

Serving Students With Disabilities

Washoe County School District
Special Education Improvement Plan

Developed through a partnership between the
Washoe County Unified School District and WestEd



Special Thanks and Acknowledgements

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WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, from Massachusetts, Vermont, Georgia, and Washington, DC, to Arizona and California, with headquarters in San Francisco.

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A Brief Overview

In the Fall of 2019, Washoe County School District (WCSD) reached out to partner with WestEd in an effort to establish and better define its priorities serving student with disabilities. WestEd is a non-profit organization that provides technical assistance and consulting and conducts research and evaluation studies to build capacity to improve developmental and academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

Washoe County School District began this journey with an unprecedented restructuring of its Office of School Leadership (OSL). It was important to the leadership to establish, early in the process, important core beliefs to frame the work. As such, the following were shared and articulated often throughout all work with stakeholder groups and task force groups:

OSL Core Beliefs

- People Come First
 - » Know people
 - » Respect people
 - » Challenge people
 - » Support people
 - » Serve people
- Believe that motivation stems from vision through principle-centered leadership
- Lead with integrity and by example
- Embrace communication, build trust, and deliver inspiration
- Improve through persistent accountability and responsibility

Stakeholder Voice

Washoe County School District is acutely aware of how important stakeholder input is to inform the district of how best to support schools and families in reaching successful outcomes for children and youth with disabilities. In order to best gain perspective and understanding, focus groups were conducted to gather information, both adaptive and technical, about educating students with disabilities*. To help prompt thinking, questions centered around; culture and climate, compliance with State and Federal statutes and regulations, communication, talent development and management, data systems and other pertinent information.

Focus group participants included Special Education Teachers, Related Service Providers, Education Service Professionals, School and District Administrators, and Family Members. Analysis of the feedback identified key priority areas that are discussed in this improvement plan as themes that formed the four basic components of the infrastructure and ultimately framed the necessary action steps to move the organization forward towards systemic change.

***Note:** data were collected prior to the impact of COVID-19 on WCSD families and educators.



Why this resource?

This resource was initiated by the Washoe County School District in an effort to re-align, re-design and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

This resource was developed in partnership between WestEd, Special Education Policy and Practice Division and the Washoe County School District, Office of Special Education Finding and Implementation Plan.

Identified leadership and through the restructuring of OSL led the partnership between WestEd and Washoe articulated a three-phase approach to improving services for students with disabilities.

Phase 1: January – April 2020

- Review and refine Office of School Leadership (OSL)
- Collect data to understand specific challenges, successes for improving outcomes for children with disabilities (CWD)

Phase 2: May – July 2020

- Develop systemic Support Plan to set goals and determine approach for desired outcomes

Phase 3: August – July 2023

- Implement Systemic Support Plan
- Re-organize approach
- Early Childhood to Post Secondary Transition focus

What is the strategic framework for this action plan?

The infrastructure components presented in this resource serve as the framework for improving systemic issues specific to the Washoe County School District special education system. However, they are not all that is needed for a well-functioning system. And they do not replace other essential conditions for effective systems, such as effective leadership and a supportive culture. Yet, as illustrated below in figure 1.1, without such basic components, having a well-run special education program — and, equally important, being able to continuously improve it — is more challenging.

The four components are as follows:
Special Education Programming, Policy and
Procedures, Capacity of district Leadership
and Capacity of site leadership.

These four components are also integral to effective implementation of the framework for serving all students and building systems such as a multi-tiered system of support and Universal Design for Learning.

