FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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A GUIDE TO

8-Step Planning & Problem Solving

FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

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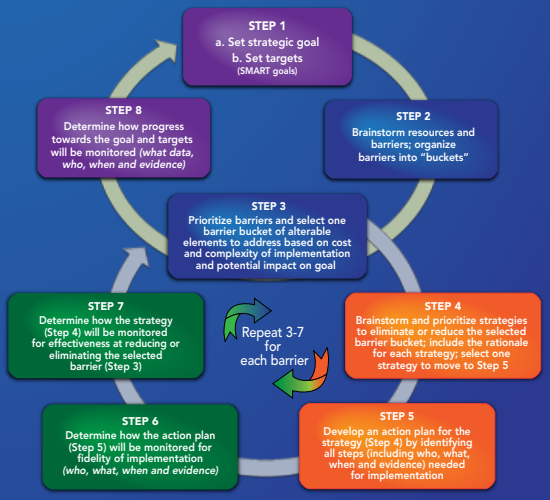
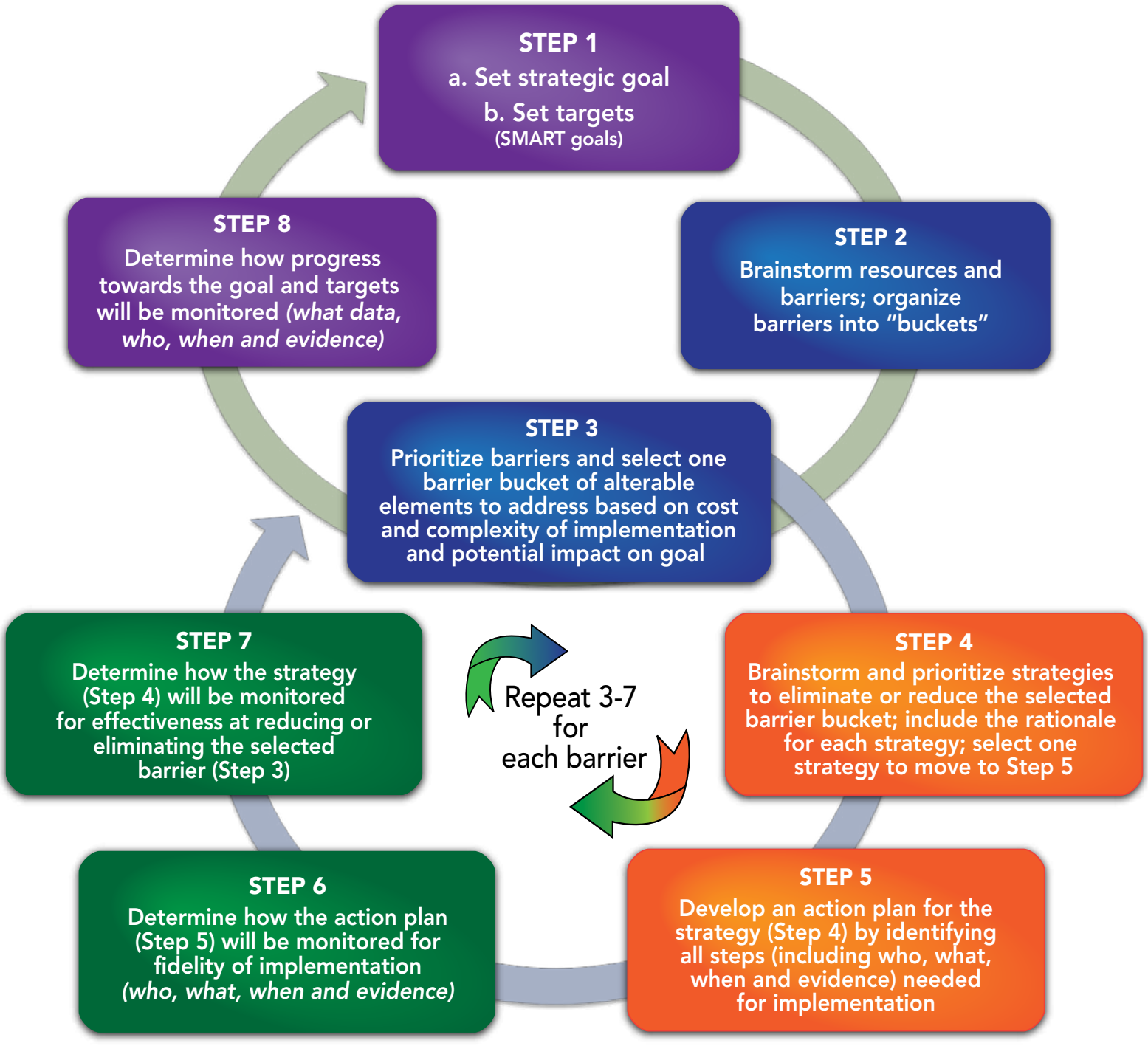


