Overcoming the Challenges of Education Policy Implementation

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**INTRODUCTION**

Education policy implementation works within a complicated system of multiple dimensions. Working under certain restraints to preserve successful outcomes requires prodigious change and reformation in the way policies are implemented. Extreme policy saturation and the lack of effectiveness seem to create more breakdowns when instituting implementation. These and other challenges act as a driving force to implement new and amended policies, which contribute to the churning affect we see prevalent in our educational policy decisions today.

For some time now, we have recognized that implementation is a crucial link between the objectives and outcomes of policies, programs and practices. We also have come to recognize that implementation, as a process of enactment or “carrying out,” is inherently problematic (Hargrove, 1985). It is fraught with uncertainty and unpredictability. It is a process that is difficult to control and prone to failure. (Smylie & Evans, 2006, p. 187)

While there are several disconnects on what affects successful implementation, this analysis provides some insight into basic concepts behind the challenge of change, examines the challenges of implementing effective policies and provides recommendations on how to make implementation of these policies more successful and sustainable.

**ELEMENTS OF CHANGE**

It is easy to witness that social, physical, technological, economical and cultural dynamics of the world are constantly changing. With changes occurring all over the world through different spectrums of understanding, it is inevitable that every person will experience change in different ways. History indicates that change in any situation is a concept that is hard to swallow.

During the IBM “Global Innovation Outlook” Conference held in November 2005, Alan Duetschman (2005) a reporter for *Fast Company* reported that top executives from all over the world gathered together to discuss solutions to occurring problems, including healthcare and technological issues. Though the conversation discussed new and upcoming healthcare issues, most of what was said revolved around the issue of change. While these leading companies tackled healthcare issues of large percentages of people, most of them agreed that the majority of people consuming the health-care budget for diseases are due to behavioral issues. “They’re sick because of how they choose to live their lives, not because of environmental or genetic
factors beyond their control” (Duetschman, 2005, para. 9). The article continues, arguing that most patients' symptoms are the result of addictions to smoking, alcohol, food, stress and lack of exercise – all of which can be controlled through certain behavioral changes. Duetschman (2005) quotes John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor whose expertise is studying dozens of organizations during upheaval, who said:

Changing the behavior of people isn't just the biggest challenge in health care. It's the most important challenge for businesses trying to compete in a turbulent world. The central issue is never strategy, structure, culture, or systems. The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people. (para. 11)

This is just one of the many examples of how people view change, particularly behavioral change. Noting that change is difficult in any circumstance, when it comes to change in education policy, it is easy for people to use change as either a motivator or as a suppressive way of being. Hall and Hord (2001) suggest that while we hope that change will all avoid us personally and professionally, that "when confronted with change there is a natural tendency to focus on how to defend ourselves from it instead of on how to use and succeed with it" (p. 3).

This theory seems to be true especially when it comes to encouraging reform in political regimes, due to the fact that it entails change in so many social agendas. Change is also considered a process, not an event (Hall & Hord, 2001), of which there are significant differences when considering development and implementation of such changes. When it comes to policy implementation, policymakers often insist that the ‘change’ occur during their term in office.

Given its promise to serve as a significant lever of change in an institution intended to serve all children and youth, education policy affects multiple dimensions of social welfare. And given these high stakes, education policy implementation warrants careful scrutiny. (Honig, 2006, p. 1)

While this analysis does not examine the particulars involved in ‘change’ dilemmas, it provides exploratory research around particular individual behaviors as constituted by different levels of understanding, and individual progression as it comes to one particular change – that of education reform and implementation. The following section examines the history of policy design and what practices policymakers and educators consider that ensure successful implementation of education reform policy.
HISTORY OF EDUCATION POLICY DESIGN

Over the course of time, policy designs have acted as largely distributive, categorical and regulatory in nature. Historically, educational policies were made to determine, 1) the appropriate use of resources, and 2) the monitoring structure of whether or not something ought to be done (Honig, 2006).

During the time that President Nixon was in office, new regulations in education began giving more authority to the federal government particularly when it came to funding certain programs. This was the federal government’s first of many attempts to encourage states to integrate accountability practices into education policies. This development in federal education policy in the 1970s brought the realization that the implementation of new programs or systems that affect classrooms, and its desired outcomes, is actually really difficult. Policymakers soon discovered that these mandatory changes in implementation required a great deal of change, and – at the very least – a motivation to change.

Other studies began to cast implementers in a different light – not as individuals who lacked the motivation to change but as engaged actors trying to cope with sheer number of new policy requirements that converged on the ‘street level.’ (Honig, 2006, p. 6)

With the political milieu of A Nation At Risk in the 1980s, both educators and policymakers saw the need to improve education around the board. While the federal government was busy creating policy that would change the way schools nationwide would achieve certain results, state policymakers began to target curriculum changes and teacher professionalism as a new wave of implementation. With these distinct changes came the promotion of more management, school-wide improvement strategies – which drove certain mandates – incentives, capacity building and overall changes to the school system by way of policy formation and implementation (Honig, 2006).

While both federal and state governments have rallied to create education reform by developing processes that directed the improvement of student achievement (including America 2000, Goals 2000, Reauthorization of Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB)), McBeath, Reyes and Ehrlander (2008) argue that “almost all states
recognized national support for assessment and accountability, and instead they adapted while negotiating for the best terms possible” (p. 1).

