



JOHNS HOPKINS
SCHOOL of EDUCATION

Going to Scale: Expanding Programs that Work



Dear Colleagues,

While few would argue against the importance of K-12 schools implementing practices that “work,” assuring that the most evidence-based practices are being implemented at scale has proven very difficult. Despite direct guidance from federal legislation and supportive repositories like the Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE, Center for Research and Reform in Education, Johns Hopkins School of Education) and the What Works Clearinghouse, K-12 schools and their leaders continue to be swayed by multiple factors other than evidence in their choices of educational practice.

Schools, school districts and states become comfortable with existing approaches and are often resistant to change. This resistance is sometimes quite rational whether the new approach is evidence-based or not. It takes time and money to fully implement any educational practice. Once fully implemented, educational institutions naturally protect their investment by resisting efforts to implement new, more effective practices.

When change is palatable, these educational institutions are bombarded with a plethora of well marketed approaches designed with impressive face validity. These approaches are logical, presented within the larger context of “doing good,” and are attractively packaged with suggestive images of their effectiveness. Too often, old fashioned sales often trump evidence of effectiveness.

The dual challenge of finding evidence-based programs that can be brought to scale has been a significant impediment to education reform in the United States. What’s needed is a tenacious commitment by colleges and universities, as well as the education community, to support faculty research efforts to develop, implement, and bring to scale the most effective evidence-based programs available. We cannot be frightened away by the required work involved to improve student performance. Together we can make evidence-based programs the rule rather than the exception.



David W. Andrews, PhD
Dean





We asked three nationally recognized researchers at the Johns Hopkins School of Education (SOE) to share their experiences and lessons learned in bringing their successful evidence-based programs to scale: Robert Slavin and Robert Balfanz, who together received \$80 million in the I3 competition to expand their programs, Success For All and Talent Development Secondary's Diplomas Now program, respectively; and Joyce Epstein, who leads the National Network of Partnership Schools.

So what is needed to bring a program to scale? What are the challenges involved? How do you bring a program to scale and not sacrifice quality? And how do you convince school leadership to implement more effective practices?

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Sadly, there's more evidence-based research to help the consumer select a toaster oven than there is to select a curriculum for an entire state or school district.

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Robert Slavin, researcher and director
SOE's Center for Research and Reform in Education

Needing the Right People

Balfanz: For our school-based Talent Development Secondary's Diplomas Now program (TDS), we found we needed to create what we called an "implementation support infrastructure." The key to this infrastructure is a trained facilitator who is respected by educators and can be our agent on the ground. The facilitator becomes the "grease and the glue" for the program and acts as the program's translator on the ground.

Slavin: Success For All (SFA) programs require a combination of two types of assistance to schools. The first is a talented core of dedicated coaches working closely with the principal and faculty and, secondly, a local network of experienced schools that can offer technical and emotional support. We also need parents to be on our side. That's why our curriculum involves parents. They have to sign off on their children's homework among other responsibilities.

But truly, the single most important element is that there is no single most important element. You've got to get all things right. Would you say, "What's the single most important element of an airplane?" I think the same is true of SFA – its relentless attention to detail in every aspect of curriculum, instruction, professional development, school organization and so on.

Epstein: It was important for the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) to recruit researchers and facilitators who shared a commitment to changing the focus of school partnerships from one of a leader working with parents to a team approach with school, family and community members - all working together to increase the success of students. It's also important for districts to identify a leader for partnerships who can become an "expert" and permanent position in the district who can guide all schools to develop partnership plans and practices linked to their school improvement plans. In that way, family and community engagement is designed to support curricular and behavioral goals for student learning and development.

Challenges In the Field

Epstein: We've also learned about the challenges created by frequent turnover in district and school personnel. People leave, retire and change positions after starting to work well as leaders for partnerships. You must help districts and schools plan for these inevitable transitions to new leaders.

Balfanz: Finding the right balance between a school or district's situation and an evidence-based model is often a challenge. Adapting a model to local conditions, such as length of the school day or preferred curriculum, increases the school's buy-in and willingness to implement the model. Doing this while maintaining fidelity to the elements of the model that have been shown to drive improvement is where the delicate balance needs to occur.

Slavin: The challenges are many. Urban districts and schools experience considerable turmoil, constantly changing superintendents, boards, funding levels, and policies. SFA has not been immune from these challenges, but has managed to survive by focusing on the school as the unit of change, building shared leadership and solid systems in every classroom to maintain proven practices.

The bulk of SOE's research efforts, which receive more federal funding than any other graduate school of education in the United States, are focused on evidence-based research.

