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ABSTRACT

Intended as a guide for educators in shared decision-making, this report summarizes the structures, procedures, and activities of local action teams in 49 schools involved in the National Institute of Education's Research and Development Utilization (RDU) program. Local action teams in the RDU program consisted of formal groups of teachers and administrators empowered to make decisions on local school improvement using decision-making models based on problem-solving and knowledge utilization. The guide discusses the consequences, organization, procedures, and leadership and communication factors involved in employing local action teams. To illustrate each of these aspects, the guide cites examples of successful local action teams in three of the 49 schools: a rural northeastern elementary school, an urban southeastern elementary school, and a suburban West Coast middle school. Included in the report's discussion are the benefits and problems of shared decision-making, the local action team's function, size, representation, and training, the principal's role, involvement of non-team faculty, and problem-solving practices. The authors identify 11 factors contributing to a local action team's effectiveness, including strong leadership, assistance from external facilitators, and willingness to commit considerable energy to the project. (Author/RW)

Linking R&D with Schools

The Role of Local Action Teams in School Improvement

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FORWARD

There are many ways to introduce change into schools, and different approaches may be more or less appropriate in different contexts. In some cases, pressing needs for social reform may necessitate a change in legislation or a court decision. In other cases, change may occur only through the development of advocacy groups and conflict. In still other cases, administratively mandated change may be the most effective method, particularly where the changes are relatively simple or are to be introduced uniformly throughout a system.

This report is about an approach to planned change in schools that relies upon collaboration between teachers and administrators and the development of consensus about needs and solutions. This approach is not appropriate in all situations, and it has a number of serious drawbacks (including its relatively high cost in terms of both time and money). However, as we studied the curriculum improvement efforts of schools involved in one federally funded change program, we became convinced that effectively implemented "local action teams," composed of teachers and administrators, could be significant factors in achieving positive school change.

The decision-making processes we observed were in most cases quite different from those that are typically used in schools. For this reason, we felt it would be useful to summarize the structures, procedures, and activities of the more successful local action teams for the benefit of other teachers and administrators. This report, then, is not intended as a research report but rather as a practical guide for principals and teachers who might wish to develop local action teams in their own settings.

PREFACE

In June of 1976 the National Institute of Education (NIE) established the Research and Development Utilization (RDU) program as a new action-research effort in dissemination. This program was designed to:

- apply research-based products or ideas to school problems;
- develop a problem-solving process, whereby schools would systematically identify such problems and select and implement new ideas; and
- organize a linkage system, whereby national, state, and other external resources would be made available to school personnel.

The RDU program is unusual among federally funded dissemination strategies because of its dual commitment to the dissemination and use of R&D products and the development of local school capabilities to solve problems through the use of externally generated knowledge. Other federal programs have tended to concentrate on either product dissemination or local capacity building, but have not concentrated on an integrated model for combining the two. The core of the RDU strategy was to provide each participating site, which was either a school or a district, with assistance in the following sequence of activities.

- identification of a problem or set of problems;
- examination of alternative solutions to the problem, focusing particularly on the products of educational research and development (R&D);
- selection of a specific solution to address the problem;
- implementation of the solution;
- evaluation and incorporation of both the solution and the problem-solving process.

The service delivery system of the RDU program operated through seven projects, each of which coordinated a network of organizations and individuals who were involved in the provision of services and information to local schools and school districts. As a whole, the seven projects operated in 20 states and served over 300 schools or school districts over a three-year period (1976-1979). Each of the projects selected and made available a pool of R&D products, which was also referred to as a knowledge base. The knowledge bases were developed as resources for identifying solutions to match client school needs. The projects also deployed "linking agents" who

coordinated the services provided to local schools and school districts, and who helped guide the local school personnel in a school improvement process. Each project supported two or more linkers. Most operated out of an intermediate service agency, or a state education agency, and each served a specific set of local schools or school districts. The range of a linker's possible roles included facilitating the decision-making process by clarifying goals and providing leadership, and mediating among autonomous organizations whose resources and services required coordination.

In keeping with the program's goal of developing the local capacity to solve school problems, the projects stressed the importance of local decision making. The sites participating in the program were generally required to have a local team of teachers and administrators who would be trained in problem-solving approaches, make major decisions related to the school improvement effort, and foster the development of local staff ownership of the program and the selected solution.

The seven projects were regionally distributed, and involved the following:

- The Northwest Reading Consortium, involving the state departments of education and other agencies in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and Idaho;
- The National Education Association Inservice Education Project, operated in collaboration with the departments of education and corresponding state education associations in 12 states: Alabama, California, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming;
- The Consortium, operated by The NETWORK, a non-profit research and service organization that coordinated the efforts of agencies in six states: California, Connecticut, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Washington;
- The Georgia Research and Development Utilization Program;
- The Pennsylvania School Improvement Program;
- The Florida Linkage System; and
- The Michigan Career Education Dissemination Project. This project was operated by the state department of education as were the projects in Georgia, Pennsylvania and Florida.

In November 1977 Abt Associates Inc., a social science research firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was contacted to conduct a study of the RDU program. The ongoing study addresses six major issues:

- How relationships are managed between various agencies that have the expertise and resources to help local schools solve problems;
- To what degree an intervention program such as RDU can help schools overcome barriers to successful problem solving (such as limited access to information, or lack of planning skills, etc.);
- To what degree the products of educational R&D are relevant to the problems and contexts of local schools;
- What the impact is of the products of educational R&D once they have been adopted and implemented;
- What factors contribute to the institutionalization of the RDU approach within a variety of organizations;
- How linking agents coordinate the flow of external resources to schools, and whether this helps the schools solve problems.

All of the seven projects have completed the federally supported service delivery part of their activities. However, the research effort by Abt Associates will continue until the spring of 1981. The lessons that can be learned from the activities and outcomes of the program will have important implications for the design and operation of dissemination programs in education as well as for the design and management of future local, state, and federal efforts to improve schools.

We would like to acknowledge the assistance of our colleagues on the RDU study who have provided us with insights, data, and moral support. These include: Kent Chabotar, Greg Spencer, Robert Yin, and Thea Moskat. Earlier drafts of this report also benefited from comments made by Nancy Ames, Robert Dentler, and the project directors of several RDU projects. NIE staff members, including our project officer, John Egermeier, and Thel Kocher, also contributed to improvements in both our interpretations and writing. Special thanks go to Thea Moskat and Mary-Ellen Perry for their unfailing attention to the details of producing this report.

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INTRODUCTION

Schools are dynamic places, and whether or not a school is involved in an organized improvement effort, decisions about change are constantly being made. For example, recurring activities that result in school change include planning for and implementing new curricular topics (such as career education), supplementing or replacing textbooks and materials, planning for and implementing staff development activities, and seeking solutions to persistent problems (such as poor pupil performance in basic skills). Our research has shown that, in many cases, participatory decision making produces successful school change and greater staff satisfaction.

This report is about one form of participatory decision making: the formation of local action teams at the school level. The aim of the report is to provide administrators and teachers with guidelines for establishing local action teams and with recommendations for enhancing team effectiveness. The report is based on an analysis of the experiences of 49 schools that participated in the Research and Development Utalization program sponsored by the National Institute of Education, but the lessons derived from this study are applicable to all kinds of organized school improvement efforts.

