8.

Principles of the Improvement Process

In previous chapters we reviewed research relating to effective classrooms and schools and identified a relatively few essential characteristics that differentiate more and less effective schools. We also suggested how principals, superintendents, and school boards can use this information to improve schools under their control.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a few guidelines for school improvement efforts taken from research and from our experience. These guidelines are not intended as an in-depth review or synthesis, and readers are referred to Emrick and Peterson (1978), Lehming and Kane (1981), Pincus and Williams (1979), and Zaltman, Florio, and Sikorski (1977) for more complete reviews.

Berman (1981) has identified three stages of the improvement process: mobilization, implementation, and institutionalization. The problems faced in each of these three stages are different, as are the expected outcomes. Therefore, our suggestions are grouped under these three rubrics.

Mobilization

Mobilization, or getting started, includes such activities as planning, assessing needs, setting an agenda, determining resources, and creating awareness. Of course, one of the most important activities is the decision to actually adopt an innovation or begin a change effort. Three guidelines should be kept in mind regarding the mobilization process: (1) the innovation should be a long-range, focused effort; (2) an

appropriate entry point must be selected; and (3) the central role of the principal must be considered.

Plan a Long-Range, Focused Effort

Too often, we want a quick fix. We believe a three-hour inservice session (or better yet, a one-hour session) will solve our problems. Solutions should be easy, painless, and cheap, we think. But guess what? That's not the way it is. School improvement takes time and hard work. It may even cost money.

Our experience suggests that anyone attempting to make more than a minor change should plan on three to five years for implementation. We don't know why that idea is foreign to so many superintendents. Most districts have five-year plans for equipment replacement—why not for instruction? Note that in the vignette in Chapter 1 the principal is reflecting on three years of effort. Imagine if the changes he made had all been attempted in one year.

To fully implement activities that will create the characteristics we described earlier (if most of them are not already present) requires a long-range, sustained effort. Changing behavior and changing norms takes time. One change project found that just trying to improve communication skills in a faculty is counterproductive unless more than twenty-four hours of training is provided (Runkel and Schmuck, 1974).

In addition to having a long-range perspective, the improvement process should also be focused. Fullan and Pomfret (1977) found that innovations are more likely to be successful if the goals are discrete and moderately complex. Under the model presented in this monograph, the ultimate goal is the improvement of student achievement; short-range goals would be changes in the dimensions affecting student achievement (that is, student behavior, teacher behavior, supervision, school norms and values, and school leadership).

Change in any one of these dimensions might be considered a major innovation in and of itself. Therefore, it is probably unwise to focus on all of the dimensions in one year. Rather, the entire model might be presented and one or two dimensions targeted as the focus for getting started. Then, as the staff becomes proficient in one skill, a new dimension can be targeted.

In fact, our experience shows that each of the student behaviors might best be treated as a separate change area. We have found that teachers can be enthusiastic about learning the skills involved in observing and improving student involvement. But when the schedule requires training on coverage before teachers feel comfortable and proficient in the first area, they become frustrated.

The importance of having a clear and shared focus for the whole

effort—somewhat akin to the "image" mentioned in an earlier chapter (Reinhard et al., 1980)—cannot be overemphasized. All the staff should be able to see a picture of what their school will be when the effort has borne fruit. As we said earlier, the model combining classroom and school factors provides an organizing framework to tie together various improvement activities. Moreover, staff must understand how these various activities contribute to reaching that goal. They must see how both increasing time-on-task and analyzing test content can lead to improved student achievement. This will help avoid the all-too-prevalent feeling that change is being made for the sake of change or that the staff must put up with a new fad each year. We have heard many teachers say, "There's no need to take this seriously. Next year they'll want us to try something else." If the staff understands the goal, they are more likely to accept and support the work involved.

Select an Appropriate Entry Point

Given that the improvement process will take more than one year and that everything can't be started at once, it is important to select an appropriate entry point. One crucial consideration is whether the staff perceives an important problem or an "opportunity for improvement" (Havelock, 1970). That is, there may be problems that are not perceived or acknowledged by the staff, but in order to attack those problems you may need to begin with the staff's list. If they see you are willing to help with what *they* believe to be problems, then they are more likely to cooperate in efforts focusing on the problems *you* perceive.

Since the student, teacher, and school-level factors are interdependent, you will often find that a single activity may lead to improvement in more than one area. For example, the process of learning to improve student engaged time usually involves the principal and teachers in communicating about academic goals and learning a common vocabulary to describe a classroom. This often results in the teachers seeing the principal as more concerned about academics and the staff having greater consensus on expectations for teaching. The communication in the training session can also help build more appropriate norms for teacher behavior.