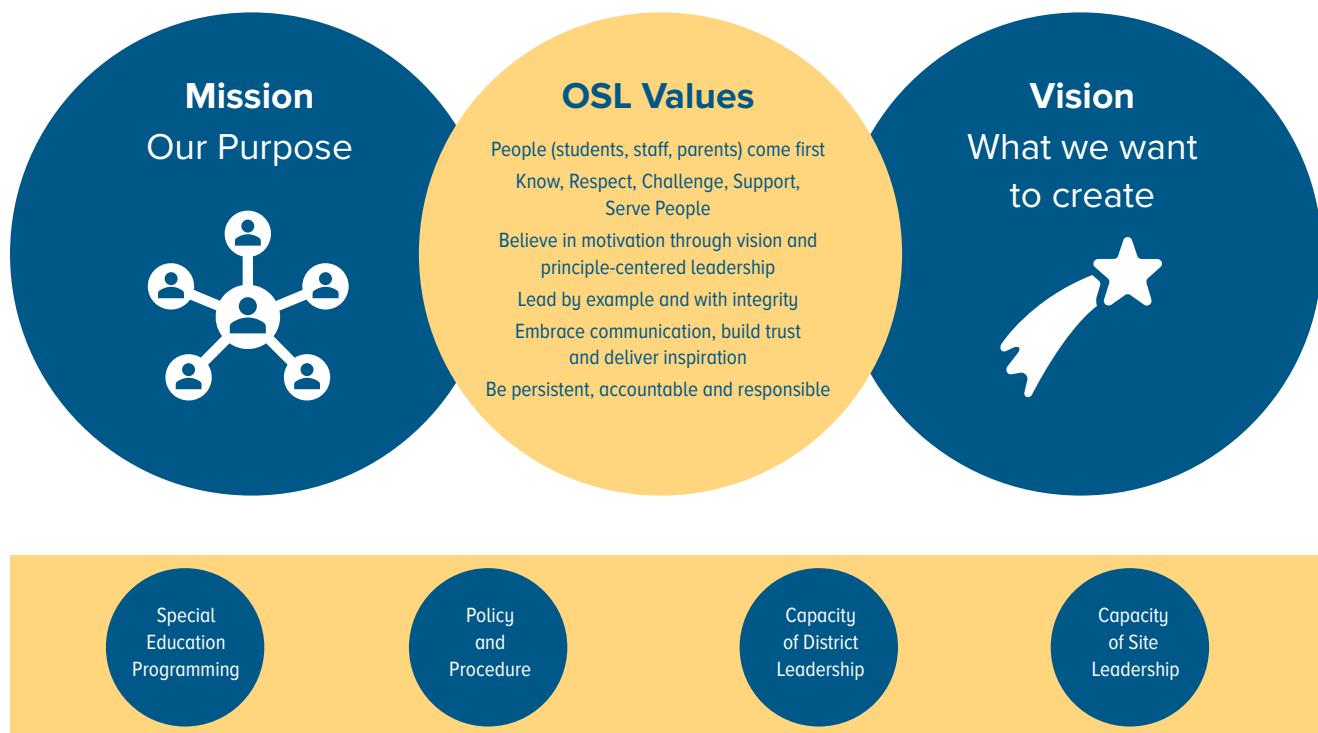
What is the strategic framework for this action plan?

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without such basic components, having a well-run special education program — and, equally important, being able to continuously improve it — is more challenging.

The four components are as follows: Special Education Programming, Policy and Procedures, Capacity of district Leadership and Capacity of site leadership.

Strategic Framework



These four components are also integral to effective implementation of the framework for serving all students and building systems such as a multi-tiered system of support and Universal Design for Learning.

What are the basic components of the Washoe Special Education Framework?

The following basic components make up the essential components that Washoe has determined must be in place for its special education system, IF that system is to operate effectively. Although the components are numbered for ease of reference, they are equivalent in importance. The components are:

1. Special Education Programming



Establishes a robust data collection process that can inform the system timely and accurately of student academic and behavioral needs.

2. Policy and Procedures



Defines clear roles and responsibilities of site teams to include Special Education Facilitators (SEFs) to collaborate, coach, provide decision-making and streamline effective practices.

