

NCSC Review

A National Journal
for the Charter School Community



Volume 1 No. 3

July 2003

If You Build It, They Will Come

By Mr. John Buck

Here's everything you need to know about facilities management: how to get that big loan; whether to buy, build, or lease; where to go for money; and, most importantly, what you need to have figured out for yourself before you get there.

I once heard at a charter school conference that the top three issues in the charter school world were "Facilities, facilities, and then facilities." As one who specializes in helping charter schools finance their projects, I must admit that even I

Continued on page 2

The Spinning Wheels of Urban School Reform

By Dr. Frederick M. Hess

A few years ago I wrote a book entitled *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform*. The volume caused something of a stir and contributed to a broader effort to focus reform efforts on the causes-rather than merely the symptoms-of urban school failure. For those in the charter school movement seeking to more fully understand the trouble with the status quo and how to avoid the pitfalls therein, it might be worth revisiting the thrust of that argument. On a brighter note, larger changes in accountability and choice may be starting to help address the plight of urban school systems.

Critiques of urban schooling almost invariably end with calls for more change and new "solutions." Critics call for new curricula, different pedagogy, longer school days, altered classroom schedules, smaller classes or schools, refined professional development, and so on. Advocates of each proposal traditionally suggest that nothing more radical is necessary. They suggest that all we need to do is listen to the education professors and the consultants and adopt the right combination of these measures (although there is the problem that the professors and consultants settle upon new solutions almost as fast as districts catch onto the old ones).

These critiques have dominated the discourse and leant urgency to calls for reform in the two decades since the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* scathingly critiqued the nation's schools. An ensuing cacophony of reform has produced a lot of activity but little real change in urban schooling. Why? Advocates of reform, ranging from proponents of massive restructuring to those arguing for a particular pedagogy or curriculum, often contend that there has been too little school reform or that school systems are largely static. This claim is refuted by the record. My 1999 book reported on reform activity in 57 urban school districts. I found that the typical urban district had launched at least twelve significant initiatives in a three-year span-that's a new reform every three months! No similar study has been conducted recently, so it

Continued on page 11

Table of Contents

If You Build It, They Will Come	
by Mr. John Buck	p. 1
Dead Poet's Corner: I Keep Six Honest Serving-Men	
Analyzed and Critiqued by Dr. William Rice	p. 10
If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking	
Commentary by Dr. April Gresham Maranto	p. 10
The Spinning Wheels of Urban School Reform	
by Dr. Frederick M. Hess	p. 1
Measurement: The Key to Charter School Marketing	
by Mr. Brian Carpenter	p. 14
Book Review: Teacher Abuse	
by Dr. Robert Maranto	p. 18
Book Review: Scholarly Research on Charter Schools and Why it Matters	
by Dr. Robert Maranto	p. 22
Where's the Alternative? Identifying, Training and Certifying Highly Qualified Teachers	
by Ms. Amy Ashley	p. 28
Learning to Keep Up with Change: Researching Education Options on the Internet	
by Ms. Onnie Shekerjian	p. 33
Horror Story: Why the ED Business is Like No Business	
by Dr. Robert Maranto	p. 35
Teacher Quality Leadership from Public Charter Schools	
by Dr. Michael Poliakoff	p. 37

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).

From "Life"

Emily Dickenson (1890)

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.*

Continued from page 1

The Spinning Wheels of Urban School Reform

is possible that the rate has slowed since-though that's not the way most veteran observers of urban districts would be likely to bet.

With most urban districts continuing to flounder amidst shocking drop-out rates and poor test scores, both observation and achievement data suggest that few of these efforts have yielded the desired results. Why? The problem is the nature of the reform enterprise itself. Most of these reforms are an alluring distraction that has actually aggravated the plight of urban school districts.

Not only is the frenetic embrace of reform counterproductive, but the incentives that promote reform also make the failure of individual reforms almost inevitable. Policymakers are driven by professional and community pressures to consistently embrace dramatic-sounding changes, while trying to avoid provoking conflict. The result is the embrace of a series of toothless reforms in a fruitless search for the silver bullet. Crucially, these efforts rarely attempt to change the way adults are assigned to schools, how they are compensated, their job security, or anything that really matters, because such changes create controversy and complicate the superintendent's life.

For too long, reform has been largely a symbolic effort to reassure impatient communities. Reform is visible evidence that mediocrity is not tolerated and that improvement is around the corner. The result is that districts recycle initiatives, constantly modify previous initiatives, and adopt innovative reform A to replace practice B even as another district is adopting B as an innovative reform to replace practice A. The amount, pace, and nature of reform efforts are inimical to effective change and responsible governance. These reforms do not-and are not designed to-significantly alter the nature of schooling, but do frustrate, confuse, and finally alienate teachers.

