

# **Effective Schools: Past, Present, and Future**

*By  
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Public education, historically one of the crown jewels of our great democracy, is sailing straight into a “perfect storm.” The current economic crisis is likely to accelerate the pace of how soon this storm will totally engulf the system, as well as the intensity of the storm itself. Three societal trends are coming together to create this “storm.”

First, to remain competitive in world markets, business and industry finds itself in a head-to-head race with foreign companies in China, India and elsewhere. As a result, our business leaders need workers better prepared to confront the best and brightest workers in those countries. These leaders have advocated that educational standards be raised and as a result they are now higher than ever before in our history. Many are still claiming that they are not yet high enough to remain competitive.

Second, the demographic profile of the United States is changing dramatically, fueled by two factors: 1) The number of foreign nationals that have come to the U.S. to attend college and have remained here has increased over the years; and 2) more importantly, the birth rate among the various demographic subgroups has changed dramatically. Middle-class birth rates are well below zero population growth, indicating that overtime this group will become a smaller percentage of the total population of the United States. At the same time, the birth rate among low-income families and those families living in poverty is well above zero population growth, indicating that this subgroup will become a larger percentage of our total population. Said another way, the number of children coming to public school who have been historically the easiest to teach (middle class) is in steep decline and the number of students coming who have been the more challenging to teach (low income) is increasing significantly. The number and percent of minority students continues to increase as well and these students also tend to be disproportionately poor and disadvantaged.

Third, while standards have been raised and the number of disadvantaged students has increased, the resources that support educational success have remained constant or even decreased. The current economic crisis has meant that state budgets, including school budgets have been cut, sometimes in mid-year. Because of budget cuts, teachers are being pinked-slipped, school calendars are being compressed, school days are being shortened, and support personal are being reduced. In addition, because of accountability, many schools believe they have already exhausted the available school and classroom changes they thought necessary to satisfy the accountability demands and avoid threatened sanctions. Even so, many of the schools are facing sanctions, with more predicted to do so in the near future.

Said in a sentence, public schools are being asked to do more with less for an increasingly more needy clientele - a perfect storm indeed.

Public school leaders are truly feeling the pressure. What to do? Where to turn?

Before offering these dedicated and caring educational leaders one tested way to navigate the turbulent waters created by the perfect storm, three important “truths” must be considered. First, the current system of public education, while designed to provide access to all students, was never designed or even intended to successfully teach all students a high-standards curriculum. The importance of this “truth” is that the public school system is currently being asked to successfully fulfill a mission for which it was never intended.

Most have heard or read the expression that “form ought to follow function.” It’s the first principle of the architect who asks for the client to describe the aim or purpose to which the space is to be used (function). The architect then uses the principles of the profession to design a physical form to fulfill the intended function. A corollary to the expression states that, anytime that a function of a system is changed, its form must be modified as well. Conversely, if one tries to fulfill the new function in the old form, the old form will reclaim the mission every time.

The individual states and the federal government changed the mission to that of “learning for all” and “no child left behind.” Educators are now called to change the form to fit the new mission. Educators, parents and many of the governing groups are struggling with this new reality.

Second, contrary to the view held by many, public schools are not performing less well today than they performed previously, especially when we examine the data that informed to previous mission. Those who quickly claim the current system is broken and needs fixing should be challenged to show a time in history when they were more successful, especially when the mission stopped far short of the learning-for-all mission. The shift in the public school’s mission embodied in the accountability movement and capped off by No Child Left Behind represents a “game changer.”

While it has always been true that there was room for improvement in public schools, it does not logically follow that changing the mission means that the system is broken. It would be more accurate to say that the current mission demands a different form of school and classroom—it doesn’t help to allow critics to use the “broken” metaphor. It would be much more helpful in building public support for future public schools if the critics said that the *schools must be reinvented or transformed to met the new mission.*

Third, throughout the history of public education some schools have always been more effective than most other schools. Even when you equate the schools based on the clientele they serve, some schools have distinguished themselves as “outliers” on the high side. Likewise, even when you equate classrooms based on the students served, some teachers have distinguished themselves as “outliers” on the high side. Now the learning-for-all, no-child-left-behind mission has come to define the aim of the system, it begs the question: *Are there public schools that distinguish themselves as “outliers” on the high side with the new the new learning for all mission?* For more than three decades, researchers have identified and described schools that were outliers on the high side when it comes to the learning-for-all mission. As a matter of fact, many of the state and federal policymakers that led the charge to change the mission of public schools used these schools to provide proof that the new fulfilling the new mission is achievable.

