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EDUCATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Abstract

The ALeRT Learning Centers (**A**ccelerated **L**earning, culturally **R**esponsive **T**eaching) offer a multi-dimensional approach to transforming high-poverty schools into high-achieving learning centers. ALeRT is not prescriptive approach to school reform. It is a performance-based process, broadly adaptive to the unique needs of individual schools and communities. ALeRT provides a comprehensive program of school restructuring, high quality professional development, student support, and community engagement. It builds upon the strengths that students bring to the classroom, linking student background and abilities with rigorous academic content within a context of teacher empowerment.

Abstrakt

Centra Uczenia się **ALeRT** (*Accelerated Learning*, *culturally Responsive Teaching* – Przyspieszone uczenie się, kulturowo odpowiednie nauczanie) oferują wielowymiarowe podejście do procesu przekształcania szkół biednych w centra uczenia się z sukcesem. ALeRT to podejście do reformy szkoły, które nie polega na sztywnych receptach. To proces oparty na działaniach i zachowaniach uczniów, silnie związany z unikatowymi potrzebami pojedynczych szkół i społeczności. ALeRT oferuje ogólny program restrukturyzacji szkoły, wysokiej jakości rozwój zawodowy, wsparcie dla uczniów oraz aktywizację społeczności. Buduje wykorzystując mocne strony uczniów, łącząc uczniowskie doświadczenia i zdolności z konkretnym zakresem materiału w kontekście organizacji pracy dającej nauczycielom poczucie sprawstwa.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the different waves of reform that have rolled over public education seem to be rooted in the Tayloresque principles of efficiency, control, and standardization couched in language of test driven accountability and deregulation measures such as charter schools, vouchers, privatization, and

takeovers.[1] In addition, the regulation and standardization of teaching practice that accompanied test driven accountability has served to further de-professionalize teaching.[2] The resulting deskilling and disempowerment of teachers and development of teacher-proof curricula has served to further erode the quality of teaching, particularly in schools serving students placed at risk.[3] While these initiatives have done much to draw attention to issues related to school reform and to illuminate the problems associated with the education of poor and minority children, they have done little to close the achievement gap. Test driven accountability has raised the academic standards for poor and minority children, but did little to change a system that virtually guaranteed their failure.[4]

Drawing from experience in several highly successful and nationally recognized school reform projects, The Midwest Educational Reform Consortium (MERC) has developed ALeRT Learning Centers (Accelerated Learning, culturally Responsive Teaching) that offer a multi-dimensional approach to transforming low-achieving, high-poverty schools into high-achieving centers of learning.[5] MERC is a collaborative partnership involving 5 colleges and universities, 4 school districts, and over 30 community and faith based organizations, businesses, foundations, and state/local agencies from three mid-western states. The ALeRT Learning Centers focus on whole school transformation. Currently, MERC has established learning centers in 15 middle and high schools in the Midwestern United States.

The ALeRT Learning Centers are not prescriptive, cookie-cutter approaches to school reform. Instead, MERC has developed a performance-based process that is broadly adaptive to the unique needs of individual schools and their communities. It builds upon the strengths that students bring to the classroom, linking student background and abilities with rigorous academic content within a context of teacher empowerment and extensive parental and community engagement. The ALeRT Learning Centers are a unique and comprehensive program of school restructuring, teacher professional development, support for students and their families, and student performance benchmarks designed to transform the educational delivery system and increase student achievement, especially for children of poverty and children of color. The reform project tied to the ALeRT Learning Centers focuses on three primary objectives:

- Restructure schools to provide a systemic approach to developing a closely-knit, family atmosphere through smaller learning communities that focus on school improvement and increasing academic achievement. Other support structures include but are not limited to developing interdisciplinary teaching teams, providing additional common planning time for teachers,

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[1] S.H. Fuhrman, *Riding Waves, Trading Horses: The Twenty-Year Effort to Reform Education*, in: D. Gordon and P.A. Graham (eds.), *A Nation Reformed*, Harvard Education Press, Boston 2003, pp. 7–22.

