

NEA Professional Excellence Theory of Change Tool

The NEA Professional Excellence Theory of Change Tool guides teams in creating strong implementation plans for programs, resources, and grant-supported ideas that enhance educator practice and transform education systems. Teams move through a three-step process—Study the System, Map a Change Theory, and Create an Implementation Plan—to use shared resources to drive impact. Throughout this work, teams and thought partners can use the Reflection Guide to review progress, provide constructive feedback, and continuously strengthen their strategy.

Resources

Resources can support teams in developing a Theory of Change and strong implementation plans for union-led professional excellence work. Relevant links are included throughout this document.
Folder: bit.ly/NEAPEPLT



Step 1: Study the System

Teams use public narrative, problem and issue, and resource mapping to uncover system barriers, identify decision-makers, and ground their work in community experiences. The term “educator” includes Pre-K through Higher Education professionals, including teachers, faculty, specialized instructional staff, education support professionals, and administrators. **Resource:** [1. Study the System](#)

Develop a Professional Excellence Leadership Team

Leadership teams bring together individuals with the skills, experiences, and perspectives to build a shared commitment using communication and collaboration strategies. **Resource:** [1.1 Leadership Team](#)

State: _____

Affiliate: _____

Name of project: _____

Team Members	Role	Responsibilities	Contact Info

Public Narrative

Translate shared values into motivation for collective action. **Resource:** [1.2 Public Narrative](#)

Constituencies	Guiding Questions	Team Response
The educators, students, and families united by shared experiences or challenges working together to shape their future.	Who are the constituents (educators, students, and families) impacted, and what experiences do they share?	
	What structural, operational, or resource barriers prevent constituents from thriving?	
	What hopes and goals do the constituencies share for their community?	

Problem and Issue

Analyze community challenges using root-cause inquiry to identify a specific, actionable systemic condition that your team can transform. **Resource:** [1.3 Problem and Issue](#)

Definition	Guiding Questions	Team Response
Problem A broad statement describing current conditions and the specific challenge people experience.	• What specific challenges are community members experiencing? • Where does the current system produce inconsistent support, friction, or unmet needs? • What evidence (data, lived experience, or context) defines this current state?	
5 Whys A step-by-step root cause inquiry. Teams drill down sequentially—using each answer to ask the next question—to uncover structural flaws rather than placing individual blame.	Ask “Why?” 5 times to drill past symptoms and find the root causes that sustain and reinforce the system: • First Why (Impact): Why is this happening to this specific group? • Second Why (Institution): What policies, practices, or institutional habits contribute to this problem? • Third Why (History): How have past policies or shifts in resources shaped this situation over time? • Fourth Why (Culture): How do common workplace or community practices normalize or hide this issue? • Fifth Why (Practices): How do current norms or practices maintain the status quo?	

Issue A specific, actionable portion of the root cause - to strategically focus on - in order to drive changes in conditions, policies, or practices.	• Which specific policy, practice, or resource gap within the root cause will the team tackle first? • Is there a clear, time-bound goal that fixes a system gap instead of blaming individuals?	
Professional Excellence The standards of quality and professional expertise grounding a strategy.	What aspects of a NEA professional framework or professional standards might guide the development of a strategy? Resource: 1.4 Frameworks	

Resource Mapping

Identify and map key allies, decision-makers, and community resources to build collective power, distribute leadership, and sustain the team throughout the project. **Resource:** [1.5 Resource Mapping](#)

Definition	Guiding Questions	Team Response
Leadership Educators who take responsibility for enabling others to achieve a shared purpose.	What opportunities will participants have to become active leaders?	
Partners Allies who supply the resources, expertise, and support needed to sustain the work.	What resources do partners bring to help this work continue?	
System Protectors People who are motivated to maintain current practices or hesitant to adopt new approaches.	Who prefers current practices, why, and what are their concerns?	
Potential Collaborators Groups working toward similar goals using different approaches or serving different groups.	Who else is working on this issue, and how can collaboration occur?	
Decision Makers People with the authority to turn the team's ideas into policy.	What motivates these leaders, and how might they be persuaded to act?	

