University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

GSE Publications | Graduate School of Education

9-1-2003

Do Universities Have a Role in Managing Public Schools: Lessons from the Penn Partnership Schools

Nancy W. Streim
University of Pennsylvania, nstreim@gse.upenn.edu

Jeanne Min Vissa
University of Pennsylvania, jeannev@gse.upenn.edu

Reprinted from *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, Volume 2, Issue 2, Fall 2003, 18 pages. Publisher URL: http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/51
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Do Universities Have a Role in Managing Public Schools: Lessons from the Penn Partnership Schools

Abstract
Over the past several years, the standards based reform movement has produced increasingly dramatic shifts in the relationship between educational policies and school-based practices. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has further intensified public scrutiny and local accountability for demonstrating that all children meet national standards in their learning. However, to achieve desired improvements in student learning, it is clear that many schools must fundamentally rethink the ways in which they organize instructional practices.

Comments
Reprinted from *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, Volume 2, Issue 2, Fall 2003, 18 pages. Publisher URL: http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/51

Do Universities Have a Role in Managing Public Schools: Lessons from the Penn Partnership Schools

Nancy Streim and Jeanne Vissa

Introduction

Over the past several years, the standards based reform movement has produced increasingly dramatic shifts in the relationship between educational policies and school-based practices. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has further intensified public scrutiny and local accountability for demonstrating that all children meet national standards in their learning. However, to achieve desired improvements in student learning, it is clear that many schools must fundamentally rethink the ways in which they organize instructional practices. Also, there needs to be systematic attention to creating accountability for learning outcomes, and providing the supports to achieve them. To address the seemingly intractable problem of improving student outcomes in its lowest performing schools, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission asked the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) to be one of seven outside organizations (collectively referred to as educational management organizations or 'EMOs') that would manage a total of 45 elementary and middle schools with the weakest performance on the Pennsylvania System of Student Assessment (PSSA). In July 2002, Penn embarked on a three-year partnership with the Henry Lea School, William Bryant School and Alexander Wilson School - three elementary schools in the West Philadelphia community - with the goal of dramatically improving student achievement. Unlike other EMOs who sought to manage all aspects of the schools, Penn agreed to a limited partnership that would focus exclusively on five inter-related domains that we believe will contribute to establishment of a community that can achieve and sustain high academic standards: curriculum, professional development, leadership, student assessment and school climate. Where the private EMOs had brand images that were associated with specific curricula, instructional organizations, and/or staffing arrangements, we are concentrating on building capacity through technical assistance and professional development within the framework of existing School District of Philadelphia structures and curriculum. Since professional development represents the heart of our approach to increasing the capacity of schools to be self-sustaining in their improvement efforts, the only condition that Penn imposed on the schools was an obligation for all teachers to commit themselves to 120 hours/year of professional development focused on the school's instructional priorities, as defined through the Partnership.

In our work with the Partnership Schools, we have engaged the question: how does a research university put its knowledge and experience to the task of creating high functioning learning communities that are characterized by shared accountability for student learning and that result in strong student outcomes? In this article, we describe our framework and approaches for bringing about the desired school improvements in the three partnership schools, reflect on our experiences in the first year of partnership, and examine how the perspective of "shared accountability" influences the dynamic of the work.

Framework for Shared Accountability

The distinctive nature of Penn's role as an educational services provider to the three partnership schools can be captured by our commitment to establish a culture of shared accountability for improving student learning. As noted by Elmore (2002), schools that succeed in responding to external pressures "have their own internal system for reaching agreement on good practice and for making that agreement evident in organization and pedagogy" (p. 20). Shared accountability is characterized by reciprocal responsibilities for student learning and embraces teachers, administrators, Penn partners, parents and students themselves. Shared accountability demands that the entire school community know the learning standards; that teachers have the skills, strategies and attitudes to teach to the standards; that there is regular discussion in the school about the quality of student work as demonstrated in ongoing assessments; and, that teaching and non-teaching staff accept collective responsibility for student success. Evidence of shared accountability can be seen in instructional teaming, where a group of teachers share responsibility for monitoring and accelerating student progress; joint examination of student work as a way to expand teachers' available strategies for capturing and extending critical thinking and communication skills; and, monthly newsletters home that inform parents about learning goals and that illustrate what proficient student work looks like.

Developing a shared accountability system depends first on establishing a professional community among school staff (Kruse et al., 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Coherence of goals is key, as collegiality and collaboration alone are unlikely to produce the desired student performance gains (Elmore, 2000). This then became the focal point, and the challenge of our partnership – to assist the Penn Partnership schools to develop coherence in their efforts and create a culture of professional inquiry where collective responsibility for student achievement defines the work of school improvement. In the Penn Partnership model, a broad array of professional development experiences afford teachers the opportunity to make their work more coherent and their strategies more intentional. The goal is to help build a community within the schools where examination of teaching practice is the norm, and where there are regular and ongoing opportunities for school staff to enhance content knowledge, work together to expand their range of instructional strategies, and examine student data.

We recognize that the hard work of school improvement in Penn Partnership Schools is being carried out in a very public arena where quick impact on student achievement is expected, even as we understand that measurable improvements in student outcomes often require five or more years of focused effort (Bryk et al., 1998; McMeekin, 2003). That reality makes us aware of a duality in the work: developing partnership that is judged for its long term value in enriching the work that goes on in schools, and partnership as a means to a very specific end, judged on the results of student test performance from year to year. What we describe here reflects the tensions in achieving the long and short-term aims of our partnership.

