

Panel Discussion

AN EDUCATION SUPPORT SYSTEM

Warren Simmons*

Before I begin the substance of my remarks, I would like to reveal some of my background because it will explain the views I am about to share. I am usually described as an expert on urban education. During the past ten years I have been involved in urban school reform, including efforts as a researcher, central office administrator, or leader of a local education fund in Prince George's County, Maryland, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC public schools. All of these systems are now subject to some type of state intervention. Thus, you might not be pleased to learn that I am now developing a close relationship with the Boston public school system. We will see if my record remains consistent.

More seriously, my experience has taught me several lessons about the magnitude and complexity of implementing standards-based reform in urban school systems. But first, I would like to point out that much of the conference discussion has dealt with standards-based accountability—a part, but not the whole, of standards-based reform. Standards-based reform emphasizes the importance of using content and performance standards—descriptions of what students should know and be able to do along with examples of what it means to be proficient—to strengthen and align curriculum and instruction, assessment, and professional development, as well as to inform decisions about school funding and other factors central to teaching and learning. This movement, which began in the 1990s, was spurred by international comparisons of student performance that showed American students faring poorly in mathematics and science in relation to their peers in Europe and Asia. The validity of these findings has been challenged based on differences in the range of

*Executive Director, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University.

students tested from country to country. The results can also be tied to variations in the nature of the education system in the United States compared to the ones in place in Europe and Asia. That is, these studies are also examining the effects of national education systems that exist in most European and Asian countries with the results of the federal system present in the United States.

In most national systems academic standards are set at the national level by a government education authority that also has the power to develop assessment, curriculum, and professional development strategies that are aligned with the nation's standards. In the federal system employed in the United States, education is controlled by the states, which in turn, delegate authority to over 16,000 separate school districts. The federal government encourages each state to develop its own standards and assessments. And while most states have complied, curriculum and professional development tend to be designed and implemented through the combined efforts of higher education institutions, textbook publishers, and school districts. Achieving alignment among standards, assessment, curriculum, and instruction in our "loosely coupled" federal system (Elmore 2000) is a more difficult and complex enterprise than in most national systems, given the distribution of roles and responsibilities among federal, state, and local education authorities and providers.

To date, federal and state efforts have paid far more attention to the development of standards-based assessments and accountability systems, compared with the amount of attention devoted to curriculum and instruction. As a result, our nation's ability to measure student progress against a collection of state standards that vary considerably exceeds our ability to provide learning opportunities to give all students the support they need to reach the standards, if they work hard enough. In short, because of the variance caused by state and local differences in standards, assessment, curriculum, and instruction, one should expect a broader distribution of student achievement in countries like ours that have federal systems of education. This leads to an important question: Can our nation produce the uniformly high results being demanded by the latest iteration of standards-based reform—No Child Left Behind—given the kind of system we have in place?

Let's refresh our memories somewhat about standards-based reform. The 1993 version of standards-based reform represented by Goals 2000 maintained that if states or national organizations developed academic standards, embedded them in assessments, and attached consequences to performance, the data and pressure generated would improve instruction by guiding the policies and practices of educators and decision makers at the state and local level. Since 1993, federal policy has been inching states and districts closer to the realization of the accountability portion of

standards-based reform, while respecting state and district discretion to choose a range of measures to address teaching and learning.

By the end of the decade—that is, the year 2000—we learned that in most respects we were no closer to reaching our national education goals than we were at the beginning of the journey. Through the No Child Left Behind Act, we are continuing our standards-based reform journey with a more ambitious set of goals and a new timeline—the goals must be met by the year 2014. And the question is: When that date arrives, will we still be short of our goals, without paying any consequences for our failure to meet them? I believe the answer to this question depends on the degree to which we remain more preoccupied with the narrow agenda of standards and accountability, as opposed to the opportunity-to-learn side of standards-based reform.

The broader, richer version of standards-based reform that I think exists in many of the countries to which we compare ourselves looks like this: Standards are used to inform, align, and create greater coherence among curriculum, instruction, and assessment. If a state or a country has standards embedded in its tests, those same standards should be used to guide curriculum and instruction. Moreover, those same standards should inform professional development, that is, how one develops expertise among teachers, principals, and central-office staff. In addition, standards should be used to inform how schools are organized and to advance evidence-based discussions with the public about the kinds of resources students need so that excellence becomes a feasible goal for all students, not just the privileged few.

The disappointing results produced by the accountability portion of standards-based reform have fostered a desire to go beyond measuring what students can do, to building a better understanding of what it will take to get them to a destination of high performance. An increasing number of districts are defining a core set of practices that are needed to give all students a fair shot at meeting the standards or at least performing well on the standardized tests that have become proxies for the standards. While this approach represents a step toward paying more attention to the relationship among standards, assessment and accountability, and opportunity-to-learn, it still leaves us short of employing all the tools necessary to foster the alignment envisioned by standards-based reform. Again, the countries we compare ourselves to, such as the United Kingdom, not only have assessment systems and standards, but also use those assessments and standards to guide professional development, curriculum development, funding, public engagement, and conversations about school organization.

