

Action Plan to Reduce Exclusionary School Discipline

**A Resource for the Advancing School Safety & Student Wellness Executive
Learning Community**

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Purpose and Background

Excessive use of disciplinary action in schools is a top driver of children and youth into the justice system (known as the school-to-prison pipeline).¹ Recent years, compounded by the pandemic, have seen a rise in psychological distress among students, leading to an increase in challenging behaviors.² The goal is to respond to these behaviors in a way that supports and addresses the underlying needs, rather than through exclusionary discipline. We know that:

- **Regardless of any underlying student characteristic**, each suspension increases the chance of later being convicted of a crime;³
- **Students of color are disproportionately subjected** to suspensions, expulsions, or other disciplinary measures;
- **Connecting students with behavioral health services** rather than removing them from school leads to significantly better student and school outcomes; and,
- **Reducing exclusionary discipline is possible** by building a county- and districtwide infrastructure based on teams, data, and proactive supports and interventions tailored to meet individual student needs.

Today, with staff in schools and justice systems navigating the increased prevalence of student trauma and related behavioral issues, addressing underlying mental health concerns that could lead to justice involvement is even more critical. As a member of this executive learning community, each district team will create an action plan for reducing exclusionary discipline in their districts aligned with one or more curriculum topics informed by our [5 Key Action Areas & Tools for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline](#) (Appendix A). The 5 key action areas and their respective sessions are:

1. **District-Level Leadership & Systems**– Solutions-Focused Approach, Brain Science, Discipline Myths
2. **Clear Discipline Processes & Continuum of Interventions**– MTSS Tier 1, 2, & 3 Interventions and Supports
3. **Equitable Discipline Policies & Code of Conduct Revision**– Mapping Decision Points, Code of Conduct Revision
4. **Behavior Health Infrastructure & Proactive Supports**– District Leadership Team, Implementation, and Coaching Systems,
5. **Discipline Data Systems & Progress Monitoring**– Establishing and Revising Data Systems, Big 5 Dashboard, Fidelity Tools

¹ Fabelo, T., Thompson, M., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M., & Booth, E. (2011, July). *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement*. New York, NY: Council of State Governments Justice Center.

http://csgjusticecenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

² Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services; 2021. PMID: 34982518. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34982518/>

³ Mowen, T.J., J.J. Brent, and J.H.B. IV. "The Effect of School Discipline on Offending across Time." *Justice Quarterly*, July 12, 2019.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2019.1625428>

Using your district’s discipline data and established district priorities, you will collaborate with your team to begin drafting an action plan. With your district team, you will begin thinking about what it will take to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline in your district. This action plan template is meant to initiate the process with the aim of refining and building upon your ideas in future sessions and beyond.

Grounding on Implementation Science

This action plan template is grounded in elements of implementation science. Implementation Science offers a clear set of strategies designed to address the challenges inherent in effectively implementing new approaches and innovative practices.⁴ In order to achieve intended outcomes, it is critical to understand and follow proven implementation strategies from the start. Interaction-based interventions, such as those used in school districts, are complex and affected by the expected and unexpected ways in which people interact. Successful program implementation relies on staff and practitioners delivering all essential program components of an intervention to fidelity and several other factors.

The implementation process has well-defined stages. Each stage affects others in a variety of complex ways and are not necessarily linear. The **core elements of the implementation science** are briefly outlined in the following section to build a common understanding. A full description of implementation science can be found on the National Implementation Research Network website.⁵

Specifying and Prioritizing the Need and Determining the Desired Outcomes

When adopting new approaches, implementation teams are more likely to succeed when using a strategic approach that includes the following:

- **Identifying the need:** Identify the need, issue, problem, or challenge your organization wants to address and define it in measurable terms. Analyze information and data demonstrating the level of need for the population you serve.
- **Prioritizing:** Review the identified need as it relates to the organization’s existing high-priority initiatives and broader goals. Determine the organization’s capacity to integrate a new intervention into its existing priorities by assessing overall

⁴ Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Metz, A., & Van Dyke, M. (2015). Implementation Science. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, 695–702. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.10548-3>

⁵ Fixsen, D. et al., (2015), Implementation Science, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, 695–702

organizational readiness for implementation, including financial feasibility, to determine whether the organization can sustain the intervention.

