

Introduction

The American Implementation Problem

This is a book about delivering results.

That word—results—is common language in education reform today. It’s an “of course” in the conversation, a given when we think about helping students learn, preparing them for college during their K–12 years, and helping them succeed in postsecondary education and beyond.

What’s more, we (mostly) agree both on the outcomes we want *and* on the broad shape of the reforms necessary to achieve them. The last several years have been a time of great ferment in education. Race to the Top has prioritized a few key initiatives in nearly every state: rigorous college and career-ready standards, tools to measure and support effective teaching, longitudinal data systems, and a focus on the lowest-performing schools. Postsecondary institutions and systems, galvanized by President Obama’s goal to once again lead the world in postsecondary attainment by 2020, have embraced an ambitious agenda around both college access and completion, with a small handful of common reforms like academic mapping and early alert being tested, refined, and improved on campuses across the country. This consensus, however fragile, has undoubtedly been good for students; it has elevated them to the center of the conversation, and these last several years have seen encouraging signs of progress on a host of outcomes, from National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) proficiency to high school graduation rates to college access and degrees conferred.

But we all know that it hasn’t been enough—at least not thus far. We’ve seen improvements, but they’ve been slower than we’d like. Progress is uneven; some systems are making gains while others are stalled. And we have even further to go when it comes to closing the achievement gaps that separate students of color, English-language learners, students with disabilities, and the economically disadvantaged from their more privileged peers. We should be proud of what we’ve accomplished, but few of us are satisfied. Which leads us to a discouraging question: if we can’t achieve a breakthrough now, during what seems like a rare moment for education reform, when can we? What’s holding us back?

The culprits’ name is a single word: *implementation*.

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In the last several years, policy—the “what” of reform—has driven this work. In many states, the passage of a big bill (usually with a number indicating its high priority, like “Assembly Bill 1”) heralded the most important changes, and the same story played out in the boards and commissions that write the regulations pursuant to these statutes. Meanwhile, implementation—the “how” of reform—has gotten far less attention.

Instead, we want to believe the comforting fiction that policy makes things happen all by itself—that once a law or a regulation directs a system to do something, it will be done. In short, everyone wants to deliver results, but we’re fuzzy on the part where we define how we actually *deliver* those results.

There’s something uniquely American about our implementation problem. As Ben Jensen, an expert on international education reform, put it, “America is one of several countries that separates policy from implementation. But in high-performing countries, the policy is the implementation plan!” Leaders in these other systems would laugh you out of the room if you proposed an abstract “policy” without a clear and serious blueprint for how it would be implemented. But we do it here all the time.

There are many reasons for this, the most prominent of which is in our Constitution: we separate the people who set policy from the people who implement it at every level of government. There are good reasons for this, but the unwelcome side effect is a major disconnect between the two. Policymakers craft laws with little consideration for how to provide the right conditions for implementation or how the mandates they’re creating affect the practitioners who must carry them out.

This separation persists over time; the American system, with its nonexecutive legislatures and boards, allows policymakers to have long careers that never bring them anywhere near the messier challenges of actually getting the work done. Practitioners do their best to make sense of the policies they’re given. They’re talented leaders, usually highly credentialed in the “what” of reform; they’re experts in topics ranging from instruction and pedagogy to financial aid to institutional research.

Unfortunately, there has not been a clear path to becoming an expert in implementation; certainly, nobody goes to school to study it. Many leaders have learned to do it on their own. But for the most part, when it comes to our overall approach to delivering results, we leave it to chance.

That’s why we wrote this book.

◎ DELIVERY, THEN AND NOW

Nearly 5 years ago, we published *Deliverology 101* to help education leaders take on the new implementation challenges they faced. Like many others at the time, we saw opportunity in the wave of reforms that was taking shape and recognized that strong implementation would be critical to success. The purpose of that first book was to introduce a generation of reform leaders to the **delivery approach**, which makes implementation into a discipline that can be taught, learned, and applied in any context.

The delivery approach is based on the experiences that Michael, one of this book's three coauthors, had in creating and leading the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) from 2001 to 2005. Tony Blair had set up the PMDU to help his government achieve 20 high-priority public service goals, ranging from improved educational outcomes to drops in street crime. Michael and his colleagues took on this challenge by focusing relentlessly on four disarmingly simple questions:

1. What are you trying to do?
2. How are you planning to do it?
3. At any given moment, how will you know whether you're on track to succeed?
4. If you're not on track, what are you going to do about it?

The questions define the approach: delivery is nothing more and nothing less than a set of tools, techniques, and systems for asking and answering these questions consistently and rigorously. During their time of service to Blair, Michael and his PMDU colleagues both invented these tools and proved their value: in those first 4 years, the government hit 80% of its targets and made significant progress on the other 20%.

