

HORACE

What Works, What Doesn't: Lessons from Essential School Reform


The directions for Essential School change don't come on the package. But veterans of the effort offer here an array of hard-earned lessons gleaned from eight years of the Coalition's work.

WHAT LESSONS HAVE Essential School people learned after eight years in the trenches of whole-school reform? Ask two dozen veterans, as we did—teachers, principals, district and state administrators, researchers, and organizers—and you'll get five times that many answers. Like iron filings on a magnetic surface, the lessons they describe cluster and shiver and overlap, forming loose patterns made up of experience, strategy, and just plain advice. Many of them have been learned in other contexts and other times, and are well documented in the literature of school change. Others resemble hunches more than proven facts, their shapes emerging from growing observations as yet unquantified.

We gather a few of these lessons here, intended not as graven tablets but as jottings from the field. If you want to get over there, they say, this route worked for us. Don't try that, we saw it backfire. Stay away; there's a swamp in that direction. That path looks hard but it gets better just beyond the hill. Often ambiguous, sometimes downright contradictory, such gleanings remind us that on the journey of change, terrain and climate differ from place to place. Common sense and improvisation sometimes get one farther than textbook strategies; taking bigger risks may well yield bigger gains.

The only thing to do with good advice, Oscar Wilde once quipped,

is pass it on. "It is never of use to oneself," he dourly added. Maybe so. The Coalition and Re:Learning, as Phil Schlechty of Louisville's Greens Academy has observed, are on "the cutting edge of ignorance." But it helps to share these things. If they complicate our thinking, then good; that is what Essential Schools stand for. If they jolt us into new action, all the better. In an effort that depends upon reflection, one cannot go wrong by pondering what colleagues have to say. Their voices, distilled here into lessons large and small, are what follows.

 ***Change efforts need the support of all key stakeholders from the start.***


Many schools have struggled with roadblocks put up by teachers, parents, and students with special interests in existing programs from AP courses to sports. What comes out clearly, both in Coalition experience and in other educational research, is the strength an effort gains when all those actors have a fully legitimate part early on in the process of change.

But even with these players on board, others must be drawn in equally early. "We've learned to connect with *everything* that's going on in the state educational world,

so the establishment cannot live without us," says Judy Duval at the New Mexico Re:Learning effort. Delaware's Robert Hampel, who has observed Re:Learning in that state since its inception in 1989, agrees. "You have to be politically savvy about boards of education, university admissions officers, every important political group," he warns. "Don't get so busy with workshops that you lose touch with key people whose support is vital."

Such a tactic must go beyond rhetoric and philosophy, notes Judy Bray, who works with Re:Learning at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in Denver. "It's as hard for administrators in state and district systems to change as it is for teachers and schools," she observes. "Ideas and research aren't enough to change practices and policies at that level; you have to carve out resources and time for reflective work at every level."

Only by working simultaneously from the bottom up and the top down, moving forward on many fronts at once, will change efforts take hold and deepen, observe Donna Muncey and Patrick McQuillan, who recently completed a five-year ethnographic study of Essential School change. "Piece-meal reforms fail," concludes CES chairman Theodore Sizer. "No school is an island."

 **Get consensus on the need for change before you start—then begin working toward a common understanding of what that change will mean.**

Do your crucial "whether to" work at the start, says CES researcher Rick Lear; but don't confuse it with the "how to" work that follows. One is a decision about ideas and principles; once it's made, schools go farther when they don't revisit that decision.


The other is a fatiguing and often frustrating discussion about technique and structure, on which a school community may take years to reach consensus.

Remembering that change is not politically neutral is a key part of this lesson, warn ethnographers Muncey and McQuillan. Although the rhetoric of change may suggest that it's good for everyone, they observe, in practice some parties will be perceived as winning and others as losing. If only a select vanguard of faculty participates in new ways, attention shifts from the ideas themselves to their political aspects, which can quickly swamp the momentum for change. Instead, schools do better if the entire faculty is talking about the same ideas, going through the same professional development experiences, meeting the same visitors, and making decisions together about how to proceed.

