

POLICY BRIEF

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The Implementation Trap: Helping Schools Overcome Barriers to Change

By Craig Jerald

Is School Improvement a “Bad Bet”?

In May 2004, two influential philanthropic groups held a briefing for education grant makers to help them decide whether to keep giving large sums of money to support school improvement. A moderator kicked off the event by asking, “Is it possible to get the types of schools that we need... [by] fixing the schools we have?” In other words, “Should foundations and donors continue to write checks to superintendents [for school improvement]?”¹

The answer to that question, detailed in a report² summarizing the two-day session, was sobering. A clear consensus emerged that grant makers should continue to support school improvement efforts, but at

progressively lower levels than in the past. Instead, they should consider putting more of their dollars behind the creation of new “startup” schools to supplement—and perhaps eventually replace—existing schools

Why is there such skepticism about the capacity for America’s schools to get better just at the time when federal education policies are putting greater pressure on schools to improve than ever before? As a speaker at the 2004 education funders briefing put it, “We’ve learned a lot in the last two decades. First, we’ve learned that changing schools is extremely difficult. In fact it is almost impossible to change them in fundamental ways... I don’t believe we are likely to get the kinds of schools we need by changing the schools we have.”³

Lack of Attention to Implementation

Part of the skepticism has to do with doubt about whether school leaders can gather the courage to deal honestly with the problem of low student achievement. As discussed in the first two policy briefs in this series, schools need to examine *school factors* that contribute to underachievement and make fundamental changes necessary to improve. They also need help understanding that effective planning doesn't result in just a good written plan, but also in an ongoing process of *collaborative, strategic problem solving*.

But much of the skepticism also has to do with whether schools can overcome obstacles to *implementing aggressive plans* for improvement.

Unfortunately, educational researchers, policymakers, and leaders have consistently failed to acknowledge and communicate the importance of this crucial implementation stage in the school improvement process. Indeed, given the emphasis on planning—and relative silence about implementation—in many of the guidebooks and tools meant to help with school improvement, school leaders can easily come away with the impression that if a team gets the plan right, successful implementation of that plan must surely follow.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The implementation stage is the *most difficult* of all. And it is the stage where the majority of serious improvement efforts fail. As thousands of administrators and teachers have discovered too late, implementing an improvement plan—at least any plan worth its salt—really comes down to changing a complex organization in fundamental ways. And, as decades of research and experience in education and other fields have confirmed, that is far from a simple task.

Confronting Barriers to Change

The hard truth is this: Even a school that has done an *excellent* job organizing and planning for improvement can fall flat on its face when the time comes to put that plan into action because, like other complex organizations, a school confronts a set of serious barriers whenever it attempts to change in fundamental ways.

First, schools face a predictable set of “internal” obstacles to change that are fairly consistent across many kinds of organizations, from corporations to government agencies and even to professional sports teams.⁴ These internal barriers include the following:

- Technical challenges—lack of “know-how” about new strategies or sufficient tools and time to put those strategies to use. In schools, this challenge most often rears its head when new approaches are implemented, and teachers need help understanding new processes and tools for performing day-to-day tasks related to curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy.
- Cultural challenges—traditional beliefs, expectations, norms, habits, and ingrained patterns of behavior that run counter to new ideas. In schools, new instructional techniques can suggest ideas about teaching and learning that collide with deeply ingrained—and even unspoken—views about how schools should be run and how teachers should “do their jobs.”
- Political challenges—passive or overt resistance to new strategies and/or conflicts among competing interests. Resistance can have many causes, but it often arises when principals and leadership teams fail to anticipate the cultural challenges described above.