While I am **not** suggesting that educators or policymakers engage in any of this behavior out of venal motives, a state of constant reform is the status quo in urban school systems. It has hindered school performance by distracting faculty

from the core functions of teaching and learning. Evidence on the performance of parochial and high-performing schools suggests that the best schools are characterized by focus, and develop expertise in specific approaches. School improvement requires time, focus, and the commitment of core personnel. This requires that the leadership focus on selected efforts and then nurture those efforts in the schools. As Richard Elmore first observed more than a decade ago, "Really good schools...often aren't very innovative; indeed, their main strength often seems to be that they persist in, and develop increasingly deep understandings of, well-developed theories of teaching and learning" (1991: 38).

The consistent failure of reforms to deliver promised improvement has done little to reduce the appeal of reform. Reformers argue that the disappointing results of reform simply indicate that the right solutions have not yet been used or that reforms were not given a fair trial. These critiques are valid. It is true that districts do not select the optimal reforms, nor do they nurture or properly implement reforms, but this is a distraction from the more fundamental problem. Reformers presume that the troubled state of urban education is due to current practice and that reforms will improve schooling, a belief that is shared by urban residents and professional educators impatient for progress. As Roland Barth observed in 1991, "Urban schools are seen as so helpless, so hopeless, so broken that it seems there's little to lose by giving them a good hard kick. To use a dated metaphor, it's like kicking a broken radio. Perhaps the tube filaments will align by chance in a different way, and the radio will work. In any case, since it's already broken, what is there to lose?" (124).

The law of averages ensures that some policy initiatives somewhere are bound to appear successful, regardless of their real promise. Those reforms that appear successful are anointed. Researchers who pursue them receive funding, consultants who preach them win work, and district policymakers often seize upon them in the hope that this reform will be the one that works. District leaders who don't jump on the bandwagon risk being criticized by their communities as uncommitted or unprofessional. The belief that innovation will eventually bring improvement is not unique to education-researchers often presume that more innovation is the mark of a good organization. The problem is that quick-fixes have distracted attention from performance and have undermined organizational coherence.

The cruel paradox is that the same impulses which compel education policymakers to adopt reform also ensure that they will do so under conditions which make large-scale success highly unlikely. Problems with urban school reform are symptomatic of larger problems. Until the larger constraints are addressed, reforms-no matter how well-designed are likely to prove futile, waste resources, and foster faculty frustration.

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).

Why They Do What They Do

Getting urban schools unstuck requires a shift in emphasis-away from the pursuit of the curricular or pedagogical “silver bullet” that will **really** work-and towards an understanding of why urban school systems engage in reform and why nearly every reform produces disappointing results. Insufficient attention to the structure within which school reform is pursued has crippled efforts to understand the failure of school reform.

Urban school systems are governed by professional superintendents subject to intense pressures from the amateur boards that supervise them. Vulnerable board members, accountable for mediocre urban schools but with little power to generate short-term solutions, rely on the superintendent’s professional judgment to provide forward direction. This increases the pressure upon the superintendent to produce visible and impressive results. In this high-stakes situation, if things go poorly, the board is able to help the system off to a fresh start by replacing a disappointing superintendent with one who inspires community confidence. Board members who fail to use the superintendent in this fashion court political risk and may be pushed out by impatient community members who want evidence that things will improve quickly.

The evidence shows that urban superintendents are rarely in place long enough to make a significant difference, the typical tenure being three years or less. As Theodore Kowalski has argued, “The idea that one individual can successfully transform a complex organization by imposing his or her vision in a relatively short period of time is simply myopic” (152). Given the superintendent’s short tenure, the visibility of his or her position, the lack of effective short-term control over classroom performance in urban districts, and the difficulties in assessing the impact of new leadership on district outcomes in just a two- or three-year period, superintendents do not have the opportunity to prove their value via substantive long-term leadership.

Fundamentally, the problems with reform are rooted in the fact that urban administrators are encouraged to concentrate on proposing change-rather than results-because it is visible activity by which they are judged. Unable to accurately assess the performance of the district leadership, due to rapid leadership turnover; the multiple social and economic difficulties impeding urban school performance; and the challenge of linking a leader’s efforts to short-term performance fluctuations in a large system, communities demand evidence that the district leaders will make matters better. The result is that community and district leaders have incentives to focus upon inputs-visible effort to improve schooling-rather than long-term performance.

For a long time, this dynamic has been dramatically compounded by the lack of clear, reliable, or agreed-upon measures

of student performance. In the world of No Child Left Behind and increasingly sophisticated state accountability systems, however, this obstacle is slowly dissipating.

