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ABSTRACT

This article discusses some of the various school-reform strategies that have been implemented since the publication of A Nation at Risk. It opens with an examination of standards-based accountability and some of the concerns and objections surrounding this movement. It asks whether standards are achieving their purpose, looks at the role of state policymakers and school leaders, and encourages leaders to be the champion for standards by focusing on developing capacity, by helping teachers connect standards with the goals and commitments they already have, by using data to focus reform, and by enlisting district-level support. The article then turns to comprehensive school reform and encourages districts that are considering this reform to count the cost, come together, learn about available programs, and make a commitment. Shared decision-making (SDM) is the next strategy that is addressed. Critics complain that SDM adds complexity and ambiguity to the principal's role, diverts teachers' attention from classroom issues, and still leaves school boards accountable. Supporters claim that SDM improves the quality of decisions, strengthens staff morale, and increases school effectiveness. The last strategy examined is market strategies, which encompass school choice, parental decisions, and charter schools. No matter which strategy is chosen, stakeholders must communicate and provide staff development. (Contains 38 references.) (RJM)

Trends and Issues

School Reform

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School Reform

By Elizabeth Coffey and Larry Lashway Created October 21, 2002

When the publication of *A Nation at Risk* jump-started the drive to reshape the nation's schools, educators viewed reform as an event, a one-time activity that would fix the problem and then recede. Sixteen years later, reform has become a permanent part of the educational landscape.

Standards-Based Accountability

Without question, the dominant state-level strategy today is standards-driven accountability. In the last decade, state policymakers have steadily moved toward a system that hinges on explicit performance standards, systematic testing, and consequences for results. They believe that this package of reforms will stimulate teachers and students to focus their efforts in the right direction (Lashway 2001).

Recently this state-driven system has been reinforced and extended by reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The new federal rules accept the existing state standards and assessments, but require that states define "adequate yearly progress" toward meeting the standards, with the goal of making *all* children proficient within twelve years. Schools that fail to make such progress for two or more years will trigger a number of escalating consequences, including public-school choice, use of private vendors to assist children, and reconstitution of schools (Education Commission of the States 2002).

Concerns and Objections

Standards-based accountability represents a major paradigm shift in reform thinking because of its emphasis on outcomes rather than inputs. Whereas teachers and administrators have traditionally defined their accountability in terms of *effort*, policymakers are now holding them accountable for *results* (Lashway). Not surprisingly, educators' enthusiasm has been muted, with reactions spanning the spectrum from cautious approval to full-throttle criticism.

- Some critics have argued that the standards themselves vary in quality and are often insufficiently rigorous or comprehensive (American Federation of Teachers 2001).
- Many have leveled their sights at the tests, questioning their fairness, validity, and effectiveness, and arguing that major policy decisions should not be based solely on test scores (Olson 1999). The AFT notes that 44 percent of the state tests are *not* aligned with state standards, thereby undercutting the logic of the system. Robert Linn and Carolyn Haug (2002) point out that scores can fluctuate from

year to year for a variety of reasons; when states measure improvement by comparing successive cohorts at a particular grade level (a common practice), the comparison does not yield a reliable measure of instructional progress.

- A common fear is that standards will focus instruction too narrowly, driving out valuable content that is not included on the tests (Jones and colleagues 1999). Linda McNeil (2000) has likewise documented examples of schools that reduced their curriculum to a sterile drill-and-practice "test prep."
- Some have questioned the motivational premises of standards-based reform, asking whether teachers will be responsive to extrinsic rewards and sanctions (Lashway; Leithwood and colleagues 2002). Others claim that motivation alone is not enough to improve instruction, and that states must pay more attention to *capacity*. The AFT says that fewer than a third of state assessments are supported by an adequate curriculum.
- Finally, some observers are skeptical that states will muster the political willpower to stay the course when the going gets rough.

Despite these concerns, policymakers continue to invest in the system not just as a means of holding schools accountable but as a tool to increase achievement by minorities (Hadderman 2000).

The public also remains supportive. Achieve, Inc., an advocacy group of state governors and corporate CEOs, notes that three-quarters of parents and nonparents agree that children should have to pass reading and math tests to be promoted from fourth grade, even if they have passing grades in all their classes, according to an August 2000 national poll by Business Roundtable. In the same survey, eight out of ten people said that raising academic standards is a move in the right direction. Public Agenda surveyed public-school parents in October 2000 and discovered similar strong support for standards. A recent Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll found that two-thirds of the parents surveyed wanted to see the same test being used across the country.

Even classroom teachers balance their concerns against the appeal of improved achievement; 87 percent of teachers surveyed in *Education Week's* January 2001 national survey agreed that raising standards is "very much" or "somewhat" a "move in the right direction" (Gandal and Vranek 2001).

