

## The Public —and Innovation

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WHAT is innovation? Interpretations are as varied as there are writers on the subject. For the purposes of this paper, the following rather textbookish definition is proposed: "Innovation in education is the creative selection, organization, and utilization of human and material resources in new and unique ways which result in the attainment of a higher level of achievement of the defined goals and objectives."

According to this definition, the outcome of the effort is innovational if it is distinctive from the *status quo*, and if it is readily identifiable. It is *significantly* innovational when the concept, the idea, the process, the media, or the tool through which the innovation is given expression has meaning to others, is accepted and approved by them, and has begun to be generally implemented in the educational programs of the country.

This definition rejects fads, frills, and novelties in education as being innovational. Fads and frills may represent change, but change is not necessarily innovational within the proposed definition. Change for the sake of change is not constructive, and does not represent a positive contribution to the improvement of the program or to the attainment of the identified goals and objectives. Although any change may temporarily have the characteristics of an innovation because of the phenomenon known as the "Hawthorne Effect," time permits the testing of the program and the validation of it as a constructive innovation; or, conversely, the recognition of it as merely a change from former practice without significantly contributing to the attainment of the defined goals and objectives.

It will be noted that a concept, or proposed change, does not become innovational until it has attained three characteristics. First, it does not achieve the status of being an innovation as long as it remains primarily the concept, belief, or point of view of one person. It must have meaning to be understood by others.

Second, it must pass the test of acceptance by others as being worthy of implementation. And, third, the process of more general implementation must have been (or be in the process of being) initiated.

Innovation, then, is essentially a process. As one writer many years ago said, change is a slow process. First, there is the philosopher who conceives; second, the interpreter who translates what the philosopher has conceived; and third, the implementer who puts into practice what the interpreter has translated from the philosopher. In the business and industrial world, the researcher and the scientist conceive, the technician and the skilled workers translate into a product, the advertiser convinces us that we cannot live happily and comfortably without it, and we buy the product for our enjoyment and utilization in our everyday lives. The significance of this can be seen when this year one corporation with over a billion dollar income reported that nearly two of every three of its products were not on the market ten years ago.

In education, innovation must play an increasingly significant role if the workers of tomorrow are to be prepared to have employability for business and industry in the process of change. At the same time, the public must have an increasing understanding of this process of change in their own way of living, in the business world about them, and for its implications in education. Not only must educational needs-to-be-met be continually in the process of analysis, but programs must be designed to meet these needs, services must be provided to support these programs, and a structure (school district organization) must be established which will provide the quality or excellence in the programs designed to meet the needs with efficiency in organization and economy of operation (returns on the tax dollar invested in education).

### **Facilitating Change**

Public acceptance of or resistance to innovations essential to cope successfully with the changing needs of our way of life will determine the degree to which education supports or hinders progress in the American way of life. For example, our country moved from the agricultural era to the manufacturing era with the turn of the century. But it has taken educators, legislatures, and the public a half century to become serious about educational programs and an educational structure to provide comprehensive vocational education programs at an acceptable level of quality, with efficiency and economy of operation.

Creative thinkers are leading us today from the manufacturing era into what they call a human resources era—a new age that builds upon and extends the best of the past into new dimensions for human ingenuity and service. Some refer to this as an electronic age, some as the space age, and others as a computerized, mechanized, automated world that challenges even the writers of science fiction. Whatever it may be, it is reasonably certain that education, the public, business, and industry cannot permit a half century to elapse before appropriate adaptations are made in training programs to meet the changing demands of labor, of leadership, and of management in a world that is in an escalating process of

change. Innovation is inevitable. The public and education must be in the process of preparation for the inevitable.

A few years ago the writer was privileged to serve as a tour leader of a Traveling Seminar on Innovational Instructional Practices. Thirty professional people (superintendents, and personnel from universities and state departments of education) visited schools in two states. Findings were compared with those developed by members of three other touring seminars visiting schools in other states. All became absorbed with an analysis of those factors which appeared to limit or to facilitate innovational practices. These may be summarized as follows:

#### **Limiting Factors**

1. Failure to establish effective communication (within the staff; within the leadership; with the public)
2. Internal staff conflict and resistance
3. Lack of risk money
4. Lack of a clear definition or understanding of what is proposed
5. Absence of research in designing and planning the program of an innovational concept
6. Limited evaluation, although informal evaluation was clearly in evidence
7. Legal obstructions
8. Excessive demands on the time and energy of a leader.

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## **Facilitating Factors**

1. Evidence of a basic philosophy of life and of education on the part of all staff members of the school district which stimulated and encouraged innovation and change
2. An organization, a structure, a system that permitted, encouraged, and facilitated change
3. Leadership, wherever it occurred (teacher, principal, superintendent, custodian, bus driver, board member, lay person), that was dedicated to study, to planning, and to implementation of adopted plans for growth and improvement
4. Expectations for a high quality of educational achievement on the part of:
  - individual staff members
  - the administration
  - the board of education
  - staff members cooperating and working in a team effort
  - the community
5. Situational factors (a setting, an atmosphere, personnel relationships, mutual respect) which tend to promote a high degree of internal security on the part of:
  - individual staff members
  - the staff as a group
  - the administration
  - the board of education
  - the community
6. The presence of motivational factors, including:
  - the availability of risk money
  - the crisis aspect that requires or forces change; pressure groups
  - a felt need (individually or collectively) for improvement
  - leadership (permissive, encouraging, stimulating, guiding, promoting, supporting, defending, challenging)
7. Continuous and creative evaluation (generally informal).

The above observations convinced the seminar members that a school system can initiate change that will keep the schools abreast of new developments. Meetings with members of boards of education and with lay people also revealed the fact that they have an equal interest in and pride for a school system that meets the challenge resulting from changes in our culture, in our way of life, and in the preparation of our youth for effective and creative participation in this evolving and changing way of life. It can be done; but it takes innovators to do it, supported by an interested, informed, and cooperative public. ☞



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