

REDESIGNING URBAN CLASSROOMS TO IMPACT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT*

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Abstract

Because of the No Child Left Behind school reform policies, public schools are gravely scrutinized. This analysis focuses on how to redesign the urban classroom in order to impact student achievement with the intent of being an impetus for better overall school performance ratings. All public school leaders are expected to adhere to the same procedures and guidelines regardless of the population served. The research exposes the fact that there is no comprehensive school reform that is a cure all for the entire public education system. Findings reveal that there are far too many variables that weigh into overall academic performance. Hence, in order to optimize maximum student potential, a situational and adaptive and site – specific approach is delineated in this study.



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1 Introduction

Anytime one uses transformation, redesign and reform it is suggested that there is a problem with the current state. By definition these words mean to change the character or condition of and to revise in appearance, function, or content. The driving forces for this change initiative are poor test results / low school performance ratings, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and low graduation rates. The restraining forces include additional teacher expectations, the increased amount of instructional time needed to tackle the content standards and the school environment.

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Considering low standardized test scores, all public schools are seriously scrutinized and school reform is a hot topic. Several programs have been implemented throughout the years to address the needed transformation in public schools. Rather than focusing on this broad scope, this analysis narrows the range by targeting a single issue - the classroom. Perhaps incremental changes and celebrating the small wins would be a springboard to more effective second order transformation. In order to specifically define the problem, the performances of both urban and suburban schools were examined. The research identifies discrepancies and introduces possible solutions in order to impact student achievement and close or at least decrease the performance gap that exists between the two settings.

According to *The Turnaround Challenge* (2007), “Five percent of America’s 100,000 public schools, representing more than 2,500,000 students, are on track to fall into the most extreme federal designation for failure by 2009-2010” (Calkins et al, p. 2). Na’im Akbar (1998) states that “what educates one person or one group of people does not necessarily educate another group of people” (p. 4). Thus, one problem is that the American public education model has been the same for everyone since its 20th century origin. We now know that children have diverse learning styles, learn at different rates, have varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and have diverse intellectual strengths yet our society provides urban, high-poverty, highly diverse student populations with the same model, expecting the same results as those of suburban and economically advantaged student populations. A professor in Idaho states in *How to Create Alternative, Magnet and Charter Schools that Work* that the idea of public education is like assembling a group of Roman Catholics, Jews, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarians, Buddhists, Baptists, Muslims and Methodists in a single building and calling it church where each year families graduate to a different religion (Barr & Parrett, 1997). When put in this context, it sounds asinine. If education is to be meaningful and efficient, we must consider that, “an effective education system must be rooted in the valid identity of its students” (Akbar, 1998, p. 5).

Peter Senge (2000) speaks metaphorically about the stress level of students. He uses the analogy of the heavy backpack to illustrate how students’ stress grows with the pressure that schools are under regarding the standardized tests. Senge says that students remain silent under this stress, problems erupt and schools are blamed for not keeping order. Because few know what to do about the deeper causes of malaise, “this situation leaves students with two basic alternatives: cope or disengage and many disengage” (Senge, 2000, p. 29). So, what is the solution?

The September 2007 Gallop Poll reflects that three-fourths of the public want to see public school improvement come via reforming the existing public schools and not through finding an alternative. With this in mind, one cannot expect that there is one best educational model for all, just as there is no best leadership approach for every situation. Therefore, designing a site-specific approach is appropriate. The two central points for this study are organizational culture / learning environment and instructional models. It is agreed that all students need the core content areas such as reading, mathematics, language arts, science, etc. However, there are different learning modalities and thus, students learn differently. Therefore, instructional models should adapt to the students’ learning styles and the climate must also cultivate excellence and academic success.

1.1 Diagnosis

As it stands most urban schools are not performing as well as the suburban schools. In addition to the existing gap in standardized tests, research results reflect that urban schools have lower graduation rates, higher discipline issues, lower parental involvement, truancy issues and many other variables to take into consideration. The *NCLB* policies were designed to address low public school performance. Some progress is evident, but unfortunately many schools are still underperforming.

