

Settings for School Improvement

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ABSTRACT *The last two decades have witnessed tens of thousands of attempts to improve schooling for primary and secondary school students. Some attempts are highly local; others range in scope from small (a cluster of schools) to very large (a nationwide school system). Many school reform efforts have simultaneously built upon and contributed to our knowledge base about school improvement, but we have much to learn if we are to make school improvement systematic and sustainable. The area of school reform provides a case in point for this conference's theme—Celebrating the Past: Envisioning the Future. It also provides an excellent vehicle for celebrating the life and work of Professor John Elkins. Through his work and example, John has helped lead the way in exploring how we can improve literacy outcomes, particularly for students whom schools have failed to teach adequately—diverse students, students with disabilities, and students with few economic resources. In this paper I will briefly review some of the findings from research and practice in school reform, with a special focus on literacy outcomes and in schools with students at risk. We know quite a few very useful things. But what has been missing from the discussion about school reform is a seminal concept first articulated by Seymour Sarason 30 years ago in a little-known classic, *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies*. I will describe the concept of “settings,” show video examples of effective settings for school improvement, and argue that without these settings systematic and sustainable school improvement is unlikely.*

Introduction

This paper will be brief because there is so much to communicate and I do not want to take up a lot of time with my words. Words are simply insufficient. I have been talking, reading, and researching about school improvement for the last 12 years or so and I am continually amazed at how hard it is to communicate about it. Language was a wonderful invention, but sometimes it is not very good for communication.

So I would like to spend the bulk of my time showing you some video excerpts that illustrate many of the things I would like to convey. This is actually part of the

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message: we need to use more than words in order to communicate the complex ideas and findings with which we are dealing. I hope, if nothing else, that this presentation will at least make this point clearly.

(For those of you reading this paper and not attending the presentation, I invite you to visit my website: <http://www.csulb.edu/~cgolden>. Once you are there, click on “video links.” At the video links webpage there are currently two videos you can watch about school improvement: *Settings for Change II* and *Analyzing Student Work in Grade Level Meetings (K)*. In this presentation I will show excerpts from *Analyzing Student Work*; but you might find both useful. I also hope to provide a more “scaffolded” viewing on the web, such that you can intersplice video excerpts with commentary that helps guide the viewing. As of this writing (October 2002) the scaffolded viewing is not yet available on the web, but I am hoping it soon will be.)

Analyzing Student Work in Grade Level Meetings (K) depicts a group of kindergarten (5-year-olds approximately) teachers doing things that should be utterly routine but in fact are far from it. You will see excerpts from a meeting, followed by a group interview with the teachers, footage from two of the classrooms, and interviews with individual teachers whose classrooms we briefly visit. Teachers in their weekly grade level meetings analyse student data and work; they also discuss strategies for improving student learning. These discussions inform classroom practices and the progress children make. Teachers then look at how students are progressing (using various indicators of performance) and bring this information back to the grade level for further analysis, discussion, and planning. And the cycle repeats itself.

It is a very rational and sensible process; but it is also exceedingly rare in schools. My basic argument in this presentation (in addition to the one about how we communicate these arguments) is that if we want to improve teaching and learning in schools we must create settings where teachers come together over extended periods of time to focus on goals for student learning, plan instruction, and analyse the effects of instruction on student learning. This must be a continuous, never-ending cycle; not a once or twice or three-times-a-year “event.” The conditions that permit this sort of thing to go on at a school are fairly complex, but I believe that in many cases they are attainable. More about that later.

School Reform in the Late 20th Century (mostly in the US)

School “restructuring” was the name given to efforts over the past 15 years or so to improve the processes and outcomes of schooling. Many terms are used mostly interchangeably—school restructuring, school reform, school change, school improvement. I prefer the term school improvement since it conveys in a reasonably straightforward way what we are trying to accomplish: improving the processes and outcomes of formal schooling. Whatever we call it, the wave of school improvement efforts that began in the middle to late 1980s has been called “the most widespread, intense, public, comprehensive, and sustained effort to improve education in our history ...” (Murphy, 1991, p. viii). Michael Fullan said in 1991 that

“it is impossible to estimate the number of innovative programs” attempted or now underway in North American schools (Fullan, 1991, p. 4). If this was true 10 years ago, it is doubly or triply or maybe exponentially true today.