Developing a Network of High Performing Schools

There is evidence that schools belonging to a network feel a greater commitment to carrying out

school improvement than those that undertake improvements on their own (McMeekin, 2003). To ensure commitment, many school reform networks look for voluntary participation, by securing a majority vote of the school faculty before embarking on a partnership. In our case, the Penn Partnership Schools network was created from an administrative mandate. When the provider-school pairings were announced in Spring 2002, teaching staff at the three schools reported that they were relieved, and indeed excited, to become part of the Penn network of schools. Not surprisingly, there were many different expectations – many unrealistic – of the benefits that would derive from affiliation with Penn (e.g., waiver from District bureaucracy, free degrees at Penn, unlimited budget for teaching materials).

We knew from past experiences that if we were successful in building the schools' capacity for shared accountability, then the meaning and value of the partnership would become clear. We were able to point our new colleagues at the Wilson and Bryant schools to our track record at the Lea School, which had already completed two years of a partnership with Penn. The principal and staff there were eager to continue the relationship and to model the internal accountability system they had been developing with assistance from Penn. Nevertheless, much of our engagement with the other two schools in the first year focused on clarifying Penn's role as a partner, building trust between Penn partners and the teachers and parents, and defining the expectations and values that characterize the Penn Partnership Schools network. We sought every opportunity to engender commitment to the goals of the network and bring the three school staffs together. Teachers who had developed effective practices in their classrooms were asked to share them at network professional development days; a cross-school literacy leadership group met monthly with the Partnership's literacy director to collaborate on a literacy framework for the Partnership schools; teachers in one school were invited to participate in selecting their new principal; Penn provided financial support to Partnership teachers who formed teacher led study groups; and the three principals met regularly with the Penn partners as a network leadership team.

Organization of the Penn Partnership Team

We organized the leadership for Penn Partnership Schools into a team that is illustrated in Figure 1. The co-authors serve as the team leaders. Members of the Penn Partnership Team include Penn Graduate School of Education faculty, professional staff, graduate students, and consultants, along with the Partnership School principals and assistant principals. It took several months to solidify the appropriate size and function for the leadership team as the initial impulse to include all Penn partners working in the schools tended to fragment focus. However, by the Winter of 2003, the leadership team was meeting regularly. Most of the early discussions focused on implementation issues as we shared information, determined professional development programs and activities, resolved issues in navigating the District bureaucracy, and supported each other's initiatives through consultation and sharing. For example, two of the schools merged their Gifted Programs to accommodate the fact that one school had a teacher but no space, and other had additional space but could not afford a dedicated teacher.

Figure 1
Penn Partnership Schools Leadership Team

Team Leaders:

- Director – oversees all aspects of partnership including program and fiscal oversight
- Associate Director – manages implementation of vision-into-practice

Leadership Team Roles:

- Literacy Lead - develops and implements literacy strategies in collaboration with school leadership and Penn staff/graduate students
- Math Lead - develops and implements math strategies in collaboration with school leadership and Penn staff/graduate students
- Science Lead - develops and implements science strategies in collaboration with school leadership and Penn staff/graduate students
- School Climate Lead - develops and implements initiatives with principals and staff related to school climate and norms, student behavioral health and special education
- Consultant on Organizational Development - assists the leadership team to understand and address community building issues
- Parent/Community Liaison - provides outreach to parents, assists principals with parent liaison, and fosters development of strong parent community including Home and School Association
- Penn Partnership School Principals
- Penn Partnership School Assistant Principals

The role of the co-authors as team leaders encompasses aspects of both mentorship and management in the implementation of school improvement strategies. The inevitable tensions that reverberate between these positions reflect the challenge of building a long-term partnership for school improvement, while accepting accountability in the District's "thin management" model assigned to the EMOs. While we see our roles as helping the schools make decisions that would create the conditions to achieve improvement, the District calls upon the Penn team leaders to act on all manner of budget, facilities, staffing, compliance, and other management issues. Most of these we defer to the principals; however, Penn team members often helped out by handling budget, ordering, and compliance tasks for the schools, especially when principals have inadequate administrative support in their buildings. At the same time, we also wear our management hats to advocate for flexibility from District policies and mandates that thwart progress in implementing Partnership plans. For example, having made a case with the principals for the importance of strategically allocating staff to align with instructional priorities, and then working together to recruit and reassign staff as appropriate, we found ourselves engaged in many rounds of discussions with the District's Human Resources staff to carry out our plans. We argued to have mistakes corrected in employee records, advocated for teachers who fell into contractual "gray zones" with respect to their seniority rights to be assigned to the Partnership schools, and arranged for a customized hiring packet to be sure that new staff assigned by the District were informed of the Penn Partnership's 120 hour professional development obligation. If nothing else, these experiences on the front lines have helped the Penn team members to better appreciate the challenges of meeting instructional goals amidst the many distractions of school management.

Establishing Focus through Needs Assessment

We entered into the partnership with a vision and a belief system about developing shared accountability for student achievement. The vision of Penn as a partner places a high value on building upon existing capacity, responding to the schools' perceived needs, and to achieving

buy in from staff. Therefore, to design the areas of focus for the partnership's initiatives, a needs assessment was conducted in Spring 2002. The assessment included review of each school's demographic, academic, and staffing data; extensive interviews with school leaders; walk-throughs and observations in every classroom; and, focus group meetings that involved all members of the professional staff at each school.

