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# Change in High Schools: Rolling Stones or Asleep at the Wheel?

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While high schools don't think they are as bad as the media claim, they're also not as good as they'd like to be. What they need now are clear strategies and processes to bring change about.



**D**emands are escalating for high schools to change. And, undoubtedly, changes will be introduced. But whether they will address major dilemmas or simply tinker with the status quo remains to be seen. Clearly, understanding the change process and identifying procedures and strategies for facilitating change are necessary prerequisites.

Fortunately, this understanding is now being furthered by studies conducted at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education. Until recently, most of the research on the implementation of change focused on elementary schools and colleges and universities. The emphasis now has shifted to the study of high school change—specifically focusing on how to facilitate the process of change, rather than testing the effectiveness of particular innovations. The objective is to identify and describe key factors and mechanisms that affect the ultimate success of implementing various promising practices.

The research staff for the high school study began by surveying the literature and consulting with various educators. They then conducted a series of visits to high schools across the nation. To date, 22 high schools, ranging from rural to urban and small to large, have been visited for two to three days each. Remarkably, the first general assessment to come from this field work was, *It isn't like they say it is*. A number of popular stereotypes and myths about the American high school clash with what we observed in high schools and how the participants in high schools see their world and their potential for change.

#### **New Insights and Old Stereotypes**

If anything is certain, it is that everyone has an opinion about high schools and what should be done about them. Although each person's assumptions and

assertions are somewhat unique, there are several more frequently heard stereotypes and myths that we now seriously question.

*Are high schools changing? (Yes/No/Maybe/None of the above)*. Whenever there is mention of conducting a study of the change process in high schools, telling comments are made by policy makers, researchers, and practitioners, most of whom imply that high schools are not changing and that they are difficult to approach. An analysis of the literature is equally discouraging, but at times more colorful. As Ducharme (1982) put it, high schools will change when dogs learn to sing. District office and elementary school staff tend to see high school people as uncooperative and disinterested in learning about new and different practices: "They're only interested in their subject areas."

Our field work challenges this stereotype of unresponsiveness and disinterest. In interviews with high school teachers, administrators, and students, we found widespread interest in change. Each school described a great number of changes, both small and large, that had been made or were in the process of

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*elementary schools/Small*). Other stereotypes begin to crumble when high schools are examined firsthand. One view that is often heard is that high schools are big (thousands of students), impersonal, indifferent, and dangerous. The opposite appears to be more frequently the case. Many, if not most, high schools in the country are relatively small (1,000 to 2,000 students). In fact, a surprisingly large number of high schools are smaller than many elementary schools (under 750 students). And there are many high schools with 300 or less students. Rather than being so large that students are lost in anonymity, it appears that a large proportion of American high schools are so small that one must question how they can offer comprehensive programs for all students.

Most high schools are safe places to visit and work, too. Students look like the all-American stereotypes from earlier days. Their clothes are not always in line with adult fashion, but their hair is shorter than it was in the 60s and they believe in the *future*. Considering the limitations imposed by resources, teacher time, class size, and legislated requirements, there is an amazing amount of life, spirit, energy, and personal warmth in the high schools we visited. This is not to deny that large, dangerous, uncaring high schools exist. However, the average or typical high school appears to be very much like the ones most adults remember attending.

Those who plan future changes would do well to keep in mind that there is a large range in the size of high schools and that the many smaller schools may not have the staff and resource flexibility to simply add on new activities. At the same time, larger high schools are likely to have more structure and bureaucracy that must be involved.

*What is the place of co- and extra-curricular programs? (Fluff/Equal/More important).*

Band, athletics, debate teams, drama clubs, pep squads, and so forth are frequently perceived as activities “on the side,” not to be taken too seriously as functions of the high school. Yet they are in major competition with the academic curriculum. In terms of resource consumption, these “nonacademic” activities are a priority and represent a significant portion of staff and student time and attention. Even teacher hiring decisions can be based more on a pro-

spective teacher’s ability to assume co/extra-curricular responsibilities than on their qualifications to teach academic subjects.

