

MAKING ACCOUNTABILITY WORK

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MCCLURE SCHOOL 1995 TO 2003

Last month I spent a morning shadowing a principal of an elementary school in a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia. On most days the principal visits each classroom for 5 to 10 minutes, and as we traveled through the school I was struck by the amount of writing taking place, the engagement of students in their assignments and the intensity of instruction in most classrooms. Repeatedly I saw first grade students working in pairs, with coaching from teachers, to revise stories they had written.

In 1995, the year I first began spending time at McClure School, it was rare to see students this young writing. That year parents began working with the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project¹ (where I was employed as a community organizer) to improve security at the school. Relatively quickly they moved on to reading and won a commitment to have all students tested for reading levels. When parents began sharing test results with other parents, many grew angry that their children were reading below grade level despite receiving good grades. Teachers objected after parents began coming to their classrooms to ask why grade levels and grades did not match, and for a time the parent group was prohibited from meeting in the school. Ultimately, these tensions led to parents helping select a new principal who has focused intensely on reading instruction for the past seven years. Today, across from the main office a large poster board lists the number of books read by each class in the school, a parent group demand that was originally resisted as potentially pitting teachers against one another, but has ultimately helped focus the school more intensely on reading.

Sustained improvement at the school has been possible because at different times the school principal, teachers and parents have all provided strong instructional leadership. In 1998, the parents and teachers helped select a librarian to staff the library they had worked to refurbish. In doing so they bypassed the district personnel system that gives schools no say in staffing decisions. Jointly selecting the librarian helped establish enough trust within the school for it to become just one of eight in the district where over the past three years seventy-five percent of the staff has voted to waive collective bargaining provisions and

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have a joint committee of administrators, teachers and parents select all new teachers.

Yet achievement levels are still far from the standards set by Pennsylvania under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001² (NCLB). From 1995 to 2000, as Philadelphia instituted a new accountability system and the school upgraded its language arts program,³ the percentage of students reading at or above basic levels increased from twenty-nine percent to fifty-three percent. This improvement made McClure one of the most-improved schools in the city and kept it off the list of forty-five schools that were privatized as part of the state takeover of the city's public schools in 2001. But it still left many students finishing elementary school reading below grade level. As the school works to improve its achievement levels, it faces, among other things, an enormous challenge in recruiting and retaining experienced teachers.⁴

THE POSSIBILITY OF LARGE-SCALE IMPROVEMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

If large-scale change is possible in urban education it will only happen by deepening the process of change at McClure and repeating the story across large numbers of schools. It can take two or three years to carefully design a new school. Even under the best circumstances, turning around a failing school can take three to six years. Reforming an entire urban school system so that all its schools provide high quality instruction remains an aspiration.⁵ Schools are complex social institutions; they change slowly and in unpredictable ways and there is still a great deal that we do not know about creating large systems of effective schools. Given the difficulties faced by educators in improving urban education, it is not a surprise then that the judicial system has had limited success in provoking large-scale educational improvement.

Nonetheless in *A Public Laboratory Dewey Barely Imagined: The Emerging Model of School Governance and Legal Reform*,⁶ James Liebman and Charles Sabel predict that public education is on the verge of a dramatic breakthrough. Their optimism is rooted in two apparently contradictory trends: one, the creation of state accountability systems that for the first time establish consequences for school outcomes; and two, the increasing ability of creative principals, teachers and civic organizations to develop successful urban schools. Out of the synthesis of these centralizing and decentralizing trends Liebman and Sabel see a new model for education governance in which states articulate high

2. Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2001).

3. The school implemented a strong balanced literacy program that combines whole language and phonics instruction.

4. Last summer, two veteran teachers took jobs in a suburban school district, leaving behind a city district where class size is the highest in the state and salaries among the lowest in the region.

5. Michael Fullan, *The Three Stories of Education Reform*, KAPPAN PROF. J. (2000), available at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kful0004.htm.

