State Support Network
Partnering for School Improvement

Problems of Practice Toolkit: Action Planning for Rural Schools and Districts

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About This Toolkit

For the purpose of this resource, a "problem of practice" refers to a specific type of challenge that schools or districts face that has a significant impact on teaching and learning. Problems of practice are challenges that school and district staff can directly address (e.g., challenges with the master schedule, effectively implementing math placement practices, or providing high-quality literacy instruction) rather than challenges beyond the direct impact of schools (e.g., transient students). Problems of practice are also directly observable, actionable, and connect to a broader strategy of improvement. Problems of practice may vary widely in focus across schools but must meet the following criteria:

- **Focused on Teaching and Learning**: the challenge has a significant impact[1] on teaching and learning over time.
- **Achievable:** the challenge can be addressed with existing staff, resources, and within a specific time frame.
- **Relevant:** the challenge is meaningful and applies to the local context.
- **Measurable:** the challenge has clear metrics of success that can be monitored over time.

A school or district may identify and address a problem of practice as part of overarching school improvement efforts; alternatively, a school or district may identify and address a problem of practice based on stakeholder feedback, leadership priorities, or targeted improvement efforts.

Example Problems of Practice

- ❖ Students in grades 4 and 5 have limited opportunities to apply their math skills in real-world settings, which leads to challenges in meeting the expectations of state standards and tests.
- ❖ Teachers of advanced math, science, and technology courses do not have sufficient time to collaborate around supports for students with interdisciplinary capstone projects, which leads to inconsistent guidance and feedback.

Collaborative problem solving can be an effective strategy for addressing problems of practice because it allows identification of needs and strategies to be customized to fit the school and community context. There are nuances, however, in how to address problems of practice using collaborative problem solving in rural communities that differ from practices designed to be used in urban and suburban schools. Rural schools and districts can benefit from customized information on how to effectively use a collaborative problem solving process to address problems of practice in rural communities.

This toolkit provides rural schools and districts with a collaborative problem solving process to address problems of practice and promote school improvement. This process is designed to be feasible for a wide variety of districts, including small, rural districts. While this process may be used in any type of school or district, the examples throughout are also focused on common problems of practice seen in rural schools across the country. This toolkit is divided into three sections outlining the main steps in addressing problems of practice (see Figure 1 below):

[1] Significant impact can be defined by the school or district based on local data, context, and potential problems to be addressed. For example, a school with a history of low performance may consider raising average student reading performance by two grade levels to be "significant," whereas another school with recent challenges around attendance may consider a 10% decline in student absences to be "significant."

Figure 1. Steps in addressing problems of practice.

1
- **Convening the planning team**
  - Selecting planning team members
  - Identifying leadership
  - Establishing guiding principles

2
- **Identifying and refining a problem of practice**
  - Identifying problems of practice
  - Selecting a problem of practice

3
- **Goal setting and action planning**
  - Identifying strategies
  - Setting a vision and goals
  - Action planning

Please note that schools and districts must comply with all applicable laws including, but not limited to, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR part 99), during the collection, use, and dissemination of data described in this toolkit, as appropriate.

Convening the Planning Team

For many schools and districts, a key to successfully addressing problems of practice is working with stakeholders with differing viewpoints and perspectives. By bringing together a planning team of stakeholders to view multiple types of data, examine perspectives on root causes, and share potential solutions, these teams may be better positioned to enact meaningful and measurable change than leaders working in isolation.

Ideally, the planning team will represent a broad group of stakeholders (including both school staff and relevant community members), have clear leadership, and agree on shared principles for collaboration. Convening the planning team can be accomplished in three main steps:

1. Selecting planning team members
2. Identifying leadership
3. Establishing guiding principles

Selecting Planning Team Members

The planning team typically includes approximately eight to ten individuals representing different stakeholder groups, which allows the team to be large enough to include numerous perspectives but small enough to work efficiently. The different stakeholders on the team may include the following groups:

- District- and school-level leaders
- Classroom teachers
- Parents
- Local leaders or community members

Team composition will vary based on local context and the focus of the selected problem of practice. Most planning teams will likely include groups of similar stakeholders, such as teachers or family members, but some planning teams may include targeted stakeholders, such as families of students participating in a competency-based education program, that have a specific stake or role in a particular problem of practice. The local staff convening the planning team should gather initial feedback from stakeholders about the problems of practice they believe are most important to address. For schools or districts with many problems of practice from which to choose, it may be helpful to use this feedback to prioritize the most pressing problems of practice. Likewise, local staff may wish to revisit or refine the planning team after a problem of practice has been selected to address. The exact number and type of stakeholders included on the planning team will also depend on whether the team is working to address school- or district-level problems of practice. Table 1 illustrates examples of potential planning team members.