In this country, standards and assessments exist alongside a baffling array of recommended school- and student-improvement strategies, such as using state or district standards to examine student work and assignments, tutoring and mentoring students, implementing content-

based and classroom-embedded coaching for teachers, school reconstitution, providing school choice for students in failing schools, creating small autonomous schools, adopting scientifically based reading and math programs, and implementing research-based comprehensive school designs, to name just a few. When one goes into schools to ask if people are doing most of the things on this list, the answer is usually yes. Further probes, however, quickly reveal that few people understand the relations among the strategies on the above list. Moreover, the strategies tend to be treated as approaches that are adopted in serial fashion—that is, a school will adopt a comprehensive school design for a year or two, and then drop it when the district mandates a research-based reading or mathematics program. Moreover, few people can explain what any of this has to do with a state's or a district's standards.

It seems that people fall into four broad groups. The first group is fixated on an accountability model that they believe will drive change by changing the standards, embedding them in assessments, and providing sanctions and awards. Another group believes that experts embedded in comprehensive school designs can drive improvement and change. A third group argues for charters, privatization, and increasing competition. And we still have, existing alongside all of this, the traditional compliance model, where we just have rules and regulations, which, if properly enforced, will cause change to occur.

I submit that none of these models in and of itself will produce change at a massive scale as required by No Child Left Behind. The rate and levels of improvement required by this Act call for a systematic and focused effort that goes far beyond the cherry-picking of school reform strategies in which most schools and districts engage as a response to pressures to improve. The failure of this approach is underscored in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results over the last 20 years. Despite good intentions and efforts, the achievement gap between white students and their black and Hispanic counterparts remains virtually unchanged. Moreover, the vast majority of all students fail to meet proficient levels of performance as defined by NAEP. Michael Barber's conference presentation showed that proficient levels of performance are being met in the United Kingdom (see Barber 2002). By contrast, the percentage of students in the United States who score proficient or above on NAEP is close to 25 percent of white students, but only 4 or 5 percent of African Americans and 3 percent of Hispanics. Miniscule percentages of minority students perform at the proficient level.

What we have been able to do with the current system is to get large numbers of poorly performing students at the elementary and middle school levels to approach basic levels of performance. But we have made very little progress in changing student performance in our nation's high schools. We have to ask ourselves if we can meet the expected rate of

improvement through the federalist education system that we now have, a system in which we essentially ask teachers, students, and parents in individual schools to take on the task of responding to the information produced by state assessments (which they rarely receive in a timely fashion), while districts, higher education institutions, providers, and the states offer a dizzying and sometimes conflicting array of “best practices.”

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act continues this trend by suggesting a wide range of improvement strategies, while narrowly defining who should improve and by when. NCLB requires states, districts, and schools to meet annual improvement objectives or face consequences for failure. Moreover, the failure will be public rather than private; failing schools and districts will be identified and a host of now-familiar actions will be taken. Students and teachers can be transferred. New curricula will be adopted. Some schools will be reconstituted. And in some cases, local superintendents and school boards will be dismissed. In other words, we will continue to do the kinds of things that we have been doing for the last decade with little effect.

I think our efforts to improve schools have been hampered by an incomplete definition of the problem. Whether we take a top-down or bottom-up view of school failure, we tend to define the problem as something inherent in an individual school rather than the product of the larger system. Even when we view the system as the problem, the solution tends to be “freeing” individual schools from the system with the hope that this will force the system to change or collapse. I think we need to change our focus substantially. We must begin to think not just about how to build the capacity of individual schools, but also about how we build, redesign, and reconstruct a local education support system—a system that would support a community or portfolio of schools. No matter where one falls on the spectrum of school reform (on issues such as privatization, choice, or change within the current system), meeting the goals of NCLB requires supports that will dramatically improve performance across a community of schools simultaneously and continuously.

My experience leads me to believe that several factors must be addressed for communities to develop the capacity to take on this work. To begin, communities need cross-sector leadership development to align the vision and efforts of local decision-makers. An increasing number of mayors and city-council people are directly involved in this work, joined by school-board members and superintendents. Mayors and city-council members often come to this work with very little background in education reform. We seem to be enamored with hiring people with management expertise outside of education to lead schools (such as generals, former CEOs, and attorneys), but we have neglected to provide ways for them to acquire the information and knowledge they lack, other than by learning on the job. Local cross-sector leadership development is essential to ensure that major decision-makers create a shared understanding of

the nature of the problem and its solution. This kind of leadership development must be informed by data and research on local conditions of instruction buttressed by national research. Currently, local leaders are inundated by the latter, but lack the information they need to adapt national models to fit local circumstances and approaches. For instance, organizations like the Boston Plan for Excellence take national designs and models, customize them, and work with local educators, parents, and community members to heighten their ability to support effective implementation.

Effective public engagement is another critical need at the local level. Many school superintendents, teachers, and principals do a poor job of communicating with the public and of engaging members of the public as partners. As several previous speakers mentioned, if we are going to require resources and supports from individuals, groups, agencies, and organizations outside of schools, then we must find ways to communicate with and engage people from a variety of sectors in defining problems and their solutions. As part of this endeavor, we must address ways to change governance to ease the degree to which expertise and resources from cultural institutions, social services, recreation, juvenile justice, child welfare, employment, and education might be pooled and applied to increase supports for learning inside and outside of school.

I think the conversation about system change rather than simply school change is beginning to increase in volume despite our culture's resistance to thinking about education in this way. I urge each of you to join this conversation about how we build a local infrastructure, not a school district necessarily, but a local infrastructure with the capacity to make our national education goals a reality rather than a hollow promise.

References

- Barber, Michael. 2002. "The Challenge of Transformation," this volume.
Elmore, Richard F. 2000. *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute.