



A Union of Professionals

The Importance of Staff 'Buy-in' in the Selection of Proven Programs

Introduction

Introduction analysts and educators have all noted that one of the most important ways to achieve the benefits of a well-designed program is to make sure that those who will use it--teachers and other school staff--are fully committed to the program before its implementation. Many districts have learned--often the hard way--that even the most effective programs can fail to raise student achievement if poorly implemented.

The authors of *Show Me the Evidence! Proven and Promising Programs for America's Schools*, Olatokunbo Fashola and Robert Slavin, have pointed out that "Implementing the kinds of innovative approaches likely to make a substantial difference in the performance of students requires a great deal of time, effort and money. School staffs must have a well-founded confidence that if they implement a given program with care, intelligence and energy, students' achievement will show a significant improvement." (Fashola and Slavin, "Effective and Replicable Programs for Students Placed at Risk in Elementary and Middle Schools," *Show Me the Evidence!*, September 1996.)

One of the most important elements for achieving this "well-founded confidence" in a program is to make sure that school staff have played a substantial role in its selection and implementation. (For AFT recommendations in this matter, see "Selecting an Improvement Program.")

What the research says

The research is clear: Districts and schools must engender faculty support of a program in order to ensure its success. One of the major findings of the so-called "Special Strategies" study (Stringfield, Millsap and Herman, *Urban and Suburban/Rural Special Strategies for Educating Disadvantaged Students Studies*, 1997), which examined ten "innovative teaching and programming strategies" employed in 25 schools with high proportions of at-risk students, was that "schools obtaining the greatest academic gains for their at-risk students paid a great deal of attention to the issues of initial and long-term implementation and to institutionalizing the reforms."

The researchers "were struck with the relatively small number of options most schools examined before choosing a specific program." Indeed, they found that "several schools had no option at all: They were simply told by central administrators that the school would be receiving a particular . . . program or would be implementing a particular type of school reform." The consequence of this practice was that the program was less likely to be successful.

According to the researchers, "regardless of the abstract strengths of a reform, the fact that a principal and faculty had considered diverse options and voted to follow a particular path increased the probability of successful implementation."

A RAND national study of 40 schools involved in the "scale-up" phase of the New American Schools project supports this conclusion. It found that ". . . schools that were forced (by the district) to implement a design showed lower levels of implementation." (Susan Bodilly, et al., *Lessons from the New American Schools Scale-Up Phase*, 1998.)

The researchers noted that "the initial selection process in most districts was hurried and did not always proceed as planned. . . ." Schools made "more significant implementation progress" if they:

- Were well informed about the designs.
- Had a free choice among designs.
- Did not have significant internal strife prior to undertaking the design.
- Did not have leadership turnover during the two years studied.

Similarly, Sam Stringfield and Steve Ross, two leading researchers on school improvement, reflecting on the early evidence of implementation effectiveness of the Memphis school restructuring initiative, commented that "(i)n general, schools were more successful when in-building professionals were able to explore diverse options and choose a change strategy that they believed to be well matched to the needs of their particular school." (Stringfield and Ross, "A 'Reflection' at Mile Three of a Marathon" *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, March 1997.)

These findings are important, since they appear to bear a direct relationship to a second frequently observed phenomenon: "No reform network can guarantee positive outcomes, as these depend on the quality of implementation." (Fashola and Slavin, *Show Me the Evidence!* 1998.)

This observation is supported by the results of a study of nearly 50 sites in three school districts that linked effective implementation of the Comer School Development Program (SDP) to student outcomes. The researchers concluded that "the higher implementing schools tended to have more positive student outcomes. The lower implementing schools tended to have lower student achievement. This finding suggests that training in, and faithful implementation of, the SDP process contributed to improved student outcomes." (Haynes, Emmons and Woodruff, "School Development Program Effects: Linking Implementation to Outcomes," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, Number 1, 1998.)

Though the conclusions of the SDP study--that appropriate training and faithful implementation are vital to the success of an adopted program--seem obvious, they are too often overlooked. Yet, these imperatives, coupled with the research that points to an intimate connection between teacher "buy-in" and "faithful" program implementation, lead to the conclusion that if we expect students to achieve at high levels, then we must give school staff the opportunity to engage in the selection and implementation of promising programs.

Developers of some of the most effective reform models seem to be keenly aware of this connection as well.

What model developers say

For the developers of Success for All, a program that will be in more than 1,100 schools across America this fall, instructional staff "buy in" is axiomatic.

