DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 149 EA 032 217

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TITLE	The Paradox of State School Reform.
PUB DATE	2002-06-13
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at "Professional Development and State Policy: Encouraging High Quality Staff Development" sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Staff Development Council (Kansas City, MO, June 13, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; Accountability; *Educational Attainment; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Faculty Development; *Management Development; Outcomes of Education; Professional Development; *State Standards

ABSTRACT

The great paradox of school reform, according to the author of this short speech, is that, on the one hand, states mandate that student performance must improve; on the other hand, states do not act to improve the performance of educators. Even when the policies are the most progressive and the standards of the state are of the highest quality, there remains a huge gap between educators' understanding of the standards and their knowing how to help students perform at standard. The speaker states succinctly: "Most teachers and administrators do not know how to help all their students perform at tough issues of persistently low-performing schools, the growing achievement gap, and other pervasive problems, improving the performance of educators is essential." The implications are clear for state policymakers. According to the speaker, professional development is the only way for educators to develop the behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, and skills they need to help all students perform at standard. (WFA)

The Paradox of State School Reform

Hayes Mizell

June 13, 2002

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Remarks of Hayes Mizell on June 13, 2002 at the conference, "Professional Development and State Policy: Encouraging High Quality Staff Development." The conference was sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Staff Development Council. It was held at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation Conference Center in Kansas City, MO. Participants included approximately 80 members of state legislatures, state boards of education, and NSDC Staff Development Leadership Councils from Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah. Mizell is Director of the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

The Paradox of State School Reform

During the past decade, policymakers in nearly all states have developed a remarkable consensus. Through legislation, policy, and regulations, they have agreed that:

(1) It is necessary for states to define what students should know and be able to do as a result of public schooling.

(2) It is necessary for states to assess systematically the levels of proficiency these students can demonstrate in relation to the states' standards.

(3) It is necessary to hold both educators and students accountable when students do not perform at the levels of proficiency the states determine to be appropriate indicators of adequate academic progress.

These policy initiatives vary greatly in quality and effect, but taken as a whole they have sent the powerful message that states have dramatically increased their expectations of the result public schools should achieve. The states' policy initiatives have not been without controversy, but few people question that the quality of public education needs a major jolt. Perhaps the iron triangle of standards, assessment, and accountability will provide the shock that educators and students need to improve their

performance. The problem, of course, is that most educators need a good deal more than a shock.

The states' higher expectations are appropriate, but meeting these expectations is not simply a matter of educators working harder or more efficiently, though there is no doubt that there are some teachers and administrators who need to do both. Even when states' policies are of high quality, there is a tremendous gap between educators' understanding standards and knowing how to help students perform at standard. Implicit in many of the states' policies is the assumption that if the state tells educators what to do, the educators have the knowledge and skills to do it. This assumption is incorrect.

Most teachers and administrators *do not know how* to help all their students perform at significantly higher levels. For those who have been teaching for the past seven to ten years, their pre-service education *did not* prepare them for the realities of today's classroom nor for the levels of performance states now expect. The *modus operandi* of these teachers has been classroom survival framed by the expectation that some students would do well, many would get by, and some would fail. In fact, for most of the 1990s, the teachers' school boards, state boards of education, and legislatures shared these expectations. The effect is that there are now many teachers and administrators who did not anticipate the current demands on them and are not prepared, either educationally or psychologically, to meet those demands. Many of these educators are working hard, but lack the content knowledge and instructional skills necessary to help all students perform at standard.

For the educators who have been teaching for less than five years, the situation is somewhat better. They may be better prepared, more knowledgeable, and more

accepting of change than their older peers, but they are, after all, new teachers. Because of the continuing crisis in pre-service education, they spend the first several years of teaching learning how to manage their classrooms and balance competing demands on their focus, energy, and time. These newer teachers may bring to their classrooms strong commitments to help all their students perform at higher levels, but they, like any of us if we were in their place, are confounded by the wide range of their students' talents, abilities, motivation, behaviors, and family contexts. How do they help all these students perform at standard? How do they help all these students make the academic progress the state expects?

This is the great paradox of school reform. On the one hand, states mandate that student performance must improve. On the other hand, states do not act to improve the performance of educators. If states only want incremental increases in test scores that result from greater focus by teachers and students, better test preparation, and more time for student learning, then one might argue that it is not necessary to devote more effort to raising the performance levels of teachers and administrators. But if states seriously want to tackle the tough issues of persistently low-performing schools, the growing achievement gap, and the pervasive lack of challenging, engaging instruction in suburbs and inner-cities alike, then improving the performance of educators is essential.

When most policymakers think of strengthening the knowledge and skills of educators, they think only of pre-service education. Professional development for new and experienced teachers and administrators is not on their radar screen. These policymakers are willing to make the leap of faith that standards, assessments, and accountability systems will spark a chain reaction ultimately resulting in higher levels of

student achievement, but they are unwilling to make a similar leap when it comes to professional development. Like many educators, policymakers know little about the elements of effective staff development. They rely too heavily on state regulations that assume post-graduate course credits and seat time produce more effective teachers and administrators. Even worse, policymakers probably do not know whether their states have goals or measures for professional development, or the total state expenditures in support of staff development, or what results these investments are producing. They never hold hearings on professional development or seek testimony from teachers and principals about the staff development experiences they find most and least useful. State policymakers do not support research that documents the links between professional development and improvements in student performance.

My point here is not to criticize policymakers, but to illustrate that they have overlooked a potentially powerful means to raise levels of student performance. In effect, the states, and now the federal government, have fundamentally redefined educators' roles. Because of the tremendous pressures that teachers and principals are experiencing as a result of standards, assessments, and accountability, they are more aware of their limitations and more willing to acknowledge them. Principals are struggling with what it means to be instructional leaders and how to do so. Teachers are struggling with what it means to be accountable not for the success of some students, but for the success of all students. Though they are on the front lines of a revolution in public education, most of them are receiving very little, if any, state support in learning the new knowledge and skills necessary to perform their new roles effectively. If this continues, many educators will respond in one of two ways. They will either continue to teach and lead much as

they always have, hoping bureaucratic inertia will spare them of the rigors of adult learning, or they will minimally adapt to their new roles with corresponding limited effects on student learning.

High quality professional development is the only effective antidote to this bleak prospect, but it requires more than the formulaic approach that has characterized so much of education policy. It is important to remember that professional development is really about adult learning, and that much of what we know about student learning applies to adults as well. The performance levels of educators will not necessarily increase simply because policymakers provide more money or time, just as providing a classroom and a teacher and a minimum school day does not ensure that student learning will occur. Because staff development is such a profoundly human enterprise, it depends on positive relationships, respect, and trust carefully developed over time. It demands not only an acceptance of but a commitment to inquiry and experimentation. It requires seeking and using the knowledge, experiences and insights of others. Above all, professional development is about believing that what matters most is more effective teaching and school leadership that *directly* results in students' higher levels of performance.

There are no shortcuts to high quality staff development and perhaps that is why we have seen so little of it. Nevertheless, professional development is the only way for educators to develop the behaviors, attitudes, knowledge and skills they need to help all students perform at standard. It is both exciting and challenging to contemplate what state policymakers can accomplish by developing policies that encourage, support, provide, and assess efforts to help current teachers and principals improve the effectiveness of their practice. Let us begin.

Thank you.

To read other remarks by Hayes Mizell, go to:

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