



# PA Essential Practices Self-Assessment Guide

*Every school. Every step.  
Every student succeeds.*

# INTRODUCTION

There is a substantive evidence base identifying explicit conditions and practices that are most critical for improved teaching and learning for all students. Drawing from decades of school improvement research, lessons from leading states and reflections on successes and challenges in our local statewide system of support, Pennsylvania’s school improvement efforts will enhance our approach to school improvement beginning with a more robust focus on essential conditions observed in schools that have shown significant and sustained gains in student achievement:

- Employ intentional practices for improving instruction;
- Establish a school-wide community of practice through leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration;
- Provide student-specific academic, social, emotional, and behavioral supports to all students; and
- Provide evidence-based, job-embedded professional learning for all leadership and staff.

Through a [pilot in Spring 2018](#), the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and 19 schools across three diverse districts (Allentown School District, Juniata County School District and Pittsburgh Public Schools) field-tested tools and a process to improve our capacity to diagnose and correct the systemic issues that undergird the performance challenges in individual schools. Through authentic collaboration with Superintendents from these three districts and their teams, we explored the following:

- A more robust approach to assessing the conditions and practices associated with rapid and sustained improvement in teaching and learning;
- Integrating state-level initiatives within the context of current district systems and priorities; and
- Authentic empowerment of district and school communities to prioritize improvement efforts that are most pressing for the students they serve.

Feedback from pilot participants contributed to the final design of a rubric for measuring current implementation of 18 essential practices, as well as an evidence-based self-assessment process completed by a committee of diverse stakeholders and relies on data from a variety of sources to ensure an objective and reliable assessment.

This guidebook, the PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities rubric (Appendix A) and supplemental materials (Appendix B & C) are designed to improve the focus of the comprehensive needs assessment in two key ways:

- Improve our capacity to diagnose and correct the systemic issues that undergird performance challenges in individual schools; and
- Increase the efficiency and efficacy of school improvement efforts and sustain progress over time.

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# PA ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

The purpose of the PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities is to provide formative feedback and inform school improvement efforts. The data gathered through the Essential Practices Assessment process will help schools and local education agencies (LEAs) understand the current status of the implementation of evidence-based practices that foster sustained improvement in teaching and learning for all students and assist school communities in identifying priorities for improvement that will lead to improved teaching and learning for all students.

While the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) highly encourages all schools to use the PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities, schools designated for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) and Title I schools designated for Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (A-TSI), and the districts that support and manage them, are required to use the PA Essential Practices for Schools as an integral part of a comprehensive needs assessment.

The PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities provides critical information and feedback on the progress districts and schools are making toward improving student outcomes.

- Schools designated for CSI or Title I schools designated for A-TSI will utilize the PA Essential Practices for Schools as part of the comprehensive needs assessment process beginning in the 2018-19 school year.
- Schools will update their Essential Practices Assessment in Spring of each subsequent school year.
- PDE will use the Essential Practices Self-Assessment to inform deployment of support and assess progress over time for CSI and A-TSI schools and their LEAs.

## STRUCTURE OF THE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES RUBRIC

The PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities is divided into four core conditions:

1. Focus on Continuous Improvement of Instruction;
2. Empower Leadership;
3. Provide Student-Centered Support Systems; and
4. Foster Quality Professional Learning.

Within each condition, discrete essential practices are defined to provide a clear playbook for school leaders in their efforts to establish and maintain these core conditions for success. There are 18 essential practices in total.

For each practice, a rubric is provided to describe the progression of implementation across a continuum from “not yet evident” to “exemplary”. Although the descriptors within the implementation continuum are unique to each practice, to give you a general sense of the meaning of each of the four implementation stages, Figure 1, below, shows the universal meaning and progression across the implementation continuum.

*Figure 1: Universal Meaning and Progression across the Implementation Continuum*