Major educational publications, such as *Education Week*, *Educational Leadership*, *ERIC Review* in the US, and thousands of articles, technical reports, and books from leading academic publishers, private organisations, and governmental units in many countries have reported and analysed many of the countless reform efforts, large and small in scale, currently underway.

Not surprisingly, many models of school improvement exist (American Institutes for Research, 1999; Slavin, 1998; Slavin & Fashola, 1998). But perhaps surprisingly, findings converge on many points. At the risk of gross oversimplification, too many words, and annoying listeners and readers, let me list a few important claims we can make. Keep in mind that it is not difficult to find exceptions to many of these generalisations, nor is it difficult to find individuals who will take strong exception to one or more. Also keep in mind that these are not timeless; they are bounded by the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves and in my particular reading of the literature and our collective experiences—if such a thing exists. It might well be that in the future some or all will lose whatever validity they now enjoy. Here is a partial list of some things we can claim to know:

1. Some *instructional practices* are more strongly related to improved student outcomes than are others. It is almost certainly NOT the case, as we sometimes hear, that anything will work as long as a dedicated teacher believes firmly in what s/he is doing. In the area of literacy, where many of us work, there is a growing consensus that effective programs must be comprehensive and contain sufficient learning experiences at both the “basic skills” level and at the higher, more integrative levels of cognitive functioning and literate behaviours.

2. As a general rule, structured and explicit *curriculum and instruction* where teachers and learners know the desired goals and outcomes and work together to try and accomplish them are more effective than open-ended, emergent approaches with vague or diffuse goals. This appears to be true in general, but especially for novice learners and for learners who are particularly dependent upon schools for adequate academic progress. Many children from low socio-economic homes and homes with relatively few educational resources are in this group.

3. The same is true of school improvement efforts. More *structured and explicit* models that deal with the “nuts and bolts” of curriculum, instruction, classroom and school organisation, and so forth are more likely to be successful than models that emphasise broad principles and require teachers and administrators to fill in the details. Again, this is probably true across the board; but is particularly true for schools with multiple issues and challenges stemming from factors such as poverty and political disenfranchisement within the community.

4. The *process* of change is no less important than the *content* of change; in other words, how you go about making change is as important as what you actually try to do. The process will profoundly influence, if not determine, the outcome. No matter how valid the content (e.g., the curriculum and instruction), it does not matter if it is never put into practice.

5. Neither *bottom-up* (teacher- or school-initiated) nor *top-down* (government-, district-, school-level mandated) strategies are sufficient; productive change requires a complex and subtle balance of both.

6. Although initial *motivation* (“buy-in”) can help in the early stages of attempted change, it is not necessary. It certainly is not sufficient. It will dissipate in the absence of concrete and tangible accomplishments that people see as important for being successful in their work. Success (often) leads to commitment. Stated differently: Nothing succeeds like success.

7. *Collaborative relationships* that strengthen professional and personal bonds within schools are very important; successful change is difficult to produce in what has been called an “egg crate ecology”—where individuals in separate cells have minimal interactions with others. But because of how schools are organised and the many and competing demands on people’s time and attention, creating stable settings for these relationships to appear and flourish is far more difficult than many people realise.

8. *Effective leadership*—establishing both bureaucratic and cultural linkages—is important at all stages of the change process. Although teachers can and should provide leadership, the principal is critical for the sort of deep, school-wide changes restructuring proponents advocate.

9. Schools are *complex systems* made up of *interpenetrated and interdependent subsystems*. It is nearly impossible to change one thing without having an effect on something else.

10. Meaningful change, consequently, can be *nonlinear, complex, unpredictable*, even “*chaotic*,” as the term has been used in the organisational change literature.

11. Successful change probably has as much to do with *changing the culture* (normative values, beliefs, behaviours) of the institution as with implementing particular instructional practices; but since some instructional practices are more effective than others, successful implementation of effective practices will contribute to success of larger change efforts.

12. *Change is endemic* in schools, and educators feel *overwhelmed* by the many challenges they face; successful change efforts must therefore help educators manage and make sense of the many demands they face.

13. In the absence of a heavy infusion of resources expertly deployed, substantive and meaningful change at a school can be expected to take a minimum of 3 to 5 years; depending upon the complexity of the changes, it can take up to 10 years.

