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ABSTRACT
                Staff members at the Iowa Department of Education are
involved in a 3-year initiative (1998-2001) to strengthen school improvement
efforts at the local school, district, and intermediate service agency
levels. Papers presented at a symposium of the American Educational Research
Association annual meeting describe the multiple purposes and design of this
initiative and how it is being studied. This paper describes the four
symposium papers: (1) "Rationale and Design for Every Child Reads: A
Statewide (Iowa) Action Research Initiative on Literacy and School
Improvement" (Nina Carran); (2) "The Professional Development Orientation of
Every Child Reads" (Chris Rinner); (3) "Building Knowledge, Skill, and
Capacity for Internal and External Facilitation and Leadership" (Assessment
Consultant, Iowa Department of Education); and (4) "The Action Research
Orientation of Every Child Reads" (Emily Calhoun). (Contains 11 references.)
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Building Capacity to Support Student Achievement—From the State Department to the Classroom and the Classroom to the State Department

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Paper presented at the
Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association
(Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).

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Building Capacity To Support Student Achievement--From the State Department to the Classroom and the Classroom to the State Department

Objectives and Educational Importance of the Symposium

Staff members at the Iowa Department of Education, under the leadership of the Chief of the Bureau of Instructional Services, are involved in a three-year initiative (1998-2001) designed to strengthen school improvement efforts at the local school, district, and intermediate service agency levels. State Department goals include building current capacity to support school improvement at all levels, including the State Department level, while also building the capacity of participants who will be the future teacher leaders, school-based administrators, and district, regional, and state staff members. The papers and presentations in this symposium will describe the multiple purposes and design of this initiative and how it is being studied.

Many educational organizations from school districts (Elmore & Burney, 1997), to state departments of education (Massel, 1998; Harkreader and Weathersby, 1998), to the U.S. Department of Education (Montgomery and Rossi, 1994; USDE, 1998) are struggling to figure out how to help school staff improve student achievement. There is much advice, guidance, and rhetoric about effective school reform efforts, building local capacity, developing professional learning communities, implementing higher standards, and requiring accountability from the classroom to the state department; yet, few, if any, scholar practitioners would say that supporting these complex processes within schools or from a distance is well understood (Cohen & Ball, 1999; CPRE, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Ball, nd; Spillane, 1996; USDE, 1999). Many AERA members are probably involved in one role or the other in thinking about, designing programs for, evaluating, or synthesizing information about these school reform processes. The presenters of this symposium think some of these members would be interested in reviewing the design and study of a capacity-building initiative originating from and supported by a state department of education and in discussing common learnings and dilemmas.

Paper 1: Rationale and Design for Every Child Reads: A Statewide (Iowa) Action Research Initiative on Literacy and School Improvement, Nina Carran, Chief, Bureau of Instructional Services, Iowa Department of Education

The Iowa Department of Education staff, just as district and school staff, are bombarded with legislative, policy, and accountability demands (as well as initiatives generated within the Department as staff seek to improve mathematics curriculum, special education instruction, etc., throughout the state), and there is rarely certain knowledge about how to proceed. The Every Child Reads initiative was designed 1) to address multiple needs and tasks that the Iowa Department of Education(IDE) is responsible for in terms of guidance or leadership, and 2) to, while doing this, provide a model for pursuing curriculum initiatives focused on student and staff learning, for

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using data to guide decision-making, for sustained staff development with research-based content and the study of implementation, and for expanding general leadership capacity and skill in supporting comprehensive school reform at school, district, regional, and state levels.