Community Assets Accessible tools, spaces, and materials that belong to the community and support the work.	What existing tools or spaces can the team use to collaborate and grow?	
Team Sustainability The group's shared time and energy, which must be protected and renewed to support long-term success.	How will the team prevent burnout and stay energized?	
Shared Leadership A model where responsibility is distributed across the group, so everyone helps shape and sustain the work.	How will the team share responsibilities, so no single person carries the load?	

Step 2: Map a Change Theory

Teams establish an explicit “if-then” hypothesis that outlines the big-picture strategy for turning collective resources into systemic change, then pull out a measurable strategic aim from that theory as their focus.

Resource: [2. Map a Change Theory](#)

Theory of Change

Think big picture. A theory of change is an evidence-based roadmap that explains how and why a strategy creates system improvement. It connects early activities directly to long-term outcomes, laying out the core assumptions and logic of a team's plan. **Resource:** [2.1 Theory of Change](#)

Possible Sentence Stems	Guiding Checklist
Select and modify any of these sentence stems: ☐ If we organize [impacted constituency] to leverage our shared resources ([time/skills/relationships]), then we will build the power needed to secure [specific change] from [decision-maker] because [why does the leverage works]. ☐ If we implement [specific action/intervention], then we will improve [core operational or learning driver], which will lead to [strategic aim] because of [core mechanism or reason why it works]. ☐ If we co-design alongside [impacted group] to [action/intervention], then [system friction] will decrease because decision-making power is expanded to those closest to the challenge.	Use these criteria to evaluate, sharpen, and stress-test the team's theory of change: ☐ Starting Point: What specific resources, relationships, or expertise is the team mobilizing? ☐ Primary Mechanism: What specific actions, interventions, or learning opportunities will the team lead? ☐ Core Drivers: Which underlying system conditions, practices, or decision-making dynamics is the team aiming to improve? ☐ Strategic Aim: What concrete, measurable goal will the team achieve as a result? ☐ Underlying Assumption: Why does the team believe these specific actions will generate the leverage or impact needed to succeed?

Team Response

Strategic Aim

A strategic aim is a clear, measurable goal that builds leadership and collective influence to improve systems. It explicitly defines the target group, measurable metric, timeline, action strategy, community strength mobilized, and key decision-makers. **Resource:** [2.2 Strategic Aim](#)

Possible Sentence Stems

Select and modify any of these sentence stems:

- ☐ By [date], we will [increase/decrease] [metric] from [X] to [Y] for [impacted group] by organizing [# of leaders] to secure [policy/resource change] from [decision-maker].
- ☐ By [date], we will launch [learning/growth opportunity] focused on [system redesign goal] by organizing [# of teams] to secure [budget/space/time] from [decision-maker].
- ☐ By [date], we will [improve goal] for [impacted group] by building a [collaborative team/council] to negotiate [policy/structural change] with [decision-maker].

Guiding Checklist

Use these prompts to test, sharpen, and stress-test the team's strategic aim/goal before putting it into action.

- ☐ **Focus:** What specific part of the problem will the team change first?
- ☐ **Metric:** What numbers will prove the project's impact?
- ☐ **Agency:** Can the team realistically achieve this goal or build the power required to do so?
- ☐ **Timeline:** What is the target completion date?
- ☐ **Leadership:** Are those most impacted by the challenge driving the decision-making?
- ☐ **Human Impact:** Who benefits directly, and how do they build agency/individual power?
- ☐ **Power:** How does this strategy build long-term, organized community strength?

