DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 334 IR 004 964

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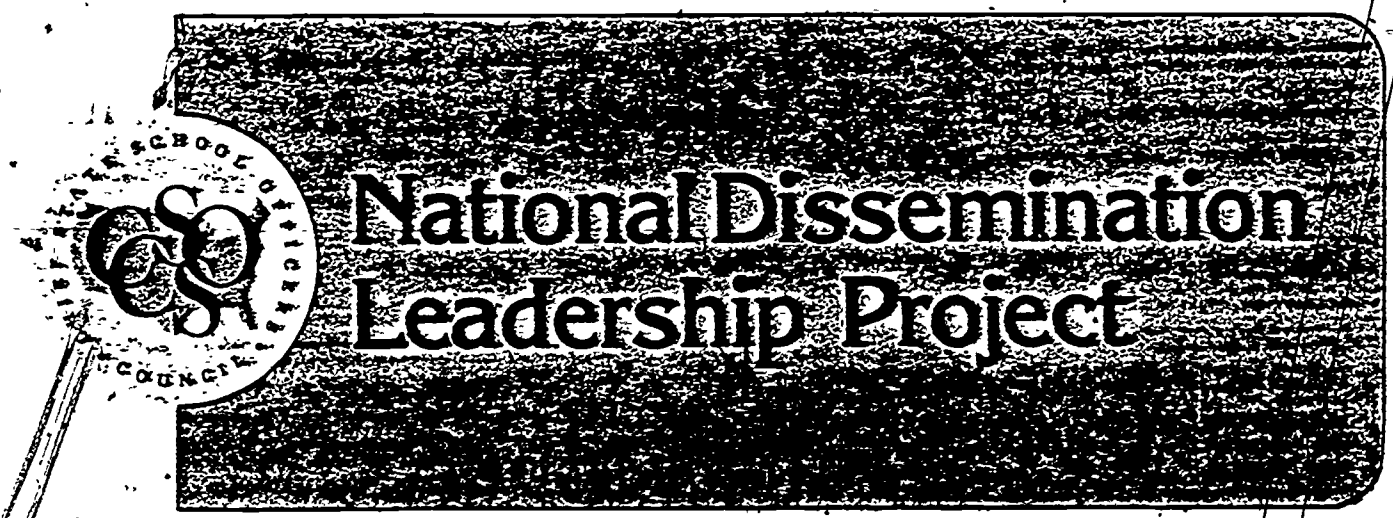
TITLE	Coordinating the State Education Agency Dissemination System. Conference Topic Paper.
INSTITUTION	Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Feb 77
NOTE	17p.; Summary of a paper presented at Second Topical Conference of the National Dissemination Leadership Project (Newport, Rhode Island, February 8-9, 1977); For related documents, see IR 004 797 and IR 004 965
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Change Strategies; Conference Reports; Educational Innovation; *Information Dissemination; Information Networks; *Information Systems; Interagency Coordination; *Program Coordination; State Agencies; *State Departments of Education; State Programs; *Statewide Planning

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes some of the issues raised and recommendations made at the second topical conference for State Education Agency (SEA) personnel. The conference focused on managing and coordinating a state program for the dissemination of educational information. Recommendations include: (1) increase awareness of the importance of dissemination activities; (2) define and disseminate important terminology in the field; (3) identify early adopters of educational innovation; (4) identify and survey key personnel; and (5) disseminate case studies of successful and unsuccessful state dissemination systems. (STS)

COORDINATING THE STATE EDUCATION AGENCY DISSEMINATION SYSTEM

CONFERENCE TOPIC PAPER



FEBRUARY 1977

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The project reported herein was performed pursuant to a grant from the National Institute of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the National Institute of Education, and no official endorsement by the National Institute of Education should be inferred.

PREFACE

The National Dissemination Leadership Project (NDLP) was the sponsor of three topical conferences for State Education Agencies (SEA) personnel who are assigned to dissemination activities. The purpose: to inform them of the wide variety of information resources now available; to inform them of problem-solving techniques; and to give them an opportunity to share concerns, practices and needs. Perhaps most important, the SEA representatives, after close study of the topic under consideration, produced a series of recommendations aimed at improving current practices.

