

Implementation Drivers as the Engine for Change
with Dr. Caryn Ward with guest host Dr. Jessica Meisenheimer
January 2018

Host: Welcome to SWIFT Unscripted. SWIFT podcasts give you, the listener, the opportunity to hear the inside story and be a part of a conversation about all means all with leaders in the field of inclusive education and school wide transformation. We are recording a remote podcast at the SWIFT Education Center at the University of Kansas on the topic of implementation drivers as the engine for change. Our guest today is Dr. Caryn Ward. Dr. Ward is the associate director of education and measurement for the National Implementation Research Network, a lot of times we hear it called NIRN for short. Dr. Ward provides intensive informed implementation supports to state and local education systems nationally through her work as the co-director of the state implementation and scaling up of evidence based practices center, center on school turn around, and National Center for early childhood development teaching and learning. Thanks for joining us today Caryn.

Ward: Thanks for having me.

Host: We are so glad you're with us. Why don't you start off by telling us about your role at NIRN.

Ward: Sure, I am I'm part of the leadership team at NIRN and I work on several different projects. You were naming a couple of them there. As an implementation specialist at NIRN, I do a lot of training and coaching of teams, developing those teams, and then supporting them, working with state education agency level all the way down to working in school buildings at the classroom level.

Think about our work within a cascade system of support, from a state level to a regional level to a district level to a building level. Though, as an implementation specialist at NIRN I find myself training and coaching teams at each of those level so that they can use best practices in implementation. At NIRN we study how well we do that, what works, what doesn't work and we use those lessons learned to inform the broader field of

implementation science and scaling.

Host: Excellent. So, we mentioned implementation drivers, why don't you just tell us what those are and how are they used.

Ward: Sure. So, we think of the implementation drivers as the core mechanisms or building blocks or the necessary support that are needed to help staff have the competencies to use effective practices with fidelity and to ensure that the organization that those staff are residing within, so like at a school building level in a district, is organized well with the capacity needed in order to support staff using those practices with fidelity in order to get outcomes that we're looking for. So, at NIRN we think about three different categories or types of drivers, those core mechanisms. We think about one type of drivers is the competency drivers. Those are all about the people within our organization. How are we selecting our staff to use the effective practices that we're wanting to see in classrooms? How are we training? So, what is the professional learning that were provided? What are our coaching support for staff to use those practices? And then how are we measuring whether or not those practices are being used as intended? So our competency drivers are all about the people and are we using best practices in our hiring in our selection of them, how we are training them, providing professional learning, and how we're providing that follow up support following training, or that job embedded professional learning or what we call coaching. And then how are we measuring fidelity? Those are our competency drivers.

And on the other side of our visual graphic the triangle is our organizational drivers. Like I said earlier, those are all about how the organization is structured and the procedures and Policy and processes that are in place. It also relies heavily on leadership.

When we think about are three different types of organizational drivers, we talk about having a data system in place that supports decision making and that data system needs to be comprised of different types of data so not just student outcome data but also implementation data, like fidelity data or our reach data: how many teachers are being trained? As well as process data: how well is our training working? How well is our coaching working? Let's look at our coaching satisfaction data as another example. All that data needs to be in a system that's reliable, accessible, provides data that is timely and very

relevant and ultimately is actionable. That we can take action on it. As well as capacity data for the organization as another key piece of data. That's our data system.

Another driver of our organizational driver is the organizational driver of facilitated administration. And that's jargon. NIRN recognizes we bring lots of jargon. We have our own language often. What facilitative administration means is that leaders are problem solving and trying ways to make the work easier for those that are engaged in the practice. So how do we ensure that we have processes and procedures that are efficient streamlined and are relieving the unnecessary burden as we move forward? That's what is internal to the organization.

Our final organizational driver is one that we call systems intervention. You might be thinking systems intervention, what is that? Again, It's problem solving but this time it's problem solving that's not just internal to the organization, but how do we problem solve and lift issues that are pushing on to us for example at the school level that are outside of our control that require us to lift up to others outside of that school, such as at the district level or at a state or regional level.

Let me give you a concrete example of what that can look like in action. When I was at the district level, we were implementing universal screening and an example and our universal screening measure that we chose was a curriculum based measure and we had screened all of our students at the beginning of the year. Later on, a couple weeks after our screening was completed, we were told that we can't use that data and we were going to have to rescreen all the students that are receiving intervention supports from our teachers that are funded through Title I services because the state requires a different screener for that. The screener was still a curriculum based measure it was just a different product. So we had to lift up to our district and to the state team that actually were they were getting the same data and there was no need to rescreen our students twice or to have those that receive intervention services we had the data. Why create that unnecessary burden on our teachers our interventionist, as well as waste time with more assessment when we already had the data that we needed? And there were two curriculum based measures, so we got that resolved after many different conversations. But that's an example of something from external, right, policy that was pushing in at the school level that we had to lift up and say

we already have this data. It's the same type of measure; it's just a different product as another, as one example of systems intervention in action.

