

BUILDING A NEW STRUCTURE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

BY RICHARD F. ELMORE

STANDARDS-BASED reform seems to be thriving. Although it has its detractors, the reform enjoys strong backing from the groups whose support is necessary for its success: legislators and other policymakers, as well as school administrators, teachers, and members of the public. However, a dangerous paradox threatens the standards movement. Most public schools and school systems, as they are now organized, are not equipped to meet the demands of standards-based reform. If our schools fail, and the public loses confidence in them, the results for public education could be devastating. The answer to this problem is to figure out how to improve teaching and learning in whole systems instead of merely in isolated schools or classrooms. We can accomplish this given what we know about teaching and learning, but to do so we will have to make a dramatic change in the way leadership is defined and practiced in public schools.

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Which Standards?

Standards-based reform sounds very simple: Society must make clear what it expects from schools by setting standards that describe what students should know and be able to do; and schools and school systems must be held accountable for making sure students meet these standards. To this end, there should be regular evaluations to see whether teachers are teaching what they are expected to teach and whether students have mastered it. The evidence from these evaluations will trigger rewards and sanctions, but more important, it will also be used to improve teaching and learning.¹

Over the past 15 years, standards-based reform has caught on and, indeed, become basic to educational policy and governance in American education. The majority of states have adopted some form of content and/or performance standards and plan to evaluate schools based on student performance. While the design of these policies still leaves much to be desired, the idea of standards has a great deal of political power. That means we will get standards-based reform. But what kind is in doubt. Will it be the version that proponents envision or a corrupted and poorly-thought-out evil twin?

If standards are bent so they fit comfortably into schools as they are currently organized—and this has been the fate of every other major education reform in the 20th century—standards will be weakened, adulter-

The Albert Shanker Institute

In September 1999, a small group of elected leaders, policy analysts, business representatives, researchers, and AFT leaders met under the auspices of the Albert Shanker Institute to talk about the progress of standards-based school reform and to consider the supports and professional development teachers and principals need to make standards live up to their promise.

As a spur to thought and discussion, the Shanker Institute commissioned a longer version of the article that appears here. The original paper can be ordered by sending a \$10 check made out to the Shanker Institute to Eugenia Kemble, Director, Albert Shanker Institute, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20001.

The Albert Shanker Institute is a nonprofit organization committed to promoting a vibrant democracy, quality public education, a voice for working people in the decisions that affect their jobs and lives, and free and open debate about these issues. The institute commissions original analyses, organizes seminars, sponsors publications, and subsidizes selected projects.

ated, and unrecognizable by the time they arrive in the classroom. In this case, the consequences for public education will be severe. I think the idea of a strong basic education for all children will be lost—although some people will continue to pay it lip service. But it is also possible that public schools will find a way to incorporate the standards-based reform that its proponents envision into their way of doing business. If so, the institutions that emerge will probably also not look anything like the current ones, but the idea of a strong basic education system for all children is more likely to survive and even flourish. So, as the famous Chinese proverb says, we are living in interesting times.

The current organization of U.S. schools—local bureaucracies governed by elected boards—developed early in the history of public education. This system employed relatively low-status (largely female) teachers who worked in relative isolation from each other. The supervisors were (largely male) administrators whose main expertise was thought to lie in administration rather than in pedagogy.² As the scale of public education grew, the structure became more elaborate and rigid. School districts got larger, and schools themselves grew in size and complexity, especially when compulsory attendance was extended to include the secondary grades, and schools became responsible for educating the students who used to drop out by eighth grade.

A Serious Disconnect

People who analyze the structure of institutions have a term for the way our schools are organized: “loose coupling.”³ Put simply, this means that people who manage such an organization do not, in fact, manage the way its basic functions are carried out. In school terms, administrators have little to do with the “technical core” of educa-

tion—the decisions about what should be taught at any given time, how it should be taught, what students should be expected to learn, how they should be grouped within classrooms for purposes of instruction, how they should be required to demonstrate their knowledge, and, perhaps most important, how their learning should be evaluated. All this is left to teachers, with little guidance or support from the organizations that surround them. Furthermore, the knowledge that guides these classroom decisions is not formalized or generally agreed upon.⁴ It is not organized into patterns that others can follow because teachers invent it for themselves. And because its use is a matter of individual judgment, it cannot be reliably evaluated by anyone from outside.

