

Principals and Teachers in a Reform Environment

My colleagues have provided some insight into how Philadelphia's recent efforts at radical school reform have involved - or in some cases not involved - local communities, as well as how one office within the school district is attempting to institute change. Here, I will attempt to shed some light on how changes in governance, policy, and institutional behavior at higher levels - such as the state, the office of the CEO, or intermediate offices within the district - impact those working at the ground levels of education: specifically, the principals and teachers who work inside the schools.

Methodology

My analysis is informed by a series of initial interviews with 16 principals conducted this winter by researchers affiliated with Research for Action - an independent, non-profit organization located in Philadelphia.

During the past two years, I have also been able to follow changes in the district by attending public meetings, reading newspaper articles and official School District press releases, and informally discussing changes within the district with a wide variety of educational professionals as well as classroom teachers and principals.

Importance of Teachers and Principals

When analyzing any school reform effort, it is essential to consider the role of principals and teachers. Regardless of the structural changes wrought by reform, the principal is still, almost universally, the functional head of the school and the primary intermediary

between the teaching staff and the larger education system. Much disorder can occur outside of school walls in the policy realm, but an effective principal can often ensure that relative order continues within a school.

Teachers and other school-based staff - as the only participants in the system with sustained, direct contact with students - are equally central to understanding any school reform effort. As Tyack and Cuban write, “Teachers do not have a monopoly on educational wisdom, but their first-hand perspectives on schools and their responsibility for carrying out official policies argues for their centrality in school reform efforts.”¹

Most of the recent changes to Philadelphia’s schools have been structural: such as central office reorganization, the adoption of new standardized assessments, and contractual arrangements with outside providers. However, it is critical to consider how these structural changes impact principals and teachers: how they affect principal-teacher relations, whether they allow principals to focus on instruction and achievement, and what motivation or stress they might cause for school-level staff.

Under the current reform, the School District of Philadelphia is overseeing the operation of multiple school models. These include heavily controlled Restructured Schools, privately managed schools, and even a small number of ‘charter’-like schools. These models are different in structure and in how they are being implemented, not just across the various categories of models, but within the categories as well.

¹ Tyack, D. and Cuban, L., *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

The following is a brief description of the different models, and the changes that are being instituted within them:

EMO Schools

The 45 different EMO-managed schools are being managed by seven different EMOs – 3 for-profit companies, and 4 not-for-profit organizations, including two local universities. Each of these seven EMOs are implementing new curricula, programs, and policies to varying degrees – with some EMOs playing a significant, hands-on role and others taking a less intensive, wait-and-see approach. In some EMO schools, new principals have been hired and large turnover in staff has occurred. In other EMO schools, virtually the same staff remains from the previous year. Each EMO is implementing its own curriculum and assessments, and they are providing varying levels of professional development and support to teachers.

Restructured Schools

The district's 21 Restructured Schools are operating under one administrative office and are working to implement the same curricula and programs. While some Restructured Schools have new leadership, others continue to operate under principals who have been at their schools for many years. In some schools the mandated curriculum is the same curriculum that has been utilized for a number of years, while in some schools the new curriculum represents a great shift for all of the teachers. And, as in all schools in the district, teachers are preparing their students for new standardized tests, in addition to the existing state test.

Charter-'like' Schools

Finally, in the district's 'charter'-like schools, we see an attempt to provide schools with greater independence without a clear and documented clarification of these freedoms.

The principals and teachers in these schools appear to be operating much as they have in the past, and principals are still accountable to the district. These schools will also be held accountable for their performance on the state and district standardized tests. Thus, in many ways, it is unclear from the outside how these schools differ in structure and operation from before. However, the district's designation of these schools as charter schools would seem to free them from certain regulations and procedures.

Taken together, these structural changes within the School District and the multitude of approaches adopted by the various EMOs and the Restructured Schools Office have created a drastically variable mix of messages, visions, and understandings for teachers and principals alike. Interviews with a sample of principals from each type of school reveal a general sense of increased energy and a feeling of support from managers. Principals also report satisfaction with the increased resources that have come to their schools as a result of the reform. This includes new materials, increased staffing, and support from EMO staff. However, interviews also reveal widespread confusion and stress among principals and their staffs. Some potentially distressing themes that appear to describe principals and teachers experiences across the reform models include confusion (and at times competition) in district and EMO interactions - including a feeling that principals are serving '2 masters'; a feeling that things are moving 'too fast,

too soon'; and distress or anxiety about the role of new standardized tests and the growing emphasis on increased test scores.

