Plain language summary

Australian Education Research Organisation

Explainer

Addressing enablers and barriers to implementation

August 2024

Enablers and barriers show what's working well and what's getting in the way when implementing evidence-based practices. Tailoring implementation in response to the enablers and barriers in a school increases the likelihood of implementation success. The priority with this component of implementation is to leverage a school's enablers and reduce barriers to implementation.

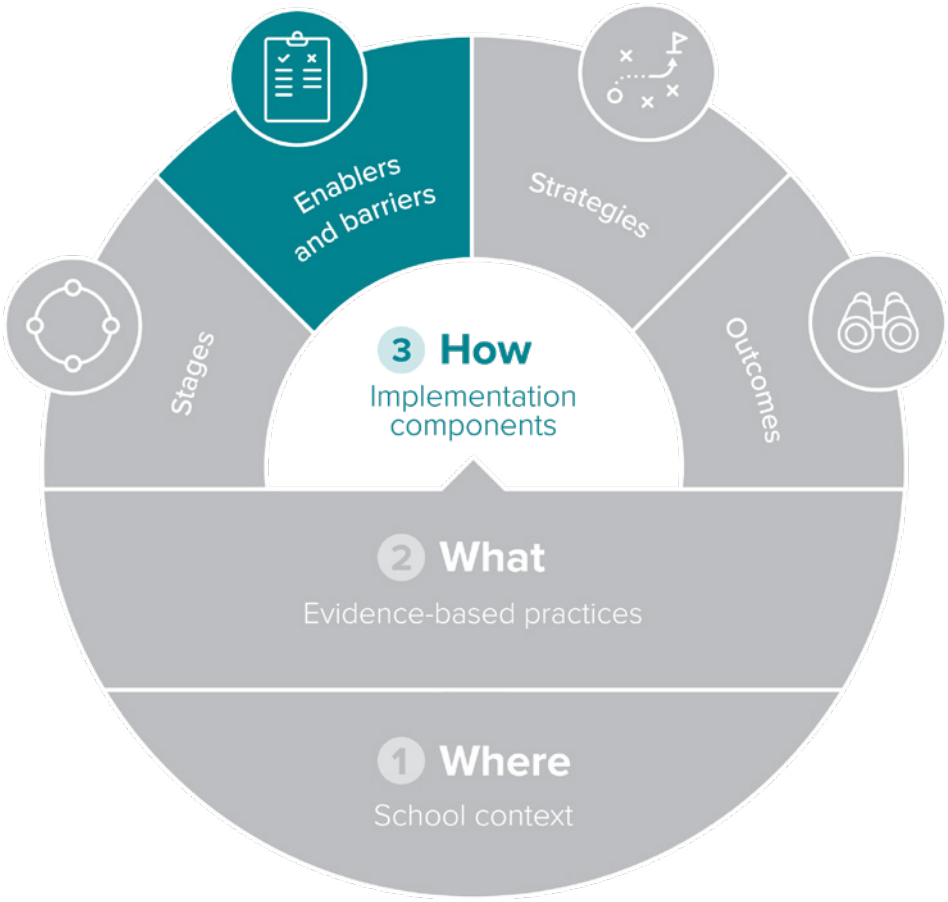
This explainer is one in a series of 5 that outlines the key components of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. The series includes:

- taking an evidence-informed approach to implementation (overview)
- using a staged approach (implementation component 1)
- addressing enablers and barriers (implementation component 2)
- using key implementation strategies (implementation component 3)
- monitoring implementation outcomes (implementation component 4).

School leaders can use these explainers to engage with the key research and ideas that underpin effective implementation. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is working with schools to learn more about implementation in different contexts, and we intend to share insights as our understanding deepens.

Addressing enablers and barriers is one component of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Implementing well in schools – Using a deliberate and structured approach to the implementation of evidence-based practices



Key points

- Enablers and barriers help schools determine what's helping and getting in the way of implementation.
- Enablers and barriers will be school-specific and can change over time, so working to increase enablers helps schools with the evidence-based practice they're currently implementing, as well as future implementation efforts.
- There's great value in all teachers and staff who are involved in implementation discussing and suggesting actions to address current barriers and strengthen enablers.
- Enablers and barriers can be assessed during different stages of implementation and linked with implementation strategies and implementation outcomes.

