Capacity Building

A Journey of Deepening Discovery

Since about 1990 there has been a growing body of work that points to common characteristics and strategies that successful school districts use to raise student achievement. In Rosenholtz's (1989) study of 78 elementary schools, she classified schools as "stuck," "moving," and "in-between." She also found that a disproportionate number of stuck schools came from certain districts; likewise, moving schools were clustered in certain other districts. This prompted her to write a chapter on stuck and moving districts (two of the eight districts were in the latter category). Here is an excerpt:

> The contrast between stuck and moving districts, nowhere more apparent than here, underscores how principals become helpful instructional advisors or maladroit managers of their schools. It is also clear that stuck superintendents attribute poor performance to principals themselves, rather than accepting any responsibility to help them learn and improve. This again may indicate their lack of technical knowledge and subsequent threats to their self-esteem. If districts take no responsibility for the in-service needs of principals, of course, principals become less able colleagues, less effective problem solvers, more reluctant to refer school problems to the central office for outside assistance, more threatened by their lack of technical knowledge, and most essential, of substantially less help to teachers. Of equal importance,

with very little helpful assistance, stuck superintendents symbolically communicate the norm of self-reliance—and subsequently professional isolation—that improvement may not be possible, or worthy of their time and effort, or that principals should solve problems by themselves—lugubrious lessons principals may unwittingly hand down to poorly performing teachers, and thus teachers to students. (p. 189)

As we headed into the new century, evidence appeared to be coalescing around what it would take for districts to achieve district-wide success, at least in literacy and numeracy (see Fullan, 2007, Chapter 11). Togneri and Anderson's (2003) study of success in five high-poverty districts found six clear and consistent strategies at work:

1. Publicly acknowledging poor performance and seeking solutions (building the will for reform)

2. Focusing intensively on improving instruction and achievement

3. Building a system-wide framework and infrastructure to support instruction

4. Redefining and distributing leadership at all levels of the district

5. Making professional development relevant and useful

6. Recognizing that there are no quick fixes (p. 13)

Anderson (2006) also reviewed the research on district effectiveness and named 12 key strategic components:

1. District-wide sense of efficacy

2. District-wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction

3. Adoption of and commitment to district-wide performance standards

4. Development and adoption of district-wide curriculum approaches to instruction

5. Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment to relevant standards

6. Multimeasure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice, hold school and district leaders accountable for results, and monitor progress

7. Targets and phased focuses of improvement

8. Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels

9. District-wide, job-embedded professional development foci and supports for teachers

10. District-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community (including, in several cases, positive partnerships with unions)

11. New approaches to board-district relations and in-district relations

12. Strategic relations with state reform policies and resources

One would think, then, that we have a growing consensus on the key factors for success and that it is just a matter of going to town on what we know. Such are the subtleties and complexities of capacity building that while it seems so obvious, implementation is never straightforward.

Not So Fast

So a district should get the standards right, align curriculum to them, conduct assessments on the new alignment, provide solid and continuous professional development on curriculum and instruction, set up a data system that can be used for both assessment *for* and *of* learning, and engage with the local community and state reform policies. It may surprise many readers that these steps by themselves are not sufficient and, at best, may represent a waste of resources or, at worst, do more harm than good.

The experience of the San Diego Unified School District is a good place to start with respect to the "not so fast" theme. Coming off a highly successful experience in District 2 in New York City from 1988 to 1996, Tony Alvarado was hired as chancellor of instruction in 1997 to join a new high-profile superintendent, Alan Bersin, in San Diego. In a sense the question was, if you could take the best

knowledge and add resources and political clout, could you get results in a large urban district within a four-year period and then keep going, in this case moving from success in 45 schools (District 2 in New York) to 175 schools (San Diego)? The answer, incidentally, is yes, but it would require good strategies and a good deal of finesse, which as it turned out were not present in the San Diego strategy.

