School Improvement Strategies That Work: Some Scenarios

A. Michael Huberman

One expects, and legitimately so, that a three-year, nationwide study will provide some operational guidelines about how school improvement can be "delivered" less haphazardly than usual. Even if the schools and districts studied were not themselves ideal models for bringing about significant change in practice and pupil achievement, they should still contain enough variation—in the form of successful and unsuccessful outcomes—to enable researchers to tease out the factors that make a difference.

There are several ways to succeed in improving schools, and just as many ways to fail—thus the notion of "scenarios." As we stepped back from the welter of field study and survey data, there emerged various *scripts* recounting how innovations are implemented across the country. We tried then, in our analyses, to get a fix on those scripts and to cluster our sites according to their proximity to one or another script.

Scripts are, of course, appealing animals. To begin with, they are real-life accounts, not a list of "factors" of which few are forcefully present in any one, warm-blooded school. Next, they allow readers to determine how well the cases correspond to their own contexts. Finally, there are comedies and tragedies, happy endings and unhappy endings, pilgrimages and cakewalks. This enables us to compare them, to see whether the ingredients of a strong outcome were absent or different from those leading to a weak outcome. Doing *that*, in turn, allows us to make some fairly concrete recommendations.

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This article is a review of four basic scenarios observed across the survey and field study data. We were able, with a minimum of force-fitting, to scale those scenarios from the most to the least "successful" and present them in that order. In this process, we extracted a few central points worth emphasizing.

The first is that it is hard to actually deliver school improvement. For example, at about a third of the field sites, the fate of the new practice depended almost entirely on what we came to call "environmental turbulence": budget cuts, new state-level policies, unexpected departures of key personnel, shifts in the composition of the school board, and the like. Also, as every administrator knows, schools are complicated entities to manipulate. Introducing change means shifting people, resources, regulations, and schedules, many of which are recalcitrant. In some cases, the people concerned are *right* to be recalcitrant, in the sense that it is not in their self-interest to go along. As a result, much of the innovation process is taken up with bargaining, both explicit and implicit. One person's "strategy" for school improvement collides with another person's "strategy" for avoiding a loss of status or freedom or benefits.

The inference, as the scenarios show, is *not* that one should retreat into improvisation but that one should try actively to deliver as many of the necessary ingredients as possible. It turns out that few are delivered, often because administrators are unwilling to take on the conflicts involved in delivering them. In a curious and self-defeating sense, administrators often construe school improvement as a self-abdicating process; one provides the resources, makes available a good instructional product, is on call to the people implementing the innovation, and then steps back. Put a little brutally, this is largely magical

School programs and student achievement improve when both administrators' and teachers' needs are met.

Project Catch-Up

Proficient teachers who are committed to help projects become institutionalized.

thinking. The results seldom correspond to the expectations; they are often, in a very real sense, random. If one wants specific results as an administrator, one has to *shape* them, which entails some benevolent authoritarianism, a combination of muscle, tenderness, and tutoring. This is not, of course, the only scenario for successful school improvement. But it is one that, in our sample, performs especially well and appears to be the most *manageable* in the dual sense of having the most control over the flow of events and of being the most buffered from environmental turbulence.

Outcomes and Outcome Themes

What actually is "success" in the improvement of school practices? Looking across the full set of outcome measures for the study, we defined "success" as a stable, built-in, widespread use of a well-designed innovation that had a positive effect on pupils and teachers.

In analyzing the data, we tried to do two things. First, and most obviously, we tried to estimate the level of success of each site on the important outcome criteria. Then—a far more complicated process—we tried to see how the various schools got there. We did this for a subset of 12 local sites in two of the four programs studied: ESEA Title IV-C and the National Diffusion Network. This was the essence of our year-long field study.[1]

We discovered that the sites ranged from highly successful to miserably failing. Four groups emerged that corresponded to "outcome themes." We came to call the two successful types "enforcers" and "overreachers." A less successful scenario was called "blunting/downsizing," and the projects that failed did so through a process of "indifference and discouragement."

Let us now look in greater detail at the four groups. In doing so, we stay with the field study data, that is, with only 12 sites in an overall sample of 146. Although we are on somewhat shaky ground here, the survey data square well with the field study data.[2]

High Outcomes from Enforced, Stabilized Use

One of the principal and clearly controversial findings in this study was that successful implementation often occurred at places where administrators exerted strong and continuous pressure on teachers. Group 1 sites are not the only places where administrative muscle was used; there was such pressure initially at virtually all the field sites and outright mandating of the innovation at some sites in other groups, yet outcome levels were lower there.

