

Being Rational and Analytical in Bringing Evidence-Based Practices into Schools

Good ideas and missionary zeal are sometimes enough to change the thinking of individuals; they are rarely, if ever, effective in changing complicated organizations ... with traditions, dynamics, and goals of their own.

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Related to demands for accountability are increasing demands to demonstrate there is a science/research/evidence-base to support practices conducted in schools. Policy makers are prone to ask: *Where's the evidence that this will help the school meet its educational mission?*

The question certainly is logical and simple to ask. Moreover, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) stresses the growing responsibility for states, districts, and schools to incorporate research evidence in their policies and practices for planning, collaborating, decision-making, and continuous improvement.

A critical problem is that the question and the legislative emphasis imply that if data aren't available, an intervention is ineffective. The reality, of course, is that many proposed innovations and comprehensive new directions for school improvement generally haven't been the focus of research, and relevant data often are not yet available on those that have.

This is especially so with respect to research on *transforming* the way schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. There is ample evidence that such a transformation is imperative (e.g., analyses of need assessments and of what's wrong with what's in place). However, the evidence base to guide the design, development, and implementation of essential systemic changes is in its infancy. Thus, at this time, efforts to unify and develop a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports strive to transform what is in place primarily using rationality and innovative prototype development.

For example, the prototype we have developed to counter intervention fragmentation *embeds* all necessary practices into a rationally analyzed set of six content arenas that intersect with a full continuum of interventions. (For details, see the references at the bottom of page 3). The resulting system includes existing practices as well as proposed additions identified to fill critical gaps. Where solid evidence supports any of the embedded practices, so much the better. And if there is significant evidence for replacing an existing intervention, so be it. But the primary concern is what's *needed*.

In sum, a rational approach focuses first and foremost on meeting high priority needs. That is, the first consideration for schools in adding or replacing interventions is:

Does the proposed practice meet a high priority need? and if so, To what degree?

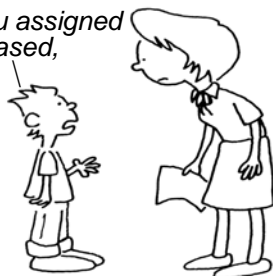
Having identified a needed practice, analyses of an evidence base comes into play. (See Exhibit on the following page.) Of particular concern is:

What's the nature and scope of and how good is the evidence?

Also of concern to schools is evidence that the approach can fit into the school culture, is scalable throughout a school district, and is sustainable.

Can the practice be implemented into the system and sustained in ways that ensure system integrity and equity? (e.g., will it help or hinder the development and substantive sustainability of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports).

The homework you assigned wasn't evidence-based, so I didn't do it.



Care must be taken not to disregard an essential change just because it has not yet been given an empirical blessing. That would be arbitrary and irrational.

Clearly, we must strive to use a scientific base for school improvement; at the same time, we must pursue innovation and new directions with logic, analysis, and wisdom.

Exhibit**Analyzing the Evidence**

The nature and scope of the evidence offered in support of bringing a needed new practice into a school setting must be carefully analyzed. The question is not just: *How statistically significant are the findings?* A key concern is the degree to which the reported findings go to the core of the addressing a school's many needs. And given the tight budgets at most schools, the data require analyses that clarify *the degree to which the practice can meet a high priority, pressing need.* This involves determining:

What specifically does the evidence indicate is the practice's impact?

(e.g., How relevant are the dependent variables? How representative was the sample with respect to the schools where the work is to be implemented? Is there evidence about a potent impact under regular school/classroom conditions? Any long-term findings? Any data on negative outcomes? Any data on scalability and sustainability? Any cost-benefit analyses, and if so, do the benefits outweigh the costs? If it is to replace an existing practice, is there data showing it is better than what is currently in use?)

Another consideration is:

What's involved in replicating the practice to scale and sustaining it over time?

(e.g., If it requires significant organizational changes, how costly will it be in terms of making system changes and replicating to scale, organizational disruption, capacity building – including personnel development)

While we all want to base our practices on good evidence, it is often the case that the “best” evidence is not good enough.

And finally there is the problem of the sparsity of evidence for implementation practices. Little research attention has been paid to (1) differentiating *direct* implementation from the process of *facilitating* implementation and doing so on a large scale and (2) differentiating implementation of a *specific practice or program* from efforts to *transform institutions* such as schools. As a result, the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) has concluded: "... very little is known about the processes required to effectively implement evidence-based programs...."*

*For more, see *Bringing New Prototypes into Practice: Dissemination, Implementation, and Facilitating Transformation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implrep3.pdf>

Our Concluding Comments; What are Yours?

It seems evident that public education is at a crossroads. Its future depends on moving in new directions to enhance equity of opportunity. The status quo is not an option. Just tinkering with and tweaking old ideas will only produce more of the same. Much needs to be done to enable the Every Student Succeeds Act to live up to its name. Of critical concern is transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Such a transformation will pay considerable dividends, including paving the way for new directions when Congress reauthorizes the special education act.

There is an urgency in all this that should transcend business as usual. In coming months, discussion of transforming student/learning supports must be a priority. In particular, the time is overdue for the various associations, guilds, unions, universities, journals, etc. to encourage their constituents to play a greater role in leading the way forward. To do less is to maintain the highly unsatisfactory status quo.

What's your perspective? Send your comments to Ltaylor@ucla.edu . We synthesize responses we receive and distribute them widely to further build momentum for transforming student/learning supports.

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And feel free to share this with concerned others.