Some of the major reasons for this initiative and its design include a) an 8-year trend in the state of declining scores on the Reading section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; b) an emphasis in the Iowa State Board of Education and Department of Education Strategic Plan (1997) on supporting "the improvement of teaching and instructional practices at the classroom level so that the achievement of all students continuously improves"; c) recent legislation requiring that Iowa's Area Education Agencies provide and be accountable for supporting school's efforts to improve student achievement (HF 2272, 1998) and pending legislation requiring all elementary schools to use diagnostic assessments at kindergarten through grade three (HF 743, 1999); d) reviews of Comprehensive School Improvement plans by districts and grant applications by schools and districts, that indicated the plans--even when the planning guides were designed to encourage quality, indepth professional development and the use of data to make decisions--continued to be dominated by brief workshops, adoption of materials or programmed packages, or support of what was already being provided by the school or district; and e) a comparison of what districts and school were doing with a review of the knowledge base about what leads to improved student and staff learning.

Paper 2: The Professional Development Orientation of Every Child Reads, Chris Rinner, Reading Consultant, Iowa Department of Education

The recruitment of schools and districts from all regions of the state and from all levels of the educational organization was part of building the professional community and of building the capacity needed to support substantive reform at the local school level. All participants were asked to attend all scheduled sessions, to implement the content of the workshop and training sessions at their sites, to share their data with the Iowa Department of Education (IDE) staff, and to study both school improvement and literacy simultaneously. To make attendance easier for participating school, district, and AEA staff, each workshop was conducted regionally in the western, central, and eastern sections of the state.

The following assumptions underpin the content and process of the Every Child Reads' (ECR) workshops and staff development design: a) persons working at each organizational level can learn about what it takes to support substantive curriculum and instructional changes through joint pursuit of a common student learning goal in literacy and mutual inquiry concerning the learners within their realm of responsibility; b) becoming more informed about current student performance and attitudes and how students have historically performed in the school, district, or region is necessary for accelerating student literacy on an organization-wide or regional basis; c)

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becoming more informed about how students encounter curriculum through current instructional practices is necessary for schoolwide or organization-wide changes in the learning environment; d) inquiring collectively into the external professional knowledge base is part of making informed decisions about current and future organizational practices; and e) studying one's own response to training, staff development content, and the external knowledge base is part of learning how to support comprehensive reform efforts.

During the first year of Every Child Reads, the external consultant to the initiative designed most of the workshop materials and delivered most of the common training, with support from IDE staff members. For the workshops, a training design was used, with content shaped by the specified outcomes of the initiative and the data on participant applications and actions. The training for content segments followed a theory/explanation/demonstration/practice/site application/study-of-application-data pattern. One of many reasons for following this pattern throughout the year was to both model and to have participants experience 1) sustained staff development in pursuit of a highly valued student learning goal and 2) organizational action research.

Paper 3: Building Knowledge, Skill, and Capacity for Internal and External Facilitation and Leadership, Assessment Consultant, Iowa Department of Education.

The orientation for these related design components was to build on and extend knowledge and skill about literacy and action research and about how to engage in and support collective study and action. Having more conceptual control of and more skill in these processes would expand capacity for supporting comprehensive school improvement for student achievement, and, consequently, expand leadership at all levels of the organization. Three conceptually simple, but socially and politically complex actions, were articulated and modeled at every workshop: be present to support each other, be willing to learn together, and "model" instead of "telling" or "monitoring" whenever possible.

1) The framework for internal facilitation and leadership: Districts and schools were encouraged to send large school teams, comprised of the principal and teachers from each grade K-3, and Title I and special needs teachers. These teams would spend the first year learning and applying literacy and action research content and practices; the second year, they would lead the staff through a similar process; then the third year, they would begin to provide some support to other schools. School teams were asked to work in peer coaching teams of two to support each other in inquiring into data, into current curricular and instructional practices, and into new or expanded strategies. The intent was to provide a colleagial structure for cognitive discourse and emotional support; in a sense, to help teams facilitate their own work and progress. Teams were asked to aggregate their data on current practices and on implementation of new or expanded practices and study this in terms of comfort with the current data picture or mastery and competence with new practices.