[2] P. Grossman, *Teaching: From A Nation at Risk to a Profession at Risk?,* in: D. Gordon and P.A. Graham (eds.), *A Nation Reformed*, Harvard Education Press, Boston 2003, pp. 69–80.

[3] Ibidem.

[4] J. Kretovics, and E.J. Nussel, *Transforming Urban Education: Toward Creating the Conditions for Educational Equality*, Alllyn & Bacon, Boston 1994.

[5] This research has been funded in part through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

establishing looping (teachers and students moving as a team from one grade level to the next), and flexible scheduling.

- Provide high quality, on-going professional development for teachers through common planning time and redesigned university coursework in order to transform the educational delivery system, establish contextual problem-based learning, and improve student achievement. The smaller learning communities support the development of culturally responsive teaching practices linked with a rigorous curriculum to accelerate student learning.
- Improve student and family support by establishing direct linkages to community and social service agencies, colleges, and universities services in order to provide enhanced learning opportunities that enable students to become better prepared to be successful in post secondary education and employment opportunities.

School Restructuring

To transform schools into sustainable learning organizations we must avoid "tinkering to utopia" and engage in school restructuring that is accountable to student performance. The conditions must be created where historically marginalized students have the opportunity to be prepared for access and success in postsecondary education or meaningful employment. To accomplish this goal, the ALeRT Learning Centers are restructuring schools to create small schools that foster a family atmosphere and structure professional development for all school personnel and interested community members so that they might better address the challenges faced by underserved student groups.

Small Schools

Traditionally structured schools lead to student and teacher disengagement and alienation. At the core of this school restructuring effort is establishing smaller learning communities. Research has convincingly demonstrated that small schools are superior to large ones on many measures and equal to them on the rest.[6] Students in small learning communities for report greater psycho-social well-being, have fewer reports of behavioral problems, and receive higher achievement scores, particularly in mathematics and reading than students from more traditionally organized schools.[7] There is also strong evidence that smaller

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[6] Raywid, *Synthesis of Research on Small Schools: A Reform That Works*, Educational Leadership 55 (4), 1997, pp. 34–39; K. Cotton, *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from recent literature*, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland 2001.

[7] R.D. Felner, D. Kasak, P. Mulhall and N. Flowers, *The project on High Performance Learning Communities: Applying the land-grant model to school reform*, Phi Delta Kappan, 78(7), 1997, pp. 520–527; A.W. Jackson and G.A. Davis, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, Teachers College Press, New York 2000.

schools can narrow the achievement gap between white/middle class/affluent students and ethnic minority and poor students.[8] Large schools are often organized to maintain control rather than to promote learning[9] and less-advantaged students end up in the largest classes, with the least-experienced teachers and the least-engaging curriculum and instructional strategies.[10]

Smaller schools are generally safer, more effective, more inviting, and higher achieving schools. They include other structural reforms such as less ability grouping, more team teaching, less academic departmentalization, and smaller student groupings. However, making schools smaller is not a quick fix. Small schools only provide a structure that can facilitate the intense work on the part of teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to effectively initiate the changes essential to school improvement.[11] There are several areas of focus that we find to be important in restructuring schools into smaller learning communities.

Teaming

One of the most important organizational features for small learning communities is interdisciplinary teacher teaming.[12] Schools that start with interdisciplinary teaming as their first reform priority tend to be more successful at implementing responsive instructional practices such as small-group instruction, heterogeneous grouping, integrated and interdisciplinary teaching, as well as increased student achievement and adjustment.[13] Teaming means that a small group of teachers works together to facilitate the learning of a cohort of students forming smaller learning communities. Depending on school improvement goals, these teams can take a variety of forms such as core interdisciplinary academic teams consisting of math, science, social studies, English and special education; teams formed around themes, career paths, or academies; teams of teachers from the arts, physical education, and health that work with core academic teams to integrate curriculum; or teams formed around issues or concerns specific to the school site. Among the factors reported to impact the level of implementation of interdisci-

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[8] K. Cotton, op.cit.