Our final category of drivers that we talk about are the leadership drivers. There's a lot published on leadership. NIRN talks about leadership from the standpoint of [Ronald] Heifetz and [Donald] Laurie, where they talk about different types of leadership, where we often have adapted leadership and technical leadership needed and that's because we encountered different types of problems in our implementation work at a building level or in a district level. Some problems are very technical, their well-known and everyone agrees on what the problem is and there are solutions readily available. That's a very different type of leadership problem than an adaptive problem. An adaptive problem is one where not everybody agrees on what the problem is. The solutions are not readily available and there's often different perspective on what is the solution needed and what is the problem. That requires a different type of leadership that requires adaptive leadership.

Let me give you two different examples.

A technical problem would be that the subs in the building don't show up that day. A principal has often many solutions readily available for when that happens. A technical problem, solutions readily available, everybody agrees on what the problem is.

An adaptive problem could be one such as when there's different competing philosophies around a program or practice and folks aren't recognizing that; and that could be impacting the implementation. That is an adaptive problem. There's not a solution readily available and we have to use different adaptive strategies to address that.

So we often are swilling in our implementation work between those different types of problems and the different types of leadership that are needed to resolve them. Those are the underlying foundations to the organizational and competency drivers.

Taken to gather, those drivers, the competency drivers of selection, training, coaching, and fidelity, along with the organizational drivers of decision to support data systems, facilitative administration, and systems intervention with leadership supporting them are integrated and they work together to support the practices being used with fidelity in achieving their outcomes.

Now, because they're integrated it's often hard to talk about one and not talk about the other. We also find that their compensatory, meaning that if one is weak or not as strong, others can compensate for it. So, an example of that is we often hear selection is challenging, we have who we have to do this work, then how do we ensure that we're compensating with the necessary training and coaching support that may be needed going forward—as an example of that compensatory principle in action. So, I'm going to stop there Jessica and see if you have any questions. I realize I talked for a little bit long there.

Host: Oh absolutely, well what I was going to say is that you did mention that sometimes things are a little jargony. As we heard there are a lot of components that go into your framework and implementation drivers, so I was really glad that you threw in some examples of concrete ways that kind of tell the story behind the driver's besides just the technical definitions that they have. So, thank you so much for providing those examples, especially with the types of leadership and the systems. I really thought those were good examples. So, I guess what I was thinking about as you were talking as you mentioned at the beginning, that part of what you do as a center is you study the work that you're doing. So, you're not just training teams, but you're also studying the work that's happening with those teams so that you can learn more and grow from that. I'm wondering what are some lessons that you've learned along the way?

Ward: The really important lesson we learned along the way is “keep data flowing” and “get it flowing within the first six months of your implementation.” For example, we have found it's critical to get fidelity data points within the first six months. Without that data flowing to help inform how well your training and your coaching support are working, you can't engage in that continuous improvement process. Getting that type of data flowing along with process data or your effort data or your capacity data also gives you data to

work from on our way to seeing improvements and changes in student outcomes. We often think outcomes are going to be immediate but what we've learned over time is that it often takes longer to get to student outcomes because we have to establish that the practice is there with enough intensity and being used with fidelity in order to show an improvement in outcomes. So how we keep the attention and maintain our focus and the momentum is by having other types of data flowing to support the decision making and the continuous improvement process that is needed is one lesson.

Another key lesson has been for really guiding districts and schools and having strong selection practices in what they're selecting to implement. We have learned that there are several factors that need to be considered such as What are the needs of the of the population that we're serving. So, what are the needs of the school? How well does that practice fit with what we're already doing? Are the philosophies in alignment? I can give you a personal example from my fifth grader, my own daughter's elementary school. That's been an elementary school that has been implementing positive behavior intervention supports for over ten years now. It has been a state recognized school for their implementation with good outcomes. They received extra money last year to become a magnet school and they had to pick some new practices to implement along with that with that magnet status, so they chose responsive classroom practices another good strong practice just like PBIS, but as they started their implementation and I was at back to school parent night and they were describing what was happening and I was listening and I raised the question to the classroom teacher I said well how is this interacting with our school wide model for positive behavior intervention supports, because as you're describing it there's two very different philosophies to how to manage behavior in classrooms underlying your techniques in your strategies and the school was very much trying to make both work at the same time. Katie's classroom teacher responded, you know it's an excellent question and we're really struggling with that as a school because we don't want to abandon our school wide matrices for example and some other pieces and making the two work. To me, that is an example of how to ensure that when you're selecting practices that you're addressing how will this fit with what we're already doing? And if it doesn't exactly align in terms of its underlying philosophy or its theory of change like we like to think about then how are we going to address that and help support our staff in reconciling those differences. So when we are selecting practices, think about need, think about fit,

think about the resources that are needed, and do we have the resources to support it, or if not where are we going to find those resources, what our current capacity, and what's the current level of evidence to say that this is a worthy practice to get behind and put our resources into, and finally is it ready, is it usable, do we have examples of where it's been done well with similar populations as the ones that were serving?