3. Capacity of District Leadership



The existence of Special Education Administrators (SEAs) and Special Education Facilitators (SEFs) is to build coherent models of process, procedures that build robust pre-referral system, such as a multi-tiered system of support, creates trustful relationships between staff, students and community and clarifies the continuum of special education options and supports.

4. Capacity of Site Leadership



The SEAs and SEFs will work with site leaders to build a coherent model of process, procedures and a communication loops that create trustful relationship between schools and Office of School Leadership teams.



How we are using the Special Education Improvement Plan

The special education improvement plan creates a structured process for the office of special education leaders to identify progress and gaps in implementation of the prioritized actions (called change ideas). The action plan indicates implementation efforts of the four components within the Washoe special education framework. The Action to Change form completed by the Office of Special Education provide progress of evidence for each change idea and provides further clarification for the leaders by answering the question, “Who, What, When and How will we know if the change idea has been put in place?”

After completion of the action plan the team determines the implementation status for each of the four components and reflects on their efforts for implementation.

After considering the examples of evidence for each change idea, the team uses the tool's three-category assessment, with its ratings of Not Yet (i.e., none of the examples of evidence are present), Partial (i.e., one or more of the examples of evidence are present), and Established (i.e., all examples of evidence are present), to determine the degree to which the subcomponent is present in your system. Using the second and third sections of the Action Plan to review implementation ratings for all subcomponents allows the team to reflect on where it might want to focus its improvement efforts.

Washoe County School District

Instructions: For each subcomponent, check the box for each example of evidence that appears to be in place within your LEA. Then determine the status for the subcomponent: Not Yet (i.e., none of the examples of evidence are present), Partial (i.e., one or more of the examples of evidence are present), or Established (i.e., all examples of evidence are present).



COMPONENT 1 Special Education Programming

Component 1.1: Establish a data system that integrates preschool to 22.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>1.1-1.3) OSL produces and informs the system of timely requirements, decision and policy changes for pre-referral processes that support teams and other problem-solving policies and/or procedures that answer and identify specific student learning needs timely and prior to referral for special education and/or related services and programming.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• OSL defines clear expectations for services and pre-referral process that are integrated and coordinated to support the whole child.• OSL uses multiples measures, including standardized assessment, for decision-making processes and procedures related to qualifying for and exiting from special education.• OSL monitors data on identification rates monthly to track student needs, site specific training, and decision-making to determine targeted supports in Least Restrictive and/or More Restrictive Environments.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 1.2: Define inclusive practices and full inclusion.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
	<p>1.2) OSL defines specifically designed instructional settings for general and special education that promote and develop a full continuum of services related to the provisions of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL provides a written clear description of the continuum of services and placements ensuring that students with disabilities receive FAPE. • OSL will develop key indicators of evidence and performance that are used for site-level instructional goal setting and accessibility to Tier 1 general education curriculum; differentiated by setting (elementary, middle and high school) and promoting inclusive practices for students with disabilities. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 1.3: Build SEF expertise and create a demand for support at sites.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>3.1) OSL provides improvement coaching and modeling for Special Education Facilitators (SEFs) in schools for supporting access for SWD to general education classrooms, curriculum and programs that use data-based decision-making.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In collaboration with instructional and department leaders (i.e., Equity & Diversity, MTSS), OSL will train SEFs to highly develop coaching skills in order to assist sites in building an infrastructure to actively support teachers and classrooms, and better ensure accessibility and inclusive practices for students with disabilities. • OSL will partner and collaborate with department leads to cross-train SEFs on district initiatives and the strategic plan. • OSL will train SEFs to examine student data and conduct root cause analysis that model's and builds trust, collaboration and support for site teams. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 1.4: Early Childhood priorities and adult transition priorities.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>4.1) OSL will engage in long-term strategy development that includes conversations about resource allocations based on matriculation data, in an effort to de-silo decision making around transitions from early childhood through post-secondary education.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL will create consistent communication and information on policy, procedures and practices that includes a guiding document for site leaders across schools (preschool, elementary, middle, high) and supports collaboration and expectation across grades for effective transitions for SWD. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	



