Real change requires a focus on implementation

At more than 1,000 locations throughout New York City, it is illegal to honk your horn unless it's an emergency, and fines for violating this rule can be as much as $350. While I don't know the history of how the city came to adopt this policy, here's what I do know. It's not working. Anyone who has been to New York City recently understands that the car horn is almost an appendage for taxi drivers and others who lack even a few grains of patience. It's one of the few places I've driven where people behind you at a traffic signal blow their horns before your light even turns green.

As I said, I don't know how this policy came to be, but here's what I imagine:

1. As the city became more congested, drivers became increasingly more impatient and began blowing their horns to release some of their frustrations.
2. Concerned residents petitioned for some type of ordinance to stop the noise, which well-intentioned city leaders passed.
3. City administrators waged a public-awareness campaign to change behaviors.
4. The horn blowing has continued; behaviors have not changed.

Unfortunately, a lot of change efforts and professional learning efforts suffer the same fate. They are well intentioned, but simply don't bring about the kinds of changes in practice their designers envisioned. The Implementation standard tells us that successful implementation begins with adult learning and change process research; provides ongoing support for individuals, teams, and schools in a variety of ways; and includes "constructive feedback and reflection to support continuous improvement in practice."

Often, one or more of these critical elements are left out, and the change efforts bring disappointing results. For example, look at the school system policies that require a certain number of hours each year for professional learning. On the one hand, it is wonderful that schools and systems recognize the need for professional learning as a vehicle for increased educator effectiveness. However, these hour-based systems often have little space for job-embedded forms of professional learning where teams apply research-based strategies, continue to learn collectively, or engage in constructive reflection and feedback.

Also consider the example of the administrative meetings many districts hold for their principals and other system leaders at the beginning of the year. Simply presenting information without providing opportunities for leaders to process what they've learned; collaborate with others as they make use of their new learning; and experience support from coaches, mentors, or supervisors as they attempt to implement this new information

will often yield the same results: little change in practice. Without a focus on the key attributes of the Implementation standard, schools often get haphazard changes in practice with little hope for taking changes to scale and almost no hope for sustainability.

There are lots of resources out there about implementation theory. One of my favorites is *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature* (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, and Wallace, 2005). The authors outline several useful frameworks, including their Stages of Implementation Process, which consists of exploration and adoption, program installation, initial implementation, full operation, innovation, and sustainability.

So when planning your next professional learning policy or experience, please make sure to consider the Implementation standard before you start blowing your own horn. Believe me, you'll be glad you did.

•

Frederick Brown (frederick. brown@learningforward.org) is director of strategy and development at Learning Forward. ●