

# What It Takes to Restructure Education

The critical elements required for success in restructuring are, first and foremost, a sincere invitation to change, then authority and flexibility, access to knowledge, and time to plan.

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Five years ago the word *restructuring* was unheard of in education circles; today it is heard everywhere. That few educators share a definition of restructuring—or even have one—has hardly slowed its spread. In fact, at the same time the “restructuring” label appears on everything, discussions about it most frequently center on what it means.

The reason for this continuing search for meaning is the very strength of restructuring: it does not provide pat answers. In fact, it is not even something a school—or superintendent or governor—can do alone. Restructuring requires all parts of the education system to change, from students and teachers up through the myriad bureaucratic layers to the nation's capital.

Two key features distinguish restructuring from previous reform efforts: it is driven by a focus on student performance, based on the premise that all students can and must learn at higher levels; and it is a long-term commitment to fundamental, systemic change. These features mark restructuring as a significant departure from previous improvement efforts—and embody a challenge greater than any the system has faced before.

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That restructuring *must* do so becomes clear when one considers the following questions:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?
- What kinds of learning experiences produce these outcomes?
- What does it take to transform schools into places where this happens?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that the desired results are achieved?

There is growing consensus in the field on broad answers to the first two questions. The third question—*what does it take?*—is where the real challenge begins. What does it take at every level of the system, and how can accountability be distributed accordingly?

## The Learning Environment

Although each school, district, and state may choose different words to

describe desired student outcomes, the lists overlap considerably, reflecting wide agreement among educators and the public. These outcomes typically include literacy and numeracy skills and their application, thinking and problem-solving ability, and personal responsibility. Further elaborations often cite communication skills, the ability to demonstrate mastery beyond paper-and-pencil exercises, and the ability to locate, retrieve, and synthesize information.

For example, the 7th grade faculty team at a restructuring middle school in San Diego has listed the following goals for their students: a sense of responsibility to self and community; a commitment to excellence; creative thinking, decision making, and risk taking; written and oral communication in all subject areas; and a foundation of essential skills.

There is also substantial agreement among educators about the kinds of learning experiences that can achieve these goals. “Teaching as telling” and “learning as recall” are now being replaced by individual and team learning opportunities that engage students, provide authentic and challenging tasks, offer choices and multiple answers, and allow flexible grouping and scheduling depending on the activity.

Some schools and a few districts have made giant strides toward creating such learning environments. In

some cases, the efforts predate today's restructuring movement. For example, an alternative school in the Bethel School District in Washington has no bells, no public address system, and no standard furniture. Students are able to complete an entire high school semester course in three weeks. They meet daily for an hour and a half seminar in a small group and do the rest of the coursework on their own or contract.

Other schools have just begun to redesign their learning environments. Another San Diego middle school, located in a low-income minority community and designated as a magnet, opened its doors to 7th graders this past fall. Instead of the usual thematic focus, the faculty chose two concepts for the school: (1) a single challenging interdisciplinary curriculum for all students, with no tracking, and (2) a guarantee that any student who successfully completes the middle school program can take any advanced course in any high school in the district.

The school is organized in "families" comprising 6 teachers and 140 students. Everything from scheduling to discipline is handled within the family. One teacher is team leader, another is curriculum leader, and a third is socio-emotional leader. Teachers have created performance-based assessments to replace report card grades. The faculty also chose to link the school with county service agencies by using funds allocated for a

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counselor to hire a family advocate housed in the school.

Still other schools are experimenting with teams of teachers and students who stay together for two or more years, cross-disciplinary courses, schedules that provide uninterrupted blocks of time, individual and team projects that connect classroom experiences with the outside world, and new roles and responsibilities for teachers and administrators.

The faculty of a rural high school in Granville County, North Carolina, for example, used extra funds to supplement the salaries of lead teachers—1 teacher in 10—who would have a reduced teaching load and take on new responsibilities. The faculty decided how the lead teachers would be selected, how much their salaries would be increased, and what their new responsibilities would be. (This approach did not provoke the resentment that often accompanies such plans when selection criteria and responsibilities are determined outside the school.)

