

Reforming Again and Again A Bumpy Ride for Six Decades

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to improve schools have been ongoing for more than half a century. Considering the magnitude of the task, there is not as much research on organizational design and practice in exceptionally high-performing school districts as one might expect. The available documentation does point to some common themes that high-performing school districts possess. Superintendents in high-performing school districts exhibited a much greater clarity of purpose, along with a much greater willingness to exercise tighter controls over decisions about what would be taught and what would be monitored as evidence of performance. They used data on student performance to focus attention on problems and successes; they built district accountability systems that complemented their own state's system; and they forged strong relationships with their school boards around improvement goals. They created a climate in which teachers and principals were collectively responsible for student learning and in which the improvement of instruction was the central task. Incentive structures in these districts focused on the performance of all students, not just on average school performance.

American society continually experiences periodic resurgences of educational reform. Over the past 60 years, there have been several significant efforts to improve schools. The main reason for the failure of these reforms to endure is that many of the principal structures and roles of schooling remain remarkably stable over time, despite repeated efforts to change them (Cuban & Nehring, 2010; Evans, 2011; Hess, 2010). Reform is more likely to be altered to "fit" existing structures than to result in major organizational restructuring. That is, many changes remain at the organizational periphery rather than penetrate to the "deep structure" of schooling (Fullan, 2010, 2011; Hille, 2011; Reese, 2011). Both local school development and a supporting infrastructure surrounding the school are critical for lasting success and penetration into the technical core of teaching and learning.

The Early Years

In 1957, the launching of Sputnik I generated national concern about our military and technological competitiveness with the Soviet Union. In response the U.S. Congress enacted the National Defense Education Act (1958), which offered substantial financial assistance to bolster science and mathematics programs in the schools. At the same time, critics such as James Bryant Conant (1959) called for an upgrading of curricular content, instruction, and teacher preparation. He was particularly concerned that the academically talented were not being sufficiently challenged by the curriculum. The 1960's produced serious social unrest that manifested itself in a hasty redesign of school curricula to produce "relevance" and "choices" for students. During this period concern for the individual, minority groups, and later females raised an awareness that segments of society were not benefitting from their public school experiences. For example, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1967) indicted the schools for perpetuating racism and inequality. Subsequently, the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children (1969) earmarked the schools as a major key to providing opportunities for the disadvantaged. The 1970's saw two concurrent movements: (a) a new reform focus on the disadvantaged broadened to include multicultural, bilingual, and special education and (b) the excesses of the liberal 1960's curricula created a "back-to-basics" movement. Instruction was focused on ensuring minimum competency and contributed to the rise of the minimum competency testing (MCT) movement. The emphasis on minimum competencies fostered concern that many students were being insufficiently challenged. The permissiveness of the Sixties and Seventies were accompanied by a downward spiral in academic standards. Nationally, test scores declined, the dropout rate increased, students selected easier courses from a broadened electives curricula, grade inflation proliferated, and textbooks were "dumbed down" by publishers. This dissatisfaction with education and reform efforts rekindled concerns over U.S. competitiveness, now economic rather than military. Policymakers felt compelled to act. In the early 1980's, a number of commissions and task force reports warned that education in the United States was in dire need of reform. The most publicized of these efforts was the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled *A Nation at Risk* (1983). It called for strengthening high school graduation requirements and admission to college, increasing standards and expectations for student performance, lengthening the school day and school year, more testing, raising teachers' salaries, and generally holding students and educators more accountable. Up to that time, it was not possible for the United States to determine whether we were making the progress needed to remain internationally competitive. America had no national goals to provide focus and consistency to determine whether education stakeholders were all working toward high-performance education results. In a number of key areas, we lacked the necessary data to judge whether we were making sufficient progress or falling further behind other industrialized nations.

Goals 2000

In 1989, the nation's Governors and the President reached agreement at an education summit convened in Charlottesville, Virginia, that unless the nation established clear education goals and unless all education stakeholders worked cooperatively to achieve them, the United

States would be unprepared to face the technological, scientific, and economic challenges of the 21st century. Recognizing that the decade of the 1990s was about to open with the information superhighway, the 1989 Education Summit led to the adoption of six National Education Goals which set high expectations for education performance at every stage of a learner's life, from preschool years through adulthood (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). These goals established a framework for life-long learning—a requisite for a world of rapidly changing information. In March, 1994, Congress adopted the six goals, expanded the number to eight, and put the eight national education goals into law by enacting the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. National efforts to reform education in the past had been more fragmented than coherent. For the first time in history, school reform had a national focus, mainly due to the National Goals. Additionally, for the first time in history, educators had ready access to information regarding best practices in education and critical asynchronous dialogue regarding school restructuring efforts, mainly due to recent advancements in technology, such as the Internet, distance learning, and affordable multimedia computers. Now, what was needed was a strategy that empowered state and local leadership to advance reform in ways that simply did not refer to the National Goals as symbolic icons, but that deeply embedded the Goals in systemic, positive change. The national accountability movement culminated more recently in a federal mandate the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Public Law 107-110).

