

Getting Ready to Implement Data-Based Individualization



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Introduction

Exhibit 1. Simplified Implementation Phases



Source: Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2023

Readiness for change is an important factor in successful implementation and scale-up of a new practice or program in schools. The process of assessing and developing readiness for change is a key feature of the Exploration Stage, which is the first of four [implementation stages](#) identified by the Active Implementation Research Network. As shown in Exhibit 1, the implementation stages may be simplified into three broad steps: Getting Ready, Getting Started, and Getting Better. Getting Ready involves establishing the conditions for successful implementation, including planning, providing training, and securing resources (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2023).

Data-based individualization (DBI) is a research-based process for individualizing and intensifying interventions through the systematic use of assessment data, validated interventions, and research-based adaptation strategies. DBI is a process, not a specific program or product. The process, which is driven by data and characterized by increased intensity and individualization, addresses both the academic and behavioral needs of the student.

Assessing and developing readiness prior to implementing DBI increases the likelihood of success and may save time, resources, and effort. Taking time to consider how DBI will fit in with the school or district context, the needs of students and staff, available resources, and the goals of DBI implementation will help leaders develop consensus and buy-in among staff and plan actionable next steps. This document provides considerations for creating readiness to implement DBI successfully.

Determine the Need for DBI

Before implementing DBI, it is important to understand the outcomes you hope to change with DBI and the goals for DBI implementation. This work may be done by an ad hoc exploration team that will determine the need for DBI and the feasibility of DBI implementation. According to the [State Implementation and Scaling-Up of Evidence-Based Practices Center](#), the need for change must meet the following criteria:

- “The need for change must be important enough and broad enough to merit using the energy and resources that are required for scaling up innovations.
- The need for change needs to be validated with data or broad consensus in order to stimulate sustained action and track progress toward the intended outcomes” (Fixsen et al., 2013, p. 3).

Schools or districts may determine that implementing DBI would help to meet the following goals:

- Address poor performance of students with disabilities.
- Refine Tier 3 and distinguish it from Tier 2.
- Help teachers better support students who have not yet responded to evidence-based intervention.
- Inform the design and delivery of specially designed instruction.

The exploration team may use a variety of data sources to identify areas of need related to DBI. These data sources can include disaggregated student performance data and educator or community feedback regarding the effectiveness of programming for students with intensive needs. After identifying the needs of the target population and considering how DBI will help meet these needs by providing educators with effective, research-informed practices, the team members may document their initial, long-term goals for DBI implementation.

Establish DBI Implementation Teams

Once the exploration team has identified the need, the next step is forming the teams that will share responsibility for implementing DBI. Rather than creating new teams, in many cases the responsibilities for DBI implementation may be integrated into existing teams. For example, the school leadership team may be responsible for helping ensure that educators have the competencies and the resources needed to implement DBI with fidelity. In addition, a child study team or student assistance team may be responsible for applying the DBI process to address individual student needs. School implementation teams for DBI may include special educators and interventionists, general educators, content specialists, school psychologists, and other staff involved in multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Regardless of the team structure and membership, all team members must be committed to DBI implementation, have dedicated time to participate in team activities, and hold the authority to make decisions.

Although the members of these teams will vary based on context, engagement and support from school and district leadership is critical. School and district leaders play a key role in securing staff buy-in and coordinating the administrative changes that may be necessary for implementation, such as adjusting school schedules to allow time for intervention. It may be beneficial to include a district representative on the team to provide additional expertise and to enhance communication between the school team and district administrators. Some districts may have a separate team focused on developing district systems and capacity for DBI and intensive intervention (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

It is critical for the DBI team to develop a common understanding of the essential features of DBI implementation. Team members must understand how DBI differs from standard practices and what implementing DBI with fidelity will look like. To build knowledge, the team may use the resources and [online learning modules](#) on the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) [website](#).

Take Stock of Current Initiatives

Taking stock of the initiatives already in place and planning for how DBI will supplement existing practices is a crucial next step. For example, it is valuable to plan for how DBI is integrated or aligned with initiatives including MTSS or positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). Similarly, teams may consider how DBI aligns with school and district priorities, such as improving special education services, promoting equity in student outcomes, or increasing college and career readiness. Considering how DBI connects with and builds upon the ongoing work will help create buy-in and reduce the likelihood that DBI is seen as “one more thing” required of busy educators. The [Hexagon Tool](#) is one resource teams can use to examine how DBI fits within the local context and to plan for implementation.

To support alignment of initiatives, the team may develop an inventory of related initiatives and identify common system features and intended outcomes across related initiatives (Center on PBIS, 2017). For example, progress monitoring, fidelity assessment, and teaming are important system features of DBI that may be aligned with related initiatives such as MTSS and PBIS. After identifying these common system features among related initiatives, the team may discuss how to improve alignment of related initiatives and how to address practices that are misaligned. Because adoption of new practices takes time and energy, it may be helpful for schools or districts to make room for DBI implementation by aligning, combining, or eliminating some initiatives.

The team may also consider policies, practices, or initiatives that may be barriers to successful DBI implementation. For example, if special education is misaligned with the school’s approach to MTSS, students with disabilities may

not have access to DBI. It is essential that special educators are involved in DBI implementation and that students with disabilities have access to the most intensive interventions available in schools. Identifying and addressing potential barriers will help establish readiness for successful DBI implementation.

