



Insights into de-implementation

Support for implementation

A key principle of effective implementation is to do fewer things, better. But how do you actually do fewer things, particularly when that could involve removing something that might be interwoven into the culture of a school, or the professional identity of a teacher?

Introduction

Schools are busy places, where time and money are precious, and educators and school leaders are experiencing increasing workloads. There is talk of doing fewer things, but how do you actually do that? De-implementation provides an opportunity for school leaders to think about, and lead, a change process which gives educators the time and energy to focus on what matters most.

Evidence for Learning (E4L) has developed this resource to assist school leaders in thinking about the complex task of de-implementation. It highlights that much like implementation, de-implementation is not a simple, one-off activity, but a cyclical process requiring time, planning and follow through.

Note: As there is limited available evidence on de-implementation in education, this resource draws on research about de-implementation from other fields -- such as medicine -- paired with the evidence base and our experience of effective implementation in schools.

This resource is designed as a starting point to help your thinking about de-implementation. It is not a definitive guide to de-implementation given the current state of the evidence.

What is de-implementation?

De-implementation is commonly described as the 'discontinuation of existing practices or interventions'[1] or 'stopping practices that are not evidence-based'[2]. It should be noted that de-implementation is not an all-or-nothing approach, and that there are scenarios where there is a scaling back, rather than a complete discontinuation.

At its core, de-implementation is a process of change, and like implementation, it should not be looked on as a single event[1,3].

Why is de-implementation important?

De-implementation is not a silver bullet for reducing workload. But it is a practical option for school leaders who are looking to prioritise implementing and sustaining practices that have the most impact for all students, regardless of their background.

One of the key principles of good implementation is to 'do fewer things, better'[3]. As such, it is necessary to regularly evaluate, and to de-implement approaches that are not having the intended impact.

De-implementing an approach may free up resources such as time, physical resources, staff, energy or finances. Freeing up resources can enable schools to focus on more impactful approaches which may lead to improved student outcomes.

The decision to de-implement an approach might be in response to:

- evidence demonstrating low impact, no impact or negative impact;
- costs that outweigh any potential benefit;
- the 'problem' that you are looking to solve no longer exists;
- evidence of more impactful approaches becoming available;
- needing to free up space to allow resourcing for new or existing initiatives, or importantly;
- needing to create space to ensure teachers and school leaders can focus on teaching and learning.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is written to assist school leaders in the development of a process for the thoughtful de-implementation of initiatives identified as requiring retirement.

While school leaders are the primary audience for this resource, we hope that those who work with schools through regional and departmental roles, may also find the insights useful in facilitating conversations about school improvement.

How should I use this resource?

This resource should be used to support you as you de-implement an approach. In any change process, it is important that you monitor the process of de-implementation and track to a set of predetermined outcomes. These can be identified through the development of a plan to de-implement.

Supporting change

It may be tempting to try to stop something just by saying 'we're not doing that anymore'. However, that approach doesn't account for the change process that teachers -- who may have been embedding that practice for years -- need to be supported through.

Ensuring staff feel supported, and that their professional identity is not being undermined, is critical. It should also be remembered that teaching and learning are evolving sciences. As we learn more from new evidence being surfaced, it is only appropriate that approaches we may have once thought effective are no longer the most appropriate, and so de-implementation should be positioned as an ordinary part of any school improvement process.

You'll find more in the Evidence Snapshot on managing change (page 3), and in Appendix B which explores the implications for professional development as an essential aspect of de-implementation.

Evidence Snapshot: ‘Types’ of de-implementation

Wang et al.[4] describes four types of change which require individual de-implementation responses:

- Complete reversal – it is not working anywhere and should be discontinued.
- Partial reversal – it is working in some settings but not all, or for some sub-groups but not all, and should be scaled down.
- Related replacement – a more effective alternative has been identified as a substitute for the approach currently in place.
- Unrelated replacement – it has been identified for de-implementation to make room for something else that has shown effectiveness.