The San Diego story is one of the most closely watched reform initiatives in the history of urban school improvement. We draw here on the excellent account by Hubbard, Mehan, and Stein (2006). The San Diego strategy was well detailed and explicit from day one and consisted of three components:

1. Improved student learning: closing the achievement gap

2. Improved instruction: teacher learning through professional development

3. Restructuring the organization to support student learning and instruction

The focus was on literacy, and the strategies, highly specific. Teachers received support from literacy coaches and principals who were positioned to be "leaders of instruction," with day-to-day support and monthly full-day inservice sessions by area superintendents whose new role (and new people) was re-created as that of instructional leader.

We don't need to discuss in detail the San Diego experience, but the main outcomes and reasons can be identified (for a full account, see Hubbard et al., 2006). To cut to the chase, literacy achievement increased somewhat at the elementary level in the 1997–2001 period, increased very little in middle schools, and failed dismally in high schools. Momentum was lost by 2001, Alvarado was asked to leave in 2002, and Bersin, after slowing down the nature and pace of reform in 2003–2004, was replaced by the school board when his term expired in June 2005. What happened?

One could say that it was a political problem—the board was divided from the beginning (three to two in favor of the reform initiative), and the teacher union that opposed the reform from the beginning eventually carried the day. There is some truth to this, but the deeper explanation comes closer to the theme of our interest in meaning and motivation, the "too tight/too loose" problem, and the depth of instructional change and thinking required to make a

difference. Hubbard and colleagues (2006) expressed the basic problem in terms of three challenges that the strategy failed to address: "the need to accomplish deep learning within the constraints of a limited time frame, principals' and coaches' limited understanding of the concepts that they were trying to teach, and the difficulty of reaching common ground between school leaders and teachers" (p. 128).

All this despite plenty of classroom visits, walk-throughs involving all schools, frequent problem-solving sessions, and an emphasis on job-embedded professional learning. The San Diego case is an exercise in the dilemmas faced by leaders with an urgent sense of moral purpose and considerable knowledge of what should happen in classroom instruction. But it also points to how the strategies employed must be more respectful of how deep change happens. Much good was done in improving literacy achievement in elementary schools, but it was not deep enough or "owned enough" to go further. The San Diego strategy failed because the pace of change was too fast, the strategy was too unidirectional from the top, relationships were not built with teachers and principals, and above all, the strategies did not really build capacity, which is the development of collective knowledge and understandings required for ongoing instructional improvement that meets the needs of each child. This is going to be a lot harder than we thought.

The purpose of our book is not only to map out capacity building more clearly, but also to suggest that even this will not be sufficient. We need to go from strong capacity building to what we call *realization.*

Another confirmation of our "not so fast" worry (reminds us of the Latin adage *festina lente*—hasten slowly) comes from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005), which examined major reform initiatives in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle. All three school systems had the attention of political leaders at all levels of the system and focused on the "right things" such as literacy and math; all three systems used current choice strategies such as concentration on "assessment for learning" data, invested heavily in professional development, developed new leadership, and focused on system-wide change.

And they had money—Seattle had $35 million in external funds, Milwaukee had extra resources and flexibility, and Chicago had multimillions. There was huge pressure, but success was not expected overnight. Decision makers and the public would have been content to see growing success over a 5- or even 10-year period. The upfront

conclusion of the case evaluators was that, as many of the principals and teachers interviewed saw it, "the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale" (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005, p. 4).

The issues in the Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle reforms help identify the missing ingredient, even though those districts appear to have gotten most components right. Chicago, for example, appeared to have an impressive strategy: "Academic standards and instructional frameworks, assessment and accountability systems, and professional development for standards-based instruction are among the tools of systemic reform that are used to change classroom instruction" (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005, p. 23). Here is standards-based system-wide reform that sounds like it should work. The failure, we think, is that the strategy lacked a focus on what needed to change in instructional practice. In Chicago, teachers did focus on standards, but in interviews they "did not articulate any deep changes in teaching practices that may have been underway" (p. 23). Furthermore, "instructional goals were articulated more often in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels than in terms of instructional quality, that is *what the schools do* to help students achieve" (p. 29, emphasis in original).