What are "local action teams"?

A local action team is a formally constituted group of teachers and administrators empowered to make decisions or engage in other tasks related to a local school improvement effort. A local action team may be formed at either the school or school district level; however, this report focuses primarily on school-level teams, since they were more typical in the RDU program.

What distinguishes local action teams from other school-level committees or task forces?

The ideal model for local action teams in the RDU program differs from the typical teacher committee or school task force--such as curriculum committees, reading task forces, or inservice committees. Key differences are:

- The team has a role in arriving at decisions, not just rubber-stamping them. The team's influence when compared to that of the administrator is greater than the influence of most advisory committees.

- The level of team effort is generally higher than that of other committees or task forces.
- A "problem-solving/knowledge utilization" model is followed to accomplish the specific objectives of the school improvement effort. This model is characterized by:

  a. Needs assessment. No matter what the specific objective, it is approached in the context of overall school objectives and needs. Those engaged in the school improvement effort take a step back in order to specify problems--to search for concrete indications of problems, analyze apparent causes, assess specific needs, and weigh them in relation to other school needs--prior to searching for, selecting, and implementing a solution.

  b. Systematic interaction with external providers of information and assistance. Information and assistance are sought from outside the district--for example, from intermediate service districts, universities, educational R&D labs, educational information storage and retrieval services, etc. In the RDU program, special "linking agents" based in these kinds of agencies were responsible for connecting schools with external resources, as well as for guiding the local problem-solving/knowledge utilization effort.

  c. Emphasis on seeking field-tested, empirically validated solutions. Federal and state funding for improvements in educational curricula, materials, and procedures has been substantial over the past decade and a half. In many cases, the improvements developed by local schools, universities, and research organizations have been extensively field-tested and have been shown to be applicable to many schools and districts. While the RDU program assumed that school needs must be locally defined, it also assumed that in most cases a school would not need to develop a completely new program to meet those needs. Rather, the school could search among available programs and materials for a product that could be adapted to local circumstances.

What are the purposes of this document?

Our analysis of the experiences of 49 schools showed that local action teams worked, and that they worked in all kinds of settings: both elementary and secondary; urban, rural, and suburban; and in all areas of the country (see the Appendix for research methods). Since local action teams are not the typical mode of decision making in schools, we have designed this report for practitioners who want more information on the role of local action teams in school improvement.

The intent of the report is to provide recommendations for the organization and functioning of local action teams. In order to tie our recommendations to the experiences of real schools and people, we have included vignettes of three schools that participated in the program. a rural elementary school in the Northeast; an inner-city elementary school in the Southeast; and a suburban middle school on the West Coast. Together these three sites illustrate many of the positive and negative experiences of schools involved in the RDU program. The vignettes, which follow each chapter of the report, are intended to give the reader a better sense of how local action teams operate and the factors that affect their success. The chapters of the report discuss:

- the consequences of shared decision making;
- the organizaton of a local action team--roles and functions, optimal size, representation, recruitment and selection of team members, training, and garnering of support for released time;
- the importance of team leadership and communication with non-team members; and
- the importance of good problem-solving practices and a reasonable schedule for meetings and milestones.

Before turning to the body of the report, we present a brief introduction to the three illustrative schools and the reasons for their involvement in the school improvement effort.

THREE SCHOOLS AND THEIR PROBLEMS

Northern Elementary

An old, brick school with an enrollment of 280 pupils in grades K through 4, Northern Elementary is located in a very stable, low- to middle-income farming community in a northeastern state. Ninety-nine percent of the school's pupils are white. Most of the school's 11 classroom teachers have lived in the area for a good part of their lives; some were born there and attended the district's schools and nearby state colleges. They seem to enjoy their jobs and to get along well with each other and with the principal. However, prior to joining the RDU project, both the principal and the teachers were concerned that a sizable proportion of Northern's pupils were not meeting the school's standards for achievement in reading. This concern was reinforced by results from a statewide assessment of school performance.

Even before a formal needs assessment was performed, teachers felt the problem was due to lack of an organized, sequential reading program, lack of communication among teachers, and lack of adequate diagnostic information. The staff felt the problem was not critical and, indeed, was an ordinary one among schools, but they were quite eager to improve the effectiveness of their reading program. Prior to this time, they had had little experience with school improvement activities; even their textbook series had remained unchanged for 15 years.

Southern Elementary

A poorly maintained school in the heart of a medium-sized city, Southern Elementary serves a very low-income, predominantly black student population in grades K through 5. Although the city has begun a gradual desegregation program, over 90 percent of the school's 400 pupils are black, and Southern Elementary is at the lower end of the district in terms of resources and reputation. The school's principal, a dedicated black woman, is determined to develop a program that not only will help children in the local black community but also will attract pupils and teachers from other parts of the city.

Prior to joining the RDU project, many of the 25 teachers at Southern felt that the school's problems were intractable. Each year a large percentage of the school's entering kindergarten pupils scored extremely low on

an inventory of readiness for learning. In the most severe cases, the children had only the most limited, concrete vocabularies and had never been more than a few blocks from home. Since the school's program was not organized to overcome the disadvantaged backgrounds of these children, many of Southern's pupils were leaving the fifth grade still lacking basic skills in the areas of reading/language arts and mathematics. The teachers were very discouraged, and each year several applied for transfers to other schools in the district.

West Coast Middle School

Located in a well-to-do, white suburb of a large West Coast city, West Coast Middle School has a very attractive physical plant, set in a wooded landscape. The school consists of four satellite pods, and the school's 850 pupils and 35 teachers are divided into four relatively autonomous sub-units, each with its own counselor and head teacher. Although there is one principal for all four sub-units, there are few attempts to maintain a school-wide identity or consistent programs and policies. The teachers are well-educated, innovative, and highly individualistic. Most of the students come from professional families and score far above national norms in reading and mathematics. The school became involved in the RDU project because the district assistant superintendent for curriculum decided to do something for the few middle school students who were reading below the level of their classmates and thereby causing management problems. Previous attempts to help these students had been hampered by the refusal of parents to recognize a reading problem, by teachers' concern about attempts to reduce their autonomy, and by the reluctance of the principal to impose centralized leadership.

CONSEQUENCES OF SHARED DECISION MAKING

How can shared decision making help achieve school improvement objectives?

We have found that team or group decision making has a number of features that help to accomplish the specific objectives of a school improvement effort:

- It spreads the ownership of decisions that are made. More people have a personal stake in making the project a success.
- It elicits multiple perspectives, insights, and types of expertise, all focused on the problem at hand. Most importantly, it enlists the perspectives of those closest to the problem, usually teachers.
- It introduces systematic communication among staff members, thus dampening the effect of a priori assumptions or pet theories of particular individuals or cliques.
- Where teams have responsibility for monitoring program implementation, attention can be focused on comparability and coordination across classrooms. Common problems of scope and sequence, which often fall between the cracks, receive attention.

While shared decision making has some clear advantages, one might ask if administrative decision making can be as effective. The answer is yes, in some settings. In general, we found this to be the case in schools where the administrator was a strong and effective educational leader whom the teachers trusted and respected and who took pains to spread the feeling of ownership by communicating and listening to teachers' concerns.

