

Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle Quick Tips for Comprehensive School Mental Health System Improvement

What are PDSAs?

The PDSA process adapts the scientific method to rapidly test system changes on a small scale in real time (Taylor et al., 2014). Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles have a long history in quality improvement science and in healthcare quality learning collaboratives. PDSAs clearly articulate a change idea and a predicted outcome (“plan”); action-oriented test of change (“do”); observation or tracking results and what was learned (“study”); and decision about next steps, which can include abandoning the change idea, adapting it, or adopting it for larger-scale implementation (“act”). PDSA cycle duration varies, but many teams find that a rapid two-week PDSA cycle is most helpful (IHI, 2017; IES, 2020).

Why use PSDAs in school mental health?

Comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHSs) provide a full array of supports and services that promote positive school climate, social and emotional learning, and mental health and well-being, while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness (Hoover et al., 2019). Optimal performance in all aspects of CSMHSs is aspirational for any school system, and every system has unique strengths and opportunities for growth. PSDAs are one tool that school teams can use to test their quality improvement change ideas and gradually scale up in a sustainable, locally, and contextually appropriate manner. The National Center for School Mental Health has used PDSAs as a tool to support school systems across the country (Connors et al., 2020; Orenstein et al., 2023).

Why start small?

Dream big, start small. Taking on too much can be overwhelming for individuals and teams involved in change improvements. PDSAs support consistent short-term changes using manageable steps that build over time to keep teams on track toward their long-term goals.



Promote engagement. PDSAs start with those most willing to contribute to the change effort. As PDSAs are adapted and iterated over time, a “proof of concept” change turns into evidence of success. Practice-based success can promote engagement and minimize resistance upon implementation.



Avoid risk of failed large-scale implementation. New initiatives “rolled out” often skip past field testing and learning. PDSAs welcome bottom-up learning and adaptations based on real-world conditions. PDSAs reduce risk of failure, implementation fatigue, and wasted resources.



Additional Resources

PDSAs are best used in the context of a broader, team based, systematic continuous quality improvement (CQI) plan and process. The following resources provide more information on CQI processes within which your PDSAs should be embedded:

- [Continuous Improvement in Education: A Toolkit for Schools and Districts](#)
- [SHAPE Step by Step Guide](#)
- [Quality Improvement Essentials Toolkit](#)
- [Rethinking Improvement: An Introduction to Applying W. Edwards Deming's System of Profound Knowledge to School Transformation](#)

Example PDSA Ideas

It is helpful to prioritize a quality improvement area and identify a goal that is specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, time bound, inclusive, and equitable (SMARTIE) before planning a PSDA. There are many different tests of change (PDSAs) that could be attempted for any specific goal. The [School Mental Health Quality Assessment Strategic Planning Guide](#) and [SHAPE Step by Step Guide](#) provide more information on how school teams can prioritize a quality improvement area and SMARTIE goal. Below are PDSA ideas for a specific quality improvement goal:

Improvement Area: Tier 1 Mental Health Promotion Services and Supports

SMARTIE Goal: By November 1st, we will assess teacher and staff well-being using an established survey (per resources located on SHAPE) plus listening sessions to inform ongoing efforts to ensure safe, supportive, and inclusive work environments in our schools. This goal is one step toward our vision of ensuring all teachers and staff feel connected, respected, and supported to educate and inspire students based on their own unique expertise and talents.

PDSA Ideas:

- Collect a teacher well-being survey from 5 teachers to gauge completion time, acceptability per teacher feedback, and usefulness of information gathered.
- Conduct a listening session with teachers from one grade level to identify at least one opportunity to reduce workplace stress.
- Test 1 new practice or strategy to support teacher well-being (e.g., identify a school staff member to provide 10 minutes of coverage for teachers in one department or grade level to take a personal break, add teacher "shout outs" to a weekly principal email) with 2 teachers.

Interested in learning more? Contact us at ncsmh@som.umaryland.edu to inquire about PSDA training materials and consultation opportunities with our team.



School Health Assessment
and Performance Evaluation System