Quality Job #1

Slavin: Constant assessment of the quality of implementation and student outcomes keeps the whole staff on track. School staffs participate in a caring national network of schools in similar circumstances. We also believe that it's important that the overall integrity of the program be maintained to reproduce the results we have so consistently found in our research. We require that each participating school must make a free choice through secret ballot to adopt our program. All of these elements increase the likelihood that a SFA school will survive changes in superintendents, principals, and other turmoil. Disasters still happen, but the median SFA school has been with the program for 11 years, a remarkable record of stability in the stormy world of urban education.

Epstein: We encourage quality by helping members evaluate their work and progress every year. Each site uses an UPDATE survey at the end of each school year to review its program design and implementation. This resource helps schools, districts, states, and organizations in our network understand the researched-based expectations for their partnership work and to measure the quality of their work against those expectations.

Balfanz: One of the most important lessons learned led to the 2010 merger of our middle and high school programs to create Talent Development Secondary in response to research indicating that students started to show signs of losing interest in school and dropping out as early as the 6th grade. The research also showed that the 6th and 9th grades are critical junctures in students' lives and a key time for intervention. Ongoing evaluation strengthens the integrity of the program.

Communicating the Data

Balfanz: You have to work on persuasion skills. You are going to have to convince people (in schools, districts and states) that you have good answers AND that what you are proposing is compatible with what they are doing that works – even though you are changing fundamental behavior. Some audiences want the “hard” evidence of third-party studies. School principals aren’t impressed with them. That’s where the soft skills are necessary – showing that the program makes sense from a “practice” point of view.

Slavin: Part of the “sell” is communicating the value of research-based programs to school leaders and families. A research-based program is one that has been evaluated in real schools over at least a year, hopefully many times in comparison to control groups. That’s an absolutely essential part of what we consider to be something that is research-based and that often is left out when people talk about what’s research-based and what’s not. In education for some reason, we’ve done very little experimentation where we compare experimental and control groups to see which of them produces better outcomes for children.

Epstein: Many kinds of rigorous research—quantitative and qualitative—form a strong research base on school, family, and community partnerships. Evidence from applications in highly diverse communities also contributes to district and school leaders’ confidence that a new approach is likely to work for them. We have learned that research on partnerships informs and improves policy and practice and that practitioner’s challenges inform needed research.

Last Word

Never in the history of American education has the potential for fundamental reform been as great. In education and other human services, evidence of effectiveness in rigorous evaluations is taking on increasing importance in policy and practice. At SOE, our research and experience has led us to conclude that successful development, dissemination, and scaling up of proven approaches requires university support of faculty work, program fidelity, talented and dedicated staff, and a local and national network of schools willing to be an active and engaged partner.

Bringing Programs to Scale

SOE has a distinguished track record of developing evidence-based programs to improve learning outcomes that have been successfully replicated in schools across the country and internationally. These nationally recognized programs currently serve more than half a million students in 1,700 schools in 40 states and three countries.

Success for All: A whole school reform model developed by Johns Hopkins researchers, Robert Slavin and Nancy Madden, to help students from poor inner city neighborhoods succeed in school. Starting in one school in Baltimore, the program today serves students in over 1,000 schools in 40 states.

National Network of Partnership Schools: Johns Hopkins researchers, Joyce Epstein and her colleagues, initiated the program based on extensive research on the positive nature and effects of parental involvement in K-12 schools and on leadership program development with districts and states. The program started with eight pilot schools in Baltimore and has expanded to more than 600 schools in 60 districts, organizations, and state departments of education across the country.

Talent Development Secondary: Johns Hopkins researchers, James McPartland, Robert Balfanz, Douglas MacIver and their colleagues, began working with school officials in Philadelphia and Baltimore to develop a comprehensive school reform model that could turn around some of their worst performing schools. Today, the Talent Development Secondary program can be found in more than 50 schools in 12 states, the District of Columbia and Guam.

Teach For America: SOE developed a customized, face-to-face master’s degree program for Teach For America (TFA) corps members in Baltimore that was expanded online to reach TFA corps members nationwide. Currently, more than 300 corps members are enrolled in the national online program, with 1,500 planned for 2018.

Henderson-Hopkins: Operated by SOE, this new K-8 school and early childhood center serves an economically disadvantaged neighborhood in Baltimore and offers the most effective evidence-based program available to improve student performance. The school was designed as a national model for a high performing school that serves a diverse, mixed-income community with scalable personalized learning.

SOE Faculty

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