

Walking the Tightrope

Part II: Fidelity and Fit for Emerging Programs

Program Adaptation Lessons from the i3/EIR Program

i3/EIR Cross-Project Analysis

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Introduction: Fidelity & Fit for Emerging Programs

When implementing a program, approach, or model, evaluating the effectiveness of the program is a core component of implementation itself. Program implementors and evaluators must record and analyze their program model, processes, and considerations of local context in order to determine the impact of the program as well as which variables, processes, and resources were central to the impact. Whether using a widely known program model or designing a new program, implementors must explore the balance between adherence to the program as designed (fidelity) and adaptations to distinct local contexts (fit) to achieve effectiveness and the intended results. Both principles on their own are valuable to an implementation and evaluation process: fidelity provides the roadmap to understanding what can and should be replicated and fit provides opportunity for stakeholders to incorporate new information and exigencies. Thus, fidelity and fit are core tenets of program implementation; exploring this balance helps programs define and shape their models and move toward successful implementation and impact.

Defining Fidelity and Fit

Fidelity is the degree to which a program is implemented as it was intended by its designers. An evaluation of fidelity to an original program allows researchers to prove that a program is effective across settings (Carroll, Patterson, Wood, Booth, Rick & Balain, 2007).

Fit is the degree to which a program is suited to the specific conditions of a site. Achieving fit means the program aligns with the availability of a site's resources (staffing, time, and funding) and the unique aspects of the local context (staffing characteristics, community setting, or political context) (Backer, 2002; Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). For the purposes of this paper, adaptations are modifications to a program made at a site to improve fit.

A natural tension exists between the fidelity, which implies rigidity, and the fit, which implies flexibility. The relationship or balance, then, between fidelity and fit in program implementation expresses the ways in which programs try to adhere to program criteria while also addressing needs arising from a local context. By striking the right balance, a program is aiming for positive outcomes and program successes. For programs with proven, evidence-based impacts, fidelity and fit are part of the conversation as these programs scale and replicate in new sites and contexts. For programs that do not yet have evidence of impact, the relationship between fidelity and fit is critical to the development of the program model and finding initial success: this balance is how many innovative or new programs emerge (Shen, Yang, Cao, & Warfield, 2008). For the purpose of this paper, we use the term “emerging” to refer to programs building evidence of impact.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation (i3) and Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant programs are designed as opportunities to fund innovations across the country and across various stages of implementation. Since 2010, the programs have awarded 247 grants to support innovation and bolster student achievement. All programs must have an external evaluator, as the grantees contribute to the field critical education research on

Early-phase grants are focused on launching, iterating, and refining innovative new practices that have the potential for future scaling.

Development grants provide funding to support the development or testing of novel or substantially more effective practices that address widely shared education challenges.

the effectiveness of their program models. These grant programs provide an opportunity for emerging programs to secure funding via Early-phase (EIR) and Development (i3) grants. These grant types, while awarded to programs that have not yet demonstrated effectiveness, are still expected to contribute to the body of research on education innovation and promising practices for the field. Thus, all programs are expected to conduct a rigorous evaluation with an external evaluator, and ultimately to gather evidence of effectiveness that leads to future scaling at new sites. In many cases, the selected external evaluator works as a collaborative partner throughout the life cycle of the grant. In fact, according to Shen et al. (2008), the evaluation role is

central to the unfolding of an innovative program design. The evaluation must be seen as a core component of the model itself and helps program implementors record and analyze what was done and the potential variables involved. Throughout this paper, we use the term Early-phase/Development, or EP/D, to refer to those with Development and Early-phase grants.

In this paper, we share implementation approaches and lessons learned from seven i3/EIR EP/D grantees as they consider the appropriate balance between fidelity and fit as it relates to their program model and objectives. EP/D grantees do not yet have evidence of program efficacy to rely on as they consider the balance between program design and any adaptations. For EP/D grantees, the core purpose is to explore this balance and identify opportunities to adapt as well as parts of the approach that cannot be compromised. Since they are still seeking to demonstrate their effectiveness, emerging grantees face a more nuanced challenge than programs that have been proven effective through one or more evaluations. For this reason, EP/D grantees approach fidelity and fit conversations differently than their peers implementing proven programs. Grantees implementing less mature or emerging programs are more likely to question how much local customization is appropriate given that they are still evaluating which program components are core, whether the program achieves desired outcomes, and how the program might scale if proven effective. For the purposes of this paper, we interviewed seven featured grantees to discuss their approach to these issues.

This paper is the second in a two-part series on Fidelity and Fit. Part I of our *Walking the Tightrope* Series explores this balance for mature projects that are scaling and expanding. This previous paper investigates how programs take strategic approaches to balancing fidelity and fit while scaling their relatively mature programs, guided by the results of evaluations that found the model to be effective.

Literature Review

As emerging program implementors plan and prepare to implement their interventions, considering the natural tension between fidelity and fit is an ongoing, dynamic conversation taken on through reflection, collaboration, and strong communication. Available research reveals that a dichotomy exists in the literature (O'Donnell, 2008; Shen et al., 2008), with some researchers purporting that fidelity to a program design is the only way to get strong outcomes of effectiveness (Szulanski & Winter, 2002) while others posit that adaptation is key (Backer, 2002). However, much of the research is intended for implementors of mature, evidence-based program that are considering the next phase of scaling and expanding into new implementation sites or populations (Shen et al., 2008).