14. The *focus* of change must be *multifaceted* and should attend to numerous dimensions of schooling: the normative beliefs of students, teachers, and community members; professional communities in schools; new curricula and pedagogy; school, teacher, student, and parent empowerment; relationships with external agencies; and assessment and accountability. Substantive educational change, in other words, requires more than implementing a new program in a school or district.

(Drawn from Fullan, 1991, 1993, 2000; Goldenberg, in press; Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994; McLaughlin, 1990; Newmann, 1991; Sashkin & Walberg, 1993; School reform: What we’ve learned, 1995; Slavin, 1998; Slavin & Fashola, 1998; Wehlage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992; and current work underway by my colleagues

and myself in Southern California, for example, Goldenberg, Saunders, & Gallimore, 1996; McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2002.)

Teachers Examining their Teaching and Student Learning: the concept of “settings”

As should be clear, we are talking about a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon; in fact, we might not fully understand all the dimensions involved in “school improvement.” But we know—or think we know—some; the video I will show to try and illustrate some of these makes at least two points.

First, improving achievement for English language learners (limited in their English proficiency) (or for any group of students) requires substantive, effective, and structured *curriculum and instruction*. The school shown uses Success for All (SFA) (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996) for its reading program, so you will hear references to “SFA” and some of its instruction/curriculum (e.g., “red words,” which are sight words put on a word wall). (SFA is one of the most successful of the school reform models that have appeared in the US since the 1990s). In addition to SFA, the school has also incorporated numerous elements designed to teach children to write more proficiently. The writing program does not have a set curriculum (as does SFA, which focuses on reading), but through the help of an instructional specialist at the school, specific writing strategies being used have markedly influenced language arts instruction. Instruction is structured and focused; but there is also opportunity for student exploration.

Second, in addition to good curriculum and instruction, there must also exist a *context and culture* at a school that promote focused, ongoing examination by teachers of what they are trying to accomplish with students and the degree to which they are succeeding. The school depicted here is using, in addition to SFA, the “School Change/Getting Results Model” (SC/GRM) that targets changing the school culture by creating key settings at the school. The concept of *settings* comes from Sarason (1972) and Tharp and Gallimore (1988). Sarason defines a setting, very generally, as “any instance in which two or more people come together in new relationships over a sustained period of time in order to achieve certain goals” (Sarason, 1972, p. 1). Change does not take place in the abstract. Rather, it takes place in specific and concrete settings—meetings, workgroups, classroom lessons, parent–teacher conferences, even workshops and inservices. *The working hypothesis that my colleagues and I have been using is that schools and school cultures change when either new settings are created or existing settings are changed to reflect new goals and activities aimed at attaining those goals.* We expect that settings are to change as soil is to agriculture. They provide the necessary context where the various ingredients can come together to germinate.

So let me turn to the video to try and illustrate one such setting and its relationship to what goes on in the classroom. After seeing the excerpts I will finish by speaking briefly about what the effects have been on student achievement at schools using the School Change/Getting Results Model and the larger school context that made possible what you see in the video.

The school in the video is in a highly urban area in Los Angeles. It has an enrolment of over 1,200 students, over 90% of whom are Latino. More than 80% of the kindergarten and first graders are English language learners, virtually all from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. The school used to have a bilingual program where children were taught initially in their home language then made the transition to English instruction. But since the passage of Proposition 227 in California, all children have been in “structured English immersion,” that is, learning largely or exclusively in English.

The video is a little under 30 minutes and divided into three major parts: excerpts from a grade level meeting; excerpts from a group interview with the teachers immediately after they saw the grade level meeting video; and classroom footage interlaced with additional commentary from the teachers discussing the links between their grade level meetings and what they do in the classroom.

Depending upon time, we will see one or more segments from each major part of the video. Below are brief synopses of each segment.

I. Grade Level Meeting

1. We first see the kindergarten team at one of their weekly grade level meetings. These teachers have been meeting like this for the past 2 or 3 years. The basic idea is to discuss goals for student learning, analyse data and student work that provides indicators of student progress, and discuss instructional and curricular strategies to help promote academic development. In this first segment, the grade level co-chair goes over *school-wide goals* that have been formulated by the school’s Academic Achievement Leadership Team (AALT). Vision, goals, and strategies are all tied to helping students read and write “at grade level.”

