A new series of periodic updates to Congress on RAND’s work in education policy

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Scaling-up Educational Interventions: What Have We Learned?

Over the last several years, the federal government and private philanthropists have invested heavily in external providers to develop and disseminate interventions intended to improve the existing practices of teachers in classrooms, and to build the capacity within schools and school districts needed to meet standards. As the nation has demanded system-wide improvement, these external providers have been challenged to scale up their reforms—implementing them more widely, more deeply, and more rapidly than in the past.

At the request of The Ford Foundation, the RAND Corporation convened the leaders of fifteen external reform provider organizations to discuss the practical implications of what they had learned about the scale-up of their models, programs and interventions over the last twenty years. A new RAND report offers lessons learned about expanding the reach of education reform in a set of papers by these leaders. It should be of interest to anyone attempting to develop and implement a scale-up strategy, whether developer, funder, district and school policymakers, or district and school staff.

Successful Scale-Up Efforts Must Address Multiple Criteria

Successful scale-up is defined by the following four characteristics:

- Spread: implementation of reform practices at additional sites or in additional groups within existing sites
- Depth: a significant improvement in classroom practice, enacted in deep and meaningful ways, that influences student performance
- Sustainability: policy and infrastructure systems in place to support continued, deep improvement in classroom practice over time
- Shift in ownership: transfer of knowledge and authority to sustain the reform to the site, allowing continuous improvement and further scale-up.

The experience of the providers indicates that the process of supporting teachers in a scale-up effort is necessarily (1) interactive and adaptive, involving the providers, teachers, schools, and districts in relationships that continue and change over time; (2) iterative, with continuous reexamination and learning over time; and (3) non-linear, as the sequence of activities is adjusted to meet unfolding circumstances.

Scale-up Requires Attention to Common Core Tasks

Analysis of the perspectives presented by these leaders suggests a set of common and interrelated tasks that each of the external providers of improvement services must face. Their contributed chapters of the report provide practical examples of how past external provider organizations succeeded and failed in addressing the following tasks:

- Develop and provide support for implementation
- Ensure high-quality implementation at each site
- Evaluate and improve the intervention
- Obtain financial support needed
- Build organizational capacity to support scale-up
- Market the product
- Create approaches to meet local context needs
- Sustain the reform over time.

Conclusions

How each set of actors addresses these tasks will vary by the type of design or model, the context, and the resources available. The actors must align the above tasks into a coherent set of policies and infrastructure supports to ensure that new and effective practices are sustained. Providers must create the supports for the implementers that are effective and economical and that meet the specific needs of the sites. In doing so we found the following:

- Promoting depth of changed practice requires developing procedures and measures of implementation for ensuring implementation quality and applying these procedures consistently.
- Assessing program effectiveness will require creativity and flexibility to address the methodological challenges that flow from efforts that are complex, locally situated, adaptive, and iterative.
- Much greater attention must be paid to the different types of funding needs, and when they occur, if scale-up is to be achieved. In particular, obtaining funding specifically for capacity-building investments will help meet the challenge of new markets.
- Providers and users must work together to understand the constructs of the design, to mutually adapt to promote the goal of improved student performance, and to build a coherent system of supports.
- As yet, little is known about how to sustain changes and how to transfer ownership effectively. This must be addressed directly and receive significant attention if scale-up is to be successful.

Read more: Expanding the Reach of Education Reforms

PROJECT UNDER WAY

- Optimizing America’s Cultural Resources: An Examination of the Visual Arts Sector and the Challenges It Faces

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