And, that's also a been a big lesson ensuring that practices are usable we like to think about our criteria. Is it well operationalized? Is it clearly outlined what I should be as a staff member doing and saying if I'm implementing or if I'm using that practice? Is there a fidelity measure readily available to help provide that data that we know is so critical to keeping the momentum going? So selection and looking at those factors of need, fit, resources, capacity, evidence and it's usability has been a lesson for us.

Two more lessons and then we'll see how we are doing. One, and this has been a lesson that's been long taught to us from our PBIS friends and others at SWIFT as well is the necessity of political visibility and support. Implementation work is challenging and it's hard and we're making change or changing often the adult behavior. What are we doing, how are we acting when it comes to implementation? And so that takes political visibility and support and for leadership to help us maintain the pace of the work and stay focused.

Then a final lesson is really taking in time for exploration and creating the readiness and the necessary buy in for the support of the implementation work. Starting small can also help with this. At NIRN we get started, get better and we've been now using the phrase start small and get better. So how can we strategically apply that methodology of plan, do, study, act and start with a small number an implementors, study what it takes, test the feasibility of the practice as well as what does it take to support it. Study how that works and make small iterative changes and get better over time with it.

Host: Excellent so I love that phrase start small to get better. We have learned so many lessons from NIRN at the SWIFT Center. One of the phrases that we use around here is go slow to go fast, which I think runs in the same vein that in order to do the stuff you want long term you have to really slow down and think about what you're doing in the short term to make those things happen. So as a lot of the things that you were talking about just

really relate to the work that I personally do at SWIFT but also what we do as a bigger center. And as you know SWIFT has had the pleasure of working and partnering with NIRN and you specifically over the last few years to help schools, districts and states implement practices that are scalable and sustainable. When you are talking about the selection practices as one of your lessons learned, I thought about how I worked with some districts in the state of Oregon to transform their job descriptions and their interviewing practices to align with the priorities that they had at the time and just the change that that made in their district and we really learned those lessons directly from you guys at NIRN. So, we thank you for that, but I wondered if you could speak to our partnership and how the two centers collaborate.

Ward: Sure, it's been a fantastic collaboration between the SWIFT Center and NIRN and SISEP Center. We have collaborated specifically on shared measures some shared assessments. As well as some other tools and resources. At NIRN and SISEP, we've been developing several different capacity measures that can be used at different levels of the state education system. One of those is the District Capacity Assessment. The District Capacity Assessment measures how well the district is making use of those implementation drivers and their best practices to support their implementation of the SWIFT framework or other practices that a district may be working to implement. So through our collaboration with SWIFT colleagues, they have been instrumental in providing us feedback on that tool on the District Capacity Assessment and how we can make continuous improvements with it. So we've shared our lessons together and using that tool and how we can you use that assessment to help our districts learn and provide coaching on how to create those and install the implementation drivers in support of their practices.

We've also collaborated on tools such as the Hexagon Tool and that's one of NIRN's most popular tools and SWIFT has taken it and thought about how to adapt it and use it specifically with schools to help guide the selection of their practices as well. So we've collaborated on many different tools. Those are just two examples as well as assessments of capacity, the ability to use best practices in implementation and build those drivers to support practices over time.

Host: Great, so as you were talking and just made me think about you I don't know if you

remember but you trained me specifically on how to administer the DCA. So our relationship goes back to the very beginning of the partnership between our two centers. One thing that I learned through that process is just how powerful of a tool it can be to really help districts understand the different things going on in their district and how they can make goals for change, but another thing that I saw happen is that there was sometimes because the great number of components in the framework that would sometimes lead to misunderstandings about what drivers are and how they're to be used to help make long term changes, so what do you think are some of the most common misunderstandings about implementation drivers and what would you want our listeners to know instead?

Ward: One example of a common misunderstanding is with selection , the selection of staff that driver. They often think it's only reserved for hiring new staff and really when we think about best practices of selection it could be in terms of existing staff, who will use practices, or selection practices for who when you're forming a team who to be on that team. So we've found it really important not to think about selection just only for hiring of new staff as one common misunderstanding.

