

Discussion paper

# Insights into implementation

What AERO is learning alongside schools about implementing evidence-based practices

August 2024



**The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.**

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### Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

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**Understanding the effective implementation of evidence-based practices in schools is a critical step to maximising educational outcomes for all students. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has been working closely with a small number of schools to learn about implementation in their settings and pilot an approach that has been informed by implementation research. This discussion paper shares early insights from our work with these schools.**

## **Implementation is important**

Schools and systems are increasingly drawing on evidence-based practices in their efforts to improve learning outcomes for all students. However, just knowing about evidence-based practices is not enough for schools to implement them effectively. The ‘how’ of implementation is just as important as ‘what’ is being implemented.

Implementation is defined as a deliberate series of planned and intentional activities aimed at integrating an evidence-based practice into real-world service settings (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017). For schools, it means being intentional about how an evidence-based practice is used and sustained across classrooms. In reality, implementation is complex and often not well understood. This is highlighted by the estimated 17 years it takes for what we ‘know’ about effective practice from research to become what we ‘do’ in common practice (Robinson et al., 2020). To close this ‘know-do’ gap, we still have much to learn and share about effective implementation.

Research has found that implementation often fails because of an overreliance on one implementation strategy, inadequately addressing barriers or using approaches that are too complex (Lewis et al., 2018). Implementation challenges specific to education are that the tools to support implementation either lack detail or are too complex, insufficient attention to school context and a lack of focus on sustaining implementation efforts over time (Moore et al., 2024).

Implementation is essential for enhancing teaching practice and, ultimately, achieving the best learning outcomes for all students, but there is still work to be done to learn about effective implementation and address the challenges faced by schools.



## Implementation and AERO

AERO's vision is for Australia to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence. One of the ways we support this vision is by encouraging the adoption and effective implementation of evidence in practice.

As part of the broader Australian education community, we:

- advocate for and support the use of evidence and evidence-based practices
- partner with schools and systems to provide direct support for implementing these evidence-based practices
- intentionally learn about implementation from these partnerships
- share insights on what we are learning about implementation back into the education community.

We are working with a small number of schools in our Learning Partner project to learn about a deliberate and structured approach to implementing evidence-based practices in different school contexts, and we are committed to sharing what we learn over time.

