

# The De-implementation Research

(with practical adaptations)

# 2

*Low value means research does not support it, student and staff voices are not being heard, ignoring the well-being of our students and staff.*

—Anonymous

## SUCCESS CRITERIA

**By the end of this chapter, you will be able to define the following:**

- What de-implementation means
- What low-value practices are
- Two types of de-implementation
- Formal and informal de-implementation
- Why it's necessary to engage in unlearning

**Add two of your own success criteria:**

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“That impact we are always looking for is at least a year’s worth of growth for a year’s input.”

Regardless of which country you are leading and teaching in, de-implementation isn’t something you should just want to do as a school community; it is something your school community *needs* to do. Why? Because somewhere in all the hundreds of actions, activities, and initiatives you already engage in, along with those you want to engage in, there are countless ones you no longer need. Yet it’s important to remember that engaging in new strategies is not an issue if they help provide an impact on student learning. That impact we are always looking for is at least a year’s worth of growth for a year’s input.

As someone who facilitates workshops and delivers keynotes, I know my job is to provide practical insight and strategies. For a while, though, I was uncomfortable that some people attended my workshops or keynotes with the hope of adopting yet another strategy, and I began to think de-implementation was about stopping them from having that mindset. I soon realized that my own assumptions about de-implementation were wrong, and that will be illustrated in the following Case in Point.



## CASE IN POINT

### New Is Not Automatically Bad

Over the years I have been running workshops, I typically began each session with success criteria. I explained that I knew the presentation would be successful because I had learning intentions and success criteria tied to it. These criteria gave me the confidence that I would effectively lead learning for participants by the end of the presentation.

During summer 2021, I began asking the audience for their own success criteria. How would they know that they learned the content? There are always people in the audience who have no idea why they are there, because they were “voluntold” to be there, and I wanted to change that experience for them. However, after asking the audience for their success criteria, I noticed that most of the audience wanted to walk away with one new strategy. That’s the popular answer, right? As educators, we go into every learning experience wanting to gain one more tool for our educational toolbox. However, de-implementation changed my mindset on that goal. I began telling the audience that should be the last thing they wanted to walk away with at the end of the presentation.

I suggested that the first action is to evaluate the strategies they are currently using to see if they are working. However, as my understanding of de-implementation evolved, I realized it's important to find new strategies. New strategies may help breathe new life into someone's career, or a new strategy could be the trick a teacher needs to elevate student voice in their classroom.

I realized I was assuming that de-implementation was merely about getting rid of practices that were not working, and I had not considered that de-implementation was also about bringing in new practices that could add value to the student learning experience.

I'd like to provide some food for thought: If discovering new ideas is not a bad thing, then maybe what teachers and leaders can do when attending workshops and keynotes is an activity to make sure they are leaving those venues with the best possible list of strategies for their classroom or school.

In the following Clutter Check, try this strategy to make sure you aren't adding too much to your plate.

The next time you attend a workshop, try this activity I learned from Jeana Williams and Melody Morgan from the Arkansas Public School Resource Center (APSRC). Take the following steps:

- Grab a paper plate when you get home after the workshop.
- Write down all the strategies you picked up during the session that you promised yourself you would use back at school.
- Cross out three of the strategies you swore you would use.
- The ones left on the plate are probably the ones you can commit to.

### CLUTTER CHECK



## Defining De-implementation

If teachers and leaders begin engaging in de-implementation, it will help foster deeper and more impactful practices. After all, leaders and teachers can't go deep if they're spread too thin. But note: de-implementation

“We need to make a conscious effort to look at our practices and understand whether they are impactful or not.”

must be based in both direct and indirect evidence; so please do not close the book yet and say, “Woo-hoo! Let’s start getting rid of stuff we don’t like!” It is far more deliberate than that.

What I’m referring to here is conscious de-implementation. We need to make a conscious effort to look at our practices and understand whether they are impactful or not. If they are not, we need to understand why. It may be that we need to approach them differently or replace them with something that is far better for our students. Before we can embark on this journey, however, we need to know what de-implementation is.

