Mandated Reform vs. Classroom Reality

by Joe Check

At NWP’s Spring 2000 Urban Sites Conference in Chicago, the air was thick with conversation about the wave of change sweeping urban schools’ systemic reform. NWP teachers from many cities were telling essentially the same story. They believe that change is needed and are working hard for reform, but are increasingly frustrated because they are experiencing not one reform, but two: the one school systems announce in press conferences and post on their Web sites, and the one teachers, principals, and students actually live in the schools.

The first consists largely of state-mandated curriculum frameworks and standardized tests, plus the school systems own ambitious goals, outside programs to help achieve those goals, and highly publicized numbers: number of dollars spent, number of schools and teachers involved, number of students passing or failing the reading test. The second is a classroom-level reality characterized by do-it-or-else, standards-based pressure that takes little account of issues teachers actually face: frequent turnover in principals, high student mobility rates, intermittent attendance, large class sizes, high numbers of English language learners and special needs students.

NWP teachers are not alone in their frustration. Systems thinker Michael Fullan has warned that educational change is nonlinear and that the continuous stream of planned and unplanned changes that affect schools are major barriers to systemic reforms. He writes that when the powers-that-be mandate linear progress in a nonlinear environment, “[o]verload and fragmentation combine to reduce educators’ motivation for working on reform. Together they make the situation that the schools face seem hopeless, and they take their toll on the most committed, who find that will alone is not sufficient to achieve or sustain reform.”

Brave or foolish souls who provide staff development in urban settings are thrust squarely into the gap between the reform vision outlined in the superintendent’s press conference and the frustrating pace of school-level change. I believe this gap can begin to be bridged if staff development providers ask themselves and the school system’s planners three questions:

• What effect is reform having on the climate for reflective practice in our school system?
• What is the teachers’ understanding of systemwide change?

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- Has the reform honestly acknowledged the social, cultural, and contextual barriers to students' academic success?

The first question is important because reforms rely on professional development to change what teachers do in the classroom. Since promoting reflective practice plays a key role in successful staff development, it makes sense to ask what effect systemic reform has had on reflection. Simon Hole and Grace McEntee, two teachers with long experience in reform, have recently reminded us that reflection is at the heart of successful teaching practice, that "[t]he life force of teaching is thinking and wondering.... During these times of reflection, we realize when something needs to change."

But in most urban reforms, changes are mandated, not discovered, and reflective practice is increasingly devalued, its place taken by testing to the test and close adherence to a prescribed curriculum. In Boston, a high-level study of systemic staff development recently acknowledged that "[t]he district's ability to dramatically improve student performance in reading and math depends on whether it can redefine the nature and quality of its professional development, moving away from teaching "to improve scores" and toward teaching "to improve student learning."

If Boston can confront this issue, other systems can too. Arguing for reflective staff development is not arguing against reform; it is arguing for the deep level of change that is the only hope of bringing needed improvements to urban classrooms.

The second question is important because writing projects are often asked, "How will your inservice training support our systemwide change message?" Since we provide inservice to teachers, not central administrators, it makes sense to ask how teachers understand proposed reforms. In many places, the reform message degrades as it goes down the levels from central office to classroom. By degrade I mean this: the more times you photocopy material, the less clear each successive copy becomes; the further you send a signal along a wire, the more interference you get. Similarly, the further down the school hierarchy the reform message travels, the less sense it often makes. Goals that seem clear in public pronouncements become fuzzy and questionable by the time they reach teachers. This causes problems because no matter how many standards are developed and how many exemplary programs are initiated, unless something changes in what goes on between teacher and student when the classroom door is closed, little has really been accomplished.

The fuzziness comes chiefly from the difference between ends and means. To implement classroom-level change, teachers must concern themselves with both what to do (goals) and how to do it in the situation they're in with the students they have in front of them (implementation). But from the teacher's viewpoint, reform communication is heavily tilted toward goals (curriculum frameworks, rubrics, testing benchmarks) and away from implementation (strategies for putting into practice the goals that will work in my teaching situation, with my students). From this perspective, the message about change that gets received at the school level is frequently much different than the one central office thinks it is sending. This year in Boston, the curriculum office mandated that "formative assessment" be used in every high school. Unfortunately, administrators and teachers were provided with neither a clear definition of what the school department meant by "formative assessment" — a notoriously imprecise term — nor examples of its use in various subject areas. A good idea at the central level got translated into chaos, anxiety, and frustration at the school level.

Such miscommunication is common because it's much easier to reform the top half of large systems — curriculum, administrative structure, downtown personnel, goal statements — than the bottom half, the messy, human business of teaching and learning. Because of this, much reform has concentrated on the top half, which is increasingly influenced by the leadership styles of corporate America. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Seattle now have former corporate executives or lawyers as superintendents.

