Focus, Feedback, Flexibility

What Makes Reconfiguration Work

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The history of education is rich with suggestions for changes in structure, governance, and schedule. Comprehensive schools or small schools? Core curriculum or cafeteria curriculum? Open architecture or individual classrooms? Short periods or block schedules? Site-based decision making or system-level reform?

In a caricature of the futility of school leaders who depend on schedules alone to influence teaching, Harvard professor Richard Elmore described one teacher's enthusiasm for the change to block schedules: "Great. Now we can show the *whole* movie!"

The evidence is overwhelming that high-quality teaching is the most influential school-based factor in student performance. However, the importance of teaching does not render the configuration of the structure and schedule of schools irrelevant. Rather, the weight of the evidence suggests that any school configuration must contain three essential criteria: focus, feedback, and flexibility.

Focus

No matter how effective an educational initiative is, it invariably takes place within the context of many other administrative and teaching activities. In our review of more than 2,000 school improvement plans, we learned that there is an inverse relationship between the number of initiatives and gains in student achievement.

Therefore, it follows that schools attempting to implement change effectively would focus only on deep implementation of one or two changes and complete those changes before embarking on other initiatives. But that logic is rarely applied in school systems. For example, a change in schedule is typically accompanied by changes in curriculum, assessment, teaching strategies, record-keeping, data analysis, and leadership techniques, to name a few. As a result, many simultaneous initiatives compete for fixed resources of time, money, and the emotional energy of teachers and administrators. Inevitably, the impact of any one initiative is lost in the fragmentation of systemic energy.

In his latest work, *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform* (2010), Michael Fullan warns that effective change at the system levels depends on vigilance in avoiding "distracters" such as "excessive bureaucracy, inconsistent messages, multiple non-classroom initiatives, and time-and-energy-consuming conflict" (p. 36). He concludes that "effective districts do not take on too many initiatives at once and are dropping distracters as well as adding things that help them focus."

Feedback

We know that feedback is essential for student learning, provided that the feedback is accurate, timely, and specific. Recent research from Hattie (2009) and Marzano (2007) make clear that feedback is also among the greatest influences on student achievement. In fact, Hattie's meta-analysis of more than 800 meta-analyses suggests that this impact is even greater than the socio-economic status of the student.

When we think of the sort of feedback that leads to improvements in student performance, comments by music directors and athletic coaches are excellent examples. The purpose of their feedback is almost always to improve performance, not merely to evaluate a student or assign a rating. Their feedback is specific and frequent, and they are always willing to make midcourse corrections, not only in the performance of the student but also in their own direction and coaching.

When schools consider reconfiguration, they must also take into account the effect on feedback. For example,

- Will your reconfiguration increase the frequency of feedback?
- Will it improve the specificity of feedback?
- Will it provide time in the schedule so that teachers have the opportunity to give feedback to students and also use feedback to improve their own performance?
- Will administrators be able to use feedback to make essential changes in time, teaching, and other strategies to improve student results?

Reconfiguration strategies that improve teaching and feedback are more likely to influence student achievement than changes in schedules and buildings.

Flexibility

In any complex system, it's unlikely that predictions will be perfect because any change in one part of the system will influence the results in another part of the system. Instead, schools that effectively implement change create a fault-tolerant environment in which mistakes are expected and leaders flexibly react to those mistakes.

When our predictions for student success are inaccurate, the least helpful model is one that is so rigid that leaders and teachers must watch helplessly while students fail—again—and then try to pick up the pieces next year, assuming the student returns next year. A flexible model, by contrast, is one that acknowledges that a student needs a change and, as a result, teaching and leadership strategies must change with it.

Effective schools not only provide frequent feedback and formative assessment, but they also give leaders and teachers the flexibility to make immediate and decisive changes based on that feedback: "You need more literacy instruction *now*, and I'm changing your schedule *today* to provide for that."

Could any administrator or teacher in your school say those words to a student who is in danger of failure? Think about it. If the same student were a new arrival to your school from another school system, you would be willing to start over, create a new schedule, design appropriate interventions, and create essential instructional strategies to meet the needs of that student today. Smart schools do this for all of their students. After all, we'll all have the time to get it right next year—why not start today?

Whatever reforms you are considering, the overarching essentials are focus, feedback, and flexibility. Build those features in now, before the structure, mandates, and rigidity of a new system take hold.

References

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