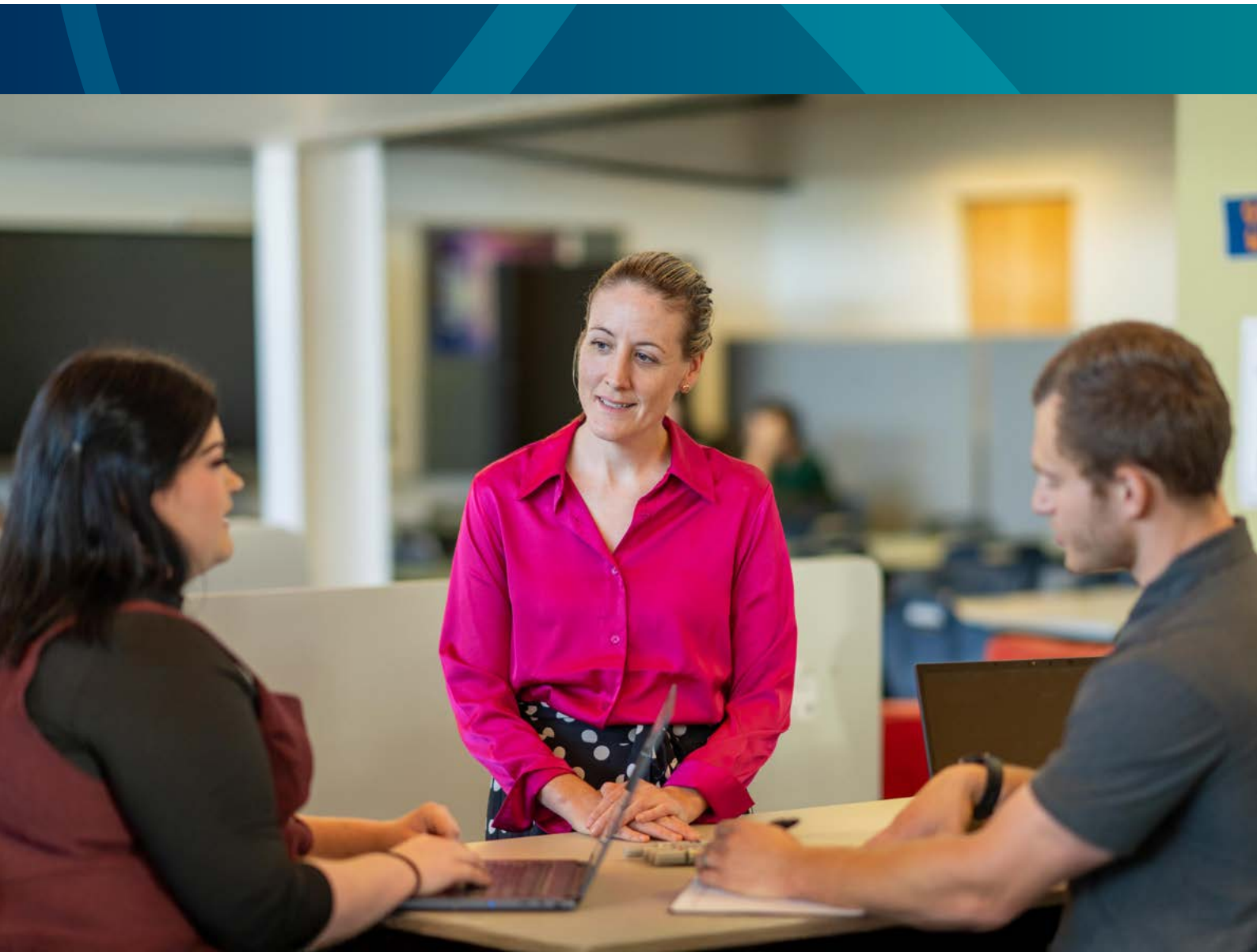


Evidence-informed implementation in schools

Why and how AERO developed a deliberate and structured approach for implementing evidence-based teaching practices

November 2025



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.

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Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

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Definitions

Term	Meaning in this discussion paper
Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR)	The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) is a widely used framework in implementation science that aims to understand enablers and barriers in a particular context.
evidence-based teaching practices	Evidence-based teaching practices are educational approaches supported by research evidence. This means there is broad consensus from rigorously conducted evaluations that they work.
evidence-informed	Being ‘evidence-informed’ means using evidence from research, together with practitioners’ professional expertise and judgement.
implementation	Implementation is the process that aims to integrate evidence into everyday practice. It focuses on the ‘how’ of ensuring evidence is embedded and can be distinguished from ‘what’ is being embedded.
implementation science	Implementation science is a field of study that examines how to integrate evidence-based practices into everyday practice.
Learning Partner project	The Learning Partner project is a collaboration between the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and school leaders, classroom teachers and regional system teams to better understand the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices in different school contexts.
practitioners	Practitioners include school leaders, middle leaders, teachers and any other members of school implementation teams.
regional system teams	Regional system teams are teams of education officers employed by school systems. These officers provide strategic and pedagogical support for networks of school leaders and work in regional (rather than central) system roles.

Summary

The value of evidence-based teaching practices lies in how these practices are brought to life for all students – i.e., in their implementation.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has developed a deliberate and structured approach to support the effective implementation of evidence-based teaching practices in Australian schools. The approach offers a way for those in the Australian education sector to strengthen how they think about and lead implementation efforts in schools.

This discussion paper outlines why effective implementation matters, provides a detailed explanation of how we developed and tested our approach to implementation in schools, and signals next steps in this ongoing work. The paper consists of 3 parts.

Part 1: Why effective implementation holds great promise for Australian schools



The first part of this paper is a ‘call to action’ outlining why the Australian education community, including AERO, needs to prioritise the effective implementation of evidence-based teaching practices.

