



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

RESOURCE

Scaling and Spreading Improvements in Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems

Purpose

The purpose of this tool is to help teams track Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles over time to move from a change idea to a change that is embedded in everyday operations and moves teams towards their school mental health goals. A PDSA cycle involves making a small change to day-to-day processes or procedures while observing the impacts in the real world (Bennet et. al 2022). PDSA cycles help teams organize their work and make steady progress towards improvement goals. PDSA cycles also help teams move from ideas about how to improve the school mental health system to action. When improvement teams engage in multiple, iterative PDSA cycles over time, they are engaging in continuous improvement. The [Testing Changes in School Mental Health Systems Improvement Tool](#) guides teams through planning and implementing a PDSA cycle.

Teams begin by testing change ideas with a very small group of people in one setting (e.g. one or two students or staff members) using a PDSA cycle. Teams should anticipate that not every test will go as planned and use small-scale tests to limit the potential negative impact on time, resources, and morale (Hinnant-Crawford 2020). During the act step of each PDSA cycle, teams reflect on what worked and did not work, and what should be kept or changed (IHI 2024).

Using this information, they decide to:

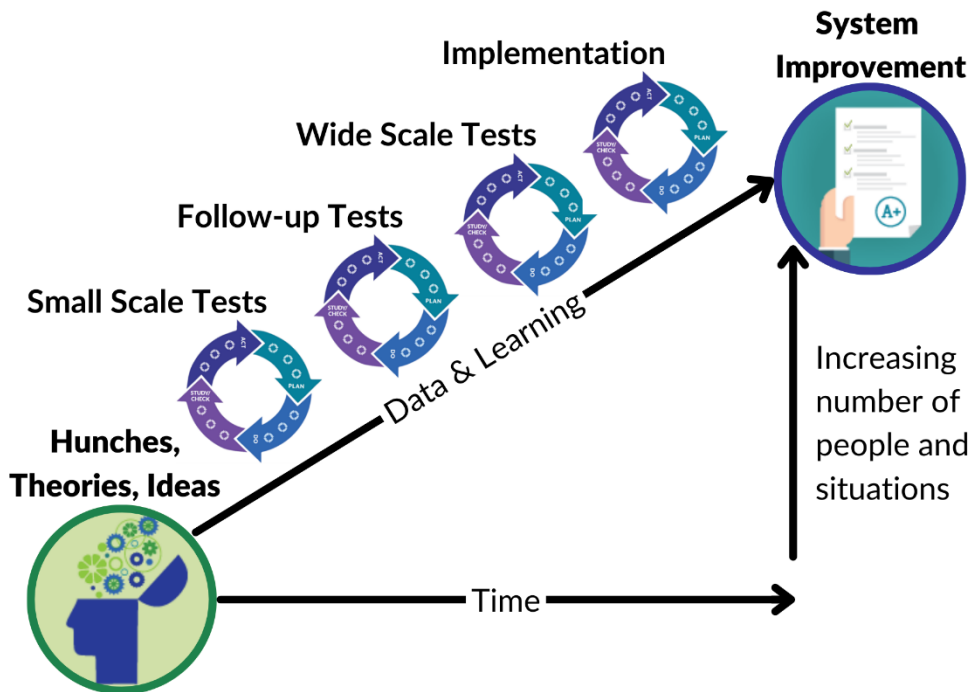
- adapt the change (make changes and test again),
- adopt the change (decide the idea is ready to implement), or
- abandon the change (start over with a new change idea).

Each cycle leads to the next as teams use the learning from previous tests to make needed adjustments. These are iterative tests.

Follow-up tests grow in scope and complexity, with increasingly more people and situations included in the tests. *Figure 1* illustrates the PDSA ramp, a way of visually representing how a team moves from a small-scale test based on hunches or theories to having data and knowledge confirming that the change idea will lead to improvement (Bennet et. al 2022). As the PDSA ramp demonstrates, the team should continue linking

tests until the change idea has been refined and is ready for wide-scale testing and implementation. Teams will know that a change is ready for wide-scale testing and implementation when they have a high level of confidence that the change will lead to improvement and staff are ready to make the change (Langly et al. 2009).

Figure 1: PDSA Ramp



Adapted from Langley et al. 2009

After several small scale and follow-up tests, teams begin wide-scale testing that aims to **spread** the change. Spreading the change means implementing it in more settings with any needed adaptations (IHI 2024). Teams engage in wide-scale testing to learn how a change works in other settings, with different implementers, needs, resources, and capacity. In this phase, teams balance replicating the aspects of the change that lead to improvement in previous settings with adapting the change idea to fit the needs of a new context. This phase of testing is critical because it is not uncommon for a change idea to produce the desired outcomes in one setting and then fail in another setting and need to be abandoned (Bennet et. al 2022).

Connections

DPI's [Roadmap for School Mental Health Improvement](#) outlines five stages for improving the quality of their school mental health system. During the implementation stage, teams focus on learning by doing. Teams implement PDSA cycles to test the utility, efficacy, feasibility, acceptability, reliability, etc. of a change idea (Bennet et al. 2022). With each cycle, teams collect more data over time. Each cycle increases the team's confidence that the change will lead to progress towards the team's aim. In the reflection stage, teams consider how the iterative PDSA cycles together have moved the team closer to their improvement goals, how the change will be spread and fully implemented across the system, and the infrastructure needed to sustain the change.



Getting Started

Teams may wish to plan their learning journey using the [PDSA Ramp Worksheet](#).

This helps teams to:

- check that each test links back to the original aim statement and drivers associated with the change idea,
- think ahead about what the next few PDSA cycles might look like, and
- incorporate learning from past PDSA cycles into the next cycle.