Are Standards Achieving Their Purpose?

Given the diversity of beliefs about standards-based accountability, what is the evidence to date? Do standards actually work in the way their advocates claim? Is student achievement improving? Unfortunately, it is far too early to draw definitive conclusions, especially since many states have not yet fully implemented their standards-based systems. However, research does offer a few clues:

- The AFT, which has been tracking the standards movement for a number of years, says that the number of states having rigorous standards with well-aligned tests continues to rise.

- Richard Elmore and Susan Fuhrman (2001) say that accountability systems get the attention of teachers and administrators, providing a clear focus for reform efforts. They also report that schools vary widely in their responses to standards. Some do narrow their curriculum as critics fear, but others expand curricular content to better address the standards. Robin Lake and colleagues (1999 and 2000) found that some schools in Washington State responded to standards with a well-focused effort that improved the following year's scores; others drifted, and scores remained stagnant.
- Standards do have motivational effects, but in very complex ways. Carolyn Kelley and colleagues (2002) found that teachers viewed performance-based bonuses positively, but that the motivational effect was often undercut by their skepticism about whether the money would actually be paid or their doubts that the standards were actually achievable. Elmore and Fuhrman note that schools are not blank slates; any system of external accountability must contend with teachers' existing sense of internal accountability. When external accountability clashes with long-held beliefs and values, it tends to be resisted or marginalized.
- Developing capacity is crucial. Kelly and colleagues say, "It is both illogical and unfair to offer a bonus to teachers and not provide the support that will enable them to reach the goals necessary to receive the bonus." However, Elmore and Fuhrman report that many schools are slow to revamp their professional development, instead continuing to do the same things they always have, only harder.

The Role of State Policymakers

Given this mixed picture, how should policymakers and school leaders respond? At the state level, several steps are crucial:

- **Standards that are clear and precise have a better chance of being successfully implemented** (Florian, Hange, and Copeland 2000). Rather than require merely that students be able to read critically, standards should specify in detail what it means to read critically and provide criteria for judging success. Achieve, Inc. points to the example of Oregon's new English standards for fourth-graders: The standards require students to read a portion of text and then use knowledge of the situation and of the character's traits and motivation to determine the cause of the character's action (Gandal and Vranek 2001).
- **Avoid creating a glut of standards that include everything a student can learn about a subject.** Too many standards fail to state precisely what students should learn, and the resulting generalizations can leave teachers feeling overwhelmed. "Educators must make tough choices about the most important knowledge for all students to learn; a laundry list helps no one," advises Achieve, Inc. (Gandal and Vranek 2001).
- **Make sure that tests are aligned with standards.** Tests should not contain content that is not covered in the standards, and if standards include high-level concepts and skills, then tests should be just as challenging (Achieve, Inc.).

- **Pay as much attention to support as to challenge.** Instructional reform is hard, complicated work that requires changes in long-standing beliefs and practices. Heavy-handed control strategies can create a "toxic" reform environment (Leithwood and colleagues).

The Role of School Leaders

School leaders face the challenge of implementing a system in which they have little direct control of the key components such as the content of the standards, the makeup of the tests, and the consequences for performance. Yet "without active advocacy, support, contextual refinement, and further development by educators at the local school level, there is little chance of these initiatives enhancing the educational experiences of children" (Leithwood and colleagues). Leaders can take a number of steps that will help:

- **Be the champion for standards.** Teachers tend to be initially skeptical of the new requirements; half-hearted leadership will allow that attitude to become entrenched. Schools that improve have principals who focus time, energy, and resources on meeting the standards, and who take a "no excuses" stance toward improvement (Lake and colleagues 1999, 2000).
- **Focus on developing capacity.** Schools will not meet increasingly higher expectations by doing more of what they have always done; new beliefs and practices are required (Elmore and Fuhrman). Continuous, well-focused professional development is essential.
- **Help teachers connect the standards with the goals and commitments they already have.** Teachers have a strong sense of responsibility to their students, but may not automatically see how the standards will fulfill their goals for students. When standards are portrayed as bureaucratic requirements, they will be perceived as something to work around, rather than work toward. Principals can build commitment by providing encouragement and support, empowering teachers in decisions about implementation, and helping them see the link between their efforts and subsequent improvements in student achievement (Leithwood and colleagues).
- **Use data to focus reform.** Test scores are not just the measure of success; they also provide information about what works and what doesn't. Objective data can challenge teachers to reexamine long-held beliefs about student capacity and effective instruction (Lashway).
- **Enlist district-level support.** Although today's accountability is focused at the school level, the district can play a key role. For example, Maria McCarthy and Mary Beth Celio (2001) found that when district leaders took a laissez-faire attitude toward standards-based reform, schools were less likely to make progress. Conversely, Elaine Fink and Lauren Resnick describe how one district realigned its operations to create a series of "nested learning communities" that provided both challenge and support to principals.