Administrators, then, do not manage instruction. They manage the structures and processes that surround instruction; they protect, or “buffer,” the technical core from outside scrutiny or interference; and in order to assure the public of the quality and legitimacy of what is happening in the technical core—the classroom—they give the impression that they are managing it. This buffering creates what institutional theorists call a “logic of confidence” between public schools and their constituents. Local board members, system-level administrators, and school administrators perform the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system, all in the name of creating and maintaining public confidence in the institutions of public education. Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, manage the technical core. This division of labor has continued unchanged over the past century.

The institutional theory of loose coupling explains a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of public education.

■ *It explains why most innovations in schools are about maintaining the logic of confidence between the public and the schools—and decidedly not about improving the conditions of teaching and learning for actual teachers and students.* It explains the mistaken practice of creating extraordinarily large high schools where anonymity discourages students from being engaged with learning; the tracking systems that condemn low-performing students to low-level academic work instead of giving them the help they need to raise their performance; the athletic programs that exclude large numbers of students from participation in extracurricular activities; the special programs that remove students from regular instruction in the name of remediation; and the site-based management reforms that engage in decision-making about everything except the conditions of teaching and learning. Although most of the people who institute these practices believe they have the best interests of the students in mind, each practice is really directed to a particular constituency in an effort to make its members feel that “good things are happening” in their schools.

■ *It explains why successful instructional practices that grow out of research or exemplary practice never take root in more than a few classrooms and schools.*⁵ Because school administration exists to buffer the instructional core, not to disturb and certainly not to improve it, and because teaching is isolated work, improving instruc-

tion is strictly a matter of individual initiative. This leads to (1) innovations that are highly personal and thus tend to be adopted only by a few receptive teachers who happen to hear of them and (2) innovations that are not connected to any larger goal or purpose belonging to the school or the school system. So, although schools are almost always aboil with some kind of "change," they are rarely involved in any deliberate process of improvement where progress is measured against a clear and well-understood instructional goal.

- *It explains the largely unsuccessful quest over the past century for school administrators who are "instructional leaders."* Instructional leadership is the equivalent of the holy grail in educational administration. Most programs that prepare superintendents and principals claim to be in the business of training the next generation of instructional leaders. Most professional development for school administrators at least refers to the central position of instruction. This is mainly just talk. In fact, few administrators of any kind or at any level are directly involved in instruction.⁶ Principals who develop the skills and knowledge required to become instructional leaders do so because of their own preferences and values—and often at some cost to their own careers. The institutional structure does not promote, or select for, knowledge and skill in the area of teaching and learning. At best, it tolerates the few who cultivate them.
- *It explains the instability of politics and leadership in most large school systems.* Local politics are often factional, and it is no surprise that school boards reflect these political divisions. A smart board member, then, is one who spends most of his or her time using issues to consolidate political support. A smart superintendent is one who can count the number of board members, divide by two, and, if necessary, add one. Superintendents come and go based on their capacity to maintain a working majority on a relatively unstable elected board. In this context, their ability to focus the schools on their core function of teaching and learning and make steady improvements over time is irrelevant.
- *It explains the infatuation of educators and the public with "trait theories" of competence.* What I mean by this is that teachers, principals, and superintendents are considered "good" because they have certain personal qualities, not because they have mastered some body of professional knowledge or because they have proved they are competent at what they do. This reliance on personal qualities for judging competence is to be expected with loose coupling. If an organization has little or no influence over its core functions, all it can do is select people on the basis of qualities that are considered desirable—and pray. Reliance on personal traits instead of verifiable competence also means there is no premium placed on improvement. The expectation that people will become more competent over the course of their careers, or that the organization will systematically invest in helping them become so, hardly exists, if it exists at all, in organizations that are loosely coupled.

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Standards and the Status Quo

It is not hard to see why standards-based reform, however willing a reception it seems to be getting, creates certain fundamental problems for public education. It conflicts with the way public schools are currently organized, and this difference is not likely to be resolved in the usual way, by bending the new policy until it fits into the existing institutional structure.

Standards-based reform, by concerning itself with teaching and learning, tries to reach directly into the instructional core. Content standards, even in their current rather crude form, require that students receive instruction in certain subject areas and certain topics. This threatens the technical core. And performance standards are even more threatening because they assert that schools should be held directly accountable for what students learn.

