



Implementation Case Study:

So much to do... so little time!

At Revolutionary Schools, we often find ourselves working to counteract a pervasive “silver bullet” culture. We help districts begin where they are, working with the resources they already have, to dramatically increase student learning. Rather than blaming teachers for low student achievement, we consider teachers to be at the heart of the solution. However, as instructional accountability increases, teachers are given less and less autonomy – *less* autonomy over those same things they are being held *more* accountable for.

The cycle is predictable. Schools attempt to rise to increasing expectations by employing innumerable silver bullet solutions—quick fixes promising significant impacts. Over time, teachers have evolved under the silver-bullet scenario. They incorporate or improve upon new ideas they believe will work for their students and ignore everything else. Unfortunately, this tinkering occurs with little to no coordination between teachers, grades, and schools. The typical result is lower cumulative levels of student learning, then more political and public dissatisfaction with schools. Pressured by an angry public, schools set about working in good faith to resolve the problems with more silver bullet “solutions”... and the cycle continues.

The innovation offered by Revolutionary Schools is to break the cycle. We provide a scalable process that balances high levels of teacher autonomy with high levels of teacher accountability. We have learned the hard way that this kind of revolution is not for the faint of heart. It takes a tremendous amount of courage and coordination for school board members and district administrators to “stay the course” and sign on to a long-term, sustainable approach. For districts that are ready, the positive results can be seen within the first year. Unfortunately, silver bullets are hard to resist and the big picture hasn’t been readily evident to all school leaders...

PART A:

The addictive lure of silver bullets can come at any time. For this district it came in the middle of their instructional revolution. Ironically, the toughest part for the administrative team was behind them. For the remaining four months of the year, all the administrators had to do was sit back and watch as their teachers dramatically increased student learning. It would be the same the next year, and the next, as teachers annually revised and increased the rigor of their instructional contracts...

We started with the unanimous support of the administrative team. Administrators assured me the work was highly valued. In fact, Board approval of the district's homegrown reading program hinged on its delivery. As usual, resistance and skepticism of the teachers was high, but I assured them that their administrators were on board. Rumbblings persisted: "This is all well and good, but our district never sticks with anything for long."

Administrators occasionally joined grade-level team meetings. The teachers and I heralded their participation as a welcome sign of support. Predictably, the immediate discovery of widespread discrepancies in their enacted curriculum fueled discontent, but the administrators were patient as the teachers worked through and established common, achievable instructional targets for the remaining four months of this first school year.

All systems were go. I routinely assured every one of the district's three hundred teachers: Your administrative team has not signed on for just another initiative. The move to this sustainable process marks the end of initiatives as you know them. Our scope is comprehensive. We are not limiting our examination of our curriculum to our (unimpressive) state standards. We are creating a plan and structure nimble enough to withstand major state and federal policy shifts.

At the first of our third, and final, round of grade-level meetings, our only remaining task was for each grade level to finalize its depth-of-knowledge descriptors and then present instructional contracts to the receiving grade teachers. Morale should have been through the roof. The group had a lot to be proud of. Instead of complaining about what their incoming students didn't know, they had created a plan to change it! Individually, they had taken huge risks in this first year. Thanks to the support of their colleagues, teachers had committed to teaching skills to mastery that they had never taught before!

Morale was not through the roof, however. The team in front of me resembled the same thirty-five skeptical strangers to which I was introduced months before.

Allie was the first to speak up, "So how does this tie to the work the other consulting company is starting with us next week?" Although I wasn't sure about the role of the new consultant, I assured the team that I would work in tandem with him in the event our efforts overlapped. The group moved ahead and finalized the contract for that first year of implementation.

In closing, I reminded the group that their true challenge was upon them. Now they needed to go fulfill the contract they had created. I was so excited to come back at the end of the school year to hear about the progress their students had made—to see how they would increase the rigor of their curriculum for next year based on those accomplishments and how those improvements triggered system-wide adjustments in their scope and sequence. With much appreciation and praise, we ended our session.

I packed up and walked across the hall to follow up on Allie's question. The assistant superintendent responded proudly, "Yeah, Steve is going to come in and help us build a

standards-based, biweekly assessment system.” For clarification, I continued, “Allie was referring to a consultant that was starting next week.” “That’s Steve,” she confirmed. “The State just released the remainder of the Title II funds, but we only have a month to spend them, so we decided it was the perfect opportunity to go ahead to the next step.”



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PART B:

In addition to the gaps and redundancies in the enacted curriculum, we had identified three central causes for low levels of student achievement during our three rounds of meetings: (a) students were not able to read at grade-level, *at any grade-level*; (b) the disproportionate classroom placement of low performing students was dramatically limiting the curriculum for *half of the students in every grade level*, and (c) each year, half of the students in one grade level are being taught by an ineffective teaching team. The immediate establishment of biweekly, standards-based, multiple-choice tests would do nothing to address any of these issues. In fact, the minimal, standards-based focus ran contrary to the teachers' instructional contracts and the lost trust between teachers and administrators would be enough to set teachers back further than when we began.

I reminded the assistant superintendent that this was not "just another initiative." They had contracted with us to help them build an *internal* system of accountability. Teachers were finalizing explicit instructional contracts for this first year that would end up being far more comprehensive and rigorous than the state standards. However, at this point, the teachers hadn't even had a chance to teach the skills that she and Steve would have their students assessed on. As we had previously discussed: If she could just stick to the plan and hold off for *a mere six months*, teachers would have a chance to follow through on their instructional contracts and *they would request* the creation of common system of assessment as a natural extension of their work.

Unfortunately, the Assistant Superintendent did not see that jumping the gun on assessment – even by six months - would fuel resistance and destroy the hard-earned camaraderie and trust of the teachers: "You were going to do it anyway, right?" she responded. "So think of this as a way to show off their accomplishments!"