### A deliberate and structured approach to implementation

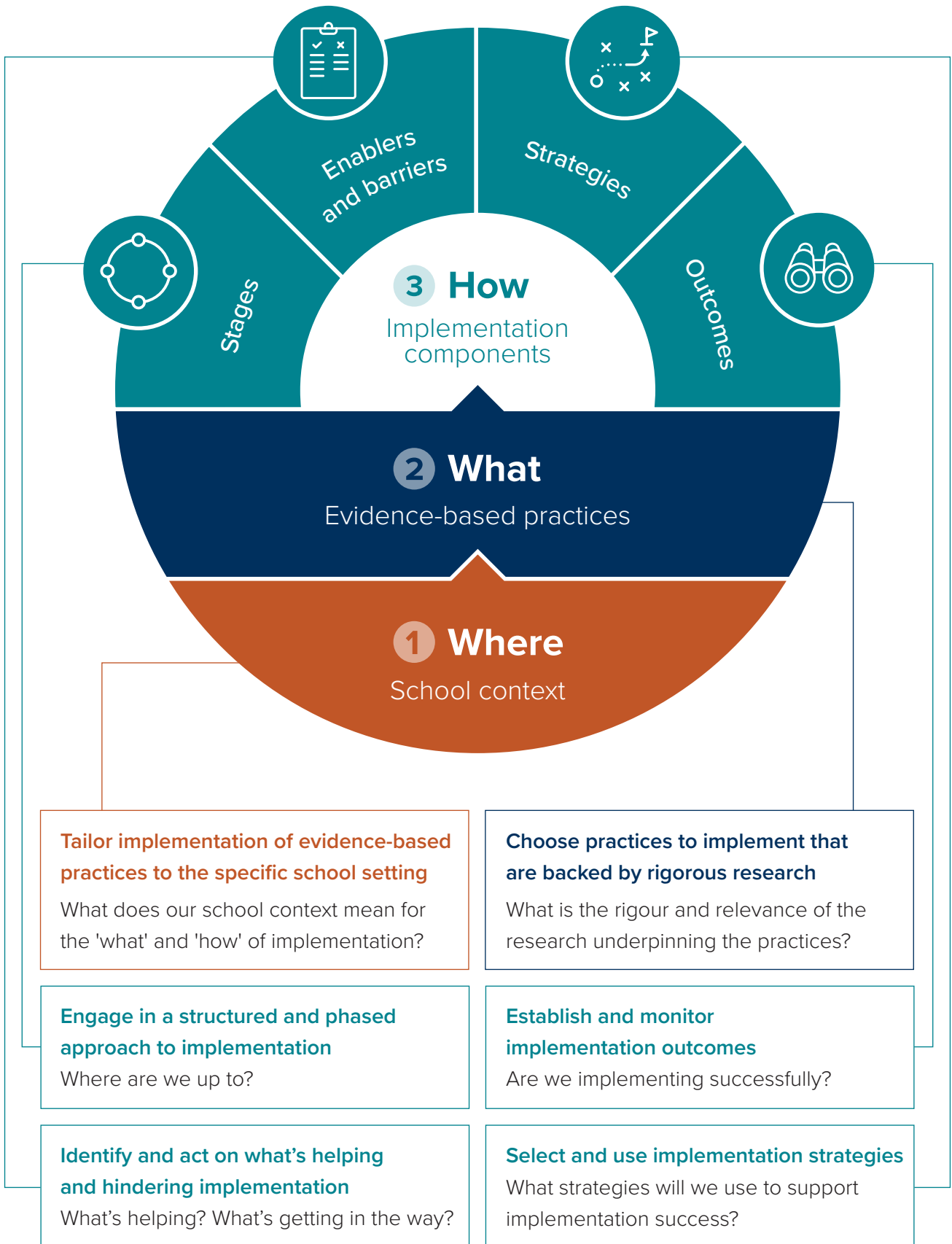
We have developed a deliberate and structured approach to implementation by identifying and operationalising key concepts from implementation research (see [Figure 1](#)).

*Deliberate* refers to intentionally committing to and planning for the implementation process, while *structured* means using reliable components systematically to inform the process of implementation.

The ideas in this approach draw on seminal implementation research and frameworks, with careful consideration about what the approach includes to support schools to engage in effective implementation.

A deliberate and structured approach to implementation begins with school context (where), includes an evidence-based practice (what) and relies on 4 implementation components (how).

**Figure 1:** A deliberate and structured approach to implementing evidence-based practice in schools



## 1 Where: School context

All schools are different, so implementation must be tailored to ensure it is responsive to each school's context. Context can be defined as the many unique factors that influence a specific implementation effort, rather than just a backdrop for implementation (Damschroder et al., 2009). Tailoring to school context can include addressing implementation barriers, selecting appropriate implementation strategies or identifying the measures to monitor implementation outcomes.

## 2 What: Evidence-based practice

Using evidence-based practices is core to a deliberate approach to implementation as they provide a good indication of what is likely to be effective for students' learning.<sup>1</sup> There is confidence in the rigour of the research and findings that underpin evidence-based practices, and they have been shown to work for students in different contexts with different demographics<sup>2</sup> (AERO, 2023). Ideally, schools adopt an evidence-based practice to implement in response to a challenge they want to address.

## 3 How: Implementation components

There are 4 components that form part of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. These components are used together throughout implementation and rely on each other – no one component is more important than another.



### Use a staged approach

Implementation is not a one-off event and can instead be thought of in stages that build upon each other (Saldana et al., 2012; Meyers et al., 2012; Albers & Pattuwage, 2017).

Our approach to implementation draws on Evidence for Learning (E4L)'s 4 stages of implementation: Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain (E4L, 2019). Stages help schools plan for key activities and decisions as they implement an evidence-based practice.



### Address enablers and barriers

Every implementation process will experience factors that can help or hinder the successful uptake of an evidence-based practice. Enablers and barriers help schools identify what is working and what is getting in the way of implementation so they can target how they respond.

1 See AERO's [model of learning and teaching](#) for the most effective and efficient teaching practices aligned with how students learn.  
2 AERO's [Standards of Evidence](#) provide an overview of different evidence types and considerations for use. Aligned [practice guides](#) support the use of research evidence to strengthen practice decisions in schools.



