



A L B E R T S H A N K E R I N S T I T U T E

Building a New Structure For School Leadership



BY RICHARD F. ELMORE

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Foreword

PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL SYSTEMS, as they are presently constituted, are simply not led in ways that enable them to respond to the increasing demands they face under standards-based reform. Further, if schools, school systems, and their leaders respond to standards-based reforms the way they have responded to other attempts at broad scale reform of public education over the past century, they will fail massively and visibly, with an attendant loss of public confidence and serious consequences for public education. The way out of this problem is through the large scale improvement of instruction, something public education has been unable to do to date, but which is possible with dramatic changes in the way public schools define and practice leadership.

Contrary to the myth of visionary leadership that pervades American culture, most leaders in all sectors of society are creatures of the organizations they lead. Nowhere is this more true than in public education, where principals and district superintendents are recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of practice. As in the military and the church, one does not get to lead in education without being well socialized to the norms, values, predispositions, and routines of the organization one is leading.

Consequently, current education leaders are no better equipped than the organizations they lead to meet the challenges posed by standards-based reform. (*Lortie 1987*) So relying on leaders to solve the problem of systemic reform in schools is, to put it bluntly, asking people to do something they don't know how to do and have had no occasion to learn in the course of their careers. There are, of course, a few gifted and visionary leaders who are busy inventing solutions to the problems of systemic reform, just as there are a few gifted and visionary leaders at any moment of history in American education. These exceptions prove the rule. Few visionary leaders have had any effect on the dominant institutional patterns of American education.

Here, then, is the seeming conundrum: Schools are being asked by elected officials—policy leaders, if you will—to do things they are largely unequipped to do. School leaders are being asked to assume responsibilities they are largely unequipped to assume, and the risks and consequences of failure are high for everyone, but especially high for children. This paper attempts to chart a way out of this conundrum through an understanding of large scale instructional improvement.

This paper looks outward—focusing on the imperatives of public school leadership and the demands standards-based accountability place upon it—rather than inward. It does not, in other words, focus on understanding how people in existing leadership positions define and do their work. I take this perspective because I don't think there is much in current conceptions of leadership in public schools that extends comfortably to the new conceptions. The logic of large scale instructional improvement leads to differences in kind, rather than differences in degree. If public schools survive, leaders will look very different from the way they presently look, both in who leads and in what these leaders do.

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The Logic of Standards-Based Reform and the Institution of Public Education

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM has a deceptively simple logic: schools and school systems should be held accountable for their contributions to student learning. Society should communicate its expectations for what students should know and be able to do in the form of standards, both for what should be taught and for what students should be able to demonstrate about their learning. School administrators and policy makers, at the state, district, and school level, should regularly evaluate whether teachers are teaching what they are expected to teach and whether students can demonstrate what they are expected to learn. The fundamental unit of accountability should be the school, because that is the organizational unit where teaching and learning actually occurs. Evidence from evaluations of teaching and student performance should be used to improve teaching and learning and, ultimately, to allocate rewards and sanctions. (*Elmore, Abelman et al. 1996*)

This logic of standards-based reform has become, over the past fifteen years, a fundamental part of the architecture of policy and governance in American education. Virtually all states have adopted some form of content and/or performance standards. Most states are moving, in at least a rudimentary way, toward accountability systems that evaluate schools based on student performance. While the design of these policies leaves a great deal to be desired, both in specificity and internal logic, the politics that surround these policies are very energetic and visible. We may get the version of standards-based reform that advocates envision or we may get a corrupted and poorly thoughtout evil twin. But we will almost surely get some version of standards-based reform in virtually every jurisdiction over the next decade.

When historians of education look back at the late twentieth century, they will almost certainly describe it as a critical period of changing policy perspectives on public education in the U.S. What they will describe by way of practices is considerably less certain. Like it or not, standards-based reform represents a fundamental shift in the relationship between policy and institutional practice. In terms of policy it is a direct attack on the most fundamental premises by which public education has been governed since its current structure emerged in the late nineteenth century. It is possible that the practice of public schooling will respond to standards-based reform in the same way it has responded to virtually every other large scale reform in the twentieth century. It may, in other words, try to bend the logic of the policy to the logic of how the existing institutions function, making the policy unrecognizable upon its arrival in the classroom. If this is the case, the consequences for public education will be severe; the institutions that emerge will look nothing like the present

ones, and the idea of a strong basic education system for all children will be lost in all but a rhetorical sense. It is also possible that public schools will find a way to incorporate the logic of standards-based reform into their practice of schooling, in which case the institutions that emerge will probably be very different from what exists today but will perpetuate a strong basic education system for all children. If public schools can adapt to the demands of standards-based reform they will have a better chance of survival.

How Did We Get Here—the Bane of “Loose-Coupling”

Early in the development of public schooling the United States, through local elites and national opinion leaders, opted for a form of organization based on locally centralized school bureaucracy, governed by elected boards, with relatively low status (mostly female) teachers working in relative isolation from each other under the supervision of (mostly male) administrators whose expertise was thought to lie mainly in their mastery of administrative rather than pedagogical skills. (*Tyack 1974, Tyack and Hansot 1982*)

As the scale of the enterprise grew, the institutional structure grew more elaborate and rigid. School districts expanded to include more schools, schools grew in size and complexity, and the extension of compulsory attendance through the secondary grades resulted in larger, more highly differentiated schools to deal with the diverse populations of previously uneducated students. (*Powell, Farrar et al. 1985*) All this was done, again by local elites and national opinion leaders, in the name of solid progressive principles: providing universal access to learning; providing local communities with direct control over their schools through elected boards; assuring that the overall administrative guidance of locally centralized systems was safely lodged in the hands of administrative experts; providing local economies with a supply of reasonably qualified labor; holding a large proportion of the youth population out of the labor force; and providing a credentialing system to allocate access to higher education.

The byproducts of this institutional form have been, among other things: relatively weak professionalization among teachers, since teaching was thought not to require expertise on a level with other, “real” professions and conditions of work were not conducive to the formation of strong professional associations among teachers; a relatively elaborate system of administrative overhead at the district and school level, thought to be necessary for adequate supervision of the relatively low-skill teacher force; and relatively large schools, thought to be a logical extension of principles of scientific management requiring economies of scale to produce efficiencies.

By the 1960s and early 1970s, analysts of this institutional structure had converged on a model that came to be called “loose-coupling.” (*Weick 1976; Rowan 1990; Meyer and Rowan 1992*) Derived from institutional sociology, this view, in brief, posits that the “technical core” of education—detailed decisions about what should be taught at any given time, how it should be taught, what students should be expected to learn at any given time, how they should be grouped within classrooms for purposes of instruction, what they should be required to do to demonstrate their knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, how their learning should be evaluated—resides in individual class-

rooms, not in the organizations that surround them.

Furthermore, the model posited that knowledge at the technical core is weak and uncertain. (*Bidwell 1965; Lortie 1975*) It cannot be clearly translated into reproducible behaviors, it requires a high degree of individual judgment, and it is not susceptible to reliable external evaluation. Therefore, the loose-coupling argument continues, the administrative superstructure of the organization – principals, board members, and administrators—exists to “buffer” the weak technical core of teaching from outside inspection, interference, or disruption.

Administration in education, then, has come to mean not the management of instruction but the management of the structures and processes around instruction. That which cannot be directly managed must, in this view, be protected from external scrutiny. Buffering consists of creating structures and procedures around the technical core of teaching that, at the same time, (1) protect teachers from outside intrusions in their highly uncertain and murky work, and (2) create the appearance of rational management of the technical core, so as to allay the uncertainties of the public about the actual quality or legitimacy of what is happening in the technical core. This buffering creates what institutional theorists call a “logic of confidence” between public schools and their constituents. Local board members, system-level administrators, and school administrators perform the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system, all in the name of creating and maintaining public confidence in the institutions of public education. Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, under highly uncertain conditions, manage the technical core. This division of labor has been amazingly constant over the past century.

The institutional theory of loose-coupling explains a great deal about the strengths and pathologies of the existing structure of public education. It explains why, for example, most innovation in schools, and the most durable innovations, occur in the structures that surround teaching and learning, and only weakly and idiosyncratically in the actual processes of teaching and learning. Most innovation is about maintaining the logic of confidence between the public and the schools, not about changing the conditions of teaching and learning for actual teachers and students. The theory of loose-coupling explains why schools continue to promote structures and to engage in practices that research and experience suggest are manifestly not productive for the learning of certain students. They include extraordinarily large high schools that create anonymous and disengaging environments for learning; rigid tracking systems that exclude large numbers of students from serious academic work; athletic programs that keep large numbers of students from participation in extracurricular activities; grouping practices in elementary school classrooms that provide less stimulation for struggling learners; special programs that remove students from regular instruction in the name of remediation, instructional aide programs that are sometimes little more than public employment programs for community members; and site-based governance structures that engage in decision making about everything except the conditions of teaching and learning.

Loose-coupling also explains why manifestly successful instructional practices that grow out of research or exemplary practice never take root in more than a small proportion of classrooms and schools. (*Cuban 1984; Cuban 1990; Tyack and Cuban 1995; Elmore 1996*) Because the administra-

tive structure of schools exists to buffer the instructional core from disruptions and improvements, and because teaching is isolated work, instructional improvements occur most frequently as a consequence of purely voluntary acts among consenting adults. The educational change literature is full of injunctions to respect the autonomy of teaching and the mystery of its fundamental practices—hence the inviolability of individual teachers’ choices about what to teach and how. This normative environment is a direct result of an institutional structure that is deliberately and calculatedly incompetent at influencing its core functions. Volunteerism is the only way to improve practice in an organization in which administrators do not purport to manage the core. Volunteerism leads to (1) innovations that are highly correlated with the personal values and predispositions of individual teachers and hence tend to be adopted only by a small proportion of receptive teachers at any given time; and (2) innovations that are largely disconnected from any collective goal or purpose of the school or the school system. Schools are consequently almost always aboil with some kind of “change,” but they are only rarely involved in any deliberate process of *improvement*, where progress is measured against a clearly specified instructional goal.