This body of work has come to be known as the Effective Schools Research and its application as Continuous School Improvement based on the Effective Schools Research. The remainder of this paper describes my perspective on the Effective Schools Movement. I have been privileged to both conduct some of the early effective schools research and work with hundreds of schools and districts throughout the United States as they have used it as the framework for their school improvement efforts.

## **The Effective Schools Movement The Early Years**

Let's begin our journey with an overview of the Effective Schools Movement and how it has evolved over thirty-plus years.

In July 1966, "The Equal Educational Opportunity Survey" by J.S. Coleman, et al, was published. The Coleman report concluded that family background, not the school, was the major determinant of student achievement. Coleman was foremost among a group of social scientists who, during the 1960s and 70s, believed that family factors such as poverty or a parent's lack of education prevented children from learning regardless of the method of instruction. His report, along with the related literature, was the catalyst to the creation of "compensatory education" programs that dominated school improvement throughout those decades. According to Ron Edmonds, these programs, provided chiefly through Title I of the Elementary Secondary Education Act, "taught low-income children to learn in ways that conformed to most schools' preferred ways of teaching." These programs focused on changing students' behavior to compensate for their disadvantaged backgrounds and made no effort to change school behavior.

By lending official credence to the notion that "schools didn't make a difference" in assuring successful student achievement, the report stimulated a vigorous reaction, instigating many of the studies that would later come to define the research base for the Effective Schools Movement. The educational researchers who conducted these studies, myself among them, developed a body of research that supported the premise that all children can learn and that the school controls enough of the factors necessary to assure student mastery of the core curriculum. Of course, the Effective Schools Movement did not discount the important impact of family on student learning. In 1982, Ron Edmonds published a paper entitled "Programs of School Improvement: An Overview," in which he states "while schools may be primarily responsible for whether or not students function adequately in school, the family is probably critical in determining whether or not students flourish in school."

The first task of the effective schools researchers was to identify existing effective schools – schools that were successful in educating all students regardless of their socioeconomic status or family background. Examples of these especially effective schools were found repeatedly, in varying locations and in both large and small communities. After identifying these schools, the task remained to identify the common characteristics among these effective schools. In other words, what philosophies, policies, and practices did these schools have in common?

Upon closer inspection, the researchers found that all of these especially effective schools had strong instructional leadership, a strong sense of mission, demonstrated effective instructional behaviors, held high expectations for all students, practiced frequent monitoring of student achievement, and operated in a safe and orderly manner. These attributes eventually became known as the Correlates of Effective Schools.

Edmonds first formally identified the Characteristics or Correlates of Effective Schools in the 1982 publication noted above. In this paper, Edmonds stated that all effective schools had:

- *the leadership of the principal notable for substantial attention to the quality of instruction;*
- *a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus;*
- *an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning;*
- *teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery; and*
- *the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation.*

While Edmonds, Brookover, and Lezotte conducted the original effective schools research in elementary schools, another team of researchers in the United Kingdom was conducting similar research, only in secondary schools. Their independent research was published in America in 1979 in the book *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Rutter, et al, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA). The conclusions they reached about school attributes that positively affect student achievement were nearly identical to those rising out of effective schools research.

The results of the original research in the U.S. and Britain, plus the hundreds of subsequent research studies further confirming the attributes of an effective school, gives credence to this insightful assertion by Ron Edmonds:

*We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.*

We've come a long way since the Correlates were first published, and the research has continued to bear out these basic "truths" of the Effective Schools Movement:

- all children can learn and come to school motivated to do so;
- schools control enough of the variables to assure that virtually all students do learn;
- schools should be held accountable for measured student achievement;
- schools should disaggregate measured student achievement in order to be certain that students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status are successfully learning the intended school curriculum;

- the internal and external stakeholders of the individual school are the most qualified and capable people to plan and implement the changes necessary to fulfill the learning-for-all mission.

