Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

College of Education Faculty Research and
Publications

Education, College of

Review of *Organizing Schools for Improvement*

Martin Scanlan
Marquette University, martin.scanlan@marquette.edu

Book Review: *Organizing Schools for Improvement*

Martin Scanlan
Marquette University

Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & & Easton, J. (2009). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

What are the *necessary and sufficient* ingredients that lead to substantial improvement in student learning in urban schools? How do they work together? What happens if one of these necessary components is missing? *Organizing Schools for Improvement* (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2009) is an ambitious work that both raises these big questions and addresses them with aplomb. As inequities in educational opportunities persist (Borman & Dowling, 2010), transforming education, particular public urban schooling, remains a vexing and urgent problem. In recent decades public discourse regarding addressing this has swelled, but policies promising transformation have proven ineffectual (Ravitch, 2010a, 2010b). A narrowing focus on rudimentary indicators of student achievement has constrained public discourse around the underlying purposes of schooling (Rose, 2009). In this context *Organizing Schools* emerges as a masterful work providing salient, compelling evidence regarding how to address this national concern.

Lauded as the most important research in a decade on the topic (Scheurich, Goddard, Skrla, McKenzie, & Youngs, 2010), Bryk and colleagues have crafted a rare work that has emerged as essential reading for practitioners, scholars, and policy makers, particularly in the field of educational leadership. The extraordinary dimension of the study is not that it establishes leadership as playing a central role in orchestrating school improvement. This central finding, though powerful, has been well documented elsewhere (e.g., Wahlstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Rather, the power in *Organizing Schools* is unpacking *how* leadership works to promote school improvement in concert with four other dimensions, and how these five components are both *necessary and sufficient* to drive substantive school improvement. In this essay review I first describe the primary aims and findings of *Organizing Schools* and then examine concrete implications of this work, specifically attending to leadership preparation and future research in the field of educational leadership.

Aims and Findings of *Organizing Schools*

Organizing Schools is oriented toward praxis: articulating and testing "a theory of action for organizing [urban] schools for improvement" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 21). The research was conducted through the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which has produced extensive studies of school reform efforts spawned by the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 (e.g., Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1999). The consortium's work demonstrates how collaborative endeavors among institutes of higher education and elementary and secondary schools can yield powerful results promoting school improvement. Data analyzed in *Organizing Schools* are drawn from a 7-year stretch (1990–1996) during which no other major school reform efforts affected Chicago Public Schools.

Establishing the framwork. The first two chapters set up the study. In Chapter 1 the authors identify (a) attendance rates and (b) student learning outcomes in reading and math (as measured on Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) as the core outcome indicators of school improvement. For both indicators the authors go to considerable lengths to establish sophisticated measures. They create calculate adjusted attendance trends that "controlled for changes over time in the compositions of students" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 31) in order to ensure that a school's improved rates of attendance can in fact be attributed to its organizational improvements (and not to demographic shifts in student population). Regarding student learning outcomes, they create an "academic productivity profile" (p. 34) to capture a school's contribution to student learning gains over time. This controlled for the changes in the achievement levels of students entering the school (input level) when measuring the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills scores (output level) and allowed the authors to more accurately determine student learning gains over time. Of 390 public elementary schools that comprise the sample, *Organizing Schools* focuses on contrasting the top quartile and bottom quartile on these outcome indicators.

Chapter 2 describes the theory of school organization and improvement undergirding the study. The authors strive to provide a theory of practice that will both "afford clinical guidance to practitioners—directing their efforts toward the core aspects of school improvement that merit their attention" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 44) as well as serve as an analytic tool for scholars to advance research in this area. The heart of this theory is the technical core of instruction, which involves the classroom dynamics (teachers and students engaged in subject matter), the amount of effective learning time for these classroom dynamics, and the effectiveness of supplemental resources supporting these classroom dynamics (pp. 48-49). The level of instructional productivity within the classroom (and school) depends on what happens in this technical core. This productivity further depends upon students' engagement with instruction, which depends upon an individual's motivation to learn and regular participation in school (e.g., attendance, discipline, homework completion). Bryk et al. (2009) describe these interacting dynamics as the "classroom black box" (p. 48).