Our implementation approach adapts the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al., 2022). It is a common framework for identifying enablers and barriers and can be helpful for considering the many different areas or ‘domains’ that influence implementation, such as:

- the evidence-based practice itself
- the practical process of implementation
- individuals’ responsiveness and beliefs
- school-wide values, systems and processes
- community and system support and alignment.



### Select implementation strategies

Implementation strategies are the actions that support the implementation of an evidence-based practice. These can include creating an implementation plan, holding regular progress meetings, modelling and coaching.

Our implementation approach uses implementation strategies from the SISTER compilation, which is the School Implementation Strategies, Translating ERIC Resources<sup>3</sup> (Waltz et al., 2019). SISTER highlights 75 implementation strategies across 9 domains (e.g., adapt and tailor to context, train and educate stakeholders). Understanding the breadth of strategies available can help schools consider the combination most suited to their context and the practice being implemented, rather than only relying on well-known strategies.



### Monitor implementation outcomes

Implementation outcomes help schools consider how their implementation of an evidence-based practice is tracking. These outcomes focus on the process itself, rather than effectiveness outcomes (i.e., student learning outcomes). While improving student learning is the ultimate goal, monitoring implementation allows schools to respond in the moment to contextual factors affecting the implementation process.

Our approach utilises implementation outcomes from Proctor et al. (2011). The outcomes that we have prioritised to help schools monitor the success of implementation are appropriateness, acceptability, feasibility and fidelity.

<sup>3</sup> Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) has 73 implementation strategies and was developed for use in the health sector.



To learn more about AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation, see our explainers about:

- [Taking an Evidence-Informed Approach to Implementation](#)
- [Using a Staged Approach to Implementation](#)
- [Addressing Enablers and Barriers to Implementation](#)
- [Using Implementation Strategies](#)
- [Monitoring Implementation Outcomes.](#)

## The Learning Partner project

In the Learning Partner project, we have been working alongside teachers and school leaders to better understand the implementation of an evidence-based practice in their school contexts. We have provided direct support and guidance to these schools to:

- enhance their implementation leadership
- develop understanding and skill in leading a deliberate and structured approach to implementation
- support the adoption and sustained use of an evidence-based practice.

The Learning Partner project is a new approach for AERO, which started with 9 primary schools joining the first cohort in Term 1 of 2023. The 6 primary schools of the second cohort began in Term 1 of 2024. The schools are from government and Catholic sectors in urban and regional environments in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria.

Each school has focused on implementing the evidence-based practice [explicit instruction](#) in either mathematics or writing.<sup>4</sup> Before joining the project, schools worked with us to help determine whether explicit instruction was aligned with what they wanted to achieve, and their perception of how ready they were to begin implementing explicit instruction. Schools that saw alignment between their goals and explicit instruction, and indicated a good level of readiness for change were selected to join the Learning Partner project.

The project relies on an implementation team in schools, supported in-person by AERO. Key roles have included:

- **school leadership teams** (including principals) that support the implementation process and the evidence-based practice being implemented
- **School Implementation Coordinator** (school-based and usually taken on by an assistant principal and/or learning and teaching leader) responsible for managing the implementation process in their school. This includes tracking progress through the stages, co-leading implementation strategies, monitoring enablers and barriers, and reflecting on implementation outcomes.
- **AERO Implementation Consultant** (AERO-based, and previously a school leader) responsible for building a school's capability to lead deliberate and structured implementation for sustained use of explicit instruction, in partnership with the Implementation Coordinator.

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<sup>4</sup> One school focused on implementation in reading comprehension (including writing).