Research suggests that implementors of programs that do not yet have evidence of impact, such as EP/D i3/EIR grantees, must view fidelity and fit as complementary, rather than competing, goals (Shen et al., 2008). For grantees implementing emerging programs, this means bringing both goals into the conversation as they develop and implement their program model (Shen et al., 2008). These programs are typically an assemblage of principles, some of which have research behind them, derived from the core values of their founder or the philosophy of the implementors (Shen et al., 2008). The approach of considering both fidelity and fit in conversations about implementation allows for fidelity to the philosophy while building in space for adaptations to the practices. Additionally, other researchers note that this space for adaptation is vital for community ownership and can lead to increased buy-in and, ultimately, sustainability (Goodman & Steckler, 1989; Rogers, 2003).

A helpful nuance to keep in mind is that adaptations can occur within both high-fidelity and low-fidelity settings. In other words, it is possible to implement a program with high fidelity while adhering to adaptation best practices since adaptations do not necessarily deviate from the program's original design and theory (Kemp, 2016). The research settles on fidelity and fit as a balance, which we call "walking the tightrope." This balance involves attunement to the tension between central control and local control of the innovation. The desired outcome of this tension is the maintenance of the integrity of the program when aspects of the model are modified at a local site. The EP/D i3/EIR grantees studied in this paper demonstrate that fidelity and fit is a "dynamic concept in which both elements are needed for program success" (Backer, 2002, p. 42), particularly as programs are implemented for the first time.

Shen et al. (2008) relate that evaluation is also a critical component of implementation for emerging programs and requires an expanded role in the process, as evaluators identify alignment with the program model, design, and how it was implemented. These factors tend to be more dynamic at the emergent stage. Additionally, because emerging programs often stem from a set of principles, they require a different evaluation method: evaluators must explore the level of buy-in and adherence to the values and principles that underlie the implementation, assisting the implementors with defining and aligning the program model, processes, and activities as well as appropriate indicators for analysis.

Evaluation asks questions around stakeholder engagement, consistency and alignment with program philosophy and action strategies, and achievement of the expected outcomes. It also records any variations, limitations, or unexpected barriers as they arise. Programs at the

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emerging stage have the opportunity to build flexibility into their models to account for cultural differences and easier adoption across sites and conditions. These practices can benefit recruitment, retention, and implementation-readiness (Rogers, 2003; Castro, F.G., Barrera, M., and Martinez, C.R. 2004; Carroll et al., 2007).

Featured Grantees, Methods, & Guiding Framework

i3/EIR Grantees Studied for This Paper

Oakland Unified School District (Oakland USD)

Oakland Accelerates

Cohort: 2011 – 2016

Project Type: Development (i3)

Results: [Impact and Implementation Evaluations](#)

Description: Oakland Accelerates was designed to implement the College Board's EXCEerator process for college readiness across Oakland Unified School District. The goal of the project was to increase the capacity of adults in the district, including counselors and instructional staff, to support college readiness in all OUSD high school students.

School District 1J Multnomah County (Portland, OR) (Portland Public Schools)

PREP: Personalized, Relevant, Engaged for Postsecondary

Cohort: 2018 – Present

Project Type: Early-phase (EIR)

Results: Not yet available

Description: Portland Public Schools' Personalized, Relevant, Engaged for Postsecondary (PREP) program is designed to improve high school graduation rates and ease postsecondary transitions for underserved youth. The PREP program is centered around social-emotional supports and a project-based learning model.

Austin Independent School District (Austin ISD)

Whole School Restorative Practices

Cohort: 2017 – Present

Project Type: Early-phase (EIR)

Results: Not yet available

Description: Austin Independent School District's Whole School Restorative Practices project implements a proactive and inclusionary approach to discipline in elementary and middle schools. The project is designed to enhance positive school climate and minimize exclusionary discipline.

Knox County Schools (Knox County)

Think About It: SySTEMatiCally Preparing Students for the Workforce

Cohort: 2018 – Present

Project Type: Early-phase (EIR)

Results: Not yet available

Description: Knox County's program is designed to improve knowledge of and interest in STEM education and careers among high-need elementary students. The project includes a series of STEM institutes and challenge days.

Fresno County Office of Education (Fresno County)

The Expository Reading and Writing Course

Cohort: 2011 – 2016

Project Type: Development (i3)

Results: [Impact and Implementation Evaluation](#)

Description: The Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) was an English course for 12th graders designed to reduce the need for remedial coursework upon entering college. The project, developed in partnership with the California State University, included a curriculum of 12 modules, professional learning, and materials targeting critical thinking, oral language, and writing skills.

Independent School District 625 (Saint Paul, MN) (Saint Paul Public Schools)

Restorative Practices

Cohort: 2018 – Present

Project Type: Early-phase (EIR)

Results: Not yet available

Description: The Restorative Practices program in Saint Paul Public Schools is designed to be a schoolwide, adult-centered approach to fostering transformative, equitable communities. The approach includes practices for building relationships, solving problems, and learning.

Baboquivari Unified School District (Baboquivari USD)

The Wisdom Project

Cohort: 2011 – 2016

Project Type: Development (i3)

Results: [Impact Evaluation](#)

Description: The Wisdom Project was a schoolwide college readiness program designed to increase high school completion and college enrollment among students in Baboquivari Unified School District's middle and high schools.

Methods

The MSG team spoke with representatives from seven i3/EIR grants. In some cases, this was the project director or other on-site staff; in one case this was strictly the external evaluators; and in a few cases a blend of project staff, evaluators, and other stakeholders joined these interviews. Selected grantees came from a mix of the i3 and EIR programs and therefore were at various stages with their grants: some had completed the grant and the evaluation and were reflecting on their now-complete project, while others were working on ramping up the project in their first year of implementation. All grantees featured in this paper held either an Early-phase (EIR) or Development (i3) grant, though one grantee (Fresno County) has since gone on to be awarded a Validation¹ (i3) grant.

