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back
stops
here

How to Keep Those New Programs Alive and Well

William Paul Frey

Research studies plus experience and common sense yield some principles of program survival.

In the basement of Apple Hill Elementary School are the remnants of programs that once promised to teach Johnny to read, write, and process; artifacts of promises broken: teaching machines gathering dust, bare-boned science kits, and hundreds of almost new copies of *Set Theory for the Toddler*.

The epitaph for the programs in Apple Hill's basement might read like this:

Here lie the remains of many innovations,
Training didn't cover all the situations,
And when the materials lost their gloss,
We counted another program loss.

What drives programs to this final resting place? Visit your own school's dead-storage area. While standing there amidst the wasted tax dollars ask yourself, "What could have been done to save all this? How can schools avoid making the same mistakes again and again?"

Principles of Program Survival

There have been a few efforts to document the factors that make some new programs successful (Berman and McLaughlin, 1975; Frey, 1978; and McLaughlin, 1976). These few studies, plus my experience with program implementation, lead me to suggest some basic principles of program survival.

- Principle 1: A new program is more likely to survive if someone is responsible for it.

The person responsible for survival of a new program has to know the program as well as, if not better than, the classroom teacher. The person may be a supervisor, curriculum coordinator, principal, or teacher. He/she must be able to work with teachers, assuring that the program is used and gathering meaningful feedback on the program's operation. She/he has to synthesize the feedback, eliminate the trivial, and modify the program to help it survive. Without someone performing this role, experienced

classroom teachers will modify the program on their own, or toss it out while no one is looking. The net result will be to obliterate the program. Some teachers will eliminate it, others will alter it, and by the end of the trial period, administrators will be unable to determine whether the program helped or hindered students—or even whether it is still being used or not. Just as children, squirming in new clothes, must be told to “hold still till we can see if they fit,” educators must learn to stabilize programs.

Too often, programs die because consumable materials are not replaced or broken equipment is not repaired. Someone must assume responsibility for knowing what materials need to be replaced, for ordering them, and for seeing that they reach the classroom. If equipment is part of the program, there must be provisions for getting it repaired promptly.

- Principle 2: A new program is more likely to survive with continuing staff development.

Teachers and others need to experience “ownership” of the program. Local ownership appears to be enhanced through staff involvement in making instructional materials and pulling together appropriate commercial materials. Material development sessions give staff members the opportunity to learn the program’s instructional approach in a concrete manner. It gives them an opportunity to modify the program in accordance with their professional preferences, and to discuss the program informally with one another.

Teachers and others obviously need training when a new program is introduced, but staff development is equally important later on. While initial training can, at best, offer a schedule and formula for instructional activities, it cannot answer all the “what if . . .” questions that a competent staff raises. Initial training cannot anticipate all the questions and problems that come with classroom operation. That’s why training must continue after the program is in use.

Finally, staff development means meetings—meetings for the purpose of planning, gathering feed-

back, and reporting progress. While meetings should be mostly for the project staff, other district personnel should be involved so they feel part of the project. For example, an elementary school reading specialist might serve as consultant to a new high school reading program. Some meetings should include administrators, school board members, parents, and representatives of community organizations.

- Principle 3: A new program is more likely to survive if it is altered.

Program implementation is more than a simple act of taking out the old and putting in the new, the way one would replace a defective mechanical part. It is more like the natural process of introducing a new organism into an environment. Both the organism *and* the environment may have to adapt in order for the organism to survive. The Rand studies (Berman and McLaughlin, 1975) called this process “mutual adaptation.” The implications for program design, evaluation, implementation, and use are enormous. From this perspective, the question is “What must be done with the program to *make* it survive?” Several more specific principles address this question.

- Principle 3a: A new program is more likely to survive if it is altered to benefit and improve student outcomes.

This principle is perhaps most important of all. It implies study of student outcomes as measured by achievement tests and teacher observations. Outcomes of the new program should be compared with earlier ones before the program is altered too much. For that to happen, program use needs to be fairly uniform; not so uniform as to stifle teacher uniqueness, but uniform enough so that variations in student outcomes can be associated with variations in program use. The best argument for survival of a program, and the best reason for making an alteration, is student benefit.

Before altering programs to improve student benefit, however, one should not forget that it takes some time to reap the benefits of most programs.

Evaluation studies generally show that program impact is greater during the second and subsequent years than it is during the first year of installation. Give the program some time before judging it.

- Principle 3b: A new program is more likely to survive if it is altered to be more complete.

Most new programs are less complete than the programs they replaced. Teachers always have to fill



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in gaps, resequence materials, and eliminate faulty ones. But as said in Principle 1, someone must maintain a degree of uniformity by investigating what is needed, finding out what teachers are doing about it, and sharing successful methods in staff meetings and through other communication channels.

- Principle 3c: A new program is more likely to survive if it is altered to agree with other programs.

A new eighth-grade science program is more likely to survive if it relates to eighth-grade math and social studies programs. It should also relate to seventh-grade and ninth-grade science programs. If it does not, an adjustment needs to be made. Of course, the other programs should probably be adjusted too, but new programs are more vulnerable because they are not yet established. The following year, teachers can identify weaknesses in students who come out of the new program, and the staff can try to improve the program without harming it. When assessing results of the new program, the new strengths students have gained should not be ignored. Encourage teachers to take advantage of the strengths. Better yet, show them how to take advantage of these assets by suggesting activities and lessons that follow up on the new program.

It will be a year before teachers of the next grade level can provide such feedback. Keep them well informed anyhow. Arrange observations, have them examine materials that will interest them, and arrange for them to try out lessons in their own classroom. Efforts to make the new program agree with upper-grade programs will continue long after the new program is installed.

Just as the new program should agree with upper-grade programs, so should lower-grade programs agree with the new program. It is best to assume that program agreement always benefits students and that failure of agreement may harm them.

- Principle 3d: A new program may need to be altered to perform reliably in your school system.

Concerns for "performance reliability" are usually present when new programs are first installed. Are the materials, personnel, space, and time available? If not, the program may need adjustments. However, once the program is adjusted to your situation, your situation may change and demand a new set of alterations. Budget crunches may increase class size or eliminate paraprofessionals, teacher turnover may mean that replacements must be trained, new buildings may have different facilities, and state mandates may alter time and curriculum requirements.

- Principle 3e: A new program is more likely to survive if it is altered to incorporate techniques, methods, and materials from new "new programs."

There is a constant flow of new programs from publishers and development centers. Some of the new ideas may be superior to those of the once-new program; they may be more cost-effective, support better student achievement, be more prestigious, or simply provide an occasionally needed shot in the arm.

- Principle 4: A new program is more likely to survive if it is cost-effective.

These days a common formula for judging cost effectiveness is: the less expensive, the better. State and federal programs often fall as soon as funds are withdrawn. This need not be the case if we anticipate and plan for phase-down. Redefine the outcomes of state and federal programs in practical, cost-effective terms; anticipate phase-down, and plan for it. Can expensive material resources be laminated or made more durable by other means? Can responsibilities be transferred to existing system employees or volunteers? Should the program be considered a continuing staff development effort to train other staff members? Consider these questions prior to adopting a new program, and plan implementation and evaluation strategies that encompass the desired outcomes.

I don't know whether or not the programs in the basement of Apple Hill School would have survived had these principles been followed, but their chances would probably have been better. *EF*

References

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