

When I visit and observe classrooms, which I do a lot these days, I am impressed both with how hard teachers are working on important issues of instructional practice and how large the gap is between where teaching practice currently is and where it needs to be to successfully provide access to high-level learning for all students.

At the classroom level, it is now much easier to find teachers who not only are exemplars of high-level instructional practice, but also powerful peer coaches for other teachers in their own schools. At the school level, finding schools that are exemplars in supporting teachers' instructional improvement through the use of resources is also much easier. Likewise, many school systems have in place broad-gauge strategies of instructional improvement and have demonstrated how to organize and manage support for schools in their improvement efforts. So we have many reasons for optimism.

However, our professional development practices, at their best, are not powerful enough to do all the work they are being asked to do by the accountability systems under which schools operate. We are much better at improving teaching and learning at the elementary level than at the middle and upper grades. This is partly because we are dealing with

very different problems in the middle and upper grades, and partly, in candor, because the culture of teaching and the individual teachers in those grades are much more resistant to outside influences on their practice. This problem is becoming more serious the more successful we become in the lower grades. For example, students in the middle grades often are unable to do higher-level tasks that we know they could do in the lower grades. Students are essentially being “untaught” by low-level instruction, reinforced by a counterproductive culture in the middle and upper grades.

In addition, the difference in achievement between the highest- and lowest-performing schools in the same systems is often increasing as a consequence of the failure of our best professional development strategies in the lowest-performing schools. In Boston, for example, which has one of the nation's more coherent and effective improvement strategies, a group of low-performing schools has received all the support and resources that other schools have received, yet the

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THOUGHT LEADER

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Let's act like professionals

group's performance is stuck at a very low level. When we look carefully at these schools, we find that they do not have the internal capacity to use the external support and resources they receive. They are so atomized that they lack the basic internal coherence necessary to act collectively on instructional problems. These schools require a different kind of intervention prior to professional development focused on instructional support to be able to translate that support into working organizational routines.

Finally, federal and state accountability policies are overinvested in testing and sanctions and underinvested in the kind of support for human capital required to meet the targets set by the accountability system. This is an extremely difficult political issue. Policy makers are rewarded by taking credit for the successes — and blaming schools for the failures — that are made evident through the accountability system. They receive few, if any, rewards for investing in the knowledge necessary to meet accountability targets, much less creating an institu-

tional infrastructure that will support and sustain improvements in instructional practice over time. Educators are accountable to policy makers for improvements in quality and performance. Policy makers apparently are not accountable to educators for providing the institutional structures and resources necessary to produce those improvements.

These are some of the most serious challenges — intellectual, institutional, and political — that I see for the future of professional learning in education. How do we deepen and broaden what we have learned from the early stages of instructional improvement and push this knowledge further into more challenging settings, push it upward into a much more resistant environment in the middle and upper grades? How do we develop intervention strategies that prepare schools with extremely low organizational capacity to capitalize on the new knowledge they receive through professional development? How do we strengthen and solidify the political base underlying current school improvement efforts to hold policy makers accountable for the investment in the knowledge and skill of teachers and administrators necessary for the next stages of improvement?

One common response would take educators a long way toward answering these questions: Educators should begin to act more like professionals. One thing is clear about the early stages of systemic school improvement efforts — a body of expert knowledge is required to carry them off. The knowledge is partly technical (instructional expertise and the accompanying knowledge of practices that promote adult learning), partly managerial (knowledge about organizational design and resource allocation), and partly social/political (knowledge of how to make the institutional connections necessary to sustain an improvement strategy over

FROM THE FIELD

Laura Reasoner Jones

Take advantage of technology



“IDEALLY, MUCH of professional development would be technology-based, for example, through a format that lets teachers video themselves teaching and then share that video online for their peers to analyze. It will be a way to virtually open classroom doors.

“We need to make teachers aware of the potential technology has, both in delivering and differentiating content, to improve teaching and learning. And we

need to teach teachers how to take advantage of kids' wonderful interest in technology to make kids more productive and creative learners. Technology would be as much a part of teachers' and students' lives as pencils or pens.”

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time). It is time to make this knowledge proprietary — that is, to require that practitioners master it before they advance to positions of formal authority and responsibility, and to use the knowledge, as professionals do, to exclude from practice people who don't have it. Knowledge that is being developed through efforts at large-scale improvement needs to be the basis for forming expectations for what all practitioners should know in order to practice.

Another prerequisite of professionalism is to begin to treat knowledge of the profession as collective rather than individual. Educators are experts in professional self-sabotage. The dominant culture of education in the U.S. tends to define knowledge and expertise as an attribute of the individual. Whether we're talking about talented teachers or talented leaders, we tend to say that these people have “gifts” that other people don't have. Professionals talk about practices, not attributes. The challenge for the next generation of educators is to move away from the culture of personalized practices and toward a cul-

ture of shared practices that can be used as the basis for the construction of a profession.

The ultimate practice of self-sabotage is the division among educators between administrators and teachers. Educators spend enormous time and energy working out their intramural squabbles over status and control, while policy makers are happy to play one side against the other in the interest of increased power and control for themselves. Again, professionals don't act like this. Professionals consolidate power around a base of knowledge and practice, and they use the authority that comes from that base to influence their environment.

The work of school improvement is unlikely to advance much beyond its current level unless educators begin to exercise some professional accountability for practice within their own ranks and unless they begin to consolidate their authority and influence to hold policy makers accountable for the investments in the institutions and professional development necessary to make large-scale improvement work. ■