[9] L.M. McNeil, *Contradictions of control: School structure and school knowledge*, Routledge, New York 1988.

[10] J. Oakes, *Improving inner-city schools: Current directions in urban district reform*, RAND, Santa Monica, California 1987; A. Wheelock, *Crossing the tracks: How untracking can save America's schools*, The New Press, New York 1992.

[11] P.A. Wasley, M. Fine, M.M. Gladden, N.E. Holland, S.P. King, E. Mosak and L.C. Powell, *Small Schools, Great Strides: A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago*, Bank Street College of Education, New York 2000; M. Fine, and J.I. Somerville, *Small Schools, Big Imaginations: A Creative Look at Urban Public Schools*, Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, Chicago IL 1998.

[12] N. Mansberger, *After "Turning Points": Evidence of the Adoption of Middle School Reforms in the United States 1989–2000*. Unpublished dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2001.

[13] N. Flowers, S.B. Mertens and P.F. Mulhall, *How teaming influences classroom practices*, Middle School Journal, 32 (2), 2000, pp. 52–59.

plinary teaming are (1) the amount of teacher collaboration and coordination of instruction, (2) the total number of students for which a teacher or teacher team is accountable, as well as (3) the overall student-teacher ratio.[14] To have any appreciative impact on instructional practice or student well-being teams should have fewer than 120 students, with student teacher ratios lower than the mid-twenties, and teachers should have at least four common planning periods per week.[15]

Common Planning Time

There is a strong positive correlation between the practice of teacher collaboration on the coordination of curriculum and student assignments and the use of responsive instructional practices such as small group active instruction, integration and interdisciplinary practices, mastery-based assessment, critical thinking enhancement practices, authentic instruction and assessment, and reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning skill enhancement.[16] As such, MERC strongly advocates for common planning time for teaching teams. This time is necessary for teachers to work together on issues related to curriculum and instructional design and to be able to discuss and address the needs of individual students or meet with parents/guardians.

The common planning time can occur during school hours, before school, after school, or through early dismissal for activities such as service learning or internships. It is equally important that the common planning time for teachers be in addition to the regularly scheduled personal planning time. Professionals need time to perform individual professional tasks such as student assessment, evaluation, and grading; the construction of lessons, unit plans, and assessment plans; and parent/guardian communication concerning classroom activities. In addition, professionals need time to work with colleagues on broader issues related to the team such as curriculum development and integration, philosophical continuity, development of themes, and appropriation of time and resources. In the best of situations, the additional common planning and personal planning should be scheduled back-to-back to provide a continuous block of time for professional work. Continuity is important for interaction among teachers as well as for teacher/student interaction.

Looping

MERC advocates looping or students and teachers progressing together from one grade level to the next, to create a stronger family atmosphere and more

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[14] N. Mansberger, op.cit.

[15] R.D. Felner, D. Kasak, P. Mulhall and N. Flowers, op.cit., pp. 520–527.

[16] N. Flowers, S.B. Mertens and P.F. Mulhall, op.cit., pp. 52–59.

consistent and coherent student/teacher interaction.[17] This enables teachers to develop stronger bonds with students and families, encourages parent/guardian involvement, and enables curricular continuity between grade levels. Long term teacher/student relationships improve student performance and job satisfaction for teachers.[18] In middle and high school, looping generally occurs between the 7th and 8th grade and the 9th and 10th grade. However, the optimum looping could occur in the transition between 8th and 9th grade, but sometimes that is difficult because of building transfer and certification issues.