The first of these topical conferences focused on "Extra-ERIC Resources" and was held December 13-14, 1976, in Portland, Oregon. The second conference, "Coordinating the SEA Dissemination Program," was held February 8-9, 1977, in Newport, Rhode Island. The third topical conference considered "Linker Training Processes" and was held in Columbia, South Carolina, March 3-4, 1977.

Coordinating the State Education Agency

Dissemination System

Introduction

Dissemination in American education is something that isn't, but has to be. A recent cooperative report from seven State Departments of Education (SEAs) concluded, "There is no system of education research and development and there is no system for disseminating education products and practices. There is no mechanism through which more than fifty responsible agents can operate according to a coherent plan."

Over the past two decades, the federal government has poured millions of dollars into developing exemplary and innovative projects and into research into new and better ways to educate the nation's school children. But the gap between research and practice is a wide one. School systems -- teachers, administrators, counselors and children -- have not fully benefitted from the work of research centers, universities and other innovative school systems. Dissemination is a way to bridge that gap.

In almost every analysis, State Departments of Education are seen as the key in disseminating new ideas and practices. States have the prime legal responsibility for public education and can bring together the resources and expertise to serve the wide ranging needs of its school districts. The National Dissemination Leadership Project (NDLP) is an effort by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) to bring together the expertise of 50 state

departments and the two federal education agencies to focus on educational dissemination.

At the 1976 National Dissemination Conference in Kansas City, participants identified three vital concerns in dissemination: what resources are available, how can a state manage and coordinate a dissemination program, and how can a linking system with local school districts be created? NDLP took the leadership role in sponsoring topical conferences on each of these concerns. This paper covers the second of these -- managing a state dissemination program. The conference brought together dissemination representatives from 25 states and officials of NIE and USOE and took place in Newport, Rhode Island, February 8-9. This paper will try to summarize some of the issues raised at Newport and recommendations that came out of the discussions there.

Categorical Supremacy

The need for state coordination in dissemination is apparent to almost everyone who is familiar with the present situation. Federal education programs, with few exceptions, have dissemination components. Title I, Title IV-C, Vocational Education, Bilingual Education, Education of the Handicapped and so on -- all require states to disseminate useful ideas and validated innovations in each area. The Interstate Project on Dissemination (IPOD) documented this situation. Altogether, federal education legislation has 208 separate dissemination requirements, with 54 different agencies and officials identified as being responsible for the dissemination. All these requirements come to roost in the State Department of Education.

But unfortunately, there has rarely been a concerted attempt to cut across these separate programs to bring together their common interest and need for dissemination. Vocational educators worry about disseminating their information, Right to Read coordinators are concerned with spreading innovative reading programs, while special educators for the handicapped want to hold workshops on designing individualized education programs for handicapped children. And sometimes the dissemination requirements are practically ignored. Each group tends to work in isolation from the others, with no common goals or common strategies to achieve those goals. Only a few states are crossing categorical lines. For the most part valuable research information and facts

about innovative projects gathers dust on the shelves.

Information Useful to Schools

No one should doubt the need for the latest in research information in local school systems. For example, teachers need to know how best to diagnose a learning disability. The new Education for All Handicapped Children Act requires that schools do this sort of diagnosis, and usually it's up to teachers to identify children who are having severe learning problems in class. A raft of literature has been published on the topic, and specialists now know many of the answers to this mystery. But still many teachers don't know the characteristics, the proper evaluation procedures and measurement criteria to judge what is and is not a learning disability.

High school guidance counselors have the rather solemn responsibility of advising students about their career goals. Some important questions are, what are the likely job prospects for a particular occupation in five years, and what skills, training or degrees are really needed to break into the field? The answers to these questions are available, in the sense that the federal government, state government and private occupational and professional associations compile such information and make projections for the short-term and long-term future. But very often high school guidance counselors don't have the latest, detailed information on prospects for particular occupations.

These are but two examples. There are a thousand others. But what they do illustrate is the need for an effective and well coordinated dissemination program for getting knowledge and information to those in education who really need it.

To some degree, federal categorical programs are one cause of the fragmented dissemination efforts. As mentioned, Title I programs require dissemination and so do most others. And federal regulations strictly forbid a "commingling" of funds for other purposes. Therefore, state and federal program managers have every incentive to keep the money to themselves and ignore the need for coordinated dissemination.