Education policy seems to be created to address the public’s reaction to previously enacted policy, particularly legislative and public reactions to the maintenance of accountability systems designed to achieve effective educational processes. Through varying changes in political agenda over the years, education policy has become highly controversial in its design and particularly in its implementation.

**CURRENT POLICY ISSUES**

The process of developing successful education policy is very dependent on how effectively those policies are implemented. There are several factors that contribute to current policy issues, which act as the driving force behind whether or not implementation of those policies succeeds. The following subsections discuss some recurring issues in current policy implementation that often restrain rather than stimulate the implementation process, including: policy saturation and churning, difficult adoption of policy and bias.

**Policy Saturation and Churning**

The churning factor mentioned earlier in this analysis is the process by which policies come in and out of fruition more frequently than not. With the constancy in the adoption of policy, schools rarely have time to implement these changes and add them into their curriculum before the policy has already undergone amendments, modifications, or has changed completely.

The idea that ‘street-level bureaucrats’ have the power to unmake or remake policy faster than policy has time to influence organizational priorities and practices seems to capture many of the findings about the churning process in policy implementation. People are most likely going to be wary and not trust that these policies, once implemented, will actually work.

This is not to say that schools cannot implement more than one policy at a time. While there are insurmountable amounts of policies hitting administrations at full force, implementers are forced to juggle a variety of strategies, logics and assumptions about how to improve school performance, which makes things significantly complicated, yet manageable (Honig, 2006).
The fact is that policymakers don’t often know what will work in each situation. There are several factors that contribute to what works and what doesn’t work in the school system, all of which could be amended at any time given varying circumstances. The creation of education policy is evolutionary in that it changes very rapidly and has become dependent on the outcomes of implementation, which may be flawed.

For example, in a case study examining policy failure in several schools through comprehensive school reform (CSR), researcher Amanda Datnow (2006) suggests that, “various policy levels have varying degrees of influence, and varying levels of connection” (p. 119). This means that there are several factors that shape the way reform works in different school districts. The study also found that high-level policies do not have the affect that most people think they could (Datnow, 2006, p. 119). This idea is supported by other researchers, suggesting that people are generally fooled about what politician’s claim, due to their own personal beliefs, whether their beliefs are skeptic or idealistic (Wyckoff, 2009). However, the idea that policy can or can’t improve education is not the issue discussed in this analysis. What can be taken from this discussion is how the implementation of policies can be improved and adjusted in order to not only meet federal and state mandates, but also to help teachers attain successful outcomes via higher student achievement levels.

**Difficult Adoption of Policy**

If a policy looks hard to adopt, or flashy, it comes across weak. If policies are weak and somehow make it through the policymaking process, they most likely will not withstand the political challenges of implementation (Malen, 2006). There are many factors that contribute to the challenge of adopting certain policies, which are explored later in this analysis. For this portion of the analysis, research indicates that, as a policy is more precise and created in a way that outlines development tactics step-by-step, implementors run into a situation of limited flexibility.

For example, one could say that NCLB has been a difficult policy to implement as certain accountability practices have resulted in sub-standard outcomes. While the policy has yet to
reach its full potential, one issue that teachers have with the implementation of this policy is that there is no room to fudge the line. It would almost be better for policies to have some sort of vagueness.

Some mandates leverage core differences in what policies will be difficult for schools to adopt. However, there are several other factors including: 1) What programs will need to be adopted in order for initiatives to be fully implemented? 2) How much time is allotted for implementation? Is the timeframe realistic? 3) How important are individual beliefs and behaviors in the implementation process? For example, how does the factor of ‘I don’t like change’ affect overall outcomes?, and 4) What else should policymakers and teachers know in order to aid in implementation success keeping everybody happy?

Education policy goals sometimes extend to a scale beyond formal school systems to address the quality of learning opportunities in students’ families and communities. (Honig, 2006, p. 11)

While policymakers may be concerned with next year’s election, educators are more concerned with how these policies will affect their current curriculum based upon how much time and effort it may take to figure it out. Educators are also concerned with how these policy changes will affect their students and communities. The next section discusses certain expectations retained by policymakers, administrators and teachers, which influence particular biases that affect the results of successful implementation.

**Bias**

There are several biases that have integrated into social conversation regarding the role of the policymaker, administrator and/or teacher in policy implementation. Before implementation even starts, these biases contribute to the main reason why implementation fails. The argument is that regardless of where the bias comes from, it affects overall outcomes when trying to implement change or reform educational strategies.

For example, each individual searching for solutions to endless educational problems seems to think they know the right answer to any particular dilemma. While it may be idealistic to think that involving more people from different knowledgeable backgrounds could help in figuring out what systems currently influence successful outcomes and work to the benefit of the students,
human nature declares otherwise. It is unfortunate that biases have been engrained so deeply into societal thinking that it jades decisions and progression of realistic solutions to common problems.

Recognizing these biases in the Policy-to-Practice Continuum, researchers Hall and Hord (2001) suggest that trust across systems (i.e. from teachers to policymakers to administrators) is in short supply, making it is easy to blame someone else for the failure of certain programs.

