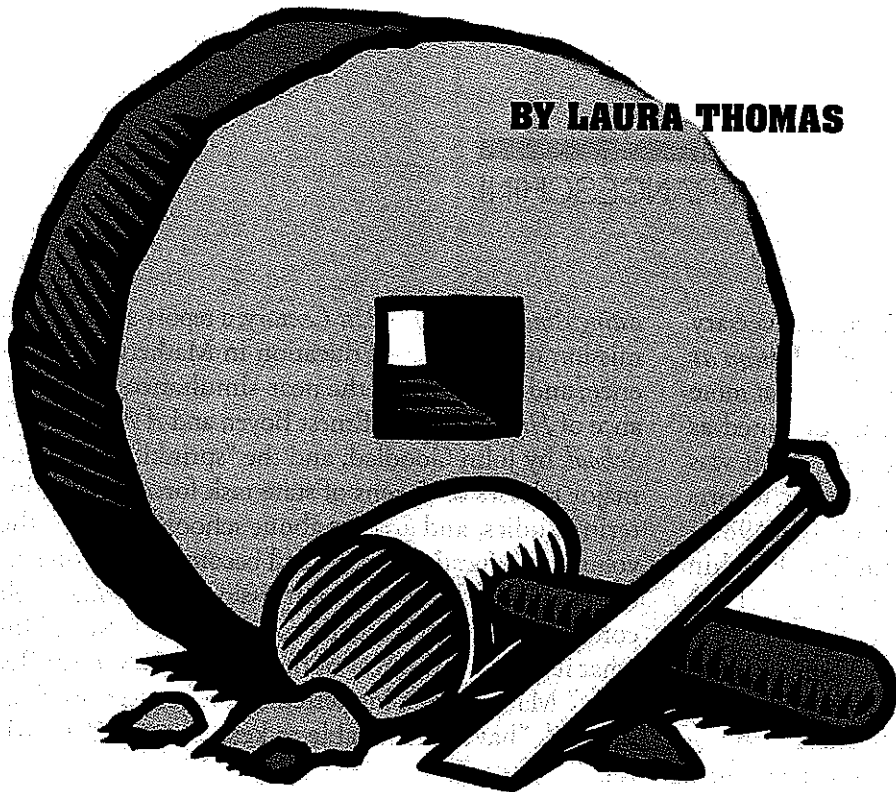


# In Praise of Reinventing the Wheel

If schools want programs that work for them, Ms. Thomas argues, it often makes sense to start from scratch instead of copying someone else's program.

BY LAURA THOMAS



ly ring out — usually accompanied by a sigh of relief. Sometimes they emerge even sooner, as soon as the problem is named. Is our dropout rate getting too high? Let's see what other people are doing. Kids starting to push back against the rules? Let's do some research and find out what's out there. Need a new schedule that builds in space for collaboration? Surely someone has already figured that one out. After all, there's no sense in reinventing the wheel!

But what if there were? What if the actual invention of the wheel

**I**N MY WORK as a school coach, helping schools navigate changes in practices, processes, or policies, I frequently run into a response I know *Kappan* readers have heard before: "No sense in reinventing the wheel."

These words usually precede a suggestion that we use a program or process that another school has used successfully. Sometimes we're looking at an innovative instructional model or a behavior management system; other times we're examining advisory structures. The exact nature of the issue at hand isn't crucial. Once a problem emerges, is named, and is recognized as having been addressed by someone else, somewhere else, these words typical-

is where the real genius lies? What if the process of solving the problem lies as much in recognizing the uniqueness of the problem as in solving it? What if someone else's wheel just won't quite fit on our cart?

The Monadnock Community Connections School (MC<sup>2</sup>) in Surry, New Hampshire, is a highly successful, progressive institution serving its students with integrity, courage, and energy. It embodies everything we know to be good for students. The teachers are engaged with their students in creating personalized learning plans that meet the diverse needs of each one. They track data carefully, adjust their strategies accordingly, and are constantly on the lookout for better ways to do what they do. Behavior is rarely an issue, students are respectful of one another, and the level of rigor in the building is almost palpable.

