



**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.

Systemic Change for School Improvement

What follows are excerpts from an article by the Center co-directors published in the *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* (2006).

The abstract states:

Despite the nationwide emphasis on school improvement, the complexities of accomplishing desired systemic changes have been given short shrift in policy, research, training, and practice. This article focuses on the problem of expanding school improvement planning to better address *how* schools and districts intend to accomplish designated changes. Specifically, we frame and outline some basic considerations related to systemic change, and to encourage a greater policy discussion of the complexities of implementing major school improvements on a large scale, we propose a set of policy actions.

Systemic Change for School Improvement

Based on analyses of school improvement planning guides, we find a widespread failure to address how desired improvements will be accomplished. That is, we find little evidence of sophisticated strategic planning for how schools and districts intend to move from where they are to where they want to go. Little attention has been paid to the complexities of large scale diffusion. Leadership training for policy makers and education administrators has given short shrift to the topic of scale-up processes and problems (Duffy, 2005; Elmore, 2003, 2004; Fullan, 2005; Glennan, Bodilly, Galegher, & Kerr, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2000; Thomas, 2002).

School improvement obviously needs to begin with a clear framework and map for what changes are to be made. It should be equally obvious that there must be a clear framework and map for how to get from here to there, especially when the improvements require significant systemic change. And, in both cases, there is a need for a strong science-base, leadership, and adequate resources to facilitate capacity building. With all this in mind, this article focuses on expanding school improvement planning to better address *how* schools and districts intend to accomplish designated changes.

School Improvement, Projects, and Systemic Change

Well conceived, designed, and implemented prototype innovations are essential to school improvement. Prototypes for new initiatives usually are developed and initially implemented as a pilot demonstration at one or more schools. This is particularly the case for new initiatives that are specially funded projects.

For those involved in projects or piloting new school programs, a common tendency is to think about their work as a time limited demonstration. And, other school stakeholders also tend to perceive the work as temporary (e.g., “It will end when the grant runs out.” or “I’ve seen so many reforms come and go; this too shall pass.”). This mind set leads to the view that new activities will be fleeting, and it contributes to fragmented approaches and the marginalization of initiatives (Adelman, 1995; Adelman & Taylor, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2003). It also works against the type of

systemic changes needed to sustain and expand major school improvements.

The history of schools is strewn with valuable innovations that were not sustained, never mind replicated. Naturally, financial considerations play a role in failures to sustain and replicate, but a widespread “project mentality” also is culpable.

Efforts to make substantial and substantive school improvements require much more than implementing a few demonstrations. Improved approaches are only as good as a school district’s ability to develop and institutionalize them equitably in all its schools. This process often is called diffusion, replication, roll out, or scale-up. The frequent failure to sustain innovations and take them to scale in school districts has increased interest in understanding systemic change as a central concern in school improvement.

At this point, we should clarify use of the term *systemic change* in the context of this article. Our focus is on district and school organization and operations and the networks that shape decision making about fundamental changes and subsequent implementation. From this perspective, systemic change involves modifications that amount to a cultural shift in institutionalized values (i.e., reculturalization). For interventionists, the problem is that the greater the distance and dissonance between the current culture of schools and intended school improvements, the more difficult it is to successfully accomplish major systemic changes.

Our interest in systemic change has evolved over many years of implementing demonstrations and working to institutionalize and diffuse them on a large scale (Adelman & Taylor, 1997a, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Taylor, Nelson, & Adelman, 1999). By now, we are fully convinced that advancing the field requires escaping “project mentality” (sometimes referred to as “projectitis”) and becoming sophisticated about facilitating systemic change. Fullan (2005) stresses that what is needed is leadership that “motivates people to take on the complexities and anxieties of difficult change.” We would add that such leadership also must develop a refined understanding of how to facilitate systemic change.

Linking Logic Models for School Improvement

Figure 1 suggests how major elements involved in designing school improvements are logically connected to considerations about systemic change. That is, the same elements can be used to frame key intervention concerns related to school improvement and systemic change, and each is intimately linked to the other. The elements are conceived as encompassing the

- vision, aims, and underlying rationale for what follows
- resources needed to do the work
- general functions, major tasks, activities, and phases that must be pursued
- infrastructure and strategies needed to carry out the functions, tasks, and activities
- positive and negative results that emerge.

