

LEADING THE LAUNCH

**A Ten-Stage
Process for
Successful
District
Initiatives**

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Introduction

There is no institution more noble or essential to our collective well-being as a society than K–12 education. And the educators within are the inventors, innovators, guardians, champions, and challengers of convention. We are the quintessential optimists hoping for a better future. That hope, when coupled with purposeful intention and strategic action, levels the playing field for progress toward increased equity, social justice, and economic welfare for all.

This is not Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1972), devoid of conflict, struggle, or dissension; rather, it's an experiment by which we constantly strive for improvement, achievement, and success. That continual effort is taking place in classrooms, teachers' lounges, principals' offices, district board rooms, families' kitchen tables, and virtual environments. In many ways, we are connected like never before, peering into a future so many of us desire to harness, design, and transform into new ways of living, learning, and working. Much like the birth of widespread public education in the 19th century, we are experiencing a unique and precious opportunity for a rebirth of our cherished educational system to improve the lives of today's and tomorrow's children as well as the world they will inherit.

One of the most common shared experiences around the world is going to school. We learned to color between the lines. In some cultures, we are trained to stand still and wait our turn. We memorize the multiplication tables. We sing the alphabet song and take spelling tests. We eat bagged lunches from home and tater tots in the cafeteria, and play hopscotch or other games at recess. We are told to raise our hands before speaking. Many of our childhood memories and stories last with us forever.

Schools everywhere are profoundly embedded in our collective fabric. It's not an exaggeration to proclaim that we've all done school in certain ways pretty much forever. And for those of us who have chosen to *do school* as a profession, we're faced with upholding revered customs while also spearheading transformation to move society

forward. Most educators, by nature, have generous hearts, inquisitive minds, and active hands. Most of us have chosen the profession (or the profession has chosen us) because we deeply care about the future and want to contribute to the betterment of society.

THE INS AND OUTS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Anyone who has worked in the field of education for more than a few years has seen myriad initiatives come and go. As district office or site leadership changes, teachers often brace themselves for some fresh “flavor of the month” while waiting for “this too, to pass.” Though this recurring cycle may feel somewhat inevitable—as leaders have differing visions, passions, and philosophies—what does *not* have to be inevitable is the process by which initiatives are introduced and infused into school or district.

Each new school year, the system bursts with promising projects, pilots, propositions, programs, personnel, plans, plots, platforms, procedures, and policies. Integrating these innovations into the curriculum requires a substantial amount of effort—pedagogically, physically, and psychologically—and school conditions for making these changes are not always the best. Protecting the status quo is not always intentional, but challenging it takes courage.

It is from these optimistic mindsets and orientations that education leaders generate ideas and plans to improve student learning and well-being. Good intentions, however, are not enough. We can want what’s best, but if we forsake the necessary planning, there are no guarantees. There are many practical and philosophical questions to answer in our attempts to successfully launch a new initiative. By instilling a process to vet potential proposals, we can filter through the *just OK* and *good* ideas and get to the *great* ones. It’s really all about implementation.

To help you further understand the definition of *implementation* in contrast to other ways an initiative might filter throughout a school or district, Aaron Lyon (2017) delineates the following nuances:

Implementation can be thought about in comparison to other ways that innovations spread in organizations. Diffusion refers to passive, unplanned, and untargeted spread of information or interventions. Dissemination refers to targeted distribution of information and intervention materials to a specific audience. Dissemination activities typically focus on improving a practice or policy audience’s knowledge and awareness. However, dissemination is not enough to change professional behavior. In contrast, implementation means using deliberate strategies in specific settings to adopt new interventions, integrate them effectively, and change practice patterns. (p. 1)

The concepts of *dissemination* and *diffusion* as nonexemplars shine a light on the deliberateness of the verb *to implement*. While the previous two terms may have some agency and consciousness involved, the latter has a more active purpose behind changing behaviors. Furthermore, the word *implement* can be used as a noun or verb. As a noun, *implement* means a “tool, utensil, or other piece of equipment, especially as used for a particular purpose” (Lexico, n.d.). As a verb, *implement* means “to put a decision, plan, or agreement into effect” (Lexico, n.d.). Both definitions are essential to executing an initiative. One must have the right *tools* in place to hit the targets for *action*.