Teachers can see their end of the continuum very well, but they do not recognize what work is like at other points along the continuum. They think that district superintendents and state policymakers have easy jobs, “They are given cars, and all they do is mandate things for teachers to do; they have no idea what life is like in the classroom.” Policymakers at the other end of the continuum have similarly limited vie. They feel harried and pressured, and do not see themselves as being able to influence much of anything. They see the complexity of their work and believe that no one understands their approach to education. Many of them view teachers as having the easy job. (Hall & Hord, 2001, pp. 11-12).

The following section provides some insight into these different biases through an observational case study of the interaction between an administrator/policy-maker and a teacher.

Observational Case Study – Administrator versus Teacher: While preparing research for this portion of the analysis, I observed two of my friends who seemed to disagree about the role of teachers and administrators in certain classroom interventions. For some background, this discourse was between an administrator who plays an influential role in policy creation, and a teacher who has experience teaching junior high level students, as well as college-level students. The background of this discussion was based on research the administrator was gathering in order to successfully implement an educational intervention at the beginning 2011.

Conversation from the Administrator: The administrator expressed frustration that he had given very specific instructions to teachers to fill out a survey that would enable him to use the data to support moving forward with this specific intervention. He argued that he had given two months for these teachers to fill out a very “simple 10-question survey.” He then recounted an experience, where a teacher had requested more time after the deadline had passed, informing him that he did not comprehend the pressures of what teacher’s had to do everyday. The argument was that he should have allotted more time for teachers to respond to the survey and should have extended the deadline. The administrator concluded his remarks by stating that his
job was put on hold because this teacher did not recognize the importance of his research, even though he felt he clearly communicated his intentions and exploration behind this intervention.

In other conversations with other administrators who influence policy, I have noticed that many have experiences with teachers that leave them with the negative impressions. Several have expressed that teachers have no idea what administrators grapple with everyday. Administrators feel that not only do they have to adhere to what federal and state governments have mandated for educators, but they also have to deal with school district needs, what resources are available (budget), realistic expectations for implementation of programs, putting out fires between other administrators and teachers and coming up with new and innovative ways to motivate not only teachers, but students, parents and communities.

**Conversation from the Teacher:** The teacher expressed frustration that when things come across her desk during the class period that most teachers shove it aside in order to concentrate on what is happening at the time. She said that it is very frustrating for teachers to fill out surveys, even if they have been “spelled out quite simply.” The simplicity of the material is not the issue for them. She argued that teachers cannot realistically stop what they are doing (which is teaching) in order to fill out these surveys. She continued saying that even when class gets out, she normally spends time working on what needs to happen for the next day, or even the next week. Though there are preparation periods to help with that, she said that one thing that administrators should understand is that most teachers are involved with the students, not only in the classroom, but through other activities as well. In a particular instance when she was given information to complete, she was working as a health and science teacher, as well as coaching basketball and was involved in various club events with the students.

Though she was not involved in this particular survey, she defended teachers as those who have to deal with the day-to-day workings of the classroom. She also said that when she has been required to fill out surveys, that it has never been explained to her why these surveys were important, nor has she seen anything come from the research. Therefore, when surveys pass her desk now, it is easy for her to pass them up. “I haven’t seen anything happen with the research, so why should I take the time to fill this out,” she said.
In other conversations with teachers, most expressed that policymakers or administrators have no idea what teachers need in their classroom. They say that because policymakers are not actually in the classroom to know the needs of the teachers or the students, policymakers don’t know what is going to work. Many teachers I have spoken with regarding these issues have said in a sense, “How many of these policymakers have actually taught in a classroom? Because it seems to me that they have no idea what we need or what it takes to even control classroom situations….and they expect us to use their intervention successfully?”

Concluding Remarks on Bias: While both arguments presented have justification for frustration, the main concern is that these biases are preventing these two actors from having successful interventions in the future. If either of these actors is approached to work with the other, this automatic bias will make their jobs even that much more frustrating. The point of this case study is to once again point out that successful implementation and change cannot happen unless these different actors begin to trust one another and work together to bring about successful outcomes. While overcoming these biases may seem like a large endeavor, as it requires constituting behavioral changes, it is important to understand the roles of individuals in policy implementation. The next section of this analysis discusses who affects policy implementation, what their individual roles are and what other factors affect implementation.

INDIVIDUAL ROLES IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

This analysis discussed some current issues that make the implementation of policy difficult. As demonstrated, there are many different variables and dimensions of what truly affects policy implementation. However, Honig (2006) argues that individual roles of people are what makes or breaks implementation. The following subsections provide a glimpse at how individual roles shape the process of implementation.

Teachers

The teacher’s role in the implementation process is one of the most important. As discussed earlier, the teacher is the eyes and ears of the classroom. They have first hand experience as to what works for students in the classroom and what doesn’t work. While they
struggle to improve teaching tactics through professional development, there are several aspects that can make or break certain implementation practices. For example, when implementation calls for certain amounts of change, most teachers are expected to graft new ideas into traditional methods. Whether or not the implementation is successful is based around several ideas, which are discussed in the following subsections.

**Teacher interaction with colleagues.** Numerous studies have found that the strength of teacher’s professional relationships influences the degree to which they change their practice. These studies argue that teachers in schools with shared goals, collaboration, a focus on student learning, shared responsibility, and social trust are more likely to make changes in their instructional behavior” (Coburn & Stein, 2006, p. 27). The research also suggests that teachers are more likely to be influenced by goal-oriented policies when they are involved with social and cultural professional learning. Basically, teachers that are more involved in professional development alongside their peers are more likely to accept and want to implement changes in the classroom.

