State Initiatives Can Foster School Improvement

by Beverly Anderson and Allan Odden

States can play substantive and important roles in helping local schools. The articles in this section, which stem from a study by the Education Commission of the States, document those elements of the change process that work to transform schools into more effective organizations.

SINCE THE LATE 1970s, well before the start of the current reform movement in education, the states have been actively engaged in helping districts and individual schools to implement research findings on effective schools, effective teaching, and the processes of educational change. The four articles that follow report the findings of a study of the implementation and impact of these programs in local schools conducted by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), titled "State Strategies to Support Local School Improvement."[1] The basic finding of that study is that states can play several substantive and important roles in helping local schools – and the students, teachers, and principals in them – to improve over time.

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The study identified those elements of the local change process that work to improve the skills of teachers and principals and to transform a school into an effective organization. The study also identified the various roles that states can play in the change process.

The key elements, and their sequencing and links over time, provide a general implementation structure that local schools can use as they put into place programs designed to improve the quality of education. The findings of the ECS study, when combined with other recent research on successful school improvement efforts,[2] provide a relatively solid knowledge base on which local and state-level educators and policy makers can build strategies to implement most of the objectives of current state-mandated education reforms.

The ECS study focused in particular on two important questions: What are effective school improvement strategies at the state level? And under what conditions do state-level strategies work effectively in local schools? Using a case-study approach, the researchers analyzed data collected in some 40 schools in 10 states. The study began in late

1983, and the fieldwork was completed in early 1985.

The researchers looked at five factors related to the implementation of a statewide school improvement program:

- *the state environment* – the political and demographic characteristics of a state and its policies and practices that influence the way in which statewide school improvement programs are defined and implemented;
- *the local environment* – the political and demographic characteristics of districts and individual schools and their policies and practices that affect the implementation of improvement efforts within schools;
- *the school improvement program as the state intended it to operate* – including the strategies used by the state to promote the desired outcomes in schools;
- *the program as it actually operates in the schools* – including the methods used by the state or its agents to help schools change; and
- *program outcomes* – for teachers (improved instructional skills and increased job satisfaction), for principals (improved instructional leadership, improved attitudes, and increased job satisfaction), for schools (commitment to continual renewal, the establishment of collegial relationships, and higher expectations for students), and for students (higher achievement and improved attitudes).

The conceptual framework for the ECS study is built on the notion that the state environment shapes the state program. However, the actual program at the local level is modified by the local environment and possibly by the state environment. Moreover, the actual program influences the outcomes within a given school. (See Figure 1.)

The intended outcomes of state programs vary. The ECS study investigated the types of outcomes that each state defined as primary.

The study paid particular attention to

Illustration by Ned Shaw

certain interrelationships among the five factors of state environment, local environment, state program, school program, and outcomes. The study focused, for example, on:

- key elements of the state environment that influenced the design of the state program and its implementation;
- how and why the school program differed from the state program;
- major factors – both positive and negative – in the state environment, the state program, and the local environment that affected the actual school program; and
- elements in the school program and in the local environment that led to positive outcomes for principals, teachers, students, and schools.

The statewide programs included in the study were chosen to reflect a variety of school improvement strategies, but not necessarily the entire range of strategies nor even those that seemed to be the most effective. The states whose programs were studied represented several different regions of the U.S.; they varied with regard to size of population, level of personal income per capita, and degree of centralized versus local control.

The researchers focused on two general types of statewide programs: 1) those that emphasized the improvement of instruction and 2) those that emphasized the improvement of schools as educational institutions. In each state the program was studied as it actually existed in from four to seven schools, at least two of which had been judged by state department staff members or other knowledgeable individuals to be implementing the program actively and successfully. The levels of activity and success in the other schools were judged to be at least moderate. In each state, the schools in the study were drawn from two to four different school districts and included at least one secondary school. Across all 10 states, the schools in the study were drawn from urban, suburban, and nonmetropolitan districts.

Most previous studies of school improvement have analyzed the implementation of products, programs, or curriculum packages developed with federal funds. The ECS study is the first to analyze state-initiated programs; it is also one of the first studies to focus on training in instructional skills and on schoolwide improvement strategies. The findings provide important insights regarding the new state roles and local change structures that will be needed in order to implement state education reforms successfully.

Before describing and illustrating the components of effective improvement strategies as they actually operate at the school level, let us offer a few comments on the factors in the state and local environments that seem to surround successful programs. Four conditions at the state level – but outside the state agency – appear to be critical for successful implementation.

