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RESULTS NOW



HOW WE CAN ACHIEVE UNPRECEDENTED
IMPROVEMENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING



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EDUCATION

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Introduction

The Brutal Facts About Instruction and Its Supervision

We have operated under the BIG LIE for too long.

—Loren Penman, a Pennsylvania school administrator

Effective teaching is quite different from the teaching that is typically found in most classrooms.

—Allen Odden and Carolyn Kelley

Improvement “takes recognition of and moral outrage at ineffective practices.”

—Roland Barth

We must overcome the awful inertia of past decades.

—Michael Fullan

Having an above average teacher for five years running can completely close the average gap between low-income students and others.

—John Kain and Eric Hanushek

The question is not, Is it possible to educate all children well? but rather, Do we want to do it badly enough?

—Deborah Meier

Place a good person in a bad system, and the system will win every time.

—Seymour Sarason

The Opportunity

Imagine a time in the near future . . . when people speak matter-of-factly about how dropout rates and the achievement gap are inexorably shrinking, when record numbers of students are entering college, and when professors are noticing how much more intellectually fit each year's freshmen have become. Imagine palpable, irrepressible hope emerging in our poor and urban schools.

*All of these improvements result from a new candor that has emerged in education and a willingness to see that historic improvement isn't about "reform" but something much simpler: a tough, honest self-examination of the prevailing culture and practices of public schools, and a dramatic turn toward a singular and straightforward **focus on instruction**.*

This book makes a radical claim: We have an opportunity to blow the lid off school attainment, dramatically and swiftly reduce the achievement gap, and enhance the "life chances" of all children, regardless of their social or economic circumstances. We have an opportunity to create schools better than anything we've ever seen or imagined. Higher test scores would only be a side-benefit of this transformation. Indeed, state assessments themselves would have to be significantly revised to adjust to this explosion in effectiveness, especially with respect to higher-order thinking and critical reasoning.

This is not a pipedream; we have clear evidence of this opportunity. Our schools continue to perform at current levels even though close studies of classroom practice over many years have revealed that most—though not all—instruction is mediocre or worse, as noted by Goodlad and Sizer (cited in Odden & Kelley, 2002), Elmore (2000), and the Learning 24/7 study (2005). For me, the most promising sign that these developments could transpire is that during my discussions and presentations over the last few years, *educators in overwhelming majorities have agreed that there is indeed a yawning gap between the most well-known, incontestably essential practices and the reality of most classrooms*. This gap persists despite the hard, often heroic work done by many teachers and administrators. To this majority of educators, for their candor and courage, I dedicate this book.

There are signs that we are making slow yet uneven progress, especially in the early grades (Murray, 2005). The advances predicted here would build on this progress, in a dramatic and swift fashion. We would achieve these results by addressing the monumental gap between common and effective teaching practices, and between typical and effective instructional supervision.

Jim Collins in *Good to Great* has famously urged organizations to see that the first difficult step toward improvement is to “confront the brutal facts” about themselves (2001a, p. 65). A rising chorus of voices is asking us to recognize that the brutal facts about teaching and its supervision are the way up and out of mediocrity. Robert Gordon, education advisor to John Kerry, pleads passionately for us to recognize that if we rectify our most glaring and manifest shortcomings, then we can achieve a social miracle. We can have an America where

birth doesn't dictate destiny. Nothing offends democratic ideals more than the fact that a typical African American 12th grader reads at the same level as a typical middle-class or white 8th grader. Nothing is a greater threat to middle-class prosperity than mediocre schools. (2005, p. 24)

Gordon believes that we will move beyond mediocrity only by being much harder on ourselves and by “demanding educational *results*” from a system that could deliver them at far higher levels than we have wanted to admit (2005, p. 25). As we'll see, the performance of certain teachers, schools, and entire states proves this conclusively. Their accomplishments demonstrate that we haven't even begun to tap the enormous potential for dramatically better schools.

Are we up to this encounter and the changes it will require? Frederick Hess isn't so sure. He tells us that our public schools are characterized by a “culture of incompetence” (2004, p. 5). He believes that 20 years of reform, “staff development,” training, and consultant visits reveal that draconian adjustments must be forced on the current system for it to improve. How valid a response can we muster against this argument?

Prominent voices from every camp are calling us to see schools as they are, to reckon, at last, with the unfortunate state into which

teaching and its supervision have devolved. The path to improvement can begin only when we take seriously Michael Fullan's call to address, at long last, "the awful inertia of past decades" (2005, p. 32).

From Brutal Facts to World-Class Schools

This encounter with the brutal facts is the surest, fastest path to creating the best schools we've ever had. The challenge of writing this book is that the opportunity could be lost in the critique. That would be a shame, because a close look at these facts only reveals how close we are to better schools: the changes that will have the most impact on student learning require only reasonable efforts and adjustment, not more time. As Collins writes, greatness can be achieved "without increasing the number of hours we work" (2001b, p. 104).