The MSG team conducted six interviews via phone and one (with Baboquivari USD) in person. These 1-hour interviews followed an interview protocol that addressed grantees' planning, implementation, execution, and reflections on fidelity and fit throughout their grant as well as challenges and tensions. This protocol can be found in Appendix A. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis. The team then conducted a qualitative analysis by reviewing all notes, transcripts, and evaluation reports (as available) and coding the interview transcripts to draw out key phrases and themes by interview question and grantee. Our analysis was intended to assess commonalities among participants as well as themes that may have been unique to a grantee but which the grantee considered important. The coding and analysis was reviewed and validated among project team members to ensure that the most salient themes, strategies, and challenges were identified and explained. These themes are presented in the discussion below.

Guiding Framework: Walking the Tightrope of Fidelity & Fit for Emerging Grantees

In Part I of this series, grantees administering programs that already have evidence of impact (referred to in this series as “mature grantees”) offered considerable guidance on how to effectively scale while striking a balance between fidelity and fit, grounded in a growing evidence base and past experience with the program. In our interviews with EP/D grantees, however, it became abundantly clear that grantees at this stage thought about fidelity to a program model differently than did grantees that already have evidence of impact and are now scaling to new implementation sites. For grantees in the early phases of program development, it is not yet known whether the program will be successful; ED/P grantees have not yet identified which elements of the program may prove to be critical to meeting their goals, nor which planned program elements may prove unsuitable for the population to be served.

To this end, **featured ED/P grantees spoke of fidelity to the guiding principles of the project, rather than strict adherence to a prescriptive set of regulations or procedures. This framework is backed up by the literature: innovative, emerging programs are more likely to adhere to a set of principles and build some flexibility into their model.** This is a

¹ Validation grants provide funding to support the expansion of projects that address persistent education challenges to the regional or national level. All i3 grantees are required to conduct rigorous evaluations of their projects.

beneficial practice for emerging programs, as it allows the programs to be innovative, to figure out their program model, and to build in some adaptations to the approach, which can all lead to sustainability and growth down the road (Shen et al., 2008).

According to the i3/EIR grantees profiled in this paper, two of the chief characteristics of this framework include **program adaptation within a mindset and body of principles** and **agency for teachers and staff** to collaboratively and strategically inform choices regarding program implementation. This notion of fidelity to a set of principles allowed programs to build in flexibility and work toward their desired outcomes. This approach had a variety of benefits for grantees, including further buy-in, an emphasis on innovation and new ideas, an awareness of cultural differences, and the cultivation of a collaborative spirit.

Because of their increased emphasis on fit, the ED/P grantees featured in this paper took a more dynamic approach to implementation than did the grantees featured in Part I. Emerging grantees were thinking through challenges in their local contexts as they arose, or within a predetermined 1-year planning period, rather than relying on years of implementation experience and research on the model's impacts. As they addressed hurdles, program implementors had to improvise to some degree. Program implementors also dealt with idiosyncratic local challenges, and without the backing of a robust evidence base, they had to address buy-in and commitment in agile ways. For the purposes of this paper, we explore i3/EIR grantees' approaches to planning, implementing, and evaluating their programs through the framework of fidelity to guiding principles (versus a model), elaborate on its chief characteristics, and discuss factors favoring the successful implementation of this type of framework.

Discussion

Applying the Fidelity-Fit Framework with i3/EIR Grantees

Implementing a principle-focused program framework leaves room for adaptation provided that the adaptations adhere to the principles. According to Kara Beckman (personal communication, September 18, 2019), the external evaluator for Saint Paul Public Schools,

I would not say that we have any document that says, 'Here are permissible adaptations.' On the other hand... I can think of a whole lot of adaptations that are being made, but it's not to the program model. It's within the program ideals and principles and it's a flexible program.

Beckman also spoke to a common theme among the grantees profiled in this paper — the need to build fidelity to a shared mindset. In her view, “when I think about implementation fidelity to restorative practices, I really think about mindset and how are we holding our implementation sites accountable to shifting the way they do... relationships and discipline.” Speaking on behalf of Austin ISD as its grant coordinator, Sarah Johnson (personal communication, September 16, 2019) echoed this perspective, indicating that the program's design and the intentions of the developers from the inception was to “embed [the program] into what they were already doing. So, it's not a program, it's not a strategy. It's actually... a mindset and a way of being.” Thus, to the extent that these grantees stress implementation fidelity, it is

fidelity to an outlook and a mindset that is committed to enacting specific principles. The actions and practices needed to enact those principles can vary and must be adapted to different contexts.

Operationally, this generally means giving latitude to teachers and staff to make their own decisions as to how to implement the intervention within the guiding framework. For example, Dr. Angela Ward (personal communication, September 16, 2019), project director for Austin ISD, voiced one of the grantees' primary concerns when she told us:

I think the original framing of the grant was more prescriptive and when I became involved with and asked to be the potential project director who got the grant, I immediately said, 'I need to make sure that we're not allowing a researcher to come in and tell our schools what to do.' That doesn't work well.

Nettie Legters (personal communication, September 25, 2019), the incoming project director for Portland Public Schools, shared this view, relating that "one of the creative adaptations, I think, that has emerged this year is having projects be something... flowing and embedded in the practice of the teachers," allowing for practices to be "infused" throughout the term and not be planned from the beginning. Therefore, giving educators a degree of agency allows them to implement the core principles and mindset in ways that are innovative and responsive to the needs of their students and schools.