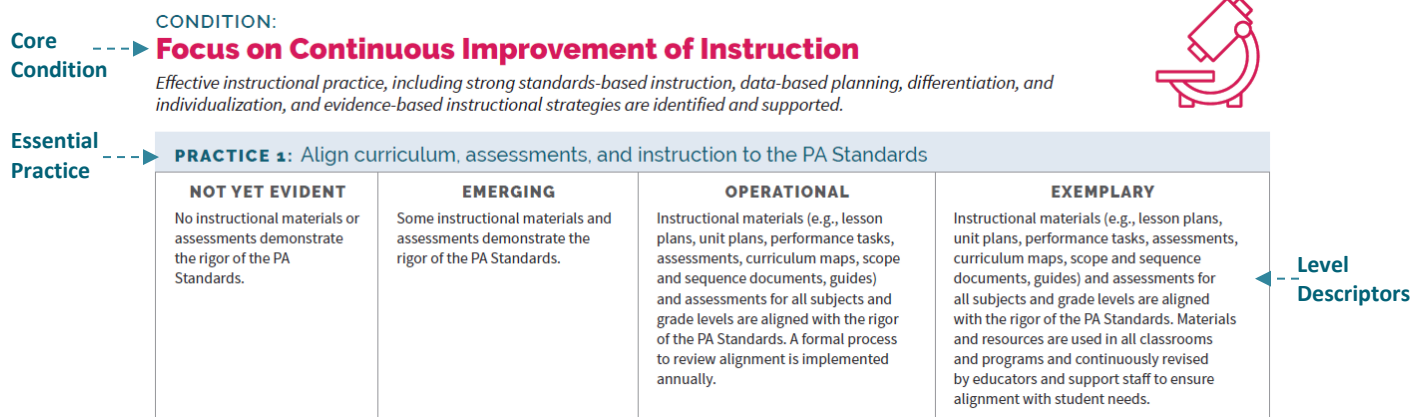
<b>NOT YET EVIDENT</b>	<b>EMERGING</b>	<b>OPERATIONAL</b>	<b>EXEMPLARY</b>
There is little or no evidence of implementation.	Initial steps to implement the practice have occurred and generated some evidence of implementation in a few areas.	The practice is implemented consistently and has generated evidence of implementation throughout the district.	The practice is implemented at a high level; there is evidence of continuous improvement of the practice, yielding evidence of more equitable results.

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Each practice also defines discrete **indicators**, further defining specific pieces of each practice along the implementation continuum.

Figure 2, below, illustrates the overall structure of the rubric, including a core condition, an essential practice, the implementation continuum, and implementation level descriptor.

*Figure 2: Sample Implementation Continuum for a Specific Essential Practice*



## PA ESSENTIAL PRACTICES SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Essential Practices Self-Assessment is a collaboration between school leadership and diverse stakeholders and LEA leadership and staff. The process is designed to determine the current status of implementation of 18 evidence-based practices that foster sustained improvement in teaching and learning for all students in a manner that:

- Promotes shared responsibility for school improvement among a diverse group of stakeholders across the school community; and
- Relies on a comprehensive array of sources of evidence to establish a valid and reliable assessment of a school’s current level of implementation of practices that are fundamental for sustained improvement.

**The Essential Practices Self-Assessment is not an evaluation of any one individual or stakeholder group. It is a formative assessment of the school’s current implementation of 18 practices that are essential for sustained improvement in student outcomes.** It is important for the school team to keep this in mind and continuously reinforce the school community’s understanding of the purpose of the self-assessment throughout the process.

Prior to conducting the self-assessment, review the listed materials in the following order:

- PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities Rubric (Appendix A)
- PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities: Quick Reference Guide (Appendix B)
- PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities: Indicators of Operational Implementation (Appendix C)

### Step 1: Form a Self-Assessment Team

Each school should begin the PA Essential Practices Self-Assessment process by forming a team that will complete the self-assessment process. Please note, the self-assessment team does not necessarily need to be representative of all school stakeholders; the assessment process itself is meant to lift the voices and perspectives of all stakeholder groups through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and site visits.

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The school administrator will form a team of four to six members who will support all self-assessment activities, including:

- Coordination of self-assessment logistics (e.g., scheduling of assessment activities, data and artifact collection, survey administration, determination of interview/focus group questions, etc.);
- Facilitation of interviews and focus groups;
- Note-taking during interviews and focus groups;
- Classroom and building walk-throughs;
- Analysis of evidence to determine current implementation status on the rubric; and
- Documentation of notable observations/comments for each source of evidence that informed rubric ratings.

## Step 2: Gather and Analyze Multiple Sources of Data to Prepare for the Self-Assessment

During this step, the self-assessment team will collaboratively collect and organize a variety of sources of evidence. This will include documents like data reports, artifacts, and surveys. Interviews and focus groups will also provide key feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders. Please refer to the “Quick Reference Guide” in Appendix B for possible sources of evidence and data to gather for analysis for each essential practice.

Below is a step-by-step guide to prepare for the self-assessment.

