

BREAKING INTO THE SCHOOLS – Best Practices

“The structure of American urban education has not changed since late in the nineteenth century; by 1880, the basic features of public education in most major cities were the same as they are today,” declares Michael B. Katz in his book *Class, Bureaucracy, & Schools – The Illusion of Educational Change in America*, (1971). But even education historian Katz acknowledges that there have been prominent innovations in the public education arena since the nineteenth century.

On March 4, 2003, two guest speakers, Laura Hemminger, Director of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute (EOHSI) Resource Center at the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ); Mickey Sarquis, Director of Ohio’s Miami University’s Center for Chemical Education; and forty individuals who are striving to bring about educational change in Los Angeles public schools participated in a one-day Forum to learn about and share “Best Practices for Disseminating and Implementing Innovative Curricula in Los Angeles public schools.” The Center for Occupational and Environment Health, the UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health (LOSH) Program, and the Southern California Environmental Health Sciences Center (SCEHSC) co-sponsored this event.

Despite statistics that show 80% of youth work before they graduate high school, and that these are high rates of workplace injuries among these youth, very little attention is given to workplace health and safety education in public schools. Using a variety of approaches to disseminate and implement their Youth Project’s 10-session curriculum, *Safe Jobs for Youth*, the LOSH Program has been unable to get this innovation adopted by a significant number of teachers. This Forum was organized by LOSH to find out how other curriculum innovators had been able to achieve adoption.

“I’ve already scheduled a meeting with someone I met here...” This response from a participant at the Forum captures a significant recurring theme at the Forum – *partnerships maximize the capacity for curricula to spread and gain adoption.*

According to both Everett Rogers, one of the leading researchers in the area of “diffusion of innovation,” and Paul Mort from Columbia University and a leader in research on “innovation in education,” change takes time. Mort claims that “...the average American school lags 25 years behind the best practice.” Participants at the Forum struggle daily with this reality, given the urgency to expose all students to a high quality, learner-centered, equitable learning experience that includes curricula that is relevant to their daily lives and challenges them to think analytically.

This Best Practice Forum was a giant first step. To LOSH's knowledge, no one had brought together these kinds of people in Los Angeles to participate in a dialogue about diffusion of educational innovations in Los Angeles public schools. *“Worthwhile and overdue...when do we meet again?”* To capture the sentiment of this participant from the Forum, the next step is for LOSH to explore collaborations with participants and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) administrators, particularly superintendents at the 11 sub-districts. These partnerships benefit all stakeholders – districts and schools can implement high quality, innovative, content-standard curricula to meet their “Principles of Learning,” as crafted by Lauren Resnick, Director of the Learning and Development Center at the University of Pittsburg, teachers gain professional development and access to an invaluable resource, and students learn about topics that are relevant and challenging in an active and participatory manner.

This last point confirms a “lesson learned” at the Forum – the need to combine various approaches to accomplish adoption of innovative curricula. In other words, change agents, such as the Forum participants, use a combination of “top down” (e.g., convincing school administrators) and “bottom up” (e.g., convincing teachers) strategies for “breaking into schools – to accomplish change and adoption of innovative educational curriculum content.”