The Effective Schools Movement, its constituent research, and the Correlates themselves have not only withstood the test of time, but have also evolved and grown as our understanding of effective schools has both deepened and broadened. Over the years, the Correlates have been refined and expanded to the following:

- Instructional Leadership
- Clear and Focused Mission
- Safe and Orderly Environment
- Climate of High Expectations
- Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress
- Positive Home-School Relations
- Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task

Other aspects of the Effective Schools Movement have evolved over the years as well. The early definition of effective schools rested on the concept of equity between children from differing socioeconomic classes. As educators became concerned about equity among other subsets of the population, gender, ethnicity, disabilities, and family structure were added to the mix. Furthermore, the early definition was cast in terms of mastery of essential curriculum, i.e., reading and arithmetic. Over time, other curricular outcomes were added: problem-solving ability, higher-order thinking skills, creativity, and communicative ability.

In addition, the early Effective Schools Movement emphasized the individual school as the unit of change. Eventually, it became clear that school improvement resulting in increased student achievement could only be sustained with strong district support.

Organizational management theories provided significant additions to effective schools research and policy. The concepts of decentralization and empowerment, the importance of organizational culture, and the principles of total quality management and continuous improvement have added important dimensions to our understanding of effective schools.

## The Effective School Defined

The brief history of public education provides the context for the defining the effective school and a conceptual framework for the research that describes such schools. We offer the following definition of the effective school. It has served as the conceptual underpinning for the research for the last three decades or more.

**The effective school is a school that can, in outcome (performance or results) terms, reflective of its learning for all mission, demonstrate the presence of equity in quality.**

A deeper analysis of this deceptively simple definition of the effective school is needed. First of all, the definition and the supportive effective schools research are only going to be appropriate and useful for schools committed to the mission of learning for all. For example, private, parochial, and charter schools could find this body of work useful if they share the mission of learning for all. On the other hand, public schools will not find this body of work useful unless or until the educators are truly committed to the mission of learning for all.

Schools that lack the passion for the learning-for-all mission may give “lip service” to the mission, and may even go through the motions of the effective schools process. Unfortunately, they’ll experience little, if any, success. Why? Because school leaders and educators who only give lip service to the mission and go through the motions either lack the commitment to do the work, or do not truly believe that all students can learn or that they should be accountable for successfully teaching all students.

By definition, the effective school is able to claim being effective based on student results, performance, or outcomes. Using results or outcomes as the primary basis for judging effectiveness is a significant departure from past practice. For most of their history, public schools were judged based on inputs, processes, and programs. For example, regional accreditation programs would ask schools to report on how many books the school had in the library. The accreditation program never asked whether anybody read the books! Likewise, in the early days of the U.S. Office of Education’s school recognition program, schools were celebrated because of their fine arts or technology programs. As important as these and other programs are, the programs themselves do not address the consequences for the students.

The leaders of effective schools that have been studied over the years were among the first educators or policymakers to realize that, at the end of the day, it’s about results. Educational leaders who are not ready to “bet” their legacy and, maybe even their professional career, on demonstrated student results will be uncomfortable with the effective schools concept.

When educational leaders commit fully to the results paradigm, they have just begun a long and potentially explosive journey. The new questions that must be addressed by the educational leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholder groups are: *What results? How should the desired results be gathered? When should the results be measured? In the final analysis, who decides?*

Finally, the definition of the effective school specifies that the two policy pillars of public education—quality and equity—must be considered simultaneously. This means that we want each child in the public schools to be guaranteed a quality education and equal educational opportunity. Strategic planning for school reform must connect with both quality and equity.

Diane Ravitch, in her book *The Schools We Deserve*, stated that there must be an in-dissolvable link between the issues of quality and equity. Further, she notes that whichever one of these two vital concepts a democracy chooses to ignore, at the end of the day, the one ignored will bring down the democracy. (Ravitch, 1985) That being said, how do we create this strong link in a way that can serve to identify and describe the effective public school? Here we call attention to the “little words,” for they set the vision.

Examining the definition of the effective school shows that we suggest that the proper connection should be to look at schools to see if there is *equity in quality*.

As a practical matter, if one were asked to evaluate a school to determine whether it meets the definition of the effective school, how should the evaluator proceed? First, the evaluator would inquire as to what the school believes are its indicators of quality (e.g., percent of students participating in advanced placement courses). Once the quality indicators have been identified, the evaluator would analyze those indicators to see who is participating in and, more importantly, *benefiting* from those centers of quality.

