

# Piecing Together the Restructuring Puzzle

Four years after the Carnegie Report, scattered schools and districts launch creative solutions to demands for wholesale change.

Set in the heart of Miami's Liberty City, where crack, drug-related violence, and poverty are a fact of life, Charles Drew Elementary School is an oasis. Given every excuse to fail, Drew students instead earn high marks on achievement tests, studying everything from the basics to ballet. Every Saturday, nearly 200 students troop in for extra help or enrichment.

Thanks to Drew's participation in one of Dade County's two school-based management/shared decision making (SBM/SDM) pilot projects, teachers there help make decisions such as the one that created Saturday classes. They also participate in interviewing new teacher candidates; thus, they have a stake in ensuring that novice teachers succeed, according to Drew Principal Fred Morley. "Our teachers have bought into the program, and they take pride in seeing these children achieve," Morley says, summarizing the school's mission. "The bottom line of why we're in school is academic achievement and producing useful citizens, and I think we're doing that here. We believe that our students can do just as well as anyone else."

**Schools must be overhauled in ways that fundamentally change the institution of schooling itself.**

*Students at Miami's Charles Drew Elementary School spend time learning performing arts, including ballet.*



*Photographs by Bill DuPriest*

Chiron Middle School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which opened for the first time last fall, isn't really a school at all—if one defines a school as a building with four walls populated by students and teachers. Instead of learning in a single building, Chiron students spend 12-week sessions rotating among several "learning centers" strategically located in community areas whose resources lend themselves to experiential learning. This year, for example, one center meets in the agricultural campus of the University of Minnesota; a second is located in a former parochial school in the heart of Minneapolis' performing arts section; and a third shares space with college evening classes in a former store in the heart of the business district. The ideas that led to the school's creation were culled from proposals responding to a district competition for creating a better school.

By diversifying the role of adults at each learning center, Chiron involves parents and makes learning more individualized and personal for its students. Each site has 40 students (grades 5-6 this year, with an eventual

goal of serving students in grades 5–8). Each center includes one site teacher, one “home base” teacher (who helps develop a personal learning plan for students in conjunction with parents and rotates among the learning centers with the students), one “impact” teacher (who spends 25 percent of his or her time in curriculum planning, staff development, and investigating community resources), two paraprofessionals, and assorted unpaid volunteers.

Each learning center uses a specialized curriculum designed to support experiential learning, a major goal of the school. “These kids are learning how to calculate how many square feet in an office building and what it means for clothes to be 30 percent off. They’re milking cows, they’re behind the stage at a TV station, they’re in courtrooms,” says Ray Harris, a local businessman who chairs the school’s steering committee.

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**A** more personal environment also characterizes Central Park East Secondary School, located in the Spanish Harlem section of New York City. A member of Brown University Professor Ted Sizer’s “Coalition of Essential Schools,” Central Park East features small, primarily two-hour classes in which lecturing takes a back seat to discussion. Following the Coalition’s view on curriculum selection that “less is more,” classes focus on major themes and the essential questions raised by those themes. Fernando Diaz, an 8th grader in his first year at the school, says that in his former larger school, “If you didn’t do any work and just kept quiet, you passed.” At Central Park East, “teachers work with you—they don’t just tell you to read this many pages in a book and do questions 1–5.”

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**T**he changes geared toward enhancing student success being undertaken in these scattered locales are at the heart of what some experts have termed school “restruc-



*The restructuring project at Miami’s Horace Mann Middle School involves greater teacher leadership, shared decision making, and increased use of technology.*

turing.” After decades of attempts to reform schools, most of which constituted little more than tinkering with surface parts, many observers feel that schools as they are presently organized must be overhauled in ways that fundamentally change the institution of schooling itself. Acknowledging the magnitude of the task, school restructuring proponents nonetheless argue that nothing less than systemwide change will produce schools capable of serving the needs of students, educators, and the community at large.

Visible signs of public education’s ills—low student achievement on international assessments, dropout rates that reach 50 percent in some of the nation’s cities, teacher dissatisfaction, bureaucratization—are even more worrisome, given demographic and economic trends mandating that public schools educate to a higher level of

success students who have traditionally presented the most challenges.

“We believe the system cannot change incrementally—it has to be shocked out of existence,” Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers Association, says in describing the impetus for a widely heralded restructuring plan in Rochester, New York. “I see the challenge of restructuring as making the terrific exceptions that now appear in nearly every school district the norm, not the exception.”