- **Describing outcomes:** Organizations must articulate the outcomes they want in measurable terms, beginning with a description of how successful implementation of the new intervention would look.

Selecting Appropriate Interventions

After the implementation team identifies the organization's need, prioritizes it in the context of their organization's larger goals, and determines their desired outcomes, they next will select an intervention. This intervention should be supported by research and evidence, align with the identified need and expected outcomes, and be consistent with the organization's broader goals and priorities.

Considering Local Context and Culture

School districts are unique and complex ecosystems that reflect their local cultures. Therefore, when selecting an intervention, implementation teams must consider the local culture's customs, values, languages, and expectations. To do this effectively, it is important that (1) data used for decision-making represents the diversity of the population served, (2) the program interventions are culturally relevant, (3) the intended outcomes are culturally equitable and representative, and (4) those implementing the intervention are culturally knowledgeable.

More information on the **key factors used by effective implementation teams** can be found in Appendix B.

Developing an Action Plan

The previous section and appendix provided an overview of implementation science and the components essential for an organization to successfully implement and support a new intervention. With this foundation in place, you are ready for the next step — action planning. This workbook condenses the stages of implementation science and breaks them down into simple activities that can be used to guide your district through the initial steps of implementing an intervention to reduce exclusionary discipline. In addition to implementation science elements, the activities in this workbook are also informed by the Heptagon Tool developed by

the Active Implementation Research Network⁶ (Appendix D) and the Regional Educational Laboratory Network’s work on *Identifying Strategies to Promote Equity in School Discipline*⁷.

As mentioned, **the overarching goal of this action plan is to reduce exclusionary discipline.** The following activities will help you refine your strategy to accomplish this. First, we must determine: **what specifically is your district trying to accomplish?** In other words, what is a SMART goal— specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound that can help your district reduce exclusionary discipline? Choosing a goal that is based on existing data and relevant to your district’s priorities. It is also important to consider feasibility based on factors such as ongoing reform efforts, current partnerships, available staff and funding, and your district's and community's culture. Use the following prompts informed by to guide your process:

Activity 1: Explore the Need/Issue and Identify Outcomes

Question	Answer
What is the specific need/issue being addressed?	
What data demonstrate a need to address this need/issue?	
What does the data tell us about the underlying needs of the target population?	
What is the current understanding of the need/issue? What is the root cause? See Appendix C.	
What will be the expected outcomes of addressing this need/issue?	Short-term: Long-term:
Does a focus on this need align with your District Improvement Plan or other district priorities?	

⁶ Van Dyke, M., Kiser, L., and Blase, K. (2019). Heptagon Tool. Chapel Hill, NC: Active Implementation Research Network.

⁷ Nishioka, V., Williams, J., & Jaffery, Z. (April 2019). *Identifying Strategies to Promote Equity in School Discipline*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

Activity 2: Choose an Intervention

What intervention or innovation in the [5 Key Action Areas for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline](#) could address your district’s discipline concern? Once you determine the root causes and intended outcomes of addressing your identified issue, identify what actions can be taken to best achieve the desired results.

Question	Answer
What action or intervention could address your discipline need/issue?	
Is the intervention evidence-based or supported by research and literature?	
How is the intervention consistent with the mission and vision of your district and target community?	
To what extent does this intervention align with current initiatives or organizational structures?	

Activity 3: Analyze the Implementation of the Intervention

Use the questions below to highlight the factors often cited as facilitators and barriers to implementing an intervention and producing intended benefits. **In your district, teams review and discuss the following questions:**

Question	Answer
Are the following supports available to meet the programmatic requirements of implementing the intervention?	Administration (internal policy and procedures)? System alignment to address barriers? Data systems? Technology supports?
What will it take to implement the intervention?	Funding: Staffing: Time investment: Training/ Coaching: Materials/Resources: Other:

Can sufficient attention be given to developing buy-in with staff, students, and families?	
What key stakeholders or teams can be engaged in the exploration and planning of this intervention effort?	
Describe the core activities to allow the intervention to be teachable, learnable, and doable:	
What are the key responsibilities in implementing the intervention and what roles will staff members play?	
What are other potential barriers in implementing this intervention?	
Is it worth it? Will the intervention effort make a big enough difference to be worth the effort?	