8-Step Planning and Problem-Solving Process

for Continuous Improvement



8-Step Model adopted by the Bureau of School Improvement Regional Teams

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Florida has been engaging in systems-level change to implement a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) at all levels of the public educational system to more effectively meet the academic and behavioral needs of all students. "Need-driven" decision-making seeks to ensure resources reach the appropriate students at the appropriate levels to accelerate the performance of all students within a school to achieve and/or exceed proficiency.

The purpose of a systems approach to change is not only to fix problems but also build capacity of the system to self-correct and be able to anticipate and resolve issues more efficiently through the ongoing use of a structured, data-based, problem-solving process. This process requires that planning team members be able to collaborate to move through the following stages:

- **Accurate identification of problem through reflection on summative outcome data, situational awareness and research**
- **Analysis of problems to uncover their root cause(s)**
- **Formulation of powerful strategic goals and relevant targets (i.e., SMART goals)**
- **Design, support, and implementation of interventions**
- **Use of data to evaluate progress toward the goals and make adjustments to interventions as needed**

There are many research-based models that encompass these stages, and the Florida Department of Education has adapted an 8-step planning and problem-solving process to assist school and district teams in designing and implementing meaningful and effective plans.

Planning Teams

The school improvement planning team must be representative of ***all stakeholders*** who will be impacted by its decisions. This will increase the likelihood that a true understanding of the problems and resources within a system will be attained, and action plans developed to address systems change, will have the necessary buy-in to be implemented as intended. Additionally, it is very important that Steps 1-3 are completed as a team. We have observed that partitioning out content areas to individual team members and then trying to piece it together again will not result in cohesive plans. Five to 10 participants are ideal for Steps 1-3. However, since the large group can become a hindrance to completing Steps 4-7, you may consider allowing those with an in-depth knowledge of the selected strategy to do some small-group planning and then report back to the whole group.

Roles within the planning team should be established from the beginning; for instance, a team might assign a Facilitator, a Recorder, and a Timekeeper to each meeting. It could be the same people each time the group meets or a rotating designation to allow each person to practice such skills. In either case, the roles should be defined and understood by all on the team.

Facilitators

Facilitators play a very important role in the 8-step planning and problem-solving process, especially when the planning team is composed of multiple stakeholders representing various interests. The job of the facilitator is not to direct the discussion but to create a safe and structured space for true collaboration to occur, listen and ask open-ended or clarifying questions, summarize information presented during meetings and ask for consensus, and prompt participants to follow group norms and procedures. The **8-Step Facilitator Tool** is designed to help the facilitator guide the team's planning sessions.

Brainstorming

Much of the problem-solving process is spent brainstorming before selecting priority barriers and corresponding strategies to incorporate into the plan. The purpose of brainstorming is to get all ideas on the table so that a full picture of the situation can be understood. It can be tempting to evaluate or criticize suggestions as they are offered. However, this practice may inhibit creativity and reduce the likelihood that all members will

continue to participate. Once a person gets an idea "shot down," they are more likely to keep to themselves.