Looping has been associated with significant gains in academic achievement, particularly in reading and math.[19] Research indicates that looping can also increase attendance, improve parental involvement, reduce student retentions, and reduce special-education referrals.[20] Some researchers indicate the second year of a loop can gain upwards of six weeks of instructional time as acclamation time becomes virtually unnecessary.[21] Looping also provides greater support for children who look to school as a stabilizing influence in their lives, reduced apprehension about the new school year and the new teacher, improves conflict resolution, and improves team work.[22]

Professional Development

Restructuring, however, does not necessarily lead to instructional change.[23] For any meaningful school reform or transformation to be effective and sustained, there must be a systematic, intensive, and long-term professional development design. It is design and not intentions that characterize successful programs. Educators need to design a framework that helps identify and build upon the strengths of the students, staff, and community. This framework must provide for a collaborative process that establishes a creative tension between dreams and vision on the one hand and the current reality on the other. Teachers and administrators need to

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[17] K. Checkley, *Multiyear education: Reaping the benefits of* "*looping*", ASCD Education Update, 37(8), 1995, pp. 1, 3, 6; J. Kretovics, K. Farber, and W. Armaline., *Reform from the Bottom Up: Empowering Teachers to Transform Schools*, Phi Delta Kappan, 73, 1991, pp. 295–299.

[18] P. George, M. Spreul and J. Moorefield, *Long-term Teacher-Student Relationships: A Middle School Case Study*, National Middle School Association, Columbus, OH 1987.

[19] J. Kretovics, K. Farber and W. Armaline, op.cit., pp. 295–299; J. Rappa, *Presentation to the National Education Commission on Time and Learning*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, September 24, 1993; F. Hampton, D. Mumford and L. Bond, *Enhancing Urban Student Achievement Through Family Oriented School Practices*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL. 1997; K. Checkley, op.cit., pp. 1, 3, 6.

[20] A. Ratzki, *Creating a School Community: One Model of How it Can Be Done*, American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers 12 (1), 1988; J. Kretovics, K. Farber and W. Armaline, op.cit., pp. 295–299; J. Rappa, op.cit.; F. Hampton, D. Mumford and L. Bond, op.cit.

[21] A. Ratzki, op.cit.; G. McKay, op.cit.

[22] B. Hanson, op.cit.; K. Checkley, op.cit., pp. 1, 3, 6.

[23] S.H. Fuhrman, op.cit., pp. 7–22.

work with parents, community members, and students to set goals and establish high expectations. In addition, educators must develop a stronger understanding of the social, cultural, and economic differences students bring to the classroom to move away from the insidious social/cultural deficit model of pedagogy.

To be successful, professional development programs need to be emergent and rooted in the three Rs. Professional development programs must be relevant to the practicing professionals and the multiple communities served. As such, they must be temporally coherent, philosophically consistent, and culturally responsive. Professional development programs must have rigor to draw upon theory, research, and best practice. They must be rooted in the needs of students, teachers, and community and based upon the most advanced knowledge and skill available. Finally, professional development programs must be situated in a climate of strong, trusting, and positive relationships in order to have any impact on curriculum, instruction, and academic achievement. Change in any of these areas cannot be forced down from the top, nor can it simply emerge from the bottom up. Transformation needs to emerge from the context of the classroom and community and be informed by the system goals and applicable research.

Professional development in the ALeRT Learning Centers occurs largely in two related and overlapping contexts: common planning time and additional university coursework. The coursework typically occurs after school hours and the common planning time affords staff the opportunity to identify issues and ideas to be examined, debate and apply ideas studied in course content, or evaluate what how implementation is working. An illustration of a multi-year professional development sequence of courses and workshop/modules situated in an urban junior high school follows. The sequence we have developed typically begins with an introduction to school restructuring, constructed and taught from a contextually relevant and inquiry based approach, which characterizes the entire professional development sequence and serves as an illustration of pedagogical practice that is efficacious with junior high and high school students as well.

Our pedagogical approach is based on principles of teaching and learning rooted in the social construction of knowledge, reflective thinking, and context/problems based education. It is conducted in the genre of action research, teacher as researcher, and teacher inquiry. The professional development experiences are designed to link the biographies of class participants with experiences in urban education. The literature on urban communities and schools is quite large, so we engage in a highly selective process regarding course readings and activities. Our judgments are based on a number of concerns. First, we want participants to develop a feel for the complexity surrounding and within urban education. Second, we want diverse cultural experiences represented in the readings and other materials. Third, we want participants to engage in a critical analysis of urban schools, both at the level of theory and of practice, and to see how the two are intimately and unavoidable linked. Fourth and finally, we want meaningful change to result from the professional development efforts. We want the school to be significantly different from the place in which we began our efforts.