How will you know whether a new strategy is working for all students? The questions below will help you consider outcome measures and begin outlining a data plan to track the impact of the intervention.

Question	Answer
What are your outcome measurements? What will need to be measured of tracked to know whether the intervention is working?	
Is it feasible to implement, retrieve, and analyze the outcomes?	
Data Collection Considerations:	<p>What <i>baseline</i> and <i>follow-up</i> data will be collected? By whom? How often will follow-up data be collected? How often will follow-up data be reviewed, and by whom? What student groups will be looked at separately?</p>

Activity 4: Set an Attainable Goal

Now that you have identified the need and the appropriate intervention, and have analyzed the implementation of the intervention, **brainstorm with your team to set a SMART goal- specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound to reduce exclusionary discipline in your district:**


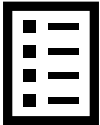



Action Plan Template

Now that you have developed an attainable goal, you can break it down further into doable and time-bound objectives. Space for 3 objectives has been provided, add or delete rows as needed:

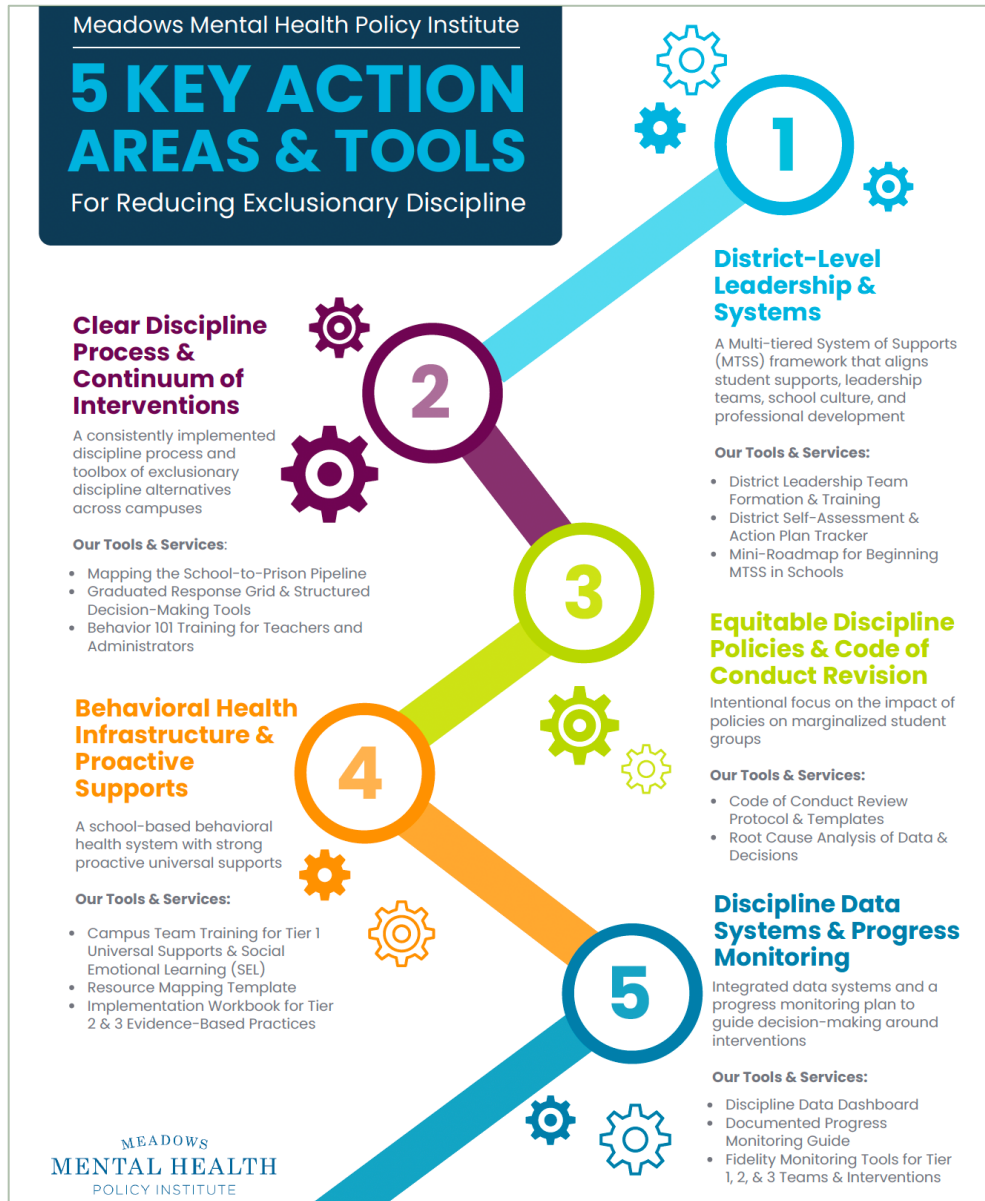
Objective	Possible Actions	Responsibility	Possible Performance Indicators & Outcomes	Helpful Resources	Target Date	Status (frequency of evaluation)
Example- Increase the # of peer support opportunities in secondary schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train students in what mental health resources are available and in recognizing signs of mental distress. Provide structured space in the school day for students to check in with their peer group. 	Counselors- Planning/implementation; Teachers- Group facilitation/monitoring; Student leaders- Group facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student participation Testimonials from students Pre- and ongoing surveys 	Building Community with Restorative Circles Examples of Community Circle Questions	Start: 01/2024 Ongoing	Initial pre-survey & monitoring every quarter.
Objective 1						
Objective 2						
Objective 3						