According to the September 2007 Gallop Poll, 68% of those polled believe *NCLB* is hurting or making no difference in school performance. The entire document of this huge reform effort can be retrieved from www.whitehouse.gov². However, the focal points of this educational blueprint are: Increase Accountability

²<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

for Student Performance, Focus on What Works, Reduce Bureaucracy and Increase Flexibility and Empower Parents.

According to data from the National Dropout Prevention Center / Network, *NCLB* is a catchy phrase, but the implementation is difficult. The author states that no child will be left behind if the individual learning needs of the child are met. Each child is unique and individualized instruction can build on the uniqueness of each child and increase student success (Neild, May 25, 2007). As well, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) state that, “no pre-designed comprehensive school reform will address the unique characteristics of a given school” (p. 82).

In view of reducing the dropout rate, redesigning the urban classroom is essential. Statistics reveal that most high school dropouts are kinesthetic learners. Also, an article published in the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) notes that more than 80% of prison inmates are high school dropouts (Boss, 1998). As well, the Parent Project (a research-based parenting program) reports that 80% of the prison population is kinesthetic learners. Accordingly, statistics retrieved from the NDPC/N report that each year’s class of dropouts will cost the country over \$200 billion during their lifetimes in lost earnings and unrealized tax revenue. They report that students from low-income families have a dropout rate of 10% while students from middle income families have a dropout rate of 5.2% with only a 1.6% dropout rate for high-income families.

Let’s agree that educators cannot control the student’s environment outside of the school and can do very little about parental involvement in education. Conversely, school leaders can manage instructional methods, the use of qualified teachers and the school’s culture. Since *NCLB* establishes the requirements for highly qualified teachers, it appears that many are adhering to this requirement. Therefore, the focal point of this analysis is to address the two remaining factors – instructional models and organizational culture.

1.2 Reform Efforts

The federal concerns with public education have prompted additional educational opportunities to include public school choice, magnet, alternative and charter schools. The Public School Choice program enables families to attend any public school of their choice. If the currently attended school falls within the school improvement status by federal standards, the school has to inform parents of this fact and propose the opportunity to attend a school in better standing as well as offer transportation to the new school, if they have the capacity to do so.

Magnet schools were developed to slow the “white flight” to the suburbs that accompanied school desegregation. Magnet schools emphasize specific areas such as the arts, technology, specific careers, professions and other themes in addition to the other graduation requirements. Some magnet schools resemble elite, private academies within public education in hopes of retaining middle-class families in urban public schools (Barr & Parrett, 1997).

Alternative educational programs are designed to recognize and respect the value of diversity. Alternative schools “provide focused educational programs to meet the widely differing needs of students, their parents and their communities” (Barr & Parrett, 1997, p. 7). Alternative schools have been used to serve a variety of purposes, including to keep high risk students in school, attract dropouts back to school, to teach difficult students, to focus on particular academic areas, to teach the gifted and talented, focus on jobs, careers and family stability and provide flexibility (Barr & Parrett, 1997).

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Most charters are granted for three to five years. In order to remain open, charter schools must achieve student performance objectives that are agreed to in the charter. As well, they must maintain an established enrollment level. According to Black Alliance for Educational Options (2007), charter schools are more likely than traditional public schools to serve African American (24% versus 17%) and Hispanic students (21% versus 18%). Charter schools also encourage community and parental involvement, encourage innovation in teaching practices and provide a strong system of accountability.

Magnet, alternative and charter schools were all designed to transform public education by presenting

educational choice, focusing on students' needs and providing flexibility. For the most part, they have produced some success throughout the years, but test scores continue to indicate a problem. The existing data is very conflicting. While some believe great strides have been made with the current school reform efforts, others believe that expectations are not being met. The final analysis is that some alternative and charter schools do okay and some do very well, exceeding their comparable traditional public schools, and others exhibit no improvement in academic achievement at all.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Organizational Change

This literature review focuses on the question: How can we implement change in the urban classroom? The central issues regarding organizational change that are discussed in this study are communication and organizational culture. The analysis provides information regarding the efforts necessary to change the culture as well as recommendations for teachers to utilize instructional models that incorporate the three learning modalities (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) in order to reach the variety of learners in the classroom.