An effective facilitator will employ certain norms to ensure all members have the opportunity to speak. One method is a "round-robin" approach, in which the group literally goes around the circle repeatedly, from one person to the next, to allow each individual the opportunity to state a barrier, resource, or strategy (depending on the step) without any additional discussion until all ideas are exhausted. As each idea is stated, a recorder should write them down in clear and concise words/phrases.

Moving through the Process

While the team should strive to move through all eight steps, as each are distinctly important, problem solving will not necessarily occur in lockstep fashion. Sometimes the group will need to cycle back to a previous step; instances like these are common and can be embraced to a point that they do not indefinitely stall the process. An effective facilitator will understand the difference between productive discussion and "wheel-spinning" and be able to encourage the group to move on when the time is right.

Monitoring

There are three distinct types of monitoring in the 8-step planning and problem-solving process.

- To establish whether the action plan for the strategy created in Step 5 is being implemented with fidelity, which simply means "as intended." This occurs in Step 6.
- To understand whether implemented strategies are effective in reducing the targeted barrier to the goal. This occurs in Step 7.
- To gauge progress toward the goal itself in order to determine whether any course adjustments need to be considered. This occurs in Step 8.

Throughout Steps 5-8 you will identify persons responsible for completing each step. Sometimes this person is not part of the planning team. In these cases, an action step might be added to the plan in which a member of the planning team becomes responsible for reaching out to that person by a certain date to explain the step and ask for his/her participation. The role of each person assigned as responsible in each step should be clearly defined, understood by all stakeholders, and supported by their supervisors.

The three steps 6-8 are equally important to the process. Step 8, while listed last, must be considered from the outset, to determine whether the goal can be measured and how. If the goal is not measurable, it cannot be monitored.

Step-by-Step Guidance

Step 1: a) Identify a strategic goal.
b) Establish targets (i.e., SMART goals) to be accomplished by successfully reaching the strategic goal.

Step 1a: Strategic Goal

To identify strategic goals, the team must be prepared with the results of a comprehensive needs assessment in a digestible format. It is imperative that goals be based upon verified information and not feelings or guesses. Equally imperative is that progress toward goals is measurable and that specific measures (i.e., targets) are identified from the outset. In both cases, data sources may be quantitative or qualitative in nature but must be documented.

There is no magic number of strategic goals, but it is helpful to keep in mind that for each potential goal there are eight steps to complete in the problem-solving process, and they each may branch out further depending on the complexity of the problem being solved. Therefore, it is not recommended that a team draft a lengthy list of goals (e.g., if 10 goals are written, that amounts to at least 80 steps).

Instead, choose a small number of meaningful goals to address the highest areas of need. Consider the following questions when formulating your strategic goal:

- **Does our strategic goal form a compelling theory of action? That is, is it causal?**
- **Will reaching our goal make teaching better?**
- **Can we measure progress toward our strategic goal?**
- **Could our goal arguably have a positive impact on multiple grades and subjects?**
- **Would effective implementation result in improvements across multiple domains known to drive student achievement?**

These domains are effective leadership, collaborative and public teaching, ambitious instruction, parental and community engagement, and safe and supportive environments. For more information, go to http://uchicagoimpact.org/5essentials.

Step 1b: Annual Targets or SMART Goals

Step 1b is where you will set your annual targets, or the specific outcomes you expect to see if you achieve the strategic goal identified in Step 1a.

Keep in mind, the strategic goal and annual targets (i.e., SMART goals) together form a "theory of action," which is an "If, then" statement: If we accomplish our strategic goal (Step 1a), then we will reach our targets (Step 1b).

Step 2: Brainstorm resources that are available to support the goal and barriers that could hinder achieving the goal. Organize barriers into thematic "buckets."

Brainstorm Resources for Implementation

- Resources include anything that can be used to achieve the goal.
- They may include tangibles such as personnel, professional skills, budgets, and supplies, or intangibles such as attitudes and cultural climates.
  - Ask…What is already available that could help achieve the goal?
- Resources that are not already available to you could be listed as barriers, if you feel they are necessary to reach your goal.

