

# ***Educational Reform and School Improvement***

***by David Hopkins and Benjamin Levin***

**T**he last 10 or 15 years have been a time of great challenge, as well as considerable excitement for educational systems around the world. Governments everywhere have been embarking on substantial programs of reform in an attempt to develop more effective school systems and raise levels of student learning and achievement. We see in these policy initiatives an unfortunate paradox that inhibits them from realizing their aspirations. The community of educational change researchers and practitioners has finally begun to learn something about how ongoing improvement can be fostered and sustained in schools. However, government policy on education has not taken adequate account of this knowledge about school development, with the result that an enormous potential source of synergy has been lost and student learning continues to lag behind its potential. We want to argue as a consequence of this gap government efforts to improve schooling are less effective than they might be and that many school improvement efforts

have to swim against the current of government regulation. Following our analysis of this central irony in educational policy, we go on to outline an approach that, based partially on our work for the OECD, would be more likely to help governments achieve their educational objectives by building policy initiatives more explicitly on the knowledge base of school development.

## **GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS OF REFORM**

In recent years schools have been subject to a barrage of legislation and policy in many countries that has meant changes in curriculum, assessment, governance and financing. The nature of reform varies across countries due to unique combinations of historical, cultural, institutional and political factors. There have, however, been a number of common elements, especially in the English-speaking industrialized countries. A general strategy has been to centralize educational policy while at the same time decentralizing

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the responsibility for implementation. To the cynic this looks as if governments have created a situation where they can have their cake and eat it too! If policies fail to meet aspirations, the fault can then be attributed not to the policy-maker, but to the schools, teachers and local authorities that have failed to put them into practice. Within this larger scheme, reforms have tended to focus on:

**Curriculum:** Governments have instituted more restrictive curriculum requirements, including increased emphasis on science, technology and so-called basic skills, such as literacy. Traditional subject divisions have been reinforced in many cases.

**Accountability:** Governments have increased testing of students and have made the results public, and in some cases put in place extensive external inspection of schools.

**Governance:** While governments have centralized curriculum and assessment, they have decentralized many decisions from intermediate bodies such as school districts or local authorities to individual schools, and have given parents an increased role in school governance, all of which has put new pressures on professional staff.

**Market forces:** Governments have tried to introduce market elements to schooling through increasing the opportunity—or requirement—for parents to choose schools (or, in some cases, for schools to choose parents and students).

**Status of teachers:** In a number of countries the status of teachers and their organizations has been attacked directly through unilateral changes by governments to the status of unions or to collective bargaining arrangements.

#### THE LIMITS OF CURRENT REFORM STRATEGIES

It is an irony of quite breathtaking proportions that the dramatic increase in educational reform efforts in most Western countries during the past decade is having insufficient

impact on levels of student achievement. Admittedly there are pockets of success, such as the claims made for the English National Literacy Strategy, but in general the failure of recent reforms to accelerate student achievement in line with policy objectives has been widely documented.

Milbrey McLaughlin gave a clear indication of the pathology of central policy change a few years ago in her reanalysis of the extensive Rand Change Agent study originally conducted in the United States during the 1970s. According to her, “A general finding of the Change Agent study that has become almost a truism is that it is exceedingly difficult for policy to change practice, especially across levels of government. Contrary to the one-to-one relationship assumed to exist between policy and practice, the Change Agent study demonstrated that the nature, amount, and pace of change at the local level was a product of local factors that were largely beyond the control of higher-level policy-makers.”<sup>1</sup> McLaughlin comes to the salutary conclusion that “policy cannot mandate what matters.” There are, in our view, two main reasons why reforms have not had the desired impact.

First, many reforms focus on the wrong variables. There is now an increasingly strong research base to suggest that initiatives such as local management of schools, external inspection, organization development or teacher appraisal, only indirectly effect student performance. These variables are too far removed from the daily learning experiences of most students. Those variables that do correlate with higher levels of student achievement are psychological, instructional and home environments. The clear implications for policy are that any strategy to promote student learning needs to give attention to engaging students and parents as active participants, and expanding the teaching and learning repertoires of teachers and students respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> McLaughlin, M. (1990). “The Rand Change Agent Study Revisited: Macro Perspectives, Micro Realities.” *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 19, No. 9, pp.11-16.

