

Will This New Round of Recommendations for High Schools Make a Difference?



The School Improvement Project is one method schools can use to determine which of the recommended changes apply to them, and then to implement them successfully.

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In the last three decades educators have seen numerous efforts to change and improve curriculum and instruction in high schools. In the 1950s and 60s the federal government, private foundations, and professional organizations recommended changes and developed materials to improve the secondary curriculum, first in the areas of mathematics and science, and eventually in all content areas. The late 1960s and early 70s were filled with recommendations for high schools to improve the effectiveness of their programs through such things as individualized instruction, team teaching, multimedia, com-

puter-assisted instruction, simulations, independent study, and community learning projects (Ornstein and Levine, 1981).

While widely advocated as important advances for improving education in secondary schools, these programs and

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practices were not implemented extensively across the United States (Goodlad, 1983, 1984). Of course, there were some innovative schools and districts that gave attention to these recommendations, but the extent of implementation was limited in most schools, and frequently the changes occurred through an individual teacher or cluster of teachers.

New Recommendations for High School Improvement

Currently, the public is being bombarded with a new series of recommendations about what ought to be done to

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improve our high schools. Some of the better-known reports include those by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Boyer, 1983), the National Association for Secondary School Principals and the Association of Independent Schools (Sizer, 1983), the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy (Peterson, 1983), and John Goodlad (1984), based on his Study of Schooling in the United States. All of these reports include recommendations that will and should be considered by educators. In fact, the October 1983 issue of *Educational Leadership* presents the reactions of several educators to “A Nation at Risk,” the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This is just the beginning of what we believe will be a hot and lively debate in the literature over the recommendations included in the reports that are finding their way into the mass media.

But will these reports and recommendations result in improved practice? Or, are we, as Goodlad (1983) suggested, headed for another round of recommended changes that result in non-events? Conditions appear ripe for a replication of what happened—or more appropriately put, what did not happen—to proposed improvements recommended for high schools between 1950 and 1980 (Goodlad, 1983).

Essentials for Implementation of Recommendations

During the 70s the staff at the Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A) worked with high schools across the United States to implement many of the innovations that had been recommended. Based on our experiences and general lack of widespread success with getting high schools to implement what we believed were important changes, we have gained some insight that could help high schools successfully select and implement improved practices in the 1980s.

I/D/E/A's experiences with change programs in secondary schools suggest some essentials for any high school improvement program. These include:

- Viewing the individual school as the largest unit of change and improvement

- Building ownership among teachers and administrators in a school for specific changes

- Having adequate time, usually six or more months, for a school faculty to select their own school improvement goals and programs

- Recognizing that significant improvements and change in schools take considerable time—usually three to five years

- Selecting and implementing substantive change in school practice, not just tinkering with what is

- Using a systematic process for involving local school staff in planning, implementing, and evaluating the new practices

- Having a trained person in the school—often the principal, but preferably a team of professionals and parents—who can guide faculty through the improvement process and give constant support and attention to this process

- Budgeting adequate resources—time, staff, training, materials—to ensure successful implementation of new programs and practices

- Having formal approval from the board of education and the superintendent for school-by-school improvements that may result in significant differences among individual school programs within the district

- Monitoring implementation efforts to identify and make improvements that are needed

- Recognizing and celebrating successes as a means of rewarding and reinforcing those involved

- Providing ongoing staff development for all personnel to prepare them for their new roles and responsibilities in teaching and administration.

All of these are characteristics of effective systems for high school improvement. Yet none of the recent proposals for improving high school curriculum and instructional practices address them. In fact, the one common weakness in all of these reports for improving schooling is that they do not adequately deal with the process of how to implement the proposed improvements. The key to determining whether this new series of suggestions will increase the effectiveness of high schools is making sure the right recommendations are selected and implemented in each of our high schools.



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The I/D/E/A/ School Improvement Process

Since 1980, I/D/E/A/ has developed, field-tested and disseminated a process that could be employed by high schools to systematically select and put into place the recommendations from the various reports that best meet their school and community needs. The I/D/E/A/ School Improvement Process is currently being used in over 50 high schools, primarily in the West and Midwest. It is based on I/D/E/A/'s past experiences with the Change Program for Individually Guided Education (IGE) and the research on organizational change, inservice education, staff development, leadership, and adult learning (Wood, 1982).

The form and substance of the School Improvement Process (SIP) allows school site planning teams to determine which recommendations in the current reports should be implemented in a particular high school. It involves parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, students, and community leaders in a systematic cycle of improvement activities. The improvement cycle begins with readiness, and moves through planning, training, implementation and replanning. Each of these stages is briefly described in the following paragraphs.

Readiness. Once the decision has been made that a high school will become involved in a SIP project, a planning team of teachers, administrators, and community members is established for the school. This team, which represents the key groups that will be affected by any changes, participates in a series of awareness meetings. These meetings prepare the team to function effectively in making decisions by consensus. As these group skills are being developed, the planning team builds a vision of what they want their high school to be like within the next five years and assesses the readiness of the school and community for the changes that might be needed to put their ideas into place.