Review Infrastructure to Support DBI Implementation

Thoughtfully considering the infrastructure that needs to be in place for educators to successfully implement DBI is critical. Essential elements of infrastructure and capacity are referred to as [implementation drivers](#) and include leadership drivers (e.g., establishing a vision for DBI, removing barriers to implementation, and managing resources), organization drivers (e.g., data systems and communication practices), and competency drivers (e.g., training and coaching systems). District leaders have a key role in developing the implementation drivers to allow school personnel to implement DBI successfully.

DBI implementation teams should consider teaming practices, resources for data collection and use, meeting processes, communication protocols, and the professional learning needs of staff. To review the current infrastructure for DBI, the team may use NCII's [DBI Implementation Rubric and Interview](#), which includes descriptions of system features necessary to support DBI readiness and implementation at the school level. At the district level, the implementation team may use the [District Capacity Assessment](#) to examine district infrastructure to support DBI implementation. The team may identify gaps or challenges related to infrastructure or resources; potential barriers; and changes to plans, policies, or procedures that will facilitate DBI implementation. In addition, the team may identify existing infrastructure to build upon to enhance DBI implementation.

Develop an Implementation Plan With Built-In Feedback Loops

Once the team has taken stock of current initiatives and reviewed the infrastructure for DBI implementation, they can use this knowledge to develop an [implementation plan](#) that addresses the needs, gaps, and barriers. The implementation plan allows the team to organize and document plans for DBI implementation and monitor progress toward goals. Implementation plans should include goals, strategies to meet goals, the person(s) responsible, benchmarks for success, and a time frame for completion of each goal. When developing an implementation plan, it is helpful to consider the current stage of implementation and the activities and outcomes associated with that stage. The [Implementation Stages Planning Tool](#), developed by the National Implementation Research Network, provides activities that the team should consider for each stage of implementation.

When planning for initial implementation of DBI, the team should first consider which teachers and staff will be involved in DBI implementation, as well as the types of support they will need. We recommend starting small by beginning DBI implementation with a focused pilot project that includes teachers and other staff who appear most ready to implement DBI. For example, the team may select one content area (e.g., math or reading), one grade level, or a few students with whom to begin initial DBI implementation within one or two schools.

Once the team has identified who will be involved in initial implementation, they should consider the professional learning needs of educators and identify goals and strategies to ensure that educators have access to training and coaching to support DBI implementation. The team may develop goals and strategies to support educators in collecting and using assessment data, selecting and delivering interventions, and conducting intervention planning meetings.

The team may also identify goals and strategies related to communication about DBI. For example, it is important for the team to establish feedback loops with the educators, district and school leaders, and family members, to determine what is working or not working regarding DBI implementation and adjust the implementation plan accordingly. In addition, one powerful strategy is to identify and cultivate [implementation champions](#) for DBI who can help build readiness and buy-in among other staff. Further, although starting with a focused pilot program is helpful, the team members should also consider how they will scale up DBI within the school or district and how they will build awareness of DBI among a larger group of educators. When discussing goals and activities related to scaling up DBI, the team may develop plans to formalize procedures (e.g., for [data team meetings](#) or for training new staff) through standardized protocols and processes.

Finally, the team should consider how success will be evaluated and the data that the team will use to track progress, including benefits to students and teachers. For example, the team may use progress-monitoring data to evaluate the number of students making adequate progress because of DBI or use fidelity data to evaluate the application of key practices, such as graphing progress-monitoring data and conducting data team meetings. Additionally, it may be helpful to collect perception data from students, families, and educators regarding the impact of DBI on outcomes and practices.

BENEFITS OF STARTING WITH A PILOT PROJECT

1. It is easier to adequately support small implementation efforts, particularly when it is a new practice.
 2. You can learn from the work in a pilot project and more quickly address implementation challenges.
 3. You can eventually apply the learning from the pilot project to scale-up implementation efforts.
 4. Pilot projects provide evidence that implementation can take place “with educators like me, in my context, and with students similar to mine.” This evidence helps educators build confidence and buy-in for DBI implementation.
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Commit to the Process

Implementing a new practice such as DBI takes time and commitment. It is helpful to recognize that implementation of DBI is hard work and that successful implementation and improved student outcomes may not happen right away. There are many factors that impact the progress of students with intensive needs and educators must regularly adjust supports for these students. School and district leaders should look for, and celebrate, small successes in DBI implementation. For example, the team may use fidelity data to identify improvements in the consistency and quality of DBI implementation and celebrate these successes. The quotation from an NCII participant demonstrates the commitment needed.

Importantly, leaders must recognize and address two types of challenges—technical challenges and adaptive challenges. According to Blase et al. (2015), technical challenges are “well defined, generally agreed upon, and able to be addressed with current strategies,” and adaptive challenges “require revising and rethinking values, beliefs, and current ways of work” (p. 3). Staying committed to the hard work of implementation and managing challenges that arise will help the team successfully lead DBI implementation.

“You really got to go in knowing that it’s hard work. . . . to really look at the data and time is another element . . . Once you’ve made that commitment, you can’t just give up . . . The only answer we’ve found so far is sometimes just going ahead and doing what we need to do and then having people look at the success.”

– Participant of NCII 2012–16

Conclusion

This document provides considerations for district and school leaders to develop readiness to implement DBI. It is important for leaders to spend time understanding the needs that DBI will address, developing implementation plans, and aligning implementation efforts with the current school or district context. Creating readiness for change will help establish buy-in and ultimately increase the likelihood of successful implementation.

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