Organizing Schools for Improvement

Lessons from Chicago

Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments | vii

Prologue: A Tale of Two Schools | 1

Introduction: A Rare Opportunity to Learn about School Improvement | 12

1 **DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE OUTCOME INDICATORS** | 29

2 **A FRAMEWORK OF ESSENTIAL SUPPORTS** | 42

3 **TESTING THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ESSENTIAL SUPPORTS** | 79

4 **PROBING DEEPER: ORGANIZATIONAL MECHANISMS** | 97

5 **TRUST, SIZE, AND STABILITY: KEY ENABLERS** | 137

6 **THE INFLUENCES OF COMMUNITY CONTEXT** | 158

Summary and Conclusions | 197

Appendix A: *Socioeconomic Status Factor* | 223

Appendix B: *A Value-Added Indicator: A School's Academic Productivity Profile* | 225

Appendix C: *Overview of the Fourteen Indicators for the Five Essential Supports* | 231

Appendix D: *Probability Experiment to Evaluate Results Presented in Figure 3.3* | 242

Appendix E: *Interview Questions from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods* | 245

Appendix F: *Coefficients from Analyses of Leadership in Chapter 4* | 246

Appendix G: *Value-Added Replication Results for 1997 through 2005* | 250

Appendix H: *Efforts of the Consortium on Chicago School Research to Build More Productive Ties between Research, Practice, and Policy to Improve Practice* | 252

Notes | 257

References | 285

Index | 297

PROLOGUE A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

I am from streets with buildings
that used to look pretty.
From safe walking trips to
Mr. Ivan's family grocery store,
where now stands a criminal sanctuary.
I am from a home and garage
illustrated with crowns, diamonds,
upside-down pitchforks, squiggly
names and death threats.
I am from a once busy, prosperous
and productive community;
where the fathers and mothers
earned a living at the steel mills,
and the children played
Kick the Can and Hide and Go Seek
until they could play no more.
I am from here.

Ms. Sparks, Sixth-Grade Teacher, Hancock Elementary School[1]

Like many teachers, Ms. Sparks grew up in the neighborhood where she now works. Neither she, nor her parents, nor any members of her extended family, however, live there any longer—some time ago all escaped the violence and general decay for safer and more prosperous communities. The housing stock in Oak Meadows is now worn and dilapidated; many buildings were burned out in the late 1960s and '70s and subsequently torn down. Neighborhood fixtures like dry cleaners, retail stores, and gas stations are long gone.

The main building for the Herbie Hancock Elementary School[2] was built around 1900. Although over one hundred years old, it retains the

architectural flourishes that were common in public buildings of the time. A "new building" was added in the early 1960s to accommodate the growing student population in Oak Meadows. It is a low, nondescript structure that could have been commissioned by most any bureaucracy. It would have fit just as comfortably in a cold-war-era Eastern European city as on the South Side of Chicago.

As Bonnie Whitmore took up the principalship at the Hancock School in 1989, she inherited a very troubled school community. Gangs roamed freely in the neighborhood, and the crime rate there was among the highest in the city. Maintaining order at Hancock had been a high priority. On more than one occasion, neighborhood conflicts had spilled right through the front doors of the school itself. Although the Local School Council had appointed Bonnie with enthusiasm, some worried aloud that what the school really needed was "a man who could wear the pants and show everyone who was in charge."

Whitmore's predecessor, Mr. Martin, sequestered himself most of the time in his office, where he dealt with the school's myriad day-to-day operational problems. Up through the late 1980s, little beyond this was expected of administrators at schools like Hancock. Keeping things under control and avoiding major crises were their main priorities. District administrators generally gave positive evaluations to principals like Mr. Martin, who kept order in their schools. In truth, however, Martin had basically "retired on the job."

The accumulated organizational neglect was quite obvious as one moved out into classrooms and around the school. Teacher quality was highly variable. Some teachers were quite good, but many others were deeply entrenched in their old ways of doing things, even though their students were obviously not learning. In general, teachers were left to "do their own thing" in their classrooms regardless of the ultimate results. As a group, the faculty was cantankerous and divided. Middle- and upper-grade teachers in the old building looked down on the primary-grade teachers in the new building whom they judged as not having to work very hard. Little interest in or support for meaningful change could be found anywhere. Not surprisingly, in 1990 Hancock's standardized test results placed it among the one hundred worst elementary schools in Chicago in both reading and math.