Comprehensive School Reform

Also known as whole-school reform, CSR has been embraced by many educators frustrated by the lack of results from hit-or-miss piecemeal reforms. In contrast, CSR seeks to overhaul the entire academic system of the school by aligning policies and practices with a coherent central vision.

Whole-school efforts took off in 1998 when Congress launched the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, making funds available to implement comprehensive reform in schools eligible for Title I funds, and providing additional monies for all public schools. In 2002, the CSRD program became a permanent part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, with funding of $310 million, increased from the $265 million of the previous year.

Despite this vote of confidence, whole-school reform has come under fire from critics asserting that many of the reform programs do not live up to their high expectations. A number of school systems, including Memphis, San Antonio, and Miami-Dade County have abandoned or slowed down whole-school efforts because of disappointing results or difficulties in implementation. However, supporters argue that the apparent poor showing is attributable to poorly designed studies, faulty implementation, or lack of support. (Debra Viadero 2001). In addition, some researchers note that it may be four or five years before reforms take hold enough to make a difference in achievement (Deborah Applebaum and Kathleen Porter 2002).

Reflecting those concerns, the Department of Education has put twenty-one million dollars into half a dozen major research projects to continue building the CSR knowledge base (http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/csrresearch.html). The recent ESEA reauthorization also requires that CSRD programs must employ proven strategies and methods based upon scientific research and effective practices to improve student achievement, and must provide support for teachers, administrators, and other school staff.

What factors should educators weigh when considering adoption of whole-school reform?

- **Count the Cost:** First-year costs for CSRD programs can range anywhere from $45,000 to $588,000. The federal CSRD grant may cover some or all of the costs associated with products and services of an external developer, but schools must fund time for teacher training and planning, professional development activities, technology upgrades, and travel. See NWREL's list of whole-school reform models for more information on costs.
- **Come together:** Most developers of comprehensive reform designs refuse to work with a school unless at least 60 percent of the faculty votes to adopt the design. Research shows that for a model to be successfully implemented, teachers, staff, the district, and parents all must support it (McChesney and Hertling 2000).
- **Learn about available programs:** The American Institutes of Research recommends that schools interested in a comprehensive reform model should identify the school's needs, visit schools using the program, ask the developers a

series of questions, and match the developer's requirements with available resources. See our extensive list of programs, which provides telephone numbers, email addresses, and website links of model programs.

- **Make a commitment:** Even models with a good track record will not show overnight results, and leaders at both the building and district level must provide unwavering support to get schools over the inevitable rough spots (Naomi Housman 2001).

Shared Decision-Making

Another strategy for improving schools focuses on empowering teachers and administrators at the school level. The rationale is that the people who know students best should have the autonomy to create and implement educational programs.

Historically, this strategy, which goes by a variety of names from site-based management to shared decision-making (SDM) to distributed leadership, sought to empower teachers and increase involvement of parents and the community. In recent years, the goal of SDM has changed from democratizing the school environment to "increasing the school's capacity to learn" (Brost 2000). Between 1986 and 1990, one-third of all school districts nationwide had implemented some version of SDM, and since then, more than twenty states have created site-based-managed charter schools (Holloway 2000).

Supporters of SDM argue that there are many potential benefits to the strategy:

- Involving other stakeholders, such as teachers, increases the probability of achieving real, lasting school reform (McGahn 2002). Decisions are more likely to achieve acceptance and implementation.
- Improved quality of decisions.
- Strengthened staff morale.
- Increased school effectiveness.
- Increased student achievement: Some studies have found that when administrators and teachers share power, higher instructional quality and increased student learning can result (Brost 2000).

Is SDM a successful route to reform? Critics reply that SDM adds complexity and ambiguity to the principal's role. Lines of authority are often blurred, and leaders may find themselves caught between images of take-charge leadership and facilitative listening (Liontos and Lashway 1997). Other pitfalls to SDM are as follows:

- Some studies have found that many of the schools have failed to fully implement SDM and had not altered the process by which decisions were made (Brost 2000 and Holloway 2000).
- In early stages, teacher attention may be focused more on peripheral issues than on classroom matters (Kent Peterson and colleagues 1996).

- Principals or faculty may not be prepared to engage in SDM. In a 1998 survey, 27 percent of the principals surveyed admitted that their site-based management teams received no training on how to develop or implement the plan (Holloway).
- While the school may try to gain authority to make its decisions, the public most likely will continue to hold the school board accountable. Indeed, unless states have legislation specifically mandating or permitting SDM, state statutes place authority for school decisions squarely on the local school boards.