While the education community has made significant progress in identifying the most effective teaching practices in a range of contexts, there is a persistent research-practice gap between what research indicates is effective and what is typical practice in Australian classrooms. Implementation efforts may not work when there is a reliance on guesswork rather than a systematic approach, and/or insufficient consideration is given to school context and sustaining efforts over time.

Effective implementation contributes to positive impacts on student outcomes. Data from nearly 500 studies indicates that *well-implemented* programs are 2 to 3 times more effective for a wide range of outcomes.

Part 2: Developing and testing AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation



The second part of this paper outlines how we have developed a deliberate and structured approach to implementation as well as how we are working alongside school leaders and regional system teams to operationalise and refine this approach.

We have aimed to develop an implementation approach that is useful and usable in schools because it is:

- evidence-informed
- practitioner-focused
- accessible
- adaptable where appropriate
- contextualised for Australian settings
- applicable to evidence-based teaching practices.

We have drawn on implementation science to develop the approach because it:

- focuses on implementation of evidence-based practices (in various settings)
- has a rigorous and growing evidence base
- has, to date, not been used extensively in relation to *teaching practices*, but is highly relevant to Australian schools
- extends existing implementation efforts in Australian schools
- was specifically recommended in expert advice for AERO.

Within implementation science, we have drawn on 6 key concepts to develop a deliberate and structured approach for school implementation teams to use:

- considering context
- selecting the evidence-based teaching practice(s)
- using a staged approach
- addressing enablers and barriers
- using key implementation strategies
- monitoring implementation outcomes.

We have developed the Learning Partner project to pilot and test our approach. In this project, AERO staff work alongside school leaders, classroom teachers and regional system teams across 4 states to understand implementation of explicit instruction in different school contexts. This collaboration has been vital for operationalising key concepts from the literature, as well as refining the approach and how we describe effective implementation. Two formative evaluations of the project indicate that using a deliberate and structured approach is a promising way to build implementation leadership and strengthen teaching practice in schools.

Part 3: Where to next



The paper concludes by emphasising that effective implementation of evidence-based teaching practices in Australian schools involves an ongoing, collective effort.

We share the next steps we intend to take to strengthen and expand our advice and guidance on a deliberate and structured approach, and to explore further options for highly scalable forms of implementation support to Australian schools.

We also suggest next steps for:

- school leaders and teams who are leading implementation efforts in their schools
- policymakers and regional system teams
- researchers.

Summary

For a one-page version of this discussion paper, see our accompanying [A3 summary](#).



Introduction

Effective implementation of evidence-based teaching practices at scale has the potential to benefit all Australian students.

As part of the broader Australian education community, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is committed to encouraging the adoption and effective implementation of evidence-based teaching practices. To this end, we have developed a [deliberate and structured approach to implementation](#) that school implementation teams can use to help embed evidence-based teaching practices in their schools.

This discussion paper provides background on this approach to effective school implementation.

Across 3 parts, the paper:

- outlines why the Australian education community needs to prioritise effective implementation
- details how we have developed a deliberate and structured approach to ensure key concepts from implementation research are useful and usable in Australian schools
- suggests next steps that AERO, school leaders, policymakers and regional system teams, and researchers can play in the collective, ongoing effort needed to support effective implementation.

Intended audience and purpose of this discussion paper

This discussion paper sets out our rationale for focusing on effective implementation and explains in detail how we developed an evidence-informed implementation approach that schools can use. It is intended to provide interested policymakers, researchers and members of school implementation teams with transparency in development of AERO's approach, as well as confidence and justification to focus on using implementation science in education.

Unlike our practical resources, this discussion paper is not intended to provide school leaders with advice on using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation in their school. Nor does it aim to provide system teams with advice for developing their own implementation approach for schools to use.

- For practical resources designed for use by school implementation teams, see our [interactive tool](#).
- For insights that draw on formative evaluations of AERO's school implementation work, see our [2024](#) and [2025](#) Insights into Implementation discussion papers.
- For a quick version of the content in this discussion paper, see our [A3 summary](#).

Why effective implementation holds great promise for Australian schools

At a national level, effective implementation of evidence-based teaching practices offers untapped potential within Australian schools. This potential stems from both the:

- nature and scale of the challenge of embedding evidence-based teaching practices
- evidence that effective implementation is an essential part of enhancing quality teaching.

Each of these points is discussed in this section.

Understanding the challenge that effective implementation seeks to address

Acknowledging the persistent research-practice gap and its implications for Australian students

In the last 2 decades, the education community has made significant progress in recognising how students benefit when teachers use evidence-based practices. There is an expectation now for the whole education community to be more evidence-literate, and being evidence-based is viewed positively (see, e.g., Evidence for Learning [E4L], 2021). There is also broad consensus, based on rigorously conducted evaluations, for a range of evidence-based teaching practices. AERO has highlighted many of these effective teaching practices in our [model of learning and teaching](#).¹

However, in education, as in many fields, there remains a significant gap between what is known to be effective from research, and what is done in practice (Schlicht-Schmälzle et al., 2024). In health, it is estimated that – due to challenges with implementation – it takes an average of 17 years for known effective practices to become common practice (Robinson et al., 2020). Similarly, in education, gaps exist between what research indicates is effective, and what is typical classroom practice (e.g., Capin et al., 2024; Hepburn & Telfer, 2022; Newton & Salvi, 2020). For example, while practices related to classroom management are positively associated with students' learning outcomes, in the most recent Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), on average fewer than two-thirds of Australian teachers reported using classroom management techniques to support students to focus on learning (Thomson & Hillman, 2019).

This research-practice gap in education persists:

- despite improvements in the quality of education research (Gorard et al., 2020)
- despite educators holding positive views about the connection of research use to improved teacher practice and student outcomes (Rickinson et al., 2021)
- even when evidence-based guidance is shared directly with schools, and this guidance is supplemented with professional development sessions and practical classroom resources (e.g., Lord et al., 2017)
- even when research use is advocated for at a policy level (Angrist & Dercon, 2024).

