



**APPLIED RESEARCH
CENTER**

Research Brief
September 2024

Scaling Innovation in Schools and Districts Through Early Adopters

Findings from a study of educators
who adopted Instructional
Empowerment's Model of
Instruction for Deeper Learning

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Introduction

To enact meaningful change in education, leaders must understand how innovations are adopted and spread across a school or district.

This research brief examines the implementation of a model of instruction by Early Adopter teachers – those who are the first to adopt innovations and influence other teachers to join them – and explores how leaders can identify and support Early Adopters.

This brief is based on a peer-reviewed study conducted by Instructional Empowerment’s Applied Research Center (Basileo & Lyons, 2024), which is one of the only known studies to empirically investigate Early Adopter teachers’ motivations to adopt an innovation and how it influenced their instructional practice.

The innovation examined in this study – Instructional Empowerment’s Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning – represents

a significant shift from teacher-directed instruction to student-led team learning. This model empowers students to become independent, critical thinkers who take ownership of their learning, a transformation that requires a deep commitment from educators and leaders to implement effectively.

For school and district leaders aiming to build buy-in and momentum for their instructional vision, understanding the critical role of Early Adopters is key. While many mandated innovations fail to achieve long-term success, leveraging the influence of Early Adopters can lead to sustainable, far-reaching change. This brief highlights the key findings from the study and provides actionable recommendations for leaders to identify and support Early Adopters, ensuring the successful scaling of innovations across schools and districts.

About the Study

Data Collection

Data was collected through two surveys and follow-up qualitative interviews.

- The first survey included responses from 568 teachers across 18 schools in eight districts.
- The second survey included responses from 108 teachers identified as Early Adopters.
- Qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 Early Adopters.

Statistical Significance of Findings

Statistical significance refers to the probability that a result or relationship observed in a sample reflects a real effect in the population rather than just being due to chance. It helps determine whether the results of a study or experiment are reliable and meaningful, or simply due to random variation.

Statistical Significance

0.5

The findings of this study demonstrated statistical significance, with a p-value of 0.5. This translates to being 95% confident that the observed effect is not due to random chance.

Findings

Early Adopters Were More Likely to Implement the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning than Non-Early Adopters

Early Adopters are teachers who are quick to implement innovative instructional methods. These teachers are characterized by their:

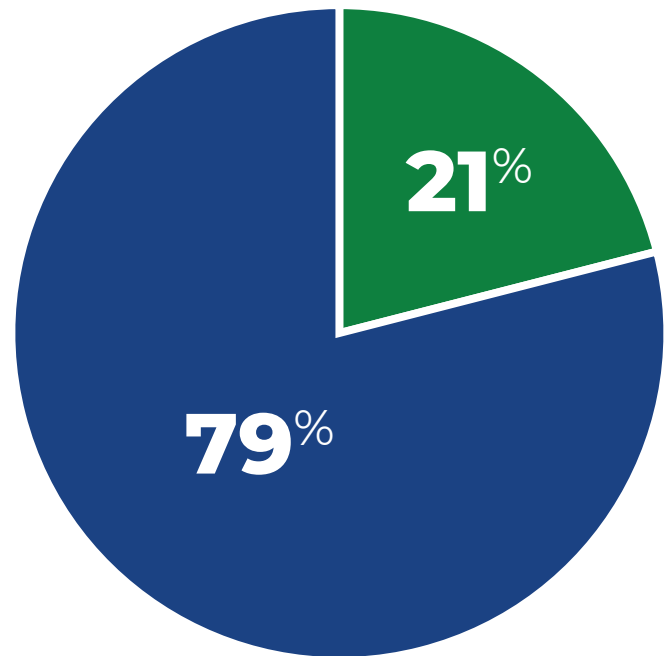
- Openness to new ideas
- Willingness to take risks
- Strong influence on their peers
- Ability to spread innovation and bring other people on board

According to the Diffusion of Innovation theory (Rogers, 2003), Early Adopters typically represent 13.5% of the population. In this study, Early Adopters appeared more likely to participate in the survey and represented about 21% of the sample.

Although Early Adopters were a small group compared to their counterparts, they were more likely to adopt the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning.

Being an Early Adopter had a statistically significant impact on whether teachers chose to adopt the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, compared with a lower likelihood for non-Early Adopter Teachers.

