Pennsylvania Essential Practices for Districts:
Self-Assessment Guide

Pennsylvania Essential Practices for Districts Self-Assessment Guide

The Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) **Theory of Action for School Improvement**[1] outlines three goals for continuous improvement of leadership, teaching, and learning in Pennsylvania:

- *LEAs, including public school districts, charter schools, and career and technical schools, are accountable and empowered to serve schools identified for support and improvement;*

- *Schools and communities are accountable and empowered to provide effective, engaging instruction within a supportive culture; and*

- *All students enrolled in PA's public education system are engaged, healthy, safe, and **ready for college, career, and community**.*

In Spring 2018, PDE and 19 schools across three diverse districts field tested tools and a process for school improvement efforts, which resulted in the development of the PA Essential Practices for Schools and their Communities rubric and supplemental materials.[2]

Building upon those efforts, PDE, in collaboration with external partners, has identified research-based conditions and essential practices for districts to support continuous improvement efforts. With input from stakeholders across the state, PDE produced the PA Essential Practices for Districts and toolkit of resources to support districts across the state to incorporate the framework and tools into the comprehensive planning process.

Self-Assessment Guide Overview

This self-assessment guide details the following important information:

- *Purpose of Pennsylvania's Essential Practices for Districts;*
- *Structure of Pennsylvania's Essential Practices for Districts Rubric;*
- *Self-assessment process; and*
- *Appendix of additional tools to support this process.*

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1   https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/K-12/ESSA/TheoryofAction.pdf
2   https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/K-12/ESSA/EssentialPracticesforSchoolsCommunities.pdf

Purpose

The PA Essential Practices for Districts is designed to promote a culture of continuous improvement across all districts and schools in Pennsylvania. The purpose of this guide and the PA Essential Practices for Districts self-assessment is to provide formative feedback as districts engage in the comprehensive planning process. These tools are meant to be non-evaluative, uncovering systems, policies, and/or practices within districts that are either facilitating or hindering sustained improvement in teaching and learning across schools. The data gathered through this process is meant to inform a comprehensive plan for continuous improvement, encouraging districts to prioritize no more than three essential practices for improvement at a time.

The PA Essential Practices for Districts Toolkit/Process **Is/Does...**	The PA Essential Practices for Districts Toolkit/Process **Is/Does Not...**
• **Is for all districts.** The framework is designed with all PA districts in mind, regardless of size, location, population, or performance profile. • **Is for self-reflection and planning.** These tools are intended for all districts to intentionally self-assess and plan for continuous improvement. • **Is customizable.** These tools propose a process and guidance for districts to self-assess and plan in a way that meets their needs. • **Highlights starting points and progress.** This framework is a tool to understand (a) where there is already progress in implementing the essential practices and (b) where there are logical starting points for local improvement efforts. • **Encourages prioritization of essential practices.** Districts should prioritize and focus on only a few essential practices at a time that will have the greatest impact. • **Informs a process over time.** We use a continuum of implementation because implementation doesn't happen overnight. Districts should aim for operational and then work towards exemplary over time.	• **Not only for districts with CSI or A-TSI schools.** The essential practices are true for all districts, regardless of the number of schools designated for support and improvement within a district. • **Not punitive or evaluative.** These tools are non-evaluative, for self- reflection and continuous improvement purposes only. • **Not one-size-fits-all.** We appreciate that all districts are unique and may need to modify processes to their local context. • **Does not identify district shortcomings.** This framework details a progression of implementation of essential practices to help districts identify where to start given their unique needs and context. • **Not an "all or nothing" approach.** It is a lot of work to thoughtfully bring each essential practice to life, and districts should not try to do everything at once. It is about quality over quantity. • **Not short-term or time-bound.** Each district has different starting places and different needs, and should plan to reach operational in an amount of time that makes sense for them.

Structure of the Pennsylvania Essential Practices for Districts Rubric

The PA Essential Practices for Districts (see Appendix A) are divided into five core conditions, related essential practices, and more detailed continuum of implementation that make up each practice.

The five **core conditions** are:

- *Empower Leadership for District Continuous Improvement;*
- *Focus on Continuous Improvement of Instruction;*
- *Provide Student-Centered Supports to Ensure That All Students are Ready to Learn;*
- *Implement Data-Driven Human Capital Strategies; and*
- *Organize and Allocate Resources and Services Strategically and Equitably.*

Within each condition, discrete **essential practices** are defined to provide a clear playbook for district leaders in their efforts to establish and maintain these core conditions for success. There are 12 essential practices in total.

For each essential practice, an **implementation continuum** is provided to describe the progression from "not yet evident" to "exemplary". Although the indicators within the implementation continuum are unique to each practice, to give 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*

NOT YET EVIDENT	EMERGING	OPERATIONAL	EXEMPLARY
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.

