It Ain't Brain Surgery: Restructuring Schools to Improve the Education of Children Placed at Risk

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Our Nation is at risk. . . . [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future. . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. . . . We have, in effect, committed an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

(National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 5)

With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a "culture war" against public education in the United States commenced. Education was linked to the nation's economic competitiveness and blamed for declining productivity, and the flag of higher standards and greater accountability was raised. Over the past twenty years both the generals and the casualties of this war on public education have been many. The generals include a long list of the leaders of business and industry and the legislative and executive branch commanders; the casualties include truth, our teachers—and most of all, the students who historically have been placed at risk.

Within a year of the original report, reform initiatives were under way in every state, and more than 275 state-level task forces were working on educational issues (United States Department of Education 1984). Not since the National Defense Education Act of 1958, passed in response to the Soviet launching of Sputnik, had the nation exhibited such determination to reform public education. But the resulting standards revolution, characterized by "test-driven accountability" and deregulation

measures such as charter schools, vouchers, privatization, and takeovers, differed from the curricular reforms that followed Sputnik (Fuhrman 2003). Although the initiatives have drawn much attention to school-reform issues and illuminated the problems of educating poor and minority children, the achievement gap has steadily increased since 1988 (Orfield and Lee 2004).

For the most part, the various approaches to school reform engendered by two decades of school reform were doomed to failure. An apparent quick fix has devolved into a quagmire of reports and legislation that are systematically dismantling public education for those who need it the most. Test-driven accountability has raised academic standards for poor and minority children but has done little to change a system that virtually guaranteed their failure (Kretovics and Nussel 1994). The failure of school-reform movements, thus far, is largely a failure to identify the root causes of educational problems; to understand the complexities of public education; to understand the social, cultural, political, and economic forces that help structure public education at the local level; and to identify and overcome barriers to improved academic and social performance (Kretovics, Farber, and Armaline 1991; Wolk 2003).

School reform is not brain surgery that a group of technically trained personnel performs on the brain of one individual in a sterile setting, yet school reform is in some ways more difficult. At the classroom level it usually involves one often-isolated individual working on the brains of 30 to 150 children in a complex and often muddled situation. At the building and district level the complexity is exacerbated by its widening political, economic, social, and cultural scope. However, school reform can take place, and it can make a difference for the life chances of children historically placed at risk. There are many individuals and groups working around—and sometimes in spite of—bureaucratic and legislative mandates to improve learning for all children.

Drawing from experience in several successful and nationally recognized school-reform projects, the Midwest Educational Reform Consortium (MERC) has developed the ALeRT (*A*ccelerated *Le*arning, culturally *R*esponsive *T*eaching) Learning Centers, which take a multidimensional approach to transforming low-achieving, high-poverty schools into high-achieving centers of learning. The learning centers are not prescriptive, cookie-cutter approaches to school reform. Instead, MERC has developed a performance-based process that broadly adapts to the unique needs of individual schools and their communities. Building upon the strengths that students bring to the classroom, it links student background and abilities with rigorous academic content in a context of teacher empowerment and extensive parental and community engagement. The ALeRT Learning Centers constitute a unique and

comprehensive program of school restructuring, teacher professional development, support for students and their families, and student performance benchmarks designed to transform the educational-delivery system and increase student achievement, especially for children of poverty and children of color. The reform projects tied to the AleRT Learning Centers focus on three primary objectives:

- Systemically restructure schools to develop a closely knit, family atmosphere through smaller learning communities that focus on school improvement and increasing academic achievement. Other support structures include but are not limited to: developing interdisciplinary teaching teams; providing additional common planning time for teachers; establishing looping (teachers and students moving as a team from one grade level to the next); and implementing flexible scheduling.
- Provide high-quality, ongoing professional development for teachers through common planning time and redesigned university course work in order to transform the educational delivery system, establish contextual problem-based learning, and improve student achievement. The smaller learning communities support the development of culturally responsive teaching practices linked with a rigorous curriculum to accelerate student learning.
- Improve student and family support by establishing direct linkages to community and social service agency, college, and university services that provide postsecondary education and employment opportunities.