Table 1: Potential Planning Team Members

School-Level	District-Level
• School administrators • Counselor(s) • Teacher(s) • Support staff • Parents • Students • Community organizations with school-level partnerships	• District staff • Union member(s) • Business partners • School board members • Community organizations with district-level partnerships • Local postsecondary institutions

When establishing teams, it is important to ensure broad representation across schools, regions, contexts, and other unique and relevant characteristics so that a wide range of relevant perspectives are adequately represented. Having the perspectives and subsequent buy-in from key stakeholders and the whole community can help to support success of the project.

For small or rural communities, it may be challenging at times to bring together a broad group of stakeholders due to time or geographic limitations. Some strategies that small or rural districts could consider to address this challenge include:

- Ask members of the planning team to represent multiple roles as applicable (for instance, a parent may also be a business partner, or a teacher may also have a districtwide curricular role).
- Utilize or expand existing groups (such as existing task forces or leadership teams) to serve as the planning team in rural contexts.
- Include, whenever possible, at least four individuals on the planning team.[2]

[2] The recommendation to include four or more individuals on the planning team comes from subject matter experts who have supported rural district and school teams addressing problems of practice. Including four or more individuals can help ensure that discussions and decisions reflect a variety of unique perspectives and prevent situations in which one person dominates the problem solving process.

- Partner with other rural districts[3] with similar problems of practice to create a larger, more broadly representative group (leveraging regional education service agencies to support connections where appropriate). Smaller rural districts may also consider creating a long-term collaborative or partnership to build capacity and relationships over time. If distance or travel time is a barrier to participation in the planning team, its leaders may convene virtual meetings.[4]

When selecting planning team members, consider the following:

- *What experience or expertise is the stakeholder bringing to the table?*
- *How can this stakeholder champion the work of the planning team within their constituent group?*
- *Can this stakeholder maintain consistent participation and commit to the required time?*

Identifying Leadership

Clear leadership is needed to make sure that someone is responsible for organizing work and helping the planning team advance its goals. When the planning team has been convened, it is helpful to identify one person as the lead for the work. This person, along with any other identified support staff, will ensure that:

- All stakeholders are identified and informed of the planning team's purpose.
- A timeline is developed for the work.
- All relevant data are collected and distributed to team members in compliance with applicable laws.
- All ideas, discussions, and decisions are documented and provided in written summary and made available for subsequent sessions.
- The planning team commits to meeting on an ongoing basis for progress monitoring.

Establishing Guiding Principles

Creating significant lasting change in a school or district requires that the planning team work together effectively and agree upon a common set of principles to guide their collaborative work. In practice, this means that the planning team's work will be:

- **Collaborative:** Every member of the team has a critical role to play. Active participation, both in the team meetings and in between meetings, is essential because it allows for collaborative problem solving that could lead to potential strategies.
- **Iterative:** The planning team will focus on creating incremental changes, which will build toward something new, substantial, and sustainable. Be prepared to rewrite and redo as needs arise.

[3] For more information on how to partner with other districts, please contact your state educational agency. A directory of state educational agencies (SEAs) is available on the ED.gov website at https://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html?src=contact-us.

[4] Virtual meetings may include conference calls (e.g., through a traditional phone conferencing system), web-based conferencing (e.g., through a video-capable platform such as Google Hangouts), or even iterative discussion through shared documents (e.g., Google Docs).

- **Learning-Focused:** To identify potential solutions to selected problems, the planning team needs to be open to trying new ways of doing things. It is important to take action rather than wait for a solution to present itself. Learn from mistakes, make improvements, and press forward with the goal and solution in mind. Consider failure as a lesson on how to do better next time.
- **Outcomes-Oriented:** The planning team's work is focused on creating solutions that may significantly change the ways in which educational services are delivered, with the goal of improving outcomes for all learners and the experiences of all stakeholders. This requires both thinking creatively and concretely.

The role of the planning team lead is to constantly ensure that the group adheres to these principles as work moves forward. For example, the planning team lead can promote the use of guiding principles or working norms, documenting and updating these guiding principles or working norms over time as needed. Likewise, the planning team lead can work with individual team members as needed to acknowledge and resolve any concerns or perspectives that might prevent the team from making timely progress.

Identifying and Refining a Problem of Practice

The purpose of this section is to assist teams in understanding what a problem of practice is as well as identifying the problem(s) that are most pervasive or have the greatest impact on the school or district. This section is designed to be used by the planning team lead in organizing and facilitating the work of the team to identify and select a problem of practice.

The process for identifying the problem of practice includes two main activities (Session 1: Identifying Problems of Practice and Session 2: Selecting a Problem of Practice), which together are expected to take approximately four to six hours. It may be helpful to engage in these activities at separate times to provide team members ample time to reflect on all the data and perspectives prior to the next session. Table 2 provides the details for each meeting:

Table 2. Identifying and Selecting Problems of Practice
(Note: teams that already have problems of practice identified may proceed directly to Session 2, starting on page 14.)