Another interesting aspect of the co/extra-curriculum that dispels its insignificance is the size of budget and revenue generating activities. Schools earn money from football gate receipts, plays, sale of yearbooks, fund-raising activities for class projects. One high school journalism teacher reported collecting more than \$13,000 in a single day from yearbook sales. Football programs frequently collect and spend tens of thousand of dollars. In total, the fiscal operations of some high schools’ co/extra-curricula entail hundred thousand dollar budgets, sophisticated bookkeeping procedures, and full-time personnel to manage them.

Thus, the co/extra-curriculum is a factor that must be considered when planning changes. It does take time and resources, but it also represents a rich array of opportunities and experiences for students. Before the co/extra-curriculum is discarded as fluff, a much closer and more systematic analysis must be made of its functions and effects. The environment in which American adolescents develop into adults and learn to be responsible members of society is centered around their high school experience. More happens than mastering reading, writing, mathematics, and computer literacy. Social skills, interpersonal communication, understanding the arts and contributing to them, maintaining one’s individuality in a group, practicing appropriate adult behaviors in different settings, and understanding and coping with peer pressures are all part of co/extra-curricular activities.

Rather than reducing or doing away with the co/extra-curriculum, perhaps it can become a vehicle for change. The co-curriculum is well known as the reason that many students stay in school. It can serve as a common factor for what otherwise would be an almost infinite number of subgroups and cliques. Yet, the dynamics, purposes, functions, and effects of the co/extra-curriculum are little understood and poorly researched.

Before this half of the high school is swept away, as some recent experts have suggested, much more must be known about what it is and what it does. Projec-

being planned or implemented. Staff members in high schools saw themselves as interested in change, willing to change, and involved in numerous change activities. Individual teachers were making student-oriented changes in curricula, adding or subtracting new courses, or introducing new technology in their classrooms. There were school-wide innovations such as competency testing, new attendance and discipline policies, strategies for enhancing school climate, and procedures for mainstreaming students. Each school could boast a variety of innovations.

The discrepancy between how high school staff members see themselves and how others see them is not only interesting, it is problematic. What is the reason for the difference in perceptions? What can be done to help both sides understand the other’s perspective? Perhaps those who see no change have not looked closely. Just what is the true extent of change and openness to it? How is an accurate picture to be determined? The reality of present practice and the potential for change in high schools clearly needs to be more accurately assessed.

*How big is the typical high school? (Thousands of students/The size of many*

tions are also needed about what would fill the vacuum if it were reduced or removed. It is likely that many of its functions would be carried on through newly created substitute activities outside the formal school organization. These replacement activities and any deficiencies could in some completely unpredicted way have serious consequences. The needs will still be there and there is no certainty that the replacement activities will be as effective. Before drastic alterations are made, much more must be understood about the real functions of the co/extra-curriculum.

*How viable is the department as a unit of change? (Primary/Possible/No way).* Another stereotype is that high schools operate and function in departmental units with the department head assuming a key leadership role in adopting and implementing new curriculum, supervising and evaluating teachers, and serving as a model and master teacher. However, all too often, department heads report that their role is basically one of checking books in and out, keeping records, passing on communications from "above," and ordering supplies. In general, they do not appear to have the time or opportunity to serve as active leaders, nor do they see themselves as having responsibility for initiating or facilitating change. Their selection typically has little to do with leadership ability, and training for the role is nonexistent.

Typically, contracts and district job descriptions offer no clear definition of the department head role. Department heads themselves are uncertain about the formal requirements of their role and there is no consistency in the role from school to school, even within the same school district! A tentative finding from our study is that the function of department heads appears to be defined most by how each principal perceives it. Within the same district, we found heads in some schools who had virtually no authority and in other schools heads who were centrally involved in evaluating teachers.