AERO Implementation Consultants worked closely with school Implementation Coordinators and leadership teams in Terms 1 to 3 and tapered their support in Term 4 (and the second year) as these schools work towards sustaining use of explicit instruction. Implementation Consultants guide the schools through a deliberate and structured approach to implementation, including supporting them to:

- use a staged approach to plan for key activities and decisions during different stages of implementation
- address enablers and barriers to understand and respond to what specifically might be getting in the way of implementation, and amplify what is already working well
- select implementation strategies to support the application of explicit instruction (e.g., develop detailed implementation plans, and provide professional learning, modelling and coaching)
- monitor 4 implementation outcomes and make adaptations as required to help support effective implementation (acceptability, appropriateness, feasibility and sustainability).<sup>5</sup>

## How AERO is learning from the Learning Partner project

The key objective of this first phase of our Learning Partner work has been to learn about promising approaches to implementation, so we have used monitoring and evaluation processes that are formative in nature. The purpose of the formative evaluation and ongoing monitoring activities in 2023 and 2024 has been to support AERO in continuously reflecting on progress, as well as to inform further developments to a deliberate and structured approach to implementation.

The formative evaluation involved school leaders and teachers completing surveys and participating in interviews and discussion groups in the middle and at the end of the year in 2023. They provided feedback about:

- their experience with the project
- the aspects they found most useful
- what (if any) benefits they experienced or observed.

In addition, the project team gathered and monitored project data (e.g., time spent using different implementation strategies) and captured ongoing learning and reflections (e.g., via meeting notes, weekly journals, teacher observations, learning loop discussions and quarterly progress reports).

Future iterations of the Learning Partner project may evaluate the impact of a structured and deliberate approach to implementation on student outcomes, however, this was not a focus of this preliminary phase.

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<sup>5</sup> Read our [implementation explainers](#) to learn more about the 4 components of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation.

## Insights into implementation (so far)

We have learned a great deal about implementation by working alongside schools through the Learning Partner project. This insights section has been informed by the 2023 formative evaluation and our ongoing monitoring and observations of the project in 2023 and 2024.

We have learned:

- Implementation, as a deliberate and structured approach, can strengthen teaching practice and benefit students.
- Implementation components are greater together than the sum of their parts.
- Implementation is not one-size-fits-all – schools can tailor it to their context.
- Implementation is a team sport and starts outside of the classroom.
- Implementation is a process for improving current teaching practice and an investment in future improvement.

Each of these insights is outlined in the following sections.

### Implementation, as a deliberate and structured approach, can strengthen teaching practice and benefit students

In the 2023 formative evaluation, all principals and Implementation Coordinators reported an increase in their knowledge and skills in using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation.

The activities they found useful were:

- developing and returning to their implementation plan
- tracking the stages of implementation
- identifying and acting on enablers and barriers
- planning for sustainability and, in some cases, scaling up.

Teachers were also very positive about their experience in the project and reported an increase in knowledge and skills in using explicit instruction. They particularly valued the implementation strategies of modelling, coaching and professional learning. In a discussion group, one teacher described the benefit of implementation strategies when starting to use explicit instruction:

The most useful part of the project is the modelling and coaching for me. It is great to have a model as to how EI [explicit instruction] lessons should look. We then were able to take what we learned and saw and use it in our own teaching. Afterwards, getting observed and immediate feedback was very useful as we could then make changes to our teaching.

While we did not formally monitor student data during this early stage of our implementation work, as part of the formative evaluation, Learning Partner schools were asked about their perceptions of the benefits for students.

Principals, Implementation Coordinators and all teachers who took part in the evaluation observed benefits in their students' confidence, engagement, knowledge and skills, with most citing these benefits as 'significant'. In an interview, one Implementation Coordinator reflected on students' sense of achievement:

Students have felt this sense of achievement and an increase in their confidence ... The sense of achievement for staff has been really good to celebrate but students as well. I've seen a big shift in that and across the board. Not just one grade or one year or one class – it's been across the board.

While using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation is showing promise in Learning Partner schools, there is still more for AERO to do to build confidence in this approach over time, including drawing on evaluation methodologies in the future that are less formative and focus more strongly on demonstrating impact.

## Implementation components are greater together than the sum of their parts

Schools were most familiar with the two implementation components of stages and strategies. The concept of using a staged approach was likened to school improvement cycles, and schools were experienced at using known implementation strategies (e.g., professional learning) to work towards improvement goals. However, it was less known that effective implementation also involves actively understanding and addressing what is helping or getting in the way of practice change (i.e., enablers and barriers), as well as using implementation outcomes as signposts for implementation progress and success. That is, when it comes to effective implementation, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and each component is dependent on the others.