But so far, school systems seem to be ignoring one of the hard-won lessons of the corporate makeovers of the 1980s and early 1990s: in times of uncertainty and change, leaders must overcommunicate. The change message and its ramifications must be repeatedly and clearly communicated, not simply mandated, and employees (teachers and principals) must have multiple opportunities to discuss and adapt it at every level if change is to take hold. To date, urban central offices have been very good at communicating reform goals to the media and the public, but very bad at effectively communicating downward to their own teachers and principals and even worse at soliciting their input on appropriate site-level modifications. The need for top-down control, or at least the appearance of control, has confounded the need for buy-in and collaboration by those charged with day-to-day implementation of the goals.

If we are serious about urban reform, we have to ask why is the communication issue important for staff developers? When inservice providers enter a school under the aegis of reform, they often become targets for anger caused by unclear systemic mandates based on unrealistic goals. If staff developers are to play a leading role in the implementation of change, teachers must have an understanding of the systemwide goals and feel safe in exploring ways in which these goals relate to their particular situation.

The third question deals with unacknowledged barriers to change. If we are serious about urban reform, we have to ask if change plans have allocated time and resources to classroom management issues, to motivation, to the needs of second-language learners, to the impact of high mobility and poor attendance.

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Le Cheval Blanc Est
by Georgia Tiffany Toppe

with volcanic tongues
with slow lava devouring the star*

Gauguin wound a Japanese tree into Polynesian myth. The white horse is a symbol of the sacred.

"But the horse is green!" said the pharmacist for whom the painting was intended. Green horses don't exist. He refused to accept it. After all, he had expected a white horse.

Lemons don't have wheels. You can't drive upside down. The sun is not a bear. Volcanos have no gods.

"There has been much silence. The silence of fear. Of the impoverished imagination, which avoids, and makes a twittering, and is still," says Rulkeyser.

That is why our student looks out the window instead of doing her equations. That is why she makes a sculpture of chalk and uproots the narcissus bulb, placing it in her eye like a tear.

That is why she does not raise her hand, but sits on it. That is why she stops the beginning of her life at the beginning of the hour. No's. Nots. The silence of fear.

"But the horse is green."

That is why.

* Pablo Neruda, Poem XII from Still Another Day

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concepts of an "ecology of education," which emphasized the importance of the surrounding social context, and the "cacophony of teaching"—the growing multitude of electronic effects (television, advertising, movies, music, electronic games, the Internet)—that teachers must compete with for a child's attention.

Current reform plans deal almost exclusively with schooling, while classroom teachers must respond daily to reform demands for new curriculum, pedagogy, and organizational structures, plus the effects of both ecology and cacophony. The decline in the educative environment caused by factors like poverty, destruction of families, and drugs is taken into account only at the school level—teachers, administrators, and counselors spend much of their day and their energy coping with these effects. Teachers must likewise compete with growing media and other electronic influences on children's learning that are much more powerful and well-funded, in many cases, than schools themselves. Yet there's little in current reform thinking that recognizes that teachers attempting to change do so in the face of constant claims on their time and energy by the often destructive educational ecology that shapes their students' lives.

At a deeper level, this question asks, has the reform initiative honestly acknowledged the continuing effects on student achievement of a history of school inequity based on race and language? In this area, views of reform held by mainstream communities, who do most of the policymaking and provide most of the teachers, often differ substantially from views held by communities of color, whose children make up the bulk of urban school students. For example, many mainstream educators date the beginning of campaigns for educational access to the 1954 Brown desegregation decision, but communities of color have a historical awareness of inequity that goes back much further. In fact, African-American, Asian, and Hispanic residents of American cities have been trying to achieve a quality education for their children in the face of legal and illegal barriers for over a hundred years.

To cite just one case in point, in Boston's Roberts case a black father sued in 1848 for his daughter to be able to attend one of the five white public schools she passed every day on her walk to the city's only black school. The state supreme court denied his request. Boston's 1970s desegregation decree attempted to resolve, in pain and violence, an issue that Boston's African-American community had been pursuing for more than 120 years. Again, reform initiatives cannot ultimately succeed by dictating changes in curriculum, pedagogy, school organization, and testing but tacitly excluding discussion of equity issues because of fears they are too complex or too volatile to handle.

In conclusion, reform appears to be the new status quo of urban education, and we would be wise to begin building an organized body of thinking about how to engage in staff development in a reform context. Amid the hype and politics, we must remind ourselves of two truths: (1) teachers remain at the center of reform; and (2) reflective understanding is the heart of good teaching and the incubator of individual change. Further, understanding that mirrors the reality of urban teaching cannot be narrowly confined to test-related strategies, because difficult social, cultural, and contextual issues walk through every urban teacher's door every day; teachers and administrators themselves have their own sociocultural baggage concerning their students. In effect, students and educators are wearing invisible backpacks whose burdens they cannot remove unaided. Authentic change cannot be accomplished without emptying those backpacks and dealing with the contents, as messy as that process may be. The three questions suggested here are invitations to conversation around reflection, teachers' understandings of reform, and social issues—conversations that will help, not hinder, the progress of change.

References


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