Moreover, standards-based reform hits at a critical weakness in the current system—it cannot account for the fact that some students master academic content while others do not. In the absence of any generally agreed-upon explanation, school people, and the public at large, have been free to invoke their favorite theories: weak family structures, poverty, discrimination, lack of aptitude, peer pressure, diet, television, etc. Standards-based reform offers a single explanation—the school and the people who work in it are accountable for student learning. Whatever one may think about this theory, it has a strong political, economic, and social appeal; and its logic is clear. The black box is open, and what teachers teach and students learn is increasingly a matter of public scrutiny and debate, and subject to direct measurement and inspection.

Standards-based reform also undermines the basic premise of local control: school districts governed by elected community school boards. In virtually all state accountability systems, the individual school, rather than the school district, is the primary unit of accountability. It's true that governors and state legislators are careful to include local school boards and superintendents in any description of how school accountability works. But the stark reality is that little more than a decade ago, most

states were not able to collect, analyze, and report data on individual schools; now they can. With the individual school as the unit of accountability, it becomes difficult to defend dysfunctional local politics and the usefulness of locally centralized governance and administration.

These conflicts between standards-based reform and the current structure of public education may bode ill for public schools and the people who work in them. If schools fail repeatedly to meet standards, the traditional arguments that have been used to defend the existing institutional structure will probably become weaker and less persuasive. And if schools also deal with these external threats in the usual way—that is by bending the new policy requirements to the existing structure—the standards movement will probably fade away. Policymakers and the public will come to accept the arguments that the core technology of education cannot be understood in any systematic way and that instructional quality and performance in education are mostly matters of personal preference both for educators and for their clients. The idea that schools should meet certain specified standards of quality and performance will then recede into the mists of policy history. The problem with this scenario, of course, is that the demand for school accountability will not go away, even if standards-based reform does, because policymakers are still left with the problem of how to account for the public expenditures they are making and what to do about the governance structure of public education.

But what if, instead of letting this scenario play itself out, we seize the opportunity that the standards movement offers? What if we remake the way schools are organized so they are tightly focused on the core functions of teaching and learning? We know how this can be done—some school districts have already embarked on the process. And, as I will point out, we even have the resources to carry it through.

The Market Solution

Many people who read this analysis of the poor fit between public education as we know it and standards-based reform will have a ready suggestion for a cure—market schools. But schools based on that model are just as subject as the current public schools to the problems associated with loose coupling. Indeed, the notion that quality and performance in education are strictly matters of personal taste is best exemplified in market schools, whether they are based on vouchers, capitation grants (in which schools get public money based on the number of students they attract), or charter schools. Because whatever form they take, these schools imply nothing about either the content or the quality of instruction. In fact, a major part of their political appeal, both to educators and policymakers, is that they do not require any clear thinking about what actually happens inside the structure, and thus they reproduce, in another form, the buffering of the technical core that we've already seen in the public schools.

When market models enter the picture in any number and education becomes even more a matter of personal taste and preference than it already is, the structure and governance of local schools will become increasingly

weak and the schools themselves irrelevant to many educators and their clients. That is what people who choose market schools, whether as teachers and administrators or parents, want. Entrepreneurial schools have no wish to operate under local governance systems if they can attract enough clients to function as free agents. Nor do active choosers—the parents and students who have strong school preferences—wish to stay with centrally administered schools when they can go to individual schools that suit their tastes. Increasingly, then, the only children in centrally administered and governed public schools will be the ones whose parents are not active choosers or who are not chosen. I frequently tell my students that if they want to see a possible future for the public schools, they should visit a public hospital—a poorly financed subsystem of the health care market that specializes in clients no one else wants to serve.

So if public educators insist that the instructional core is inviolate and the role of administrators is to support it, they are inviting policymakers simply to agree, and then to shift public education by degrees into a system based entirely on personal taste, preference, and judgment. This will mean that public responsibility for education will only extend as far as distributing the available money to individual families or schools. What happens afterwards will be up to the individuals and schools, not the state. And many issues that we now believe to be of importance to society will become matters of individual taste, preference, and judgment: whether students are exposed to high-quality teaching and learning as a consequence of public expenditures; what students know as a consequence of the teaching they have received; and whether certain groups of students routinely have access to more powerful knowledge than others. So there are reasons why public educators should be measured in their criticisms of standards-based reforms. Indeed, they might even be grateful that the standards movement, by laying open the long-standing weaknesses in the system, gives us an impetus to change them.