Let us offer one final caveat regarding the definition of the effective school. The concept of the effective school, as it has been employed in research and practice, does not mean that “effectiveness” is an all-or-none concept. For example, a school could, based on the outcome data examined, be judged effective in the curricular area of Math but not when it comes to Language Arts. Even so, it is very useful in verifying success and pointing out where more work is needed.

## **A Primer on the Correlates of Effective Schools**

The Correlates are critical to the effective school because they represent the leading organizational and contextual indicators that have been shown to influence student learning. *In other words, the extent to which the Correlates are in place in a school has a dramatic, positive effect on student achievement.* Furthermore, the individual Correlates are not independent of one another, but are interdependent. For example, discipline problems in the learning environment relate to the safety and orderliness of the learning environment as well as the opportunity to learn and time on task.

The following descriptions are intended to give you a basic understanding of each Correlate as it was first conceptualized. As you begin to successfully implement the Correlates, the question may arise, “What next?” At that point, you will be ready to consider and implement the Second-Generation Correlates - an even more challenging developmental stage for schools committed to the learning-for-all mission. A description of the Second-Generation Correlates is available elsewhere. But you must walk before you run, and the original Correlates must be in place *before* your school can aspire to the next level of development.

**Instructional Leadership.** In the effective school, the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates the mission of the school to staff, parents, and students. In addition, the principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program. Clearly, the role of the principal as the articulator of the mission of the school is crucial to the overall effectiveness of the school. If you read *In Search of Excellence*, the management bible written by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman, you'll quickly discover that complex organizations, like schools, suffer from drift with respect to the core values or mission. They emphasize that it is the obligation of the leader to make sure that everyone has a shared sense of purpose, and a shared understanding of the mission and core values of the organization. Clearly, schools qualify as complex organizations that require strong leadership. The principal must fulfill this role.

Ron Edmonds often said "there may be schools out there that have strong instructional leaders, but are not yet effective; however, we have never yet found an effective school that did not have a strong instructional leader as the principal." Simply put, the principal as a strong instructional leader is a necessary, but not sufficient component of an effective school.

**Clear and Focused Mission.** In the effective school, there is a clearly articulated mission of the school through which the staff shares an understanding of and a commitment to the school's goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability. The staff in the effective school accepts responsibility for the students' learning of the essential curricular goals.

When we first started doing research on effective schools, we took as a given that schools had a shared understanding of what their mission was and ought to be. The more I work with schools, the more I become convinced that the issue of mission is one that must receive substantial discussion. When you think about all the things that might be done in the name of good education and realize the limits of your time, people power, and energy, it becomes clear that there has to be some focus to the overall effort. This idea of a shared sense of mission is one way to assure that we're all moving in the same direction. One way to ascertain whether your school has a clear focus is to ask each stakeholder "What does this school care most about?" Would you get the same answer from each individual asked, or many different answers? To the extent that there are many answers, the school would be said to lack a shared sense of mission.

**Safe and Orderly Environment.** In the effective school we say there is an orderly, purposeful, business-like atmosphere, which is free from the threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive and is conducive to teaching and learning.

For many years, parents have said that the safety and disciplinary climate of the school is their first concern when judging schools. School shootings, bomb scares, and other senseless violent acts have only served to deepen parental concerns. We obviously want the learning environment to be a safe and secure place for its own sake.

We also want schools to be safe and secure because the presence or absence of a safe learning environment enhances or impedes learning. Even if the environment does not sink to the level of shootings or bomb scares, the extent to which student learning is interrupted by routine

disciplinary problems serves to diminish learning to some degree. Therefore, the goal of the effective school is to minimize, if not totally eliminate, such incidents.

What I have found in working with schools is that safe and orderly environment is one of the easier Correlates, or characteristics, to address in terms of school improvement if you can get certain prior conditions in place.

First, all the adults, but most particularly teachers, must accept that they are on duty, all the time, everywhere, during school hours. If there's a place in the school or a time in the day when students perceive that there is no adult on duty, that's my nomination for a trouble spot. Second, rules must be enforced with absolute consistency across all teachers and administrators in the school. Inconsistency will quickly undercut and destroy the orderly environment of a school. Students will be quick to pick up on inconsistent enforcement and be quick to cry "unfair." Quite frankly, they're right.

