Plain language summary

Australian Education Research Organisation

Explainer

Using a staged approach to implementation

August 2024

Using a staged approach to implementation is helpful for understanding implementation as a process that takes place in phases over time. The stages highlight a school's key activities and considerations throughout the implementation of an evidence-based practice and demonstrate that no one stage is more important than another. Leaders can draw on stages to reflect on where they are in the implementation process and plan for what comes next.

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.

Using a staged approach 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
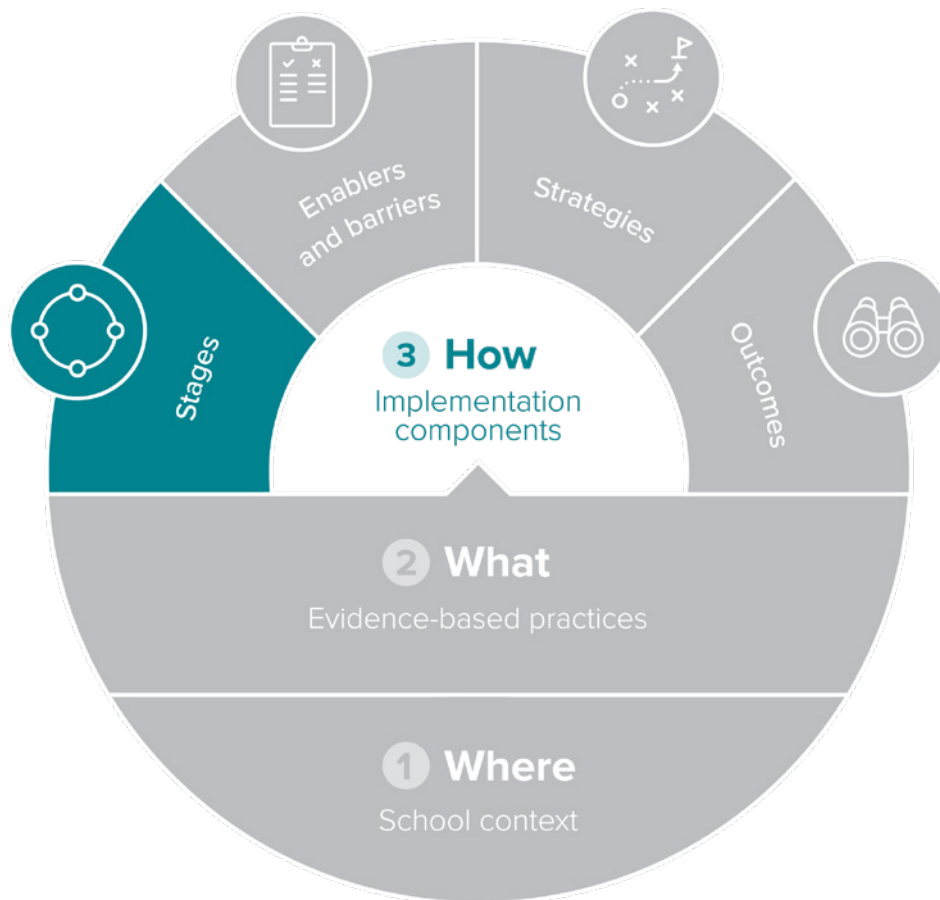
Key points

- There are 4 stages to implementation (Explore, Prepare, Deliver, Sustain) and each has key activities and requires key decisions.
- Phasing implementation into stages helps schools determine what to focus on and when, what to plan for and enact, and what to monitor and evaluate.
- Implementation starts in the Explore stage, well before an evidence-based practice is tried in classrooms for the first time.
- Schools can be in multiple stages at once and will likely return to earlier stages as they progress through the implementation process.

The importance of implementation stages

Implementation isn't a single event. Implementation research suggests that implementing an evidence-based practice often involves distinct stages or steps that repeat or build upon each other (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017; Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2019; Meyers et al., 2012; Saldana et al., 2012). This means that implementation begins before a decision to adopt an evidence-based practice is reached and continues well after this decision has been made.

Conceptualising implementation in stages is helpful for phasing activities and decisions. Knowing which stage of implementation a school is in or moving towards can help determine what to focus on, what to plan for and what to monitor and evaluate. Matching activities to implementation stages can increase the likelihood of success at each stage while anticipating challenges in future stages (National Implementation Research Network [NIRN], 2023). While there are different ways to represent implementation stages, the most common approach in the literature is a 4-phased implementation process (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017).