Loose-coupling explains the elusive and largely unsuccessful quest over the past century for school administrators who are “instructional leaders.” Instructional leadership is the equivalent of the holy grail in educational administration. Most credentialing programs for superintendents and principals purport, at least in part, to be in the business of preparing the next generation of instructional leaders. Most professional development for educational leaders makes at least symbolic reference to the centrality of instructional leadership to the work. Insofar as there is any empirical evidence on the frequency of actual instructional leadership in the work of school administrators, it points to a consistent pattern: direct involvement in instruction is among the least frequent activities performed by administrators of any kind at any level, and those who do engage in instructional leadership activities on a consistent basis are a relatively small proportion of the total administrative force. (*Murphy 1990; Cuban 1988*) School leaders are hired and retained based largely on their capacity to buffer teachers from outside interference and their capacity to support the prevailing logic of confidence between a school system and its constituencies. Again, the ethic of volunteerism prevails. Principals who develop the skills and knowledge required to actually do instructional leadership in a serious way do so because of their personal preferences and values, often at some personal cost to their own careers, not because they are expected to do so as a condition of their work. Overall we get about the proportion of instructional leaders in the administrative ranks that corresponds to the proportion of people in the population who are inclined to do that sort of work. The institutional structure does not promote, or select for, knowledge and skill related to instructional leadership; at best, it tolerates some proportion of the population who indulge in it out of personal commitment and taste.

Loose-coupling explains the nervous, febrile, and unstable condition of politics and leadership around most school systems of any size. The governance structure is designed to support the logic of confidence in the institutional structure of public schools, not to provide stability, guidance, or direction for the long-term improvement of school performance. Local politics is usually driven by pluralist imperatives; local factions mobilize by neighborhood, by racial or ethnic group, or by moral principle, they galvanize electoral support, and they reproduce, not surprisingly, the same political

divisions on school boards as exist in the community at large. Since politics is not about the instructional core, but about the logic of confidence between the schools and the community, all policy decisions are essentially about the symbolism of mobilizing and consolidating political constituencies. A smart board member, in this world, is one who spends most of his or her time using issues to consolidate political support. A smart superintendent is one who can count the number of board members, divide by two and, if necessary, add one. Superintendents come and go based on their capacity to maintain a working majority on a relatively unstable elected board, rather than on their capacity to focus the institution on its core functions and make steady improvements over time.

Finally, loose-coupling explains the attachment of educators and the public to what I will call “trait theories” of competence in instructional practice and leadership. Good teachers, good principals, and good superintendents are thought to be so, under trait theories, because they have the necessary personal qualities for the work, not because they have mastered some body of professional knowledge or because they work in an organizational environment in which they are expected to be competent at what they do as a condition of employment. Hence, many prescriptions for improving schools focus on recruiting and retaining “better” people, meaning people who are naturally predisposed to do whatever we want them to do.

An organization that purports to have little or no influence over its core functions is one that can be expected to subscribe to trait theories of competence. If the organization cannot influence what goes on in its core through how it is organized and managed, then it can only influence the core by selections based on the personal attributes of whom it recruits and retains. Hence, the success of the organization depends more on who gets in and who stays than on what happens to them while they are actually working in the organization.

The idea that people should acquire additional competencies over the course of their careers, that the organization should systematically invest in the improvement of these competencies, or, more controversially, that people should be expected to meet higher expectations for competence over the course of their careers—these expectations don’t exist, or exist only weakly and idiosyncratically, in organizations that purport not to be able to manage their core functions.

Enter Standards-Based Reform

With this overview of loose-coupling as background, it is not hard to identify why standards-based reform creates certain fundamental problems for public schooling—problems that probably can’t be solved by tinkering with the existing institutional structure—and why standards-based reform is often greeted with dismay and disbelief by experienced educators, who are battle worn veterans of past educational reform campaigns. The logic of standards-based reform is fundamentally at odds with the logic of loose-coupling, and this difference is not likely to be resolved in the usual way, by simply bending and assimilating the new policy into the existing institutional structure.

First and most surprisingly, standards-based reform violates the fundamental premise of loose coupling—buffering the technical core from interference by external forces. With standards-based

reform, policy reaches, at least in theory, directly into the instructional core of schools, making what actually gets taught, a matter of public policy and open political discourse. Content standards, even in their current somewhat clumsy and overspecified form, carry the explicit message that students should receive and absorb instruction in certain subject areas and on certain topics. Performance standards are even more threatening to the technical core because they assert that schools are accountable for what students learn, meaning that *someone* should manage the conditions of learning in schools so as to produce a given result.

Not surprisingly, teachers and administrators who have fully assimilated the norms and values of loose-coupling find these intrusions into the technical core to be both disconcerting and threatening. They often respond with well-known arguments that conjure up the mystery and inviolability of the unique relationship between each student and teacher and its need for distance from bureaucratic or policy controls. What's remarkable in the present political climate is how little weight these arguments now carry in policy discussions. The course of standards-based reform seems largely immune to these traditional arguments.

Second, standards-based reform hits at a critical weakness of the existing institutional structure, namely its inability to account for why certain students master academic content and can demonstrate academic performance while others do not. When the core technology of schools is buried in the individual decisions of classroom teachers and buffered from external scrutiny, outcomes are the consequence of mysterious processes that no one understands at the collective, institutional level. Therefore, school people and the public at large are free to assign causality to whatever their favorite theory suggests: weak family structures, poverty, discrimination, lack of aptitude, peer pressure, diet, television, etc.

Standards-based reform explicitly localizes accountability for student learning with the school and the people who work in it, and it carries the increasingly explicit message that students learn largely as a consequence of what goes on inside schools. Hence, schools are being asked to account for what students are actually taught and what they learn as a consequence of that teaching. And, whatever one may think about this theory—that students generally learn what they are taught, if they are taught with skill and understanding—it has a strong political, economic, and social appeal.

Third, standards-based reform undermines a basic premise of local governance of education because it identifies schools, not school districts, as the primary unit of accountability in virtually all state accountability systems. Governors and state legislators are typically polite and indirect about this issue, carefully constructing ways of including local school boards and superintendents in any description of how school accountability works. But the stark reality is that little more than a decade ago most states did not have the capacity to collect, analyze, and report data on individual schools. Now most do, thanks largely to the political imperatives elected officials feel to account for state education expenditures and to the miracles of modern information technology. When states have the capacity to collect data on individual schools, the individual school becomes the unit of accountability, and the remedies and sanctions that apply to low performance apply to schools. Districts may find a productive role to play in this system of accountability, if they try, but the institutional

drift of the system will create increasingly direct relationships between states and schools. The pluralist politics of local boards and administrators will increasingly be played out under a large, dark umbrella of state performance accountability requirements. Over time, it will become increasingly difficult to defend dysfunctional local politics in the face of increasing public scrutiny of individual school performance. Putting schools at the center of the accountability problem, in other words, has the effect of calling into question the purpose of locally centralized governance and administration.

These conflicts between the logic of standards-based reform and the logic of the traditional institutional structure of public education challenge both public schools and the people who work in them. The traditional arguments that have been used to defend the existing loosely-coupled institutional structure—the mystery and inviolability of teaching and learning, the sanctity of local preferences in the governance of schools, the generally positive support of local schools by their elites, etc.—will probably become weaker and less persuasive as evidence about the performance of schools accumulates over time. The usual process by which public schools deal with these external threats is to bend the new policy requirements to the logic of the existing institutional structure. In this case, the response would mean that policy makers and the public would, over time, accept educators' arguments that the core technology of education is highly uncertain and unspecifiable, and that most matters of instructional quality and performance in education are matters of personal preference and taste, for both educators and their clients. The idea that schools should meet certain specified standards of quality and performance would then recede into the mists of policy history. The problem with this scenario, of course, is that the imperative for school accountability will not go away, even if standards-based reform does, because policy makers are still left with the problem of how to account for the public expenditures they are making and what to do about the governance structure of public education.

Taking it to the Next Level: Challenges from the Market Model

The hallmark of standards-based reform is school-site accountability for common measures of student performance. The standard critique of this model is that it ignores the complexity and idiosyncrasy of teaching and learning and the necessary variability of local and school-site tastes and preferences. Within the current educational reform debate, the governance structure that best fits the view that all matters of quality and performance in education are matters of personal taste, preference, and judgment is, in fact, a market model. The most efficient way to allocate resources around matters of personal taste is to give public money directly to consumers to purchase education based on their own preferences (vouchers), or, in a slightly more domesticated version, to give money directly to schools based on the number of students they attract (capitation grants), or, in an even more domesticated version, to allow educators and their clients to escape the gravitational pull of the existing institutional structure by forming publicly supported schools that operate under independent charters (charter schools). Under each of these systems, the existing superstructure of local administration and governance in education becomes increasingly weak, unstable, and irrelevant to many educators and their clients.¹ Active choosers in each of these systems—on both the supply side and the demand side—have very strong incentives to escape the gravitational pull of locally centralized governance and administration. Entrepreneurial schools have little incentive to operate

¹ Notice also that vouchers, capitation grants, and charters are quintessential structural changes, in that they imply absolutely nothing about either the content or the quality of instruction, except insofar as quality can be defined as the satisfaction of consumer preferences (a tautology). So a major part of the political appeal of these policies, to both educators and policymakers, is that they don't require any commitment as to what will actually happen inside the structure, hence reproducing, in another form, the buffering of the technical core.

under local governance systems if they can function successfully, by the standards of consumer demand, as free agents. Parents and students with strong tastes and preferences, and the wherewithal to act on them, have little incentive to affiliate with centrally administered schools when they can express their preferences more directly through individual schools. Increasingly, then, the domain of centrally administered and governed public schools, under vouchers, capitation grants, or charters, becomes the domain of the non-choosers and the unchosen. I frequently tell my students that, if they want to see a possible future for the public schools, they should visit the public hospital system—a subsystem, in a largely capitation-based health care market, that specializes in clients no one else wants to serve, a subsystem that is also chronically underfinanced, and one in which the costs of serving clients bear little or no relationship to the reimbursements the hospitals receive through the capitation grant system. Such systems exist to catch the overflow of the unchosen from market-based capitation systems that work pretty well for active choosers.

