
**STRUCTURING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR INCREASED
COMPREHENSION, COMMUNICATION, AND
COMPUTER LITERACY—FROM A STATE, COLLEGE
SYSTEM, AND SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE**

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Do you want to improve comprehension, increase oral and written communication or develop computer literacy among students and teacher? Based on a six year instructional improvement effort, we in SPUR, Louisiana's Special Plan Upgrading Reading, recommend to you a generic planning process which has proven effective in not only increasing reading achievement in Louisiana but in improving the total school climate.

In 1983, Ralph Tyler, responding to Goodlad's "Study on Schooling," stated three generalizations which he believed had significant bearing on efforts to improve schooling:

- (1) Educational reform requires the "active participation and education of responsible and effective participants." To be effective, individuals should:
 - understand the purposes they are trying to achieve,
 - believe those purposes are important.
 - understand their roles and have the confidence and skills to carry them out.
 - participate in defining goals, designing curricula, planning instruction, and
 - develop understanding, skills and attitudes needed to perform roles they have helped to define.
- (2) "The improvement of schooling requires a team effort." Plans for improvement must be carried out at the school level to provide for varying students, staff, and material resources.
- (3) "The development of a highly effective team takes far more time than planners usually allow." It takes five to ten years to develop a program, train people to become competent in their roles, and to show improvement in the learning of students.

For participants in SPUR (then concluding its fourth year of operation), these three generalizations had special

significance because they summarized the ideology on which our statewide reading improvement effort was based.

As reviewed in the *Third Yearbook of the American Reading Forum* (Lofton, 1983), SPUR, a statewide reading improvement effort was developed primarily on research findings from the comprehensive Rand Study (McLaughlin and March, 1978) which showed that "successful projects were not projects at all but part of an ongoing problem-solving and improvement process." Change was found to be more a function of people and organization than technology and finance. Through collaborative planning and problem-solving comes commitment and ownership.

Now in its sixth year of operation, SPUR has evidence to support, that change—whether it be the introduction of computers or improvement of comprehension or communication—is facilitated through the use of a team approach—people at all levels working together toward common goals. The process of collaborative planning and problem-solving has been so successful in upgrading reading in grades K - 8 that the decision was made by the newly elected superintendent to extend the process to total instruction pre-kindergarten through adult education. Under a new acronym, LEARN, Louisiana's Educational Assistance Resource Network, the goal will be to develop comprehensive instructional programs resulting in lifetime learners — individuals who not only have the skills to learn but also the desire to learn.

Providing a Structure and a Process for Change

In a statewide effort such as SPUR/LEARN, the process ideally occurs at six levels: state, region, system, school, teacher, and students — with people at all levels united toward common goals. The planning process may be used independently or collectively, however, at any level to improve or implement any aspect of the program. Simply stated, the process involves assessing needs and developing a plan to meet those needs. The process is cyclical in nature and involves the following steps: (1) determining needs, (2) establishing goals, (3) establishing objectives, (4) setting priorities, (5) establishing timelines, and (6) implementing, evaluating, adjusting, and maintaining the plan.

While all steps are critical, the assessment of needs has been an area that has required particular attention. In implementing this step, individuals are encouraged to picture or define "the way it is" and "the way it's supposed to be." For many, there was uncertainty about the way it was "supposed to be." This necessitated the addition of a new dimension to the planning process.

Prior to the assessment of needs, it is recommended that individuals develop a statement of beliefs regarding the area being addressed. Questions are formulated that target the areas of decision-making and alternatives are explored. To provide consistency, coordination and continuity of efforts, consensus must be reached, and a system of beliefs that all can commit to is written. This document represents the value system of the group. In essence, it represents the ideal and provides direction for the planning process. Operating on the premise that a system of beliefs is worth nothing unless examined, the system of beliefs is always open to new evidence. In light of new information or findings, individuals are asked: Does this support what we believe? Does it contradict what we believe?

If it contradicts, what additional study is needed to determine which view is right?

Once the ideal has been defined, needs in relation to that ideal may be determined and the planning process may continue. Broad goals and specific objectives are identified, and priorities are indicated through carefully thought out action steps. Ownership and shared responsibility for implementation of the plan are fostered by designating who is responsible for each activity. The establishment of timelines as well as procedures for documenting and evaluating the accomplishment of each step, are critical in monitoring implementation of the plan. Written action plans that are briefly stated, free of educational jargon, and targeted to identified needs have proven most successful in effecting changes.