Team Response

Step 3: Create an Implementation Plan

In this section, teams put their strategy into action by defining concrete, measurable steps, anticipating outcomes, identifying qualitative and quantitative data to collect, and continuously adapting to build collective leadership and achieve the strategic aim. The number of goals identified by the team are dependent on what efforts and timelines are necessary to achieve the strategic aim. For each goal, teams should complete a detailed budget allocation outlining how funds will be used. **Resources:** [3. Implementation Plan](#) and [3.1 Budget](#)

Component	Definition	Guiding Questions
Actions	Specific, measurable steps and group actions that align with the strategic aim and build collective strength and develop new leaders.	What are the specific steps to take to achieve this goal, in a way that directly grows members' skills and leadership?
Predicted Outcome	The real-life changes expected to be seen in work settings, classrooms, students' lives, educators' lives, and the group's collective strength.	What specific changes or growth does the team hope to see with students, colleagues, membership, and union leadership?
Informative Data	A mix of stories (qualitative) and statistics (quantitative) that show how teams engage diverse members, build shared leadership, and know that their plan is working.	What kind of information will help the team know whether they are making progress toward their strategic aim? What new data might you need to collect?
Strategic Planning and Reflective Practice	Turning team resources, time, and relationships into collective impact while continuously reflecting and adjusting your strategy based on learning.	How will the team strategically use resources to achieve their goals, and how will the team regularly pause to reflect, learn, and adapt their approach along the way?

Goal #1	Team Response
Action	
Predicted Outcome	
Informative Data	
Strategic Planning and Reflective Practice	

Goal #2	Team Response
Action	
Predicted Outcome	
Informative Data	
Strategic Planning and Reflective Practice	

Goal #3	Team Response
Action	
Predicted Outcome	
Informative Data	
Strategic Planning and Reflective Practice	

Goal #4	Team Response
Action	
Predicted Outcome	
Informative Data	
Strategic Planning and Reflective Practice	

Reflection Guide: Theory of Change

An evaluation tool to assist in reviewing and strengthening the Theory of Change. **Resource:** [4. Feedback and Examples](#)

Indicators	Transformative	Developing	Emerging
Public Narrative & Inquiry Process	Crafts a compelling narrative using strong evidence to uncover system friction, highlight opportunity gaps, and align insights directly with professional standards.	Identifies community experiences and system barriers, outlining clear service gaps, and logical connections to professional standards.	Describes the issue with limited details, offering a surface-level system analysis with minimal connection to professional standards.
Problem & Issue	Uses rigorous root-cause inquiry to turn a human-centered problem into a focused, actionable issue with a clear goal, target, and timeline.	Identifies clear system barriers beyond surface-level causes and frames an actionable issue.	Outlines a broad or vague problem with partial root-cause inquiry and an issue lacking a clear goal, target, or timeline.
Resource Mapping	Maps key decision makers and system relationships, creating a strategy that distributes leadership and builds long-term collective power.	Identifies key decision makers and resources, outlining a practical plan to build shared leadership and reach the aim.	Identifies basic resources or figures but lacks a clear strategy to distribute leadership or influence systemic outcomes.
Theory of Change	Details an evidence-based roadmap linking resources, co-designed actions, core drivers, and a measurable aim, backed by a clear power-shifting assumption.	Connects actions to outcomes with general logic, but has minor gaps in defining system drivers, leverage points, or explicit underlying assumptions.	Offers a fragmented hypothesis with weak links between activities and goals, missing key components like resources, core drivers, or rationale.
Strategic Aim	Defines a precise, time-bound, and measurable target pulled from the broader theory; explicitly details the focus, metrics, timeline, decision maker, and power-building strategy while centering leadership among those most impacted.	Sets a clear, measurable goal with a target date and system focus, but contains minor gaps in specifying numerical baselines, key decision makers, or leadership agency.	Outlines a broad or vague goal that lacks clear metrics, a concrete timeline, or an explicit connection to collective power and systemic improvement.
Implementation Plan	Outlines coherent actions that build shared agency and leadership, incorporating clear metrics, transparent resource allocation, and reflective learning loops to guide continuous improvement.	Describes aligned steps toward the goal with defined outcomes, basic data collection, and structured reflection to guide progress.	Lists general or disconnected steps with vague outcomes, limited data tracking, and minimal reflection to adapt the strategy.
Overall Coherence & Strategic Alignment	Demonstrates a cohesive strategy where all components logically align to turn identified challenges into collective action and measurable system change.	Shows a clear flow connecting key components from the initial problem through to the proposed solution.	Presents a fragmented or unclear strategy with significant gaps between components, making long-term impact difficult to trace.