

Driving Literacy Outcomes Through Effective Implementation

A Guide for District and School Leaders



Education is an up and down, fast moving, often high-stakes endeavor.

Nowhere is that felt more acutely than in literacy, where the pressure to improve outcomes for all students—especially those not yet meeting grade-level expectations—is urgent and constant.

No matter where the current swing of the pendulum is landing, schools are navigating a familiar and difficult tension:

Educators and leaders are being asked to deliver results while also absorbing and figuring out new programs, new expectations, and new demands—often all at once.

Even when teachers are committed and a program is well designed, implementation can break down when the systems around it are not yet strong enough to support success. The risks of an unsuccessful implementation are real: eroding trust, worn-out teachers and staff, and parents wondering why there is a curriculum change every three years.

If this sounds familiar, this guide is for you.

Inside the Guide:

- ✓ Why strong programs alone aren't enough—and what actually drives successful implementation
- ✓ How to create the conditions that support teachers and sustain intervention initiatives
- ✓ A phase-based roadmap from planning to full implementation
- ✓ Practical tools and strategies to improve fidelity, monitor progress, and drive student outcomes

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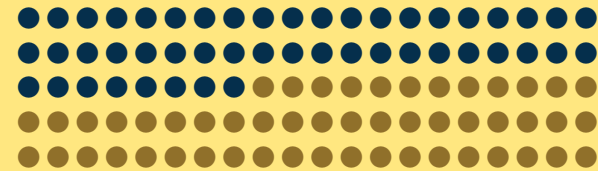
The Leader's Dilemma

When an implementation doesn't go as planned, it's natural to look first at what's happening in classrooms—at how teachers are delivering instruction and how students are responding. Implementation science invites us to widen that lens and examine the conditions surrounding the work: the systems, supports, and structures that leadership puts in place to set everyone up for success.

48%

of district leaders say they struggle with curriculum implementation.

EdReports & The Decision Lab, *Beyond Selection* (2025)



Rather than asking, *What are teachers not doing correctly?* or *Why aren't students responding?* Leaders may find it more useful to return to three questions:



WHO are the people with the authority and expertise to lead implementation at every level?



WHAT research-based program is the best fit for our students' specific literacy needs?



HOW will we ensure teachers are consistently supported and implementing with fidelity?

What the Science Tells Us

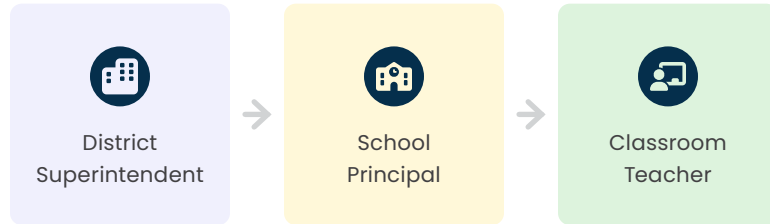
Research in implementation science is clear: without the right conditions for implementation, even strong, evidence-based programs can struggle to deliver the outcomes they promise.

Implementation science examines what it takes for evidence-based practices to move from research into real-world settings—especially complex ones, like schools. Research by Dean Fixsen and colleagues (2005, 2010, 2025) has consistently shown that structured implementation support—including clear expectations, ongoing coaching, and systems for monitoring progress—significantly increases the likelihood of meaningful, lasting outcomes.



The Leadership Throughline is Key

In practice, this begins with leadership alignment as a throughline across every level of the system:



While the initial work of setting and committing to clear expectations begins at the district level, the vision, execution, and responsibility for effective implementation lives at every level.

When the leadership throughline is strong, expectations are shared, monitoring is consistent, and teachers are supported. When it breaks down, the negative effects are predictable:

- Inconsistent implementation from classroom to classroom
- Teachers receive limited or misaligned coaching support
- New initiatives compete with—rather than connect to—existing priorities
- Leaders lack clear data

Over time, these gaps can fuel a cycle that so many leaders recognize: frustration builds, trust erodes, and another curriculum change is already on the horizon.

