

Indicators of Effective Policy Development & Implementation

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Abstract

Within the SWIFT framework, the Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice domain addresses the need for a supportive, reciprocal partnership between the school and its district or local educational agency. Therefore, intentional and effective policy decision-making processes are integral to SWIFT implementation. Such processes create opportunities for administrators, educators, parents and other community members to identify and eliminate policy barriers, and align policies to support good practice. This brief helps district leaders identify indicators of these processes in their organization, and use the indicators to guide policy development that supports implementation of the SWIFT framework.

Introduction

Recent changes in federal education policy, such as the Congressional reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, require LEAs to assess the academic achievement of all students against state academic achievement standards. ESSA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provide public access to aggregate student achievement and other data. This data is a powerful tool for states, districts, and local communities to use to guide decisions about updating and changing both policy and practice, especially as it relates to improving the achievement of low-performing students. Further, the availability of student achievement data offers unprecedented transparency and accountability for how groups and subgroups of students are faring in public education systems.

This brief's purpose is to guide district leaders as they consider student outcome data with stakeholders, anticipating that policy change may be an identified action for improving outcomes. It also describes quality indicators for development and implementation of district-wide inclusive policies and practices that align with the SWIFT framework.

Quality Indicators

This section identifies five quality indicators of effective policy development and implementation. These quality indicators are consistent with the evidence-based principles outlined by The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN).¹ Brief explanations for each indicator follow, with a summary of key features at the end.

Indicator 1: Practice-Policy Alignment

Effective practices are more feasible when policy supports their implementation.² Conversely, when policy and evidence-based practices are not well aligned, policy can act as a barrier to achieving expected student outcomes. For example, consider the following scenario:

Peer coaching among teachers is one of a district’s evidence-based professional development practices for improving student academic achievement. This practice involves teachers making multiple visits to other teachers’ classrooms and debriefing sessions after each visit. However, district policy states a teacher may be out of the classroom for professional development only one day per semester. This district policy creates a barrier to peer coaching which could be solved by a revision that allows teachers more time away from their classrooms for coaching activities.³

Aligning policy with evidence-based practices requires asking the question, “Will changing a policy improve student outcomes?” If the answer is yes, then school and district leaders, policy makers, parents, community members, and other stakeholders can use this as an opportunity to work together on change. For engaging in this conversation, NIRN highlights a model known as the Practice Informed Policy (PIP)-Policy Enabled Practice (PEP) Cycle.⁴ Practice Informed Policy engages and informs stakeholders so that they can ensure the developed or altered policy, procedure, or regulation will enable new practices to occur in classrooms, schools, and districts.

Indicator 2: Stakeholder Engagement

States and districts build community support for education policies (e.g., state standards, comprehensive practices, funding) by engaging parents, business leaders, and other stakeholders early in the process.⁵ To achieve full collaboration, active stakeholders should represent all community members invested and interested in the successful outcomes of students in the district. This approach requires that district leaders think expansively about who their stakeholders are, such as families, teachers, students, business leaders, local child-serving organizations, and others. A significant resource to support the concept of stakeholder engagement is the book titled, “Leading by Convening: A Blueprint for Authentic Engagement.”⁶ The IDEA Partnership—a technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs—developed this book using a stakeholder driven process. The book offers valuable tools for making sustainable engagement happen.

Evidence suggests that districts and schools are best served by seizing opportunities to work with various stakeholders to create shared ownership and support for policy improvements. Such partnerships are known to generate social, emotional, academic, and even fiscal outcomes that positively affect students, families, and communities.⁷

When a school has to make its case with a more diverse group of stakeholders—who may ask challenging questions—the decisions are better and the school is stronger.

—Patricia Lampron, Principal
Henderson Inclusion School²

Indicator 3: Active Implementation

Active implementation is a process that involves active communication among state, district, and school leaders, soliciting input from stakeholders, and gathering relevant data.⁸ Policy alignment is one component of this process. For example, leaders may start by examining the degree to which a particular policy meets their district's needs. Furthermore, it is helpful to assess feasibility of existing policies, identify barriers to implementation, and determine the sources of those barriers. Following this process helps to identify needed policy changes.

Once a team determines to change a policy, leaders and stakeholders begin practical preparations to make the change. They will often conduct a thorough review of documents, confirm and clarify barriers, establish individual and procedural authority for decision-making, and create multi-dimensional communication protocols with stakeholders. This stage can also involve significant training and coaching for those involved in the implementation of a new policy.

Inevitably, when a new policy takes effect, challenges emerge. During this time, a district leadership team may develop and use strategies to promote continuous improvement and rapid-cycle problem solving based upon data. When the team confirms policy barriers, they identify short-term work-arounds and long-term solutions. This phase focuses on creative problem solving in the short term, while in a parallel process, state and district leaders create strategies to achieve long-term solutions. After implementing policy changes, leaders should engage in ongoing evaluation and provide required support to ensure that new policies are achieving desired outcomes.