The importance of enablers and barriers in implementation

Each time an evidence-based practice is implemented, enablers and barriers will be present. These can either help (enablers) or hinder (barriers) the implementation process and its overall success. Understanding exactly what's acting as an enabler or barrier within a school context is useful, but being prepared to *respond* to this information is key to effective implementation.

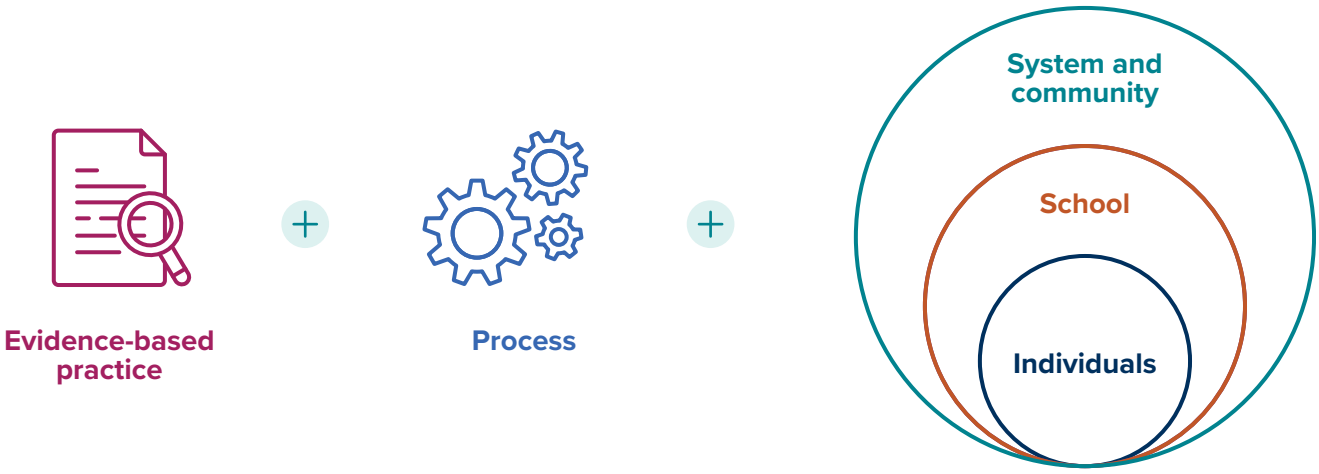
Each school has implementation enablers and barriers specific to their own setting that influence the success of implementation (Damschroder et al., 2022). Enablers and barriers will change over time and with the specific evidence-based practice being implemented.

Use a framework for enablers and barriers

In implementation research, enablers and barriers are sometimes referred to as 'determinants'. This language highlights that an enabler in one context may be a barrier in another context (e.g., the evidence-based practice may be supported within one school and is, therefore, an enabler, but may not be supported in another school and is, therefore, a barrier). Determinants can also shift from being barriers to enablers over time.

There are frameworks that collate common implementation determinants, and these can be used by schools to identify and understand the enablers and barriers in their context. The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) is one of the most used determinant frameworks (Damschroder et al., 2022). CFIR presents 39 determinants within 5 domains that influence implementation (Figure 2) and creates a shared language for understanding these. It includes determinants from a range of 19 frameworks or related theories across 13 scientific disciplines.

Figure 2: Representation of the 5 CFIR domains



Using a determinant framework can help schools consider the people and processes implementation will rely on and allow for consideration of implementation from multiple perspectives. Each determinant, by having a specific, narrow focus, can be useful for promoting targeted planning and action to support implementation. It should be noted, however, that not all determinants should be used at one time – given the difficulty of monitoring all determinants at once – and that schools should carefully select and tailor each determinant selected to their context. Table 1 shows example determinants for each CFIR domain, and provides some considerations that schools may use when planning for, or during, implementation.