So if public educators insist on pressing the inviolability of the instructional core of schools, and the durability of the institutional structure that supports that view, they are inviting policy makers simply to agree. They are also inviting them to then begin to shift the structure of public education by degrees into one based entirely on personal taste, preference and judgment. The stakes for the existing institutional structure of public education, and for the public at large, if this shift occurs, are extremely high. The shift, in essence, will mean that public responsibility toward education will be discharged when the available money is fully allocated to individual families or schools; what happens after the money has been allocated is the responsibility of the individuals and schools, not of the state. Any residual collective responsibility for whether students are exposed to high quality teaching and learning as a consequence of public expenditures, for whether the differentials in exposure to high quality teaching and learning are a matter of public concern, for what students know as a consequence of the teaching they have received, and for whether certain students routinely have access to more powerful knowledge than others—all these concerns become matters of individual taste, preference, and judgment, rather than matters of public policy discourse and debate.

So there are some reasons why public educators should be measured in their criticisms of standards-based reforms. The only thing that could be worse than opening up the instructional core of public schooling to external scrutiny and debate might be not doing so, and watching the public purposes of public education drift away into matters of individual taste and preference.

Leadership and the Imperative of Large Scale Improvement

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM has a deceptively simple logic: schools, and school systems, should be held accountable for their contributions to student learning. The rationale for maintaining local governance and administration of education in the U.S. lies principally in the possibility of using the institutional structure for large-scale improvement of instructional practice and student performance based on standards. In the language of economics, large scale improvement will increasingly be the main comparative advantage of local school districts in the competitive market for clients that will arise as schools and parents increasingly attempt to escape the gravitational pull of local school bureaucracy. Individual schools, operating largely as individual firms, have difficulty generating surplus resources for use in improving the skills and knowledge of their teachers and administrators. Individual schools that are part of larger corporations also have incentives, in markets largely defined by taste and preference, to underinvest in skill and knowledge, since they market their reputations for quality rather than any specific service or result. Most public school systems still have access to resources—largely now spent on non-instructional administrative overhead—that they can capture and invest in improvements in the skills and knowledge of principals and teachers. In the present structure, these issues of instructional practice and performance are typically left to individuals to decide. Principals and teachers declare whether a given change has worked based on whether they individually think they have altered their practice in useful ways and whether they think students know and can do things they haven't known or done before. Not surprisingly, this situation produces lots of change and not much improvement.

Now add the problem of scale, a key weakness of the existing institutional structure. Improvement implies not just that any given unit in a system is improving (classroom, grade level, school, etc.) but that all units are improving at some rate. In the language of statistics, the mean, or average, of quality and performance in all units is increasing over time, while the variation among units in quality and performance is decreasing.

Next add the problem of context. The problems of the educational system are the problems of the smallest units in that system, and each unit faces a different version of the overall problem of the system. If the overall problem of the system is student performance on higher order cognitive tasks (explaining, for example, why a change in temperature of a few degrees in an ecosystem could produce a large change in the plant or animal life in that system; why $3/5$ and $18/30$ are equivalent fractions; or why Richard Wright and James Baldwin disagreed on the nature of blackness), this problem will be present in very different forms in every classroom where it occurs. Different groups of

students will have different prior knowledge of the basic concepts and different attitudes toward the importance of knowing them. Different groups of students will bring different cultural, linguistic, and cognitive understandings to bear on the problem. At the school level, differences at the classroom level aggregate into differences in the overall culture of expectations for learning, order, and engagement, into the structure of opportunities that determine whether students get access to the content and teaching at all, and into whether they get it in a form that engages them. So the problem of improvement at each location in a system has to be solved in a way that produces results that are roughly consistent across many highly varied contexts.

Next add the problem of feedback. Most of what happens in organizations engaged in large scale improvement is collective problem-solving, structured by a common set of expectations about what constitutes a good result. A major source of learning in such situations is analysis and discussion of successes and failures, and feedback about this into the larger pool of knowledge and skill in the organization. Improvement seldom, if ever, occurs on a straight trajectory; it typically involves bumps and slides, as well as gratifying leaps. Learning about improvement occurs in the growth and development of common understandings about why things happen the way they do. Notice also that learning depends, to a very large degree, on the existence of some variation in the overall system. If everyone is doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way (a highly unlikely event in a situation where contexts vary dramatically by school and classroom), then we have no internal evidence on which to base judgments about how it might be done better.

Finally, add the problem of benchmarks or standards. Someone usually knows how to do something better than you do, no matter how well you may think you know how to do it. Using variation in practice and performance for purposes of improvement means exploiting situations in which someone, inside or outside the organization, knows more than you do about what works. Often the knowledge gleaned from other contexts is woefully incomplete; it comes with blank spaces in critical places. So the task of learning from other people in other contexts is an active one of analyzing similarities and differences, adapting what makes sense, and leaving behind what doesn't. The essential problem here, though, is that the knowledge we need to solve problems often doesn't reside close at hand; it has to be found through active inquiry and analysis.

Improvement, then, is change with direction, sustained over time, that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don't.

De-Romanticizing Leadership

Leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement. This is a deliberately deromanticized, focused, and instrumental definition. Leadership tends to be romanticized in American culture, especially in the culture of schooling, both because we subscribe heavily to trait theories of success—people succeed because of their personal characteristics, more than because of effort, skill, and knowledge—and because we like our heroes to have qualities that we think we don't have. The

problem with this romanticized theory of leadership is that the supply of character traits we associate with “good” leaders is, by definition, limited, or we wouldn’t envy and admire them so much in other people. Also, character traits are much less amenable to influence by education, training, and practice than are knowledge and skill. Deromanticizing leadership would have a very positive effect on the quality of schools.

A definition of leadership in terms of instruction is also far more focused than most conceptions of leadership in education. Reading the literature on the principalship can be overwhelming, because it suggests that principals should embody all the traits and skills that remedy all the defects of the schools in which they work. They should be in close touch with their communities, inside and outside the school; they should, above all, be masters of human relations, attending to all the conflicts and disagreements that might arise among students, among teachers, and among anyone else who chooses to create conflict in the school; they should be both respectful of the authority of district administrators and crafty at deflecting administrative intrusions that disrupt the autonomy of teachers; they should keep an orderly school; and so on.

Somewhere on the list one usually finds a reference to instruction, couched in strategically vague language, so as to include both those who are genuinely knowledgeable about and interested in instruction and those who regard it as a distraction from the main work of administration. But why not focus leadership on instructional improvement, and define everything else as instrumental to it? The skills and knowledge that matter in leadership, under this definition, are those that can be connected to, or lead directly to, the improvement of instruction and student performance. Standards-based reform forces this question. It makes leadership instrumental to improvement.

The leadership envisioned here differs from that typically described in the literature on management—leaders, or higher level managers, who exercise “control” over certain functions in the organization. There are, to be sure, certain routine organizational functions that require control—bus schedules, payroll, accounting, etc. But the term “control” applied to school improvement is a dubious concept because one does not “control” improvement processes so much as one guides them and provides direction for them, since most of the knowledge required for improvement must inevitably reside in the people who deliver instruction, not in the people who manage them. Control implies that the controller knows exactly what the controllee (if you will) should do, whereas guidance and direction imply some degree of shared expertise and some degree of difference in the level and kind of expertise among individuals. It is this problem of the distribution of knowledge required for large scale improvement that creates the imperative for the development of models of distributed leadership.

The basic idea of distributed leadership² is not very complicated. In any organized system, people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, that are related to their predispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles. Furthermore, in any organized system, competency varies considerably among people in similar roles; some principals and teachers, for example, are simply better at doing some things than others, either as a function of their personal preferences, their experience, or their knowledge. Organizing these diverse competencies into a

² For a more extensive treatment of the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of distributed leadership, see (Spillane, Halverson et al. 1999)

coherent whole requires understanding how individuals vary, how the particular knowledge and skill of one person can be made to complement that of another, and how the competencies of some can be shared with others. In addition, organizing diverse competencies requires understanding when the knowledge and skill possessed by the people within the organization is not equal to the problem they are trying to solve, searching outside the organization for new knowledge and skill, and bringing it into the organization.

In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership (again, guidance and direction) among roles in the organization, and without working hard at creating a common culture, or set of values, symbols, and rituals. Distributed leadership, then, means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture. It is the “glue” of a common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common frame of values for how to approach that task—culture—that keeps distributed leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling.

To be sure, performance-based accountability in schools, and good management practice generally, require that certain people be held responsible for the overall guidance and direction of the organization, and ultimately for its performance. Distributed leadership does not mean that no one is responsible for the overall performance of the organization. It means, rather, that the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result.

Since this view of leadership draws on several strands of research on school improvement, it is worth pausing here to take a brief inventory of how the idea emerges from the existing base of knowledge. Some time ago Susan Rosenholtz observed, based on an empirical study of variations in school effectiveness, that there were two distinctively different types of school cultures or climates. One kind of normative climate, characterized by an emphasis on collaboration and continuous improvement, develops in schools where teacher effort, through a variety of principal actions, is focused on skill acquisition to achieve specific goals. In such schools, experimentation and occasional failure are expected and acceptable in the process of teacher learning. Further, seeking or giving collegial advice is not a gauge of relative competence, but rather a professional action viewed as desirable, necessary, and legitimate in the acquisition of new skills.