USOE/NIE Contributions

In addition, since 1972 the federal government has had two education agencies -- NIE and USOE -- with some common but many divergent agendas. USOE has invested millions of dollars in innovative and exemplary projects. NIE, as the research arm of HEW's Education Division, has naturally opted for research over large-scale development and pilot projects. USOE runs the National Diffusion Network -- a system of helping school districts learn about and adopt validated innovations. NIE, on the other hand, funds the ERIC system -- a computerized information bank of articles and reports related to education and educational research. NIE also supports state "capacity building" grants to assist SEAs in developing dissemination systems. State dissemination representatives generally feel that both NIE and USOE are making

valuable contributions to dissemination/diffusion, and their separate programs are not necessarily incompatible. But better coordination between the two would be helpful. Many states, for example, have a diffusion grant from USOE with a person coordinating that effort and a capacity building grant from NIE with a different person and staff managing that effort.

SEAs Can Coordinate Dissemination

Better coordination from Washington would help, but SEAs alone can coordinate dissemination programs, despite federal categorical funding. What it takes is "top level commitment" in the state department. If the state chief and his top deputies see the need of coordinating dissemination, it can happen. In fact, it already has happened in several states. But the converse is also true. If coordinated dissemination is not a top priority, dissemination efforts will limp along as ineffective attempts to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Confusion in Definition and Purpose

One problem that has hampered dissemination efforts, and even aggravated the fragmentation among these efforts, is confusion over its definition. Depending on who's talking, dissemination can mean everything from publishing articles in journals, to holding workshops, carrying on public relations in "awareness" campaigns, marketing innovations, problem-solving and two-way communications. Many of the differing definitions hide deep disagreements about the substance of the issue. Some believe that

innovative programs should be made available with a strategy that is somewhat similar to marketing. The goal is for a school system to adopt an innovation. Others feel that adoptions or even change is not an adequate goal. Program improvement is more important, they say, even if this doesn't produce anything as visable as adopting an innovation. The Interstate Project on Dissemination defined it as "a two-way sharing process for (1) communicating educational needs, problems, solutions and information among education practitioners, decision makers and knowledge producers, and for (2) facilitating rational consideration and appropriate use of the outcomes of research and development, effective educational practice and other knowledge that can be used for the improvement of education." The Newport meeting also recommended that key groups in dissemination -- NIE, USOE, CCSSO, NDLP -- prepare common definitions for other terms used like diffusion, linker, change agent, etc.

The important phrase in the IPOD definition is "two-way communication." Thus, dissemination is not a top down process by which knowledge or innovations from on high are passed down to school officials. Instead, it is a mutual or cooperative effort by researchers, state departments and school districts to improve programs through effective use of information. This model also shows that local school administrators and teachers should be able to effect the priorities and goals of research.

Regulation and Service

At the Newport meeting, Illinois Deputy Executive Commissioner Nelson Ashline discussed his state's attempt to take two-way dissemination from theory to reality. State departments have gradually evolved from regulatory to service agencies, he said. But many local schools are still not enamored of state departments because of their regulatory tradition. To change that, the SEA has to adopt a "consumer-oriented approach," he said, with the hope of "developing a helping and trusting relationship" between state and local agencies. His state uses a simple needs assessment that is completed by districts to identify problems common to a number of districts. The state then makes available its information system and money for inservice training. "You (LEA) make the choices, we (SEA) give you information, materials and training to address the problem," he said.

Some Theoretical Concepts

Joe Bohlen, rural sociologist from Iowa State University, urged the dissemination representatives to "know your audience." Innovations in agriculture are not accepted uniformly, he said. Some farmers can clearly and regularly be identified as "early adopters." In other words, they consistently beat the field in adopting new innovations. Their characteristics include an "aggressive seeking of information," which they see as an important part of their job, and a reliance on expert opinion rather than

on friends or neighbors. After these early birds pick up a new idea or innovation, it gradually filters down so that larger and larger numbers of farmers adopt it.

This research in agriculture has a number of applications to education. First, there are surely "early adopters" in education. Some educators are always looking for new ideas and better ways of doing things, and they are willing to make an extra effort in searching out useful information. But beyond this, the early adopters in education are not well-known. The Newport conference recommended that more research be done to identify the characteristics of early adopters in education.