- *State pressure to change, reform, or improve education.* This pressure derived from new state testing programs, strengthened accountability requirements, and education reform objectives. The existence of this pressure was more important than the particular type of pressure.
- *State respect for the traditional balance between state and local control.* Traditional patterns of control did not determine whether programs were voluntary or mandatory, however. For example, programs were voluntary in such a traditionally centrist state as California, yet they were mandatory in such a traditionally decentralized state as Colorado. Mandatory programs, however, were linked to traditional state regulatory functions such as school accreditation.

Discretionary dollars gave school teams a sense of empowerment that was important in building commitment to the improvement effort.

- *Support from political leaders.* While state agencies initiated most programs, usually without formal legislative sanction, those that earned the support of the governor and the legislature grew in size and strength. For example, California's multi-million-dollar funding of the School Improvement Program would not have been possible without legislative approval, while the lack of such support weakened the Colorado Clusters Program and the Pennsylvania Long-Range Planning Program.
- *Discretionary money available to local districts and schools.* Although the amounts of discretionary funds available to local schools were small except in California, discretionary funds were important to the success of the programs. The availability of discretionary dollars gave school teams a sense of empowerment that was important in building commitment to the improvement effort. When a state did not provide extra funds, only districts with surplus funds of their own – usually wealthy districts – could afford to participate.

Five factors within the state departments of education were also found to be important to the success of the improvement programs.

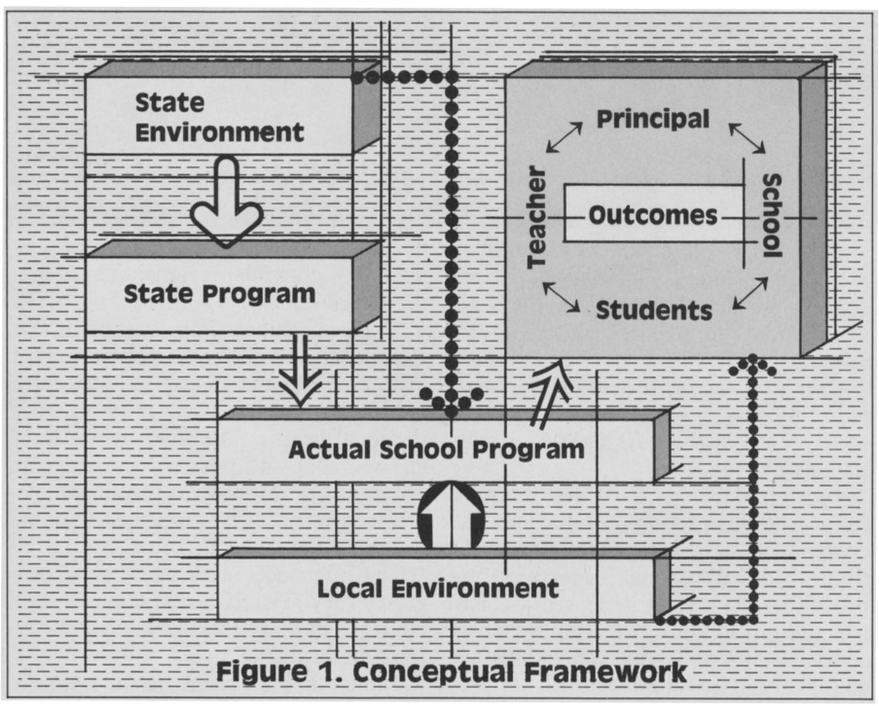
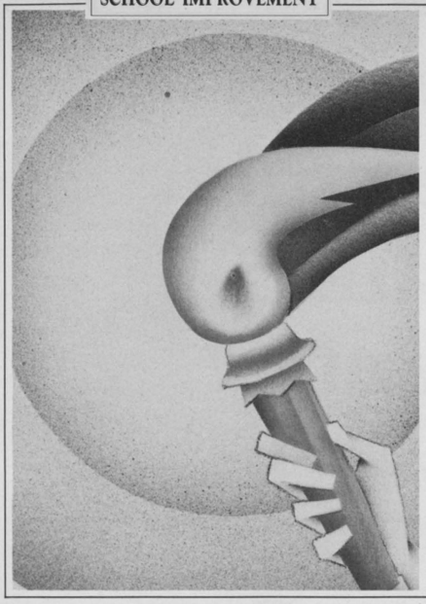


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Chart by Mary Miller



The increased complexity of secondary schools did not preclude improvement, but it did make the process much more complex.

