

Complementary Roles in Successful Change

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School improvement doesn't happen by itself, but who makes it happen has been a topic of much investigation. In recent years researchers examining the whys and wherefores of school improvement have sought to identify the individuals critical to change in the classroom. Some have focused on the principal as the indispensable "instructional leader";¹ others have isolated the assister from outside the district as the change agent essential to a successful improvement effort;² still others have looked at teachers.³

From the Study of Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement,⁴ we have learned that all of these views are correct: principals, external assisters, and teachers are indeed important players in school change efforts. In addition, central office personnel—curriculum coordinators, program directors, and specialists—have emerged as significant actors in the process of change. In fact, central office staff may well be the linchpins of school improvement efforts, linking together the external assisters and the building level administrators and teachers. They appear to be the most appropriate local sources of assistance in actually using new practices.

In the implementation of new classroom practices, teachers, of course, are on the front line; they are most often the actual "users" of the new methods. Some simple innovations are very easy to install and have little impact beyond the individual teacher. Most innovations of any size, however, place demands that go beyond what individual teachers can or should have to deal with

alone. This is where assistance and support from the principal, central office personnel, and outside helpers can make the difference between barely coping or abandoning the effort, and achieving real change.

This article describes how principals, external assisters, and central office staff each contribute to a change effort and the outcomes of their particular assistance. The image is one of a constellation or configuration of assisters working with teachers and students to adopt or develop, implement, and institutionalize a new practice.

Principals

"Because some of the students had been in a remedial reading program for five or six years and still couldn't read, I knew that we were failing. I decided this new practice sounded like a good approach, so I contacted its developer, who agreed to work with us. I asked the two teachers if they would mind going clear down to southern Illinois with me for training, and they were both willing. I think it's important that a principal go to these workshops to know what's really going on."—*Principal, elementary school, Illinois*

"He told his staff that the project was something to go with. He urged others to support it and pushed it."—*Comment about a principal*

"I know I had to do a lot of constant encouragement and positive reinforcement. . . . We would set our sights on improving one component of the new practice, and then another."—*Principal, elementary school, Michigan*

In the course of the study, we interviewed 144 principals. Of these, 110 had knowledge of the new practices being implemented in their buildings, while 34 were unfamiliar with them. Principals who were active in successful school improvement efforts made sure

that:

- All instructional staff were aware that the successful implementation of the practice was a top priority

- The requisite materials were available

- Teachers had ready access to personnel within or outside the district who knew about and were experienced with the practice

- Teachers were given time to actually use the practice through help with classroom scheduling, and through facilitating schoolwide scheduling

- The schoolwide climate was conducive to continuous, systematic problem solving

- Teachers understood the expectation that *all* the components of the practice were to be implemented

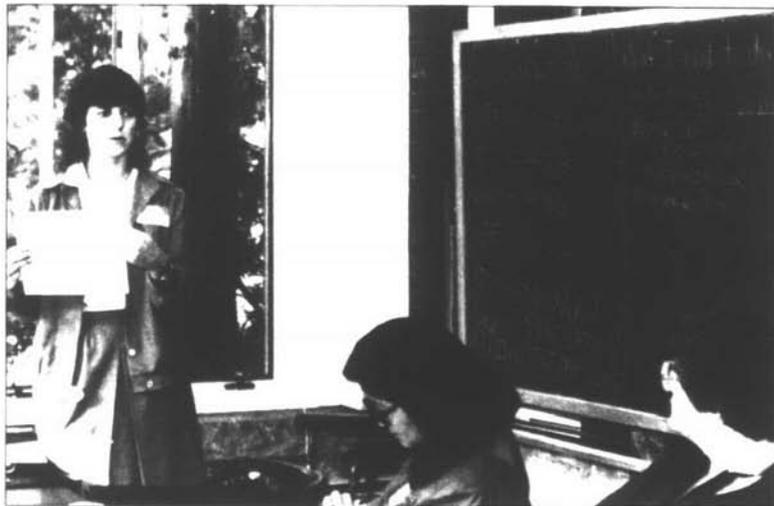
- When all of the above were in place, teachers were allowed to figure out on their own how to meet the expectations

- Teachers, parents, and central administrators were working in a realistic time frame and did not feel pressured by premature evaluations. (Successful implementation of innovations that require major changes takes two or three years, and possibly longer).

One more note of interest: principals who gave help to teachers that was focused on the new practice contributed to *teacher or classroom outcomes* such as perceived benefits, mastery of the practice, and fidelity to the practice's key components. The actions listed above helped teachers change their instructional practice and master the new innovations. On the other hand, when principals focused on general schoolwide direction and leadership, *school-level outcomes* such as change in the school itself and, indirectly, institutionalization of the new practice were the result. Principals whose schools were orderly and had existing procedures for problem

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Assistance to teachers from people in a variety of positions contributes to school improvement.