Session	Typical Time Frame*	Objectives	Handouts
Session 1: Identifying Problems of Practice	Two to four hours	The planning team will analyze data, identify challenges, and frame these challenges as problems of practice.	Data Dive Protocol handout Reframing Problems and Challenges handout
Session 2: Selecting a Problem of Practice	Two hours	The planning team will select a problem of practice to address.	Narrowing our Focus and Reaching Consensus handout

* These are suggested time frames. Teams may decide to combine sessions, or customize accordingly, to best suit the needs of the planning team.

Session 1: Identifying Problems of Practice

Time frame: Two to four hours

Purpose: To analyze data, identify challenges, and frame these challenges as potential problems of practice to address. (Note: if the planning team already has a problem of practice on which to focus, they may use the *Reframing Challenges* handout to check that the problem of practice is clearly articulated and move on to Action Planning and Goal Setting.)

Materials: *Data Dive Protocol* handout; *Reframing Challenges* handout

Background: Prior to the first session, collect (in compliance with applicable privacy and confidentiality laws) relevant school, district, or state-level data from planning documents, publicly available sources, survey data, stakeholder focus group interviews, and other documents that provide the data needed to identify trends and challenges. The planning team can start with data that has already been collected, such as data from local needs assessments,[5] standardized or local academic assessment results, state accountability system data, local report card data, or stakeholder input gathered through the state ESEA Consolidated State Plan development process.[6] This data can help the planning team identify potential challenges or gaps in performance; however, if previously collected data are too high-level or lack necessary detail, the planning team will need to collect additional data. Additional data may be general (e.g., survey data on educator and parent perspectives) or may be targeted based on anticipated needs (e.g., triangulation of behavior, achievement, and attendance data).

The planning team will need to gather, clean, and organize the data[7] in advance of this activity. This may require the planning team to coordinate a few times prior to Session 1 to brainstorm which data are most relevant to the identified issue, identify potential data sources, gather any additional data needed in compliance with applicable privacy and confidentiality laws, and ensure data are ready for Session 1. Please note that this and subsequent steps in the process do not require advanced data analysis skills, as many of the most common data sources (e.g., local report cards, needs assessment data) have already been cleaned and organized. Likewise, school-based members of the planning team will likely be familiar with other data sources (e.g., staff survey data, local assessment data). It can be helpful for the planning team lead to share the clean and organized data with all planning team members a week or two in advance, if possible. If it is not possible to share data in advance (e.g., due to timing), the planning team may need additional time (up to two hours) to fully analyze the data (Step 3). Many rural schools have fewer overall students, fewer students from special populations, or fewer students from targeted or minority groups. Because of this:

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[5] Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a local educational agency (LEA) is required to conduct a needs assessment for each school identified for comprehensive support and improvement.

[6] With the reauthorization of the ESEA, states have submitted plans that share and support their visions and goals for education to ED. To see all submitted state plans, click here.

[7] Please note that gathering, cleaning, and organizing the data can be a simple process, depending on the data sources used. The data does not need to be synthesized in one document or report; rather, the data simply needs to be clear and understandable to the planning team and should not include individually identifiable data (i.e., summarized in aggregate rather than presented as raw data). Most data sources used in the process of identifying problems of practice (e.g., needs assessment data, local report card data) will already be cleaned and organized. For some teams, the process of gathering, cleaning, and organizing the data may be simply compiling existing reports in one file or handout for the planning team; for other teams, the process may require some time to clean and summarize local data. The planning team lead can work to ensure that the process of gathering, cleaning, and organizing data is not overly burdensome.

- It may be difficult to find meaningfully disaggregated public data on student performance and achievement trends due to low sizes for targeted groups.
- There may be concerns about bias as well as legal issues that arise when internal data is used on a small group of students since such data is more likely to be protected from non-consensual disclosure by applicable privacy and confidentiality laws, especially if that data contains personally identifiable information on students obtained from their education records.

In these cases, the planning team may benefit from focusing on:

- Data for larger groups of students, such as an entire grade level or cohort, and working to identify problems of practice based on these data that impact larger groups of students.
- Data for a smaller group of targeted students, if the planning team is able to obtain such data in compliance with applicable privacy and confidentiality laws, such as because the data would constitute aggregate, deidentified data that does not contain any personally identifiable information contained in the education records of any students in this smaller group of targeted students or because the planning team would obtain such data with appropriate written consent.

Note: Across the next five steps, the planning team will go through a standard cycle where they predict, observe, infer, and reframe hypotheses based on data.

