Dimensions of School District Improvement

In districts that have sustained improvements in student achievement for three years, we found a continuing instructional dialogue, a foundation of supervisory support, and instructional leadership from varied sources.

Educators have made extensive use of the research on effective schools, but most of the findings are derived from individual schools only and are therefore limited to within-school variables. To discover dimensions of school improvement at the district level, we conducted a comparative case study of three districts in Georgia (Glickman and Pajak 1986, Pajak and Glickman 1987). Here we describe how these districts created a climate for professional dialogue, provided supervisory support, and welcomed leadership from a variety of positions and levels.

Methods and Questions

In our investigation, we studied school districts with demonstrated improvements in student achievement *sustained for three consecutive years* (1982-83, 1983-84, and 1984-85). Specifically, we identified (1) the sequence and influence of events, factors, and people that contributed to improvement; (2) commonalities, if any, across all three districts; and (3) factors particular to each system, in order to construct a narrative of the change process for each.

The criterion we used to select districts was that of improved student achievement on state criterion-referenced test (CRT) scores for 4th and 8th graders in reading and mathematics. We used a linear regression formula to predict mean test scores for each district by factoring in the proportion of students enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program. Then we compared this number to the actual mean raw scores to determine whether a district was performing better or worse than might be expected. Out of 187 districts in Georgia, we found 4 that demonstrated continued residual score improvement for three consecutive years on at least three out of the four criterion-referenced tests. We were not judging whether CRT gains should be the measure of a school's or a district's success; we were simply accepting a measure used in many previous school effectiveness studies (see Glickman 1987a).

In each of the districts we found that the superintendent and central office supervisors were key figures in stimulating and facilitating efforts to maintain and improve the quality of instruction.

After the smallest district served successfully as a pilot for the study, a team of six trained interviewers visited each of the remaining three districts. In each, we interviewed 30 individuals, including the superintendent, central office staff, principals, lead teachers, and teachers of reading and mathematics in elementary and middle schools. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio-

taped and transcribed. Questions we asked included:

- From your point of view, what accounts for the consistent gains students in your district have shown on the CRT?
- Looking back, can you think of any key events or turning points?
- What persons have been influential in improvement efforts?
- What is different in your school now from five years ago?
- What are you personally doing differently?
- Is there anything else we haven't talked about that I should know?

We then analyzed the typed transcripts of the 90 interviews for common themes, some of which are reported here (see also Glickman and Pajak 1986, Pajak and Glickman 1987).

The Districts

The three school districts are identified here as "Northview," "Eastview," and "Westview." Northview is a moderate-sized system with approximately 280 teachers, 7 elementary schools, 2 junior highs, and 1 high school. It is located in a rural community in the northern mountain region of Georgia and has a predominantly white student population. Achievement scores of students have typically ranked in the top quartile in the state.

Eastview is a large urban system in eastern Georgia with approximately 1,300 teachers, 33 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 6 high schools. The overall student population is balanced in racial composition between white and black students, and achievement scores have been below state averages.

Westview is a small system in western Georgia, with 150 teachers, 2 elementary schools, 1 intermediate school, 1 junior high, and 1 high school. Two-thirds of the student population is white. Students score among the highest in the state on achievement tests.

The Central Office Role

In each of the districts, we found that the superintendent and central office supervisors were key figures in stimulating and facilitating efforts to maintain and improve the quality of instruction. Administrative and supervisory functions were quite specialized, however, with superintendents more heavily involved in external affairs and supervisors concentrating more on the internal workings of the district (Pajak 1989).

Notable in all the schools and central offices we visited was a continual dialogue about improving instruction.

In all three districts, the superintendents had emerged from the ranks of principals within the last five years. In each case, the superintendent also embodied certain traits that helped to redirect what had been unremarkable expectations toward a commitment to high-quality instruction. The specific value that each superintendent seemed to exemplify was simply "the children come first." One of the first steps each had taken was to inform the public, garner its support, and increase financial commitment for improving instruction in the district (Pajak 1987). District-level supervisors were heavily engaged in facilitating the improvement effort by working directly with teachers and principals.

We have reported specific findings from this study relating to the "what" of improvement elsewhere (see Pajak and Glickman 1987, Glickman 1987b, and Glickman and Pajak 1986); however, we speculate that what is new and most important is not the "what" but rather the "how" of improvement. All three school systems linked discrete factors into a complex chain of decisions that resulted in repeated improvements; this was their approach to overall change. To explain the "how" of improvement, we propose three major dimensions evidenced in all three school systems: (1) an instructional dialogue, (2) an infrastructure of support that promoted the dialogue, and (3) varied sources of instructional leadership.

An Instructional Dialogue

Notable in all the schools and central offices we visited was a continual dialogue about improving instruction. School, department, grade level, and system meetings emphasized planning, implementing, and reviewing curriculum and instruction. Teachers exchanged ideas and materials with each other, and individual teachers frequently had central office supervisors, principals, instructional lead teachers, or peers to visit, talk, and plan with them for classroom improvements. Further, teachers did not view these visits as evaluative but instead as a source of help for improving what they were trying to accomplish with their students.