Second, schools face a set of “external” obstacles to implementing change that, while similar to challenges imposed by external

forces in other sectors, are especially severe in public education:

- Insufficient support. Districts are often organized to manage programs and procedures rather than to provide direct support to—or broker support for—specific school improvement efforts, and district administrators and school boards have not succeeded in helping principals juggle traditional job responsibilities with the demands of leading organizational change.
- Insufficient control over budgets. In most districts, the central office still sends “stuff” to schools based on their perceived needs or automated allocation processes, rather than sending money and allowing schools to reallocate dollars in support of specific instructional reforms.
- Insufficient control over personnel. The rules and procedures of district human resource offices can make it difficult for school principals to hire teachers who fit the school’s needs, including teachers who are a good fit with the instructional changes the school is making as part of its improvement plan.⁵

Internal Barriers

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal⁶ claim “change agents fail when they rely almost entirely on reason and structure and neglect human, political, and symbolic elements.” They urge those who would set about changing an organization to consider the advice of retired Harvard Professor John P. Kotter, whose articles and books on leading organizational change are staples in the business world. Compiled after watching hundreds of corporate transformation attempts, Kotter’s list of the eight biggest errors that cause organizational change efforts to fail⁷ includes the following:

1. Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency.
2. Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition.

3. Lacking a vision.
4. Undercommunicating the vision.
5. Not removing obstacles to the new vision.
6. Not systematically planning for and creating short-term wins.
7. Declaring victory too soon.
8. Not anchoring changes in the [organization’s] culture.

Note that some of these errors occur long before a plan is implemented and reflect inadequate anticipation of internal implementation obstacles. When schools first begin to organize for reform, a failure to establish a sense of urgency, create a powerful support coalition for change, or establish a compelling vision of the future can reappear as obstacles when it is time to implement a plan for change. Others (such as undercommunicating the vision or not removing obstacles to its taking hold) occur in the implementation phase or later, *after* an improvement plan already has been determined, and reflect inadequate anticipation of internal implementation obstacles associated with the culture and politics of an organization.

Those barriers play out in schools just as surely as they do in other organizations undergoing improvement efforts. A study examining slow-improving schools in Washington found that the problems schools experienced in these areas often took two forms: “distrust and resistance among veteran teachers to principal-led reform initiatives; and minimal commitment to education reform, a mentality that ‘this too shall pass’...”⁸ Certain kinds of organizational changes tended to engender greater resistance. For example, “principals often found that collaboration, team planning, and sharing of effective strategies generated considerable resistance from veteran teachers, since they have traditionally worked in isolation and teaching has long been a ‘cottage industry.’”⁹

Political challenges can take many forms. Michael Fullan stresses that “even in the most tightly controlled and authority-bound organizations, it is so easy to sabotage new directions during implementation. Even when things appear to be working, the supposed success may be a function of merely superficial compliance.”¹⁰

External Barriers

While internal obstacles are present in many organizations, obstacles related to lack of support and insufficient control over budgets and personnel are especially acute in public education.

Imagine a corporate board of directors deciding to bring in a new CEO to “turn around” a flagging company and telling candidates they will not have the authority to create their own budgets or to hire personnel who have knowledge and skills matching the company’s new business plan. In fact, such a scenario is *impossible* to imagine. But that is precisely what we ask of thousands of school principals every year.

For example, an *Education Week* analysis of the federal Schools and Staffing Survey found that fewer than half of public school principals say they have a great deal of influence over how their school budgets will be spent.¹¹

Far from being supported, progressive principals often must buck the system or, more frequently, sneak through its back corridors to get important things done. In a 2001 survey of principals by Public Agenda,¹² only 30 percent agreed that “the system helps you get things done the way you want.” In contrast, about half the principals said they could get things done only by working “around the system” while another 19 percent agreed that you often “feel like your hands are tied.”

Finally, even if principals had the freedom to fully implement improvement plans, would

they have the time to do it right? The same *Education Week* analysis also found that while more than 80 percent of principals say they spend some time every day “managing school facilities, resources, and procedures,” less than half that many say they spend some time each day “facilitating achievement of the school’s mission” and only 27 percent find time every day to help “guide the development and evaluation of curriculum and instruction.”¹³

Regression to the Mean(ingless)

All of these obstacles can chip away at the will and the ability of schools to implement the most meaningful parts of their improvement plans. Statisticians long ago documented a tendency within populations whereby, left to themselves, people tend naturally to revert back a normal—or average—state of affairs. They call it “regression to the mean.” The process whereby schools respond to internal and external obstacles by incrementally scaling back implementation efforts and focusing on things that are easier to accomplish might be called “regression to the mean(ingless).”

