

Work Collaborative Forum 3: Slice Teams and Implementation Science

18th November 2025

Executive Summary

Our third forum explored how schools can implement meaningful change that actually sticks. James Mannion joined us to share research and practice around 'slice teams' – cross-curricular collaborative groups that help schools make better decisions and build sustainable change.

The session revealed that most school improvement initiatives fail to improve outcomes, with success rates estimated at well below 30%. James shared evidence from implementation science, particularly from healthcare, showing that thoughtful collaborative structures can dramatically improve both the implementation process and the outcomes themselves.

The forum generated honest discussion about the practical challenges of building collaborative cultures, the tension between autonomy and structure, and how schools can create the conditions for sustainable change. This summary reflects our open source commitment – all insights from Work Collaborative forums are freely available for the education community.

What Brought Us Together

Building on our August and September forums, this session brought external expertise into our collaborative inquiry. James Mannion, author of *Making Change Stick*, joined to share his research and practice around implementation science in schools.

Shane opened by updating the group on Work Collaborative's current projects, including Kathryn Taylor's research on community confidence in schools, discussions about values frameworks, and plans to test the double diamond model in specific school change projects. The collaborative continues to operate as a not-for-profit in its founding stage, focused on empowering schools to lead change for themselves.

The Mind Blowing Question

James began with what he calls "the mind blowing question": What proportion of school improvement initiatives leads to improved pupil outcomes?

The answer, from both research and experience, is shockingly low. Teacher Tapp surveyed their database and found over 70% of educators estimated the success rate at below 30%. School leaders were notably more optimistic than classroom teachers in their estimates.

James referenced John Kotter's research showing that more than 70% of needed change either isn't launched, isn't completed, or finishes over budget and late with initial aspirations unmet. Analysis of the Education Endowment Foundation's 211 evaluated projects found that only 65 had positive impact on learning outcomes – giving a 69.2% failure rate even for pre-screened, high-potential initiatives.

Learning from Healthcare: The Implementation Gap

James introduced implementation science as a field that emerged from healthcare, where researchers found a shocking 17-year lag for best practice to achieve just 14% uptake across the system. This means there's a high chance patients receive sub-optimal treatment even when better evidence-based treatments are available.

He shared a quote from Anthony Bryk and colleagues describing the pattern in education: "Implement fast, learn slow and burn goodwill as you go." This captures the cost of constant failed initiatives – not just wasted time but damaged trust and growing cynicism about whether change is even possible.

The Cincinnati Children's Hospital Example

James shared a powerful example from Cincinnati Children's Hospital, where high asthma admission rates persisted despite knowing how to treat asthma effectively. They assembled a team including medics, school nurses, pharmacists, patients and families to understand why treatment wasn't working.

Through this collaborative investigation, they discovered practical barriers: kids forgot medication at home, had two houses needing separate medications, parents couldn't collect prescriptions due to work schedules and lack of transport, homes had damp and mould issues with negligent landlords.

By addressing these root causes – making medication available at school, providing multiple medications, delivering prescriptions to homes, providing mould spray and legal support – they reduced hospital admissions by more than half within five years, with massive reductions in missed school and work days.

The Power of Slice Teams

Dean Fixsen's research found that when change is implemented using representative collaborative teams, you can achieve 80% uptake within three years, compared to the typical 14% over 17 years. This dramatic difference led James to develop the slice team approach for schools.

A slice team is a representative cross-section of the school community working together on specific change initiatives. The term comes from taking a 'slice' across traditional hierarchies and subject silos.

