Monitoring Fidelity of Implementation

Center on Innovation & Improvement

A model or program is a coherent and systematic assemblage of practices. Fidelity of implementation means adherence to both the proper execution of the specific practices and the effective coordination of all the practices as they are intended to be combined. A program or practice with demonstrated effectiveness in some schools can be ineffective elsewhere if the way it is being implemented takes it far away from its original (evidence-based) design. This variation in outcome has spurred a heightened interest in the science of "implementation." The experience with comprehensive school reform (CSR) models contributed greatly to this line of investigation. Even though CSR models are, by definition, "research based," they tend to produce different results in different contexts, and the variation in outcomes has often been attributed to differences in the fidelity of implementation (Berends, Bodilly, & Nataraj Kirby, 2002). "Only when effective practices are fully implemented should we expect positive outcomes. Implementation matters" (Blase & Fixsen, 2005, p. 10).

In recognition of this problem, researchers began focusing on the concept of *fidelity of implementation*, the delivery of content and instructional strategies in the way in which they were designed and intended to be delivered: accurately and consistently" (National Center on Response to Intervention, n.d., online).

Fixsen discusses what can happen when an effective program is not implemented properly and calls the result an "implementation gap." This gap can occur either when the program or practice, from the start, is not used with fidelity or when an originally "good" implementation "disappears with time and turnover" (2006, online). A U.S. Department of Education (2009) guide to implementation of research-based programs highlights the importance of ensuring that the core elements of a program are implemented as designed. These could include the basic program structure, content, and method of delivery.

Plans for monitoring fidelity of implementation should actually begin when programs are being considered for adoption. In general, "the more clearly the core components of an intervention program or practice are defined, the more readily the program or practice can be implemented successfully" (Fixen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005, p. 24). Researchers have identified elements of programs that can impact fidelity of implementation. For example, programs that are "packaged" to simplify the tasks of implementation and programs that are a good match with the needs of the target population and school site are more likely to be implemented with fidelity (Getting Results, 2007).

In addition, a school's failure to put core elements in place could be the result of inadequate staff training and preparation or staff unwillingness to shift away from programs or practices with which they are comfortable. Thus, once a program has been selected, attention must be paid to preparing staff to implement the program by providing training, opportunities to practice, and coaching as needed (Guldbrandsson, 2008). Wallace et al. (2008) identify key "implementation drivers" that, when given sufficient attention, increase the likelihood that an instructional program will be implemented correctly. These include elements such as observations to ensure that the program is being implemented correctly, with intervention if necessary.

While careful program selection, planning, and staff preparation can make effective implementation more likely, continued monitoring is critical to ensure that the program or practice continues to be implemented as designed—and to assess the program's impact on student learning. Ongoing and "systematic data collection about implementation is needed. By determining which program components are firmly in place and which ones are only being given lip service, those managing the new program can learn about and address the barriers that are limiting or interfering with use [and help schools] fine-tune their efforts to make a program work" (Yap et al., 2000, p. 19). This ongoing assessment of fidelity of implementation also provides information critical to assessing whether it is the program or the implementation of the program that is the problem if the expected positive impact does not occur.

Action Principles

For State and District

1. Consider possible difficulties with implementation when selecting new programs and be ready to address the difficulties.

2. For any program implemented, state- or district-wide, provide comprehensive training and support materials for staff with opportunities for teacher practice and corrective feedback included in the training plan.

3. Develop "calibration checks" for teachers to use to monitor their own implementation (Gunn, n.d., online).

4. Include principals in training with emphasis on what the program looks like in practice so that principals can provide effective monitoring and feedback on an ongoing basis.

5. Develop a plan for monitoring implementation of the program that includes data collection, observation of the program as implemented, analysis of the data, and planning for ways to address off-target implementation or "poor-fidelity drift."

6. Use the data collected regarding fidelity of implementation in efforts to identify possible reasons for programs not performing as expected.

References and Resources

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