

# Readiness for Change in the Out-of-School Time Field

The out-of-school time (OST) field often champions new ideas and engages in continuous improvement efforts, given the flexibility, autonomy, and creativity that are core elements to OST programs. As new ideas take hold, OST programs often dedicate many resources—time, funding, training—to making changes, yet implementation challenges can still impede their efforts. Why? Research and practical experience suggest that **readiness** may be a critical factor when making changes, which is something we often overlook. Change comes in many forms—from revamping a program completely, implementing a new set of activities or strategies, or making improvements to existing practices—but one thing is clear: **OST programs are more likely to be ready for change when leadership, staff, and stakeholders have the motivation, capacity, knowledge, and skills to make that change with intentionality and quality.**

## What Is Readiness and What Does It Look Like in OST?

Drawing on implementation science, early research on the idea of readiness referred to the extent to which an organization was willing and able to implement an “innovation”—in other words, a practice, program, initiative, or policy that is new to the organization. A helpful heuristic for thinking about organizational readiness is  $R = MC^2$  – in other words, readiness ( $R$ ) is the product of motivation ( $M$ ), the general capacity to do anything new ( $C$ ), and additional capacity that is specific to the innovation ( $C$ ).<sup>1</sup> Readiness thinking has been applied in fields such as public health and, to some extent, in the education sector, however these ideas have not been fully translated and applied in the OST context.

To apply readiness thinking in OST, we employed a rigorous, field-driven approach (Exhibit 1) that involved establishing expert advisory groups of field leaders and practitioners, conducting an extensive literature review, and hosting focus groups and interviews with OST leader and staff experts. Hearing from OST practitioners and thought leaders in the field transformed our understanding of what

### Exhibit 1. Methodology



<sup>1</sup> Scaccia, J. P., Cook, B. S., Lamont, A., Wandersman, A., Castellow, J., Katz, J., & Beidas, R. S. (2015). A practical implementation science heuristic for organizational readiness:  $R = MC^2$ . *Journal of Community Psychology*, 43(4), 484–501. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21698>

readiness looks like in the OST field. One key takeaway from our conversations is that organizations do not make change happen; people make change happen. Organizations, and those who lead them, can create processes and practices that support implementation, but, ultimately, it is the practitioners, the participants, and other key stakeholders who are essential to change management. Why? Because they are the ones responsible for implementation. In thinking about how early ideas of readiness aligned with new findings from our work in the field, we took steps to reconceptualize readiness in a way that centered people in the definition.

## An Updated Definition for Readiness in OST

Readiness refers to the overall willingness and capacity within an organization and its staff that enables change to occur successfully. OST programs are ready for change when **leadership**, **staff**, and **stakeholders** have the motivation, capacity, knowledge, and skills to make a change with **intentionality** and quality. As shown in Exhibit 2, readiness has four pillars (shown as gears), with specific elements that further describe each pillar.

### Exhibit 2. The Four Readiness Pillars



# What Should We Keep in Mind When it Comes to Measuring and Building Readiness?

Our conversations with experts and practitioners in the field informed our understanding of readiness in a number of ways. We redefined readiness and applied it to the OST context and, in doing so, learned more about how readiness work happens – in other words, what is important when measuring and building readiness in programs. As shown in Exhibit 3, our fieldwork elevated five key principles for measuring and building readiness (what we sometimes refer to as “readiness thinking”). These principles are important to keep in mind as program leaders, staff, and partners begin to engage in readiness thinking as part of their ongoing program implementation and improvement efforts.

## Exhibit 3. Five Principles of Readiness Thinking



1

**No one pillar of readiness is more important than the others.** We use the gears model to describe readiness because we have observed (and existing research suggests) that, like gears, all four readiness pillars function together to ensure that change happens successfully.



2

**Readiness happens at multiple levels within programs.** Remember: organizations do not make change happen; people do (especially those people who are responsible for implementation). Therefore, talking about readiness and engaging in readiness thinking should include the many people involved in making change happen—all staff (not just leadership or supervisors), young people, and their families, for example.



3

**Readiness is ongoing.** Although the term “readiness” implies a onetime touchpoint—in other words, “we are ready, let’s go!”—readiness is always evolving, and it changes as time elapses. Understanding and building readiness is therefore an ongoing process that requires continuous reflection and recalibration.



4

**Readiness is something you can measure and build across time.** Contrary to what the term “readiness” might imply—that you must be ready before you can begin—we have witnessed that readiness is something that can be built across time. To increase or improve readiness, you must first have a mechanism for assessing and monitoring readiness. This was the driving force behind our creation of the [Ready to Implement Toolkit](#), which includes a free, reliable, validated readiness assessment that produces an automated report with readiness scores and access to resources.



5

**Programs do not always have to be 100% ready for change, but they should adapt implementation based on their levels of readiness.** Programs should not only know how ready they are but also have access to resources and flexibility to adjust implementation activities.