Slice Team Core Principles

James outlined key elements of effective slice teams:

- **Cross-curricular mixing** – Including people from different departments, roles and perspectives to overcome groupthink
- **Representative membership** – Including keen supporters, neutral parties, and even sceptics to ensure all voices are heard
- **Regular meetings** – Often 30 minutes fortnightly works better than longer, less frequent sessions
- **Focus on real challenges** – Working on actual classroom and school issues, not theoretical discussions
- **Clear ways of working** – Ground rules establishing psychological safety and equal voice regardless of role

Two Key Benefits

James identified two major advantages to working with slice teams:

1. Better decision-making through diverse perspectives and avoiding groupthink
2. Buy-in from the school community, as people see genuine representative involvement rather than top-down mandates

Three Implementation Models

James described three ways schools can work with slice teams, depending on available time:

- **One-off consultation** – Gathering input from representative groups before decisions are made
- **Steering group** – Regular check-ins (e.g., termly) with a representative group providing accountability
- **Working party** – The slice team makes decisions and drives the change process, meeting regularly

Voices from the Forum

Experience with Collaborative Policy Development

One forum member described creating a workload charter through collaborative consultation across multiple schools. They brought together representatives who went back to gather input from their schools before returning to refine the document.

This approach created something specific to their context rather than generic, building strong buy-in. The staff involved found the process developmental. However, managing the pace was challenging, with some frustrated by how long the consultation took. They reflected that the outcome was more sustainable because the right people were involved who truly understood it and had identified barriers upfront.

Perspectives on Education and Other Sectors

A forum member highlighted the complexity of education compared to other sectors, particularly the number of human interactions at different layers combined with government influence. This complexity is precisely why collaborative change processes are so important – the complexity is in the humans, so working out how to work well together becomes crucial.

They noted a disconnect between education and corporate sectors, with each sometimes dismissing the other's approaches. They see value in connecting both environments, drawing on healthcare as potentially the closest parallel to education.

They emphasized that co-creation of change is essential, and that much implementation literature comes from when change was less rapid and systems were complicated but not complex. The iterative way of working is crucial for today's educational contexts.

A Technology Implementation Example

A forum member described implementing new technology across multiple schools during COVID. There was significant fear and anxiety about the decision, which felt rushed to many staff.

In their schools, they already had student voice structures with different focus areas including technology. They used this existing structure to involve students, linked adult leaders to these groups, and brought parents into the process. This approach reduced

anxiety dramatically and allowed them to address issues before they became problems.

The contrast with schools that didn't use this collaborative approach was stark. When someone from their school went to support others, they had to backtrack on issues that could have been prevented. The reflection was that schools often have structures already in place (like student councils) that could be made more meaningful rather than tokenistic.

Questions about Sensitive Decisions

A school leader asked about navigating exploratory discussions when changes might be sensitive – specifically around potentially changing staff roles. They wanted to gather input from parents and staff but were concerned about creating panic if people thought decisions were already made.

James advised being transparent about the decision not being made yet, but only if that's genuinely true. He suggested framing it as seeking input from different perspectives, using tools like pre-mortems to explore potential advantages and issues of different options, and being open to creative solutions that might emerge from the collaborative process.

Questions about Trust and Previous Failed Initiatives

Forum members raised the challenge of building collaborative approaches when trust feels damaged from previous failed initiatives. There was discussion about whether some foundational conditions – basic psychological safety, some degree of trust, leadership valuing collaborative learning – need to exist before structured collaboration will work.

James acknowledged this directly, noting that simply creating collaborative structures won't fix damaged trust. Sometimes the work is rebuilding trust first, which is slower and messier. Slice teams work when there's enough psychological safety for people to share genuine challenges without fear of judgment.

The Time and Scheduling Reality

Several participants raised practical scheduling questions. James shared an example of a London school that had restructured their week to create protected collaborative time – adjusting lesson lengths, starting times, and break schedules to carve out 90 minutes weekly for all staff without simply adding to workload.

Forum discussion revealed various approaches schools have used:

- Repurposing existing meeting time rather than adding new commitments

- Strategic use of professional development days
- Schedule adjustments that create time without reducing total teaching time
- Voluntary lunch and learn sessions with school providing food

The pattern was clear: schools that protected regular time without simply adding to teacher workload showed much better sustainability.