Effective Change Agents:	Principles for Continuous Renewal:
1. They are catalysts for change.	1. People are the secret to success.
2. They see things differently.	2. Create healthy organizations.
3. They have an attitude of optimism.	3. Effective leadership is power.
4. They are tenacious.	4. It's all about attitude.
5. They are self-motivated.	5. Leaders link actions and policies to change.
6. They believe in people and in life.	6. Reinvent your organization, not the wheel.
7. They are real people.	7. Renewing org. are self-actualizing organizations.

Table 1

In view of the above information, in order to effectively implement and sustain change, change agents who adhere to the necessary principles are instrumental. He or she must create a sense of urgency, develop a team that includes key stakeholders and strategically plan the change initiative.

The authors of *Management of Organizational Behavior* (Hersey et. al, 1996) state, "Leading or influencing requires three general skills or competencies, diagnosing, adapting and communicating" (p. 9). Effective leaders exhibit cognitive, behavioral and process proficiencies. They understand the current situation and what he or she can reasonably expect to make it. Effective leaders are also able to adapt their behavior and resources to close the gap between what is and what is desired and they are able to clearly communicate expectations.

In view of change endeavors, the inception of the change can begin with a few of Peter Senge's (1999) steps for setting the stage for an organizational culture change. He suggests first clarifying the purpose and then assembling a group of cultural students. By cultural students, Senge is referring to the group who can represent a cross-section of the organization as it relates to the problem.

It is noted that "before embarking upon any change strategy, it is appropriate to determine what you have going for you and what you have going against you in the change effort" (Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 1996, p. 465). Kurt Lewin's Force Field Analysis can be instrumental in the clarification of discrepancies between what is, why it is and what one would like to be in a given situation. Lewin's analysis focuses on the identification and affects of the driving and restraining forces, as well as the process to reaching equilibrium or the desired level of productivity.

When dealing with change efforts, *The Leadership Assignment* discusses three basic lessons for the leader which are to create a supportive environment for the desired change, to involve those who are affected by the

change in the planning and the implementation of the change and to reeducate (Calabrese, 2002). Change is a process that takes time as constituents may need to unlearn past ways of acting and behaving and learn new ways. Oftentimes, it involves changing beliefs, standards, emotional attachments, needs, values and knowledge. Kurt Lewin calls this reeducation process unfreezing, changing and refreezing as cited in Calabrese 2002.

2.2 Communicating Change Initiatives

The Leadership Challenge discusses the importance of follower buy-in. The authors' state that people are committed to causes and not plans (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Therefore, those spearheading the change must create a sense of urgency as well as passion for the cause. As well, the leader must communicate in a way that is understandable and memorable. This will ignite and enlist others in order to inspire and enable them to help achieve desired goals. "If you cannot communicate the vision to someone in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are not yet done with this phase of the transformation" (Kotter, 1998, p. 92).

2.3 Organizational Culture

Another element of organizational culture is people. It is critical for leaders to foster the human factor of leadership; thus relationships are vital. Because without the people (the right people), nothing is possible. Jim Collins says that the right people make the leader's job less complex. He also says that the right people will do the right things and deliver the best results they're capable of (Collins, 2001). Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) discuss four dimensions of emotional intelligence in *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. The skill of emotional intelligence in regards to recognizing and understanding one's own moods, emotions and drives, control disruptive behaviors, having a strong drive to achieve, understanding the makeup of other people and exhibiting the ability to build rapport and manage relationships is instrumental in organizational success. It is noted in the Harvard Business Review on *What Makes a Leader* by Daniel Goleman that emotional intelligence not only distinguishes outstanding leaders but is also linked to strong performance (Goleman, 2001).

In reference to trust, it is built on honesty. Trusted leaders understand their own strengths and weaknesses. They are honest, genuine and transparent. As it relates to motivation it is vital for change agents to understand what motivates others to act and incorporate strategies consistent with human motivation. This includes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Additionally, change comes from two primary motivations: people are dissatisfied with their current state and desire something different or people are satisfied with their current state, but a different state is more appealing (Calabrese, 2002). As in the case of redesigning the urban classroom, the first type of awareness will produce the most effective outcomes.

Morale is fostered through acceptance, praise and expectations. Thus promoting autonomous work environments can also boost morale as well as encourage and empower others to be creative and implement innovative approaches that will lead to success. Autonomy generates ownership and commitment to achieve the best results.