¹ For example, AERO's [model of learning and teaching](#) includes many evidence-based teaching practices aligned with how students learn, such as chunk content, explain learning objectives and revisit and review.

This research-practice gap may also have equity implications. Practitioners with postgraduate qualifications, over 15 years of experience and sufficient time to engage with research report greater confidence in their capacity to use it (Rickinson et al., 2021). Consequently, schools that find it easier to recruit and retain teachers and those with greater resources may face fewer barriers in closing the research-practice gap in their setting. Similarly, schools in rural and remote contexts may encounter additional barriers to accessing research due to factors such as higher costs of accessing professional development opportunities (Maher & Prescott, 2017).

A persistent gap between research and practice results in students not having access to teaching practices that research indicates are likely to improve their learning outcomes. Narrowing this gap represents a significant opportunity for the Australian education community to enable all students to improve their outcomes. Doing so relies not only on generating high-quality research on effective teaching practices, but also on supporting schools to *implement* these practices.

Understanding why implementation efforts may falter

Narrowing the research-practice gap requires a clear understanding of why previous implementation efforts may have faltered. Schools are complex systems, which means that implementing and sustaining evidence-based practices at a whole-school level can be challenging (Chong & Lee, 2021). While the education community has grown in its research literacy, more can be done to support efforts to make evidence-based practice part of everyday practice at scale.

At a high level, implementation may falter when:

- there is a reliance on guesswork rather than a systematic approach (Hamilton et al., 2022)
- insufficient consideration is given to school context and sustaining implementation efforts over time (Moore et al., 2024)
- tools to support implementation either lack sufficient detail or are too complicated to be practical (Leeman et al., 2018)
- there is too much reliance on a single implementation strategy, such as holding professional development sessions (Moore et al., 2024)
- barriers to implementation are not fully identified and addressed.
 - These barriers can exist at different levels, including within the school, the system and the practice itself (Damschroder et al., 2022).
 - For example, a lack of clarity and alignment at the system level, changing system priorities or a ‘push’ for multiple reforms to be implemented at once, can contribute to change fatigue (McLure & Aldridge, 2022).

When implementation is unsuccessful, a potential opportunity to improve student outcomes is missed, and valuable time and effort are wasted. Poor implementation may also lead to the belief that the practice itself is not effective or relevant, when instead it was the *implementation process* that could have been strengthened.

Given the complexity of implementation, practitioners need and deserve support to carry it out effectively.

Recognising that effective implementation leads to improved outcomes

Effective implementation involves a series of planned and intentional activities aimed at integrating an evidence-based practice into real-world service settings (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017). In schools, it means being intentional about how an evidence-based practice is used and sustained.

Evidence-based programs and practices have greater positive impacts on students' outcomes, including maths and reading achievement, when implemented as intended (Killerby & Dunsmuir, 2018). This is true for a wide range of outcomes, including academic and mental health, physical health promotion, social skills, and academic achievement. Data from nearly 500 studies indicates that *well-implemented* programs are 2 to 3 times more effective for these outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). For example, a focus on fidelity of implementation is strongly associated with greater positive effects in youth mentoring programs (DuBois et al., 2002). Similarly, increased implementation fidelity in a positive behaviour initiative in schools has been linked to improved behaviour outcomes (James et al., 2019).

By taking a more deliberate and structured approach to implementation, school leaders, regional workforces, and policymakers can avoid common pitfalls of implementation and effectively respond to the factors that influence how well schools adopt evidence-based practices. To do this well, the Australian education community, including AERO, must collectively work towards effective implementation at scale.

Developing and testing AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation

The need to focus on and support effective implementation is clear. This section explains how AERO has responded by developing and refining a deliberate and structured approach to implementation for schools to use. More specifically, it details our processes for:

1. outlining AERO's responsibility within the collective effort to strengthen implementation of evidence-based teaching practices in Australian schools
2. determining what type of implementation approach would add value to existing advice and efforts within the Australian education community
3. identifying a rigorous and relevant evidence base that could inform the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices
4. identifying key concepts from that evidence base, and packaging these together into an overall approach
5. working alongside schools and regional system teams to bring this approach to life for practitioners, ensuring it is useful and usable.

Each of these points is discussed in the sections that follow.

1. Outlining AERO's responsibility to support effective implementation in Australian schools

As part of the global 'what works' movement, AERO is one of a number of evidence intermediaries around the world that works to narrow the research-practice gap (Abdo et al., 2021).

Our vision is for Australia to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence. One of the ways we support this vision – and one of our key strategic priorities (AERO, 2025b) – is to encourage the adoption and effective implementation of evidence. In doing so, we seek to act in ways that avoid the common reasons why 'what works' efforts falter (Abdo et al., 2021). These actions include:

- paying attention to effective, sustainable implementation
- paying attention to how practitioners understand and use evidence
- building credibility among practitioners (e.g., by presenting work that reflects the realities of practice)
- sharing evidence that is not only rigorous but is also relevant for practitioners and policymakers.

Part of our role within the Australian education community is, therefore, to support schools and systems by:



- providing advice and guidance on an approach to implementation that is informed by rigorous and relevant evidence
- drawing on the experiences and expertise of practitioners across diverse school contexts to operationalise and refine the approach
- being transparent about how the approach was developed.