2. Next, the other co-chair discusses the results of the beginning- and mid-year assessments across a wide range of early literacy indicators. She has made pie charts and tables showing changes in kindergartners’ achievement from the beginning to the middle of the year. While pointing out areas of progress, she also suggests what she thinks are important performance levels the teachers should target. Note the discussion between the two co-chairs, about halfway through this segment, concerning what should be the target for children’s writing performance in kindergarten. Each has a somewhat different perspective, but there’s no disagreement about the need to encourage as many children as possible to become more and more proficient in their early writing development.

3. Next, each teacher presents an *analysis of learning trends* he or she saw among the children. Before the meeting, teachers had been given forms to fill out that asked them to analyse these trends, identifying strengths and areas of need for their own students. The group collates these analyses on a chart as each teacher reports his or her analysis. The first teacher to speak in this segment is Ms Quezada. We will be visiting her class later in the video and hearing more from her about the relationship between what goes on in the grade level meetings and what she focuses on in her classroom.

4. The final segment from this meeting shows how the teachers bring examples of

student work from their own classrooms to discuss and analyse with colleagues. All teachers brought three writing samples, illustrating the achievement range in their classes. The following clip shows Ms Estline presenting and discussing work from her class. We will be seeing Ms Estline's class and hearing more from her later in the video.

II. Group Interview

5. Two weeks after the above was filmed, the teachers were shown a somewhat longer version of the video clips just seen. They were asked how they got to the point where they regularly and systematically went over indicators of student achievement, analysed them in relation to academic goals, and discussed instruction and curriculum to promote higher levels of academic development. This is typically not seen in grade level meetings. How did they come to be able to do it so effectively and, seemingly, so naturally? Note that one of the grade-level co-chairs makes reference to the "awlt." This is the AALT or Academic Achievement Leadership Team. The "awlt process" they refer to is part of the School Change/Getting Results Model—teachers work on specific student learning goals (drawn from standards or the curriculum); bring in samples of student work or data indicating student performance; examine/analyse student data with respect to agreed upon goals; plan subsequent instruction based on the analyses; and so on. The grade level chairs also refer to a School Change/Getting Results Model institute they had attended the previous summer.

6. The discussion then turns to the impact these meetings have had on the classroom. As the next teacher we hear comments, the teachers try instructional strategies discussed in the grade level meetings, then come back and debrief "how did that strategy work?" Other teachers provide other examples of how the meetings have influenced their classrooms, including their assessment practices. The segment ends with teachers pointing out how much more focussed they feel their lessons are now and that there is more consistency and uniformity throughout the grade level.

7. The teachers were asked what advice they would offer principals and teachers who are trying to implement grade level meetings at their schools that are focused and productive. The teachers' responses indicate that a number of elements are needed: Principals must build trust among the staff and between the administration and the staff. But the administration must also make clear that they expect this sort of activity on an ongoing basis ("stay firm," one of the teachers says). Teachers must understand why they are doing this and be shown how it can help them and their students. They must also have the necessary guidance and *assistance*, from experts and from each other, to know what strategies to try. The final comments from one of the grade level co-chairs encapsulate the support and pressure that is required—"you have to pull and push at the same time," she says, as if speaking to principals. Her final words: "It's kind of that real delicate balance."

8. In the final segment of this group interview, one of the teachers reflects on the changes she has seen in kindergarten children's achievement since the first year she taught, when the first grade teachers gave her and her colleagues "an earful" about

where students needed to be when they began first grade. This helped them clarify their goals and “understand what we needed to do.”

III. Classrooms

9. We next get a peek at two classrooms, Ms Quezada’s and Ms Estline’s. Notice the quantity and quality of children’s writing. Note also their general enthusiasm. Despite a fairly academic program that stresses reading and writing in kindergarten, there is no evidence of stress or inappropriate pressures of any sort. To the contrary, children appear motivated, engaged, and eager to demonstrate what they are learning.

10. In the final segment we visit Ms Estline’s and Ms Quezada’s classrooms and hear from them what they are working on and how their grade level meetings inform what they are doing in their classes. Notice the focused environment that helps children acquire literacy skills in reading and writing while maintaining a very high degree of positive affect. Note also how important the process of specifying learning goals, assessing students, discussing student progress, and trying out instructional strategies—all at the grade level meetings—has become.