Deliverology 101 was our attempt to codify this approach and translate it to the American education context. It's a practical field guide that gives reform leaders a step-by-step framework for undertaking a **delivery effort**: a concerted and purposeful application of the delivery approach to help an education system set and achieve ambitious goals for students. And as the book was published, we launched the Education Delivery Institute (EDI), a nonprofit that partners with education leaders to implement their reforms at scale using the tools of this approach. This partnership was designed to be two-way: from its earliest days, we set EDI up to receive as much as it gave, continuously learning about and updating the delivery approach by capturing the stories of practitioners who were applying it. The idea was to provide both the tools for implementation and a center of excellence that would continuously improve them.

In the years since, EDI has had the privilege of partnering with over 100 education systems and organizations to apply the delivery approach to their work. They include leaders at every level of the system: schools, colleges and universities, school districts, state systems of K–12 and higher education, and education philanthropies and nonprofits. We've struggled alongside our partners to navigate the complexities of implementing an incredibly ambitious reform agenda. We've celebrated their successes and shared in the inevitable failures as well.

So what have we learned?

When we wrote *Deliverology 101*, we saw the opportunity that lay ahead. But we also issued a warning: "the presence or absence of the capacity to deliver," we wrote, "will make the difference between a once-in-a-generation opportunity seized and a once-in-a-generation opportunity missed." Today that opportunity survives,

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but it's at risk. On the one hand, there are education systems and leaders that are delivering on their promises for students:

- The Kentucky Department of Education has steadily improved its high school graduation rate and nearly doubled the proportion, from 34% to 54%, of its students who graduate college and are career ready since it adopted the delivery approach in 2010.
- Since incorporating the tools of delivery into its implementation of Race to the Top in 2012, the Hawai'i Department of Education has seen gains of 7 and 11 points in reading and math proficiency in high school. At the same time, the University of Hawai'i System has already attained its goal of awarding 25% more degrees and certificates by 2015 while simultaneously narrowing their Native Hawaiian student graduation gap.
- The University of Missouri–St. Louis saw a dramatic improvement in a key indicator, achieving a record-high first-year retention rate of 78% in 2012.

These are just a few examples of what our partners have accomplished using simple but powerful tools for setting goals, planning the strategies to achieve them, and regularly monitoring performance. There are many more that are in earlier stages of implementation but have early signs of progress: movement in leading indicators, widespread buy-in for the reforms, and evidence of consistent implementation across their systems.

But for every success story, there are multiple others that turn out differently. Some leaders have lost the confidence of a field that's frustrated with reforms that seem scattershot, even incoherent, because they weren't properly planned. Others have gotten public pushback because they didn't get ahead of the narrative on reform or build the necessary stakeholder relationships to maintain the consensus for it. Still others simply don't have the evidence to be able to say whether any progress is being made at all, either because they didn't define their goals or the feedback loops to measure them; they're working hard, but with no clear sense of whether it's the right work.

Poor implementation is like poison to a reform effort. It demoralizes the front line. It excites the opposition. It frays the coalition supporting it, peeling off people who can use it as an excuse to defect while maintaining that they still support the reform in theory. Tim Daly (formerly of The New Teacher Project) has a name for this—the “implementation dodge”—but when implementation actually is poor, the critics have a point. Moreover, poor implementation deprives us of an important tool for innovating in policymaking. Good implementation gives rapid feedback on the effectiveness of a reform; in effect, it allows the “how” to check the sensibility of the “what.” At every stage, from goal-setting to planning to monitoring, the questions of delivery force us to get a lot clearer about what we're actually doing. But if implementation isn't working, we never get to that point, and policy continues to be made in a vacuum.

So of all the lessons we've learned, the biggest one is this: now, more than ever, delivery is an essential discipline for every education leader. We used to think that the delivery approach was mostly for people at the state level, laboring in offices far from the front line, in need of help to see how their work impacted students. But as we started to experiment with it in other venues, we

discovered that delivery resonated with leaders at every level—even school or campus leaders, who are nearly as close to the students as you can get. No matter where we went, everyone seemed to struggle with the same challenges.

This is why we have to think of delivery as a *discipline*: a skillset, just like instruction or research methods or classroom management, that should be a requirement for every education leader to possess. They still don't teach it in school. But what's needed in our field is a movement that takes implementation seriously, that insists that any reformer worth their salt be proficient with these tools. In this world, EDI wouldn't be the organization that teaches everyone how to do this; it would merely be a gathering place for practitioners who are learning faster about the science of getting things done than we could ever hope to do.