COMPONENT 2

Policy & Procedures

Component 2: Define clear roles and responsibilities of SEAs and SEFs at sites.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>2.1) OSL, through coaching and mentoring, will support SEAs and SEFs in building a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities (job expectation) in an effort to better provide more equitably based support across sites and district defined areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">OSL documents—using a job-related rubric—to communicate site expectations for special education administrators (SEAs) and special education facilitators (SEFs) that presents consistent information on policy and practices, curriculum and instruction, and standards of practice, staffing and resources.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established		

Component 2.2: Create intentional and collaborative, timely, clear decision-making process expectations.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
	<p>2.2) OSL defines and adopts clear and timely communication, policies, procedures and practices related to the provision of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for the district and schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL makes publicly available a decision-making process, handbook or other resource with written policies, procedures and/or current practices specific to the provision of special education that includes state and/or federal legal requirements. The resource will be regularly updated to reflect current policy and offers training—when needed—to staff on the program requirements of IDEA (e.g., least restrictive environment [LRE]). 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 2.3: Establish person-first and inclusive minded culture.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>2.3) OSL defines roles and responsibilities of special education in an intentional system of supports that includes policies and procedures to support all educators in addressing specific learning needs of students in special education and/or related services for inclusion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL provides written descriptions (as part of other resource or handbook) of the defined continuum of placements and services that promote “full-inclusion” opportunities and promotes an “Inclusive Mindedness” mindset as guidance for the district and school site. • OSL creates guidance and monitors IEPs for student placements (including nonpublic and alternative schools) that includes description of each student placement, as well as, alternative dispute resolution, due process filings and outcomes. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 2.4: Prioritize/continue with collaborative communication process established for distance learning plan.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>1.3) OSL creates a flexible streamlined system and processes that support relevant and timely two-way communication with input from community stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, community members) that informs practice, policy and procedures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL includes representatives' stakeholders (e.g., parents of students with disabilities) in regular feedback/ communication on issues related to district wide special education improvement efforts. • OSL stays current and communicates to stakeholders (e.g., through annual review) on applicable state and federal special education guidance, court findings, and research. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	



COMPONENT 3

Build Site Leadership Capacity

Component 3: Define clear roles and responsibilities of SEAs and SEFs at sites.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
3.1) SEAs/SEFs build coherent models of process, procedures and a communication loop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• OSL defines and understands what core and supplemental resources/interventions are available to provide and promote students' access to core instruction.• OSL will inform district leaders and stakeholders on issues related to supplemental resources and interventions for special education students.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 3.2: Create trustful relationships between schools and OSL team of support.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>3.2) OSL models essential conditions for building effective systems and leadership that create a culture of collaboration and trust between district, department and site leaders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL will contribute to department director meetings to build capacity of leaders for supporting schools, honoring norms and creates a process that allow for meaningful and productive psychologically safe interaction. • Special education directors, SEAs and SEFs will promote consistency of message, integration and alignment between other departments vision and goals. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 3.3: Make PD broadly available for IDEA best practices vs compliance driven actions.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>3.3) OSL special education office has a defined strategic organizational structure that promotes a culture of collaboration and trust between all site, department and district leaders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL has identified and communicated how to use compliance data to drive understanding of how evidence-based practices connects to student outcomes and whom school staff are to call for support related to IDEA compliance and/or instruction of students with disabilities. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 3.4: Emphasize the importance of coaching adults, building relationships that navigate conversations.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>3.4) OSL provides training and builds capacity of special education leadership to navigate and solve difficult communication that outlines clear expectations for providing improved services to students with disabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL has created an organizational process that will build SEAs and SEFs capacity for navigating communication focused on the primary goal of clarity before accountability to build special and general education two-way conversations and ownership of the responsibility for improved outcomes for students with disabilities. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Established	