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 detailed indicators.

Core Condition ┄┄┄►

CONDITION:

Empower Leadership for District Continuous Improvement

District leadership establishes a vision for continuous improvement and cultivates a culture of collective responsibility to provide the conditions for all students to be college, career, and community ready. There is a shared commitment to collaboratively identify, plan, implement, monitor, evaluate, and communicate the conditions necessary to continuously improve student learning and outcomes.

Essential Practice ┄┄┄►

PRACTICE 1: Foster a vision and culture of high expectations for success for all stakeholders

Implementation Continuum ◄┄┄

NOT YET EVIDENT	EMERGING	OPERATIONAL	EXEMPLARY
• District leadership does not define or communicate a clear vision for district and school continuous improvement. • There is no clear vision for the success of all students, including students who have historically experienced opportunity and achievement gaps. • The district does not yet take observable action to build a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and a growth-orientation among district staff and stakeholders.	• District leadership demonstrates efforts to define a vision for district and school continuous improvement; the vision is informal and/or inconsistently communicated. • The developing vision may articulate expectations for the success of students but does not yet specifically address students who have historically experienced opportunity and achievement gaps. • The district has initiated steps toward building a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and/or a growth-orientation among district staff and/ or stakeholders; efforts may be developing and/or limited to only a few stakeholder groups.	• District leadership defines and regularly communicates a clear vision for district and school continuous improvement. • The vision clearly articulates expectations for the success of all students, including students who have historically experienced opportunity and achievement gaps. • The district takes observable action to build a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and a growth-orientation among district staff and stakeholders.	• District leadership, in collaboration with a diverse array of school and community stakeholders, defines and regularly communicates a clear vision for district and school continuous improvement. • The vision clearly articulates expectations for the success of all students and district leaders publicly communicate, review, and address these opportunity and achievement gaps in order to advocate for district and school needs. • The district takes observable action to build a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and a growth-orientation among district staff and stakeholders, resulting in high levels of school, family, and community belief and trust in the district and district leadership (e.g., as measured by formal surveys).

◄┄┄ **Indicators**

Pennsylvania Essential Practices for Districts Self-Assessment Process

The Essential Practices for Districts Self-Assessment is a collaboration between district and school leadership and diverse stakeholders, including staff, students, families, and community members. The process is designed to determine the current status of implementation of 12 evidence-based practices that foster sustained improvement in leadership, teaching, and learning for all students in a manner that:

• *Promotes shared responsibility for district and school improvement among a diverse group of stakeholders across the district;*

• *Relies on a comprehensive array of sources of evidence to establish a valid and reliable assessment of a district's current level of implementation of practices that are fundamental for continuous and sustained improvement; and*

• *Encourages prioritization of one to three essential practices for district comprehensive planning.*

Form a Self-Assessment Team ► Gather and Analyze Multiple Sources of Data to Prepare for the Self-Assessment ► Self-Assess Current Implementation Using Essential Practices for Districts Rubric ► Determine District Priorities for Improvement

Step 1: Form a Self-Assessment Team

Each district should begin the PA Essential Practices for Districts Self-Assessment 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 district 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.

The district Superintendent 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 *(please also see considerations for customization later in this document).*

- ☐ ***Collect a variety of data and artifacts,*** using the possible sources of evidence listed in the "Quick Reference Guide" in Appendix B (e.g., most recent district comprehensive plan, communication materials, sample current school improvement plans and related documents, district-wide student achievement data, stakeholder survey data, etc.).

- ☐ ***Administer surveys to central office and school staff.*** Sample central office and school staff survey questions can be found in Appendix D, as well as guidance for administering the surveys.

- ☐ ***Analyze preliminary data and evidence to lift high-level trends and create a snapshot of district-wide student performance and the overall state of the district*** (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.

> **Best Practice Tip:**
>
> Find opportunities to analyze preliminary data along the way.
>
> This can help reveal gaps in evidence prior to the actual self-assessment and allow districts to probe deeper into areas where data reveal challenges or successes.
>
> Use ongoing data analysis to inform deeper levels of questioning in focus groups, interviews, and walkthroughs.

- ☐ ***Identify and schedule interviews and focus groups*** with district leadership, representatives of the school board, central office staff responsible for leading key district functions (e.g., academics, student support, facilities, human resources, finance, operations, etc.), principals, families, students.

  Districts will have different approaches to the organization of interviews and focus groups based on their size,

organizational structure, and individual roles and responsibilities, as well as other contextual factors.

A bank of questions aligned to each essential practice can be found in Appendix E. Districts can customize questions based on:

- *Stakeholder group and/or type of interview/focus group;*
- *Identified areas to probe further (e.g., areas identified through collection of data and artifacts, through surveys, etc.); and*
- *Other district contextual factors (e.g., reframe questions using language familiar to the district, etc.*

See the chart below for potential interviews and focus groups. Appendix E also provides additional guidance for maximizing interviews and focus groups to gather evidence toward all essential practices.