Table 1: Example implementation considerations for schools aligned with adapted CFIR domains and determinants

Domain	Example determinants with short description	Example considerations for schools
Evidence-based practice	• **Evidence strength and quality:** Stakeholders' perceptions of the quality and validity of evidence supporting the belief that the practice will have desired outcomes. • **Complexity:** Perceived difficulty of implementing the practice.	• How has the potential benefit and impact of the evidence-based practice been explained, including the underlying evidence to support it? • To what extent have the key steps required to implement the practice been explained and made available to staff?
Process	• **Planning:** The degree to which implementation activities are planned, and the quality of the activities. • **Reflecting and evaluating:** Feedback about the progress and quality of implementation, and regular debriefing about progress and experience.	• How well-described and understood are the implementation actions and activities? • How is feedback about implementation captured and discussed among staff? How is this information used to strengthen implementation?
System and community	• **Student needs and resources:** The extent to which student needs are accurately known and prioritised. • **External policy and incentives**: Alignment between the evidence-based practice and policy settings (e.g., government or system policies, guidelines, support materials).	• What data do we have (e.g., from students, their work, their families, teacher observations) about student needs, and how will the practice address these? • How is the evidence-based practice reflected in external policies and guidance?
School	• **Implementation climate:** The capacity for, and structures to, support change within a school. • **Available resources:** The level of resources dedicated to implementation, including money, training, physical space and time.	• What systems and structures will support changing practice in our school (e.g., an established coaching system)? • How can we reprioritise existing resources to support implementation?
Individuals	• **Knowledge and beliefs about the intervention:** Individuals' attitudes toward and value placed on the practice, as well as knowledge of the practice. • **Self-efficacy:** Individual belief in their own capabilities to take action to achieve implementation goals.	• To what degree do staff believe in the evidence-based practice, and its role in addressing a challenge that's relevant to the school? • Are staff ready for, and supported to, change their practice?

Aligning enablers and barriers with stages and implementation outcomes

To understand what the current implementation enablers and barriers are, schools can adapt a determinant framework (such as CFIR) to select and edit the statements that are most relevant for their implementation process. When determinant statements have been selected, those who are leading the implementation can plan for how they will capture the views of the staff participating in the implementation process. This may take the form of:

- a survey where staff can indicate whether the statement is an 'enabler', 'barrier' or 'neutral' from their perspective
- an activity where individual or small groups of staff rank statements as enablers or barriers
- a discussion where staff are prompted to share their perspectives of which determinants are enablers, barriers, or neither and provide examples from their experience.

Regardless of the format, all of the statements should be discussed and defined so staff have a shared understanding and can consider how it is relevant to them.

Once enablers and barriers have been identified, it's critical that schools use this information to plan for how to address them. This is another process that all staff involved in implementation can be part of by discussing examples of what the enablers and barriers look like in their classroom and practice, and by generating practical ways to overcome barriers and continue to support enablers.

It's important to note that not all barriers can be overcome at once – 2 to 3 barriers are likely a realistic number to focus on at any given time. Additionally, schools may have limited influence over resolving some barriers (e.g., those related to external policies). In this case, schools can instead look for what they can work towards improving, and continue to leverage their enablers. Staff can provide insights into their perceptions and experiences of the enablers and barriers, and which barriers they believe should be prioritised.

When enablers and barriers have been identified and prioritised, and staff have had the opportunity to suggest how they might be addressed, leaders can consider the strategy (e.g., coaching and modelling) they might use to reduce or remove a barrier. For example, if low acceptability of the evidence-based practice is a barrier, the leadership team may use professional learning and modelling as implementation strategies – they could delve into the robust evidence underpinning the practice and seek modelling from an expert teacher so teachers can see the practice in action, in their context, to help counter the barrier.

Aligning enablers and barriers with implementation stages

Enablers and barriers provide an indication of what's working and what's getting in the way of implementation at any given time in a school. They can be applied at the 4 stages of implementation:

- In the Explore stage, schools may consider potential enablers and barriers when identifying a goal for improvement and the evidence-based practice they want to implement.
- In the Prepare stage, schools can assess current barriers and enablers and identify the activities they'll use to respond to specific barriers and enablers, then include these in their detailed implementation plans.
- In the Deliver stage, schools may draw on enablers and barriers to monitor implementation progress and adjust implementation strategies and activities as needed.
- In the Sustain stage, schools can use enablers and barriers data collected to determine how successful the implementation has been, and what future implementation plans might entail (Means et al., 2020).

