

# Reforming Secondary Schools: A Critique and an Agenda for Administrators

Research studies of European, Japanese, and American schools suggest that reform is most likely to succeed when local schools set the agenda, when school leaders learn to plan and orchestrate change, and when everyone gets enough time—as much as 10 to 15 years—to do the job.

Educational reform seems to be a top priority in almost every state. An increasing number of thoughtfully designed reforms draw on accumulated research about school and teaching effectiveness and provide positive incentives for schools while hewing to the universal emphasis on increased standards and testing. I would argue, however, that even relatively visionary state programs are unlikely to significantly affect as many as half the schools unless educators confront a new set of considerations.

My prediction is based on two research studies: one compares school improvement policies in a number of developed countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and another looks at major improvement efforts in U.S. urban high schools. Both studies suggest that moving from a reform platform to better quality education is not just a "macro-implementation" problem that can be solved through clearer legislation, better assistance, more flexibility for schools to adjust the reform to their own context, or other strategies emerging from research on program innovation in schools.<sup>1</sup> Instead, centrally designed reforms are inherently limited.

This observation is not, however, a

signal to abandon our collective commitment to increasing the quality of public education. The same studies, along with others, indicate that, under the right circumstances, change orchestrated at the school level has a

significant chance of making a difference. Research also points to some of the things that people outside of schools can do to help translate into action the pervasive enthusiasm for change that we now feel.

## Views from the International Arena

Many countries, including those that have strong traditions of local school control as well as those that are more centralized, have a longer tradition of educational reform than we do. Their collective experience suggests that even under the best of circumstances the results of national reforms are spotty. A few examples of well-designed reforms will illustrate the issues.

- In Norway, the Informal Education Reform (a variant on the U.S. open education movement) became part of the national education law in 1974.<sup>2</sup> This reform began as a grass roots movement sponsored by teachers and backed by a broad coalition including the union and parents. Implementation was to be gradual, supported by persuasion, inservice, technical assistance through teacher networks, and some seed money. Since the late '70s, government support has increased, and the mandate has been reinforced in a revised ver-

**"In contrast with current U.S. efforts to strengthen state roles in education, countries with centralized education offices such as France and Sweden are busy trying to design reforms that give individual schools more responsibility for change."**

sion of the law. Despite a combination of pressure and assistance, only 30 percent of the elementary schools and less than 15 percent of the secondary schools have incorporated significant elements of open education.

• In 1976 the Japanese Curriculum Council recommended a major reform that centered on creating flexibility, fostering independent thinking, individualizing instruction, and creating "warm-heartedness" in students.<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that the conditions for effective government-initiated reform are better in Japan, where the culture is considerably more cohesive and respectful of central authority than is ours. A 1983 preliminary assessment of progress indicated that most schools had adopted the required new textbooks and had initiated new nonacademic subjects. But the reform had not penetrated basic operations in most schools: less than half had made recommended structural changes to relax the school day.

• Probably one of the most extensively supported reforms that I have come across is the Dutch effort to change the lower secondary (MAVO) schools (1975-present). Originally intended as a plan to promote achievement/promotion examinations appropriate to the mixed ability population of the schools, the change in exams would have had major consequences at the organizational, classroom, and teaching levels. Local autonomy is a strong Dutch tradition, so persuasion and substantial technical assistance were considered critical. However, despite public consensus, the passage of 10 years, and the equivalent of \$30 million for school-level training and technical assistance, only about one-third of the approximately 1,100 MAVO schools have seriously incorporated the reform package.<sup>4</sup>

### Views from the School

Along with several colleagues, I am looking at improvement efforts in urban high schools across the U.S. that emerge from the effective schools or effective teaching literature.<sup>5</sup> This work suggests several reasons why only a subset of external reform pressures penetrate the schools' boundaries.

Our survey of urban high schools reported to be successfully imple-

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menting effective schools programs revealed that slightly more than three-quarters were located in states with a significant reform effort.<sup>6</sup> Yet, when we asked the principals how much influence relevant organizations and groups had upon their school improvement plan, they responded that only students, teacher unions, and outside consultants ranked lower than the state education agency. Nearly half of the principals indicated that the state had either no or only a little influence over their plan.

Interviews with teachers and administrators in four high schools and one junior high corroborate this possibly surprising finding. All five schools are located in states with a major reform platform; two states provided direct funding for the schools. But only one school paid much attention to the state's platform (and even here it was not central to that school's improvement efforts). In the others, the topic came up peripherally and only at the administrative level.

