

Individual School Improvement vs. District-wide Reform

While it is possible and even common for school districts to have a unified mission statement which envelops all schools in the district under one umbrella of centralized educational goals and student outcome expectations, it is vital that each school be individually responsible for improvement efforts for their staff and students. Communication between administration and teachers is the key first step in producing worthwhile strategies that will have a lasting impact on overall school culture, teacher consistency and enthusiasm, and student learning and understanding.

In order for teachers to feel confident in a school improvement effort, the school leaders should carefully listen to, consider, and utilize teacher created ideas whenever they show clear benefit toward school and student improvement. Because teachers work so closely with their students, those teachers should have a say in how improvement efforts will be organized. Without teacher input and eventual “buy-in” to an improvement effort, teachers are likely to feel alienated and frustrated with any reform presented to them. One clear fault in the San Diego reform effort was its inability to win-over the teacher union. Because of the forced “top-down” implementation of the Blueprint, teachers often lost sight of the possible positive outcomes of the reform (which was in fact designed to include teacher professional development that would teach and assist teachers to incorporate and implement reform techniques) and instead focus only on “how” the reform was appointed “on” them. Though Bersin believed in the beginning that, “Sustaining and enhancing the instructional strategy in place, over time, will attract most teachers sufficiently to

gain their loyalty to the reform.” (Hess, P. 44) they found, even six years later, that many teachers were still resentful because “It has been perceived as disrespectful” not to include teachers in the decision making and organization process. (45)

The Newmann text reinforces the concept of shared decision making among administration and staff as the best possible tool for school improvement. Schools cited in the Newmann text that were found to be the most successful in terms of restructuring techniques that created improvements in student achievement, such as Careen Elementary, and Cibola High School, each had a shared decision making structure and were considered “choice” schools. Where teachers feel important in designing the reform and eventually obtaining the desired goals, they are much more likely to cooperate in the effort and the students will benefit. Although not all teacher suggested restructuring ideas will be worthy of use and the school leader should know when to overlook poor suggestions, communication between staff and administration should prompt a plan that is realistic, workable, and acceptable by the majority.

Once teachers feel part of the overall improvement plan, constant communication needs to occur in order to keep the school on track to ensuring the plan’s success. Administration should also play a key role in improvement. School leaders should consistently make classroom visits to better understand the daily needs of staff and students so as to search out professional development and other resources for teachers that will help improve teaching techniques that are relevant to those needs. Bersin’s push for principal reform was based on the belief that school leaders should be closely involved in and responsible for the learning that takes place in their schools. The strategy was that of providing professional development for principals which

would then trickle-down to enlightened professional development for teachers which would then create a unified approach for all teachers to reach all students in the building. By creating an allied teaching strategy for all teachers, students would benefit from instruction consistency across the curriculum. This consistency would aid not only in instruction, but it would also help to create a strong structure throughout the school. In most schools, a firm structure of communication, unity, and goals will create for the students a positive culture in which to learn. As Bersin admits in the text, “At least at the high school level, we underestimated the importance of structure, among other matters.” (Hess, 331)

School structure (rules, policies, and practices) determines school culture (goals, norms, and values). Careen Elementary’s structure was one of shared power, student choice, and a teaching staff that dedicated themselves to an Applied Learning technique built “around inquiry-oriented activities and real-world applications. “ (Newmann, P.167) Students at Careen remained with the same teachers for two year periods so as to better understand their students’ needs. The faculty was dedicated to student improvement and continually monitored student progress through meetings involving staff, students and parents. At Cibola High School, staff “talk about standards over and over again by sitting together and looking at the work of students.” (Newmann, 176) Cibola teachers were given the responsibility of designing their curriculum, lessons, and assessments. Constant communication among staff and leaders enabled Cibola to work on a united front to ensure that students were completing tasks that staff deemed worthy for use beyond school. Newmann states that at Cibola, the “culture was pervasive, built on a shared set of beliefs intended to improve the achievement of students and the quality of their

experiences both within the classroom and in the school at large.” (223) It was the positive culture, structure, and atmosphere that landed Cibola at the top of the SRS study.

In San Diego, the communication that was occurring between administration and teachers was more often bitter because teachers, instead of being a part of the reform, felt threatened by the Blueprint. While some teachers recognized the need for and improvement through required professional development, others felt like “your head’s in a spin, but you didn’t have time to really practice it [until] something else [was introduced].” One peer coach acknowledged that “the district’s mistake was moving too fast and trying to put too many things in place at one time...” (Hess, 89) Even though Bersin and Alvorado recognized the need for a unified instructional approach, they misunderstood the time frame that would be required for teachers to fully comprehend and implement the ideas in their classrooms. If Bersin and Alvorado had presented their plan differently in the initial stages so as to include and “win-over” the teachers union, the teachers would have been more likely to recognize and appreciate the professional development provided for them. In order to provide students with opportunities for higher learning, it is essential that teachers feel empowered and necessary to the overall goal.

In theory San Diego’s Blueprint was sound in its desire to “shake-up” the system by creating a unified team of administration and teachers all working toward student improvement using the same techniques and philosophies. It was also clear that change was not going to occur without an extensive revision of the prior system. What Bersin didn’t take into account though was that at the high school level many issues arise that are not able to be solved with one blanket strategic plan. Recognizing too late that high schools require special attention in order to reach all of its

students was an enormous weakness in the Blueprint. By acknowledging that the plan wouldn't work for ALL schools, San Diego had to concede that there might also be other places in which the Blueprint failed. At the threat of one school, wealthy La Jolla High School, becoming a charter school unless it was able to be exempt from the Blueprint, one observer states, "At that very moment, I knew it was the end of the Blueprint because now you would have two sets of rules-this is for the wealthy people, this is for the rest. It was only a matter of time for the Blueprint to fall." (Hess, p. 145)

Since the Blueprint and Bersin, San Diego has moved on and put into action plans for high schools based on strategies that express more of the teachers' ideas. While not all aspects of the Blueprint have disappeared from San Diego, there is in place now new communication and more teacher input. Though there are many, one lesson that we educators should take away from the San Diego study is that "Both teachers and students also suffer from the lack of professionalism in the teacher corps." (330) Without communication, everyone in the school system suffers. Yes, schools need a district mission that promotes reaching students and improving achievement, but at the same time it is the individual schools who need to be charged with the responsibility of reaching those students. Through strong structure, constant professional communication between administration and staff, perpetual relevant professional development for all staff members, and a true teacher commitment to students, all students should have the chance to gain an education that will prepare them for higher order thinking in school and beyond.

Administrators and teachers focusing together on the best possible outcome for each student and communicating professionally on how to achieve those outcomes should always be the first step to turning reform goals into reality.

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03/18/07