- **Collect a variety of data and artifacts**, using the possible sources of evidence listed in the “Quick Reference Guide” in Appendix B (e.g., curriculum documents, lesson plans, IEPs, ELD plans, curriculum documents shared with families, classroom visit summaries, educator surveys, etc.).
- **Administer surveys to school staff.**

### Important note about stakeholder surveys:

Surveys and focus groups are both very effective methods to solicit input from a wide variety of stakeholders. If your LEA already administers surveys to educators, students, and parents/ guardians, your school is encouraged to crosswalk the survey items with the PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities and use those items as sources of evidence for the respective practice(s). It is highly recommended that the survey data be no more than one year old. If the surveys were last administered more than one year ago, we encourage you to administer them again prior to engaging in the PA Essential Practices Self-Assessment.

- **Analyze preliminary data and evidence to lift high-level trends and create a snapshot of student performance and the overall state of the school** (e.g., enrollment, teacher retention, stakeholder perceptions, etc.); utilize data analysis findings to identify areas to probe further during remaining self-assessment activities (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and walkthroughs) and identify any gaps in evidence.
- **Schedule focus groups** with teachers, families, students.

Schools can customize questions based on:

- Stakeholder group and/or type of focus group;
- Identified areas to probe further (e.g., areas identified through collection of data and artifacts, through

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- surveys, etc.); and
- Other district contextual factors (e.g., reframe questions using language familiar to the district, etc.

- **Facilitate scheduled focus groups.** The school self-assessment team will conduct stakeholder interviews and focus groups and capture notes from these conversations.

### Guidance for facilitating focus groups:

- Depending on the size of the school community, three to five focus groups with students and three to five focus groups with educators should be conducted prior to the PA Essential Practices Self-Assessment.
- The focus groups should be facilitated by neutral individuals who would typically engage in honest discussions about student or educator experiences in the school. For example, school counselors or another adult in the building whom students trust would be the most ideal person to facilitate student focus groups. Lead teachers, mentors, or coaches might be best fit for facilitation of educator focus groups. The presence of rating supervisors in focus groups is discouraged, as this typically compromises focus group discussion and candor.
- When planning for focus groups, keep in mind a plan for following up with communication regarding how the focus group feedback is being used to inform the school planning process.
- Feedback gathered through focus groups should remain anonymous. Focus group data should be presented as high-level themes that emerged across focus groups. If a direct quote would be a powerful piece of evidence, do not attach a name or any other information that can be traced back to the individual who provided it.

- **Gather walk-through data representative of all school types and grade levels within the district.** Coordinate with principals to ensure school staff is aware of the walk-through and its purpose (e.g., non-evaluative, informing a district continuous improvement planning process, etc.).

## Step 3: Self-Assess Current Implementation Using the Essential Practices for Schools Rubric

- **Each member of the self-assessment team completes an individual, anonymous self-assessment.** PDE recommends that the self-assessment team members complete an individual, anonymous self-assessments of the PA Essential Practices for Schools Rubric (see Appendix A) prior to the group self-assessment. This allows time for individual members to learn the contents of the rubric and prepare initial thoughts about their own perceptions of the school's current implementation of each of the 18 essential practices. *Please see guidance on how to rate implementation using the PA Essential Practices for Schools Rubric below.*

Identify a point person to collect and collate the individual committee member responses and summarize ratings (e.g., tallies sheet, synthesize rubric, etc.) in each implementation level for each practice prior to the scheduled PA Essential Practices for Schools Self-Assessment.

- **Assign self-assessment roles.** On the day of the scheduled PA Essential Practices Self-Assessment, it is important to identify members of the self-assessment team who will serve in the following roles:
  - **Facilitator:** Person responsible for guiding the self-assessment team through review of relevant sources of evidence and discussion of agreed-upon rating for each of the 18 essential practices. The Facilitator will likely be the principal or identified designee.
  - **Note-taker:** Person responsible for capturing key points of discussion about the evidence for each of the 18 essential practices, as well as the group’s agreed-upon rating for each practice.
  - **Curator of evidence:** Person responsible for organizing and ensuring the committee’s access to the possible sources of evidence for each essential practice as the group moves from one practice to the next.
  
- **Conduct the self-assessment with the full self-assessment team** using the PA Essential Practice for Schools Rubric and following the process recommended below.