Leadership Redefined

For those interested in improving public schools, the local governance and administration of education hold a trump card, which can be played to bring about broad improvements in teaching and learning. Individual schools, which operate largely as individual firms, have difficulty finding money to spend on improving the skills and knowledge of their teachers and administrators. Individual schools that are part of larger corporations also have incentives, in markets largely defined by taste and preference, to underinvest in skill and knowledge, since they market their reputations for quality rather than any specific service or result.⁷ However, most public school systems still have access to money—most of it now spent on administrative overhead—that could be invested in improving the skills and knowledge of principals and teachers.

Standards-based reforms are delivering a relatively clear signal to schools and school systems that their main business should be to improve teaching and learning. Will they be able to respond to this demand? Only if we have a clear understanding of what we mean by “improvement” and “leadership.”

Leaders are responsible for helping to make possible what they require others to do.

“Improvement” is change that can be defined in terms of time and direction. It takes place when an organization can demonstrate that it has made progress toward a goal by doing certain things; and it engages people in analyzing and understanding why some actions seem to work and others don’t.

A school leader? Quite simply, he or she is a person who can guide this kind of instructional improvement. Reading what has been written on principalship can be daunting because it suggests that principals should be heroic figures who embody whatever is necessary to remedy their school’s every defect. Somewhere on the long list of exemplary qualities, one usually finds a reference to instruction. It is probably vague, in order to include both those who care about instruction and those who regard it as a distraction from their real job. The definition I offer focuses on instructional improvement; and the skills and knowledge that matter, under this definition, lead to the improvement of instruction and student performance.

Writings about management generally describe leaders, or higher-level managers, as exercising “control” over an organization, but this term is misleading when applied to improvement. Control implies that the controller knows exactly what the controllees should do. Because teachers, the people who deliver instruction, will have the best grasp of how to improve it, a school leader does not control improvement as much as guide it. “Guidance” and “direction”—better terms for what should be going on—imply that expertise is shared. They also imply that there are different kinds and different levels of expertise in an organization. And if knowledge is distributed, we must also think in terms of what I will call “distributed leadership.”⁸

The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated. People in any system develop specialties that reflect their interests, aptitudes, and skills; but competence varies considerably among people in similar roles. Harnessing these varied skills and talents so they complement each other is a tricky job. Equally challenging is the task of figuring out when there is not enough competence inside an organization to solve its problems, thus requiring a search outside. In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform the complex tasks involved without distributing the responsibility for leadership and creating a common culture that

makes this distributed leadership coherent. It is the “glue” of a common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common set of values for how to approach that task that keep distributed leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling.

Across-the-board agreement on basic aims and values is a precondition for leading an organization toward instructional improvement. Collaboration and collegiality are important, but they alone are not enough. Distributed leadership seeks to parcel out responsibility and authority for guiding and directing instruction, and learning about instruction. The point is to increase the likelihood that the decisions of individual teachers and principals add up to collective benefits for student learning.⁹ Standards-based reform creates an enabling context for all this.

The New Model

Creating a new model of distributed leadership consists of two main tasks: One involves describing the ground rules that leaders would have to follow in order to carry out large-scale improvement; the other describes how they would share responsibility. Here are some principles for distributed leadership that focus on improving teaching and learning in a school system.

- *The purpose of leadership is to improve practice and performance.* Thus, the skills and knowledge that matter are those which contribute to creating classrooms, schools, and districts where there are clear expectations about performance.
- *Improvement requires continuous learning, both by individuals and groups.* Collective learning needs an environment in which learning is the normal activity. The current structure of public education encourages isolated and individualistic learning. Distributed leadership needs to create an environment that views learning as a collective good. Individuals should expect to have colleagues look critically at their personal ideas and practices; and groups should expect the same thing from individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation, and isolation is the enemy of improvement.
- *Leaders lead by exemplifying the values and behavior they want others to adopt.* If learning is their central responsibility, leaders must model the learning they expect others to engage in. They should also expect to have their own practice subjected to the same scrutiny that they turn on others.
- *People cooperate with one another in achieving their goals when they recognize other people’s expertise.* Large-scale improvement requires a relatively complex kind of cooperation among people in diverse roles. The key to creating this cooperation is understanding that learning grows out of differences in expertise. If collective learning is the goal, my authority to command you to do something doesn’t mean much if I don’t have the knowledge and skill which, when joined with yours, make us both more effective.¹⁰
- *Leaders are responsible for helping to make possible what they are requiring others to do.* A boss can command whatever she likes. A leader gets her authority

from making sure that people have a chance to learn to do what she asks.