• *Political support within the department*. The strongest programs had an active advocate within the state department – either the chief state school officer or someone backed by the chief.

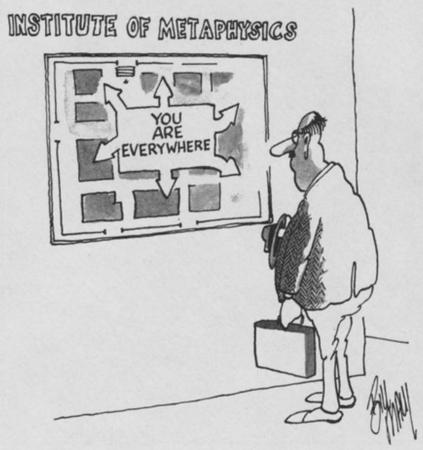
• *A collegial relationship with local schoolpeople*. In the strongest programs, the state agency viewed educational improvement activities as collegial ventures with local educators and made staff members available to assist the schools and districts. This collegial relationship was particularly important for small districts, which were more likely to turn to the state agency for support. Large districts tended to have their own experts on staff.

• *Adequate resources*. State programs were strengthened when funds were ample, staff members possessed substantive and process skills, and at least some resources were available to local schools.

• *Structure and organization of the state department*. When programs were adequately staffed, placed in a separate administrative unit linked to or integrated with other state improvement efforts, and supported over time, their local impact was greatly enhanced.

• *An effort to develop local capacity through technical assistance*. All the successful programs made the development of local capacity central. The Ohio Academy for School Improvement Strategies was designed to strengthen the leadership skills of principals. The programs in California, Ohio, and Connecticut trained cross-role teams at the school level to identify and solve their own problems. The Program for Effective Teaching in Arkansas depended on developing local people as program trainers.

Four general factors in the local environment – turmoil, innovation overload, large school/district size, and school/district complexity – had negative effects on the success of state school improvement programs. Turmoil included strained relationships among the interested parties at the local level, such as opposition by the parents and community, fragmentation caused by court-ordered busing, school closings caused by declining enrollments, or staff cuts caused by diminishing budgets. In general, such conditions were absent in the schools we studied.



Innovation overload – the making of too many changes simultaneously – was also avoided in the successful programs. In most successful schools, the state program was the major educational improvement activity. In a number of schools, teachers welcomed a focus on a single improvement program as a sign that districts and principals had clear priorities. Commitment to a single program for more than one year reinforced this message.

Large schools had more difficulty implementing educational improvement programs than small schools did. Secondary schools generally had more trouble than elementary schools. Attending to the details of an improvement effort was easier when fewer people were involved. The increased complexity of secondary schools did not preclude improvement, but it did make the process substantially more complex. In successful secondary school improvement programs, departmental units were officially recognized and actively involved in the process. The size of the district also complicated the improvement process. Even when a program had strong district support, all program directors in a large district were unlikely to be equally supportive. High school department heads, who find themselves in contact with many central office curriculum coordinators, can receive mixed messages. Because elementary schools have to deal with fewer central office administrators, the potential for mixed messages is lessened.

Two local variables were positively associated with the successful implementation of a state school improvement program: stability of staffing and leadership, and good labor relations. Staff turnover made implementation much more difficult. School and district orchestration suffered, and schoolwide programs, which require careful coordination of interrelated activities, became even more complex. Because a sense of collegiality and the existence of cross-role teams were important, strained labor relations also hampered the implementation of a school improvement program.

When the supportive environment described above existed, school improvement efforts had the greatest chance of success. Fortunately, nearly all these conditions are within the control of state and local education leaders. The articles in this section show how, when these conditions exist, state-sponsored educational improvement programs can be effectively implemented.

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1. The study on which this article is based was conducted under the direction of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), with funding from the National Institute of Education (NIE Contract No. 400-83-0028) and the Spencer Foundation. The investigators for this study were Beverly Anderson, Allan Odden, Eleanor Farrar, Susan Fuhrman, Alan Davis, Patricia Flakus-Mosqueda, Jane Armstrong, and Eugene Huddle. The findings and conclusions reported here do not necessarily reflect the views of ECS, NIE, or the Spencer Foundation.

2. See, for example, David Crandall et al., *People, Policies, and Practices: Examining the Chain of School Improvement* (Andover, Mass.: The Network, 1983). K