As stated in the introduction of this section, in a statewide effort such as SPUR/LEARN, the process ideally functions at six levels—state, region, system, school, teacher, and individual. Structure for the process is provided at each level by the designation of a representative group (a Task Force or Committee) who will engage in the planning process, seeking input and guidance from individuals they represent. It is important that all groups affected by the change have representation.

With the expansion of SPUR beyond reading, the process has been implemented at the State Department of Education (SDE). A Coordinating Committee composed of two representatives from each office in the SDE has been established to determine how SDE personnel can provide coordinated leadership, technical assistance and service to systems involved in the instructional improvement effort. Statewide needs are identified with input from a State Task Force composed of eight Local Education Agency personnel representing eight regions in the state, and a plan for meeting these needs is developed at the state level. A key component of the state plan is the funding of eight regionally based technical assistance teams who provide leadership training and on-site technical assistance to systems and schools in implementing the instructional improvement process. With the expansion of SPUR to total instruction, the technical assistance team will be "backed up" by SDE Personnel who will provide expertise in the areas represented by the various offices in the SDE.

At the regional level, the planning process occurs through a Regional Board composed of representatives of each local school system. This Board develops a plan for meeting common needs throughout the region and promotes sharing and visitation across systems. Regional training is provided and taken back to local systems and participating schools using a "trainer of trainers" model.

Participation in the instructional improvement effort at the system level is voluntary. Sixty-three of Louisiana's 66 systems are involved. To participate, systems must agree to appoint a system level task force composed of representatives from all areas that impact instruction—regular education, Special Education, Chapter 1, guidance, etc., and develop a plan for improvement. To assist systems in assessing their program at the system level, *The Comprehensive Reading Program Training Series* (SPUR, 1982) was developed at the SDE and is available upon request. The process of defining a program's curriculum, methodology, administration, and organization has application for all instructional areas. Two systems have

used the process in mathematics and another is piloting the process in writing. Systems are encouraged to include in their plan, a delivery system for ultimate involvement of all schools in the instructional improvement process.

At the school level, a Task Force, similar in make-up to the system level, assesses its need in light of the parish plan and its own unique needs. In assessing programs at the school level, schools may choose to use *The Louisiana Criteria of Excellence*, (SPUR, 1984) 17 standards of effective instructional programs which grew out of the Right to Read effort. This summer the standards were reviewed by a statewide committee and underwent minor modifications to make them applicable to the total instructional program.

Available for teacher and student assessment are the Effective Teaching Behaviors and the characteristics of independent learners identified by Hunter (1981).

At the system and school levels the process emphasizes both a top-down and bottom-up approach. It is believed that "lasting change must come about at the initiation, and through the efforts, of the local school system, and that this change must flow down from the leadership of the Superintendent at the same time it flows up from the commitment of the principals and teachers (Hoffman, Cantwell, Stewart, 1983)." Because the process is locally controlled, it can be and has been modified to meet the needs of local systems.

Colleges and universities have supported the process at all levels in a variety of ways—by participation on regional boards, by providing college credit for inservice training, through development of courses in areas of need, and by adjusting existing preservice and graduate programs to better meet the needs of the systems they serve.

Reasons for Participating in the Process

In an effort to better understand the process, the Bureau of Evaluation during the 1982-83 school year conducted a qualitative study of six school systems who were considered by the SDE staff to be successful in implementing the SPUR process and that represented a variety of ways for implementing the process. In each school system a team of three evaluators conducted interviews with the Superintendent, the SPUR Director for the local system effort, other central office staff involved in SPUR, the technical assistant(s) who served that system, as well as the principals and a sample of teachers from at least two schools at various stages in the process. A set of questions, intended as probes, covered very general areas such as major costs and benefits of participating in SPUR, major accomplishments, and opinions as to what made the system's participation unique. A full report of that study, including narrative responses of participants is available in an evaluation report entitled, "Because We're Better" . . . How and Why Six School Systems Adopted SPUR (Hoffman et al, 1983)."

Based on the interviews as well as the working relationships observed, evaluators were able to identify four stages that each of the systems had gone through in adopting the SPUR process, although the means by which these stages were accomplished differed among them:

1. *Awareness*: the school systems or schools became aware of the possibility of change or growth through SPUR.

