





Validated Change

By Justin Baeder

We have no shortage of ideas for improving instruction. The challenge is finding the right ideas, validating them, and taking them school- or systemwide.

Most seasoned educators have witnessed countless instructional initiatives come and go. A new idea is seized upon by key leaders, then mandated, and implemented—only to fade away in the shadow of the next big idea a few months later. “This too shall pass,” seasoned teachers tell themselves. While this sentiment might be dismissed as cynicism, it’s often a reflection of reality: Too many initiatives appear and then disappear with little thought, but with great cost to staff, students, and budgets.

How can we ensure that new practices make a lasting difference?

Why Change Initiatives Fail

Regardless of the source of a new idea, mandated mass adoption almost never works. Everett Rogers, the sociologist who coined the term “early

adopter” in the 1960s, described the spread of new practices with a bell-curve distribution: A minuscule number of innovators are followed by a slightly larger group of early adopters. Then, if the idea takes hold, these pioneers will be followed by the early and late majority—the bulk of the group. Eventually, the remaining holdouts accept the change, though they may continue to resist for some time.

This process, which Rogers called “diffusion of innovations” in his 1962 book by that name, applies to the adoption of technology and new policies and practices across all sectors of society. Yet we often ignore Rogers’ wisdom in education because we want our organizations to change rapidly and in unison. When we insist on mass adoption—for example, by purchasing a new curriculum, training teachers, and expecting immediate change—we’re working against the nature

of the change process. If we instead embrace the diffusion of innovative models, we can avoid the pitfalls that usually lead teachers to shake their heads and say, “This too shall pass.”

Validating Promising Practices

If a new practice is to succeed in improving student learning, it must first be validated—that is, we must ensure that we’re making the right change. While this may sound obvious, there’s a particular phrase we use to avoid considering this critical question: “research-based.” If research has shown the effectiveness of a new initiative elsewhere, we often overlook the question of whether we’re attempting to solve the same problem in our particular situation.

To avoid this pitfall, it’s critical to articulate a clear theory of action, which is a set of causal assumptions: If we take action *A*, then we’ll achieve result *B*. For example, “If we adopt a new K-2 reading curriculum, then our percentage of third-graders reading below grade level will decrease.” When we’re pressed to articulate these hypothesized relationships, we tend to avoid pursuing good ideas that aren’t logically linked to the outcomes we want. We also tend to be more realistic about the conditions for success. For example, a new reading curriculum is unlikely to help more students read at grade level unless teachers are adequately trained, and unless the new curriculum is implemented as designed.

The simplest way to articulate a theory of action is by mapping it on a whiteboard, perhaps with your leadership team or key early adopters. A simple handwritten flowchart allows you to start with either the desired result or the proposed change, and draw the presumed relationships between actions and results, as well as the conditions for success. If it’s clear that key assumptions are unfounded—for example, if a proposed parent literacy night is clearly incapable of achieving its stated aim of improving third-grade reading scores—you can go back to the drawing board and revise your plan.

Once you have a plausible theory of action, it’s time for your early adopters to validate it, to see if the change works as expected, and then to pilot it before scaling up to the school or system level. Innovative educators tend to tackle new challenges with enthusiasm, but it’s important not to merely rely on early enthusiasm to validate the pilot. Instead, you can operationalize success with three types of goals.

1 Purpose Goals. This is the first type of goal to set for your initiative: Why are we doing this? What do we hope to ultimately achieve for our students? Purpose goals may be tough to measure, but they should be plausible and meaningful. If you aren’t inspired by the purpose goals you’ve set, or aren’t confident that they’ll pan out, go back to the drawing board. Purpose goals motivate your team to take action and link to organizational and individual values.

2 Progress Goals. These goals allow you to determine if your efforts are working. Progress goals should specify outcomes, not efforts. For example, SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely) are often used to determine if an approach is generating the expected results. Progress goals aren’t directly doable, but they’re critical for determining if your theory of action is correct, or if changes are necessary before scaling up.

3 Practice Goals. Practice goals are about developing new patterns of behavior, so the theory of action has the opportunity to prove itself. Practice goals should be directly achievable and directly observable. For example, if you’re implementing a writer’s workshop curriculum, you might set a practice goal that teachers will confer one-on-one with at least five students a day. If the practice goals you’ve set seem to miss the point of the initiative—for example, if they seem to focus on teacher behaviors that don’t matter—that’s a good sign that your theory of action may need work. Note that because your overall theory of action may involve efforts at several levels by different staff, practice goals for one group, such as teachers, may serve as progress goals for another group, such as instructional coaches.

Once your theory of action and three types of goals are in place, you’re ready to pilot the change. This need not be a lengthy process, but it should be long enough to determine if the theory of action is accurate or if it needs to be revised to yield an answer.

Fidelity at Scale

If your pilot is successful, and works as predicted by your theory of action, you’re ready to scale. One of the most important factors to keep in mind, though, is that early adopters are funda-



REFLECT ON THIS

- **What** has been the result of previous change initiatives at your school? Were they a success?
- **Who** are the early adopters on your staff?
- **What** old, failed initiatives need to be formally let go?



mentally different from other staff in several key ways. First, early adopters are more risk-tolerant. They accept the idea that not everything will work out, and that failure is an acceptable cost of learning. Second, they are typically willing to work harder to make an innovation succeed than their colleagues will be. They require less proof and demonstrate more persistence. Third, early adopters typically ask for very little in the way of permission or support for trying new ideas; they simply take action and see what happens. The rest of your staff will tend to be more cautious and hesitant to make unproven changes.

What do these differences between earlier and later adopters mean for your change initiative? It's important not to estimate the total cost of the change in time, training, or resources by extrapolating from early adopters to the rest of the staff. If three innovative teachers get great results in 30 days from their \$500 pilot project, it's far from safe to conclude that the other 30 teachers can achieve full implementation for \$5,000 in just a few

months. Scaling up to school- or system-wide implementation

will require substantially more time, money, and support per person than the initial pilot.

It's even more essential to set clear practice goals when you're scaling up.

In their bestselling book *Switch*, scholars Chip Heath

and Dan Heath suggest that leaders "script the critical moves" to help their teams take specific, deliberate actions to move the initiative forward. Whereas early adopters may be content to figure things out as they go, the rest of your staff may hesitate to take even the first step if they're not clear on exactly what to do.

For example, when my school was in the process of implementing a new writing curriculum, our pilot teachers were very clear about the practices that their colleagues needed to implement right away to truly "do" the new model. As an instructional leadership team, we set the expectation that writing lessons would begin with no more than 15 minutes of explicit instruction focused on a clear teaching point, followed by at least 40 minutes of independent writing and one-on-one conferring. Regardless of their intentions, teachers who weren't following this lesson structure knew that they had not yet implemented the new model. As a result, I could provide clear feedback in my classroom walkthroughs and formal observations.

Letting Practices Die

Too often, old initiatives are never officially terminated. Instead, they're allowed to simply fizzle out as new initiatives compete for time and attention. In some cases, this means that conflicting theories of action are at work at the same time, resulting in counterproductive efforts. For example, teaching math for mastery directly conflicts with the theory of action behind many newer "spiral" math curricula. When many of my teachers complained that they couldn't keep up with the pacing guide (students weren't "getting it" before they had to move on to the next unit), we realized that it was time to formally end the expectation that every math concept would be taught to mastery.

When we maintain a clearly articulated theory of action; set clear purpose, progress, and practice goals; and clarify when we're changing course, we can engage in continuous cycles of piloting new ideas, validating them with early adopters, and scaling the successful practices across the board. 

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