This successful scenario highlights the factors that contributed to the eventual outcomes. First, the central office

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administrator, who is usually responsible for curriculum and special projects, puts pressure on teachers to adopt or develop the practice. Such strong-arming can, and often does, lower teachers' initial commitment. However, when substantial assistance is supplied, it tends to increase teachers' technical mastery and subsequently their commitment. In addition, modest organizational rearrangements—usually revisions in scheduling, teaming, and monitoring—are authorized to facilitate use and, in so doing, heighten the impact of the innovation on students. In parallel, levels of teacher mastery and commitment, along with stability of program staff, lead to stabilized use, which increases the percentage of teachers and leads to institutionalization as the number of teachers increases and the practice supplants earlier ones. Stability of program leadership also aids institutionalization. The general picture is one of administrative decisiveness, accompanied by enough assistance to increase teacher skill, ownership, and stable use in the context of a stable school system. To get a visual sense of how these several factors combine to produce high institutionalization, the reader should turn to Figure 2 on page 17 of Mile's article. The important points of Scenario 1 are:

- *Central office initiative* becomes a strong influence on follow-through.
- Teachers are given *little latitude to make changes* in the innovation, at least in the initial year. This creates friction between teachers and administrators, but it also means that innovations requiring major changes are put into practice in one piece.
- Teacher-administrator friction, taking the form of low teacher commitment, is eventually resolved when teachers are able to master a *well-designed, technically challenging innovation while receiving sustained assistance.* The assistance comes not only prior to project execution but also—and more decisively—in the course of project execution.[3]
- *Stability of program leadership* means that central office and building administrators stay with the project, rather than handing it off or turning their attention elsewhere. The least successful projects in the sample were orphaned by the administrators who initially promoted them.

Moderate to High Outcomes from High Mastery and Low Settledness

The sites in Scenario 2 achieve well, but not as well as the enforcers. Specifically, teachers excel and the effect on students is strong, yet positive classroom-level outcomes do not translate into equally high institutional outcomes. We call these sites "overreachers."

These projects have more of a problem-solving impetus. Local performance is seen as inadequate, which sets the stage for administrative pressure to adopt or develop a program that will change the situation. Administrators also have career ambitions. The projects are not simply vehicles for self-promotion, but they seem to attract people with interests in moving in, moving up, or moving someone else up. These career motivations ultimately weaken the project, but initially they provide energy and muscle.

These innovations are demanding; less so in their institutional ramifications than in the efforts they require of teachers. Preparation, both technical and political, is adequate, as is central office assistance in the initial year. In practice, however, teachers find that the innovations are problem-prone and that their fit to local conditions is poor. They are variously too fluid, too Herculean, or too ill-matched to pupil characteristics. This has important consequences. First, teachers seek, and get, authorization from administrators to make changes in the project. While these changes sometimes reduce the scope and bite of the innovation, the degree of change in local practices remains high. This is largely due to teachers being thrust into organizationally novel roles: a new pull-out remedial lab; an entirely new high school; an autonomous program spanning two high schools; a major counseling function appended to classroom roles.

But poor fit also triggers within-building assistance, which in turn heightens teacher commitment and mastery of the innovation. The sites in this group rank the highest in peer assistance; their response to "overreaching" is, from the start, mutual help, which often lends a crusading flavor to the process. These are sites at which teachers work hardest and with relatively little administrative pressure. The fruit of that work is high classroom change and mastery of the practice and, through stabilization of the technical apects of the innovation, increased student achievement and teacher capacity.

The assistance-mastery-commitment cycle is the sunny side of these sites, and it accounts for the strong outcomes. But there is also a more shadowy side. For teachers, poor initial fit—together with continuous adaptation of the project, high degrees of practice, and change under conditions of uncertainty—produces attrition. At two sites there are clear signs of burnout. At another, teachers begin to look elsewhere. At yet another, teachers respond to role overload by watering down the innovation. Attrition, combined with the relative success of the practices, also revises or crystallizes career advancement motivations. Teachers begin to leave the project; many leave the site altogether. The results are less staff stability, less stabili-

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zation of use, and fewer project users. At the same time, three of these four sites are hit with budget cuts, and some teachers are thrust back into conventional classroom slots.

Administrators also begin disengaging. What these four projects have in common is that administrator commitment is gradually directed elsewhere. In several cases, the trend is toward career shifts out of the project—often out of the district—either for more opportunities or because of environmental turbulence. In any case, leadership stability is weakened and, as a result, so are stabilization of use and institutionalization.