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2) The framework for external facilitation and leadership: Iowa Department of Education (IDE) and Area Education Agency (AEA) consultants were to work with school leadership facilitation teams regularly (the recommendation was once a month for IDE and as often as possible for AEA), with AEA consultants taking over the on-site facilitation the third year, and IDE consultants phasing out direct on-site support at the end of the initiative. The intent was to provide direct support to the school from persons who probably had more knowledge and skill in some of the application activities, or could have more rapid access to additional technical support if needed; to provide presence as a mode of support; to observe and gather data about current school team progress; to have a laboratory for state department and AEA staff to study school improvement as they worked to facilitate it; and to model learning and collective inquiry when they do not have certain knowledge about how to proceed.

Paper 4: The Action Research Orientation of Every Child Reads, Emily Calhoun, Thje Phoenix Alliance

Action research was the primary mode of inquiry, with frequency distributions and content analyses used to summarize and display data for collective study and use. One of the major questions explored: Could the IDE staff design and lead an initiative that serves multiple purposes: supporting a substantive curriculum initiative in literacy that both moves into the classroom and expands instructional practices and leadership capability; that operates from an action research perspective where participants at all organizational levels are studying, learning, and leading simultaneously; and that is modified, not domesticated, based on data about what participants are doing, what they understand, and what they want to accomplish?

Action research was conducted on the goals, outcomes, and application activities comprising the initiative and on problems that arose during the year. Primarily, the designers of the initiative and the State Department of Education (SDE) Team 1) checked first and regularly on fidelity to the announced design (e.g., for the Technical Assistance Component, were SDE staff working with school teams on-site once a month; for the Time Allocation Component, did schools allocate time for their Every Child Reads work and how much time; for the Cross-Role Learning and Modeling Component, were all team members keeping implementation logs as they worked on each instructional strategy; and 2) recorded who was doing what and to what extent at the school team level and at the individual level (e.g., were school teams gathering and disaggregating data about their school population and its learning history; were all leadership facilitation team members--teachers, principal, district office and AEA staff member--attending the workshops and training sessions). One of complexities was the necessity, by design, of studying both responses to action research application activities and literacy application activities and using the results to plan support.

Action research data and the results of content analyses were used in the design of

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workshops and broadcast sessions, the development of training and support materials, and the modification of the initiative and its timelines. Many facilitation, training, and design modifications were made based on these data because the orientation was on using action research results diagnostically and not just summatively. The major modifications will be shared in the paper, but here are a few of the results (and implications) used in making modifications during and at the end of the first-year:

1) First Year Population: While Iowa has 375 public school districts with around 850 elementary schools and 15 Area Education Agencies, IDE staff sought only one school in each AEA region. When the first training sessions were conducted in September 1998, there were 21 schools and districts represented and 13 AEAs.

2) School-based staff (teachers and principals) were most responsive in attending the seven days of training provided in each region. AEA and district office staff were far less responsive, with about 20% of participants attending all sessions. This was of great concern because from these role groups come the persons who need to provide facilitation and technical assistance as or if the initiative is scaled up.

3) 20 of 21 school teams collected, organized, and reviewed data on school enrollment and attendance, on student characteristics that have positive and negative correlations with progress in literacy in U.S. schools (such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender), on grades or other progress indicators assigned by the school, on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills data, on the number and progress of students receiving Title I and special needs services, and on school staff characteristics and personnel deployment. However, while teams did collect, organize and share these data, they had great difficulty in determining implications, relating the results to what was happening on a daily basis in instruction and curriculum, and on generating further questions they wished to pursue or hypotheses to test.

4) 20 of 21 schools collected data on how many times and how much instructional time was used daily on reading aloud fiction to students and reading aloud nonfiction. After reviewing their data, every school team decided to make a collective effort to increase their students' exposure to informative prose by increasing the amount of class time used for sharing nonfiction tradebooks.

5) As the complexity of the instructional strategy increased, the completion and sharing of implementation logs decreased.

6) As with attendance at workshops, teachers and principals were the most responsive role group in completing and sharing their implementation logs.

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