2. Adding value to existing implementation advice for schools

In 2022, during our first year of operation, we started developing an evidence-informed implementation approach for use in Australian schools. To fulfil our remit as a national evidence intermediary and ensure this approach to support school implementation would add something unique or different to what was already available, the approach needed to meet several criteria. These criteria are set out in Table 1.²

Table 1: Criteria for ensuring our approach would add value to existing implementation advice




Criterion	Summary	Adding value
Evidence-informed 	The approach has a relevant and rigorous evidence base that can add value to what school leaders and teachers are already doing, and systems are already advising, for implementation.	Often, the rigour around the ‘how’ of implementing receives less attention than ‘what’ is being implemented – both in practice and in research. Yet, there are multiple fields of research, theories, models and frameworks that can add rigour to implementation processes and increase the likelihood of successful implementation. ³
Practitioner-focused 	The approach focuses on how practitioners (school leaders, middle leaders and teachers) can use evidence-informed implementation concepts in real-time and with just enough rigour to support improved teaching practice in their schools and classrooms. Concepts in the approach are ‘operationalised’ (i.e., brought to life or made ready to apply in practice).	When developing the approach, we wanted to explore how practitioners could use implementation concepts <i>proactively</i> (e.g., for planning) and when <i>monitoring</i> for continuous improvement. We also wanted practitioners to be able to apply concepts and collect data in ways that did not require so much rigour as to be burdensome. ⁴ This focus differs from how concepts are often applied with the research literature. ⁵ To operationalise the approach, we aimed to work alongside school practitioners to ‘bring to life’ concepts from the implementation literature for the ultimate benefit of students in their schools. We aimed to reflect what school practitioners seek, frame concepts in language that is relevant to them and make changes based on their experiences.

2 Incidentally, this list of criteria has similarities with constructs in the ‘Innovation’ domain in the updated Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al., 2022).


3 Since we developed our approach, the evidence base has also significantly expanded. In particular, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in the United Kingdom has published a systematic review of evidence relating to implementation in education – an effort that involved a consortium of 3 universities over 4 years between publication of a research protocol and final publication (Moore et al., 2024). We will continue to draw in depth on the EEF review to refine our school implementation work.

4 This can be likened to the distinction between ‘measurement for improvement’ and measurement for research (Takahashi et al., 2022).

5 As a broad statement, researchers aim to generate *generalisable* findings and commonly use concepts from implementation literature to retrospectively explain why an initiative was or was not effective. Data collection usually requires the development or use of validated tools, and there is often a time delay between collecting data and presenting findings. By contrast, focusing on how practitioners can use implementation research in their everyday work echoes the call for ‘practice-based implementation’ (Dobbins, 2023).

Criterion	Summary	Adding value
Accessible 	The approach respects the daily pressures of teaching and leadership.	Given the myriad of competing demands on school leaders and teachers (Dicke et al., 2025; Hunter et al., 2022), we aimed to develop an approach that would be as simple and feasible as possible while retaining enough of what research suggests are core components of successful implementation work.
Adaptable (to an extent) 	The approach has some flexibility, both at the school and system levels.	Incorporating elements of flexibility was important in 2 ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring school leaders using the approach could adapt certain elements while retaining the rigour of the original approach. As schools are complex systems with diverse contexts, feasibility and adaptation to context are essential. creating something that could, in future, be tailored by systems to fit within their own models for schools to use. Systems have a critical role in supporting implementation within schools, which are the sites of implementation (Viennet & Pont, 2017).⁶
Contextualised for Australian settings 	The approach uses language and concepts tailored to Australian schools and their diverse contexts.	We needed to ensure that any research from outside Australia would be appropriately presented for Australian audiences. At the same time, we needed to keep scalability and diversity of context at the forefront. That is, we needed to ensure the approach could be contextualised across different jurisdictions and sectors, school types, staff and student populations, geographic and cultural settings, and equity considerations.

⁶ As is appropriate, Australian school leaders and teachers tend to be most familiar with the guidance and resources published by their own system or sector. We were, therefore, keen to communicate ideas in a way that could be adopted by systems within their own policies and frameworks for schools, rather than present a complete, final and comprehensive ‘package’ or model of implementation that must be followed exactly. In this way, we aimed to avoid contributing to a lack of alignment between different implementation approaches, where school leaders need to understand and choose between (or merge) a combination of approaches.

Criterion	Summary	Adding value
<p>Applicable to evidence-based teaching practices</p> 	<p>Evidence-based teaching practices form the bread and butter of quality teaching in Australia. To fill a gap in advice and guidance, and add the most value to existing work, the approach must be relevant to implementing these teaching practices.</p>	<p>At the time we were developing our approach, there was already an increased focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quality use of evidence (generally) in Australian schools (e.g., Rickinson et al., 2021) • implementation of evidence-based whole-school frameworks, like multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) or Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS)⁷ (e.g., Corcoran & Edward Thomas, 2021) • implementation of nutrition and physical activity programs in Australian schools (e.g., Shoesmith et al., 2023) • how to use various evidence-based <i>programs</i>, including highly scripted or manualised programs • use of whole-school improvement models (e.g., Robinson & Gray, 2019) and effective school strategic plans (e.g., Chiong & Pearson, 2023). <p>However, there was limited advice or guidance for schools on implementing <i>evidence-based teaching practices</i>, which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • essential for quality teaching across all subject areas and all levels of primary and secondary education • likely more complex to implement than manualised programs⁸ • a key focus area of AERO’s resources for school leaders and teachers.

By applying these criteria, we ultimately aimed to develop an approach to implementation that would be appropriate and feasible⁹ – or, in other words, *useful* and *usable* – for implementation teams to apply in their schools, for the benefit of their students. These criteria drew us to the field of implementation science.

7 The National Implementation Research Network in the United States has played a leading role in integrating implementation science into the work to implement MTSS and PBIS, which has gained significant traction across many US school districts (Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, 2019).

8 For example, evidence-based *programs* are likely to include practices that have already been intentionally combined and sequenced, are likely to be delivered with pre-designed professional development, training and support, are delivered by trained coaches and/or researchers, and may come packaged with a set of implementation strategies.




9 Incidentally, appropriateness and feasibility are 2 implementation outcomes (Proctor et al., 2009).

3. Drawing on the field of implementation science

Many bodies of research provide potential guidance for how evidence or evidence-based practices can be disseminated or used to change behaviour. These include knowledge mobilisation, dissemination and diffusion, research translation, behavioural science, improvement science, literature on quality evidence use, and complex adaptive systems literature.

