

Phi Delta Kappan

Are we taking the wrong path?

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School turnaround has become a national industry. Driven by the political necessity to show results in the short term, educators have responded with strategies that reliably raise standardized test scores, some-times dramatically, within one to two years. But such gains are typically achieved through focused test prep and alignment of instruction with tested content. Such strategies redirect existing practice without doing much to improve it. McKinsey & Co. uncovered similar pat-terns internationally (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). Top-down mandates and scripted curriculum reliably move schools from poor performance to minimally acceptable performance on national and international tests. Thus, both nationally and internationally, we've demonstrated that we can move schools from poor to mediocre by relying less on teacher skill and more on fostering a command-and-control work culture.

Proponents argue this is a necessary "first step" up the staircase to excellence, but the same international research that shows how schools move from poor to mediocre, also shows that moving schools from mediocre to excellent requires a nearly opposite set of policies and practices based on cooperation and a reflective work culture. That raises the question of whether command-and-control is a legitimate first step--or a dead end.

Even as current policies and practices improve low-performing schools, they also reduce the capacity of high-performing schools to continue to offer a rich curriculum (Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008). In short, such policies and practices tend to move everybody in the system toward the minimum. It's reasonable to predict that intensifying such practices will foster widespread mediocrity.

What if our national aspiration is something grander than the minimum for all? Research since the 1980s has identified traits associated with high-performing schools. These traits include high cognitive demand, high [expectation](#) for all students, collective responsibility for student [learning](#), shared instructional norms, collaborative examination of practice, shared vision and purpose, and an inquiry stance toward professional practice overall. We know what really good schools look like, but we know less about how to help other schools acquire and sustain their traits. This is because such work requires deep cultural change, and we are fixated on mere technical intervention.

At the University of Massachusetts Lowell, we are consolidating research conducted by ourselves and others that suggests excellence is a discipline and is both a means and an end. Comparing the traits of excellent professional development, excellent individual professional practice, and excellent schools, we have found considerable overlap. Teachers who habitually and skillfully examine shared work, relying on inquiry, observation, analysis, dialogue, and experimentation in practice are engaged in the best sort of professional development. We call this discipline collaborative inquiry. It is not particularly new, and some of the best work with communities of practice and action research draws on similar principles. Such work, however, is

widely dismissed because it requires time for teacher collaboration and a culture that embraces reflective thought. Building such a culture runs counter to conventional norms--the very norms fostered by current school improvement policies. Educators and policy makers who expect to produce the collaborative and reflective culture associated with excellent schools by way of a command-and-control process are like the gardener who expects to produce orchids by planting cactus seeds.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has famously pointed out that one can't achieve peace through war. If the end is peace, then the means, too, must be peaceful. "There is no path to peace; the path is peace," he wrote. Likewise, we won't achieve great schools with a scripted curriculum. The traits to which we aspire must be the discipline we practice from the start. There is no path to excellent schools. The path is excellence.

References

Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., & Barber, M. (2010). How the world's most improved systems keep getting better. New York, NY: McKinsey & Co. www.mckinsey.com.

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