This phenomenon is one reason why challenges in the implementation stage of the school improvement process have been so often overlooked: Schools seldom fail to implement *at least some* of the strategies in their improvement plans. But the strategies they do end up focusing on just happen to be those less likely to engender real, long-term improvements in student achievement. The hustle and bustle of acting on less-meaningful parts of the plan, especially those that don’t require changing classroom instruction, make it appear that “implementation” is chugging along at a reasonable clip.

Of course, not all implementation efforts fail. Many schools have responded to the accountability challenge by successfully implementing and sustaining schoolwide improvement plans. But in order for *all*

schools to help *all* students reach high levels of academic achievement, we must do everything we can to help leaders avoid the implementation trap. And to do that, we need to help them more successfully overcome obvious barriers to change.

Overcoming the Barriers: Roles for Principals, District Administrators, and Policymakers

Although the barriers to change are significant, most researchers believe there is now enough evidence to suggest that all organizations, including public schools, can undertake and achieve serious reform.¹⁴ But everyone involved in school improvement efforts must play a role in improving the odds of successfully implementing improvement strategies by dealing with internal obstacles to change and removing or ameliorating as many external barriers as possible.

- **Recommendation 1:** *Become knowledgeable about the research on organizational change. Recommend that preparation and professional development programs in educational leadership incorporate a study of research on performance management and organizational change—even when the research has been conducted in other fields.*

Principals and other school leaders need help understanding and overcoming internal barriers to change. Of course, there are no simple, universal recipes for dealing with the plethora of technical, cultural, and political obstacles that might crop up in a particular school. But awareness of such factors is half the battle, and the research on high-performance management and organizational change is rife with *examples and suggestions* that could help principals anticipate and deal with them.

Kotter, for example, addresses the error of undercommunicating the vision:¹⁵

“Transformation is impossible unless... people are willing to help, often to the point of making short-term sacrifices,” he writes. “Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible. Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops will never be captured.” He recommends that leaders talk about the vision all the time, rather than just in isolated “speeches.” Successful change leaders also exploit all existing channels for communication, often repurposing newsletters and meetings to focus on the new vision. Finally, he says, successful leaders align their own behavior with their words: “Nothing undermines change more than behavior by important individuals that is inconsistent with their words.”

Kotter also stresses that communicating the vision is not enough. Leaders must remove at least the major obstacles that get in the way of staff members acting on the vision. He lists four kinds of obstacles¹⁶ that can be especially troublesome:

1. **Structures.** For example, what if teachers need to collaborate in order for the plan to work well? Leaders who want change to succeed will find ways to rework schedules so they can meet during working hours, rather than assuming they will meet on their own time.
2. **Skills.** Too often, writes Kotter, “Training is provided, but it’s not enough, or it’s not the right kind, or it’s not done at the right time. People are expected to change habits built up over years or decades with only five days of education.”
3. **Systems.** For example, organizations often don’t align their systems of hiring and compensating employees to support the new vision. (Of course, as we have seen, many public school leaders face external obstacles in this regard.)



4. **Supervisors.** “These blockers stop needed action,” writes Kotter. “Perhaps even more important, others see that these people are not being confronted and they become discouraged.” An assistant principal who does not support the vision, for example, can easily undermine it.

Of course, sometimes such advice can seem like simple common sense. Why focus on what should be obvious? But the point is to turn common sense into explicit action. How often do principals and other school leaders *purposely and systematically* set out to build such “common sense” advice into their strategies for implementing ambitious improvement plans?

Districts and assistance providers can take explicit action to make this information available to principals and others leading schoolwide change. Consider a real-life example from Clover Park, Washington, which during the 1990s took on the tremendous challenge of implementing schoolwide reform models across multiple schools: “Every Clover Park principal had to deal with some degree of resistance during the school improvement process. To cope with this problem, principals studied the change process and devised explicit strategies to meet challenges resulting from systemic change. For example, critics were continually invited into the process from the onset because principals believed that they needed to be a part of the process.”¹⁷

The experiences of districts like Clover Park can themselves make for useful case studies that, along with examples of less-successful transformation efforts, can be incorporated in turn into leadership training and development.