Strategic planning for school improvement should account for each of these elements, first with respect to a school's prototype for ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in school and then with respect to how the school will accomplish essential changes. At the district level, the need is for a strategic plan that clarifies how the district will facilitate replication and scale-up of prototype practices. [Each of the above elements as it relates to systemic change in the article from which this is excerpted.]

Figure 2 briefly highlights key facets related to the four phases of change involved in prototype implementation and eventual scale-up. [Here, too, each cell in the matrix warrants extensive discussion; see the original article.]

Figure 3 highlights a set of parallel and linked tasks related to each of the four phases. Again, the intended nature and scope of focus shapes the costs and the degree of importance assigned by policy makers with respect to ensuring that effective systemic changes are designed, implemented, sustained, and taken to scale.

Overlapping the efforts to create readiness are processes to develop an organizational structure for start-up and phase-in. This involves establishing mechanisms and procedures to guide reforms, such as a steering group and leadership training, formulation of specific start-up and phase-in plans, and so forth.

An understanding of concepts espoused by community psychologists such as empowering settings and enhancing a sense of community also is useful. There is a growing body of work suggesting that the success of a variety of initiatives depends on interventions that can empower stakeholders and enhance their sense of community (Beeker, Guenther-Grey, & Raj, 1998; Trickett, 2002). However, the proper design of such interventions requires understanding that empowerment is a multifaceted concept. In discussing power, theoreticians distinguish "power over" from "power to" and "power from." *Power over* involves explicit or implicit dominance over others and events; *power to* is seen as increased opportunities to act; *power from* implies ability to resist the power of others (Riger, 1993).

Enhancing a sense of community involves ongoing attention to daily experiences. With respect to sustaining initiatives, stakeholders must experience initiative in ways that make them feel they are valued members who are contributing to a collective identity, destiny, and vision. Their work together must be facilitated in ways that enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness with and commitment to each other (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, wisely notes: "Effective practices typically evolve over a long period in high-functioning, fully engaged systems" (Vander Ark, 2002).

Systemic Change Infrastructure and Strategies

Implementation and scaling-up of major school improvement efforts require *administrative leadership* and the addition of *temporary infrastructure mechanisms* to facilitate changes.

Infrastructure. In general, existing infrastructure mechanisms must be modified in ways that guarantee new policy directions are translated into appropriate daily operations. Well-designed mechanisms ensure local ownership, a critical mass of committed stakeholders, processes that overcome barriers to stakeholders effectively working together, and strategies that mobilize and maintain proactive effort so that changes are implemented and there is renewal over time.

Figure 1. Linking Logic Models for Designing School Improvement and Systemic Change

Key considerations with respect to both (a) desired school improvements and (b) “getting from here to there” (e.g., systemic changes):

- >What is the vision, long-term aims, and underlying rationale?
- >What are the existing resources that might be (re)deployed and woven together to make good progress toward the vision?
- >What general functions, major tasks, activities, and phases need to be implemented?
- >What infrastructure and strategies are needed to carry out the functions, tasks, and activities?
- >What short-term indicators will be used as process benchmarks, what intermediate outcomes will indicate progress toward long-range aims, and how will negative outcomes be identified?