Six Years Later: Hancock on the Move

It is an unusually nice late spring afternoon in Chicago as Hancock's teachers gather in the cafeteria after school for a regularly scheduled profes-

sional development session.[3] After welcoming remarks from the principal, a teacher leader offers a brief overview of the day's activity, and teachers quickly move around the room to form small work groups. As they systematically review stacks of student papers, teachers begin to outline a set of observations about the strengths and weaknesses of their students' written work. They focus on identifying shared problems that students appeared to be having in understanding and writing about the key ideas in some common instructional units that they are attempting to teach. As a group, they begin to brainstorm about how their instructional efforts might be improved and draw up some preliminary recommendations to be forwarded to a schoolwide curriculum committee. At the end of the meeting, the principal announces that eleven of their colleagues have been accepted into a special citywide program that will prepare them for the arduous journey toward possible certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Clearly, profound changes have occurred at Hancock, and even more appear on the horizon.

After a period of steady decline, enrollment at Hancock began to increase during the early 1990s. By 1996, the school served more than one thousand students, from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Grades 6 through 8 formed a middle school that served students graduating from Hancock's lower grades as well as those coming from other elementary schools in the area. Some sixty-five teachers now formed the faculty.

Renewing this faculty had been a chief concern for Bonnie Whitmore. Before her tenure at Hancock, Bonnie had developed a reputation in her previous principalship as a no-nonsense educator. She held high standards and expected the same from the entire school staff. Several teachers who had been at Hancock for a number of years chose to leave early on in Bonnie's tenure, feeling they would be more comfortable at a school where their instructional practice might receive less critical scrutiny. In turn, Bonnie invested heavily in the professional development of those who chose to stay on as well as the new teachers whom she hired.

One of these new teachers was Patricia Sparks. Although she came to Hancock with limited professional experience, Patricia threw herself into the various professional development opportunities at her new school. She worked hard to incorporate into her lessons both the subject matter content and the new pedagogy that she learned about in school-based workshops. Over time, she joined an emerging cadre of strong teacher leaders within the school.

At the same time that Bonnie was advancing the professional development of her staff, she also worked hard to nurture a collegial spirit among

the faculty and camaraderie around their collective efforts toward school improvement. Using her own personal funds, she organized monthly staff breakfasts that created opportunities for relationship building and professional development.

The end result of this concerted focus on professional capacity building was a very different faculty. Gradually, teachers deepened their subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, and felt increasingly comfortable talking about their practice and their efforts to improve it. They were encouraged to take courses and attend conferences and professional meetings, and then develop workshop sessions at Hancock where they might share with colleagues what they had just learned. Eventually, the expertise of several teachers, who had been quite active in these professional development activities, became widely recognized. These individuals now took on significant leadership roles within the faculty and larger school community.

A number of important structural changes, introduced in the early 1990s, were key in supporting these developments. Working with her faculty, Bonnie introduced common planning periods for each grade level. To create more time for professional development, Hancock added a few minutes to each school day, and once a month released students early to allow teachers to participate in ongoing professional development and to continue their improvement planning. Bonnie also allocated substantial discretionary resources for securing extra teacher substitutes to free up her regular staff, so that they could observe other teachers' classrooms and work with outside staff developers.

Instructional improvement efforts focused initially on literacy. Developing students' reading and writing skills is the single most important goal of elementary education. This work engages a substantial amount of time and effort from almost all members of an elementary school's faculty, and was a strategic choice for where best to begin.

After extended opportunities for discussing their own instructional practices, teachers came to recognize the incoherence in instruction across Hancock's classrooms and grades. Subsequently, the faculty agreed to adopt a common literacy framework, Pat Cunningham's Four Blocks.[4] Grade by grade, teachers sought to systematically build skills in phonics, word study, vocabulary development, and writing while offering students a rich exposure to literature, and to meaningful discussions about the ideas encountered there. Moreover, teachers nurtured a "love of reading" through a supplemental Links to Literacy program that recognized each book read by a student with a colorful paper link posted on hallway bulletin boards.