3 Action Plan

3.1 The Framework for Change

"To create a school that works for everyone would be to create a school that works for no one" (Zmuda, et al, 2004, p. 2). With this in mind and in view of the organizational change issues discussed previously, it is recommended that educational methodology have a situational approach. The framework for this situation is to integrate a site-specific approach that consists of focusing on the teacher level factors, which engage issues that individual teachers can effectively address. The dynamics consist of instructional strategies, classroom management, and classroom curriculum design (Marzano, et al, 2005). The framework should also include

learned intelligence and motivation, which are two of the three student level factors. In addition to teacher and student level factors, this model also includes school level factors. However, the school factors and home environment (student level factor) will not be addressed in this action plan, since the fundamental concepts for this framework are teacher and student controlled initiatives that will improve academic achievement.

The goal is not to create a new culture; it is to transform the existing culture into one that produces academic success. It is suggested in *The Dance of Change* that one is to immerse oneself into studying a culture until he or she understands it and then propose new values, new ways of doing things and articulate new governing ideas, then overtime new behavior will result (Senge, 1999). Cultural transformation involves patterns of assumptions, beliefs and attitudes. It involves mental models and scripts, which limit people's ability to change and can cause complacency with the status quo. "If you want to change a school system, before you change the rules, look first to the ways that people think and interact" (Senge, 2000, p. 19). Change involves a variety of issues and one can expect that there may be resistance. Therefore it is expected that actually changing the classroom culture will take some time, however steps in doing so are provided in this project.

Out of a list of 228 variables, classroom management is identified in *School Leadership that Works*, as having the greatest impact on student achievement. The authors believe that a chaotic classroom as a result of poor management not only doesn't enhance achievement, it might even inhibit it (Marzano, et al, 2005, p. 90). Relying on positional power does not influence students to comply with rules. Oftentimes, it may accomplish compliance, but not true commitment. Hence, classroom management is not contingent upon simple respect for authority, but is greatly associated with mutual respect, a genuine and trusted leader / teacher and continuity.

3.2 Cultural Change Process

Also, long-lasting institutional change stems from change in the belief systems, attitudes and a deep understanding of the reason and rationale for change. Therefore, encouraging group discussions can assist in understanding one's own as well as each other's mental models (Senge, 2000). This systemic approach can begin to uncover the existing mental models in order to understand how one part affects the whole. In this particular case, utilizing the information to diagnose the relevance of classroom performance as it relates to the entire school system. Before attitudes and beliefs can be changed, they must first be understood.

The group of constituents can answer survey questions, share their own assessments of the problems and offer remedies that they feel would be beneficial. The authors of *Transforming Schools* state, "Without clear, explicit definition and mutual agreement on the purpose of school, it becomes difficult to meet each other's needs, to assess one's own adequacy, or to measure progress meaningfully" (Zmuda, et al, 2004, p. 39). As well, the information gathered can then be used to implement a strategy similar to that of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado. Although the superintendent sought to transform the entire district, their strategies are easily applicable to the culture of the single classroom.

Jefferson County's culture change process included surveying constituents and assembling a team to utilize the information to create an adopted set of core values. Along with the core values were a set of behaviors attached to each value so that it would be evident when one was operating within the set of values. This system also included regular evaluations and a values award program to honor those nominated for exhibiting apposite behaviors and operating within the core values. With this idea, the group of students and teachers could develop a set of core values and behaviors for the classroom as well as institute an incentive award program to honor appropriate behavior.

The incentives should encompass the student's wants and desires in order to make it beneficial for them. Additionally, staff should make a huge deal out of academic achievement and afford a quarterly ceremony or program to give accolades openly for measured progress. The celebration should include students, staff, families and community members.

In proportion to data retrieved from the NCPC/N, motivation is particularly important when working with at-risk students. Thus, incentive and award programs are promising intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that can change the morale of the class. When developing the reward programs around motivation, there

are three elements of motivation to keep in mind: positive value, clear connection between behavior and consequences and a belief that success can be achieved with the available skills and resources (Neild, 2007). Incorporating such a program speaks loudly, depicting that education matters, we are proud of you and we care about your success.