Step 1—Norms: Norms can be helpful to ensure all stakeholders are reviewing data with the same lens. First, agree on norms before looking at the data. This could be as simple as reminding the group to stay patient and try to be objective when reviewing the data. Other common norms[8] include:

- Respect differing opinions.
- Maintain equity of voice (be conscious of air time).
- Limit use of technology.
- Make decisions by consensus.

Step 2—Forecast: Before discussing the data, it can be helpful to discuss team members' assumptions about what the data might reveal. If possible, ask everyone to review the data in advance and come prepared to share the initial predictions they had prior to reviewing the data. These predictions should be related to potential problems of practice when possible (e.g., predictions that young students who take math exclusively in the afternoon tend to show lower performance). Make individual notes using the *Data Dive Protocol* handout for this step and throughout.

If this is the first time all planning team members are reviewing these data, start by making predictions about what the data will reveal. These predictions may be related to a previously identified topic area or may be general predictions. Use the following sentence stems as examples:

- *I predict that the data will reveal . . .*
- *I assume that the data will state . . .*
- *I believe the data will tell us . . .*

[8] For more information on common meeting norms for school and district problem solving, please see Learning Forward's August/September Issue of Tools for Schools which focuses on developing group norms.

The planning team lead may wish to capture these predictions in notes or on chart paper during the conversation to refer to in Session 2.

Step 3—Observations: If planning team members are able to review the data in advance, have everyone come prepared to share and reflect on what trends and data points seemed significant to them. If this is the first time all planning team members are reviewing these data, allocate the necessary time for planning team members to review the data. Whether reviewing the data in advance or in the session, first begin with publicly held data to process information that all team members have access to, then consider aggregate, de-identified internal data. By reviewing the data in this order, the planning team can begin by reflecting on what data points leaders and the public may see as significant, then reflect on what aggregate, de-identified internal data points may provide a more complex or complete picture of the data and associated challenges. Be clear on which data are which: if there are differences in the public and internal data, it may indicate differences in how different stakeholders understand local challenges. Discuss observations on the data, withholding any judgement statements. Identify facts, trends, etc., but resist "interpreting" the data until Step 4. Encourage use of the following sentence stems:

- *I notice . . .*
- *I can count . . .*
- *I observe that . . .*
- *I see that 30 percent of students are scoring . . .*

Provide individual thinking time prior to sharing with the larger group. Focus strictly on statements based on observations and allow ample time for analysis. Take notes using chart paper to capture the key data points that will be used in Step 4. Afterward, as a group debrief how successful this step was to prepare for future adjustments.

Step 4—Inferences: Having now made predictions and observations, continue generating multiple conclusions and inferences based on the evidence. Work independently and then discuss as a group. Use sentence starting points such as:

- *Example: I am convinced that the data suggests that many students don't take advanced coursework because they do not see its value for their future.*
- I am convinced that the data suggests . . . because . . .
- The observations I made lead me to believe . . . based on . . .
- I need to see additional data on . . . so that . . .

It will be helpful to engage in a root cause analysis process, using activities like the "five whys" exercise to isolate how specific challenges may influence trends in the data.[9] Be careful to focus on the specific challenges without assigning blame, continuing to be objective and solution-oriented. If the planning team reviewed data in advance, this step is likely to take the longest

[9] There are many resources that provide information about how to perform a root cause analysis. For example resources on root cause analysis, see the *Root Cause Analysis Workbook* from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (https://gtlcenter.org/learning-hub/equitable-access-toolkit/root-cause-analysis-workbook), the Maryland Root Cause Analysis Guide (attachment VIII in http://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/02262019/TabG-SupportingSchoolImprovement.pdf), or the Six Sigma guide to the Five Whys (https://www.isixsigma.com/tools-templates/cause-effect/determine-root-cause-5-whys/.

time; if the planning team is reviewing data for the first time together, this step may take less time as some inferences may be made alongside observations from Step 3.

Step 5—Reframe Challenges as Problems of Practice: After identifying the challenges that might be attributed to specific data points, reframe these challenges as potential problems of practice for the team to address. Use the *Reframing Challenges* handout for examples as needed. As a reminder, problems of practice are:

- *Focused on teaching and learning:* the challenge has a significant impact on teaching and learning over time.
- *Achievable:* the challenge can be addressed with existing staff, resources, and within a specific time frame.
- *Measurable:* the challenge has clear metrics of success that can be monitored over time.[10]
- *Relevant:* the challenge is relevant to the goals and objectives of school activities.

Be prepared for inconsistencies across team members' viewpoints and set aside extra time if needed for clarification. Again, continue to emphasize being objective and solution-oriented. The goal of this work is to establish common understandings and priorities.

As part of the concluding activity, debrief both the process and content. Share next steps.