In the beginning of the sequence we reflect on two things: (1) the current status of the school, its strengths, and needs for improvement from the participants' perspective; and (2) the presence or absence of community resources. Concurrently, we examine the historical development and dynamics of schooling in urban centers across the United States. Urban schooling is as diverse as the population it serves, and we construct the course to reflect this diversity. Yet there do appear to be commonalities across the multiple urban settings and the course examines those commonalities as they relate to schooling, teaching, and learning. The broader urban context of the course is divided into three overlapping components. The first looks at the contexts of urban communities in contemporary society. In examining and analyzing those contexts, we rely on texts and activities that focus on current conditions as well as relevant historical antecedents to those conditions. In so doing we explore factors that led to the development of what David Tyack has called "the one best system" of urban schooling which has dominated public education since the turn of the twentieth century, moving back and forth from historical accounts to a critical analysis of current urban contexts as they relate to urban educational problems, issues, and reform initiatives, including the school with which we are working.

The second component of the course focuses on issues and examples of more contemporary urban schooling reform. In examining a broad selection of reform efforts, both locally and nationally, we see a complex and dynamic interplay of forces arising out of both the lived experiences of participants and the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions in the United States. Finally, in the third component we use our exploration of school reform to propose restructuring the school within which the staff works. Included in that restructuring are the organization of the school day, scheduling of teachers and students, relationships with parents/guardians and the broader community, and curricular and instructional development. This exploration sets the stage for the next two to five years of reform work, depending on the individual needs of the district, resources available, and a variety of other contextual factors.

A few caveats are in order here. What we are presenting is an abbreviated reconstruction of a very dynamic process that is designed to follow the needs and interests of the staff and the dynamics and events prominent in the school and district at the time of the restructuring effort. As a result, there is no single sequence of courses, workshops, or topics that cuts across all sites identically. Rather, we are trying here to illustrate a pattern, beginning with overview work on the contexts and critiques of urban schools and moving toward focused inquiry into a pedagogy sensitive to the cultures of the school and its surrounding community. The tendency is that pragmatics and politics (local) of school reform predominate in the beginning, with issues of teaching and learning, collaborative practice, and community involvement taking a back seat. As the professional development continues over two to four years, pedagogical issues become overwhelmingly more important and the worries over roadblocks and budgetary constraints, while never completely absent, do become secondary.

Partnerships for Student/Family/Community Support Community Engagement

Another critical component of school reform, along with restructuring and professional development, is the relationship between school and community in all of its forms and complexity. School reform does not just occur within the schools. Surrounding community organizations and other educational institutions must be engaged, not simply involved in successful reform efforts. Issues such as hunger, poverty, housing, and violence have an enormous impact or a student's readiness and willingness to engage in active learning. We know that social service agencies, family centers, colleges and universities all can play significant roles in the transformation of students' and parents' lives by providing programs that supplement preK-12 reform activities. The ALeRT learning centers have created a web of partners from community-based organizations, businesses, and state agencies active in our target communities to provide services and supports to parents/guardians and directly to the schools and students. In some instances, services have been integrated and located at convenient centers in the target communities and schools. A selection of professional development activities focus on helping educators deepen and take advantage of the opportunities such partnerships offer.

The primary role of ALeRT becomes the lead partner to assess, plan, link, monitor, and advocate for the delivery of support and services to students. Support and services for students are available from a variety of organizations, institutions and agencies. These services need to be cataloged, evaluated, and analyzed for gaps and weaknesses where there are no or limited existing resources or services. The support and services would need to be aligned with district and school goals, objectives, and curriculum.