The high school faculty determined that the lead teachers would (1) provide information on scheduling options based on their reading of research and visits to other schools, (2) design a clinical supervision model, and (3) analyze data to assess needs and progress. After considerable discussion, they decided on a new schedule in which classes meet for 90 minutes every other day; they have also created their own in-house accountability model with assistance from outside consultants.

Across the country, a growing number of schools like these are struggling to reorganize the way they operate in order to increase student performance. They are altering their traditional answers to questions of what they want students to know and be able to do and of what learning experiences will produce those outcomes. Those schools that have made the most progress have external conditions that support change. For restructuring to succeed, educators and policymakers must understand these conditions; otherwise, restructuring

will follow the well-worn path of failed reforms, creating a handful of extraordinary schools instead of the conditions that would allow most schools to become extraordinary.

### **The Right Conditions**

The challenge the education system faces is how to restructure the many pieces at multiple levels simultaneously. Even those schools that best exemplify the goals of restructuring face an uphill battle. Individual teachers and administrators are devoting considerable energy and time to creating new roles, yet must maintain their old roles and responsibilities to function in a system that has not changed.

To sustain and expand this wave of admirable grass roots efforts, districts and states must change the way they do business. Specifically, districts and states must provide an invitation to change, authority and flexibility, access to knowledge, and time.

*An invitation to change.* An invitation to change is perhaps the most critical aspect of leadership at the state, district, and school levels. People need both a reason and the opportunity to change what they are doing. An invitation signals that the goals and the rules have changed; it is no longer to be business as usual. Risk taking, experimentation—even failure—are invited.

The invitation can take a variety of forms. It might be a grants competition or an opportunity to volunteer at the state or district level. For example, Maine's Restructuring Schools Project, Washington's Schools for the 21st Century, and Massachusetts' Carnegie Schools Program have awarded grants to schools proposing significant restructuring activities. Arkansas has solicited volunteers for a similar but unfunded program, and North Carolina has funded pilot sites volunteering to participate in their Lead Teacher Pilot. At the district level, the invitation can be an opportunity to volunteer, as in Dade County's School-Based Management and San Diego's Restructuring Schools. Creating a proposal in response to a request can be an impetus for organizing a group to plan for

change and coalescing a preliminary set of ideas.

The invitation might also be an opportunity created by an external event, as in Kentucky, where the State Supreme Court declared the entire system unconstitutional. The legislature was faced with creating an education system from scratch—an unprecedented opportunity for change. Similarly, the offer of a large grant from a local foundation provided the impetus for change in Jefferson County, Kentucky.

**Authority and flexibility.** The sincerity of the invitation is conveyed by the accompanying changes from the top to provide authority and flexibility. Faculties need both authority to make decisions and freedom from constraining regulations if they are to redesign their schools in ways that suit their particular circumstances.

The most common mechanism for granting authority to schools is budgetary or management decentralization, often called site-based management. The essential feature is that school faculties, through some type of representative arrangement, have decision-making authority over such important areas as staffing, scheduling, student grouping, curriculum, and instructional materials. Unfortunately, examples of token authority—a small discretionary budget with specific requirements for planning and reporting—are far more common than examples of meaningful decentralization.

Authority over these decisions typically requires relief from numerous state, district, and union contract rules that dictate much of what happens inside schools. Kentucky's new education code, for example, confers far-reaching authority and flexibility on the school site. The law requires each school to form a council responsible for employment of school staff (including the principal), curriculum design, use of technology, assignment of staff time, scheduling of the school day and week, and use of space.

More common is a delegation of limited decision-making authority with a provision allowing schools to request waivers from certain rules. Under these circumstances, schools have been able to alter learning environments to some degree. For exam-



Photograph by Marcia Marlow

*Providing teachers access to knowledge and the time to reflect on it and practice new ideas is one of the many interrelated responsibilities faced by districts embarking on restructuring for school improvement*

ple, an elementary school in Dade County, Florida, chose to contract out bilingual instruction to Berlitz. A middle school in Edmonds School District in Washington extends the school year two or three weeks for those students who need that additional time to master the coursework.