Perhaps our chief obstacle is the prevailing perception that because most educators work hard and with dedication, we are within reason doing most of what's necessary for good schools. This is simply not the case. The system itself has prevented even the most talented and industrious among us from seeing this pronounced gap between poor and effective practices (Marzano, 2003, p. 23; Powell, Farrar & Cohen, 1985, p. 102; Lortie, 1975).

Swift, Systemic Change: A Precedent

There is a precedent for swift, significant transformation of an entire profession. In 1910, the medical profession had its honest encounter with the brutal facts. At that time, the most fundamental elements of professional practice were being routinely ignored. The problem wasn't a lack of knowledge or funding; the real problem was that there were no meaningful mechanisms for *monitoring and thus ensuring professional practice* and its improvement. As a result, there were countless, untold cases of unnecessary suffering, illness, and death.

Then, in 1910 Abraham Flexner was asked to visit hospitals and medical schools. Afterward, he wrote a frank report on the state of medical practice and medical education. The impact was seismic. As

Mark Clarfield writes, “it did not merely make waves. Rather, it produced a tsunami” of improvements that transformed medical practice forever (2004, p. 1).

It is critical for our profession, which has historically resented criticism, to know that Flexner was “not a man to mince words.” He wrote with great candor about what he saw on his visits to medical schools and hospitals, deeming almost all of it “utterly hopeless” (Clarfield, 2004, p. 1).

Fortunately for all of us, the medical profession embraced rather than resisted these unpleasant but invaluable findings. Instead of discouraging the members of the medical community, these brutal facts opened their eyes to a historic opportunity. They realized that prodigious improvements were within their immediate reach. Hence the “tsunami” of benefits that ensued as the medical profession began to monitor and implement the most well-known and life-saving practices. Almost overnight, they closed what Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) would call the “knowing-doing gap.” Some historians believe that Flexner reduced suffering and saved more lives than any man in history (Smith, 1987).

Educators are also in the life-saving business. Will we embrace the brutal facts? The intent of this book is to help awaken education to a similar opportunity. Be prepared: Section I contains a frank critique of typical schooling. The purpose here is not to discourage but to point to how existing funds of time, talent, and money are being misdirected. That is, they are being diverted from our greatest opportunity for better schools: *a simple, unswerving focus on those actions and arrangements that ensure effective, ever-improving instruction.*

Acting on What We Already Know

Happily, these historic advances can result largely from acting on what we already know (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). This approach is consistent with Carl Glickman’s perennial assertion that the key components of effective schools are “not a mystery,” even though they are exceedingly rare (2002, p. 4). Teachers themselves agree that these practices are widely known, that they can and should be carried out by people

in any school and with current levels of funding—and that these practices can demonstrate how additional funding and higher teacher salaries could leverage even greater improvements (Hess, 2004; Fullan, 2005, p. 35; Miller, 2003).

In Chapters 5 and 6, we'll see how a commitment to such well-known practices will make its greatest mark in the areas most essential to school success, career advancement, and civic participation: higher levels of literacy and critical reasoning.

If we wish to resist the creeping dissolution of conventional public schools, we have to wake up to the fact that the experts are among us. The current system prevents these experts—practitioners—from acting on the best practices they already know and should be refining together continuously. In Chapter 8, we'll see how professional learning communities will allow us to make dramatic progress almost exclusively on the basis of in-house expertise.

Consider Bessemer Elementary School in Pueblo, Colorado. About 80 percent of students there are minorities who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Between 1997 and 1998, the number of students performing above standard in reading rose from 12 percent to 64 percent. In writing, achievement rose from 2 percent to 48 percent. And scores went up the next year as well—in all subjects. We're talking about the same teachers, same principal, same levels of funding—but leadership, at both the school and district level, underwent a sea change. The school set goals and identified areas of weakness. The staff made arrangements for teachers to work regularly in teams to share, prepare, assess, and then adjust their teaching on the basis of formative assessment results—a virtual definition of a true professional learning community (see Appendix B). Along with these steps, school leaders employed the talents of their best teachers—their in-house experts—to coach their colleagues toward better practices.

On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum is affluent Adlai Stevenson High School—a one-school district in the Chicago area. Students and teachers there worked in the same team-based professional learning communities and benefited from the same honest, tough-minded leadership advocated here. They relied exclusively on in-house expertise as teams met, by course, to share and prepare lessons

and units that they continuously improved on the basis of common, team-made assessment results. Over a 10-year period, under the leadership of Richard DuFour, Stevenson broke every achievement record on school, state, and college entrance exams. Advanced placement success increased by 800 percent (Schmoker, 2001b).

Such schools and districts point to the opportunity we have for vastly better schools, across the socioeconomic spectrum. Their success, like that of hundreds of other schools and a growing number of districts, underscores the importance of leadership that is exceptionally candid and built around self-managing teams (Schmoker 1999; Schmoker 2001b). But schools that function as professional learning communities are still in a distinct minority. If we truly desire better schools on a large scale, then we have to make these collaborative structures the norm—an expectation from the state, district, and school. Section III will make the case for the essential elements of professional learning communities. We'll see how they could lead to a renaissance in leadership at every level.