**Teacher cognition and interpretation.** A teacher’s prior knowledge, understanding of community traditions, interpretation of how the policy affects those traditions and personal understanding of the policy, including the expectations and beliefs of what practices and processes has worked in the past, affects the implementation (Spillane, Reiser & Gomez, 2006, p. 49). As discussed earlier, the interpretation of the intervention or change affects how teachers implement it in their classroom.

Some of these differences were due to the teacher’s varying opportunities to learn about the policy, including the policy texts available, professional development workshops, and guidance and support from district or school. (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 52)

For example, let’s say that X school district wants to implement a new intervention that would change the way math scores were measured in order to meet current NCLB standards. Mrs. Y decides to support this implementation and teaches what she feels will help the students achieve a knowledge of the upcoming test used to account for these math scores. As part of teaching methods, she helps students with their answers. Even though she read something to the
affect that she couldn’t help the kids during testing, she felt that as long as she didn’t given them the answers, it was fine for her to help them out.

As part of this new intervention, the regulations state that nobody in X school district can help these students during the testing period. In this instance, Mrs. Y is reprimanded and doesn’t know why. It is obvious that Mrs. Y’s basic knowledge and understanding of executing these measures did not meet the standards required by both state and federal mandates. This is an example of how teacher cognition and interpretation of certain implementation affects its overall success.

**Teachers’ resistance to change.** Research suggests that the success of whether or not a policy is implemented can also be centered on whether or not teachers resist or transform the policy to meet their own individual standards (Croll, Abbott, Broadfoot, Osborn & Pollard, 1994). As alluded to previously in this analysis, if teachers feel they are not part of the process, they will be more resistant to change. Hord and Hall (2001) suggest that in order for change to succeed, all participants need to replace this typical vertical-thinking (top-down) perspective with a horizontal perspective, “in which all of the actors are viewed as being on the same plane, with none higher or lower than any others” (p. 11).

**Policymakers**

While policymakers have the ability to affect implementation formulating and designing procedures, processes, tools, interventions and accountability systems, their role indirectly influences shifts in practice by shaping certain conditions (Coburn & Stein, 2006). The idea that policymakers aid the implementation process requires that the policymaker wear many hats. The definition of policymaker in this analysis refers to local, state, federal representatives, and even those persons who influence policy, like administrators, lobbyists, superintendents, mayors, etc. In order to garner successful outcomes, the policymaker’s role in implementation include designing policies that compliment existing conditions and understanding the teaching community.

**Designing policies that compliment existing conditions.** “The policymaker can shape conditions for learning in communities by balancing reification, participation, and negotiability in
policy design” (Coburn & Stein, 2006, p. 43). Policymakers are responsible not only for the development of the framework, but also how that framework can be used in varying circumstances that compliment existing and future conditions of the school, and even the community environment.

For example, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School (CMS) District, one of the leading edge, innovative instructional and academic school districts with rising achievement levels, has dealt with policies that did not fit the conditions of their school program. In a 2006 report written by the Council of Great City Schools, growth of student enrollment for pre-k through 12th grade classrooms increased dramatically catering to an additional 3-5,000 students a year since 2000 with an increase in minority student enrollment requiring English as a second language support (CMS, 2006). The district faced demanding challenges as the changing student-body dynamic and the need for more support to aid enrollment escalated.

With the demands for higher student achievement levels required by the federal government and a variety of state mandates, the Council of Great City Schools took it upon themselves to conduct several different assessments during the school year about the effectiveness of certain implementation requirements with different divisions, specifically dealing with the implementation of HR functions in the school. The research found that the organizational structure of the role of HR representatives within the district did not meet alignment requirements of the strategic vision, mission goals and objectives of the state (CMS, 2006). In other words, there was a disconnect between expectation and implementation of HR functions in the school district.

This case study demonstrates what happens when policymakers do not design policies that compliment existing conditions. In this case the implementation tactics proposed by policymakers did not meet the demands of the school-district development, which left the responsibility on the shoulders of the district to determine what strategies and analyses needed to happen in order to meet the demands of current policy.

**Understanding teaching community.** The most effective implementation techniques include when policymakers work with the teaching community to understand what is needed in
the classroom. Datnow (2006) argues that policymakers have not been very sensitive to the culture of schools, and that mutual adaptive processes allow both parties to be more apt to collaborate and figure out what strategies work. This specific area is discussed in-depth later in this analysis.

**Community**

Individuals view implementation based on individual decision-making skills, their preference, what previous knowledge they have accumulated and what resource constraints there are (Loeb & McEwan, 2006). As demonstrated earlier, the types of relationships teachers have with one another affects implementation. It is no surprise that other social groups, including community and the relationships formed in this community also affect implementation. Individuals that make up a community that can either hamper or enable the politics behind certain legislation.

Some recent implication studies have underscored the influential role of social interaction as part of social context in the implementation process. (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 56)

Within the community, researchers have highlighted the roles of both business leaders and advocacy groups as contributors to the implementation of policy.