COMPONENT 4

Building District Leadership Capacity

Component 4: SEAs/SEFs build coherent models of process and communication loops.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>4.1 OSL will communicate and collaborate with all necessary stakeholders regarding access and using information, resources and supports related to IEPs and interventions through MTSS expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> OSL has stated expectations that site Professional Development Mondays-PDM (monthly) meetings are used to build, integrate and prioritize district system of support and build district leadership understanding of department processes, procedures and practices that form common understanding of all information, resources and MTSS related academic and behavioral interventions. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established		

Component 4.2: Create trustful relationships between schools and OSL team of support.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>4.2) OSL district leadership models essential conditions for building a culture of collaboration and trust between sites, district department leads and leadership directors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL will contribute to monthly department director meetings to connect the Washoe County School District mission, vision, values and goals statements that support improved outcomes for all students. • OSL will create and honor norms that build a culture that includes student-first language (e.g., “students with disabilities” rather than “disabled students”) that promotes consistency of message, integration and alignment between the district vision and site goals. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established		

Component 4.3: Make PD broadly available for IDEA best practices vs compliance driven actions.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>4.3) OSL uses a clear, transparent and equitable data-based decision-making process for how to choose, use and allocate resources for Evidence Based Practice that improves equitable outcomes for all student groups and reduces disproportionality.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL will identify, monitor and analyze risk factors associated with outcomes data (e.g., graduation rate) that create disproportionality amongst student groups. • OSL will provide guidance to support and drive vertical teaming and cross-team meetings to identify, monitor, inform and connect best practices to improve equitable outcomes for all students. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

Component 4.4: Emphasize the importance of coaching adults and building personal and professional relationships.	Examples of Evidence (change ideas)	Status (Check only one)	Notes
<p>4.4) OSL will improve student learning experiences and outcomes by building district staff capacity to prioritize basic student needs, identify actions and support opportunities for alignment and integration that facilitate conversations and resulting measurable actions focused on improving outcomes for students with disabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSL will build SEAs capacity for navigating complex communication and resulting measurable actions focused on the primary goal of improving and prioritizing the needs of students with disabilities to build clarity for both special and general education district leaders. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Yet <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input type="checkbox"/> Established	

The Improvement Tool Summary Table

Instructions: Use this table to summarize your responses from the Basic Components Tool to easily identify the implementation status of each subcomponent.

Basic Components	Subcomponents	Not Yet	Partial	Established
1. Special Education Programming	1.1. Establish a data system that integrates pre-k-22	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	1.2. Define inclusive practices and full inclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	1.3. Build SEF expertise and create demand for support at sites	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	1.4. Early childhood priorities and adult transition priorities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Policy and Procedures	2.1. Define clear roles and responsibilities of SEFs at sites	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2.2. Create intentional and collaborative decision making	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2.3. Establish person-first and inclusive minded culture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2.4. Prioritize collaborative communication process that has been part of establishing distance learning plan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Basic Components	Subcomponents	Not Yet	Partial	Established
3. Site leadership	<p>3.1. SEA/SEFs build coherent models of process, procedures and communication loop</p> <p>3.2. Create trustful relationships between schools and OSL Team of support</p> <p>3.3. Make PD broadly available for IDEA best practices vs compliance driven actions</p> <p>3.4. Emphasize the importance of coaching adults, building personal and professional relationships that navigate difficult conversations</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. District Leadership	<p>4.1. SEAs/SEFs: Build coherent models of process, procedure and a communication loop</p> <p>4.2. Create trustful relationships between schools and OSL team of support</p> <p>4.3. Make PD broadly available for IDEA best practices vs compliance driven actions</p> <p>4.4. Emphasize the importance of coaching adults, building personal and professional relationships that can navigate difficult conversations</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Reflection Questions

Instructions: Use the following reflection questions to help guide next steps.