In addition, an employee award program should be implemented to honor teachers' efforts in producing innovative instruction and performance results. This will also boost employee morale and demonstrate appreciation for their hard work and commitment to the cause. Again, this serves as both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The reward programs also serve as a means of demonstrating growth. "A renewal effort risks losing momentum if there are no short wins to celebrate" (Calabrese, 2002, p. 95). Calabrese also believes that most people will not stay the course without compelling evidence within 12 – 24 months that the journey is producing expected results. Thus quarterly recognition is suitable.

3.3 Instructional Change Models

In view of the high percentage of kinesthetic learners who drop out of school, instructional models should be flexible and include all learning styles. Teachers must grasp the concept that all children can learn and that children learn in multiple ways. They can utilize Kolb's Learning Style Inventory or some other learning style instrument that will depict the make-up of their students.

Senge (2000) says that, "a classroom is saturated with interests, desires and talents" (p. 111). He believes that teachers can help students gain personal mastery by helping them decipher their passions and nurturing their courage to delve into them, without judging them right or wrong. This also helps to create a learning classroom.

In addition to the core subjects, instruction should include technology, as technology is a huge component in education and is highly recommended at all levels. Moreover, it is a component of *NCLB*. A great deal of research-based curriculum that serves to provide interactive instruction and that also utilizes various learning styles is accessible. However, I will use one scientifically researched based technology curriculum called "I Support Learning" as an example. Their mission is to empower educators in their quest to create and support life-long learners, to make education relevant and engage the students through creative software (citation). Each program comes with an instructor's CD and allows the teacher to emphasize the skills important to his or her class. Overall, the program provides an engaging, interactive multidisciplinary curriculum that is challenging and makes learning personally relevant.

All of their computer based programs are intended to revolutionize learning through engaging real world interaction. For example, with the Video Game Development Curriculum, students are thrust into the fast-paced hectic world of being a "virtual" video game development intern. Students meet with bosses, customers and co-workers, receive e-mails, faxes, etc and learn critical thinking and problem solving skills as they navigate through the real life experiences. The constant interaction keeps students engaged and excited. The entire curriculum is self directed, interactive and designed to support state assessments by addressing national math, language, and science and technology standards. An added bonus is that students have functional video games that can be played and shared with family and friends.

"If academic content is embedded in a game or game-like activity, students tend to be engaged in the task and consequently learn the embedded content even if they are not interested in the content per se" (Marzano, et al, 2005, p. 96). Educators are grasping this concept, as there is now a technology based academic classroom version of Jeopardy that attaches to the television.

In addition to these two technology programs, teachers can also involve students in long-term projects that are specific to their goals and interests and provide adequate resources and the time necessary for completion. This is another powerful conduit by which students are intrinsically motivated. Furthermore, teachers can utilize systems thinking in the classroom. This practice explores the interdependencies among the elements of the system. It includes integrated and thematic curriculum, aligned goals and measures and ensures that all parts of the classroom are working together.

Moreover, on going professional development must be available to keep teachers abreast of the new research-based curriculum and innovative approaches to educating. Because professional development is a

component of the *NCLB* Act, resources are available. As well, *NCLB* designates funding for technology. Should additional resources be required, there are many federal, state and foundation grants available for every demand. Funding searches can be very time consuming and writing proposals even more taxing. However, the benefits to students and schools are tremendous.

4 Summary

In conclusion, the diagnostic examination exposes the necessity for redesigning the urban classroom setting and provides recommendations for the change. Rather than targeting one organizational change issue, this study examines several issues including culture, communication, morale and resources.

The effective transformation of the classroom begins with communicating the need for change and gaining commitment from all involved. The classroom culture can be altered by targeting issues that are under the teacher's and student's control. Creating an environment that is conducive to learning entails mutual respect, achievable expectations, a means of measuring results and an exciting and engaging curriculum that integrates all learning styles. These efforts are huge morale enhancers. Finally, federal resources are available for underperforming schools to implement research-based strategies. However, if allocations are not sufficient for initiating change, other grant funding is obtainable. Finally, if one can effectively manage this change, the ultimate consequence could easily be sustainable change to the system.

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