6. 28 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 183 (2003).

standards of performance and then give school districts and schools the autonomy to develop strategies to meet those goals. The great potential for this model, now codified in NCLB, is that it shows the way to designing education systems that have the capacity to systematically learn from their experience and use that knowledge to continuously improve instruction.

The ability of this general theory of reform to systematically transform instruction for low-income students depends on three interrelated questions:

- (1) Can parents and communities that have the most at stake in better schools develop enough power to take advantage of new accountability systems, *or* will education organizing efforts remain relatively isolated examples of school transformation and policy innovation?
- (2) Can school districts make increasing demands on schools to improve test results while at the same time providing deep capacity-building necessary to transform failing schools, *or* will the rush to meet yearly performance goals result in jettisoning school improvement efforts that are most likely to provide students with a high quality education?
- (3) Can NCLB be an effective tool for changing policies that result in the least qualified teachers being assigned to teach the students who need the most effective instruction, *or* will deep inequities undermine even the most enlightened accountability systems?

CONSTITUENCY

Liebman and Sabel are optimistic about public education in large part because they see a new constituency for greater accountability that cuts across traditional ideological divisions. This is an important part of their argument, one that helps explain the essential role of civic organizations in new systems of education governance. Accountability, defined as the existence of consequences for action, necessarily takes place inside of relationships. An unanswered question about accountability systems is, to whom are schools, school districts and state governments accountable? Large numbers of middle and upper class parents have abandoned urban public schools; in most cities key policy and political leaders send their children to private school; and arguments that economic development depends on good education go only so far. Parents and community members in low-income neighborhoods have the most at stake in better schools but in most places they have not been organized powerfully enough to hold school officials accountable.

Over the past decade this has begun to change as an increasing number of community groups have successfully undertaken to organize parents, students and community institutions to improve local schools. Traditional neighborhood organizing avoided public education issues. But the same failures that have led urban school systems to lose legitimacy in the political arena have also created

opportunities for community organizations to challenge the professional expertise that historically isolated public schools from the neighborhoods they served.⁷ Community organizing has contributed to improving schools in several ways, including increasing resources, creating new small schools, replacing ineffective principals, involving parents in school-level decision-making, forging stronger relationships between teachers and parents, and building social trust and leadership skills among principals, teachers and parents. In a number of cities, organizing groups are responsible for some of the most important policy innovations in urban education.⁸

Yet given the challenges facing urban school systems, education organizing still constitutes a series of isolated and tentative successes. As the example of McClure School suggests, parents can help spark and lead instructional improvement. Contrary to stereotypes, urban parents overwhelmingly want higher academic standards. But parents are less unified on whether they themselves should be involved in managing schools.⁹ Even when strong parent organizations are built, it can be difficult to sustain them as children move on to new schools. Groups involved in education organizing face the challenge of increasing the scale of their work to embrace entire school systems while deepening their impact on teaching and learning in the classroom.¹⁰ Their success is essential to the transformation of public education in this country. If these groups are able to build what Liebman and Sabel label “countervailing

7. For a brilliant analysis of the opening of urban public education to democratic influence, see Michael B. Katz, *Chicago School Reform as History*, TCHR. C. REC., Fall 1992, at 56–72. The opportunity for parent and community organizing has often been shaped by top-down changes in education policy. In Chicago for example, the community organizations that are most involved in transforming public schools today only became involved in education issues after state legislation, pushed by a coalition of education advocacy and business groups, opened up opportunities for thousands of parents to help govern schools.

8. Most notable are Oakland Community Organization’s Small Autonomous Schools initiative, which is serving as a model for small school efforts around the country; Austin Interfaith’s Alliance Schools Initiative, a network of 17 reforming schools in Austin which has demonstrated how parents, teachers and administrators can collaborate to create a learning culture within schools; Sacramento Area Congregation’s Home Visit Project, now a statewide program established by the PICO California Project that is the first large-scale parent involvement effort based on teachers visiting the homes of their students to build relationships with parents and share teaching strategies; Chicago ACORN’s teacher quality campaign, which has helped make equal access to qualified teachers a central focus of school reform efforts in Chicago and other cities; and the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project’s Right to Know campaign, which is using NCLB to push for greater transparency by districts in sharing information about student achievement and teacher qualifications. All these efforts are by community organizing groups that are affiliates of national organizing networks: PICO Network (Oakland, Sacramento and Philadelphia), ACORN (Chicago), and the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation (Austin).

