Develop Your Theory of Improvement in Comprehensive School Mental Health:
The Driver Diagram

Purpose: A driver diagram is a tool used to visually represent a team's working theory of improvement. This visual map is a key collaboration tool for improvement teams because it provides a common language and organizes efforts across many individuals coming together to solve a common problem. The driver diagram contains several components:

- **Aim:** Goal for improvement efforts.
- **Primary drivers:** The main areas of influence in a system that the team hypothesizes will advance the aim.
- **Secondary drivers:** Areas of influence in a system that are hypothesized to influence each primary driver.
- **Change ideas:** Alterations to a system or process that can be tested using a PDSA cycle to better understand how the change will impact the drivers.
- **Tests of change:** Also called a Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle (PDSA), each test of change is a mini experiment in which a change is implemented, and the outcomes observed are compared with predictions about what might happen (Byrk et. al 2015).

Framing: The Driver Diagram can help teams to clearly articulate a theory of school mental health system improvement. A theory of improvement is a team's hypothesis about why and how a particular change will lead to improvement in the school mental health system. It reflects the local system identifying the problem, the expertise of people on the ground who will implement the changes, and theory and best-practice research about the problem (Hinnant-Crawford 2020). The Wisconsin School Mental Health Framework outlines theory and best practice research in building Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems (CSMHS) using six components: continuum of mental health supports, collaboration, needs assessment and resource mapping, mental health referral pathways, data, and sustainability. These components serve as a starting point to help teams consider which aspects of their system, or drivers, might be impacting their identified problem.

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Facilitation Directions:

1 Begin by identifying the problem. To avoid the common mistake of moving too quickly to solutions, teams should spend time clearly defining the problem and understanding the system creating the problem. Teams can utilize tools to help define the specific problem they are trying to solve:

- **Root cause analysis**: A tool used to clearly define problems of practice. Root cause analysis helps teams answer the question, "what is the exact problem we are trying to solve" by helping teams determine what the cause of the problem truly is (Hinnant-Crawford 2020).
- **Empathy Interviews**: Empathy interviews utilize semi-structured interviews to elicit stories and uncover hidden needs of interviewees. They help teams remain user-centered and see the system from the perspective of the user (students, families, etc.) (Bennett et. Al 2022).

Note, teams should select tools that make sense to them, based on their current level of knowledge and exploration of the problem. Not all teams will need to use every tool.

Equity Check

Whose voices have we included as we defined our problem? Whose voices have we left out?

How does our school or district's policies, practices, procedures, priorities, and personnel contribute to the problem, intentionally or unintentionally?

What facets of our system are risk-inducing for certain populations? Who are they risk-inducing for? (Hinnant-Crawford 2020).

2 Determine what the team's goal or **aim** is related to the identified problem. In this step, the team must move from a broadly defined collective purpose to a well-defined goal (Bennett et. Al 2022). The aim statement should:

- Answer the question, "what specifically are we trying to accomplish?
- Specify what will be improved, how much, for whom, and by when.
- Motivate collective action.
- Include clear, shared definitions of terms (e.g., "Successfully Complete." What does success look like?)
- Focus on equitable outcomes.

To craft an aim statement, teams should:
1. Start with a sentence or two that includes the team's answer to, "what are we trying to accomplish?".
2. Check that aim is appropriately scoped, or not too big or too small given the timeframe and available resources.
3. Next, teams should add specificity by defining key terms, identifying measures, and setting targets based on baseline data. Record the team's **aim** in the box in the first column of the diagram.

3 Identify primary drivers. Primary drivers are the high-level areas of influence in a system that the team hypothesizes need to change to accomplish the aim. These high-level aspects of the system include structures, processes, policies, and procedures. The components of Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems, collaboration, continuum of supports, data, sustainability, and mental health referral pathways, are all examples of primary drivers that are backed by best-practice research. Teams may opt to utilize these or other language that aligns to their local context. Record identified primary drivers, along with a description of each driver, in the boxes in the second column of the diagram.