2. *Interest*: change become salient to the school systems or schools; they see that it would meet their needs and that it is possible to accomplish.
3. *Trial*: the school systems or schools invest some efforts in trying out the new practices but do not yet commit themselves totally to change.
4. *Adoption*: the new practice is completely accepted by the school systems or schools and is often so integrated with other activities that it is difficult to tell that they had ever acted differently.

As indicated by the evaluators, these steps are classic examples of the adoption of innovative ideas. Perhaps more beneficial was the identification of factors which the evaluators referred to as the defining characteristics of SPUR. These were the characteristics of the process that had made it successful in the school systems visited:

- 1) *Central office support* — The process must have support from the central office. At least one person in a position of power must value the process, understand how it can benefit education, and legitimize the TA to the schools and other central office staff.
2. *Convergence of interests* — The process may begin at the school or system level, but at some point they must converge with active participation of leaders from both levels.
- 3) *Role of the technical assistant* — The ambiguous role of the TA adds to his/her effectiveness. Part of the ambiguity is created by the hiring procedures. The TA is hired by both the SDE and the system serving as fiscal agent for the region. As SDE representatives, the TAs bring in outside ideas and assist with SDE initiatives. As local system employees, they report to their respective central office representative, assuring the school system that its authority will not be sabotaged or attacked. The TAs are in a "power neutral position" with no authority other than that granted by the local system. This separation from the chain of command allows them to challenge practices and take risks—to serve as a change agent or catalyst for change.
- 4) *Quality of the TA* — The quality of the TA and the service they provide has been a key to SPUR's success. The TAs are handpicked. They must be reading specialists and demonstrate skill in working with people. In addition they receive constant inservice education themselves, and a large proportion of the staff's time at the state and regional levels is involved in preparing timely, relevant and up-to-date inservice training. In one two-year period the TAs received 200 hours of training in the Comprehensive Reading Program and the Change Process.
- 5) *Criteria of Excellence Schools* — If a school so chooses, the faculty may formally pursue the standards embodied in the Criteria of Excellence (1984) and become designated a Model School. The creation and use of these model schools are key to the adoption of the program improvement

process. The Model Schools are concrete signs of progress, and they have done much to upgrade the image of public education in the public's eye. Opportunities to visit these schools and see new ideas working has motivated many to adopt the process.

- 6) *Strong personal commitment* — At the school level, there is a high level of pride and emotional commitment. According to the interviewers, participants didn't answer questions; they preached. Why? Achieving the Criteria of Excellence is a lengthy difficult process. Teachers are made vulnerable as they question their own practices and make personal changes. Initial stages were described by the teachers as confusing, frustrating, often bringing hostility and distrust. Confirming a finding of social psychology, people tend to value an accomplishment in direct proportion to the effort required. All teachers felt their schools had improved. Prior to involvement in the process, they described their schools as "already good" to "awful."
- 7) *Generic process* — The generic nature of the process has contributed to its success. The basic process of developing a philosophy and defining the curriculum, methodology, organization and administration for a parish-wide program can apply equally well to other subjects. Some systems are extending the process to mathematics and science improvement. The process emphasizes coordination among different subject area teachers and the use of sound generic teaching practices such as instructional management, evaluation of a student's entry level in a subject, and ways to increase time on task, which increase achievement in all areas.
- 8) *Side benefits* — The process results in side benefits which may be as important as the ultimate goal of increasing achievement in reading. Teachers felt the process allowed them to work cooperatively as equals with SDE and central office staff. Developing school wide plans and working toward common goals broke down barriers across subject and grade levels and increased staff unity. The required parental involvement led to greater community recognition of the school's work and accomplishment. Student attitudes toward education and teachers improved as the program changes increased chances of students performing successfully. In essence, the school became an efficient, pleasant place in which to learn—an integrated part of the community and the local educational system. While there are no tests to measure their outcomes, they were highly valued in the eyes of the participants.

Based on comments of the participants interviewed, the evaluators conclude: "It appears that the model could be readily modified to meet a variety of local conditions without losing its basic identifying characteristics. The process requires initial commitment from school systems and schools. It also

requires a great deal of work carried out over a period of several years. However, in the judgement of those who have adopted it, the efforts are more than adequately repaid by the results."