District/EMO Confusion and Competition

Understandably, the district's transition to a multiple provider model has caused confusion as schools, EMOs, and the district work to establish functional lines of communication and navigate new lines of authority. The following two quotes illustrate the feelings of some principals around this issue:

There are two Philadelphia principal meetings every two weeks. First there was a memo that said, "EMO schools need not attend." So I didn't go. Then the district asks, why don't you come? [interview 1/31/03]

It is a challenge being in an EMO school but being a [School District] employee. The district doesn't seem to support the EMO schools as much as others. There is some confusion about who is responsible for what. [interview 1/16/03]

These quotes also indicate a 'pull' of allegiances for principals, especially those with longstanding relationships within the district. Another principal describes this pull more descriptively,

We're pulled, because we're the Office of Restructured Schools, but also the regional [district] office. My fax machine is burned out, because I send everything to both offices...It's often unclear who is in charge...It's a funny line. Also, I had a previous relationship with the regional office and I'm used to going to them. [interview 1/13/03]

Together, principals involved in the reform have begun to develop a common language around their situations, with the most prominent phrase being that of "serving two masters." A number of principals used that phrase when describing their situation, and it is clear that they have shared their experiences. The following principal quotes elaborate upon this idea,

Now the problems – one is I serve two masters. Who do I report to? That's not clarified but it is now better. At first I was told only to go to [EMO] meetings but that meant I was missing School District meetings and I was missing important information. Now I go to both the [District] meetings and [EMO] meetings. [interview 1/7/03]

You mean what's it like to serve two masters? Thin layer of management, whatever the crap it's called. I don't have a problem with the EMO, I have a problem that the district hasn't defined my role. [The EMO] said I didn't have to go to a district principals meeting. We didn't know if EMO principals were supposed to go or not. [interview 1/29/03]

In addition to the confusion created by the existence of multiple supervisors, a few principals reported that the district seemed to be, in some cases, competing with the EMOs or providing their schools with a discriminatory level of service because of their school model. As one principal notes,

In the beginning it was frustrating. It seemed like if you were an EMO school, you didn't get anything from the district on time. It was as if they sent in all the orders for their own schools, then EMO schools were last on the list. [interview 1/14/03]

While such reports should not be surprising, as district staff struggle to adapt to new procedures, and as new relationships must be formed. However, animosity and competition of this nature seems likely to impede progress rather than facilitate it.

Too Fast, Too Soon

Another concern of principals is the speed and quantity of change that is being encouraged and expected by EMOs and by the school district as a result of the reform. From staff overhauls to the employment of new curricula, many principals feel taxed and express concern about the stress levels of their teachers. While any vast reform effort is likely to put new pressures upon principals and teachers, some veteran principals argue

that this reform, in particular, is moving at a very fast speed. As the following two principals note,

A difficulty at the beginning of the year was trying to do too much at one time. Although this is usually true in schools, it seemed more so this year. [interview 1/16/03]

I think [the social studies curriculum] should have waited. There was lots of resistance from teachers, because they already had to learn [the reading curriculum] this year. It's too much to do all these new instructional models in one year. It puts teachers on edge. I hear a lot about this from the teachers. [interview 1/29/03]

While the first year of a reform is always likely to be difficult, moving too fast and doing too much all at once holds the potential to over-stress and damage the morale of principals and teachers working in schools. For some principals and teachers, the stress of this year will lead them to seek new jobs, both inside and outside of the district. For a school district like Philadelphia's that is struggling to attract and retain quality staff, it is important to not lose an inordinate quantity of talent, since future success will likely hinge on the capacity of school-based staff to improve instruction.

Test Anxiety

A related issue is the anxiety and stress that is currently being created by the districts adoption of a new standardized test, the Terra Nova, as well as the likely development of accountability measures based on the Terra Nova and the PSSA – the state-mandated standardized test. In addition, each of the EMO and Restructured Schools is required – under the reform plan – to utilize additional assessments to measure the progress of students. Taken together, this testing load and the uncertainty surrounding the implications of future test scores appears to be a source of unease for principals in all of

the school models. Consider the following comments from three different principals about the stress and fatigue that testing is causing in their schools,

The whole testing issue is disturbing. The kids are over-tested. They have test fatigue. They just do not have the stamina for all of these tests. The state and city need to come to an agreement on one test. [interview 1/8/03]

All [the EMO] cares about is test scores, and when you try to showcase what you are doing right they say, well, why are your scores so low? The scores are our fault. [interview 1/16/03]

People feel very pressured by the tests. The kids are definitely learning, but teachers feel pressured to help them prepare for the test. And this is the first time I've started to see that kids are feeling pressured to do well on the tests. [interview 1/13/03]

One notices, from these quotes, how test fatigue and stress work their way down from the principal to teachers to students. Unfortunately, it is unclear how an EMO might shield a principal and his or her staff from state and city testing requirements. Most likely, only a major policy change at the district or state level would alleviate this stress. Considering that the recently signed No Child Left Behind legislation at the federal level places a strong emphasis on annual standardized testing, such a policy change is unlikely to occur.

Conclusion

As with any reform effort, it is impossible to gauge the success of this one after only 6 months. In fact, the confusion, disequilibrium, and anxiety that many principals and teachers are feeling is not entirely accidental – as the SRC and new CEO both work to change the culture of a school district that has been found to be ‘failing’. Yet, there is little precedent for successful, lasting education reform based on the principles of confusion, contradiction, and turmoil. Looking forward, one hopes that some of the

doubts and fears of principals will be allayed, and that more coherent, consistent, and fluid systems of authority and communication will evolve across the system. Such improvements, coupled with the increased resources and energy being focused on Philadelphia schools may, in fact, be a recipe for improvement. Yet any improvement in Philadelphia's public schools will require the active involvement and ongoing commitment of its principals, teachers, and other school-based staff.