

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING

A Report to the Public and Educators by the
Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools

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This is a progress report on findings that deserve serious attention by practicing educators, policymakers, researchers and the public at large. These findings should advance knowledge and educational practice.

At the same time, this summary is incomplete. The more detailed reports cited in notes offer a more complete treatment. This report's conclusions will be elaborated in future analyses to be summarized in the Center's final report, to be issued in 1996.

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OVERVIEW

The Problem

In 1983 Americans were warned in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education) that a rising tide of mediocrity in their education system threatened the nation's security. Since then, the call to arms has centered on an arsenal of new tools to "restructure" schools. Restructuring has no precise definition, but the term suggests that schooling needs to be comprehensively redesigned; simply improving parts of schools as we know them isn't enough. Structural reforms include decentralization, shared decision making, school choice, schools within schools, flexible scheduling with longer classes, teacher teaming, common academic curriculum required for all students, reduction of tracking and ability grouping, external standards for school accountability, and new forms of assessment, such as portfolios.

It is tempting to ask, "Which reforms work the best for students?" There is no simple answer to the question. Our studies of school restructuring indicate that, while each of these reforms has some potential to advance student learning, none of them, either alone or in combination, offers a sure remedy. The quality of education for children depends ultimately not on specific techniques, practices or structures, but on more basic human and social resources in a school, especially on the commitment and competence (the will and skill) of educators, and on students' efforts to

learn. In short, specific innovations should be seen as structural tools to be used for specific purposes in particular situations. Hammers, saws, or sandpaper can substantially enhance or diminish the value of the materials to which they are applied, but their effectiveness depends on how they are used in specific contexts. Similarly, the effectiveness of each education restructuring tool, either alone or in combination with others, depends on how well it organizes or develops the values, beliefs, and technical skills of educators to improve student learning. Restructuring initiatives, by definition, introduce substantial departures from conventional practice. New configurations of power and authority challenge educators, students, and parents to perform new roles that require new skills and attitudes. The more that new practices and structural tools depart from conventional practice, the greater the difficulties of implementation. Overcoming these difficulties, then, becomes a dominant concern of reformers, practitioners, and researchers. The prevailing issue often becomes, How do we implement the new practice or structural tool?

Although this question is reasonable, preoccupation with it often diverts attention from the more fundamental question: How is the new structural tool or practice likely to improve our school's human and social resources to increase student learning?

The “Solution”

Starting with a focus on student learning, the point of our research was to learn how the tools of restructuring can be used to elevate learning for all students. There is no “magic bullet” or simple recipe for success. But the solution lies in the “circles of support,” diagrammed in Figure 1.

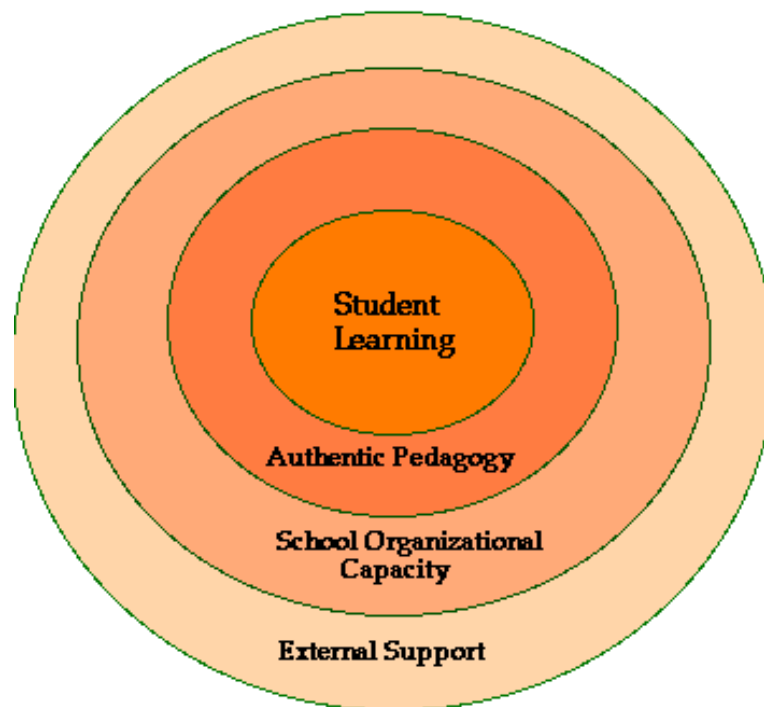


Figure 1: Circles of Support — The Context for Successful School Restructuring

1. Student Learning. Planning, implementation, and evaluation must focus on how current practice and innovation enhance the intellectual quality of student learning. Teachers in schools need to agree on a vision of high quality intellectual work. Goals for high quality learning need to be communicated to students and parents. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, scheduling, staff development, hiring, student advising all the core activities of the school must be oriented toward the vision of student learning. The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) developed a particular vision of high quality student learning called authentic student achievement. We found that when schools restructure around this kind of vision, it works students learn more.

2. Authentic Pedagogy. A vision for high quality student learning is a necessary guide, but not sufficient. Teachers must teach according to the vision. What kind of teaching promotes high quality learning? To address this question, CORS developed teaching standards, not to prescribe techniques such as cooperative learning or portfolios, but to gauge the intellectual quality of the pedagogy we observed; that is, the mix of activities and interaction that teachers use to instruct and assess students. Our standards emphasize teaching that requires students to think, to develop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important, realistic problems. We call this “authentic pedagogy,” and we found that authentic pedagogy boosted student achievement equitably for students of all social backgrounds.