Unfortunately, while MBA candidates and business managers now delve into organizational change research and case studies at great length, *educational* leaders are seldom exposed to them. Two recent studies of administrative education programs highlight this gap:

- A study of course syllabi for leadership programs at graduate schools of education found that “there is little evidence that principal-preparation programs are designed... to introduce students to a broad range of management, organizational, or administrative theory and practice... Notably missing are [leading researchers and thinkers] in the world of business management.”¹⁸
- A survey of principals¹⁹ found that only 56 percent took courses in managing change as a part of earning administrator certification, and only 59 percent of those principals found the courses to be of high quality. This same study recommends that the Ed.D. degree be replaced with a much more practical master’s of educational administration (M.E.A.) degree “rigorously combining the necessary education subject matter and business/ leadership education...”

Some policymakers are ahead of the curve. Several states—including Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, and North Carolina—are redesigning their school leadership programs and threatening to close down programs that do not improve. Virginia recently established a “School Turnaround Specialist Program” run jointly by the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business Administration and Curry School of Education.

- **Recommendation 2:** *Restructure district offices to provide schools with the support they need to implement ambitious improvement plans—or broker external assistance to help them do so.*

Districts can restructure central offices to establish a more thoughtful, targeted approach to supporting school improvement efforts. Patricia Burch and James Spillane²⁰ argue that midlevel district staff can become a powerful force to assist school improvement if districts shape their own policy agendas to fit school improvement needs; redefine the job

responsibilities of central office staff to focus on providing assistance with improvement rather than enforcing compliance with rules and regulations; and create time for district staff members to work inside school buildings rather than spend all of their time “downtown.”

That doesn’t necessarily mean that schools call all the shots. A study comparing high-improving urban school districts with slow-improving ones found that the former structured their central offices to combine high building-level support with a high level of “reform press,” to get reforms into the classroom. Those districts monitored implementation much more closely and did not hesitate to intervene decisively when progress was unsatisfactory.²¹

- *Recommendation 3: Provide principals with the most important kind of support they need—time to focus on implementing improvement plans, especially to make sure that changes become embedded in classroom teaching.*

Some districts are working to free up time for administrators to lead organizational change and improve classroom instruction. *Education Week*²² reported last fall, for example, that Talbot County, Maryland, created a new “school manager” position in 2002 to “handle virtually all of their buildings’ noninstructional administrative tasks. They order supplies and repairs, supervise the food service and custodial workers, and track staff attendance.” One principal there told *Education Week* that program has been “a godsend... I’m in the classrooms every day.”

- *Recommendation 4: Distribute responsibility for implementing the plan among the school staff, not just among administrators.*

Of course, no principal can make every decision and solve every problem that will arise in the course of implementing changes to a school’s instructional strategies. Therefore, principals also need help understanding that power to improve instruction is already distributed across a wide “web” of staff members including classroom teachers, and distributed leadership for instruction can be proactively built on top of that web.²³ Contrary to the popular notion that it takes high-profile “superstar” principals to turn around low-performing schools, for example, every one of the eight high-performing schools in a recent Kentucky study was found to have a culture of shared decision making rather than a micromanaging, authoritarian leader.²⁴

- *Recommendation 5: Allocate resources to support school improvement and enact policies to give schools real control over their own budgets.*

If school leaders are to be held accountable for making improvement work, they need to be able to reallocate resources away from things that are not helping the school improve and toward new strategies for changing instructional practice. Giving schools control over their budgets can significantly improve their chances of successfully implementing ambitious improvement plans.