**Business Leaders.** This group of actors wouldn’t generally be considered as one that influences policy. However, research shows that because of their role as business leaders, these actors are generally respected in their communities. People have come to view them with a certain degree of trust, and have followed their example when certain school initiatives were supported. Research indicates that these business leaders were “individuals who are not formally named as targets in policy design but who nonetheless participate in and otherwise influence implementation” (Honig, 2006, p. 16).

**Advocacy Groups.** While there is plenty of research to support the theory that people are influenced by other people, the mention of advocacy groups in this analysis should not be surprising. When large groups of people resist certain procedures, they can have a direct influence on whether or not the policy for implementation is passed.

…those who stand to win or lose from particular policies significantly shape the mobilization of groups either in support of or against implementation. (Honig, 2006, p. 15)
For example, as part of the Primary Assessment Curriculum and Experience (PACE) study where teachers were interviewed as part of a large research project in Great Britain in 1993, teachers unions and community supporters (advocacy groups) resisted a section of the Education Reform Act. This section of the Act seemed as though it were requiring teachers to work under a great deal of pressure. During the reauthorization of this bill, union action refused to carry out the statutory assessment procedures (Croll et al., 1994), which stymied the passing of certain standardized assessments. Though these groups weren’t opposed to the content of the policy, they were driven by a belief that the new assessments would create unreasonable demands on teachers. The role of these unions and supporting advocacy groups helped policymakers question educational policy and future implementation tactics.

While these individual actors making up the community have a lot to do with whether or not certain implementation techniques work, there are several other factors that affect the success of implementation.

As demonstrated in the PACE study, communities as organizations can create a unification of negative reactions that contribute to how policy goes from an idea into a program that can be implemented. Generally when a state passes legislation, it has to go over many borders. As will be discussed in the Case Study of Jordan School District, the state legislature made decisions that affected all the schools districts in Salt Lake City. Because certain policies have to go over district borders, policymakers have to be aware of the differing pre-established norms and repertoires of practice, etc. (Coburn & Stein, 2006).

Other political indicators that influence implementation are the: 1) urban contexts including the cultural and political economy of the school districts, 2) tactic knowledge that is learned through experience, individual processing, unconscious integration of contextual cues from the community and expectations in how to value or act in different situations (Hall & Hord, 2001; Spillane et al. 2006), 3) gender, 4) workplace environment and whether or not there are goal-related policies as opposed to more peripheral changes that need to be made (Honig, 2006), and 5) other social constructs.
There are hundreds of books written about how the community can affect politics and policy decisions. However, it is important to understand that while policy must try to bridge new practices, the community has to support and preserve the continuity of the practice in order for it to be successful. The next section examines varying disconnects that have been researched and what this means for the future of implementation.

**THE GREAT DISCONNECT(S)**

As this analysis has already examined, there are several reasons that affect the implementation of certain policies, including the churning and saturation process i.e. too much turnover, too much policy, biases that prevent the effective outcomes and individual roles that are determined by previous knowledge beliefs, etc. The following section investigates several other reasons including lack of communication, infrastructure, alignment, budget and the politics of policy that might prevent certain implementation measures from happening.

*Lack of Communication*

It is inevitable that misunderstanding and communication errors happen, whether in educational settings or not. As was stated earlier, interpretations of policy contribute to how a policy is implemented. While policymakers have one thing in mind when they write policy, teachers may interpret them differently, and how that interpretation works in the classroom may be very different than what policymakers had in mind. While the lack of understanding cannot just be attributed to “lack of effort, incomplete buy-in, or explicit rejection of ideas” (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 52), there can be great inconsistency on the interpretation of actual policy by both administrators and teachers.

For example, as mentioned above, during the PACE study, interviews showed that teachers were not really wanting to negate using standardized tests, “it was the way in which they interpreted the demands made on them and attempted to get the most accurate assessment in a difficult and pressured situation which has led to assessment intended to be independent” (Croll et al., 1994, p. 344). The PACE study also concluded that teachers really have not been given the instruction they need in order to successfully implement differing interventions. From the example
of the administrator versus the teacher case study about bias above, one complaint from the
teacher was that she was not informed of what her participation would contribute. Had she known
that her answers would contribute to an intervention that would aid her workload as a teacher,
she may have been more prone to participate.

In a qualitative case study used to analyze and define intermediary organizations through
a series of interview questions (which will be discussed later in this analysis), Honig (2004)
discovered that administrators using intermediary organizations to help with the implementation of
new policy had under-developed goals and strategies that impeded knowledge development of
both teachers and administrators. There was also a lack of familiarity with other policies regarding
the same implementation. The policy was ambiguous, which created general misunderstanding
about what was required in the school (Honig, 2004).

Lack of leadership – disconnect between policy and practice: Interpretation and
misunderstanding of policy is only one issue of communication that contributes to the great
disconnect. However, there seems to be a lack of alignment between policy and practice, which
can result from feelings of restriction, demands of policy or lack of support via leadership and
infrastructure.

Problems with implementation are seen as arising either from limitations in school
management or teacher capabilities, or from essentially technical hitches in the way
policy was designed or explained. (Croll et al., 1994, p. 337).