Each of the four types of de-implementation arise from ‘when’ they should be used, and the likely impact on resources. However, they are not impermeable, and at their core the process remains the same. It may be useful to have these ‘types’ in mind when thinking about the specifics of de-implementation. In this resource, we focus on the selection of programs or practices to de-implement which are ineffective and therefore require no immediate replacement.

Further reading:

- [Working smarter not harder: Coupling implementation to de-implementation](#) (Wang et al., 2018)

Evidence Snapshot: Managing change and the need for professional learning to support staff through de-implementation

In the Grattan Institute report ‘Making time for great teaching’, 44% of school leaders noted that ‘cultural resistance from teachers and other staff to changing the way they work’[5] was a constraint to applying changes that would potentially alleviate the demands on teachers’ time. Any type of change requires some form of professional learning and de-implementation is no exception. Wang et al.[4] refers to the things that need to be ‘learned and unlearned’[1,4], which has implications for professional learning (see professional learning considerations in Appendix B).

Professional learning should be partnered with time to understand, rehearse and apply the learning being done as a teachers’ professional identity is built over time and can’t be undone in an instant. Generally the longer an approach had been implemented, the longer it takes to de-implement[6]. The number of stakeholders can also be a barrier, with hierarchical structures often slowing the transfer of information[6].

Further reading

- [Making time for great teaching](#) (Grattan, 2022)
- [Letting Go: Conceptualizing Intervention De-implementation in Public Health and Social Settings](#) (McKay et al., 2018)
- [Effective Professional Development](#) (Evidence for Learning, 2022)
- [A scoping review of de-implementation frameworks and models](#) (Walsh-Bailey et al., 2021)

The stages of de-implementation

Given the scarcity of evidence relating to de-implementation in education, much of this resource draws on our understanding of how change occurs in a school as based on the evidence on effective implementation[3].

This evidence suggests that implementation can be described as a series of stages relating to thinking about, preparing for, delivering, and sustaining change.

Much like effective implementation, de-implementation is not a simple, one-off activity, but a process requiring time, planning and follow through. An effective de-implementation process is likely to be cyclical and follow the interconnected stages of 'explore', 'prepare', 'deliver' and 'sustain'.

Figure 1 depicts the stages of de-implementation.

The de-implementation process looks only at the elements which take us to a point of removing an approach.

E4L's [Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#) can be used as a companion document to this resource if you are interested in implementing a replacement approach or practice.



See: E4L.org.au/implementation

Foundations for good de-implementation

Before embarking on any change process, it is important to understand the climate in which the change is being made.

From the evidence on effective implementation[3], we know that there are two important underlying factors that influence a school's ability to implement change effectively.

These factors apply to de-implementation:

1. Treat de-implementation as a process, not an event. Plan and execute it in stages.
2. Create a leadership environment and school climate that is conducive to good de-implementation.

