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New Book by Consortium Researchers Identifies Proven Formula for Successful School Reform in Chicago

As states vie for billions in federal Race to the Top funds designed to spur school improvement, a new book from current and former researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago reveals what it really will take to turn around the nation's neediest schools.

Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago draws on an extensive longitudinal data set spanning nearly two decades—the type of data set that U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has pushed all states and districts to compile. The data provided investigators unique insight into why students in 100 public elementary schools in Chicago were able to improve substantially in reading and math over a seven-year period, while students in another 100 schools were not. *No other district or reform group has engaged in a similar large-scale longitudinal investigation of school improvement.*

The investigation reveals conclusively that there is no “silver bullet” for school reform—but there is a reliable recipe. Schools organized according to the recipe improved, the authors found. Schools missing just one key ingredient stagnated.

The key ingredients, which the authors call the “essential supports,” are school leadership, parent and community ties, professional capacity of the faculty, school learning climate, and instructional guidance. Schools that measured strong in most supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools with just one or two strengths to show substantial gains in reading and math. A sustained weakness in even one of these areas undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning.

In short, the authors found, school organization drives improvement, and individual initiatives are unlikely to work in isolation. These findings have strong implications for states and districts focused

on any number of reforms that have gained increasing political currency—“turning around” low-performing schools, improving teacher quality or mandating a single curriculum, for example.

“As school districts think about the task of strategic planning for school improvement at scale and redesigning their central offices to support such work, our evidence does suggest that districts are highly unlikely to succeed absent sustained attention all five of these subsystems,” the book’s authors say.

Other key findings:

- Improvements in test scores depended on adult cooperative work focused on instruction. Schools where teachers report their colleagues are continually learning, committed and loyal and have can-do attitudes were three times less likely to stagnate in math than schools weak on this measure.
- Schools with strong parental involvement were 10 times more likely to improve substantially in math than schools with weak parental involvement.
- School improvement is highly unlikely to occur without a strong principal. Schools with strong leadership were seven times more likely to improve substantially in math than schools with weak leadership.
- Organizational structures are vitally interconnected. Weakness in one support can amplify the negative effects of another weakness, while strength in one can amplify the positive effects of another. For instance, weak safety and order, together with poor instruction, virtually guaranteed poor attendance.

Moving beyond the schoolhouse doors, the authors found a similar interconnectedness between schools and their communities. Community factors, like church going and crime, are inexorably entwined with school improvement, the book shows.

- Schools with high rates of abused and neglected students were three times more likely to stagnate in math than schools with low rates. Just 2 percent of schools with a high concentration of abused and neglected children reported strong essential supports.
- Schools in communities with weak religious participation were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities with strong religious participation.
- Schools in communities where people did not believe they had the ability to make a positive change were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities where people believed they could.
- The authors also identified 46 “truly disadvantaged” schools, located in neighborhoods with the lowest levels of collective efficacy and religious participation and the highest crime rates

and proportion of abused and neglected children. Truly disadvantaged schools proved nearly impervious to reform.

These findings demonstrate that educators and policymakers must attend to the larger community context of schools as they develop reform strategies. Though it is popular to talk about 90-90-90 schools (schools where at least 90 percent of students are low-income and minority and at least 90 percent meet standards), the “truly disadvantaged” schools highlighted in this study suggest that some low-income and minority schools face far greater obstacles to reform than others. Even more care must be taken to ensure that the essential supports take root in those schools. The good news is that while it may be harder for these schools to develop the essential supports, the authors found that truly disadvantaged schools with robust essential supports did post substantial improvements in student performance.

About the Authors

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