

# **Implementing Change at the Building Level**

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The question of implementation is simply whether or not a given idea, practice or program gets “put in place”. In focusing on teaching and learning, for example, I have suggested that implementation consists of (1) using new materials, (2) engaging in new behaviors and practices and, (3) incorporating new beliefs (Fullan, 2001 a). The logic is straightforward – no matter how promising a new idea may be, it cannot impact student learning if it is superficially implemented.

Concerns about implementation surfaced in the late 1960’s after a flurry of innovative reforms failed to make a difference. The first order problem that Sarason, Goodlad and others identified at the time was that most innovations at best got “adopted” on the surface, but did not alter behaviors and beliefs. For the past thirty years, research and practice has focused on identifying key factors associated with failed or successful implementation. In this brief introduction, I will examine first, what we know about the dynamics of implementation at the building level, and second what external-to-the-school issues should be considered.

### Implementation at the Building Level

There has been a growing sense of urgency in society that schools must do a better job of teaching the young. Moreover, policy makers and citizens have demanded large-scale reform involving all or most schools, not just an innovative few. Models of Whole School Reform have been generated to help the spread and depth of reform.

Still, there are perplexing problems. Datnow and Stringfield (2000) talk about the problem of initial and continuing implementation. In one study of eight schools that had implemented given reform models, only three

had continued use after a few years. In another district, Datnow and Stringfield (2000) report:

By the third year of our four-year study, only one of thirteen schools were still continuing to implement their chosen reform designs. Reforms expired in six schools. A significant challenge to the sustainability of reforms ... was the instability of district leadership and the politics that accompanied it. In 1995-1996 [the] then-superintendent actively, publicly promoted the use of externally developed reforms. During his tenure, the district created an Office of Instructional Leadership to support the designs' implementation. The following year, however, a new district administration eliminated this office, and district support for many of the restructuring schools decreased dramatically. (p. 198)

If we look closely at the building level, we can identify the key factors and processes. The best up-to-date analysis is provided by Newmann, King & Youngs (2000) in their recent case studies (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

Source: Newmann, King and Youngs (2000)

First, the logic. School must focus on a constellation of quality curriculum, instruction and assessment of student learning. If they do this, they can have a powerful impact on student learning. In order to do this, they must have or develop the capacity to work together over periods of time, all the while attempting, monitoring and refining improvements.

Newmann, King & Youngs' identification of the five factors which comprise school capacity is very instructive:

1. Knowledge, skills and dispositions of individuals
2. Professional community
3. Program coherence
4. Technical resources
5. Principal Leadership

Knowledge, skills and dispositions refers to the individual capability of teachers. One can enhance this by hiring teachers with desired traits and/or by providing professional development. Note the limitation, however. This is an "individualistic" strategy by itself. Put another way, never send a changed individual into an unchanged environment.

For this reason, effective schools have also built up their "professional learning community" in which principals and teachers work together over time. These interactive communities examine and reexamine their practices and results.

Most schools suffer from overload of innovations – what Tom Hatch described as "multiple innovations colliding". Thus, schools, to be effective

must work on “program coherence” by becoming more selective, integrative and focused.

Schools need “resources” to do all this. Technical resources refers to access to time, materials, ideas, expertise.

Finally, Newmann et al found that “principal leadership” was critical. In a sense, the best definition of school leadership is that which “causes” the previous four factors to get better and better, i.e. effective leadership enhances individual development, professional community, program coherence, and access to resources.

The relationship of school capacity to implementation should be obvious. School capacity, as defined by Newmann and Youngs consists of the very strengths that produce greater implementation. Stated differently, schools with higher capacity that take on given innovations operate in a way that is likely to access materials and alter behaviors, skills and beliefs of teachers within the school.

### External School Factors

While we have an increasingly clear idea of what school capacity looks like, the key question is how to get more of it when you don’t have it. It is the case that only a small proportion of schools are as good as the one depicted by Newmann and colleagues (Fullan, 2001 a, 2001 b). In order to get school capacity on a wider-scale we must turn our attention to the infrastructure for school reform. The infrastructure includes all those agencies and levels outside the school such as the community, the district,

and regional or state agencies, policies and programs. For example, returning to Datnow and Stringfield's study of school reform:

We found that clear, strong district support positively impacted reform implementation , and the lack thereof often negatively impacted implementation ... schools that sustained reforms had district and state allies that protected reform efforts during periods of transition or crisis and secured resources (money, time, staff and space) essential to reforms ... schools that failed to sustain reforms were sometimes located in districts that were "infamous for experimenting with new kinds of programs" but did not provide ongoing support for any of them. (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000, pp. 194-195)

These kinds of findings have led many of us to conclude that the district and other levels of the system are crucial if we want large scale sustainable reform. There is some evidence, for example, that districts and states can make a larger difference in many schools by using a strategy that integrates "accountability" and "capacity building". This is illustrated in Fullan (2001 b) in which District #2 in New York City, San Diego City Schools District, and England are used as case studies. For example, England has dramatically increased its literacy and numeracy achievement in over 19,000 primary schools over a four-year period, using a reform strategy that increased accountability by naming and monitoring targets, and capacity through substantial investments in new roles, new materials and new opportunities for professional development.

### Conclusion

In summary, we have an increasingly clear idea of what is required at the building level to achieve greater implementation that positively affects student learning. We need to have more case studies of what this looks like

at the building level. More than that, however, we need strategies that will increase the number of schools engaged in successful reform strategies.

This brings us full circle to a paradox. Implementation, by definition, only occurs at the school and classroom level. Yet, if schools are left on their own, only a minority of schools will evidence the kind of school capacity needed, and fewer still will be able to sustain it. This is why rethinking the roles of districts, and state policies is required in order to stimulate, and support school-based capacity building.

The good news is that there is a growing focus on developing leaders at many levels (school, district, state). In *Leading in a Culture of Change* (Fullan, 2001 b), I identified five crucial mind and action sets that leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must cultivate, namely: a deep sense of moral purpose, knowledge of the change process, capacity to develop relationships across diverse individuals and groups, fostering knowledge creation and sharing, and the ability to engage with others in coherence making amidst multiple innovations.

Implementation, whether or not things change in practice, will always be at the heart of these new developments, and the building-level will always be where the implementation buck stops.

## References

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