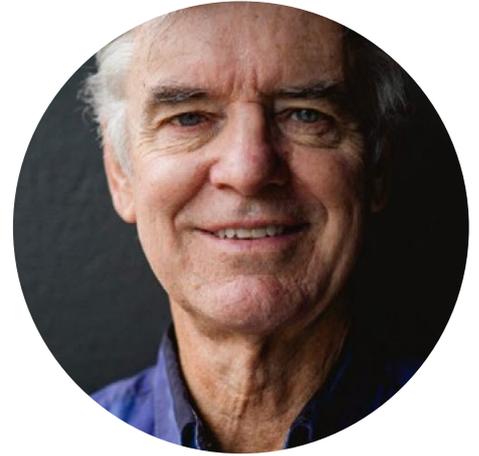
John Hattie, Co-Director of Hattie Family Foundation

The aim of implementing any new program should be improvement. Too much change can lead to no - or even reduced - improvement. Improvement, rather than change, should be the focus. But how?

Adopt a model

Begin with a model of implementation, such as the [Discovery (DIIE) model](#).

Diagnosis

- What is the problem you wish to address?
- What would the success of the implementation look like?
- What evidence would convince you the implementation worked?
- Who will be your action team to guide the next phases?
- How will you evaluate the readiness and capacity to deliver the program?
- What is the program logic for the next phases?

Intervention

Are you using the optimal evidence-based intervention that addresses the problem identified in the diagnosis phase?

Implementation

How would you indicate the intervention is implemented with fidelity, appropriate dosage, quality, and reasonable but careful adaptation (too often, we adapt the intervention to make it like what we were doing already!).

Evaluation

This phase is often a repeat of the diagnosis stage. Implement formative and summative evaluation, asking whether the problem has been ameliorated, check intended and unintended consequences, and celebrate the success of the educators who implemented the intervention.

The core success of any implementation is the leadership:

- to create trust and openness to work through the four phases of DIIE
- to work together in meaning-making
- to develop consensus and make decisions to move ahead, pause, recalibrate, and abandon the intervention
- to prioritise effort and attention and be agile
- to monitor fidelity and dosage
- to be ever-present and act as knowledge broker, keeping the core team and all participants informed and involved.

Every implementation encounters barriers and enablers, which can become core discussion and decision points that need leadership. Every educator has prior strong theories, beliefs, and practices, and they must be acknowledged and understood as part of the intervention: it is less what teachers do that matters, and more how they think about what they do. Attend to the thinking, make it safe to think aloud, raise barriers and enablers, and develop collective efficacy about the enhanced impact of the intervention. Mistakes happen – and they are opportunities, not

embarrassments.

What is YOUR model of implementation? Do those asked to implement your intervention know and appreciate your implementation model?

How does the Great Teaching Toolkit help trusts put these ideas into action?

John's mention of evaluation is a crucial consideration. Often, it's the thing we think about last, whereas it really should be one of the first - asking: "How will we know if this initiative has been successful?"

Leaders using the Great Teaching Toolkit have diagnostic tools to understand the lived experience and perceptions of teachers and leaders across their schools and trusts. Those on the front line of teaching share their voice to help leaders diagnose real problems using the School Environment and Leadership survey tool.

Teachers have access to diagnostic tools (like student endorsement measures, pictured) to help themselves and their leadership teams answer John Hattie's Diagnosis questions.
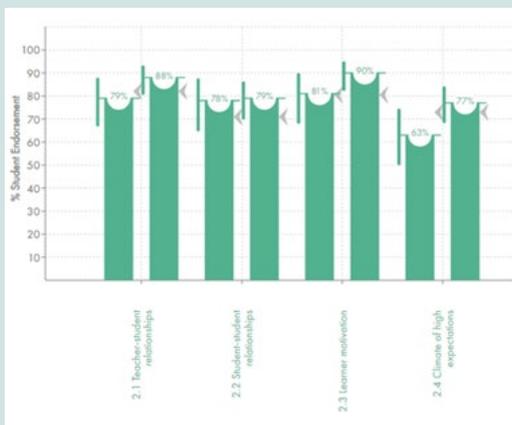
But the major advantage of the GTT is that the gap between diagnosis and intervention is eradicated – the tools and insights needed to help teachers to use evidence-based approaches are available at their point of need, along with clear implementation guidance.

As one teacher at Falinge Park High School in Rochdale put it: "As a teacher you can think you are the expert, but we have to listen to our students. They are the ones experiencing the teaching. The student surveys put the focus on the teaching, not the teacher.