[10] There are many resources that provide information on identifying metrics of success; for example, the Pacific Regional Educational Laboratory (REL Pacific) has a resource on progress monitoring (https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/pdf/REL_2014011.pdf).

Data Dive Protocol Handout

Use this handout for Step 2 of Session 1: Identifying Problems of Practice. Record and connect related forecasts, observations, and inferences in each row of the table below. Add additional rows as needed.

Forecast	**Observations**	**Inferences**
(e.g., we predict that the data will reveal…)	*(e.g., we see that 30 percent of students are scoring…)*	*(e.g., we are convinced that the data suggests that many students…)*

Reframing Problems and Challenges Handout

Use this handout for Step 5 of Session 1: Identifying Problems of Practice. Reflect on the examples, then use the template on the following page to reframe the problems identified by the planning team as problems of practice. Consider including the identified root cause along with the problem statement to inform the problem of practice statement.

Part 1. Reframing Problem Statement Examples[11]

Problem	Problem of Practice Reframe
Schools are "one-size fits all."	How might we provide differentiated school options to meet student needs?
School-level decisions are not made by people who work directly with students.	How might we increase school autonomy so that decisions are made by those who work directly with students?
Local accountability is top-down.	How might we build a robust and reciprocal accountability system?
Resources are not managed by school sites and not allocated based on student needs.	How might we move resource management (and decision making) to schools and align resources to student needs?
The district central office is structured to meet state and federal, but not school site, needs.	How might we restructure the central office to focus on services to school sites?
Educator talent is not actively recruited, developed, and retained to meet student needs.	How might we recruit, develop, and retain talent that is aligned to student needs?
There is a lack of community trust and ownership.	How might we develop community partnerships that foster shared accountability?

[11] Please note that these example problem statements reflect common challenges observed by subject matter experts who have supported rural district and school teams addressing problems of practice. These problem statements are not necessarily applicable or relevant to all schools or districts; instead, these examples can be used by the planning team to help generate and refine problem statement(s) that reflect their unique context.

Part 2. Reframing a Problem Statement as a Problem of Practice

Problem (including root cause)	Problem of Practice Reframe

Session 2: Selecting a Problem of Practice

Time Frame: Two hours

Purpose: To reach consensus about the problem(s) of practice to be addressed by the planning team

Materials: *Problems of Practice Scorecard* handout; notes from Session 1

Background: The final list of potential problems of practice, along with notes about relevant data and root causes, can be compiled, organized, and shared prior to this meeting to help the planning team settle on the problem(s) that most require their attention. The ultimate goal of these sessions is to identify and select a problem of practice, based on the data, to address as a team; it is less important to isolate the impact of the problem of practice in the data or identify the most pressing problem of practice. Clarifying these expectations and goals may reduce pressure for the planning team members and expedite decision making.

For rural schools and districts that identify multiple challenges, it may be especially helpful to focus on problems linked to specific data. Some problems of practice may be clearly tied to the data; for example, the planning team in a rural district may note that students with an especially long commute have poorer performance in their early classes over time or have an increased number of absences during certain points of the year. In other instances, the data may reflect multiple problems of practice (e.g., limited social emotional supports, irregular behavior management systems). In these instances, the planning team may choose to spend additional time setting up Session 2 and reinforcing the commitment to be targeted and solution-oriented.

Step 1—Reviewing Problems of Practice: Review the list of potential problems of practice from Session 1 individually or in pairs to prompt thinking about which to prioritize and potentially address. To do this, use the *Problems of Practice Scorecard* handout, then compare scores as a group.

Step 2—Group Discussion and Consensus: To facilitate a group discussion toward consensus, consider the highly ranked problems of practice compared to medium- and low-ranked problems of practice, and note any major trends or similarities. Discuss preferences for which problems of practice to target based on group consensus and rationale. Identify a notetaker to capture the details of the discussion. Consider the time or financial investment needed to address the problem of practice or the feasibility of achieving key milestones in the work. The goal of this work is to come to consensus around which problem of practice to target first and which problems to prioritize at a later time. Use activities such as dot voting and pro/con reviews to promote consensus. Identify clear recommendations for problems of practice to address moving forward.

Step 3—Gather Feedback (Post-Meeting): To ensure all perspectives have been included, gather feedback and approval from key decision makers who are not part of the planning team as needed to move the work forward. The planning team lead may establish concrete next steps and a timeline for this feedback at the end of Step 2. It may also be helpful to gather informal stakeholder feedback about which highly ranked problems of practice to target first.

Step 4—Final Consensus (Post-Meeting): Discuss and finalize the decision on which problem of practice to target, either virtually or in another planning team meeting.

Selecting a Problem of Practice Scorecard

Use this handout for Step 2 of Session 2: Selecting a Problem of Practice. Using one of three scores (High = 3, Medium = 2 and Low = 1) rate your potential problem of practice against the criteria listed at the top of each column below.