A Framework for Moving Forward

This guide introduces the **Formula for Intervention Success**, a practical approach grounded in implementation science that helps leadership teams move from program adoption to sustained impact. This framework organizes the work into three interconnected components and four implementation phases to help teams focus on the right actions at the right time.



Throughout the guide, you'll find tools, guiding questions, leader actions, and indicators of success to support your team at every stage. →

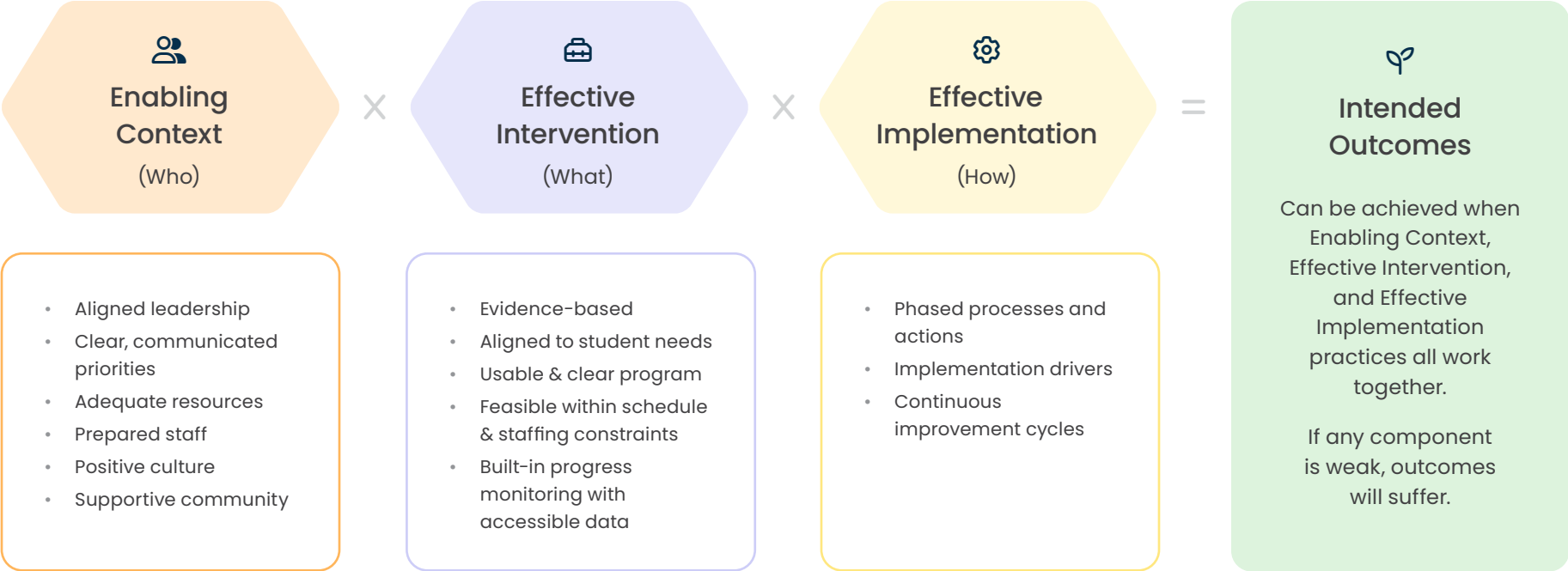
The Formula for Intervention Success

Program quality alone doesn't determine outcomes. What makes the difference is the actions leaders take to build a sense of shared accountability, support the people doing the work, and create the conditions for a program to succeed.

The **Formula for Intervention Success** is designed with exactly that in mind. It is grounded in the research of implementation science and adapted here with literacy intervention at the center.