"Whole-group learning is more powerful than splinter groups or individual teachers separately pursuing topics of interest," says Patricia Wasley, who heads CES's School Change Study. "The dilemma is how to provide the multiple points of entry that are especially important to a large high school faculty, at the same time working for a shared understanding of what the whole group is doing." Agreement about what to focus on, though it may not be every teacher's first choice, helps a school move faster because it builds shared values and common ideas, she believes. Multiple entry points are natural and desirable, Rick Lear

emphasizes, the product of different learning styles—as long as everyone remains actively committed to making the change happen.

"If I had it to do over, I would retrain *everyone* from the start, not begin with a small number and then expand," says Marian Finney, Essential School coordinator at Baltimore's Walbrook High School, one of the Coalition's charter schools. "It wasn't until three summers ago that we started setting up our summer offerings to train anyone who would come." Joe McDonald, who directs CES's Exhibition Project, agrees. "Schools shortchange themselves by trying to choose between breadth and depth," he says. "Getting the two in balance from the start has proved very important."

 **Get conflict out in the open.**

Schools that have learned to manage and negotiate conflict move farther and faster than those who avoid a fight, Essential school veterans agree. Conflict generated by naysayers is one of the key blocks to change, ethnographers Muncey and McQuillan soberly conclude, and ignoring it gets schools nowhere.

The enemy, Muncey suggests, is hearsay, and the solution is unrestricted communication—common ground for faculty to talk about, and common expectations as to what they'll be held accountable for. "Gather perceptions constantly from all directions," she says. "Don't be

 **Parents can be teachers' biggest allies.**

This is a well-established educational lesson with important political ramifications. The most successful Essential schools have reaped crucial support by involving parents on graduation committees, duplicating staff workshops with them in evening sessions, including them in grade-level advisory councils, and asking them to join as volunteers in assessing student papers.

afraid of people voicing and defending strong opinions."

The manager of school change plays a key role in this process, both within the school and between the staff and the larger system. "In the schools where change is zooming along," Muncey observes, "the principal shields the teachers from politics they don't have to deal with, and makes sure they understand the politics they do have to deal with." Too much direct exposure to outside criticism and bureaucratic roadblocks, for instance, can demoralize a faculty. Within the school, though, a good manager will quietly combat the notion that Essential school teachers are the only ones doing good things.

"Focus on communicating across the factions, even if that seems very difficult," Muncey urges. "It's a subtle thing—a coordinator might publicly praise a non-involved teacher, for example, for something she did in her class without emphasizing that it reflected Essential school ideas."

Ironically, the ethnographic study points out, communication between the vanguard for change and the outside community is often better

✓ Plan carefully, but seize opportunities as they arise.

Several successful schools have made bold moves forward when they took advantage of unexpected circumstances. In one case, the resignation of a superintendent provided a vacuum in which a strong principal moved more freely toward curricular change. In another, a governor's promise of waivers if the school could move quickly toward an outcomes-based diploma sparked a key grant that freed teachers for large-scale planning. Forced to move from their building for several years because of asbestos problems, another school leaped into whole-school involvement when it came time to move back in, giving reluctant teachers the chance to transfer out gracefully if they liked.

than that within the school itself. Turn the same skills inward, observers say, and progress is more likely.

✓ People can't take too much change in the midst of change.

The downfall of a fledgling Essential school can be a shift in leadership, especially if the effort has depended on a strong principal or superintendent for support. Schools with a more collegial ethos withstand such changes much better, but getting to shared leadership presents its own problems: the old hierarchical model of principals' behavior dies hard.

The most stable schools have provided authentic leadership roles for teachers, training the entire staff in shared decisionmaking. Extensive coaching for principals in the ideas and practices of Essential schools is also crucial, argues Dorothy Magett, who until last year headed reform programs for the state of Illinois and particularly for Chicago. "Principals must come to understand what the critical thinking process and its product look like," she says.

Equally important, Magett notes, central offices must commit not to disrupt a school staff by unnecessary transfers as it works for change. "Once we dedicate money so teachers

can sit down together and plan, they need a chance to stay together long enough to reap the benefits of the work they have done," she declares.