Conversely, Fresno County pointed to the limitations of this approach based on their experience with an earlier grant, relating that it may be necessary to actively encourage certain teaching practices while restricting others. Nancy Brynelson (personal communication, September 23, 2019), shared that program implementors worked with teachers to employ strategies that were conducive with learning and counter instructional strategies that were not. She shared, "Based on our observations... we have discovered that some teachers need more support to help their students read complex text and to engage in high-level discussions of the texts they read and write" (N. Brynelson, personal communication, January 15, 2020). Learning from past implementation efforts, Fresno County's perspective is a reminder that a fit-centric model of implementation still requires limits on adaptation to ensure that the core of a program is enacted.

Choice of Approach: Ground Up vs. Top Down

To implement a principle-centered framework, grantees indicated that it was better to build from the ground up and allow a relatively large degree of flexibility for adjustments to program design, once again demonstrating emerging grantees' orientation toward local fit. The grantees thought that this approach generated more buy-in, greater integration of the desired principles and mindset, and, in turn, more effective implementation of the practices flowing from the principles. Operationally, a ground-up approach meant that a program had goals but would intentionally incorporate flexibility as to how to reach those goals and that it would embrace continual improvement through iteration, in turn making room for teacher agency and professionalism.

Regarding the choice to use a ground-up approach, Matthew Eide (personal communication, September 25, 2019), the outgoing project director for Portland Public Schools, captured the benefits when he told us,

we could have taken a... deductive... top-down design... where we could have taken some things off the shelf, [but instead] we decided to take a more... bottom-up, inductive path where we started with some principles... Now, there's a cost to doing it that way... There's a little bit of ambiguity... But I think we're going to end up with something that people buy into because they were authentic partners in the development of it. And as it evolves, it is going to evolve in a way that fits the schools and their young people.

In practical terms, successfully enacting this vision of a ground-up model means establishing specific goals but building in flexibility as to the strategies and actions taken to reach those goals. For example, in Beckman's (Saint Paul Public Schools) words, "we have an implementation model and a logic model and... I would say a pretty clear idea of where we're heading and remain very open to schools helping to figure out how to get there" (personal communication, September 18, 2019). This approach allows school administrators to have a say in what works best for their schools.

Thus, Saint Paul Public Schools had an established model through which it could evaluate fidelity, but it still gave latitude to schools and teachers to figure out the means to achieve the program's goals. Beckman also stated that this approach was intentional, proclaiming, "we've really intentionally built flexibility into our model and maybe even more so like timing, not flexibility as far as where we want to go, but flexibility in terms of how quickly we need to move." The choice to allow individual schools and staff members flexibility to act based on their own professional expertise and opinions provides staff with agency, in turn leading to buy-in, commitment, and accountability. This is the key benefit of a ground-up approach.

The benefits of this combination of goals and flexibility potentially include more effective program implementation that achieves desired program impacts. Rebecca Cohen (personal communication, September 24, 2019), former College and Career Mentor for Baboquivari USD, touted these benefits when she told us,

I was able to be flexible. I was given the freedom to be flexible and seeing what worked and what didn't and changing based on my perception of if something was successful or not. And so, I think if I was given more rigid goals... then that would have been more difficult. But it was more like, we have this goal — now... try these things and see what works — and if something works, keep doing it, and if it doesn't work, don't keep doing it.

Inherent to this approach is a process of trial and error that seeks continual program improvement through an iterative process. By building the program from the ground up, grantees were better able to alter and improve program features as the intervention progressed and allow contributions from individuals based on their professional expertise. This embrace of continuous change allowed some of the grantees to decide what sorts of adaptations they would ultimately allow over the life of the grant. Thus, from Portland Public Schools' perspective, Eide (personal

communication, September 25, 2019) related that the team has “embraced this last year as a pilot year” and have taken an iterative design approach with a continuous improvement perspective. “We’ve just reached the point now, I think, where we’re able to be a little bit clearer on the parameters for local adaptation.”

Oakland USD also found this process helpful, as their evaluator said,

if we had developed a fidelity matrix... during one of those first meetings that we’re sticking to this no matter what it would have not benefited anyone, so I think it was good to have gone through this process of what does this look like... even though it took so long I think it ended up giving us something useful by the end. (D. Toussaint, personal communication, September 17, 2019)

Though many grantees favored a ground-up approach, others wished they could have put more boundaries and structures around this process. For example, speaking as Fresno County’s evaluator, Tony Fong (personal communication, September 23, 2019) related that, “for me, that’s one of the challenges is like, well, when is it too much? When are you modifying an activity too much so that it’s not to the ERWC way?” For Fresno County, this meant reducing concessions to program fit in their second EIR grant and placing more emphasis on fidelity.

Process: Partnerships & Community

To successfully implement a ground-up model that rests on a framework of fidelity to principles, grantees reported that it was helpful to have strong partnerships among LEAs, other key community members, and individual leaders.

Establishing partnerships within the local context yielded benefits for buy-in, planning, and implementation resources. Thus, Saint Paul Public Schools related that it was “incredibly helpful for the LEA to be the primary beneficiaries” of a grant since their desire “to do right by the money” helped generate buy-in.