Often people think, another common misunderstanding is that this comes from the district capacity assessment because we often in the DCA when we are assessing your use of the implementation drivers, we're also looking for sources of evidence to support your scoring and what are the products or the tangible pieces. So a lot of folks say man this district capacity assessment is requiring us to get everything in writing, having a plan for this and this documented and so on. And so people often think it's a common misunderstanding that if we get it in writing we're good. And the writing piece of having a documented publicly available processes and procedures for your practices in using the implementation drivers is one piece and it's important because we're trying to make a host system and one that's transparent and everyone knows how it works and if it's written down we can find it and we can make improvements upon it over time. But we also don't want just to lead to what we call here at NIRN "paper implementation." We often see that in the beginning where folks get it in paper and then they need that ongoing coaching support to bring what they've written down to light and make those continuous improvements as they go

forward. So that's an example of a common misunderstanding of the implementation drivers. And from their use of the district capacity assessment.

Another common misunderstanding is once we've built training we're done. We've built training. We've got our coaching piece. We're in place. The drivers are meant to be continuously improved and refined by our data system and what is our data telling us and what we're learning. So we should always be what we call at NIRN, so we should always be feeding data forward and backwards between or drivers. So for example, for our selection practices, data coming out of our selection should be informing our training. How well our training is working should be informing back on our selection practices. Are we constantly training on something that we should perhaps be selecting for? Is our training data being fed to those that are coaching? Where do we need to target our coaching and in return is our coaching data informing our training? Really bringing that integration those drivers to bring to life as we go forward.

Those are three common misunderstandings.

Host: Those are important things that I think I even learned a little bit on that as well. Good examples. I think the selection driver really hit home for me because I think we did really think about it just on the hiring side, but I think looking at the staff and strengths that you have within and how you can utilize those to work towards the goals that you have is a really important aspect, so thanks for that. I think you've given our listeners a lot to think about. Let's say a school a district or state or region wants to start using implementation drivers but really has no idea where to start what advice would you give them?

Ward: I would say step back and kind of think where they are at currently in their use of the implementation drivers. We're often not starting from scratch when it comes to implementation of a new practice. For example, we've been implementing really good behavioral practices and we're seeing good outcomes. What is working about that implementation that we can leverage in use if we're now shifting our focus for example in implementing really strong literacy practices? We don't need to reinvent the wheel each time in how we do something. So I think really stepping back in assessing how do we

currently select, train, coach, assess, use data, problem solve is an important step to do to see what we currently have in place that can be leveraged.

We've talked about a couple different tool that can help with that. If you're a district administrator and you're sitting at a district level the District Capacity Assessment can be a great tool to drive those types of conversations and assess where you're at. If you're sitting in a school building and you're wondering about your own use the implementation drives at a school level, you can use our drivers best practice assessment to assess where we're at.

I will tell you it's really hard at a school level to think about those drivers independently from the district, because so often there's what we call a shared locus of responsibility between the drivers between the district and school. So, an example of that the district often sets the selection practices or hiring policies or practices and schools are enacting on them or districts help secure training efforts and school are making sure that staff have access to those training supports, or they may be seeking their own. So I think stepping back and assessing where your at, where are your strengths, where are your areas of opportunity and how they can be strengthened as you move forward is always in our mind a good place to start.

Host: And SWIFT would agree 100%. We're very strengths based and that's what our models based on too, so you are singing our language. We love it. So we're getting close to the end of our time and as were closing up here is there anything else you would like our listeners to know?

Ward: I would just say keep the important message in the work and why we do what we do to ensure that all students and each and every student has a high-quality education and there's equity to it. Keeping that as our main focus as to why we do what we do and also thinking about how do we support our staff so that we are managing and keeping them here. We know that the data clearly supports that when we have strong systems with those strong and implementation supports in place we have happy staff, we have happy teachers who stay, and who reduce our turnover rate. So really thinking about the system although it's often like doing a bathroom remodel where you start on one piece and all you really want to do is decorate, but you find that you've got to work on the underlying floor joists

and that's not really a lot of fun to do. You really just want to work on decorating, but take that time to do that and keep that vision in mind that we're really hoping for all students to have that high-quality education and have the same experiences and achieve their outcomes moving forward.

Host: Absolutely, I think that's a perfect place for us to wrap this up. A happy staff creates happy kids and happy communities. So I think that is a great place for us to focus our energy and even on those tough days just remember the reason why we do what we do. So thank you so much again Caryn for joining us. We appreciate it so much.

Ward: Thank you for the opportunity.

Host: Absolutely. If you want to know more about the full story about implementation drivers you can go to swiftschools.org where you can find lots more resources and stories in the field of schoolwide transformation. SWIFT education center provides support in equity-based MTSS and inclusive education to promote the learning and academic achievement of all students.