The stage of implementation a school is in – or planning for – will help them determine the implementation strategies to use, which may also be informed by context-specific enablers and barriers. Similarly, identifying particular barriers may shed light on a specific implementation outcome and help the school determine an appropriate implementation strategy for addressing the barrier.

The following example illustrates the interconnectedness of implementation components. While one school was in the 'Prepare' stage and exploring their enablers and barriers, teachers revealed they were unsure about the evidence underpinning explicit instruction. This exposed an issue with 'acceptability' (an [implementation outcome](#)). Some teachers had not 'accepted' the practice and, therefore, were at risk of not adopting it. The AERO Implementation Consultant and school Implementation Coordinator provided further professional learning (an [implementation strategy](#)) on the evidence base underpinning explicit instruction and developed a stronger case for 'why' it has shown to be effective.

As we progress our work in the Learning Partner project, we aim to build on the interrelationships that exist between the implementation components and help schools understand these connections and dependencies to enhance implementation success.

## Implementation is not one-size-fits-all – schools can tailor it to their context

School leaders and teachers valued that the deliberate and structured approach to implementation could be adapted and modified to respond to their context and viewed flexibility as an important factor for success. This is important because determining an implementation process that not only proves to be effective but is also appropriate for the context and feasible for key stakeholders to implement is the goal of most implementation efforts, including ours.

When tailoring implementation for school context, we learned that enablers and barriers played a critical role. The process of systematically identifying, addressing and monitoring enablers and barriers was largely new to schools in the project and sometimes confirmed their perceptions of issues, but often revealed barriers they were not aware of. For example, one school had a largely new leadership team, and leaders were concerned that teachers were not confident in leadership support of the evidence-based practice to be implemented. Rather, the enablers and barriers activity revealed leadership support as a main enabler. This not only gave leaders a confidence boost to lead the implementation process but also helped them avoid spending time and energy on a barrier that was only perceived by leaders and not experienced by teachers.

As we have only worked with a small sample of schools so far, there is much more to learn about promising approaches to implementation in varying school contexts. This includes what adaptations can and should be made to an implementation process without compromising the fidelity of a deliberate and structured approach. While implementation is not one-size-fits-all, neither is it a free-for-all.

## Implementation is a team sport and starts outside of the classroom

A strong theme in the 2023 formative evaluation was that both teachers and leaders attributed much of their implementation success to people and the specific roles they fulfilled.

Gaining a clearer understanding of the multiple implementation roles required in schools was an important insight because the implementation of evidence-based practices is often most associated with the individuals whose practice we are seeking to improve – that of classroom teachers. While working towards individual practice change is the goal of an implementation process, successful implementation is not the sole responsibility of teachers and relies on the contribution of people in numerous roles.

Each role in the school's 'implementation team' was seen as important for success and had unique functions. School leader support was seen as a key enabler across Learning Partner schools. Leaders and teachers in all schools also viewed the AERO Implementation Consultant as critical to the success of the project. School Implementation Coordinators were essential too, with all 2023 Learning Partner schools continuing to allocate time for this role as they moved to sustain explicit instruction in 2024.

The Implementation Coordinators and Consultants led many of the implementation activities in schools. They also played an important role in fostering relationships. Teachers and leaders reported the value of this in the 2023 formative evaluation, recognising that collaborative relationships between leaders and teachers and among teachers encouraged engagement in implementation activities and built trust in the implementation process.

As part of our commitment to learn more about effective implementation over time, we are thinking carefully about school-friendly guidance materials and the various roles that are needed to support schools with their implementation efforts – from within a school, across schools (e.g., professional networks), immediately around a school (e.g. regional offices) and in the broader education system (e.g., AERO). We also recognise that implementation is relational work, and we intend to explore this element in more detail as we continue working with schools and building our approach.

## **Implementation is a process for improving current teaching practice and an investment in future improvement**

At the end of 2023, after a year of the Learning Partner project, all Principals reported an intention to continue using implementation strategies to either sustain or scale up the use of explicit instruction in 2024. At the same time, teachers also felt confident about managing their time to continue using explicit instruction, in part because activities such as designing explicit teaching lessons would not need to be repeated and could be used again in future years.