9. See RESEARCH FOR DEMOCRACY, TEMPLE UNIV. CTR. FOR PUB. POLICY & THE E. PA. ORG. PROJECT, *A RIGHT TO KNOW: A PARENT-TEACHER STRATEGY TO IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS* (2002).

10. See GENE CORBIN, TEMPLE UNIV. CTR. FOR PUB. POLICY, *OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES TO SCHOOL REFORM: A REPORT ON THE 2002 ORGANIZING FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE INSTITUTE* (2003).

power” at both a school and district level they will make it possible for districts to go down the path of sustained reform rather than jump from initiative to initiative in search of a magic bullet.

SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Improving instruction across an entire school is an organizational development question. It depends on creating systems and cultures that focus school staff on individual student learning, promote continuous analysis of data to improve practice and enable teachers to learn from one another.¹¹ The only way to get to classrooms is through schools. Large urban school districts, as they are almost all currently organized, face problems of *timing*, *control* and *capacity* in facilitating school development. Faced with average tenures of three to four years, superintendents are under intense pressure to quickly deliver increased test results.¹² They are loath to give up the levers they control for the sake of promoting agency at the school level that may or may not lead to better education. And even if district leadership does see its role as promoting innovation and organizational development in schools, district bureaucracies are not necessarily filled with people skilled in capacity building.

The risk of increasing pressures to meet annual improvement goals is that districts short-circuit longer term school development efforts. For example, Philadelphia and New York City are each in the process of implementing a new centralized curriculum and instructional model in all but a limited number of schools. There are some good reasons for greater uniformity in instruction, including high student mobility and the difficulty of coordinating professional development when schools are using so many different teaching approaches. Initial research on district reform suggests that superintendents can at least modestly raise achievement levels by instituting standardized instructional approaches.¹³ But this top down strategy is unlikely to create enough change in how schools operate and in classroom practice to truly transform urban education. Liebman and Sabel are correct that the key change occurs when different parts of the education system develop the capacity to learn and innovate to meet increasingly tough standards. To work this needs to begin at the school

11. A large-scale evaluation of Philadelphia’s Children Achieving Initiative, a standards and accountability reform strategy, found that the schools that saw the greatest gains in test scores were places where teachers collaborated intensively and felt a high degree of control over their professional activities. ERIN TIGHE, AUBREY WANG & ELLEN FOLEY, CONSORTIUM FOR POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUC., AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN PHILADELPHIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (2002).

12. There seems to be a disagreement between superintendents (lower) and school boards (higher) on how long the average superintendent stays in his or her position. See COUNCIL OF GREAT CITY SCH. DISTRS., URBAN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: CHARACTERISTICS, TENURE AND SALARY (2001) (2.5 years); NAT’L SCH. BOARDS ASS’N, SUPERINTENDENT TENURE (2002) (4.6 years).

13. MANPOWER DEMONSTRATION RESEARCH CORP., FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS: CASE STUDIES OF HOW URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT (2002).

level with enough time and space to pursue the messy process of transforming organizations.¹⁴

TEACHER QUALITY

Access to skilled teachers is the one piece of the school reform puzzle that Liebman and Sabel miss. It is the area where courts may have the most important role to play. Increased resources are a necessary but not sufficient condition for improved student achievement. The reason is not a mystery; it is that more money alone does not necessarily translate into better teaching. What we know is that teaching matters. The idea that students learn more when taught by skilled teachers is an obvious one. Yet education research finding that teacher qualifications are one of the single biggest contributors to variations in student achievement represents an enormous break from the pervasive view that school success is largely determined by socioeconomic status.¹⁵