Another facet of student behavior bears on both the climate of the learning environment generally, as well as individual student learning specifically. Researchers have documented the importance of student engagement in both the teaching/learning process, as well as the social aspects of the learning environment. Student engagement is important all along the learning path, but becomes especially significant at the middle grades and secondary school levels.

**Climate of High Expectations for Success.** In the effective school, there is a climate of high expectations in which the staff believes and demonstrates that all students can obtain mastery of the school's essential curriculum. They also believe that they, the staff, have the capability to help all students obtain that mastery.

What are some of the important implied notions in the high expectations for success correlate? I'd like to emphasize the words **for success** in the description because there are an awful lot of people who believe that simply raising the standards in a school communicates higher expectations to students. Quite frankly, there is a world of difference between high standards and high expectations. High standards are those externalities that we ask students to meet, i.e., graduation requirements. An expectation is the internal belief that the adults have that the kids can and will meet those higher standards. Expectations are crucial.

**Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress.** In the effective school, pupil progress over the essential objectives are measured frequently, monitored frequently, and the results of those assessments are used to improve the individual student behaviors and performances, as well as to improve the curriculum as a whole.

Unfortunately, the results of the assessments often do not get back to the school in time for the teacher and principal to be able to make much use of those data. I'm often asked, "How frequently should you monitor pupil progress?" The answer depends on how frequently are you prepared to adjust your instruction. If you don't ever intend to adjust instruction, then why bother monitoring at all? The only justification for monitoring without adjusting is if you perceive your mission to be that primarily of sorting and selecting students.

**Positive Home-School Relations.** In the effective school, parents understand and support the basic mission of the school and are given opportunities to play important roles in helping the school to achieve its mission.

I think it's pretty clear that schools can be effective in having the students master the basic skills curriculum without extraordinary levels of parent involvement and support. I can also tell you that it is much easier if parents are part of the collaborative team and are seen by the school as partners in the education of their youngsters. That's a much more difficult task today because of our mobile society and the increase in two-career and single-parent families, as well as the distances some children travel to school.

**Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task.** In the effective school, teachers allocate a significant amount of classroom time to instruction in the essential curricular areas. For a high percentage of this time, students are actively engaged in whole-class or large group, teacher-directed, planned learning activity.

This simply says that kids tend to learn most things that they spend time on. If you want your students to master certain curricular objectives and goals, one of the first prerequisites is to assure that they spend time on them. We see instance after instance where students are held accountable for outcomes over which they were never taught. This is patently unfair and must be changed.

Time on task implies that each of the teachers in the school has a clear understanding of what the essential learner objectives are, grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject. Once we are clear on what students should be learning, students must be given the time to learn it. This can be tricky because interruptions in the day-to-day flow of routines in the classroom and in the schools seriously and significantly detract from our ability to be effective for all of our kids.

In summary, the Correlates of Effective Schools provide school improvement teams with a comprehensive framework for identifying, categorizing, and solving the problems that schools and school districts face. And because the Correlates are based upon the documented successes of effective schools, they offer hope and inspiration to those struggling to improve. **If the schools from which the Correlates are drawn can do it, any and all schools can as well!**

## **A Brief History of the Effective Schools Movement**

As previously noted, the body of work that has come to be known as the Effective Schools Movement (ESM) was prompted by the publication of the Equal Educational Opportunity (EEO) Study by distinguished sociologist James Coleman in July, 1996. The study had been commissioned by the United States Congress for the purpose of assessing the status of education among minority children in the U.S. Without question, the EEO study was a high-profile study and captured the educational headlines for some time to come.

Probably the most significant sound-bite that came from the press conference where the study results were announced was, "When it comes to the education of minority and poor children in American, schools don't make a difference." The EEO study and the question of whether or not

schools make a difference in the achievement of children began what has turned out to be a decades-long movement with no end in sight. The quest to answer this question has evolved through several significant stages. Understanding these changes helps to understand where the movement is today and where it is likely to go in future.

