Practitioners GUIDE

Mathematica — Progress Together

AmeriCorps

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Build Organizational Capacity to Implement an Intervention

For an organization to implement an intervention successfully, having a suitable intervention is necessary but not sufficient. To be ready to implement, an intervention must have a thorough and detailed description that specifies the activities to be conducted, the types of people who will participate, and the supports that are in place so it can be implemented as designed.[1–3] Even then, the organization must also have the capacity to successfully implement the intervention, which entails having an implementation infrastructure and an enabling context.

An implementation infrastructure. The organization has the resources and workforce needed to deliver, support, and manage the intervention.

An enabling context. Organization leadership, key stakeholders, partners, and the community support the intervention, and the organization's culture supports innovation, learning, and improvement.

This guide aims to help practitioners build the organizational capacity to be ready to implement their desired intervention effectively. It (1) describes the specific components of the implementation infrastructure and the enabling context that an organization needs to implement a planned or current intervention, (2) explains how organizations can develop those components based on reviewing the details of an intervention, and (3) provides a hypothetical example of the process. Informed by a framework Mathematica developed for the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) on conditions required to successfully scale an intervention, this guide addresses organizations planning to implement an intervention for the first time, those continuing to implement one, and those planning to scale one, such as to new locations or populations.

EXAMPLE OF BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

In this hypothetical example, the intervention is an after-school science program for high school students, who participate in weekly small-group sessions. After examining the intervention, the organization identified steps to take to build its capacity for implementation; these steps are listed in the sidebars throughout the rest of this guide.

BUILDING IMPLEMENTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

To be able to deliver the intervention as intended, organizations need an underlying infrastructure in place. Turning the intervention from plans and descriptions to on-the-ground reality requires personnel and other resources. Infrastructure is often about quantity—having enough of a resource—but quality is also important. For example, in addition to having a sufficient workforce, an organization must prepare personnel to fulfill their roles effectively for the intervention. However, the structures and mechanisms to accomplish this take place behind the scenes and are sometimes overlooked.

Implementation science research, such as the resources included in the Further Reading section, has identified components of implementation infrastructure that are critical to success; site visits to three CNCS-funded grantees confirmed their value.[3–5] An organization should review the intervention and the entire set of activities needed for implementation so it can establish its approach to preparing each infrastructure component. Some activities, such as directly delivering services to participants, are likely to be clearly spelled out

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1

in the intervention description. Others, such as indirect support and management tasks, might not be fully specified; instead, the organization would have to determine what else it must do to deliver the intervention successfully. The organization can also use tools to identify its strengths and areas needing more support (see the Further Reading section for one example).[6] The critical components of implementation infrastructure include:

Key components of implementation infrastructure:

$ Funding

Materials

Physical space

Sufficient workforce

Human resource system

- **Resources.** Organizations can examine the details of a well-specified intervention to ascertain the resources they will need to implement it.

  - **Funding.** Information on what is needed to implement the intervention should enable the organization to calculate the cost of delivering it. Funding must cover all activities involved, including indirect costs for support and management tasks.

  - **Materials.** The intervention should include or describe materials needed for participants and frontline personnel, such as workbooks and manuals. The organization should produce these materials internally or obtain them from another source. It may need to develop and produce other materials, such as checklists for supervisors to use when monitoring frontline personnel.

  - **Physical space.** Spaces where services are delivered to participants will likely be part of the intervention description. Others that might be needed include space to hold pre-service training, office space for frontline personnel to work in when not providing services, and a location to store materials. Space that meets intervention requirements can be scarce or expensive, so the organization needs a plan for obtaining it. This might entail use of space from partners or stakeholders or additional funding.

- **Sufficient workforce.** The intervention will likely specify the number and qualifications necessary for each workforce role, and must include those who deliver the intervention as well as those conducting support and manage-

ment activities. To ensure it has a sufficient qualified workforce, the organization might hire new personnel, assign current personnel, partner with other organizations to use their personnel, or combine these strategies. To avoid overlooking support and management activities, the organization might need to focus on identifying personnel who will conduct all those activities and ensuring that they have enough time to support and oversee the frontline workforce.

- **Human resource system.** This consists of activities to select, train, and supervise all personnel, from frontline to managers. Although the intervention might not specify this system, its requirements should inform what the system must include. For example, if frontline personnel deliver the intervention in locations separate from those of their supervisors, additional supervision activities might be needed. The organization might need to develop a formal system or, if it already has one, modify it to aid intervention delivery.

ESTABLISHING AN ENABLING CONTEXT

Implementing an intervention occurs in a broader context. For example, the organization may have other interventions or activities to conduct, stakeholders may support or oppose the intervention, and many interventions require working with partners. Also, there will often be new and unanticipated challenges that organizations will have to be able to address. Implementation science, such as the resources included in the Further Reading section, has identified key components of a context that enables successful implementation of an intervention; site visits to CNCS-funded grantees confirmed their value[3,4]:

- **Supports from leaders, stakeholders, and partners.** To implement an intervention, an organization needs support internally from organizational leadership and externally from stakeholders and partners. An assessment of the support needed might help the organization identify structures or processes that will help to ensure that the intervention receives enough attention and resources relative to other organizational activities. It also might foster a recognition of resources or supports that must come from stakeholders or partners, and what coordination with them is needed to ensure that the resources and supports are maintained throughout implementation.