Perhaps the greatest injustice in American public education is that low-income and African-American and Latino students are disproportionately taught by teachers who have limited teaching experience, lack certification and are not educated in the subject areas they are teaching. In Philadelphia, for example, sixty percent of all new teachers hired in 2003 lacked state certification. These teachers were placed overwhelmingly in schools with the lowest achievement levels and greatest poverty.¹⁶ Districts that have invested heavily in professional development find that suburban districts hire away their teachers once they become proficient. To compete effectively for skilled teachers, urban districts need to be able to do many things, including create career ladders, provide teachers with more security, improve building conditions, raise salaries, lower class size and improve mentoring programs. Some of these things require substantial fiscal support from states, and from the federal government, as well as other policy changes that strengthen teacher training and make it easier to recruit experienced teachers certified in other states.

14. In Philadelphia, students in most grades will be taking two sets of high-stakes standardized tests. One, designed by the state as part of its accountability system, is a criterion-referenced exam that assesses students based on Pennsylvania's academic standards. The second is a nationally standardized norm-referenced test that Philadelphia is currently implementing as part of its new accountability system. In some schools, students will begin taking this test in first grade. One reason given for using the nationally norm-referenced test on top of the state exam is that school districts need to be able to compare themselves with other districts when they apply for large federal grants. The end result is a lot of time and energy spent on testing during the school year.

15. See R. Ferguson, *Paying for Public Education: New Evidence of How Money Matters*, 28 HARV. J. ON LEGIS. 465 (1991).

16. By assigning the least experienced teachers to the students who have the greatest need, many systems end up burning out new teachers and creating unstable faculties in low-income schools. There are a number of elementary schools in Philadelphia where the average years of experience for the entire faculty is less than five years.

In one of its most important yet overlooked provisions, NCLB requires that “[state governments take] steps to ensure that poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by *inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field* teachers.”¹⁷ A similar provision applies directly to school districts.¹⁸ These conditions for receiving federal education funding are tied to provisions that give parents a right to know the qualifications of their child’s teacher and mandate that parents be notified if their child has been taught for four consecutive weeks by a teacher who is not highly qualified.¹⁹ The U.S. Department of Education and courts could play an important role in reducing racial disparities in access to highly qualified teachers and insuring that the critical teacher quality provisions of NCLB are not ignored by states.²⁰

The broader lesson is that it is difficult for accountability systems to work under conditions of severe inequality. It is not just that poorer school districts lack the absolute resources to meet standards, but that they are unable to effectively compete in a competitive process of school improvement.²¹ While more children may be learning to write at earlier ages at McClure School, the same trends in standards and accountability are also putting pressure on wealthy suburban districts to improve their language arts programs. Educating all students at high levels requires unprecedented public accountability over school systems that have been able to function with little or no consequences for failure. But it also depends on unrelenting pressure to equalize access to skilled teaching. We should not lose sight of the question of who gets what in our surprise at finding such an unlikely coalition of forces aligned around the task of improving urban education.

17. No Child Left Behind Act § 1111(b)(8)(C), 20 U.S.C. § 6311(b)(8)(C) (2000) (emphasis added).

18. No Child Left Behind Act § 1112(c)(1)(L), 20 U.S.C. § 6312(c)(1)(L) (2000).

19. The definition of highly qualified is being contested in several states, including California. However, the statute makes it clear that the definition includes three components: (1) years of experience (“inexperienced”); (2) certification (“unqualified”); and (3) alignment between a teacher’s education and the course she is teaching (“out-of-field”).

20. To date, little has been done to implement this provision. For example, the state plans submitted to the Secretary of Education in December 2002 did not directly address the teacher quality provisions of NCLB.

21. Another example is that when suburban schools lower class size (and therefore need more teachers), urban schools end up with greater teacher shortages and less experienced teachers.