Examples

- Personnel, professional development opportunities, materials, schedules, curriculum, instruction, funding, leadership, partners, environment, school culture, and volunteers

Brainstorm Barriers to Implementation

- Barriers include anything, existing or anticipated, that could hinder achieving the goal.
- They may include tangibles such as personnel, professional skills, budgets, or supplies, or intangibles such as attitudes and cultural climates.

Don't skip the brainstorming process! Identify all possible barriers before moving to the organization and prioritization phases. All ideas are valid; team members should refrain from passing judgment on or asking questions about ideas put forward.

Examples

- Poorly implemented instructional strategies, master scheduling disallows common planning time, disengaged parents, lack of student motivation, negative school culture, and misalignment of instruction to state standards.

Organize Barriers into Buckets

Upon completion of brainstorming, ensure barriers listed are alterable, existing conditions that limit the effective implementation of current school improvement efforts. During this process team members may ask clarifying questions to determine whether barriers should remain on the list.

You will often find that some barriers are duplicative or subsets of others. This is the time to discuss the barriers in order to group them by common themes or into "buckets".

Step 3: Prioritize barrier buckets and select one bucket of *alterable elements* (e.g., curriculum, instruction, environment and organizational systems) to address, based on the cost and complexity of implementation and the potential impact the elimination or reduction of the barrier would have on the goal.

- Identify the highest priority barriers.

  – Ask…Which barriers, if removed, would result in the greatest impact on progress toward the goal?

  – Ask…Which barriers are of shared interest across the team?

- Finalize your list of targeted barrier buckets. These are your high-priority barriers that you wish to address throughout the year.

- Select one priority barrier bucket at a time and apply Steps 4-7.

Step 4: Brainstorm and prioritize strategies that could be used to eliminate or reduce the selected barrier bucket; include the rationale for each strategy. Select a strategy to develop an action plan for implementation.

The same approach for identifying barriers will apply in this step, starting with a free-flowing idea session and ending with a process of prioritization. The list of resources identified in Step 2 can serve as a starting point for this discussion. Rather than reinventing the wheel, often a resource just needs to be repurposed or better implemented in order to be effective in reducing a barrier.

It is important in this step to examine the current programs and projects already in place. Brainstorming new strategies does not necessarily mean you have to "add something to your plate." A strategy can actually be to stop doing something, or to refine current projects. Since we have a finite amount of time each day, for every new program or project added, there should be thought given to what could be taken off your plate.

For each strategy listed, be sure to consider how it supports or complicates other strategies in the plan or those already being implemented. This will ensure that selected strategies are integrated rather than isolated.

Remember, strategies are actions taken to address or remove a priority barrier bucket. They are not detailed action steps; those will be outlined in Step 5.

When prioritizing strategies, ask:

- Is this an evidence-based practice?
- To what extent does it eliminate or reduce the priority barrier bucket?
- Is it doable within current resource constraints? A "no" here should not necessarily eliminate the strategy, but procurement of a new resource will need to be included as part of the action plan created in Step 5.

For each strategy identified, include a rationale for why the team believes it will help to reduce or eliminate the barrier.

Step 5: Develop an action plan by identifying all steps that need to be taken to implement the strategy selected in Step 4.

This is where you build your detailed action plan, step by step, to implement your selected strategy for reducing or eliminating the barrier to the goal. You should end up with more than one step for the strategy to be implemented fully and effectively. If you wish to use the action plan as a project management tool, resist the urge to combine multiple steps into one, as a greater level of detail will be necessary to know you are moving toward implementation. It may be helpful to think of action steps in terms of what milestones are needed to fully implement a strategy.

Each action step should answer the following questions:

- What needs to be done? Be specific and include action verbs.
- Who will ensure each action step is carried out? This does not necessarily mean they are completing the step alone, but these people will be the ones to keep their team on track. The role of these point people should be clearly defined, understood by all stakeholders and supported by their supervisors.
- When, how frequently and for how long will this step will be implemented (i.e., start date, end date, and intervals, if applicable)?
- How will you monitor task completion (what evidence you will collect)?
- Will the step require funding (how much and from what source)?
- If the step is a professional development (PD) and/or technical assistance (TA) opportunity, who will facilitate/develop and who is the intended audience?

