

Educational Reform as Continuous Improvement

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The changes in this book were prepared to serve as a resource document for the National Education Association's (NEA, 1997) Keys project. Keys is an acronym for "Keys to Excellence in your Schools". NEA has identified 35 factors essential to effective schools, and has developed a survey instrument designed to gather data on these items, and in turn to feed back the data to participating schools. The 35 items cluster into five main domains:

- shared understanding and commitment to high goals
- open communication and collaborative problem solving
- continuous assessment for teaching and learning
- personal and professional learning
- resources to support teaching and learning

The keys project is one example of the larger effort to transform the teaching profession. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 1996) documented the problem:

1. Low expectations for student performance
2. Unenforced standards for teachers
3. Major flaws in teacher preparation
4. Painfully slipshod teacher recruitment
5. Inadequate induction for beginning teachers
6. Lack of professional development and rewards for knowledge and skill
7. Schools that are structured for failure rather than success (NCTAF, 1996:24)

This is not the first time that the reform of teaching has come to the forefront (Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris & Watson, 1998). What is needed, as we have argued in our study The

Rise and Stall of Teacher Education Reform is a comprehensive sustained initiative that incorporates:

- a stronger knowledge base for teaching and teacher education
- attracting able, diverse, and committed students to the career of teaching
- redesigning teacher preparation programs so that the links to arts and sciences, and to the field of practice are both strengthened
- reform in the working conditions of schools
- the development and monitoring of external standards for progress as well as for teacher candidates and teachers on the job
- a rigorous and dynamic research enterprise focusing on teaching, teacher education, and on the assessment and monitoring of strategies (Fullan et al, 1998:58)

We have also said that teachers, ranging from the individual teacher in the classroom to the most visible union leader must “help to recreate the profession”. Hargreaves and I concluded in *What's Worth Fighting For Out There* that the teaching profession has not yet come of age and that the next decade:

“...will be defining era for teaching profession. Will it become a stronger learning profession? Will it become a force for societal change and social practice? Can it develop its own visions of and commitments to educational and social change, instead of simply vetoing and reacting to the change agendas of others?”

(Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998:103)

The Keys project with its survey instrument, feedback and action planning in the schools and districts participating in the program is engaged in very difficult work. The ultimate goal is to mobilize scores of schools and districts in transforming professional

development and organizational learning. The Keys project by itself will not accomplish such fundamental reform. It can, however, have a significant impact if it connects the powerful concepts in the Keys instrument with the content priorities embedded in the new teaching and learning curriculum being developed across the nation. In short, systematic professional development, learning schools and school districts, and success for all students are closely intertwined.

What we need, then, is to consolidate the knowledge base about what makes for continuous improvement, and correspondingly to mobilize sets of actions among educators in partnership with others to engage in reform initiatives, that are based on this knowledge base!

The chapters in the book were the Keys project. The papers align with the themes as follows:

- Shared understanding and commitment — Newman
- Communication and problem solving — Little
- Assessment for teaching and learning — Baker; Earl
- Personal and professional learning — Valli/Hawley;Lieberman/Miller
- Resources — Elmore; Leithwood

The assumption of Keys is that schools and districts that focus on the five clusters, and do so in a way that connects these themes closely to particular curriculum priorities will

increase their capacity to achieve coherence and focus, and will affect learning for all students within the system.

In this introductory chapter I start with the core argument that professional development, pedagogical improvement and student learning need to be tightly interwoven for schools to be effective. The Newmann, Little, Baker and Earl chapters form the basis of this conclusion.

Second, I reinforce the argument by examining the personal and professional learning. These ideas are founded on the chapters by Valli and Hawley, and Lieberman and Miller.

Third, you can't have learning organizations without having schools and districts as learning systems and without having teaching as a learning profession. The last section focuses on districts as learning systems and on teaching as a profession. Elmore and Leithwood provide the analysis which show how districts need to become involved in continuous learning. While much has been accomplished over the past several years in clarifying and demonstrating professional development, the more fundamental issue is the evolution of teaching as a profession. I see the Keys project in the context of the changing teaching profession.

Professional Community, Pedagogical Improvement and Student Learning

In this chapter, Newmann makes the case — strongly backed up by research conducted by him and his colleagues — that three core things must come together, in a highly interactive and systematic way if a school is to become effective. First, there must be a professional learning community in which teachers and others develop (as a result of continuous interaction) shared understanding and commitment to achieve high level outcomes for all students. Second, this joint work must focus on critically assessing and adopting new instructional practices that are best suited for accomplishing high level outcomes for all students. Third, and in turn, shared understanding and new teaching techniques must be determined by what students are learning. In brief, these three factors — professional community, instructional practice, and assessment of student work — feed on each other to create new synergies tantamount to continuous improvement.

Little's chapter establishes the theoretical underpinning in relation to Newmann's findings on shared understanding. Little indicates why professional development, communication and collaboration must go together, and in so doing shows how this cluster affects the “culture” of professional relationships. Hargreaves and I have called this the need to *reculture* the school away from isolating, balkanized and superficial collegiality towards strong forms of collaboration. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996 and Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998) Similarly, Little talks about three supporting conditions for culture-building:

- (1) shared interests and shared responsibility, (2) opportunity to interact and learn, and
- (3) resources. Little concludes with a point that we will return to in the last section

— that collaboration does not mean agreement and does not mean absence of conflict. As I shall argue later, the more that people collaborate the more that they have to disagree about.