This model of distributed leadership assumes that what goes on in the classroom is a collective good—a common concern of the whole institution—as well as a private and individual concern. It posits a theory of leadership that, while respecting, acknowledging, and capitalizing on differences in expertise, locates failure in isolated practice and success in the creation of interdependencies that stretch over these differences.

Improvement is about developing and distributing knowledge. Hence, leadership roles have to represent those who create and engage people in learning new forms of practice. These roles develop in systems that are engaged in large-scale improvement, as we shall see below. Where they don't exist, they will have to be created or redefined from existing roles.

Learning How To Do the Right Things

Many well-intentioned reformers argue that large-scale improvement of schools can be accomplished by finding good people and freeing them from the bonds of bureaucracy. However, improvement is more likely to come from what people learn on the job than from what they knew when they began it. Organizations improve because they agree on what is worth achieving and then create processes that help their employees learn what they need to meet these goals. Moreover, such organizations select, reward, and retain people who are willing to embrace the purposes of the organization and learn how to achieve them. Improvement occurs through organized social learning, not through idiosyncratic experimentation and discovery.

The idea of learning how to do the right thing—collectively and over time—is at the core of the theory of standards-based reform. There are major problems with the design of most state standards and accountability systems. One would expect such problems with new policies that are discontinuous with past policies and that deal with complex processes and institutions. But as important as these problems are, the problems of institutional design and educational practice implicit in standards-based reform are much more serious. If the theory of distributed leadership outlined in the previous section is correct, these problems of institutional design and practice cannot be solved through policymaking alone. Policy can set targets for practice and performance; it can stimulate public discussion about content and performance in schools; and it can alter the incentives under which schools and school systems work. But the closer policy gets to the instructional core—to how teachers and students engage with content—the more policymakers lose their comparative advantage, the more they become dependent on the knowledge and skill of practitioners to mold and shape the instructional core.¹¹

We are still learning how to bring about large-scale improvement of instruction and performance. However, it seems evident that some schools and districts are better at the task than others. Murphy and Hallinger, in a study of California school districts with high student achievement, found evidence of common management strategies. Super-

intendents in these districts were knowledgeable about curriculum and teaching strategies, and they were key initiators of changes in these areas. Together with other central office people, superintendents took an active role in monitoring curriculum and instruction. They were also active in supervising, evaluating, and mentoring principals, and they were more likely to fire principals who performed poorly. These successful districts were clearer in their goals and more willing to decide what would be taught and what would constitute evidence of performance. On the other hand, these districts were also more willing to let the schools decide how to carry out an instructional program, and, despite strong leadership, they were less bureaucratic than their counterparts. They tended to rely more on common values, which typically focused on improvement of student learning. They showed evidence of steady, sustained improvement; a positive approach to problem-solving in the face of unforeseen difficulties; a view of structures, processes, and data as instruments for improvement rather than as ends in themselves; and a heavy internal focus by administrators on the demands of instruction, rather than a focus on events in the external environment.¹²

Knapp and his colleagues, in their study of high-quality instruction in high-poverty classrooms, found that the pattern of district involvement in instructional improvement was either to avoid high-quality practice (pushing teachers toward less ambitious, lower level, more structured practice) or, more commonly, was chaotic and incoherent. "Most teachers," they conclude, "received mixed signals [from the district] about what to teach." Further, the researchers found that the instruments most districts use to influence instruction—guidelines, textbook adoptions, testing and assessment, scope and sequence requirements by grade level, etc.—were almost entirely disconnected from the learning that teachers had to do in order to master more ambitious instructional practices. Districts were, in the researchers' words, long on pressure and short on support, with the predictable effect that most of the efforts to adopt ambitious instructional practice were idiosyncratic by school and classroom.¹³ This research tracks with earlier work on what determined content and pedagogy in a large sample of schools, which concluded that, for the most part, district influences on instructional practice were diffuse and ineffectual and usually peripheral to teachers' decisions about what to teach or how.¹⁴