“The situation is exceedingly serious,” says Bruce Goldberg, co-director of the American Federation of Teachers’ Center for Restructuring. Even so, he adds, “I don’t think everyone is convinced of that, including many of those in the education system.”

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cities, where some experts warn that a complete overhaul is needed to stem the tide of student dropouts and ill-prepared graduates. "What we're talking about is breaking the mold," Marc Tucker, president of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, says of current restructuring initiatives. "That doesn't happen unless people are terribly dissatisfied with what they've got."

Many of the initiatives being tried by schools and districts attempting to restructure are not altogether new; still, the term did not enter the popular education lexicon until 1986, when *A Nation Prepared*, the Carnegie Forum's landmark report, asserted the need to "restructure schools to provide a professional environment for teachers, freeing them to decide how best to meet state and local goals for children while holding them accountable for their progress."<sup>1</sup> The report included a "scenario" of how restructured schools might take advantage of a radically changed teaching profession.

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port was issued, it had already become clear that the so-called "first phase" of school reform launched in the early 1980s and propelled by *A Nation at Risk*

would fall short.<sup>2</sup> Such reforms as increasing student graduation requirements, strengthening teacher preparation and certification standards, and lengthening the school year, they argued, would not accomplish the needed fundamental changes in learning and teaching. Those would only come through a new phase of reform directed toward changing the very heart of the teaching and learning process.

"If the watchword of the first phase was 'excellence,' for the second phase it is 'restructuring,'" says a report by the National Governors Association (NGA), which tracks and supports school restructuring initiatives in several states.<sup>3</sup>

Although opinions on what restructuring should constitute have varied, a framework developed by the NGA is typical of some current proposals, suggesting that restructuring must be a unified, systematic approach to rethinking curriculum and instruction, authority and decision making, staff roles, and accountability (see box).<sup>4</sup>

**Restructuring Curriculum**

While countless school reformers have advocated the use of a variety of learning experiences and a greater emphasis on thoughtful work, textbooks and teacher lectures still dominate classrooms. Some schools attempting to restructure, however, are succeeding in turning classrooms into places where all students, not just those in advanced classes, take greater responsibility for their learning, and where teachers are "coaches" rather than "tellers."

The Coalition of Essential Schools, a group of about 50 schools nationwide (and in one Canadian province), is attempting to fundamentally restructure learning and teaching around a set of core principles. Each Coalition school proceeds independently, but they are united by their adherence to such principles as curricular design that promotes student mastery rather than content coverage, a personalized environment in which no teacher has more than 80 students, student diplomas based on exhibition of mastery, and more.

**Areas of Restructuring**

The National Governors Association has developed a framework for school restructuring similar to that expressed by many experts. NGA says that as part of the restructuring process:

- Curriculum and instruction must be modified to support higher-order thinking by all students. Use of instructional time needs to be more flexible, learning activities must be made more challenging and engaging, and student grouping practices should promote student interaction and cooperative efforts.
- Authority and decision making should be decentralized so that the most educationally important decisions are made at the school site. Teachers, administrators, and parents should set the basic direction of the school and determine strategies and organizational and instructional arrangements needed to achieve them.
- New staff roles must be developed so that teachers may more readily work together to improve instruction and so that experienced and talented teachers can support beginning teachers, plan and develop new curriculums, or design and implement staff development. Greater use of paraprofessionals should be considered. And principals will need to provide the vision to help shape new school structures, lead talented teachers, and take risks in an environment that rewards performance rather than compliance.
- Accountability systems must clearly link rewards and incentives to student performance at the building level. Schools must have more discretion and authority to achieve results and then be held accountable for results. States must develop measures to assess valued outcomes of performance of individual schools and link rewards and sanctions to results.

On a recent day at Central Park East Secondary School, a Coalition member, a combined humanities class of 16 9th and 10th graders discussed reading completed the previous day. Nearly all students participated, combing the text repeatedly for specific evidence to back their contentions. As part of a yearlong focus on the theme of justice, students examine the American criminal justice system and another nonadversarial system. The essential questions guiding the course, plainly posted on the classroom wall, are: What is justice? What is the relationship between truth and justice? Can something be moral and illegal or immoral and legal? How are decisions made for our many groups? Does the punishment fit the crime? and How and why do law and morality change?

In developing the curriculum at Central Park East, the school's staff decided to limit the number of class periods in order to focus on core subjects, some of which, such as the humanities (English, social studies, and the arts), were combined. A typical week for students in grades 7-10, for example, includes several two-hour blocks of humanities and math-science, daily one-hour classes in

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Spanish, two to three hours of community service, and several advisory periods. During an extended lunch period and after school, students may participate in clubs, music, physical education, sports, and other activities.