In schools characterized by norms of autonomy, on the other hand, there are ambiguous goals and no attempt to develop a shared teaching technology. There is no agreement among teachers and principals about the outcomes they seek and the means for reaching them. In such settings, therefore, definitions of teaching success and the manner in which it is attained are highly individualistic. Without these commonly held definitions, collegial and principal assistance serves no useful purpose. (*Rosenholtz 1986, 101*) These two cultures, she continues, result in “profoundly different opportunities for teachers’ skill acquisition.” (*ibid.*)

Rosenholtz argues that collegial support and professional development in schools are unlikely to have any effect on improvement of practice and performance if they are not connected to a coherent set of goals that give direction and meaning to learning and collegiality. Effective schools, she argues, have “tighter congruence between values, norms, and behaviors of principals and teachers, and the activities that occur at the managerial level are aligned closely with, and facilitative of, the activities that occur at the technical level. There is an organizational basis for directing behavior, for motivating behavior, for justifying behavior, and for evaluating behavior.” (*Rosenholtz 1985, 360*) Significantly, she found that principals’ collegiality with teachers had no direct effect on school performance, but it did have an indirect effect when mediated by school-level goal setting, as well as teacher recruitment, socialization, and evaluation. In other words, principal collegiality with teachers affects school performance only when it is connected to activities that focus the school’s purposes and that translate those purposes into tangible activities related to teaching. (*Rosenholtz 1986, 100*)

In addition, Rosenholtz draws a direct relationship between teachers’ uncertainty about the technical core of their work and the normative environment in which they work. Schools with a strong normative environment focused on instructional goals promote a view of teaching as a body of skill and knowledge that can be learned and developed over time, rather than as an idiosyncratic and mysterious process that varies with each teacher.

The issues of uncertainty also extend to principals. Principals who attributed a high level of uncertainty to teaching practice tended to be “turf minded” and were unwilling to relinquish control in order that teacher colleagues may render mutual assistance. “By contrast,” she observes, “more certain principals seem able to galvanize their faculties for specific, goal-directed endeavors, increasing teachers’ clarity about what to pursue.” (*Rosenholtz 1989, 69*)

Similarly, in a broadscale study of a national sample of high schools, Newmann, et al. found that teachers’ knowledge of each others’ courses and a focus on improved practice were, in addition to orderly student behavior, the cultural variables in schools that had the strongest relationship to teachers’ sense of efficacy. They also found that the responsiveness of administrators to problems of practice—with help, support, and recognition—was most strongly related to teachers’ perceptions of community within a school. Interestingly, they found no independent effect of teachers’ perceptions of principals’ leadership, teachers’ participation in professional development, or teachers’ participation in organizational decisions on either teachers’ sense of efficacy or community. This latter finding is interesting not so much because of what it says about principal leadership and professional development, per se, because the schools in the sample represented the full array of practice in this regard. It is interesting because it suggests that principal leadership, professional development, and participation in decision-making by teachers have no effect on teachers’ sense of efficacy and community *unless* they are deliberately connected to tangible and immediate problems of practice. (*Newmann, Rutter et al. 1989, 360*)

Rowan found in his review of research on school improvement that participation of teachers in extended roles—that is, roles that require them to acquire knowledge and solve problems in groups and networks as opposed to individually—“fosters higher levels of commitment and satisfaction.”

(Rowan 1990, 373)[See also, Little, 1982 #51] He also observed, though, that studies of teacher collegiality under naturally occurring conditions suggest that teachers focus the bulk of their interactions on relatively narrow issues of materials, discipline, and the problems of individual students, rather than on the acquisition of new knowledge and skill. “Teachers reasoned that they talked less about these issues because they already knew much about these subjects and because teacher behavior is personal, private, idiosyncratic, and intuitive. Few thought that time and opportunity prevent exchanges of information about teaching behaviors.” (Rowan 1990, 375) In other words, participation in collaborative work increases commitment and satisfaction among teachers, but it is unlikely to result in changes in teachers’ practice, skill, or knowledge in the absence of a clear organizational focus on those issues.

Recent international research from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) corroborates the idea that a focus on concrete instructional practice results in increased student learning. Countries in TIMSS that scored well in mathematics and science tended to have less complex curricula, greater coherence of curriculum across age levels, and greater emphasis on narrowing the range of quality in the curriculum actually delivered in the classroom. Hence, when school organization and policy reinforce a focus on curriculum and embody clear expectations about the range of acceptable quality in the delivered curriculum, a broader range of students learn at higher levels. (Schmidt, et al. 1997; Stigler and Heibert 1999)

These studies dovetail well with the line of work I have been pursuing with my colleagues on school restructuring and accountability. In our study of schools involved in significant, self-initiated restructuring activities, we found that these activities, all of which involved high levels of collegial interaction among teachers, did not result in classroom practice that reflected the rhetoric of reform, except in a school where the principal and teachers explicitly created a normative environment around a specific approach to instruction. (Elmore, Peterson et al. 1996) Similarly, we found in our work on how schools construct their ideas about accountability that schools that lacked a strong internal normative environment—characterized by clear and binding expectations among teachers, among students and teachers, and among principals and teachers—were inclined to defer all judgments about what students could and should learn, and all decisions about to whom the school is collectively accountable for what, to individual teachers operating in isolation from each other. (Abelmann and Elmore 1999) For example, teachers in most schools in our study were unable to provide specific evidence about ways in which their daily decisions about instruction and their expectations for student learning were influenced by administrators in their schools or by their colleagues. Hence, when asked to whom they were accountable, they would reply either to no one or to themselves. In a small proportion of schools in our study, teachers were able to cite specific examples of how their practice and their expectations for student learning were influenced by their colleagues, by administrators, or by external networks of colleagues outside their schools. These latter schools tended to have a clearer idea of their purposes, stated in terms of expectations for student learning, and to manifest these purposes in detailed decisions about classroom instruction.

Organizational coherence on basic aims and values, then, is a precondition for the exercise of any effective leadership around instructional improvement. Collaboration and collegiality among teach-

ers, and among teachers and principals, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improvement. Distributed leadership poses the challenge of how to distribute responsibility and authority for guidance and direction of instruction, and learning about instruction, so as to increase the likelihood that the decisions of individual teachers and principals about what to do, and what to learn how to do, aggregate into collective benefits for student learning. I will discuss the practical implications of this challenge in a moment.

Before I advance, I would like to take a brief detour into the problem of learning and policy. David Cohen and Carol Barnes have suggested that we think about the pedagogical functions of policy, in addition to the institutional and political functions. They argue that, while policy—say, in the form of content and performance standards—is usually intended to convey information and intentions to teachers and administrators, the policies themselves seldom pay much attention to what teachers and administrators would actually have to learn and what their activities should be to behave consistently with the policy. They conclude a review of reform policies with the observation that:

The pedagogy of educational policy has been didactic and inconsistent. Policy makers have told teachers to do many different, hugely important things in a short time. And in each case policy makers have acted as though their assignment was to dispense answers, not to provoke thought, ask questions, or generate discussion. The pedagogy of policy has been teacher-centered. As policy makers taught, they created few opportunities to listen as teachers and other educators tried to make sense of new demands. Nor have policy makers cast policy as something that might be revised in light of what they learned from teachers' experience. (*Cohen and Barnes 1993, 2267*)

In other words, the same argument about distributed leadership that applies within schools and school systems applies between policy makers and the organizations they attempt to influence. Policy itself, in its design and implementation, is unlikely to augment or stimulate improvement in practice and performance if it doesn't explicitly acknowledge the problems of expertise and learning embedded in its goals. Furthermore, policy is unlikely to result in improvement if it doesn't focus and deliver a coherent message about purposes and the practices that exemplify them, in the same sense that organizational coherence on purpose and practice is an important precondition for the success of school improvement.

There is, of course, strong evidence that asking policy makers to bring coherence and stability to education policy at the state and local level is akin to trying to change the laws of gravity. Instability and incoherence, in the form of pluralist politics, are the rule; coherence and stability, the exception. Pluralism—organized factions mobilizing and using political institutions as a means for legitimizing their particular interests in public policy—is hardwired into the culture and institutional structure of American politics. James Madison, in *Federalist #10* puts the matter succinctly: institutions of government exist to play the interests of competing factions against each other, so as to prevent the tyranny of one faction over all others.

In his exhaustive survey of midsized urban school districts in the U.S., Frederick Hess paints a deeply pessimistic picture for those, like myself, who see the future of urban school systems as lying in large scale improvement of the instructional core. Hess found that local school boards and superintendents consistently engage in a kind of hyperactive policy dance—a phenomenon he calls “pol-

icy churn”—in which relatively unstable political factions advance new “reforms” as ways of satisfying their electoral constituencies, pausing only long enough to take credit for having acted, and quickly moving on to new reforms, with no attention to the institutionalization or implementation of previous reforms. The political rewards in the pluralist structure, Hess argues, are in the symbolism of initiation and enactment of reform, not in its implementation. Among the pathologies the incentive structure creates is high turnover of leadership, both political and administrative. The average tenure of superintendents in Hess’s sample was about two and one-half years. Factions are fickle, political opportunists abound. Board majorities hold onto school superintendents just long enough for them to advance their reform proposals (skillfully tailored to attaining their next job; after all, they are rational actors too), and at the first sign of opposition, move onto the next superintendent. (*Hess 1999*).