But first, let’s take a look at what constitutes a new initiative. The term *new* can actually involve a combination of scenarios. It might be something that:

- Has never been done before
- Has been tried in the past, but not for many years
- Currently exists, but significant changes are being considered
- Is widespread, large scale, or will affect many stakeholders
- Requires resources above and beyond what is currently budgeted or planned for (human resources, materials, professional development, time, funding)

How long should all of this take? It depends. Smaller initiatives could be completed within a few months, while larger ones might be a year or longer. Since some stages will take longer than others, depending on the circumstances, the adage *go slow to go fast* should drive the timeline.

This practical guide sets forth a course of action to implement new initiatives effectively into schools and districts that will stand the test of time. School leaders and district office administrators alike will benefit from learning ways to break through existing barriers, vet potential ideas, and create strategic plans for the effective execution of innovative tools, programs, or protocols in service to students. Initiatives can range from instructional endeavors, such as infusing college and career readiness into the core curriculum or altering a middle school schedule to allow for science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) opportunities, to an institutional change in practice or process, such as adopting a new student information system or districtwide discipline policy. Establishing a set of checks and balances for new initiatives will not only streamline the implementation, but result in a higher-quality product, program, or practice.

Employing realistic case studies, examples, and scenarios to connect to familiar experiences, I pose solutions to common dilemmas and offer procedural approaches to overcome challenges. You will gain a deeper understanding of change management

theory, learn research-based methods to address challenges, and acquire practical templates, models, and frameworks for immediate use in your school.

This book outlines a protocol consisting of ten stages to successfully implement new initiatives. The first three stages include researching and vetting the idea, pitching the proposal, and determining priorities. Curiosity, inquiry, and study dominate this stage. Sentence starters like, “What if we . . .,” “How might we . . .,” and “Can we consider . . .” prompt open-ended thinking about the topic at hand. This is the laboratory where many ideas fail to thrive—and that’s a good thing. We want only the potentially fittest to survive.

The next three stages involve testing out the proof of concept through designing a prototype and piloting it on a limited scale. Once the pilot period is underway, the leadership team solicits feedback from stakeholders and collects data for analysis. The team should employ multiple measures to reduce the potential for a biased outcome that doesn’t authentically reflect the true pros and cons of the initiative.

Then it’s decision-making time. After presenting the findings, the leadership team collectively decides to green-light, yellow-light, or red-light the project. While yellow-lighting and red-lighting may kick the initiative back to an earlier stage or stop it in its tracks, respectively, a green-lighted initiative will proceed to the final stages in the process to bolster success. Professional development, clear and frequent communication, and ongoing support will help embed the fledgling initiative into practice. Figure I.1 (page XX) shows an overview of the ten-stage process.