Monitoring enablers and barriers doesn't necessarily mean repeating the activity over and over. Instead, schools could consider what overcoming a barrier might look like and working backwards using reflective questions such as:

- What would this barrier look like if it was an enabler?
- What are the steps needed to overcome this barrier?
- What data would show we've made progress on this barrier?

Enablers and barriers in practice

Enablers and barriers are one of the 4 components of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. AERO is working with schools to learn more about the deliberate and structured approach to implementing evidence-based practices in the Learning Partner project.

The AERO Learning Partner project

In preparation for working with Learning Partner schools, AERO drew on the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) to develop a shortlist of likely enablers and barriers for schools implementing explicit instruction.

The shortlist includes 24 determinants that have been tailored to explicit instruction and the Learning Partner project. The shortlist was developed from:

- wider research literature on evidence use, school improvement and explicit instruction
- AERO findings (for example, the evidence use baseline and an internal desktop review of perceptions of the science of learning)
- discussions with school leaders of Learning Partner schools.

This shortlist of determinants uses school staff-friendly language based on a published plain language version of the CFIR (Piat et al., 2021). Table 2 presents examples of determinants for each domain that have been used in the Learning Partner project.

Table 2: Example determinants used in the Learning Partner project

Domain	Example determinants used in the Learning Partner project
Evidence-based practice	• I think explicit instruction is based on strong research. • I believe explicit instruction is simple to use in the classroom.
Process	• Our school has a plan for implementing explicit instruction. It includes clear steps and timelines. • Having an identified member of our school staff as the Implementation Coordinator supports us in implementing explicit instruction.
System and community	• Policies, guidelines or incentives from our education department support implementation of explicit instruction. • I believe that our students' families support this style of explicit teaching.
School	• Our school has a climate of continuous improvement where teachers feel empowered and supported to try new things. • I think our school has the resources (for example, time, classroom resources and classroom layout) available to successfully implement explicit instruction. • The way my immediate teaching team operates will make it easy to implement explicit instruction.
Individuals	• I think it is really important to use explicit instruction in my teaching. • I have the skills to use explicit instruction in my teaching.

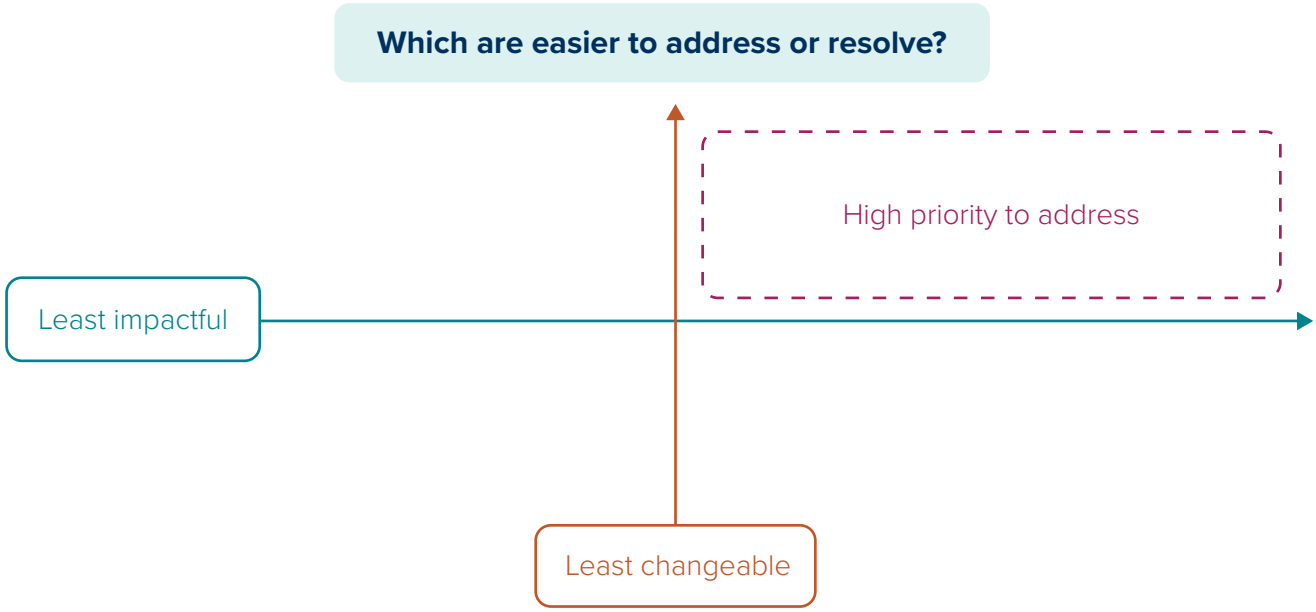
An activity for identifying and planning to address enablers and barriers in Learning Partner schools