The public expects that superintendents should rapidly demonstrate that better times are coming and community support is crucial to any improvement effort. District leaders are much more likely to be effective if they enjoy business support, parental cooperation, the active participation of community organizations, and the backing of municipal officials. The surest way to earn this kind of support is to cultivate a community reputation as a promising innovator. Superintendents who initiate reforms are feted in the local media, praised by the mayor and local business community, and offered a honeymoon in which to reshape troubled school systems. Superintendents are propelled into proactivity-if only as a tactic to rally resources and support. Superintendents who focus on the long term and fail to propose quick fixes will be handicapped by a lack of support and resources. Superintendents who proceed in a controlled, deliberate, incremental fashion will find their effectiveness hobbled by a lack of community prestige. In short, **current arrangements create a situation in which pursuing significant change in a responsible manner undermines the district’s ability to secure the resources and community trust necessary to enact significant change.**

The urban superintendent faces a dilemma. Focusing on selected initiatives enhances the likelihood of producing significant change, but attracts relatively little notice and makes it unlikely the superintendent will be able to finish the job he set out to do. On the other hand, by initiating a great deal of activity and leaving his or her successors to worry about results, the superintendent can set a district upon the “right path” and can trust others to finish the job. Additionally, the proactive superintendent benefits because he or she is positioned to take credit for apparent successes, while the managerial successor is often seen as a mere technician. Obviously, most superintendents will choose to be initiators, and there will be a lack of implementers to finish their handiwork. **Whether or not the schools are viewed as improving, professional and political realities reward those superintendents who are seen as proactive.**

Those reformers perceived as successful are offered a series of increasingly prestigious positions atop larger and larger districts, and find doors into government, consulting, and academia opened to them. Acclaimed reformers are sought after by more prestigious districts, increasing their influence and visibility. Aspiring superintendents learn to emulate these success stories while less active superintendents are selected out. This Darwinian process serves to ensure that hyper-reformers are encouraged and rewarded.

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).

Aware of their short expected tenure, superintendents have strong incentives to rapidly establish their reputations as effective leaders by emphasizing input, even at the expense of careful program design, oversight, and implementation. Emphasizing follow-through is often professionally self-defeating in the high-turnover world of the urban superintendency, because professional status accrues to those who initiate programs. Carrying on a predecessor's innovations is a caretaker role which does little to establish a strong reputation, so new superintendents are compelled to launch their own reforms.

Looking Ahead

Reform-rather than being the remedy to what ails urban schools-has generally been a distraction and a hindrance. Reform is an expensive endeavor, requiring time, money, and energy and imposing significant opportunity costs on urban school systems. A series of partial reform efforts can serve to undermine the school-level stability, focus, consistency, enthusiasm, trust, and commitment that are the keys to effective schooling.

The irony of school reform is that the sheer amount of activity impedes the ability of schools to improve in meaningful ways. Meaningful reform requires time, energy, commitment, and focus. The infatuation with new reforms ensures that only the rare measure is seen through to the end. The churning of policy distracts administrators, teachers, and community members from fostering faculty commitment and expertise-the real keys to school improvement. Dramatic

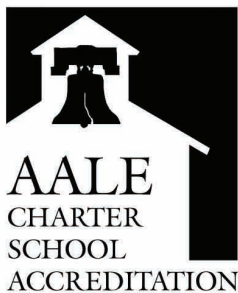
top-down reforms, which tend to be hobbled by vague conceptions of how teaching and learning will improve, rarely foster this commitment. Rapid leadership turnover and the constant search for new solutions cause commitments to the initiatives of former superintendents to dry up and programs to be abandoned. The result is that faculty and administrators become disillusioned and increasingly resist further change. The problem has not been that "nothing ever changes," but that "everything changes."

In effect, policy churn punishes teachers who throw themselves into reform efforts, even though these very teachers are likely to be among the more effective teachers in a school system. The disinterested and unmotivated teachers who are the targets of most reform activity safely ride out the successive waves of reform behind the closed doors of their classrooms. Those teachers who invest their energy, disrupt their classrooms, and sacrifice their time find their efforts wasted if reforms dissipate. Because each regime tends to initiate new reforms, within a few years this entire process starts again. Veteran teachers quickly learn to close their classroom doors and simply wait for each reform push to recede (often getting labeled "burn outs" in the process), ensuring that each subsequent wave of reform is largely manned by newer teachers who lack institutional memory.

The inability of urban districts to make reforms work says little about the intrinsic merit of individual initiatives or the efforts of those who have designed them. On the other hand, the well-intentioned promises and programs produced by the professional reform community have aggravated the perverse incentives driving short-term district leadership and policy churn. By continuously promising newer and better mousetraps, reformers increase the pressure to pursue new initiatives, while encouraging the public to hold unrealistic expectations. Rather than look to reformers and consultants who promote "new and improved" remedies for educational problems, educational leaders need to provide focused, consistent, stable leadership that cultivates expertise and community.

