

# At Last: Some Good News From a Study of School Improvement

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Few times in history rival the present for bad news about education. In the past half year, the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education<sup>1</sup> has accused schools of mediocrity, and John Goodlad's Study of Schooling<sup>2</sup> presents a similarly grim picture. Yet many educators, at all levels of the enterprise, have been in classrooms where teachers and students pursue learning with excitement; in schools where goals are set simply so they can be achieved and higher ones aspired to; and in districts where careful planning and high-quality development work contribute to challenging experiences for students. Are these random events? Are they few and far between?

Are they exceptions to the rule? Recently, The NETWORK and several collaborating institutions<sup>3</sup> completed a large, national study of school improvement efforts whose findings answer these questions with a loud, emphatic "No!"

There are a great many schools around the country where careful, thoughtful efforts to improve have been successful in many ways, accruing benefits to students, teachers, and the school as a whole. And these successes are *not* random. They have resulted from a conscious and long-term commitment of federal and state governments to encourage and support school growth by providing a few extra resources and an array of strategies and

programs from which to choose.

The findings from the Study of Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement allow us to look at schools and improvement-oriented change from a somewhat different perspective and in a somewhat different light than previous studies that yielded discouraging results. First, unlike the Commission's survey and the Goodlad study, we were looking at schools that had made a commitment to improvement and had done so by implementing a new curriculum or instructional practice. Second, unlike the well-known Rand Change Agent Studies,<sup>5</sup> we looked at schools supported by federal and state programs that had either evolved better ways of helping schools improve or used strategies different from those examined by Rand.

Before turning to the findings in more detail, a word or two about the study itself. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 1978, the study was a three-year effort to examine the effects of strategies the government used to encourage school improvement, primarily by the dissemination of new practices that had been developed with federal support. We traced 61 different innovations<sup>6</sup> from their federal sponsors to 146 districts and schools, and over 400 classrooms in ten states. With questionnaires and interviews, we surveyed teachers, principals, superintendents, central office coordinators, external consultants, trainers and facilitators, and federal pol-



The Newport-Mesa, California, USD staff of Project Catch-Up, which has been adopted by hundreds of elementary schools across the country.

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Schools all across the country are replicating each others' successes with a variety of programs that improve student achievement.



icy makers. We carefully depicted classroom use of the innovations with the Practice Profile, which allowed us to measure teachers' extent of implementation, change in practice, and fidelity to the developer's core components. We then focused on 12 local sites for a year-long intensive field study, using qualitative techniques to probe the dynamics of the school improvement process.

Our 146 schools were drawn from long lists of schools that had, since as far back as 1974, either (1) received funding to develop innovative projects through ESEA; (2) adopted nationally validated programs through the Education Department's National Diffusion Network, or state-validated programs through their state department of education's dissemination program; or (3) purchased special education materials from publishing companies that had been developed in schools and funded by the Office of Special Education.

When we sampled schools from these lists, we had a 75 percent "hit rate"; that is, we found a large majority of these programs still in place, and many were thriving. Furthermore, when we visited with teachers in classrooms, we found more than just "lip service" given to the innovative practices. There were concrete, frequently major, changes in their classroom approaches, strategies, and materials. And, through discussions with teachers, building and district administrators, and with individuals external to the district who had provided training and support, we were able to discern what factors contributed to the success of the programs. These include:

- The commitment of teachers, developed either through actual use of the new practice or before they began to use it
- Curricula or instructional practices that were carefully developed, well-defined, and determined to be effective

- Training by credible people—often former teachers—that included follow-up activities

- Assistance and support by an array of players, including other teachers, principals, district staff, and external trainers and linkers

- Attention to factors contributing to institutionalization (ensuring that the new practice remained), including line items on budgets, orienting new or re-assigned staff, and writing the new program into curriculum guidelines.

These factors and many others are illuminated in the next five articles. In the first, David Crandall answers the questions, "How do meaningful changes occur in the classroom, and what causes teachers to make them?" He describes how the combination of new, effective practices and skillful, credible trainers builds teachers' commitment to not only use the programs, but to replicate their key components. Ongoing assistance and firm direction from administrators complete the picture of school improvement at the classroom level.

Pat Cox, in the second article, describes the constellation of players needed to support school improvement efforts. She highlights the role of the local facilitator, a district level coordinator or project director whose contribution is critical to success.

Successful classroom use of the new programs does not necessarily lead to continued use or institutionalization. In the third article, Matthew Miles discusses the factors that contribute to continuation, and the steps that administrators can take to make a new program "stick."

The study resulted in four scenarios for improvement, ranging from great success to disappointing failure. Michael Huberman describes these, illustrating with stories of the people, prac-

tices, and activities that led to various outcomes.

Finally, David Zaechei and I pool the findings and apply them to innovations being implemented in schools today. Using illustrations from our work with microcomputers and effective schooling practices, we describe the leadership roles and assistance activities that can contribute to successful improvement efforts. □

<sup>1</sup>National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>The University of Texas Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, American University's Knowledge Transfer Institute, The Center for Policy Research, and UCLA's Center for the Study of Evaluation.

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

<sup>5</sup>Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. IV: Summary* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1975).

<sup>6</sup>In the study, we use the terms "innovation" and "new practice" interchangeably, meaning a definable product, program, or process that requires its users to change their behaviors.

<sup>7</sup>The Practice Profile methodology was developed collaboratively with the developers of the concept of Innovation Configurations at the University of Texas Research and Development Center for Teacher Education. See Susan F. Loucks and David P. Crandall, *The Practice Profile: An All-Purpose Tool for Program Communication, Staff Development, Evaluation, and Implementation* (Andover, Mass.: The NETWORK, Inc., 1981); and Gene E. Hall and Susan F. Loucks, *Innovation Configurations: Analyzing the Adaptation of Innovations* (Austin, Tex.: R&D Center for Teacher Education, 1978).

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