

Mastering School Reform

In NEA's Mastery in Learning Project, school-based instructional needs drive the local reform agenda, and teachers define the policy and action plan.

As teachers, we know that most of our colleagues want to do a good job. As teacher leaders who regularly visit schools across the country, we know the incredible amount of caring and commitment from individuals who rarely are taken seriously for the knowledge they possess. And as advocates of school-based approaches to improvement, we are encouraged by the growing consensus that faculties must be granted more autonomy. Advocates for significant and lasting change are calling for an unleashing of the creative energy of school faculties, which too often is ignored, wasted, and smothered by a hyper-rationalized system.¹

Because of the growing recognition of the efficacy of school-based improvement models, we see merits in a particular one, the National Education

Association's Mastery in Learning Project. Its strengths lie not only in the commitment to empower local faculties, but also in its attention to a refreshing view of students and their learning.

Mastery in learning implies the facility and confidence, judgment and strength, and command of knowledge and skills achieved through education. Mastery in learning means increasing each student's opportunity to acquire depth in subject matter, to organize knowledge to solve problems, and to apply what is learned (McClure 1986).

The project does not limit its considerations of mastery to student achievement.

Mastery in teaching means going beyond mechanistic schooling. It means cultivating higher order thinking, particularly the abilities to analyze, critique, and synthesize.

A curriculum that encourages mastery helps students see interrelationships across issues, themes, and subjects (McClure 1986).

Mastery Project: Design and Pilot

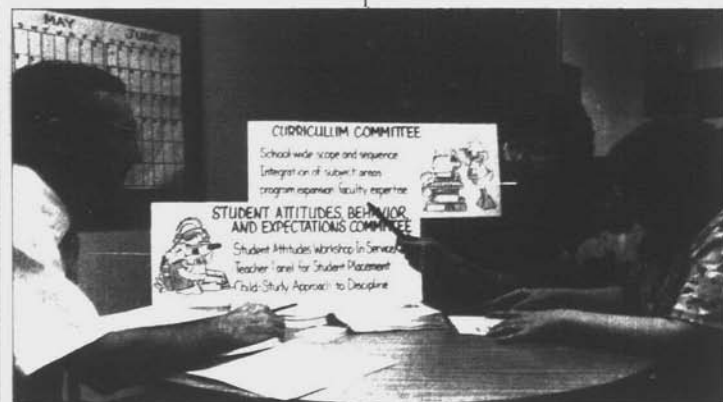
The Mastery in Learning Project grew from the NEA's *An Open Letter to America on Schools, Students, and Tomorrow* (1984), which advocates restructuring America's schools and raising curricular and instructional standards. The report suggests that there is much that is now known about improving schools that is not institutionalized, and that the key to a school's quest for excellence is the involvement of a knowledgeable faculty empowered to act upon the central issues of schools—teaching, learning, and curriculum.

In 1985–86 six schools—Conejo Elementary School in Thousand Oaks, California; Greasewood School on the Navajo Reservation near Ganado, Arizona; Hillside Junior High School in Simi Valley, California; Mount Vernon Community Center School in Alexandria, Virginia; Westwood School in Dalton, Georgia; and Atlantic City High School in New Jersey—participated in an experimental, pilot test.

Project staff members developed, tested, and revised several procedures and processes, conceptualized and began automation on a school reform knowledge base, and established plans for a three-year demonstration project to begin during the 1986–87 school year. In this phase, 24 demographically balanced schools will form a national network of demonstration sites.

Based on our review of project documents and reports, frequent contact with project staff, interviews with faculty members from pilot schools, and on-site experiences in three of the schools, we believe that the Mastery in Learning Project has everything necessary to bring about real and lasting changes (Obermeyer and Lee 1985). In this article we describe the potential of the project's design and share views provided by members of these faculties.

Participating schools and their systems expressed overwhelming support for the project's basis for achieving constructive change. This support



A majority of Hillside Junior High School staff in the Simi Valley Unified School District is involved in the Mastery in Learning Project. Teachers Bob Voris, Demi Byrnes, and Davida Shipkowitz examine methods to improve student attitudes, a critical factor in the learning process.

came from initial contacts with school system leaders and was most evident in the faculties of the pilot schools. For admission to the project, members of these staffs were required to conduct a secret ballot, and at least 75 percent had to vote affirmatively. Project school principals have been encouraged by central administrators to experiment and to work in flexible, creative ways with the teachers and community.

The project's goal is to create the conditions that need to exist if mastery is to be achieved; the district grants autonomy to the school staff to pursue this goal. Peters and Waterman (1982) refer to this approach as loose-tight, a characteristic evident in many alternative schools (Raywid 1982). One purpose of the mastery project is to demonstrate the viability of this approach as the standard, rather than the exception.

A Collaborative Effort

The Mastery in Learning Project is collaborative² in two respects:

1. The project was established with the support and involvement of the school district, the school administrators, and the school staff. Financial support for each site comes from the NEA, the local association, the school district, and various granting sources. In addition, several Federal Research Centers and all the Regional Educational Laboratories are collaborating by providing assistance for the project.