Milwaukee reveals similar problems in achieving instructional improvements while using greater decentralization in the context of system support and competitive choice. The focus was on literacy; a literacy coach was housed in every school in the district, and considerable professional development and technical support services were available. Education plans for each school were to focus on literacy standards through (1) data analysis and assessment and (2) subject-area achievement targets, including literacy across the curriculum. Sounds like a convincing strategy. However, what is missing, again, is the black box of instructional practice in all classrooms. The case writers observe: "We placed the Education Plan in the indirect category due to its non-specificity regarding regular or desired instructional content and practices" (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005, p. 49). More generally, the report concludes that while these serious district-wide reform initiatives appeared to prioritize instruction, they did so indirectly (through standards, assessment, leadership responsibilities). However, in the experience of principals and teachers, the net effect was that "policies and signals were non-specific regarding intended effects on classroom teaching and learning" (p. 65).

Our third case, Seattle, is a variation on the same theme. The game plan looks good. Standards defined the direction, while the district's Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process "was designed as a vehicle for (1) helping students meet standards, and (2) eliminating the achievement gap between white students and students of color" (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005, p. 66). Like Milwaukee, Seattle reorganized to support site-based management, including the allocation of considerable resources to schools. The case writers observe: "The recent effort to become a standards-based district was one of the first sustained instructional reform efforts with direct attention to teaching and learning. However, the conversations district leaders had about standards *were rarely connected to changes in instruction"* (p. 69, emphasis added). The report continues: "At the school level, finding teachers who understood the implications of standards for their teaching was difficult" (p. 72).

We cite one more case, which in some ways is more encouraging but still proves our main conclusion that instructional change is going to require different strategies that help shape collective capacity and shared commitment to engage in continuous improvement. Supovitz (2006) conducted an excellent case study of the reform effort in Duval County, Florida. The title of his book captures the emphasis of his analysis: *The Case for District-Based Reform.* Supovitz chronicled the district-wide reform effort from 1999 through 2005. The reform strategy is now familiar to us.

1. Develop a specific vision of what high-quality instruction should look like

2. Build both the commitment and capacity of employees across the system to enact and support the instructional vision

3. Construct mechanisms to provide data at all levels of the system that will be used both to provide people with information that informs their practices and to monitor the implementation of the instructional vision

4. Develop the means to help people continually deepen their implementation and to help the district continually refine this vision and understand its implications

With a sustained five-year focus on these four strategic components, the district made significant gains in student achievement. For example, the number of schools receiving a C or better on the state

assessment system went from 87 (of 142) in 1999 to 121 by 2003. Also, for the first time in seven years, in 2005 no school received an F on the state accountability system.

The strategy was driven by a strong superintendent who helped orchestrate the development of district-wide capacity according to the four core components. The strategy was enacted with considerable action and focus. As Supovitz (2006) reports, "Duval County leaders repeatedly stated their vision and the strategies for achieving it in public venues" (p. 43). He argues that the spread and deepening of district-wide success is as much "gardening" as it is "engineering" (p. 63), and that the balance requires "advocacy without mandate" (p. 66), "fostering urgency" (p. 68), and "building existing proof" of success (p. 69). We see a similar array of strategies in San Diego, but with less heavy-handedness: direct training of teachers, school standards coaches, district standards coaches, principals' instructional leadership development, and district leadership development.

With six years of consistent effort and an explicit emphasis on professional learning communities as a strategy, "the possibilities of professional learning communities—rigorous inquiry into the problems and challenges of instructional practice and the support of that practice—seemed only to be occurring in pockets of the district" (Supovitz, 2006, p. 174). Much was accomplished in Duval County, but it was by no means deep or durable. So our "not so fast" worry is apt. Even with comprehensive strategies and a relentless focus over a five- to six-year period, we are still not getting it right.