What do teachers and principals gain from shared decision making?

Team or group decision making also has beneficial side effects for both teachers and principals. These are:

- Improved staff morale, sense of efficacy, and sense of influence over matters outside their individual classrooms. In some cases, there were marked increases in collegiality, sharing, and the sense that staff could rely on each other as resources.
- Enhancement of administrator influence within the school, particularly in terms of instructional issues. Although group decision making was designed to increase teacher involvement, it frequently also had the effect of enhancing the principal's ability to support and promote staff interests.
- Improved coordination, communication, and articulation within and across grade levels.

- Professional development of both teachers and administrators in terms of:
  a. leadership experiences;
  b. problem-solving capabilities;
  c. awareness and acceptance of new educational knowledge and practices; and
  d. awareness of resources available for problem solving.

These side effects of group decision making were, of course, absent in sites where decisions were made unilaterally by an administrator.

What can go wrong?

The potential pitfalls of group decision making are largely avoidable, although problems may arise when sound group decision-making practices are ignored. For example:

- Conflicts within the team, or between the team and administrators, may be raised and not resolved, thereby preventing consensus from being reached.
- The team may be regarded as an elite and may be resented by other staff, especially if care is not taken to communicate with these staff and involve them in the decision making.
- Frustration and a lowering of staff morale may result if:
  a. Steady progress is not made from one meeting to the next.
  b. The overall process takes an unreasonable amount of time and effort, given the circumstances and the outcomes.
  c. Decisions are subverted or dictated by the administration or other outside parties.
  d. Team members are not provided adequate orientation and therefore do not understand what they are supposed to do or where it is leading.

Group decision making does have some inherent drawbacks. For example, group meetings may take teachers away from their classrooms more often or for a longer time than they would like, the released time for these teachers is an additional expense, and decision making may be less "efficient." These drawbacks, however, are typically outweighed by the benefits stated earlier.

Before we discuss strategies for promoting the effectiveness of local action teams and for avoiding potential pitfalls, let us first examine the consequences of the team activities in the three schools.

Results of Activities in Three Schools

Both Northern and Southern Elementary Schools enjoyed very positive outcomes in different types of school settings and utilizing very different improvement activities. The case of West Coast Middle School, however, exemplifies many of the pitfalls encountered when team activities are poorly planned and implemented.

Northern Elementary. Through a series of activities involving first a team of staff and administrators and then the faculty as a whole, the staff at Northern Elementary confirmed their initially perceived needs and decided to adopt a new reading management system. Although the model for the new system had been developed in another school district, the entire staff at Northern were involved in adapting it to meet their site-specific needs. They wrote a scope and sequence for the reading curriculum, compiled a checklist of reading skills for recording pupil progress, constructed criterion-referenced tests for each skill, developed a new reporting system, and arranged to obtain inservice training in reading instruction. As a result of their concerted effort, they all feel a great sense of pride in the reading management system.

In addition, some significant district-wide changes have occurred as a result of the program. A school reading teacher (whose responsibilities were poorly defined prior to the program) became a very effective and influential local action team coordinator. Because of the enthusiasm generated by her activities during the first year, the district created a half-time position for her as district reading coordinator in order to expand her leadership responsibilities; this position grew to full time after two years. The three administrators who were trained in the program improvement process--the reading coordinator, the elementary principal, and the assistant superintendent for curriculum--are now assisting in efforts to apply the same process to an analysis of the reading program at the district's middle school.

Southern Elementary. After deciding that an "add-on" program would not solve the school's problems, the staff at Southern Elementary chose to adopt

a comprehensive strategy known as Individually Guided Education (IGE). Developed by the Wisconsin Research and Development Center, the IGE model has seven components. The most important components for Southern were a model for restructuring the faculty into instructional units with representation on a school-wide instructional improvement committee; a model for individualized instructional programming, based on cross-grade-level grouping and the use of compatible programs in math, reading, and other subject areas; a model for pupil assessment and evaluation; and a model for enhancing home/school/community relations.

As the staff at Southern Elementary discovered, implementation of IGE is an ambitious task requiring a considerable amount of staff development and training, as well as the cooperation of everyone concerned. At times, there was great resistance from some staff. However, after two years of implementation, most teachers were beginning to feel good about the changes they had achieved. Reports from the school indicate improvements in teacher morale as well as in student communication and math scores. A teacher who was not on the team noted a great deal more cooperation and communication among the teachers, who had previously felt they could do no more than handle their own classrooms as well as possible. The unprecedented requests by some student teachers to return to Southern for their internships were viewed as evidence that even the school's reputation was improving.

West Coast Middle School. Not much has happened as a result of the effort to help slow readers at West Coast Middle School; in fact, many teachers seem embarrassed by the lack of improvement following their involvement in RDU. The reading program that was selected features a teacher-made resource file that is to be used by all teachers who have slow-readers in their classrooms. It was selected by a small group of administrators and teachers on the basis of limited information about the teachers' perceptions of needs and the program's characteristics. During training provided by the program developers, the staff learned that the program would require more effort than they had expected in the areas of materials development, pupil testing, recordkeeping, and retrieval of materials from the resource file. Moreover, the training was very poorly presented, and no attempt was made to address the issue of differences between the developer site (a rural school

system in Alabama) and the adopting school. All but one sub-unit of the school subsequently withdrew from the program.

A reading coordinator was hired to help implement the program in the remaining sub-unit, but the teachers quickly became disenchanted with the program and dropped it. The reading coordinator is now operating a "pull-out" remedial reading program with little guidance from the principal and little support from the teaching staff. In fact, when she attempted to expand the program to the other sub-units, she faced resistance from the staff, who were opposed to having students pulled from their classes. Currently the program is operating on a very small scale, and its future depends entirely on whether outside funds for the reading coordinator are continued.

What roles and functions can a team perform?

Thus far, we have referred to local action teams primarily as decision-making bodies. Actually, the roles and functions performed by local action teams varied a great deal across the schools we studied. Basically, there were three different roles played by the teams: facilitating the change effort, making decisions regarding the change effort, and implementing the selected products or ideas. In some sites one team played all three roles, or some of the functions of each role. In other sites, the roles and functions were divided among two or more teams, or among the team, the faculty, and various individuals.

By our definition, a facilitating team is one that initiates meetings of a larger decision-making group, plans the agendas for these meetings, helps to spark the enthusiasm of the participants, structures and facilitates the group process, collects and presents the necessary information for decision making, follows up on details between meetings, seeks administrative support and cooperation, and serves as the primary contact between the school and external consultants or information resources. In some RDU sites, the facilitating team also screened the initial options for action and wrote the first drafts of problem statements, search requests, and implementation proposals or plans. A facilitating team may be formally organized, but in many RDU sites the functions of a facilitating team were assumed informally by several members of a larger group. In our study, we referred to the people who took charge, kept things moving, resolved minor problems, and fanned enthusiasm among the faculty as "internal change agents," or the "internal change agent team."

A decision-making team is one formed for the purpose of reviewing information, brainstorming, discussing, and prioritizing options at each step; making the final decisions (or deciding on recommendations to the administration); and revising or approving drafts of the problem statements, search requests, and implementation proposals or plans. In some RDU sites, the decision-making body was the faculty as a whole, while in others a smaller but still representative body made the decisions.