The focus at the building level is on providing assessment, advocacy, monitoring, and linking students to available services so that the academic and social achievement of all students is improved. At each school, planning and decision-making should be shared by the three major partners – the school system, the community and parents – to promote comprehensiveness, a common vision, a sense of shared responsibility, collaboration and service integration. At the school level the partnership should strive to:

- Identify and develop the long-term commitment and resources necessary to fulfill the potential for all students that has been identified in the research.
- Build in the capacity for evaluating the effectiveness of all elements in contributing to student's academic achievement.
- Establish a broadly agreed upon set of priorities based on student needs, resource availability, school-parent-community decision-making and feasibility/capacity.
- Utilize existing research on best practices and actively seek existing expertise, while honoring the uniqueness of the community.

Each community has a variety of areas in which services, resources, and development are provided. These areas include but are not limited to faith-based, volunteer, non-profit, health, human service, social service, juvenile justice, as

well as colleges/universities and the school district. Many students, families and caregivers do not know about community resources in their neighborhoods and other community locations that can help support learning, social, and physical needs outside of school. They do not have set mechanisms to ensure assessment, identification and referral for intervention with situations that interfere with social, physical, emotional and, academic success. ALeRT needs to coordinate the partnership to build on existing community assets, organizations and structures,

> uniting the most important influences in children's lives – families, schools and communities – to create a web of support that nurtures their development toward productive adulthood. This web of support incorporates three interconnected support systems into one core structure: strong core instructional program; enrichment activities to expand learning opportunities to support cognitive, social, emotional, moral and physical development; and a full range of health and mental health services to safeguard children's well-being and remove barriers to learning.[24]

In one example, Partnerships for Community Action (PCA) at Bowling Green State University, a MERC partner, had already established a record of cultivating and sustaining community partnerships. The ALeRT learning centers were able to utilize PCA resources and the established principles of building and supporting university/community projects based on reciprocity, co-equal participation, and mutual benefit. Through PCA, the ALeRT learning centers have been able to establish relationships with such varied groups as the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the Toledo Zoo, the Latino MacArthur Fellows, local hospitals and libraries. Building on the principles established by PCA, the different sites were able to establish reciprocal relationships with family and community centers, city recreation departments, Rotary and other civic clubs, Councils for the Arts, faith-based organizations, and other community partners.

We believe that the conceptual framework and programmatic breadth and depth of our efforts at creating community engagement and student support increase the likelihood that students will attend and be successful in post secondary education. We know that parental support and involvement are important contributors to student success, but parents living in poverty face many difficulties to meaningful interaction with schools. Their own experiences in schools are often less than ideal, their academic skills are often wanting, and the rigors and strains of living day to day often preclude such interaction and support. Through a coalition of school, university, and local community agencies and groups, the MERC partnership provides the social and academic support so often lacking in the lives of children in poverty.

Conclusions

The ALeRT Learning Centers have a strong commitment to school restructuring, intensive professional development, and student, parent and community support.

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[24] The Children's Aid Society, *Building a Community School*, Third Edition, National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools, New York 2001.

The project provides appropriate academic preparation, skills, and proficiencies as well as develops the attitudes, aspirations, and actions necessary to help historically marginalized students attend and complete college or compete in the world of work. It is our belief that public schools in partnership with the university and community can transform themselves into high achieving learning centers. This restructuring has been effective at the middle school level but is just beginning in the high schools. The initial results are reason for cautious optimism.

School reform isn't easy. There is no quick fix. There is no silver bullet. Legislative and bureaucratic reforms from the top down are doomed to failure because there is no engagement with and ownership from those affected the most. Empowering reforms from the bottom up cannot work without structural support. Fragmented school reform cannot be sustained. Our collective experience indicates that for school reform to be successful it must include a comprehensive, coherent, and integrated program of restructuring, professional development, student support, and community engagement. There is no "one best" model. School reform is an emergent process that is focused on improving the lives and well being of future generations so they are prepared and motivated to become active participants in a democratic society.

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