Next, the authors describe four organizational dimensions that directly affect this black box: instructional guidance, professional capacity, learning climate, and parent/community relations. The first two dimensions most directly affect the classroom learning. Instructional guidance signifies the products and processes of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Professional capacity references the human resources, namely the professional expertise of the educators. The other two dimensions interact with other elements in the classroom black box. By the student-centered learning climate, the authors describe how conducive the culture and atmosphere in the school are to promoting teaching and learning (e.g., academic press from teachers and peers, level of order and safety). The parent/community relations dimension includes the level of parental support for learning, school support for culturally respon-

sive instruction, and community support for supplemental services for students.

After unpacking these four dimensions, the authors identify a fifth essential organizational support—leadership—as the driver of the other four. Leadership involves managing resources and processes in the school effectively and efficiently; providing instructional leadership focusing on improving the technical core of instruction; and facilitating the inclusion of broad, often disparate constituents in a shared vision and path toward improvement. While the principal is the central leader and catalyst, leadership must be distributed, as "no one person can transform a school on his or her own" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 64). The authors conclude by noting 14 indicators used to measure these five essential supports.

Though the text describing this theoretical framework is lucid, the diagrams and metaphor used to illustrate it are awkward. The authors refer to the five essential supports as the ingredients to baking a cake, inadvertently implying that the process of school improvement has a discrete beginning, middle, and end, and that once the recipe is followed, the end result will consistently emerge. While all metaphors, at some point, break down, baking a cake is a strikingly weak way one to communicate this sophisticated framework. An alternate encapsulation might be to consider the five essential supports as interacting cogs working in conjunction to promote instructional productivity within the classroom black box (see Figure). This metaphor captures the interdependence of each of the five supports in promoting student learning in the classroom and underscores the notion of school improvement as not merely sequential, but an ongoing process.

A: Leadership
B: Instructional Guidance
C: Professional Capacity
D: Student-Centered Climate
E: Parent/Community Relations
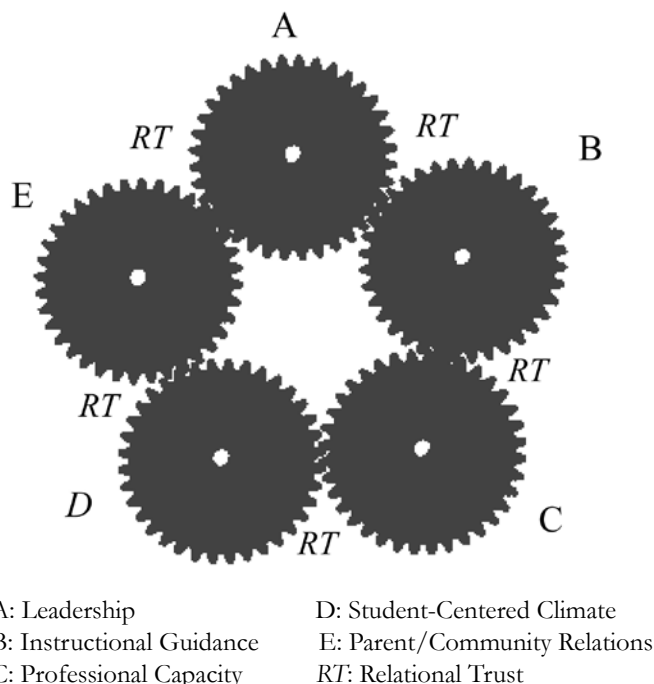*RT*: Relational Trust

Figure. *Dynamic interaction of five essential supports and relational trust.*

Testing the framework. The subsequent two chapters of *Organizing Schools* are devoted to applying the theoretical framework to the outcome indicators identified. In Chapter 3 the authors analyze the evidence that these five organizational elements are actually essential to promoting school improvement in attendance, reading

and math. Schools are categorized as strong or weak on essential support, depending on whether they score in the top or bottom quartile of schools for the relevant indicators. First, each of the five dimensions is determined to actually support school improvement. The authors describe the relative strength of each of the five dimensions at predicting improvement. Second, each dimension is determined to be essential. They explain how weakness in one dimension predicts a lack of improvement: "Schools having a weak report on any one of the five indicators are at least two times more likely to stagnate in reading and mathematics than schools having strong indicator reports" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 86). Third, the five supports are determined to interact as a system. Schools tend to have consistent patterns across the five essential supports, and the cumulative effects associated with the combination of all five supports are particularly compelling: "Schools strong in most supports were at least ten times more likely than schools weak in most supports to show substantial gains in both reading and mathematics" (p. 93).

