

What Is a Proof of Concept?

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A proof of concept (POC) is the preliminary rollout of a specific program, process, method, principle, model, or idea to demonstrate its feasibility. It's meant as a trial run—a way to “test the waters,” so to speak—to see if that program or idea is achievable in real schools and districts. It can either mean formulating a similar or exact replica (or model) of an established program or innovation that has already proven viable in a similar school or district.

A POC can be used to evaluate most any educational method, vehicle, or resource. For example, a POC could involve the piloting of new curriculum materials for a specific period prior to adopting them in order to determine if the materials would be an appropriate match. This new curriculum would be implemented on a small scale (perhaps targeting a specific grade level or subject matter)—reviewed, updated, and revised, if necessary, before a possible wide-scale adoption.

A POC is usually small, may or may not be complete, and can be done fairly early on in a school or district's planning and implementation process. It's a useful tool for assessing user requirements and determining the activities you want your specific user community to perform.

Typically, a POC is a close representation of the environment that may be ultimately deployed. A POC can be used to show what's possible and to begin to determine what works (and what doesn't), so a school or district can determine what should ultimately be deployed.

When a school is launching a brand new program or project, it is extremely powerful to raise funds, awareness, support, and practical experience in part by providing a proof of concept that clearly demonstrates the efficiency, viability, and strong potential of the new program or project.

How does it begin? A Proof of Concept starts with a need, and that need begs a proposed solution or multiple solutions. To support the validity and viability of this solution, your POC must be supported by research. Reach out to colleagues, research the latest study findings, and speak to educators at different schools and districts and ask what they are doing to deal with this issue.

Once you find examples of actual programs that are working elsewhere, research these potential model programs (ones that each have operated long enough to boast plenty of results and findings, what lessons were learned, and what costs were incurred) to help inform your proof of concept.

Once you've gathered enough data, sit down with your stakeholders (e.g., faculty, curriculum designers, IT, student representatives, concerned peers, and any relevant members from the community). This group will, ideally, help form a program committee. Your program committee will conduct the research, discussion, and planning necessary to design, budget, fund, and implement your POC.

After the completion of a POC or pilot program, the programs, devices, and innovations that were tested can be thoroughly assessed for viability and their potential for application beyond the original development context. This careful assessment and evaluation of your program, while challenging in terms of knowledge management, is vital to gauging the success of your pilot. Even if a development does not proceed past the initial exploratory phase, the experience gained is valuable and can guide teaching and learning development at both individual and strategic levels.

Consider conducting a POC to help all of your stakeholders make informed decisions. A thoughtful implementation and review of the POC will allow an understanding of the effectiveness of a proposed solution, while assessing feasibility and impact on a small scale before any full-scale changes are in place.