School Improvement: A Federal Mandate

Accountability for school improvement is a central theme of federal and state policies. The No Child Left Behind legislation sets demanding accountability standards for schools, school districts, and states, including new state testing requirements designed to improve education. For example, the law requires that states develop both content standards in reading and mathematics and tests that are linked to the standards for grades 3 through 8, with science standards and assessments to follow. States must identify adequate yearly progress (AYP) objectives and disaggregate test results for all students and subgroups of students based on socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, English language proficiency, and disability. Moreover, the law mandates that 100 percent of students must score at the proficient level on state tests by 2014.

There are numerous reports that demonstrate that it is possible to find effective public schools where administrators, teachers, and parents collaborate to produce high achievement for all students. But these successes occur in only a small number of schools. We still cannot account for the fact that some students master academic content and many others do not. Most schools and school districts are not organized to effectively support and encourage learning.

The answer to this problem is to determine how to improve teaching and learning in whole school districts instead of merely in isolated schools (Fullan, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2010; Reese, 2011). The mantra “the school is the unit of improvement” was based on the misguided belief that individual teacher professionalism would produce excellent schools. The most recent literature suggests that we need to modify that belief (Chapman, 2011; Creemers, 2011; Schlechty, 2011). The school will always be the primary unit of intervention, but without a supportive policy environment and resources outside the school, the chances of enduring change

and improvement are limited. Similarly, research suggests that unless improvement efforts penetrate the classroom and affect individual teachers and students directly, we will continue to find far more variance within and between schools (Blankstein, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Smylie, 2010).

The New Framework

Policymakers are sending a clear message to school systems that their main focus should be to improve teaching and learning. Will they be able to respond to the demand? In an ideal system, school improvement efforts focus educational policy, administration, and practices directly on teaching and learning. This will require districtwide leadership focused directly on learning. School leaders can accomplish this by (a) clarifying purpose, (b) encouraging collective learning, (c) aligning with state standards, (d) providing support, and (e) making data-driven decisions (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). Taken together, these five dimensions provide a compelling framework for accomplishing sustained districtwide success for all children.

Clarifying Purpose

The school district and the administrators and teachers who work in it are accountable for student learning. This assertion has strong economic, political, and social appeal; its logic is clear. What teachers teach and students learn is a matter of public inspection and subject to direct measurement (Elmore, 2004). Superintendents need to develop a practical rationale for school improvement. Clearly and jointly held purposes help give teachers and administrators an increased sense of certainty, security, coherence, and accountability (Smylie, 2010). Purposes cannot remain static for all time, however. They must be constantly adapted to changing circumstances and the needs of the system. Few really successful schools lack purpose (Bulach, Lunenburg & Potter, 2012).

Encouraging Collective Learning

School administrators must develop and sustain school structures and cultures that foster individual and group learning (Kruse & Louis, 2009). That is, administrators must stimulate an environment in which new information and practices are eagerly incorporated into the system. Teachers are more likely to pursue their group and individual learning when there are supportive conditions in the school and school district, such as particularly effective leadership (English, 2008; Northouse, 2010). Schools where teachers collaborate in discussing issues related to their school improvement efforts are more likely to be able to take advantage of internally and externally generated information. Teachers can become willing recipients of research information if they are embedded in a setting where meaningful and sustained interaction with researchers occurs in an egalitarian context (Lunenburg, 2003).

Aligning with State Standards

Most states are attempting to align their tests with their standards. States need to consider three principles in this endeavor (Spalding, 2010). First, tests not based on the standards are neither fair nor helpful to parents or students. This is what Fenwick English (2010) refers to as

“the doctrine of no surprises.” States that have developed their own tests have done a good job of ensuring that the content of the test can be found in the standards. That is, children will not be tested on knowledge and skills they have not been taught. However, the same is not true when states use generic, off-the-shelf standardized tests. Such tests cannot measure the breadth and depth of each state’s standards. Second, when the standards are rich and rigorous, the tests must be as well. Tests must tap both the breadth and depth of the content and skills in the standards. Third, tests must become more challenging in each successive grade. The solid foundation of knowledge and skills developed in the early grades should evolve into more complex skills in the later grades.

