

## Fiddling with structures is not the way to improve

For the last 15 years, I have studied the geological accumulation of education reforms in U.S. schools — the sedimentation of the last two or three geological eras. In a book I wrote with Penelope Peterson and Sarah McCarthy on the structure and restructuring of schools, the main finding we report is that changing structure does not change practice. In fact, the schools that seem to do the best are those that have a clear idea of what kind of instructional practice they want to produce, and then design a structure to go with it.



Richard F. Elmore

My favorite story, which is now increasingly confirmed by the aggregate analysis of block scheduling — the current structural reform du jour of secondary education — involves a high school social studies teacher I interviewed. I asked him, “So what do you think of block scheduling?” He said, “It’s the best thing that’s ever happened in my teaching career.” I asked, “Why?” And he said, “Now we can show the whole movie.”

That captures my take on structural reform. We put an enormous amount of energy into changing structures and usually leave instructional practice untouched. Certainly that message has been confirmed by Fred Newmann’s work at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, and other research. We’re just now getting the first generation of aggregate studies on block scheduling, which, shockingly, show no relationship between its adoption and any outcome that you can measure on student performance. Of course, this is exactly what one could have predicted, given the research on structural reforms.

The pathology of American schools is that they know how to change. They know how to change promiscuously

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and at the drop of a hat. What schools do not know how to do is to improve, to engage in sustained and continuous progress toward a performance goal over time. So the task is to develop practice around the notion of improvement.

### BETTER BENCHMARKS

Improvement is a discipline. It requires picking a target that has something to do with demonstrated student learning. If you’re a school leader whose students are scoring consistently in the 95th percentile, you need another performance measure because that one is doing you no good. For improvement purposes, you need a new ceiling. You also need some kind of external benchmarks.

If the only benchmarks you have come from your own particular opinions and ideas about good practice, then you’re in trouble. Real improvement comes when you visit a classroom where somebody is doing the same thing you are — only much better. That’s when the tough conversation about improvement takes place. Whether you’re a novice or an expert, the important thing is to focus on the next stage of improvement and to determine where that increment of knowledge and skill will come from.

The norms and values that go with ambitious conceptions of learning and improvement grow out of practice, not vice versa. School improvement doesn’t happen by getting everyone to come to the auditorium and testify to their belief that all children can learn. Only a change in practice produces a genuine change in norms and values.

Finally, instructional leaders need to know and model the knowledge and skills needed to do this work. This includes knowledge about performance, knowledge about development in content areas, knowledge about the improvement of instruction. Leaders need to create structures for how they learn in schools. If you can’t model the norms and values you expect others to adopt, it’s unlikely that any real improvement will take place.

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