Role definition and operational descriptions of the ideal ways that department heads can function is clearly needed. They will also need training and supervision in how to function in new ways. It cannot be assumed that department heads are school leaders who can easily facilitate educational change.

Further, there frequently is not enough staff unity and identity with the department for it to automatically serve as a unit for the adoption of major changes in high schools. Teachers go their own way; they do not necessarily identify with their departmental colleagues. Subject area and co/extra-curriculum responsibilities are often the first-level identity group. In most cases, before departments and department heads will be able to carry out a change mission there will need to be clarification of roles (legally, contractually, and operationally) and subsequent selection and training of heads with the new role in mind.

*Are principals too busy to lead school improvement projects? (You bet/Sometimes/No way).* High school principals and others are often so busy and laden with administrative duties that they have no time to be facilitators of change. Yet in many high schools, both large and small, principals manage to function as instructional leaders and are active in supporting change. Whether or not principals initiate change appears to be related more to what they accept as priorities than to immutable conditions of the job. The tasks they decide to do, those they decide to delegate, and the overall commitment of the school and the district to principal leadership are factors that can be influenced.

It does not appear that the high school principal should automatically be assumed to have a limited role in facilitating change. At the same time it cannot be assumed that they will be an effective force for change. When changes are considered, careful consideration should be given to the potential of each principal. If it is assumed that all principals are or are not key players in facilitating school improvement, then the mark will be missed in many schools.

*Where does the high school fit in the grand scheme of things? (An island/At the center/Just another cog).* In many ways high schools have been isolated from the mainstream of community life. However, new collaborative enterprises are emerging, including new kinds of partnerships between schools and businesses. Community agencies and other local groups are fostering the development of mutually beneficial relationships. In addition, high schools are becoming centers for continuing and adult education and for other com-

munity educational and social endeavors.

Community perceptions of high schools are a significant factor in the life of high schools, in the kinds of changes high schools can easily make, and how change is approached. The continued association of a high school's graduates with activities at the school, along with community interest in the school, make all activities at the high school public knowledge. As one principal put it, "I will not be fired for what happens in the instructional program; however, I can be fired for what happens on the athletic field." In many ways the image of the entire school district is linked with how the high school is viewed and valued by the community.

Clearly, any future change efforts in high schools will need to plan for and attend to the community's interest in, involvement in, and potential resistance to proposed changes. High schools are the bell cow for the district; if their image is enhanced the total district is likely to gain and there should be more willingness to consider future change.

### Understanding Change in the High School Setting

The field work to date strongly indicates that there are unjustified stereotypes and misunderstandings about the characteristics of high schools and what goes on in them. Clearly a great deal more research and exploration is needed. As a consequence of the initial work, several questions have been identified that require further examination if we are to better understand the change process in high schools. Several of these questions are described here along with some of the factors that appear to be key in planning for change in high school settings.

*Who knows what?* The fable about the three blind men and the elephant illustrates very well the problem of identifying comprehensive sources of information about an entire high school. Just as the three blind men described the elephant very differently depending on what part they touched, different observers and participants describe a high school differently depending on the part they have "touched." In the field work, various school-, district-, and state-level informants were asked about particular high schools. Often, their knowledge

was limited to a few specific characteristics. Probing also revealed that many informants were not at all knowledgeable about the school as a whole and, in fact, relied on other people's perceptions.

This led the research team to more vigorously search for informants who could provide reliable, broad-based information about a high school. More disturbing was the finding that many of the key participants, administrators, and teachers in a high school do not have in-depth knowledge of what is happening beyond their office and classroom doors. Teachers know only about what other teachers are doing within their subject, department, area, or grade level. Administrators tend to have extensive knowledge only about those persons and activities for which they are directly responsible.