As explanations flounder, teachers have to fudge the boundaries of reform in order to
meet the requirements of any implementation practice. While some teachers may feel that the
pressure to perform is immobilized, they are still required to meet certain standards and as such
feel restricted in what they can or can’t do in the classroom. When it comes to autonomous
approaches to the implementation of policy, teachers actually feel that creative engagement limits
their professional ability to teach due to certain curriculum and assessment guidelines (Croll et
al., 1994, p. 338). Meeting the demands of policies, especially if there are limited resources,
requires a certain amount of leadership from administrators. If teachers must adhere to certain
requirements in order to help students ‘make the grade’, then it is imperative that leaders take
responsibility to direct their development.
While there may be general misunderstandings during the implementation process, the lack of infrastructure, including lack of leadership, contributes to the great disconnect. Generally speaking it is hard to report any results when there is no one to report to or who could direct advice on how to improve certain practices. When the administrative infrastructure is weak or fails, accountability also declines. During the analysis mentioned above regarding intermediary organizations, Honig (2004) also reports that when clear standards and accountability processes lag, support and evaluation falter in a sense that revision of certain implementation methods can not be provided, making the coordination of both administrative and teaching jobs difficult.

In giving policy background on comprehensive school reform (CSR), Datnow (2006) states that certain “districts failed to provide organizational, public, and instructional leaderships to schools implementing the designs” (p. 110). The lack of support from administration demonstrated conflicting values on whether or not the reform was even a priority for the school district. The research continues to state that when district leadership didn’t support new reform, that the implementation method was likely to be dropped.

**Budget**

Obviously it is hard for any entity, whether for profit or not for profit, to achieve certain outcomes without the proper budget. When it comes to the implementation of policy, educators are often left with little to no resources in order to implement certain changes.

For example, I worked for an organization in Salt Lake City, Utah called the 100% For Kids Credit Union Education Foundation where 100% of the funds donated go directly to teachers for use in their classroom\(^{ii}\). Administrators or teachers had the opportunity to apply for grants ranging from $100 - $5,000. After receipt of the grant, the 100% For Kids board would approve of how much monies would be given to each school and/or district. What was appalling to each member of the board was the fact that the majority of the grant applications were for materials as fundamental as books in order to make leveled-reading libraries, which would aid students in obtaining the proper reading skills required by certain state mandates.
As another example of how budget could hinder the implementation process, Datnow (2006) introduces school reform efforts in New Jersey schools to implement certain standards in lower-income areas and provide a thorough and efficient education, as was required by law since the passing of Abbott v. Burke. During the implementation of a universal pre-k development program that supplemented student needs in high-poverty areas, Datnow (2006) suggests that early “implementation efforts were thwarted when schools did not receive the resources from the state that they were expecting in order to pay for materials and training. This outcome was further driven by a lack of capacity for school-based budgeting and insufficient direction from states and districts” (p. 110). There is no doubt that constrained fiscal resources weaken independence and flexibility in the implementation of educational programs and practices.

**Politics**

The political aspect of successfully implementing or generating school reform tends to impede rather than enable policy implementation. The following is a case study example of how ‘political’ policy implementation can get.

**Case Study Jordan School District**: In early 2010, the Salt Lake City School board in Salt Lake City, Utah was informed that there would be a 5.2% budget cut for 2010-2011 school year. While this cut meant denying the district $3.39 million, several school districts, including the Jordan School District, held open meetings to discuss what new policies would be put in place to help districts save money.

Already having begun to extract cost saving efficiencies this past year that amounted to about $800,000 in savings, the School Board is being challenged to examine possible personnel cuts (which Superintendent McKell Withers hopes would only come through attrition), program and service cuts, compensation reductions, class size increases, or increased property taxes. (examiner.com, 2010).

While the Utah school board tackled the issues of reducing the school year in order to save money, the Jordan School District decided the best way to solve these budget cuts would be to let go of some teachers, while classroom sizes would increase as a result. Though nothing was covered by the media, one teacher working for the Jordan School District shared his observations of the political role the board of education played in dealing with the implementation of these new strategies intended to save the school district money.
Observation: The teacher attended an after-school meeting that was open to the public to discuss concerns about these controversial decisions. He observed that the room of the hearing was filled to capacity (about 230 some odd seats). Students were outside the room in the corridor protesting with signs that said, “Don’t let our teachers go,” and “You cut teachers, we cut class.” While the disruption in the hallway ensued, members of the public also stood in the hallway wanting to know the background of the decision with hopes of persuading the members of the board to find alternative solutions for this budget problem. The board alerted the public that they would not allow the meeting to go on with the doors of the auditorium open. While people in the hallway wanted to be a part of this open forum, the board would not allow them to participate because they couldn’t fit in the room. Some suggested moving the date and the meeting to another location and time. The board was said to have closed the doors, and those wanting to participate who were in the hallway could not contribute to the meeting.

Meeting Minutes: In the minutes of the meeting (Jordan Board of Education minutes, 2010), West Jordan City Mayor, Melissa K. Johnson addressed the board stating, “It has been helpful for the city when setting policy and making decisions to have this constant supply of information” (p.3). She continued saying that board members should let her know if they needed help with other education-related legislation so the city could help by way of a resolution supporting their measures. She concluded by saying that “the Legislature caused this funding shortfall problem and should be addressing what they will do to fix it” (JBOE, 2010, p. 3).

