

POC Questions to Ask

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The Why, What and How of a Successful Proof of Concept: The Essential Questions to Ask Before You Begin

A Proof of Concept (POC) is a strategic device and a clearly articulated framework for how a school will demonstrate that the combination of its strategies can achieve significant and sustained change. Employing a POC empowers schools and districts to select smaller scale test environments within which to collect proof points, learn from results, refine strategies, and highlight successes to prove change is possible.

Whether a brand new program succeeds is the result of many variables, such as how well designed the new undertaking is (i.e., how well it truly addresses the needs of the beneficiaries in their experience); how well it is supported by its community (i.e., volunteer hours, financial or in kind contributions, community partners, etc.); and, ultimately, the results it actually delivers (i.e., does the new endeavor actually work or not).

A school or district that has a POC for a proposed program or technology allows that school to demonstrate the actual potential of its new program. It can be a bonus to point to another school or district that has successfully conducted either the same or a very similar program, especially if there is quantifiable data, demographics that demonstrate the need that exists, results and outcomes

that are determined through surveys and findings, and a clear program design that has already been conducted and had its results reviewed.

Having a POC provides stakeholders and the entire school or district with a certain amount of confidence, despite being a brand new program or an extension or enhancement of a current program. It can inform communication with potential donors or stakeholders with demonstrable proof of potential success (i.e., the data that your committee gathered from other similar successful programs).

Finally, when the school advertises its new program to its potential beneficiaries, the POC can be included in the program's brochure and other notices to instill confidence.

Having a POC saves a lot of time, trial, and error, the expenses that come with that, and the risk of your school or district losing any credibility over a potential program that does not ultimately work. But before you invest resources and time into exploring if a POC is right for your school or district, you should ask yourself some important questions.

1. Why?

It's so simple yet it often gets overlooked when caught up in the anticipation of an education technology solution: why implement it? If you can't make a specific case for integrating a new technology or concept into your curriculum, then you need to rethink your reasons for implementation.

With shrinking budgets and more demands on school staff, you need to approach your proposed initiative with a critical eye, ensuring that it will improve instruction and that some existing technology or method can't be utilized instead to achieve the same result, especially considering the numerous (and often free) tools being used in today's classrooms.

No matter what your evaluation model is, your new program, concept, or technology must help teachers to ensure academic excellence, not provide yet another obstacle on the road to student success.

2. What?

You and all stakeholders must know exactly what you want to accomplish in your classrooms to make the biggest impact. Teachers have to be researchers and work with their technology and curriculum specialists to get the right fit for what they want their students to accomplish.

If your potential POC relies on the implementation of new devices, have your administrators or tech director call vendors and ask for demo units that will allow you to run a proof of concept trial before making the purchase. Technology that is not the right fit for a specific classroom, school, or district can create frustration, and the technology ends up not being used.

3. How?

Planning is crucial in education: its how you get from "here" to "there." A POC can give you the practical experience necessary to bridge your planning phase to a

successful, real-world initiative. It keeps you aligned with the original impetus behind your initiative so that your goal drives the entire process.

A POC is an integral step in the process, providing a roadmap for implementation that can be used to evaluate the findings of the assessment and determine the viability of your education solution. Implementing a school or district-wide initiative requires guidelines to prevent integration mishaps. Teachers collaborating in professional learning communities are instrumental in analyzing best practices and steering instruction. A POC allows you to see how to overcome typical challenges as they occur in real time while receiving valuable feedback from students and staff—the end users who have the most at stake.

A collaborative focused on dramatically improving educational outcomes in a given community might select three schools or four cohorts of students to serve as its POC, for instance. Incorporating POC in this way allows schools to proactively embed experimentation, failure, learning, and accountability into their strategic mandate.

Other Important Questions

Savvy schools and districts require a preliminary set of criteria to ensure relevance and guidelines for implementing a POC. Some questions to help establish such criteria may include:

- What might the elements/components be of a process to evaluate the initiative?
- How might a set of activities be structured over a period of time to implement such a process?
- How might your POC process be organized and managed?
- What is your target audience? Is it a specific grade, school, or type of learner?

After these questions are answered, a measurement framework can be created, ideally organized into a leveled hierarchy:

Level 1: Establish goals. These goals should establish and maintain implementation expectations and capacity building.

Level 2: Criteria for stakeholders to consider when implementing education technology strategies. These criteria describe the characteristics of a highly successful initiative.

Level 3: Indicators of each criterion. The indicators are the factors that are actually measured to reveal how well each criterion is being fulfilled.

Level 4: Means of measure: the techniques, methodologies, and units of measure that are used to evaluate each indicator on a quantitative or qualitative scale.

By following these common-sense guidelines, you can save yourself and your school or district time, money, and frustration before implementing a POC.