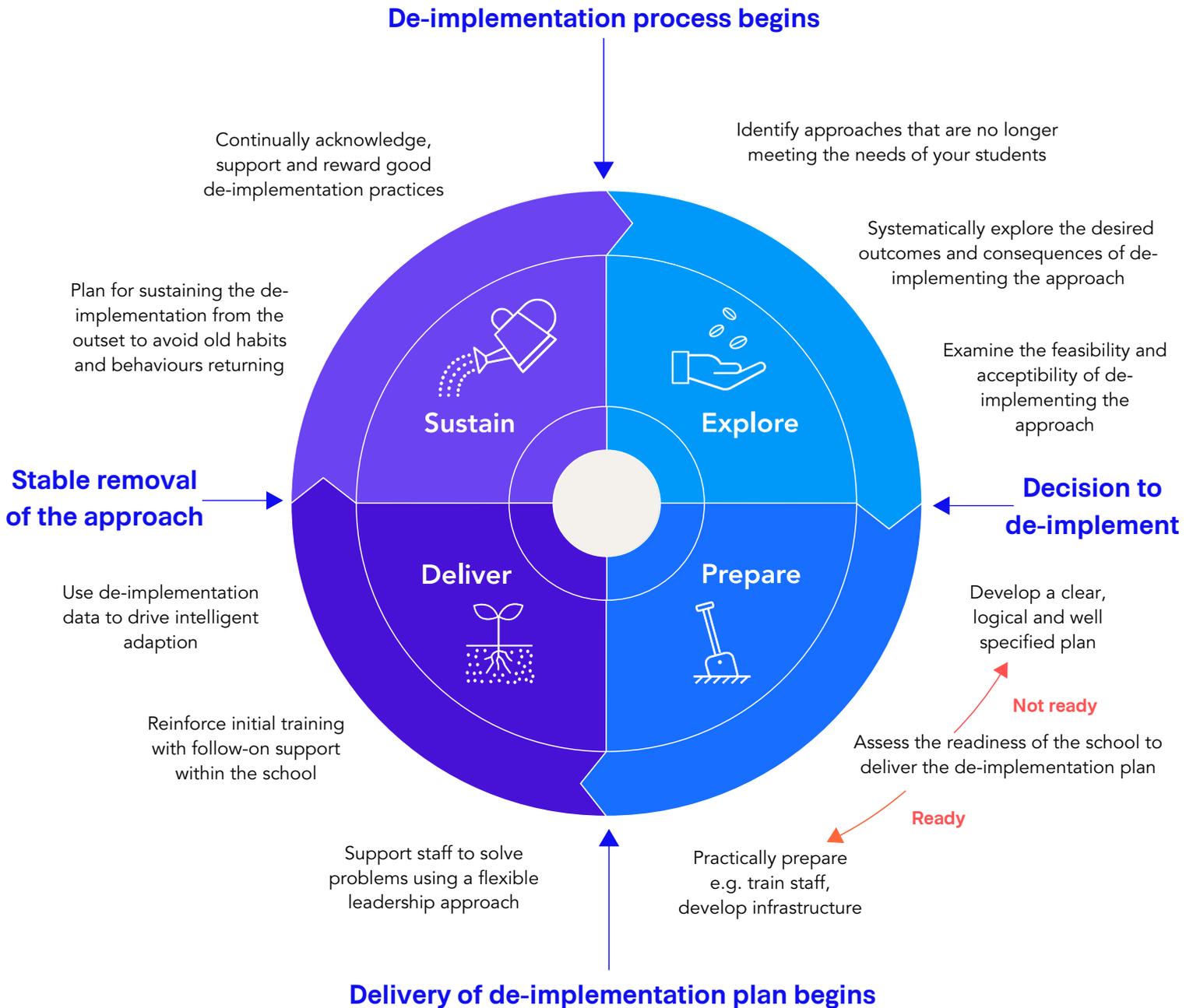
More information on these foundations is outlined in [Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#).

Questions for reflection

- Do you de-implement across your school in a structured and staged manner?
- Is adequate time and care taken when preparing for de-implementation? This may feel counter-intuitive, however it is important to invest time initially in order to save time later.
- Have you considered the time and energy required and identified how those requirements will be met?
- Do you have a climate that is conducive to change?
- Have you created a clear understanding of expectations when de-implementing the approach?
- How do day-to-day practices affect the motivation and readiness of staff to change?



Figure 1: The stages of de-implementation





Explore

Define the problem and identify an appropriate way forward.

Thorough investigation will help you to establish what approach, program or practice is ripe for de-implementation.

This will likely come about because of monitoring and evaluation that you are conducting as a school to understand the impact you are having on your students.

The next steps after a school review process, or the start of a new annual planning cycle, may be opportune moments to review data to determine what might be suitable for de-implementation and why.

Gather and interpret evidence to identify priorities

Using evidence to help you determine approaches that are ready for de-implementation is crucial to ensure that the 'right' approaches are selected, and that there is a convincing case to help others understand why an approach has been selected to de-implement.