An implementing team is a trained cadre or nucleus of implementers. The members participate in training sessions about the adopted solution, develop

related materials and activities, participate in adapting the solution to fit the site's needs and context, implement the solution in their own classrooms, evaluate and provide feedback on the solution, and occasionally recruit and train additional implementers.. In some of the schools we studied, there was no team at all until the implementation stage: an administrator took the responsibility for identifying a problem and selecting a solution. As we noted earlier, this strategy seemed adequate when the administrator was a trusted leader who was attuned to the teachers' concerns. Yet the experience of some sites indicates these conditions are difficult for administrators to judge on their own, and it is sometimes better for an administrator to get systematic input from a decision-making group than to assume he or she knows what the teachers are thinking.

No matter what roles or functions it is designed to perform, the team will eventually need the support of the administration in order to have any impact. This issue is discussed further in a later section. The following sections discuss optimal team size, representation, and training, as summarized in Figure 1.

Is there an optimal team size?

The optimal team size depends largely on the role the team is expected to play. On the one hand, we found that a facilitating team could be very effective with as few as three members, particularly if both the administration and the faculty were represented. In our judgement, small facilitating teams were more efficient and helped the schools to avoid the problem of faculty "burnout," a situation that sometimes occurred when too many people were involved in too many meetings. A decision-making team, on the other hand, generally required at least eight members in order to represent each group that would be affected by the team's decisions. Some decision-making teams included as many as 15 or more members, but these teams were less likely to play an effective decision-making role, beyond assenting to decisions made by an administrator or a smaller facilitating team. An implementing team could be very large or very small, depending on the number of teachers and supervisory personnel ultimately expected to implement the solution.

Figure 1

TYPES OF LOCAL ACTION TEAMS

ROLE	Facilitating team	Decision-making team	Implementing team
FUNCTIONS	Initiate meetings Plan agendas Spark the enthusiasm of participants Structure and facilitate the group process Collect and present information Follow up on details Seek administrative support and cooperation Serve as the primary contact with external consultants and information resources Screen initial options Write first drafts of problem-statements, search requests, implementation proposals, and plans Monitor implementation	Review information Brainstorm, discuss, and prioritize options Make final decisions Revise or approve drafts of problem statements, search requests, implementation proposals, and plans Review evaluation results	Participate in training sessions about the solution Develop related materials and activities Participate in adapting the solution to fit the site's needs and context Implement the solution in own classroom Evaluate and provide feedback Recruit and train additional implementers
OPTIMAL SIZE	3 to 5 members	8 to 15 members	Varies depending on the number of implementers
REPRESENTATION	Selection criteria: • leadership ability • commitment to project • flexible time allocation • expectation of remaining in the system Candidates include the principal or assistant principal, central office representatives, and informal opinion leaders on the staff	More teachers/implementers than administrators Representatives of every relevant grade level or department Parents or community members only in some situations	All staff expected to implement in first stage, plus some who are expected to implement at a later date.
TRAINING	Orientation to goals and process Special training in: • leadership • problem-solving • group process • formative evaluation • finding outside help	Orientation to goals and process	Orientation to goals and process Special training in solution implementation

Who should be represented on the team?

There is no single answer to the question of representation, since who should be represented depends on a number of factors. Among these are the organizational structure of the school--whether departmentalized or graded, for example; the scope of the general problem area--whether it affects students at all or some levels and in all or some subject areas; the capabilities and interests of those who might be involved; and the designated roles and functions of the team. Nevertheless, some general guidelines can be drawn from our analysis.

The members of a facilitating team should have demonstrated leadership ability and a strong commitment to the project. Since they will be responsible for much of the project's legwork, they should have a great deal of flexibility to allocate their time, either because their roles allow them this flexibility or because they have been given the released time required for accomplishing the tasks. If possible to predict, they should be chosen on the basis of the likelihood that they will remain in the system at least through the first year of solution implementation. The obvious candidates for a facilitating team--or for a facilitating role on a decision-making team--are the principal or assistant principal, a central office staff member with close ties to the school, and informal opinion leaders on the school staff.

An implementing team should include all staff who are expected to participate in the first stage of implementation, if implementation in stages is being considered, as well as some staff who are expected to implement at a later date. If this group is too large to meet together productively, it can be divided into subgroups--by grade levels or functions, for example. Coordination across subgroups can be accomplished through meetings of the subgroup leaders.

The issue of representation is most critical for teams that are assigned decision-making responsibilities. In our judgement, the most effective decision-making teams gave greater representation to teachers and other potential implementers than to administrators, and included representatives of every grade level or department that would be affected by the team's decisions or that had a legitimate interest in those decisions. (For example, teachers in the upper elementary grades have a legitimate concern about how children are taught in the lower grades, since early preparation affects later learning.)

If the faculty is very small, or if the change program might require substantial changes in the teaching styles and behavior of all faculty, then the whole faculty should be involved at some point in the decision process.

Other people who should be represented in decision making are the principal or assistant principal. Their approval of the group's decisions may be required if policy or the expenditure of school funds is involved, but more importantly, we found that their support was a critical factor in the success of school improvement efforts. Other helpful team members are school or district specialists in the general problem area.

There was no school in our study where parents or community members had a decisive influence over the activities and outcomes of the change program. However, it might be wise to include parents or community members on the decision-making team if any of the following is true: parent or community participation is an important goal of the school; the project is being undertaken because of parent or community pressure; the project being considered would require parent or community participation in its implementation; or public confidence in the school is in need of bolstering.

If different teams are responsible for the three roles of facilitating, decision-making, and implementing, their memberships should be overlapping. Indeed, whenever a new team is formed--for example, at the point of implementation--there should be sufficient continuity in membership to ensure that the new team benefits from the knowledge and experience of the former team's members. Of course, some turnover in team members is unavoidable and unpredictable, such as when a principal is reassigned to another school or when a teacher suddenly decides to retire. These unexpected events can cripple a project if the departing member was a key to administrative or faculty support. As far as possible, the team should anticipate these events, and under most circumstances turnover in team members should not be introduced deliberately. In addition, it is wise to delegate the responsibility so that no one person is critical to the group's success.

Are there special considerations for a departmentalized school?

It may appear that team decision making, as we have described it, is not applicable to very complex schools, such as departmentalized secondary (or elementary) schools. In fact, this is not the case. There were many such schools in our study where team decision making across departments did work

and where significant schoolwide changes were achieved. There are, however, some special considerations when dealing with a departmentalized school--or, indeed, when dealing with any school in which collaboration across units (such as grade levels) is unusual. To achieve cross-departmental school improvement, there may be a need for extra time to develop the collaborative work arrangement before real progress can be made towards defining and resolving a problem. In these cases, it is even more important than usual to include a representative from each department that will be affected by the team's decisions--preferably a representative who is a strong, supportive opinion leader. The department representatives should be encouraged to communicate the activities of the team to the other members of their departments. Finally, it should be remembered that not all school improvement efforts need to involve multiple departments. For example, if the target problem in a secondary school is reading in the content areas, then there should be representatives from several departments <u>besides</u> the language arts department (such as social studies and science). But if the problem is mathematics, representation from the mathematics department would probably be sufficient.