There are four main reasons for the lack of direct state influence. First, many schools have their own improvement agendas. Where these are well defined, the school simply picks and chooses among the elements of a state

reform program that are compatible with a locally developed plan. The school *will* improve but not because of a centrally mandated program. Second, some schools view the state's plan as irrelevant or do not understand it and therefore largely ignore it. This stance is particularly likely if a state reform, imposed after a local plan has been developed, is for the most part incompatible with the local plan. Third, some schools view the state reform somewhat negatively: state plans may contain elements (new testing programs, for example) that schools regard as time-consuming distractions from the real job of improving education and teaching. Although these elements cannot be ignored, they are not incorporated. Finally, state programs are often filtered through a district office, where they may be reinterpreted and redirected to other ends. Districts usually present their demands to schools with considerably more pressure for implementation than the more distant state agency can muster. Where there is conflict between the two (conflict that the district may be unaware of), the district's priorities win out.

### Where Will Reform Come From?

What can be done to translate the new images of educational excellence into practice? Our best bet for improving schools lies not with fine-tuning state reforms (although some of these are, of course, necessary) but with stimulating individual schools to change and providing them with appropriate assistance. A number of studies suggest that both process assistance (to help in guiding the school's progress through the change programs) and specialized training (to provide staff with new skills) is needed to implement significant change.<sup>7</sup> But at the secondary level there is also a pressing need to train school leaders to become better change managers.

The international work on educational improvement referred to above has resulted in consensus on one issue among all 14 countries involved: real and lasting change requires a focus on the school as the basic unit for planning and direction.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in contrast to current U.S. efforts to strengthen state roles in education, countries with

centralized education offices such as France and Sweden are busy trying to design reforms that give individual schools more responsibility for change. In many cases, the government's role has shifted from inspecting and evaluating schools to supporting them.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on schools does not mean that we must "let a thousand flowers bloom," or that all reforms require reinventing the wheel within each school. Preliminary data from the U.S. urban high school study suggest that reform is a cooperative effort. A mandate or a voluntary reform initiative from outside the school may stimulate the introduction of programs and materials that were initially used elsewhere. Nevertheless, the school's combination of externally developed ideas and programs becomes unique. In two case study schools that were doing less well, however, the imposition of a *well-defined* program from outside seemed to interfere with developing internal capacities to guide the reform over the long haul and to adjust to normal crises that plague any long-term effort.<sup>10</sup>

Designing and carrying out a major change effort, particularly in a secondary school, is not an easy task and requires skills both in planning and orchestrating change.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly true if the intent is to alter the school's structure and operations rather than focusing only on curriculum or classroom-level changes.<sup>12</sup> Whether leadership from the principal is *essential* to successful improvement is still debatable, but the need for some direction from within the school is unquestionable. And, in fact, in most cases initial leadership and later coordination for significant school-based reform does come from the principal, although he or she may be assisted by a "kitchen cabinet."<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to the point of view expressed above, Berman argues that reform through school-based planning is unlikely to succeed at the secondary level.<sup>14</sup> Having a competent principal, he says, is much more critical to a school's success at the secondary level, but secondary school principals are, on average, judged to be less competent by their staffs. However, these findings should be viewed not as a reason to abandon school-based re-



*A participant in the urban schools study, Dorchester High School "manages the future of the school" by mobilizing faculty, administrators, and external resource coordinators at a two-day site planning session. Stan Swartz, headmaster, says the collaborative planning allows the school to address student needs and to set attainable goals.*

form models, but as a call for new kinds of assistance to school leaders.

It is not reasonable to assume that, as a group, secondary school principals are administratively incompetent. The staff responses in Berman's study reflect, I believe, the significantly greater difficulty of managing a typically complex high school.<sup>15</sup> Few principals are exposed during their early careers to experiences that would provide them with the relevant skills to become good "general managers." But where they are, it can have a big impact: in our study of change in urban high schools, the principals in the most successful schools received significant exposure to strategic planning and management principles through apprenticeship or technical assistance on the job. They were not simply "charismatic leaders" who turned around their schools through force of personality; they were better change managers.<sup>16</sup> The least successful schools had no comparable assistance.

### **What Are the Implications?**

Calls for reform are everywhere, but the research summarized above suggests that widespread and rapid turnarounds in performance are unlikely. Educational reform is hard work, and most of the work has to be done in schools. There is no easy blueprint, but my observations suggest several conclusions that administrators at all levels should take into account.

- In most secondary schools, real reform requires extensive, consistent support, including inservice training

and technical assistance for school leaders targeted at change management and planning skills, and help in dealing with the school and classroom implications of the reform. Good school administrators know this and spend a lot of effort to acquire it; supportive districts make it available as a matter of course.