Following the controversial meeting, the following statement was released to all Jordan School District employees:

February 25, 2010

Dear Employees,

We appreciate very much the perspectives and viewpoints of patrons, staff, and students expressed at Tuesday night’s Board Meeting and in subsequent days. These suggestions, and many others we are receiving, will be reviewed and discussed.

Inasmuch as the Legislature has not finalized a State education budget for next year, we will not be making further statements or commitments about balancing the budget deficit until we have received and reviewed budget allocations to education for next year (2010-11). Once this information is available, the Board will proceed to re-evaluate what actions will be needed to balance next year’s budget based on next year’s State allocation.
Teachers, thank you again for your love of students, teaching, and learning in our District. To our support staff and administrators, thank you for your devoted service to our schools and patrons.

Sincerely,
Jordan Board of Education (Anonymous, personal communication, February 25, 2010).

Impressions: While this is an issue that is most likely close to home for many school districts, the politics of this issue is a contributing factor to the overall controversy. In the observation of the proceedings, the minutes of the meeting and the follow-up letter to attendees, the board of education and Mayor Johnson were keen on placing blame on the legislature to act. Education, resources, teacher quality, student achievement, etc., are all extremely political issues and tend to tie up implementation on varying levels.

Economics

Since the development of *A Nation at Risk* discussed earlier, research has proven that economics is directly related to policy, and with that policy implementation. While policies may focus on certain outcomes and standards, there is no doubt that they have started to move more toward accountability processes. The dynamic change of policy has created situations where economy has become a prominent piece of implementation. For example, researchers Brewer, Hentschke, Eide, Kuzin and Nayfack (2008) state that for education policy, there has been increasing attention to resource allocation and decision making at the school level, and continue stating:

…in order to understand educational policy in an era of accountability it is necessary to consider more explicitly the way in which actors in a large complex system respond to the incentives they face. As a part of building accountability systems, states, districts and schools have become more interested in the collection of data on outcomes and making them available in a way that permits their use in decision making. (p. 24)

As legislature continues to create policies that revolve around a variety of different ways to measure knowledge, what social organizations do and how they use resources particularly affects the economy. Over the course of history, systems in government have been developed to aid education funding, specifically regarding regulatory mandates imposed by property tax. In this sense, government involvement in developing ways to acquire additional financial support for lower income areas, has added to the economic demands of policy. Brewer et al. (2008) suggest that as the economy shifted in the 1970s and 1980s that government started looking at education
as a business where, “there have been various attempts to introduce elements of market-based resource allocation to K-12 education in the United States” (p. 32).

**SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION: RECOMMENDATIONS**

After a thorough examination of the possible disconnects of why policy implementation can break down almost as soon as it is passed, this next section focuses on what policy or policymakers should implement in policies in order to have successful implementation.

*Create Alignment Mechanisms*

With the disconnect between policymakers, administrators and teachers, several researchers have recommended the establishment of intermediary organizations or partners to aid in correct implementation.

...intermediary organization has come to refer to a motley collection of organizations otherwise known as technical assistance providers, vendors, collaboratives, capacity builders, community development coaches, universities, resource and referral organizations, external support providers, professional development organizations, reform support organizations, design teams, Public Education Funds, regional reform organizations, and corporate law firms. (Honig, 2004, p. 66)

Whichever medium is suggested for each school district, it is recommended to hire someone who knows the in’s and out’s of student mentality or at least someone who is willing to familiarize themselves with it. In that same role, intermediary organizations must also become familiar with policymakers’ intentions and expectations. In order to have successful intermediary organizations, it is important for both parties to communicate needs. Acting as the mentor and advocate between these two groups, the intermediary organization must define expectations, progress and concerns one with another in order to have establish clear communication.

For example, Honig (2004) examines a case in Oakland School District that established four intermediary organizations to mediate accountability practices that adhered to the state and federally mandated initiatives. Based as a PR move that also helped establish local support for implementation, the intermediary organization acted as a mediator in a sense that it helped school districts manage long-standing tensions between sites and district central offices (Honig, 2004).
It is possible that with the establishment of intermediary organizations, that these organizations can provide knowledge of sites and policy systems, social/political ties to sites and policy systems, and an administrative infrastructure – necessary for implementation of collaborative education policy but traditionally unavailable in the district central office or sites. (Honig, 2004, p. 73)

Policymakers can institute, recommend or even mandate intermediary organizations as their own PR move in a sense that they are creating high-level political support for struggling entities. The spin created from this governmental move emphasizes that government cares about the success of school reform and is dedicated to making work at all levels. To support the alignment mechanisms, there are several other factors that need to be addressed that have been alluded to above, but deserve to be mentioned again in this analysis.

Successfully Implement Communication: Clear and frequent communication helps to clear up any misunderstanding of the demands and expectations of both policymakers and education staff. Successful implementation happens when there are regular meetings to discuss what is working and what isn’t working (Honig, 2004). Indicative of what happens when intermediary organizations are thrown into the mix, this theory is proven to work in almost every work-related situation.

Developing Relationships of Trust: Part of developing trust includes creating stable situations and environments in which both policymakers and educational staff work. If administrators or policymakers are constantly switching things around, there is less consistency, which leads to less efficiency during the implementation process. The same is said of turnover.