What about increased student achievement? It was interesting to note that many of the participants interviewed did not have evidence to show that student achievement had improved. The side benefits derived, had provided sufficient motivation and positive reinforcement—a noteworthy finding in itself given the low morale and burn-out among professional educators today. Because increased student achievement is a desired outcome and an important means of evaluating the plan, however, a current project at the SDE, the "Basic Skills Test Utilization Model," is concerned with helping systems and schools use test results in assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of the process in building comprehensive programs characterized by increased student achievement.

Statewide analysis of the language arts performance of students in Grades 2, 3, and 4 on the State Basic Skills Test does show that the process is making a difference in student achievement. The 1983-84 Evaluation Report (Hoffman, 1984) reveals the following results:

- 1) SPUR schools (schools participating in the instructional improvement process who receive some technical assistance service) serve children from less advantaged backgrounds than other schools when parents occupations and levels of formal education are considered. Differences are statistically significant (p. 05).
- 2) SPUR participating schools had a higher average performance in language arts on the State Basic Skills Test than non SPUR schools and a smaller percentage of students scoring below the standard for the test, thus qualifying for the State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program. The differences were statistically significant at second and third grades, but not at fourth. (Average percent correct at grades 2, 3, and 4 respectively = 94.58 vs. 94.02, 90.76 vs. 89.99 and 89.0 vs. 88.4. Percent of students failing to meet the standard in grades 2, 3, and 4 respectively = 3.82 vs. 4.77, 6.31 vs. 7.64 and 11.98 vs. 13.60.)
- 3) Schools that had achieved the Criteria of Excellence had higher average scores in language arts and smaller percentages of students qualifying for compensatory/remedial services than schools that had not achieved the Criteria of Excellence. The differences were statistically significant at all grade levels. (Average percent correct at grades 2, 3, and 4 respectively = 95.49 vs. 94.00, 91.65 vs. 89.99 and 89.56 vs. 88.44. Percent of students failing to meet the standard = 2.70 vs. 4.76, 4.55 vs. 7.66 and 10.61 vs. 13.52.)
- 4) If all schools had performed as well in language arts as the Criteria of Excellence schools, almost 4,000 fewer regular education students would have required compensatory/remedial services, for a savings to the state of \$997,500.
- 5) Over time there has been slight but steady improvement by Criteria and Non-Criteria schools

with Criteria schools scoring consistently higher. (Average Percent Correct from 1982-84 in grade 2 and from 1983-84 in grade 3 respectively = 94.6 to 95.49 vs. 92.91 to 94.00 and 91.19 to 91.65 vs. 89.69 to 89.99. Percent of students below standard from 1982-84 in grade 2 and from 1983-84 in grade 3 respectively shows a decline from 5.7 to 2.7 vs. 7.8 to 4.8 and 5.9 to 4.6 vs. 8.4 to 7.7.)

Although the differences in scores are small, they take on increased significance in light of the following:

1. The Basic Skills Tests are criterion-referenced tests of minimum standards and thus impose ceilings, making it impossible to determine how much growth has occurred at higher levels.
2. Only schools receiving on-site technical assistance service are labeled SPUR schools. Many schools designated non-SPUR schools have been part of a system-wide effort which has impacted all schools. In those instances, comparisons of SPUR and non-SPUR schools puts SPUR in competition with itself.
3. Because SPUR schools serve less advantaged students than other schools, they would be expected to show poorer performance in the absence of a reading improvement effort.

Based on these findings, the evaluators conclude that "the SPUR process has a tangible and important effect upon the reading abilities of students enrolled in the schools that are participating in the project."

Summary

Based on results from a six year instructional improvement effort, the process of collaborative planning is recommended as a viable means for implementing change at any level in the educational establishment. We believe that the procedure described for providing a process and structure for change, as well as the results of the qualitative study describing how and why systems and schools adopted the process, have implications for improving any aspect of the instructional program—whether it be comprehension, communication, or computer literacy.

To paraphrase Shel Silverstein's challenging poem, "Recipe for Making a Hippopotamus Sandwich . . ."

"Recipe for Change"

Desired changes are easy to make
 All you do is simply take . . .
 A team of individuals with common needs,
 A change agent,
 A process of collaborative planning and problem-solving,
 A system of beliefs,
 An action plan — let's see
 That ought to do it,
 But now comes the problem
 Biting into it!

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