On the state and district policy level, stability also plays a crucial role in Essential school success. Re:Learning's Judy Bray warns against establishing separate funding and administrative structures to facilitate only Essential schools; these policies prove fragile, she says, in the face of leadership changes, staff turnover, and state budget troubles. Because the aim is changing the whole system, Ted Sizer agrees, a "waiver mentality" can backfire; instead, state policies and practices must shift to support a range of reform initiatives including Essential schools.

✓ Though changes at the individual classroom level do revitalize teachers, they are not enough to drive schoolwide change.

Focusing on pedagogical changes like "student-as-worker" has the benefit of engaging teachers and students more fully in their work. But such efforts have little wider effect unless they are overtly linked



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Editor:
Kathleen Cushman
Managing Editor:
Susan Fisher

✓ Go far enough quickly enough so you can't go back.

When its staff began to fall into old ways of evaluating kids on progress reports, Central Park East Secondary School took steps to accelerate the pace of change, to "escape the force of gravity that was pulling us back," as Deborah Meier put it. Fatigue makes cowards of us all, Vince Lombardi once quipped; the remedy lies in early boldness, constant self-evaluation, prompt corrective action.

at the outset with structural changes in the whole school—lowering the student load for teachers, instituting schoolwide exhibitions, revamping curriculum, or changing the schedule. Muncey's and McQuillan's ethnographic study concluded this in no uncertain terms, and seasoned Coalition people agree. "We've learned that everything important affects everything else important," says Ted Sizer. "You can't separate curriculum, assessment, instruction, and schedule."

This lesson has many important strategic implications for Essential schools—foremost among them the "planning backwards" process the Coalition now strongly advocates. "Decide what you want students to know and be able to do, then reorient and integrate your systems as necessary," says Joe McDonald. "Don't start with specific competencies in particular subjects; start with a single constructive act that is unbounded by disciplines—writing, inquiry, discussion of texts, problem-solving, experimentation." Where schools have done this (as at Chicago's seminar-based Sullivan High School, for example), the strands of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and schedule interweave to support the whole school's transformation.

Building a common curriculum around "essential questions" also reflects this lesson. Without such unifying techniques, even an "inter-disciplinary" curriculum with teacher teams can fail utterly to draw

in new pedagogy and assessment practices, and ultimately restricts the student's intellectual experience. "When people figure out what the essential questions are, they become less discipline-centered," says Patricia Wasley. "This in turn causes teachers to think about what's important for kids to know and do, rather than about mere coverage."

Like so many of these lessons, this one comes back to looking at Essential school change as systemic, rather than piecemeal. Viewing new classroom methods as separate and isolated acts allows participants to regard them as among a smorgas-bord of possibilities change-seekers can choose from, not a fundamental shift that will transform the entire system. "A school cannot be successful if it tries to do several things at once without making each authentically integrated with the others," says Paula Evans, who heads the Coalition's National Re:Learning Faculty. "When people take on too many new projects simultaneously, they don't have the energy to do it

all. They revert to the old argument of the shopping-mall high school—'If I don't want to work on one thing, I can work on another, or I don't have to work on any.'"

✓ Essential School change takes more time and resources than you think—stick it out.

School reformers at every level are learning the hard way how much their efforts cost and how long they take. A dogged patience seems to be part of the bargain, giving schools the time to move steadily along the continuum of change—planning, taking action, stopping to reflect, reevaluating decisions, taking stock, and trying new things.

This lesson has implications at two levels. Within the schools, as Deborah Meier of New York City's Central Park East Secondary School points out, teachers need time and support to develop new ways of viewing teaching and learning, new classroom habits, and newly collegial work styles. "Teamwork, for example, doesn't automatically happen by setting up a planning period," says Paula Evans. "It takes time, training, and coaching. And as the level of complexity of change increases, we've learned, support must also increase." Even the best summer workshop is not enough, Evans argues; teachers need continuous and long-term professional development during both the school year and the summer.

✓ Keep revisiting the Nine Common Principles for deeper understanding.

Catch phrases and one-time handouts won't capture or fully probe these complex ideas. The most successful schools continue to argue through Essential School philosophy, addressing the gap between understanding its principles intellectually and practicing them in a class of squirming kids.