"I've already seen from my survey results that my students' motivation to learn has improved."

What advice would you give to someone in a school or college who is planning to implement a new programme or initiative?

Ed Wright, Vice Principal, North London Collegiate School, Singapore

Start with the 'Why?'

If you can't concisely and eloquently explain why the thing you are planning to do is important, is aligned with your trust vision and values, and will result in a better experience for students, then stop before you invest too much time and effort into it. Ask yourself: Is the right initiative to invest valuable time, energy, and money into?

Define success

Think forward to the end of the process. If everything has been successful, what will have changed in your trust? What will the outcomes be? We are dealing with organisations centred around people: as such, it can be difficult to measure things reliably, or at a scale at which you can draw robust conclusions. Remember, you're not writing a post-doctoral thesis. Don't be put off by an inability to turn people into numbers and quantify success, but also don't start something if you have no idea what success looks like.

Look at capacity

Can you do this on top of everything else? You need to know the teams in your trust and schools, and know what their workload is like already. Counterintuitively, you will get some people who are already overloaded jumping at the opportunity to do more, whilst you will also get some with objectively lighter loads reluctant to take on more. You've got to know your teams and filter their responses through the lens of your organisational understanding to work out whether something needs to be removed or reduced to create capacity.

Identify your core team

You can't do everything alone. A single voice can start a revolution, but it can't maintain it. You need to know who your core individuals are who will be supporting you and bring them on board early. You need to be certain that they understand the clarity of purpose and hold the respect of the teams that you will need to gather around this initiative to make it successful.

You're not the brightest lightbulb

You might have had the idea, you might have seen something working well somewhere else or you might have read about something that you want to try.

Whatever it is, no matter how much you have thought about it, someone else will have a bright idea about implementation in your context that you haven't thought about. Welcoming challenge, discussion, and refinement of the idea before presenting it to a much wider group will result in a better initiative and greater likelihood of success.

Simplicity

If something is complicated, difficult, slow, or unintuitive then it will either fail or take significantly longer than anticipated to effect change. Spend the time with your core teams conceptualising the process behind the initiative, reducing 'clicks' or refining steps to ensure that it's easy for the wider team to engage with.

The sales pitch

If you've done the rest, this should be the easy bit. Start with the why, sell the vision of success and don't get bogged down in the process (because you've simplified it enough that everyone will get it).

How does the Great Teaching Toolkit help trusts put these ideas into action?

Ed is keen to point out that leaders should start by asking if the initiative they're about to implement is likely to result in a better experience for students. This is a truly evidence-based approach that looks for evidence of the likely impact before the initiative is started.

Leaders using the Great Teaching Toolkit know their 'Why?' Professional development is the strongest lever trust leaders hold for increasing long-term student outcomes. Trust leaders implement the GTT to maximise the impact of PD, to prioritise long-term benefits over 'shiny' quick fixes, and to make time for teacher development by reducing the time teachers spend on less effective things ('de-implementation' to make room for impact).

Teachers using the Great Teaching Toolkit know their 'Why?' They know their classrooms and their learners better than anyone else in school. But they also need personalised feedback to help them understand their own developmental needs, and often find it difficult to take ownership of their own professional learning because it depends on other people's limited time and resources. The GTT is ready for them at the point of need, not at someone else's point of readiness.

As one school leader put it: "The Great Teaching Toolkit has been really effective in putting staff CPD back in their own hands, giving them ownership of their own training and building enthusiasm for teacher pedagogy. It's helped staff to think about what the best available research evidence tells us is most likely to have an impact on student progress and improve outcomes."

What advice would you give to someone in a school or college who is planning to implement a new initiative?

Dr Carolina Kuepper-Tetzel, School of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Glasgow

Implementing a new initiative into teaching routines

It can be motivating to try new techniques in one's teaching. You may have heard of a new initiative or strategy that you think would work well in your context and are now eager to give it a go. I'd like to share my own learned lessons on how to make the implementation of a new approach successful and – maybe even more important – sustainable. While it is great to have innovative ideas, in today's work climate there is a real chance to overload yourself and burn out. Here are two tips that can support the implementation of a new initiative.

Reflect on own practice and identify the need for a new initiative

Before introducing a new initiative, get an overview of all existing ones you are already doing. Which strategies and activities are already part of your teaching repertoire? How much time does it take you to set them up and monitor? Think about how the new initiative would complement what you are already doing. Even small tweaks will take some time to think through and prepare. For that reason, anything new that you introduce should have a clear purpose and be a solution to a problem that you want to address.