A huge part of the buy-in comes because they [the LEA] also decided that they wanted to do restorative practices together with their teacher’s union and did the work around the pilot and kind of saying, ‘What will this look like for us and by us and what’s the model we want to develop based on all sorts of lessons learned from around the country that is unique to us?’ (K. Beckman, personal communication, September 18, 2019)

Austin ISD also reported that being a school district with a central office was helpful because, in Dr. Ward’s (personal communication, September 16, 2019) view,

I already have relationships with central office leaders. So I was able to go to our associate superintendents who oversee our middle schools and our elementary school and say, ‘This is the grant we’ve been provided, how can we work together?’ And so knowing that I’m there and that we have the staff that is dedicated to climate and culture and shifting climate and culture, that’s been helpful.

Baboquivari USD also emphasized how a partnership with an LEA could aid effective implementation through provision of resources. In Rebecca Cohen’s (personal communication, September 24, 2019) recollection, being employed by the district was critical to her success in her role. For example, having access to student data and being able to manage district resources was simplified because of her status as a district employee. If she had not been an employee, she posited that “being able to set up field trips would have been much more difficult because of liability issues.”

For the grantee, however, having a strong partnership with an LEA means potentially accepting limitations on program design or making concessions to the priorities and concerns of LEA officials. As Eide (personal communication, September 25, 2019) indicated, the program is implemented in schools which make up part of a larger district; it’s not being implemented “in a vacuum... The initiative and the priorities of the district are something that we need to...either respond to, need to embrace and incorporate into the design of the project, or figure out a way to sort of dance around.”

This compromise also favors a fit-centric model oriented to the circumstances of specific districts and communities and acknowledging other factors at play in the project, such as competing district priorities. For example, Austin ISD’s Dr. Ward (personal communication, September 16, 2019) lamented that the planning year was difficult and delayed because the team first had to work through community interpretations and understandings of the grant as it was written and how it was awarded. Austin ISD’s experience points to emerging grantees’ tendency to be inclusive, allowing for broader community buy-in and thus adherence to the principles and values of the program.

For this reason, grantees indicated the need to bring other key community stakeholders on board in addition to the support of LEAs. In particular, it was important to gather community members’ support for the guiding principles and overall program mindset. Accordingly, as Dr. Ward related,

all the professional learning that we offer... we invite community members to engage in the professional learning with us... because what we understand is in order for us to be culturally responsive, we can’t operate in an education bubble. We have to understand what’s going on outside the community, outside the school in the community, and really understand what is impacting our children.

Grantees also pointed to the importance of partnering with individuals and leaders who are committed to the principles in the guiding framework. For example, Kathy Lombardi-Kimani (personal communication, September 18, 2019), the project director for Saint Paul Public Schools, emphasized that the “principal or administrator’s mindset and commitment to having a restorative way of being is critical. And if they’re not supporting this, if they’re not all in on this, it makes a big difference.” Knox County echoed the importance of leaders who could shepherd the program in specific local contexts as they “looked to hire very capable leaders, and so they were able to anticipate the need day to day.” This was not something they had planned for, but it was beneficial to the program to “utilize strong leaders in that population and people who were familiar with the school” (L. Denton, personal communication, October 15, 2019). Furthermore, it is helpful to have key leaders embrace flexibility and innovation. In Oakland USD’s view,

“getting people in the district who are very open to learning and trying new things and are perhaps pragmatic and adaptable is also important” (D. Toussaint, personal communication, September 17, 2019).

On the other hand, relying on key leaders and individuals raises an obvious risk. As Oakland USD put it, “with College Board and with the district they were like, ‘Oh, this was easy. We’ll roll this up to the district-wide.’ And then, of course, you know, immediately the superintendent left who was the one who brought them in.” One possible solution that Oakland USD’s evaluators offered for this problem — turnover of personnel who take their knowledge of and dedication to program principles elsewhere — was to create program manuals and policy and procedure documents to ensure program stability and continued commitment to program principles.

Ultimately, effectively implementing a guiding framework that rests on fidelity to a set of principles means that most of the featured emerging grantees had to pursue implementation strategies that allowed for significant adaptations to program fit. This is apparent from the prominence of giving educators greater agency, building in significant flexibility in the means of reaching program goals, seeking continuous improvement in response to local conditions, and building contextually driven relationships with key community organizations and leaders. However, even though this approach leans strongly toward program fit, it does so in the ultimate service of program fidelity: the best way to implement an emerging program centered on principles, values, and mindsets with fidelity is to do so contextually.

Go Slow to Go Fast: Planning & Implementing

During the interview process, featured grantees frequently expressed that they found themselves in the unique position of planning and designing a program while simultaneously trying to implement and even evaluate it. As Kara Beckman (Saint Paul Public Schools) explained, “there is not a playbook” for these early-stage programs (personal communication, September 19, 2019). ED/P Grantees in the initial stages of program development do not yet know what challenges may arise when the project is taken from theory to practice. These grantees’ status as emerging meant that they were tasked with taking a program from a previously untested concept to a functioning, stable project that could provide some meaningful results in evaluation. Grantees handled this complex task in more or less structured ways, but nearly all reflected that an effective emerging grantee should focus its early efforts on developing a firm plan, piloting the program concept, and then modifying that program based on lessons learned before undertaking full-scale implementation and evaluation.