2. Within the school, faculty members work together to conduct an assessment, develop inventories, set priorities, develop action plans, and eventually adopt changes. Collaborative work is an antidote for the separateness and isolation that characterize teaching.³

Focus at the School Level

The decentralizing of resources and trust in bottom-up reform are essential ingredients to school improvement. While the idea of focusing on the school as the basic unit for improvement is not new (Williams et al. 1972), widespread interest in this approach is recent. The effective schools movement has spawned numerous school improvement projects, yet many exist in name only (Olson 1986). What may be most unique about this project is that the direction of the work comes

entirely from the inventory and assessment that are generated locally.

Support for Learning Is Paramount

The end result of the mastery project should be the institutionalization of an approach in which instructional needs drive the system. The central questions are:

- What is significant in the course of study?
- How do students learn best?
- How can we teach more effectively?

The project's three major activities focus on finding answers to these questions.

1. *Project work begins with a detailed description of each participating school.* The descriptive materials include demographics of the community and the school, as well as indicators of student attitudes and performance. This profile provides a reference point for the improvement work. The staff also participates in the Faculty Inventory, a new program designed by the project to help set school improvement priorities.

2. *The faculty explore the knowledge base for the best educational research on learning, teaching, curriculum, and school reform.* The faculties in the pilot sites are already organized into subgroups and committees, focusing on issues and problems identified through the inventory process. Each determines its own grouping and work schedules. Topics covered among the pilot schools include critical and creative thinking, discipline through improved self-esteem, writing skills, developmental curriculum, and grouping alternatives. Three of the six sites have identified community involvement/support as a priority topic.

3. *The faculty develop, test, and implement a school improvement action plan.* The fully developed plans are intended to be ready for implementation in the fall of 1989. In the meantime, committees and subgroups in the pilot sites are testing alternatives. The critical and creative thinking committee members at Mount Vernon Community Center School are setting up control groups to test their approaches to teaching critical thinking. Using the goal of mastery as the guide, each group plans approaches to its tasks.

What Pilot Schools Teach

Some of the work produced immediate change. Another Mount Vernon subgroup set up a series of meetings with parents and other community members to engage them more fully in the school's work. Some parents were "painfully blunt in expressing their feelings." The staff responded with immediate action to assure the community of the faculty's commitment to community involvement.

Many spinoffs have resulted from the Mastery in Learning Project. Representatives of the pilot sites have described the project to hundreds of interested professionals at conferences, clinics, and workshops. One such contingent from the Westwood School made a presentation at the Association of Teacher Educators. Participants in that seminar were impressed with the confidence and facility with which the teacher presenters analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the research base.

Faculty members from this same school have been writing letters to their state department of education. Based on their experience and equipped with the latest research, they are calling the officials to task for the inappropriateness of certain elements contained in the state-mandated curriculum.

Enthusiasm, commitment, and a willingness to share and experiment pervade conversations with participants, some of whom were unbelievers at first. One participant, who was initially skeptical, reported that the project activities had positively changed her attitude toward teaching.

There are problems, of course. Faculty members at one of the schools, without a principal for awhile, had to reorient themselves when a new leader came on board. In all the sites, after the initial excitement, the faculties felt uncertainty and frustration until they really understood that nobody was going to give them answers or tell them how to improve their schools. When the faculties reached that point, the projects came alive.

Commitment of Faculty Leaders

One measurement of project commitment is the time teachers are dedicating to it. At Conejo Elementary School, for example, Tuesday afternoons are

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set aside for either the project steering committee or subproject work. All staff members have volunteered to serve on at least one project committee. Teachers at Conejo live and breathe the project—doing research, attending workshops, and learning all they can about such topics as thinking skills, parent involvement to support their children's learning, and a curriculum that helps all students realize their potential.

In all of the pilot sites, at least half of the staff members are actively involved in the project, and in all schools, time for project work is identified as a major concern. Time for teachers to engage in the project is drawn from days reserved by the school system for staff development, from a time bank established for the project, and from time volunteered by individuals. School organization patterns are also being examined for ways to give teachers more time to engage in research and development work.

Perhaps Brian Newberry, a teacher from Greasewood School, summarized the project best:

[We] began to think about the school's problems not as impossible obstacles that must be circumvented at the expense of education, but as barriers in the way of our students' education. It's part of our job to remove them.

When the faculties of these schools get ready to present their fully developed action plans, they will have had solid experience with assessment, setting goals, testing alternatives, implementing plans, and evaluating results. They will be well grounded in the knowledge base of their profession and will act with confidence. A comprehensive analysis of the project is planned, and collaborating groups will conduct multiple smaller studies. The results should give policymakers an empirical base for what common sense already tells us. The project should help institutionalize approaches that give more credence to the good judgment, competence, and commitment of the experts who work in schools. □

1. For further insights on the problems of top-down approaches to change, see, for example, Arthur Wise, *Legislated Learning*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, *Action for Excellence* (June 1983); Louis Harris, Michael Kagay, and Stuart Leichenko, *Metropolitan Life Survey of Former Teachers in America* (New York, 1985); and Samuel B. Bacharach, *Educational Reform: A Managerial Agenda*, Organizational Analysis and Practice (unpublished paper, Ithaca, New York, 1985).

2. Definitions of collaboration are provided in a synthesis by Shirley Hord in *Educational Leadership* 43 (February 1986): 22-26.

3. For further insights on the conditions of teaching, see Daniel Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). For further insights on the context of organizations in general, see Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *The Changemakers: Innovations for Productivity in the American Corporation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

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