- *High indicates that the problem of practice meets or exceeds the criteria (e.g., it is easily* achievable *or it has a very manageable* scope*).*
- *Medium indicates the problem of practice only somewhat meets the criteria (e.g., it is only somewhat* broadly shared *and does not have* clear impact *for most teachers and students).*
- *Low indicates the problem of practice does not meet or partially meet the criteria (e.g., it is not* relevant *to local schools).*

Indicate the score for each criteria in each column, then add all the rankings together in the "Total" column to provide a final score. Compare scores for each proposed problem of practice to help the planning team prioritize.

Problems of Practice	**Achievable**	**Clear Impact**	**Scope**	**Broadly Shared**	**Relevant**	**Total**

Action Planning and Goal Setting

The purpose of this section is to assist teams in establishing common strategies, goals, and objectives for addressing the selected problem of practice. This includes identifying strategies that outline how the team will address each problem of practice as well as setting a vision for the work that is multiyear, aspirational, and specific to the identified problem of practice. This section also includes goal-setting to define success for the coming year's efforts. This section is designed to be used by the planning team lead or coordinator in organizing, planning, and completing the work.

The process for action planning and goal setting includes three main activities (Session 1: Identifying Strategies, Session 2: Setting a Vision and Goals, and Session 3: Action Planning), which together are expected to take approximately four hours, resulting in the development of a specific action plan that can be implemented to address an identified problem. These sessions may be conducted back to back or at separate times, based on the planning team's schedules. Table 3 provides additional detail for each meeting:

Table 3. Action Planning and Goal Setting Overview

Session	Typical Time Frame*	Objectives	Handouts
Session 1: Identifying Strategies	One hour	The planning team will assess the potential effectiveness of current and potential strategies for addressing the problem of practice.	Considering Strategies handout
Session 2: Setting a Vision and Goals	One hour	The planning team will set a clear vision and goals for the work.	Vision and Goals Template handout
Session 3: Action Planning	Two hours	The planning team will create an initial action plan for the work.	Action Planning Tool handout

* These are suggested time frames. Teams may decide to combine sessions, or customize accordingly, to best suit the needs of the planning team.

Session 1: Identifying Strategies

Time frame: One hour

Purpose: To identify at least one promising strategy that the planning team may implement to meaningfully address the identified problem of practice in the next 6–12 months. Strategies should be clear, evidence-based, relevant to identified root causes, and realistically achievable with available resources.[12] Identifying potential strategies allows the team to both target specific changes that need to take place and conceptualize an initial path forward.

Materials: *Considering Strategies* handout, description of the problem of practice selected to address from previous session.

Background: The team can complete the activities in the *Identifying and Refining a Problem of Practice* section prior to this meeting.

Step 1: Discuss Previous Approaches: As a team, identify the strategies that individual teachers, administrators, schools, or other groups (such as parents) have used in the past to address the problem of practice. It may be helpful to formally or informally gather this information from other stakeholders and leaders across the school, district, or community prior to this session. When listing the strategies that have been used in the past, use the *Considering Strategies* handout to quickly establish consensus about the impact and potential of these previously used strategies. Understanding why and how previous strategies were not effective may help the planning team better identify promising and appropriate strategies to use in the future.

Step 2: Review Evidence-Based, Promising, and Innovative Strategies: Some problems of practice have a wide range of associated evidence-based strategies or interventions. Other problems of practice may not yet have a clear evidence base through formal research or evaluation but may be linked to promising or innovative strategies that demonstrate a strong rationale for impacting positive results. As a team, identify and share the evidence-based, promising, and innovative strategies that may help to successfully address the problem of practice. Use resources such as the *What Works Clearinghouse* to identify evidence-based strategies that might be relevant to your selected problem of practice.[13] Continue to use the *Considering Strategies* handout to list and quickly discuss these strategies as they are identified. As with previous approaches used, it may be helpful to gather information on these strategies prior to meeting as a planning team.

Step 3: Group Discussion: Review the *Considering Strategies* handout as a team, then discuss using the following prompts:

- *Which potential strategies do you consider to have a high likelihood of success?*
- *If these strategies are evidence-based, are there existing models you can replicate or follow?*
- *If these strategies are promising or innovative, are there emerging models or guidance you can follow? Are there foundations or other groups able to sponsor or support pilot efforts for emerging models?*

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[12] For more information, see the *Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments from the U.S. Department of Education* resource at https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseseinvestment.pdf.

[13] For more information, please see the State Support Network resource “Leveraging Evidence-Based Practices for Local School Improvement” at https://statesupportnetwork.ed.gov/content/leveraging-evidence-based-practices-local-school-improvement. .