While we scanned these bodies of literature and adopted some ideas, we drew most heavily on implementation science to develop a deliberate and structured approach. Implementation science is a cross-disciplinary field of study that aims to understand how to effectively promote the uptake of evidence-based practices into routine practice (Dyssegaard et al., 2017; Moore, 2021). Table 2 outlines our reasons for using implementation science as the basis of our approach.

Table 2: Why implementation science forms the basis of our approach

Implementation science	Details
focuses on implementation of evidence-based practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation science aims to ensure that research findings on evidence-based practices are not only adopted but also effectively implemented and sustained in real-world settings (Kelly & Perkins, 2012).
has a rigorous, broad and growing evidence base 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The field of implementation science originated through innovation diffusion studies in the 1960s and gained prominence with the rise of the evidence-based practice movement in healthcare in the 1990s (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). In recent decades, the field has grown enormously. For example, between 1998 and 2017, there was a substantial rise in high-quality, experimental implementation science studies and systematic reviews, increasing from hundreds to more than 10,000 (Albers et al., 2020). This surge has led to the development of numerous implementation theories, models and frameworks to bridge the research-practice gap (Tabak et al., 2012). Being cross-disciplinary, implementation science also incorporates concepts from other disciplines and fields. As a result, there are abundant concepts within implementation science for our approach to remain (at least initially) within that field.
has to date not been used extensively in relation to evidence-based teaching practices, but is highly relevant to Australian schools and systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation science concepts have not been used to a large extent in relation to evidence-based teaching practices in Australian education (see Adding value to existing implementation advice for schools), and yet they are relevant and hold great promise. In particular, implementation science supports a systematic approach, which helps avoid the guesswork that can undermine school improvement efforts (see Understanding why implementation efforts may falter).

Implementation science	Details
<p>extends existing implementation efforts in Australian schools</p> <p>✓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of implementation science concepts have some links to what schools are already doing and systems are already advising. For example, using an evidence-based teaching practice ‘with fidelity’ is language familiar to many practitioners, and fidelity is a key implementation outcome (see Identifying key concepts from implementation science). • At the same time, implementation science concepts considerably extend these efforts. • In offering this ‘value add’ compared with what is already underway in schools and systems, implementation science concepts represent a potential growth area.
<p>was specifically recommended in expert advice for AERO</p> <p>✓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To learn from the successes and failures of evidence intermediaries around the world, AERO commissioned the Centre for Evidence and Implementation to produce a report on what works for ‘what works’ centres shortly after forming. This report recommended we draw on the ‘rich lessons’ from the field of implementation science to help drive the uptake of evidence in Australian education (Abdo et al., 2021).

Drawing on the growing, rigorous field of implementation science, therefore, holds considerable promise for improving the uptake of evidence-based teaching practices in Australian schools. Yet, we are also aware that further translation and guidance are needed for implementation science to be useful and usable in the daily work of school leaders. There are 3 main reasons why further guidance is necessary:

1. Ironically, the field of implementation science is often seen to have an implementation problem, as there is insufficient focus on how concepts can be used in practice settings (Beidas et al., 2022; Westerlund et al., 2019). Concepts such as ‘determinants’ and ‘implementation outcomes’ can seem abstract and overly theoretical when not clearly explained or placed in context.
2. Implementation science is messy. There is little consensus within this growing field on a *single framework* to guide implementation efforts. Rather, there are over 60 implementation frameworks (Tabak et al., 2012), 73 implementation strategies (Powell et al., 2015), 601 enablers and barriers (Krause et al., 2014) and 420 measures of context, processes and outcomes (Lewis, Fischer, et al., 2015a; Lewis, Stanick, et al., 2015b). Partly this messiness may reflect the complexity of implementation efforts, but this array of options can be overwhelming for researchers and practitioners alike.
3. Ideas from implementation science have to date been applied more extensively in fields such as health rather than education (Sanetti et al., 2020). Consequently, many implementation science concepts need further tailoring for educational audiences. This is especially the case for implementation of *evidence-based teaching practices* (see [Adding value to existing implementation advice for schools](#)) and given the potential added complexities of implementation in education compared with health (Smolkowski et al., 2019).

We have aimed to bridge these issues so that the important ideas from implementation science can help leaders and teachers in schools successfully implement evidence-based teaching practices.


4. Identifying and packaging key concepts from implementation science

Identifying key concepts from implementation science

From within the broad field of implementation science, we sought to identify core (widely cited) concepts and frameworks that were relevant to educational settings.¹⁰ To do so, we focused on seminal implementation science papers and drew on internal and external subject matter expertise. From these sources, we identified 6 key concepts. Each of these concepts is a component within our deliberate and structured approach to implementation, and is described in more detail in our [explainers for implementing evidence-based practices](#) in schools. Importantly, the core concepts we identified align well with those in a ‘generic implementation framework’ developed for researchers and practitioners in school settings (Komesidou & Hogan, 2023).¹¹

Table 3 details the 6 key concepts, how they are presented within the implementation literature and why they are relevant to school settings.

Table 3: The key concepts we have drawn from implementation science




Concept	Details
<p>Considering context</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of context is a widely accepted notion in implementation science (Abdo et al., 2021; Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019). • Drawing greater attention to context counters one of the common difficulties in school-based implementation efforts (see Understanding why implementation efforts may falter). • Starting with context helps with the selection of an evidence-based teaching practice. Considering context throughout an implementation process helps to tailor how that practice will be embedded.

¹⁰ The use of multiple frameworks in implementation planning is seen as both ‘necessary and desirable’ (Moullin et al., 2020). For this reason, we have drawn upon different frameworks to elaborate on different implementation science concepts – e.g., a framework for considering enablers and barriers, a framework for considering outcomes.