Portland Public Schools, still early in the life of their EIR grant, has taken an intentional, structured approach to this process. At the outset of the grant, the district determined that the program would begin with a pilot phase. As described by Matthew Eide (Portland Public Schools), the implementors were “not quite sure what to expect” when their intervention was introduced to the diverse populations and implementation sites inherent to their district-wide project (personal communication, September 25, 2019). Rather than define firm boundaries for site-specific adaptations at the outset of the project, the implementors in Portland Public Schools determined that a pilot phase would impart flexibility and adaptability to the program. At the conclusion of the program’s pilot year, the district’s plans to hold a structured reflection process

to inform any necessary changes moving forward. “We really embraced the pilot phase as an opportunity to learn what works, make adjustments, and then be prepared to... call the question on the design of the intervention,” explained Eide (personal communication, September 25, 2019). This intentional period of adaptability and reflection has allowed Portland Public Schools to see what does and does not work in practice, refine the program’s framework based on lessons from the pilot phase, and formalize criteria for fidelity before expanding to full-scale implementation.

Not every grantee took such a structured approach to planning and piloting their program. Oakland USD, for example, emphasized program fit and a high degree of adaptability throughout the life of its project. “The boat was completely being built and rebuilt [during] the first couple of years of implementation” as the implementers developed a better understanding of how the program would be best executed, per Dr. Danielle Toussaint (personal communication, September 17, 2019), evaluator of the Oakland Accelerates project. While Oakland USD therefore favored program fit over implementation fidelity in order to meet the demands of the district’s shifting circumstances and priorities, the evaluators expressed that this led to a lack of clarity and consensus on the program’s purpose and requirements. Without clear direction, implementors and evaluators of the program experienced challenges such as communication breakdowns, lack of buy-in, and confusion around indicators for evaluation (D. Toussaint & R. Chang, personal communication, September 17, 2019). Similarly, Dr. Lisa Benham-Lewis (personal communication, September 23, 2019), Director of Fresno County’s Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) Project, shared reflections on the district’s now-complete Development grant compared to its ongoing Validation grant and recommended that grantees include structured planning and pilot phases in their project: “We did not do that in the first grant. This time we did, and I think it really took a lot of kinks out.”

According to these perspectives, emerging grantees may be well-served by emphasizing fit over fidelity in the earliest phases of their project. However, determining the boundaries for acceptable program adaptations is a critical step in the maturation process for emerging grantees preparing to enter the validation and scale-up phases of development. To be ready for these phases, EP/D grantees should begin shifting their mindset from identifying what works to ensuring that what works is what is actually implemented. Along these lines, they must carefully consider their approach to a beneficial fidelity and fit balance moving forward. Throughout the interview process, many grantees referenced the adage “go slow to go fast,” suggesting that an intentionally designed ramp-up period or pilot phase with built-in reflection points structures this shift toward an emphasis on fidelity in a way that sets up emerging grantees for success (A. Ward, personal communication, September 16, 2019; L. Benham-Lewis, personal communication, September 23, 2019).

Successful Execution: Formal & Informal Checks & Balances

EP/D i3/EIR grantees know that having a well-developed concept for a program is not enough to ensure successful implementation and, more importantly, achieve program goals for positive impacts on students. Establishing strong relationships, structures, and processes is a necessary step in successfully executing a program. To do so, grantees underscored the importance of establishing strong lines of communication and rapport among staff and stakeholders and instituting formal and informal evaluations and check-ins, constant reflections

and continuous improvements, and standardized and formalized processes, protocols, and procedures.

EP/D grantees expressed the view that developing strong lines of communication is a key factor in getting everyone on the same page about the project's mission. Sarah Johnson (Austin ISD) explained, "we need to communicate with school leaders and with campus staff in order to make sure that the project goals are clear and to make sure that everyone understands the messaging" (personal communication, September 16, 2019). In some cases, the lines of communication that emerging grantees develop with implementors, evaluators, and community partners grow into sustained relationships that last beyond the life of the i3/EIR grant. "Building partnerships didn't cost us money per se," explained Dr. Edna Morris (personal communication, September 24, 2019), Superintendent of Baboquivari USD, but it did create opportunities for students. "I think that's something really good that's come out of this grant," stated Rebecca Cohen, explaining that "we have created a much, much stronger relationship with Tohono O'odham Community College than I think we ever had before the grant was implemented" (personal communication, September 24, 2019). Perhaps more significantly for the i3/EIR community, Baboquivari USD was able to leverage these connections into lasting relationships that resulted in funding opportunities that sustained the Wisdom Project's work beyond the life of the district's initial i3 grant (E. Morris & R. Cohen, personal communication, September 24, 2019).

For some grantees, the relationships cultivated among implementors, evaluators, and community partners grew into ongoing informal evaluations. Kara Beckman (Saint Paul Public Schools) reiterated the importance of evaluators having open lines of communication with the implementation team: "[We have] regular conversations between... the evaluation team and the district team to say, 'Here's what we're thinking of measuring. Does this make sense? ... What unintended consequences does this have?'" (personal communication, September 19, 2019). Dr. Angela Ward (Austin ISD) reiterated that this ongoing communication is critical to ensure that implementors and evaluators are "all speaking the same language" (personal communication, September 16, 2019). In Austin ISD, these conversations include one-on-one coaching sessions to connect the staff on the ground with the larger vision of the project. Ongoing informal input from the teachers and administrators involved in the program was a common theme among emerging i3/EIR grantees, often taking the form of informal interviews or check-in meetings. In Fresno County, even students are involved in these conversations. Dr. Tony Fong reported that the ERWC team holds focus group with students to better understand their experiences being part of the project (personal communication, September 23, 2019). These informal touch points and channels of communication allow all stakeholders to provide feedback and offer guidance with the secondary benefit of providing these participants with a greater sense of agency.

Emerging grantees also shared that this kind of ongoing communication can be a key tool in identifying and addressing tensions between implementation fidelity and program fit.