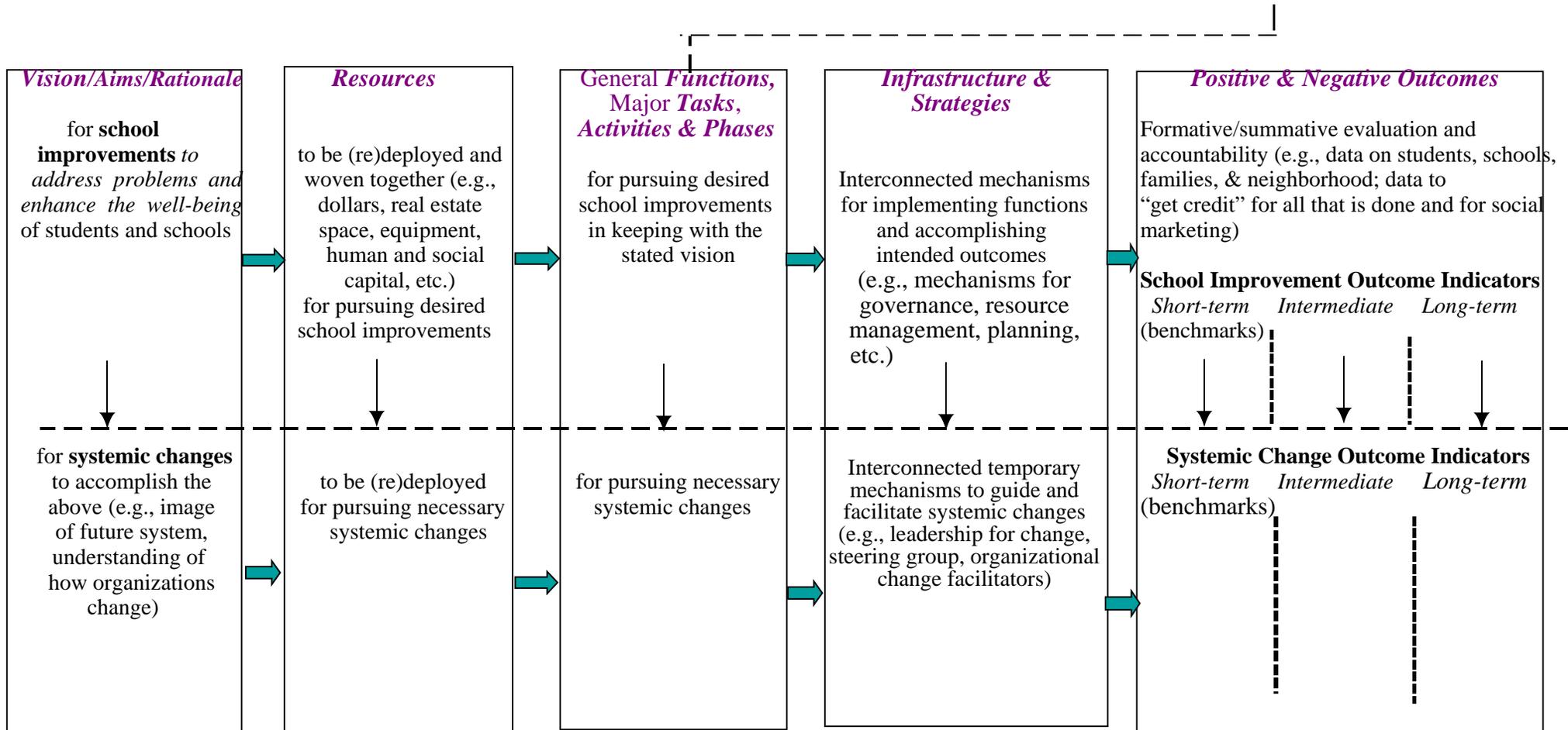


Figure 2. New Initiatives: Considerations Related to Planning, Implementing, Sustaining, and Going-to-scale