Presentations

The Advancing School Safety & Student Wellness Executive Learning Community experience will culminate in presenting a snapshot of your district’s action plan to members of the ELC cohort. During this time, districts will have structured time to present their plans and receive valuable feedback from their peers. The goal is for district leaders to walk away with ideas on how to refine their plan and opportunities for continued connection and collaboration with other districts. You may use the template below to organize your thoughts or create a presentation.

 Reducing Exclusionary Discipline Project Snapshot	
<p>Needs</p> 	
<p>Goals</p> 	
<p>Metrics</p> 	
<p>Impact</p> 	

Appendix A 5 Key Action Areas & Tools for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline



Appendix B Key Factors Used by Effective Implementation Teams

Successful, sustainable implementation requires ongoing support. This is especially important when the new intervention represents a change to something — a process, an organizational value, a way of doing business — that is persistent, longstanding, and resistant to change. There are several key features used by effective implementation teams. These features include (1) multi-level distributed leadership in the team, plus institutional or organizational support, (2) implementation drivers, (3) phased implementation stages with documented successes, and continuous progress monitoring. These concepts are defined below.

Multi-Level Distributed Leadership and Organizational Support

Strong implementation leadership is team-based, collaborative, and includes multi-level representation (e.g., staff, supervisors, management, and executive leadership). Decision making and organizational policy implementation is distributed across each level of authority. Effective teams include members who are motivated, have collective practice expertise (e.g., experience delivering the specific program or services), and have the power to make decisions and changes that support implementation. Successful implementation relies on meaningful guidance provided by a leadership team that collaborates, communicates, and actively engages in the planning and implementation process. In addition to effective leadership, successful implementation requires organizational support for the implementation process, which includes adequate fiscal resources, organizational policy and procedural support, and expertise.

Implementation Drivers

Implementation drivers are part of an organization's operating framework that enable successful implementation. Key implementation drivers include:

- **Professional Development**, which refers to the initial and ongoing training required to develop the ability to successfully deliver the intervention and sustain implementation.
- **Coaching**, which is the assistance provided to staff that allows for the transfer of knowledge to ensure that initial and ongoing implementation is faithful to the intervention.
- **Evaluation**, which uses data and information to guide the implementation and continuous improvement.
- **Leadership**, which includes active team member participation in decision making, organizational policy development, and fiscal and resource management across all stages of implementation.
- **Practice expertise**, which is the team's learned and existing knowledge on the intervention and its implementation.

