

GUIDE

A quick-start guide for practitioners planning and monitoring academic interventions



As learners continue to rebound from pandemic disruptions, effective interventions are top of mind (and ESSER punch-lists) for school and system leaders. Guided by our mission to help all kids learn, a primary goal for NWEA® Research is to support schools and districts in investigating if and how their instructional and organizational practices improve educational outcomes for students.

However, choosing and implementing a new academic intervention is a complicated, time-intensive process. Educators must review evidence-based practices considering local context and the unique needs and resources of their school community. It is not always feasible for data collection, process improvement, or evaluation to be a priority when planning and implementing interventions. We saw an opportunity to help.

In our research partnerships with schools and districts throughout the country, building and system leaders have shared that the following subset of questions is a relevant, helpful way to think through planning interventions and identify what aspects of their intervention they need to track to monitor its effectiveness.

Why is tracking so important? Consider this: A district develops a summer school program but doesn't see any immediate impact on the intended outcomes. Is it because the program isn't particularly efficacious or because attendance rates were low? Perhaps curriculum design or staffing challenges were barriers to success? Planning interventions without asking the right questions or tracking relevant data can lead to wasted money and time—resources in short supply for most schools and districts.



The five questions

In preparation for monitoring an academic intervention, we recommend documenting answers to these guiding questions early in the planning process and whenever changing or updating the design of an intervention.

1. What are the academic goals of the intervention?

Starting a journey without a clear destination can result in headaches and wasted effort. It may seem simple, but clearly articulating and documenting the goals of the intervention will help to identify the outcomes that are most important to track. Specifying not only what the intervention aims to improve but also how much it aims to improve is critical.

- How will your team measure success in terms of academic outcomes?
 - How much increased growth? Proficiency? Course performance?
- Are there other primary goals of the intervention?
- How much improved attendance? Social-emotional health/well-being?
- When (and under what conditions) do you expect to see the intended outcomes?
 - After one year? After attending XX sessions of the intervention?
 - Does regular attendance matter?

2. What is the intervention? Take time to document the content, provider(s), and delivery method of the intervention.

- Content: Is this for specific subject areas or a particular curriculum?
- Providers: Who provides instruction to students? Does the intervention require specific qualifications, training, or additional support? Will each student be matched with a consistent provider for the duration of the intervention? What is the teacher-student ratio?
- Delivery: Is the intervention delivered during school or outside school? If outside of school, is transportation available? Are remote or hybrid options available? Is learning synchronous or asynchronous?

3. Who is the intervention for?

Knowing which students are expected to receive an intervention and whom we should compare them to when examining their progress is essential to monitoring any evaluation.

- How is eligibility determined?
 - Is this intervention for learners in specific grades or schools? Do students need to meet certain test scores, meet attendance thresholds, or be recommended by a teacher? What are the cutoff scores and thresholds for eligibility?
- How many students is this intervention planning to serve?
 - If not all eligible students can participate, how are they prioritized for the intervention? Is it first come, first served? Is there an enrollment cap or waitlist? Does scheduling influence who is served first?

4. How much of the intervention will they get?

Documenting the amount of the intervention that students are expected to receive will be key for monitoring and interpreting student attendance and participation.

- How many days or hours are students supposed to get of the intervention each year?
- How much of the intervention time is spent on academic work in each subject?

5. Is it reasonable to expect the intervention will have the desired effect on the intended recipients?

This question encourages you to examine your responses to questions two through four and decide whether the intervention plans need to be adjusted to meet your goals (question one).

- Is there evidence this intervention will have the intended effect when students receive the planned amount of it?
- Does it serve enough of the intended students to meet the district's goals?
- Will the intervention be better for students' outcomes than the classes or activities the intervention time is replacing?



Follow up to the five questions: Continuously monitoring the intervention after launch

Throughout the course of the intervention, an educator or team of educators should convene to determine how the intervention in practice is varying from its intended delivery. This information will be critical for setting expectations for and understanding any estimated impacts of the intervention. Note: This individual or team does not have to be the same as the individual or team who did the initial selection and planning.

Some considerations for monitoring and evaluating the efficacy of the intervention throughout the year:

- Capture any variation in “what” the intervention is by student and/or school
 - Did students have different teacher-student ratios? Did some students access the intervention virtually whereas others received it in person?
- Track student eligibility and participation
- How was eligibility determined? What factors (and what cutoffs) were used to prioritize students for receiving the intervention? Has the intervention served the intended number of students? Are the students who received the intervention the “right” students who were targeted to receive it? Track student participation in the intervention over the course of the year (and between testing periods, if relevant for the outcome)
 - How many days/hours of the intervention were students supposed to get?
 - How many days/hours did students attend?
 - What classes or activities did students end up missing (if anything) to participate in the intervention?
- What have been the major barriers to implementing the intervention as designed?

Conclusion

While we developed these five questions and follow-up guidance to highlight some of the key questions to consider when planning and monitoring an academic intervention, it is not a straightforward process. It is nonlinear and requires collaboration, communication, and a willingness to make improvements.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a continuous loop—implementing, monitoring, analyzing, reporting, sharing insights, and making changes to the intervention. This process, while challenging, is key to addressing unfinished learning and having a keen understanding of what’s working in your school or system and why. It’s a first step toward meaningful, sustained growth for your students.



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