¹¹ Given that implementation science has an array of models and concepts, ‘generic implementation frameworks’ are an attempt to identify the most important ideas across multiple implementation frameworks (Moullin et al., 2015). Based on a systematic review of core implementation science concepts for healthcare (Moullin et al., 2015), Komesidou and Hogan (2023) developed a generic implementation framework for researchers and practitioners in school settings, including particularly speech-language pathologists. It has many elements in common with our approach. Specifically, Komesidou and Hogan (2023) also use the concept of stages, use CFIR and another framework for domains and determinants of practice (that is, enablers and barriers), use School Implementation Strategies, Translating ERIC Resources (SISTER) as a framework for implementation strategies, and use an evaluation component which includes evaluation of implementation outcomes based partly on Proctor et al. (2009; 2011).

Concept	Details
<p>Selecting the evidence-based teaching practice(s)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In implementation frameworks, the practice being implemented (the ‘what’) is usually separated from the ‘how’ of implementing (e.g., Curran, 2020). • However, in early discussions with school leaders and regional systems teams, it became clear that our approach should include guidance to ensure the practice to be implemented is backed by sufficiently rigorous evidence. • This is especially the case since the terms ‘evidence-informed’ and ‘evidence-based’ are now used frequently in education research, policy, programs and professional learning offerings, suggesting that a wide array of (sometimes contradictory) practices are backed by strong evidence. Yet, certain forms of evidence can provide greater confidence in rigour and relevance than others (see AERO’s Standards of Evidence). • When a practice is chosen that lacks rigorous evidence, implementation efforts will not ultimately benefit students, which could in turn contribute to change fatigue among teachers and leaders. • To ensure schools would be able to apply a selected practice across different classroom contexts, the need to highlight the <i>core elements</i> of a practice also became clear.¹²
<p>Using a staged approach</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is widely accepted that effective implementation is not a one-off event – it occurs in recursive, well-defined stages (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017; EEF, 2019; Meyers et al., 2012; Saldana et al., 2012). • These stages can be ‘carved up’ in various ways, but a 4-stage approach is the most common (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017). • We use 4 stages with the language of ‘Explore’, ‘Prepare’, ‘Deliver’ and ‘Sustain’ because this structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - builds on the work of E4L (2019), which was adapted specifically for Australian schools from the work of the EEF (2019). The E4L work had already gained some traction within the Australian education community (see, e.g., E4L, 2023). - reflects the ‘Exploration Preparation Implementation and Sustainment’ (EPIS) implementation science model that ‘is the sole theory, model or framework developed specifically for public mental health and social service settings’ (Moore et al., 2024). • We also use the 4 stages as an organising framework for other concepts in our approach, since all other concepts take place over time.

¹² Core elements are the essential features of an evidence-based practice needed to use that practice with fidelity. They are also known as core intervention components or active ingredients (see, e.g., Fixsen et al., 2013).

Concept	Details
<p><u>Addressing enablers and barriers</u></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enablers and barriers are factors (or ‘determinants’) that help or hinder implementation efforts. Understanding these factors is seen as a key part of translating practices from research trials into diverse, real-world settings (Damschroder et al., 2022). • We aimed to highlight how taking a systematic approach to enablers and barriers offers a significant value add for schools (also see Operationalising key concepts). • For an organising framework, we use the updated Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al., 2022). CFIR is the most frequently used theory, model or framework in existing school implementation studies (Moore et al., 2024).
<p><u>Using key implementation strategies</u></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation strategies are actions that support the implementation of evidence-based practices. • We aimed to counter the typical reliance on professional development being synonymous with implementation rather than part of an implementation effort (Fixsen, 2005; Moore et al., 2024) (see Understanding why implementation efforts may falter). • We, therefore, sought taxonomies in the literature that classify and present a range of options for implementation strategies. Taxonomies allow for use of more consistent terminology and definitions (Cook et al., 2019), which can also ultimately allow implementers to make greater use of recommendations from research. • We use the most comprehensive taxonomy of school-specific implementation strategies, which is the School Implementation Strategies, Translating ERIC Resources (SISTER) taxonomy (Cook et al., 2019). This is itself an adaptation of the Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) taxonomy (Waltz et al., 2015), which is widely cited.
<p><u>Monitoring implementation outcomes</u></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation outcomes are used to track how implementation efforts are going. They are different from effectiveness outcomes, which focus on the impact of a practice on student learning. • We use one of the most widely cited publications on implementation outcomes, which identifies 8 conceptually distinct outcomes for evaluating successful implementation (Proctor et al., 2011). • As it is not realistic for school implementation teams to monitor all 8 outcomes, we recommend focusing on a few: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>appropriateness, feasibility</i> and <i>acceptability</i>, because they are considered to be leading indicators of whether implementation will be successful (Proctor et al., 2011) - <i>fidelity</i>, which is the most frequently measured implementation outcome and is strongly related to the intended outcomes of an evidence-based practice (Massar et al., 2019; Proctor et al., 2011) - <i>sustainability</i>, which relates to one of the overarching challenges in school implementation (see Understanding why implementation efforts may falter).

Packaging key concepts from implementation science

As it is also important to present these key implementation science concepts in a cohesive way, we packaged the concepts into a deliberate and structured approach.¹³ When being *deliberate*, leaders intentionally commit to and plan for the implementation process. When taking a *structured* approach, leaders systematically use reliable implementation components to inform the implementation process. With these terms, we aim to counter ad hoc and one-off implementation efforts, which can impede implementation in schools.

Figure 1 visually represents this deliberate and structured approach.

Figure 1: Visual representation of a deliberate and structured approach to implementation



¹³ The selection and packaging of key implementation science concepts in this way also has some alignment with the Implementation Research Logic Model (Smith et al., 2020). This model aims to specify the linkages between the core implementation science concepts of determinants (enablers and barriers), implementation strategies, mechanisms of change and implementation outcomes.

5. Working alongside schools and systems to ensure the approach is useful and usable

Once key concepts were identified from the literature, there was (and remains) much work to be done to ensure those concepts would be useful and usable for school implementation teams to put into practice. Going beyond synthesising the literature has, therefore, been a key part of our implementation work.

This section outlines how collaborating with schools and regional system teams in the Learning Partner project has helped to:

- operationalise (or ‘bring to life’) a deliberate and structured approach
- iterate the approach and how we describe effective implementation
- evaluate the approach in a range of contexts.