The PDSA ramp worksheet should be paired with the use of the [PDSA Worksheet](#), which provides a space for detailed documentation of each PDSA cycle. Before considering how to implement linked PDSA cycles, teams should complete a [driver diagram](#). The driver diagram walks teams through creating a theory of change, which identifies an aim, aspects of their school mental health system that could impact that aim, and ideas for ways to change their existing system to move closer to that aim.

EQUITY CHECK ✓

- Whose voices are included in planning and testing PDSA cycles? Do they represent the diversity of thought needed to develop the best improvements? Whose are missing?
- Whose perspectives and suggestions were considered when reflecting on learning from previous PDSA cycles to inform the next? Whose were overlooked or ignored? (Hinnant-Crawford 2022).
- What evidence does the team have that spreading a particular change idea will positively impact

Example PDSA Ramp

Aim Statement: By the end of the 2025-26 school year, we will increase retention of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) staff by 20 percent.

Change Idea: Implement a BIPOC teacher network with one nearby school district that increases the number of racially or ethnically matched mentorship opportunities for school staff.

Test One



Describe the test: The cross-district improvement team will research and select three possible teacher mentorship models and get feedback from a few teachers on feasibility and acceptability of those models with a short survey.

What did the team learn? Two of the three models elicited positive responses from those surveyed. All noted that the third model seemed overly complex.

Test Two



Describe the test: The improvement team surveyed a larger group of teachers and administrators about the feasibility and acceptability of the two models that were rated the most positively in the previous test.

What did the team learn? While both models continued to elicit positive responses from the teachers, administrators agreed that one of the models required too large of a financial and time commitment.

Test Three



Describe the test: Using feedback from the last two tests, the team selected one model, tested a possible network meeting agenda with a few educators, and did short empathy interviews with them afterward to get feedback on their experience.

What did the team learn? While the feedback was generally positive, some educators thought that the meeting was too structured and did not allow time for educators to really connect the way they'd hoped.

Test Four



Describe the test: Using feedback from the last test, the team adapted the network meeting agenda and tested it with a larger group of educators.

What did the team learn? Feedback was generally positive, and the changes made to the format of the meeting prompted participants to make more connections with staff from other school districts as they'd hoped.

Test Five



Describe the test: The team decided to move forward with testing the network meeting agenda with the full group of educators and collect feedback via an exit ticket.

What did the team learn? Feedback was positive, but turnout was low.

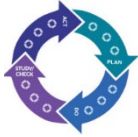
Test Six



Describe the test: Due to low turnout, the team sent out a short survey to educators to learn about barriers to attending.

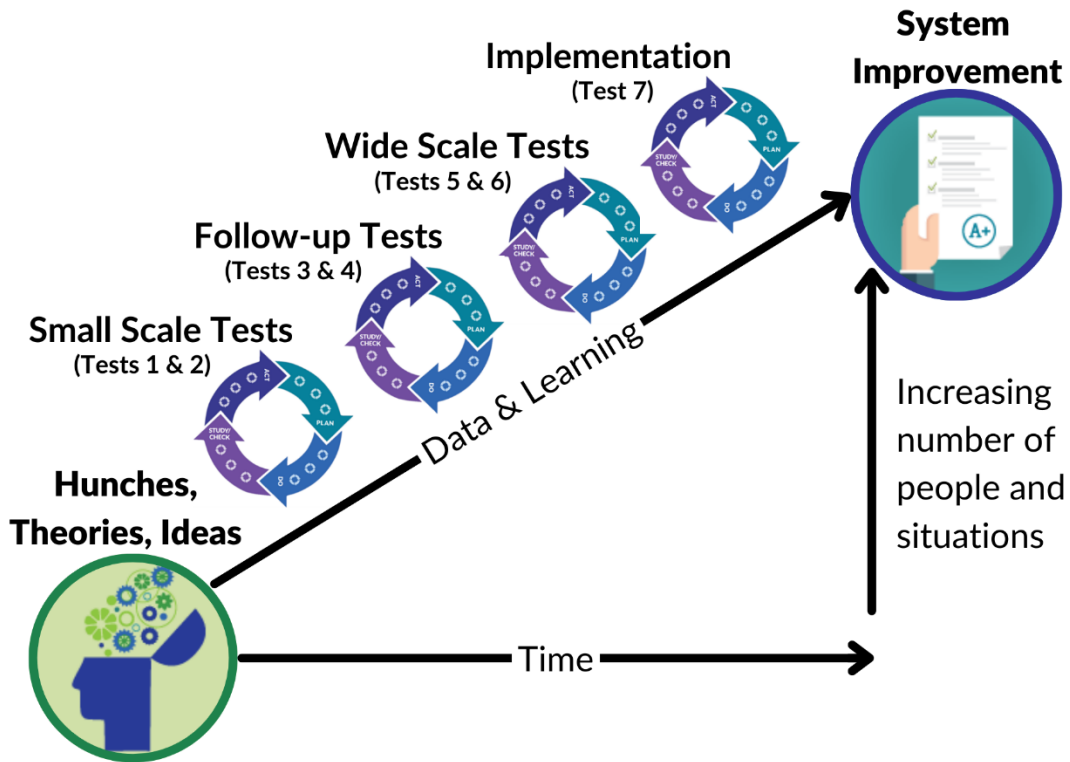
What did the team learn? The day and time of the meeting was a barrier because it occurred after school and potential attendees found it difficult to arrange childcare to attend.

Test Seven



Describe the test: Based on survey results, the team arranged to provide childcare at the next meeting to help increase turnout.

What did the team learn? Feedback was positive and attendance increased by 30 percent from the previous meeting.



Adapted from Langley et al. 2009

References

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