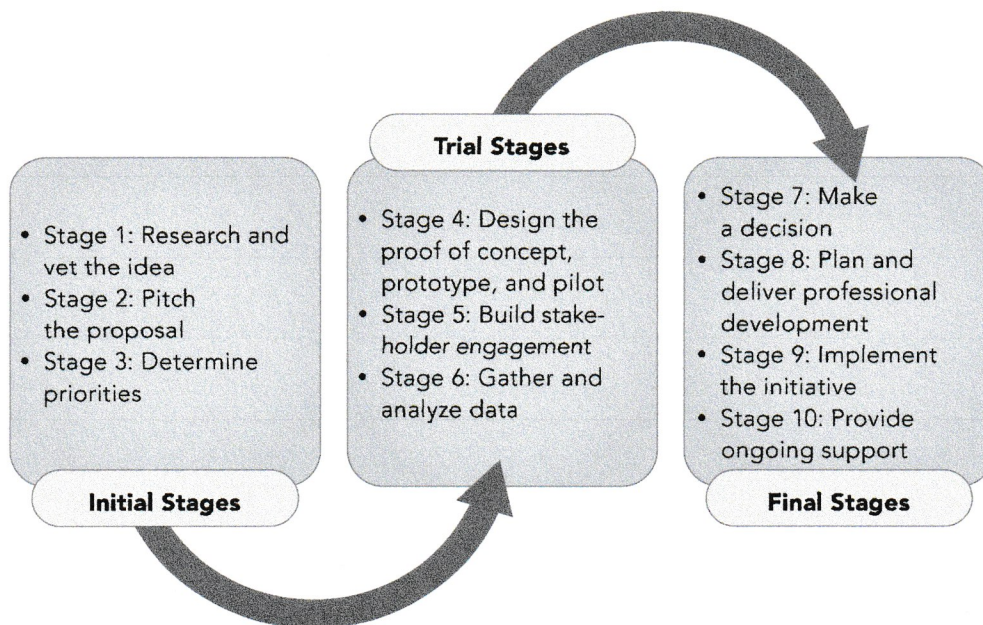


Figure I.1: Ten stages of the initiative implementation process.

Before even entertaining a new initiative, one should examine the motivation for doing so. Sometimes it's plainly a mandate such as the following.

- Legislation stipulates that all school districts add an ethnic studies course to their high school graduation requirements.
- A civil rights lawsuit is settled by requiring all staff to be trained in gender spectrum awareness.
- The curriculum and instruction department must institute new state-adopted social science resources to meet the 2011 Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act.

In other situations, a district or state may impose an initiative from the outside, such as sanctions being levied on a district by the state's department of education for persistently low student achievement scores or having an unbalanced budget. Addressing these situations is not optional and, although they may have a different kind of pressure and intensity, leadership teams can approach them similarly to an elected initiative.

Intrinsically driven motives, on the other hand, may include voluntarily and willingly enhancing or altering programs or services for students and staff. For example:

- To cut costs, the technology advisory committee is recommending going from three separate yet overlapping communication services down to one.
- The elementary-level Spanish dual immersion program is spread across the district and would like to consolidate at a single site instead.
- The district's student support services department is interested in moving from site-based paper forms to centralized online enrollment.

All these initiatives are worthy pursuits, even if not compulsory. Whether the arena is a school site or district office, the options we select will have a long-lasting effect. The initiatives inherited from our predecessors are a bit of a different animal than those we develop from scratch, however. Sometimes intervention is the operating system needed when stepping into an initiative already underway. When crafting one's own initiatives, however, many pitfalls can be avoided by following a series of preplanned stages.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

The precursor to getting started is first untangling the roots of why educational initiatives can flounder in the first place. There are deep undercurrents related to the adoption of new products and practices in the field of education. Peggy Ertmer (1999), identifies two orders of barriers to technology integration in the classroom: (1) *first-order barriers*—equipment, resources, and support and (2) *second-order barriers*—knowledge,

skills, beliefs, and attitudes. While Ertmer (1999) developed this theory specifically to technological adoptions, we can broaden and apply it to new initiatives requiring shifts in materials, mindsets, and organizational culture. Although this theory is dated and technology has advanced exponentially since 1999, it still holds true.

First-order barriers may include procuring external resources (for example, adequate numbers of devices, consumables, professional development, coaching, or technical support), while second-order barriers present intrinsic obstacles to effective integration (for example, opinions, feelings, past experiences, and perceptions). These two barriers can be focused down to *skill* and *will*—just as has been widely applied to research on teacher efficacy and student learning. *Skill* is akin to knowing how to do something and being able to do it well, while *will* is about one's attitude toward learning. When students are faced with new tasks or concepts and exhibit resistance, it can be helpful to find out if skill, will, or both are in play. Adults, likewise, bring their own unique and varying levels of openness to new concepts as well as abilities to adapt their former routines into novel approaches. In 2005, Ertmer expanded on her research by noting: "Three strategies seem to hold particular promise for promoting change in teacher beliefs about teaching and learning, in general, and beliefs about technology, specifically: (a) personal experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, and (c) social-cultural influences" (p. 32). These aspects also influence educators' receptiveness and affinity to new initiatives as well.

Robyn Jackson (2013) developed several tools to illustrate how skill and will intersect, one of which is displayed in table I.1 (page XX).