4 Identify secondary drivers. Secondary drivers are areas of influence in a system that are hypothesized to influence each primary driver. Moving from primary to secondary drivers helps teams become more focused and specific, since primary drivers alone are too general to direct change efforts (Byrk et. al 2015). The selected primary and secondary drivers included in the driver diagram should not be exhaustive but represent the areas the team hypothesizes to be the highest leverage. While some secondary drivers could impact multiple primary drivers, for clarity it is helpful to connect each secondary driver to just one primary driver in the diagram. Record identified secondary drivers in the boxes in the third column of the diagram.

***Helpful resources in steps 3 & 4:** Teams can utilize a completed Fishbone Diagram or School Mental Health Quality Assessment (SMHQA) summary reports and assessment questions to inform identification of primary and secondary drivers.

5 Identify change ideas. Change ideas are an alteration to a system or process that can be tested using a Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle to examine its efficacy in improving some driver(s) in the working theory of improvement (Carnegie 2023). A change idea should be:

- specific,
- feasible given resources, time, etc.,
- directly linked to the team's aim and drivers,
- able to make a large impact as indicated by existing research and practice knowledge,
- tested with multiple, short test (PDSA) cycles (within a two-week time frame) and on a small scale (involving a few people to start), and
- reflect the needs of the community.

Equity Check

Are our identified drivers and change ideas based on deficit understandings of the populations we serve?

Whose knowledge is reflected in our theory of improvement? Are some stakeholders' knowledge privileged above others? Whose knowledge is absent? (Hinnant-Crawford 2020).

In this step, the team may choose to focus on one or two secondary drivers and identify change ideas just for those drivers. Record identified change ideas in the boxes in the fourth column of the diagram.

***Helpful resources for step 5:** If teams are having difficulty identifying potential change ideas, they can utilize methods such as scanning research and best practice literature, getting ideas from "bright spots" or examples of practice where schools have made progress on a similar aim, connecting with experts, or using creative thinking techniques (Byrk et. al 2015).

6 Select a change idea and brainstorm ways that change idea could be tested using a PDSA cycle. Test should include an actual change to day-to-day processes, tasks, procedures, etc., and should be able to be completed within a two-week period. Record potential tests in the fifth column of the diagram.

Congratulations! The driver diagram is complete (for now). Next steps:

- Identify measures for each area of the driver diagram.
- Establish improvement routines for the team.
- Start testing by implementing PDSA cycles.
- Update the Driver Diagram to reflect new learning as the team implements PDSA cycles and learning occurs.

Find tools and resources for next steps on DPI's Roadmap for School Mental Health Improvement webpage.

References:
Bennet, Brandon, Gunrow, Alicia, Park, Sandra. 2022. *Improvement Science at Your Fingertips.* San Francisco, CA: Improvement Collective and ISC LLC.
Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. 2015. *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Hinnant-Crawford, B. N. 2020. *Improvement Science in Education.* Myers Education Press.

Example Driver Diagram

(1) Problem Statement: The Wisconsin 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data show that the number of students that feel like they belong has decreased. Specifically, 39 percent of our students who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual and 42 percent who identify as questioning feel like they belong as compared to 68 percent of students who identify as heterosexual.

(2) Aim Statement

By June 2025, the number of LGBTQ+ students who indicate that they feel like they belong at school will increase by 20% as measured by the YRBS.

(3) Primary Drivers

- Teacher/staff support of students
- Student emotional stability
- Environmental and school safety

(4) Secondary Drivers

- Staff wellness (continuum of mental health supports)
- Culturally responsive classroom practices (continuum of mental health supports)
- Student Voice (collaboration)

(5) Change Ideas

- Implement a process for gaining student feedback about increasing belonging in the classroom
- Schedule an advisory period where students connect with teachers and peers about non-acemic topics
- Engage student groups, such as the GSA, in planning for school-wide belonging activities

(6) Tests of Change

- Select several possible climate surveys and test them with a few group of students
- Develop a focus group protocol and test with one group of students
- Implement a new belonging activity in class and test an exit ticket strategy for gaining feedback on how it went for one classroom of students