School Restructuring

To transform schools into sustainable learning organizations, educators must avoid "tinkering toward utopia" (Tyack and Cuban 1997) and engage in school restructuring that is accountable to student performance. Conditions must be created in which historically marginalized students can prepare for access to and success in postsecondary education or meaningful employment. To accomplish that goal, the ALeRT Learning Centers are restructuring schools to create smaller learning communities that foster a family atmosphere and structure professional development for all school personnel and interested community members.

Large schools are often organized to maintain control rather than to promote learning (McNeil 1988); less-advantaged students end up in the largest classes, with the least-experienced teachers and the least-engaging curriculum and instructional strategies (Oakes 1987; Wheelock 1992). Research has convincingly demonstrated that small schools are superior in many measures and equal in the rest (Raywid 1997; Cotton

2001). Students in small learning communities report greater psycho-social well-being, experience fewer behavioral problems, and receive higher achievement scores, particularly in mathematics and reading, than students in more traditionally organized schools (Felner et al. 1997; Jackson and Davis 2000). There is also strong evidence that smaller schools can narrow the achievement gap between more-affluent students and ethnic minority and poor students (Cotton 2001).

Smaller schools are generally safer, more effective, more inviting, and higher-achieving schools. They include structural reforms such as more team teaching, less ability grouping, less academic departmentalization, and smaller student groupings. However, making schools smaller is not a quick fix. Small schools provide only a structure that can help teachers, administrators, parents, and community members initiate the changes essential to school improvement (Wasley et al. 2000; Fine and Somerville 1998).

We find several areas of focus important in restructuring schools into smaller learning communities. One of the most important organizational features for small learning communities is interdisciplinary teacher teaming (Mansberger 2001). Schools that start with interdisciplinary teaming as their reform priority do best at implementing responsive instructional practices such as small-group instruction, heterogeneous grouping, integrated and interdisciplinary teaching, and increased student achievement and adjustment (Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall 2000). Teaming means that a small teacher group facilitates the learning of students forming smaller learning communities. Depending on school-improvement goals, such teams can take several forms: core interdisciplinary academic teams consisting of math, science, social studies, English, and special education; teams formed around themes, career paths, or academies; teams of teachers from the arts, physical education,

and health that work with core academic teams to integrate curriculum; or teams formed around issues or concerns specific to the school site. Among the factors that reportedly affect the implementation level of interdisciplinary teaming are: 1) the amount of teacher collaboration and coordination of instruction; 2) the total number of students for which a teacher or teacher team is accountable; and 3) the overall student-teacher ratio (Mansberger 2001). For any appreciable impact on instructional practice or student well-being, teams should have fewer than 120 students, with student-teacher ratios lower than the mid-twenties, and teachers should have at least four common planning periods per week (Felner et al. 1997).

There is a strong positive correlation between teacher collaboration on coordination of curriculum and student assignments on one hand, and responsive instructional practices such as small-group active instruction; integration and interdisciplinary practices; mastery-based assessment; critical-thinking enhancement; authentic instruction and assessment; and reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning skill enhancement on the other hand (Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall 2000). As such, MERC strongly advocates common planning time for teaching teams. This time is necessary for teachers to work together on issues related to curriculum and instructional design and to discuss and address individual students' needs or meet with parents and guardians.

Common planning time can occur during school hours, before school, after school, or through early dismissal for activities such as service learning or internships. It is important that common planning does not preempt the usual personal planning time. Teachers need time to perform individual professional tasks such as student assessment, evaluation, and grading; constructing lessons, unit plans, and assessment plans; and communicating with parents or guardians concerning classroom activities. In addition, they need time to work with colleagues on broader team-related issues, such as curriculum development and integration, philosophical continuity, development of themes, and appropriation of time and resources. In the best situations, additional common planning and personal planning should be scheduled back-to-back to provide a continuous block of time for professional work. Continuity is important for interaction among teachers as well as for teacher-student interaction.

MERC advocates "looping," or students and teachers progressing together from one grade level to the next, to create a stronger family atmosphere and more consistent and coherent student-teacher interaction (Checkley 1995; Kretovics, Farber, and Armaline 1991). Looping enables teachers to develop stronger bonds with students and families, encourages parent-guardian involvement, and enables curricular continuity between grade levels. Long-term teacher-student relationships

improve student performance and job satisfaction for teachers (George, Spreul, and Moorefield 1987). In middle and high school, looping generally occurs between seventh and eighth grades and then between ninth and tenth grades. However, the optimum looping could occur in the transition between the eighth and the ninth grades, barring any building-transfer or certification difficulties.