Focusing on Practice in District Two

My own work on instructional improvement in Community School District Two, New York City, reinforces many of the themes in these studies. (See article on page 14.) District Two is, by any standard, one of the highest-performing urban school systems in the country, with fewer than 12 percent of its students—60 percent of whom are low-income—scoring in the lowest quartile of nationally standardized reading tests. A comparable figure for most urban districts is the 40 percent to 50 percent range. The District Two story is a complex one, but the main themes are consistent with what I've been saying about leadership and long-term improvement. Over the past 10 years, District Two has pursued a strategy to improve teaching and learning that has involved:

- Long-term focus on core instruction, first in literacy and then in mathematics
- Heavy investments in professional development in the fundamentals of strong classroom instruction both for teachers and for principals
- Strong and explicit accountability for principals and teachers for the quality of practice and the level of student performance, backed by direct oversight of classroom practice by principals and district personnel
- The expectation that adults will take responsibility for their own, their colleagues', and their students' learning.

District Two comprises a wide variety of schools in widely varying neighborhoods. As a result, the schools embody different problems of practice, enroll very different student populations, and are at different places in their improvement processes. The district adjusts for these differences by treating the schools differently: More oversight, direction, and professional development are concentrated on schools with the lowest-performing students; professional development plans are adapted to the particular instructional progress of specific teachers in each school; and high-performing schools are granted more discretion than low-performing schools in both practice and professional development. Principals are the linchpins of instructional improvement in District Two. They are recruited, evaluated, and retained or dismissed on the basis of their ability to understand, model, and develop instructional practice among teachers and, ultimately, on their ability to improve student performance. At all levels of the system, isolation is seen as the enemy of improvement, so most management and professional development activities are specifically designed to connect teachers, principals, professional developers, and district administrators with one another and with outside experts in regard to specific problems of practice.

District Two has also enjoyed an extraordinary level of stability in leadership. Anthony Alvarado, the superintendent who initiated the large-scale improvement strategy, was in the district for eight years, and his former deputy, Elaine Fink, who served as the main source of instructional guidance and oversight in the district throughout Alvarado's term, is now superintendent. Similarly, the community school board, which represents many segments of a very diverse community, has been relatively stable and has served as a steady source of guidance and support for administrative leadership.¹⁵

Considering the magnitude of the task posed by standards-based reform, there is shockingly little research about institutional design and practice in high-performing school districts. The work does point to common themes, which I will treat in a moment. However, educators are fond of responding to any piece of research that demonstrates a promising approach with a host of reasons why "it"—whatever it is—would never work in their schools: Their students are different; their communities would not tolerate such practices; their union contract would never permit such actions; their teachers are too sophisticated (or unsophisticated) to accept such improvements, etc., etc., etc. Public education is, in the default mode, astonish-

A major principle in school improvement is getting people at all levels focused on instruction.

ingly, perversely, and ferociously parochial and particularistic; all significant problems are problems that can only be understood in the context of a particular school or community.¹⁶

The most effective response to this parochialism, which is a direct outgrowth of the isolation of teaching as a vocation, is to surround practitioners with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of examples of systems that have managed to design their institutional structures around large-scale improvement. We can get those examples by substantially increasing the research and documentation of high-performing systems with high proportions of low-income students. We can also use policy to stimulate demand for such knowledge by investing in inspection activities among high- and low-performing districts. The states with relatively high proportions of high-performing districts seem to be the ones that have invested in an infrastructure to capture, examine, and disseminate information about these successes.¹⁷ Still, in the short term, the lack of knowledge about the practical issues connected with large-scale improvement is a big problem. However, it is possible to state a few principles.

Improve Practice and All Else Follows

A major principle in large-scale improvement is getting people at all levels of the system focused on some aspect of instruction. Low-performing schools and systems generally start with literacy. They focus on that area until practice in most classrooms approaches a relatively high standard and performance begins to move decisively upward. This could take a number of years. Then, they add another instructional area—typically mathematics—which increases the level of complexity in practice and learning that is expected of teachers and principals. Focus also has to be accompanied by stability—in leadership, in the language that high-level administrators and board members use to describe the goals and purposes of the organization, and in monitoring the policies and structures that are supposed to bring about improvement. The principle of tight focus and stability in message should apply to everyone: Superintendents and board members should be just as subject to criticism for straying off-message as principals and teachers.