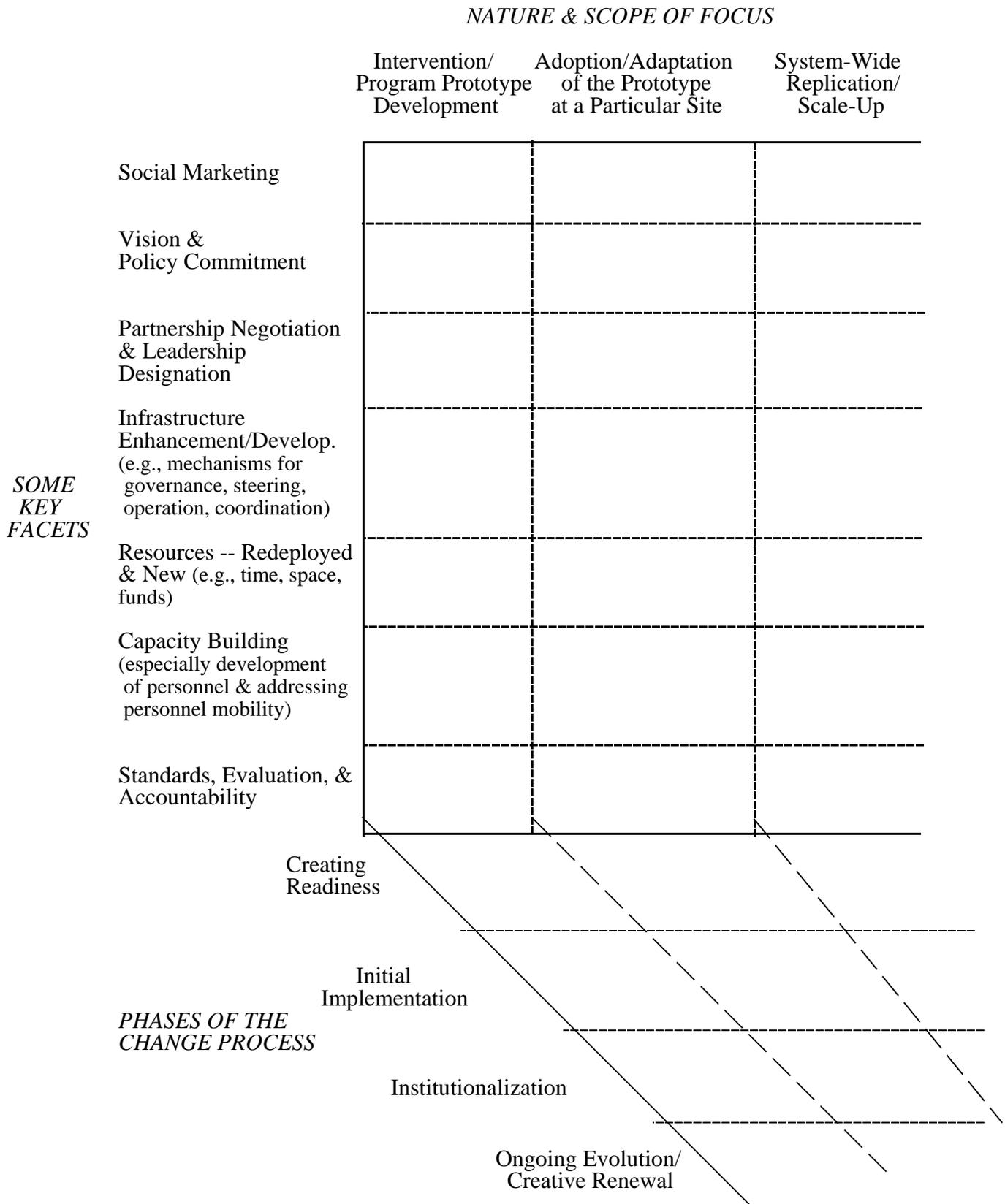
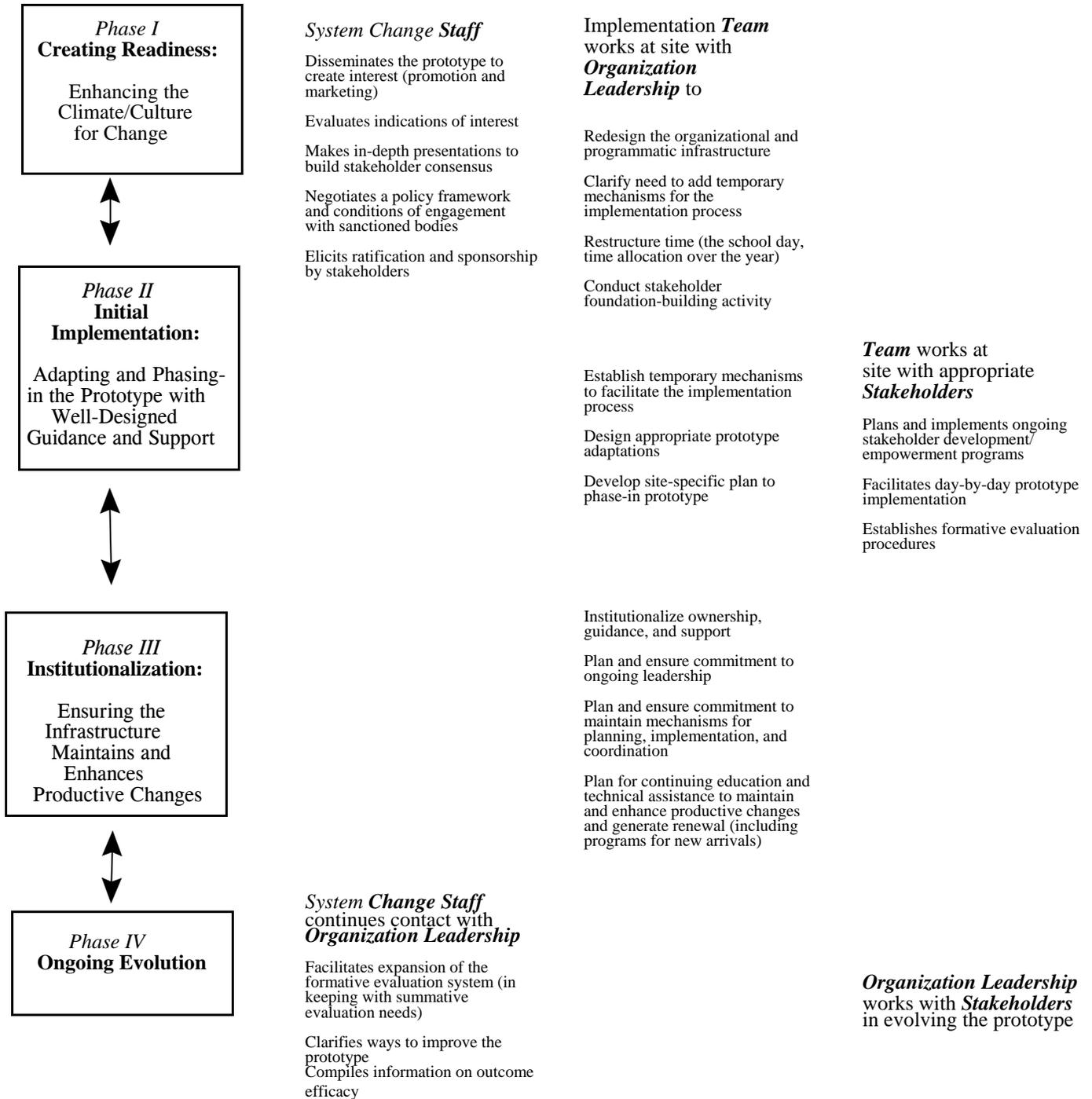