These were important times for us to get a sense of what was happening on the ground and make sort of just-in-time adjustments. ... At least three times throughout the life of the project we convened the design team comprised of teachers, social workers, and leaders from the three implementation sites to engage in... intentional design, reflection,

and revision of [our] logic model. (M. Eide, personal communication, September 25, 2019)

In contrast, reflecting on the experience of the Oakland Accelerates project, evaluators Dr. Danielle Toussaint and Ruthie Chang (personal communication, September 17, 2019) stated that ongoing informal communication was insufficient and that the project was most successful when the outputs of informal conversations were tracked in a more formal manner. Accordingly, Oakland USD developed both a fidelity matrix as well as a dashboard to track implementation progress on the project, giving implementors and evaluators a common system to understand one another's work.

Based on this experience with Oakland Accelerates, Dr. Toussaint and Ms. Chang suggested that emerging grantees consider formalizing processes, procedures, and written protocols to ensure lasting structure and stability in a project. Dr. Toussaint (personal communication, September 17, 2019) explained that especially for projects operating in “low-performing urban school districts... turnover is just a fact of life. Developing from the beginning ways that the program and the vision can continue... despite people leaving [means that] they wouldn't have to start... from scratch,” ensuring that the project remains viable despite staff changes.

Thus, EP/D grantees at all stages of program implementation stressed that regular communication and ongoing informal or formal evaluation structures were highly important for the successful execution of a project. These conversations and tools cannot exist in a vacuum, however. Matthew Eide (Portland Public Schools) explained that at the end of the day, the underlying purpose of these structures must be to continuously improve the program to better serve students: “Fidelity is sort of the program developer's favorite word. But we're really most interested in implementing with effectiveness... this is high stakes for our kids” (personal communication, September 25, 2019). For grantees constructing and implementing a project from scratch, circumstances that call for critical adaptations may not yet be evident, leaving it up to implementors to achieve positive impacts. In these early phases, maintaining fidelity to the program vision while allowing a large degree of flexibility to site-specific circumstances may be a developmentally appropriate approach — and in accordance with the guiding framework we present for emerging grantees. Regular communication and informal and formal evaluations are vital to striking this balance.

Conclusion

i3/EIR emerging grantees featured in this paper all shared the various ways that they navigated project implementation and their approach to the relationship between fidelity and fit. The guiding framework we identified was based the grantees' experience in the field and coincided with available literature. This framework was characterized by adherence to a set of principles or a guiding philosophy, which allowed sufficient flexibility in terms of the program model so that implementors could adapt as necessary to the local context and continue moving toward their program goals as challenges arose. This framework of a flexible model is critical to an emerging program that must begin to define its program and evaluate its essential components while aiming for positive outcomes; this also allows for stronger community support and buy-in as stakeholders in the community are considered agentic professionals.

Delving into this guiding framework, this paper explored how EP/D grantees balanced fidelity and fit during implementation. It analyzed the chief characteristics and practices of the guiding framework, particularly a ground-up approach that allows for buy-in, agency, and accountability from stakeholders; partnerships with evaluators, community stakeholders, and district officials; internal and external communication strategies; considerations for the need to include planning and piloting phases in the implementation process; and an overarching goal of successful execution to make positive impacts on student achievement and reach program objectives. EP/D grantees also rely on strong communication systems among stakeholders such as implementors, evaluators, and others in the community to continuously assess what is working, what the goals of the program are, and how to address challenges as they arise. This communication allows implementors to promote agency and collaboration, foster adherence to the program values and principles, and provide the flexibility to address dynamic shifts in the implementation landscape.

This framework departs from the one presented in the *Fidelity and Fit when Scaling* paper in that scaling grantees must adhere to the model and its processes more carefully in order to determine the effectiveness of the model and evaluate appropriately. As grantees move from the emerging phase into the validation and scaling phases, their mindsets must also shift as they consider the balance between fidelity and fit in new ways. This process is a continuum rather than two sides of a coin; as grantees move toward establishing evidence of impact, they must also establish boundaries, guidelines, and procedures along the way. In the early stages of implementation, when there is not yet an evidence base, a fit-oriented framework allows programs to determine the key components and processes that are essential to the intervention and achieve program objectives by making key adaptations. Additionally, building this evidence and moving from a principles-based fidelity that favors fit to a more concrete definition of fidelity is critical to keeping a program running effectively toward the end goal of improving outcomes for students. The evaluation is a key component to grantees effectively building evidence and establishing defined models and guidelines. EP/D grantees must recognize the goal of achieving an appropriate balance of fidelity and fit.

Ultimately, navigating this balance of fidelity and fit is an essential conversation for all program implementors and evaluators and can be key to moving programs toward effective models and stakeholder buy-in. Fidelity and fit are as much a part of the conversation for emerging grantees as for evidence-based programs that are ready to scale. However, as opposed to more established programs' focus on setting boundaries and defining allowable adaptations, the guiding framework for emerging grantees is characterized by a commitment to a set of principles with space to adapt the model as programs move toward their impact goals. This framework ultimately affords grantees the flexibility to navigate challenges and evaluate implementation while contributing to the evidence base and the field at large, as well as further contributing to and developing their program models. This stage is a critical first step in moving toward designing and building innovative and impactful programs that can one day be ready to scale.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Good morning/afternoon. My name is ____ and I am with the i3/EIR Dissemination team. Each year, the Dissemination team produces two cross-project analyses on topics of interest to i3/EIR grantees. These papers are based on grantees' experiences and lessons learned and aim to highlight promising practices, implementation successes and challenges, and findings around priority areas for the larger i3/EIR community and the field.