At the district and state level, the challenge is to fund and foster that work throughout the crucial period when change is taking hold. "It is not possible to have a good fix on the duration of that period," contends Chicago's Dorothy Magett. "To say 'It takes five years,' as Illinois Re:Learning did when we started, only short-circuits the effort—it makes you rush in to start, try to finish this stage and that stage, when you don't quite know what is entailed. Coalition membership must be perceived as the beginning of an ongoing relationship that will characterize the way the school is run forever, not as some innovation with starting points, benchmarks, and a predetermined ending point. You can't just incubate it for five years and then come out as a butterfly."

So how much does it take? "You need three to four years of \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year just to bring people to the work, the books, the sites, to give them time to argue out what they want configured in their schools," says ECS policy analyst Bob Palaich. "If you don't allow them that luxury, it's not going to work. They've got to reach a critical mass where they can start moving existing resources around." Ted Sizer, who has long argued that once change takes hold Essential schools can operate at no more than 10 percent above their current levels, would put even more money into research and development than Palaich estimates. "Early on, Dennis Littky calculated that in his small school [in Thayer, New Hampshire] they needed an extra \$125,000 a year to start, and by now it would be more," Sizer says. "That would pay for two to three weeks' additional time a year for teachers, summer stipends for a quarter of the faculty, a few overstaffed 'empty chairs' during the year to allow for teachers to travel and learn."

Fiscally strapped schools that find such projections daunting might look to Baltimore's Walbrook High School for a lesson in financial ingenuity. "Marian Finney is a whiz at getting grants from

✓ **Find ways to break large schools into smaller decision-making units.**

Unless a school's setting is intimate enough to be truly collegial, self-governance and professional development schemes can exhaust teachers' energies, divert them from their central work, and dilute the school vision. Because communication is more complex in a large school, change efforts may be more threatened by alienation and divisiveness. In any case, trying to negotiate change in a very large group is undeniably harder.

everyplace under the sun," says former CES staffer Amy Gerstein, now a consultant to the Coalition in California. "She'll tell you, 'If we weren't so poor we wouldn't be so good at grant writing.'" Walbrook applies for everything, Gerstein notes—"but they always make the use of grant money consistent with their Essential School program. If you're going to apply for aerospace funds, focus the grant on your larger goals."

Ted Sizer speaks caustically of the "grotesque contrast" between public expenditures and the R&D needs of school change efforts. "It's instructive that Chris Whittle's Edison Project is spending \$60 million just to get the outlines of the earliest pre-schools and primary schools designed," he says. But even Essential schools with bare minimum budgets have seen progress by taking bold steps to redeploy the dollars they have. In the grip of California's fiscal crisis, Gerstein says, "there are still schools that amaze me with their tenacity. If you decide to do it no matter what, you'll take what's in the pot and spend it in new ways."

✓ **Workshops don't fundamentally change school practice.**

The most successful Essential schools, observers say, have virtually no use for the traditional "staff development" scenario where

outside experts conduct periodic workshops on subjects determined by the central office. Instead these schools take teacher learning experiences into their own hands, arranging the long-term coaching they need to carry out the work they have decided on.

This insight plays out in several Coalition strategies. One is the National Re:Learning Faculty's effort to establish "longer, more intensive, more stable relationships between practitioners and schools," as director Paula Evans describes it. Principals and teachers selected for the National Faculty work with their own and neighboring schools to mentor and reflect on change efforts over time. In a similar strategy, schools that participate in the Coalition's year-long "Trek" process work with two nearby schools as "critical friends." And finally, the Coalition is working to establish regional mechanisms and networks that would make it easier for schools to visit and consult each other as partners in change.

Travel to other schools does help, experience shows, especially if there is a nearby Essential school that is truly far along. "Sometimes you can't get people to talk about a thing until they've seen an example of it," says ECS's Bob Palaich. "If you see it, you can imagine it; if not, you won't consider it a possibility." But many visitors also experience insecurity and defensiveness when they compare their own progress to others', Rick Lear observes. "It takes a long time to get

past that so schools can share freely," he says.

