

TRANSFORMING

Professional Development

INTO Student Results

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Accountability: Why Autopsies Do Not Improve Patient Health

Imagine that you received the following announcement from your local physician and hospital:

In a sharp break with tradition, we have decided to start using evidence to make our medical care decisions. We will evaluate carefully the available data and, in the future, engage in more of the practices that improve health and fewer of the practices that appear to kill people.

Would you find this announcement reassuring? Perhaps, on the contrary, you would exclaim, “Isn’t that what you have been doing in the past?” The astonishing fact is that evidence-based decision making in medical care is innovative (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Moreover, the most detailed medical evidence on the individual level is the autopsy, a procedure that is undoubtedly filled with data but that rarely improves the health of the patient. There are, of course, exceptions to every rule. In one famous courtroom exchange, the cross-examining attorney asked the medical examiner who had performed an autopsy, “And how did you know that the patient was dead?” The pathologist replied, “Well, his brain and heart had been removed and were in a jar, but I suppose that it’s possible that he is out practicing law somewhere.”

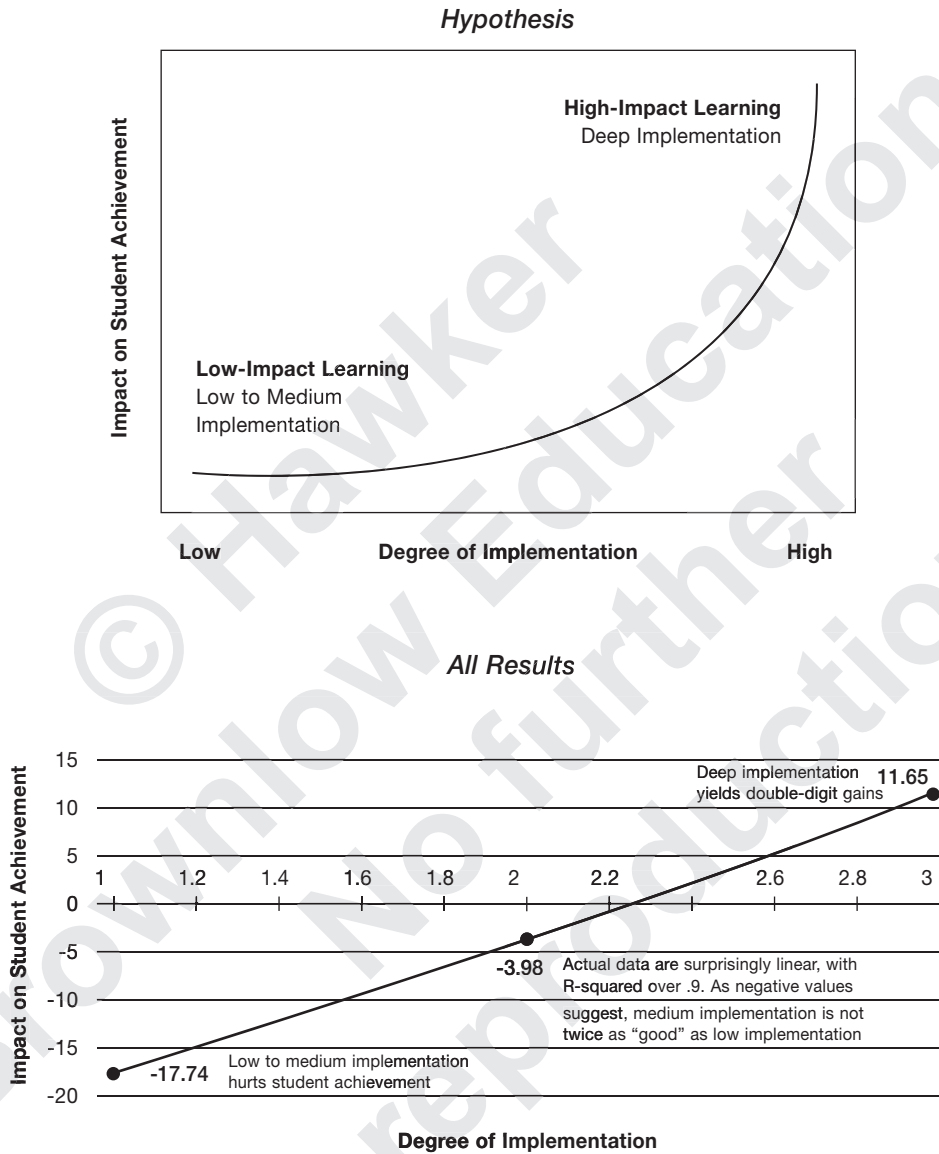
The Limits of Effect Data

While crime shows captivate television audiences around the globe, viewers would be puzzled by the amiable coroner who announces to the patient, “I’ve learned what’s wrong with you, so just be careful the next time you cross the railroad tracks and you should be fine tomorrow morning.” This scenario is no more absurd, however, than the accountability czars who tell schools many months after the end of the school year precisely what was wrong with student achievement. Consider the following typical time line for a process that is euphemistically called school improvement:

- May 15—Students are tested.
- June 30—School improvement plans are due, designed to explain how student achievement in the next year will be better than in the previous year.
- September 1—The superintendent opens the new school year with a declaration that teachers and school leaders must be committed to using data to drive instruction. After the speech, teachers listen to yet another workshop presenter extol the virtues of data, yet no one in the room possesses a single shred of authentic student data that teachers can use to improve teaching practice. “We’ve got it,” they think. “Data good; ignorance bad. Is there anything else before I get back to my classroom to prepare for 35 students tomorrow?”
- October 1—The data that might have informed the June plan or enlightened the September speech at last arrive at schools and classrooms. Unfortunately, teachers are looking at data for students who were in their class the previous year.
- October 2—The local newspaper prints yet another article on the continuing failures of teachers and school leaders.

Some states, no doubt with good intent, have chosen to administer tests in the fall so that they can attempt to provide data to schools in time to influence the current group of students. This policy choice, however well intentioned, has failed. First, test results from the early months of the

FIGURE 4.1
Nonlinear Model of Implementation



or perform tricks; school and prepare (a horse, especially a racehorse) for competition.”

Oxford is no more encouraging in its definition of *trainer*: “A person who trains or instructs a person or animal; an instructor; a person who trains athletes, footballers, racehorses, etc., as a profession. Also, a piece of equipment used for training; an exercise machine” (pp. 3,320–3,321). Suddenly the phrase “train the trainer” is a compound expression for the very worst in professional learning. In this chapter we explore how schools and educational systems can break free of this counterproductive notion and create a new vision for building capacity for high-impact learning.

Essentials for Sustainable Improvement

Fullan (2005, p. 14) suggests that sustainability has eight elements:

1. Public service with a moral purpose
2. Commitment to changing context at all levels
3. Lateral capacity building through networks
4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships (encompassing both capacity building and accountability)
5. Deep learning
6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results
7. Cyclical energizing
8. The long lever of leadership

Fullan adds that “systems thinking in practice ... is the key to sustainability” (p. 43) and argues that leaders must amplify their learning with experience. As a general leadership principle, however, the longer the list of things to be done and criteria to be met, the lower the probability that the list will be accomplished. That’s why at least a few people still read Immanuel Kant (1785); the Categorical Imperative is a very short list indeed, with a single nonnegotiable moral mandate. But outside of the philosopher’s world, being right is not sufficient. We must be both right and effective, a quality