Instructionally embedded assessments represented another central reform element. Teachers at Hancock agreed to conduct assessments every five weeks that provided common data on each student's progress as a reader and a writer. The content of these assessments evolved, based on teachers' analyses of their students' annual standardized test scores and more general discussions about student learning at the school. For example, when the results from a new state assessment showed weaknesses in students' narrative writing skills, teachers went to work. Professional development time was set aside to study the new narrative writing rubric developed by the Illinois Department of Education, and then teachers used this rubric to analyze their own students' work. As the faculty reviewed these results with the school literacy program coordinator, they planned additional workshops to further hone their skills in this instructional domain.

Along the way, Hancock also made good use of a wide array of external resources available through various universities, cultural organizations, and social agencies in the Chicago area. A couple of years into their instructional reform efforts, teachers became concerned about weaknesses in their students' mathematics learning. Two faculty members from a local university spent over two years helping Hancock's teachers to diagnose gaps in mathematics instruction at the school and improve the alignment in the mathematics curriculum across the grades. Although it took some time, math test scores eventually did rise. For the teachers at Hancock, initiatives like this gave real meaning to the phrase "all students can learn." With time, effort, and the right support, they learned that much more was really possible. Increasingly, they saw the efficacy of their efforts in action. As one teacher noted, "We don't feel we're any different from any other school anyplace else. Our kids, given the opportunity, can do it."[5]

Outside resources also proved especially helpful as the school sought to address the numerous academic, personal, social, and health-related needs of the students and families that Hancock served. While instructional improvement was the school's primary concern, staff quickly realized that these other problems, left unattended, could seriously impede their students' learning. Assembling a first-rate social services support team and accessing external program services that extended well beyond the meager ones offered by the school system itself was another key piece in the school's reform agenda. In general, social and academic supports for student learning form one of the most fragmented and incoherent programmatic areas in large urban school systems. Locating, accessing, and coordinating the contributed services from various universities, hospitals, and neighborhood and citywide social service agencies—and making all of

this actually work for the students at Hancock—took considerable ingenuity and commitment.

Reconnecting to families and supporting them in the education of their children was still another reform strand that emerged. The school initiated Even Start, a state-funded program that brings parents and children in pre-kindergarten through second grade together for a variety of activities, including reading and computer use. Hancock became a site for a parental GED program and offered job search classes. To capitalize on the presence of many grandparents in the community, it started the Grandparents Club. A Real Men Read program was also launched to enlist adult male role models from the neighborhood to come into the school to read stories to children. The staff was constantly looking for new and more effective ways to reach out to parents and strengthen their ties to the local community. Even though some of these activities felt frustrating to teachers, as parents did not always reciprocate their efforts, they nonetheless knew they had to keep trying.

In short, principal Bonnie Whitmore catalyzed an impressive array of changes at Hancock Elementary School. She took the lead in articulating a coherent vision of reform for her school community. She pushed for curriculum alignment and greater pedagogical coherence, classroom by classroom and grade by grade. She envisioned Hancock as a community of professional practice, where school improvement was everyone's job. She introduced the idea of continuous assessment of students' performance, and maintained focus on the key issues affecting individual students' learning and studying evidence about whether learning was actually occurring. Finally, Bonnie opened the school to outside expertise as a resource for improvement,[6] and she championed the difficult work of strengthening ties to parents and the local community.

Despite having been a principal for many years, Bonnie never lost touch with her identity as a teacher. As she stated, "I knew the times [as a teacher] when I was not supported and allowed to do the things that I felt would really benefit children. As an instructional leader, as a principal, I'm always a teacher, too." She also knew that while she might be able to envision reform, it would take the engagement of many individuals throughout her school community to make it happen. She explained:

> I can't be the leader of everything, and there are leaders within school, people with strengths and talents. As the overall leader, I have to allow these other leaders to emerge . . . I look at myself more as a facilitator than someone who's in charge of something, because we're all part of this.[7]

However, when the situation demanded it, Bonnie could also be quite authoritative. Those who resisted reforms at Hancock became an increasing focus of her attention. As the chairperson of the first Local School Council (LSC) noted, "The older regime doesn't much care for Mrs. Whitmore." Although encouraging teachers' instructional improvement efforts, facilitating teachers' work, and supporting it with resources were key elements in Bonnie's leadership style, those who did not come on board with the emerging reforms knew that they had to leave. Eventually, most did, of their own accord.

