TIME FOR IMPROVEMENT

Research-Based Expectations for Implementation of the Community Schools Initiative in New York City

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June 2016

Introduction

Attempts to dramatically turn around schools to show quick improvements in student outcomes are often counterproductive, resulting instead in school conditions associated with persistently low performance.[1] Many quick school turnarounds, like those initiated via the federal School Improvement Grant program, were associated with unintended, negative outcomes such as high teacher turnover, large numbers of inexperienced teachers, administrative instability, poor school and classroom climate, and socioeconomic segregation.[2] In contrast, reform efforts grounded in the idea of sustained improvement over time are more likely to improve student achievement along with other critical aspects of the school.[3] The evidence is clear: in the first three to four years, schools generally achieve only partial implementation of complex change efforts, with full implementation taking upwards of five to 10 years.[4]

Part of the challenge in turning around schools is that outside-of-school factors likely account for twice as much of the variance in student outcomes as do inside-of-school factors.[5] Accordingly, the community schools approach—one of the most prominent and research-based approaches to sustained reform—addresses the academic, social-emotional, and health needs of children as well as the capacity to systemically meet these needs in communities of concentrated poverty.

Models such as the Community Schools Initiative in New York City seek to address these out-of-school factors by providing wrap-around supports to students while also engaging teachers and parents in the process of school change. This initiative is amongst the key school improvement efforts in New York City, and may offer many important lessons for school improvement. While community school models show promise, evidence and logic tell us that there must be time between initiating a program and seeing measureable results.[6] Careful and complex efforts are needed in order to engage the broader school and community in addressing the educational and other needs of students, while also creating vibrant learning environments with a stable cadre of engaged teachers and parents.[7]

Three major findings from the school improvement literature inform the New York City Community Schools Initiative: (a) school improvement is a process,[8] (b) full implementation of a whole school transformation requires meaningful support and will take upwards of five years,[9] and (c) measuring school reform success should use multiple and interim measures.[10]

School Improvement is a Process

In their study of the Chicago School Reform Act, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues explained that sustainable school improvement is a process that happens over time and in different phases with distinct forms of growth.[11] Specifically, they explain that institutional change in schools happens in two phases: the initiating phase, in which the status quo is challenged, followed by the sustaining phase where roles, rules and responsibilities are reshaped.[12] They found that successful cases of individual school change took more than five years to implement. The first evidence of change was the restructuring of school operations, while changes in student achievement were among the last indicators to move. They conclude that rather than judging progress of a whole-school reform based on short-term standards such as immediate change in student test scores, it is wise to first look for reasonable intermediate markers of progress. Such intermediate indicators provide school leaders with formative feedback and evidence to use in improving the transformation efforts. In their study, schools with more successful reform efforts approached school change as a developmental process that occurs along no set timetable.

Importantly, Bryk and his colleagues also found that successful restructuring and instructional improvement was most likely in those Chicago schools that developed strong systems for democratic parent participation during the initiating phase. School personnel built on these systems to create and maintain supportive relationships with parents and community members during the sustaining phase. In addition, teachers in these schools were supported by school leadership and outside partners to improve classroom teaching, and they were cooperatively engaged in the school improvement process. Successful schools had stronger participation and relationships among stakeholders, supported by facilitative and inclusive principal leadership.[13]

Even for schools that are highly successful in the first stage of reform, significant change in student achievement will not generally be measurable until the sustaining phase. In fact, the researchers found that "a primary emphasis on short-term trends in student achievement could actually be detrimental to the progress of an institutional reform."[14] In a subsequent study, Bryk and other colleagues found that changes in student test scores during the first two years of a reform would not predict which schools were on their way to be-

coming improving schools.[15]

Accordingly, policymakers should use reasonable markers of progress and formative feedback on missteps and achievements to guide future change.[16] As part of this process, including community leaders in creating and executing early evaluations strengthens the capacity of the local school leadership.[17] This type of approach is more constructive, evidence-based and sustainable than immediately focusing attention on high-stakes consequences like school closure.