CAPACITY BUILDING TO REALIZATION

The good news, then, is that school districts have realized that capacity building is the key to successful school improvement. We define *capacity building* as investment in the development of the knowledge, skills, and competencies of individuals and groups to focus on assessment literacy and instructional effectiveness that leads to school improvement. What districts have not realized is that capacity building is only a good start. The real goal is converting it to full implementation or what we call *realization.* Capacity building must become systemic if it is going to make a performance difference for all schools in a district. The quest for realization via systemic capacity building—broad (every school) and deep (every classroom)—is the subject of this book.

Capacity building, a highly complex, dynamic, knowledge-building process, is intended to lead to increased student achievement in every school. To achieve that goal, consideration must be given to approaches that will result in systemic capacity building. And the key to driving this successful systemic capacity building—full realization in every classroom by which we will succeed in improving all schools for all students—is knowledge building that is universally aligned and coherent, knowledge building that emanates both from the center and the field simultaneously and in concert.

We have worked in many different districts across North America and beyond on district-wide capacity building. Our most intensive and extensive work has been in York Region District School Board (YRDSB), where one of us (Sharratt) was superintendent of curriculum and instruction designing and leading the strategy from within and the other (Fullan) served as external consultant and researcher.

We use YRDSB as one detailed case, but the ideas are entirely consistent with the pursuit of district-wide reform that we reviewed in the previous section of this chapter. YRDSB is a large multicultural region immediately north of Toronto, Ontario. It has over 130,000 students and 8,800 teachers in its 161 elementary and 31 secondary schools. More than 100 languages are spoken in the schools, and there is a steady stream of immigrants entering YRDSB schools every month of the school year. Student achievement in Ontario is assessed through criterion-referenced assessments for all children in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 conducted by an independent agency, the Education and Quality Accountability Office (EQAO). The district's reform, driven by a focus on literacy, unfolded in the context of a province-wide strategy that commenced in 2003.

The journey began in 1999 after the director of education (superintendent/CEO), Bill Hogarth, had shocked the system by stating that "all students will read by the end of Grade 1." A provocative challenge that begged the question: How would this be accomplished? This book is an account of how the district successfully implemented capacity building across its schools, discovering along the way that this is not sufficient for deep, sustainable reform.

YRDSB started with four big-picture, enduring understandings that would form the foundation of systemic capacity building:

- Commitment to the shared vision and staying the course with a singular priority—literacy
- Knowledge of and resources for focused assessment linked to instruction at all levels

- Strategic leadership emanating simultaneously and consistently from the center and the field, and politically
- Engagement of parents and community—involvement so schools become theirs (L. Sharratt, 1996, 2001)

These broad strokes are expanded in the remainder of this chapter. It is important to note that we have intentionally used the term *professional learning* (PL) over the more narrow conceptual terms *professional development* and *professional learning communities* (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006) because our work here is about focused, ongoing learning—for, with, and on behalf of every teacher and student. In the course of this book, we will move from the broad picture to the nitty-gritty of capacity building, into systemic capacity building, ultimately achieving realization.

Commitment to a Shared Vision

Teachers change practices when the school district is committed to a single priority, vision, or belief that is supported by PL. Teachers feel that inservice training is essential to their learning, especially when principals support and participate in the PL (L. Sharratt, 1996, p. 100). We have found that focusing deeply on only one goal, such as literacy (including mathematical literacy), with teachers and administrators is necessary—even urgent—in order to create passion, commitment, and a zeal for teaching and learning. Commitment from system leaders, administrators, and teachers to a single, shared vision is what we call *the moral imperative.*

Focused Assessment and Instructional Practices

In order to increase achievement, teachers need an expanded repertoire of instructional practices reflective of valid formative assessment data that together form an accurate, integrated image of each learner. Practices used need to embrace, for example, data-driven whole-group, small-group, and individual learning; structured group work; focused time on task; and uninterrupted blocks of instructional time.

Strategic Leadership

Teachers feel that leadership influences their learning, and they change practices most when leadership is strategic. This includes