In Term 1 of the Learning Partner project, determinant statements were transferred into an online platform where teachers and leaders could anonymously select whether they believed each statement was an enabler, barrier or neutral.

All teachers and leaders who were part of the project and implementing explicit instruction in their school completed the survey during a professional learning session. The collated results were shown in the same session so everyone could see the most common enablers and barriers, and where responses were mixed and needed further exploration. The responses were discussed as a whole group before breaking into small groups.

During the discussion, a decision matrix with 4 quadrants was used to map a school's enablers and barriers from 'highly impactful, high probability for change' to 'least impactful, least probability for change' (see Figure 3 for an example of the mapping tool used).

Figure 3: Tool used to help schools prioritise enablers and barriers to address



Smaller groups were then formed to discuss specific enablers and barriers in more detail. Each group selected at least one barrier and one enabler. They then provided examples of what these looked like and generated ideas and actions that would reduce barriers and strengthen enablers.

Following this session, the leadership team selected one or 2 key enablers and barriers and committed to actions they would work on by a set date. These were recorded in the school's implementation plan and the activity was repeated in Term 3 to track progress against identified enablers and barriers.

Enablers and barriers at St William's School

St William's School is a Catholic primary school in Brisbane that has 454 students and 31 teaching staff. It has an Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 1,109 and 7% of students have a language background other than English. St William's is a Learning Partner school.

In the 2023 Learning Partner project, St William's School focused on implementing explicit instruction in writing for Years 4 to 6.

Early in Term 2, teachers at St William's were asked to respond to a series of statements to help determine the enablers and barriers to implementing explicit instruction at their school. The collated data revealed a barrier for the statement: 'We believe our school has structures in place to support implementation of evidence-based teaching practices'.

The discussion that followed indicated that this was a barrier for teachers because they valued the release time they were currently receiving to engage with the implementation of explicit instruction but were concerned the release time might not continue beyond 2023 and implementing explicit instruction would become an 'add on' to their teaching load.

The leadership team and the AERO Implementation Consultant discussed a range of ways to respond to this barrier. They decided to try a new structured approach to coaching, with the view to embed it over time. This new structured approach to coaching included the school's Implementation Coordinator observing a teacher for a designated part of a lesson. The teacher and coordinator then met for 15 minutes to discuss feedback against specific criteria, such as how often success criteria were referred to during the lesson and what strategies teachers used to check for student understanding during guided practice. A school leader or co-teacher covered the class during this time.

This coaching structure meant the coordinator could coach all participating teachers at least once a fortnight, and teachers felt supported in trying explicit instruction in their classrooms and could quickly see their growth.

As the year progressed, the leadership team wanted to survey teachers to determine how the enablers and barriers had changed over time. When they completed the activity again in Term 3, the survey showed that this was seen as less of a barrier than previously. The school has continued with this structured approach to coaching and is sustaining explicit instruction in writing in 2024.

Figure 3: Discussing implementation enablers and barriers

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AERO would like to acknowledge the contribution of every school we've worked with on the Learning Partner project, particularly the Implementation Coordinators in each school. We especially thank the team at St William's School for sharing their experience of addressing implementation enablers and barriers.

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