RECOMMENDED SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS	GUIDANCE
1. Share the goals, purpose, and process for the self-assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce that this is a formative assessment of the district’s current status of implementation, not an evaluation or indictment of any one individual or stakeholder group.</li> <li>• Establish norms for engagement in the self-assessment that create conditions for safe, open discussion about what the sources of evidence suggest about the current implementation of each practice.</li> <li>• Keep the group focused on the sources of evidence, not anecdotal perceptions.</li> </ul>
2. Start with Practice 1. Review the Rubric indicators for the selected essential practice at each level of the implementation continuum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the “Quick Reference Guide” (Appendix B) to identify sources of evidence related to the selected essential practice.</li> <li>• Review the “Look-fors” tool (Appendix C) for more guidance regarding what to look for in specific pieces of evidence in alignment with the practice.</li> <li>• Ensure everyone is clear on what the practice entails and looks like at each level of the implementation continuum.</li> </ul>
3. Review the summary of individual, anonymous self-assessment ratings related to the selected essential practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify where the team is aligned on potential ratings and where deeper analysis and discussion of evidence is needed.</li> <li>• If there is a high degree of consensus, allow time for the team to confirm whether gathered evidence supports the initial consensual rating. Test assumptions and document evidence before moving to step 4.</li> <li>• If there is a great deal of diversity in ratings, the team will spend more time in step 4 considering the guiding questions in the “Quick Reference Guide” (Appendix B), the “Look-fors” (Appendix C), and the school’s gathered evidence.</li> </ul>

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<p>4. Compare gathered evidence of the selected essential practice to the Rubric indicators at each of the implementation levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the guiding questions in the “Quick Reference Guide” (Appendix B), the “Look-fors” (Appendix C) to discuss to what level of implementation the school’s evidence currently supports.</li> <li>• Document evidence that indicates level of implementation progress for each indicator (e.g., using a note-catcher, folder of evidence, etc.).</li> </ul>
<p>5. For each indicator come to consensus on the current level of implementation.</p>	<p>On the rubric, document the agreed upon level of implementation progress for each indicator by highlighting/boldfacing the indicator that best describes the district’s current level of implementation.</p>
<p>6. Repeat this process for each practice until you complete these steps for each of the 18 practices.</p>	<p>At the end of this process, schools should have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Completed rubric with bold/highlighted indicators for each of the 18 essential practices essential practices; and</li> <li>□ Documented notes and evidence to support rubric ratings.</li> </ul>

#### Step 4: Determine School Priorities for Improvement

Once the self-assessment team finalizes and documents its current implementation status for each practice, **convene to summarize findings and lift trends from the review process.** This debrief should include a summary of findings that highlight specific strengths and challenges aligned to the core conditions and essential practices, as well as a presentation of final ratings for each practice.

- **Identify the highest-leverage priorities for continuous improvement.** A school may choose to have the existing self-assessment team make these decisions and propose recommendations or a school may invite other leaders and stakeholders to review framework findings and participate in the prioritization discussion. Ultimately, the school will elect a manageable set of essential practices (no more than three) to focus on for the current school planning cycle.
- **These priorities should inform the school’s plan.** It is recommended that schools consider any recommendations from the self-assessment team, conduct root cause analysis on challenges related to identified essential practices, and plan for continuous improvement. It may take several years to reach fully operational implementation of any given practice.

#### Recommendation to determine the highest-leverage priority areas:

- Start with a strong vision; all other essential practices flow from the vision.
- Identify root causes; drill down to determine which essential practices can impact multiple areas of leadership, teaching, and learning.
- Look for trends across all stakeholder groups; for example, if all surveys and focus groups are lifting a concern with programs and supports for a student group or outcome area, this signals urgency.



## APPENDIX OF ADDITIONAL TOOLS

TOOL	PURPOSE	SUGGESTED USE
<a href="#">Appendix A: Rubric</a>	Provides a clear playbook for school leaders in their efforts to establish and maintain the core conditions for success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During Step 2 of the review process for individual, anonymous self-assessments.</li> <li>• During Step 3 of the review process to self-assess and document implementation progress in each essential practice.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Appendix B: Quick Reference Guide</a>	Guiding questions and possible sources of evidence, aligned to each essential practice to determine a school's current implementation progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During Step 2 of the review process to determine sources of evidence to collect.</li> <li>• During Step 3 of the review process to assist with analysis of evidence.</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Appendix C: Look-Fors</a>	Detailed Look-Fors aligned to each essential practice, to provide details about what districts should be "seeing" in their possible sources of evidence if they are truly operational or exemplary in that practice.	During Step 3 of the review process to assist with analysis of evidence.