The major findings from the assessment were that the schools were desperately in need of coherence. The School Improvement Plans were without focus, and characterized by dozens of uncoordinated initiatives. The teachers viewed themselves as having persevered through curricular turmoil, which was exacerbated by extensive turn-over of teaching staff year-to-year. Additionally, at one school there were issues surrounding the inclusion of students with special needs, and at another there were concerns about poor communication between administration and staff. Many teachers cited the need for improving school climate relative to "disruptive students."

We were assisted in our efforts to help the schools establish focus by the School District's newly established Quality School Review Process, which provided an assessment of instruction, climate, and leadership at each Penn Partnership School with respect to standards-based achievement. The Quality Review teams found a pervasive mismatch between the level of current instruction and the performance standards of benchmark tests, including the state's standardized assessments (PSSA) and the nationally-normed Terra Nova exams. As specified in their feedback to each school, teachers would need to increase the rigor of their instruction, which embraces the level of critical thinking demanded by each learning task, as well as the amount of new learning they made accessible to students within a lesson or unit.

A frequent mistake of many school reform initiatives is the impulse to attempt change in too many areas at once, or conversely, to neglect aspects of school culture that can make or break the success of the targeted area of improvement. Toward that end, we found it useful for the principals and Penn partners to collectively articulate priorities for the network schools through a succinct statement of mission and principles. These are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Statement of Mission and Principles for Penn Partnership Schools

Mission Statement

Build schools' capacity for sustainable improvements in student achievement through professional development, leadership development, curriculum development, academic enrichment for students and parent/community involvement.

Guiding Principles

1. Build a school culture of continuous professional growth
2. Cultivate intentionality in preparing children to meet high standards
3. Use ongoing assessment of student work to guide instructional decisions

Moving on all five fronts (curriculum, professional development, leadership, assessment and school climate) would be critical, but given the limits of time, resources, and leadership capacities, establishing priorities for the first year would provide the necessary coherence, especially with respect to planning professional development.

Increasing the rigor of teaching and learning became the first priority in each school's annual School Improvement Plan and the fact that the identification of need came from multiple sources helped the staff accept that the Partnership would work with them to address goals that were established by the School District. The leadership team selected literacy as the primary school-wide focus for 2002-2003. Giving primacy to literacy translated to having all teachers engage in re-articulating the reading, writing, listening, and speaking expectations they had for students, drawing from national (No Child Left Behind), state (Pennsylvania), and local (Comprehensive Balanced Literacy) frameworks. We also acknowledged, however, that even as the Penn Partnership was most focused on consolidating improvements in literacy, there should be opportunities for teachers interested in mathematics and science to participate in professional development courses and demonstrate leadership that would lay the groundwork for a deeper focus on these areas in the years ahead.

Using our focusing principles as a guide, the leadership team also coordinated and leveraged many disparate activities that heretofore characterized Penn's involvement in local schools. In fact, in the first year, we turned away a number of Penn and other community initiatives and redirected others whose well-intentioned efforts were not adequately aligned with the Partnership's priorities. At the same time, we sought new relationships that promised to integrate better with the partnership's instructional goals including strategic use of student tutors, civic organizations, and arts groups.

From Vision to Reality: Lessons from the First Year

The first year of partnership met our expectations and achieved some notable successes. As described in this section, we learned many lessons in the first year that will inform our efforts moving forward. Below we share the priorities, challenges, and accomplishments related to the five domains of the Partnership's focus.

Curriculum. In response to the teachers' request for curriculum stability, the leadership team concluded that more would be gained by improving implementation of the existing curricula in literacy, math, and science than by introducing new materials and approaches. The data from the needs assessment suggested that what teachers most needed was support to deepen the coherence between the standards-based materials available in their schools and the performance standards they were meant to achieve, which would also lead to stronger student performance on standardized tests. A challenge for the Partnership was making time for staff to work together with their grade-level and building-level colleagues to address these curricular issues.

Literacy instruction was a prime area for investment because each of the schools had engaged in extensive professional development in literacy-related initiatives over the last few years, and took pride in their efforts. However, we saw a clear need for consolidation of effort if the literacy

instruction was to flourish. There was little clarity about ways to assess the reading progress a child was making, or choice of strategies and materials that could promote movement to the next level of comprehension. The schools were satisfied with the independent reading component of their literacy program, but needed to develop more explicit strategies for addressing the more challenging areas of guided and shared reading.

Many researchers have suggested that teachers need to have opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs about what constitutes academic success in a subject, as well as their expectations of what urban children are capable of achieving (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Knapp, 1995). The Penn Partnership used significant portions of professional development time to work with teachers to generate a document of Expectations of Student Behaviors in Literacy across genres and across literacy components. The goal of this experience was to delineate performance standards for students *grade by grade* to make the standards achievable and demonstrable in the benchmark testing years.

The Expectations of Student Behaviors in Literacy document has become the framework for guiding teachers to probe more deeply into the challenges of practice. As we continue to build professional community, the Penn partners need to look for enhanced opportunities that enable teachers to translate espoused philosophies into enacted practices more readily. To help teachers envision what the management of rigorous instructional environments looks like, we are working toward more opportunities for teachers to visit each other's classrooms, and greater use of video to accelerate progress.