This group of projects illustrates the fact that new practices can be introduced and consolidated without heavy administrative strong-arming, and that at the outset career-driven motives can accelerate adoption. The necessary conditions appear to be administrative flexibility, strong peer assistance, and adaptations in the programs that resolve poor fit while preserving significant change in practice.

The problem appears to be that as teachers master the practice and develop ownership, some burn out and others revive career ambitions. Nor do career-driven administrators appear to build lasting commitment to projects they sponsor or lead; both success and turbulence prompt them to move on. Still, though the stakes they pull up unsettle the rest of the enterprise, the school improvement effort stays reasonably well in place in the strength of its achievements.

Moderate to Low Outcomes from Program Blunting or Downsizing

Outcomes for Group 3 are modest. In all of the sites, innovations that were not major ventures to begin with have been further reduced in scale and scope, so that major change is ruled out and outcomes are limited. The reductions take place at the instructional level. Given wide latitude by administrators to make changes, teachers redo the innovations, stabilizing them as minor add-ons or drop-ins. To redo, teachers unbundle external (NDN) projects, using only those components that are congenial to personal teaching styles and that call for few changes in ongoing instructional routines.

An additional thread ties this group together and connects it thematically to Group 2: for three of the four sites, continuing administrative leadership is low. Key advocates at the building or district level back off, leave, or get reassigned.

As an example of the scenarios, in one site the districtwide mandate for using an early childhood screening and skill development program creates new and stiff demands on the kindergartens. This makes for a poor fit between program and building characteristics, already potentially poor because of the heavy requirements of the program design. The central office administrator thus gives wide latitude to building administrators to "adapt" the project, thereby restoring teacher-administrator harmony that was compromised by the innovation and its requirements. As a result, there is substantial program change, resulting in less impact on pupils than its developers expected.

The scenario at other sites is similar. The central office advocate considers the program to be in a "pilot" year, when teachers can "pick and choose" promising aspects, then, supposedly, build them into the curriculum. But teachers quite naturally shy away from the more demanding or adventurous components (for example, emphasis on activist community experience and more student-directed learning activities). But because these aspects of the program are central to its success, the impact on pupils is minimal.

The point here is not that local adaptation is a poor policy, but that fiddling with a project to improve the fit between the school and the innovation can often trivialize results. The whole point about innovating is that it creates a discrepancy between local practices and the demands of the new practice, and in that discrepancy lie the changes that can produce significant results. Reduce that discrepancy and you throw away important outcomes. The logical—and understandable—response of teachers is to improve the fit, to begin gently, and to avoid situations of high uncertainty, all of which create pressures on administrators to give teachers their head. Except in the somewhat atypical case of Scenario 2, this appears to lead to down-sizing, which is rarely followed by up-sizing later on. In particular, administrators who give a lot of leeway (often in order to get the innovation accepted) and then turn their attention elsewhere, are asking for placebos. More often than not, this is precisely what they get.

Failing: Low Levels of Outcome From Indifference and Discouragement

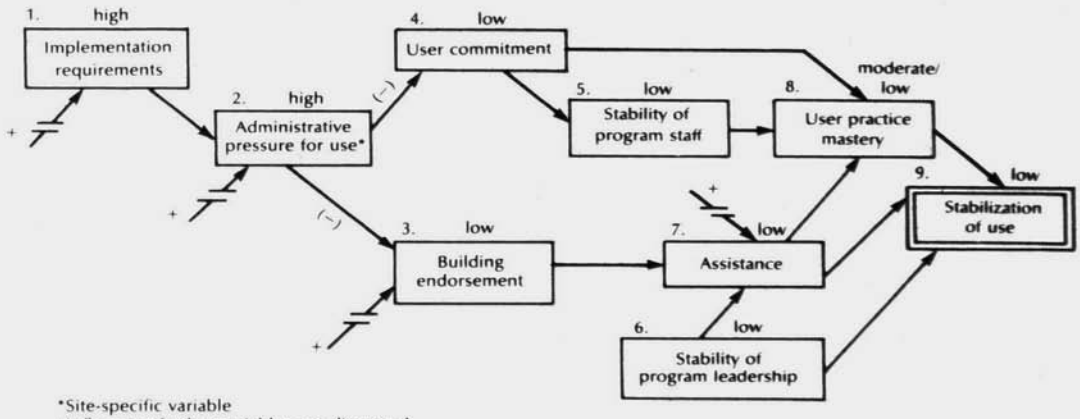
In the two sites illustrating Scenario 4, there are reasons to think that the innovations were of poor quality and *should* have been dropped. Still, a less indifferent execution might have salvaged both projects. Other projects, including the two "winners" in our four-scenario horse race, started out poorly as well.

