

Developing a Sustainability Plan

Given the hard work of achieving goals, schools understandably want to sustain the improvements that were made, but doing so can be challenging. Many factors influence whether improvements will be sustained or disappear, leaving little to mark their existence. School improvement consultants can help leaders, whether principals, building leadership teams, or a school's entire staff, understand and manage the factors that affect sustainability. Addressing these factors from the beginning of an improvement initiative will contribute to the longevity of improvements.

The Sustainability Plan Template¹ guides teams in creating a plan for the development and ongoing maintenance of the structures, processes, and attitudes that are necessary for addressing the factors that affect sustainability. The template includes a set of questions that help teams understand each of the factors that affect sustainability and possible ways to address the factors.

Using the Sustainability Plan Template

The Sustainability Plan Template has three sections. The first section asks for the year of implementation that the plan addresses and the important aspect(s) of the program or practice to be sustained. For example, the ongoing success of the initiative might depend on the continuation of professional learning communities or assistance from instructional coaches. The second section presents a description of each factor and associated questions to help teams identify which factor(s) are related to the structure, process, or attitude they want to sustain. The questions help clarify the factor and guide identification of actions. The third section provides space to record actions to address the factor(s), person(s) responsible, and timeline.

There might be several aspects of the initiative that need to be sustained or several factors that affect sustainability that need attention, but it is best to focus on one or two aspects and factors during any given year. The decision about which factor(s) to focus on will depend on the team's assessment of their status regarding each factor and other criteria that the team identifies (e.g., importance of the factor, capacity or resources related to the factor, ease of addressing the factor).

¹ The Sustainability Plan Template is based on information from the following sources:

- Century, J., & Levy, A. (2002, April). Sustaining change: A study of nine districts with enduring programs. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans. [Microsoft Word - AERApaper2002final.doc \(terc.edu\)](#)
- Florian, J. (2000). *Sustaining education reform: Influential factors*. Aurora, CO: McREL. [ED453583.pdf](#)
- Koh, G., Askell-Williams, H., & Barr, S. (2023). Sustaining school improvement initiatives: Advice from educational leaders. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 34(3), 298-330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2023.2190130>

Sustainability Plan for _____ School Year

Section 1: Background Information

Year of improvement initiative for which this plan is intended:

- First year
 Second year
 Third year
 Fourth year
 Fifth year
 Beyond fifth year

Aspects of the initiative we want to sustain:

(Consider the most essential or non-negotiable parts of the program or practice as well as aspects that are important in your context.)

Section 2: Selection of Factor(s) the Plan Will Address

Place a check mark in the column to the left of the factor(s) most closely related to the aspect(s) of the program or practice you want to address with the plan. The questions will help guide the actions you identify to address the factor.

Check	Factor	Questions to Guide Planning for Sustainability
<input type="checkbox"/>	Human Capacity The knowledge and skills people need to implement an improvement program or practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What knowledge and skills do our staff need to develop to successfully implement the new program or practice? • What is the plan for providing initial and ongoing professional development and support (e.g., coaching)? • How will we ensure that the program becomes “standard practice” (i.e., there is widespread use of the program)? • How will we ensure our professional learning communities engage in activities (e.g., collective learning, shared responsibility, reflective dialog) that support sustainability?
<input type="checkbox"/>	School Culture The shared norms, values, attitudes, perspectives, and relationships within the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we embed commitment to the values and beliefs that undergird the new program or practice in our school culture? • How will we maintain a high level of trust in the school (among teachers, between teachers and administrators)? • How will teachers be involved in decision making and shared leadership? • What agreements will guide communication (e.g., what is communicated, to whom, when)? • What actions do leaders need to take initially and over time to support sustainability?

Check	Factor	Questions to Guide Planning for Sustainability
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Organizational Capacity The school structures, policies, and resource allocation needed to implement and sustain the program or practice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources are needed to support the new program or practice initially and over time? How will these resources (e.g., funding, time) be acquired and allocated? • What policies are needed to support the new program or practice? Which policies are in place, and which need to be developed? • What policies—current or possible—serve as barriers to sustainability? How might these policies be revised or avoided? • What structures are needed to support the new program or practice? Which of these are in place, and which need to be developed?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Political Context and Demand The external pressures that influence the school’s ability to sustain programs or practices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What state-level policies or activities will support sustainability? Which might serve as barriers? • How might teacher preparation practices affect implementation and sustainability of the program or practice? • How will the school help the community understand the school’s work and the elements of the new program or practice and maintain the community’s support over time?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Adaptability The ability to use deep knowledge about and commitment to the program or practice to make decisions that support sustainability when faced with changes in the system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What changes in the system might impact the sustainability of the program or practice? What are appropriate adaptations to the program or practice under these conditions? • What are the most essential or non-negotiable aspects of the program or practice that need to be sustained when there are changes in the system?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Philosophy The knowledge of and alignment with the values and beliefs that undergird a program or practice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well are teachers’ and leaders’ beliefs and values aligned with the beliefs and values that undergird the program or practice? How will teachers and leaders develop deep understanding of these beliefs and values? • How will we embed commitment to the values and beliefs that undergird the new program or practice in our school culture? • Are there competing beliefs that could act as barriers to sustainability? • How clear is the purpose of the new program or practice? How is that purpose communicated and supported by teachers and leaders?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Quality The use of data to determine and communicate how well the program or practice is being implemented and its impact on those involved.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data about implementation (e.g., quality of instruction, number of people implementing) will be collected? How often will it be collected? How will the results of data analysis be communicated and with whom? • What data about impact will be collected? How often will it be collected? How will the results of data analysis be communicated and to whom?

Section 3: Identification of Action Steps, Person(s) Responsible, and Timeline

Selected Factor	Actions to Address the Factor	Responsible Person(s)	Timeline