The formula for intervention success is organized into three interconnected components:



Adapted from Fixsen et al., 2008

“Sustainable school and district transformation isn’t about adopting the right curriculum—it’s about implementing it with integrity and fidelity, monitoring its impact, and continuously refining practices. Without a strong implementation framework, even the best strategies will falter.”

Julia Carlson, EdD, Author, *Implementation Science: A Playbook for Instructional Leaders*

Each component is explored in greater detail in the sections that follow. →



Enabling Context (The Who)

Creating the Conditions for Success

A successful implementation always begins with people. Enabling Context is about building the teams and conditions that will carry an implementation through every stage and whenever the inevitable challenges arise. This is where the leadership throughline is established, and where distributed responsibility across teams replaces a common pattern of one person or group bearing the weight of success alone.

“The teacher is the strongest driver in the classroom, the principal in the school, and the superintendent in the district—but often there’s no throughline connecting them.”

Julia Carlson, EdD, Author,
*Implementation Science:
A Playbook for Instructional Leaders*

The Six Areas of Enabling Context

Each area requires genuine investment. Together, they create the foundation that everything else is built on.



1. Leadership

As education leaders well know, strong leadership in a complex school system depends on the depth of the team, rather than the efforts of a single individual. For an implementation to succeed, it needs people at every level—across the leadership throughline—who can hold the vision, identify what’s needed to achieve it, and support the people doing the work around them.

“Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.”

Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (2004)



2. Priorities

A school day is a human-run effort—which means it often requires adjustments. When something is truly a priority, protecting it when friction arises is part of the practice. This may look like arranging the master schedule around the intervention program or committing to an all-hands-on-deck approach to staff training because the initiative is that important.



3. Funding & Resources

Sustainability is best planned for before a program is selected, not after. The question isn't only whether there's funding to launch, but also whether there is funding to make it last. Key considerations include multi-year funding commitments, staffing stability, and training new staff.



4. Staff

Teachers are at the center of any implementation, and how they are brought into the process matters enormously. Teachers who have a voice in selecting the program they'll use, and who received meaningful training and ongoing support, are far more likely to implement with confidence and fidelity.

“Informed teachers are our best insurance against reading failure. While programs are very helpful tools, programs don't teach—teachers do.”

Dr. Louisa Moats, Author, Researcher, Literacy Advocate

Only 22% of teachers report having a role in selecting instructional materials, even though participatory selection processes are associated with stronger buy-in, increased trust, and more consistent implementation fidelity.

EdReports & The Decision Lab, *Beyond Selection* (2025)



5. Culture

Culture is set from the top and felt at every level. The leadership throughline plays a strong role in establishing a tone of shared urgency and responsibility, protecting time based on priorities, and maintaining clear expectations from district to school to classroom. A positive culture also shows up in how a community uses data—not to place blame, but as a shared tool for collective problem-solving and continuous improvement.

Research shows that the effects of strong school leadership on student learning are greatest in schools facing the most significant challenges (Leithwood et al., 2004). Because school leaders play such a central role in cultivating culture, this suggests that a positive school culture is especially critical for students with the greatest needs.



6. Community

Community grows out of culture. Every person involved in the work of teaching and learning—teachers, paraprofessionals, interventionists, families, and the students themselves—is part of the community that will sustain the implementation. Recognizing, including, and encouraging all of them is what makes change feel possible and energizing, rather than imposed.

High-Impact Leader Actions to Take Now

- 1. Identify your implementation leads:** Who has the authority and expertise to guide implementation at district and school levels?
- 2. Prioritize and protect intervention time:** Is time carved out and non-negotiable in the master schedule?
- 3. Confirm your funding runway:** Do we have the resources to sustain this initiative beyond year one?
- 4. Establish a professional learning and coaching cadence:** When will professional learning happen, and how will teachers be supported in applying what they learn over time?
- 5. Establish data review cadences:** At what intervals will data be reviewed at each level of the throughline—district, school, classroom—and who needs to be at the table at each level?
- 6. Define how your community will be engaged:** How will teachers, paraprofessionals, students, families, and others be included throughout the implementation—and how will we celebrate success?