This compartmentalized view of the school was also true of most students. Attempts to find out about the range of activities in high schools by interviewing elected student government leaders, star athletes, newspaper staff, and other students was surprising. All too frequently the student leaders provided equally restricted visions of what was happening across a high school. As idiosyncratic as it is, one of the broadest perspectives of the dynamics within one high school was offered by an all-American tight-end who had made it a personal goal to learn about the various subcommittees and factions within his high school. One individual testifies as a high school expert when all he or she really knows is the school's tail, while another is only an expert on the trunk, and a third expert has only seen the legs. Each knows about a limited area, but their statements are generalized to the school as a totality.

More robust and valid mechanisms for determining the present state and conditions of a high school are desperately needed. Relying on limited or segmented views is highly precarious. Before change and reform can sweep the nation and before any one high school can reasonably be expected to improve, accurate diagnostic information must be gathered. Otherwise the well-intentioned arrows of improvement may accidentally hit the archer.

*Who's in charge?* The division of responsibility and distribution of authority across various administrators in the high schools contributes to the challenge of effectively managing and moni-

toring change efforts. Each teacher, each department, each administrator appears to be able to operate in their own way and in their own time. Yet there is a very tight set of restricting parameters within which movement occurs. Each student moves through a sequence of 50- to 55-minute modules. As the assembly line moves along, students and teachers play out their parts. The system is self-operating with each player knowing his or her schedule and routine. The overall orchestration of the production appears to be due more to the integrative ability of individuals than anything that is done by the administration or faculty as a whole.

High schools seem to run themselves. Long-established systems and procedures preserve the routine while the occasional anomaly is resolved on a case-by-case basis. For any particular issue, how decisions get made and who makes them is anything but straightforward and common across schools. The unwritten norms and rules of functioning are difficult to map or predict.

And this, indeed, is one of the fascinating characteristics of high schools. While they are highly structured and organized, at the same time each player has a great deal of freedom to act and decide at will. One implication of this dual operation is that universal attempts at change run the risk of being lost in the gaps between the gears of these smoothly rolling driverless colonies. Clever plans will be needed for integrating new innovations into the present routines or for breaking established patterns and implementing major reforms.

*Where is the sense of community?* Another dimension of high schools that is puzzling is the sense of community that teachers, students, and administrators hold. As described earlier, teachers do not necessarily identify first with their department. They do not necessarily identify with the school either. In some cases, teachers identify more with grade levels or "buildings" than with academic departments. Still others identify with particular co-curricula or extra-curricular functions. Some identify primarily with their subjects areas. Understanding the sense of community or lack of it, and how it is defined, appears to be another critical factor that must be understood if change is going to be meaningful and successful in the high school context. Unless teachers as individuals are the primary adopting

unit, identifying the dimensions of their sense of community will be most useful.

### Focusing on the Future

At this point it is clear that knowledge about the American high school in general and about the specific factors that are important for facilitating change in high schools is insufficient. There has been limited research; now theory and the validity of the folklore must be questioned. In order for high schools to effectively respond to the present regional and national concerns, many additional insights and understandings will be needed. Descriptive studies of how high schools work and how change can be facilitated at the school, department, and classroom level are needed. Further, the design of regional and national plans for school improvement will need to carefully attend to the real processes and characteristics of high schools. Plans to facilitate change in high schools that are effective are not going to be simple to create or universal in their application. What high schools are really like and how the desired changes can be matched with local conditions, must be more carefully considered and planned than ever before.

In summary, after conducting systematic visits to a sample of high schools from around the country, our conclusion is that American high schools are better than they are being portrayed by the media and many of the commission reports. At the same time, they are not as good as high school students, teachers, principals, and commissioners would like. In terms of the potential for change, high school staffs are ready and willing. The strategies and processes to use in bringing about and sustaining improvement are not as clear. If the ideas of commissioners, policy makers, researchers, and practitioners can be combined, then our high schools will indeed be able to make major changes, and dogs will be singing. This could be one of those times in the evolution of schooling that will be seen as an epoch—a time when school improvement was viewed as a process and the implemented changes made a meaningful difference. □

### Reference

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