

TO: Governor Brian Kemp

FROM: Alex Hinton

RE: Policy Implementation: Importance and Strategies for Improvement

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Executive Summary

This brief discusses the importance of implementation, details its current status in academic and policymaking discourse, and provides strategies for the improvement of implementation state- and nation-wide. These strategies include the involvement of local administrators in discussions on what local communities need; the institution of coherent statutes from state offices as to what implementation should seek to accomplish; the provision of sufficient funding to programs for the purpose of implementation; and the potential redefinition of policy success.

Introduction

Implementation, simply put, is important. State employees, bureaucrats, and elected officials all have the common goal of putting into practice what citizens want and need; and, at the most basic level, that is what implementation is. In order for the government to work on behalf of the people, its first goal should be putting into practice what taxpayers want. Effective policy implementation is behind all programs of which American citizens take advantage. Both public roads and social security disbursements are controlled by the implementation practices of government officials—and as such, it is vital for all employees of government to understand best practices for implementation.

Without effective implementation, infrastructure will fall into disrepair; public health programs will fail to reach those who need them most; and welfare programs to help veterans,

victims of abuse, or any other of a wide variety of destitute citizens will fail to succeed at their goal. Without effective implementation, there is no government of, for, and by the people. While the State of Georgia as an entity does not necessarily control a wide range of these nationally-implemented programs, the local-level bureaucrats who reside in Georgia have an influential hand in its implementation—and Georgia itself has a wide variety of programs that it has formulated and implements without federal guidance or assistance.

It is for this reason that this brief is written: implementation is important, but oftentimes it is not effective. One does not need to look far to see instances of “failed” implementation. From administrators of any point on the political spectrum, there are cases of failure—from the rollout of the Affordable Care Act website to the integration of public schools following *Brown v. Board*. This brief will seek to inform its readers of the current state of implementation, prevailing theories on the topic, and strategies that can improve implementation practices statewide.

The Current State of Implementation

In order to understand how to best improve implementation practices, it is important to understand the current state of implementation—both as a field of study and as a field of action. There was no established field of study for implementation until the publication of Jeffery Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky’s *Implementation* in 1973, in which they studied the implementation of a federal program in Oakland, California. Pressman and Wildavsky discovered, or maybe simply commented on, the complexity involved in implementation. Indeed, since the publication of *Implementation*, the literature surrounding the topic has related similar messages: that it is difficult, that it is complex, and that it is reliant on intricate, human interactions which cannot necessarily be predicted by a so-called “Grand Theory.”

There have been some prevailing theories and frameworks on implementation that have emerged over the years. While none have discovered, or even presented, a “Grand Theory for Policy Implementation,” some common themes have emerged from these studies. First, implementation is more effective if there are shared goals between the ones formulating policies to be implemented and the ones who are actually implementing on a local (or state) level (Ingram 1977). On a large scale, this can look like shared goals between the US Congress and the state of Georgia; on a smaller scale, however, this can look like shared goals between the state judiciary and its lower court judges, or, even more localized, a principal and her teachers. One can look to the implementation of Common Core nationwide to see the validity of this framework. On a national level, it makes sense to have some sort of standardized procedure and framework by which to ensure all students are being taught equally, then having students evaluated on their retention. However, in looking at a teacher-to-teacher focus, many teachers, while aware of some of the benefits of a standardized lesson plan, were against the widespread use of standardized testing—and some against standardized lesson plans altogether (Miriam 2015). In this instance, the goals of the teachers were not necessarily in-line with federal officials who instituted Common Core, or even state officials, who interpreted what “Common Core” meant for each state. As a result, the rollout of Common Core standards could be considered a failed policy.

Second, in order for there to be effective policy implementation, the focus should be more on those who implement the policy rather than those who formulate the policy (Lipsky 1978). This framework reflects Ingram’s postulation that goals should be shared from the top down, but also stipulates the focus in implementation should not be on those who craft policy but rather on those who put it into action. This stands to reason, as, especially at the federal level, Congress considers hundreds of bills each session. Often times, these bills are merely a mandate wherein Congress declares states should do a certain thing (adhere to a measure, enact a law,

etc.) but Congress does not dictate exactly what it should look like. Considering public school integration following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, we can see the discrepancies between what Congress—or another other large governing body—declares and what actually happens. In the case of public-school integration, the process was slow-moving. In the South, where segregation was written into law (*de jure*), implementation of the Supreme Court decision was stymied by local administrators' rejection of the policy. Though the decision was made in the 1950s, it was not until the 1970s desegregation took hold in the South. In the North, the process was even slower-moving due to geographic segregation through redlining practices. There was no shortage of federal policies detailing the necessity of states to desegregate—however, these policies were largely ignored by local administrators, and it was not until the federal government could take legal action against detractors that progress began. In terms of success, integration still has not been fully realized nationwide, and it is due to this fact: while the Supreme Court dictated the policy, and Congress formulated the policy, neither branch implemented it. Instead, each state's local leaders and bureaucracies did (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989). Therefore, we may consider Lipsky's framework valid in the reflection of the current state of implementation.

It is following these two frameworks that cohesion begins to crumble. Some researchers will claim policy implementation's success or failure is determined by sufficient control by formulators (Hill and Hupe 2003); others will claim that too much asserted control is to blame for failure and the pathway to success is in lessening control in favor of a multi-layered, interorganizational coordination effort (Torenvlied and Akkerman 2004). These same arguments play out in the debate between top-down implementation and bottom-up implementation. Top-down is an inherently hierarchical approach that focuses on the authority of governing bodies and officials to implement policy, while bottom-up implementation focuses on local stakeholders

(leaders, bureaucrats, etc.) determining predominant issues in a community, formulating solutions, and then presenting these solutions to higher-level officials for governmental support. Though there is widespread debate between academics and government leaders alike on which method is best, the fact of the matter is that neither is the best practice: both have had great successes, and both have had massive failures.