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Second, reform efforts have not paid sufficient attention to how to create a framework for implementation that leads to changes in practice. The key issue is that if classroom practice is to be affected then teachers' behaviors and practices, as well as their beliefs and understandings, need to be addressed. It is teachers' struggles to come to terms with the technical and psychological aspects of the change process that leads to 'implementation dip,' and explains the levels of resistance characteristically associated with school improvement efforts that focus on classroom change. Policy formulation therefore has to be concerned with helping teachers through the change process.

We agree with McLaughlin that the reason government policy does not impact directly on outcomes is that by and large it lacks a school improvement perspective. As the OECD International School Improvement Project demonstrated, it matters little how "good" the policy may be, unless it is implemented then there will not be any impact on outcomes. The logic of our position is that governmental policy, if it wishes to impact upon schools, teachers and students, needs to be informed by what we know about how schools improve.

It is salutary to compare the approach to school self-improvement being used by most Western governments with the evidence from research and evaluations of successful school-improvement projects. The body of evidence around school improvement has grown significantly over the last couple of decades, and now includes important studies in the United States, Britain, Canada, Scandinavia and Australia, as well as in developing countries. What can school-improvement research tell us about the effective implementation of governmental policy? Let's look at their key findings before attempting to synthesize these themes into guidelines for policy-makers.

*Focus on classroom practice, as well as organizational change*

This point relates to the crucial failure of most policy initiatives to impact on the "learning level." In our experience most school-improvement initiatives are poorly conceptualized in the precise ways in which they might impact upon learning in the classroom which is the educational factor with the greatest impact upon pupil outcomes. While many schools are pulling the 'levers' of curriculum and organization, the precise ways in which these changes impact upon learning are unclear and usually unaddressed. The implication for policy is to place far more emphasis on expanding the teaching repertoires of teachers.

*Develop a variety of curriculum and teaching programs or models*

Much recent centralized reform places great faith in the ability of curriculum guidelines to codify and ensure consistency of practice. Although this ensures a degree of uniformity in the curriculum diet of students, it is unlikely to raise standards of performance. The policy implication is that government should be actively encouraging the development, use and evaluation of curriculum and instructional models in a wide variety of curriculum areas. These programs need to be comprehensive,

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specific, contain student and teacher materials, integrate curriculum content with explicit instructional strategies, have an implementation strategy built in and be proven to work.

*Pay attention to context—one size does not fit all*

Most education reforms are insufficiently differentiated to allow schools to choose or adapt programs to fit their own particular situation. Some schools' performance is outstanding over a period of time, others less so. Innercity schools may face very different challenges than do rural or suburban schools. It is therefore sensible to assume that a strategy for moving a school from a low level of performance to average performance would be qualitatively different from a strategy designed to move a school from average to excellent performance. A strategy that helps to keep a school at an excellent level of performance is likely to be different again. The policy implication is to develop a methodology for differential school improvement strategies.

*Build capacity*

School improvement works best when a clear and practical focus for development is linked simultaneously to work on the internal conditions of the school. Although this focus on "enabling conditions" or "enhancing the school's capacity" for innovation and change draws on the implementation research, it is an idea that is still not well understood. The policy implication is to emphasize the importance of the relationship between an external change and the school's internal condition, and their combined impact on the school's capacity for improvement.

*Pay careful attention to staff development*

If we are to increase the skills of teachers then we need to rethink our approach to staff development. There are two key elements in effective staff development designs: the workshop and the workplace. The **workshop** is where we gain understanding, see demonstrations of the teaching strategy we may wish to acquire, and have the opportunity to practice them in a non-threatening environment. If, however, we wish to transfer

those skills that the workshop has introduced us to back into the **workplace**—the classroom and school—this requires the opportunity for immediate and sustained practice, collaboration and peer coaching, and studying development and implementation. We cannot achieve these changes in the workplace without, in most cases, drastic alterations in the ways in which we organize our schools. The implications for successful policy implementation are obvious if profound.

*Improve research and dissemination*

The increasing evidence about effective practice, which comes both from formal research and from educators' experience, plays far too small a role in policy and in school development. An important role for government lies in supporting the creation and dissemination of evidence, so that schools can learn from the efforts of others. Instead of every school "re-inventing the wheel," governments should be developing, piloting, disseminating and evaluating curriculum and instructional programs that directly address in feasible ways the targets that schools are setting themselves. At the same time, schools need help to improve their own ability to gather and use data. Careful analysis of achievement data, both from external tests and internal evaluation, should be a key part of any school's efforts to improve. Educators are generally not well versed either in data collection or analysis. Policies need to support people in learning how to use data effectively, and how to analyse and debate its implications.