◎ WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO?

In hopes of advancing toward that vision, we've written this book.

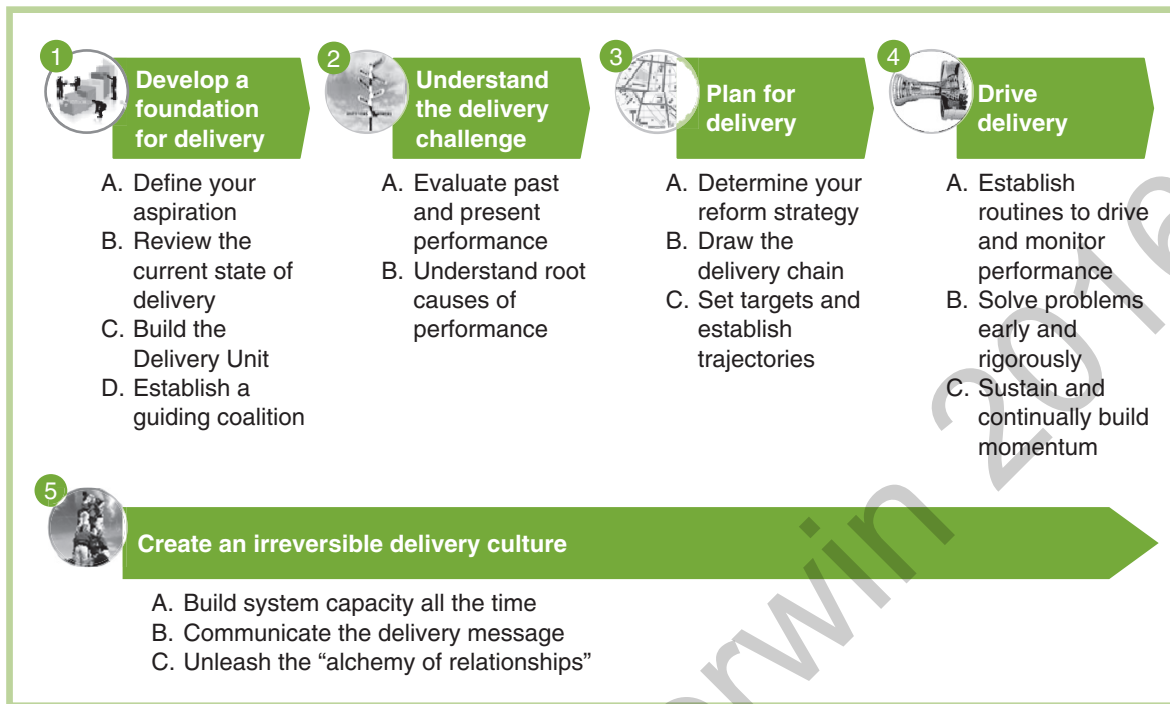
Deliverology in Practice improves on the original (we hope) in at least three ways. First, it updates the framework and tools to reflect the lessons we've learned from our work over the last 5 years. Our three coauthors are well suited to this task. One of us—Michael—is the inventor of the approach, who has since helped it spread around the world. The others—Nick and Ellyn—are two original leaders of EDI who have been involved with nearly every partnership the organization has built over the last 5 years. We've drawn on all our collective wisdom and experience to update what we know about the delivery approach.

As for the approach itself, the four questions of delivery remain absolute, and the 15 elements of delivery introduced in *Deliverology 101* have held up fairly well. Figure I.1 shows the current version.

The only real difference is in Part 3, Plan for Delivery. Here, we've added an element that specifically takes on the **delivery chain**, which has turned out to be one of the most important tools in the approach. Other than that, the elements are the same:

- **Develop a foundation for delivery:** Set clear goals for students, establish a **Delivery Unit** (like the PMDU) to help your system achieve them, and build the coalition that will back your reforms.
- **Understand the delivery challenge:** Analyze the data and evidence to get a sense of your current progress and the biggest barriers to achieving your goals.
- **Plan for delivery:** Develop a plan that will guide your day-to-day work by explicitly defining what you are implementing, how it will reach the field at scale, and how it will achieve the desired impact on your goals.
- **Drive delivery:** Monitor progress against your plan, make course corrections, and build and sustain momentum to achieve your goals.
- **Create an irreversible delivery culture:** Throughout your delivery effort, identify and address the change management challenges that inevitably come with any reform.