Early Adopters Are a Small But Influential Group



■ Early Adopters ■ Non-Early Adopters

The Likelihood of Adoption Among Early Adopters Was Very Strong



The Strongest Predictor of Successful Adoption Was Fulfillment of Teachers' Basic Psychological Needs

While being an Early Adopter significantly influenced whether a teacher adopted the innovation, the fulfillment of teachers' basic psychological needs (as defined by self-determination theory) had an even stronger impact.

According to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017), individuals are motivated to grow and change by three basic psychological needs:

1. **Autonomy:** The need to feel in control of one's own behaviors and goals. This translates to teachers feeling that their principals have given them freedom to exercise their professional skills and judgment.
2. **Competence:** The need to feel capable of acquiring and demonstrating high levels of knowledge and skill. Teachers need to be able to see their own progress and know that their principals recognize that progress as well.

3. **Relatedness:** The need to feel connected through supportive relationships with others. Teachers should feel comfortable working with peers to share ideas, and their principal should create opportunities for collaboration in teacher teams.

When these three needs are satisfied, individuals experience higher motivation, well-being, and a greater willingness to embrace challenges and innovations. Research indicates that basic need satisfaction affects both teacher job satisfaction and teacher commitment to professional learning (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020).

The study found that satisfaction of these basic psychological needs was the strongest predictor of successful implementation of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning among Early Adopters.



Fulfillment of Teachers' Basic Psychological Needs

.46

Statistically Significant

Teachers' Perceptions That Their Practice Changed

.30

Statistically Significant

Whether Teachers Were Early Adopters

.21

Statistically Significant

School Leaders Impacted the Fulfillment of Teachers' Basic Psychological Needs

In qualitative interviews, teachers shared examples of how their basic psychological needs were either fulfilled or thwarted by their principals. Responses such as these clearly indicate that even Early Adopters, who are highly self-motivated, want their principals' support for their basic psychological needs to sustain their efforts to innovate.

Positive Early Adopter Response

"I have encountered many challenges with implementation, but my administration in my building has been very supportive in adjusting things to overcome these challenges. For example, having time to plan for teaming activities and unpacking standards is a challenge. We have rearranged our Specials schedule to accommodate for additional planning time to meet with grade-level teams."

Negative Early Adopter Response

"Yes, I have had challenges in implementation because I have not received very much support from leaders in my school. I have received minimal lesson plan feedback as well as observational feedback although I've made consistent changes using the practices. The conclusion I've drawn is that I have more of a personal investment than the leaders at my school."

Early Adopters Expressed Positive Beliefs About the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

According to Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003), the adoption of an innovation is influenced by five characteristics. The Early Adopter teachers in this study expressed positive beliefs about almost all of these characteristics in regard to the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning.

1. Relative Advantage

How much the innovation is perceived to be better than the ideas or practices it replaces.

Findings: Early Adopters expressed that the model had many benefits compared to traditional models, which motivated them to adopt it.

Early Adopter Interview Quote

“I decided to adopt the student-centered model of instruction in my classroom because it facilitates a student-centered learning environment. It promotes collaborative learning, and it encourages students to take ownership of their own learning. It allows students to learn from each other while practicing reflection and higher-order thinking skills.”

2. Compatibility

How well the innovation fits with existing values, past experiences, and current needs.

Findings: The model aligned with Early Adopters’ experiences and beliefs about teaching, making them more receptive to adopting it.

Early Adopter Interview Quote

“The student-centered model of instruction aligns with my core beliefs and philosophy about teaching and learning. I’ve always known the importance of this instruction for myself and my students. Now we have tools and processes to develop the necessary skills to collaborate.”

3. Complexity

How difficult the innovation is to understand and implement.

Findings: This characteristic received the fewest positive responses, due largely to the time and practice needed to learn, implement, and master new instructional strategies. Even so, while Early Adopters saw the model’s complexity as a challenge, they were willing to navigate it with the help of training and coaching support.

Early Adopter Interview Quote

“Yes, implementation is overwhelming at first. It takes LOTS of training, months, before there is a natural flow among the majority of the class to work together and listen to peers.”

4. Trialability

How much the innovation can be experimented with before committing to it.

Findings: Early Adopters commented on trying out the model in small ways, which helped them feel more confident before fully implementing it.