POTENTIAL INTERVIEWS *(Large Districts)*	POTENTIAL INTERVIEWS *(Smaller Districts)*
In districts with a larger organizational structure, we recommend conducting one-on-one interviews by role. Questions will be customized based on role to understand progress towards role-related essential practices. • Superintendent (90 minutes) • Self-Assessment District Lead (45 minutes) • Chief of Staff/Strategy or other district leaders not otherwise named below (45 minutes) • Chief Finance Officer or similar role (45 minutes) • Chief Talent/HR Officer or similar role (45 minutes) • Chief Academic Officer (45 minutes) • Chief Accountability and Data Officer, or similar role (45 minutes) • District Lead for Family and Student Supports and/or Community Partnerships (45 minutes)	*In districts with smaller central office teams, we recommend conducting one-on-one interviews by functional area. This allows for the review team to gather evidence toward all essential practices, even if the team interviews the same individual for different functions.* • District Leadership (90 minutes) • Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction (45 minutes) • Accountability/Data (45 minutes) • Talent/HR/Human Capital (45 minutes) • Finance and Operations (45 minutes) • Family and Student Supports/Community Partnerships (45 minutes)

POTENTIAL FOCUS GROUPS
• Two school board members, including board president (60 minutes) • Principal supervisors focus group (45 minutes), *if applicable* • Principals focus group (60 minutes), *representative of all grade levels, school types, levels of performance, locations, etc.* • Parents/guardians/family member focus groups (45 minutes each), *4-6 participants in each focus group that represent district demographics* • High school student focus groups (45 minutes each), *6-8 participants in each focus group that represent different school types and demographics*

☐ *Facilitate scheduled interviews and focus groups.* The district self-assessment team will conduct stakeholder interviews and focus groups and capture notes from these conversations. Ideally, all members of the team should be present during every interview (and at a minimum each interview/focus group should be conducted with a facilitator and a note-taker).

> ## Guidance for Facilitating Interviews and Focus Groups:
>
> - Be mindful of who is conducting each interview and focus group; for example, a principal supervisor should not be conducting a principal focus group.
>
> - When planning for interviews and focus groups, keep in mind a plan for following up with communication regarding how the interview and focus group feedback is being used to inform the comprehensive 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.
>
> - Take advantage of time between focus groups to synthesize findings, check for gaps in evidence, and identify areas to probe further with remaining stakeholders.

☐ *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 Districts Rubric

☐ *Each member of the district self-assessment team complete an individual, anonymous self-assessment.* PDE recommends that the self-assessment review team members complete an individual, anonymous self-assessments of the PA Essential Practices for Districts 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 district's current implementation of each of the 12 essential practices. *Please see guidance on how to rate implementation using the PA Essential Practices for Districts 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 Districts 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 12 essential practices. The Facilitator will likely be the district Superintendent or identified designee.

- **Note-taker:** Person responsible for capturing key points of discussion about the evidence for each of the 12 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 Districts Rubric and following the process recommended below.

RECOMMENDED SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS	GUIDANCE
1. Share the goals, purpose, and process for the self-assessment.	• 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. • 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. • Keep the group focused on the sources of evidence, not anecdotal perceptions.
2. Start with Practice 1. Review the Rubric indicators for the selected essential practice at each level of the implementation continuum.	• Use the "Quick Reference Guide" (Appendix B) to identify sources of evidence related to the selected essential practice. • 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. • Ensure everyone is clear on what the practice entails and looks like at each level of the implementation continuum.
3. Review the summary of individual, anonymous self-assessment ratings related to the selected essential practice.	• Identify where the team is aligned on potential ratings and where deeper analysis and discussion of evidence is needed. • 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. • 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 district's gathered evidence.

4. Compare gathered evidence of the selected essential practice to the Rubric indicators at each of the implementation levels.	• Use the guiding questions in the "Quick Reference Guide" (Appendix B), the "Look-fors" (Appendix C) to discuss to what level of implementation the district's evidence currently supports. • Document evidence that indicates level of implementation progress for each indicator (e.g., using a note-catcher, folder of evidence, etc.).
5. For each indicator come to consensus on the current level of implementation.	• 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 (See Figure 3, below). • Because each practice involves multiple layers of implementation, it is possible for a district to meet indicators across more than one column within the same essential practice based upon each indicator's level of implementation.
6. Determine an overall implementation rating for the selected essential practice.	• If progress within an essential practice falls across several levels on the implementation continuum, the district can select the average rating *(e.g., if indicators span three levels, choose the middle level; if indicators span all four levels, choose the lowest of the middle two)*. • Shade the full column to indicate a districts' overall implementation level for each essential practice (see Figure 4 for an example).
7. Repeat this process for each practice until you complete these steps for each of the 12 practices.	At the end of this process, districts should have: ☐ Completed rubric with bold/highlighted indicators and shaded implementation columns for all essential practices; and ☐ Documented notes and evidence to support rubric ratings.