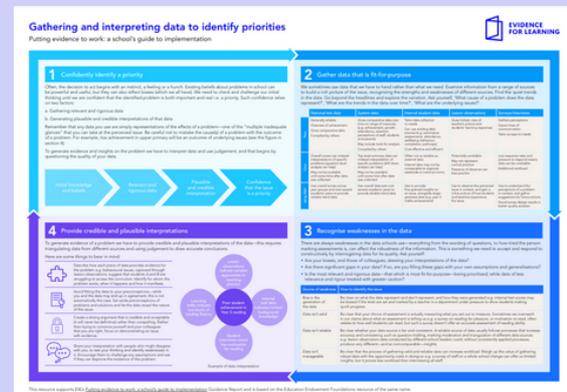
Local data from the school combined with the latest research evidence from sources like [E4L's Teaching & Learning Toolkit](#) can provide useful signals on approaches for de-implementation.

Consider your school context, identify barriers and enablers

It is important to reflect on your school context, including exploring any related approaches. It is advisable to identify factors that will present a barrier, or act as an enabler. McKay et al.[1] note the importance of understanding the factors that will increase challenges in influencing de-implementation, such as historical importance of a practice, or even the reliance on hard-copy resources which may stay in existence long after a practice has been disproved or debunked.

Support for gathering and interpreting data

E4L's resource '[Gathering and interpreting data to identify priorities](#)' supports school leaders to use data effectively as they look to make decisions around school improvement, including what (and when) approaches may be ready for de-implementation.



See: [E4L.org.au/implementation](https://e4l.org.au/implementation)

Questions for reflection

- Do you have a clear understanding of how wide-spread and embedded the approach currently is?
- How will you decide how long to implement or adapt something before determining it isn't working and should be de-implemented? Have you gathered reliable evidence (local data and research evidence) to support this decision?
- Have you identified who the approach is impacting?
- Have you considered the barriers and enablers that you may encounter during de-implementation?



Prepare

Create a clear de-implementation plan, judge the readiness of the school to deliver that plan, and then prepare staff and resources.

Having decided to de-implement an approach, the focus turns to preparing the staff and the school. This phase can be intensive.

Develop a clear plan

A clear de-implementation plan should be developed to demonstrate the process and desired goal of de-implementation, identify the activities required, assess the readiness of the school and staff to undertake de-implementation, and determine the ways in which you will monitor and evaluate your plan. An example is provided in Appendix A.

Check for acceptability and fidelity

Acceptability is the degree to which stakeholders are on board with the change being made. It may be helpful to think of this as a continuum, rather than as people being either 'ready' or 'not ready' for change. Surveying staff, parents and students will assist you in understanding if they are moving on the continuum. Fidelity is the degree to which the de-implementation activities are being done as they are intended. Consider how you will monitor both acceptability and fidelity during the de-implementation process.

Communication

Communication strategies should be embedded in your de-implementation plan and they allow you to respond as issues arise. Messages should communicate the intention and reason for the change, the amount of progress where relevant, and be tailored to different groups. The frequency and method of communication should be carefully considered. E4L's [Working with parents to improve children's learning](#) looks further at considerations when communicating with families.

Professional learning (PL)

Any change process requires specific PL, built into a plan, to meet varied staff needs. There is strong evidence around the features of effective professional learning which you will find summarised in E4L's [Effective professional development](#). Your de-implementation plan should consider how PL fits within the change process, who will be involved, and the resources that are required.

PL should include what should be learnt, but also address what requires unlearning, something which is often overlooked. Both learning and unlearning, in this context, recognise the importance of the cognitive challenge that comes with change, particularly when an initiative has been in place for a long period of time.

Support for PL

E4L's [Effective professional development](#) contains a suite of recommendations to support school leaders as they select and design learning opportunities for their staff.