Fuhrman, while somewhat more sanguine about the prospects of coherent and stable reforms, identifies clear tendencies working against coherence in the recent drift of American politics toward term limitations for legislative and gubernatorial offices. This, coupled with a tendency for elected officials not to specialize in substantive policy areas long enough to develop understanding and expertise, leads to strong incentives for superficiality and instability. (*Fuhrman 1993; Fuhrman 1994; Fuhrman and Elmore 1994*)

Notice the compatibility of this pattern of politics with the institutional theory of loose-coupling outlined in the first section of this paper. While the pace and intensity of policy churn may have picked up in recent years, owing, in large part, to the growth of new electoral factions in urban areas and the introduction of electoral reforms designed to increase turnover in political office, the phenomenon of policy churn has a deep history in American educational policy. The metaphor that Larry Cuban uses to describe the relationship between reform policy and teaching practice from the late nineteenth century through the final decades of the twentieth, is the ocean in a severe storm: “The surface is agitated and turbulent, while the ocean floor is calm and serene (if a bit murky). Policy churns dramatically, creating the appearance of major changes, calculated to reinforce the symbolic rewards of action for policy makers and to cement the logic of confidence in the institutions, while deep below the surface, life goes on largely uninterrupted.” (*Cuban 1984*)

So whatever problems of leadership might lie in the administration of schools and school systems, these problems are reflected and amplified in policy leadership. Administrative and policy leaders are joined in a codependent, largely dysfunctional relationship, and as in most such relationships, the bond is strengthened by its pathology. We transform dysfunctional relationships into functional ones, not by continuing to do what we already know how to do more intensively and with greater enthusiasm, but by *learning how to do new things and, perhaps more importantly, learning how to attach positive value to the learning and the doing of new things*. Therein lies the challenge of harnessing leadership to the problem of large scale improvement.

Creating a new model of distributed leadership consists of two main tasks: 1) describing the ground rules which leaders of various kinds would have to follow in order to engage in large scale improvement; and 2) describing how leaders of various kinds in various roles and positions would share responsibility in a system of large scale improvement. It should go without saying that this model is

necessarily provisional and tentative since it is a considerable departure from the status quo and its basic premise is that improvement involves both learning the ground rules and sharing responsibility for implementing them over time. It is impossible to say at the outset exactly what will be required at later stages.

Here, then, are five principles that lay the foundation for a model of distributed leadership focused on large scale improvement:

■ *The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role:* Institutional theories of leadership, in the loose-coupling mode, stress the role of leaders as buffers of outside interference and as brokers between the institutions of public schooling and their clients. Political theories of group leadership stress the role of leaders as coalition-builders and brokers among diverse interests. Managerial theories of leadership stress the role of leaders as custodians of the institutions they lead—*paterfamilias*—and sources of managerial control. Cultural theories of leadership stress the role of leaders as manipulators of symbols around which individuals with diverse needs can rally. None of these theories captures the imperative for large scale improvement, since none of them posits a direct relationship between the work that leaders should be doing and the core functions of the organization. One can be adept at any of these types of leadership and never touch the instructional core of schooling. If we put improvement of practice and performance at the center of our theory of leadership, then these other theories of leadership role must shift to theories about the possible skills and knowledge that leaders would have to possess to operate as agents of large scale instructional improvement. If the purpose of leadership is the improvement of teaching practice and performance, then the skills and knowledge that matter are those that bear on the creation of settings for learning focused on clear expectations for instruction. All other skills are instrumental. Hence,

■ *Instructional improvement requires continuous learning:* Learning is both an individual and a social activity. Therefore, collective learning demands an environment that guides and directs the acquisition of new knowledge about instruction. The existing institutional structure of public education does one thing very well: It creates a normative environment that values idiosyncratic, isolated, and individualistic learning at the expense of collective learning. This phenomenon holds at all levels: individual teachers invent their own practice in isolated classrooms, small knots of like-minded practitioners operate in isolation from their colleagues within a given school, or schools operate as exclusive enclaves of practice in isolation from other schools. In none of these instances is there any expectation that individuals or groups are obliged to pursue knowledge as both an individual and a collective good. Unfortunately the existing system doesn't value continuous learning as a collective good and does not make this learning the individual and social responsibility of every member of the system. Leadership must create conditions that value learning as both an individual and collective good. Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement.

- *Learning requires modeling:* Leaders must lead by modeling the values and behavior that represent collective goods. Role-based theories of leadership wrongly envision leaders who are empowered to ask or require others to do things they may not be willing or able to do. But if learning, individual and collective, is the central responsibility of leaders, then they must be able to model the learning they expect of others. Leaders should be doing, and should be seen to be doing, that which they expect or require others to do. Likewise, leaders should expect to have their own practice subjected to the same scrutiny as they exercise toward others.

- *The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution.* As we shall see shortly, large scale improvement requires a relatively complex kind of cooperation among people in diverse roles performing diverse functions. This kind of cooperation requires understanding that learning grows out of differences in expertise rather than differences in formal authority. If collective learning is the goal, my authority to command you to do something doesn't mean much if it is not complemented by some level of knowledge and skill which, when joined with yours, makes us both more effective. Similarly, if we have the same roles, I have little incentive to cooperate with you unless we can jointly produce something that we could not produce individually. In both instances the value of direction, guidance, and cooperation stems from acknowledging and making use of differences in expertise.

- *The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity:* If the formal authority of my role requires that I hold you accountable for some action or outcome, then I have an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that you have the capacity to do what I am asking you to do. (Elmore 1997) All accountability relationships are necessarily reciprocal—unfortunately, often only implicitly. Policy usually states the side of accountability in which a person with formal authority requires another to do something he or she might not otherwise do except in the presence of such a requirement. Many educational professionals perceive standards in this way—as a set of requirements carrying formal legal authority, without attending to the circumstances that make doing the work possible. Furthermore, policy makers typically fail to acknowledge their own learning curve and to model it for others. This creates expectations that everyone should know what they don't know and without any preparation. The chief policy leaders—elected officials—are finally accountable to the public for providing the resources and authority necessary for improvement. The chief administrative leaders—superintendents and principals—are accountable for using these resources and authority to guide improvement. Both types of leaders are responsible for explicitly modeling in their own behavior the learning they expect of others. And leaders of practice—teachers and professional developers—are accountable for developing the new knowledge and skill required for the demands of broad-scale improvement. Distributed leadership makes the reciprocal nature of these accountability relationships explicit. My authority to require you to do something you might not otherwise do depends on my capacity to create the opportunity for you to learn how to do it, and to educate me on the process of learning how to do it, so that I become better at enabling you to do it the next time.

The practical side of a theory of distributed leadership describes how leadership roles would be defined if these principles were to work. The table on the following page (TABLE 1) describes one

LEADERSHIP ROLES	LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS
<p>POLICY Elected, Appointed Officials: Legislators, Chief State School Officers, State Board Members, Local School Board Members</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set performance targets • Approve standards • Monitor performance • Approve, monitor incentive structures • Monitor design problems, redesign • Adjudicate conflicts over design, performance issues • Administer rewards and sanctions • Buffer non-instructional issues
<p>PROFESSIONAL Distinguished Practitioners, Professional Developers, Researchers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop, vet standards • Develop, pilot new instructional practices • Design pre-service, in-service learning • Conduct model professional development • Create benchmarks for content, practice • Develop, pilot new structures
<p>SYSTEM Superintendents, Support Personnel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design system improvement strategies • Design, implement incentive structures for schools, principals, teachers • Recruit, evaluate principals • Provide professional development consistent with improvement strategy • Allocate system resources toward instruction • Buffer non-instructional issues from principals, teachers
<p>SCHOOL Principals, Support Personnel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design school improvement strategies • Implement incentive structures for teachers, support personnel • Recruit, evaluate teachers • Broker professional development consistent with improvement strategy • Allocate school resources toward instruction • Buffer non-instructional issues from teachers
<p>PRACTICE Teachers, Professional Developers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design, conduct, participate in professional development • Participate in recruitment, hiring of new teachers • Evaluate professional development • Consult, evaluate professional practice of colleagues • Evaluate student work • Participate in development of new professional development practices

TABLE 1

possible way of defining leadership roles. The table makes little sense, however, without first describing some underlying assumptions about the nature of the work involved in large scale improvement and how it translates into leadership roles. The first assumption has to do with distribution of expertise around the problem of improvement. There is a principle of comparative advantage, embedded in the table, which essentially says that people should engage in activities that are consistent with the comparative expertise of their roles and avoid activities that are beyond their expertise. Policy makers (state and local board members and state legislators, for example) should, as elected officials, have a comparative advantage in adjudicating conflicts among competing interests, winnowing these interests down into goals and standards on what should be taught, setting the legal mandate within which rewards and sanctions are administered, and translating the feedback from various quarters into new guidance. Policy makers do *not* have a comparative advantage on issues relating to the specific content of standards or of practices that lead to student performance of a certain kind, no matter how well they do their jobs, no matter what their expertise has been in the past, no matter how much effort they invest in learning about standards and practice. They don't have a comparative advantage in these domains because *the nature of their work does not permit them to develop it*; in fact, the better they are at their work, the more they should recognize the limits of their expertise. The content of standards and instructional practice lie in the domain of professional knowledge, broadly defined as the intersection between instructional practice in classrooms and schools and systematic inquiry and evaluation of practice. To the extent that professional knowledge exists, it cuts across the specific community contexts in which it has to be used. Hence, the "professional community" might say that a particular kind of standard represents the best current conception of what should be taught, and the standard could be effectively enacted using a variety of instructional practices, but specific decisions about what a standard looks like when it is enacted in a given classroom, school, or school system would require expertise in both the practice and the context. This leads to a dependency across the professional community and leaders at the system, school, and classroom levels. So the functions described in Table I reflect the comparative advantages of different leadership roles in different positions, as well as their dependencies on each other.

I have used the language of "comparative advantage" here because I want to emphasize the degree to which large scale improvement requires deference to and respect for expertise, coupled with reciprocity of accountability. I have selfconsciously avoided using terms like "division of labor" or "division of responsibility" because I think it connotes a kind of balkanization that is more typical of loose-coupling than of distributed leadership. Spillane, in his important piece on distributed leadership, borrows from the language of distributed cognition and speaks of expertise and responsibilities as being "stretched over" people in different roles rather than neatly divided among them. (*Spillane, Halverson et al. 1999*) The language fails us here, because the terminology that comes most readily to the surface in discussions of policy and management is the language of control rather than the language of reciprocity and mutual dependency.

