Getting Better Schools

Despite widespread calls for school reform and many seemingly ineffective schools, some schools appear to work—even with the most disadvantaged youth. Three RAND studies have identified especially effective schools, the changes needed to emulate these models, and systemwide strategies that make reform possible.

Schools that work

A study by Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster, and Tamar Gendler of Catholic and special public high schools in New York City revealed that students in these institutions, which the research team call focus schools, clearly achieve more than similar students in standard schools. More students graduate, SAT scores are higher, and more black students score above the national mean. Family characteristics and student motivation can explain only part of the difference; the studied populations were very similar in background and abilities. In fact, a number of the Catholic-school students were there on scholarship and had been selected precisely because they were failing in public schools.

Two features set focus schools apart. First, they have clear, uncomplicated missions and strong social contracts. They concentrate on school outcomes to the exclusion of virtually everything else, emphasize a core of skills for all students, and clearly communicate everyone’s responsibilities for accomplishing their objectives. They have a strong commitment to filling a parental role and aggressively mold student attitudes and values. In contrast, standard public schools have diffuse missions: civil rights mandates, state and federal program regulations, union contracts. They respond more to these than to students and parents. They focus on programs and procedures, let staff and students define their own roles, and see themselves primarily as transmitters of information.

Second, focus schools are strong, essentially site-managed, problem-solving organizations. They can pursue their own missions, solve their own problems, and manage their own relationships. This independence need not produce innovation, but it does let students and staff consider their school a special creation that reflects their efforts and meets their needs.

Standard schools, on the other hand, are essentially franchises of a uniform model, with little capacity for independent action. Staff and students have little reason to consider these schools their own.

Reform through site-based management?

Hill, Foster, and Gendler concluded that school systems could, in fact, make the key features of focus schools available to all students. But giving each school the level of control that focus schools have implies critical requirements. A second study, by Paul T. Hill and Josephine Bonan, examining five major urban and suburban school systems that have adopted site-based
management, revealed similar principles. Key lessons include:

- Schools must be built around a small core of committed people; they cannot be mass-produced. Because neighborhoods, staff, and students differ, schools must be free to develop distinctive characters. But site-based management alone is not enough; a host of other changes is also required. The challenge to teachers will be to move beyond short-term preoccupations with working conditions and address such issues as climate and instructional practices. The challenge for school boards and superintendents will be to help schools and guarantee quality in a system whose basic premise is variety, not uniformity.

- Schools should be judged on student benefit—not on compliance with procedural requirements. Does the school define and maintain an appropriate, distinctive character? Are the school's climate, curriculum, and pedagogy well matched to student needs? Does the school deliver on its promises of experiences it will provide for students?

- Students and staff must be able to choose among schools. Parental choice is the ultimate accountability mechanism for any system of site-managed schools. Teachers and principals must take the initiative to inform parents and the general public about what they intend to do for students—and to show proof of performance.

Reforming systems to support good schools

Trying to reform schools from the central office may be a formula for failure. But the Hill and Bonan study revealed that site-managed schools can lead to real changes only if it is a system's basic reform strategy. Schools cannot change if the expectations and traditional control mechanisms of the centralized system are intact. So systems, too, must change. A RAND study by Paul T. Hill, Arthur E. Wise, and Leslie Shapiro of six cities that have made progress in reforming their school systems suggests how people in other cities can get started.

The researchers found that an urban school system can be turned around only if the entire community unites on its behalf. The problems cannot be solved by the educational bureaucracy alone. Further, improvement takes a long process of trial and error. Community support won't survive that process if it is based on promises of easy solutions; long-term support depends on a widely held conviction that failure of education could threaten the social and economic future of the community.

The most promising reform processes were supported by coalitions, with fairly consistent roles for the major players. School superintendents need not dominate, but must help create a public mandate for improvement. School boards should play a limited role, helping set priorities and evaluating the superintendent in their light. Business leaders can provide funds to underwrite innovations, but their greatest contribution is putting educational problems at the top of the local political agenda. Various local groups can make plans, but they cannot create classroom changes without the participation of a powerful, well-led teachers' union. Finally, state and federal governments should not try to regulate or standardize. Their role should be limited to assistance: encouraging and providing modest support for agenda setting and strategic planning, and waiving requirements for urban districts that enroll the most minority students.

The study found that many big cities already have the financial, intellectual, and leadership resources to build their own agendas and strategies for reform. Its results suggest some fundamental tasks for the coalitions to pursue; getting the larger community involved in education; subordinating the traditional roles of boards, administrators, and teachers to the larger imperative of systemwide improvement; and making information about school needs, resources, and performance widely available. Access to information not only lets citizens compare claims with performance, but also pays off in community support.