The spread of accountability-based and choice-based reform have also helped to address these challenges. By using achievement measures or market forces to gauge performance and increase accountability, these reforms help assuage the anxieties that feed the demand for visible change. Accountability systems change the way in which superintendents are measured, so that visible reform is no longer so palatable if unaccompanied by results. Meanwhile, it becomes easier to justify a slow and deliberate leadership style if results testify to real improvement.

Choice-based reform create the possibility for market-based and contractual accountability while decentralizing management and removing school governance from the sporadic and erratic oversight of the urban community. Instead, it delivers



A program to recognize public charter schools of high distinction

- Well-sequenced academic curriculum
- Frequent, reliable assessment
- Highly-qualified teachers
- Institutional health

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION
1710 Rhode Island Avenue NW, 4th Floor
Washington, DC 20036
T: 202-452-8611 / F: 202-452-8620

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).

this authority to a smaller school community of interested parties. It is far easier for this small community to assess school performance in a straightforward way, reducing the incentive for school officials to engage in high-profile reforms of uncertain value.

In short, while urban schools continue to suffer from arrangements that tempt leaders to chase one shallow reform after another, the larger environment is starting to change in ways that appear likely to help address this problem. It is vital, however, that charter operators and authorizers take care not to invite the pathologies of urban school reform into their sector and their schools as they move into urban communities.

References

Barth, R. S. (1991). "Restructuring schools: Some questions for teachers and principals." *Phi Delta Kappan* 73(October): 123-128.

Elmore, R.F. (1991). *Innovation in education policy*. Prepared for the Conference on Fundamental Questions of Innovation at Duke University, Durham, NC.

Kowalski, T. (1995). *Keepers of the flame: Contemporary urban superintendents*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.



Frederick M. Hess is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and executive editor of *Education Next*. His books include *Spinning Wheels* (Brookings 1999), *Bringing the Social Sciences Alive* (Allyn & Bacon 1999), *Revolution at the Margins* (Brookings 2002), and the forthcoming *Common*

Sense School Reform (Palgrave). His research has appeared in journals including *American Politics Quarterly*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Urban Affairs Review*, *Urban Education*, *Educational Policy*, and *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Measurement: The Key to Charter School Marketing

By Brian L. Carpenter

A public school board member recently made the following statements to a local newspaper:

"We say we're going to market, market, market this school, but we don't do it," said the board vice president, expressing frustration that her district continues to lose students to other schools. "We've talked about this for years, but we haven't done anything."

Ever feel that way as board member of your charter school?

The solutions to the marketing challenge at your school might not be what you think-especially if you think that

money alone is the answer. The school in the example above has an annual marketing budget of \$120,000, yet it is still losing students to other schools.

One reason is readily apparent: The board doesn't understand how to design and execute a marketing plan. Most revealingly, the article also stated, "district leaders said they don't have numbers on how many [XYZ] School students are leaving the district." If the board had an effective marketing plan they would know precisely how many students had left, why they left, and where they went. In a word, an effective marketing plan should have prescribed the constant measurement of these important data and the board and administrative team should have been evaluating the results to try to win them back and keep others from leaving in the first place.

Competition for students

Since most schools have the goal of being friendly, nurturing and collaborative, some people find the thought of competing with a "sister school" disdainful.

If some on your board are prone to make this mistake, you can help them understand the value of competition by pointing out that marketing brings out the best performance in people and helps keep the price of goods and services affordable.

Competition operates on the incentive principle. When two or more entities compete for the same customers or markets, they put forth their best efforts to win them. This incentive principle has worked throughout history. It will work in modern American schools as well, regardless of whether some on your board fail to recognize it.

When boards fail to understand the necessity of strategically positioning the school to attract students, they will usually lose them. Complacently staking their hopes for a successful school on the "if you build it they will come" dream, the board at such a school will often witness a decline of enrollment numbers to the point where it is not possible to continue operations. Sometimes by sheer luck, during times when the birth rate of school age children is on the rise or the community is growing, such a school may survive for a decade or two and even increase its enrollment, but without a master marketing plan it will not likely build permanent world class facilities of its own, project a shared vision for the future, or in the end, produce **sustainable excellence**.

If the leadership does not agree that your school needs to market itself to compete for students, your first marketing challenge is to get them on board. Failing that, get them off the board. That may sound harsh, but the fact is, if you're in the school leadership business you have a duty and a fiduciary responsibility to the school to see to it that it flourishes.

If understanding the competitive nature of successful school viability already describes every board member and

Bringing useful ideas, humor, and non-boring scholarship to the charter school community (for over seven weeks).