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 has accused schools of mediocrity, and John Goodlad's Study of Schooling 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 these 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 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, we looked at schools supported by federal and state programs that had 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 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-
Schools all across the country are replicating each others' successes with a variety of programs that improve student achievement.

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