Early Adopter Interview Quote

“Try it! Look at your practice, really look at how you are using time, space, and sounds. If you hear your voice more than your students’, reflect and reframe your practice. Give yourself time and realize the students can do more than you might think.”

5. Observability

How visible the effects of the innovation are.

Findings: This characteristic had the largest number of responses, with Early Adopters remarking on the many positive changes in students' learning and behavior. This reinforced teachers' commitment to the model.

Early Adopter Interview Quote

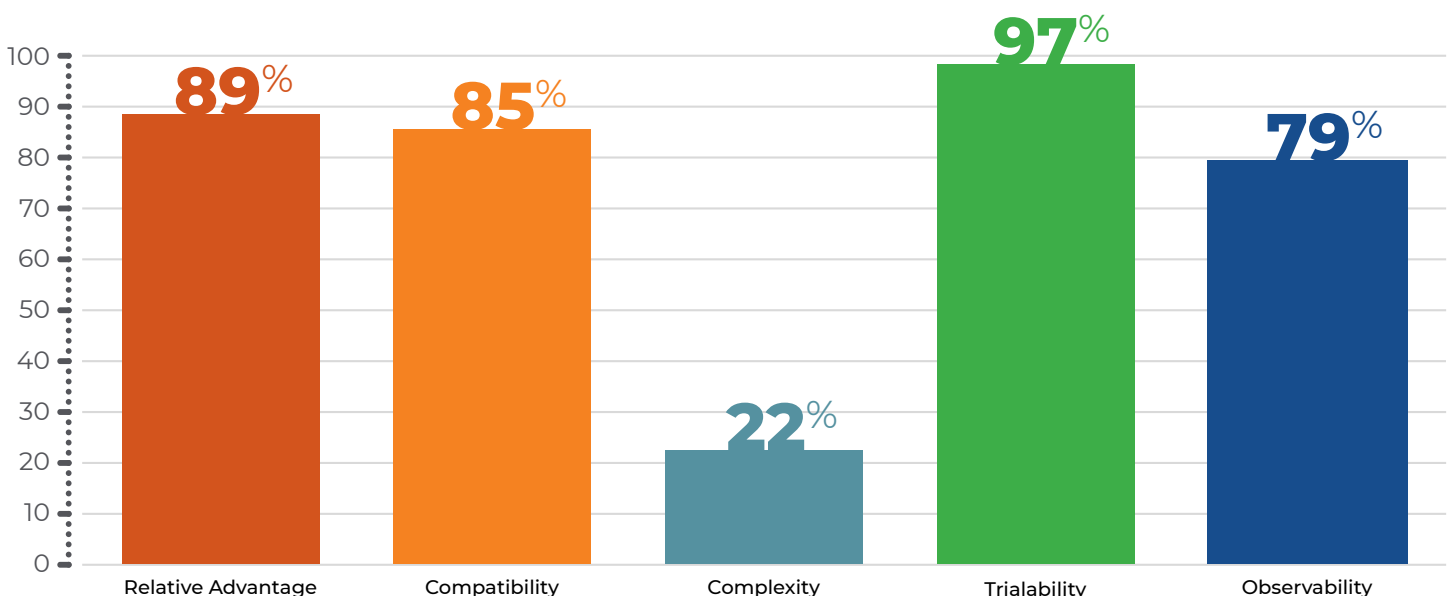
"There has been a noticeable climate change within our building. Our behaviors have reduced within our building as a whole. Students are more invested in their learning thus reducing disruptive behaviors. Everyone feels included and heard."

About the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Instructional Empowerment's Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning centers on student-led team learning, which involves students organized into small, diverse teams with clear protocols for engaging in rigorous standards-based academic work, as defined in the book *The Power of Student Teams* (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

This model cultivates independent, critical thinking instead of dependent, compliant learning. It builds students' academic agency through structures that develop their ability to self-direct their own learning. Students are empowered with real roles and responsibilities within their team structures and become highly motivated to drive their own learning. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning can be implemented in all subjects and grade levels K-12. When implemented effectively, student-led team learning has been proven to close or narrow opportunity and achievement gaps.

Percent of Early Adopters Who Responded Positively About Characteristics of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning



Research-Based Recommendations for Leaders

Change through innovation is challenging because it involves a paradigm shift (Marzano et al., 1995). This research study confirms that when it comes to scaling an innovation throughout a school or district, Early Adopters matter, and the support of leaders matters. Forced implementation of an innovation and a lack of leadership involvement can stifle the motivation of Early Adopters who would otherwise be the strongest proponents and accelerators of change.