Looping has been associated with significant gains in academic achievement, particularly in reading and math (Kretovics, Farber, and Armaline 1991; Rappa 1993; Hampton, Mumford, and Bond 1997; Checkley 1995). Research indicates that looping can also increase attendance, improve parental involvement, reduce student retentions, and reduce special education referrals (Ratzki 1988; Kretovics, Farber, and Armaline 1991; Rappa 1993; Hampton, Mumford, and Bond 1997; McKay 2000). Some researchers indicate that the second year of a loop can gain six weeks or more of instructional time as acclimation time becomes virtually unnecessary (Ratzki 1988; McKay 2000). Looping also provides greater support for children who look to school as a stabilizing influence in their lives, reduces apprehension about the new school year and the new teacher, improves conflict resolution, and improves teamwork (Hanson 1995; Checkley 1995).

Professional Development

Restructuring, however, does not necessarily lead to instructional change (Fuhrman 2003). To sustain any effective, meaningful school reform or transformation, there must be a systematic, intensive, and long-term professional development design. It is design and not intent that characterizes successful programs. Educators need to design a framework that identifies and builds upon the strengths of the students, staff, and community. This framework must provide a collaborative process with creative tension between dreams and vision on the one hand and current reality on the other. Teachers and administrators need to work with parents, community members, and students to set goals and establish high expectations. In addition, educators must develop a stronger understanding of the social, cultural, and economic differences students bring to the classroom.

Successful professional development programs are emergent and rooted in the three Rs (Wagner 2002). Professional development programs must be *relevant* to the practicing professionals and multiple communities served. As such, they must be temporally coherent, philosophically consistent, and culturally responsive. Professional development programs must have *rigor* to draw upon theory, research, and best practice. They must be rooted in the needs of students, teachers, and community and based upon the most advanced knowledge and skill

available. Finally, to have any impact on curriculum, instruction, and academic achievement, professional development programs must be situated in a climate of strong, trusting, and positive *relationships*. Improving any of those attributes cannot be forced from the top down, nor can it simply emerge from the bottom up. Transformation must emerge from the context of the classroom and community and must be informed by the system goals and applicable research.

Professional development in the ALeRT Learning Centers occurs largely in two related and overlapping contexts: common planning time and additional university course work. The course work typically occurs after school hours, and common planning time affords staff the opportunity to identify issues and ideas for examination, to debate and apply ideas studied in course content, or to evaluate how implementation is working. An illustration of how a professional development sequence works itself out in practice follows. The sequence we have developed typically begins with an introduction to school restructuring, constructed and taught from a contextually relevant and inquiry-based approach, which characterizes the entire professional development sequence and illustrates an efficacious pedagogical practice.

Our pedagogical approach is based on principles of teaching and learning rooted in social construction of knowledge, reflective thinking, and context- or problems-based education. The professional development experiences are designed to link the biographies of class participants with experiences in urban education. The literature on urban communities and schools is extensive, so we are highly selective regarding course readings and activities. Our judgments are based on several concerns. First, we want participants to develop a feel for the complexity surrounding and within urban education. Second, we want diverse cultural experiences represented in the readings and other materials. Third, we want participants to analyze urban schools critically, in both theory and practice, and to see how the two are intimately and unavoidably linked. Finally, we want meaningful results from the professional development efforts. We want a school that differs significantly from the place in which we began our efforts.

In the beginning of the sequence we reflect on two factors: 1) the current status of the school, its strengths, and its needs for improvement from the participants' perspective, and 2) the presence or absence of community resources. Concurrently, we examine the historical development and dynamics of schooling in urban centers across the United States. Urban schooling is as diverse as the population it serves, and we construct the course to reflect this diversity. Yet there do appear to be commonalities across the urban settings, and the course examines the commonalities as they relate to schooling, teaching, and learning. The

broader urban context of the course is divided into three overlapping components. The first looks at the contexts of urban communities in contemporary society. In examining and analyzing such contexts, we rely both on texts and activities that analyze current conditions and on relevant historical antecedents to the conditions. In so doing we explore factors that helped develop what David Tyack (1974) has called the "one best system" of urban schooling, which has dominated public education since the turn of the twentieth century. We move back and forth from historical accounts of the system to a critical analysis of current urban contexts that relate to urban educational problems, issues, and reform initiatives, including the school with which we are working.