Clover Park gave principals control of their budgets when it pushed them to adopt schoolwide reform models: “... planning teams were required to develop a budget that showed the total cost for implementing their proposed comprehensive reform plan. This had to include all anticipated resources, not simply their Title I allocations, as well as all expenditures for the upcoming year. The district provided technical support to faculties unfamiliar with developing budgets. Budgets from the previous year were studied and district staff carefully explained how different monies could be spent.”²⁵

- *Recommendation 6: Enact policies to give schools real control over personnel so they can recruit and hire teachers whose skills and values match the strategies in the school improvement plan, and eliminate regressive policies and district budgeting practices that make it hard for low-income schools to compete for experienced teachers.*

States and districts can assist school improvement efforts by ceding considerably more control over personnel to building-level leaders as well. Jim Collins writes in *Good to Great*, a study of high-improving companies over three decades, “We expected that [great] leaders would begin by setting a new vision and strategy. We found instead that they *first* got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and *then* they figured out where to drive it... People are *not* your most important asset. The *right* people are.”²⁶

New research on teacher effectiveness has revealed that this advice is just as important in education as it is in the corporate world—even though education systems have long operated as if all teachers are more or less interchangeable.²⁷ And a recent study comparing high- and low-performing elementary schools in Kentucky found that “a contributing factor to the high morale and overall success of the eight high-performing schools was the careful and intentional manner in which teachers were recruited, hired, and assigned.”²⁸

Part of the solution simply involves helping principals engage in smarter screening practices at the building level: A Virginia principal whose school now uses periodic benchmark assessments and data to monitor and intervene when students need extra help gives job candidates actual student performance data from classrooms in her school and asks them to explain what the data mean and what they would do about them (L. Thomas, personal communication, April 27, 2004).

However, many studies of high-performing schools have found that principals often have to exercise considerable creativity to get teachers who are a good match in terms of abilities and experience while at the same time complying with district policies on transfers and hiring.

Some districts have taken steps to give principals more control over personnel—especially in the schools that need such flexibility the most. Memphis, Tennessee, contracted last year with an organization called New Leaders for New Schools to train 60 new principals in cutting-edge school leadership strategies. To address the organization’s concerns about how much autonomy those new leaders would have once they were on the job, the district negotiated a deal with the Memphis teachers’ union that provides high-performing principals with much greater influence over budgets and staffing, including the authority to select teachers based on merit and not seniority.²⁹

Of course, providing schools greater building-level control over personnel is much easier said than done, particularly in places where collective bargaining agreements must balance adult and student interests, and it will take time to put such policies in place. In the meantime, however, federal, state, and district leaders can abolish current policies that make it difficult for schools serving our neediest students to compete for the teachers they so desperately need.

For example, recent research has revealed that district budgeting procedures make it hard for their higher poverty schools to compete for experienced teachers. District salary schedules are pegged to experience, with teachers earning higher paychecks as they accrue experience and advanced degrees over time. As they gain experience, many teachers take advantage of seniority privileges to migrate to lower poverty schools with less challenging jobs and better working

conditions—and they take those bigger paychecks with them. Unfortunately, the large school-to-school spending inequities that result are typically hidden because most districts misleadingly use average teacher salaries instead of actual salaries to report school-level spending data.³⁰

One California study found that this “hidden gap” in *actual* personnel budgets across schools is so large that over the 12 or 13 years a student spends in public education it can translate into \$100,000 less being spent to educate the average low-income student compared with the average nonpoor student.³¹ The Center for American Progress recently noted that, “For decades [the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act has] actually abetted such dishonest accounting practices by prohibiting the use of actual salaries when districts provide written assurances that they offer ‘comparability of services’ across schools.”³²

Policymakers can do two things to ameliorate the problem: (1) enact policies to prohibit “salary averaging” and instead require districts to report school spending on personnel based on actual salaries, and (2) work to remediate the root problem—inequities in teacher quality across schools—by investing greater dollars to help principals in low-poverty schools attract highly qualified teachers with offers of better pay or more supportive working conditions (such as reduced class sizes or student loads).

Of course, schools and districts cannot afford to wait until the tangled skein of current policies can be transformed into coherent set of supports to assist schools in this new era of greater accountability. But that doesn’t mean the only option is to wait.