Figure 3. Prototype Implementation and Scale-up: Phases and Parallel and Linked Tasks



Updated from: H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor (1997). Toward a scale-up model for replicating new approaches to schooling. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 8, 197-230.

It is rare to find situations where a well-designed systemic change infrastructure is in place. More characteristically, ad hoc mechanisms have been set in motion with personnel who have too little training and without adequate formative evaluation. It is common to find structures, such as teams and collaboratives operating without clear understanding of functions and major tasks. This, of course, defies the basic organizational principle that structure should follow function.

Effective and linked administrative leadership *at every level* is key to the success of any systemic change initiative in schools. Everyone needs to be aware of who is leading and is accountable for the development of the planned changes. It is imperative that such leaders be specifically trained to guide systemic change. And, they must be sitting at key decision making tables when budget and other fundamental decisions are discussed.

As highlighted in Figures 1, 2, and 3, the general functions and major tasks related to sustainability and large-scale replication require dedicated change agent mechanisms that are fully integrated into the infrastructure for school improvement at each school site, for a “family of schools,” and at the district level. Thus, a significant portion of the resources for systemic change must be used to design and implement the set of integrated mechanisms that constitute the temporary, but essential, infrastructure for steering, facilitating, and evaluating the change process itself.

Part of a systemic change infrastructure are teams of “champions” who agree to steer the process. Such a team provides a broad-based and potent mechanism for guiding change. At the school level, for example, such a steering group creates a special leadership body to own the linked visions for school improvement and systemic change and to guide and support the work. These advocates must be competent with respect to what is planned, and they should be highly motivated not just to help get things underway, but to ensure sustainability.

The first focus of these teams is on assuring that capacity is built to accomplish the desired systemic changes. This includes ensuring an adequate policy and leadership base for implementation. If essential policy and staffing are not already in place, this becomes the first focus for the group.