<u>How can team members be recruited and selected?</u>

In most of the RDU sites, the principal either handpicked the team members or recruited them through a call for volunteers. Teachers as a group were rarely involved in selecting the individuals who would represent them. There is no evidence that this caused any problems except in the few sites where there was an unusual degree of factionalism among staff or antagonism between staff and the principal. In these cases it was difficult to ensure that differing viewpoints were fully represented. Thus, where the selection process was not democratic, there were teachers who felt the team had been stacked in favor of one point of view.

The chief incentive for teachers to participate on the team appeared to be the desire to help solve a pressing school problem. However, there were other incentives as well. The opportunity to develop professionally through training and through travel to product demonstration sites and conferences; the chance to take a leadership role in the change effort; and the availability of released time from classes are some examples. In our observation, as long as progress was being made toward goals or intermediate objectives, team members did not get bored or drop out. Having clear milestones at intermediate points in time was helpful to maintain team interest.

What kinds of preparation should be required for team members?

The preparation required for team members again depends partly on the role they are expected to play, though there are some kinds of preparation everyone should receive. For example, it is particularly important that everyone involved in the process understand not only what is to be done and how it is to be done, but also where it will lead. Thus, the whole faculty should be given an adequate orientation to the goals of the effort. In addition, the members of a facilitiating team or the leaders of a decision-making or implementing team may need special training in leadership skills, problem-solving practices, group process techniques, formative evaluation techniques, and ways to find and contact outside resources. The members of an implementing team will require special training in how to implement solutions.

In the RDU program, training was usually provided by outside linkers or consultants from intermediate service agencies, universities, and so forth. However, many of the training materials developed for use in the RDU program are now available to other schools and districts (see Appendix).

Is released time necessary?

In our observation, adequate support for released time was an essential ingredient for successful school change. The schools that we studied had the advantage of participating in an externally funded program which provided financial support for teacher released time. Some of the teams had a day-long meeting once a month for a full year; others were able to attend week-long training sessions, because funds for the released time were available. Also, districts often provided support for released time--either from district inservice budgets or from related Title I and Title IVc grants.

Support for released time gave a psychological boost to the change effort: teachers were more willing to devote their own time to the effort (after hours and on weekends) if the district had shown its willingness to provide at least some financial support.

It may not be necessary to provide a full day of released time for every team member every month. However, it is absolutely essential that the team facilitators be given adequate released time to carry out the myriad tasks that are involved in coordinating a school improvement program. An early step in planning the change effort should be to identify

all the potential sources of local, state, and federal funding. If funds are extremely tight, released time may be supported by grouping classes for a special event such as a film or by enlisting the aid of parent volunteers.

Organization of Local Action Teams in Three Schools

The three schools allocated the functions of facilitating, decision making, and implementing among potential participants in very different ways. In addition, the ways in which the faculties of the three schools were involved in the activities of the team diverged. These differences account, at least in part, for differences in the pace and success of the schools' progress through the decision-making process. The cases also illustrate the critical importance of the facilitating functions.

Northern Elementary. During the first two years of the program, a group of external consultants facilitated the school improvement effort at Northern Elementary. This group conducted a series of formal workshops, during which they guided the local action team through a specific sequence of needs analysis, solution selection, and planning for implementation activities. The local action team included six teachers (three of whom specialized in reading), an elementary counselor, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, and the school principal. The key roles of this team were to participate in the all-day workshops and to make decisions at various points with the guidance of the external consultant group.

The nature of the internal team's responsibilities changed significantly after the first two years, as the school moved into an implementation phase. The entire faculty participated in the selection of a solution, choosing a reading management system from among three programs presented to them by the team. At this point, the faculty was divided into grade-level groups, each led by a local action team member. The responsibility of each group was to adapt the management system to the specific needs of the different grades. The team leader (one of the reading teachers who was promoted to a district position) took responsibilitiy for coordinating these activities. The responsibilities of the external consultants then became more marginal.

Southern Elementary. All major decisions related to the problem-solving process at Southern Elementary were made by the faculty as a whole during regularly scheduled faculty meetings. However, a very important role was played by three individuals--the school principal, a central office

resource teacher (or curriculum coordinator), and one of the first grade teachers--who acted as the facilitator team. The team members were appointed by the principal, based on her understanding of the criteria established by RDU project staff. The function of the facilitator team was to help move the faculty through the procedure of defining a problem and selecting and implementing a solution. They were trained in this role at two statewide training sessions sponsored by the project. The facilitators served as group leaders in the faculty meetings and also tried to demonstrate, by their own behavior, the group process techniques they had been taught. In addition, they wrote the first drafts of the problem statements and implementation proposals, which were then revised and approved by the faculty. With implementation of IGE, the new instructional improvement committee composed of the principal and representatives from each teaching unit took over the functions of facilitating and decision making, while the teaching units became directly responsible for implementation.

West Coast Middle School. The decision-making group of West Coast Middle School consisted of four teachers representing the four satellite schools, a counselor, the principal, and the assistant superintendent for curriculum. All of the team members were volunteers. The leadership of the group was never specified, and the team members did not receive training or clarification of their roles and functions from the RDU linking agent. The linker's attempts to provide technical assistance met with resistance from the team, who did not view her as an expert resource despite her advanced degrees and experience in organization development. During one two-day workshop, the group identified the problem and selected a program for adoption. The group made both these decisions without any input or ratification from the faculty as a whole. The group then met once to discuss implementation plans. However, since the group did not include any strong facilitators, its interest in the change effort could not be sustained following the disappointment of the first training workshop. Therefore, the group ceased to function even before the product was implemented.

FACTORS AFFECTING TEAM EFFECTIVENESS: LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION WITH NON-TEAM MEMBERS

How important is team leadership?

Even when decisions are made collectively, leadership is still very important. We have found that the presence or absence of a strong and effective team leader--someone who can keep things moving, follow through on details, resolve minor problems, provide a liaison to external facilitators, and maintain staff motivation and enthusiasm--has a great effect on the success of team efforts.

In a team setting the leader plays a facilitating rather than a decision-making role. A good team leader does not dominate or dictate the group's decisions; rather he or she helps structure and guide the group decision-making process. If the leader begins to exercise too much influence over the group's decisions, the attempt to share decision making may backfire and the staff may become more resistant to the desired changes than if the participatory process had never been established.

Team leadership can be provided by a school principal or assistant principal, a district curriculum specialist, a strong faculty leader, or some other local figure who is respected by the staff. In the RDU sites the team leaders were usually selected by the principal (or by the superintendent in a district-level site), in conference with the external RDU linker. Often, principals themselves served as the team leaders. Very rarely were the team leaders democratically selected. Since there was so little variation in the method of selection, it is difficult to say whether any particular method made a difference.

In a number of sites, a team leader was never formally designated. In some of these sites, the change effort floundered due to lack of leadership, while in others leadership emerged naturally from among the team's members. Quite often, teachers who had not had any previous leadership responsibilities rose to the leadership requirements and were very effective in this role. As noted earlier, the development of new staff leadership capabilities can be a major side benefit of group problem solving. Nevertheless, where effective leaders do not exist at the beginning, the decision-making process may be slow, and there may be a greater need to rely on external assistance.

In what ways can an external facilitator help the team?