The following recommendations are based on the study and its findings.

1. Understand the Innovation and Communicate its Benefits:

Understand the purpose of the innovation and clearly convey how it will improve student learning outcomes.

- **Example:** When student-led team learning is adopted, teachers shift away from traditional teacher-directed methods. Communicate that students will learn more deeply, increase their academic achievement, and visibly demonstrate more advanced skills.

Consider the characteristics of successful adoption and communicate about each one.

Example:

- **Relative advantage:** Explain the benefits of the innovation
- **Compatibility:** Connect it to what teachers are already doing
- **Complexity:** Chunk it into parts and allow adequate time for learning
- **Trialability:** Encourage testing it out
- **Observability:** Celebrate the small wins and significant results you see in classrooms

2. Identify Your Early Adopters and Support Their Basic Psychological Needs:

Embrace the Early Adopters who volunteer to try the innovation. Find them early in the process, take the time to focus on building their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and know that their influence can help spread innovation throughout the school.

- **Example:** Leaders and fellow Early Adopters can visit classrooms and celebrate the progress they see and offer constructive feedback to one another. Non-Early Adopters may also visit classrooms and find inspiration and encouragement to try the model for themselves.

3. Provide Training and Resources for Teachers:

Adequate time, training, and resources are essential to reduce the complexity of innovations and ensure successful adoption. In the qualitative interviews, teachers expressed the need for support that would help them adapt the innovation to meet the needs of all students, including early childhood students, students with disabilities, and students for whom the language of instruction is not their home language.

- **Example:** Ensure teachers have access to multiple layers of support such as professional learning courses, virtual or in-person coaching, and online communities where your Early Adopters can connect with other Early Adopters and see different adaptations.

4. Equip Yourself to Effectively Lead Schoolwide or Districtwide Adoption:

As a leader, prepare yourself for the second-order change process which will require shifting your mindset and the systems in your school or district. Determine how to organize and coordinate efforts as your innovation begins to scale.

- **Example:** Engage in professional development that is specifically focused on instructional systems change. Expert coaching is another way to gain a new perspective that can help you effectively lead and scale change.

About Instructional Empowerment's Applied Research Center

Instructional Empowerment's independent [Applied Research Center](#) verifies that every service we provide to our partner schools and districts is evidence-based, impactful, and replicable.

Federally Certified Researcher

Dr. Lindsey Devers Basileo, a What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Certified Reviewer, leads the Applied Research Center. The WWC is part of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences and supports educators in finding high-quality research and interventions according to the evidence requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Meeting Evidence-Based ESSA Levels

The Applied Research Center rigorously tests Instructional Empowerment's methods to prove they achieve replicable results in various situations, across various populations of students. Every activity, strategy, and intervention we use has attained or is in the process of attaining criteria for evidence-based practices under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Objective, Independent Research with Rigorous Testing

To ensure objective, stringent research protocols, the Applied Research Center operates autonomously and holds the rest of Instructional Empowerment accountable to the highest research standards. We go to the lengths of verifying our results through the Applied Research Center because this work matters to us. We transparently share data with our partners regardless of the findings because trust comes from transparency.



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Ph.D. in social science,
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Nationally Certified [What Works Clearinghouse](#) Reviewer: Group Design Standards (Version 4.0 & 4.1)

Research Specialties:

- Process & Outcome Evaluations (15+ yrs.)
- Experimental & Quasi-experimental Designs (15+ yrs.)
- Qualitative Methods (15+ yrs.)
- Questionnaire Design, Probability Sampling (15+ yrs.)
- Propensity Score Matching (10+ yrs.)
- Hierarchical Linear Modeling (10+ yrs.)

[Learn More About the Applied Research Center](#)

<https://instructionalempowerment.com/applied-research-center/>

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This research brief shares highlights from a more comprehensive peer-reviewed study published in an open access academic journal.

See the full study here:
<https://doi.org/10.1108/QEA-10-2023-0009>



Instructional Empowerment's Social Mission

Our social mission is to end generational poverty and eliminate racial achievement gaps through transformed core instruction.

Learn more about Instructional Empowerment's Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

<https://instructionalempowerment.com/Model-of-Instruction/>



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