Effective Intervention (The What)

Choosing the Right-Fit Solution

When it comes to intervention programs, there is no shortage of options. The challenge isn't finding a program, it's finding the right fit for your students, your teachers, and your context. Before researching specific programs, it's worth getting clear on your non-negotiables: what your students actually need, what your teachers can realistically implement, and what your systems can sustain.

Need help identifying a student's most urgent literacy need? Use this short, practical guide to determine what a student needs most right now.

[Download Resource →](#)

Evaluating a program? Use this tool to assess science of reading alignment and implementation feasibility.

[Download Resource →](#)

Guiding Question	What to Look For
1. Does the program address a clearly defined student literacy need?	Go beyond identifying that a need exists—clarify the specific gaps of the striving readers you are serving (e.g., foundational skills, multisyllabic decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension).
2. Is it grounded in the science of reading and designed for its intended purpose?	Ensure the program is research-based and proven to work for the specific instructional purpose you need.
3. Is it a clear, learnable program model?	Look for a complete, logical scope and sequence, along with clear, easy-to-use lesson plans and materials that don't require extensive prep.
4. Does it offer strong educator and leader supports?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look for structured instructional language and routines—these support teachers at all experience levels.• Confirm that the provider offers professional learning and ongoing support for both teachers and leaders.
5. Does it have built-in progress monitoring?	Ensure teachers and leaders can easily access and use the data generated by the program.
6. Are there defined fidelity expectations?	Review fidelity expectations, including weekly usage, typical duration of implementation, and the program components that are essential for successful outcomes.
7. Is it feasible within our schedule and staffing parameters?	Rather than evaluating based on ideal conditions, ensure the program can be implemented as designed within existing or achievable scheduling, staffing, and resource parameters.



Effective Implementation (The How)

Supporting Engagement and Fidelity

Having the right people and the right program in place is essential, but it's what happens next—and what keeps happening—that determines whether an implementation succeeds or falls short. Supporting implementation fidelity is an ongoing practice that extends well beyond program adoption and launch.

This section looks at the **How** in two ways: the leadership behaviors that set the tone day to day, and the systems that sustain the work over time.



Part One: What Leaders Can Do

Establish and communicate clear expectations

The way expectations are created, communicated, and upheld by leadership will inform how the whole community shows up for the work. A shared walkthrough structure is one of the most practical ways to communicate support and make expectations visible across all levels of the leadership throughline. For example:

- Superintendent or district lead visits a school to observe intervention underway
- Principal or other building leader observes teachers

Support teachers consistently

On any given day, a teacher implementing a new program is also managing a classroom of individuals, communicating with families, and collaborating with colleagues—all while using something they may not have mastered yet. That takes strength and stamina.

The best thing a leader can do for students is make it possible for teachers to do their best work.

Leaders can support teachers by:

- Conducting regular, non-evaluative fidelity walkthroughs
- Protecting coaching cycles to ensure they happen
- Participating in PLC data reviews
- Staying close to the data and understanding the data teachers are seeing

Part Two: Implementation Drivers: The Structures That Sustain Success

Day-to-day leadership behaviors matter enormously, and it helps when there are structures and systems to stand on. Implementation drivers are supports that fuel consistent, high-fidelity implementation over time. There are three types of implementation drivers, and all three deserve attention.

1. Competency Drivers

These are the systems and supports that build and sustain the knowledge, skills, and confidence once implementation is underway. For example:

- Ongoing training so new teachers can get up to speed quickly
- Regular on-site coaching and feedback connected to what leaders see in the classroom
- Fidelity checks for consistency across schools and classrooms

2. Organization Drivers

These are the structural systems that sit above the daily work and directly enable it. For example:

- Master schedules with dedicated, protected intervention time
- Clear, consistent data review routines with agreed-upon data points
- Policies that prioritize and protect intervention efforts

3. Leadership Drivers

These drivers represent the opportunities leaders have to respond to both difficulties and successes. There are a couple key questions worth asking regularly once implementation is underway:

- Are we responding quickly when challenges or barriers surface—or just acknowledging them?
- Are we celebrating student and teacher progress visibly and consistently?

