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ABSTRACT

Maryland's Challenge Grant Program was designed to bring systemic change to schools with relatively low performance levels. This paper presents findings of an ethnographic study that examined the workings of an educational reform effort across several levels of administration. Specifically, the study explored conditions that facilitated and inhibited implementation of a state-sponsored reform effort in one school district. It looked at how earnest intentions and significant resources were filtered through a set of important but competing administrative mandates. Examination of the seven participating schools' school-improvement plans (SIPs) revealed several shared goals and objectives: (1) improve curriculum and instruction; (2) extend the school day and year; (3) facilitate student transition; (4) support families; and (5) provide staff development. Conditions facilitating reform included dollars, staff and parent morale/cooperation, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and waivers from standard operating procedures. Inhibiting conditions included a cumbersome SIP review process, accounting regulations and procedures, an unsynchronized annual budget cycle and SIP approval process, an overabundance of leadership with different messages, low tolerance for risk-taking, a high staff turnover rate, and the insularity of the schools. A conclusion is that standards-based reform is a first step in the reform process, which should seek ways to achieve educational equity. (LMI)

SCHOOL REFORM MEETS ADMINISTRATIVE REALITIES

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BACKGROUND

The present study employs an ethnographic approach to examine the workings of an educational reform effort across several levels of administration from the state legislature thriugh the state and local agencies to the local schools. This is a study of how earnest intentions and significant resources got filtered through a set of important but competing administrative mandates.

In the 12 years since *A Nation At Risk* was published, many parents, principals and politicians have embraced programs that promise improved test scores, increased school participation, more motivated staff, or broader community support as long as they promise reform. Corporations have formed partnerships with schools; parents and principals have established site-based management; and some state education agencies have even taken over or contracted out the operation of some schools judged to be in dire need of reform. Yet, the earnest mentality of "Ready, Fire, Aim" often overlooks the realities of school administrative structures. This study of a state-sponsored reform effort in one school district explores conditions that facilitated change and factors that inhibited change. Such factors may explain, in part, the difficulties both in maintaining education reform and in "scaling up" reform practices to larger numbers of schools or districts.

The Maryland State Board of Education issued a list of ten educational goals for thebyear 2000. Inspired by the National Goals 2000 movement, this expression of education reform did not specify curricular areas, instructional strategies, or administrative structures. Instead, the Maryland Schools for Success Goals for Public Education by the Year 2000 specifies state-wide standards on various student performance indicators. The list of indicators includes:

* Student attendance rate
* Annual dropout rate
* Annual promotion rate
* Percentage of students completing state university entrance requirements
* Student scores on a new series of performance assessments in grades 3, 5, and 8
* Percentage of 9th graders passing functional level tests in reading, math, writing and (10th graders) citizenship.
* High school graduates' post-secondary plans

The mechanisms for reaching these goals were left up to the individual school districts. This view of school reform differs from efforts elsewhere that mandated administrative reform as well as instructional change and revised student outcomes.

Oregon's Educational Act for the 21st Century established a new outlook on education, preschool to post secondary. The Act presented the foundation for a systematic redesign of Oregon's schools, with an emphasis on secondary education. Major reform efforts elsewhere have mandated administrative and instructional changes first and foremost in primary education. An example is Kentucky's Education Reform Act (KERA) which mandated school-based management, non-graded primary schools, and alternative assessments of student achievement.

The reform strategy employed by the State of Maryland was one used by other states: Set high standards for student performance. Administer standardized tests to the students. Publicize the results. This reform movement, labelled "systemic" or standards-based" reform, exists in a variety of forms. By 1994, 45 states claimed to be developing challenging standards and assessments (Pechman and LaGuarda, 1993).

Maryland, like most other states promoting standards-based reform, stresses assessments. Georgia, which has a new assessment system and few other instructional reforms, and Michigan, which has revised its MEAP assessment for selected grades and is now developing a new high school test, placed testing first. Kentucky and Delaware, with their more comprehensive reform strategies, did not focus on assessment, but because interim assessments preceded other reform elements and attracted attention, assessments have become their leading strategies as well (Fuhrman, 1994).

THE CHALLENGE GRANT PROGRAM

As part of the Maryland Schools for Sucess Goals, the state legislature authorized a three-year "Challenge Grant Program." This program provided "seed money" to stimulate educational reform practices in three districts throughout the state. The Challenge Grant Program was intended to bring systematic change to schools with relatively low performance levels through strategic planning, direct intervention, expanded opportunities, and human and financial resources.