Walbrook's Marian Finney considers her faculty's critical friendships a key factor in the school's progress. "The few days we spent at Paschal High School in Fort Worth before we started was one of our most valuable experiences," she says. "Now we work closely with six other schools in Baltimore." National Faculty teacher Cheri Dedmon speaks ruefully of the professional isolation her colleagues have experienced at Hixson High School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. "We're doing our own stuff—we're alone in the city, the state, the region," she says. "The closest schools working with Coalition ideas are in Atlanta and Mississippi, and there just isn't any money to send us there."

Another strategy to weave professional development into the fabric of school life involves fostering critical friendships within the school itself. "Teachers need to watch each other teach, look at kids' work that they don't have to grade themselves," says Joe McDonald. Walbrook has set aside a large room in the school as its "Center for

✓ *Early fame can help the work or harm it.*

Good publicity brings money, freedom, and excitement, along with the well-known positive effect achieved by just paying attention to something. But such attention can create rifts if the whole school is not involved, and it can also distract teachers from their difficult early efforts and encourage complacency about the results. Schools that use fame best don't rest on their laurels; instead, they ask outside visitors for critical feedback.

Change," where faculty members regularly meet and work with visitors or consultants, view videotapes, and share professional conversations. And many successful Essential schools arrange periodic weekend staff retreats for planning and reflection.

✓ *Take the initiative in setting standards and documenting your performance.*

This applies, Essential schools have learned, both to student achievement and to benchmarks for the change effort overall. "In the first year or two there's a grace period," observes Delaware's Bob Hampel. "Then people want to know. If you don't measure your own progress using criteria that make sense to you, people will do it to you, and they'll grab any handy measure."

"Be clear and public about what you consider a high standard for your students," Ted Sizer urges. This is a collective responsibility, observes Joe McDonald, which involves teachers "daring to inquire whether graduating students *do* possess the intellectual skills you want them to have." Such hard questions of rigor will eventually come at Essential schools from a skeptical public; it can only help a staff to ask them regularly and honestly of each other. And ending the isolation of the individual

teacher's judgment fosters a balance of "warm" (more empathic) and "cool" (more objective) assessment methods that holds up well under outside scrutiny.

A school must document its overall progress with equal rigor and care. Ethnographers Muncey and McQuillan urge schools to gather evidence on student achievement over long periods of time, in a variety of ways, and at several levels including individuals, teams, and the school as a whole. "Incorporate portfolios and other documentation from students into every evaluation," Donna Muncey says. "Be prepared to show what kids can do as a consequence of their Essential schooling, and how that is qualitatively different from what they could do before." This can also prove politically dangerous, she warns: "It implicitly criticizes the status quo."

CES Director for Schools Bob McCarthy has another documentation strategy, in which schools would contract with certain key employers and colleges that accept many of their graduates to supply examples of student work along with recommendations and transcripts. The practice, he believes, would raise expectations, increase awareness of new standards, and forge strong partnerships with what he calls "the external forces schools invariably come up against when they start making significant changes." It helps to follow graduates' progress well after high school, several successful Essential schools have found; such

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efforts foster community bonds and provide important data for critics and analysts.

✓ **Schools within schools are potentially divisive.**

Experience shows that such programs rarely lead to whole-school involvement. But this is a complex lesson to digest; many huge city schools, for example, see no other way to start an Essential school effort. Unless a school agrees from the start on a plan for expanding a "pilot program" into the entire school, however, a limited program has several serious political and philosophical drawbacks.

First among these is the "we-they" split such programs foster. Selecting only a portion of the school to pursue reform aggravates this by implying both that something needs reform within the status quo and that dramatic change is not a schoolwide priority or responsibility. When teachers within the school-within-a-school get extra planning time, lower student loads, and other preferential treatment, their colleagues' opposition crystallizes.

The division often encompasses faculty and students both. Forward movement of the school-within-a-school is often held hostage, Rick

✓ **Schools that nurture student involvement get farther with schoolwide and classroom change.**

Ironically, students are seldom full participants in the change process and may have a shallow sense of Essential School ideas and practices or even resent their new demands. Where a student-faculty congress addresses important issues together, or where kids have written a pamphlet explaining changes to parents and peers, schools have seen clear benefits.