In many instances, an external change agent--for example, from a state department of education or an intermediate service agency--can compensate for a lack of internal leadership on a school team. In these cases, leadership from outside the school system is greatly appreciated because the external facilitator has a fresh outlook, has particularly relevant expertise, or simply has more time to devote to the effort.

Externally provided leadership can also be helpful in situations where the obvious choice for an internal leader might not be in the best interests of the change program. For example, the staff may be too dependent on the internal leader and may leave most of the decision making and implementation responsibility to him or her. An external facilitator may be able to get team members to take more responsibility themselves. Furthermore, current relations between the internal leader and the staff may be strained, or the internal leader may find it difficult to assume the role of facilitator, rather than decision maker.

There are cases where external leadership may be rejected. The staff may not trust the external facilitator's credentials; they may feel that an outsider could not possibly understand the local situation; or they may be defensive when dealing with outside "experts" who are going to help them identify and solve their problems. These considerations must all be weighed when deciding whether to have an external change agent lead the team.

External facilitators can perform other important functions in addition to provision of team leadership. They may:

- observe, document, and provide feedback on the group's activities;
- provide or arrange for training in a substantive area or in problem-solving or group process techniques;
- coordinate or arrange for human and material resources (for example, consultants, funds for released time, etc.);
- provide expert counsel in
  - diagnosing school needs,
  - assessing the match between innovations and needs,
  - implementing an innovation, and
  - evaluating the solution's implementation and effectiveness;
- help to write proposals, make travel arrangements, or take care of other details; and
- serve as a communications link between the school and other external providers of assistance.

Our analysis showed that the extent to which linking agents in the RDU program provided these services, and the amount of time they gave to an RDU site, were significantly correlated with measures of success at the local school level.

How important is the support of the principal?

We found that it was not essential for the principal to become actively involved in the change program. However, the principal's support for the change program was crucial.

Principal support should not be taken for granted. Even if the principal is not an active team member, he or she should be kept informed of the team's activities and of decisions that are taking place. Every effort should be made to ensure that the principal's support is genuine during all phases of team activity.

The principal's support is especially critical at the point of implementing a chosen solution. If school-wide implementation is desired, the principal has to take a leadership role to make sure everyone participates. Even though the decision may have been participatory, teachers will feel that actual use of the selected product is optional unless the principal tells them otherwise. Furthermore, the principal controls the allocation of school resources which will be needed for continuation of the solution beyond the trial stage.

What about the faculty as a whole? How should they be involved?

A potential problem in team decision making arises when the team's decisions are not accepted by other faculty members or do not elicit active faculty support. This can happen even though the team has been given a clear mandate to make decisions that affect the entire school or an entire group of teachers. The problem can be avoided if steps are taken from the beginning to spread project ownership.

Such steps include involving the entire faculty in an orientation to the goals of the school improvement effort and the role of the team, making sure that team members adequately represent the viewpoints of their constituencies (for example, the different grade levels), maintaining regular communication on team activities (through faculty meetings, news bulletins, sharing of agendas, open team meetings, etc.), and giving the entire faculty the chance to vote on problem priorities and solution decisions.

While consensus-building activities are important throughout the school improvement process, they seem to be especially important at the point of planning for implementation. In fact, an effective strategy used in a number of schools at that point was to expand the team's membership to include more of the potential implementers.

Leadership in Three Schools

The three schools--Northern Elementary, Southern Elementary, and West Coast Middle School--had very different histories of leadership for school change. Each had some difficulty developing a stable pattern of leadership for the school improvement activities being tackled by their teams. These problems were effectively resolved in the cases of Northern and Southern, but contributed to the general setbacks that confounded the change effort at West Coast Middle School.

Northern Elementary. Both the principal and the assistant superintendent for curriculum were very supportive of the group decision-making process at Northern. As team members, they attended all team meetings, though they chose to play non-directive roles. The philosophy underlying the principal's approach is revealed in a letter to the RDU project director, where he emphasized "...the need for grassroots involvement...[and] insisting on staff making the decisions...as staff will have to live with such decisions."

Internal guidance for the curriculum improvement effort was to be provided by the team coordinator, who was promoted from reading teacher to district reading coordinator during the course of the project. This individual was inexperienced and uncertain of her role for the first months of the project, but later emerged as an energetic enthusiast who was viewed as an important component of the success of the school's improvement effort.

A factor that helped to compensate for the relatively weak internal leadership situation during the first year was the intense assistance provided by an external consultant group. This group was composed of staff from several agencies, including the state department of education, the regional intermediate service agency, an educational research and development lab, and an educational research and information service. During some of the local workshops, the external consultants actually outnumbered the members of the local action team. The linker was an employee of the intermediate

service agency. She was very active behind the scenes and provided encouragement to the staff, helped them to complete assignments begun during the workshops, worked with members of the external consultant team to tailor the processes to fit the school's particular needs, and made all the logistical arrangements for the workshops.

Southern Elementary. The active involvement of the school principal was a significant factor that contributed to the achievement of fundamental, school-wide change at Southern Elementary. In fact, the principal pushed hard for adoption of a comprehensive solution to the school's problems and, specifically, for adoption of IGE. This pressure almost backfired, since some staff initially resisted the implementation of IGE simply because they felt it was being forced on them. Although the decision was made by total faculty consensus, some teachers reportedly felt as though "words were being put into their mouths." Paradoxically, IGE itself calls for more participatory decision making through the establishment of instructional units and a representative instructional improvement committee. With the help and encouragement of a university-based IGE consultant and a newly hired assistant principal for curriculum, both the staff and the principal slowly gained confidence in the decision-making capability of the committee.

Another individual who played an important facilitative and supportive role in the change effort was the school's external linker, in this case an employee of the local teacher education center. The linker was extensively involved in the school's problem-solving activities: she met with the school's facilitators several times a week for long periods of time; attended all of the faculty meetings related to the project; helped with planning agendas, brainstorming, writing and editing proposals; and put the school in touch with technical assistance and material resources. As the principal said, "It's easy to sit back and say I'm doing the best I can. The support person really gives you more incentive to try, and she broadens your perspective."

West Coast Middle School. West Coast Middle School would not have attempted an organized effort to solve its problem with slow readers had it not been for the instigation of the district assistant superintendent. This person was described as a very skillful, charismatic individual. However, once the program was selected, he apparently moved on to other interests and provided little continuing support. The principal of West Coast Middle

School was a low-profile administrator who chose not to rally staff support for the program and who delegated all responsibility for program implementation to the school's reading coordinator.

The linker made bi-weekly visits to assist the reading coordinator with evaluation plans, implementation strategies, and the specifics of developing an effective instructional program. However, the lack of forceful leadership when the new reading program was first selected was not overcome during the implementation stage.

FACTORS AFFECTING TEAM EFFECTIVENESS: PROCESS

How important is the problem-solving model?

Earlier, we mentioned that local action teams in the RDU program were expected to follow a "problem-solving/knowledge utilization" model to accomplish the specific objectives of their school improvement efforts. The key characteristics of this model are thorough analysis and prioritization of school needs or problems prior to searching for school improvement strategies; a search outside the local school system for assistance and information (particularly in the search for solutions to problems); and a focus on solutions that have been field-tested and empirically validated. One can talk about the model as a four-phase process beginning with problem identification and continuing with solution selection, planning for implementation, and implementation itself. Although largely sequential, the phases, or stages, often overlap in practice.