## A WAY FORWARD?

As the OECD has found over three decades of research, most governments are committed to the aspirations of school improvement. The bad news is that they lack a considered conceptual framework in which to drive forward and deliver their educational agenda. Our reading of the OECD research and other evidence suggests that for government policies to have the desired effect of enhancing outcomes for all students, these policies must

focus on the key elements previously described. In particular, they require a new mindset on the part of policy-makers in attempting to link reform strategies to the achievement of young people in our schools.

In developing the following proposals we have drawn on our own experience with a number of OECD educational change projects, such as the *International School Improvement Project*, the *Quality in Teaching Project*, and the recent series of projects that coalesce under the *Schooling for Tomorrow* theme.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, this body of knowledge supports both the assertions made earlier and the proposals that follow.

How might governments move such an agenda forward?

Our analysis of even the best of current reform initiatives suggests that they adopt an a la carte perspective to the principles we have just outlined. Some may be included, but rarely all of them; the criteria for inclusion often appear to be serendipitous. Most, in our experience, fail to understand the dialectic between classroom and whole-school change, and research and dissemination also usually get short shrift. While we are not claiming that the principles outlined in the previous section are the last word on the matter, they do provide an integrated set of research-based criteria against which policies can be formulated and evaluated.

Reform does require additional resources, but the critical issue is how the resources are deployed. It is vital to link funding to clear

plans for improvement that are based on thoughtful use of the best available evidence. It is also important to make sure that all the various forms of additional funding are accessible and coherently focused, so that schools and districts are not trying to manage multiple funding requests and multiple programs that lead them in different directions at the same time. Effective reform may be impossible without resources for other purposes, such as retaining good teachers, maintaining adequate school facilities or overcoming some of the deep-seated effects of social disadvantage and poverty.

However, in all cases the essential element is a clear link between resources and outcomes.

Policy alignment needs to be horizontal and vertical—reaching across policies and through the various levels of the system. Such varied elements as assessment, inspection, teacher training, curriculum development and funding must all support the central goals of improvement.

In Britain, for example, target setting, testing and inspection are central elements of the policy context. Horizontal coordination would suggest that all of these be aligned to support instructional goals and strategies. Vertical coordination would mean that classrooms, schools and local authorities receive consistent messages about what is required for success. In this respect, the proliferation of educational agencies and actors in most systems may not be helpful.

The building of local capacity is as important as a coherent national policy. Key elements of building local capacity are often in existence

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<sup>2</sup> Hopkins, D. (ed.) (1987). *Improving the Quality of Schooling: Quality in School*. London: Falmer Press. OECD (1994). *Quality in Teaching*. Paris: CERI/OECD. Istance, D. (2000). "OECD/CERI Work on Schooling for Tomorrow." Paper prepared for the National College for School Leadership Research Conference, London, June 21st 2000. OECD (1999). *Innovating Schools*. Paris: CERI/OECD.

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but not well connected with each other or linked to a capacity building agenda. We need to support teachers, school leaders and parents in learning how to implement and use these and other practices effectively. We also need a closer connection between school-improvement work and initial teacher training, so that new teachers come to their work with at least some understanding of key improvement strategies and skills. Building capacity and managing real change require skills that most administrators now only learn through practice and experience, if they learn them at all. These elements, as well as local research and dissemination, could be integrated in ways that are much more powerful than their current separate embodiments. Some new thinking about appropriate organizational forms and delivery modes could have powerful effects in building capacity for change in schools, and in creating the enabling conditions that allow positive change to take place and to become institutionalized.

Above all, governments should insist that schools be thoughtful in their approach to

change and improvement, but not necessarily require that everyone do the same thing in the same way at the same time. The only way to get people to think is to create and support the expectation of thinking. Overall we do not believe that our program would be any more costly than current activities supported by governments. Nor do we think that it would be politically problematic. Governments could continue to focus, if they wish, on matters of achievement, standards and accountability, but they would do so with more confidence that their policies are likely to bring about the conditions they say they desire.

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