- *Do you have the capacity to implement multiple, coordinated strategies at once?*
- *How would we know if the strategy is working, i.e., what data do we need to evaluate our progress?*

Use the handout to gather notes and rate the potential for success for each identified strategy.

Some evidence-based strategies that have been designed to be used in urban and suburban settings may need to be modified to work in rural districts. For example, rural districts may need to modify how staff time or resources are used, given that they may be drawing on a smaller pool of staff and funding sources. Staff that fill many different positions in smaller rural districts may have less common time to meet with colleagues and may require a more flexible and iterative approach to collaborating and sharing information than colleagues in urban or suburban settings that have more opportunities for collective face-to-face engagement. Where possible, rural schools and districts facing similar problems of practice may wish to form a consortium to create a larger pool of resources from which to address their identified challenge;[14] however, rural schools and districts may still need to modify strategies to reflect the local needs and context.

Step 4: Prioritization: Identify at least one priority strategy to implement in the next three to six months. Identify and save notes from Step 3 on relevant models, staff capacity, and evaluation metrics that may inform implementation of the selected strategy over time.

[14] For more information, see the State Support Network blog series on Rural Consortiums (https://statesupportnetwork.ed.gov/resources/new-blog-series-using-collaboratives-promote-success-rural-schools). Many organizations and states have created resources tailored to rural school districts; example resources include the Colorado Rural Collaborative (http://www.coruraledcollab.org/), the report on the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative from Battelle for Kids (http://battelleforkids.org/docs/default-source/publications/rec-case-studyoacfinal.pdf?sfvrsn=2), and the Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium (https://www.esmec.org/).

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Considering Strategies

Use this handout for Step 2 of Session 1: Identifying Strategies. This handout may be used to both capture individual planning team member's reflections as well as to capture notes from the group discussion. First, provide brief descriptions of previously attempted approaches and evidence-based strategies identified by the planning team (including those that are not yet based in evidence but demonstrate a rationale). Next, assign a ranking for each strategy's perceived potential for success (e.g., low, medium, or high) and then describe the rationale for this ranking. Use the following prompts to guide thinking and discussion:

- *Which potential strategies do you consider to have a high likelihood of success?*
- *If these strategies are evidence-based, are there existing models you can replicate or follow?*
- *If these strategies are promising or innovative, are there emerging models or guidance you can follow? Are there foundations or other groups able to sponsor or support pilot efforts for emerging models?*
- *Do you have the capacity to implement multiple, coordinated strategies at once?*
- *How would we know if the strategy is working, i.e., what data do we need to have to evaluate our progress?*

This may be done as a group or individually, followed by a group discussion to reach consensus.

Identified Problem of Practice:

	Strategy Description	**Potential for Success (low, medium, or high)**	**Rationale for Potential for Success Rating**
Previous Approaches			
Evidence-Based Strategies			
Promising and Innovative Strategies			

Session 2: Setting a Vision and Goals

Time frame: One hour

Purpose: To establish a set of three to five Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, and Time-Bound goals (i.e., SMART goals) that communicate the vision and define success for the team's work. Setting a vision allows the planning team to conceptualize success, or how it would look if the problem of practice was ideally addressed. Setting a vision prepares the team to set tangible and appropriate goals for the work over time.

Materials: Vision and Goals Template handout

Step 1: Defining Success: In many schools and districts, problems of practice may be compounded by other challenges that are difficult to address with existing staff, resources, and within a specific time frame. Many rural districts face similar challenges that are highly unlikely to change over time, such as geographic isolation. For example, the problem of practice may specifically focus on parent engagement. However, this problem of practice may be influenced by other challenges, such as transportation costs, distances between home and school, and other demands on parents' time such as farm operations. In these cases, rural schools and districts may want to reconsider what "success" looks like. Rather than hoping to completely eradicate or solve the problem, these schools and districts may consider what it would look like if the problem no longer had a significant impact on teaching and learning. This may require new and innovative approaches, systems, or infrastructure, such as more virtual parent engagement via text or social media. These schools and districts may also be able to estimate the potential impact of selected strategies to determine what type of change they may reasonably see over time.

Consider and discuss the following prompts:

- *What would "success" look like in two years?*
- *How different does that vision look like from where you are today?*
- *Is your vision achievable but still ambitious?*
- *Is there broad agreement within your team? Where do differences of opinion remain?*

Develop simple, short statements for the problem of practice that include **ambitious** but **achievable** outcomes for the work. Avoid using jargon or broad language and be as specific as possible. Some examples of statements defining success are:

- Students' motivation in mathematics will be high, and anxiety low, resulting in increased academic achievement. (Goals to be set for 9th grade algebra students' survey results, participation, completion, GPA)
- Off-track students in 5th grade will receive appropriate intervention to return to on-track status by 8th grade. (Goals to be set on data utilization, intervention process, remedial pathways)

Step 2: Set SMART Goals: Using a SMART structure ensures that the goals reflect important milestones in project success. Use the *Vision and Goals* handout to write a few goals (no more than five) based on the overall vision for the work. This work may be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Keep the following tips in mind:

- A good SMART goal will use a simple syntax, incorporating a verb (increase, reduce, maintain), an objective (what do you want to change?), by how much (expressed as a percent or other quantification), and by when (time frame or end date).