Such a curriculum departs markedly from the aptly titled "shopping mall" high school.<sup>5</sup> Central Park East Principal Deborah Meier says that the large comprehensive high school, with its discrete one-hour periods, myriad electives, and vocational programs, developed "as a way to keep kids off our backs by giving them lots of choices." By contrast, Meier says, "we decided that everything would be simplified," and though she sometimes regrets the trade-offs, Meier believes the focus is essential to success.

#### **Change from the Bottom Up**

Central Park East Secondary School, as well as the three Central Park East elementary schools Meier has helped to start up since 1974, would not have been possible without fundamental changes in the relationship between District 4 and its schools. A process begun during the 1970s by former Superintendent Anthony Alvarado supported the creation of myriad small alternative schools characterized by such "entrepreneurial" features as enrollment through choice, school-based budgeting, and staff control of fundamental decisions about curriculum and instruction.<sup>6</sup> In the intervening years, numerous such schools have appeared, and the district, which once had among the worst standardized test scores in New York City, has risen to the middle of the pack.

District 4's experience illustrates what many educators, frustrated with numerous bureaucratic mandates and regulations that impede innovation, feel should be a new principle guiding restructuring: give educators the means for acting upon their best ideas about education and hold them accountable for student progress. "It is critical that those closest to the point of educational impact—teachers, principals, parents, and community members—have the opportunity to explore, create, and implement innovative approaches and ac-

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countability structures designed to ensure significantly increased student achievement," says Joseph Fernandez, formerly school superintendent in Dade County (Miami), Florida, and now the New York City public schools chancellor.

Educators in Dade County, the nation's 4th largest school district, have embarked on a radical course to upgrade schools through their SBM/SDM projects designed to foster creativity and autonomy at the school level. New school-based councils have been established at 119 schools participating in two pilot programs, and their new decision-making cadres of teachers, administrators, and (in some instances) parents and community members may seek waivers to bypass district regulations or teacher union contract stipulations that threaten to impede innovative proposals. The new arrangement has led to such creations as Saturday classes at 20 schools and "satellite

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learning centers" established at the offices of several large employers.

Officials at Horace Mann Middle School, one of the SBM/SDM pilot sites, credit the new plan with reshaping the roles of teachers and administrators and providing opportunities for professional growth. "Now we have a voice," says Richard Vidal, a teacher who chairs the school's decision-making cadre. School-based management "really gives people at different levels increased abilities or leadership experiences to change roles or to be a leader within the school."

Horace Mann Principal Patricia Parham adds that the cadre has helped create three "lead teacher" positions. The new teachers earn an extra \$3,500 per year and take on such added responsibilities as conducting staff training, observing and evaluating other teachers, and working on curriculum. In a survey, teachers at the school who were observed and evaluated by the new lead teachers reported they "didn't feel intimidated by their peers," says Parham.

### New Roles for Staff

Merely pushing decisions down to the school level, however, will do little in the absence of a complete rethinking of how the roles of teachers, administrators, and others must change to take advantage of new freedoms and responsibility, some experts contend. Without finding ways to attract better

teachers and to take advantage of their talents, creating school-site councils of teachers to play a larger role in making decisions "can just as easily be a force for cementing in the current ways as for opening up the field to new ideas," says Marc Tucker, president of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.

The Forum, which issued the aforementioned Carnegie report, is currently working with the Rochester, New York, public schools to implement a landmark teachers' contract signed in 1987. The contract substantially raised pay for teachers and expanded their duties, creating a four-tiered teaching force of intern teachers, resident teachers, professional teachers, and lead teachers. Lead teachers participate in extra duties such as mentoring, textbook selection, and curriculum development.

In addition, through a "home-based guidance" provision in the contract, teachers in middle and high schools are "case managers" for 20 students each throughout the school year, responsible for making home contacts and generally giving personal attention and supervision to each pupil. And school-based planning teams, which include teachers, parents, administrators, and (in high schools) students, have been created that decide such matters as instructional goals or school budgets.

The several years since the contract was signed have been "in some ways a smashing success, and in other ways a disappointment," according to Urbanski. Gradually, he says, teachers' attitudes have changed so that they now realize "they can't say 'I taught them, but they didn't learn.'" School-based teams also have improved morale and climate, he says.

