

# The Doors to School Improvement

By sharing our experiences and synthesizing the results—in other words, working together—we can do more to improve schools than any of us could do alone.

**R**estructuring" is the current name for school improvement. Not surprisingly, the word is used by different people to connote various meanings, and conflicting claims and contentions result. Bringing some order to the rhetoric, Elmore (1990) has noted that the term usually refers to one of the following orientations or intents:

- the *technical*—changes in curriculum and instruction;
- the *political/social*—changes in client relationships with the schools;
- the *occupational structure* of educators—either creating a more collegial workplace or involving teachers more in the governance of education.

Just as there are varied intents in the efforts of restructurers, they use different strategies or approaches to achieve desired effects. To understand the many approaches, I have examined the writings and activities of proponents of school improvement (Fullan 1990a, b; Lezotte and Levine 1990; Slavin 1983, 1990a, b; Johnson and Johnson 1990; Schmuck and Runkel 1985; Barth 1980; Goodlad 1984; and Glickman 1990a).

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These proponents emphasize different aspects of school culture at the outset—in other words, they choose to open different doors to school improvement. Each door opens a passageway into the culture of the school. My examination of their work reveals the following five major emphases:

1. *Collegiality*: developing cohesive and professional relations within

school faculties and connecting them more closely to their surrounding neighborhoods.

2. *Research*: helping school faculties study research findings about effective school practices or instructional alternatives.

3. *Site-specific information*: helping faculties collect and analyze data about their schools and their students' progress.

4. *Curriculum initiatives*: introducing changes within subject areas or, as in the case of the computer, across the curriculum areas.

5. *Instructional initiatives*: organizing teachers to study teaching skills and strategies.

All these emphases (roughly directed at one or more of Elmore's categories) can eventually change the culture of the school substantially. Perhaps, if we look carefully at each door to school improvement, we can discover where each is likely to lead, how the passageways are connected, what proponents of any one approach can borrow from the others, and the costs and benefits of opening any one (or any combination) first.



### **Collegiality within the Faculty**

The organizational development movement (Schmuck and Runkel 1985, for example) has concentrated on the socio/professional dynamics of the faculty as a group—the first door to school improvement we will discuss. Often, in this approach, external process facilitators work with the faculty to help them develop problem-solving methods. But process leadership may also come from within the school, either from the principal (see Leithwood 1990 or Barth 1980 for examples) or from the teachers (see Joyce et al. 1983, 1991). As the group process evolves, the problem-solving process opens the other doors: The faculty may begin to study and apply research findings, collect local data, or initiate curricular and instructional changes.

The most prominent proponents of organizational development continue to emphasize group process, especially in site-based school improvement efforts (see Glickman 1990a, b). Often they network schools to share resources and ideas. For example, Fullan, Bennett, and Rolheiser-Bennett (1990) have helped develop a consortium within which schools develop their own particular reform efforts; and Goodlad's (1984) networks and leagues are similar. With support and stimulation, a school staff learns to work together to create a culture that embraces broad, vision-directed improvements as well as day-to-day operations. Groups who employ this approach draw heavily on studies of more and less productive faculties, such as those conducted by Little (1988), Rosenholtz (1989), Louis and Miles (1990), to gain understanding of their own dynamics and how they might be changed.

Many specialists in organizational development have found that a faculty can best develop their collegiality in combination with solving actual school problems in an area of agreed-on need such as curriculum. Keeping a real problem in mind ensures that practical problem solving is kept prominent and that group process doesn't become an end in itself. Learning to solve problems together takes time in any case, for it involves levels of collegiality almost op-

posite to the individualistic norms most common in faculties. Where communities are heavily involved (Joyce et al. 1983, 1991), the process is more complex but is intended to generate more energy as the client/school relationship improves.

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### **Studying the Research Base**

Another group of reformers advocate a second door: bringing research findings directly to the faculty, helping them to study the research on effective schools (Lezotte and Levine 1990) or on topics of their choosing (Richardson 1990) or to investigate the research products of clearinghouses such as the National Diffusion Network (U.S. Department of Education 1986). The core is the expectation that, as the faculty members become acquainted with research, they will use the findings to define local problems and identify their own solutions.

The key to this approach is the perception by the faculty that research can be relevant to their situation. Initially, schools vary in perception. For example, teachers in schools that serve families of high socioeconomic status (SES) may reject effective schools research because many of the studies were conducted in low-SES schools. Nevertheless, proponents assert that, as educators become more familiar with research findings, they will find wider ranges of research relevant and applicable to their

concerns. Once the faculty identifies the problems to be solved, however, they may need instruction in how to put the research into practice, thereby moving their focus toward other dimensions (passageways) of the school improvement process.

### **Site-Specific Information**

All schools have information about the progress and feelings of their students, but the manner in which that information is collected and used varies widely. Some initiators of restructuring enter by the third door: by helping the faculty pull together information and learn to collect more—information about promotion, grades, graduation, disciplinary action, self-concept, reading and writing habits, and attendance, for example.