In 1997, Bonnie Whitmore was among twenty-two school principals who won a School Leadership Award from the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association. Her choice came with considerable justification. Hancock ranked as one of the most improved schools in both reading and mathematics in the city of Chicago.

Alexander Stands Still

Less than two miles away in a neighborhood directly adjacent to Oak Meadows stands Alexander Elementary School.[8] It is a pale-yellow, concrete-block building that serves about five hundred students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Like Hancock, the neighborhood surrounding Alexander is very poor. Directly across the street from the school is an abandoned building, which students must pass every day on their way to school. In clear view of the school are broken windows, partially burned buildings, garbage, and debris. Not far away, one can occasionally see clusters of older men who gather during the day to socialize and drink.

As school reform began in 1989, most of Alexander's faculty had been at the school for a very long time, many teachers for more than twenty years. They wistfully recalled the halcyon days when the community was different, students seemed to care about school, families were stronger, and teaching was a respected and enjoyable profession. All of these things had changed, and none for the better, during their tenure at this school.

Like Hancock, Alexander began the decade among the worst one hundred schools in Chicago in terms of its students' reading and math achievement. Unlike Hancock, however, it remained so six years later.

Issues of order and safety were chronic concerns in this school community. The sounds of gunfire were not uncommon, and much local crime stemmed from the use and sale of illegal drugs. Parents often kept their children from playing outdoors unless they could be present. Fear of victimization also meant a real reluctance to attend evening meetings at Alex-

ander. One parent told of the time she was on her way home from a meeting when bullets whizzed by her. She ran back to the school as if it were a "foxhole." Another, who was a candidate for the LSC, refused to attend an evening candidates' forum unless provided with a bulletproof vest. Yet if meetings were held during the day, working parents could rarely attend.

Given the dangers of the streets, the school was always locked, and a security guard was on full-time duty. Several years earlier, Alexander had opted for a "closed campus" and a shortened day. This meant that teachers had no lunch hour and left early with the students at 2:30 p.m. This constrained schedule limited teachers' interactions with one another, and helped maintain their isolation as the norm. As one teacher explained:

> I go in my classroom, teach my children, bring them to lunch, take them to gym and the library and go home. I don't get involved. I've learned not to get involved in situations where I have no control. I don't know how long before I'll be retiring. I mean I care, but I prefer going home . . . I feel I have given my time.[9]

Betty Green, the principal of Alexander, grew up in Chicago, attended Chicago public elementary and high schools, graduated from a local teachers' college, and received her master's degree from a local university. In her early twenties, she had begun working as a teacher at Alexander. She became a counselor and finally the principal there in the mid-1980s. When LSCs were formed in 1989, each council had to choose the principal for their school. The Alexander council refused to consider anyone else. Betty Green was their choice to lead reform in their school community.

Under her leadership, Alexander became a safer and more orderly place. She courageously confronted and chased gang members away from the school grounds several times and eventually got them to agree to stay away. She was able to get a play lot built so the preschool children would have a place to romp around. Inside the building, arguments, cursing, and occasional fistfights among parents and teachers had ceased. Norms of civil conduct had been established, and for the most part, folks now got along with one another. Betty had become "mom to the school community," and this meant a lot to parents and teachers alike.[10]

Betty worked actively with her first LSC, encouraging parents and teachers to initiate change. She also sought to expand teacher participation in instructional improvement. Toward that end, she initiated a professional personnel committee, called the first meeting, and recommended possible projects. But like the LSC, this committee never jelled as a functional work group. Teachers, as was also true of the parents, felt uneasy about their

new leadership roles, having grown accustomed over the years to just doing what Betty asked of them. They worried that taking a more active role might reignite conflict across the school community and, more important, jeopardize their personal relationship with Mrs. Green. All of this posed a major dilemma for Betty. Without her direct personal involvement, reform objectives were unlikely to be accomplished; but with it, teachers and parents would remain dependent on her—and there was far too much work for just one person to shoulder.

Like the Hancock School, Alexander launched a wide array of initiatives to connect to parents, strengthen ties to the local community, and improve instruction. The school began workshops and GED classes for parents, offered after-school tutoring, created smaller classes for primary students funded by Title 1, and launched a program for gifted students. Although each of these initiatives began with considerable enthusiasm, few took root, and virtually all were moribund within a couple of years.