Still, Urbanski notes, "It's a perennial danger—assuming that just because we feel better about each other, that will improve student learning." The district's efforts also have been dogged by criticism of the home-based guidance plan (some complained that teachers failed to follow through on home visits) and the extra responsibilities given teachers (the lo-

cal union representing administrators filed an unsuccessful lawsuit against a plan to involve teachers in evaluating other teachers).

### Redefining Accountability

Perhaps the trickiest part of restructuring schools, according to some observers, will be to completely reshape a system that has been measured thus far by compliance with bureaucratic mandates into one focused on the bottom line—evidences of authentic student achievement. Not only will that take new negotiations between educators and policymakers at all levels on what the goals of schools should be, it demands a rethinking of what standards are acceptable and what measures must be formulated to ensure that standards are met.

Accountability as it relates to student achievement is typically measured by standardized tests of basic skills, critics say, and has generally avoided thoughtful discussions of what schools should achieve. "You can agree on a test easily, even if you can't agree on the goals of the activity," according to Paul Hill, a senior social scientist with the RAND Corporation. "You save all the negotiation costs required to agree on what you are trying to accomplish. Instead, you agree on a technological fix without agreeing on goals, and everyone thinks it's fine."

When schools start by deliberating what thoughtful student behavior looks like in a restructured school, other characteristics of the school's organization spring from that vision. Meier, explaining how she supports classrooms where students take a more active intellectual role and teachers act as coaches, says she tried to "create the most favorable circumstances for its happening": through such features as smaller classes, longer class periods, and a collegial environment in which teachers plan and evaluate curriculum together.

The creation of student assessment alternatives to standardized multiple-choice tests is an essential feature of redesigned schools, some experts believe. According to Grant Wiggins, formerly director of curriculum and

teaching for the Coalition of Essential Schools, educators need to "design schools backwards from the criteria for acceptable performance." If the criteria are rich and varied, he says, "teaching to the test" will no longer be a problem. Wiggins says "performance-based" assessments, now influencing state testing programs in Vermont (which soon will include student portfolios), Connecticut, and California, may foreshadow a growing movement away from accountability focused solely on standardized tests.

A major complaint of educators during the "excellence" movement of the 1980s concerned far-reaching state mandates that blocked innovation. Some experts, however, believe there are increasing signs that some states are willing to negotiate waivers of bureaucratic mandates in return for evidence of better student achievement. A survey last year by the National Governors Association found that 21 states offered school districts the chance to apply for waivers to impeding regulations as part of their restructuring initiatives, and several others were considering doing so.<sup>7</sup>

In North Carolina, for example, a far-reaching bill passed last year encourages districts to submit plans for differentiated teacher pay or greater budget flexibility, and it offers districts the chance to apply for waivers of cumbersome regulations. Those that do will receive extra state funds, but they also must submit a local school improvement plan that includes clear measurable student performance goals.

This year, the state education department will be reviewing district waiver proposals, expected to include requests to bypass stringent teacher certification requirements and to use instructional materials not on the state-adopted list, according to John Dornan of the Public School Forum, a major proponent of the bill. And the state's examination of district accountability plans will spark "a healthy debate over how we're doing and how we're going to measure it," he adds. (See article by MacPhail-Wilcox, Forbes, and Parramore, p. 22, this issue.)

In addition to such efforts, the Education Commission of the States and the Coalition of Essential Schools are cooperating with six states to support the type of restructuring being undertaken by Coalition schools. As part of the Re:Learning project, the six states—Arkansas, Delaware, Illinois, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island—each have made a five-year commitment to support approximately 10 secondary schools that follow Coalition principles. That support will include about \$50,000 per school per year, and state and district officials involved in the project will be investigating what policy changes are needed (in areas such as school/student assessment and teacher certification) to support the work of participating schools.

#### **A Comprehensive Strategy**

As educators have grappled with the notion of school restructuring, many have remarked that such initiatives as school-based management, hands-on curriculum, or better assessments are nothing new. At the same time, many schools and districts have developed

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approaches to revamping one of the areas mentioned above. But examples of districts that have attempted to change all areas simultaneously are rare, experts contend. "Very few of these things are in and of themselves new," says Tucker of the Carnegie Forum. "But they have not been put together in a strategy for changing the entire system. That, to me, is what restructuring is."

Tucker and others worry that restructuring has come to be seen by many as the addition of certain programs, rather than as a comprehensive strategy affecting the entire education system. "A lot of people have equated restructuring with site-based management or shared decision making," Tucker asserts. "I think districts who follow that are headed for disaster."