Professional development. We agree with Elmore (202) that "professional development . . . should be designed to develop the capacity of teachers to work collectively on problems of practice, within their own schools, and with practitioners in other settings. . . the essential purpose of professional development should be the improvement of schools and school systems not just improvement of individuals who work in them"(p.8). Because professional development is fundamental to our approach to school improvement, we secured agreement from the School District and the teacher's union that as a condition of Penn's partnership, all teachers at the Lea, Wilson and Bryant Schools would be expected to engage in 120 hours of professional development a year in activities that advance the school's instructional priorities; further, at least half of those hours must be spent collaborating with colleagues in the school to foster articulation of curricula across grades and other aspects of improving teaching and learning. Teachers who could not support this commitment had the opportunity to transfer from their schools. (Lea teachers had the same opportunity in 2000 when the Penn partnership was initiated at that school). Very few teachers elected to leave. The advantage in having most teachers stay was that the chance to accomplish significant school improvement seemed to motivate many of them. The disadvantage was that some teachers stayed who are resistant to significant change. As teachers heard us ask them to ascribe to a rigorous professional development framework, some expressed the sentiment that Penn was proposing to impose on their time rather than addressing the real needs, which were more often than not described as failures of the students and their families. Such responses were not unexpected, but they did make clear the challenge of addressing beliefs and norms that can impede improvement (Fullan, 2002; Newmann & Sconzert, 2000; Payne & Kaba, 2001).

Although literacy was designated as the primary instructional focus, the Penn Partnership leadership team decided that it would be best to provide staff with an array of professional development options in an effort to respect and build on teachers' interests and strengths. We created a menu of six 30-hour, graduate level continuing education courses with academic credit and stipends provided by Penn. The six seminars included two that focused on guided reading (lower and upper grades), two on teaching "big ideas" in lower grades and upper grades math, one on science inquiry approaches, and for the sixth seminar, we engaged the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers in adapting their Peer Intervention workshop and consultation model into a course about effective classroom management. We also constructed two full-day professional development days to bring together all three schools to articulate the network's literacy learning expectations for each grade. Teachers could also meet the professional development expectation by attending District workshops and institutes, participating in professional association meetings, being coached in their classrooms by Penn faculty and peers, taking courses at local universities and mentoring student teachers and colleagues.

To embed professional development in daily practice, the Penn team was visible and available on-site for consultation, coaching, problem solving and planning. Penn team members with expertise in literacy, math, science, parent outreach and behavioral health visited the schools on a regular basis, meeting with teachers, parents, principals and visiting classrooms. There was at least one representative of the Penn partnership team in each school every day. The goal was to build commitment to the shared accountability model, and build trust in the university partnership, by quietly and consistently assisting individual teachers to achieve success in areas of their practice that were challenging to them, and to provide recognition for effective practices that could be extended throughout the schools. For example, the teachers at the Lea School noted that the new math materials were weak in problem solving, and they showed us how they were using supplementary materials from a previous series. From this and other examples, we learned that there need to be ample and even redundant opportunities for teachers to discuss the rollout of instructional changes with each other, with Penn partners, and with principals in order to contribute to school-wide strategies that highlight effective approaches.

While professional development began as a series of "events," we will consider ourselves to be successful if the first year's efforts result in teachers' deepening their disposition to come together to inquire into their educational values, the values inherent in standards-based curriculum materials, and the correlations of instructional practices to the desired goals of student achievement. This view is consistent with the framework of teacher networks, which see teacher conversations as key to the development of professional community:

> Being a part of a discourse community assures teachers that their knowledge of their students and schooling is respected. Once they know this, they become committed to change, willing to take risks, and dedicated to self-improvement. . . Members of networks report an emotional stimulation that gives them the courage to engage students differently in the classroom-an opportunity especially valued by teachers in urban schools. (McLaughlin & Lieberman, 1992, p. 674)

Early indications are encouraging with respect to building a culture of continuous professional

improvement. Over 75% of the school faculty met the 120-hour professional development expectation, and over 50% participated in the Penn seminars. In their evaluations of the Penn seminars, teachers most often commented on the value of peer interaction, the high quality of instructors, and the applicability of strategies as being among the highlights of the seminars.

Although we are satisfied that the menu approach to professional development achieved the early buy-in we sought, it did not produce the degree of shared knowledge and shared vocabulary about literacy standards and practices needed as a foundation for building shared accountability. To foster further coherence of our efforts, we are shifting the professional development strategy for Year 2. All teachers will participate in a core set of literacy focused professional development experiences aimed at establishing common language and expectations for implementing the literacy curriculum. These will occur during the school day, taking advantage of the District's revised school calendar, which includes 18 early dismissal days for students. The math, science, and classroom management seminars will be offered again after school, supplemented by much more "at-the-elbow" coaching in the classroom in all three core subject areas. In addition, all of the professional development seminars in the second year will provide academic credit to groups of teachers who meet apart from the scheduled meeting times to pursue peer coaching and inter-visitation. And, we will increase support for teacher-led study groups, encouraging more teachers to participate in ongoing inquiry of teacher and student work.