An example: A couple of years ago, I changed my final slide of my lectures from 'take home messages' to 'take home questions'. On the surface this sounds like a small tweak and while in some way it is, in other ways it required some communication with the students so that they fully understood the purpose for this and how they could benefit from it.

The reason I introduced 'take home questions' was that I wanted to provide students with a first resource for their revision. Instead of re-reading their notes or lecture slides, I instructed them to start with the 'take home questions' and try to answer those from memory as the first step in their revision. In addition, this change also allowed me to think a bit more about which take home questions to add. I wanted to reduce the uncertainty surrounding exams (for example, students being unsure what will be covered) and so I use the take home questions strategically to guide their focus towards the concepts that I want them to be able to explain in their own words.

Seek advice from peers and feedback from the target group

I find it useful to seek advice on new ideas before implementing them because I tend to overstretch myself and take too much on. My first point of contact are my immediate peers. I will present them the rationale for the initiative and how I plan on implementing it. My peers are a group of experienced higher education lecturers who have insight into workload issues, but also expertise in assessment, feedback, and teaching practices. Their advice is invaluable and helps me contextualise a new initiative idea.

When I ask for advice, I will phrase my question in a negative way ("I would like to introduce X. Is this a terrible idea and what can go wrong?") because I am genuinely interested in potential challenges that I haven't anticipated. This allows me to adjust the implementation. Once the new initiative has been implemented, I will obtain

feedback from the target group (often students) and ask them what they thought of the new teaching practice and whether they have any suggestions.

An example: Last semester I introduced Study Club sessions to my Level 2 Psychology students. We would meet fortnightly for 90 minutes and use the Pomodoro technique to work on tasks independently. When I spoke to my peers about it, their main concern with this was workload-related, but they understood the rationale of the approach which was to build a learning community and foster structured working on a task.

The students really loved the Study Club sessions and asked for more. Given the feedback from my peers, I knew that I could not do more sessions. However, when I spoke to the Level 2 student class representatives, they were eager to adopt the Study Club initiative and make it their own. So, this semester all Study Club sessions were student-led and run by the class reps. The uptake has been very positive. This demonstrates the power of seeking feedback from the target group and listening to your peers. Plus, sometimes letting go of something you have initiated can lead to surprising outcomes.

How does the Great Teaching Toolkit help trusts put these ideas into action?

While Carolina works in higher education, these recommendations apply in schools. Leaders using the Great Teaching Toolkit can use the School Environment and Leadership survey to get a clear, benchmarked understanding of their working environment from teachers and teaching assistants (as in the example below) – it's an evidence-based way to reflect on current practice and identify need. The data generated immediately help leaders to reflect and identify areas where things are going well, and where further work might be needed.
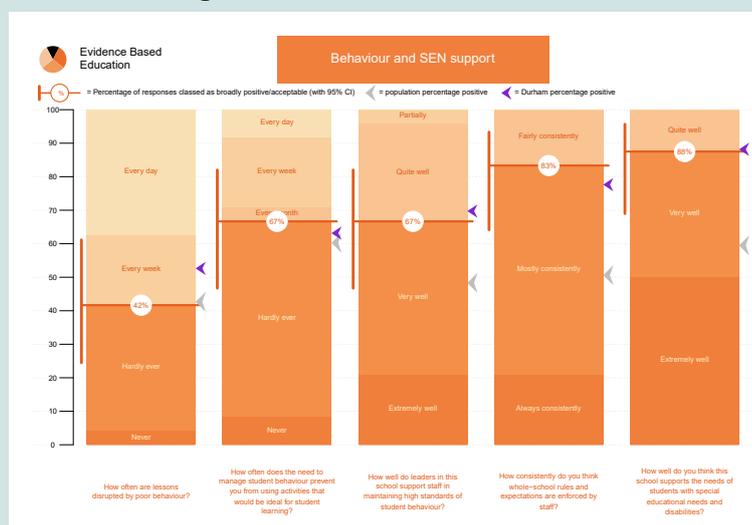
Teachers can reflect on their own practice using student survey data, self-reflections, peer observations, and other tools that help them hold a mirror up to their current practice. Doing so helps a teacher see their strengths and areas for development clearly, ensuring that, as Carolina says, "anything new that you introduce should have a clear purpose and be a solution to a problem that you want to address". Also, by working in Great Teaching Teams, teachers can seek advice from peers, whose expertise they can learn from.

What advice would you give to someone in a school or college who is planning to implement a new programme or initiative?