For those educators who are looking to implement SDM, Brost advises, "The question that educators must answer is not whether they support SDM but what form it should take." Few models are available for educators to choose from. Nonetheless, Brost notes that research has found seven key features that increase the success of SDM in improving school performance:

- **Leadership**–Principals need to facilitate involvement by staff, as well as develop vision, set goals and establish high expectations.
- **Professional Community**–Researchers agree that the staff at the school must be part of a professional community of peers.
- **Instructional Guidance Mechanism**–SDM needs to be focused on instruction and curriculum to improve performance.
- **Knowledge and Skills**–Staff must receive training about group and change processes.
- **Information**–Information on the performance of the schools, as well as data on instructional best practices, should be shared with all stakeholders.
- **Power**–Power should be shared to involve as many staff members as possible, and they must have the power to make decisions that influence organizational practices, policies, and directions.
- **Rewards**–Schools should offer rewards based on the contributions of stakeholders and the performance of the organization.

Market Strategies

A persistent thread in the last decade of reform has been the call for parental choice. Some people have argued that public schools have little incentive to improve as long as they possess an effective monopoly on schooling. By making it easier for parents to choose among alternatives, they assert, a marketplace is created in which competition will force schools to improve their performance.

The most common market approach uses tax-funded vouchers, with which parents can pay for education at any school, public or private. See the discussion of school vouchers in School Choice for more information on this reform strategy.

A less radical, but still controversial approach involves charter schools, which are public schools designed around unique philosophies and freed from many of the usual regulations. Because they can succeed only by attracting a sufficient number of students,

they essentially operate in a marketplace. See the discussion of charter schools in School Choice for more information on this reform strategy.

Do voucher programs and charter schools have the results to back them up? So far, research is inconclusive and oftentimes contradictory. After researching vouchers and charter schools, RAND, Inc., offered these recommendations to policymakers:

- To ensure academically effective voucher and charter schools, program designers should include existing private schools, enforce requirements for student achievement testing, and keep parents informed.
- Policymakers should require that all participating schools practice open admissions.
- To ensure that voucher programs and charter schools serve low-income and special-needs students, policymakers should be prepared to provide funding at least equal to regular public schools and to target specific students. (Gill and colleagues 2001)

Sustaining Change

Choosing the right school-reform design for a district or school may seem daunting enough. Sustaining that reform through a successful implementation is even more challenging. Research offers administrators some tips and lessons on how to keep school reform on track:

- **Communicate:** Administrators should create a widely understood strategy for improving school performance (Hill 2001). Moffett advises creating a communication networking system–frequent stakeholder meetings, face-to-face meetings, ongoing oral and written updates, and parent and community meetings–to communicate this strategy. Houston's school board frequently holds retreats for personnel to renew their commitment to their reform movement, which also educates new members of the board (Hill 2001).
- **Reduce Staff Turnover:** Research consistently demonstrates that leadership by a principal committed to school reform is key to sustaining change (Moffett 2000, Hawley 2002). The coming and going of teachers, principals, and superintendents takes its toll on the continuity of school reform. Cynthia Prince (2002) suggests that districts can address the issue through policy changes such as eliminating residency requirements, financial incentives such as higher salaries and housing assistance, and nonmonetary incentives such as improved working conditions and respect for teacher autonomy.
- **Involve Civic and Business Leaders:** Where turnover in school districts is high, or where education policies are a volatile issue, civic and business leaders can provide a welcome political stability. In addition, they tend to be increasingly supportive of choice, charters, and other alternatives to public schools (Usdan and Cuban 2002).
- **Provide Staff Development:** Mark Berends and colleagues (2002), analyzing a decade of efforts by New American Schools, found that teacher capacity was

invariably a crucial factor in successful reform. Professional development gives teachers and staff members the tools they need to implement school reform. Administrators need to tailor staff development to the demands of their particular reform. For example, rather than focusing on teaching practices, professional development might focus on allowing teachers to see how external standards relate to their classroom practice (Hawley). Moffett cautions that in the early years of a reform initiative, as teachers transfer knowledge and skills they learned in training into the classroom, there is likely to be an "implementation dip," as they adjust to the new way of teaching.

- **Align the system:** Success is more likely when standards, assessment, teaching practices, and professional development are focused on the same goals (David Cohen and Heather Hill 1998).
- **Consider Using Change Facilitators:** External and internal facilitators or change agents can help districts and administrators tackle the complexity of sustaining a large-scale school-reform initiative. A facilitator can provide support, technical assistance, and clarity about new change projects (Moffett).

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