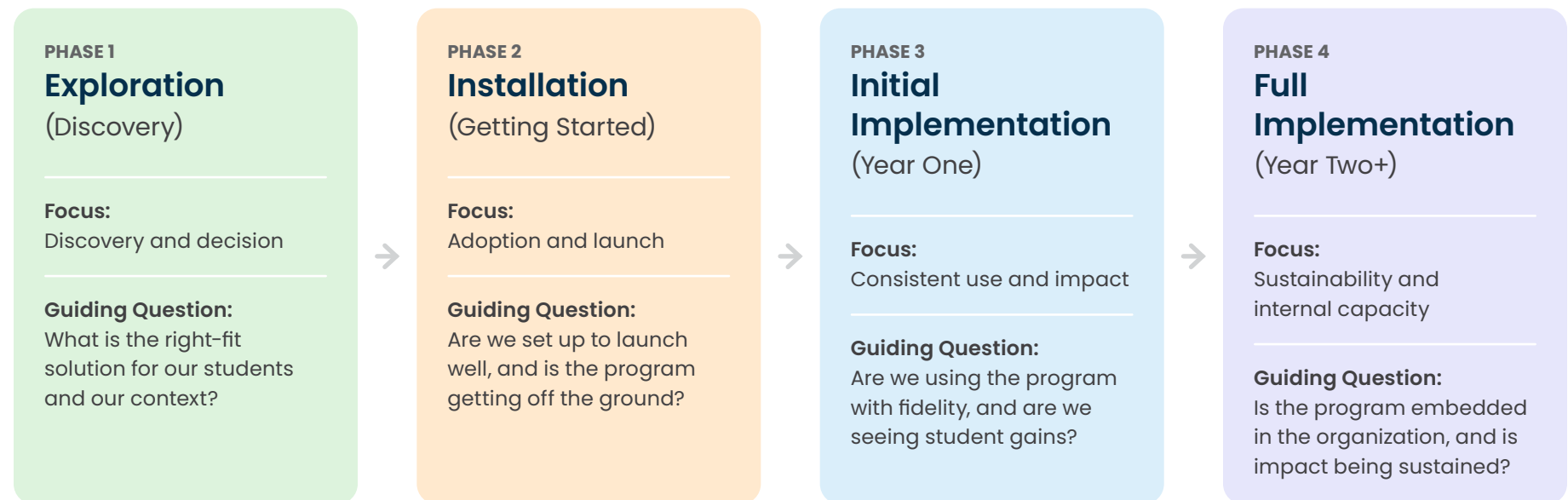


The Implementation Roadmap

Four Phases from Planning Through Sustained Success

With the **Formula for Intervention Success**—the **Who**, the **What**, and the **How**—as your foundation, the roadmap below shows what the work looks like as it unfolds over time. Understanding each phase, along with what to prioritize and what challenges to expect, makes it easier to stay the course when things get bumpy.