Another major design principle has to do with develop-

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ing the accountability relationships in schools and school systems. People in improving systems seem to buy into standards-based accountability largely because leaders set examples of commitment and focus and use face-to-face relationships rather than bureaucratic controls. Basically, what they need to do is to unlearn the behaviors and values that accompany loose coupling, and learn the new behaviors and values associated with collective responsibility for teaching practice and student learning. People make these fundamental changes when they are frequently exposed to the new ways of thinking and acting, have a chance to argue these new ways into their own systems of belief, observe other people practicing them, and, most important, become successful at practicing them in the presence of others (are seen to be successful). Business-as-usual in schools is what sustains the current loose coupling. Unless new values and behaviors alter the way business is carried on, there will be no real change in the schools.

The early evidence also suggests that schools and systems with weak collective values and atomized organizations look for the easiest way of solving accountability problems within the knowledge they have.¹⁸ Schools teach to the test, because they have no better ideas about how to improve content and pedagogy. They focus on students who are closest to meeting standards because they do not have any strategies for reaching the students who are harder to teach. They give vague and general guidance about instruction because they don't believe that working collectively would produce new instructional practices—and they would not know how to go about collective work, anyway. The path of least resistance represented by these responses is replaced, in improving systems, by an insistence that the expectations and standards apply to all students. As a result, people in these schools examine assessment data on individual students in all classrooms and schools, focusing on the particular problems of low-performing students, and they refuse to make judgments about school performance based on school- or grade-level averages.

It is also the case that improving systems confront the issue of isolation implicit in loose coupling, directly and explicitly. Administrators—both system-level and school-level—observe practice in schools and classrooms rou-

tinely. They have mastered ways of talking about what they see that allow for support, criticism, and judgment—but do not threaten. Such systems also create multiple avenues of interaction, focused on acquiring new skills and knowledge, among classrooms and schools as well as between schools and their broader environment. These systems make adjustments in the way the school day is organized to create times when teachers, administrators, and outside experts can meet to talk about practice. In the words of former superintendent Alvarado, all discussions are about “the work,” and all non-classroom personnel are expected to learn and model in their own interactions with others in the organization the practices they want to see in the classroom. A corollary of this principle is that if anyone's practice is subject to observation, analysis, and critique, then everyone's practice should be. Supervisors should be just as subject to evaluation as their supervisees. The principle of reciprocity applies to all accountability relationships.

It should go without saying that in systemwide improvement, schools don't get to choose whether they participate. Some systems have allowed schools to enter various phases of an improvement process at different times. Some systems allow schools to choose among various instructional approaches as the focus for improvement. But allowing schools to choose whether they participate is tantamount to returning to loose coupling, in which improvement occurs in small pockets and never influences the rest of the system. It is not coincidental, I think, that most of the current examples of improving districts occur in states that have relatively strong standards-based accountability systems in place. Local school systems in those states are discovering that they don't have the option of using volunteerism, because ultimately their performance as a system will be based on the performance of all classrooms and schools in the system.

As I said earlier, I offer these design principles based on my own work on large-scale improvement and my reading of the little research that exists on this subject. The main point here should be the urgency of learning more about these issues in many school districts, in many different settings, and in pushing hard for more concrete knowledge about how large-scale improvement processes work.

The Road Ahead

Standards-based reform poses problems of the deepest and most fundamental sort about how we think about the organization of schooling and the function of leaders in school systems and schools, as well as an opportunity to make necessary and fundamental changes. In the current reform period, the stakes are high for the future of public schooling and for the students who attend public schools. Change, as it has been conceived and carried out in the past, is not an option in responding to these problems. Large-scale, sustained, and continuous improvement is the path out of these problems. And this kind of improvement is what the existing institutional structure of public schooling is specifically designed not to do. Improvement requires fundamental changes in the way public schools and school systems are designed and in the ways they are led—changes in the values and

norms that shape how teachers and principals think about the purposes of their work; changes in how we think about who leaders are, where they are, and what they do; and changes in the knowledge and skill requirements of those who work in schools. We are in an early and perilous stage of this process. It is not clear whether public schooling will actually respond to the challenge of large-scale improvement or will simply adapt the reform to the way schools currently do business.