Teachers receive inservice training for Project QUILL.

solving, decision making, and following through on plans were more likely to see organizational changes as a result of implementing new practices. Different principal behaviors, then, contribute in different ways to the success of improvement efforts.

Assisters from Outside the School District

"You assess what the school's needs are and you see if you have something that's going to meet those needs. You try to tailor what you've got to meet those needs."—*External consultant, Title IV-C project*

"She went into the classrooms, observed teachers, and put it in writing. She told us the things that needed to be improved."—*Comment about an external assister*

"My strategy was to provide these people with as much information as they could possibly get about a variety of

programs. Once they narrowed the focus to a particular practice, they could use their common sense and professional judgment to make a decision about it. My only role was arranging experiences for them."—*State Facilitator, National Diffusion Network*

The innovations we studied were either exemplary practices of the National Diffusion Network (NDN) or state dissemination programs, locally developed projects funded by ESEA Title IV-C, or special education products developed with Office of Special Education funds and marketed through private publishers. We found very little use of the third category of innovations in schools. The products were purchased but, with few exceptions, eventually discarded. We concluded that in-person assistance is essential to getting new practices actively used and established in classrooms, given all the other pressures and constraints that are part of the daily routine.

The first two categories of innovations have helpers associated with them. The NDN and state-sponsored dissemination program fund demonstrator roles, which are most often held by the developers of the new practices, who are usually active or former practitioners themselves. The NDN has an additional funded position in the state facilitator: every state has at least one facilitator who helps schools assess needs and choose NDN practices appropriate for them. Many state-sponsored dissemination programs have similar facilitator positions.

The locally developed Title IV-C projects are just that: practices that are created in a local school district. Although technically "home-grown," many of these practices began as seeds or even seedlings elsewhere; several of our Title IV-C projects identified outside assisters who had worked with them—some of them extensively—on the development and implementation of their practices.

We interviewed 80 of these external assisters who had worked with 97 of the 146 local schools in the study sample. These individuals were identified by the school staff as having helped them in some way with the adoption or development and implementation of the new practices.

What did these outsiders do, and which of their actions contributed most to successful improvement efforts? External assisters gave the following types of help:

- Made school people aware of the existence of new practices
- Helped school people choose among a range of new practices, matching local needs with an appropriate resource
- Sometimes helped arrange funding for the new practice
- Worked with local administrators,

“Local facilitators contribute to more implementation outcomes than any other single group of assisters.”

teachers, and school boards to develop commitment to the new practice and arrange for it to be installed

- Arranged and conducted training in how to do the new practice
- Worked with a local contact person on the new practice
- Provided materials for the new practice
- Worked through the details of the practice with teachers, planning implementation schedules and paying attention to the specifics of actually using the practice in the classroom
- Evaluated the new practice and analyzed data
- Provided follow-up help as implementation progressed
- Helped develop plans for continuation and institutionalization, for example, securing additional funds and developing new users at the school.

Of these activities, the most helpful for teachers were efforts to actually work through the specifics of using the practice in the classroom. This kind of assistance is very different from being passively trained in a workshop setting; the two are as different from one another as cooking a Chinese meal is from listening to a Chinese chef describe how to cook. Actually *performing* a new routine—getting all the right ingredients in the right sequence at the right time in one’s own environment—is a major challenge for both cooks and teachers using a practice for the first time. (And cooks don’t usually have 30 or more children to work with as they try out new recipes!)

While such assistance was invaluable, relatively few external assisters gave it to any extent. This makes sense because, given the number of schools with which they typically work, few outsiders can afford to spend the intensive time required to work with individual teachers in the classroom.

The external assisters’ activities were especially helpful for organizational change and, indirectly, institutionalization at the *school level*. Indeed, their major contribution to school improvement appears to be preparing a congenial environment for the new practice (ensuring that resources, facilities, and so forth are in place), rather than assisting with the content of the new practice.

Given that external assisters’ major contributions were at the school rather than at the individual teacher level, who then provided the practice-focused assistance, the working through of the nuts-and-bolts of the new innovation, that teachers need to successfully change their practice? We found that central office staff often filled this role for individual schools and teachers in their district.