### **Phase I: Identification (1960s – Mid-1970s)**

The best, perhaps only, evidence that could actually challenge the EEO findings that schools serving poor and minority students don't make a difference was to identify schools that did seem to make a difference for poor and minority children. At its core, the best way to conduct such studies was to find a pair of schools with similar size student bodies, similar proportions of minority and poor students and comparable resource inputs but with one of the schools demonstrating significantly higher measured to achievement than the other. The key question was, "Could such high achieving schools be found?"

Several researchers, initially operating independently of one another began to go in search of schools that seem to defy the Coleman conclusion. During this period, Ron Edmonds, one of the major researchers identified with Effective Schools, was at Harvard University serving as the Director of the Center for Urban Studies. Wilbur Brookover and I were at Michigan State University. Because Ron Edmonds had gone to Harvard from his position in the Michigan Department of Education, he knew the Michigan State University team through earlier collaboration on different projects. Through collaboration and by sharing the body of original studies, our work began to form the knowledge base for the Effective Schools Movement.

Michigan was one of the first states to develop and administer statewide, curricular-based, criterion-referenced assessments of all students in selected grades in all public schools. As a result, the State of Michigan was one of the first states where the search for effective schools was even feasible, as a practical matter. While the Michigan assessment results were routinely made available to the schools after being scored, the computer technology was limited. Nevertheless, it was possible, but not easy, to examine the achievement profiles of the schools on the state assessments relative to the demographic profile of the students who attended each school. For example, we could estimate the number of poor children attending the school by examining the number of student receiving free or reduced-price lunches. The goal was to find those schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students (minority or nonminority) and find a comparable school where the input profiles were similar but the achievement profiles were not as positive.

### **Phase 2: The Descriptive Phase (1970 – 1980)**

The search for and identification of the effective schools in the early studies captured the interest of the research community. The educational practitioners were only mildly interested in this sort of academic research but it did prompt them to ask, "How did these schools do it?" Or, "In what ways are these schools different than most other schools serving poor and minority students?"

The second major phase of the Effective Schools Movement we have called the descriptive phase because the focus was on studying the inner workings of these schools to determine why these schools were clearly "outliers" when it came to the education of poor and minority children. The

Correlates of Effective Schools came about during this phase of the Movement. To do this, we identified pairs of comparable schools, one of which met the criteria for effectiveness and one that did not. The next step was to send the field research team into the schools to conduct interviews, surveys and direct observations without specific prior knowledge of their achievement history. When the field research team returned from the schools, we recorded everything we learned about the set of effective schools on one wall and the data from the comparison schools on the other wall. Then we asked the question, “What characteristics do the effective schools have in common with each other, but are not shared by the comparison schools?”

Ron Edmonds published the initial study in which he identified and described what he called the five characteristics of effective schools. His findings were quickly validated in other studies of the effective outlier schools. Sadly, the effective schools movement specifically and the educational research and policy communities were delivered an devastating blow with the news that Ron Edmonds passed away at the young age of 49 in 1983.

It noteworthy to point out that the effective schools research studies in both the identification and descriptive phases of the movement in the United States focused primarily on elementary schools. In England the initial study that received wide acclaim was an effective schools study of secondary schools. These findings were reported in a book titled, *Fifteen Thousand Hours: A Study of Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Student Achievement*. In the ensuing years since the earliest studies, the mosaic of effective school studies has been filled in on both sides of the Atlantic as well as in several other countries.

### **Phase 3: The Prescriptive Phase (1985 – 1995)**

When the studies describing the effective schools correlates began to make their way into the professional education literature, the world of the effective schools researchers changed dramatically. The telephone began to ring “off the hook” with calls from local school leaders (principals and superintendents). The question was no longer focused on how the effective schools were different. Now the question turned to, “Can you come to our school or district and guide us as to how we can make our schools effective?”

The MSU team was honored by the request but bit unsure as to how to a respond. Here was the problem. Remember, when we found effective schools “in nature” as it were, they were already effective. Further, when we discovered the correlates of effective schools present and strong in the effective schools, they were already there when we arrived. The problem was we had no idea how the schools became effective or how the correlates came into place. It’s one thing to discover the outlier as it existed in nature, its quite another to tell someone how to create an effective school out of one that is not. Said another way, we had confidence in our descriptions, but that didn’t tell us what to prescribe in terms of process steps that interested schools should take. Here is how we resolved the dilemma and it seems to have served us well.