It is in this environment that implementation must be considered—not in an environment by which all factors can be meticulously controlled, measured, and evaluated; nor in an environment where there is one, catch-all theory or method by which one can guarantee success. Rather, the state of implementation today is much as it has always been: something of a mystery, where a complex web of interactions determines the success or failure of the policy's implementation.

Strategies for Effective Implementation

Despite the complexity of the issue, there are certain methods by which the process may be simplified and streamlined. By no means will these methods ensure the success of a policy, but they do increase the chances of success. The first of these strategies is the involvement of local administrators in policy formulation. Representative government can achieve this to an extent; however, oftentimes elected officials either have no experience working on the behalf of the public or they have no experience in implementation practices. Take, for instance, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). She is one of the rising stars in the Democratic Party after being elected to the US House of Representatives in 2018; however, before she was an elected official, her experience was purely academic and her profession leading up to her election was as a bartender. One could make a convincing argument of her commitment to public service for her district; however, one would be strained to make the argument she had experience in public policy

implementation prior to her election. Mitt Romney is another example of elected leadership with little-to-no public policy experience before their election. Romney's first political position was that of Governor of Massachusetts following the 2002 election—prior to that, he worked in corporate America in various roles. While business leaders can be said to have experience in implementation, oftentimes this sort of implementation is for profit-maximization rather than for social welfare. So, while Romney may have had implementation experience prior to his governorship, he did not necessarily have the public-service mindset in that implementation experience.

These two examples of elected leadership are to illustrate a potential pitfall in implementation: a lack of understanding from elected officials on how to implement a policy in a complex environment, involving hundreds of public employees and affecting hundreds of thousands of people. Because of this dilemma, it is important for high-ranking officials to take into consideration local administrators' opinions on what their communities need. Otherwise, while a policymaker's intentions may be good, there may be a sharp disconnect between what a locality needs and what is implemented.

The second strategy for effective implementation is the clarification of goals and guidelines for policies to be implemented. Often in policy formulation, policies (or laws) are enacted with broad goals and desired functionalities, with broad rules for implementation. This is not conducive to achieving desired results. In 1995, Kenneth Meier and Deborah McFarlane studied the difference in success between policies with coherent statutes and those without. Policies with coherent statutes are defined as being ones with clear goals supported by causal theory, clear administrative responsibilities, clear implementation rules, and assignment to committed agencies. They found policies with coherent statutes for implementation saw greater levels of success than those without (Meier and McFarlane 1995). This makes sense—if an

education policy outlines the goal of the program to “have better educated students,” it leaves the door open for a number of possibilities of interpretation, and the final product will likely look much different than what policymakers expect; however, if the policy outlines the goal as “increasing pre-algebra test scores by 10 points by May 2021,” the number of interpretations is much lower, and the final product will match expectations more closely. Likewise, if an agency does not understand who is responsible for the policy or how the policy should be implemented, it will be more difficult to get the policy to succeed.

The same study ties into the third strategy for effective implementation: sufficient funding. One aspect of a coherent statute is being assigned to a committed agency for oversight. Implicit in this specification is the need for sufficient funding. If a policy is not given to an established agency to implement, it will not have the requisite funds to become functional. For example, if a local government decides to repave a road but gives the contract to a volunteer pothole repair organization, the road will not be repaved in a reasonable amount of time due to the organization’s lack of resources to accomplish the goal. If, however, the government gives the contract to an established construction firm with the tools, employees, and knowledge needed to repave a length of road, the road will likely be repaved in a reasonable amount of time. Likewise, if the State Board of Education declares all public high schools are required use a certain, newly-published history textbook, but the State Legislature decreases funding for K-12 public schools, it is unlikely that the majority of public high schools in the state will actually switch to the use of a new textbook.

In light of these strategies to improve implementation, it is important to recognize the difference between the failure of a policy and the failure of a policy to meet its makers’ expectations. In a results-driven political economy, success for policies is a highly-valuable currency: lawmakers run entire campaigns on the failure of incumbents to deliver policy

successes. While success is valuable, and a failure to meet policymaker's expectations should not be taken lightly, it is important to understand success can be defined in a multitude of ways. Take, for instance, the Hardest-Hit Fund's implementation: many critics of the policy will point to it as a failure because, both nationally and in specific states, it failed to help the intended number of people it was enacted to help. While the policy failed in that measure, it stands to question as to whether the policy was truly a failure or not. The authors of *Effective Implementation in Practice* argue HHF was not necessarily a failure as a policy; rather, it failed to meet the expectations of lawmakers while still helping hundreds of families affected by the Great Recession and the housing bubble crisis (p. 195-222). If a policy's measure of success is whether or not it meets lawmakers' expectations, then the study of implementation truly is "misery research"; however, if a policy's success is to be understood as whether it adds to the public good—creating "public value" as Sandfort and Moulton define—then the study and practice of implementation is not one of misery. Rather, it is the study and practice of doing the most societal good with the resources available.

Conclusion

Implementation is a key part of a public servant's career. It is constant through all cultures, countries, and timelines. As such, it is vital for public servants to understand both the discourse surrounding policy implementation and strategies by which to improve the implementation process. This brief has done both: providing information on the state of implementation, as well as describing strategies by which public administrators can seek to improve the process of implementation in the years ahead.

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