Implementation Stages

Implementation is a process that happens in stages. These stages are not linear or separate; they are dynamic and complex. Organizations often move back and forth through the stages as circumstances and personnel change. The stages of implementation are as follows.

- 1. Exploration:** This is the starting point of the implementation process where an initial implementation team defines the need and selects an intervention supported by evidence.
- 2. Installation:** The function of this stage is to develop organizational capacity and infrastructure to implement the selected intervention. During this stage, the implementation team is fully established. This team identifies resources needed for training, professional development, and coaching; provides initial training to staff; identifies evaluation tools and procedures; reviews and modifies policies and procedures; creates referral policies and pathways; and develops data reporting systems. During this stage, the team also works to secure resources and contractual relationships identified during the Exploration Stage and prepares staff to implement the new intervention.
- 3. Initial Implementation:** In this stage the intervention is used for the first time and change begins. It is considered the most fragile stage of implementation because the difficulties associated with change can cause staff to return to more comfortable routines. This stage tests the infrastructure supporting implementation efforts. Here, professional development and coaching can help develop staff competencies. This is also the stage in which the team assesses implementation fidelity, determines resource needs, and supports the adjustment of organizational roles and functions for alignment.
- 4. Full Implementation:** Full implementation is reached when more than 50% of the staff or team members are implementing the new intervention with fidelity and demonstrating good outcomes. During full implementation, the team assesses the use of resources and organizational support, evaluates implementation and fidelity, and reviews outcomes.
- 5. Sustainability and Scaling:** During this stage, the intervention has been implemented with fidelity across the organization for three or more years and is being rolled out to new locations. As with the Full Implementation stage, the team assesses its use of resources and organizational supports, monitors outcomes, evaluates fidelity and capacity building, and shares implementation resources and supports with other initiatives.

Factors That May Impede Implementation

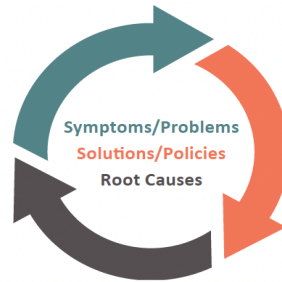
Use the following questions to explore structural and functional changes that the organization might need to address.

- Does the intervention require new staff to be hired or require re-allocation of staff?

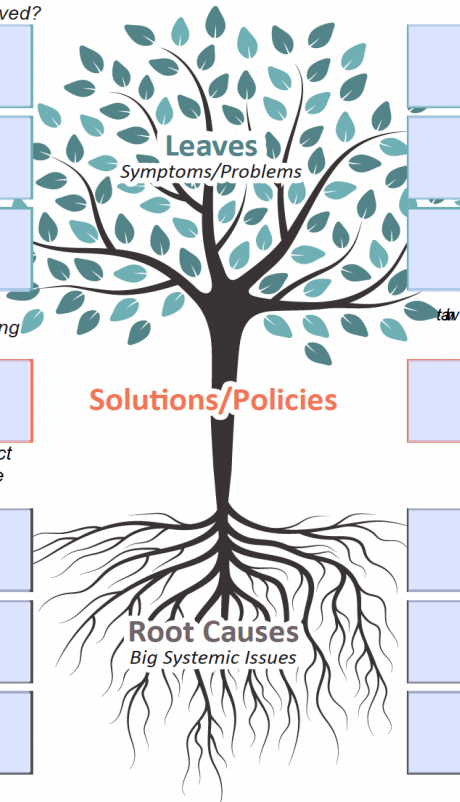
- Consider whether current staff have the desire and ability to learn new skills that may pull them out of their comfort zone. How will you achieve staff buy-in?
- If new staff will be hired, develop a job description to match the skills and values needed to implement the intervention and a timeline for hiring.
- If current staff will be used in the implementation process determine staff members who will be re-allocated. Select staff members whose skills and values match those of the intervention and can dedicate a percentage of their time to these efforts.
- Consider whether additional skills must be developed in new or existing staff and document a process for developing those skills. Develop a plan for new staff to obtain the required training.
- Does the intervention require staff members to change their established schedules? If so, develop policies outlining expectations of staff members in the implementation process.
- Do the supervision requirements of the new intervention match your organization’s current supervision structure? Document supervision requirements and reporting structure. If documented policies contradict the intervention’s supervision requirements, develop a recommendation to change the language of the policy to support the new intervention.
- Does the new intervention require dedicated space in the building to be reserved or materials to be purchased? Document the need and develop a plan to ensure the availability of necessary space and materials.

