Selecting practices to deliver improvement

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has produced a series of practice guides to help school leaders develop and apply quality strategic plans. This guide is the third in a series of 4 and focuses on

1. Select practices to improve an approach

The second guide in this series provides recommendations for prioritising approaches to achieving each goal. As a recap, an **approach** describes broad curriculum, pedagogical and assessment methods that need to improve to achieve each goal in a strategic plan.

A **practice** is the practical application of an approach.

Examples of the relationship between approaches and practices

- If a pedagogical approach being prioritised is the instructional model, a relevant evidence-based practice could be to embed explicit instruction in the model.

- If a curriculum approach being prioritised is unit planning, a relevant evidence-based practice could be to sequence unit plans to achieve mastery learning.

- If an assessment approach being prioritised is formative assessment, a relevant evidence-based practice could be to improve staff's ability to provide timely feedback linked to formative assessment.

You should prioritise practices with the strongest evidence base and the greatest potential for improving learning outcomes. It can help to write down all the practices you have identified that you *could* do and then narrow down the ones you *will* do. Prioritising practices is as important as prioritising approaches and goals. During this process, you will likely find that you need to reduce the focus on some valid practices (or approaches or goals) if they are not the *most effective* in your context or if they stray from the *most important* areas for improvement.

It can feel counterintuitive to leave something off a strategic plan that could contribute to positive change. However, being **sharp and narrow** when selecting practices will maximise your chance of success by allowing you to direct sufficient resources towards achieving the most pressing improvements.

2. Plan how to deliver improvement

Once you have selected the practice you intend to use to improve a prioritised approach, you need to plan the **actions** necessary for delivering this improvement. This involves identifying both the sequence of steps and the resources required. Many systems (for example, education departments) will provide guidance and templates to school leaders to capture this information.

Sequencing actions

When planning the order of improvement actions, consider the following questions:

- What actions do school staff need to take for teachers to use the selected practices effectively?

- Which of these actions are dependent on other actions and will need to occur consecutively? For example, what whole-school actions do leaders need to take first to create conditions that support teacher practice in the classroom?

- Is capacity building required before teachers can use a particular practice? For example, do you need to establish professional learning communities related to a practice, to build staff capability and confidence in using that practice?

- When do key activities related to certain practices occur across the school year? For example, examination periods and professional learning sessions.

You'll need to bring this all together to develop a timeline for delivery that includes start and end dates for each action, along with key milestones.

Resourcing actions

When allocating resources for completing these actions, consider the following questions:

- Who is accountable and responsible for delivery, and how will staff work together? You'll need to ensure roles, leadership and collaborative processes are clear.

Note that for smaller schools, the leader accountable for delivery may also be completing some of the actions. To assist with both collaboration and efficiency, leaders of smaller schools may benefit from establishing an external network with other schools who have prioritised the same practice or practices. Larger schools can also benefit from this collaborative approach.

- How much time will it take for each step to be successful?

- What size budget is required (or is available) to cover operating costs such as engaging external experts, mentors and coaches, or purchasing curriculum and instructional materials?

If you're creating a multi-year strategic plan, you still need to spend time selecting practices and considering how you'll sequence and resource actions. However, you can do this at a broader level than an annual plan, which requires more operational detail.

3. Identify risks and set mitigation strategies

It's important to consider any factors that might prevent staff from using a practice to the level of effectiveness required to achieve a goal. Risks to achieving each goal should be paired with mitigation strategies during the planning stage. Table 1 provides examples of common risks and associated mitigation strategies.

Table 1: Examples of common risks and associated mitigation strategies

Summary considerations for selecting practices to deliver improvement

- Have you evaluated the strength of research evidence on the effectiveness of selected practices?

- Are there too many (or competing) practices in the strategic plan, and if so, how will you determine what will and won't be prioritised?

- Have you documented the actions required to deliver improvement in each practice, and clearly communicated the steps to improvement with staff?

- Do staff understand how collaboration will help them make the required changes in practice to achieve the goals and targets?

- Have you identified any factors that could prevent staff from using a practice effectively? Have you put in place associated mitigation strategies?

- Do staff have the capability to use the prioritised practices? If not, is focused professional learning available to help build staff capability?

- Are staff properly resourced to use the prioritised practices, including being given the necessary time to do the work required?

- What questions or concerns do staff have about the change process? How will you address these?

We recommend reading the next guide in this series, *Evaluating for continuous improvement*.

To provide feedback on this guide or view further information, including full references and additional resources, visit AERO's website.