The second component of the course focuses on issues and examples of more contemporary urban schooling reform. In examining a broad selection of reform efforts, both locally and nationally, we see a complex and dynamic interplay of forces arising from the lived experiences of participants and social, political, economic, and cultural institutions in the United States. In the third component our exploration of school reform guides restructuring proposals for the school involved. The proposals include organizing the school day, scheduling teachers and students, relationships with parents and guardians as well as the broader community, and curricular and instructional development. This exploration sets the stage for the next two to five years of reform work, depending on the individual needs of the district, resources available, and various other contextual factors.

A few caveats are in order here. What we are presenting is an abbreviated reconstruction of a fluid process designed to follow the needs and interests of the staff as well as current dynamics and events prominent in the school and district. As a result, there is no single sequence of courses, workshops, or topics that applies to all sites identically. Rather, we are trying here to illustrate a pattern, beginning with an overview of urban schools' contexts and critiques and progressing to focused inquiry into a pedagogy sensitive to the cultures of the school and its surrounding community. The tendency is for pragmatics and (local) politics of school reform to predominate in the beginning, while issues of teaching and learning, collaborative practice, and community involvement take a back seat. As professional development continues over the next two to four years, pedagogical issues become overwhelmingly more important and worries over roadblocks and budgetary constraints, although never completely absent, do become secondary.

Partnerships for Student/Family/Community Support

Along with restructuring and professional development, another critical component of school reform is the school-community relation-

ship in all its forms and complexity. School reform does not occur just within the schools. Surrounding community organizations and other educational institutions must be engaged, not simply involved, in successful reform efforts. We know that social-service agencies, family centers, colleges, and universities can all transform students' and parents' lives significantly by providing programs that supplement pre-K–12 reform activities. The ALeRT Learning Centers' web of partners—community-based organizations, businesses, and state agencies—provides services and supports to parents and guardians as well as to the schools and students in our target communities. In some instances, services have been integrated and located at convenient centers in the target communities and schools. A selection of professional development activities focuses on helping educators deepen and take advantage of the opportunities such partnerships offer.

We will discuss just a few examples of the programs and activities we have established. The programs stem from needs and interests reported by members of schools, community organizations, and businesses. We have also been able to construct programs that involve musicians, dancers, and others involved in theater arts. Often the content of these programs has then been integrated into the school curriculum. Please note that the examples we present here are works in progress. We realize the need for constant reevaluation of each one of our programs as we learn more about the contexts within which our students, teachers, and parents live, work, and play. Our programs are also affected by opportunities presented by changes within urban environments.

Partnerships for Community Action (PCA) at Bowling Green State University, a MERC partner, already possessed a record of cultivating and sustaining community partnerships. The ALeRT Learning Centers used PCA resources and the established principles of building and supporting university-community projects based on reciprocity, co-equal participation, and mutual benefit. Through PCA, the ALeRT Learning Centers have established relationships with such varied groups as the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the Toledo Zoo, the Latino MacArthur Fellows, local hospitals, and libraries. Building on the principles established by PCA, the different sites were able to establish reciprocal relationships with family and community centers, city recreation departments, Rotary and other civic clubs, arts councils, faith-based organizations, and other community partners.

One illustration of an ALeRT project developed by PCA is Educational Transformation through the Cultural Arts (ETCA). By cultivating cross-disciplinary cultural arts-in-education experiences with public schools, the university, and the broader community, ETCA draws on traditions and expressive forms emerging from dynamic interactions between individu-

als and their communities. Curricula developed and implemented by ETCA enhance the educational experience by integrating dance, music, folklore, popular culture, and the visual arts into language arts and social studies. ETCA revitalizes understanding and appreciation of the arts by situating them in academic subjects, cultural contexts, and community life. The programs and curricula serve as resources to bring students, educators, and local and national figures in the arts together in a celebration of education as lifelong learning based in both local and global experiences. Enrichment programs, increased parental involvement, and curricular reform can thus inform how other subjects are taught in the schools. Ongoing programs included Drum Circle for World Peace, *Odun Omo Eniyan* Children's Festival and Workshops, and various programs with four clusters at East Toledo Junior High. Other projects with ALeRT Learning Centers include the work of the East Toledo Family Center as a multiservice provider to the East Toledo community; after-school programs developed with the Battle Creek Department of Recreation; the development of a regional postsecondary education access center in concert with the State of Ohio's College Access Network (OCAN); and the work of the Harvey School district with several faith-based organizations to establish mentoring programs.

