

# Less Is More: Leveraging the Power of De-Implementation to Drive Excellence in Education

Sophia Farmer, Kesha Hudson, and Caryn Ward



## Key Points

- The "more is better" approach to education is contributing to unsustainable teacher workloads and burnout without corresponding gains in student achievement.
- Legislative bans alone are insufficient to drive change; cognitive biases, organizational pressures, and escalation of commitment perpetuate low-value practices.
- De-implementation—the intentional discontinuation of low-value programs, practices, and policies—offers a strategic approach to reduce system strain and refocus resources on what works.
- The GROW framework (Get Ready, Remove/Reduce/Replace, Optimize, Watch) provides a systems-level road map for leaders to phase out ineffective practices and sustain evidence-based replacements.
- Transforming from "more is better" to "less is more" requires coordinated action from researchers, policymakers, funders, and practitioners.

## Introduction

The search for better solutions never stops in the education field. Driven by a deep commitment to their students, educators continually seek out the next innovative approach that promises to address their most pressing challenges. As a result, educators are expected to implement a staggering number of programs and practices in hopes of improving outcomes for all students. This "more is better" or "new is better" approach to education is taking a toll on teachers' workload and well-being. According to recent data from a nationally representative sample of public kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers, 84%

of teachers said they do not have enough time during their regular work hours to get their work done, and the majority said the major cause is simply having too much work to do.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, 81% of teachers reported working more than 40 hours a week. Additionally, 62% reported that their job is often or always stressful, and 53% reported feelings of burnout.<sup>2</sup> But even though the vast majority of teachers reported working overtime, student achievement levels remain low. According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 31% of fourth graders and 20% of eighth graders were considered proficient in mathematics,<sup>3</sup> and 23% of fourth graders and 26% of eighth graders were considered proficient in reading.<sup>4</sup>

This troubling picture of teacher burnout coupled with persistent low achievement scores occurs against an unprecedented wave of education policy reforms, particularly in literacy instruction. As of April 2024, 38 states and the District of Columbia have enacted evidence-based reading laws since 2013, with 8 states banning specific literacy strategies and many others publishing lengthy lists of prohibited instructional approaches deemed ineffective.<sup>5</sup> Despite legislative bans, many ineffective practices persist in classrooms. Teachers feel caught between using familiar methods to meet student needs and complying with mandates for practices they do not yet feel comfortable implementing. This creates a system where teachers work longer hours and experience higher levels of stress without achieving the improved outcomes that evidence-based practices should provide. Collectively, these data suggest that the “more is better” mindset is proving to be counterproductive; teachers are overworked, and student outcomes are not improving.

The critical question now facing education leaders is how to cultivate environments that empower teachers to prioritize the quality of implementation over the quantity of initiatives. De-implementation addresses this challenge through the intentional and sustained discontinuation of low-value programs, practices, organizational routines, and policies. This strategic removal shifts the collective mindset toward “less is more,” enabling educators to direct their professional expertise and limited resources toward evidence-based approaches that are proven to improve student outcomes.

In the sections that follow, we provide a brief overview of de-implementation, consider the existing evidence of de-implementation in education, introduce a systems approach to de-implementation, and present a call to action for researchers, policymakers, funders, and practitioners.

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## De-Implementation: A Brief Overview

### Definition

*De-implementation* is the systematic process of identifying, then reducing, replacing, or discontinuing low-value programs and practices, including organizational routines and policies.<sup>6,7</sup> Low-

value programs and practices are those that (1) have not been shown to be effective, (2) are less effective than other available options, (3) cause harm, or (4) are no longer necessary or able to be implemented as intended.<sup>8,9</sup> It is important to recognize that de-implementation is a deliberate and intentional process conceptually distinct from either the failure to sustain or the abandonment of implementation, where programs and practices are prematurely discontinued without thoughtful consideration.<sup>8,10</sup>

### The De-Implementation Process and Associated Outcomes

Most of our current understanding of de-implementation comes from the fields of health care and health services research, public policy, and behavioral sciences. Despite variations in terminology, experts in these areas generally recognize key sets of organizational behaviors that guide the de-implementation process in a systematic manner (e.g., identify practice(s) for de-implementation, assess de-implementation barriers and facilitators, develop strategies to support de-implementation, etc.).<sup>6,8,9,11</sup> Beyond these process steps, there are also key outcomes associated with the de-implementation process. Prusaczyk and colleagues reconceptualized Proctor’s taxonomy of implementation outcomes at each step (acceptability, adoption, appropriateness, feasibility, fidelity, cost, penetration, and sustainability) as they relate to de-implementation efforts.<sup>12,13</sup> In our summary of the stages, we also include de-implementation outcomes, creating a conceptual framework with the basis for a de-implementation process that is explicit, transparent, and measurable.

