



**Diffusion of Innovations and
Science-Based Practices to
Address Barriers to Learning
& Improve Schools:**

**A Series of Information
Resources on
Enabling System Change**

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, new directions are imperative. And, this involves more than tinkering with prevailing approaches. The need is for developing major innovations (e.g., comprehensive school-level prototypes) and taking them to scale throughout a school district.

The success of all this depends on stakeholders in public education becoming more knowledgeable about the complexities and strategies related to diffusion of innovations, enabling major systemic changes, and developing a *sophisticated* understanding of the role of empirically-based practices.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, to provide informational aids for use as tools in policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school improvement planning.

**From Robert C. Granger's
The Big Why?
*A Learning Agenda for the Scale Up Movement***

This resource offers a few excerpts to highlight an important article by Robert C. Granger, President of the William T. Grant Foundation. He raises concerns about the prevailing model for scaling-up promising practices and poses six questions as a learning agenda for those who are part of the scale-up movement.

The piece was published by the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality in their *Pathways Magazine* (Winter 2011).

We encourage readers to read the article in its entirety. It can be accessed at –
[http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/File%20Library/
Publications/PathwaysWinter11.pdf](http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/File%20Library/Publications/PathwaysWinter11.pdf)

From Robert C. Granger's *The Big Why? Learning Agenda for the Scale Up Movement*

Policymakers and practitioners who believe that research evidence should inform policy and practice face several challenges. These include debates about the standards of evidence for allocating resources to programs, weak information on how to produce change at scale, and concerns that a few, well-evaluated programs will drive out others that deserve support. Such challenges threaten to undermine 30 years of progress in learning which social programs improve child, youth, and family outcomes. The purpose of this article is to describe a strategy that can inform these and other issues facing evidence-based policymaking. . . .

Much research and development work is focused on clarifying the effects created by schools, youth organizations, and programmatic interventions. My argument is that too little of this work examines the conditions, policies, and practices that produce such effects. In today's vernacular, we need more research attention paid to why and under what conditions things work as the missing ingredients in the "what works" agenda. . . .

Concerns about the Scale-Up Model

Despite the research community's ability to identify promising programs, there is almost no evidence that it is possible to take such programs to scale in a way that maintains their effectiveness. ... Better support, incentives, and infrastructure will lead to wider diffusion of model programs and organizations. Such improvements may lead to better results. However, the mixed success of prior efforts sends a strong message that changes via replication of evidence-based programs may never be enough to produce widespread improvements for vulnerable youth with additional adjustments to the strategy.

Programs as One Influence on Youth

... Youth development is influenced by what happens in the daily environments where youth spend their time: classrooms, households, neighborhoods, community-based programs, and in informal activities with peers and others. What happens in any one of these daily settings is influence by what happens in the others (e.g., events at home influence what goes on in school and vice versa).... We ought to be modest in our expectations of any scale-up effort that does not transform daily life, and programs are unlikely to be as transformative as the policies, secular trends, and historical events that shape youth and their daily settings. . . .

Learning Agenda for the Scale-Up Movement

Currently, it appears that federal agencies will use their various scale-up initiatives to produce reliable information on whether or not individual programs produce positive effects for young people when they are extended to new participants, organizations, and communities. However, these agencies are positioned perfectly to learn more. . . .

The following questions are at the heart of current debates. . . .

- 1. How does the rigor and extent of the prior research evidence of effectiveness predict effectiveness at scale?** (Capture the rigor and extent of prior evidence in the review process.)
- 2. Are programs more effective with certain youth and families than others?** (Gather common measures of participants across evaluations at baseline.)
- 3. Are certain scale-up strategies more likely than others to produce effects at scale?** (Categorize the planned scale-up strategies along practical dimensions, such as how expensive and how prescriptive they are.)
- 4. Are scaled-up programs more likely to make a difference in some environments than others?** (Capture relevant baseline information on environmental factors that might influence effects, such as the mobility of youth or the extent to which services analogous to the innovation are available in the community.)
- 5. Are certain program approaches more likely than others to produce effects at scale?** (Categorize program strategies along practical dimensions, such as the degree to which they are highly structured, their cost, or their presumed intensity and duration of services.)
- 6. Are there organizational policies, capacities, or practices that predict effectiveness when an organization replicates an evidence-based program?** (Capture baseline information on proxies for organizational capacity, such as the stability of funding, leadership, and line staff.) . . .

Program developers frequently talk about the features that they believe distinguish their particular innovation and rarely acknowledge that there may be a set of strategies and practices common to all effective youth programs whether or not they have been rigorously evaluated. For example, in a recent compendium of observational measures of youth program quality, Nicole Yohalem and Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom (of The Forum for Youth Investment) examined the content of nine measures that are widely used to assess effective staff practices in youth programs. Although the measures varied slightly (e.g., some measured program management practices while others did not), all of them measured six common features of staff's work with youth: (1) the supportiveness of relationships; (2) the program environment's safety; (3) the predictability of the program's structure and routines; and practices that produced (4) positive engagement, (5) positive social norms, and (6) the opportunity to build new skills. The recognition of these commonalities is shaping subsequent work in the after-school field, as we try to identify the practices that produce good results. It is the sort of information we need in all youth fields to move beyond an endless stream of model-specific impact evaluations. . . .

Answering the Big Why

... The ability to examine how well factors such as program context, content, and practices predict youth-level effects would put us far ahead of our current level of understanding. It is difficult to create a change in a young person's experiences that has an impact on their long-term well-being. ... We need to use the scale-up initiatives to help us learn why.