Leadership development. Schools that have significantly raised student achievement are characterized by strong instructional leadership. The process of leading instructional changes calls upon the principal to be what Michael Fullan (2002) calls a "coherence maker". Yet, studies show that instructional leadership is one of the least frequent activities performed by school administrators (Elmore, 2000).

Under the School District of Philadelphia's invigorated accountability system, the quality of classroom instruction has become a clear priority, but success in improving the consistency of instruction will require a degree of school leadership that goes beyond the capacity found in many Philadelphia schools. Achieving coherence calls upon principals to collaborate with staff on instructional and operational issues, make time for teachers to have instructional conversations during the school day and in seminars, and develop teacher agency for change. They must attend to vision, urgency, implementation, evaluation, and nurturance. Successful principals conceive of this work as invigorating, rather than withering. Understandably, not all principals feel that they can make the long-term commitments necessary to accomplish the demands of school improvement in these ways. By September 2003, each of the three Penn Partnership Schools had a different principal than the one with whom we began the work.

A good example of the investment it takes to support a coherent literacy program can be seen at the Lea School. In formulating a budget for the school year, Principal Michael Silverman considered a number of facets that could contribute to consolidating literacy instruction at the school. He won agreement from the staff to lengthen the regular school day to create a bi-weekly early dismissal schedule that allowed the entire staff to participate in paid professional development in literacy on alternate Wednesdays. He changed the job description for the Small Learning Community Coordinators so that instructional support in reading became their

dominant focus. He also obtained agreement from the staff to exercise a contractual option for site selection of teachers, which allowed for classroom teachers to participate in the interviews for four literacy specialists.

Examination of how the Partnership schools organize themselves to promote achievement continues to be an important element to our collaborative conversations. Our view of enduring school improvement reflects the position expressed by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) that "intervening to improve school leadership by focusing exclusively on building the leadership of an individual formal leader in a school may not be the most optimal or most effective use of resources" (p.27). Rather, principal leadership and "distributed leadership" among teachers are both needed to build and sustain a shared accountability system (Elmore, 2000; Spillane, Halverson& Diamond, 2001).

In Partnership schools that were not well organized to foster distributed leadership, teachers expressed limited agency with respect to their role in leading change. For example, at one Partnership school, teachers were vocal about their displeasure in using dated social studies books; however, when grant funds became available to purchase new materials, they did not easily organize themselves to contribute to the review and selection of new texts. With the potential loss of these funds in the balance, we contacted vendors to supply the schools with sample materials, and to help teachers become empowered to contribute to decision-making, we guided them in developing questions by which they could evaluate different texts. By the end of the school year, teachers' willingness to assume leadership had already improved. As evidence, when the school faced a particularly thorny issue of an excellent multi-age, grades 1 through 3 Montessori program that negatively impacted teaching loads of the other staff, the teachers resolved to co-locate all the first and second grade classrooms so that they could form an integrated instructional unit, and benefit from the Montessori classroom in their midst.

The salience of behavioral issues for teachers in Penn Partnership Schools may be a focal area for encouraging distributed leadership. Opportunities for leadership of climate-related initiatives should be announced at a school early in the year, with the objective of engaging the participation of each teacher in at least one initiative related to school improvement. At the same time, we confront a significant challenge in keeping teacher leaders within the schools. The School District has begun to tap these talented individuals for District coaching positions, and the Partnership schools have lost four valued teachers from the schools already. Our experience is consistent in this regard with reforms in Chicago, where the fragility of change has been tested by frequent turnover in the leadership teams (Payne & Kaba, 2001).

Student assessment. The current national attention to upgrading student achievement is not a new concern; what is different in this iteration of school reform are some of its premises. One premise appears to be that a society that has thrived in an Information Age must hold all its schools accountable for producing and analyzing vast amounts of assessment data. No Child Left Behind legislation mandating adequate yearly progress is overwhelming to many schools because they are in their infancy as consumers of data. Schools in Philadelphia, as in many other communities, are increasingly inundated with test scores and student data, yet too often, there has been little connection between the data and instructional strategies. Schools know that they

are failing, but school leaders may not know how to translate the data into a plan for improving teaching and learning. Supovitz & Klein (in preparation) argue that critical group examination of the school's performance data is a cornerstone of a professional learning community (see also Johnson, 2002). As partners to schools without a history of using student data, we have begun to examine the structures within the schools and School District for collecting and analyzing summative and formative data on student performance for purposes of enriching instructional decisions.

There are many ways that student data can be used to stimulate improvements, such as informing instructional choices, selecting interventions for individual students, identifying areas for professional development, setting targets and goals, and celebrating student and faculty achievements (Supovitz & Klein, in preparation). In their recent study, Supovitz and Klein found that school-wide assessments were the most powerful but least frequently used forms of assessment. The question of who takes responsibility for generating and acting upon formative data in the schools is a core issue. The schools have not had school-wide benchmark assessments that could allow teachers to tailor their instruction to individual student needs. Penn Partnership Schools had a history of performing periodic individualized reading assessments, however, they were more likely to be administered by reading specialists than by the classroom teachers. In the debate over whether or not to continue this practice, there are key issues to be confronted about ways to increase the coherence between the data and instructional decisions. Teachers need more opportunities to consider these mid-term assessments in light of their expectations and implications for differentiating instruction. It is also important to address the responsibility of a principal to make mid-course corrections suggested by the data, such as providing time in the schedule for flexible re-grouping of students, co- teaching, one-to-one interventions, and coaching.