The intent of principals and teachers to sustain explicit instruction in their school was significant because it demonstrated the benefits they were experiencing from taking a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. This was a particularly important insight for the project team because at mid-year:

- Principals had expressed concerns about how they might continue with the implementation of explicit instruction beyond the Learning Partner project.
- Leaders and teachers had identified teachers' lack of time as a barrier to improving or changing teaching practice and thought staff turnover could impact the sustainability of explicit instruction into 2024.

The change in perception that occurred from mid-year to end of year illustrates that while a deliberate approach to implementation is an investment of time, energy and resources, it was seen as worthwhile. During the project, schools were encouraged to consider how existing time and resources could be used differently. For example, they viewed the roles, structures, systems and processes they had already set up to support the implementation of explicit instruction with current teachers as an investment in future teachers too. This included activities such as allocating roles to lead implementation processes and timetabling professional learning, modelling and coaching to support fidelity of the evidence-based practice with current and new teachers.

As we are only in the early stages of our implementation work, it is still too soon to tell whether changes to teachers' practice will be sustained beyond participation in the Learning Partner project. However, in our commitment to learn more about sustained practice change, we will follow up with Learning Partner schools in our 2024 and 2025 evaluations.

## Responding to what we are learning in 2024

AERO is already responding to and building on what we have learned since beginning the Learning Partner project, and we have refined several elements of the project in 2024. Our insights are not just relevant for the Learning Partner Project though, and we encourage schools to discuss what these implementation insights might mean for their context, using the reflection questions in this section as a guide.

### Implementation

- We have more clearly defined and articulated each of the implementation components to support schools in their understanding of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. This has been translated into more comprehensive planning and reporting documents to support school leadership with each implementation component.
- Further work is underway to support schools with the two components they are least familiar with – enablers and barriers, and implementation outcomes – to reinforce their importance in the whole approach and increase the likelihood of implementation success.

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Reflection question: How has your understanding of implementation strengthened, and what implementation idea or concept from this paper would you like to explore further?

### School context

- In 2024, we are partnering with schools across a broader range of socio-economic backgrounds to strengthen our insights into implementation across varying school contexts.
- Implementation Consultants are working with schools to strengthen the efficiencies of some implementation strategies, such as professional learning, modelling and coaching, particularly where schools have a larger number of teachers.

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Reflection question: What enablers and barriers from your school context might influence the process of implementing an evidence-based practice?

### Recognising roles

- We are working on ways to extend the leadership of implementation beyond the school coordinator role, including developing leader-specific professional learning modules to build the knowledge and capability of leadership teams in leading a deliberate and structured approach to implementation.
- Other leaders and teachers will also be identified as early adopters and champions who can support the delivery of implementation strategies such as professional learning, modelling and coaching.

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Reflection question: Who in your school community can support the implementation of evidence-based practices, and what role(s) might they play in a deliberate and structured approach?



## Encouraging sustainability

- Initially a 12-month project, we decided to keep working with 2023 Learning Partner schools to learn more about how schools are largely leading implementation efforts on their own, and how they are tracking with sustaining explicit instruction.
- The 2024 Learning Partner schools are being supported to plan for sustainability much sooner and to set up roles, structures and processes that build implementation capability for the long term.

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Reflection question: What roles, structures and/or processes does your school have in place that could be leveraged to support practice change and sustained improvement?

## What's next in 2025 and beyond

AERO is united with the rest of the education community in our desire for children and young people to have access to evidence-based teaching practices. But just knowing 'what' the practices are is not enough for schools to know 'how' to implement them. While evidence-informed approaches to implementation will take time to develop, and then for schools to enact, we have made a promising start and are committed to sharing what we learn as we go.

In 2024, the Learning Partner project will continue to teach us a lot from working side-by-side with schools and will inform our implementation work in 2025 and beyond. To strengthen Learning Partner work in the future, and inform our learnings about implementation, we are considering:

- how we can work more closely with education systems and sectors to understand issues of scale and context – we are especially interested in partnering with more diverse school communities to better understand tailoring for context
- the relationship between the 4 implementation components, and where we can provide more guidance for schools on how they intersect and support one another
- the importance of relationships in effective implementation, and how we support schools to intentionally develop relationships throughout the implementation process
- the practical guidance and resources we can provide for all schools about implementation – not just those in the Learning Partner project.

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