

Why the back stops here

Declining Achievement Can Be Reversed

Roscoe L. Davidson

A successful effort to raise reading achievement in the Denver Public Schools illustrates key factors in educational change.

Two interrelated problems facing schools across the country are declining achievement and ineffective change efforts. The persistence of these problems suggests not only that many instruction programs continue to be unproductive for substantial numbers of children, but also that key elements are lacking in attempts to improve the situation.

Traditional responses to these problems have been influenced by the belief that change could be brought about with smaller class size, increased numbers of ancillary personnel, infusions of money, or increased instruction time. Goodlad (1979) has pointed out that attempts to alter school outcomes typically have relied upon manipulating single instructional variables that seldom have accounted for more than five percent of the variance in student achievement. Significant change in education is, for the most part, yet to be achieved.

In recent years, however, several substantial research projects¹ have identified factors and processes associated with successful change efforts in schools.

These factors, which are discussed below, relate directly to innovation and implementation processes. A host of additional factors relate less directly to change processes, but are crucial to effective teaching and learning in the classroom.²

Need and Purpose

The first requisite in planning for meaningful change is to be certain that a need has been clearly defined, and the purpose to be achieved is thoroughly

¹ A number of helpful resources dealing with critical variables in educational change are included in the bibliography. See especially: Ford Foundation, 1972; Fox, 1968; Goodlad, 1979; Gorman, 1972; Rand Corporation, 1975; and Trump, 1972.

² Many of these factors were discussed in the October 1979 issue of *Educational Leadership*.

understood by all who are to be involved. Possible solutions should be analyzed in terms of the promise they hold for producing the desired effects. This step is necessary to avoid focusing attention on activities and modifications that have superficial appeal, but fail to address the real needs.

Climate and Adaptability

A cluster of key variables relate to (a) the climate for change within the organizational setting, and (b) the modifiability of the change effort or project itself (Rand Corporation, 1975).

With reference to climate for change, such variables as commitment of participants, levels of expectation, and staff involvement leading to "ownership" have been identified as being necessary, but not sufficient, for change to occur. Goodlad (1979) has included school autonomy, sense of mission, and pride as elements that contribute to a positive climate for school improvement.

The counterpart of a receptive climate is the malleability of the project or change effort itself and the degree to which the change is compatible with, or can become compatible with, the major objectives and practices of the school or school system. The nature and amount of change required are of course critical considerations in this connection. In the Ford Foundation's (1972) Comprehensive School Improvement Program, innovations were most effective where the objectives and techniques involved were few and sharply defined.

The significance of adaptation factors is emphasized in one of the conclusions of the Rand study (1975): "The predictors of effective implementation are likely to lie in those project characteristics promoting or inhibiting adaptation to the institutional setting—the implementation strategy—rather than in the educational treatment or technology itself" (p. 16).

Leadership

A consistently recognized major influence on change processes is the leadership of the principal. When the school is viewed as an operating unit having a great deal of autonomy (Goodlad, 1979) and as being ". . . the largest organic unit for educational change" (Goodlad and others, 1970, p. 107), the leadership role of the principal takes on paramount importance. The Rand report (1975) dubbed the principal the "gatekeeper of change" (p. 20), and the Model Schools Project (Trump, 1972) specified instructional leadership as the principal's chief function (p. 121).

The success of any project is dependent upon the development of sufficient "thrust" to achieve the objectives that have been established. The principal is the key motivator and catalyst in unifying staff efforts and in generating a sense of mission. As means to this end, it is vital for the principal to participate in staff training, to become an active member of the school instruction team, and to provide ongoing direction and support in adapting the project to local needs.

Staff Development

Projects that include extensive provisions for staff training and development have the most lasting effects on the staff and hold the greatest promise for permanent incorporation into the school program (Rand Corporation, 1975). Staff development opportunities must provide for the acquisition and continuous refinement and reinforcement of skills and knowledge that relate directly to project implementation. The most helpful training activities are those that are concrete and specific, both in terms of the requirements of the project and the needs of the participants. A staff development problem that has plagued many projects and that must be taken into account in ongoing planning and training is the slippage that occurs with staff turnover and the loss of key project personnel.

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Rewards

Any list of key variables influencing changes in schools would be incomplete without recognizing the potential effects of rewards, in some form, for all participants—students, staff, parents. The principal's role again is prominent in providing support and recognition and in contributing to the morale of all who work on school improvement projects.