Organization Facilitators. Some years ago, as part of a federal dropout prevention initiative, we developed a change agent position called an Organization Facilitator to aid with major restructuring (Adelman & Taylor 1997a, b, c; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2000; 2001a, b; Taylor, Nelson, & Adelman, 1999). This form of specially trained change agent embodies the necessary expertise to help school sites and complexes substantively implement and institutionalize school improvements. Such an individual can be used as a change agent for one school or a group of schools. A cadre of such professionals can be used to facilitate change across an entire district. The focus can be on changes in a few key aspects or full-scale restructuring.

One of the first functions of an Organization Facilitator is to help form and train an on-site change *team* that includes a site administrator and encompasses work groups. With the change agent initially taking the lead, members of the school’s change team learn to be catalysts and managers of change. After initial implementation, the change team focuses on ensuring maintenance and renewal. Clearly, substantive school improvements require site team members who are committed each day to ensuring effective systemic change and who have enough time and ability to attend to details.

Capacity building, of course, also includes special training for change agents. Over time, the main functions of a steering group are to ensure that staff assigned to facilitate changes (a) maintain a big picture perspective, (b) make appropriate movement toward long-term goals, and (c) have sufficient support and guidance.

Steering groups should not be too large. For example, at a school level, membership should include a few well-connected “champions” and the key change agents (e.g., the administrative leader and other system change staff) who have responsibility for implementing school improvements. To work against the perception that it is a closed, elite group, it can host “focus groups” to elicit input and feedback, provide information, and problem solve.

As indicated in Figure 3, one way for a district to conceive the daily operational infrastructure for systemic change is in terms of a *system change staff* (e.g., organization facilitators). As a group, such district staff has full-time responsibility for creating readiness, coalition building, implementing strategic plans, maintaining daily oversight, problem solving, resolving stakeholder conflicts, and so forth. They provide a necessary organizational base and skilled personnel for diffusing improvements into a school and across a district. Organization Facilitators can rotate among schools to guide the change process. In addition, special “coaches” or mentors can be brought in whenever a specialist is needed to assist in replicating a specific type of improvement.

Strategies in facilitating systemic change. Using the frameworks, drawing on available literature (see references), and based on our own efforts in the field, we have begun to operationalize strategies to facilitate systemic changes. For illustrative purposes, a few are discussed below.

As we have noted already, any move toward substantive systemic change should begin with activity designed to create readiness by enhancing a climate/culture for change. Steps include:

- articulation of a clear, shared vision for the changes (e.g., building interest and consensus; introducing basic concepts to relevant groups of stakeholders)
- mobilizing interest, consensus, and support among key stakeholders (e.g., identifying champions and other individuals who are committed to the changes; planning and implementing a “social marketing” strategy to mobilize a critical mass of stakeholder support; planning and implementing strategies to obtain the support of key policy makers, such as administrators and school boards)
- clarifying feasibility (e.g., how necessary changes can be accomplished; who will lead; what mechanisms can be used to steer and underwrite the change process)
- ensuring there is a major policy commitment from all participating stakeholders (e.g., establishing a policy framework that recognizes the importance of the work)
- negotiating agreements with decision makers and implementers (e.g., about role responsibilities; about how accountability for commitments will be assured).

This is followed by processes for

- enhancing/developing an infrastructure based on a clear articulation of essential functions (e.g., mechanisms for governance and priority setting, steering, operations, resource mapping and coordination).

Pursuing the work requires special attention to the problem of the match between intervention and those who are to change and

- ensuring there is strong facilitation related to all mechanisms
- redeploying resources and establishing new ones
- building capacity (especially personnel development and strategies for addressing personnel and other stakeholder mobility)
- establishing standards, evaluation processes, and accountability procedures.

Because substantive change requires stakeholder readiness and ongoing motivation and capability, it is essential to monitor these matters and to maintain an ongoing emphasis on social marketing and capacity building.

Clearly, the many steps and tasks described above call for a high degree of commitment and relentlessness of effort. Moreover, time frames for building capacity to accomplish desired institutional changes must be realistic. Major systemic changes are not easily accomplished. Awareness of the myriad political and bureaucratic difficulties involved in making major institutional changes, especially with limited financial resources, leads to the caution that the type of approach described above is not a straight-forward sequential or linear process. Rather, the work proceeds and changes emerge in overlapping and spiraling ways. And those interested in generating systemic changes need to be opportunistic.