Key components of enabling context:

- Supports from leaders, stakeholders, and partners
- Culture of innovation and improvement
- Ability to address challenges

- **Culture of innovation and improvement.** Organizations with this type of culture constantly evaluate how they are implementing an intervention and strive to improve what they are currently doing or innovate new approaches. An organization can review information from a well-specified intervention to determine what high-quality implementation looks like or how to measure success. Then, during implementation, the organization can compare its efforts to those indicators and use the results to identify ways to improve its approach or innovate, while ensuring it delivers the intervention as designed.

- **Ability to address challenges.** All organizations encounter challenges in delivering, supporting, and managing an intervention; successful implementation involves resolving those issues when they come up. One way to do this is to identify aspects of the intervention where challenges could arise, in order to head them off or to be better prepared to deal with them if they occur. For example, an organization might notice that one of the intervention activities will likely place additional demands on participants or that the data system seems to have a steep learning curve for users. Through a risk assessment, the organization could predict which challenges are most likely to occur and which would harm implementation the most, so it can prioritize addressing those challenges.

ADJUSTING APPROACH BASED ON TYPE OF IMPLEMENTATION

Regardless of whether an organization has experience implementing an intervention or is doing so for the first time, it must have the organizational capacity to support implementation. However, its experience with the intervention and its plans for future implementation might shape its approach to building capacity.

Initial implementation. Organizations without experience implementing the intervention will likely need a more intensive effort both to put an implementation infrastructure in place and to develop an enabling context. An organization might find that infrastructure is more straightforward and can serve as a starting point for planning, but that the steps needed for the surrounding context are less clear and take more time to devise. The organization could also contact others that implement the intervention or the developer (if it did not develop the intervention) for guidance.

Ongoing implementation. An organization that has already implemented the intervention and plans to continue doing so is familiar with the work required and has experience building capacity to succeed. However, the organization can still examine what else it needs to do to strengthen existing capacity. For example, it might find that some aspects of implementation relied on implicit institutional knowledge, which would have to be spelled out more explicitly if new personnel were to implement the next phase. It also might find that although it has an infrastructure in place, it needs to improve the surrounding context to enable more successful implementation.

Scaling. Many organizations, including the CNCS-funded grantees visited, plan to scale a current intervention, such as by implementing it in new locations. While the organization has an existing infrastructure and context, scaling involves new aspects of implementation that require new elements of organizational capacity. As with the intervention, the planned scaling must be well defined, and the organization must examine its plans to determine how it needs to build or strengthen capacity.

Approach may differ if type of implementation is:

- Initial
- Ongoing
- Scaling (expansion, replication, adaptation)

All types of scaling require strong implementation infrastructure and an enabling context, but different types of scaling might require organizations to focus especially on certain aspects of capacity. For example:

- **Expansion** of an intervention in a location where it already operates might require additional focus on support and management activities, as more services will be provided

to a larger population. For example, it should decide whether processes for hiring and supervising frontline personnel have to be revised to accommodate the larger workforce.

• **Replication** of an intervention to a new location might require more focus on infrastructure to support monitoring activities, to ensure that it is implemented with fidelity. The organization might also need to do more to ensure that the new context enables successful implementation. For example, it should identify whether there are different stakeholders and partners in the new location and what support it needs from them.

• **Adaptation** of an intervention for a new population or new setting might require extra focus on improving implementation and on addressing challenges to ensure that the changes to the intervention have worked as intended. It will be helpful to ensure that the changes are clearly specified, including how they differ from the original intervention, so that the organization can implement the modified intervention as intended and assess how well the modifications are working.

FURTHER READING

[1] Mathematica. "Practitioners Guide: How to Fully Describe an Intervention," 2018 (https://nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/evidence-exchange/how-fully-describe-intervention)

[2] Mathematica. "Practitioners Guide: How to Structure Implementation Supports," 2019 (https://nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/evidence-exchange/how-structure-implementation-supports)

[3] Mathematica. "Planned Scaling Activities of CNCS-Funded Organizations: Benchmark Findings," 2018

[4] National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)
   "Active Implementation Hub" (https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/ai-hub)
   "Implementation Drivers" (https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/module-2)

[5] University of Kansas. "Community Tool Box: Improving Organizational Management and Development" (https://ctb.ku.edu/en/improve-organizational-management-and-development)

[6] Corporation for National and Community Service. "Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool," 2017 (https://nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/resource/CNCS_Organization_Assessment_Tool_Final_082517__508_0.pdf)

ABOUT THE SERIES

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) supports the scaling of effective interventions that it funds. CNCS engaged Mathematica Policy Research to conduct the Scaling Evidence-Based Models project (contract GS10F0050L/CNSHQ16F0049). As part of that project, Mathematica developed a series of guides to help practitioners assess their scaling efforts critically, collect evidence on the effectiveness of their interventions, and increase the likelihood of effective scaling of successful interventions.

Each guide provides a succinct, but non-exhaustive, overview of a topic relevant to practitioners. The guides are based on implementation science research, as well as information collected during site visits conducted by Mathematica staff with three CNCS-funded grantees during fall 2018. As part of the effort, Mathematica staff reviewed program documents (such as manuals and grant applications) and conducted in-depth interviews with organizational leaders and frontline personnel, partner personnel, AmeriCorps members, and other stakeholders. More in-depth information on the topic of this guide can be found through references in the Further Reading section.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, contact Scott Richman, director of the Scaling Evidence-Based Models project, at srichman@mathematica-mpr.com.

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4