Summary

Implementation of improvement plans is the least acknowledged, least understood, and least supported phase of the school improvement process. That doesn’t mean it is the least important, however.

Due to an assortment of internal and external obstacles to organizational change, implementation is the stage where most serious improvement efforts fail. That failure is often hidden from plain view during the early months of implementation as schools incrementally scale back efforts to implement more meaningful changes—those related to improving classroom instruction—while continuing to carry out easier but less meaningful activities that are unlikely to result in substantial increases in student learning.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Work can be done at all levels—by principals, district leaders, and policymakers—to help schools overcome obstacles:

1. Prepare all school leaders for the difficulties of organizational change by helping them understand and anticipate the internal obstacles—technical, cultural, and political—that can arise and give them tools and strategies to monitor change.
2. Address the external obstacles by transforming the relationship between districts and schools through ensuring adequate school support at the central-office level and adequate control over budgets and personnel at the school level, and by enacting policies that give principals more time to focus on leading change and improving classroom instruction.



Neither set of changes will be easy. But if we want schools to take responsibility for student outcomes and engage in serious, “whatever-it-takes” efforts to improve learning and close achievement gaps, district personnel and other assistance providers must begin to think outside the box and engage in creative strategies to help schools overcome internal and external barriers to serious organizational change.

Endnotes

¹ The Philanthropy Roundtable and Grantmakers for Education. (2004). *Creating new schools: Promising strategy for change? A briefing for donors and grantmakers: May 26–27, 2004*. Denver: Author. (page 1) Retrieved August 1, 2005, from http://www.edfunders.org/downloads/events/Graba_NewSchools.pdf

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⁴ Education leaders who believe that schools face a unique set of challenges when it comes to convincing personnel of the need for change should read the second chapter of *Moneyball*. The author, Michael Lewis, provides a fascinating account of a 2001 meeting among Oakland A’s managers and scouts in which managers try very hard to convince a group of very experienced and very skeptical scouts that data analysis can help significantly improve the organization’s ability to make good draft picks. See Lewis, M. (2003). *Moneyball*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company. (pages 14–42)

⁵ The factors that frustrate efficient and effective hiring and assignment of teachers are many and complex, especially in urban districts, and some of them originate outside human resource departments. For example, negotiated contracts with teacher unions can prevent principals from taking steps to fill vacancies with candidates from outside the district until lengthy internal transfer periods are complete. For an excellent accounting of the multiple factors that subvert principals’ abilities to hire the best candidates, see Levin, J., & Quinn, M. (2003). *Missed opportunities: How we keep high-quality teachers out of urban classrooms*. New York: The New Teacher Project.

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- ²⁷ A study in Tennessee, for example, found that two groups of students who start out at the same level of achievement can end up 50 points apart on a 100-point scale if one group is assigned three ineffective teachers in a row and the other is assigned three effective teachers in a row. See Sanders, W., & Rivers, J. (1996) *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center. (page 3) Another study, using Texas data, found that the low-income students who have five years of highly effective teachers in a row during elementary school can join their wealthier peers in mastering grade-level math by seventh grade. See Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2004). How to improve the supply of high-quality teachers In D. Ravitch (Ed.), *Brookings papers on education policy—2004* (pp. 7–44). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
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About the Center's Policy Briefs

This is the third in a series of four policy briefs to be published by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement in 2005. The first, *Establishing a Strong Foundation for School Improvement*, was released in January and the second, *Planning That Matters: Helping Schools Engage in Collaborative, Strategic Problem Solving*, was published in April. The briefs are intended to provide fresh insights and useful advice to policymakers and school assistance providers.

This year's four-part series is structured around The Center's emphasis on school improvement and reform as a collaborative, schoolwide cycle of activities: (1) organizing for improvement, (2) planning for improvement, (3) implementing improvement plans, and (4) sustaining improvement efforts. Each publication addresses one of those areas and builds upon the ideas and strategies discussed in the preceding briefs. Therefore, we recommend reading them in order and using them in concert.

All three publications are available on our Web site (www.centerforsri.org).

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