A few general comments about systemic change practices at schools. Although many of the above points about systemic change seem self-evident, their profound implications for school improvement are widely ignored. As a result, it is not surprising that so many efforts to improve schools fail.

From the perspective of systemic change, the importance of creating an atmosphere at a school and throughout a district that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community takes on added importance. New collaborative arrangements

must be established, and authority (power) redistributed. Key stakeholders and their leadership must understand and commit to the changes. And, the commitment must be reflected in policy statements and creation of an organizational and operational infrastructure at all levels that ensures effective leadership and resources. For significant systemic change to occur, policy and program commitments must be demonstrated through effective allocation and redeployment of resources. That is, finances, personnel, time, space, equipment, and other essential resources must be made available, organized, and used in ways that adequately operationalize and sustain policy and promising practices. As stressed above, this includes ensuring sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation, albeit a temporary one, for systemic changes and related capacity building.

Reforms and major school improvements obviously require ensuring that those who operate essential mechanisms have adequate training, resources, and support, initially and over time. Moreover, there must be appropriate incentives and safeguards for individuals as they become enmeshed in the complexities of systemic change.

Projects as Catalysts for Systemic Change

With a view to sustaining valued functions, most demonstration projects and initiatives can be a catalyst for systemic change. More to the point, it is frequently the case that such projects *must* produce systemic changes or much of what they have developed is unlikely to be sustained. Federally-funded projects, such as those established through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative, illustrate both the need and opportunity for being a catalytic force. These projects are funded with the aim of coalescing school and community collaboration for violence prevention. As the first cohort of projects entered their third and final year of federal support, the scramble began to find another grant to sustain threatened functions. Much earlier, a few projects realized that sustainability should not be thought about in terms of hopefully finding more grant money. Rather, they understood the necessity of taking steps each year to move policy in ways that would sustain the valued functions established through the project's work. Moreover, they understood the importance of embedding such functions in a broader context to enhance their status in the eyes of policy makers.

Because the categorical agenda was to improve violence prevention, most Safe Schools/ Healthy Students' projects took the tack of adding on some services and programs. Although local policy makers were pleased that such projects brought in added resources, they also viewed the work in terms of the limited categorical emphasis and seldom integrated the project's services and programs into school improvement planning. This contributed to the fragmentation and marginalization that characterizes school and community efforts to address the many barriers to learning and teaching and usually worked against sustaining the innovations when the project ended.

To counter the tendency toward viewing project functions as having limited value, project staff must view their special funding as an opportunity to leverage systemic changes to ensure sustainability of valuable school improvements. To this end, they must strive to reframe the work into a broader context and find their way to key decision making tables. For example, the activity can be braided into other school improvement initiatives and presented as an integral part of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach that enhances the school's ability to meet its mission for many, not just a few, students and families. At the same time, it is important for staff to negotiate for inclusion into prevailing decision making, capacity building, and operational infrastructures. Being at decision making tables enables direct and ongoing discussion about sustainability and even about replicating the work on a large scale. By moving in these directions, project staff position themselves to be a catalytic force.

Concluding Comments

Those who set out to improve schools and schooling across a district are confronted with two enormous tasks. The first is to develop prototypes; the second involves large-scale replication. One without the other is insufficient. Yet considerably more attention is paid to developing and validating prototypes than to delineating and testing systemic change processes required for sustainability, replication, and scale-up. Clearly, it is time to correct this deficiency.

In doing so, however, it is essential not to lose sight of the simple truth: if improvements don't play out effectively at a school and in the classroom, they don't mean much. Schools and classrooms must be

the center and guiding force for all prototype and systemic change planning.

At the same time, it is essential not to create a new mythology suggesting that every classroom and school are unique. There are fundamentals that permeate all efforts to improve schools and schooling and that should continue to guide policy, practice, research, and training.

These include, for example:

(1) The curriculum in every classroom must include a major emphasis on acquisition of basic knowledge and skills. However, such basics must be understood to involve more than the old “three Rs” and cognitive development. There are many important areas of human development and functioning, and each contains “basics” that individuals may need help in acquiring. Moreover, any individual may require special accommodation in any of these areas.

(2) Every classroom must address student motivation as an antecedent, process, and outcome concern.