First, practitioners identify the low-value program or practice (or multiple) for de-implementation. This requires assessing potential cost savings, stakeholders’ perceptions about why the program or practice is no longer acceptable or appropriate, and stakeholder support for discontinuation. These indicators signal readiness and willingness for change and influence whether de-implementation is likely to succeed.

Next, educators systematically assess implementation barriers and facilitators, then develop targeted strategies to address them. This requires exploring

de-implementation feasibility by identifying drivers that perpetuate the targeted program or practice while also leveraging organizational strengths that support discontinuation. Staff then develop evidence-informed strategies that are tailored to overcome barriers and capitalize on organizational strengths, enhancing feasibility, promoting de-adoption, and ensuring sustained change.

Researchers conceptualize the next step as one in which practitioners engage in active de-implementation. Staff regularly monitor progress toward removing the selected program or practice by assessing fidelity for recommended populations and settings. Effective efforts also examine whether de-implementation is occurring across all system levels. Practitioners must adapt, as needed, to continuously improve de-implementation quality.

Practitioners then assess the effects of de-implementation through process evaluations (assessing fidelity and system-wide occurrence) and outcome evaluations (measuring impacts on individuals and systems while documenting cost savings). Evaluation fosters transparency and accountability while providing evidence about successes and potential unintended consequences.

Finally, practitioners work to actively maintain long-term discontinuation. The goal is change that endures over time, not merely short-term cessation. Achieving sustainability requires deliberate and ongoing reinforcement of new values and behaviors to ensure discontinued practices are no longer part of educators' instructional repertoire.

Educational systems are complex. The process of removing low-value practices does not occur in isolation but within a larger ecosystem. Therefore, it is necessary to consider external factors, such as policies and funding; the organizational context, including culture, leadership, and readiness for change; and the individual characteristics of key stakeholders, including their beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes. Each of these factors will influence the de-implementation process.<sup>8,14,15</sup>

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## De-Implementation in Education: The Current Research Landscape

Research on de-implementation in the education field is in its infancy. The research to date is theoretical in nature and primarily focused on (1) identifying broad areas where de-implementation efforts are needed—including school psychology and mental health, literacy instruction, and disciplinary practices<sup>6,16,17</sup>—(2) discussing barriers to de-implementation,<sup>17</sup> (3) presenting operant learning theory as a framework to support de-implementation,<sup>6,16</sup> (4) postulating how de-implementation frameworks can be applied in schools,<sup>18</sup> and (5) articulating critical questions for future empirical research to address.<sup>10</sup>

To our knowledge, only one study has empirically examined de-implementation in education.<sup>19</sup> Barrett and colleagues conducted semistructured interviews with building- and district-level administrators to understand why de-implementation is challenging. They introduced escalation of commitment—a behavioral phenomenon that results in continued investment in programs and practices even when evidence suggests they are ineffective or unlikely to produce desired outcomes—as a theoretical framework to explain de-implementation resistance in education settings.

Barrett and colleagues identified cognitive biases, psychological pressures, organizational factors, and external constraints as key contributors to escalation of commitment. Rather than questioning the effectiveness of programs or practices themselves, administrators routinely made attributional errors, blaming poor performance on leadership gaps, implementation challenges, or data limitations. They also demonstrated sunk cost fallacy: rationalizing continued investment in failing practices due to time, money, or effort already expended. Psychological factors, such as feelings of ownership over adoption decisions, hope for improvement, and fear of reputational harm, further influenced decision-making. Organizational factors—strong internal support, broad district-wide adoption, or practices embedded in school identity—created additional barriers. External factors, including mandates,

multiyear vendor contracts, and lack of alternatives, limited administrators' autonomy and reinforced commitments to demonstrably ineffective practices.<sup>19</sup>

Escalation of commitment leads educators to resist de-implementation of low-value programs and practices, creating competition for limited resources like time, money, and attention. Competition increases the strain on the education system and has the potential to diminish the impact of other co-occurring evidence-based programs on student outcomes.<sup>6,10</sup> The results of Barrett et al.<sup>19</sup> underscore the need for a systems-level approach that educators can leverage in making evidence-based decisions to discontinue low-value programs and practices, strengthen capacity, and achieve better outcomes for students.

## GROW: A Systems Approach

The education field needs a systems-level de-implementation framework that translates emerging research into observable and measurable strategies. We propose a transformative approach for leaders to fully phase out low-value practices and systematically replace them (if needed) or focus on existing programs that have a stronger evidence base for improving student outcomes. This deliberate replacement prevents the coexistence of old and new practices, which is a common problem that leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed by “one more thing,” rather than empowered by genuine transformation. In its simplest form, de-implementation reflects the removal, reduction, or replacement of low-value practices; however, our approach is based on the premise that even though removing or

reducing low-value practices is essential, in many cases, it may be insufficient without the provision of replacement practices.<sup>20</sup> Replacement practices offer concrete alternative behaviors that help prevent implementation drift and reduce resistance to change.