In order for parent partnership to flourish within a shared accountability model, we also need to find new vehicles for engaging parents by sharing data and offering specific suggestions for supporting their children's academic success. For example, many parents might appreciate a voicemail that gives them a specific suggestion as to what to work on with their children. To be effective educational partners, parents of underachieving students (as well as teachers and students) can benefit from the research showing how and why specific feedback, rather than grades, promotes more achievement gains. As noted by Black and Wiliam (1999):

> While formative assessment can help all pupils, it yields particularly good results with low achievers by concentrating on specific problems with their work and giving them a clear understanding of what is wrong and how to put it right. Pupils can accept and work with such messages, provided that they are not clouded by overtones about ability, competition, and comparison with others (142).

The Spring 2003 Terra Nova assessments provided teachers with feedback on the impact that accrued from their teaching efforts this year. As a group, students in Penn Partnership Schools made the largest improvements in reading and language skills in the School District of Philadelphia, achieving gains of 2.9% in reading and 7.5% in language over baseline scores from Fall 2002. Although the Partnership alone cannot take credit for producing significant gains in

one year's time, the visible progress give credence to our emphasis on coherence and generates momentum for efforts in the coming years.

Many parents have expressed frustration that they have been falsely reassured by the reading levels shown on report cards, which led them to expect that their children would demonstrate proficient performance on high-stakes assessments. However, despite promising improvements noted above, approximately 40% of the students in the Penn Partnership Schools still perform in the bottom quartile of the national percentile rankings. When parents' expectations are not borne out, and especially when the data result in negative consequences for their children, such as required summer school or retention in grade, parents lose confidence in the school. It is difficult for parents to buy into shared accountability, or the urgency of achieving higher standards if report card grades are inflated with respect to a more objective assessment of their children's attainment of national learning standards. On the other hand, we also need to fight against the tendency for schools to respond to the misalignment of internal and external data by mechanistically teaching to the test. Rather, we are attempting to bring the internal and external learning standards closer together through the ongoing reflections of a professional community that works to develop more intentional teaching approaches and regular data monitoring.

In the past year, we have structured Partnership activities to expand our collective knowledge base on data utilization. We introduced two mid-year math assessments for all students in grades 5 and 8 that mirrored the knowledge expected on nationally-normed standardized tests. Results were used to guide discussions with teachers about how to help their students transfer concepts developed in class to the expected format of the PSSA tests. With the encouragement of our doctoral student assistant, teachers piloted peer "think alouds" that benefited their understanding of how to further concept development in math. Teachers across the partnership also learned how to use the Tuning Protocol to study and compare student writing against benchmarks and rubrics (see Allen, 1995).

Clearly we have a long way to go in understanding the lessons and limits of data. We are investigating "off the shelf" and customized measures that can be used next year as grade-level or school-wide benchmarks to inform teachers about their students' developing skills, as well as the practical matter of modeling how to transfer skills and strategies to the constructs of the key summative assessments. We are in the process of identifying instruments and data management systems that will allow us to make more effective and rapid use of such formative assessments, and share them with students and parents. These additional assessment strategies are particularly important as we have committed the Partnership to offer after-school interventions for the lowest performing students.

School climate. Even as priorities focused most Partnership work on curriculum and instructional issues, we also began to address staff concerns about student behavior and school climate that were having a negative impact on teacher morale. In two schools, students had concerns as well, having reported to the Quality Review Site Visit Team that they felt "unsafe." This feedback corroborated the importance of working on climate and academic fronts simultaneously. We responded to the student behavior issues as an opportunity for addressing coherence, by developing the perspective that orderly climates are related to engaging

instruction. Addressing behavior in this way also allowed us to begin to raise consciousness about prospective roles for parents, administrators, teachers, and the students themselves for achieving shared accountability on dimensions of behavior and achievement.

Volunteers from the Wilson and Bryant Schools met over the summer to address the school climate issues with members of the Penn team. Each school developed three proactive norms that emphasize responsibility and respect for learning. The Lea staff had engaged in a similar exercise in 2000, and these codes of behavior have been publicized throughout the schools. At the Lea School, recognition and incentive initiatives throughout the year have already made a difference to students enacting more responsible and respectful behavior. Even as we address individual behavioral issues with the staff, we are aware that behavioral incidents are likely to rise unless students receive abundant reassurance from teachers that they are capable of meeting the higher order learning objectives (Black and Wiliam, 1999). In fact, the Lea School contended with increased behavioral referrals at the outset of the 2002-2003 school year, which can be attributed to the frustration students were initially experiencing with the enhanced academic expectations of the school's reorganized middle grades program.

Attending to school climate also extends to fostering professional community among staff. Shared accountability presupposes that schools have a social infrastructure that can support collegial reflection and distributed leadership. Yet, while social trust within the school community may be the most important factor in accomplishing school improvement, it is often in shortest supply in the lowest performing schools (Payne & Kaba, 2001; Bryk et al., 1998). The single most important focus in the first year of our partnership – and arguably the most significant challenge – was building trust in Penn among school staff and parents, and securing buy-in from opinion leaders in the school community.