We started with the assumption that if we were going to ask school leaders to use our research as a way of improving their school or district, we should use research to guide us in creating a process. So what research, we pondered, should we use to help frame a process for guiding the schools and districts seeking our help? We decided that there are three ways to conceptualize

school improvement based on the effective schools research. Each conceptualization suggests a different body of research that should be considered. Fortunately, the findings from the three school improvement concepts were found to be interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

First, we said that if schools were going to become effective, the behaviors of the staff would need to change to some degree. In this case, school improvement equals “people change.” That conclusion led us to examine the research on effective staff development models and effective training models. Second, we said that if schools were going to become effective, the organization or system must change to some degree as well. That conclusion led us to examine the best available research on organizational development. Finally, we concluded that whether it’s people change or organizational change—we happen to believe it’s both—it must be *planned* change. This led us to examine the best available models of planned change.

Some of our key findings from the study of the three different concepts and their supporting research include the following:

- Sustainable change requires the commitment by the people that have to do the changing.
- Effective leadership is a necessary, but not sufficient condition.
- Involving the people is one of the best and surest ways to build ownership, buy-in and sustained commitment.
- Change takes time and it is and must be viewed as a process not an event.
- Leadership is critical in providing both the vision and the support for the changes that are needed to make it happen.

The prescription that emerged from the integration of the effective schools research findings with the guiding process principles led us to recommend that we organize the change process around a collaborative leadership team. We also suggested that the entire effort be *data driven* and *results oriented*. To increase the level of involvement and, at the same time, bring the research into the school collaborative, we suggested that correlate teams—one for each correlate—should be formed.

The number of schools and districts that purported to initiate programs of school improvement based on the effective schools research number in the hundreds, if not thousands. We at Michigan State only worked with a relatively small percentage of the total, since others took up the challenge. We lead a variety of trainer-of-trainer programs since the task was huge and our capacity limited. What we don’t know is how many of the schools that claimed that they were implementing effective schools did so with real fidelity and quality. We are pretty confident that a lot of these schools and districts were implementing the concepts in name only. On the other hand, we have dozens, if not hundreds of cases where the process was implemented with care and the results were impressive.

One of the interesting problems that we had to confront when it came to implementing the effective schools research had to do with the fact that it focused on the single school and not the school district, per se. For example, when someone would ask, “What is the role of the central office, superintendent or board of education in creating effective schools?” Initially, we responded by saying that they were irrelevant! Our reasoning went as follows. When we found

an effective school, it was likely in a district with many other schools, none of which were effective yet all had the same board, superintendent and central office. Furthermore, we proclaimed that a school staff could implement the correlates of effective schools at any time. No particular outside help or support was required, since no outside help or support was found to be associated with the schools that were already found to be effective. While our proclamation was literally true, we subsequently tempered our view.

It is true that schools come to be effective school-by-school and one school at a time. It is also true that it is very difficult to sustain the effective school as effective without the support of the central office, superintendent and board of education. If creating and maintaining schools as effective isn't a district-wide priority, the school will likely not be able to maintain its effectiveness status. Without broader based organizational support, school effectiveness tends to depend too heavily on the heroic commitment of the school leader or only a few staff. We have numerous cases where the principal of any effective school moved on for one reason or another and was replaced by someone who did not share the passion, vision or values. When this happened the school usually, and quickly I might add, returned to its earlier state.

#### **Phase 4: The School District (1985 – Present)**

For the reasons discussed in the previous section, we made a mid-course correction in our approach to assisting schools with programs of school improvement based on the effective schools research. After securing a grant from the U.S. Office of Education, the MSU team, in collaboration with local school-improvement experts, developed an approach to effective school research based school improvement in which the intervention effort ran on two parallel tracks. One track was designed to train and empower school-level collaborative teams to plan and implement school improvement based on the research. The second track focused on a district-level leadership team, including the superintendent, charged with the responsibility with developing and subsequently implementing a district plan designed to support the school-by-school process. Clearly, this dual effort was intended to increase the likelihood that schools that became effective would remain so even if the school leader changed.