The authors proceed in Chapter 4 to examine in greater depth the interactions among four of these essential supports (excluding leadership) by presenting a careful analysis of the 14 composite indicators. The findings presented here are actionable for practitioners. By way of example, specific connections between organizational dimensions and outcome indicators are spelled out:

> While an unsafe, disorderly climate promotes absenteeism, engaging instruction encourages regular student attendance…schools using a well-paced, aligned curriculum and deploying an applications-oriented pedagogy were much more likely to show significant improvements in attendance. In contrast, schools relying heavily on didactic teaching methods with constant repetition of basic skills worksheets, practice drills, and teacher-directed instruction tended to stagnate. (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 102)

The authors not only provide powerful cautions against negative consequences of "deadening instruction" (p. 104), they also candidly acknowledge the tensions that schools face that drive them toward dysfunctional cycles of weaknesses in a student-centered climate and in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment:

> Efforts to "tighten the screws on instruction" in the face of absenteeism…can have negative consequences for students' engagement. A natural response by teachers is to slow down the curriculum an∂d to reteach lessons with the whole class. This instructional repetition, however, only contributes further to the problem. .…Helping teachers break out of this loop becomes a primary focus for quality professional development. (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 106)

Of particular value is the way the authors unpack how different essential supports interact with "productive reciprocity" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 117). For example, they describe the curricular alignment (part of the instructional guidance dimension) as highly dependent on the social supports provided in the professional capacity dimension. They conclude the chapter by describing the evidence that leadership drives this interaction. Leadership most directly strengthens parent/community relations and professional capacity and more indirectly affect instructional guidance and the student-centered climate. The longitudinal evidence

shows that "an average school community with a strong leadership base would have a set of organizational indicators three years later that approached the top quartile of schools in this study" (p. 131), underscoring the role of leadership as driving change.

Adding nuance. In the final two chapters, *Organizing Schools* add nuance to the theory of action for urban school improvement. Chapter 5 emphasizes the critical role of relational trust, which is built from social respect, personal regard, role competence, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), in promoting shared ownership of reform efforts. (In addition, structural dimensions such as small size and stable enrollment are noted to promote successful reform.) Relational trust "conditions the school's capacity to enhance the functioning of these core organizational subsystems" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 147). The authors assert, "Trust formation in a school community is a key mechanism in advancing meaningful improvement initiatives" (p. 157). To return to my metaphor of the five essential supports functioning as interconnected cogs, relational trust could be seen as the grease lubricating their movement (see Figure *C*).

As Chapter 5 looks inward to the school, Chapter 6 looks outward to the broader context. Here the authors present a textured analysis of the interplay of racial isolation and socioeconomic status on schools in the study, slicing these data to craft seven "racial-SES classifications of school communities" ranging from "truly disadvantaged" (borrowing from Williams, 1987) to racially integrated. Not surprisingly, they find "large and significant differences across the seven categories of schools with respect to

The Brock International Prize in Education recognizes an individual who has made a specific innovation or contribution to the science and art of education, resulting in a significant impact on the practice or understanding of the field of education. It must be a specific innovation or contribution that has the potential to provide long-term benefit to all humanity through change and improvement in education at any level, including new teaching techniques, the discovery of learning processes, the organization of a school or school system, the radical modification of government involvement in education, or other innovations. The prize is not intended to recognize an exemplary career or meritorious teaching, administration, or service with a primarily local impact. The prize itself is awarded each year and consists of $40,000, a certificate, and a bust of Sequoyah.

10th Annual Brock Symposium
The University of Oklahoma
April 8, 2011

2011 Brock International Laureate:
Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond

trends in academic productivity in both reading and mathematics" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 164). In truly disadvantaged group, only 15% of schools showed significant improvement. By contrast, within the integrated group, 40% improved in reading and 60% in math. They conclude by examining the levels and types of social capital (bonding, promoting internal cohesion within communities, and bridging, creating linkages to external individuals and organizations) and different community indicators across these seven categories, describing the negative impact of concentrations of social barriers (e.g., high levels of crime, abuse, and neglect and low levels of social cohesion, religious participation, and integration with other neighborhoods). They demonstrate how "differences among communities in their social resources and problems significantly influence the capacity of local schools to improve" (p. 186), suggesting that policies promoting urban school reform must take into account these contextual differences.