In the urban-suburban school district studied, with enrollments of 118,000 students in 175 schools, a cluster of seven schools, pre-kindergarten through grade 12, was selected to participate in the program as Challenge Schools. The cluster, composed of a high school and its feeder schools, was selected on the basis of a high concentration of students in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program and a high student mobility rate. The local school administration expected the Challenge schools to

provide models for successful programs addressing the issued of high student mobility and the needs of a student ESOL population that could be replicated throughout the system in schools with similar circumstances.

The cluster consists of a high school, a middle school and five elementary schools that share a number of demographic characteristics including racial and ethnic diversity, a high percentage of students with limited English proficiency, high student mobility, and a high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price meals.

All five elementary schools in the cluster have attained the MSDE "Excellent" standard of 98% for promotion and the "Satisfactory" standard of 94% for attendance. None have met the "Satisfactory" standard of 70% of students with satisfactory schores at either 3rd or 5th grades in any subject area of the state tests. High school students in the cluster met the "Excellent" standard for the perentage of students passing the Maryland Functional Reading Test as 9th graders and 11 graders, and the "Satisfactory" standard for passing the Maryland Functional Math test as 9th graders and the Maryland Writing Test as 11th graders. The middle school has not met the "Satisfactory" standard in any subject area of the standardized tests in grade 8.

The Challenge Grant Program stipulated a planning year in 1992-93, followed by two program implementation years. The district received about $2.6 million in years 1 and 2 and $2.0 million in year three in Challenge Grant funds for a total of $4.6 million. During the planning year, each Challenge school was required to: form a School Improvement Team (SIT) comprised of principals, teachers and parents; develop a School Improvement Plan (SIP) for school reform, and submit the plan first to the local school district for review and approval, and then to the state Challenge Grant Review Board for review and approval.

The local SITs were provided with several training sessions by the state concerning the design and format of these plans and the need to address in the plans the state-mandated student attainment and performance standards. Principals, staff and teachers initially interpreted the Challenge Grant as an opportunity to experiment with site-based decision-making on a wide variety of educational strategies.

SCHOOL RECIPES FOR REFORM

The Challenge strategies in the seven cluster schools involved innovative instructional programs, intervention activities, and collaboration between schools to improve student achievement. Efforts included technology-assisted instruction, peer tutoring, staff development, block scheduling of instruction, extended day and summer enrichment programs, and evening courses for parents.

Cooperation between the cluster schools allowed the development of model reform efforts that focused the entire community in order to affect educational programs for children from pre-kindergarten through grade 12.

Several common themes appeared in the goals and objectives presented by the seven schools. The first of these themes was the improvement of curriculum and instruction. A common subtheme was the use of computer technology to support and enhance instruction. Expenditures for computer technology were among the highest of all categories of expenditures.

A second recurrent theme was the extension of the school day and the school year through after-school and summer enrichment programs. The third theme was the facilitation of the transition and adaptation of new students in response to the high student mobility rate within the cluster. Among the targeted students were incoming ninth graders at the high school and incoming transfer students in all grades.

A fourth theme was the support of families primarily through improved home-school communication and parent outreach. All schools targeted parents of ESOL students and other parents with limited English proficiency. The last of the common themes was staff development, particulaly in support of the goal of achieving State of Maryland student achievement standards by 1996.

Examples are provided below of activites that fall within the common themes. The potential for replicating these activities in other schools varies. Many Challenge activities had modest start-up and recurrent costs, met identifed needs, and have a high potential for being replicated at other MCPS schools. Other activities however were built upon significant investments in instructional technology and have the potential for being replicated only in schools with existiing computer facilities.

Strategy 1. Improve Curriculum and Instruction

At the high school, the school day was restructured from a seven-period to a four-period day accompanied by staff training in instructional strategies that took advantage of the longer class period. As a result of the restructured day the teachers and students report an improved school climate, the introduction of innovative instructional practice, and reduced absenteeism.

One of the elementary schools piloted a multi-age classroom during the first yar of implementation. The initiative was so successful that the number of multi-age classrooms was expanded for the current year. Not only is the initiative popular with teachers and students, but parents also rate the multi-age classrooms as very popular.

Strategy 2. Extend the School Day and Year

Challenge schools have extended instruction by providing after-school enrichment programs and summer enrichment programs. Among the elementary after-school enrichment programs, one successful innovation is the inclusion of volunteers from the cluster high school as aides in the computer club and as tutors. The high school students earn service hours toward their graduation requirement and also serve as role models for the elementary students.

The summer programs at the elementary level are primarily targeted toward those students not performing at grade level in math. At the high school, the summer program included algebra and English courses for incoming ninth graders, while the middle school delivered extensive summer programs in mathematics and ESOL.