Within de-implementation efforts, leaders play a crucial role by predicting challenges, being knowledgeable about evidence-based practices, supporting staff, and overcoming obstacles.<sup>21</sup> Our systems approach, GROW, consists of four key components that operationalize these essential leadership activities within the context of de-implementation. The GROW framework provides an opportunity for leaders to engage interest holders in a series of activities with concrete outputs that lead to changes in district-level systems. This, in turn, discourages the use of ineffective practices and reinforces evidence-based practices. Table 1 provides an outline of the core components, described below.

### (G) Get Ready for De-Implementation

Central to GROW is the development and facilitation of an implementation team. The team first establishes working agreements and decision-making protocols that will support the technical and adaptive challenges of de-implementing the low-value practice and implementing a replacement practice. Gathering and using quantitative and qualitative data, the team will then determine the need for change in instructional practices (including identifying specific statutes, legislation, guidance, and priorities). Next, they will identify the low-value practice or practices for removal and a replacement practice for use based on data from an initiative inventory in the specific instructional

**Table 1. Core components of GROW**

Component	Component Definition
G	Get ready for de-implementation: Key stakeholders explore the need for change, identify what low-value practices should be de-implemented, and when needed, suggest replacement practices for implementation.
R	Remove, reduce, or replace ineffective practices: The team systematically and intentionally removes or reallocates funding, resources, and time for the identified low-value practices. The team also installs an infrastructure to support de-implementation and the use of any selected replacement practices.
O	Optimize the new system: With district support, educators systematically avoid the use of ineffective practices and increase the use of any selected replacement practices.
W	Watch for improved outcomes: Implementers effectively abandon the use of the low-value practices and fully implement any selected replacement practices.

content area, a fit-and-feasibility assessment (e.g., the Hexagon Tool<sup>22</sup>), and outcome assessments. Following identification of the low-value practice, the team will use survey and focus group data to identify potential barriers and enablers to de-implementation (including naming any cognitive biases and psychological, organizational, and external factors), as well as potential implications. Finally, the team will develop a communication plan for implementation of a replacement practice that includes the rationale for de-implementation of the incompatible and low-value practice to optimize readiness for change at both the individual and organizational level.

### **(R) Remove, Reduce, or Replace Ineffective Practices**

With the practice chosen for de-implementation in mind, the identified team will self-assess its membership to determine whether the needed perspectives are represented. They will then clearly define what is being de-implemented, as well as what will be implemented in its place. This is done by operationalizing what specific replacement practice the educators will perform while similarly outlining what educators should eliminate or perform less of. The next steps involve building the processes and procedures that will intentionally make it more difficult to use ineffective practices and more efficient and effective to use the replacement practices. Careful attention is given in this step to allocating time for intentionally processing the loss of familiar practices or instructional habits and coming to terms with changing approaches. Whether introducing new replacement practices or redirecting focus toward existing evidence-based approaches that require improved implementation, teams must create the conditions for change. Teams will identify early adopters or those implementing with fidelity; identify what resources or materials need to be reallocated and in what ways (e.g., funding, materials); ensure that teachers have adequate time for planning; develop a comprehensive, high-quality professional learning plan that includes training and coaching in both what to implement and what not to continue using; and use a communication plan to campaign for the strengthened or new practice. Finally, a data collection system will be developed for evidence to

show that low-value practices have been removed, as well as for implementation fidelity of the new practice and decision-making criteria for success.

### **(O) Optimize the New System**

The outcome of this component is to systematically avoid the use of ineffective practices and increase the use of the more effective practices or the replacement practices. The team will continue to reduce the use of what is being de-implemented while more clearly operationalizing what is being implemented and will continue to support teachers in their instructional delivery. The team will improve processes and procedures developed in the previous component and monitor progress using data (e.g., training and coaching effectiveness data, fidelity of practice data related to the replacement practice, or continued capacity building).

### **(W) Watch for Improved Outcomes**

In this component of the de-implementation approach, the team will continuously monitor and improve functioning at both the implementation support and practice delivery levels. Educators will be clear on what is being de-implemented, and if a replacement practice was selected, that it is being implemented with greater fidelity. The processes and procedures built to sustain the new practices will continuously be refined to support changes in systems. Data will continue to evidence high-quality implementation and will be used to expand the use of new practices by additional instructional staff within additional schools. In this phase, the team will be able to start anticipating improvement in outcomes for all students. The final activity will be to determine readiness for scaling to other schools by assessing (1) the relative advantage of the process over previous ways of rolling out new practices; (2) the process's compatibility with district and school culture; (3) the simplicity or feasibility of the process; and (4) the process's measurability.