To judge the extent to which the RDU sites had engaged in sound problem-solving processes, we identified a number of criteria for each stage of a "rational" problem-solving model. These criteria are listed in Figure 2. In our subsequent analyses, we found that adherence to these problem-solving practices was significantly correlated with the degree of positive organizational change--that is, with a summary index of the amount of improvement in curriculum, materials, methods, structure, teacher morale, pupil performance, and scope or severity of the targeted problem. To summarize, improving the quality of the problem-solving process apparently had a significant impact upon the functioning of the school and the quality of its curriculum.

What is a reasonable schedule of meetings and milestones?

In order to maintain staff enthusiasm for the school improvement effort, the process should not be allowed to drag on too long. In particular, it is important not to use up all the energy and motivation for the project during problem identification and solution selection, since no lasting impact can be achieved unless a solution is actually implemented. Conversely, the team should not assume that a very general definition of a problem (such as "we have a reading problem") will be sufficient to indicate the types of curricula, materials, or methods that would be most useful. Another potential pitfall, which we observed fairly often, was the tendency of teams to define the

Figure 2

PRACTICES CONTRIBUTING TO SOUND PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem identification

- Alternative definitions of the problem are posed and carefully considered. The problem is not simply a restatement of preconceived assumptions about needs or the pet theory of a particular clique or individual.
- Adequate evidence of the problem is obtained (though, in some cases, this may not require extensive documentation or new data collection).
- The problem is analyzed before the search for a solution is begun. This includes:
  - identifying concrete problem indicators
  - analyzing perceived causes
  - assessing specific needs
  - weighing these needs in relation to other school priorities
- The definition of the problem is clear, manageable, and acceptable to both the administration and relevant staff. The problem definition is neither too narrow (trivial) nor too broad (grandiose).

Solution selection

- Appropriate external resources are consulted in the search for a solution; this may include an intermediate service district, the state department of education, universities, educational R&D labs, educational information storage and retrieval services, etc.
- The selection process begins mainly after suggestions are obtained from the appropriate external resources. If locally familiar solutions are contemplated while the formal search process is taking place, the final selection is postponed until the formal search process is completed and all alternatives are considered.
- The alternatives are carefully examined; their merits and demerits are examined according to explicit criteria, including:
  - evidence of effectiveness
  - relevance to the original problem statement
  - suitability and manageability in the local school context
  - acceptability to both the administration and relevant staff
  - other locally determined criteria
- Additional information about the solution is sought (for example, through site visits, consultation, etc.) or additional searches are ordered when questions arise that are unanswered by the information yielded by the original search.

Figure 2 (concluded)

Planning for implementation

- The constraints that will affect implementation are realistically assessed and efforts are made to resolve them.
- Administrative support and cooperation and the support and cooperation of potential implementers are gained or reinforced.
- Formal plans are drawn up to govern:
  - leadership and staffing of implementation team
  - field trials
  - resource needs (money, materials, equipment)
  - scheduling of treatment
  - distribution of treatment among students and staff
  - training or staff development
  - feedback or evaluation
  - public relations with nonparticipating staff or community
- Measures are taken to ensure that the chosen product or program retains its essential features and goals in the course of implementation.
- The product is modified, as needed, to anticipate:
  - obvious product or program defects
  - genuine local needs of students or staff
  - unalterable constraints of the situation
  - special opportunities or leverages in the situation that allow for enhancement of the product or the program's effect

Implementation

- All elements of the implementation plan are borne in mind and realized in some form.
- Any difficulties that arise during implementation are realistically assessed and efforts are made to resolve them.
- Measures are taken to ensure that the chosen product or program retains its essential features and goals throughout implementation.
- The product is modified, as needed, to respond to:
  - obvious product or program defects
  - genuine local needs of students or staff
  - unalterable constraints of the situation
  - special opportunities or leverages in the situation that allow for enhancement of the product or the program's effect

problem in terms of the type of innovation they wanted, rather than carefully analyzing current weaknesses in the school's program. Thus it is very important to avoid over-simplifying the process, while at the same time maintaining team momentum. A reasonable goal is to spend no more than one school year--or even less--identifying the problem and selecting a solution. If the process is begun in the fall, the school year then ends on a high note, with everyone looking forward to positive action toward implementation the following year.

It is more difficult to suggest a reasonable level of effort for the process within this time span. The level of effort depends on whether the school has been through the process before, how much new data collection and analysis are needed, how broadly the problem is defined, and how complex the planned solutions are. In our observation, if the goal is to achieve very broad and significant changes, the team should be willing to devote considerable effort to the process--as much as 30 or more person-days (days times persons) per year. In most cases, this would allow for weekly meetings of about one hour, or monthly meetings of several hours or more. If teams meet less frequently than once a month, there tends to be a serious loss of momentum between meetings.

The Problem-Solving Process in Three Schools

The teams at Northern, Southern, and West Coast Schools had very different experiences in terms of the activities in which they engaged and the amount of time they spent on these activities. As seen in the vignette below, the process at Northern was very detailed, involved very high levels of effort, and took a long time. This was, at least to some extent, due to lack of experience on the part of school staff members, although the staff believed that they spent too much time on problem definition. At West Coast Middle School, few of the activities presented in Figure 2 were conducted. The entire process of defining the problem, choosing a solution, and planning for implementation was so abbreviated that there was no time for reflection on the match between the school's needs and the improvement activities intended to meet those needs. At Southern Elementary, the process was closer to our ideal model.

Northern Elementary. The "kick-off" for the curriculum improvement effort at Northern Elementary was a one-hour orientation session for the entire faculty in October 1976. Two months later, members of the external consultant group visited the school to conduct individual interviews with the teachers

and to observe their classrooms. The information obtained during this visit--including a preliminary analysis of problems perceived in the reading program--was shared with the local action team at its first meeting, held late in January 1977. Between January and August 1977 eight full days of team meetings were devoted to further specification of student and program needs; between meetings a great deal of effort was spent collecting and analyzing data through teacher interviews, student testing, etc. The result was a problem statement that confirmed the needs voiced by the teachers at the beginning of the effort.

The staff at Northern maintained their enthusiasm for the project despite their feeling that too much time had been spent on problem identification. During August and September 1977 the local action team met twice (again, these were full-day sessions) to specify solution selection criteria and to screen the alternatives selected for them by the project staff. Six of these alternatives were presented to the faculty during an all-day meeting in October. An all-day follow-up meeting of the local action team confirmed the faculty's decision to adopt the reading management system. During the 1977-78 school year, the local action team met only three times; these sessions were devoted to developing an implementation plan. Finally, in July 1978 the local action team participated in a full week of intensive inservice in the adoption of the reading management system. A one-day session for the entire faculty was held in October 1978. The remainder of the year was spent in modifying the reading management system for use in the school. Parts of the system were finally implemented in the fall of 1979.