Central Office Staff

“I’m the one who originally found out about the funding, that’s my job—to instigate these things. Prior to getting funding I met with the two high school principals to make sure they were agreeable to the concept. There’s no sense getting funds for something you’d have to fight to implement. After funding, we met with them again and located a facility to house the program in and got some ground rules set for how it would operate.”—*Vocational curriculum director, Michigan*

“She was the motivator. In every district there are one or two people who become very excited about what they’ve heard, pursue that, and overcome whatever inertia exists.”—*Comment about a central office staff person*

“I’m the curriculum director. Not only is it my professional obligation, but I feel a personal obligation to find any way we can to improve the effectiveness of our educational program. We’re constantly searching for ways to do that.”—

Curriculum director, Arizona

When we asked personnel from schools in our sample to identify individuals who had assisted them, 78 persons outside the school building but within the district were nominated. A smattering of these were teachers from other schools in the district, but most were central office personnel: curriculum coordinators, program directors, and specialists. The 78 we interviewed worked with 65 schools in our sample, providing invaluable assistance, especially to teachers. These assisters, whom we call “local facilitators,” did the following:

- Became familiar with the needs of students in individual schools in their district
- Located and helped select the new practices
- Knew the content of the new practice, its purpose, and the benefits that were to result from its use
- Helped arrange and conduct training in the new practice, working with external assisters
- Arranged funding and other support from the district or other sources
- Obtained endorsements for the new practice from the superintendent, school board, principal, and teachers
- Worked with teachers using the practice in the classroom, working out “bugs” and overcoming obstacles
- Assisted in evaluation
- Helped plan how to continue and institutionalize the new practice.

All the assistance given to teachers by local facilitators had positive effects. Their help contributed to more implementation outcomes than any other single group of assisters, having impact on the amount of change in teachers’ practice, the level of mastery teachers achieved, the commitment teachers developed, and the benefits they perceived from using the practice. In fact, the



Teachers and administrators in Project QUILL discover the advantages of hardware and software.

major effects of local facilitators' assistance were at the *individual teacher level*—more so than at the school level.

In particular, we found that the more time local facilitators spent training or arranging for training and the more time they put into working with administrators (presumably to get their commitment to the practice and help develop building-level support systems for its use), the more sophisticated, skillful, and "tuned in" to students the teachers were with the students.

For teachers, many central office staff represent someone with curricular expertise who can help them with the content of a new practice. Because they know the content, these local facilitators can provide encouragement and incentives for doing it right, for not throwing out pieces that are not immediately understood or don't at first glance seem appropriate. And they have clout: they can provide resources, help convince principals, and generally smooth the way. Above all, from their positions in the central office, they can look outside the district in a way building personnel cannot, to scan for new ideas, tricks, and practices to meet the needs at home. They are the ones who bring outsiders in to help. In short, central office personnel can perform critical functions that make school improvement really work.

Configurations of Assistance

How do all these activities performed by three different kinds of assisters fit to-

gether, and with what effect?

- Each type of assistance and support is important. We ascertained, for example that local facilitators do not replace involved building administrators, and vice versa: of the 65 sites with local facilitators identified, all but 12 had involved principals as well. Clearly these were schools that received considerable help in their change efforts.

- External assisters' and local facilitators' efforts complement one another. We found that external helpers gave *less* assistance to schools in districts where there was a local facilitator, and conversely, that local facilitators gave *more* assistance to schools where an external assister was also helping. This suggests that local facilitators, in fact, perform many of the tasks that would be required of an external assister and that their efforts are enhanced by the presence of an external assister.

- Some local facilitators and some external assisters do work alone and achieve successful results. But those outsiders who work alone tend already to be familiar with the individual building and to work on the specifics of implementation directly with teachers. In general, those schools that had both local and external assisters working with them experienced much more change in teachers' practices—in some cases, twice as much—as schools that had only outsiders working with them.

- Assistance needs to continue throughout an implementation effort, especially for schools attempting major changes. Local facilitators and other

assisters do not necessarily need to be involved forever in a new practice, but they do need to see that a practice and the participating teachers are fully supported.

Our findings suggest that school improvement efforts need support at two levels: assistance focused on the *content* of the new practice, directed at the teachers who are implementing the innovation; and assistance focused on the *context* of the new practice, aimed at securing the necessary approval, resources, facilities, and personnel to ensure continuation and institutionalization of the innovation. It is up to the constellation of assisters—central office staff, principals, and external helpers—to see that change efforts in schools receive such support. □

¹See, for example, Ron Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," *Educational Leadership* 36 (1979): 15-27; David Clark, L. Lotto, and M. McCarthy, "Factors Associated with Success in Urban Elementary Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* (March 1980): 467-470; Michael Fullan, "School District and School Personnel in Knowledge Utilization," in *Improving Schools: Using What We Know*, ed. R. Lehming and M. Kane (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981).

²See, for instance, John Emrick and Susan Peterson, *A Synthesis of Findings Across Five Recent Studies in Educational Dissemination and Change* (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory, 1978); and Karen Seashore Louis and Sheila Rosenblum, *Linking R&D with Schools: A Program and Its Implications for Dissemination* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1981).

³An example is Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Education Change*, Vol. VII: *Factors Affecting Implementation and Continuation* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1977).

⁴David P. Crandall and Associates, *People, Policies and Practices: Examining the Chain of School Improvement* (Andover, Mass.: The NETWORK, Inc., 1982).

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