We hypothesize that training leaders and their teams to effectively remove low-value practices using GROW will improve the acceptability and implementation of new practices, improve

the organizational climate and capacity for implementation at the district level, support teacher uptake of new practices, lessen teacher workload burden, and ultimately improve student outcomes.

## Call to Action

The education field stands at a critical juncture. Although teachers are working longer hours than ever before and reporting unprecedented levels of stress and burnout, student achievement remains stagnant. The data are clear: our current “more is better” approach is failing both educators and students. The time for incremental change has passed—we need a fundamental shift toward strategic de-implementation.

## For Researchers

The field urgently needs rigorous empirical research on de-implementation in education settings. We call on researchers to

- Investigate the GROW framework through studies measuring implementation outcomes and student achievement impacts. Research should examine how systematic de-implementation affects teacher workload, job satisfaction, and instructional quality.
- Develop measurement tools specifically designed to assess de-implementation fidelity and outcomes in education contexts, as current implementation science measures inadequately capture the process of discontinuing and adopting practices simultaneously.
- Examine contextual factors that influence de-implementation success, identifying which organizational, cultural, and leadership characteristics facilitate or hinder effective efforts.

## For Policymakers

Education policy at all levels must evolve to support rather than hinder de-implementation efforts. We urge policymakers to

- Audit existing mandates and identify policies that contribute to teacher overload without evidence of effectiveness. Implement sunset clauses, ensuring

education initiatives continue only after periodic evidence-based reviews.

- Incentivize de-implementation through funding mechanisms that reward districts for eliminating low-value practices, rather than just adopting new programs. Create grant opportunities supporting systematic de-implementation efforts.
- Protect educator autonomy by establishing policies that give teachers and administrators explicit authority to discontinue ineffective practices, even when commercially marketed or previously mandated.

## For Funders

Philanthropic organizations and federal agencies have an opportunity to catalyze transformative change by shifting funding priorities. We suggest that funders

- Invest in de-implementation research, instead of only implementation studies. The field needs evidence about effectively eliminating harmful or ineffective practices, not just adding new ones.
- Support capacity building through professional development, coaching, and organizational change initiatives that help education leaders develop skills in evidence-based decision-making about discontinuing low-value practices.
- Fund longitudinal studies tracking cumulative effects of de-implementation on educator well-being and student outcomes.

## For Practitioners

Education leaders and teachers can begin implementing the GROW framework immediately within their spheres of influence. We challenge practitioners to

- Conduct initiative inventories, documenting every program, practice, and requirement currently in place, then systematically evaluate each against criteria for effectiveness, necessity, and sustainability.
- Form implementation and de-implementation teams with teachers, administrators, and

stakeholders to pilot the GROW process with one low-value practice. Start small, learn, and scale successful approaches.

- Champion evidence-based decision-making by demanding effectiveness data before adopting initiatives and by regularly reviewing existing practices.
- Share successful de-implementation stories to build a knowledge base, informing broader change efforts.

## A Collective Commitment

The transformation from “more is better” to “less is more” requires coordinated action across all levels of the education system. No single group can drive this change alone. Researchers must provide the evidence base, policymakers must create supportive conditions, funders must invest in capacity building, and practitioners must champion implementation on the ground.

The cost of inaction is clear: continued teacher burnout, persistent achievement gaps, and wasted resources. The benefits of systematic de-implementation are equally clear: more-focused instruction, improved teacher satisfaction, and better student outcomes.

The GROW framework provides the road map. What we need now is the collective will to act. The students in our classrooms today need us to get serious about doing less so we can accomplish more. The question is not whether we should engage in de-implementation, but how quickly we can begin. Our students and teachers deserve our immediate and sustained commitment to this critical work.

## Data Availability Statement

In this publication, we do not report on, analyze, or generate any data.

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### About the Authors

**Caryn Ward**, PhD, is the director of Implementation Science Research and Practice at RTI International. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6026-6597> ([cward@rti.org](mailto:cward@rti.org))

**Sophia Farmer**, MT, is the co-director of Implementation Science Research and Practice at RTI. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6579-9341> ([sfarmer@rti.org](mailto:sfarmer@rti.org))

**Kesha Hudson**, PhD, is a research education analyst at RTI. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2155-4040> ([khudson@rti.org](mailto:khudson@rti.org))

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Cover photo: A group of school administrators and teachers walk through a school corridor. Photo courtesy of Kali9 via Getty Images.

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