Fashola and Slavin write:

Of course, it is essential that school staffs have a voice in selecting school reform designs. For example, our Success for All and Roots and Wings programs require a vote of at least 80 percent of the professional staff and go to great efforts to see that the staff are well informed about the model and are supportive of it. . . . No matter how effective they are in their evaluations, no program should be imposed on an unwilling or uninformed staff. (Fashola and Slavin, *Show Me the Evidence!* 1998.)

Many other program developers advise similarly high thresholds of staff acceptance before they will work with a school. In its implementation guide, New American Schools (NAS)--which sponsors eight design models, collectively working in more than 700 schools nationwide--advises districts on a

number of steps that they should take to assure a quality implementation of NAS reform models. (NAS, *Blueprints for School Success: A Guide to New American School Designs*, 1998.)

The guide states that:

New American Schools strongly believes that each school should have the opportunity to choose the design that best fits its vision, strengths, weaknesses and philosophy. To do that, each school must assume the responsibility for obtaining all the information needed to make a good choice and establish a thoughtful process of deliberation, consensus building and selection.

Furthermore, it points out that it is "essential that the entire school staff be included in the information-gathering effort. While a few teachers or administrators might take the lead in obtaining the information, all staff members need an opportunity to explore, discuss and ask questions about implementing a design." Finally, NAS advises that "once faculty have had sufficient time to explore information from various sources, they need to come together as a group to reach consensus to move forward with one design."

The NAS designs vary in requiring between a 60 percent and 80 percent affirmative staff vote for adoption of a program. This commitment to a "super-majority" vote reflects the NAS experience that "if faculty have the opportunity to engage in a thoughtful exploration process and choose the design that best fits the school, they are more invested in contributing to the success of the design and more rapidly develop ownership over the implementation process than if the process had not taken place or if the choice of the design is mandated."

Others who have worked on the implementation of research-proven programs offer similar advice and require similar procedures. One example is the Ft. Lauderdale-area Alliance of Quality Schools, a highly successful, "homegrown" school improvement model that has helped all 25 of Broward County's "critically low-performing" schools come off the statewide academic watchlist.

The model--which includes Direct Instruction as a central component--requires an 80 percent affirmative vote by the staff before the school will be admitted into the program. As a recent report on the program indicates, "The program isn't forced on schools . . . Broward officials have learned that real reform is nearly impossible if teachers and parents aren't on board." ("What Works in Teaching and Learning," July 29, 1998.)

In fact, in addition to the teacher vote, the school's principal, chairperson of the school improvement team, union steward, PTA/PTO chairperson and parent advisory chairperson must also sign the application and certify that a "town meeting" was held with parents and the community to discuss the application.

What the policy analysts say

The findings of researchers and the experience of program developers has been incorporated by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE)--and others--into guidance for state and district policymakers who are turning to external school reform models to raise student achievement. (CPRE, "Policy Briefs: States and Districts and Comprehensive School Reform," May 1998.)

The policy brief suggests, "One of the most important district roles is to help sites select a school design that matches the needs of their students and the capability of their faculty." In outlining the district's role in these initiatives, CPRE points out that:

Research is showing that schools have much less information about designs, and about the breadth of what they include, than they need. Districts need to be aggressive in developing strategies that facilitate informed selection by schools.

Implicit in this guidance is the assumption that it will be the school staff that makes the final decision about which program to select. This being the case, the policy brief also offers useful guidance on how districts can "help schools make good design selections."

Similar advice is offered by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Its guide to the selection of proven program models observes that "most developers work only with schools that have chosen to engage in the partnership, requiring that at least 60 percent--and some as high as 80 percent--of the faculty vote to adopt the design." Further, it cautions policymakers that "None will work with a school in which faculty have not been included in discussions and exploration of design options." (ECS, *Comprehensive School Reform: Identifying Effective Models*, 1998.)

Conclusion

A faulty selection process can doom even the best of programs.

Recent criticisms of Success for All, one of the most effective, well-regarded and widely used improvement models, underscore this point. These critiques have been based largely on a single study of a failed implementation at a Charleston, S.C., school. In response, Robert Slavin, the program's developer, has pointed out that this one failure must be weighed against the overwhelming number of studies that point to the model's success in countless schools. Furthermore--and for our case, more importantly--Slavin explains that the school "never implemented the program adequately."

How so? As he pointed out in a letter to his critics, one of the main causes for the failure was that "the school did not follow the prescribed buy-in procedure." (David Hill, "Success Story," *Teacher Magazine*, Aug./Sept. 1998.)

The lesson seems clear, and the evidence overwhelming. A district's investment of time, money and energy in adopting improvement models will be wasted unless it makes sure that school staff actively participate in the selection and implementation of proven programs.

March 1999