### The Science

De-implementation is based in the dissemination and implementation science shared in Chapter 1. Van Bodegom-Vos et al. (2017) define de-implementation as the process of “abandoning existing low-value practices.” This research originated in the medical field, but recently studies have been published in the field of school psychology as well.

In fact, when looking at the research from a social-science perspective, which is quite a new concept, McKay et al. (2018, p. 190) define de-implementation “as the discontinuation of interventions that should no longer be provided.” The key to the research, and what makes it so difficult to agree on at times, is the term “low-value practices” and the process behind deciding which interventions “should no longer be provided.”

Before your team can begin the work of defining low-value practices, or those practices that should no longer be provided, it’s important to consider your *why*. De-implementation shouldn’t be seen as the shiny new toy; so this Clutter Check focuses on why you believe you need to move forward with this work in the first place.

## CLUTTER CHECK



Please take a moment to define your *why*. Answer the following questions:

- Why are you interested in de-implementation?
- What do you hope the process of de-implementation will do for your classroom or school?
- What are your success criteria? Meaning, what does successful de-implementation look like for your classroom or school?

### “Low-Value” Misconceptions

What I learned while researching this book is that what is considered low value to one person may in fact be high value to another. This tension does not necessarily happen because either party has a plethora of research on how effective the practice is but more because, as discussed in Chapter 1, one person likes the practice and the other does not.

McKay et al. (2018, p. 190) use an example of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program (D.A.R.E.), which was implemented in many schools but was not supported by research. They write, “When evidence of effectiveness became part of the criteria for obtaining federal funding, the program was revised in 2003 but failed to demonstrate effectiveness” (p. 192). However, the researchers go on to say, “D.A.R.E. continues to be widely implemented; the program estimates that it is present in 75% of the nation’s school districts and is taught in all 50 states” (p. 192). McKay et al. suggest that there are many interventions within the social-science field that have not been evidence-based but have been maintained “via persuasion, training, or tradition” (p. 190).

As a teacher in a high-poverty city school in 2002, I remember having the D.A.R.E. program in our school and loving the idea behind it, but I also remember that in the 2004 school year it was no longer offered because funding was cut due to lack of evidence that it worked. It felt right, but the bottom line is that it was wrong. Our feelings and instincts are powerful persuaders and can at times mislead us.

What also makes low value an interesting area of tension is that when I began surveying leaders and teachers in coaching sessions and workshops, I found that many people considered low-value practices the ones that they felt were done to them, as opposed to any practices they voluntarily engaged in within their classroom or school. Objectively, we know that something imposed externally can be an effective practice. But if there has been no buy-in or proper training, that effectiveness may never have the chance to reveal itself.

### The Reality of “Low-Value” Practices

To provide some research, and a bit of a deeper understanding here, Farmer et al. (2021) suggest that low-value practices are those that

- have not been shown to be effective and efficacious,
- are less effective or efficacious than another available practice,
- cause harm, or
- are no longer necessary.

McKay et al. (2018) write, “Dissemination and implementation science, which is dedicated to enhancing the successful uptake and implementation of research, increasingly recognizes the importance of also understanding when and how it is appropriate to decrease or end interventions” (p. 189). It’s important to understand the circumstances for when de-implementation is appropriate.

“In fact, de-implementation should be seen as a way to build sustainability within schools.”

In fact, de-implementation should be seen as a way to build sustainability within schools. McKay et al. (2018, p. 190) narrow Farmer et al.’s (2021) work a bit to three circumstances or criteria for when de-implementation is appropriate:

- (a) **When interventions lack effectiveness or are harmful**—This means that educators must be aware of declining data; increases in negative data such as the number of students asked to leave their classroom to go to the main office or number of suspensions; or a decrease in student and/or staff engagement. All of these speak to low effectiveness or poor fidelity.
- (b) **When more effective or efficient interventions become available**—This is an area where educators need to be careful, because they will want to ensure that the new practice is better than what they are already using and that they are not simply chasing after the next hot fad.
- (c) **When the health or social issue of concern dissipates**—This research is from the medical field; so another way of looking at this within our educational context would be to say when the area of need is no longer there. Take a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), which offers targeted support for students who are struggling. At some point the interventions will work and the student will not need that targeted support any longer. This is difficult because sometimes MTSS and its counterparts, like Academic Intervention Services (AIS), are used as a gateway to identify a student for special education, as opposed to being seen as short-term targeted support to help students become successful.