Establishing the Learning Partner project

In 2022, we established the Learning Partner project. Now in its third year, this project involves AERO staff working alongside school leaders, classroom teachers and regional system teams (see Box 1). The collaboration enables us to learn alongside those who work in schools every day to ensure effective practices are adopted, used with fidelity and sustained over time to enhance teaching and learning.

Box 1: The Learning Partner project to date

As of 2025, 53 schools across 3 cohorts have participated in the Learning Partner project. These schools are located in both urban and regional environments, are from government and Catholic sectors across 4 Australian states and are a mix of primary and secondary schools. All have been focused on implementing evidence-based teaching practices aligned with the pedagogy of explicit instruction.

The project involves a locally based AERO Implementation Consultant working either directly with school leaders and teachers, or through regional system teams and school implementation teams, to learn about implementation in different contexts and provide support with using a deliberate and structured approach to implementation. This support includes:

- » building leaders’ knowledge and skills in using a deliberate and structured approach
- » helping to develop implementation plans
- » providing advice on conducting enabler and barrier sessions
- » modelling the practice being implemented in classrooms
- » supporting the establishment of coaching systems
- » providing advice on sustaining and/or scaling an implementation effort.

Operationalising key concepts

Working alongside school implementation teams in the Learning Partner project helps us to operationalise key implementation science concepts by:

- ensuring each concept is appropriately framed, sufficiently explained and supported by relevant tools
- indicating how the approach can be adapted to fit a variety of settings and still achieve desired outcomes
- identifying aspects of the approach that school implementation teams need additional support or guidance to use, and aspects that usually require minimal support.

Box 2 provides an example of how we have worked alongside school leaders and teachers to operationalise the key concept of ‘addressing enablers and barriers’ (see [Identifying key concepts from implementation science](#)). Similar processes are being used for the other components of our deliberate and structured approach.

Box 2: Example of operationalising a concept – Enablers and barriers

At a high level, the concept of enablers and barriers – naming what’s helping and what’s getting in the way of a particular initiative – seems both deceptively simple and a standard part of everyday practice in school improvement. By contrast, research on enablers and barriers can get quite complex quite quickly. The concepts are not specific to implementation of evidence-based teaching practices or in language that is readily accessible to school leaders and teachers.¹⁴ Extending practitioners’ existing, intuitive understanding of what is helping or hindering efforts in their school with some of the nuance and systematic approach from research is where the potential ‘value add’ lies.

Operationalising the concept of enablers and barriers has, therefore, involved multiple steps and ongoing work alongside school leaders and teachers. To date, these steps have included:

- » tailoring CFIR constructs to the Australian school context by using the literature on evidence use in schools¹⁵ to create a shortlist of potential factors that are likely to be relevant in schools and the evidence-based teaching practice being implemented
- » using relevant literature (e.g., Piat et al., 2021) to convert CFIR constructs into plain language statements that allow for responses of ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ or ‘unsure/neutral’, in order to create a survey or discussion activity for use with school staff
- » providing advice on administering this enablers and barriers survey or discussion activity, and visualising the collected data
- » developing a prioritisation tool to support collective decision-making in a school about which enablers to leverage and which barriers to start working to change
- » working with school leaders and teachers to trial sessions in which they use the survey and prioritisation tool to identify and prioritise among enablers and barriers in their context

¹⁴ For example, CFIR includes 5 domains with 67 constructs such as ‘Innovation Relative Advantage’, ‘External Pressure’ and ‘Relational Connections’ (Damschroder et al., 2022).

¹⁵ In particular, we used Dagenais et al. (2012), Prendergast and Rickinson (2019), White (2021), Mills et al. (2021), Parker et al. (2020), Q Project (2021) and Rickinson et al. (2021).

- » providing advice on how the concept of enablers and barriers links with other components of a deliberate and structured approach (e.g., by providing advice on identifying relevant strategies to address priority barriers)
- » updating our advice (based on learning from schools about how quickly enablers and barriers can change) to suggest monitoring enablers and barriers at least twice per year
- » publishing a set of resources specific to enablers and barriers, including an [explainer on addressing enablers and barriers](#) to implementation, a [practice guide on addressing enablers and barriers](#) (which includes the staff survey), and an editable PowerPoint [slide deck to support facilitating a whole-staff session to identify and prioritise enablers and barriers](#)
- » publishing a series of insights (e.g., AERO, 2025a) into what we are learning about the impact of involving school staff in efforts to systematically identify, prioritise between and act on enablers and barriers.

Refining the approach and how we describe effective implementation

The Learning Partner project also presents the opportunity to refine our approach to, and language about, effective implementation. This section includes 2 examples to illustrate these points.

The first example describes how working alongside practitioners has resulted in key refinements to our deliberate and structured approach (see Box 3).

Box 3: Refining our approach to amplify the role of school implementation teams

One important example of how working with practitioners in schools has resulted in refinements to the approach relates to school implementation teams.

The role of teamwork in bringing about sustained change features in the concept of enablers and barriers.¹⁶ However, in the first year of the Learning Partner project, we worked most closely with a single school-based Implementation Coordinator in each school and did not draw particular attention to the role of implementation teams over other potential enablers.

In working alongside Learning Partner schools and drawing on the literature (e.g., Fixsen & Blase, 2020), it became clear that relying too heavily on one or two individuals to drive an implementation effort (even if they are highly capable and motivated) can be limiting. Such reliance can place too much of the onus for sustained change on one person or emphasise a single perspective of the strengths and challenges within a school. Instead, a team should be specifically formed within a school to support an implementation effort. The team should ideally comprise members from across the school community who can carry out specific functions.

¹⁶ Specifically, 'Teaming' is a construct within the 'Implementation process' domain and 'Implementation team members' is a construct within the 'Individuals' domain of CFIR (Damschroder et al., 2022).