The Four Phases at a Glance



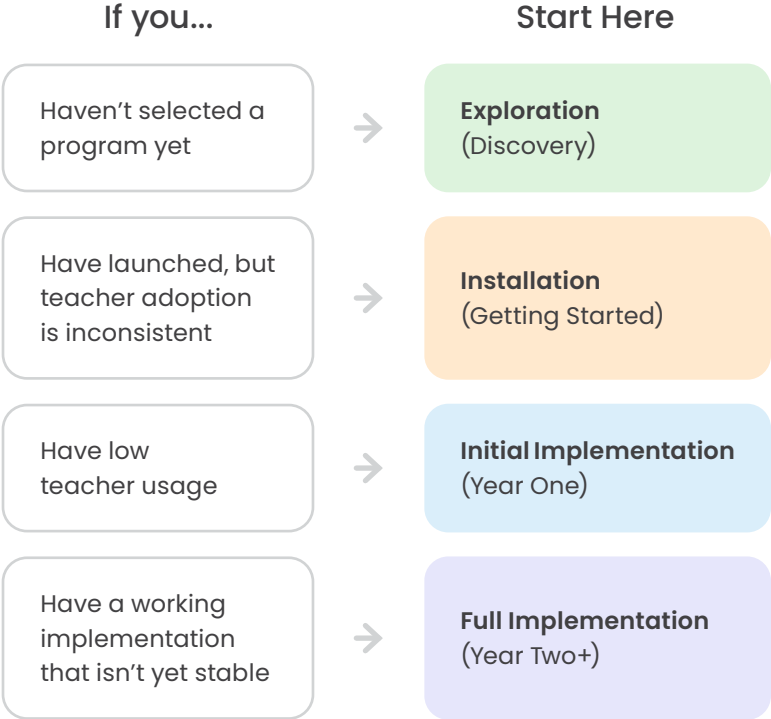
Data Review for Insight and Continuous Improvement

Across all phases, consistent data reviews foster transparency, insight, and shared accountability. Once implementation is underway, it is typically through the data that challenges and barriers surface—and this gives leaders the opportunity to respond. While the data routine itself doesn't change from phase to phase, the specific data to focus on does.

Level	What data review looks like
District	District leadership team reviews high-level trends across schools
School	Leadership team focuses on what's happening across classrooms
Classroom	PLCs review student data to stay aligned, identify challenges and problem-solve, and adjust groupings or support as needed

The sections that follow explore each phase in depth. You'll learn what to focus on, what actions to take, and how you'll know when you're moving into a new phase. For each phase, you'll find a suggested data focus, the leader actions that can make the biggest difference at that stage, and additional tools to support your process.

Not sure where to begin?



PHASE 1

Exploration (Discovery)

Focus: Discovery and decision

Guiding Question: What is the right-fit solution for our students and our context?

This is where everything begins. The Exploration phase includes getting clear—on what students actually need, what staff are ready to take on, and what conditions need to be in place to support success with an intervention. Teachers and staff are asked for input early, student data is reviewed, and program selection criteria are established.

This is also when the Enabling Context (the Who) is built. The leadership throughline is established here, and the foundation for every phase that follows is laid.

High-Impact Leader Actions: The priority in this phase is alignment. Time invested here pays off in the phases that follow.

- Conduct a needs assessment
- Build shared clarity around the problem and the desired outcome
- Establish the leadership throughline from district to school to classroom

Data Review Focus: Understanding need and readiness

- Review student outcomes
- Evaluate current practices
- Gather staff input on both need and readiness

This early data clarifies the problem you're trying to solve and will help surface potential barriers before launching a new program.



Signal for next phase: Your program is selected and enabling conditions are being built.

Resources and Tools:

Identify student need:

Identifying a Striving Reader's Most Urgent Literacy Need

[Download Resource →](#)

Evaluate a program:

Structured Literacy Intervention Program Review Tool

[Download Resource →](#)

PHASE 2

Installation (Getting Started)

Focus: Launch and adoption

Guiding Question: Are we set up to launch well, and is the program getting off the ground?

This phase is about logistics and launch. It's getting everything in place so teachers can begin using the program with confidence.

High-Impact Leader Actions:

- Confirm the implementation plan is in place and understood at every level
- Verify scheduling, rostering, and technology readiness
- Make sure teachers have the time, training, and systems needed to get started—and quickly address what's missing
- Establish training and coaching structures before launch
- Clarify data monitoring practices, including data points of focus

Data Review Focus: Program launch and adoption

- Track percentage of teachers trained
- Track percentage of teachers who have begun using the program



Signal for next phase: Most teachers (~75%) are trained and are using the program with some consistency.