School faculties most often request waivers from rules that tightly regulate how time is spent with students, subject-area certification and course credits (which preclude cross-disciplinary teaching), and categorical program requirements (usually associated with federal or state funds targeted to compensatory bilingual or special education). For example, an elementary school in Bald Knob, Arkansas, after considerable negotiation with state and federal officials, was able to place enough categorical teachers in classrooms to dramatically reduce class size for the entire school.

Early experiences suggest, however, that granting waivers on a rule-by-rule basis will not provide significantly increased flexibility. The numerous regulatory bodies and mechanisms, pervasive lack of trust by each level in those below, and ingrained ways of thinking and operating combine to inhibit flexi-

bility far more than any single rule. Therefore, although waivers have considerable symbolic value initially, they are not a substitute for reducing regulation at all levels of the system.

**Access to knowledge.** If teachers and administrators do not have the knowledge and skills needed to create new learning environments and teach challenging curriculums, the goal of restructuring will not be met. Rules, regulations, traditions, myths, and even building architecture pose significant barriers to change—but the biggest barrier is the absence of knowledge and skills needed to do one's job differently.

Providing new knowledge to teachers and administrators is no small task. The body of relevant knowledge is broad and continually expanding. It includes content knowledge, pedagogy, current research, new ideas and models of restructuring activities, as well as group decision making and other skills demanded by new roles and responsibilities. Teaching students to think, make informed judgments, and work together on projects is much more difficult than teaching isolated facts and algorithms. Similarly, providing guidance and assistance to teachers is much more difficult

for school and central office administrators than generating and enforcing rules.

For teachers and administrators to have access to knowledge, new conceptions of professional development and of curriculum are needed. Opportunities to learn and to practice must be readily available and considered part of each educator's professional responsibility. Jefferson County, Kentucky, has created one such model through their Gheens Professional Development Academy, which houses a variety of full- and part-time staff from the central office, schools, and nearby universities. The academy sponsors an array of activities for teachers and administrators, serves as a curriculum resource and production center, and promotes collegial interaction and intellectual stimulation.

In a growing number of states, including California, Kentucky, and Michigan, university and school faculties are collaborating to create professional development or professional practice schools, which are akin to teaching hospitals. The concept is to design schools that continue their primary function of educating students but that also train new teachers, generate new knowledge, and provide continuing education to both school and university faculty. Beyond these new functions, these approaches share the premise that schools must be substantially reorganized to implement best teaching practices.

Faculties recreating their schools require development opportunities that are suited to their particular needs, available to the entire faculty, and based in the school. One example is a newly created ungraded elementary school in Olympia, Washington. Under the principal's leadership, a core team of teachers and parents determined what they wanted students to know and what competencies teachers needed to attain these learning goals. As teachers complete blocks of competencies, based on peer evaluation, they will be able to attend conferences of their choice. Development activities include school-based workshops, peer assistance (for example, one teacher is an

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expert in cooperative learning and responsible for teaching it to colleagues), and classroom coaching designed to help teachers model thinking.

In general, schools with the most inventive plans are those that have had experience with innovative programs in the past, participate in networks that expose them to new ideas, have a source of new information in the school (a new principal or other staff member), and have time to plan. The majority of schools participating in Maine's Restructuring Schools Project, for example, were involved in the University of Southern Maine/Goodlad partnership, which had stimulated an exchange of ideas and information. A high school in a Seattle suburb is generating its own new knowledge by creating new approaches—teams teaching cross-disciplinary courses—and piloting them before deciding to implement them on a regular basis.

In California, the Cupertino/Fremont Model Technology Schools project made a substantial investment in teaching teachers how to use technology—first for their own professional productivity and then for instruction—through training, access to hardware and software, and school-based support and assistance. As a result, teachers made sophisticated decisions about hardware and software purchases. In addition to formal training and site-based assistance

tailored to the particular needs of the faculty of the school, teachers learn from networks, visits to other schools, conferences, courses, and the expertise of colleagues when time permits.

