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Three Studies of Schools: Consistent or Contradictory?

Although they clearly recommended a continuing but limited federal role in school improvement, the authors of the Rand studies¹ of the mid-1970s were interpreted as saying the national effort to sponsor local education projects was "a failure."²

The Rand researchers reported that in those rare instances where schools succeeded in institutionalizing new programs, there was "mutual adaptation"; both the users and the programs changed in the process. In other words, successful change required a great deal of grassroots participation.

Participation is clearly desirable, but authors of the School Improvement Study summarized in this special issue found that other factors were equally important in determining whether seedling programs took root. Moreover, they found that successful school improvement is not only possible, it is fairly common.

This new portrayal of determined educators scratching around for better ideas and putting them to work also seems contrary to the writings of John Goodlad³ and his associates, who depict schools as relatively static and life in typical classrooms as routine, passive, flat. In fact, it was our April issue—called "Why the Unchanging Curriculum?"—that stirred Susan Loucks to suggest we publish this report. "It's not true that schools don't change," she argued. "What is true is that with a little outside support, teachers and principals can attack local problems. What's more, they don't have to do it all on their own; they can adopt programs developed and tested in other schools."

The point might seem irrelevant. The innovations era is gone; there aren't many federal projects being funded these days. But as Loucks and David Zaccari point out (p. 28), school leaders still want to make changes, although the changes they are seeking—effective schools, outcome-based education, revised science and mathematics programs—may be different from those of earlier years.

The researchers, including principal investigator David Crandall, say results

of their study can be applied to these efforts. They probably can, but whether they will depends in part on public policy.

One reason the Rand findings were somewhat different was that many of the projects studied at that time were relatively diffuse. They were attempts to put big bold ideas into practice even though no one had worked out the details. No wonder there was a lot of "mutual adaptation."

Loucks, Crandall, and their fellow authors are convinced that American educators are becoming better planners. Locally initiated projects are now more focused and well-defined, and programs disseminated through the National Diffusion Network have been carefully tested and evaluated. Most are also less ambitious; they aim not at doing something different, but at doing something better.

This difference in specificity between earlier projects and more recent ones raises questions about how the findings will be applied to current school challenges. For example, educators who must quickly design science and mathematics courses for a new clientele, who are unsure about what content is most appropriate for these students, and who cannot draw upon similar programs validated in other schools will probably experience not only mutual adaptation, but lots of blood, sweat, and tears.

That does not detract from the value of the School Improvement Study. On the contrary, these findings mark a well-defined route to successful school improvement. It should not be abandoned. □

¹Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VIII: Implementing and Sustaining Innovations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1978).

²"Federal School Aid Program Called an Expensive Failure," *Washington Star* August 29, 1978, p. 2.

³John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

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