See: [E4L.org.au/professional-development](https://e4l.org.au/professional-development)



Questions for reflection

- Have you developed a clear, logical and well specified de-implementation plan?
- Have you clearly defined who is affected by de-implementing the approach, and the degree to which they are impacted?
- Have you interviewed or surveyed staff to understand the degree of readiness and acceptance/resistance to de-implementing the approach, and the reasons behind this position?
- Have you identified the professional learning needs of staff?
- Have you communicated to the staff the approach that has been identified for de-implementation and why?
- Have you tailored communication to respond to possible concerns or reactions to the de-implementation of the approach?
- Have you identified a way to capture any desired and undesired changes that might occur?





Deliver

Support staff, monitor progress, solve problems and adapt.

Focus on supporting staff, monitoring progress, solving problems and adapting strategies. All of this should be done with reference to the de-implementation plan which you have developed. Leadership is essential during this time, guiding the ongoing support for staff, managing expectations and monitoring the process.

Be flexible

Flexibility in any change process is required, however, it should be tempered and done through a process of consultation.

In the first instance, the core design of the de-implementation plan should remain stable, but you may need to adjust the amount or intensity of certain activities such as professional learning.

If changes to the core design of the plan are required, the previous steps of 'explore' and 'prepare' may need to be revisited.

Reinforce with professional learning

PL activities developed in the prepare phase should be continued as the delivery begins and may take many forms. Ensure that the purpose of the PL is explicit and that it relates directly to the change process. See Appendix B for professional learning considerations.

Learn from data

Make thoughtful adaptations in response to the data you are gathering and ensure that it is being investigated during the change process, rather than as a single evaluation at the end of the delivery stage.

Questions for reflection

- Are you able to respond to challenges that arise through the change process?
- Can you use existing change structures and processes or are new solutions required?
- Is appropriate follow on support available to embed new skills and knowledge developed during initial training, in the form of coaching, mentoring, and peer to peer collaboration?
- Is the approach being de-implemented as intended? How do you know?
- Does de-implementation data suggest you need to review and adjust your strategies or activities?



Sustain

Plan for sustainability from the outset.

No matter which approach you have de-implemented, sustaining the change is crucial to ensure that the approach does not creep back into practice. Planning to sustain the de-implementation of an approach should be considered as you begin the process.

When evaluating a de-implementation process, look for evidence that the approach is no longer being practiced. Initially, there may be opportunities to reward or recognise staff who are de-implementing with fidelity. Over time, there may be further PL that needs to take place to accommodate staff movements, habits reappearing or policy change. The 'sustain' phase should focus on continuing the work established throughout the 'prepare' and 'deliver' phases.

Ongoing professional learning

Old habits die hard – continue to offer tailored learning and unlearning at points of need.

Monitoring and evaluation

Once your evaluation gives you confidence that the initiative is no longer occurring, time spent monitoring and evaluating can be redeployed.

Reinforce

Recognise and reward staff who have faithfully de-implemented the approach. It may be found that the time that teachers gain when something is successfully de-implemented drives their motivation to engage in further opportunities to change.

Questions for reflection

- Do you have an ongoing plan to support staff where necessary (and aligned with professional learning considerations developed during the 'prepare' phase)?
- Do you have an ongoing plan to evaluate the impact of de-implementing the approach?
- Is your de-implementation plan achieving the desired outcomes? How do you know?
- Have you identified rewards and recognition for the faithful adoption of the de-implementation process?

Appendix A - Example of a de-implementation plan

This illustration reflects the output of the prepare phase and will guide the next phases – deliver and sustain.