PHASE 3

Initial Implementation (Year One)

Focus: Establishing consistent use and impact

Guiding Question: Are we using the program with fidelity, and are we seeing student gains?

The focus shifts from launching the program to ensuring it is used consistently and with fidelity across classrooms. This phase is strongly supported by coaching, fidelity checks, and ongoing data review. This is the phase when challenges surface most clearly—identifying and addressing barriers quickly is what keeps implementation on track.

It is worth naming: this phase is hard. Teachers are building new habits and leaders are getting into the flow of monitoring data and supporting teachers. Challenges are to be expected—and it’s likely there will be some early, energizing successes as well.

High-Impact Leader Actions: The priority in this phase is consistent use first, then refinement through coaching.

- Conduct regular fidelity walkthroughs
- Protect coaching cycles
- Participate in PLC data reviews; stay close to the data and what teachers are experiencing
- Respond quickly when barriers surface

Data Review Focus: Consistent use and progress

Focus Area	What to Look For	Example Indicators
Implementation (Use)	Are teachers using the program consistently and as intended?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sessions per week• Coaching visits
Student Growth	Are students who are experiencing the program with fidelity making the expected gains?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decoding growth• Oral reading fluency (ORF) growth• Progress on benchmark
Using the Data		
If you see...	Then...	
Use is inconsistent	Check for adequate time in the schedule, strengthen coaching, and/or clarity of expectations	
Use is strong, but progress is limited	Conduct fidelity checks first, then examine instructional quality, grouping practices, and/or alignment to student needs	



Signal for next phase: Most teachers are using the program consistently, and measurable student progress is visible.

PHASE 4

Full Implementation (Year Two and Beyond)

Focus: Sustainability and internal capacity-building

Guiding Question: Is the program embedded in the organization, and is impact being sustained?

The program is now part of regular instructional practice. The focus shifts from establishing consistency to maintaining it, and this involves intentionally building internal capacity. Systems such as scheduling, coaching, and resource allocation are integrated into the district or school ecosystem—this allows the work to continue without heavy external support.

High-Impact Leader Actions: The priority in this phase is ownership and building the internal capacity for the work to continue and grow on its own.

- Invest in internal trainers, peer coaching structures, and district- and school-level implementation teams
- Establish and maintain leader data routines that keep the work visible at every level of the leadership throughline
- Continue to celebrate progress

Data Review Focus:

Focus Area	What to Look For
Implementation (Use)	Are usage/fidelity levels consistently high and stable across classrooms and schools?
Student Growth	Are gains consistent across grades and subgroups?
Internal Capacity	Are teachers deepening their expertise? Is coaching becoming more internal?



Signal for next phase: Most teachers are using the program consistently, and measurable student progress is visible.

An Important Note

These phases are presented in a linear sequence, but real-world implementations rarely follow a straight line. Effective implementation is an iterative process, one that requires ongoing monitoring, reflection, and adjustment at every stage. Moving forward and then revisiting earlier work is to be expected; it's the process working as intended. A full implementation typically takes two to four years, and understanding that from the start can make the winding road feel a bit easier to navigate.

Insight Into Action: Building What Lasts

At some point, every leader experiences an initiative that doesn't take hold as expected.

When that happens, it's rarely because the program lacks quality or teachers lack commitment. More often, it's because the systems, structures, and supports required for successful implementation are not yet fully in place. The Formula for Intervention Success is designed to help leaders create and cultivate the conditions that allow strong programs, teachers, and leaders to succeed together.

If you take one thing from this guide, let it be this: successful implementation does not happen by chance—it's built through intentional, aligned action at every level of the system.

The roadmap, the frameworks, and the tools are here. What makes the difference now is the intentionality, consistency, and vision that only leaders can provide—across teams, across phases, and across the system.



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