3. School Organizational Capacity. Learning of high intellectual quality is difficult work for students, and authentic pedagogy places complex, demanding challenges on teachers. How can schools be organized to help them meet these challenges? The solution here is not only to hire or train competent staff, but to build the capacity of the school to work well as a unit that strives for continuous improvement. The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities. That is, they found a way to channel staff and student efforts toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning; they created opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another achieve the purpose; and teachers in these schools took collective—not just individual—responsibility for student learning. Schools with strong professional communities were better able to offer authentic pedagogy and were more effective in promoting student achievement.

4. External Support. Schools are nested in a complex environment of expectations, regulations, and professional stimulation from external sources including districts, state and federal agencies, independent reform projects, parents and other citizens. Schools need critical financial, technical, and political support from these external sources. We found that external agencies helped schools to focus on student learning and to enhance organizational capacity through three strategies: setting standards for learning of high intellectual quality; providing sustained, school-wide staff development; and using deregulation to increase school autonomy. But sometimes external influences pulled schools in different directions, imposed unreasonable regulations, and instigated rapid shifts in policy and leadership, all of which can undermine organizational capacity. In brief, we found that restructuring offered no panacea, but that it advanced student learning when it concentrated on the intellectual quality of student work, when it built school-wide organizational capacity to deliver authentic pedagogy, and when it received support from

the external environment that was consistent with these challenges. This report is organized around these circles of support, since they are what makes restructuring work for students, rather than around specific restructuring initiatives such as site-based management or flexible scheduling.

The Research

What kinds of schools did we study as examples of restructuring? As suggested above, we used “restructuring” to represent no single change or set of changes, but we considered each of the following to be important examples:

- site-based management and shared decision-making, with the school having meaningful authority over staffing, school program, and budget;
- students and teachers organized into teams responsible for most of students' instruction, with frequent common planning time for teachers;
- students participating in multiyear instructional or advisory groups;
- students grouped heterogeneously for instruction in the core subjects;
- enrollment based on student and parent choice rather than residential location.

With these multiple factors, it is more useful to think of schools as restructuring to a greater or lesser extent, rather than as categorically restructured or conventional. And restructuring occurs both when existing schools make major changes and when new schools are established to implement factors like these.

Box 1

SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

School Restructuring Study (SRS). This study included 24 significantly restructured public schools, evenly divided among elementary, middle, and high schools, located in 16 states and 22 districts, mostly in urban settings. There was a large range of enrollment, with an average of 777 students; 21 percent African American; 22 percent Hispanic; 37 percent receiving free or reduced lunch. From 1991 through 1994 each school was studied intensively for one year during two weeks of on-site research. Narrative reports were supplemented by surveys of students and staff, conventional tests of student achievement, and the scoring of student achievement on two teacher-assigned assessments according to standards of authentic performance. Researchers also made intensive study of mathematics and social studies instruction in about 130 classrooms, with complete data on about 2,000 students. This study allowed intensive examination of authentic pedagogy and student performance in a carefully selected group of schools that had made significant progress in restructuring. [1]

National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). This study included a nationally representative sample of over 10,000 students, followed from grade 8 (1988) through grade 12 (1992) in about 800 high schools nationwide. The schools include public, Catholic, and independent schools and represent a wide range of school enrollment, geographic settings school social composition, as well as various levels of restructuring activity. Student test data in mathematics, science reading and history for grades 8, 10, and 12 were drawn from items from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Researchers also studied survey data from teachers and students, and the school principal's report on curriculum, instruction, school climate, and the extent of school restructuring. Complementing the more intensive study of school restructuring in the SRS, this study permitted examination of factors that influence student learning on conventional achievement tests over four years of high school in a large representative national sample of secondary schools and students. [2]

Study of Chicago School Reform. This study included survey data from 8,000 teachers and principals in elementary and 40 high schools from 1990 to 1994. Surveys reported on instruction, school climate and organizational features, professional activities, relations with parents, and reform activities. The study also included three-year case studies of 12 elementary schools, including six schools actively involved in restructuring. Case study schools represent the full range of elementary schools in Chicago, which vary substantially in social composition, but most have a majority of poor and minority children. The study, focusing on local school politics and school organizational change, offered both in depth case analysis and extensive quantitative information on the nation's most ambitious effort in school decentralization. [3]

Longitudinal Study of School Restructurings. This study included four case studies of eight schools that had embarked on different forms of restructuring in four communities. Representing a variety of school social composition and enrollment, the schools included two urban elementary schools, two urban middle schools, two urban high schools, and a rural middle school and high school. From 1991 through 1994, researchers spent about 15 person-days per year in observations and interviews at each school, studying teachers' work, interactions in groups, participation in decision-making and organizational learning. The study offered in-depth analysis of how professional community, politics and organizational learning evolved in a diverse set of restructured schools. [4]

This report synthesizes findings of research conducted by CORS staff from 1990 through 1995. Research on educational reform poses complex problems, which call for diverse research designs and methodologies. Our conclusions are drawn primarily from four projects described in Box 1.

These studies provided a rich combination of in-depth case studies, along with survey data that portray general trends. They included schools at different stages of restructuring that participated in a variety of district and state reform strategies, including public school choice, radical decentralization, and state level systemic reform.