Use an implementation stages framework

Evidence for Learning's (E4L)'s implementation cycle is designed specifically for schools. It has 4 stages, which are shown in Figure 2: Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain (E4L, 2019). Although the stages are depicted as discrete, they're not linear and intersect and overlap. Schools may be in more than one stage at the same time and will likely cycle back to earlier stages.

In each stage, there are key activities and decisions to be worked through. These stages provide guidance and structure to implementation, with the aim of supporting the sustainability of the evidence-based practice.

Figure 2: Stages of implementation
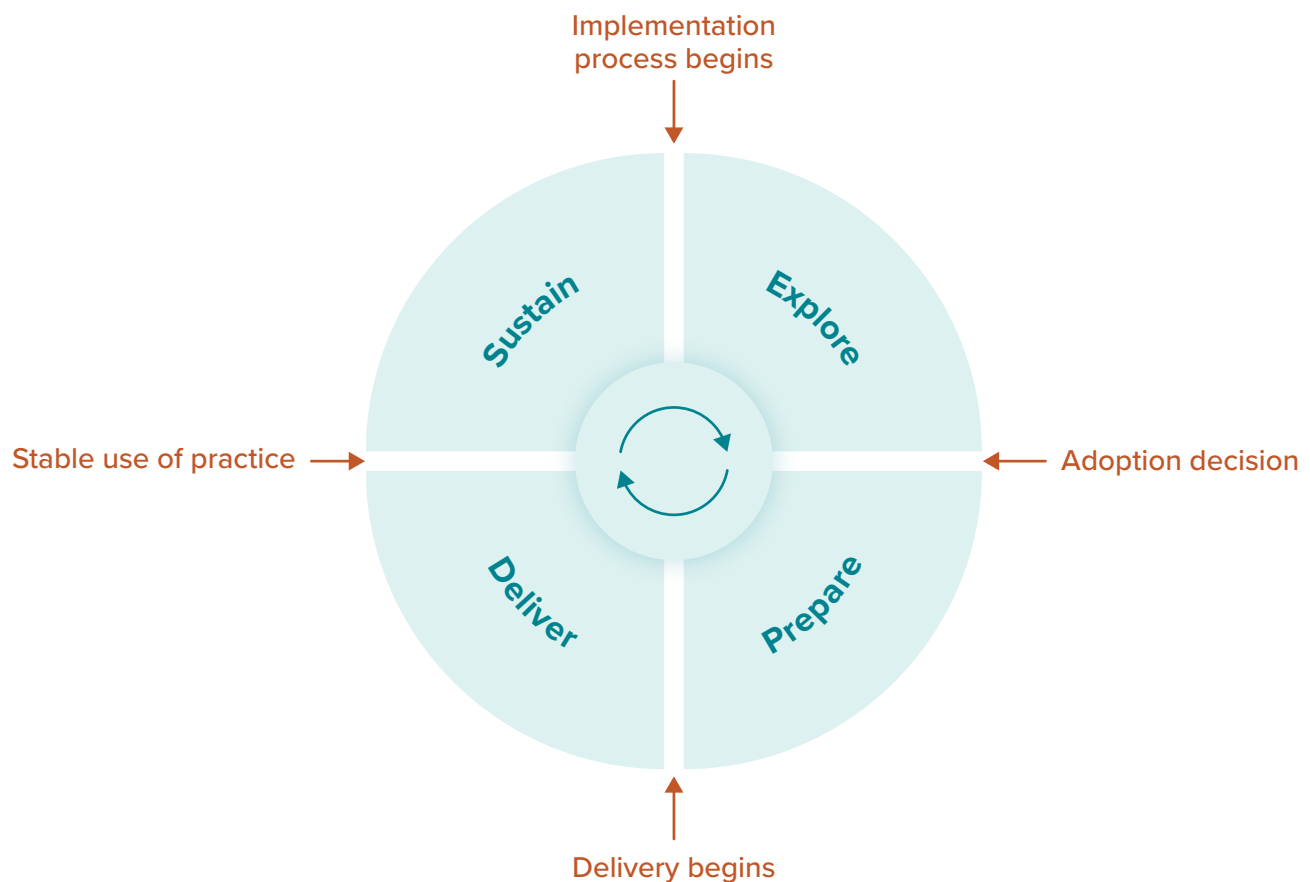
Source: 'Figure 1' in Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation by E4L (2019, p. 8), licensed under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence. Adapted with permission, including recreating in AERO branding and simplifying content.

The 4 stages of implementation

Explore stage

School implementation begins in the Explore stage. During this stage, schools identify a specific challenge they want to address, and identify evidence-based practices that can support them with this (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017).