- Many efforts to improve administrator training have been proposed. Most focus on preappointment training, out-of-school academies, principal networks, or short workshops in new management skills. These are probably useful, but they cannot substitute for technical assistance directed to on-the-job experiences, particularly change management skills. Business has always invested in developing its managers; there is no reason why we shouldn't examine the applications to education. Where school-based administrators have a choice, they should look for at-the-elbow assistance rather than a summer workshop.

- The time lines for any reform effort must be very long. In the U.S. we often allow only two or three years to meet reform goals. Although this time frame is consistent with electoral cycles (or public pressure on the superintendent), it sets up educational reform—and educators—as fall guys. Ten to 15 years should be the minimum time frame for any major change, and emphasis on student outcomes in the early years is likely to destroy public confidence in the system's potential for renewal. (Monitoring of progress and assessment for program adjustment, however, are vi-

tal.) The implications for district and school planning, as well as for evaluation, are clear.

• Quite a few secondary schools will not be reached even under ideal conditions (public and professional support, high resources, etc.). The implications of partial reform must be confronted by policymakers, administrators, and professional associations. If my observations are accurate, the distance between good (and improved) schools and poor quality (nonimproved) schools may widen. Responsible groups must consider new means to address this reality. □

These remarks were initially presented at the 1986 meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

1. P. Berman, "The Study of Macro- and Micro-Implementation," *Public Policy* (Spring 1978). A summary of research about the design of implementable programs appeared in D. Grandall, J. Eisman, and K. S. Louis, "Strategic Planning Issues that Bear on the Success of School Improvement Efforts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* (Summer 1986).

2. T. Hauge, "The Informal Education Reform in Norway" (paper presented to the International School Improvement conference on dissemination, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands, February 1985).

3. S. Okuda, "Curriculum Reform in Japan," Yokohama University, 1983. (Unpublished paper.)

4. The Dutch/Belgian perspective on the limits to reform will soon be available in English: R. Van den Berg and R. Vandenberghe, *Large Scale Innovation in Education* (Leuven, Belgium: ACCO, 1986).

5. My colleagues are Matthew Miles (Center for Policy Research), Eleanor Farrar (Abt Associates), Sheila Rosenblum (independent consultant), and Anthony Cipollone (Center for Survey Research, University of Massachusetts-Boston). A review of the kinds of programs that we looked at, and a statement on state-of-the-art theory and practice, can be found in *The Effective Schools Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.G.P.O., 1984).

6. For a preliminary description of the survey, see K. S. Louis, "A Survey of Effective Schools Programs in Urban High Schools," presented at the 1986 meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

7. This literature is reviewed in K. S. Louis, "External Agents and Knowledge Utilization: Dimensions for Analysis and Action" in R. Lehming and M. Kane, *Improving Schools: Using What We Know* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), and K. S. Louis, "Strategic Planning Issues that Bear on the Success of School Improvement Efforts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* (Summer 1986).

8. W. van Velzen, M. Miles, M. Eckholm, and D. Robin, eds., *Making School Improvement Work* (Leuven, Belgium: ACCO, 1985).

9. Numerous examples could be cited, but this shift is clearly identified in France, Belgium, and Northern Ireland, all of which have formal government inspectorates.

10. M. Miles, "Caruso High School" (unpublished case study, 1986); M. Miles and S. Rosenblum, "Chester High School" (Unpublished case study, 1986).

11. See D. Crandall, J. Eisman, and K. S. Louis, "Strategic Planning Issues that Bear on the Success of School Improvement Efforts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* (Summer 1986).

12. B. Anderson et al., *State Strategies to Support Local School Improvement: Cross-Site Analysis* (Denver, Co.: Education Commission of the States, forthcoming).

13. Our survey of schools that were "doing it well," for example, found that most program designs were most strongly influenced by the principal, and the department heads had the next most influence. This was true regardless of the composition of a formal school planning team.

14. P. Berman, *Improving School Improvement* (Berkeley, Calif.: Berman Weiler Associates, 1984). Case studies of 21 high schools involved in a program intended to stimulate significant change through locally designed plans found that only 42 percent had visibly improved. Note, however, that this rate is significantly higher than any of the reforms discussed above.

15. The research suggesting reasons why high schools are harder places in which to manage change is reviewed in M. Miles, K. S. Louis, E. Farrar, S. Rosenblum, and A. Cipollone, *Reforming the Urban High School* (forthcoming, but available from the authors).

16. K. Lewis and A. U. Cipollone, "Agaissez High School," 1986; S. Rosenblum, "Arcadia High School" (unpublished case study, 1986).

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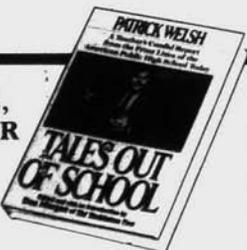
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