

Why Innovative Programs Are



Photo: Ian Sutherlin Lane

Programs chosen for the right "technical" criteria must also fit the cultural criteria of teachers.

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• A principal of a small rural school who had led a two-year planning and adoption process for introducing a corrective reading program into his school "sort of found out" that the program was not being used as he talked to teachers in the hall one day.

• Title I teachers in a large urban school sat silently through three days of training on how to use a special program for high-risk kindergarten and first-grade students, even though they knew that the special room required for the program was not available.

• "We preferred the activities in our traditional program," report teachers who discontinued a new physical education program adopted by the superintendent and board of education upon the advice of a local doctor who also chaired the district's curriculum advisory committee.

Over the past two decades, concerned people in local schools have expended considerable energy and resources aimed at making schools better. Some changes in practice have occurred but not nearly as often or with the scope that was intended. According to Mann (1978), innovations or revisions in programs have had only about a 20 percent success rate in education. Other studies have concluded that successful implementation is much more complex and difficult than one might expect (Lortie, 1975; Miles, 1979; Sarason, 1971; and Fullan and Pomfret, 1977). We can learn from our efforts, however, if we view our failures not as resulting from stubborn resistance or bad intentions but instead as ingrained in the complex relationships found in schools.

Study of Midwest Schools

Lack of success in implementing programs may be related to a lack of understanding of how schools work as social systems, how political processes influence change efforts, and the many dilemmas facing those who attempt to facilitate school improvement. We have identified features of the formal and informal structures of schools that can help explain the discontinuation of school improvement programs. Our information comes from interviews with teachers, administrators, and change agents in five midwestern school districts that adopted innovative programs and discontinued their use. Each district we studied had been assisted with its adoption and implementation efforts by state Title IV-C Adoption Grants and members of the National Diffusion Network (NDN), a federally-sponsored group created in 1974 to disseminate exemplary programs to local schools.

Administrators and Politics. Kogan (1978) and House (1974) speculate that the implementation of an innovation in schools can only be understood as a political dynamic between the school and its many interested constituent groups. Scott, Meyer, and Deal (1980) go even further and suggest that it is more important for a school's survival to please its constituents than to find better ways to improve its technical core, such as perfecting better methods for teaching children.

Each of the schools in our study had adopted innovative programs (externally developed) because of political pressures—in one instance from a local, influential doctor on a curriculum advisory committee; in another from a group of parents; and in still another from several dissatisfied teachers. At every site, a superintendent or building principal had assumed early advocacy and leadership in response to constituency demands. Administrators played a

key, and in some instances the major, role in selecting and adopting programs offered by NDN and in coordinating efforts to provide training and assistance to staff who were expected to implement the programs.

Change Agents as Technicians. The assistance provided to the schools by the NDN facilitators and developers was almost exclusively technical in nature. That is, exchanges (1) were with members of the formal decision-making structure and followed the prescribed NDN adoption process, (2) were responsive to desires of local administrators, and (3) provided information about how to "make an adoption" and receive training as contrasted to assisting with the social consequences of using the new program.

Training was also technical in nature and short-term. It provided teachers with specific skills needed for teaching the innovative program and focused on learning the program's language and world views. Little effort was made to deal with the local issues or special circumstances that called for adaptations, which were later discovered to be crucial to implementation.

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Teachers and Autonomy Norms. It is well known that norms exist in schools that promote teacher autonomy and individualism. This means that most teachers cope with everyday teaching tasks and those associated with change efforts individually, that they are prone *not* to interfere with the work of colleagues, and that for the most part they guard carefully their right to teach in ways they think best.

Teachers we interviewed were willing to consider new programs, particularly if requested to do so by administrators. They viewed attending awareness conferences, inservice, and training events as part of their professional duty. However, when it came to implementation and use of a new program, we found universal agreement among teachers that the program had to fit their way of teaching. Teachers believed they had the right to determine, on their own, what would happen in their classrooms with their children.

Teacher autonomy not only influenced aspects of the programs that would be used, it also decided their ultimate fate. At all five sites in our study, the decision to discontinue was made by teachers outside the formal decision-making structure of the school. Administrators were informed later of that decision. In every instance, administrators who were the key decision makers in adoptions accepted the nonimplementation decisions of their teachers. The change agents (developers and facilitators) left everything up to those at the local level.

The Informal Covenant. We use the concept of "informal covenant" to help explain what happened to these innovative programs. The informal covenant is an informal agreement created to deal with instances when external solutions are used to solve problems of local schools. The informal covenant is characterized by three critical features:

1. The principal (a) speaks for the school concerning needs and is entitled to negotiate with outsiders and make adoption decisions for the school; and (b) is entitled to select materials and arrange for inservice he or she believes appropriate.

2. Teachers (a) will support administrative decisions made by the principal or others and attend inservice events if requested; (b) will maintain final authority about if and how a new program will be used in their classrooms; and (c) expect principals to support program decisions they make and not to interfere with instructional decisions.

3. The covenant itself remains informal, is adhered to, and allows principals and teachers to maintain important control over day-to-day operations without confronting authority. It allows outsiders to penetrate the system at the formal level during the adoption stages of an innovation but not at the more important informal level where critical implementation decisions are made.

For example, at the beginning of the school year, teachers at one site were informed that their principal had volunteered "their school" to field-test a new physical education program. Teachers were provided technical training for a program that was somewhat different from their traditional approach. They were given detailed teachers' manuals, a physical education specialist with whom to team, and extensive new equipment and materials. However, within two months, the "lounge talk" was all negative. The few teachers who were comfortable with the new approach did not want to risk the displeasure of their fellow workers by saying good things about the program. Subsequently, even though the program had some strong community support, it was discontinued by teachers who decided to develop their own programs, which interestingly included a considerable portion of the new program. And administrators in the district supported the teachers' actions.