Drawing conclusions. The concluding chapter of *Organizing Schools* summarizes the core lesson of the study: "meaningful improvement typically entails orchestrated initiatives across multiple domains" (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 197), specifically, the five essential supports. At both the school and system levels, sustained improvement depends on simultaneously attending to each dimension. Here the authors make direct suggestions for educational leadership, asserting that the integrative framework can "guide principals as they reflect on their everyday actions and engage in longer-term strategic planning" (p. 204). First, school principals must promote coherence across the four areas of instructional guidance, professional capacity, the learning climate, and parent/community relations with an unrelenting focus on "improving the technical core of teaching and learning" (p. 204). Second, principals must recognize that "the technical activities of school improvement rest on a social base" (p. 204) and, accordingly, build relational trust within the school community.

Implications of Organizing Schools

Leadership preparation. Several implications of *Organizing Schools* for leadership preparation—including both preservice leaders and practitioners—emerge from a careful reading of the text. First, this work speaks to how school leaders master standards in the field. These standards emphasize the role of leaders cultivating an effective teaching and learning environment by setting a shared vision, developing a school culture and instructional program, ensuring the management of resources, and collaborating broadly (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Leadership preparation programs frequently emphasize these standards discretely but may find the research presented in Organizing Schools helpful in drawing interconnections among them. Further, these leadership standards have been criticized for failing to foreground issues of educational inequities and the obligation of school leaders to redress these (Cambron-McCabe, 2006). By grounding a theory of essential supports on evidence from schools that predominantly serve students who have been marginalized by poverty and racism, *Organizing Schools* appropriately emphasizes this as a focal point in the field of educational leadership.

Second, this work has implications for preparing leaders to facilitate organizational learning. Literature in educational leadership emphasizes specific foci for organizational learning, such as the instructional capacity of teachers (Spillane & Seashore Louis,

2002), curricular and instructional improvement (Marks & Nance, 2007), or teacher empowerment (Marks & Seashore Louis, 1999). Organizational learning involves distributed leadership (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Evidence from successful urban schools reflects such organizational learning: Leadership is shared across a range of individuals, from supervisors (i.e., principals) to mentors (i.e., coaches, teacher-leaders), and data analysis consistently guides efforts to improve instruction (Portin et al., 2009). Rather than diverging from this extant literature, *Organizing Schools* bolsters and synthesizes it by providing a unifying theory of action. The analysis of a unique, longitudinal data set across a system of schools yields novel insights into the specific dimensions working in concert that promote urban school improvement. Preservice coursework (e.g., organizational theory) as well as in-service supports for practitioners should integrate these insights.

Third, this work has implications for how school leaders think about data. One of the striking features of the text is the relentless effort of the authors to describe complex data cogently. For the most part, they succeed in prodding readers to forego indicators that are easily measured for those that have strong analytical purchase. By creating composite, value-added measures of attendance, reading, and mathematic outcome measures, the authors' claims of school improvement hold sway. By looking beyond the commonplace indicators of race and socioeconomic status, they demonstrate a more compelling approach to describing these dimensions of diversity in schools. Leadership preparation programs often seek to scaffold skills at conducting equity audits (Johnson & La Salle, 2010; Skrla, Scheurich, & McKenzie, 2009). In this, they will be well served to draw upon *Organizing Schools* to demonstrate the potential of creatively approaching data collection and analysis.

Implications for future research. Implications for future research in educational leadership emerge as well. Regarding content, *Organizing Schools* will likely spawn a cadre of work that tests its theory of action within other sectors (e.g., secondary settings, non-urban settings). In addition, scholars will likely explore in greater depth the interrelations among the five domains. Whereas some of the conclusions that the text draws from these domains are not new, the data that substantiate the claims are. For instance, in Chapter 6 the authors go to lengths unpacking the manner in which contextual factors delimit opportunities for school improvement. Others have described educational outcomes as closely linked with both the political economy (e.g., Kantor & Lowe, 2006) and the social advantages and disadvantages that students experience (e.g., Lee & Burkam, 2002). What is novel in this work is demonstrating the nature of these linkages vis-à-vis specific dimensions of school improvement. Future research will expound these connections.

Organizing Schools has the potential to inspire boundary spanning among researchers and practitioners. Born of collaborative efforts amongst schools and an institute of higher education, this work illustrates that such partnerships have immense potential. The five essential supports explored by this work point toward the need for interdisciplinary research. Most directly, this could provoke partnerships among colleagues within colleges of education studying specific domains (e.g., departments of leadership and administration and departments of curriculum and instruction). The ubiquitous silos that characterize institutes of higher education notwithstanding, *Organizing Schools* also provides fodder for research endeavors that bring together colleagues across fields (e.g., educators working with colleagues in communications, community development, sociology, and family studies).

