

“The key to de-implementation is holding on to what is impactful and reducing or replacing what isn’t.”

- Peter DeWitt



AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER DEWITT

Demystifying De-Implementation

By Ellen Ullman



If you’re the type of leader who believes in the phrases “less is more” and “work smarter not harder,” you’ll be excited to discover de-implementation. The concept – which means to replace or reduce low-value practices – originated in the medical field but is equally relevant for educators.

“The idea of de-implementation has been around for a long time, but it’s never been more useful,” says Peter DeWitt, a former principal from Albany, New York, who is now an author, speaker, coach, and *EdWeek* columnist.

“Right now, people are burned out, and stress and anxiety are at an all-time high.” His new book, *De-Implementation: Creating the Space to Focus on What Works*, offers an evidence-based framework and steps to help educators start their de-implementation journey.

DeWitt started thinking about de-implementation after a conversation with noted Australian education researcher John Hattie. The two men were discussing expanding workloads, teacher burnout, and America’s mental health crisis. “I couldn’t get the conversation out of my head,” says DeWitt. “I do a lot of social-emotional learning (SEL) and well-being coaching and write about both topics, and I couldn’t stop thinking that something has got to give. Our workloads keep increasing and teachers are leaving their jobs in record numbers.”

The specific inspiration for writing a book on de-implementation came from research DeWitt was conducting about teacher well-being for a book about instructional leadership teams. He wrote a blog about mental health that was forwarded hundreds of thousands of times. He decided to help educators take action to improve working conditions in schools.

DE-IMPLEMENTATION STARTS WITH “WHY”

In the last 30 years, we’ve seen countless education trends, including adaptive learning, microlearning, gamification, and small classrooms ... just to name a few. Too often, we keep chasing the next big thing instead of honoring the work we are already doing.

De-implementation lets us evaluate what is working so that we don’t fall prey to the next best thing. Begin the process by identifying low-value practices. Low-value practices:

- provide little or no benefit or impact to students
- are less effective or impactful than another available practice
- have potential to cause harm
- are no longer necessary.

Make sure to include teachers in your conversations to identify low-value practices; what is not effective for one person might be essential for another. An example of a low-value practice, according to DeWitt, is a zero-tolerance policy.

DE-IMPLEMENTATION METHODS

Informal de-implementation is something you can do on your own. “You might, for example, reduce the number of times you check email each day or the number of nights you work late,” says DeWitt. Other examples: replacing meetings with shared documents, leaving work at 5:00 p.m., or removing your work email from your phone. “It comes down to determining if something is ‘busy work’ or adds value,” says DeWitt.

Formal de-implementation is when you look at larger initiatives. It requires a team, impacts most of the school or district, and may require data collection from a variety of sources. Examples include revising your student discipline process, shifting from traditional to standards-based grading, or replacing zero-tolerance policies for more equitable methods.

You can de-implement low-value practices by reducing or replacing them. Some questions to ask yourself: Will reducing this practice allow me to spend more time with my family, help me feel less anxious, or give my teachers an emotional connection to their work?

DeWitt says some of the first things schools can reduce are meetings, emails, assessments, and homework. School leaders can help teachers minimize their assessments and reduce the homework they assign.



GETTING STARTED

If you’d like to put de-implementation into practice, you’ll need to ensure people feel safe to discuss well-being, what is working, and — most important — what isn’t. Teachers will need to be willing to talk about

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what they are doing that contributes to over-workload, too. You’ll need to develop a shared definition of student engagement and which of your district’s practices deepen that engagement.

“Don’t walk in blindly,” says DeWitt. “I think most good leaders understand that people are working hard but they are stressed and anxious and suffering. Start with the reasons you would like to engage in this work.”

As you figure out what and how to de-implement, discuss how you’ll collect evidence to measure effectiveness. For example, will your teachers find they can go deeper in the practices they replaced? If you reduce the number of meetings, are people going home and spending more quality time with their families? Are people less anxious? Less stressed? Are they checking email less often?

During the last two years, DeWitt asked thousands of people what they would de-implement, and every single

person answered something that was being done to them — not what they do themselves. “It’s a lot easier to point fingers at others than to look at your own practices,” he says. “But we need to look internally. It isn’t about getting rid of things you don’t like. The key to de-implementation is holding on to what is impactful and reducing or replacing what isn’t.”

ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Massachusetts, and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.

4 THINGS TO DE-IMPLEMENT

- 1. Common formative assessments:**
 The truth is, we don’t use the information assessments reveal.
- 2. Overcoaching:**
 Instead of sending three or four coaches, match the right teams for greater impact.
- 3. School improvement plans:**
 “Schools create these plans in the summer out of compliance,” says DeWitt. “Instead, use the plan as a resource. Don’t just shove it in a drawer for no one to see.”
- 4. Walkthroughs:**
 Leaders have multiple walkthrough tools and do it out of compliance. Instead, use walkthroughs to learn from.



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