Governance Challenges

A forum member raised the governance level challenge. Boards or trustees sometimes make decisions that contradict or override the collaborative work happening at school level. This creates tension where staff feel the board is out of touch, even when the board made decisions for justifiable reasons.

They described a situation where a board wrote a strategy without involving school leaders who actually understand what's happening on the ground. The senior team was then caught between delivering the board's strategy and meeting the actual needs of their community.

James recommended including a governor or trustee in slice teams as a link person who can hold the school to account whilst also having their views in the mix. He suggested incoming heads should be appointed to help manage things already in place rather than sweeping everything out and starting fresh.

Ground Rules for Effective Slice Teams

James shared key ground rules that help slice teams work effectively:

- Everyone around the table is an equal member regardless of perceived status or role
- All relevant information should be shared, especially inconvenient information
- People need to feel genuinely free to air honest views without fear of repercussion
- Members should be prepared to have their own views challenged where appropriate
- Confidentiality about discussions involving specific people or departments
- Working towards agreement through consensus rather than top-down decisions

The Selection Process

James recommended inviting applications to join slice teams and conducting selection interviews. This helps ensure you have:

- Keen supporters (early adopters)
- Neutral parties (people without strong views yet)
- Sceptics (people who have concerns or doubts)

Having this mix prevents preaching to the converted and helps reach the parts of the school community that most need reaching.

Interview questions might explore why someone wants to join, whether they have capacity without negatively impacting other work, and what areas of school life they'd like to improve.

Sustainability Factors

Discussion revealed several factors that support long-term sustainability:

Leadership participation – Schools where leaders actively participated in slice teams (not just mandated them for others) showed stronger commitment and cultural shift.

Starting small – The most successful implementations started with voluntary pilot teams. As those teams experienced value and shared insights, others became interested. Growth happened organically rather than being imposed.

Expecting and planning for the messy middle – Every sustained initiative has difficult periods. Schools that sustained slice teams expected this and treated challenges as information for adjustment rather than evidence of failure.

Areas for Continued Exploration

The forum surfaced questions for ongoing inquiry:

About Implementation:

- How might schools assess readiness for collaborative approaches?
- What's possible for building trust in schools where relationships feel strained?
- How can we help leaders understand that collaboration requires protected time rather than added time?

About Different Contexts:

- How might slice team approaches adapt to different school structures (primary, international, different organisational models)?
- What cultural factors affect how collaborative approaches work across different international contexts?

About Facilitation and Support:

- What role does external facilitation play in getting started versus building internal capability?
- Could we develop resources that support schools without creating dependency?

About Impact:

- How can schools understand the effects of improved collaboration beyond standardised metrics?
- What unexpected benefits emerge from cross-curricular collaboration?

A Closing Reflection

The session generated palpable energy in the virtual room – not superficial enthusiasm about a new initiative, but genuine engagement with ideas that connected to participants' lived experience and challenges.

The forum itself modelled collaborative inquiry, bringing different perspectives, exploring challenges honestly, and building on each other's insights. This is what Work Collaborative exists to create – spaces where educational communities discover their own wisdom through collaborative inquiry, where external expertise strengthens rather than replaces internal capability, where sustainable change emerges from conditions we create together.

The journey continues.

Special thanks to James Mannion for generously sharing his research, practice and insights with our community.

Open Source Commitment

This document is published in the spirit of Work Collaborative's commitment to open-source collaboration. All content, ideas, frameworks and resources developed through our forums are made freely available to the global education community.

We encourage adaptation, modification and sharing of these materials to support schools and education organisations worldwide. This document will be housed in the Work Collaborative open-source library at workcollaborative.com/library.

This summary utilises AI to synthesise contributions from our forum discussion. It represents the collective thinking of our community and is intended as a working document for feedback and refinement.

Next forum meeting: January 2026 (Date TBC)

For more information about Work Collaborative: workcollaborative.com