### CLUTTER CHECK



- What is a strength of starting a de-implementation process in your school?
- What is a weakness of beginning a de-implementation process?
- What is an opportunity that the de-implementation process may create for your school or district?
- What is a threat to the de-implementation process in your school or district?

## Two Types of De-implementation

Wang et al. (2018) suggest that de-implementation comes down to four areas: partial reduction, complete reversal, substitution with related replacement, and substitution with unrelated replacement of existing practice. When we look at these four areas, it seems a bit complicated, right? I'd prefer to un-complicate the topic and look at it as a process teachers and leaders go through to be more minimalist in their practice. Yes, perhaps when we work in the medical field it must be complicated due to compliance issues, but within education we can streamline a bit.

For our purposes I have consolidated the work of Wang et al. (2018) and suggest it might be more useful for educators to focus on two areas instead of four. What I am proposing is that we continue to use partial reduction but we take the other three and combine them into a category called replacement action (see Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1**



Wang et al. (2018) offer us support in this suggestion: “Partial reduction/reversal of practice may require minimal learning effort because new skills are not required for an established practice, but some degree of education is needed on the new evidence” (p. 106). They go on to say, “Complete reversal or discontinuation of an existing practice without replacement may require significant effort to overcome confirmation bias or loss aversion that might slow or prevent discontinuation” (p. 106).

There is an additional reason why I am suggesting consolidating the four aspects of de-implementation into two aspects, and that is because regardless of what we discontinue, we will replace that time with something else—likely the opportunity to go deeper with another practice that is more worthwhile.

Before we move any further, I'll ask you to process this information in the Clutter Check. I want you to consider how you have done this work before. Although you may not know it, you have most likely already partially reduced or replaced an action in your teaching and leading.

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“Regardless of what we discontinue, we will replace that time with something else—likely the opportunity to go deeper with another practice that is more worthwhile.”

## CLUTTER CHECK



In your career as a teacher or leader, what have you partially reduced in your practices before? For example, have you ever partially reduced the amount of homework you gave to students each night?

Write your example here: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

In your career as a teacher or leader, think of a time when you engaged in a replacement action because something you were doing was not working. For example, you used to lecture a lot, then moved in the direction of engaging in cooperative learning for students instead. Write your example here: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Formal and Informal De-implementation

One of the other important considerations is that of informal and formal de-implementation. In Chapter 4, a formal de-implementation process is introduced for significant school change to make sure that decisions to reduce or replace are well thought out. However, the reality is that not every partial reduction or replacement action needs a formal process. If a teacher in the classroom realizes they are lecturing too much and decides in the moment to move to a collaborative learning model so students can process information, they are certainly not going to ask students to sit quietly while they fill out a de-implementation checklist. The anecdote about the two-day workshop I was facilitating, in the “Case in Point” section in Chapter 1, is a good example of an informal de-implementation. I was providing too many slides and too much information. I needed to quickly reduce that number and replace it with a more practical activity for the audience to engage in. That change improved the learning in a matter of minutes.

In addition, if teachers and leaders are going to have fewer meetings or check email less often, they do not need to engage in a formal process to do that work. An informal process of de-implementation represents those practices that can be done quickly because we realize they are just not providing the impact we need. What does remain constant in either process is the need to make sure that the decision is based in evidence. Research from reputable sources is one form of data, but if you are constantly exhausted or frustrated, that is a form of data too.

The formal de-implementation process needs to be initiated when leadership teams, professional learning communities, or departments are going to change their grading policies, change their literacy program, or do anything else that will impact a large group of teachers and students. The formal de-implementation process is for those initiatives and activities that may impact an entire school community.

