





## Using Action Research to Initiate School Change

The following information on action research is adapted with permission from the Alberta Teachers' Association's monograph *Action Research Guide for Alberta Teachers* (2000). Visit the ATA Web site at [www.teachers.ab.ca/NR/rdonlyres/708CB2AF-4506-4A0B-851A-03734A15961B/0/ActionResearch.pdf](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/NR/rdonlyres/708CB2AF-4506-4A0B-851A-03734A15961B/0/ActionResearch.pdf) for more information.

Action research is a form of applied research that draws on a range of designs and methodologies that can be used to examine a practical problem or issue, generate solutions or institute a change. For example, school districts across Alberta have organized school improvement projects on a range of topics. Action research can be applied to many of these initiatives.

Action research has the potential to greatly enhance both teacher professional development and school improvement initiatives. It provides educators with a systematic process to reflect on issues, consider options, implement solutions and evaluate results. Action researchers focus on constructing a detailed, coherent, useful understanding of what was intended, and of what actually happened and why. They do not limit their role and responsibilities to judging program effectiveness. They are “in the world” much more than this, actively working on an initiative to:

- observe and analyze the unfolding of the character education effort
- continually revise their thinking about the paths to achieving program goals
- actively engage the various stakeholders to test the soundness of the initiative.

Action research is a valuable form of inquiry for educators because it is:

- *practical*: the focus is on realistic, concrete improvements
- *participative*: teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, students and parents can all be involved in meaningful ways
- *empowering*: all participants can contribute to and benefit from the process
- *interpretive*: meaning is constructed using participants' multiple realities in the situation
- *tentative*: there are not always right or wrong answers; rather, there are a variety of possible solutions based on multiple viewpoints
- *critical*: participants look critically at specific problems and act as self-critical change agents.<sup>1</sup>

## The Action Research Process

Action research generally involves a process of planning, action, observation and reflection. Depending on the research question, the purpose of the study and the number of researchers involved, each of these phases can be expanded. A single teacher-researcher focusing on a classroom issue may work through the process in a relatively short time. In contrast, a collaborative group of researchers studying a broad school improvement initiative may engage in an in-depth study taking the entire school year or longer to complete.

Although some action research projects have a clear end point, the action research process lends itself to a spiral of cycles, with researchers reflecting on the results of the current action in order to plan the next series of actions. Each reflective phase yields more information about the issue and increases understanding. Sometimes the information gained leads researchers to refine the question with a different focus.

One of the first tasks in a project should be to develop an outline to guide activities and describe the various steps in the action research process. The process designed will depend on the nature of the research question and the context of the study.

Engaging in an extensive literature review and seeking out expert information will help to ensure that the interventions chosen for implementation will have a positive impact.

## Facilitating and Supporting Action Research

The success of action research initiatives can be significantly increased through the support and facilitation of others not directly involved in the project, for example, a school administrator, district consultant, university professor or teacher experienced in the process. These people can help to keep the project moving forward, encourage reflection and problem solving, provide feedback, and generally lend support.

The following sample strategies can be used by those in leadership and facilitating roles to support and help sustain action research projects.

- Encourage risk taking.
- Allow sufficient time to prepare the action plan, gather data and analyze results.
- Demonstrate genuine professional curiosity about the project.
- Support the project with financial or other resources.
- Provide feedback on the research design.
- Assist with problem solving during the study.
- Express interest in the progress of the study.
- Share literature or other resources related to the project.
- Organize inservice workshops that support the research process and allow teachers to build new knowledge and skills.
- Let others know about the work that school staff are doing.
- Promote the publication and dissemination of the study.

The entire school staff can engage in action research such as character and citizenship education initiatives, which are focused on school improvement, student behaviour and staff development. Whole-staff collaborative action research has the potential to increase teamwork, improve staff morale and increase student achievement.

In addition to these strategies, consider the following six general conditions as ways to foster effective school-based action research.<sup>2</sup>

**Openness to weakness:** Administrators and staff members speak honestly to each other about the parts of the school program that need improvement.

**Chances for creativity:** Administrators provide staff members with opportunities to brainstorm and analyze inventive ideas about alternative future practices.

**Support for trial and error:** Administrators provide staff members with support and resources to initiate and test alternative processes.

**Cooperative staff relations:** Administrators and staff members share norms and skills that support cooperative problem solving about their own group efforts.

**Value data collection:** Administrators and staff members believe they should go beyond casual inquiry to collect systematic data about their processes and school outcomes.

**Time for improvement:** Administrators create ways to release staff members from regular duties so that they can engage in professional reflection, action research and problem solving.

## For More Information

### Action Research in Alberta

[www.uleth.ca/edu/research/arnia/](http://www.uleth.ca/edu/research/arnia/)

This Web site, developed by David Townsend of the University of Lethbridge, provides an overview of action research in the Alberta context. It includes references to projects undertaken by teacher-researchers in recent years.

### Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)

[www.education.gov.ab.ca/k\\_12/special/aisi/](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi/)

This Web site contains an annotated bibliography of print materials that support action research aimed at school improvement.

### Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA)

[www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca)

## Endnotes

1. Schmuck 1997.
2. Adapted with permission from Richard A. Schmuck, *Practical Action Research for Change* (Arlington Heights, IL: IRI/SkyLight Training and Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 142.