John Tomsett, author and former headteacher

I was a secondary state school headteacher for 18 years, latterly at Huntington School, York, from 2007-2021. Huntington was one of the first schools designated as an EEF Research School.

In September 2010 we began a singular initiative to improve the quality of teaching and learning. That was an incredibly ambitious initiative, because it meant transforming 112 teachers, three cover supervisors, and 17 teaching assistants into deliberate classroom practitioners, and them accepting the professional obligation to improve their practice.

The right people

We were lucky. We had Alex Quigley working at Huntington, now the EEF's Head of Content and Engagement, as well as people like Julie Kettlewell, the EEF's erstwhile Content Specialist for Learning Behaviours. We also had a governing body that trusted us and allowed us to take risks. This allowed us, between 2010 and 2018, to change all our school structures to accommodate our singular initiative.

Strategy

We had a very simple vision for improving the quality of teaching and learning. If we could maintain the status quo in every aspect of school life from the beginning of one year, to the beginning of the next, but every classroom practitioner engaged successfully in the deliberate process of improving their practice, supported by school structures which provided them with expert, evidence-informed training and sufficient, ring-fenced, sacrosanct directed time to work on improving their practice, we would improve as a school.

Tactics

In September 2010, we began sending home students early from school once a fortnight. That provided 19 two-hour long training sessions, as well as our existing five training days. In 2012, we scheduled eight training days and just didn't tell anyone. In 2013 we focused on just three pedagogic areas: metacognition, how memory is enhanced, and deliberate vocabulary development; we sustained that limited focus for a decade. In 2015 we began our single Performance Management objective of completing a personal inquiry into a specific aspect of our teaching, our Inquiry Question Process (IQP). Everyone involved in teaching pupils to learn had to complete the IQP, including the headteacher, enacting Philipa Cordingley's "reciprocal vulnerability". Importantly, our governors declared that everyone would be awarded their pay rise and that Performance Management would be called Performance Development.

Implementation

Once our structures were in place, to support such change we used the four hurdles concept of the American business management consultancy Blue Ocean Strategy. The four hurdles are: cognitive, resource, motivational, and political. We performed Gary Klein's pre-mortem process (where "team members assume that the project they are planning has just failed and then generate plausible reasons for its demise at the outset, so that the project can be improved rather than autopsied".)

Success measures

So, was our singular initiative implemented successfully? The Sutton Trust's publication _What makes great teaching_ defines "effective teaching as that which leads to improved student achievement using outcomes that matter to their future success." Well, in August 2018 Huntington School's pupils' examination results were the best they had ever been, both at GCSE and A level, in terms of attainment and progress, just eight months after Ofsted had judged the school to be outstanding for the first time in its history.

In 2018 Professor Jonathan Sharples commented to me that what we had achieved at Huntington, in terms of evidence-informed practice, was globally unique. A more detailed account of this story of change can be found in Putting Staff First.

How does the Great Teaching Toolkit help Trusts put these ideas into action?

John and his team recognised that teacher expertise is the key driver of student learning, and that of all the things schools can influence "what teachers know, do, and care about" (Hattie, 2003) has the biggest impact on student outcomes, by some margin (for example, Chetty et al. 2014; Rivkin et al, 2005; Rockoff, 2004).

They also saw that high-quality teaching narrows the attainment gap (Burgess et al, 2022; Slater et al, 2012), that it varies across classrooms and can be developed amongst existing staff.

The Great Teaching Toolkit supports leaders who have made a strategic decision to prioritise the personal professional development of everyone who teaches in their trust. Because teachers have different developmental needs (just like the learners they teach), leaders choose to use the GTT because it responds to individual needs. But leaders like John also recognise the vital importance of investing time in their strategy.

According to the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey, the median reported time spent on continuing professional development by teachers in England is 21-30 hours per year - approximately half an hour a week. That compares with their average working week of about 50 hours in total, about half of which is spent actually teaching. So, if we believe these surveys, roughly 1% of an average teacher's working time is spent in professional development (PD).

On the one hand, any call to get teachers to spend more time doing anything has to be made very cautiously: workload for many is far too high and contributes to challenges of wellbeing, recruitment and retention. On the other hand, half an hour a week on the thing that has the most potential to improve the experience and outcomes of young people does seem far from sufficient. The Great Teaching Toolkit is designed to increase the time teachers spend on professional development, but also reduce their overall workload.

The toolkit helps teachers focus on developing their expertise – the thing that matters most to learners. This means that they build their knowledge (like securing and updating their knowledge of learner motivation and belonging), as well as developing practical classroom techniques that they can try out in their day-to-day work. The main thing always remains the main thing.