To provide student and family support, several sites have established after-school and summer academic-enrichment programs with a challenging curriculum linked to state standards and benchmarks. These programs are designed to foster creative and interesting learning activities that build upon the strengths and experiences students bring to schools. At Western Michigan University, the summer enrichment program brought faculty from the university and middle school to develop and team teach two week-long residential summer programs for middle school students. The innovative and engaging units focused on careers in occupational therapy, papermaking, engineering, drama, and computers. Discipline-specific and developmentally appropriate concepts, linked to state benchmarks, were presented in a college atmosphere. Feedback from the students was positive.

Each site also systematically provides sixth- through twelfth-grade students with college campus visits and informational programs at the school site. Sixth-graders receive a two-hour campus tour with presentations by a student panel and the office of admissions. Eleventh-graders take part in a day-long student shadowing program, including lunch with faculty members in areas of student interest. In each participating district, workshops and engaging programs increase student and parental awareness of postsecondary options in college admissions and financial aid.

Despite such preparation, the poverty level of many of our students bars their way to college. Consequently, the ALeRT Learning Centers directly link financial assistance and other incentives to student benchmarks established progressively throughout the five years of the grant. Students can then perceive the connections between enhanced academic performance and possibilities for their futures.

We believe that the conceptual framework and programmatic breadth and depth of our efforts increase the likelihood that students will attend and succeed in postsecondary education. We know that parental support and involvement are important contributors to student success, yet parents living in poverty face many barriers to meaningful interaction with schools. Their own school experiences were often less than ideal, their academic skills are often wanting, and the rigors and strains of living day to day often preclude such interaction and support. Through a coalition of school, university, and local community agencies and groups, the MERC partnership provides the social and academic support so often lacking in the lives of children in poverty.

Conclusions

The ALeRT Learning Centers are strongly committed to school restructuring, intensive professional development, and student, parent, and community support. The project not only provides appropriate academic preparation, skills, and proficiencies but also develops the attitudes, aspirations, and actions necessary to help historically marginalized students attend and complete college or compete in the work world. We believe that public schools in partnership with the university and community can transform themselves into high-achieving learning centers. Such restructuring has been effective at the middle school level but is just beginning in the high schools. The initial results are reason for cautious optimism.

We are seeing a dramatic increase in students taking core academic subjects. The increase tells us that many students who historically would not have enrolled in college preparatory courses are now doing so. We have seen a 30 to 40 percent increase in students passing their core classes, and in most cases more students are passing at the 80 percent level. For example, we have found dramatic increases (+500 percent) in the number of sixth-graders taking math, science, or English-language arts courses and in the percentage passing (+10 percent) at 80 percent or better.

Among this year's seventh-grade cohort taking math, English-language arts, and science, math enrollment increased from 117 in sixth grade to 1,236, while only 7 percent fewer passed at the 80 percent level. English and language arts enrollment in sixth grade increased from 113 to 1,181, while 23 percent more passed at the 80 percent level. Science enrollment increased from 112 in sixth grade to 1,273, while

only 8 percent fewer passed at the 80 percent level. In this year's eighth-grade cohort math enrollment increased from 1,031 in seventh grade to 1,300, while 6 percent more passed at the 80 percent level. Science enrollment increased from 1,163 in seventh grade to 1,326, while the percentage passing at the 80 percent level remained constant.

School reform is not easy. There is no quick fix or silver bullet. Top-down legislative and bureaucratic reforms are doomed to failure because there is no engagement with and ownership for those affected the most. Empowering reforms from the bottom up cannot work without structural support. Fragmented school reform cannot be sustained. Our collective experience indicates that successful school reform must include a comprehensive, coherent, and integrated program of restructuring, professional development, student support, and community engagement. There is no "one best" model. School reform is an emergent process focused on improving the lives and well-being of future generations so their members are prepared and motivated to become active participants in a democratic society.

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