Appendix C Root Cause Analysis Worksheet⁸

What school discipline related issue do you seek to address?



How is this issue showing up in your district or campus, what is observed?

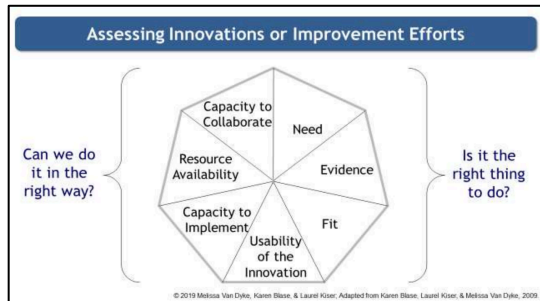


What district policies are contributing towards or supporting the current issue?

What mindsets, beliefs, or district systems help sustain/anchor the issue?

⁸ Adapted from the California Tobacco Endgame Center for Organizing and Engagement <https://organizingtoendtobacco.org/root-cause-analysis-worksheet-final/>

Appendix D Heptagon Tool Analysis



Heptagon Categories and Questions to Guide Exploration Discussions	
<p>Need The intervention demonstrates meeting the need for the identified population and specific subpopulations, and addresses service gaps.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data demonstrate the need for an improvement? • What data demonstrate the social significance of this issue? • What do the data tell us about the underlying needs of the population to be served? • How do students, parents, and the community understand the issue or underlying needs of the population to be served?
<p>Evidence The intervention has documented effectiveness through research studies, including proven outcomes, fidelity data, and cost effectiveness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcomes – Is it worth it? Will the intervention effort make a big enough difference to be worth the effort? • What is the strength of the available evidence? • Is there cost-effectiveness data? • Does the available evidence align with the needs and context for this intervention effort?
<p>Fit The intervention fits with current initiatives, the organization’s priorities, and the community’s culture and values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does this intervention effort align with one of the highest agency, community, district, or state priorities? • To what extent does this intervention effort align with the organizational structures? • To what extent does this intervention effort align with community values?
<p>Usability of the Intervention The intervention has measurable core components, can be modified to support use across settings and populations, and tools to support fidelity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is expert or technical assistance available? • Are there any mature sites to observe? • How many other sites have successfully implemented and sustained this approach? • Does the approach have operational definitions of the essential functions? • How well-defined are the necessary implementation drivers?
<p>Capacity to Implement The implementation site has the supports needed to implement the intervention to fidelity, including qualified staff, financial supports, technology, and more.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the existing workforce meet the minimum qualifications for this intervention effort? • Will it be possible to sustain the necessary support to maintain staff competence, to maintain organization supports, to financially maintain this intervention or improvement effort? • Can sufficient attention be given to developing buy-in with practitioners, young people, and families?
<p>Resource Availability There are resources available to support implementation (e.g., training, coaching, data use support, policies, and procedures).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the following resources and supports available to meet the programmatic requirements for the intervention effort? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Administration (internal policy and procedures)? System alignment to address barriers? – Staffing? Training? Coaching and supervision? – Data systems? Technology supports?
<p>Capacity to Collaborate There is a history of effective collaboration across the implementation region, and the implementation team has engaged key stakeholders in planning. Implementation efforts align with a larger shared purpose among partners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a history of effective collaboration in this sector, across related partners, and in this geographic region? • Have key stakeholders been engaged in the exploration of this intervention effort? • Have transparent decision-making processes and communication methods been established? • Is there a broadly held shared purpose that aligns with this intervention or improvement effort?