(3) Special assistance must be *added* to instructional programs for certain individuals, but only after the best nonspecialized procedures for facilitating learning have been tried. Moreover, such procedures must be designed to build on strengths and must not supplant continued emphasis on promoting healthy development.

(4) Beyond the classroom, schools must have policy, leadership, and mechanisms for developing school-wide programs to address barriers to learning. Some of the work will need to be in partnership with other schools, some will require weaving school and community resources together. The aim is to evolve a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated continuum of programs and services ranging from primary prevention through early intervention to treatment of serious problems. Our work suggests that at a school this will require evolving programs to (a) enhance the ability of the classroom to enable learning, (b) provide support

for the many transitions experienced by students and their families, (c) increase home involvement, (d) respond to and prevent crises, (e) offer special assistance to students and their families, and (f) expand community involvement (including volunteers).

(5) Relatedly, decision makers at all levels must revisit current policy using the lens of addressing barriers to learning with the intent of both realigning existing policy to foster cohesive practices and enacting new policies to fill critical gaps.

(6) Leaders for education reform at all levels are confronted with the need to foster effective scale-up of promising reforms. This encompasses a major thrust to develop efficacious demonstrations and effective models for replicating new approaches to schooling on a large scale.

For significant prototype development and systemic change to occur, policy and program commitments must be demonstrated through effective allocation and redeployment of resources to facilitate organizational and operational changes. That is, finances, personnel, time, space, equipment, and other essential resources must be made available, organized, and used in ways that adequately operationalize policy and promising practices. This includes ensuring sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation for prototype development, systemic changes, sustainability, and ongoing capacity building.

We do not mean to belabor all this. Our point simply is to make certain that there is a greater appreciation for and more attention paid to the problems of systemic change. To do less is to undermine substantive systemic change and perpetuate an unsatisfactory status quo. As Seymour Sarason (1971) stressed a long time ago:

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

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A Few Other Related Center Documents and Publications

Systemic Change for School Improvement: Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Prototypes and Going to Scale. Online at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/systemicreport.pdf>

Toward a Scale-Up Model for Replicating New Approaches to Schooling. Online at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/06%20toward%20a%20scale%20up%20model%20for%20replicating%20new%20approaches.pdf>

Scaling-Up Reforms Across A School District. Online at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/21%20SCALING-UP%20REFORMS%20ACROSS%20A%20SCHOOL.pdf>

Organization facilitators: A change agent for systemic school and community changes.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Report/orgfacrep.pdf>

On Sustainability of Project Innovations as Systemic Change. Online at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/45%20on%20sustainability%20of%20project%20innovations%20as%20systemic%20change.pdf>

Systemic change for school improvement. Online at:
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/Systemic%20Change%20for%20school%20improvement.pdf>

New Initiatives: Considerations Related to Planning, Implementing, Sustaining, and Going-to-Scale. Online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/sustainbrief.pdf>

Sustaining School and Community Efforts to Enhance Outcomes for Children and Youth: A Guidebook and Tool Kit. Online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sustaining.pdf>

Getting From Here to There: A Guide book for The Enabling Component. Online at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/gettingfromhere.pdf>

The Center's Series of Information Resources on Enabling System Change

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

- >Brief Overview of a Major Review by L.W. Green, et al. (2009) entitled: Diffusion Theory and Knowledge Dissemination, Utilization, and Integration in Public Health
- >Brief Overview of Major Concepts from E.M. Rogers' Work on Diffusion of Innovations
- >Brief Overview of Malcolm Gladwell's Concept of the Tipping Point
- >Some Key Terms Related to Enabling System Change
- >Systemic Change for School Improvement
- >Change Agent Mechanisms for School Improvement: Infrastructure not Individuals
- >System Change and Empirically-Supported Practices: The Implementation Problem
- >Policy Implications for Advancing Systemic Change for School Improvement
- >Some Key References Related to Enabling System Change
- >Dissemination Focused on Diffusion: Some Guidelines
- >Diffusion: In Pursuit of Action
- >Excerpts from Child Trends' series of Research-to Results Briefs on Adopting, Implementing, Sustaining, and Replicating Evidence-Based Practices
- >Making and Disseminating Recommendations is Not Sufficient
- >Intro to Multi-Level Community Based Culturally Situated Interventions