  - We will… (increase, reduce, maintain)
  - An objective (what are we changing?)
  - By how much
  - By when
- For example,
  - *Example 1:* “All students recognized as off-track in 9th grade will receive interventions designed to return students to college- or career-ready standards by graduation within one semester of identification.”
  - *Example 2:* “We will double the percentage of students self-identifying as motivated in mathematics in three years.”
  - *Example 3:* “We want to increase the advanced/proficient rate on our state test by five percent this school year.”

Step 3: Share and Synthesize SMART Goals: Share draft SMART goals and discuss as a team. Synthesize these draft goals into a singular set of clear, distinct goals for the work.

Vision and Goals Template

Use this handout for Step 2 of Session 2: Setting a Vision and Goals.

VISION
Goal 1
Problem of Practice Addressed by This Goal
Potential Evidence of Progress
Goal 2
Problem of Practice Addressed by This Goal
Potential Evidence of Progress

Goal 3
Problem of Practice Addressed by This Goal
Potential Evidence of Progress
Goal 4
Problem of Practice Addressed by This Goal
Potential Evidence of Progress
Goal 5
Problem of Practice Addressed by This Goal
Potential Evidence of Progress

Session 3: Action Planning

Time frame: Two hours; monthly check-in meetings afterward

Purpose: Now that the planning team has its top three to five goals to achieve in relation to the problem of practice, the next step is to develop the activities and milestones that will guide the team in addressing the problem. For the planning team to accomplish its stated goals, it is critical that the team organize their actions and tasks by identifying key milestones in the implementation process.

Materials: *Action Planning Tool handout*

Step 1: Distribute the *Action Planning Tool*. Depending on the number of goals and number of team members, have the team split up by goal, and have each group map out the year's milestones as they relate to their assigned goal. Depending on the size of the group, it's very possible that groups will be assigned more than one goal. Share the following tips with the participants:

- Choose individual owners or leaders, rather than groups.
- Be as specific as possible in the timeline, rather than simply recording entire months ("January") or quarters ("Fall") in the timeline column.
- Indicate the status for achieving milestones using the following range: ahead, on-track, behind, or not started.
- Use the project management planning tool that is easiest to use in this context. For example, if the school or district has a standard action planning template, consider using it instead to keep everything in a consistent format.

Step 2: Once the *Action Planning Tool* is completed, aim to regroup the planning team monthly to review it and report out on progress made. The tool is intended to be a living document to track and monitor accomplished milestones, note completed activities, and inform necessary course corrections along the way.

Action Planning Tool

Use this handout for Step 1 of Session 3: Action Planning. Use multiple copies of this handout as needed to match the number of goals identified by the planning team.

Goal:					
Milestone	**Tasks**	**Owners**	**Timeline**	**Status**	**Notes**
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					

Resources

Instructions: These resources[15] can help you and your team dive deeper into this topic. You may want to assign various team members to review one or two resources and share their key take-aways with the rest of the team prior to beginning the work.

Resources for teams and facilitators:

- Making Good Teams Great: https://hbr.org/2008/02/make-your-good-team-great-1
- Design Thinking for Educators: https://designthinkingforeducators.com/
- Five Whys Activity: https://www.oakland.edu/Assets/upload/docs/Pawley/Lean-Enrichment-Activities/LEA---5-Whys.pdf
- Root Cause Analysis Workbook: https://gtlcenter.org/learning-hub/equitable-access-toolkit/root-cause-analysis-workbook
- The Essential Guide to Writing S.M.A.R.T. Goals: https://www.smartsheet.com/blog/essential-guide-writing-smart-goals
- Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509

Resources for problem solving in rural districts:

- The Promise of Personalized Learning in Rural Districts: https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether_Personalized%20Learning-Rural_FINAL_0.pdf
- The Promise of Rural Education Collaboratives: http://battelleforkids.org/docs/default-source/publications/generatingopportunityprosperityview.pdf?sfvrsn=2
- Promising Practices in Rural Workforce Development: http://ruralfutures.nebraska.edu/skills-gap/promising-practices/
- Opportunities for Teacher Professional Development in Oklahoma Rural and Nonrural Schools: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/REL_2017273.pdf

Resources relating to data privacy, confidentiality, and security:

- U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office: https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/

[15] Note: This document contains resources that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of these materials is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.