The pathologies of the existing institutional structure are all being addressed in some school systems that are seriously at work on the problems of large-scale improvement. It's essential that other school systems, operating in an environment of increased attention to student performance and quality of instruction, discover that they need to learn, not just different ways of doing things, but very different ways of thinking about the purposes of their work, and the skills and knowledge that go with those purposes. □

NOTES

- ¹ Elmore, R. F., C. H. Abelman, et al., *The New Accountability in State Education Reform: Holding Schools Accountable*, H. Ladd, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996.
- ² Tyack, D., and E. Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*, New York: Basic Books, 1982, and Tyack, D., *The One Best System*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974.
- ³ Weick, K. E., "Educational Organizations as Loosely-Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21(1) (1976): 1-19.
- ⁴ Bidwell, C., *The School as a Formal Organization. Handbook of Organizations*, J.G. March, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965, and Lortie, D., *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- ⁵ Cuban, L., *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms*, New York: Longman, 1984, and Cuban, L., "Reforming Again, Again, and Again," *Educational Researcher* 19(1) (1990): 3-13. And Elmore, R. F., "Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice," *Harvard Educational Review* 66(1) (1996): 1-26.
- ⁶ Cuban, L., *The Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in Schools*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988, and Murphy, J., "Principal Instructional Leadership," *Advances in Educational Administration* 1 (Part B) (1990): 163-200.
- ⁷ If Edison is successful in creating a national network of schools, it will also have the resources to bring about the large-scale changes I discuss here. Whether it will have the inclination to do so is open to question.
- ⁸ For a more extensive treatment of the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of distributed leadership, see Spillane, J. P., R. Halverson, et al., *Distributed Leadership: Toward a Theory of School Leadership Practice*, Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, 1999.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Elmore, R. F., *Accountability in Local School Districts: Learning To Do the Right Things. Improving Educational Performance: Local*

and Systemic Reforms, P.W. Thurston and J. G. Ward, Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 5:59-82, 1997.

- ¹¹ This discussion owes a great deal to Susan Rosenholtz, especially *Teachers' Workplace*, New York City: Longman, 1989.
- ¹² Murphy, J., and P. Hallinger, "Characteristics of Instructionally Effective School Districts," *Journal of Educational Research* 81(3) (1988): 175-181, and Murphy, J., P. Hallinger, et al., "The Administrative Control of Principals in Effective School Districts," *The Journal of Educational Administration* 25(2) (1987): 161-192.
- ¹³ Knapp, M.S., P. M. Shields, et al., *The School and District Environment for Meaning-Oriented Instruction: Teaching for Meaning in High Poverty Classrooms*, M. Knapp, 1995.
- ¹⁴ Floden, R., A. Porter, et al., "Instructional Leadership at the District Level: A Closer Look at Autonomy and Control," *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 24 (1988): 96-124.
- ¹⁵ Elmore, R. F., and D. Burney, "Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff Development and Instructional Improvement in Community District Two, New York City," *National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and Consortium for Policy Research in Education*, 1997, and Elmore, R. F. and D. Burney, "School Variation and Systemic Instructional Improvement in Community School District Two, New York City," *University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center, High Performance Learning Communities Project 1997*, and Elmore, R. and D. Burney, "Continuous Improvement in Community School District Two, New York City," *University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center, High Performance Learning Communities Project 1998*.
- ¹⁶ In my own attempts to explain my work in District Two to practitioners from other districts, I have heard what I think must be every possible explanation of why the District Two experience could not be useful in other settings: District Two is a small district, therefore its lessons don't transfer to large districts; actually, at 23,000 students, the district is larger than the average school district and about the same size as many districts with high proportions of low-income children. District Two has exceptional teachers (one of my favorites), therefore one can't expect "ordinary teachers" to do what teachers in District Two do. Actually, District Two has attracted exceptional teachers by being good at what it does. District Two must have a different union contract than the one in my district in order to get teachers to participate in so many professional development activities. Actually, District Two operates under the same union contract as all other community districts in New York City; it has developed exceptionally strong working relations with the union; and it has its share of union/management issues. District Two must spend an inordinate amount of time "teaching to the test" to get such high scores. In fact, teachers spend very little time preparing students to take standardized tests; the performance gains are mostly produced by high-quality instruction. After a while, one begins to think that the source of questions is not curiosity but its opposite.
- ¹⁷ Grissmer, D., and A. Flanagan, "Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas," Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, November 1998, and O'Day, J., M. Goertz, et al., "Building Capacity for Education Reform," Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1995.
- ¹⁸ Abelman, C., and R. F. Elmore, "When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?" Consortium for Policy Research in Education Research Report RR-42, 1999.