To identify a challenge to address, schools spend time examining what could work better in their setting. This might include pulling together a collective of teachers, families and community members to work through a deliberate process. Schools can draw on different forms of data (e.g., student achievement on national assessments, through to teacher assessment records, attendance data, themes from teacher observations or learning walks) to become increasingly precise on the exact challenge they want to solve. The aim is to move from general high-level ideas to being confident that the challenge is a priority for the school and is apparent in the school's data (E4L, 2019).

Once a challenge has been identified, the focus shifts to determining the evidence and/or evidence-based practice available to support the school in addressing the challenge. Evidence-based practices are those supported by research evidence (AERO, 2023a). This means there's confidence in the rigour of the research and findings, and that the practices have been shown to work for students in different contexts with different demographics.[1] Evidence-based practices are those most likely to enhance teaching and, ultimately, lift outcomes for all students.[2]

When a practice has been identified, schools must decide whether it's appropriate for their context and feasible to implement. Discussions about evidence-based practices should include determining the core elements and underpinning principles of the practice (AERO, 2023b), and exploring how the practice will look as it's used across classrooms, in response to student needs (e.g., students' ages, the learning area, the amount of scaffolding students need).

Readiness for change processes and discussions can assist schools in determining whether they're set up to tackle implementing an evidence-based practice.

Prepare stage

Schools begin the Prepare stage when they've decided to adopt an evidence-based practice and move into more deliberately planning for a structured implementation process. The Prepare stage ensures the school is ready to 'deliver' and begin using the practice in classrooms (E4L, 2019). Selecting systems and processes to support implementation and developing a common understanding of implementation take place in this stage.

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1   AERO's Standards of Evidence provide an overview of different evidence types and considerations for use.
2   AERO has developed a model of learning and teaching that identifies the most effective and efficient teaching practices aligned with how students learn.

There are several activities that can be undertaken in this stage to help schools build their knowledge of implementation and the evidence-based practice as they plan to use it in their school. For example, a school might:

- create an implementation plan
- determine the specific enablers and barriers to implementation of the specific evidence-based practice
- establish what data will be collected and analysed to track implementation
- deliver implementation strategies to support understanding and use of the evidence-based practice and of implementation.

The Prepare phase ends when the school starts using the practice.

Deliver stage

In the Deliver stage, the evidence-based practice is applied in classrooms for the first time. The focus of this stage is on supporting teachers to begin using, or enhance their use of, the evidence-based practice, and on continuous improvement as teachers start to use the practice more (NIRN, 2023). This can be a vulnerable stage for teachers, as they apply new knowledge and skills, which might feel awkward and challenging, even for experienced teachers (EEF, 2019).

To respond to the likely challenges of this phase, leaders can ensure that implementation strategies such as modelling, coaching and learning loops are used. These strategies support teachers to work through the challenge of a change process and can help to ensure they do not revert to previous practices.

Schools may choose to start working with a few teachers on implementing the evidence-based practice before involving all teachers. During this time, leaders work closely with teachers to reflect on the implementation process and the use of the evidence-based practice, monitoring and adjusting support as required. For example, the dosage of implementation strategies (e.g., professional learning and modelling) may be altered to meet the needs of teachers.

Inevitably, barriers and enablers to implementation will arise, for example teachers not yet buying into the practice or believing there is enough time and resources to support changing their practice. Monitoring enablers and barriers and implementation outcomes can help leaders be responsive to challenges and see improvements over time.

Schools move to the Sustain stage when use of the evidence-based practice is stable.

Sustain stage

The Sustain stage of implementation happens when the evidence-based practice becomes embedded in classrooms across the school. The practice is evident in observational data, professional learning conversations, development goals, and in lesson planning and other learning materials. Other indicators of sustainment may appear in key school policies, procedures and planning documents where the practice has been operationalised and forms part of a school's DNA (NIRN, 2023).

Planning for sustainability occurs from the outset of implementation (EEF, 2019). Implementation plans should include consideration of the people, processes and structures that will become enabling factors for the ongoing use of the evidence-based practice, so the foundations for sustainment can be built early on.

Considerations to support sustaining the evidence-based practice include:

- ongoing resource allocation and prioritisation (e.g., time for coaching or shared planning to support fidelity of the practice)
- processes to upskill staff or identify champions so knowledge is dispersed throughout teams
- policies about how new staff will be trained in the practice
- what ongoing monitoring may be required.

If the evidence-based practice has been piloted with a smaller group within the school, leaders should consider whether it may be appropriate to scale across the school. Data collected from the trial and across the school will inform this decision. If scaling up is determined to be appropriate, the implementation process may need to start again.