### Cues for Formal or Informal De-implementation

TYPE	GUIDING STATEMENTS	EXAMPLES
Informal de-implementation	<p>I can make this change on my own.</p> <p>It impacts only me or my immediate team.</p> <p>I can begin this change immediately.</p> <p>I can see change within a day.</p>	<p>Checking email</p> <p>Short response times for students during class discussions</p> <p>Frequency of late nights</p>
Formal de-implementation	<p>This change requires a team.</p> <p>This change impacts most of the school.</p> <p>This change requires data collection from a variety of sources.</p> <p>It could take many months or a year to see a result.</p>	<p>Shifting the middle school science program</p> <p>Student discipline procedures</p> <p>Levels of family engagement</p>

### Anticipating Roadblocks

It's important to understand that there are positive reasons for focusing on de-implementation, but negative issues will arise as well. For example, during a keynote focusing on instructional leadership, I brought up the topic of de-implementation, and the assistant superintendent who had brought me in to provide the keynote was heavily concerned people within his district would just stop doing things they didn't like. Therefore, a weakness of de-implementation is that if it is not done correctly, it might cause a bit of lawlessness, and we do not want that. Therefore, I have included a de-implementation checklist in this book, which can be found in Chapter 4. That is also why I offer an intermission section in the book where I focus on the difference between formal and informal de-implementation. If you are concerned that colleagues will go about de-implementation in the wrong way, consider doing the following:

- Using your instructional leadership team for the formal de-implementation process in your school
- Clearly articulating at staff meetings how to de-implement

- Sending staff a blog or article on de-implementation as a precursor to a meeting or as a follow-up after a staff meeting

And keep in mind:

- Teachers and leaders will value de-implementation if superintendents and district offices value de-implementation.
- People who feel safe will be more likely to engage in open discussions about what works and what doesn't.
- When people complain about initiative fatigue, we should probably listen.

### **Monitoring Our Minds: Unlearning and Relearning**

One area that makes de-implementation challenging at times is that it will involve unlearning and relearning on the part of the educators engaged in the process. We have all been so trained to follow the rules and engage in compliance. We are conditioned as educators to take on more and more for the good of the students, when it may not be good for the students at all.

Wang et al. (2018) suggest, "Unlearning is a process of discarding outdated mental models to make room for alternative models" (p. 106). Dutta (2019) writes that "relearning efforts are grounded in gaining and embodying new knowledge" (p. 3).

For example, when COVID-19 came crashing into our lives, teachers, students, parents, and leaders were asked to go from in-person teaching and learning to pandemic teaching and learning. We were forced to unlearn how we normally operated and relearn new ways to do everything. We had to change our idea of what teaching and learning looked like and figure out how to engage students who were no longer in front of us in a classroom. De-implementation takes unlearning and relearning to help deconstruct our old mental models of how we should operate. You can go about unlearning and relearning in a few ways.

### **In the End**

Conscious de-implementation is important because when we do it, we are taking back the power in our classrooms, schools, and districts. We are exerting our control over the initiatives and actions we are often confined by, taking positive steps toward managing our time differently, and focusing on doing less to have more of an impact on student learning.

## TIPS TO UNLEARN AND RELEARN

- Instead of entering professional learning hoping for a new strategy, begin thinking about how the content being learned fits into your present situation, and whether you are implementing the practice correctly.
- Make a list of any activities, within your own practices, you currently partake in. Then push yourself to find objective evidence that each one is effective. This will take some brutal, internal honesty.
- Notice when you have a strong reaction to an idea, particularly a negative emotion. Explore that discomfort to try to get at its roots.
- If you are exploring this work as a partner or part of a team, consider how you presently engage in discussions, if at all, and consider how you may need to unlearn the roles around the table. (In my collective leader efficacy work, I ask teams to assign roles to everyone around the table, consider the role of status in how they function, and use protocols to focus on intentional professional learning at each meeting.)