Implementation Lessons

The experiences of the people in our study, along with research and practice by others, point the way to guidelines for planning and disseminating new programs:



Photo: Karen Kata

Understanding the Culture of the School. Anthropologists have argued for many years the need for cultural adaptations if innovations are to be used. Spicer (1952) records a classic case, illustrating the importance of informal cultural norms in implementing new technologies. A group of southwestern Spanish-American farmers had been introduced to a new hybrid corn that was more weather- and bug-resistant as well as three times as productive as their traditional "red" corn. By the end of the second year, over 60 percent of the farmers were using the new corn with greater success than expected. However, by the end of the third year, only four farmers were still using the innovation. The hybrid corn did not look like, taste like, or make tortillas like the old corn, and the farmers believed it was not worth the complaints of wives and children.

For effective implementation to occur, it is essential for those in schools, such as principals and teachers, and those from outside, developers and change agents, to understand the cultures of the groups involved and plan their implementation efforts accordingly. It is important for change agents to understand the natural way things are

done inside schools and for school personnel to understand the technical, more research-oriented approach to teaching and curricula that characterizes most NDN and RD&D programs. Some examples from the schools in our study illustrate this point.

The principal and some of his teachers in a large urban school district decided to do something special for a group of disadvantaged students having trouble in kindergarten and first grade. They adopted an NDN program designed for high-risk students that required setting up several learning centers in a special room, having no more than 15 students in the class, and maintaining a complex record and communication system. The teachers received training and quickly understood the skills needed to use the new procedures and materials. However, the program was discontinued after the first year because of possible racial antagonism (a situation that was never discussed), the loss of the only space in the building that was suitable for the program, and the active campaign of an influential teacher who disagreed with the philosophy and methods of the new program.

Intervention strategies exist that would allow all of these cultural and

systems issues to be addressed and resolved. They could have been employed by those within the system who worked toward implementation of the new program or by the outside change agents.

Extend Time for Training Teachers. The training conducted at the five schools in our study was brief—one to five days—and limited to specific skills teachers would need to implement the new programs in their classrooms. In only one instance was follow-up training requested or provided, and specific school problems that could later hamper implementation were universally ignored.

For instance, a small rural district wanted to improve reading in its junior high content classes. The district adopted a diagnostic/prescriptive reading program that required a special reading teacher to work with 10 to 15 students who were released from their regular classes several times a week. Four secondary content area teachers were trained over a grueling five-day period, but none mentioned the fact that the program could not be used because funds did not exist to provide the needed space or a special reading teacher. Materials were purchased for the new program with an adoption grant. During training, the teachers never mentioned the local situation, and the trainers never inquired why regular subject matter teachers were taking training designed for special reading teachers.

Fullan and Park (1981) have written that "implementation will occur to the extent that *each and every* teacher has the opportunity to work out the meaning of the implementation in practice" (p. 27) and when they have had the opportunity to change their behaviors, skills, and beliefs. From everything we know about changing human behavior and adult learning, it is unlikely that teachers will work out "new" meaning and change their behaviors and beliefs over a short period of time. It seems reasonable to assume that, for most new programs, extended training spread over time is a prerequisite for change and that on-site cultural adaptation assistance is required to solve the specific problems that occur during implementation.

Develop a Two-Level School Site Implementation Plan. Traditional wisdom and research suggest that the principal is critical to successful implementation. Yet we found that although principals were critical in the adoption phase, they were not critical to implementation—teachers were. Teachers implemented or discontinued innovation without the principal's involvement and held to the view that a principal did not have the right to impose specifics of a new program on them.

This has led us to two conclusions: (1) Principals control access and adoptions; therefore, strategies for adoption and training must include interaction with the formal system. (2) Teachers control implementation; strategies must be used that involve and include the informal networks and "ways of doing things" that exist in each school. Any implementation plan must be developed with heavy collaborative input and involvement of teachers and principals prior to training.

Expect, Encourage, and Assist with Adaptations. Even though the programs we studied were discontinued, many aspects of these programs were used during early implementation stages. In each instance, however, the materials, procedures, and techniques were adapted from the original design of the program's creator. This phenomena is not unique to schools or programs in our study. Whether it is a new home, new technology in automobiles, or technology relating to work, we want the things around us to fit our individual views and the context within which we live.

Those who plan change efforts within schools and those who provide assistance from the outside have much to learn about how to maintain the essential ingredients of an innovation while allowing it to be molded to fit local situations and preferences. We suspect it will require regular and extended interaction between developers and users and a willingness by all parties to enter into further development of an innovation already judged effective. We also suspect it means creating some new roles as curriculum, inservice, and staff development functions are redefined.

Summary

We can provide no easy steps for those who work in schools or for those who assist from the outside. Our suggestions are intended to indicate new ways of viewing schools in order to learn about the "territory." Once the territory of a particular school is known, collaborative plans for implementing new programs can be made that utilize the strength of the teachers' culture as well as the cultures of administrators and developers. We need to question some traditional assumptions about accomplishing change by finding a fit between research and user needs. We need to examine strategies that are more in tune with cultural change than technological change. And we need to make our change efforts at the same time more rigorous and flexible and allow our plans, in the words of Lars Lerup (1977), to remain with a "touch of the unfinished." □

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