In two of the three school systems, teachers and principals made no mention of formal teacher evaluation as contributing to their improvement. Instead they talked about the direct assistance provided to them in terms of feedback, discussion, planning, and provision of resources. Teachers viewed peers and supervisors as working *with* them, not *on* them, to help improve instruction. In these schools, talking about students, lessons, and curriculum was the norm, not an aberration.

An Infrastructure of Support

Schools such as these in which teachers are professionally engaged with each other and focused on improving instruction beyond their own classrooms do not happen by chance. Prior to the improvement period, each superintendent had provided an organizational structure—staff in designated positions—responsible for stimulating dialogue about improving instruction and increasing student achievement. The problems were, first, how to get teachers closer to each other for planning and then how to provide direct assistance to teachers for their plans. The details of the solutions differed, but in each case an infrastructure of supervisory support had been established.

Time was built into the normal work schedule of staff whose primary responsibility was engaging teachers in talk about their classrooms, students' progress, lesson plans, and curriculum.

In Eastview, although the central office staff had been reduced because of severe budget cuts, a building-level supervisor, in the position of an instructional lead teacher, had been added to each elementary school; and an assistant principal for instruction, to each middle school. In smaller Westview, one new supervisory position had been added to the central office; and various systemwide committees had been formed to make decisions about CRTs, promotion, attendance, and curriculum. In Northview, two additional supervisors had been added to the central office, one responsible for working with the elementary teachers; and the other, with junior high teachers. These individuals spent most of their time working in the schools with teachers and principals.

Much as an infrastructure of transportation and communication—roads, railroads, airline routes, and telephone lines—is built to carry goods, people, and information from one point to the next, so were there infrastructures of assistance built to help teachers and principals move from one level of achievement to another. With an infrastructure of transportation and communication, it is possible for a society to progress. Likewise, with an infrastructure of supervisory support, the plans of these districts for improving instruction could succeed.

Sources of Instructional Leadership

The primary initiators and implementers of change varied from system to system. In Eastview, the prime agents for working with teachers on schoolwide student achievement were the in-school supervisors. The lead teachers or the assistant principals for instruction and the central office staff disseminated test scores, helped schools interpret scores on staff development days, and provided inservice programs on topics and concerns that would help teachers put their plans into action. The in-school supervisor's primary responsibility was talking to teachers, observing in classrooms, and convening groups of teachers to decide on curriculum and instructional changes. For the most part, principals played a secondary role: attending to the day-to-day administrative affairs of the school, conducting teacher evaluations, and encouraging cooperative planning between teachers and the lead teachers/assistant principals.

With an infrastructure of supervisory support in place, the three districts' plans for improving instruction were able to succeed.

At Northview, the prime change agents were the central office staff. Supervisors and curriculum directors observed and conferenced with every teacher at least twice a year, devised record-keeping systems and lesson plans, convened systemwide committees for curriculum and textbook decisions, and explained the targeted objectives for CRT improvement for each grade level and school. Again, the principals played a secondary role. They observed each teacher twice a year but were not directly involved in decisions about classroom record-keeping, lesson requirements, curriculum alignment, or improvement plans.

At Westview, the prime change agents were representative teachers at various grade levels and schools, who served on schoolwide committees coordinated by the central office supervisory staff. The curriculum director facilitated meetings, set agendas, distributed information to committee members, and kept an informal drop-in schedule at the various schools to keep abreast of concerns and needs. Yet it was the committees of teachers that determined the direction of goals, activities, and requirements of instructional improvement for the system. Again, for the most part, principals were not engaged in curriculum and instruction issues. In several cases, principals appeared to have little knowledge of what individual teachers, departments, or grade-level teams of teachers were doing in reading and mathematics instruction. We do not mean to disparage the role of these principals but wish to clarify that the teachers were their own initiators and monitors.

Contrary to the effective schools research, which portrays the school principal as the most critical actor in school success, our data on improving school systems suggest that the principal was most often secondary to central office supervisors, lead teachers, assistant principals for instruction, department- and grade-level heads, and teams of teachers. Although principals supported and encouraged the hands-on work of teachers in each case, they were not responsible for instructional improvement. The key initiators varied in roles and positions in each school system, but what they had in common was that their roles and positions were clearly defined as supporting and working primarily with teachers to improve instruction and curriculum.

The participants interviewed in all three districts agreed that teachers were working harder than ever before. They put more detail into their lesson plans, kept careful records on individual student progress, and taught more content in less time. Teachers were generally proud of their work and believed strongly in its value; rising test scores reinforced both their satisfaction and their efforts. In Westview and Eastview, none of the teachers interviewed mentioned dissatisfaction, stress, or resentment. Only in Northview, where decisions were frequently made and monitored by the central office, did a few teachers say they felt pressured.

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A Final Word

Superintendents and their staffs have designed a number of approaches to bring about improvements in schooling in their districts, as our results show. There is really nothing surprising about the inventiveness and commitment of educators who care deeply about the work they are doing and the students whose lives they are touching. What is important is to create district expectations of professional dialogue and support so that educators in all positions in a school system can share in that inventiveness and express that commitment. □

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