

# In the Common Core era, schools need good organizational 'gardening'



Researchers at the University at Albany say making school improvement strategies work is like tending a garden. Could this be your school district?

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New York State's strategy to help all students become college- and career-ready can be summed up with three acronyms: CCSS, APPR and DDI. They stand respectively, for Common Core State Standards, the Annual Professional Performance Review system, and data-driven instruction. Together, these three innovations are designed to influence teachers' work and, in turn, improve student and school outcomes.

We are part of a team of researchers at the University at Albany that has sought to identify important organizational features of districts and schools whose early results are better than their peers. We have conducted case studies of schools and districts where students are performing above predicted levels based upon student demographic characteristics such as the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in their schools. We studied both elementary and middle schools, examining practices in what we dubbed "odds-beating" schools as well as a comparison set of typically performing schools.

## Tending the organizational garden

The CCSS, new APPR system, and DDI can be thought of as transplants to the school organizational "garden." We discovered particular garden-like features in the schools and district offices where the transplants have taken hold and students are performing above predicted levels. We found, for example, trust-building activities and timely communications in odds-beating schools. Leaders strategically distribute responsibilities and duties related to the transplants – CCSS, APPR and DDI. We looked carefully at the extent to which teachers and other front-line professionals accept and share responsibility for implementing innovations in their schools – i.e. tending the transplants. And we learned how overall organizational climates provide conditions conducive to sustaining organizational learning and growth.

## How have the odds-beaters done it?

Although elementary and middle schools differ in some fundamental ways, our research identified several important characteristics that are common across the odds-beating elementary and middle schools.

For instance, all the odds-beating schools had the services of stable, committed, and well-educated workforces.

In the odds-beating schools, more than 70 percent of respondents to a survey indicated that they had worked

at the school for more than five years. Similarly, New York State school report cards show these schools have an average annual teacher turnover rate of around 10 percent, which is slightly lower than the state average rate of around 12 percent.

In addition, odds-beating schools have, on average, 40 percent of teachers with advanced graduate level coursework beyond the minimum required for professional certification. In contrast, just 30 percent of teachers in typically performing elementary schools and 22 percent in typically performing middle schools have the same levels of advanced preparation.

**In odds-beating schools, individual teachers were not expected or required to attempt to implement the CCSS or adapt curriculum and instruction alone.**



Our interview data also point to another key feature of odds-beating schools: Teachers in the odds-beating schools are more likely to participate in effective professional development programs whether inside or outside of the district. The combination of advanced formal education and effective professional development helps to account for two important findings about odds beaters. In comparison to typically performing schools, they are positioned better to adopt and implement the CCSS, APPR, and DDI, and they are able to absorb these innovations without significant declines in their overall school performance.

So, workforce stability, preparation, quality, competence, and deployment matter, especially in light of other research that demonstrates how undesirable workforce turnover is instrumental in sub-optimal performance.

Our observation is that district and school leaders of odds-beating schools have developed a clear, adaptable innovation implementation strategy, and the exemplary ones have done so with teacher collaboration at the center. Their gardening strategy for ensuring that the new innovative transplants can "take" and grow has three major components:

(1) Planning for the implementation with teachers and other front-line professionals.

(2) Explicitly giving teachers and front-line professionals clear expectations, priorities, and manageable timelines along with permission to use professional discretion as they adapt curriculum and instruction to meet those expectations.

(3) Monitoring progress by looking for the "sweet spots" and finding a balance between being too tight and rigid versus being too loose or under specific about

expectations.

For more information on this approach, see "The Future of Educational Change: System Thinkers in Action," by M. Fullan in the *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(3), 113-12 (2006).

## Being a better organizational gardener

The supportive climate for odds-beating performance we found is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It results from deliberate efforts of district and school leaders as organizational gardeners and facilitators of policy innovation transplants. For example, we found that in odds-beating schools and their district offices, curriculum planning and professional development focused on developing teachers' competencies in aligning instruction to the CCSS was well underway prior to the mandated start of implementation. We also found evidence that teachers and other front-line professionals made adaptations as they revised curricula and modified instructional strategies to support their respective students to meet the CCSS.

Significantly, individual teachers were not expected or required to attempt to implement the CCSS or adapt curriculum and instruction alone. Teachers went about this important work with the social supports provided by peers, instructional coaches, principals, and district office officials, and, in some cases, outside facilitators. In some middle schools, especially, teachers who serve as department chairs also serve as instructional coaches.

This study applied what's known in the literature as "systems thinking" to schools. But the gardening metaphor is more easily grasped, and many school personnel perform gardening roles. While organizations adjusting to rapid change can experience a short-term "implementation dip," our study shows that schools generally have been able to implement innovations without significant performance declines. In these schools, well-coordinated efforts to implement the CCSS, the new APPR and DDI are delivering better performance on CCSS-aligned assessments.

*This article is adapted from "Comparing and Contrasting Odds-Beating Elementary and Middle Schools: Toward a Theory of Action," a June 2015 report to the New York State Education Department. In addition to the authors of this article, the University at Albany team included Kathryn S. Schiller, Karen Gregory, Francesca T. Durand, and Sarah J. Zuckerman as well as doctoral students and other educational professionals. A synopsis in the form of a four-page brief can be found at <http://www.albany.edu/nykids/files/brief.TOA.NYKids.pdf>. Other related research is available at <http://www.albany.edu/nykids/>.*