Finally, this work has implications for the delivery form that research takes. As a text, *Organizing Schools* strives to be both accessible and multidimensional. More than once the authors invite "the reader less interested" to skip ahead. Elsewhere, readers hungry for greater detail are urged to explore appendices and online resources. Although not explicitly referenced in the text, a webinar in which the authors present this work is also available (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2011). Such creative extensions of a static text into more flexible, responsive formats are bound to grow more commonplace as information technology resources continue to burgeon.

Conclusions

Perhaps more than ever, issues at the heart of school reform are widely and hotly contested in the public discourse. Inequities in educational opportunities abound and solutions are elusive. The field of educational leadership, in particular, is positioned at a critical juncture in which its influence on this discourse may either deepen or deteriorate (Shoho, 2010). *Organizing Schools* provides powerful evidence that strong school leaders can help promote educational equity by advancing curriculum, instruction, and assessment; cultivating professional capacity; fostering student-centered climates; and building parent and community relations. In our roles as scholars, practitioners, and policy makers, we are called upon to promote these necessary and sufficient supports with diligence and ingenuity. In short, we are called upon to organize schools for improvement.

References

Borman, G., & Dowling, M. (2010). Schools and inequality: A multilevel analysis of Coleman's equality of educational opportunity data. *Teachers College Record, 112*(5), 1201-1246.

Brooks, J. S., Jean-Marie, G., Normore, A., & Hodgins, D. (2007). Distributed leadership for social justice: Exploring how influence and equity are stretched over an urban high school. *Journal of School Leadership, 17*(4), 378-408.

Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage.

Bryk, A., Camburn, E., & Seashore Louis, K. (1999). Professional community in Chicago elementary schools: Facilitating factors and organizational consequences. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 35,* 751-781.

Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. (2009). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Kerbow, D., Rollow, S., & Easton, J. (1999). *Charting Chicago school reform: Democratic localism as a lever for change.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Cambron-McCabe, N. (2006). Preparation and development of school leaders: Implications for social justice policies. In C. Marshall & M. Oliva (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education* (pp. 110-129). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Consortium on Chicago School Research. (2011, January). *Symposium on Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago.* Retrieved from http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/videos/organizing_schools_symposium_20100114.php

Council of Chief State School Officers. (2008). *ISLLC 2008 Educational Leadership Policy Standards: As adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.* Retrieved from http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications/ Educational_Leadership_Policy_Standards_ISLLC_2008 _as_Adopted_by_the_National_Policy_Board_for _Educational_Administration.html

Johnson, R., & La Salle, R. A. (2010). *The wallpaper effect.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Kantor, H., & Lowe, R. (2006). From New Deal to no deal: No Child Left Behind and the devolution of responsibility for equal opportunity. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*(4), 474-502.

Lee, V., & Burkam, D. (2002). *Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school.* Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Marks, H., & Louis, K. S. (1999). Teacher empowerment and the capacity for organizational learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 35,* 707-750.

Marks, H., & Nance, J. (2007). Context of accountability under systemic reform: Implications for principal influence on instruction and supervision. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 43*(3), 3-37.

Portin, B., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F., Samuelson, C., & Yeh, T. L. (with Gallucci, C., & Swanson, J.). (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools.* Seattle: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.

Ravitch, D. (2010a). *The death and life of the great American school system.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Ravitch, D. (2010b, November 11). The myth of charter schools. *New York Review of Books.* Retrieved from http://www .nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/myth -charter-schools/

Rose, M. (2009). *Why school?* New York, NY: New Press.

Scheurich, J. J., Goddard, R. D., Skrla, L., McKenzie, K. B., & Youngs, P. (2010). The most important research on urban school reform in the past decade? *Educational Researcher, 39*(9), 665-667.

Shoho, A. (2010, October). *UCEA Presidential Address.* Presented at the UCEA meeting, New Orleans, LA.

Skrla, L., Scheurich, J. J., & McKenzie, K. B. (2009). *Using equity audits to create equitable and excellent schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Spillane, J., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher, 30*(3), 23-28.

Spillane, J., & Louis, K. S. (2002). School improvement processes and practices: Professional learning for building instructional capacity. In J. Murphy (Ed.), *The educational leadership challenge: Redefining leadership for the 21st century* (Vol. 101, pp. 83-104). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wahlstrom, K., Seashore Louis, K., Leithwood, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Investigating the links to improved student learning.* Minneapolis, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement.

Williams, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.