It frequently is necessary to deal specifically with the feelings of isolation that can confront project participants, particularly in the face of negative or indifferent attitudes of nonparticipants. A significant turning point occurs in project implementation when evidence of accomplishment begins to appear, and success becomes its own reward.

An Exemplary Change Effort

A districtwide reading project in the Denver Public Schools illustrates how these critical variables can be combined in a successful effort to improve student achievement.

Faced with continuing decline in reading during the 1960s, particularly in schools serving children from low-income families, Denver launched a new attack in the spring of 1971 on reading problems in the primary grades. Figure 1 shows dramatic evidence that the earlier decline in achievement test scores has been reversed, and that significant progress has been evident from year to year.

Most of the features found by researchers to be associated with successful change efforts are readily apparent in the Denver project. First, local school staffs recognized the achievement problem and became committed to a unified effort designed to correct it. The project began on a pilot basis in a limited number of schools.

Basic reading programs of several publishing companies, selected because of their stress on basic skills and their emphasis on the individual pupil, were made available, and faculties were asked to select the program of their choice. Teachers were encouraged to use appropriate materials and techniques of their own for enrichment, extension, and reinforcement of project goals. However, they were also required to maintain fidelity to the program they selected because of each program's carefully developed, sequential material and its built-in evaluation system.

Another significant element was the thorough preservice training required of participating staffs. In recognition of their critical leadership role and the need for quality control and continuing staff development, principals were included in the training programs.

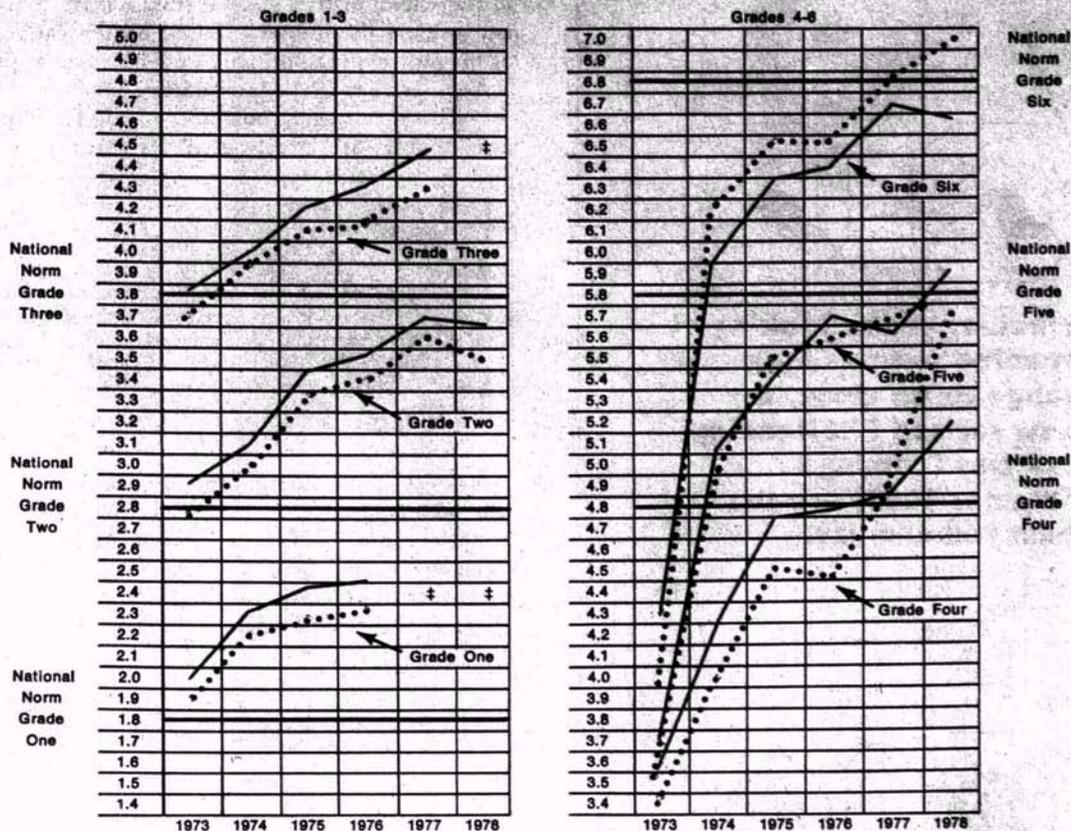
Provisions specifically designed to keep projects on target are essential. Without control mechanisms that help assure refinement of techniques and productive uses of resources, project thrust dissipates, and impact is lost.