*Time.* Time is a precious commodity in schools. Changing schools into productive learning environments requires time to learn, to plan, to test ideas, to maintain lines of communication—time that is not typically considered part of the job of teachers or administrators.

Some experimental approaches, however, do make time available. Dade County, Florida, for example, is experimenting with mini-sabbaticals for teachers, providing time for study. Washington's Schools for the 21st Century, a state effort to stimulate restructuring in schools, receive funds to support an extra 10 days for the entire faculty. Even with this extra time, however, these faculties are stretched to their limits. Not only are they creating new curriculums, new assessments, new schedules, and new materials; they are also redesigning their own jobs, gathering data, and convincing others—colleagues, students, parents, and often central office staff—of the value of their undertakings.

Schools with significantly different approaches to teaching and learning usually have been granted abundant planning time by their district or state. A team of teachers began planning for the new middle school in San Diego described above a year in advance of the school's opening. In addition, they and others obtained foundation grants to support retreats so that the entire faculty can wrangle with the difficult issues encountered in designing an organization from scratch.

**Shared Responsibility**

The goal of restructuring education is to raise significantly the performance of all students. What happens if these outcomes are not reached? What happens if the conditions necessary for changes in curriculum and instruction are not provided?

Restructuring aims to strike a new bargain between the school system and the public in this matter. The

current system leaves very few choices to individual teachers, yet holds them accountable. In exchange for a more flexible, adaptable system to replace the current tightly regulated one, educators agree to be held accountable for the results their actions produce. This bargain raises two thorny issues: how to measure the results we care about and how to allocate responsibility in a way that matches authority.

Many educators are developing new ways of measuring performance, from demonstrations and portfolios for judging individuals to open-ended and even behavioral questions for judging schools, districts, or states. Vermont is helping schools across the state develop student portfolios; Connecticut and California, among others, are testing performance-based assessments.

In the meantime, however, educators who tackle restructuring are caught in a time warp between the old and the new. On one hand, teachers are being asked to teach their students to think—to forsake superficial coverage of content for depth and understanding. On the other hand, they are still judged publicly and privately by standardized tests that emphasize isolated facts, rote learning, and content coverage.

Moreover, assuming that we will be able to assess desired outcomes adequately, holding educators responsible for results is not simply an issue of teacher accountability. For, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, significant change inside schools will not happen in the absence of necessary conditions provided by districts' and states' staff.

Creating a system of shared accountability based on measures of valued goals is therefore a critical requirement for school change. If school faculties are to take responsibility for results, district policymakers and staff must take the corresponding responsibility for providing the requisite conditions—time, knowledge, authority, and flexibility.

#### Change at All Levels

The success of restructuring hinges on the ability of people at all levels of the system to change. If restructuring

is viewed as something schools can do with only a token increase in authority and no other changes, most schools will never even know what restructuring is about. And the few schools that create exciting learning environments will be constantly threatened by a new superintendent, school board member, or principal, because support for change is not built into the system.

A sincere invitation to change, authority and flexibility, access to knowledge, and time to plan are the crucial requirements for restructuring. But these are not "services" that can be provided schools under the existing system. A sincere invitation to change implies a shared understanding of the urgent need to change and the goals for change. Granting of authority implies a new conception of leadership, hierarchy, and power relationships.

Flexibility results only from significant deregulation, not occasional exceptions to the rules. Knowledge must be readily available in a useful and accessible form. And time to learn, to plan, to implement changes, and to reflect must be built into the daily lives of educators. □

*Author's note:* This article is based on work I did for the National Governors' Association (NGA) and the National Center on Education and the Economy. See also: David, J. L., M. Cohen, D. Honetschlager, and S. Traiman, *State Actions to Restructure Schools: First Steps*, 1990; and David, J. L., *Restructuring in Progress: Lessons from Pioneering Districts*, 1989; both published by NGA, Washington, D.C.

**Jane L. David** is Director, Bay Area Research Group, 3144 David Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94303.

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