What advice would you give to someone in a school or college who is planning to implement a new programme or initiative?

Dr Morgan Polikoff, Professor of Education, University of Southern California

Schools are awash in programs and policies that often fail to achieve their intended goals. Indeed, some would argue that the one-sentence take on why education reforms don't work is "It's all about implementation." So, what can leaders do to increase the likelihood that reforms will stick and work as planned? Here are my suggestions.

Start with a real problem

First, make sure the solution solves a problem that people actually have. Too often in education the solution comes before the problem - there is some innovation out there (perhaps being offered by a researcher or an outside vendor) and the leader wants to apply it, so they push the reform from the top down. But this is no way to get a reform implemented - this is a way to get resentment and resistance from educators and to create a school where multiple conflicting reforms are in play at once. If instead you start with the problem - the real need or challenge - you are more likely to get buy-in and take-up from folks on the ground.

Make teachers' and leaders' lives easier

Second, make sure it makes educators' jobs easier, not harder. Teachers are buried with things that make their jobs more complicated - technologies that are impossible to use; laborious compliance exercises; new outcomes and goals foisted on them from above. These are layered on top of structural challenges like highly heterogeneous classrooms and tightly packed schedules. Teaching is difficult enough when it has relatively narrow goals (like help kids learn maths) and strong supports (high-quality curriculum materials). Reforms that make things even more complicated for teachers are unlikely to be implemented well over time.

Clarity and alignment

Third, make sure the initiative is clear, specific, well supported, and aligned with existing initiatives. School reforms are often a hodgepodge that doesn't fit well together, but if leaders can think about how the set of reforms fit together, they are much more likely to see success. A useful framework for reform is the so-called "policy attributes framework," which suggests that reforms will be better implemented if they:

- are consistent with other reforms happening at the same time
- are coupled with specific guidance and supports to help teachers understand what they are supposed to be doing
- have authority, or buy-in, among those tasked with implementing
- monitored, perhaps with some external accountability (power)
- stable, being implemented over time to avoid "reform fatigue."

Of course, even with these things in place, implementing programmes effectively to achieve intended outcomes is difficult. But with forethought and a coherent approach to reform selection and implementation, the likelihood of better outcomes can be improved.

How does the Great Teaching Toolkit help Trusts put these ideas into action?

Morgan's recommendations echo the other authors' in this paper: identify a real problem people actually have; increase simplicity and reduce workload; clarify how any new initiative fits with existing ones.

Leaders must recognise that they themselves have limited time, money and capacity to create and deliver personalised professional development to teachers across a trust. What they can bring is visible leadership and 'stable' implementation that avoids "reform fatigue". This is where the GTT comes into its own as an evidence-based, learner-centred and workload-aware approach to personalised PD.

Teachers using the Great Teaching Toolkit then have independent access to help, rather than when someone else is available to give it. For example, a teacher can find information on a new teaching technique, or material to help them refresh their understanding of metacognition.

Further reading and resources

- Making Room for Impact: a webinar from EBE with Arran Hamilton and Dylan Wiliam. Hamilton and Wiliam make the case for 'de-implementation' and how educators can focus on impact efficiency.
- The Great Teaching Toolkit: an evidence-based, learner-centred and workload-aware way of implementing teacher development across a Trust.
- The DIIE model: one model to guide Diagnosis / Discovery, Intervention, Implementation, Evaluation.
- The Learning Scientists: Carolina Kuepper-Tetzel is proud to be part of this science communication project that disseminates the science of learning with a focus on how it can be applied to education. They write blog posts, have a podcast, provide downloadable resources, and have written books on the topic. If you have a new initiative idea and are looking to learn more about it, chances are that our website has posts on it or information in relation to it.
- The Teaching Innovation & Learning Enhancement Network (TILE): Carolina founded the TILE Network as a way to bring together stakeholders across educational sectors to discuss best practice in teaching and learning. TILE is mainly an online speaker series that features researchers and teachers who share new teaching initiatives or research on an education-focused topic. All seminars are recorded and can be found on the website. If you have implemented a new initiative and want to share it, TILE could be the platform to do so. TILE are particularly looking to represent more voices from the primary and secondary education sectors.

School Improvement Hub

CST and ImpactEd Group are working together to collate examples of school improvement practices used by trusts, freely shared to help schools across the country. If your trust has work that aligns with our conceptual framework for trust-led improvement, please visit the website for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.

schoolimprovementhub.org

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