Even more troublesome, there was little evidence of an overall plan toward which all these initiatives and people were working. The idea of a comprehensive improvement strategy seemed highly foreign to Alexander's leaders. As the assistant principal responded when asked to characterize a good school: "Off the top of my head, that's hard for me to say . . . I haven't graduated to that level of thinking yet . . . I'm used to having not. It's hard for me to think of a good school when I've been here for so long."[11]

Alexander did initiate a partnership with a local university to focus on comprehensive school change, which included a major effort to strengthen instructional practice in both literacy and math. This work got off to a very promising start the first year, with active faculty participation and some genuine instructional leadership emerging from the school's literacy coordinator and a few other teachers. Their growing expertise, and the changing school community relationships which ensued, however, threatened Betty's traditional role as the "school mom." Tensions arose with the university partner, as its efforts were challenging established norms at Alexander. While the partnership persisted for several years, the initial promising developments were stunted, and little of value emerged from this work.[12]

Alexander's efforts to engage parents in the school community also proved difficult. There was a small core of reliable volunteers, but most parents appeared largely apathetic. Many were very young, in their early twenties, having had their children when they were just in their mid- to late teens. Extreme poverty pressed down hard on these young parents, sapping their energy and dashing most shreds of hope. Betty Green understood that many simply could not respond in a sustained, effective fashion.

The enduring problems that they confronted fostered widespread malaise and depression. When she asked parents why they did not come to the school, they often talked about "the stress and how they weren't coping very well, just living day to day. And they weren't sure how to help their children at home."[13]

For those who were able to get involved at Alexander, the school sometimes operated as an agent of adult social mobility. Perhaps through a job at the school or some adult training activity, or by securing a GED, these parents now had opportunities to better themselves, and many moved up and out of the Alexander community as soon as they could. As the LSC chair explained, "The area is so transitory that sometimes you get your hands on some [parents] that you find are really interested . . . and by the time you have them where you want them . . . then, they're gone."[14]

In sum, a complex community dynamic of disorder, concerns about human safety, and high transience among neighborhood residents combined to exacerbate the problems of reform at Alexander Elementary School. Building and sustaining a collective capability to support comprehensive change just seemed overwhelming. In many ways, the sense of isolation, resignation, and hopelessness found in the community infused the school itself. Although some individuals tried very hard to improve opportunities for the children at Alexander, doubt remained widespread that this school could actually be fundamentally different.

Intriguing Questions

How did Hancock beat the odds? Why did Alexander fail to do so? These two schools appeared quite similar and like dozens of other Chicago schools. The per-pupil fiscal resources supplied by the central administration were virtually identical. In terms of student test scores, the two schools started out in 1990 about the same. Less than two miles apart, the two schools serve adjoining neighborhoods that appeared similar on most sociodemographic characteristics. Both schools serve only African-American children, virtually all of whom were considered low income by federal standards. Many parents were unemployed. Census data from 1990 tells us that in both neighborhoods, about half the men aged sixteen and older did not work. Similarly, about half the households in each neighborhood received public aid of some kind, such as food stamps or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (later replaced by Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), and each school had more than a few children whose family was homeless.

But over time, these two schools did become quite different places. And, change processes like this occurred literally hundreds of times during the early and mid-1990s across the city of Chicago. What, then, accounts for the varied educational outcomes that emerged among these schools?

The cases themselves offer some intriguing suggestions. Differences in principal leadership style and the engagement of both parents and school staff in the work of improvement are obvious. The sustained focus on instruction and professional capacity building at Hancock also stands out as notable. While on the surface the two school communities look demographically similar, more subtle differences in local history and community may have also played a role here. Student mobility, for example, was somewhat higher at Alexander than Hancock.

Ideas such as these represent interesting conjectures, largely grounded in a post-hoc and somewhat anecdotal comparison of the developments in two specific schools. In the pages that follow, we seek a more systematic analysis. We strive to understand the internal workings and external conditions that distinguish improving elementary schools from those that fail to do so. In so doing, we aim to establish a comprehensive, empirically grounded theory of practice—in this instance, the practice of organizing schools for improvement—that teachers, parents, principals, superintendents, and civic leaders can draw on as they work to improve children's learning in thousands of other schools all across this land.