Another consideration is that it may be best not to start with the most severe problem, since solving it may require the most time, work, and skill. Rather, begin on a problem on which there can be some progress rather soon (Havelock, 1970). This success will reinforce the staff for their efforts.

Consider the Role of the Principal

A strong principal is one of the hallmarks of an effective school, and any attempt to make a substantial, lasting impact on a school must involve its principal. This has been shown in repeated studies of school change (Wellisch et al., 1978; Berman and McLaughlin, 1975; Sikorski et al., 1976; Lipham, 1977; Little, 1981). In a recent study of school-based organizational development efforts, Stout and Rowe (1981) found that the single best predictor of success was the principal's estimation, before the project was implemented, of how successful it was likely to be in his or her school. Those principals who predicted failure were not likely to support the innovation. Similarly, in a review of the results of a major study of change conducted by the Rand Corporation, McLaughlin and Marsh (1978) noted that the principal's attitude was critical to the long-term results of change projects. They found that very few of the projects toward which the principal displayed unfavorable attitudes were able to be successfully implemented.

What is it that principals do that makes them so crucial to change efforts? A study by Reinhard (1980) suggests several behaviors by which principals can make an impact. First, they show commitment to the concept and vision of the project at the outset. Second, principals work to achieve role clarity for all the participants. Next, they buffer the staff by negotiating with competing environmental pressures. Then they secure and provide the necessary resources. Finally, they provide social support as well as actively participating themselves. Such behavior seems to endow the concept of leadership with explicit meaning.

But crucial as they are to the change effort, not all principals support innovations. In one district, for example, orientations were scheduled at two schools. At one school, the principal notified teachers well in advance of the after-school meeting and its purpose, had the room and equipment ready, and was on hand to learn and help. At the other, teachers were told only at the last minute to report to the meeting. The room was not arranged adequately, and the principal showed no signs of support. Little wonder that many more teachers in the first school than in the second volunteered to participate.

Implementation

Implementation is the process of actually following through with an innovation. It includes all of the activities necessary to carry out the innovation at a specific site. Two activities that are especially important are adapting the innovation to local circumstances and clarifying the innovation continually as it is being used. Two guidelines seem to be particularly relevant: continually monitor and evaluate the implementation, and complete what you start.

Monitor and Evaluate

Monitoring whether your activities are being carried out as planned and evaluating whether the activities are having the intended effect is essential (Pincus and Williams, 1979; Wellisch et al., 1978). First, if what you planned did not occur, there is no sense in trying to see if it worked. Second, if what was planned was implemented, you need to know if it worked or whether you should try something else. The data-gathering suggestions in Chapters 2 and 4 and in Appendix 1 can provide information for monitoring and evaluation.

Beyond the value of monitoring and evaluation for decision making is their symbolic importance. Conducting these functions honestly sends a clear signal that plans are to be carried out and results are expected.

Finally, evaluation permits public acknowledgment of accomplishments made, thereby reinforcing the effort.

Complete What You Start

Be sure to carry through what you set out to do. If you allow efforts to die or to be continually postponed, you may kill any chance of getting the staff to be serious about future improvement efforts. In one project, for example, each training session that was scheduled was cancelled at the last minute by the principal. Teachers became increasingly frustrated and less willing to continue with follow-up activities between sessions. While reasons for cancelling an activity are often legitimate, the principal should realize the consequences and weigh the alternatives.

Not only must you identify what you are willing to finish, but you must also identify what you have the resources to complete. If a particular activity specifies that 15 hours of inservice training are needed but only 6 hours are left in the school year, it is unrealistic to expect that activity to be completed that year. It may be acceptable to complete only 6 of the 15 hours, but make it clear that this is only one phase and more will follow the next year.

Institutionalization

Institutionalization is the process of stabilizing or establishing new routines as part of the ongoing operation of the system. We offer one guideline relating to the institutionalization stage: move from "project" status to "standard operating procedure" as quickly as possible. As long as a school improvement effort is seen as a project, it is quite vulnerable (Corbett, 1983). The quicker it becomes part of the ongoing operation of the school or district, the more likely it is to endure.

Certainly many of the activities required to implement the improvement effort do not need to be continued. But the critical features of the project must become institutionalized or made a part of the school norms and work behavior. For example, a principal can regularly observe engaged time as part of the routine, ongoing operation of the school. A principal in Delaware does just this (Bailey and Morrill, 1980). She observes each teacher several times a year and includes engagement rate as a regular part of that observation. In the same way, compiling a school year planning guide for academic content can be as routine as compiling absentee lists. In short, these critical activities need to be seen as normal.

Conclusion

The research findings from the previous chapters can serve as the target of school improvement efforts. In other chapters, we have offered suggestions for assessing these critical areas and monitoring any change. We hope that this chapter has offered a few principles of how to put together a general strategy for improvement. It will not be easy or quick, but it can be done.