Your project has been selected to participate in this year's paper about finding the balance between fidelity and fit in program implementation for emerging projects. When we say "fidelity and fit," we're talking about the extent to which you maintained fidelity to your program design when implementing your project. Did you follow your program to the letter, or did you adapt to local conditions? Please stop me at any time if you are not sure what a question means or if you would like more clarification.

The successes and challenges that you identify will be combined with lessons learned from eight other grantees to inform this year's cross-project analysis on fidelity and fit in emerging grantees. This paper will be part of a series on fidelity and fit; a previous paper was developed on fidelity and fit when scaling.

All programs selected for this interview have either an Early-phase (EIR) or Development (i3) grant. Additionally, this paper will focus on the experiences of grantees that are local education agencies (LEAs). Our goal in this analysis is to identify best practices and lessons learned from grantees like yourself in the area of fidelity and fit and to share those findings with the broader i3/EIR community and the field.

Over the course of the 1-hour interview, I will be asking you about your project's approach to balancing implementation fidelity and program fit. This will include questions about your experiences and processes as well as lessons learned. There will be a total of 12 questions, but I may also ask you to elaborate on your responses.

Do you have any questions at this time about either the purpose of the interview or how the interview will be conducted?

You may remember that when you signed up to participate in this interview, we asked whether it would be acceptable for us to record our call. This recording will be used strictly to improve the accuracy and detail of our report. Before we get started, could you please verify that it is okay for us to record this call for internal note-taking purposes?

I. Interviewee Contact Confirmation

1. Before we get started, please verify your name and role.
2. How long have you been in this role, and how did you get involved with the project?

3. Let's set the stage for the interview with a bit of background information about your project. I am going to read off the information that we have on file for your project. Please let me know if any information is incorrect. Feel free to elaborate on any of these areas if you have more information to add.
 - a. Grant type and years active
 - b. Implementation sites: How many? Location (state, urbanicity)
 - c. Grade level and content area
 - d. Purpose of the project
 - e. Project status/progress in grant
4. Generally, what has been your experience with implementation? Have things gone according to plan?
 - a. Have there been times when you realized that something would not work as originally planned?

II. Identifying and Addressing Fidelity-Fit Tensions

5. What processes are in place to identify tensions between fidelity and fit?
 - a. Do you regularly conduct formal or informal implementation evaluations?
 - b. If you have multiple implementation sites, are these processes conducted centrally, or do you rely on implementation sites to communicate challenges they encounter?
 - c. Does your team have any tools in place to regularly assess implementation fidelity? Some examples might include rubrics, matrices, surveys...
IF YES: Would you be willing to share those tools with us? Would you be willing to share them with the i3/EIR community more broadly?
6. Have you ever had to sacrifice implementation fidelity in order to address concerns related to local context or site-specific conditions?
IF NO: Could you provide an example of how your team handles site-specific challenges?
IF YES: Could you describe that situation? What was the concern, and how was it addressed by the team? Do you feel that the concern was effectively resolved? What might you do differently next time?
7. How would you describe your team's approach to reconciling the tension between implementation fidelity and program fit?
 - a. In general, would you say that your team is more inclined to favor strong implementation fidelity, or closely aligned local fit?
 - b. How does your team resolve these tensions without compromising positive outcomes?
8. Do you feel that the balance between fidelity and fit is a strength of your project or an area for growth?

IF STRENGTH: What would you say are the strongest aspects of your project in this regard?

IF GROWTH: What would you say are the most critical areas of growth for your project in this regard?

9. How would your team know that a program change has reached a good balance between fidelity and fit?

III. Planning for a Balance between Fidelity and Fit

10. Was the balance between fidelity and fit something that you considered and planned for in the initial phases of the project?

IF YES...

- a) Did you identify potential areas where the project may need to adapt to fit site-specific conditions?
- b) Has your plan been effective in practice?
- c) Did you correctly anticipate the challenges that you faced?
- d) Do you feel that your plan helped you more effectively address challenges that arose?

IF NO...

- a) Did you later encounter a situation that called for program adaptations? At that point, did you create a plan to anticipate further challenges? What does that plan entail?

11. We talked in a previous question about how you addressed tensions between fidelity and fit. Did you define in advance which adaptations would be permissible, or did you improvise? For example, did you predetermine that sites must stick closely to required training hours, but allowed room for the training to happen over a longer period of time?
- a. If you did not have this initially, is it something that has been developed over the course of the project?

IV. Reflections on Fidelity and Fit

12. Do you feel that being an LEA helped or hindered your project with regards to balancing fidelity and fit?
- a. Did your project have access to any resources, partnerships, or other supports that you feel were beneficial to balancing fidelity and fit?
 - b. Were there any other resources that you feel would have been helpful?
 - c. What implementation challenges and/or advantages of being an LEA did you encounter?
13. What lessons have you learned about adapting your program to different settings?
- a. If you had to start over, would you do anything differently?
 - b. Would you make changes in the future?
 - c. What is one change that you think could have made things easier for you?

14. Do you have any suggestions for other grantees — particularly LEAs or small organizations — with regard to balancing fidelity and fit?
- a. How could a new project set themselves up for success?
 - b. What could they plan ahead for or be aware of in advance?
 - c. Any other recommendations?

Conclusion

That concludes my questions. Do you have anything else that you would like to add or elaborate on?

Before we wrap up, do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your time. We will be in touch with a draft for your review by the end of the year. Please feel free to contact me directly if you think of anything else you would like us to know or if you have any additional questions or comments. If there are relevant resources or materials from your program that you can share, we would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you again for your participation!