How long to spend in each stage

There is no 'right' amount of time for implementation or to spend on each stage – it depends on many factors. Some research indicates that implementation of an evidence-based practice can take between 2 to 4 years (NIRN, 2023). There's also some evidence from child protection settings that moving quickly but thoroughly through the implementation stages increases the likelihood of reaching sustainability (Saldana et al., 2012). There is a risk that, if implementation moves too slowly through a stage, the momentum may be lost. However, if the process is too fast, important steps may be missed. Monitoring the progress of key activities and decisions during implementation is important so schools know when to move on to the next stage.
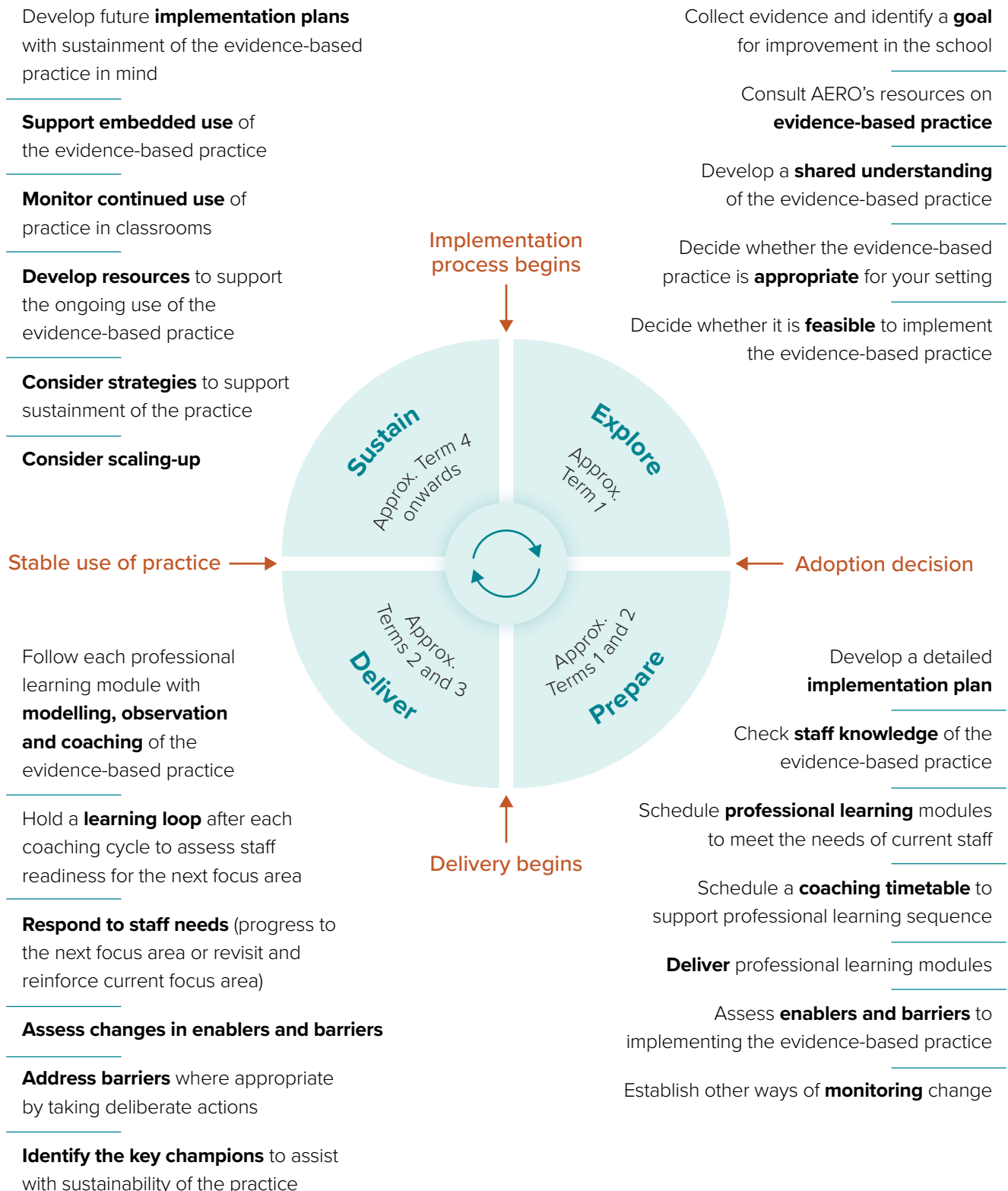
Implementation stages in practice

Implementation stages are one of the 4 components of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. Each of the other components (addressing enablers and barriers, using implementation strategies and monitoring implementation outcomes) takes place throughout different implementation stages.