- Which subcomponents are we not yet implementing, and why?
- Which subcomponents are we only partially implementing, and what might it take to get to full implementation?
- Are there subcomponents that have already been established, but that might need some improvement? If so, why?
- Of the subcomponents needing attention, where might there be the greatest will or sponsorship for improvement efforts?
- Are there subcomponents that have already been established but that might require greater and/or more-immediate attention than others, based on the current needs of our OSL?

Given answers to the above questions, what are our top priorities for improvement?



What's Next: Improving Washoe Infrastructure

As you think about how to improve your existing special education infrastructure, consider using continuous improvement methods, such as improvement science or design thinking, to develop change strategies and guide your improvement efforts. Improvement science is a methodology that uses disciplined inquiry to solve a specific problem of practice; at its heart is continuous inquiry and learning, resulting in efficient and useful feedback to inform system improvements.¹ Design thinking is a process for problem-solving that uses creative activities to foster collaboration and solve problems

in human-centered ways.² Teams might also consider using implementation science to help guide the successful implementation of new roles, processes, and tools for each prioritized basic component or subcomponent. Implementation science is an improvement method that concentrates on how education changes are carried out, to ensure that the implementation process accounts for local variables in schools and other relevant contextual factors in order to be successful in any setting.

¹ Park, S., & Carver, P. (2013). Continuous improvement in education. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/publications/continuous-improvement-education/>; Regional Educational Laboratory West. (n.d.). Improvement science [webpage]. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Topic/ImprovementScience>.

² IDEO. (2020). What is design thinking? [webpage]. Retrieved from <https://www.ideo.com/blogs/inspiration/what-is-design-thinking>.

Supplemental resources for planning and prioritizing improvement efforts

Action-Planning Table. An action-planning table like the one below can be used to help organize the actions, people, time, and resources needed to instate or improve your prioritized component(s) or subcomponent(s), and to determine how you will know if OSL has successfully implemented them.

Prioritized Basic Components/ Subcomponents	Actions	Opportunities for Alignment/ Integration with Other Processes or Initiatives	Person(s) Responsible	Resources Needed	Timeline	Evidence of Successful Completion

Impact-Effort Matrix. An impact-effort matrix is a tool that can help teams decide where to start their improvement work, by assessing the potential value of a specific action, compared to the degree of effort entailed in carrying it out. Impact is the action's possible effect on an LEA's priorities or existing initiatives (e.g., improving student learning experiences and outcomes, or building staff capacity). Effort refers to the resources (e.g., time, funding, opportunity cost) required to implement that action. The Impact-Effort Matrix on the following page consists of four quadrants:

- **Quick Wins:** Actions that are high impact, low effort
- **Major Projects:** Actions that are high impact, high effort
- **Fill-Ins:** Actions that are low impact, low effort
- **Thankless Tasks:** Actions that are low impact, high effort

The following criteria, adapted from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement,³ can help you determine, for each category (i.e., impact and effort), what makes something high or low:

Impact:

- **Evidence:** Is there evidence that this kind of change has made a difference in other contexts?
- **Contribution:** How much would this change contribute to our overall objectives?

Effort:

- **Speed:** How quickly could we do this?
- **Resources:** What resources would it take to implement?
- **Acceptability:** Would this change likely be supported by system stakeholders?

³ Institute for Healthcare Improvement. (2018). Improvement Coach Professional Development Program [Professional learning materials]. Boston, MA: Author.

Instructions:

In deciding how to strengthen your special education infrastructure, use the Impact-Effort Matrix to help identify the actions on which your LEA might want to focus first. Place each action identified in the Action-Planning Table into a quadrant, based on what you think its level of impact will be once it is strongly established, and, also on the amount of effort you think it will take to instate, establish, or improve it. Your LEA should prioritize the actions in the Quick Wins quadrant first, followed by the actions in the Major Projects quadrant.

Impact/Effort Matrix