Providing Support

One of the biggest challenges in advancing state standards and tests, and the accountability provisions tied to them, is providing teachers with the training, teaching tools, and support they need to help all students reach high standards. Specifically, teachers need access to curriculum guides, textbooks, or specific training connected to state standards. They need access to lessons or teaching units that match state standards. They need training on using state test results to diagnose learning gaps (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006). Teachers must know how each student performed on every multiple-choice item and other questions on the state test. And training must be in the teachers’ subject areas. Only then can teachers be prepared to help students achieve at high levels on state-mandated tests.

In addition to professional development for teachers, all schools need an intervention and support system for students who lag behind in learning the curriculum. Schools need to provide additional help to students who lag behind in core subjects, either in school, after school, on weekends, or during the summer. School administrators need to supply the financial resources to fulfill this mandate. This involves acquiring materials, information, or technology; manipulating schedules or release time to create opportunities for teachers to learn; facilitating professional networks; or creating an environment that supports school improvement efforts (Lunenburg, 2002).

Making Data-Driven Decisions

How can school districts gauge their progress in achieving high state standards? Three factors can increase a school district’s progress in meeting state standards (Sclafani, 2001). The primary factor is the availability of performance data connected to each student, broken down by specific objectives and target levels in the state standards. Then schools across the district and across the state are able to connect what is taught to what is learned. The curriculum goals should be clear enough to specify what each teacher should teach. And an assessment measure, aligned with the state standards, will indicate what students have learned. Also, teachers need access to longitudinal data on each student in their classroom. With such data, teachers are able to develop individual and small-group education plans to ensure mastery of areas of weakness from previous years while also moving students forward in the state-mandated curriculum.

The second factor is the public nature of the measurement system. Assuming the school district has a system of rating schools annually; the district should publish a matrix of schools

and honor those schools that have performed at high levels. This provides an impetus for low-performing schools to improve their performance. It also provides role models for other schools to emulate. At the school and classroom levels, it provides a blue print of those areas where teachers should focus their individual education plans (IEPs) and where grade levels or schools should focus the school's professional development plans. The public nature of the data from the accountability system makes clear where schools are. Data should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and disability. Performance of each subgroup of students on assessment measures makes the school community aware of which students are well served and which students are not well served by the school district's curriculum and instruction.

The third factor in gauging progress toward meeting state standards is the specifically targeted assistance provided to schools that are performing at low levels. The first step is to target the schools in need of help based on student performance data. Next, each targeted school is paired with a team of principals, curriculum specialists/instructional coaches, and researchers to observe current practices, discuss student performance data with the staff, and assist in the development and implementation of an improvement plan. Lastly, the targeted schools learn how to align their program of professional development to the weaknesses identified by the data. They learn how to develop an improvement plan to guide their activities and monitor the outcomes of the activities, all of which are designed to raise student performance levels.

Conclusion

Considering the magnitude of the task posed by high-stakes accountability for school districts and schools, there is not as much research on organizational design and practice in exceptionally high-performing school districts as one might expect (Elmore, 2004). The available documentation does point to some common themes that high-performing school districts possess, but the knowledge base on which to offer advice to school districts and administrators on the design of sustained districtwide improvement processes is somewhat limited.

Within the past 10 years, however, a few examples of sustained districtwide academic success of children have begun to emerge in the research literature. These examples have appeared in states that have highly developed, stable accountability systems (see, for example, Chapman, 2011; Creemers, 2011; Hess, 2011; Hille, 2011). Preliminary research in some of these districts found evidence of common strategic elements in the way these districts managed themselves (Cuban 2010a, 2010b).

Superintendents in high-performing school districts exhibited a much greater clarity of purpose, along with a much greater willingness to exercise tighter controls over decisions about what would be taught and what would be monitored as evidence of performance. They used data on student performance to focus attention on problems and successes; they built district accountability systems that complemented their own state's system; and they forged strong relationships with their school boards around improvement goals. They created a climate in which teachers and principals were collectively responsible for student learning and in which the improvement of instruction was the central task. Incentive structures in these districts focused

on the performance of all students, not just on average school performance. Superintendents realigned district offices in these school districts to focus on direct relationships with schools around instructional issues; and they focused more energy and resources on content-specific professional development.

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