Secondly, most change for the later adopter will have a similar "filter down" effect. This is a vital principle to remember. Dissemination is something new for educators, and since it is a two-way process, it requires that they change somewhat their way of doing things to make it effective. Based on agricultural experience and common sense, a few, but only a few educators, will quickly see the benefits of being able to tap into the information bases of education and educational research. But if these "early adopters" find it an advantage in doing their job well, its acceptance will gradually spread to the others.

Bohlen also said most people go through a five-step process in adopting new ideas and practices. They are: awareness, information (gathering the facts), evaluation (mental process), trial and adoption. As a parallel to education, this shows that

a statewide "awareness" campaign about innovations or better ways to address problems is a necessary step but only part of what it takes to effectively meet the need for dissemination. A state dissemination program must be a multi-level process that includes awareness activites that reach almost everyone, ways to provide more information for those who are interested and ways to facilitate trial and adoption. Again, all these steps are necessary, but in themselves, are not the answer.

From Theory to Practice -- Some Concerns

The sessions with Bohlen and Ashline provided a theoretical basis for the rest of the conference, as the conferees broke up into small groups to consider these concepts in the real world of the SEA dissemination system. They used a group processing method, with the assistance of trained facilitators, to bring out the concerns of all the dissemination representatives, not just those who were the best known or most experiencd in dissemination. The conference participants initially split into groups of three to brainstorm and identify their key concerns. These groups later merged into groups of six and then twelve. A spokesman for each larger group presented its concerns to the entire conference. Afterward, an ad hoc committee met and synthesized the concern statements into three main topical areas that served as a guide for discussion groups for the second day of the conference.

Recommendations

Based on these concerns -- the need for state-level coordination, common definitions of key terms and a wider appreciation of the literature of dissemination -- the conferees met in small groups to formulate recommendations. Perhaps remembering Bohlen's adage about knowing your audience, the recommendations were directed to different audiences, ranging from NIE and USOE, CCSSO and individual chiefs and to the steering committee of NDLP. The recommendations are:

I. Awareness Activities

1. Provide awareness sessions to all SEA people engaged in dissemination activities.

2. Conduct a concerted on-going awareness effort which is directed at the chiefs:

a. by individual representatives in each state to provide them with key, relevant, and up-to-date information,

b. by NDLP - a report on this conference could be sent to all chiefs and other follow-up types of communications should be developed and maintained to keep chiefs abreast of developments, state of the art, etc.

3. Produce a guidelines manual/resource document for "new" dissemination people.

II. Definition of Terms

4. Appoint a representative group to agree on definitions in connection with dissemination/diffusion, for example, linker, facilitator, field agent, dissemination, diffusion, change agent.

5. Disseminate and diffuse the accepted definitions.

6. NDLP should appoint a person to initiate and coordinate this effort.

III. Early Adopters

7. Identify "early adopters" through assistance and support from the chiefs Research, Development and Dissemination committee.

8. Form a pool of early adopters who could then be tapped by:

a. individual states upon request.

b. sub-groups - such as various committees among the chiefs.

9. Linkages between the resource base and clients should be based on findings in dissemination/diffusion literature:

a. identify clients who will most effectively utilize resources to improve decisions and programs;

b. use appropriate dissemination/diffusion strategies to encourage clients to communicate educational needs and facilitate rational consideration of educational knowledge.

IV. Key Personnel

10. Identify (or survey) people who have expertise in the area of dissemination.

11. Take steps necessary to inventory personnel engaged in dissemination/diffusion activities, descriptions of state dissemination capabilities, OE-NIE dissemination/diffusion projects in the form of a prototype directory.

12. Use this directory for planning future conferences and other options for exchanging expertise, up-dating mailing lists, interchange with other diffusion/dissemination networks.

13. Seek funds to sustain a personnel exchange program (like interests sharing practical information)

14. Provide basic orientation conference that would:

a. detail skills needed,

b. show how to develop proposals and consider funds, and other resources.

V. Case Studies.

15. Develop a paper based on case studies of the experiences of "successful" and "non-successful" states in setting up dissemination/diffusion systems:

a. identify strategies and tactics that work and don't work, and document systems,

b. the contextual framework in which the various elements of the strategies operated.

16. Disseminate this paper to D/D representatives for use in their agencies (a major possibility in terms of strategies is focusing on the functional approach to dissemination).