Southern Elementary. The entire faculty of Southern Elementary was oriented to the goals of the RDU program during a one-hour faculty meeting in September 1976. The three facilitators then attended a two-day, statewide orientation meeting, where they were trained in group problem-solving techniques. Later that month, the faculty brainstormed problems during a one-hour faculty meeting. After the meeting, the results were summarized by the facilitating team and distributed to the faculty for prioritization. In January the facilitators attended another five-day statewide workshop in which they learned how to clarify the school's problems and write a problem statement. This information was shared with the faculty during another staff meeting later in the month. Between January and March 1977, the facilitator

team met several times to work on the problem statement and on a request for information on relevant products. The drafts of these documents were reviewed by key faculty members.

When the suggested alternatives were received from the project staff several weeks later, the facilitator team met several times to screen the products, three of which they chose to present to the faculty. The faculty then met in grade-level groups to discuss and prioritize the options. During the following month, various steps were taken to gain more information about the options, including visits to sites where the products were being used, awareness sessions conducted by product consultants, and a meeting with experts in the state department of education. The final decision to select IGE was arrived at in two faculty meetings in June 1977. During these meetings, the staff were divided into cross-grade groups, each of which had to reach a consensus through collective deliberation. During the second meeting they decided on IGE.

Planning for implementation of IGE took place during a two-day session in the summer of 1977, and the first day of planning for the school year was also devoted to a discussion of IGE. The school began the year under the IGE organizational model, and a university-based consultant in IGE then met with the staff on a monthly basis throughout the year to provide them with intensive inservice in all aspects of the innovation.

West Coast Middle School. Problem identification and product screening for West Coast Middle School were both accomplished during a two-day workshop in the late spring of 1977. During the first day of this session, the decision-making group brainstormed about problems with the school's reading program and also discussed the school's objectives. These problems and objectives were diffuse and not prioritized. The next step was to have been a specification of program selection criteria; however, the teachers were impatient and wanted to review available products. Therefore, the following day was spent examining and discussing materials on hand at the regional educational lab where the meeting was being held. A few phone calls were made to developers, and, by the end of the day, a program for teaching slow readers had been selected. A follow-up meeting during the summer was devoted to a discussion of implementation plans, including arrangements for a training workshop in September. This training session proved to be enormously

disappointing because the trainers were insensitive to the differences between West Coast Middle School and their own schools. Most of the school's teachers later dropped out of the program. Nothing happened for several months, until the school's reading coordinator was hired. After that, very little attention was paid to the program except by the reading coordinator and the RDU linker. With very little support from the principal or staff, the reading coordinator developed a remedial reading program that is quite different from the program originally selected.

SUMMARY

Local action teams can be an effective vehicle for shared decision making in school improvement efforts. Shared decision making facilitates the achievement of school improvement objectives by spreading project ownership; by eliciting multiple perspectives, insights, and expertise; by minimizing the effects of a priori assumptions; and by focusing attention on objectives that might otherwise be neglected. Shared decision making may also improve staff morale; improve coordination, communication, and articulation within and across grade levels; and help foster staff development.

A number of factors can contribute to the effectiveness of a local action team. The most important of these are:

- representation on the team of both administrators and those who will be directly affected by the decisions, namely teachers;
- adequate preparation for team roles;
- strong and effective team leadership;
- collective deliberation and democratic decision making;
- a supportive principal--and, if the principal is not actively involved, adequate communication with the principal;
- assistance from an external facilitator as required;
- efforts to spread project ownership to non-team members;
- adherence to sound problem-solving practices;
- adherence to a reasonable schedule of meetings and milestones;
- a reasonable balance between process sophistication and simplicity, especially in problem identification; and
- a willingness and ability to devote considerable energy and resources to the school improvement effort.

APPENDIX

A NOTE ON METHODS

The recommendations presented in this report are based on an analysis of qualitative (non-quantified) data from 49 sites that participated in the RDU program. These sites were selected from among 91 sites on which Abt Associates has both qualitative and quantitative data, in order to focus only on the most typical site: one with a school-level, as opposed to district-level, local action team. Although this type of site represents approximately 70 percent of the 91 sites, at the time this report was being prepared data were available only on the 49 included in the analysis for this report.

A few of the sites were "case study sites." These sites were visited regularly by a case study writer over a period of several years. The case study writers were employed by the seven operational RDU projects rather than by Abt Associates, though the Abt Associates research team had some influence over the content and analysis of the case study data. The case study sites were not chosen by use of a statistical sampling scheme; however, all projects selected the sites to be included in case studies before there were any data that would have allowed a prediction of "success." Each project sponsored the development of case studies on at least six of the sites they served, although at the time this report was being prepared, very few of the case studies were available. As a result, this report is based on data from just 14 "case study sites."

Most of the sites were visited by members of the Abt Associates research team. The number of person-days at a site varied from four to seven. During the site visits, a topical guide was used as a basis for conducting open-ended interviews with school and district administrators and with a sample of between five and ten teachers and specialists at each site. Site visit notes were developed on the basis of the interviews and were written according to the topical interview guide. Sites were selected for site visits as follows: each project nominated their most problematic site and the site that best exemplified what they were trying to do; four more were sampled randomly from among the remaining sites in each project, excluding those which were "case study sites."

Due to the elimination of sites with district-level local action teams, the analysis for this report focused on sites in only five of the seven RDU projects, excluding the sites in the National Education Association and Georgia State Department of Education projects. While the report thus omits much that is unique about these two projects, our subsequent analyses of their sites reveals that the recommendations presented in this manual are also applicable to them.

For this report, the case studies and site visit materials were read and synthesized by the primary report authors. Key findings were also substantiated by analyses of our quantitative data on all 91 sites. For preliminary results from these analyses, see Linking R&D With Schools: Product and Process (Karen Seashore Louis, 1980). This report is available from Abt Associates Inc. for $1.00.

Later analyses in this project will be based not only on these data, but upon a survey of teachers and principals in a total of 131 sites. These surveys focus more extensively on the practitioners' attitudes toward the services that they received in the program. The final reports of the study, including a final report to practitioners, will be available in the spring of 1981.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FROM THE RDU PROGRAM

Each of the seven RDU projects developed a number of products that could be useful to schools about to initiate a school improvement effort, or to external agents responsible for assisting in such efforts. These products have been cataloged by The NETWORK, which operated one of the seven projects and which later received a contract from NIE to gather and document information on the products of all seven projects. The catalog resulting from this contract is called Resources for Educational Program Improvement: A Collection of Materials from the R&D Utilization Program. Available from ERIC or from the Regional Exchanges, the catalog describes 60 documents and tells how to obtain them. The documents include:

- resources to help school staff work through a program improvement process--including how-to-do-it manuals;
- role-related resources for linking agents--including one project's "tool kit" and a handbook;
- resources from educational R&D--including descriptive program catalogs and syntheses of research findings, with emphasis on the applicability of findings to the classroom; and
- resources describing the RDU projects' experiences and learnings.

Further information may also be obtained on the Abt Associates study. The following reports are currently available or will be available shortly:

- Linking R&D With Schools: An NIE Program and its Policy Context
- Linking R&D With Schools: An Interim Report
- The Use of R&D Products in the RDU Program
- Training and Support of Educational Linking Agents

Reports on project management practices and issues, linking agent roles in the RDU program, and perspectives for analyzing school improvement efforts (a casebook for school administrators) will be available in the fall of 1980. The final technical report of the RDU study--and a final report to practitioners--will be available in the late winter of 1981. All of these reports may be obtained, at cost, by writing to:

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