Strategy 3. Facilitate Student Transition

The high school experimented with a "New Student Facilitator" to speed the transition for highly mobile students entering during the school year. The outcomes have been very positive and the position has been extended into the current year. At the elementary level, efforts have been more modest an include introducing new students by posting photos and brief descriptions on bulletin boards in central locations.

Strategy 4. Support Families

All of the schools have implemented programs to support families and most have targeted limited English proficient parents. All have expanded thier use of translator services to make school publications and meetings more accessible. The most intereesting of these efforts has been the use of the AT & T translator service at the middle school. The service connects the school with an on-line translator who simultaneously translates English and any one of dozens of foreign languages. The service has reportedly been very successful in improving communication with parents and in reducing the number of suspensions.

A number of schools have opened their computerized learning labs in the evening to offer adult ESOL classes while others have opened or expanded their parent resource rooms. The middle school initiated a popular "Hispanic Mothers and Daughters" guidance program. Other schools have contracted with family and student support networks that include mental health and bilingual social services.

Strategy 5. Staff Development

Staff development lies at the base of many of the schools' improvement strategies. All of the computer-assisted instructional strategies have required extensive staff development components.

Teachers and staff have enthusiastically supported training efforts by investing their own free time in the labs, taking lap-tops home for practice, and attending additional courses independently.

Other staff development initiatives have evolved around math instruction at the elementary level, helping students to develop problem solving thinking skills, the use of student data systems, and individualized instruction.

CONDITIONS FACILITATING OR RESISTING REFORM

There were many conditions that facilitated the process of school reform in the Challenge schools. At the same time, the school teams confronted a number of difficulties in the process of implementing the school improvement plans.

DOLLARS

Among the facilitative conditions, the additional grant dollars probably contributed the most toward making the needed changes. Each school received hundreds of thousands of dollars over the three-year life of the program. This dramatic resource has permitted the schools to invest in computer technology, materials and supplies, and staff development, among other things.

STAFF AND PARENT MORALE/COOPERATION

In addition to the direct investments in the school, the grant money boosted staff and parent morale and engendered additional support which has translated into additional parent volunteer hours and unpaid staff overtime.

DISSATISFACTION WITH STATUS QUO

All of the reforms proposed in the school improvement plans were predicated on dissatisfaction with the status quo. Within the cluster there had long been the sentiment expressed that the system did not spend as much on the cluster as on other, more successful, middle-class clusters. This sentiment was supported when the results of standardized testing revealed the students in the cluster were performing below the system average. With training provided by the State department of education, the school improvement team was able to look objectively at the test results and make a needs assessment that formed the basis for the school improvement plan.

WAIVERS

The school board promised the cluster schools that waivers from standard operating procedure would be considered if the school improvement teams felt that they were needed in order to make the

changes necessary to implement reform. During the first two years however, the schools have not generally petitioned for waivers, for a number of reasons. The first is that the schools in reality were not proposing drastic changes in operating procedure. The second is that school board policy was actually flexible enough to accomodate most changes under consideration.

RESISTIVE CONDITIONS

Despite the many favorable conditions facilitating reform, there were also those resistive conditions that hindered implementation. The majority of those involved administrative procedures and regulations at both the local and state levels.

CUMBERSOME SIP REVIEW PROCESS

Many of the school improvement team members felt that the improvement plan review process hampered the change process. The review cycle required that two plans be submitted twice annually- one for the Fall and Winter semesters and another for summer school. The format for the plans changed periodically. At first, no particular format was recommended, but later the plans were required to be in a standard format. Even the structure for stating goals and objectives became stardardized, requiring time-consuming rewrites.

Plans were reviewed by system administrators before being sent on to the state Review Board. At either level of review, and frequently at both, the plan could be sent back to the school improvement team for extensive revisions that meant long hours of umpaid labor for principals, staff and parents alike. Most team members reported that after the plan was approved, however, all the work seemed worthwhile. This certainly was not the case in the one school in which the first-year plan was never approved. Faculty and parent morale suffered, although the team continued work during the summer and into the Fall semester to revise the plan which was approved for the second year of implementation.

ACCOUNTING REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES

State and local level accounting reulations and procedures caused many headaches for school improvement team members, particularly for elementary and middle school principals who did not have business managers. The state limited the categories of expenditures that could be made, but later amended this list of allowable expenditures to allow for more categories. After money was moved to the system and into school budgets, there were additional accounting regulations and restrictions. School accounts had to be set up for each school by the central administrative office, which was time-consuming and delayed the expenditure of funds for several months initially.

School account structures were inflexible and did not permit money to be moved easily between categories of expenditures, even after necessary changes were made in school improvement plans. Because expenditures were delayed in the beginning, schools had balances remaining at the end of the school year. In order to spend the remaining funds, special accounting arrangements had to be made.