Until recently student assessment was not carefully examined in the work on collaborative cultures. It now becomes clear as the chapters by Baker and by Earl demonstrate that assessment of student work and corresponding planning for improvement are essential for school effectiveness.

Baker takes up the issue of “improving the learning of students who are tested“ by involving students in reflecting on their work; and by engaging teachers in altering their teaching in order to help students reach academic goals. Earl extends these ideas by claiming that “classroom assessment can be one of the most powerful levers for enforcing student learning.” As Earl concludes:

When teachers share the decisions about how to assess, there will be fewer discrepancies in student assessment standards and procedures between grades and/or classes, they will develop a deeper understanding of curriculum and of individual students, and they will engage in the intense discussions about standards and evidence that lead to a shared understanding of expectations for students, more refined language about children and learning and consistent procedures for making and communication judgments.

As Hargreaves and I have also said, teachers must become “assessment literate” for two reasons (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). One is that external assessment and accountability is here to stay. The “out there” is now “in here” and educators need to “move toward the danger” and learn to hold their own in the politically contentious arena of debating how

well students are doing. Second, becoming assessment literate is absolutely essential for examining and improving one's own teaching practices in order to get better results.

Examining student work with other teachers is a powerful strategy for enhancing teaching and learning. Examining student work with other teaches is a powerful strategy for enhancing teaching and learning. Thus, professional learning community, instructional practices, and student learning go hand in hand.

Personal and Professional Learning

Valli and Hawley in their chapter consolidate learning about professional development in eight basis principles or “essentials” of effective teacher learning:

1. Professional development should be driven by analyses of the differences between (a) goals and standards for student learning and (b) student performance.
2. Professional development should involve teachers in the identification of what they need to learn and, when possible, in the development of the learning opportunity and/or the process to be used.
3. Professional development should be primarily school-based and integral to school operations.
4. Professional development should provide learning opportunities that relate to individual needs but are, for the most part, organized around collaborative problem solving.

5. Professional development should be continuous and on-going, involving follow-up and support for further learning — including support from sources external to the school that can provide necessary resources and an outside perspective.
6. Professional development should incorporate evaluation of multiple sources of information on (a) outcomes for students and (b) processes that are involved in implementing the lessons learned through professional development.
7. Professional development should provide opportunities to engage in developing a theoretical understanding of the knowledge and skills to be learned.
8. Professional development should be integrated with a comprehensive change process that deals with impediments to and facilitators of student learning.

These essential principles of course are entirely compatible with and reinforcing of the chapters in this book, and represent a solid summary of the knowledge base for effective professional development.

Similarly, Lieberman and Miller conclude that professional development must be transformed to encompass (1) teacher career development (2) organizing schools to support ongoing learning communities, and (3) education reform networks that support teacher learning. Thus, personal learning, organizational (school-based) learning, and broader education reform networks (subject matter collaboratives, school-university partnerships, and other reform networks) are all playing a role in building new learning communities and reshaping professional development.

The School and District as Learning Organizations

A great deal of lip service is given to the concept of learning organizations, but what does it really mean in concrete terms? At the general level it means continually acquiring new knowledge, skills and understanding in order to improve one's actions and results. Thus, the previous sections in which professional development, collaboration, pedagogical improvement and student learning interact over time is an example of organizational learning at the school level. Elmore raises the question of how entire school districts — large sets of schools — can become learning systems. He does this in a way that is founded on the ideas in the chapters reviewed so far. As he puts it “the single most persistent problem of educational reform in the U.S. is the failure of reforms to alter the fundamental conditions of teaching and learning for students and teachers in schools in anything other than a small-scale and idiosyncratic way”. Restructuring by itself does not affect teaching and learning. Most professional development — reforms au jour — as Elmore calls them, do not have the characteristics of continuous learning.

The answer is to do for entire school districts what Newmann and our other authors have done for individual schools, namely, establish system-wide frameworks of accountability, support teachers and others in analyzing their instructional practices *together* in light of what students are learning, and establish processes of continuous learning within and across schools. This is something that has not normally happened but there are several examples in the literature of successful attempts at turning school districts into learning organizations including Elmore's (1996) study of District #2 in New York City, the four

urban districts in the Rockefeller Foundation's professional development infrastructure initiative (Fullan, Watson, Kilcher, 1997), and the Durham School District in Ontario, Canada (Fullan, et al, 1996). It is only recently that district-wide improvement has been the focus of reform strategies and corresponding research, so much more needs to be done in this domain. Leithwood's paper maps out what has to be done at the system level to create learning districts. He describes seven sets of conditions that must be met: mission and goals; culture; information and decision-making; policies; community partnership; and planning.

In summary, there are new developments in the field of educational reform that are based on two interrelated forces. One is the knowledge-base which more and more specifically characterizes that makes for continuous improvement in schools and school systems; the other is the increasing commitment to achieve reform on a larger scale. In the next few years we expect to see more and more large scale reform initiatives that build on this growing knowledge base (see also Fullan, in press)

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