In contrast to standard school executive meetings and meetings focused heavily on operational aspects of implementation like scheduling of modelling and coaching, implementation team meetings focus on the components of a deliberate and structured approach.

We have subsequently developed a set of resources aimed at supporting schools in building and operating successful implementation teams, including a [case study video](#) sharing the experiences of an implementation team in a Learning Partner school. Ensuring that school implementation teams are sufficiently supported was also one of our [insights for 2025](#).

The second example describes how working alongside schools and systems has enabled a sharper definition of what we mean when we talk about effective implementation (see Box 4).

Box 4: Clarifying how we talk about effective implementation

Schools are frequently tasked with implementing many programs and policies ranging from new curricula to healthy canteen programs, and school leaders have a great deal of experience with this. In this context, the Learning Partner project has highlighted how important it is to clarify what deliberate and structured implementation of evidence-based teaching practices is and is not.

Although the term ‘implementation’ is used frequently in many different contexts, effective implementation of teaching practices is *not*:

- » a one-off event (e.g., a launch is not implementation)
- » a series of professional development sessions (rather, professional learning cycles including modelling and coaching are one of several core implementation strategies)
- » about the adoption of policies or guidelines (documents themselves cannot be implemented) – rather, it is the practices within such documents that matter for implementation
- » synonymous with doing or using a teaching practice – rather, implementation is the process that will support staff to start using or more effectively using a practice
- » the sole responsibility of teachers in their own classrooms – while working towards individual practice improvement is the goal of an implementation process, successful implementation relies on the collective contribution of people in numerous roles (AERO, 2024). A practice has been successfully implemented when it is embedded sustainably across a school.

Evaluating the approach

Formative evaluations of the Learning Partner project help to determine whether a deliberate and structured approach shows promise in relation to improved implementation leadership and teaching practice, which will ultimately improve student outcomes. The 2 formative evaluations conducted to date have indicated that AERO's deliberate and structured approach does show promise in these ways (AERO, 2024, 2025a).

Each year, AERO publishes insights from the Learning Partner project drawn from these formative evaluations, as well as the AERO school implementation team's ongoing monitoring and observations of the project since it began (see the discussion papers published in [2024](#) and [2025](#)).

Further evaluations are planned, and we are committed to sharing what we learn over time.

Where to next

Through the Learning Partner project, we are already seeing that taking a deliberate and structured approach to implementation is a promising way to build implementation leadership and strengthen teaching practice in Australian schools. Building on this and other implementation efforts, and ensuring the 'how' is carried out with as much rigour as the 'what', involves a long-term, collective effort. This section outlines the next steps we aim to take on this, and offers suggestions for how school leaders, policymakers and regional system teams, and researchers can contribute to this 'call to action'.

For AERO

While our work alongside schools and systems to date provides a solid foundation, there are further opportunities to make an evidence-informed approach to implementation more useful and usable for school implementation teams. To this end, we will:

- continue to engage with the latest research on implementation and implementation science, especially the wide-ranging EEF review on implementation in education (Moore et al., 2024), but also other bodies of literature
- work alongside school leaders, teachers and regional workforces in the Learning Partner project to further refine how we operationalise a deliberate and structured approach
- publish additional practical guidance and resources on implementation that all school implementation teams can use
 - in particular, we aim to provide more detailed advice on using core implementation strategies like modelling and coaching, and on monitoring implementation outcomes like feasibility and fidelity.

Importantly, we also aim to develop evidence-informed options for highly scalable forms of implementation support that AERO (alongside systems) could potentially provide to implementation teams across Australian schools regarding evidence-based teaching practices. This 'guided implementation support' will be less intensive than that currently provided through the Learning Partner project, but more intensive than disseminating implementation resources through AERO's website.¹⁷

¹⁷ To help design this guided support work, we are undertaking a rapid review of the literature on light-touch, scalable approaches to implementation support to assist the effective implementation of evidence-based practices.

For school leaders

School leaders and members of school implementation teams are key to leading implementation efforts in their schools. We recommend these leaders could:

- if new to ideas around taking a deliberate and structured approach to implementation:
 - watch this [5-minute case study video](#) on building and operating an effective implementation team
 - use this [Implementation for Impact module](#) to build foundational knowledge, either as an individual or in a team.
- if familiar with a deliberate and structured approach:
 - read our [2024](#) and [2025](#) Insights into Implementation discussion papers
 - consider ways of sharing your expertise with other schools in your networks or more broadly.
- if currently leading an implementation effort, use the [interactive tool](#) to find practical resources connected with each stage of implementation.

For policymakers and regional system teams

Both policymakers in central offices and regional system teams play an important role in supporting schools in successfully implementing evidence-based teaching practices. Some next steps for system-level staff could be to:

- consider ways of enabling implementation at a system level – e.g., ensuring a coherent curriculum with aligned assessment
- consider how implementation data (e.g., data on fidelity and feasibility) might be collected and used to help inform decision-making at a system level
- work with schools in your network to understand their current efforts to implement evidence-based teaching practices and determine what implementation support might be needed to enhance or maintain those practices over time.

For researchers

While there is a rigorous and growing research base to support implementation efforts in education, there are considerable opportunities to expand that research in ways that may have practical implications for schools. Researchers with an interest in both implementation and education could:

- focus more on practitioner use of implementation science concepts (i.e., practice-based implementation), as well as levels of implementation support
- help to adapt and contextualise implementation science concepts for educational audiences, with a particular focus on implementation of evidence-based teaching practices
- carry out rigorous research into scalability, particularly given the diverse contexts of Australian schools
- consider how cultural lenses and equity considerations can be further incorporated within implementation science.

Ensuring all Australian schools are supported to take a deliberate and structured approach to implementation is a work in progress. We are excited to partner with school leaders, teachers and regional system teams in these critical efforts to ultimately enable students to improve their outcomes.

Your feedback

If you have feedback about AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation or ideas for the next steps presented in this discussion paper, [we'd like to hear from you.](#)



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