Another aspect of Table I that might strike readers as unfamiliar is the addition of "professional" and "practice" roles to the conventional inventory of policy, system, and school level leaders. This is an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of instructional expertise, at both the general, professional, level and at the level of schools and classrooms. Since this is the task of large-scale improvement and improvement is about the development and distribution of knowledge, leadership func-

tions engaged in improvement have to include those that explicitly create and engage people in learning new forms of practice. These roles must develop in systems that are engaged in large-scale improvement. Where they don't exist, they will have to be created or redefined from existing roles.

Notice also that there is a role for leaders in moving non-instructional issues out of the way to prevent them from creating confusions and distraction in school systems, schools, and classrooms. The principle of buffering here is the inverse of the principle of buffering under loose-coupling. In a loosely-coupled system administrators buffer instructional practice from outside interference. In a distributed leadership system the job of leaders is to buffer teachers from extraneous and distracting non-instructional issues so as to create an active arena for engaging and using quality interventions on instructional issues.

Overall, then, Table I presents a model of how one might go about reconstructing roles and functions around the idea of distributed leadership in the service of large scale instructional improvement. The exact design of roles and functions is less important than the underlying principles of distributed expertise, mutual dependence, reciprocity of accountability and capacity, and the centrality of instructional practice to the definition of leadership roles. Policy leadership, in this model, focuses on translating diverse political interests into coherent standards of content and performance, adjudicating conflicts around the nature of goals, exercising discipline in the design and redesign of accountability systems, and keeping the system focused on its core functions and their consequences for students. Professional leadership—stemming from the research community, professional associations, and knowledgeable experts in content, pedagogy, and professional development—focuses on creating external benchmarks for content and pedagogy that represent the best available knowledge at any given time. Administrative leadership, at the system and school levels, designs strategies of improvement that aligns these with practice using resource allocation, hiring, evaluation, retention, and accountability measures. The job of leaders of instructional practice is to extend professional leadership into schools and school systems, drawing upon the differential expertise of educators at each level. Those who have a higher degree of knowledge, skill, and competence should be expected to spend some portion of their work engaged in the improvement of practice across schools and classrooms. The success of such a framework depends as much on the transactions across roles—the creation of mutual dependency and reciprocity—as it does on defining the core responsibilities of the roles themselves.

It is also worth emphasizing again that this model of distributed leadership is very far from the dominant institutional structure of most public schools and school systems. It confronts the impulses for privacy and for idiosyncratic instructional practice. It challenges the conventional roles of policy and administrative leaders in buffering that practice from outside interference. It posits instead a model in which instructional practice is a collective good—a common concern of the whole the institution—as well as a private and individual concern. It posits a theory of leadership that, while respecting, acknowledging, and capitalizing on differences in expertise, predicts failure in the social isolation of practice and predicts success in the creation of interdependencies that stretch over these differences.

Learning to do the Right Things: Issues of Institutional Design and Practice

MANY WELL-INTENTIONED REFORMERS argue that large scale improvement of schools can be accomplished by recruiting, rewarding, and retaining good people and releasing them from the bonds of bureaucracy to do what they know how to do. Schools get better, in this view, by attracting and empowering good people. It's not hard to see why this view is so widely held among educators. It accords well with the existing institutional structure. The properties of system inhere in the personal qualities of the people in it, not in the system itself. To the minds of these reformers the job of the system is to stay out of the business of the gifted practitioners who work in it and to keep the outside world at bay. The problem with this view, of course, is that it produces "good" practice and performance only from those people who already embody the personal attributes and characteristics that make good practice and performance possible. We know that this proportion seldom grows larger than about one quarter or one third of the total population of classrooms, schools, or systems.

What's missing in this view is any recognition that improvement is more a function of *learning to do the right things* in the setting where you work than it is of what you know when you start to do the work. Improvement at scale is largely a *property of organizations*, not of the pre-existing traits of the individuals who work in them. Organizations that improve do so because they create and nurture agreement on what is worth achieving, and they set in motion the internal processes by which people progressively learn how to do what they need to do in order to achieve what is worthwhile. Importantly, such organizations select, reward, and retain people based on their willingness to engage the purposes of the organization and to acquire the learning that is required to achieve those purposes. Improvement occurs through organized social learning, not through the idiosyncratic experimentation and discovery of variously talented individuals. Experimentation and discovery can be harnessed to social learning by connecting people with new ideas to each other in an environment in which the ideas are subjected to scrutiny, measured against the collective purposes of the organization, and tested by the history of what has already been learned and is known.

The idea of learning to do the right thing—collectively, progressively, cumulatively over time—is at the core of the theory of standards-based reform. Such reforms must set content and performance targets, open school performance up to public scrutiny and discourse, and, over time, calibrate rewards and sanctions based on the degree to which schools and school systems engage in sustained improvement. There are, to be sure, major problems with the design of most state standards and accountability systems, problems of the sort one would expect with new policies that are discontinu-

ous with past policies and that deal with inherently complex processes and institutions. As noted in the previous section, the success of these policies will depend, in large part, on the willingness of policy makers to model the kind of learning they are expecting from educators—to scrutinize their own actions and consequences and to modify policies based on their impact on practice and performance.

As important as the problems of policy design and implementation are, the problems of institutional design and educational practice embedded in standards-based reform are much, much larger. One can “make” policy by stitching together coalitions of political interests. Redesigning institutions and improving educational practice are massively more complex. As noted earlier, they involve changes of the most fundamental kind in the norms and values that shape work in schools, in the way the resources of the system get used, in the skills and knowledge that people bring to their work, and in how people relate to each other around the work of the organization. If the theory of distributed leadership outlined in the previous section is correct, these problems of institutional design and practice cannot be solved through policymaking alone. Policy can set the initial expectations and conditions within which large scale improvement will occur, it can set targets for practice and performance, it can open and stimulate public discussion about content and performance in schools, and it can alter the incentives under which schools and school systems work. The closer policy gets to the instructional core—how teachers and students interact around content—the more policy makers lose their comparative advantage of knowledge and skill, and the more they become dependent on the knowledge and skill of practitioners to mold and shape the instructional core; the more—again, in the words of distributed cognition—knowledge of policy and practice have to be “stretched over” each other in order to be complementary.

Issues of institutional design and practice in large scale improvement are the domains where our collective, public knowledge is weakest. There is strong suggestive evidence, both in early research on effective schools and districts and in recent research on the effects of standards-based reform, that some schools and districts are systematically better at the tasks of large scale improvement of instruction and performance than others. Murphy and Hallinger, in a study of instructionally effective school districts in California—school districts that showed high performance on student achievement measures relative to others, controlling for student composition—found evidence of common strategic elements in the way these districts managed themselves.

Their superintendents were knowledgeable about, and the key initiators of, changes in curriculum and teaching strategies. Superintendents and system-level staff were active in monitoring curriculum and instruction in classrooms and schools, as well as active in the supervision, evaluation, and mentoring of principals. Superintendents in high-performing districts were also more likely to dismiss principals on the basis of their performance. These districts showed a much greater clarity of purpose, a much greater willingness to exercise tighter controls over decisions about what would be taught and what would be monitored as evidence of performance, and a greater looseness and delegation to the school level of specific decisions about how to carry out an instructional program. Despite strong leadership, these districts were less bureaucratic than their counterparts. They tended to rely more on a common culture of values to shape collective action than on bureaucratic rules and controls. The shared values typically focused on improvement of student learning as the central goal,

evidence of steady, sustained improvement, a positive approach to problem-solving in the face of unforeseen difficulties, a view of structures, processes, and data as instruments for improvement rather than as ends in themselves, and a heavy internal focus by administrators on the demands of instruction, rather than a focus on events in the external environment. (*Murphy, Hallinger et al. 1987; Murphy and Hallinger 1988*) [*see also, Peterson, 1987 #471*]

Spillane's more recent work on the district role in the implementation of reform in mathematics instruction points to the pivotal role that district personnel, including administrative leaders, play in shaping discourse about the purpose of changes in instruction, in setting expectations about what will happen in classrooms, and in modeling the active construction of new knowledge, both about the teaching of mathematics and about the learning of new conceptions of content and pedagogy. Spillane's theory focuses on the parallel processes of cognitive change that must occur across levels of the district in order for new ideas to reach into the instructional core, again pointing to the importance of a common normative frame in shaping instructional change on a large scale. (*Spillane n.d.*) [*See also, Spillane, 1999 #17*]

Knapp and his colleagues, in their study of high-quality instruction in high-poverty classrooms, found that the modal pattern of district involvement in instructional improvement was either negatively associated with high-quality practice (pushing teachers toward less ambitious, lower level, more structured practice) or, more commonly, chaotic and incoherent. "Most teachers," they conclude, "received mixed signals [from the district] about what to teach." Furthermore, they found that the instruments that most districts use to influence instruction—guidelines, textbook adoptions, testing and assessment, scope-and-sequence requirements by grade level, etc.—were almost entirely disconnected from the learning that teachers had to do in order to master more ambitious instructional practices. Districts were, in their words, long on pressure and short on support (knowing what support to offer takes instructional sophistication), with the predictable effect that much of the learning that did occur around ambitious instructional practice was idiosyncratic by school and classroom. (*Knapp, Shields et al. 1995*) This research tracks with earlier work on the determinants of content and pedagogy in a large sample of schools which concluded that, for the most part, district influences on instructional practice were diffuse and ineffectual, usually not reaching deeply into teachers' decisions about what to teach or how. (*Floden, Porter et al. 1988*)

With an explicit focus on standards-based reform, Grissmer and Flanagan have attempted to explain the reason for larger than expected gains in achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and on state-administered performance measures in Texas and North Carolina, two states with very diverse student populations and with relatively well developed standards-based reform policies in place. They demonstrate that the achievement gains are, in fact, larger than one would predict based on performance of similar students in other states, and that the achievement gains seem to be occurring disproportionately among traditionally low-performing students. They offer as explanations for these gains a number of factors, including clearly stated content and performance standards, an incentive structure that focuses on the performance of all students, not just on average school performance, consistency and continuity of focus among political leaders, clear accountability processes, and a willingness to give flexibility to administrators and teachers in craft-

ing responses to the accountability system. They also observe that “both states have built a substantial infrastructure for supporting a process of continual improvement. . . , jointly funded through the public and private sectors” that uses research and technical assistance around research on effective practice and professional development. (*Grissmer and Flanagan November 1998*)

³ The study includes ten districts in which at least 50 percent of the students are low income and at least one third of the schools in each district received either of the highest two ratings in the state’s accountability system, putting these schools in the top 40 percent of schools in the state. (*Ragland, Asera et al. 1999*)

⁴ This study also found suggestive, but not conclusive, evidence that stability of leadership and good relations between superintendents and boards around core issues of instruction were a key factor.