Promoting School Improvement: the School Change/Getting Results Model

The video excerpts you saw are partly the result of a school improvement effort my colleagues and I have been working on for the past 5 years; and before that at a previous pilot school for another 5 years. I should make a disclaimer at this point: I wish I could say that what you saw in the video is typical of what goes on at our project schools. In reality, this grade level was functioning at a very high level, even among the project schools. However, we know from an independent process evaluation we contracted an outside evaluator to conduct last year that you are far more likely to see these types of interactions during grade level meetings at the Getting Results (GR) schools than you are at the comparison schools (McDougall et al., 2002). Sometimes meetings are uneven; sometimes not all grade levels “buy in” equally. But within and across GR schools there is a qualitative difference. By and large teachers devote some amount of time discussing goals for student learning, indicators gauging progress, and strategies for improvement. In contrast, we rarely see sustained conversations around these topics at the comparison schools; much less do we find any evidence of classroom instructional practices or improvements grounded in ongoing discussions and analysis among teachers.

This effort we have been engaged in is conceptually rooted in a model of school improvement that initially we dubbed rather blandly “The School Change Model,” but which has since been renamed “The Getting Results Model” by our school colleagues. We are very happy with the change in names, because we think the new name is largely accurate. Based on analyses of standardised and performance-based measures conducted by my colleague Bill Saunders (2002), the schools in our project are getting results, compared to the rest of the school district and to comparison schools we have been following and monitoring since the beginning of the project. Whereas our nine project schools (all heavily minority and low SES) were below

district means on standardised achievement measures four years ago, they have now met or even surpassed these means. In comparison to six demographically comparable schools, our project schools have seen their achievement rise at a higher rate; whereas four years ago their achievement was very similar, now the project schools are achieving at higher levels. Our project schools also outperformed another group of schools in the district funded for a separate school improvement effort. The positive impact the project has had on Hispanic students' achievement is particularly notable (Saunders, 2002).

To be sure, there is still a great deal of work to do. None of these schools is achieving anywhere near where they should be. We do not want to overstate the magnitude of the effects we have obtained, but the trends are positive and somewhat encouraging.

What does the Getting Results Model consist of? It involves four key elements, or change factors that we believe act as levers or, if you prefer an organic rather than mechanistic metaphor, ingredients for change. There is nothing particularly novel or exotic about these four factors; they are fairly easy to find in the school reform/improvement literature. They are: *goals* that are set and shared; *indicators* that measure success; *assistance* from capable others; and *leadership* that supports and pressures (Goldenberg, in press; Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994).

If you think back to the segments we saw of the teachers' meeting and of my group interview with them, you will perhaps recall direct or indirect evidence of these change elements—the goals the school as a whole and these teachers in particular had for their students' learning; the indicators they were using, both for groups of children and for individual children, to gauge progress toward those goals; the assistance they were providing each other and that others, not in the group, were providing (e.g., the writing coach); and the leadership—leadership that supported and pressured—provided in the group by the grade level co-chairs but also at the school level by a principal who firmly, but in a supportive way, led the teachers to engage in this process.

If there is anything distinctive about our formulation, I think it is this superordinate concept of settings—the places where these change elements actually take root and spur action. Without these reliable and predictable settings in place—where people come together over a period of time to accomplish tangible and specific ends, school reform, change, or improvement—whatever we call it—remains only so much talk. And talk—mere words—is a very poor substitute for action.

Conclusion

We face many challenges in our efforts to improve schooling for all students. One challenge is taking advantage of the knowledge and abilities of educators working in the schools. Another is utilising the many insights gained over the past two decades of school reform. We are constructing a knowledge base that can help guide our efforts productively. Part of that knowledge base suggests we need to create consistent and reliable settings where teachers can come together regularly to discuss goals for student learning, how to gauge whether those goals are being attained, and

various options for helping students and teachers attain the goals. Few would disagree with this formulation, but it is easier said than done. Getting it done requires strong and supportive leadership at school sites, from administrators as well as from teachers (Teacher Leadership, 1995).

Many elements are required for successful school reform; no simple formulas exist. One key element to which we have paid insufficient attention is the creation of settings for school improvement, places and instances where people come together over a prolonged period of time in order to achieve certain goals. When the "egg crate ecology" of schools gives way to an ecology defined by settings that focus on teaching and learning—and how to improve both—we are likely to see meaningful actions and substantive change, not mere words.

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