Fullan (2002) says that true reform results in cultural change. We acknowledge that shared accountability will require continued attention to individual and systemic beliefs that have impeded school improvement in the past (see Newmann & Sconzert, 2000 and Payne & Kaba, 2001). To achieve sustained school improvement assumes collegiality and trust among the partners (Elmore, 2000). One striking cultural change that we have targeted at the school level is the dissolution of the "them" and "us," culture evident in teacher/administrator relationships and in school/university partner relationships. This has been described in the organizational development literature as navigating the "identity" boundary between insiders and outsiders (Hirschorn & Gilmore, 1992).

The challenges we face can be illustrated with several examples. Whereas schools that have succeeded in establishing a productive shared accountability culture have also abandoned seniority-based assignment of teachers to their schools, the faculties in two of the Partnership schools continue to express reluctance to participate in building-level selection of teachers because they fear that principal favoritism will influence assignments and opportunities. Contributing to this tension is our observation that the role of the principal as instructional leader has yet to carry over into classroom observation protocols which too often remain an "exclusive" engagement, i.e., a moment when the on the feet decision-making and the accompanying angst of typical classroom life is suspended for the roll-out of a polished lesson. This maintains the ruse

that the only learners in a classroom are the students. As Gallimore and Tharp (1990) have noted, a school climate becomes more productive when we all see ourselves as observers of, and contributors to, the myriad ways that learning can be constructed.

As University partners, we have to continue to work at overcoming the impression of some staff and parents that we are there only as "researchers" with a narrow scope of focus that is largely tangential to the teachers' *real* work. We have made some progress on this front. For example, at one school, which was without a permanent principal for most of the year, the members of the Penn team began holding weekly get-togethers before school to address whatever issues staff wished to raise. Although the meetings were sometimes frustrating for all parties because of unclear roles and uneven follow-through on initiatives, the staff expressed disappointment when we stopped meeting (after the new principal was hired). The regular chat sessions will be re-instated in the fall. At another school, where the union's building committee was often at odds with the principal and the Partnership, we increased our own sensitivity to keeping the committee abreast of Partnership initiatives before they are discussed with the school community. Whereas the enduring qualities for sustainable social infrastructure lie in the vision and actions of the school's leaders, encouraging positive school climate requires that the entire Partnership team give thoughtful consideration to offering a range of distributed leadership opportunities early in the school year, with coherence of initiatives and full participation of all faculty in at least one initiative as objectives.

Effective school climate must also be gauged by the degree of advocacy expressed by parents in supporting their children's education. We have a parent liaison on our team to help break down some of the barriers to effective parent participation on school-related issues. Our liaison meets with parents at home, attends school meetings, and makes an effort to get the pulse of issues that are important to parents. She was helpful in framing issues in a meeting between dissatisfied parents and Partnership team members when the principal vacancy at one school was unfilled for longer than anticipated. The Penn team also hosted a series of Family Math Workshops and introduced the idea that such events should be held in the evening, on weekends, and during the school day-to help parents understand the level of proficiency their children must demonstrate in math in order to meet standards, especially by the benchmark grades for promotion.

Reflections on Systemic Challenges and their Implications for our Work

Philadelphia represents the most extensive experiment in privatized school management that has been undertaken anywhere in the country. While the system is trying to accommodate itself to the providers' different approaches, there have been challenges in carrying out our vision in a big city school system that moves forward with its own initiatives, policies, contractual agreements, and normal operating procedures and sweeps us along in its wake. For example, the opportunity for EMOs to introduce their own curriculum models is occurring even as the school system is investing tremendous energies and resources toward implementing a core curriculum and pacing guides, along with packaged after-school remediation curricula, in an effort to standardize learning opportunities. This approach is common to other large urban school districts that are concerned with high student mobility. These are mostly positive steps for the district; however,

we are concerned that the rapid consolidation of initiatives has engendered little opportunity for cross-pollination with the providers' initiatives. Since we decided to work with the district's curriculum rather than introduce a wholly separate one, our main objective is to make sure that the scripted materials do not cloud the perspective that ongoing collaboration as well as formal monitoring of instruction must provide the impetus for assessing student learning needs and dictating appropriate interventions. In literacy development, for example, we believe that students need targeted supplementary instruction aimed at narrowing the gap between minimal and proficient comprehension and minimal and proficient self-expression. In fact, it is the latter which has influenced our decision to offer our own extended day programs in Penn Partnership Schools in 2003-2004, rather than send children to other district-run programs. While it is a significant additional undertaking to organize the extended day curriculum, we are committed to leveraging the learning approaches we espouse in both school day and after school programs.

The School District of Philadelphia itself faces challenges in getting all of its divisions to communicate with, and accommodate to the variations introduced by the diverse outside providers. Fortunately, the district has placed the Office of Partnerships in the hands of a capable leader who is committed to communicating that we are all serving the same children. Nonetheless, it is time-consuming as well as frustrating to continually monitor that external funding opportunities are fully disclosed, that reduced-price purchasing power is extended to the Partnership schools, that long-awaited data management system enhancements are made available to us, to advocate for non-traditional staffing that is critical to our model, and to assure that the Partnership schools are not penalized for their affiliation with an outside provider.