As you read, de-implementation must be based on research and evidence. As Farmer et al. (2021) suggest, low-value practices are those practices that

- have not been shown to be effective and efficacious,
- are less effective or efficacious than another available practice,
- cause harm, or
- are no longer necessary.

This chapter also defined two ways to de-implement:

- 1) Partial reduction—do less of a practice that is already in place.
- 2) Replacement action—remove a practice and replace it with something better (including more time to focus on current practices that are effective).

As we move on, keep these three points in mind: First, we must understand which strategies are working and which ones are not. Second,

we know that workload is at an all-time high, and high workload takes teachers and leaders away from their most important work, which is to focus on student learning. Last, this is a mental health issue. Too often, leaders and teachers talk about well-being but do very little about it. De-implementation should be considered as a strategy to begin finding well-being within our positions as teachers and leaders.

The next chapter will go deeper into the criteria for what to de-implementation, with many relevant examples. It will also set the foundation for how to begin a formal de-implementation with your team.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you define de-implementation?
2. McKay et al. (2018) and Farmer et al. (2021) suggest there are criteria for identifying what needs to be de-implemented. How will you use that information as you begin to engage in the de-implementation process?
3. What are your initial thoughts about what needs to be de-implemented in your classroom or school?
4. What do you see as the biggest barriers to engaging in this work?

## INTERMISSION

### Beliefs, Distractions, and Opportunities for Change

I'm a fan of the arts, especially stage shows. During most Broadway and West End shows or off-Broadway and off-West End shows, there is an intermission. It gives us time to run to the restroom—and hope there isn't a line—and perhaps grab our favorite beverage. During that time, we reflect on what we just saw and think about what may be coming next in the performance.

My hope is that this topic of de-implementation is part drama and part comedy. The comedy should be the fun you have while engaging in this process. Take time during your conversations to laugh with one another. Learning should be joyful. We need more comedy in our lives! For the intermission in this book, there is one activity and one clarification.

At the beginning of the book, I asked you to write three beliefs using the image you see below. On the left side, you wrote the relevant activities you engage in to support those beliefs. On the right side, you wrote the actions that distract you from obtaining those beliefs.

Let's use the following activity to see if any of that information has changed. Once again, write your three beliefs, as well as relevant actions and distractions. Take time to notice if any of them have changed.

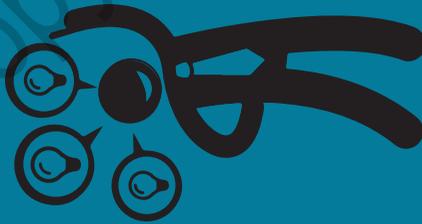
Additionally, I have added an image to help you brainstorm your ideas focusing on distractions. Here I'll ask to you write down the distractions to see if there is anything you can do differently. For example, people will talk about faculty meetings being a distraction because they are agenda-driven and not helpful. However, through conversations as a team when it comes to de-implementation, people share their concerns about the ineffectiveness of faculty meetings, and the team may move forward toward a flipped faculty meeting process.



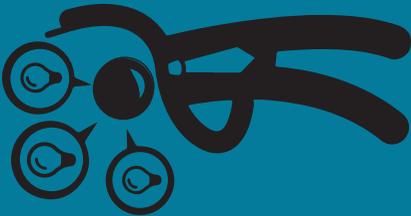
DISTRACTING

### 3 Beliefs

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



RELEVANT

<p><b>WHAT I CAN DO INSTEAD</b></p>	<p><b>DISTRACTION</b></p>	 A stylized black silhouette of a person sitting at a desk, leaning forward with their hand on their chin in a thinking pose. Three lightbulbs are shown floating above the person's head, each with a small circle around it, representing ideas or thoughts.
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Now take a moment to process the information from Chapters 1 and 2. I have included questions to help you:

How are implementation and de-implementation interrelated?

How do our assumptions factor into both implementation and de-implementation?

When it comes to the three beliefs you wrote down in the beginning of the book, how might de-implementation help you?

I thought de-implementation was about . . .

One area of de-implementation I did not consider is . . .

One thing I wonder when it comes to de-implementation is . . .