Figure 3: *Example of District Placement on the Framework Based on Implementation Progress*

In this example, within the same essential practice, the district is "emerging" in one indicator, "operational" in another, and "not yet evident" in the remaining indicator, meaning the district demonstrates different levels of implementation progress in the same essential practice.

CONDITION:
Empower Leadership for District Continuous Improvement

District leadership establishes a vision for continuous improvement and cultivates a culture of collective responsibility to provide the conditions for all students to be college, career, and community ready. There is a shared commitment to collaboratively identify, plan, implement, monitor, evaluate, and communicate the conditions necessary to continuously improve student learning and outcomes.

PRACTICE 1: Foster a vision and culture of high expectations for success for all stakeholders

NOT YET EVIDENT	EMERGING	OPERATIONAL	EXEMPLARY
• District leadership does not define or communicate a clear vision for district and school continuous improvement. • There is no clear vision for the success of all students, including students who have historically experienced opportunity and achievement gaps. • The district does not yet take observable action to build a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and a growth-orientation among district staff and stakeholders.	• District leadership demonstrates efforts to define a vision for district and school continuous improvement; the vision is informal and/or inconsistently communicated. • The developing vision may articulate expectations for the success of students but does not yet specifically address students who have historically experienced opportunity and achievement gaps. • The district has initiated steps toward building a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and/or a growth-orientation among district staff and/or stakeholders; efforts may be developing and/or limited to only a few stakeholder groups.	• District leadership defines and regularly communicates a clear vision for district and school continuous improvement. • The vision clearly articulates expectations for the success of all students, including students who have historically experienced opportunity and achievement gaps. • The district takes observable action to build a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and a growth-orientation among district staff and stakeholders.	• District leadership, in collaboration with a diverse array of school and community stakeholders, defines and regularly communicates a clear vision for district and school continuous improvement. • The vision clearly articulates expectations for the success of all students and district leaders publicly communicate, review, and address these opportunity and achievement gaps in order to advocate for district and school needs. • The district takes observable action to build a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and a growth-orientation among district staff and stakeholders, resulting in high levels of school, family, and community belief and trust in the district and district leadership (e.g., as measured by formal surveys).

Figure 4: *Example of Final Rating for Current Implementation of Essential Practice*

This example shows how a district might synthesize the indicator levels into a full implementation rating for the entire essential practice (note the gray shaded column).

This rating system supports the district in two ways: (1) the single, overall rating for each practice allows the district to more easily assess their implementation progress over time, and (2) the yellow highlighted indicators allow the district to identify specific next steps and supports needed to progress to the next level of implementation.

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Step 4: Determine District 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 district may choose to have the existing self-assessment team make these decisions and propose recommendations or a district may invite other leaders and stakeholders to review framework findings and participate in the prioritization discussion. Ultimately, the district will elect a manageable set of essential practices (no more than three) to focus on for the current comprehensive planning cycle.

- **These priorities should inform the district's comprehensive planning.** It is recommended that districts 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.

Recommendations 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 or indicators can impact multiple areas of leadership, teaching, and learning.

- Look for trends across all stakeholder groups; for example, if all surveys, interviews, and focus groups are lifting a concern with programs and supports for a student group or outcome area, this signals urgency.

- Identify practices in which no indicators were highlighted as "operational" or "exemplary".

Appendix of Additional Tools

TOOL	PURPOSE	SUGGESTED USE
Appendix A: Rubric	Provides a clear playbook for district leaders in their efforts to establish and maintain the core conditions for success.	• During Step 2 of the review process for individual, anonymous self-assessments. • During Step 3 of the review process to self-assess and document implementation progress in each essential practice.
Appendix B: Quick Reference Guide	Guiding questions and possible sources of evidence, aligned to each essential practice to determine a district's current implementation progress.	• During Step 2 of the review process to determine sources of evidence to collect. • During Step 3 of the review process to assist with analysis of evidence.
Appendix C: Look-Fors	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.
Appendix D: Sample Survey Questions *(for district and school-based staff)*	A bank of survey questions aligned to each essential practice to assist with data-gathering from central office and school staff.	• During Step 2 of the review process to focus data-gathering.
Appendix E: Sample Interview/ Focus Group Questions	A bank of questions aligned to each essential practice to assist with information-gathering. This document includes a list of master questions by essential practice and a list of recommended questions by potential stakeholder group.	• During Step 2 of the review process to focus information-gathering. • During Step 2 of the review process to conduct interviews and focus groups.