A second major component of quality control is the continuing flow of accurate data about effects of project implementation. Appropriate kinds of feedback reveal needed modifications or adaptations and contribute to stabilization of the implementation process.

Cooperative Involvement

The influence of the mutually supportive involvement of staff, students, and parents has been given less recognition as a potentially powerful influence in educational change than have a number of other variables. However, the Model Schools Project recognized the importance of this force (Trump, 1972), and Goodlad (1979) believes that parents and students are ready to join educators in attempts to improve their schools. Superintendent Ruth Love implemented a contract plan including students, parents, and teachers because of her belief that only through such a partnership could the Oakland schools make the changes she believed were necessary (Angell, 1978).

Figure 1. Scores of Students in the Reading Package Program 1972-1978. Gates MacGinitie Reading Test Mean Grade Equivalent Scores¹



Source of Data: Department of Development and Evaluation, Division of Education, Denver Public Schools

¹ Includes only those pupils who were in the same school and reading package for at least 80 instruction days. Scores for 1979 are not shown because the district now uses a different test and the scores are not directly comparable.

Ongoing inservice activities and direct assistance in classrooms were provided by principals and regularly assigned supervisory personnel. Teachers new to schools were provided intensive inservice and supervisory assistance as a deterrent to program slippage.

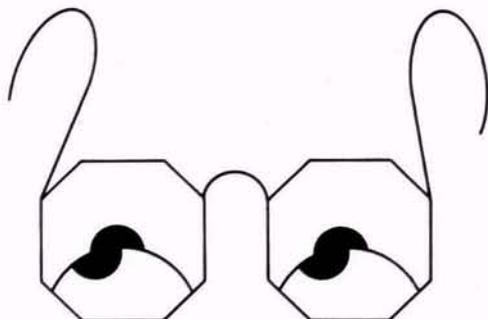
Parent understanding and involvement were solicited. Through the use of "take home" materials, parent meetings, and teacher-parent conferences, parents were helped to understand the work being done with their children. In some programs parents were taught techniques for helping their children at home.

Continuous evaluation has been an ongoing part of the project and is viewed as one of the most essential components. Standardized achievement tests have been administered periodically, results analyzed, and corrective action taken where necessary. Parent, pupil, and teacher attitude surveys have been used as a

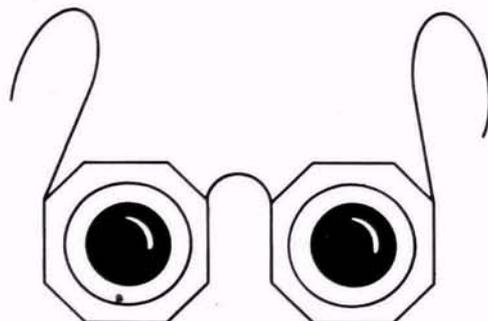
source of feedback in dealing with feelings about the instruction provided, and the degree of carry-over at home and in other areas of instruction. Help has been given to teachers in assessing day-to-day progress and in providing immediate modifications in instruction where called for.

The belief of individual school faculties that improvement is possible for all children has been a key influence on teacher behavior and pupil response. All reading programs in use capitalize upon individual pupil gain and provide for advancement to new levels of instruction as soon as the previous levels have been mastered.

Board of education commitment to the goal of improving reading achievement has been crucial. At the outset of the project, one objective was to utilize more effectively the funds available for reading im-



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provement from federal, state, and local sources. Since the discontinuation of state funds for the program, the local board of education has increased funds in the school district general fund budget to maintain and expand the program. Based on the early success of the project in the primary grades, a similar program was undertaken in the intermediate grades.

The encouraging outcomes of the Reading Package Program are largely attributable to a committed



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and skillful staff, the full support of the administration and board of education, and the presence of other essential elements discussed in this article. Significant changes in schooling occur when simplistic approaches are rejected in favor of carefully developed, long-range strategies that incorporate these variables. *EL*

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