Isolated initiatives such as school-based management, moreover, carry the danger of being seen as ends in themselves, rather than as pieces in an



*Drew Principal Fred Morley cites high expectations for students as a factor in the school's success. "We believe our students can do just as well as anyone else."*

overall strategy to raise student success. "The danger is that we will continue to define and redefine school-based management and the career in teaching plan . . ." Urbanski says of efforts in Rochester, New York. "The real litmus test . . . is to peek into classrooms and see if the teacher is talking, and if the students are in neat rows with their books turned to the same page, taking the same goofy multiple-guess tests."

Michael Kirst, professor of education at Stanford University and co-director of Policy Analysis for California Education, predicts that the "restructuring" movement may soon starve, victim of a lack of agreement on goals, policy options to support it, and clear ways to measure its impact. "There's still no consensus on what [restructuring] is, or what it ought to be," he says. "States haven't yet hit upon a means to build up local capacity to restructure . . . We have various people out there selling their medicines, but we don't know yet what the medicines will do."

Others, however, warn that nothing short of restructuring will produce needed gains for public education. "If you don't restructure, public education in America is going to be finished in 5 to 10 years," Al Shanker, president of the AFT and a leading backer of school restructuring, told participants attending a recent conference sponsored by ASCD.

Indeed, Shanker views such developments as the recent takeover of the Chelsea, Massachusetts, public schools by Boston University as a sign that if educators fail to address their own lingering problems, others may step in and clean house. Tuition tax credit bills that passed in two states last year, he hints, also may foreshadow a trend toward turning to private entities to address public education's problems.

Other, recent developments are seen by some as ominous. The Illinois legislature, dismayed by lingering problems and unresponsiveness within the Chicago public schools, pushed through a radical law that last fall created new parent-led governance teams at each of the city's 600-

plus schools. Although many players in the unfolding drama agree that radical change in the city's schools was needed, some observers feel the plan will fall short because the shift in power fails to address other pieces of the restructuring puzzle, such as recruiting and retaining better teachers. "I'm pessimistic about its potential to bring about change," Tucker says of the Chicago plan. "In the end, a great deal, maybe everything, depends on what happens between the teacher and the kids."

"Underlying many present reforms is a thinly veiled threat to public education," summarizes a report by the NGA. "Change, or see your responsibilities and clients drift away to other organizations."<sup>8</sup>

### Cautious Optimism

Despite the ever present threat that serious restructuring efforts will be short-circuited before they really get off the ground—a common fear is that any failure by restructuring pilot projects to quickly bring about change will cause disillusionment and, perhaps, more legislative mandates—some experts point to promising signs that the restructuring agenda will take hold.

In the past several years, some observers believe, positions taken by the two major teachers' unions on such issues as differentiated staffing have evolved (NEA has eased its opposition; AFT promotes experimentation), and such stances are making their way into more "professional" contracts in Miami, Rochester, and elsewhere. Stanford University's Gary Sykes says that while both unions remain committed to bread-and-butter union issues, each has a "leadership cadre" emerging that backs new expressions of professionalism. "Without a willingness on the part of organized teachers to take risks, to experiment with new forms of agreement and cooperation, there will be no genuine reform," he asserts.

With the advent of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which has the support of the two unions, improvements in teacher

pay, working conditions, and roles bode well for improved learning environments able to produce more successful students, some experts believe.

Moreover, others feel that restructuring efforts will be boosted by efforts being carried out in several states and nationally to better spell out desirable learner outcomes. One possible result of the efforts over the past few months by the Bush administration and the nation's governors to set national goals for education will be to "get everyone's attention focused on the bottom line," says Tucker. The goal-setting process, he adds, may help ensure that the tentative steps toward restructuring taken so far will be directed toward the ultimate goal: students able to think and act in a changing world. □

<sup>1</sup>Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, (May 1986), *A Nation Prepared Teachers for the 21st Century*, Report of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Forum).

<sup>2</sup>National Commission on Excellence in Education, (1983), *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office).

<sup>3</sup>R.F. Elmore, (1987), "Early Experiences in Restructuring Schools: Voices from the Field," *Results in Education Series* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association).

<sup>4</sup>J.L. David, with S. Purkey and P. White, (1987), "Restructuring in Progress: Lessons from Pioneering Districts," *Results in Education Series* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association).

<sup>5</sup>A.G. Powell et al., *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.).

<sup>6</sup>D. Meier, (June 1987), "Central Park East: An Alternative Story," *Kappan*: 753-757.

<sup>7</sup>National Governors Association, (1989), *Results in Education: 1989* (Washington, D.C.: NGA).

<sup>8</sup>Elmore, "Early Experiences in Restructuring Schools."

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