Table I.1: Skill or Will

Teacher Type	Characteristics	Looks Like
Low Skill and High Will	Enthusiastic; idealistic; unwilling to learn	Seeks feedback and explores new strategies and ideas, but implementation is inconsistent and ineffective
Low Skill and Low Will	Discouraged; not invested; "retired on the job"	Does not volunteer or contribute; passive; tries to stay beneath the radar
High Skill and High Will	Motivated and skillful	Easily identifies and implements appropriate strategies; explores new ideas, seeks feedback, and refines practice; takes on challenges
High Skill and Low Will	Skillful but disinterested; "has seen it all"	Unreceptive to feedback; resists efforts to try new approaches; saboteur

Source: Jackson, 2013, p.15.

First- and second-order barriers don't exist in a vacuum, but rather within a school or district's context, culture, and history. *Third-order barriers* (for example, pressure to cover the curriculum or teach to the test, fixed bell schedules, negotiated labor contracts, or parent or community expectations) can create additional hurdles (Wallace, 2012). While teachers and administrators often have some locus of control over first- and second-order barriers, third-order barriers can transcend their influence. Furthermore, the environment itself may need to change or an otherwise fruitful endeavor may wither on the vine. Mastering first-, second-, and third-order barriers requires a conscious knowledge that change management is the driver and that the road ahead has many curves.

IN THIS BOOK

This book will walk you through the ten stages of the initiative implementation process. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 outline the initial stages of researching and vetting, developing and pitching the proposal, and determining its placement and prioritization in the overall scheme of a school or district. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 contain the key ingredients for designing the proof of concept, prototype, and pilot; building stakeholder engagement; and gathering and analyzing data.

After the first six stages of the new initiative process are complete, chapter 7 tackles the “to be or not to be” culminating decision to push the plan forward, slow it down, or shelve it. Once a proposal is approved, the final three stages are put into motion. Chapter 8 attends to the clear communication of professional development plans prior to the actual implementation process, which is outlined in chapter 9, and its need for ongoing support, outlined in chapter 10. To help districts and schools balance and sustain their most impactful initiatives, the epilogue delves into eliminating ineffective and outdated programs to make room for systemwide growth and concludes with a summary of the ten-stage process.

Although the ten stages are described sequentially in the upcoming chapters, they are not meant to be lockstep or set in stone. If we've learned anything in our collective years as educators, it's that very little is ever completely predictable, and the ability to pivot to respond to evolving times and changing conditions is paramount to progress. You may choose to combine certain phases or execute them simultaneously depending on different variables or conditions in your own unique environment. The leadership charge in front of us calls for ingenuity, teamwork, responsiveness, and flexibility. But most of all—passion.

Perfection is a process, not a destination. One initiative at a time.

Educators can use this guide in a myriad of ways. It's ideal for a team book study or a handbook for administrators to advance their schools and districts to the next

level. It includes strategies, tools, examples, and case studies throughout the book to help you at each stage of the process.

Finally, to help you organize and hit the benchmarks throughout the process, the end of each chapter presents an action plan with a checklist and reproducibles to guide and document the work toward your specific initiative. It's a great way to track your progress in a snapshot and communicate the level of thoughtfulness and due diligence the team exerts to bring this important program, policy, process, or practice to life in your school or district.

Following is an overview of what's included in this book.

- **Process:** A set of procedures to lead to desired goals and outcomes in the new initiative implementation process
- **Case studies:** Hypothetical scenarios that illustrate the stages in the context of a variety of education settings
- **Stages:** Ten sequential stages containing the overarching ingredients to advance you through the implementation process via short-term discrete actions
- **Action Plan Checklists and Reproducibles:** Models, templates, charts, and reproducibles to be adopted, adapted, or improved on for use in your own school or district, and help guide you through the process

INTRODUCTION ACTION PLAN: CHECKLIST AND REPRODUCIBLES

The following checklist and reproducibles help you apply what you learned in this chapter and move forward to the next stage of the initiative implementation process.

- ☐ Define your new initiative in a few sentences (elevator pitch).
- ☐ Determine whether it is externally or internally initiated and how that may affect your approach.
- ☐ Examine and call out the three barrier levels that may exist in your school or district related to this implementation.