Full Implementation of a Whole School Transformation Requires Meaningful Support and Time

Research offers strong cautions against claims of miraculous school change. Instead, changing a school's culture and practices in sustainable ways that improve student learning takes years of commitment by all stakeholders in the school.[18] Increased opportunities to learn arise through new resources, supports, and approaches to teaching and learning. Key components of the success that emerge across studies include:

- Effective schools have stable leaders who support teachers in improving instruction, engage parents and community members as partners in effecting change, forge strong relationships and foster trust, establish a common vision, and continually refine practice.[19]

- Effective schools have teacher leadership that's distributed through the school and that facilitates a continuous improvement cycle. As a result, the school culture shifts toward increased trust and engagement of teachers as well as the development of their professional knowledge.[20]

- Effective schools meaningfully engage families and the community. This engagement provides direct supports for students at risk of failure or poor performance in school as well as added accountability for serving low-income communities of color. This creates relational trust among adults and students and positively affects student efficacy.[21]

The work of David Kirp and his team illustrate these points in more detail. Kirp examined 25 years of district-level reform in Union City, New Jersey.[22] Union City schools served predominately low-income and immigrant students during the study period. The schools in this district evolved to become a coherent system whose students exceed demographic predictions and perform approximately as well as the state average on state achievement tests and have a graduation rate of 89.4%. These measured benefits did not happen immediately—they emerged gradually over two decades and reflect changes such as the implementation and sustaining of a system of schools with high-quality, full-day universal pre-K; bilingual programs; hands-on help for both teachers and students; challenging curriculum; strong parental engagement; and high expectations for all.

Kirp reported on this research in a 2013 book called *Improbable Scholars*, in which he stressed the district's rejection of quick fixes and explained that with time and support school districts can dramatically improve.[23] Rather than using market-driven techniques such as closing schools with lower test scores, importing Teach for America recruits, or proliferating charter schools, the district worked to get educators to design curriculum based

on evidence, collaborative work and parent engagement.

Such findings are not new. In fact, James Comer reported in 1980 that the New Haven schools he helped restructure did not see measurable improvements for at least five years.[24]

Measuring School Reform Success Should Use Multiple and Interim Measures

Policies that demand rapid school turnaround largely ignore the complexity of reforming schools for sustainable improvement and also ignore out-of-school factors such as poverty, race and systemic funding disparities.[25] These mistakes arise, in part, from an imbalanced focus on test scores that can be gamed to show temporary and shallow improvements. Instead, policies should look to a broad range of appropriate interim indicators to assess whether a school is improving.[26] Indicators need to address all stages and aspects of a change effort.[27] A broader framework allows schools and systems to measure such factors as changes in school climate; the growth of school and family partnerships and parent participation; and the increase in teacher knowledge, cooperation, leadership and ownership, all alongside several measures of student progress.

Measures of student achievement should also be comprehensive. In addition to test scores, indicators like student engagement with schooling, attendance, retention and dropout rates, graduation rates, course-taking and GPA, the quality of student projects, and student health and wellness are useful to track. Evaluations of sustainable reforms are best done in collaboration with community leaders and parents—the collaboration strengthens the knowledge and expertise of local actors to enable more effective local democratic accountability over the long term.[28]

As noted earlier in the description of research from Bryk and his colleagues, intermediate markers of progress provide school leaders with formative feedback and evidence to use in improving the transformation efforts.[29] Those intermediate markers should arise from a reform's theory of action or logic model, which can be thought of as steps that are expected to happen along the way and that will lead to the anticipated positive outcomes of the reform. A theory of action will require progress in particular areas; if that progress is not emerging, additional efforts will be needed and eventually—if necessary—the reform should be abandoned.[30] A community schools initiative, for example, should show interim progress in areas such as building strong relationships with parents and other community members, and putting in place resources and supports needed by students.

Recommendations for New York City Community Schools Initiative

Based on the reviewed research, we recommend that those interested in the New York City Community Schools Initiative, now finishing its second year of implementation, should initially look to indicators that are more appropriate for short-term measures of success. Test score increases and other measures of desirable outcomes may follow from changed learning environments, but the full effects will emerge only with longer periods of exposure.[31] The research is clear: sustained and serious effort is necessary for most meaningful

school reforms.[32] Building capacity and shifting practices and culture can increase student learning, which in turn will show up in later measured outcomes[33]. Each step is beneficial and involves immediate change; but each step is also complex and requires time to be implemented, institutionalized and felt.[34] Teachers and school leadership cannot fully integrate a complex reform overnight; parents and community will similarly not fall into line, taking up new roles in response to a top-down request—nor should they.[35] Schools serving low-income students and students of color exist within a social context and history of disinvestment and systemic racism, all of which must also be considered and responded to when planning such reforms.[36]

Community schools are well-positioned to create and sustain changes by helping to address these needs and to engage families and community members in a meaningful, equitable and shared way. Like any change effort, these reforms should proceed along with a strong process for gathering and responding to evaluative feedback. They should be held accountable for achieving interim objectives, along with the research-based understanding that achieving long-term outcomes will require sustained support and time to build the local capacity in and around the schools to ensure full implementation. The New York City Community Schools Initiative can effectively serve its students and communities if they are given the time and resources that this research demonstrates are needed for success.

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