Let us illustrate with one site, represented in Figure 1. Here nothing works "right." A demanding innovation (1), pushed by the administration (2), encounters resistance (3) and weak commitment (4) at the building level. Instability of program staff (5) and leadership (6) enfeeble assistance efforts (7), and mastery (8) is minimal. The innovation withers away. This is, of course, an unfairly brief synopsis of a far more complex story, but a few comments may flesh out the "failure" cases a bit better.

In these cases, *motives for adoption were opportunistic*: career-centered at one, and political at the other. Still, we have seen that career incentives can fuel a school improvement effort without disabling it. Also, both projects were of potential interest within the school district; they addressed a real need.

These projects began with *lukewarm support*. Teacher commitment was low or moderate at the outset, largely because of heavy-handed administrative

Figure 1. A Scenario Leading to Failure



*Site-specific variable
+Influence of other variables not discussed

pressure to implement, but also because the innovations were poorly designed and created problems of coordination and overload at the classroom or building levels. In addition, building administrators had been pressured and were skeptical of both the merits of and motives for implementing the project. Here, sheer administrative muscle—the administrator as thug—exerted on other administrators or on teachers is counterproductive. The enforcement scenario needs more than enforcement alone to succeed. Essentially, what we have here are underdesigned or poorly designed innovations, forced on lukewarm teachers and principals who are suspicious of the project's origins and who realize when they start in that the projects are full of bugs. It is not an auspicious beginning, and things get worse when needed assistance is weak.

Here again, we underscore the *importance of teacher commitment, in itself and as a function of mastery of the practice*. In all cases, if initial commitment was low, it tended to be boosted by district-level and peer assistance, by the experience of mastery and the resulting change in practice, and by gradually improving classroom or building fit. As the level of teacher commitment rose, so did further mastery and, ultimately, stabilization of use. This is essentially the pattern for Groups 1 and 2. In Group 4, on the other hand, levels of commitment declined rapidly and in direct relationship to the absence of district or building-level support.

Low levels of assistance provided by administrators betray the lack of administrative commitment in the later stages of the project. There was simply no advocate sufficiently committed nor even sufficiently *present* to keep the projects alive. This also meant that district-level administrators were unwilling or unavailable to counter the resistance of building administrators, which in turn suggested to the central office that it was better to let the projects die than to waste energy on them. And die they did—in both cases from the discouragement and desertion of teachers and from leadership shifts that effectively orphaned the projects among hostile teachers. In that sense, these two "failure" cases are a successful effort by teachers to protect their schools against inefficient leadership.

Conclusions

Where does this leave us? Overall, it suggests that administrators, both at the central office and building levels, have to go to center stage and stay there if school improvement efforts are to succeed. More nondirective strategies *can* work, as in Scenario 2, but are poorer bets; they amount essentially to playing dice with the fate of an innovation. If one intends to achieve higher outcome levels, the key tasks for administrators are finding and developing a practice with a potentially good fit, getting it adopted, providing technical and institutional support, and getting the practice stabilized and extended to a wider number of teachers and "routinized" into existing training, budget, and policy cycles. If one goes with the model of forceful leadership shown in Scenario 1, there is the additional administrative task of keeping the project intact, both in terms of its core components and by preserving the magnitude of change that the innovation requires of its teachers.

The trick is to do all this while still attending to the key tasks of teachers, which are different from those of administrators. What matters to teachers are the demands made by the innovation on their present skills and the way they run their classrooms, the initial and continuing assistance provided to them, the commitment they feel to the practice as they get on top of it, the possibility of settling down into routine, impact-producing use, and the likelihood of deriving some skills and materials that are transferable to other parts of their daily repertoire. The successful projects are clearly ones in which both *agendas*, those of administrators and teachers, get met. If administrators can accomplish *their* list of tasks, teachers will be able to get *theirs* done, too.□

[1]The details of the estimating and grouping procedures used can be found in A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles, *People, Policies, and Practices: Examining the Chain of School Improvement. Vol. IV: Innovation Up Close: A Field Study in Twelve School Settings* (Andover, Mass.: The NETWORK, Inc., 1982).

[2]See A. Michael Huberman and David P. Crandall, *People, Policies, and Practices: Examining the Chain of School Improvement. Vol. IX: Implications for Action* (Andover, Mass.: The NETWORK, Inc., 1982).

[3]For more details on assistance, see the Cox article in this issue or Huberman and Miles, *Vol. IV: Innovation Up Close*, pp. 137–176.