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Renewing Schools

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> *"Don't be afraid to take a big step when one is indicated. You can't cross a chasm in two small steps." David Lloyd George*

Reform--and its associates, renewal and change--are as American as the Declaration of Independence, western migration, and ever more powerful computers. Born out of the belief that things can be better, reform has been a dominant theme in American culture.

American education is no exception to this tradition. From the idea of free public schools to the educational philosophy of Thomas Dewey, tremors of reform have touched our educational system time and time again. In the 1950s and early '60s, the brain race became as much of a political concern during the Cold War as was the arms race. And since 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was published, considerable attention has been focused on purported failures of our nation's educational system and on proposed remedies to those shortcomings.

Proposals to bring about educational reform have varied widely, from channeling more dollars into current systems to revamping the systems themselves. In spite of the strength of inertia, the natural reluctance of people to change, and the tendency of proposals to become vehicles for self-serving personal or institutional advancement, some reform efforts are both substantive and effective.

The works reviewed here represent some outstanding examples of efforts to do more than simply respond in knee-jerk fashion to political pressure.

Bruce Joyce and *Emily Calhoun* look at five case studies of diverse districts across the nation that have made dramatic improvements in student learning through synergistic combinations of well-implemented programs.

James M. Wolf reports on the findings of an ethnographic study of an elementary school's success in educating low-income minority children.

The Vermont Restructuring Collaborative examines the weaknesses of "traditional" public education and the testimony of several educators who have experienced programs and initiatives that work.

Lew Allen and *Barbara Lunsford* offer practical suggestions on how educators can form partnerships with other schools that can lead to more effective teaching.

R*obert E. Slavin* analyzes several reform theories and their relation to schools' readiness for reform.

Joyce, Bruce, and Calhoun, Emily, Eds. **Learning Experiences in School Renewal: An Exploration of Five Successful Programs.** Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1996. 208 pages. [ED401 600](). *Available from:* ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. $14.50 plus $4.00 shipping and handling. (800) 438-8841.

Real change can take place in schools, change that enables students to improve their ability to learn. This is the contention of Joyce and Calhoun, who document varied but successful approaches to renewal in five school districts across the country.

The districts varied in geographic location, size, economic background, and demographics. They are pseudonymously named the River City Program serving about 30,000 students with traditionally average achievement; the University Town Program, with about 5,000 students and achievement among the top 5 percent in the nation; Readersville, a collection of eleven Department of Defense schools that worked to improve in-school and out-of-school reading and writing programs; the Inner City Program, an urban district of about 100 schools serving 350,000 residents living in a generally blighted economic environment; and the Action Network, focusing on shared governance and involving more than sixty schools of differing demographics in a Southeastern state.

Areas targeted differed from program to program, though commonalities existed. In each of the programs studied, all teachers and administrators were involved. In three of the programs, several models of teaching were studied, peer coaching teams were organized, and data were systematically gathered and used to make adjustments in the programs.

Action research was used in several of the programs to help establish some degree of democratic governance in the school, help staff study the health of its own educational system, use those studies as a basis for formulating initiatives, and study the effects and recycle the process. Action research can work quite effectively, the studies found, especially with adequate technical assistance.

Ultimately, each program brought about the needed change through concerted multilayered efforts. In

one middle school, faculty participating in an intensive school-renewal program committed themselves to a collegial organization, the intensive study of teaching and curriculum, and the formative study of implementation and student learning. The student promotion rate rose from 30 percent to 90 percent in two years, an effect that has been sustained for six more years. Not all the programs became self-perpetuating, however; the challenge of helping them do so is an issue still awaiting serious research.

Wolf, James M. **An Ethnographic Snapshot of a Successful Elementary School in Educating Low Income Minority Children.** Missouri City, Texas: Executive Steering Team Achievement Gap Task Group, Fort Bend Independent School District. *Available from:* Synergistic Schools, 4646 Highway 6, Suite 216, Sugar Land, TX 77478-5214. $10.00 plus $4.00 shipping and handling. (281) 437-0230.

The student population at Glover Elementary School in Missouri City, Texas, is 90 percent African-American, 8 percent Hispanic, 1.5 percent white, and less than 1 percent Asian. Thirty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch programs. But Glover students achieve way beyond the stereotypical expectations of their demographics.

For example, on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), third-grade scores were in the 90th percentile, while fourth- and fifth-grade scores were in the 80th and 70th percentiles, respectively. Economically disadvantaged students were the second highest scoring single subgroup. Over one-third of the students in grades 2 through 5 made the honor roll. The attendance rate at Glover is 96.6 percent, higher than the district or state average.

Something is working at Glover, and Wolf and his researchers set out to discover what it is. Following a series of open-ended and structured interviews with staff members and students, as well as classroom observation, Wolf identified a number of characteristics under these headings: the principal, a shared belief system, common goals, working in teams, cultural cohesion and teacher commitment, teacher efficacy, and preparation activities for the TAAS.