Such local data have immediate and direct relevance to the everyday concerns of the faculty and to the fate of the students. For example, teachers can learn to score writing and use the information to redirect their writing program. In the Department of Defense Schools in Panama, James Wolf and I (1990) found that a school initiative supporting independent reading and writing increased amounts of independent reading six times in the upper elementary grades and more than that in the high schools. In Augusta, Georgia, the staff development director routinely assembles a comprehensive data package that schools use to examine the progress of their students and make decisions about change efforts (see Murphy and Sudderth 1990; see also article by Murphy, this issue, p. 63.). The Fountain-Fort Carson, Colorado, Schools guide school improvement through a database that includes tracking of student grades and disciplinary action (referrals and so on), reading and writing, summarized biweekly, to inform teachers about conditions and progress.

The process of developing and interpreting site-specific data ranges from these relatively informal examples to systematic and formal systems of evaluation. Some districts generate comprehensive evaluation designs and then use them to help all personnel assess progress and strategies (Hopkins 1989a, b). Regardless of the



degree of formality, once the door is open to the collection and analysis of data and to greater collegial decision making, faculties can make other initiatives in the domains of curriculum and instruction.

### Curriculum Initiatives

Frequently, schools, districts, and even states enter the school improvement process through a fourth door: initiatives in particular curriculum areas. California's use of curriculum frameworks is a good example. In a local school or district, the typical effort is an initiative in one subject, with the intention of enhancing faculty decision making during implementation, thus leaving the school or district more likely to move in other directions.

Despite the longstanding use of this approach, the research on it is discouraging. When curriculum changes require anything beyond a change in material, most districts have great difficulty achieving their loftier purposes (Fullan and Pomfret 1977, Goodlad and Klein 1970, Cuban 1984). These disappointments often stem from inadequate staff development and failure to develop shared understandings or to organize the faculty for extended cohesive action (Fullan 1990b, Louis and Miles 1990, Miles and Huberman 1984, Joyce et al. 1983).

If this approach is to achieve even its short-run objective—to get the new curriculum in place—the problems of implementation must be corrected. And, if it is to achieve its promise as a door to restructuring, decision makers must pay much more attention to the helpful findings generated at the sites where adequate attention has been paid to social dynamics and the necessary staff development. However, good curricular and instructional designs have, well implemented, had dramatic effects on student learning (Sharan and Shachar 1988, Joyce et al. 1989).

### The Study of Instruction

The fifth door to restructuring revealed by my review is staff development that focuses on instruction and organizes the faculty for collective action. The content of these programs and processes varies widely. For ex-

ample, this approach can include the study of:

- generic teaching skills (Hunter and Russell 1981, Good et al. 1983, Brophy and Good 1986, Fisher et al. 1980);
- repertoires of models of teaching (Joyce et al. 1991, Joyce et al. 1989);

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- specific approaches to teaching such as cooperative learning (Slavin 1990a, b; Johnson and Johnson 1990; Sharan and Shachar 1988);
- the styles of expert teachers (Wallace et al. 1990);
- thinking skills programs (as Beyer 1988, Costa 1985).

This approach begins with the study of theory or research-based teaching skills or strategies and moves through the demonstration, practice, and coaching necessary to translate research into practice. Up to this point, the approach resembles that of any other program where the learning and application of new skills and strategies is the goal. However, once the faculty has been oriented toward visions of improvement, the teachers and administrators can organize study groups and councils in an attempt to build a synergistic community that continues to identify and solve problems collectively (Joyce et al. 1983, Joyce and Showers 1987).

During the last 20 years, this approach has generated a great deal of practical information about how to

implement specific skills and strategies, but, despite its sometimes dramatic effects on student learning, much less about how to bring about a genuine reorientation of the workplace. Even where it has been used on a large scale (Joyce et al. 1989) and linked to research, locally collected data, and curriculum, the way to shape it to generate changes in the culture of the school has not been fully demonstrated (see Fullan 1990b for a thorough discussion). There is a strong base of clinical history and research in this area, however, and the best effects have managed to find their ways into the passageways opened directly by the other doors.

### Working Together

Advocates of any of these five approaches obviously need to guard against a tendency to suggest that those who enter restructuring through the other doors are off track. For example, I have been told that those of us who help teachers study alternative models of teaching (Joyce and Showers 1987, Joyce et al. 1991) are incompatible with efforts to build "reflective teaching" communities (Schon 1982), although we obviously aim at the same goal. I've heard process trainers referred to as "touchy-feely," and I've heard some of them refer to skill training as something done only to animals.

We must rise above our particular preferences in order to build better approaches, using what we learn from the ones we have been trying. I've seen firsthand that experienced trainers cannot achieve even short-run successes without the expertise of persons skilled at building synergistic communities. In turn, many of them do not have the skills possessed by "trainers." Not only do we need to appreciate the other frames of reference; but, in practical terms, the newer doors that we are only now imagining may well require team compositions different from those to which we are accustomed. Quite simply, we need to work together.

A synthesis is now in order. No single approach, taken alone, will emerge as the treatment of choice. Major school improvement programs



probably need to begin with agreement by all parties that all the doors will be open, with collegial faculties using research and site-specific information and studying and improving curriculum and instruction. There is no prescription for making connections among the different approaches, but we must figure out how to do so if comprehensive restructuring is to take place. Whatever door a faculty enters, the long-term goals of restructuring will require everyone to wander around in *all* the passageways. My own little odyssey in school improvement has led me and my colleagues to where we are trying to open all the doors simultaneously, using the experience and expertise of persons more familiar with the other doors to augment the instructional and curricular approaches with which we have traditionally opened the process. We believe that persons more familiar with the other doors will find it productive to generate similar syntheses from which we can all go forward to the next set of problems. □

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