Creating a Distinct Chain of Command: When discussing the great disconnect mentioned earlier, it was proven that when leadership or administration did not support policies, the likelihood of successful implementation was nearly non-existent. In the example of using intermediary organizations when “leadership was responsible for being the primary operators, documenters, or was responsible for disseminating information, it didn’t get lost in the chain of command and systems or implementation was more efficient” (Honig, 2004, p. 75). As any staff developer understands, when policymakers establish a chain of command it is also important to develop plans for allocating resources, creating office systems that are needed to aid organizational practices and establishing written expectations in strategic plans. This should not
be left up to the administrators to undertake, or there could be another breakdown in successful implementation. Ultimately, adhering to these alignment mechanisms ensures successful implementation.

**Crossing the Boundary**

Policymakers should be aware that there is a way to balance initiatives across community and district boundaries.

Policy designs must strike a balance between a reliance on reifications necessary to coordinate meaning across the multiple overlapping communities of practice, and the structures of participation necessary to create the engagement required for local communities to participate in the negotiation of meaning (Coburn & Stein, 2006, p. 43).

As was mentioned earlier, policymakers should create boundaries in a way that stimulates an overall understanding of what these changes mean for the community as a whole. As policymakers include this in their implementation policies, they must also make sure to define practices for administrators and what that means on a district-wide level.

**Combine Old and New Ideas**

As was examined at the beginning of this analysis, people generally don’t like change. In fact when it comes to implementing change through the implementation of new policies, most assert that change is a very painful process (Hall & Hord, 2001). When instituting change whether by little or large amounts, it is important to combine old and new ideas. Research indicates that when teachers see new ideas coming from more familiar areas, like those already discussed, they are more likely to implement similar frameworks (Spillane et al., 2006). It is also important to create appropriate and realistic interventions.

**Teachers as Partners:** Another way to combine old and new ideas is to involve teachers as policymakers. The theory introduced by Croll et al. (1994) suggests that when teachers act in a partnership role, they have increased influence because of their connections to other educators, which could be beneficial for implementation.

The model emphasizes that it is not necessary for teachers to act collectively in order to have a systematic impact on policy, but that common action can arise from the similarity of the situations teachers act in and the ideas in which inform their action. (Croll et al., 1994, p. 344)
As demonstrated earlier, the theory is that when teachers become more involved in policy creation or in what demands they must meet, they become less resistant to change. There is a need for teachers to be more aggressive about change that will not only adhere to rising standards, but that is also realistic for classroom and student advancement. While teacher’s have the responsibility to cover core curriculum requirements, as a street-level operator, they know what works and what doesn’t work in order to reach and adhere to a child’s “true attainment” (Croll et al., 1994, p. 343).

**Talk the Walk**

To eliminate all those misunderstandings, policymakers need to dismiss political grammar, and put political grammar into words that the teachers understand. This is not to say that teacher’s are incapable of understanding. Policymakers come from a whole other standard of discourse. In other words, policymakers use certain symbols to get across their meaning, while teachers use a whole other set of symbols. In the previous communication section, the seriousness of what a policy says and how it is read can directly affect implementation of policy. In speaking about intermediary organizations, Honig (2004) explains that simplified and condensed information works to aid implementation.

For example, researcher Heather Hill (2006) offers a profound observation of this argument by providing an example of a state policy:

By the end of grade 12, students will apply proficiently a range of numeric, algebraic, geometric and statistical concepts and skills to formulate analyze, and solve real-world problems; to facilitate inquiry and the exploration of real-world phenomena; and to support continued development and appreciation of mathematics as a discipline. (Hill, 2006, p. 72).

While teachers can create real-world situations and apply them to mathematical principles, policymakers may view these real-world situations as something else. Policies are filled with different and varying meanings. For policymakers who desire to convey real messages through their policy, Hill (2006) gives some suggestions including: 1) educational policymakers can interprets new standards through standards documents, curriculum materials, assessments, professional development, video-taped classroom instruction, descriptive case studies and other forms 2) policymakers should consider involving teachers in creating the actual language for the
policy, and 3) policymakers should work at standardizing the language by professional education, materials and other means (p. 81).

**Become Receptive**

During an investigation initiated through the Rand Change Agency Study, researchers found that an organization’s willingness to change and become receptive is indicative of their commitment to collaborative interaction. These valuable relationships, viewed and categorized as ‘social capitol’ has contributed more to the receptivity to change than anything else (Smylie & Evans, 2006). While this research was specific for relationships in the inner-workings of the educational atmosphere, this information is valuable to policymakers as they can create policy that could influence organizational programs to create a sense of community.

**CONCLUSION**

While there are several factors impacting successful implementation and education reform, this analysis provided some insight into basic concepts behind the challenge of change. When demanding certain outcomes of policy that will be implemented on school-wide levels, it is important for policymakers to understand that a policy needs time to churn in order to be effective.

This research also supports the theory that biases between policymakers, administrators and teachers, should be addressed and dispelled before a policy takes shape. Therefore, successful implementation demands that policymakers have consistent open communication with school administrators and teachers in order to evaluate and reevaluate expectations and the realities of implementation of the policies they develop for the classroom.
RESOURCES


END NOTES

1 Information found at: http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/94/open_change-or-die.html
2 Information found at: http://www.100percentforkids.org/
3 Information found at: http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/AbbottvBurke/AboutAbbott.htm