Planning. When these initial meetings are completed and the planning team has assessed the readiness of the school and community, a retreat is scheduled. The retreat allows the planning group, over two or three days away from work, to refine their vision of the school they want and to identify the specific outcomes that define how

teachers, students, administrators, and parents would behave when the team's vision is in place. With this vision in mind, the team also *begins* to identify specific program changes and practices they believe should be implemented in their school.

Armed with the results of the retreat, a subgroup of the planning team is assigned to develop a written plan for achieving the outcomes selected in the retreat. This subgroup examines current practice in and outside their school, and selects those specific curriculum and instructional improvements they want implemented over the next five years. The subgroup then develops a plan for long-term implementation—the who, what, why, when, and how. They also develop a strategy for obtaining commitment to and ownership of the vision and implementation plan from the high school faculty.

When the long- and short-term plans are developed, they are reviewed by the total planning team. After necessary revisions are made, the final plan is taken to the school staff for review, and the strategies to obtain faculty commitment are implemented.

Training and Implementation. Staff training is the next major task in the School Improvement Process. New knowledge, attitudes, and skills are needed to implement the practices that have the approval of the school staff. The training activities identified and developed by the school staff make extensive use of learning teams, experiential learning, and peer observation/feedback and, to the extent possible, personalized learning. After the training sessions, follow-up assistance is provided to help teachers and administrators as they carry out what they have learned.

Implementation is constantly monitored to ensure that progress is being made on the improvement goals that the faculty has selected. Based on this continuous review of what is and is not working and additional needs that are identified for those implementing new practices, additional training is provided. Thus continuous improvement of current practice and extension of the initial vision of what the school ought to be like are built into the process.

Evaluation is a planned component of SIP. The value of any improvement in high schools is the impact it has on achievement for students and growth

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and satisfaction for the personnel responsible for student achievement. Both student achievement and school climate need attention in our high schools. In fact, most high school SIP projects address these two problems.

Replanning. About the middle of the first year of implementation, the planning group reviews the monitoring data and begins a series of steps to plan for the second year of implementation. In replanning, the vision is reviewed, extended, and refined; detailed plans are made; training needs are identified, planned, and scheduled; budgets are established; and monitoring and evaluation strategies are determined. The school faculty, as they did for the first year, then reviews and approves this plan—and the cycle goes on.

SIP Materials and Training. To ensure that this process was replicable in a variety of high school settings, the I/D/E/A/ staff developed a comprehensive set of support materials that can be used to guide local planning teams and school personnel through SIP. In addition, they developed a comprehensive training program for principals and central office staff to prepare local district personnel to take schools through this process. This training lasts approximately 30 days and is usually conducted in three- to five-day workshops over a two-year period. Trainees experience the entire School Improvement Process in a simulated setting. Follow-up assistance for trainers is also available (Wood, 1982).

Preliminary Evaluations of SIP. The results in high schools using the School

Improvement Process over the last three years have been quite different from past improvement efforts, which were generally unsuccessful. Preliminary evaluation in SIP high schools are uncovering significant increases in student achievement, school climate, and voluntary participation in the academic and non-academic offerings, and substantive decreases in teacher and student absenteeism, vandalism expenses, and discipline problems (Wood and Johnson, 1983).

SIP and the Recommendations

Of course, the current involvement with SIP was not initiated as a means of dealing with the stream of recommendations for improving high schools that have hit us since January 1983. These recommendations were not published when schools first field-tested the School Improvement Process.

As noted earlier, however, this process can be used to make decisions about which recommendations in recent reports should be implemented in a particular high school. There are several points in the readiness and planning stages where the reports or a summary of these reports might be used. For example, prior to or during the awareness meetings the recommendations from the reports might be presented to the planning team as a rationale for initiating school improvement and to provide ideas about what the team might wish to include in a tentative vision for their high school. This same information might be provided prior to or during the retreat to assist the planning team in selecting specific goals for their SIP project and possible programs and practices to achieve their goals. Certainly the subgroup that writes up the five-year plan ought to spend time reviewing the report recommendations as they select the specific programs and practices they will propose for school improvement.

One way of getting school staff support for the SIP plan might be to have the school faculty discuss the key recommendations that are included in the final improvement plan that has been approved by the planning team. Once the improvement plan is accepted by the school staff and the specific recommendations have been selected for a school, the training, implementation, and replanning stages provide an excellent way of putting those recommendations into place.

Closing Thought

Earlier we raised the question of whether educators are heading for another time when all that will come from the recommendations in this new round of national reports on how to improve high schools is a series of debates. In our judgment, if that is all that happens, it would be a disaster for educators and this nation's youth! Now is a time when we must act; we must take systematic steps to put the best of these recommendations into place in our high schools. Our nation is again realizing the importance of our most precious resource, our youth. They are again looking to the schools as a means of developing this resource. The debate over the future of education in this election year reflects the growing support and concern for providing quality education to all our future citizens. □

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