The AERO Learning Partner project

AERO is working with schools to learn more about the implementation of evidence-based practice through the Learning Partner project.[3] As part of the Learning Partner project, AERO has mapped for schools the key actions and decisions for each stage of implementation. This mapping is used to support conversations with schools to reflect on the current state of implementation and to plan for future stages (Figure 3).

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3   To learn more about the Learning Partner project, read Insights into Implementation or Taking an Evidence-Informed Approach to Implementation.

Figure 3: Key activities and decisions mapped to implementation stages

Develop future **implementation plans** with sustainment of the evidence-based practice in mind

Support embedded use of the evidence-based practice

Monitor continued use of practice in classrooms

Develop resources to support the ongoing use of the evidence-based practice

Consider strategies to support sustainment of the practice

Consider scaling-up

Stable use of practice →

Follow each professional learning module with **modelling, observation and coaching** of the evidence-based practice

Hold a **learning loop** after each coaching cycle to assess staff readiness for the next focus area

Respond to staff needs (progress to the next focus area or revisit and reinforce current focus area)

Assess changes in enablers and barriers

Address barriers where appropriate by taking deliberate actions

Identify the key champions to assist with sustainability of the practice

Collect evidence and identify a **goal** for improvement in the school

Consult AERO's resources on **evidence-based practice**

Develop a **shared understanding** of the evidence-based practice

Decide whether the evidence-based practice is **appropriate** for your setting

Decide whether it is **feasible** to implement the evidence-based practice

← **Adoption decision**

Develop a detailed **implementation plan**

Check **staff knowledge** of the evidence-based practice

Schedule **professional learning** modules to meet the needs of current staff

Schedule a **coaching timetable** to support professional learning sequence

Deliver professional learning modules

Assess **enablers and barriers** to implementing the evidence-based practice

Establish other ways of **monitoring** change

Implementation process begins

Delivery begins

Sustain — Approx. Term 4 onwards

Explore — Approx. Term 1

Deliver — Approx. Terms 2 and 3

Prepare — Approx. Terms 1 and 2

Each week the school leadership team and AERO Implementation Consultant look at the mapping and discuss the activities they're undertaking, the decisions they're making, and check how they're tracking through stages. This reflection is part of a 30-minute check-in, designed to create awareness of how well implementation is going (implementation outcomes and stages), what's working well or getting in the way (enablers and barriers), and what's happening to support implementation (strategies).

Using Figure 3 with schools to support reflective conversations has highlighted that the Learning Partner schools are often in several stages at once and do move backwards and forwards between stages. Regularly looking at progress and what's ahead has helped shift the focus from spending a prescriptive amount of time in a stage to ensuring the time in each stage is well-spent.

Implementation stages at South Melbourne Primary School

South Melbourne Primary School (SMPS) currently has 443 students and 33 teaching staff. It has an Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 1,140 and 70% of students have a language background other than English. South Melbourne Primary School is a Learning Partner school.

In the 2023 Learning Partner project, SMPS focused on implementing explicit instruction in mathematics for Years 4 and 5.

SMPS had recently updated their whole-school instructional model to align with explicit instruction and had already begun using implementation strategies such as delivering professional learning to develop knowledge of explicit instruction and establishing professional learning communities as a way for teachers to unpack and practice the different elements of explicit instruction.

At the beginning of the Learning Partner project, the implementation team at SMPS worked with AERO to develop an implementation plan that included key activities and considerations for each stage. In weekly meetings between the coordinator at SMPS and the AERO Implementation Consultant, they tracked which stage of implementation they were currently in and what was ahead (see Figure 4 – the grey highlights on the laptop screen in the image indicate completed activities and decisions made, while the yellow highlights show what's in progress).

Understanding and applying a staged-based approach to implementation highlighted opportunities in the Explore and Prepare phases to develop a shared understanding of *why* explicit instruction was being implemented and *how* it related to the school's strategic plan and goals to improve student outcomes.

Using the stages also highlighted to SMPS the need to focus on sustaining and scaling explicit instruction into 2024. As part of this focus on sustainability, SMPS ensured systems and processes were in place to support current and new staff. They did this through a variety of mechanisms including, reviewing curriculum documents, identifying professional learning modules, creating a 2024 implementation plan and identifying champions to continue to support implementation of the practice across the school.

Figure 4: Reflecting on key activities and decisions for each implementation stage at SMPS

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