MC<sup>2</sup> is educational nirvana for an old progressive like me. Thus it is currently high on the list of schools

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to be examined for possible replication. Other schools are looking at the work there, examining the processes with an eye toward adopting them. What works in Surry will surely work in Detroit, right? Why wouldn't it? And look at all the time, money, and energy we'll save! After all, there's no point in reinventing the wheel.

I think, however, that most folks will be disappointed when they implement their shiny new innovations. They'll find that they don't quite work as imagined. They'll undervalue the hard work done by the MC<sup>2</sup> staff and students in creating this particular wheel, so they'll puzzle a bit as to why it isn't working in a new setting. They'll question the validity of the original claims. Then, they'll most likely toss the borrowed artifact onto the ever-growing pile of shiny new innovations collecting metaphorically behind the building. Then they'll go wheel shopping once again.

The wiser schools, however, will take a bit more time with the innovation. They'll look beyond the surface implementation of the program or practice; they'll dig into it deeply enough to discover the obvious tensions that exist between it and their own school cultures. They might even tweak, twist, or tune the innovation into something that works, sort of. Eventually, they'll settle for good enough and ignore the continuing manifestations of problems until the symptoms become too pervasive to ignore. Then they'll go wheel shopping once again.

The wisest — and rarest — schools will take an entirely different approach. They will go shopping, for sure. They'll look at the processes, programs, and practices in place elsewhere. They'll gather information and maybe even attend workshops and trainings to learn the finer workings of the innovation. Then they'll commit educational heresy: they'll reinvent the wheel. They'll take their collective learning, lay it on the table, and take it apart. They'll figure out why a process works for some and why it might or might not work for them. Then they'll take the pieces that fit into their own cultures and cobble them together into a complete something designed for their unique school at that particular moment. The rest, they'll lay carefully aside for another day. Possibly. Or maybe for never. They won't discard it totally, however, because they recognize that schools are made up of people, and people have this infuriating habit of changing over time. Maybe someday that thing that wasn't a good fit today will become a good fit, and then they'll be very grateful to have it around.

This kind of reinvention takes time. And because it is so collaborative, it can be highly frustrating. Just ask

anyone in the MC<sup>2</sup> community. Reinvention requires adults to talk to one another about the process of educating children and about their own shortfalls and struggles. It pushes everyone to be uncomfortable at times, but it requires that collaborative processes be made safe for participants. It is neither efficient, scientifically based, nor replicable in its product. It cannot be disseminated, published, packaged, or sold. It does, however, work.

The process works because it is custom designed for the people who live and work with it. It is intentional, and it is flexible. While it can be replicated, it is not a "plug-and-play model." The process that MC<sup>2</sup> created must be honored by any school wishing to follow in its footsteps. Other groups of adults can partner with their students and create the same lightning in a bottle, but only if they are willing to engage in the work of creating a culture in which no one gets anywhere important alone. Cooperation — the tacit agreement not to get in each other's way — is simply not enough. True collaboration — a group becoming more than the sum of its parts — is required.

The Greenfield Center School in Greenfield, Massachusetts, is one of the few schools currently attempting this kind of replication. Rather than disseminate a model for instruction based on the school's own highly effective practices, the people at Greenfield Center have endeavored to create a meta-process that enables others to travel the path they themselves walked in developing their model. Their goal is not to pepper the educational landscape with replicas of their school, but to plant a garden of uniquely powerful learning communities that fit the diverse needs of their own students, parents, and teachers. They are attempting to create a model steeped in the power of reinventing the wheel.

This would be my charge to educators everywhere. I challenge us to allow time, space, and energy for wheel reinvention. I believe that our teachers, our communities, and our administrators sell one another short when they take the easy — and less effective — way out. We know what our students need, and we have the tools and knowledge to figure out how to build it. We don't need another expensive, prepackaged videotape series to show us how to implement something that won't really fit our school cultures without massive adaptation. We need, at most, thoughtful guidance in gathering diverse information — our raw materials — and in using our tools carefully as we craft our own wheels. Then we need support people — be they coaches, consultants, or administrators — with the good sense to know when to get out of the way of our newly invented, powerfully customized, beautifully crafted, brand-spanking-new wheels. ■