Step 6: Determine how the action plan (Step 5) for the selected strategy will be monitored for fidelity of implementation.

For each ***strategy***, develop a plan that will support the team in completing action steps on time and as intended. This plan should be viewed as a proactive approach of providing support to help the team stay on schedule rather than reactive after you have already fallen behind.

The monitoring plan should answer the following questions:

- What will be done to support and monitor implementation of the action plan for the selected strategy?

This might include looking at the evidence of completion submitted for each step of the action plan, actually observing the steps, or a combination of the two. The monitoring plan should also outline what support will be provided for person(s) implementing the action plan (e.g., ensuring necessary materials are obtained, providing protected time to complete tasks).

- Who is responsible for monitoring the strategy? This person might be seen as a "project manager" for the strategy in that they will provide the support necessary to ensure all tasks identified in the action steps are implemented on time and as intended by the planning team, which may include looking for additional resources if needed to make it happen.
- When and how often will monitoring occur (i.e., start date, end date, and intervals, if applicable)?
- What evidence of completion of monitoring activities will be collected? **How will you know the monitoring occurred?**
- How will the results of monitoring for implementation be analyzed and reported to stakeholders?

Step 7: Determine how the strategy (Step 4) will be monitored for effectiveness at reducing or eliminating the barrier bucket selected in Step 3.

For each ***strategy,*** develop a detailed plan that explains what data will be collected, and at what intervals, to evaluate whether the strategy is reducing or eliminating the barrier bucket.

The monitoring plan should answer the following questions:

- What data will be collected?
- What are benchmarks for success? What will successful implementation produce?
- What will questionable or poor implementation produce, and what will we do if we see those results or lack of results?
- Who is responsible to collect, chart and prepare data?
- When will data will be collected and evaluated? **Use multiple measures where possible.**
- What evidence of completion of monitoring activities will be collected? **How will you know the monitoring occurred?**
- How will the results of monitoring for effectiveness be analyzed and reported to stakeholders?

At predetermined intervals, the team should be made aware of any strategies that do not appear to be working so that they may determine whether it is an issue of implementation fidelity (as evidenced in Step 6) or if the strategy itself is flawed.

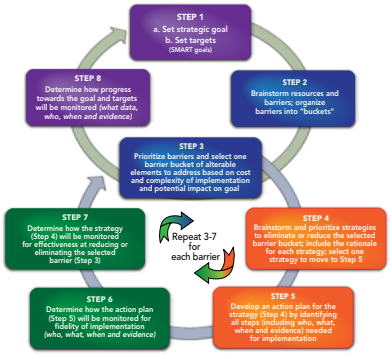
After completion of Step 7, cycle back to Step 4 to select the next strategy, or to Step 3 to select the next barrier bucket, and continue through the steps.

Step 8: Determine how progress towards the goal and annual targets established in Step 1 will be monitored.

(What data will be collected and reviewed throughout the year?)

For each *goal*, the progress-monitoring plan should answer the following questions:

- What process will we follow to use data collected through Step 7 and/or to collect additional data to decide if progress toward the goal is satisfactory?
- What criteria will you use to evaluate results? How will you address each type of result (positive, questionable, or poor)? **Use multiple measures where possible.**
- Who is responsible for monitoring progress toward the goal? Ensure critical decision makers are involved.
- When will you measure and monitor incremental changes?
- What evidence of completion of progress monitoring activities will be collected?
- **How will you know the monitoring occurred?**
- How will the results of progress monitoring be analyzed and reported to stakeholders?

At predetermined intervals, decide as a team to continue, intensify, modify or discontinue strategies, revisit barriers or modify the goal itself based on data.

After completion of Step 8, cycle back to Step 1 to start on the next goal.