Problem	De-implementation description	De-implementation activities	De-implementation outcomes	Outcome
What needs to change e.g. teacher behaviour, student behaviour, achievement?	What are the core elements of your plan?	How will it be done? What blend of activities are required?	How will you know that de-implementation is occurring? Do staff feel the de-implementation is feasible and useful?	How will students, staff and the school benefit?
<p>An instructional practice widely used is evaluated and has shown insignificant or no impact on student outcomes.</p> <p>Consideration: The de-implementation of a practice may require something to take its place, however this example plan focuses solely on the removal of the ineffective practice. Anything implemented after this point, should follow the process set out in E4L's implementation guidance.</p>	<p>Ensure that stakeholders understand and accept the reasons for de-implementation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a communication strategy to explain to stakeholders why the instructional practice is being reversed and the implications of that reversal. <p>Staff actively remove the instructional practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create understanding about the lack of effectiveness of the approach. Design and deliver professional learning (PL) to support the removal of the instructional practice. <p>Alter policies that have led to the instructional practice being implemented and sustained.</p> <p>Undertake monitoring to highlight whether de-implementation of the instructional practice has been successful.</p>	<p>Initial staff meetings focus on the evaluation of the instructional practice and give leaders an opportunity to test staff readiness and acceptability of de-implementing the practice.</p> <p>Conduct PL and follow-up coaching for staff to eliminate the use of the ineffective instructional practice.</p> <p>Support teachers to revise timetables for learning which capitalise on the increased time that can be dedicated to effective approaches.</p> <p>Tailored communication to staff, families and students about the discontinuation of the practice with avenues for feedback.</p> <p>Monitor the reversal of the instructional practice through classroom observations – noting the frequency of the practice and any unintended consequences on student outcomes.</p>	<p>Short term outcomes</p> <p>Staff and other stakeholders signal increasing acceptability when surveyed via quick 'pulse-checks' to obtain anonymous feedback at regular intervals.</p> <p>Teachers report less engagement with the instructional practice.</p> <p>Medium term outcomes</p> <p>Classroom observations highlight that the instructional practice is not being used in classrooms.</p> <p>Teachers report that they can spend more time on other more effective approaches.</p>	<p>Long term outcomes</p> <p>The reversal of the ineffective instructional practice will enable teachers to expand the time spent on more effective activities which are currently being compressed.</p> <p>Teachers will be able to focus on the approaches that relate to positive outcomes, students will have exposure to more effective teaching and outcomes will improve.</p>

Appendix B - Examples of approaches for de-implementation and their professional learning considerations

Reason for de-implementation	Example	Professional learning considerations
The approach has been evaluated as ineffective	An instructional practice for reading that is widely used in a school is evaluated and has shown no impact on student outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop teachers' understanding of the evidence which shows that the approach is ineffective (or has limited impact). • Ensure teachers understand any policy or practice changes that have been made to support de-implementation of the approach.
The approach being used widely is ineffective to most but suited to a small group of students	An online maths program is used in Years 5 & 6. An evaluation conducted highlights that students in a small group who began well below average progress at a rate better than expected, however most students have not shown adequate progress in that time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop teachers' understanding of the evidence which shows that the approach is ineffective to use universally (and the evidence which shows it is still valuable for the sub-group). • Build capability in the use of tools to identify populations who should no longer be exposed to the approach (or diagnostic tools to identify those students who are likely to benefit). • Ensure teachers understand any policy or practice changes that have been made to support the reduction of the approach.

This resource has been influenced by E4L's 2019 work with the Northern Territory Department of Education on a De-implementation Guide for departmental staff. We thank our Territory colleagues for their leadership in the de-implementation space.

Notes:

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2. Prasad, V. (2014). Evidence-based de-implementation for contradicted, unproven and aspiring healthcare practices. *Implementation Science*(9), 1-5. doi: doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-9-1
3. Evidence for Learning. (2019, May 15). Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation. Retrieved from Evidence for Learning: evidenceforlearning.org.au/guidance-reports/putting-evidence-to-work-a-schools-guide-to-implementation/
4. Wang, V. M., Maciejewski, M.L., Helfrich, C. D., & Weiner, B. J. (2018). Working smarter not harder: Coupling implementation to deimplementation. *HealthCare*, 6:104-107.
5. Hunter, J., Sonnemann, J., & Joiner, R. (2022). Making time for great teaching: How better government policy can help. Grattan Institute.
6. Walsh-Bailey, C., Tsai, E., Tabak, R. G., Morshed, A. B., Norton, W. E., McKay, V. R., Brownson, R. C., & Giford, S. (2021). A scoping review of de-implementation frameworks and models. *Implementation Science*. 16:100.

Further reading:

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