This brief paper is a presentation that preceded another case of considering the ongoing dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of centralized and decentralized school-improvement processes. It attempts to raise a number of questions about the relationship between state-designed standards and accountability initiatives and change and systems theory. Following are three of those questions: (1) How can centralized school-improvement processes overcome the need to be conceptualized at the local level when they are not designed locally? (2) How can the dual nature of the school-improvement process be utilized to facilitate a different model of school improvement that combines the best of centralization and decentralization? and (3) How do change and systems theory impede or facilitate stakeholders' knowledge of the school-improvement process at the local and state level. (Author)
A Discussion of Change Theory, System Theory, and State Designed Standards and Accountability Initiatives

Dr. Larry McNeal
And
Dr. W. Keith Christy
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Little Rock, Arkansas

Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration
Jacksonville, FL
November 2001
Introduction

In a previous presentation, information was presented on state designed standards and accountability initiatives in the Southwestern Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) service area (McNeal & Christy, 2001). The SEDL service area includes the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Within the region governors, legislators and departments of education have been actively involved in promoting and mandating school improvement efforts since the A Nation At Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) publication. This publication served as catalyst for all educational stakeholders to become more actively involved in improving public education. The publication also helped to redefine the role of each group of stakeholders. School improvement was no longer considered a local issue but a state and national issue and as a result the school improvement effort became more centralized at the state level. The centralization of school improvement at the state level raises a number of issues relative to change and how it occurs in the educational system.

The research on change theory recognizes that change can occur on numerous levels simultaneously or in concert (Fullan, 1994; Hall, 2002). The research also is clear on the need for change to be just as much a local phenomenon as it is a global one (Sarason, 1990). In addition, the old adage about the best change is that change that arises from the reality of those that need to be changed because it is at that level that change has its most profound impact (Sarason, 1990). The localization of the change process must then be considered as an important factor in the improvement of schools.

System theory indicates that an organization must be understood as a whole entity because the sum is greater than its individual pieces (Hall, 2002). Schools as organizations are complex in nature because of the various pieces; however, it is the collective sum of the pieces that facilitate a clear understanding of the dynamics and challenges associated with school improvement. The applicability of
the system approach to addressing the dynamics and challenges is documented throughout the research on school improvement (Hawley, 1988). The research includes state designed standards and accountability initiatives that focus on individual schools as well as school districts, and the entire state school systems as the unit needing improvement. The research also documents efforts where the unit needing improvement is a single school.

In considering how change occurs in complex organizations such as public schools it is apparent that it occurs simultaneously on several levels but not necessarily as a concert would perform “Mozart’s 5th Symphony” but rather like Tina Turner’s rendition of “Proud Mary, Keep On Rolling.” It is the duality nature of change in complex organizations that makes the change process so unpredictable but rich with meaning. It is also the duality that causes the dynamics and challenges relative to improving public schools in an environment where the biggest stakeholder is now the state as opposed to local school boards. Again, change theory is consistent about the effectiveness of change when it is based on the local reality of those needing to be changed. This implies that state designed standards and accountability initiatives are by their very being born into conflict because they lack local reality. The conceptualization of the school improvement process then is subjected to competing visions of the school improvement process.

The whole school model of school improvement being implemented by the SEDL is founded on the notion that school improvement is a multilevel process with a role for all stakeholders within the system, however, the conceptualization of the school improvement process is localized because the unit of improvement is the individual school (Southwestern Educational Development Laboratory, 2001). This approach also fits the “Theory To Practice Continuum” model used by the presenters to explain the importance localization plays in promoting and facilitating school improvement at the school building
level. The theory links practice to reflection and then back to practice before being linked back again to theory. The continuum model is predicated on change and systems theories.

In summary, the presenters have attempted to present another case for considering the ongoing dialogue between centralized versus decentralized school improvement processes. The presenters have also attempted to raise a number of important questions about the relationship between state designed standards and accountability initiatives and change and systems theory. Three of those questions are identified below:

1. How can centralized school improvement processes overcome the need to be conceptualized at the local level when they are not designed locally?

2. How can the duality nature of the school improvement process be utilized to facilitate a different model of school improvement that combines the best of centralization and decentralization?

3. How does change and systems theory impede or facilitate stakeholders’ knowledge of the school improvement process at the local and state level?
References


I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>A Discussion of Change Theory, System Theory, and State Designed Standards and Accountability Initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Larry McNeal, Ph.D.; W. Keith Christy, Ed.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Source</td>
<td>Arkansas Association of Colleges for Teacher Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication Date</td>
<td>November 3, 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign in the indicated space following.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2A</th>
<th>Level 2B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents</td>
<td>The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents</td>
<td>The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY</td>
<td>PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY</td>
<td>PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)</td>
<td>TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)</td>
<td>TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample Sticker" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample Sticker" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample Sticker" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g. electronic) and paper copy. Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only. Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)
IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name: ____________________________
Address: ____________________________

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:
Document Acquisitions Department
ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
5207 University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403-5207