Lear notes, to the reservations, resentments, and fears of the rest of the faculty—often those who are least ready to change. "A faculty that starts this way has to understand that their every success may isolate them more and more from their colleagues," Donna Muncey observes. "If they're not ready to deal with that, the added stress on top of the extra work of an Essential program will burn them out." And students are often resistant too, observers say, when Essential School practices make them work harder than their peers and toward different kinds of goals.

At the same time pressure is high on the school-within-a-school to show good results quickly. This encourages superficial gauges of progress, Rick Lear points out, which may actually hamper the

development of the program.

Schools-within-schools also feed a "deficit model" of education, Lear argues, in which the problems are seen to lie in the kids themselves, not in the school's practices or expectations. "A school will often decide to try the new ideas on a small segment of kids, often ones who are not doing well so there's nothing to lose," he says. "If the new stuff works, it then becomes something that may work with 'certain' kids, but not with all, and certainly not with successful kids. And it's seen to work because those kids 'lack something' that other kids have who are able to fit into a conventional approach to schooling."

Baltimore's Walbrook High School is unusual for its successful transition from school-within-a-school to whole-school Essential School involvement. But coordinator Marian Finney today regrets that Walbrook did not start with a full grade level; and other schools with similar strategies have seen less happy outcomes. "We're too big to do our thing and not irritate the others," laments Cheri Dedmon, who has struggled for five years to extend Hixson High School's "pilot program" schoolwide, "but too small to really sway the school."

The lesson: Start with an agreed-upon plan for whole-school expansion; work hard at maintaining the program's status as part of the larger faculty; and don't limit it to selected kids.

✓ **Getting the numbers down is crucial to serious reform.**

Only when the teacher-student load is significantly reduced can teachers really get to know their students well and focus on the teacher-student-subject relationship that is at the heart of Essential school reform. Schools that have moved along the farthest have taken seriously the Coalition's recommendation of no more than 80 students a year. They've tackled this highly charged issue head on, trying such compromises as simplifying the curriculum, team-teaching integrated subjects to the same group of students, or expecting every certified adult in the building to work with kids.

**✓ Kids are more
invested in their work
when it's more rigorous.**

Whether this is a lesson Essential school veterans have really learned or merely a wishful gleam in their eyes depends on the teacher, the day of the week, even the assignment they've just evaluated. But quite a few concur with Patricia Wasley, who concluded after her School Change Study that "when students are challenged to do something that's bigger—involving more complex thinking, synthesis, analysis—they are more willing to put out time and energy and go to greater lengths."

"Kids will surprise you with what they're capable of," agrees Amy Gerstein. "It's a lot more than we give them credit for. If you take a deep breath and give them a real opportunity to show off, they won't abuse your trust." Croton-Harmon High School in New York's Hudson River Valley took such a breath last year when all students took the elite state Regents exam, with dramatically positive results.

✓ Serious change is a series of individual transformations.

These occur, observes CES's Rick Lear, on at least two levels. First, of course, is when *one teacher after another* has that key insight or breakthrough that allows them to commit to the change—"what we usually think of as chalking one more person in the 'committed' column," he says. On another level, though, and more important in the long run, is the series of transformations that occur *over and over within each teacher*, which go on for a long time, again and again and again.

But just giving a tough assignment and expecting kids to meet high standards doesn't alone do the trick, Joe McDonald warns. "In fact, my evidence shows that kids hit with rigorous work when they're used to worksheets will virtually go on strike," he says. Instead, a school must develop new community norms that create pride in how hard the work is, just as athletic teams do. Chicago's Sullivan High School, where seniors must pass a demanding graduation exhibition involving a tough set of classic readings common

to all, has come close to this goal, he believes. And at Walbrook High School, Pat Wasley says, "visitors are surprised at the depth to which kids delve in exhibitions."

The hardest part of raising standards, in fact, comes not with less advantaged students but with those who have excelled under more conventional expectations. School after Essential school has struggled with heated opposition from students and parents with little incentive to change a system that has served them well. □



Coalition of Essential Schools
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