A parallel study, conducted by the Dana Center in Texas, examined high-performing Texas school districts³ with diverse student populations. The study found that superintendents in these districts used their positions to create a sense of urgency in their communities that translated into expectations that students could meet demanding new standards. They used data on student performance to focus attention on problems and successes, they built district accountability systems that complemented the state’s system, and they forged strong relationships with their boards around improvement goals. They created a normative climate in which teachers and principals were collectively responsible for student learning and in which the improvement of instruction and performance was the central task and other distractions were reduced. Accountability systems in these districts rewarded higher performance with greater discretion and challenged school personnel to develop better solutions to the problems faced by the districts. Superintendents realigned district offices in these systems to focus on direct relationships with schools around instructional issues, and they focused more energy and resources on professional development, much of it delivered in classrooms and schools rather than in offsite locations.⁴ (*Ragland, Asera et al. 1999*)

My own work on instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City, reinforces many of the themes in these studies. District #2 is, by any standard, one of the highest-performing urban school systems in the country with, overall, fewer than 12 percent of its students—60 percent of whom are low income—scoring in the lowest quartile of nationally standardized reading tests. A comparable figure for most urban districts in the 40–50% range.

The District #2 story is a complex one, as are, I suspect, the stories of all improving school districts. But the main themes of the story are *continuity* of focus on core instruction, first in literacy and then on mathematics; *heavy investments in highly targeted professional development* for teachers and principals in the fundamentals of strong classroom instruction; *strong and explicit accountability by principals and teachers* for the quality of practice and the level of student performance, backed by direct oversight of classroom practice by principals and district personnel; and a *normative climate in which adults take responsibility for their own, their colleagues, and their students’ learning*. At all levels of the system, isolation is seen as the enemy of improvement, so most management and professional development activities are specifically designed to connect teachers, principals, professional developers, and district administrators with each other and with outside experts around specific problems of practice.

Principals in District #2 are directly and explicitly accountable for the quality of instruction and performance in their schools, which means that principals and teachers hold their jobs based on their capacity to learn how to practice at progressively higher levels of accomplishment. Schools operate in very distinct and different communities, they embody very different problems of practice, they include very different student populations, and they are at very different places in their improve-

ment processes. The district applies a strategy of differential treatment to these variations, concentrating more oversight, direction, and professional development on those schools with the lowest-performing students, adapting professional development plans for every school to the particular instructional progress of specific teachers in those schools, and granting high-performing schools more discretion than low-performing schools in both practice and professional development. Principals are the lynchpins of instructional improvement in District #2. They are recruited, evaluated, and retained or dismissed based on their ability to understand, model, and develop instructional practice among teachers and ultimately, on their ability to improve student performance.

District #2 has also been characterized by an extraordinary level of stability in leadership. Anthony Alvarado, the superintendent who initiated the strategy, was in the district for eight years, and his former deputy, Elaine Fink, who served as the main source of instructional guidance and oversight in the district during Alvarado's whole term, is now superintendent. Similarly, the community school board, which is quite diverse and represents many segments of a very diverse community, has been relatively stable and has served as a stable source of guidance and support for administrative leadership. (*Elmore and Burney 1997; Elmore and Burney 1997; Elmore and Burney 1998*)

Considering the magnitude of the task posed by standards-based reform for local school districts and schools, there is shockingly little research and documentation of institutional design and practice in exceptionally high-performing school districts. The available work does point to common themes, which I will treat in a moment. But the knowledge base on which to base advice to local districts on the design of large scale improvement processes is very narrow.

Educators are fond of responding to any piece of research that demonstrates a promising approach, or any seemingly successful example from practice, with a host of reasons why "it"—whatever it is—would never work in *their* setting. *Their* students are much different from those in the example, *their* communities would never tolerate such practices, *their* union contract contains very different provisions that would never permit such actions, *their* teachers are much too sophisticated (or unsophisticated) to deal with such improvements, etc., etc., etc. The institutional environment of public education is, in the default mode, astonishingly, perversely, and ferociously parochial and particularistic; all significant problems are problems that can only be understood in the context of a particular school or community; no knowledge of any value transfers or adapts from one setting to another.⁵

The most effective response to this parochialism, which is a direct outgrowth of the isolation of teaching as a vocation, is to surround practitioners with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of examples of systems that have managed to design their institutional structures around large scale improvement. The way to get those examples is both to substantially increase the research and documentation of high-performing systems with high proportions of low-income students and to use policy to stimulate demand for such knowledge, by investing in inspection activities among high and low-performing districts. The states that seem to be stimulating higher proportions of high-performing districts seem to be the ones that have invested the creation of an infrastructure to capture, examine, and disseminate successes of large scale improvement. (*O'Day, Goertz et al. 1995; Grissmer and Flanagan November 1998*) Still, in the short term, the fundamental problem is a relative lack of knowledge

⁵ In my own attempts to explain my work in District #2 to practitioners from other districts, I have heard what I think must be every possible explanation of why the District #2 experience could not be useful in other settings: District #2 is a small district, therefore its lessons don't transfer to large districts. Actually, at 23,000 students, the district is larger than the average school district and about the same size as many districts with high proportions of low-income children. District #2 has exceptional teachers (one of my favorites), therefore one can't expect "ordinary teachers" to do what teachers in District #2 do. Actually, District #2 has attracted exceptional teachers by being good at what it does. District #2 must have a different union contract than the one in my district in order to get teachers to participate in so many professional development activities. Actually, District #2 operates under the same union contract as all other community districts in New York City, it has developed exceptionally strong working relations with the union, and it has its share of union/management issues. District #2 must spend an inordinate amount of time "teaching to the test" to get such high scores. In fact, teachers spend very little time preparing students to take standardized tests; the performance gains are mostly produced by high quality instruction. After a while, one begins to think that the source of questions is not curiosity but its opposite.

Design Principles for Large-Scale Improvement in School Systems

Maintain a Tight Instructional Focus Sustained Over Time

Apply the instructional focus to everyone in the organization

Apply it to both practice and performance

Apply it to a limited number of instructional areas and practices, becoming progressively more ambitious over time

Routinize Accountability for Practice and Performance in Face-to-Face Relationships

Create a strong normative environment in which adults take responsibility for the academic performance of children

Rely more heavily on face-to-face relationships than on bureaucratic routines

Evaluate performance on the basis of all students, not select groups of students and -- above all -- not school- or grade-level averages

Design everyone's work primarily in terms of improving the capacity and performance of someone else – system administrators of principals and teachers, principals of teachers, teachers of students. In a well-developed system, the order should be reversed as well.

Reduce Isolation and Open Practice Up to Direct Observation, Analysis, and Criticism

Make direct observation of practice, analysis, and feedback a routine feature of work

Move people across settings, including outsiders into schools

Center group discussions on the instructional work of the organization

Model desired classroom practice in administrative actions

Model desired classroom practice in collegial interactions

Exercise Differential Treatment Based on Performance and Capacity, *Not* on Volunteerism

Acknowledge differences among communities, schools, and classrooms within a common framework of improvement

Allocate supervisory time and professional development based on explicit judgments about where schools are in a developmental process of practice and performance

Devolve Increased Discretion Based on Practice and Performance

Do not rely on generalized rules about centralization and decentralization

Loosen and tighten administrative control based on hard evidence of quality of practice and performance of diverse groups of students; greater discretion follows higher quality of practice and higher levels of performance

about the practical issues of institutional design in the face of problems, stimulated by standards-based reform, that require knowledge-intensive solutions.

Based on existing work, however, it is possible to state a few initial guiding principles that can be used to design institutional structures and to stimulate practices that result in large scale improvement. Table 2, at left, states these principles. Again, the exact form or wording of the principles is less important than the fact that they are an attempt to derive general guidance from practice and research in a form that can be tried in multiple settings and revised and elaborated with experience.

A major design principle is to organize everyone's actions, at all levels of the system, around an instructional focus that is stable over time. Most low-performing schools and systems start, for example, with a single instructional area—literacy, in most cases—and focus on that area until practice begins to approach a relatively high standard in most classrooms and performance begins to move decisively upward. They then add another instructional area—typically mathematics—and increase the level of complexity they expect of teachers and principals in practice and learning. Even relatively high-performing schools and districts could benefit from this approach, since the purpose of focus is not just to improve practice and performance but to *teach people in the organization how to think and act around learning for continuous improvement*. Presumably, many nominally high-performing schools and districts do well because of the backgrounds of their students and may be just as lacking in organizational resources for learning as low-performing schools. Focus also has to be accompanied by stability—in leadership, in the language that high-level administrators and board members use to describe the goals and purposes of the organization, and in the commitment to monitoring and redesigning policies and structures that are supposed to enable improvement. Most importantly, the principle of tight focus and stability in message should apply to *everyone*. Superintendents and board members should be just as subject to criticism for straying off message as principals and teachers.