Among more than thirty characteristics of the principal that contribute to the school's success are the following:

- Being a strong, positive, and reinforcing instructional leader, initiator, and manager.
- Being highly goal-oriented with a keen sense of goal clarity.
- Creating and communicating a compelling vision of what the school should look like.
- Strongly believing that all children can and will learn.
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Factors under the other categories that contributed to school success included:

- A schoolwide belief that all children can and will learn.
- Goals and objectives that are jointly formulated.
- A commitment to and emphasis on team-building.
- Teachers' belief that student failure is a teaching failure.
- Extensive preparation, including morale-building "pep rallies," for the TAAS tests.

Vermont Restructuring Collaborative. **Field Guide to Educational Renewal.** Brandon, Vermont: Holistic Education Press, 1994. 348 pages. ED372 496. *Available from:* Holistic Education Press, PO Box 328, Brandon, VT 05733. $15.00 plus $3.95 shipping and handling. (802) 247-8312.

The authors of this collection of essays on educational renewal believe, in the words of John Dewey, "the purpose of education is a democratic society." This means that education is understood to be for all children, and its goal is to maximize each child's particular abilities, as well as to help students adapt to change and develop problem-solving and communication skills.

The book is based on six precepts: school change must be driven by a vision for a better and more responsive educational system; leadership is essential for the establishment of this vision; teaching and learning in renewed schools must fundamentally differ from traditional approaches; educators must be learners as well as teachers; the idea of education must be expanded and integrated with other elements of society; and each of these pieces must be put together into one seamless whole.

Of particular interest are the sections on encouraging teachers to be continuous learners and breaking down barriers among schools, social-service agencies, and businesses.

"We have the kind of schools that our society has chosen to build and support; and they reflect both its lack of a clear social focus and its cacophony of conflicting demands," notes William J. Mathis, one of the authors. This collection represents substantial, successful efforts to move beyond confusion toward a visionary, systematic approach to educating our children.

Allen, Lew, and Lunsford, Barbara. **How To Form Networks for School Renewal.** Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995. 57 pages. ED381 868. *Available from:* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 North Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-1453. $6.95. (703) 549-3891.

This handbook, designed to improve members' educational effectiveness through interschool networks,

offers insights gleaned from the authors' own experience. Allen is director of outreach in the Program for School Improvement at the College of Education, University of Georgia, Athens. Lunsford directs the League of Professional Schools, also from the College of Education at UG Athens.

Allen and Lunsford offer practical suggestions on establishing networks that can enable educators to do their jobs better. Although outside assistance in the form of university classes, workshops, or special speakers is often available, those with the most comprehensive understanding of what teachers and principals face each day are other teachers and principals.

Decrying the fact that "school-based" educators too often become "school-bound," the authors recommend shifting from inservice days, where outside experts are brought in, to a regularly scheduled, organized format in which educators can meet with each other and share their expertise.

As an example, the League of Professional Schools:

- Provides regularly scheduled meetings where school teams share their work.
- Encourages cross-school collaboration by having teachers and principals visit other member schools.
- Enables school-based personnel to share their expertise by publishing network newsletters and monographs that feature their writing.
- Involves educators in the network through the League Congress, ongoing consortiums, and ad hoc task forces.

"When school-based educators are given ongoing opportunities to network across schools, their professional knowledge, motivation, self-esteem, and, ultimately, their effectiveness in renewing their efforts with students increases dramatically," state Allen and Lunsford.

Such networks need to be "practitioner driven," not simply another organization to which the school belongs. Networks must be fully participatory and responsive to changing needs. Full participation by each principal is also necessary, as is at least 80 percent support from faculty.

Robert E. Slavin. **Sand, Bricks, and Seeds: School Change Strategies and Readiness for Reform.** Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University, April 1997. 24 pages. *Available from:* Johns Hopkins University, Attn: Robert E. Slavin, 3505 North Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218. Free. (410) 516-8809.

All the king's horses and all the king's men can't bring about school reform if the school is not ready for reform. This is the thesis put forth by Slavin. Noting the persistent calls for reform over the past fifteen years and the numerous programs that can bring about reform, Slavin states that some schools nonetheless aren't ready for reform.

Following a discussion of various types of reform--organizational-development models, comprehensive-reform models, and single-subject models--he poses the question: Which approach is most likely to bring about change in teachers' practices and improvement in student achievement?

The answer, he says, depends on the characteristics of the individual schools--characteristics that allow schools to be placed into one of three categories: seeds, bricks, and sand.

Seed schools have an extraordinary capacity to transform vision into reality, are filled with faculty who are cohesive and excited about teaching, and are led by a visionary who is willing to involve the entire staff in decisions. They are like seeds that, when placed in the fertile ground of vision, can grow their own reform.

An awareness and willingness to participate in reform is evident in *brick* schools, but they are unlikely to create their own methods of reform. These schools need to bring in outside programs--haul in the bricks--to build a successful system of reform.

Sand schools are those in which even the most heroic efforts at reform will fail, whether due to complacency, financial or personnel turmoil, or lack of leadership. Trying to bring about change in these schools is like building a house on sand.

Warning against mismatches between reform strategies and reform readiness, Slavin urges reformers to remember that reform takes time and money, demands dedicated funding, and requires administrators to be selective, investing effort where it will do the most good.

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