ANNUAL BUDGET CYCLE

Approval of SIPs too late in the school system budget cycle to allow for materals and supplies to arrive in time for school start up in September. Ideally either the SIP approval cycle should have ended earlier, or accounting procedures should have been made to allow the Challenge schools to purchase materials and supplies directly from vendors without going through central office purchasing procedures.

MIXED LEADERSHIP/CHAIN OF COMMAND

School principals and staff reported that they felt they were serving many masters: parents, central office administrators, the superintendent, the Board of Edcation, the state department of education, and the State Board of Education, each with different messages: take risks, don't take risks, teach to the local criteria-referenced tests, teach to the state tests, teach to the SATs. In addition to the mixed messages resulting from a mixed chain of command, there was also a problem with a very high turnover rate in leadership, particularly in the principalships, that made implementation difficult.

LOW RISK TOLERANCE

At all levels, there was not much reward for trying new ideas. Although there was discontent with the status quo, there was still a lot of sentiment for just trying the old ideas harder. Even at the state level that initially encouraged taking risks, the outcome evaluation looked at the same old outcomes reflected in standardized test scores.

Inertia was not the only inhibitor of reform. Change required additional investments in time, money, and staff development. Without any guarantees of rewards, those investments were sometimes made reluctantly. Resistance also came from a central administration that values homogeneity (all of our schools are equally good), and is unwilling to identify the uniqueness of individual schools. There was also school-level resistance to individualizing instruction at the school level, mostly because of a reluctance to label the students as requiring a different approach (our kids are just like everybody else).

STAFF TURNOVER

The high turnover rate in the cluster caused problems at many levels. The rapid turnover in principals, teachers and parents in the Challenge schools created a leadership vacuum that required recruiting and training new SIT members. The turnover in teachers and staff required additional and continuous staff development in new strategies. The turnover in administrators not only added to the leadership vacuum but also created changes in direction due to differences in interests and philosophies between principals. The turnover in parents reduced the schools' ability to implement strategies with volunteers (compared to more stable clusters).

INSULARITY OF SCHOOLS

The insularity of the schools in the cluster was not limited to the Challenge schools, but was merely the norm for the system. Challenge schools were at first even reluctant to meet together at a cluster level. School personnel do not generally share information across the system, either by written communications or by visiting each other.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL REFORM

The outcomes of the Challenge Program have some interesting implications for school reform at a number of levels; at the school level, the system level, and nationally. At the school level it is clear that the programs that have been initiated cannot all be continued at the current level, given the resource constraints. The Challenge Grant funds have been spent at the school level primarily on computer technology, materials and supplies, and staff development. Additional money at the same level of funding will not be available for upkeep, upgrading, replacement and continuing education.

Time is also a resource constraint. Teachers, staff and parents have invested tremendous amounts of uncompensated time in training, meetings, writing SIPs, and strategy implementation. It is not realistic to assume that this level of effort can continue. A factor that will contribute to the level of human resource investment is the high rate of teacher and parent turnover in the cluster. As informed and involved teachers and parents leave the schools, the burden increases on the remaining individuals to recruit, train and retain replacements. At some point in time, there rate of diminishing returns will tend to extinguish the effort to find new recruits.

At the system level, the challenge will be to generalize the results of the Challenge to other schools in the system that share some of the cluster's characteristics. This process, known as scaling-up (Fuhrman, 1994), is a weak link in the process of moving from good examples to more widespread reform. The

institutionalization of pilot projects is limited by both the insularity of the Challenge schools and the low risk-tolerance of schools in a large bureaucratic system. In this case, the widespread adaptation of successful Challenge strategies is also limited by existing human and budgetary resource constraints.

Standards-based reform in Maryland is similar to the reform strategy in a number of other states. In almost of all of those states, standards-based reform has equity at its base; the idea that all students can achieve at high levels (Smith & O'Day, 1991; O'Day & Smith, 1993). In reality however, not all students in Maryland are the same, not are all schools or all school systems. To help explain large disparities in test scores from different schools and school systems, the state board of education factored in the percentage of students who didn't speak English as their primary language, the percentage of special education and economically disadvantaged students at each school, and the amount of money each district spent on education.

Explaining away differences however does not address the absence of equity. The president of the Maryland State Board of Education has announced that during the 1996 legislative session, Maryland will have to look at how it funds public schools to eliminate disparities among school systems. In a sense, setting standards can be seen not as educational reform in itself, but as a first step in the process of reform. States and school districts will continue to look for ways to achieve equity, and their success will be demonstrated as students' academic performance continues to improve.

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