Another major design principle has to do with the development and conduct of accountability relationships in schools and school systems. It appears from early research that school systems that improve are those that have succeeded in getting people to *internalize* the expectations of standards-based accountability systems, and that they have managed this internalization largely through modeling commitment and focus using face to face relationships, not bureaucratic controls. The basic process at work here is *unlearning* the behaviors and normative codes that accompany loose-coupling, and learning new behaviors and values that are associated with *collective responsibility* for teaching practice and student learning.

People make these fundamental transitions, by having *many* opportunities to be exposed to the ideas, to argue them into their own normative belief systems, to practice the behaviors that go with these values, to observe others practicing those behaviors, and, most importantly, to be successful at practicing in the presence of others (that is, to be seen to be successful). In the panoply of rewards and sanctions that attach to accountability systems, the most powerful incentives reside in the face to face relationships among people in the organization, not in external systems. It is the dailiness of life in schools and school systems that sustains loose-coupling. Unless new values and behaviors

reach into the dailiness of schools, there will be no change in business as usual.

The early evidence also suggests that low-capacity schools and school systems—schools and systems with weak collective values and atomized organizations—tend to try to find the easiest possible way of solving accountability problems with the knowledge they already have. (*Abelmann and Elmore 1999*) Schools tend to teach to the test because they have no better ideas about how to improve content and pedagogy. They tend to focus on students who are closest to meeting standards rather than those who are furthest away. They tend to give vague and general guidance about instruction rather than working collectively on learning new instructional practices, etc. Improving school systems override these practices by insisting that the expectations and standards apply to all students, which translates into examining assessment data on individual students in all classrooms and schools, focusing on the particular problems of low-performing students, and avoiding judgments about school performance based on school or grade level averages.

A corollary of this focus on all students is that adults in the organization all frame their responsibilities in terms of their contribution to enhancing someone else's capacity and performance. System-level administrators are judged on the basis of how well they contribute to principals' capacities to work with teachers, principals are judged by how well they contribute to teachers, and teachers are judged for their contributions to students. In very well developed improvement systems, one could imagine the evaluation working the other way too—students being evaluated, in part, on their contribution to improving their teachers' capacities, teachers for principals, principals for superintendents, etc.

One thing is clear: schools and systems that are improving directly and explicitly confront the issue of isolation embedded in loose-coupling. Administrators—both system-level and school-level—are routinely engaged in direct observation of practice in schools and classrooms; they have mastered ways of talking about practice that allow for non-threatening support, criticism, and judgment. Such systems also create multiple avenues of interaction among classrooms and schools, as well as between schools and their broader environment, always focusing on the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. They adjust and adapt the routines of the workplace—teaching schedules, preparation periods, substitute teacher allocations—with the primary purpose of creating settings where teachers, administrators, and outside experts can interact around common problems of practice. In the words of Anthony Alvarado, former superintendent of District #2, all discussions are about “the work” and all nonclassroom personnel are expected to learn and model the practices they want to see in the classroom in their own interactions with other people in the organization. Inquiry-oriented classrooms, working toward high standards of performance, require inquiry-oriented administrators and support staff who not only know what a good classroom looks like, but who consistently use the precepts of instructional practice in their own interactions with others. A corollary of this principle is that if *anyone's* practice is subject to observation, analysis, and critique, then everyone's practice should be. Supervisors should be just as subject to evaluation as those they supervise. The principle of reciprocity applies to all accountability relationships; there can be no demands without attention to the capacity that exists to deliver them. Such reciprocity makes the purpose of getting better at work the common currency of exchange in all relationships.

Improving school systems appear not to have been captured by age-old, largely pointless debate about centralization versus decentralization. Rather they seem to have developed ways of tailoring systemwide strategies of improvement to differences in communities, schools, and classrooms, without losing the overall coherence of systemwide standards for content and performance. I call this phenomenon differential treatment. Research on school-based management has said for a long time—more than ten years now—that there is no systematic relationship between the degree of centralization in school systems and their overall performance. (*Malen, Ogawa et al. 1990; Elmore 1993; Drury 1999*) This should not be a particularly mysterious finding, since decentralization tends to be toward the top of the list of symbolic reforms that most relatively large districts undertake to create the appearance that they are governing schools, even as they seldom, if ever, deal directly with instruction or student performance. And, one might add, these schemes are almost never fully implemented before they are overturned in favor of some other innovation. (*Hess 1999*) Indeed, one could argue that certain school-based management reforms are explicitly designed to push instructional decisions off the policy agenda altogether and focus debate instead on the representation of key constituencies in school governance.

It seems clear that administrators in the districts that are improving avoid pointless and distracting debates about centralization and decentralization. Instead, they spend a lot of time building a sense of urgency and support in specific schools and communities around issues of standards and performance. It also seems clear that if they communicate that urgency to principals and teachers, as well as to schools collectively, they will have to accept a high degree of responsibility for the detailed decisions required in managing improvement. In so doing they may need to engage in differential treatment of high- and low-performing schools, varying both the content of their oversight and professional development and the *process* by which they deal with schools, depending on how well a given school is doing on instructional quality and performance. Burney and I have documented this process in some detail in District #2. It is less well documented in other settings. (*Elmore and Burney 1997*)

It seems that discretion in decision-making about core issues should, in some fundamental sense, be a function of demonstrated capacity and performance in managing an improvement process at the school level. This is the final design principle I would offer. Elsewhere, I have called this the issue of “what’s loose and what’s tight.” (*Elmore 1993*) That is, strategic administrators seem to have different standards for how much discretion they grant to various units in their systems, based on judgments about how well those units can manage their resources in an improvement process. While high-performance organizations might require high levels of discretion in their operating units, most large school systems are confronted with schools that are either at widely different levels of quality and performance or at uniformly low levels of quality and performance. Starting with a broad scale grant of discretion to all schools in either of these situations virtually guarantees that those who know what to do will get better and those who don’t will stay the same or get worse. So some form of differential treatment, based on judgments of quality and performance, seems to be a requirement of large scale improvement. Yet differential treatment only makes sense, as an administrative strategy, when it is embedded in a set of clear expectations and standards of learning that apply to all schools, teachers, and students. Differential treatment is, in other words, not an invita-

tion to return to loose-coupling; it requires careful scrutiny of instructional practice and student performance in schools, as well as detailed knowledge of the conditions that distinguish one school from another in responding to common expectations.

Also, it should go without saying that volunteerism is *not* a strategy of differential treatment. In systemwide improvement, schools don't get to choose whether they participate or not. Participation is condition of being in the system. Different schools might get to choose how they will participate. Some systems have allowed schools to enter various phases of an improvement process at different times. Some systems allow schools to choose among an array of instructional approaches as the focus for improvement. There are a variety of ways of introducing choice at the front end of an improvement process. But allowing schools to choose *whether* they participate is tantamount to returning to the old principles of loose-coupling, in which improvement occurs in small pockets captured by faithful adherents to some instructional approach and never influences the rest of the system. It is not coincidental, I think, that most of the current examples of improving districts occur in states that have relatively strong standards-based accountability systems in place. Local school systems in those states are at various stages of discovering that, in some fundamental sense, they don't have the option of using volunteerism, since ultimately their performance as a system will be based on the performance of all classrooms and schools in the system.

Conclusion

I HAVE ARGUED that standards-based reform poses problems of the deepest and most fundamental sort about how we think about the organization of schooling and the function of leaders in school systems and schools. The stakes are high for the future of public schooling and for the students who attend public schools. Change, as it has been conceived and carried out in the past, is not an option in responding to these problems. Large scale, sustained, and continuous improvement is the path out of these problems. This kind of improvement is what the existing institutional structure of public schooling is specifically designed not to do. Improvement requires fundamental changes in the way public schools and school systems are designed and in the ways they are led. It will require changes in the values and norms that shape how teachers and principals think about the purposes of their work, changes in how we think about who leaders are, where they are, and what they do, and changes in the knowledge and skill requirements of work in schools. In short, we must fundamentally re-design schools as places where both adults and young people learn. We are in an early and perilous stage of this process, in which it is not clear whether public schooling will actually respond to the challenge of large scale improvement or will adapt to this reform in the way it has adapted to others over the past century, by domesticating it into the existing loose-coupled institutional structure.

The pathologies of the existing institutional structure—a normative environment that views all matters of practice as matters of idiosyncratic taste and preference, rather than subject to serious debate, discourse, or inquiry; a structure of work in which isolation is the norm, and collective work is the exception; and a managerial philosophy in which it is the job of administrators to protect or buffer teachers from the consequences of their instructional decisions and from any serious discussion of practice—these pathologies are all being addressed, in one way or another, in isolated school systems that are seriously at work on the problems of large scale improvement. The question is whether other school systems, operating in an environment of increased attention to student performance and quality of instruction, will discover that they need to learn not just different ways of doing things, but very different ways of thinking about the purposes of their work, and the skills and knowledge that go with those purposes.

This shift requires first, a redefinition of leadership, away from role-based conceptions and toward distributive views; and second, a clearer set of design principles to guide the practice of large scale improvement. Distributed leadership—hardly an original idea with me—derives from the fact that large scale improvement requires concerted action among people with different areas of expertise

and a mutual respect that stems from an appreciation of the knowledge and skill requirements of different roles. Design principles derive from the fact that large scale improvement processes run directly against the grain of the existing institutional structure of public education, and therefore it is difficult to do anything consequential about large scale improvement without violating some fundamental cultural or managerial tenet of the existing structure. The problem, then, is how to construct relatively orderly ways for people to engage in activities that have as their consequence the learning of new ways to think about and do their jobs, and how to put these activities in the context of reward structures that stimulate them to do more of what leads to large scale improvement and less of what reinforces the pathologies of the existing structure.

As I said earlier, I offer these design principles based on my own work on large-scale improvement and from my reading of the little research that exists on the subject. The main point here should be the urgency of learning more about these issues in many school districts and in many different settings. This requires pressing hard for more concrete knowledge about how large-scale improvement processes work.

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