Figure I.1 The Delivery Framework



As with the previous book, each chapter is aligned with an element of the framework. It explains the core principles of that element and the tools, practices, and techniques that work best to apply it in any context. Some things turned out to be more important than others (like the delivery chain example above). Others have mattered less and were simplified or even eliminated. We’ve learned more about the details of these tools than could ever fit in one book, so throughout each chapter, we’ve embedded links to additional resources on our website, www.deliveryinstitute.org/resources. These include more detailed examples of the tools and exercises to help you use them. We hope that you find them helpful and give us feedback to improve them even further.

Second, this book is written for a broader audience than the first one. As we said, we started our work mostly with *state* systems of K–12 and higher education. In this book, by contrast, **system** means any education organization of any size, at any level. It could be a state system; it could be the federal government; it could be a school district; it could be a department or a division of a university, an individual school, or a nonprofit. Whatever corner of our field you are a part of, that’s the system you’re trying to change when you read this book.

Specifically, we have three audiences in mind for any given system and some advice for how each should read this book:

- A **system leader** is exactly what it sounds like: the person leading the education organization that’s trying to improve its results. If you’re a system leader, your role is analogous to the one Tony Blair played with the original PMDU: you’re the one who sounds the call for improvement and decides to undertake a delivery effort. You give it the backing and the

resources it needs, starting with the delivery leader (the second role on this list). It may not be necessary for you to learn about the details of every tool in this book. For that reason, we've included a system leader summary at the beginning of each chapter that gives you the highlights of what you need to know to play your role.

- A **delivery leader** is the person or team that the system leader designates to manage the delivery effort. If you're a delivery leader, you're responsible for helping the system leader set and achieve their goals, no matter what. You play a role analogous to the one Michael played in leading the PMDU—and depending on the size of your system, you may lead a Delivery Unit of your own (for more detail on the role that Delivery Units play, see Chapter 1C of this book). The tools in this book are particularly important for you to master; you'll often find yourself facilitating teams through them or building the capacity of others to use them.
- Finally, **system staff** includes anyone who works in the education organization that's trying to improve its results. You are the people who are actually responsible for doing the work of implementation; a delivery effort both holds you accountable for this work and supports you to do it. If your system undertakes a delivery effort, you can use the tools in this book to anticipate and respond to the changes it brings for you: in particular, being asked to set goals, plan for delivery, and report on progress to the system leader. But even if your system leader isn't doing delivery, you can still adopt the tools in this book in your sphere of influence. In that case, congratulations: you've just redefined the "system," and you're now the leader!

Each chapter will close with a short reflection on its key implications for each of these three role groups.

Finally and most important, this book improves on its predecessor by highlighting the experiences of those American education leaders who have undertaken the delivery approach over the last 5 years. There are stories of both success and failure here—both of which were incredible sources of learning both for us and for the leaders involved. For obvious reasons, we've anonymized the most challenging cases. But we want to emphasize that we have nothing but respect for all our partners, including the ones who have struggled. Their work is difficult—as yours no doubt is—and we might not have done any better in their shoes. When they run into barriers, it is as much our challenge and our problem as it is theirs. In the end, we point out failures not to pass judgment, but to give you the same experience of learning that failure has given us.

These stories are written in the first-person plural; they often describe the work that a given leader has done in the context of their partnership with EDI. As such, there are places where this book risks looking a bit like an advertisement for the services that EDI provides to education leaders. For this, we ask your forgiveness in advance. The stories we have to tell are the ones born of these partnerships, and in many cases, there was no way to tell them completely without noting the role we played. In any case, we wrote this book so that people like you can take these tools and use them without seeking help from EDI. We'd love to meet and work with you one day if you think it would

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help, but if not, this book and the associated online resources should provide a viable alternative.

One last note: by the time you read this book, many of the systems highlighted will have changed or moved on from the exact approaches described in these stories. The delivery approach is flexible and evolving; our partners innovate with and iterate the tools every day, including several instances when we updated our stories even as we were writing this book. But at some point, we had to stop and concede that a snapshot of a system's work—even if it's out of date—is still informative. In fact, in some cases, we deliberately took examples from specific points in time to highlight a particular lesson learned in that moment. Of course, there will be some systems that have abandoned the approach or failed in some way by the time you read their stories. It's a result we try to minimize (and so far the track record is good!), but one that is inevitable in the messy course of implementation.

Wherever they are now, we thank all our partners for making this book possible. We're grateful for the privilege of working with them, for the chance to learn from them, and the permission to share their stories with you. We know that you'll benefit from them as much as we have.

Our implementation problem may be uniquely American. But for the last 5 years, the work we've done has helped us craft a uniquely American solution. We hope that it provides you with a tangible resource for reform and that it motivates you to join this growing movement to deliver outstanding results for all students.