In harnessing the school's community partners in support of academic achievement goals, there is one group of service providers whose functioning presents a challenge. Sometimes six or more children in a school are served by "wrap-arounds," individuals employed by a community behavioral health agency to maintain children with special needs in the least restrictive environment, often the regular classroom. That these providers are not part of the school system is problematic because they often see their roles as reactive to behavioral outbursts, rather than as academic support to minimize the frustration that often leads to an outburst. Unfortunately, this aspect of school support, which consumes millions of dollars, results in questionable impact on our efforts to engage all school-based personnel in shared accountability for children's academic success. City mental health authorities that contract with these agencies are considering a pilot that would affect approximately 15 schools, however Penn Partnership Schools have not been included.

The single most significant enhancement to reaching our goals would be the ability for the schools to select staff. School improvement can be accelerated and enhanced when the principal and leadership team have the opportunity to interview and select those candidates whose skills, attitudes and experiences are best suited to the school's culture and goals. Under the current teacher contract, the decision to engage in site selection requires a three-quarters affirmative vote of the faculty. The teacher's union has historically discouraged their members from accepting site selection. However, the Lea School has already achieved this agreement with the staff, and their progress can be attributed, we believe, to the coherence it has engendered. The challenge to the Partnership is to build sufficient trust between the faculty and

administration, and to sufficiently strengthen the leadership culture at the other two schools, to the extent that site selection becomes the obvious choice. District CEO Paul Vallas is a proponent of site selection, and we are hopeful that it will become the norm when the new contract is negotiated in 2004.

Addressing systemic issues in school improvement will surely require a more concentrated focus on deepening the pool of candidates for school leadership positions. Philadelphia's historic lack of emphasis on instructional leadership in the preparation and support for school principals has taken its toll in too many schools. However, even the most talented principals must have both vision and fortitude to address the social, instructional, and organizational cultures that have contributed to stagnation among failing schools. Among the tensions for principals is the compliance orientation that requires them to implement and document a dizzying array of local, state, federal, and court-ordered mandates.

Final Thoughts

The School Reform Commission endorsed the Philadelphia experiment in school privatization as a three to five year initiative. As the Penn Partnership moves into its second year, we have already begun to concern ourselves with "succession." The schools' capacity to accelerate gains in student academic proficiency needs to develop beyond the term of our tenure, the effectiveness of any one principal, the experience of individual teachers, parents who are "insiders" in their children's education, indeed beyond the last grade offered in the school. Long-term gains in student achievement can come about when all the partners contribute to a more public understanding of, and commitment to, working toward continuous improvement. As recently noted by Fuhrman (2003):

> Perhaps we need to shift the metaphor from reform to improvement. Reform is a matter of policies sweeping down from on high. . . Improvement is slow, unending, not particularly glamorous, hard work. . . Improvement is a matter of continued attention to the basics of teaching and learning – the heart of schooling. . . It involves deep investment in teacher quality and knowledge, through recruiting, compensating and developing teachers. (p. 10).

Thus far little has appeared in print that documents the work of the diverse providers and examines their approaches to school improvement. As described here, our focus is on teaching and learning – what Fuhrman calls "the heart of schooling" – through the development of teachers and leaders. We are committed to analyzing the effectiveness and value of the Penn partnership model as our work progresses. We hope that the Philadelphia experiment will engender a body of research so that we can all make best use of this unique opportunity to test and compare approaches and conditions that lead to leveraging achievement gains in urban schools.

References

Allen, D. (1995). *The Tuning Protocol: A process for reflection*. Providence: Coalition for Essential Schools.

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1999). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80, 139-144.

Bryk, A. Sebring, P., Kerbow, D., Rollow, S. & Easton, J. (1998). *Charting Chicago school reform: Democratic localism as a lever for change*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Elmore, R. F. (2002). *Bridging the gap between standards and achievement.* Washington, D.C.: The Albert Shanker Institute.

Elmore, R. F. (2000). Building a new structure for school leadership. *American Educator*, *23*, 6 -13.

Fuhrman, S. F. (2003). Is reform the answer for urban education? *Penn GSE: A review of research* (pp. 9-11). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

Fullan, M. (2002). The change leader. *Educational Leadership. 59*, 16-20.

Gallimore, R., & Tharp, R. (1990). Teaching mind in society: Teaching, schooling, and literate discourse. In L. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 175-205). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Haberman, M. (1995). *Star teachers of children in poverty*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Hirschhorn, L. & Gilmore, T. (1992). The new boundaries of the "boundaryless" company. *Harvard Business Review*. May-June, 104-115.

Johnson, R. (2002). *Using data to close the achievement gap (2nd Ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Knapp, M. (1995). *Teaching for meaning in high poverty classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Kruse, S., Louis, K. & Bryk, A. (1995). An emerging framework for analyzing school-based professional community. In K. Louis, S. Kruse and Associates. *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools.* (pp. 23-42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers. Successful teachers of African American children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McLaughlin, M. & Lieberman, A. (1992). Networks for educational change: Powerful and problematic. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73, 673-677.

McMeekin, R. (2003). Networks of schools. *Education analysis policy archives*. 11, (16).

Newmann, F. M. & Sconzert, K. (2000). *School improvement with external partners.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Newmann, F. M. & Whelage, G. G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center on Education Research.

Payne C. M. & Kaba. M. (2001). So much reform, so little change: Building-level obstacles to urban school reform. Unpublished manuscript.

Spillane, J., Halverson, R. & Diamond J.B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher,* 30, 23-28.

Supovitz, J. & Klein, V. (in preparation). Mapping a course for improved student learning: How innovative schools systematically use student performance data to guide improvement.