Indicator 4: Ongoing Evaluation and Support

As teachers and staff work to implement new policy supported practices, they may experience barriers. The implementation literature suggests following a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) improvement cycle helps to evaluate effectiveness of new practices and identify needed supports. Data gathered through the PDSA process are then used to make meaningful changes, alleviate barriers, embed solutions, and

improve intended outcomes.³ Such improvement cycles allow for testing if new policy and practice serves the desired function and are implemented as intended (form and function).³

PDSA provides a coherent way to incorporate feedback from PIP-PEP and to evaluate a policy. A district leadership team, for example, can use a PIP-PEP Cycle to assure that an implementation team is actively measuring and assessing sustainability and success. The systematic approach helps district teams gain valuable knowledge and understanding of how policy and process may be aligned [or not] and informs ongoing improvement to either the policy or the process in order to sustain growth and/or achieve positive outcomes.

The activities of PDSA cycles are:

- **Plan** — Identify barriers or challenges, using data whenever possible, and specify the plan to move programs or interventions forward as well as the outcomes that will be monitored
- **Do** — carry out the strategies or plan as specified to address the challenges
- **Study** — use the measures identified during the planning phase and collected during the ‘do’ phase to assess and track progress
- **Act** — Make changes to the next iteration of the plan to continue improving implementation

Indicator 5: Transparency

A final indicator of effective policy development and alignment is transparency throughout the process. Best practices for transparency include making policy documents accessible to the public in many formats (e.g., printed, electronic/web-friendly, translated into a variety of languages), understandable to all stakeholders (e.g., plain language, linguistically relevant to the community), and distributing supporting documents to specific stakeholder groups to increase understanding and buy-in.

Conclusion

This brief guides district leaders to use local policy as a key driver of effective implementation of the SWIFT framework to achieve improved student outcomes for all students. Policy should support effective practice and align with the common values of stakeholders for the sustainability of positive, systemic change. Policy can provide a significant advantage to affect meaningful improvements for students. When districts use policy as a tool to successfully introduce, implement, replicate, and sustain inclusive school practices, the hard work of transformation can withstand changes in leadership, shifting politics, and the varying economic climates in a community.

Quality Indicators for Effective Policy Development & Implementation

Indicator 1: Policy-Practice Alignment

- Use the Practice Informed Policy-Policy Enabled Practice Cycle
- Ask whether policy change will improve student outcomes
- Ensure all policies are aligned with district vision/values, and tools/resources

Indicator 2: Stakeholder Engagement

- Engage range of stakeholders in policy development, implementation, and alignment
- Think expansively about who stakeholders are, including families, students, teachers, business leaders, local child-serving organizations, and others

Indicator 3: Active Implementation

- Introduce new/revised policy to stakeholders through professional development and other communication methods
- Develop targeted professional development to staff with specific responsibilities to implement policy (e.g., finance staff training to implement funding policies)
- Consider re-teaching policy and/or revising policy as needed

Indicator 4: Ongoing Evaluation and Support

- Provide supporting documents (e.g., FAQs, model forms, rubrics) written in plain, understandable language and offer other supports (e.g., training, coaching) to increase fidelity of implementation
- Insure that supporting materials explain regulations, rules, or directives in plain language to increase the likelihood that policy will be implemented in ways that achieve the desired outcomes
- Use Plan, Do, Study, Act decision-making cycle to establish a strong decision-making framework to support implementation and sustainability of any policy

Indicator 5: Transparency

- Make policy documents accessible to the public (e.g., available in many formats: printed, electronic/web-friendly, translated into a variety of languages)
- Ensure policy is understandable to all stakeholders (e.g., avoid use of jargon, linguistically relevant to the community)
- Distribute supporting documents to stakeholders to increase understanding and buy-in early in the process

Suggested Citation

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References

1. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) is a unit of the Frank Porter Graham Institute at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. NIRN researchers have extensively studied district and school processes intended to support effective implementation that leads to successful outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities; offers tools and resources designed to help district and school leaders assess their progress in active implementation, planning and ongoing use of effective policies and practices.
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3. The National Implementation Research Network's AI Hub. (2015). *Module 4: Implementation stages, Topic 5: Initial implementation, Key functions* [website]. <http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/module-4/topic-5-initial-implementation-stage/key-functions>
4. The National Implementation Research Network. (2015). *Improvement cycles: Policy-practice communications loop* [website]. <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/learn-implementation/improvement-cycles>
5. McGuinn, P., & Kelly, A. (2012). *Parent power: Grass-roots activism and K-12 education reform*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
6. Cashman, J., Linehan, P., Purcell, L., Rosser, M., Schultz, S., & Skalski, S. (2014). *Leading by convening: A blueprint for authentic engagement*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.
7. Kaloi, L., Blue-Banning, M., Stonemeier, J., & Trader, B. (2015). *Policy as a support for trusting family partnership in a SWIFT framework*. Issue Brief #7. Lawrence, KS: SWIFT Center.
8. NIRN states, "Implementation is defined as a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions. According to this definition, implementation processes are purposeful and are described in sufficient detail such that independent observers can detect the presence and strength of the 'specific set of activities' related to implementation. In addition, the activity or program being implemented is described in sufficient detail so that independent observers can detect its presence and strength." For the purposes of this brief, we discuss implementation of policy. <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/learn-implementation/implementation-defined>.



schoolwide
integrated
framework for
transformation



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