These few, simple structures and practices act magically on levels of achievement, because they directly affect the factor with the largest influence on learning: instruction.

Instruction: The #1 Factor in Achievement

Schools like Bessemer and Stevenson force us to confront the fact that the single greatest determinant of learning is not socioeconomic factors or funding levels. It is instruction. A bone-deep, institutional acknowledgment of this fact continues to elude us.

Let's look at just one teacher to see the full power of good instruction. As a high school English instructor, Sean Connors took a position in the poorest, lowest-achieving high school in his community, where writing scores were the lowest in town and well below the state average. I watched him teach. He was clear, organized, and effective. But more to the point, he did nothing unusual—nothing any teacher couldn't do or hasn't already learned. He was clear about which writing standards he expected students to learn on any particular day. He showed them samples of the kind of work he expected, and had

students analyze and discuss the samples. He explained and modeled each specific skill—with students' involvement—on his overhead projector. He had students practice the new skills briefly in pairs, then individually while he circulated. He called on students randomly to share, so he could see if they were learning. Some educators call this a “check for understanding.”

When Connors felt that students were ready, he assessed how well they had learned the new skill. There's nothing exotic in this approach. This simple lesson structure could be effectively repeated or varied for an endless number of standards, eventually saving precious preparation time.

But if you think such lessons are commonplace, think again. Yes, every element described above is absolutely basic; *every teacher has learned and can do such things at some level of proficiency*. But as we'll see in the next section, most teachers don't use these practices consistently. If more of them did, they would be getting results similar to Connors's: in one school year, scores at his school shot up by 26 points—from 59 percent to 85 percent—largely because of his efforts. There are many talented, hard-working teachers at his school. But it certainly looks as though they could learn from him (and he from them—bet on it). However, a brutal fact is that the culture of schools and school leadership militates against their ever learning from each other, despite the certain and enduring impact of such collaboration.

Why do such bizarre anomalies exist in our schools? Because, as we'll see in Section I, instruction isn't closely observed or supervised. As Robert Gordon points out, even in the age of accountability the current system “reinforces the irrelevance of achievement” (2005, p. 26). For all our reform, staff development, workshops, and conferences, very little close attention gets paid to actual teaching and its effectiveness. I see this indifference, this irrelevance, in schools where I've had an up-close look at classroom practice, where instruction is manifestly poor or mediocre. But almost nothing has changed—as long as that school hasn't been placed on some public list of “underperforming” schools.

Sadly, Connors's achievement wasn't noted or celebrated at the district or state level. Although hundreds of administrators expended

thousands of hours in well-intended activities that school year, no one from the district or state education department ever so much as made a 5-minute phone call to congratulate Connors or to find out how he had achieved the largest writing gains in the state. No one asked or considered, "What can we learn from him? Can he do a presentation for other teachers?" This is what Gordon means by "the irrelevance of achievement." Connors left the district a year later.

It's About Teaching (Stupid)

Many will remember that Bill Clinton's first successful presidential campaign was focused on the idea that "it's about the economy, stupid." With due respect, we need to realize that "it's about teaching, stupid." Stories like Connors's and a pile of studies show how easily seduced we are by training or programs or products that divert us from a focus on sound (not perfect) teaching. Teaching needn't be exceptional to have a profound effect; continuous commonsense efforts to even roughly conform to effective practice and essential standards will make a life-changing difference for students across all socioeconomic levels.

The evidence is indisputable. Mortimore and Sammons (1987) found that teaching had 6 to 10 times as much impact on achievement as all other factors combined. Robert Marzano (2003) points to numerous studies demonstrating that two teachers working with the same socioeconomic population can achieve starkly different results on the same test: in one class, 27 percent of students will pass; in another, 72 percent—a life-changing difference. William Sanders, known for his "value-added" studies, found that just three years of effective teaching accounts on average for an improvement of 35 to 50 percentile points. That's in only three years. And the effects are enduring (Sanders & Horn, 1994). Eric Hanushek has found that five years of instruction from an above-average teacher could eliminate the achievement gap on some state assessments (Haycock, 2005). Indeed it has, and in entire districts (see Chapter 5 of Schmoker, 2001b). One recent study shows that the best teachers in a school have *six times as much impact* as the bottom third of teachers (Haycock & Huang, 2001). Researcher

Allen Odden and his colleague conclude that “improved classroom instruction is the prime factor to produce student achievement gains” (Odden & Wallace, 2003, p. 64).

The core argument of this book is that we know two things that constitute a truly historic opportunity for better schools:

1. Instruction itself has the largest influence on achievement (a fact still dimly acknowledged).

2. Most (though not all) instruction, despite our best intentions, is not effective but could improve significantly and swiftly through ordinary and accessible arrangements among teachers and administrators.

We have not done enough to clarify and broadcast these facts or the immense opportunity they so clearly afford us. To fully understand and appreciate this opportunity, we need to examine the institutional forces and traditions that prevent us from having an unimpeded view of our current reality and thus form a barrier to constructive improvement. Ingeniously, Richard Elmore calls this protective barrier “the buffer.”