We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to train and guide literally hundreds of school district teams through the effective schools process. The results represent good news and bad news. The good news was that many more schools were able to realize significant progress because they received assurances and support from central office and the superintendent. The bad news was that if the superintendent left, for whatever reason, as often as not, he/she would be replaced with a person who did not have the passion, share the vision or offer the support needed to sustain the district effort. The net result was that now whole school districts that had taken "two steps forward" would quickly take "two steps back." To this day, we struggle with building continuity and stability in the districts with whom we work. For you see, in spite of the of the accountability movement, district leaders are usually given the authority to put their own "brand" on the organization, regardless of whether the earlier "brand" was working or not.

## **Phase 5: Total System Alignment (1995 - Present)**

As we follow the history of the effective schools research movement from the earliest days to the present, it is easy to see how it has become more inclusive and expansive. For example, virtually every state has developed some results-oriented accountability system. Many of the states have required or at least encouraged their schools to plan and implement programs of school reform based on the effective schools research and proven practices. In addition, most of the regional accreditation models require schools to document their school processes and practices based, in whole or in part, on the effective schools research. Needless to say, No Child Left Behind also contains many of the provisions that we have been advocating since the earliest days of the movement. With this being so, it seems reasonable to claim that most of the crucial elements of the system at-large are now aligned and all are “pulling the wagon” in the same direction.

There is one part of the system that is still on the fence when it comes to alignment with the rest of the system, higher education. Higher education has a great deal of power and influence when it comes to public education. It controls who gets admitted to colleges and it trains and certifies teachers and administrators. Unfortunately, if we are to believe our colleagues in the schools, most of these institutions are not yet doing what needs to be done to prepare students or staff for the schools and districts we need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The journey from 1966 to the present represents a history of successes in helping more schools to be more effective in helping more students to be successful. For that we can and should be proud. On the other hand, the journey from 1966 to the present is a story of starts and stops when it comes to sustainable change in our public schools. The resistance evidenced by the system-in-place all along the journey is testimony to the stability of the current system. Stability is good when the system is doing what we as a nation and people want. Stability becomes the enemy when it is not doing what we want and need and we know how to do it better.

## **Conclusion**

There are six changes that have been influenced by the effective schools research and the school reform movement that it inspired. These changes are taken for granted today, but such was not always the case. These changes include:

1. The use of disaggregated data to simultaneously attend to quality and equity in our schools.
2. Judging the effectiveness of the schools by the results they achieve, not the processes or programs they utilize.
3. Becoming more data-driven systems with leaders who have had to become knowledgeable about this approach.
4. The assumption that there must be collaboration and ownership among the staff in order to successfully initiate and sustain school improvement.
5. Change is clearly understood to be a process that is complex and takes time.
6. The understanding that, when it comes to sustainable change in schools and districts,

there are no unimportant adults. We all have to be a part of the dialogue and the changes that follow.

### **Effective Schools Research and Practices Going Forward**

At the moment the public schools are over halfway to the 2012 NCLB goal of having 100% of the students proficient or above. While NCLB is up for Congressional reauthorization there is no indication that the revised law would significantly alter this goal. Furthermore, because the Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks continue to go up year after year, all indications suggest that the number of “failing schools” will continue to increase every year until 2012.

If we look back over the first five years of NCLB it becomes apparent that, schools have “picked all the low hanging fruit” when it comes to changes designed to improve student learning and student performance. It appears that most schools have tried to do their best to improve the schools by “tweaking” this and that without confronting the deep systemic changes that are required to meet the goal of NCLB. Looking forward, the question is: *Will the schools and school districts have the courage and will required take-up picking the “higher hanging fruit” and begin to address the needed systemic changes called for by the new mission of “learning for all”?*

From the earliest days of the Effective Schools Movement, we have claimed that the mission of public education ought to be “learning for all.” The standards and accountability movement that began over a decade ago, culminating in No Child Left Behind, has finally caught up to and formally embraced the “learning for all” mission. The question now is whether efforts to reform schools to accomplish this new mission will choose to benefit from the effective schools knowledge base to inform the systems change that will be required.

The mission of the public schools has been changed from a teacher-centered mission to a learning-centered mission. Revisiting our “form must follow function,” it is fair to say that the learning-centered mission will not succeed in a system that is teacher-centered. Embracing the learning-for-all mission requires taking up the challenge of systemic change. What does that mean?

The new mission will only be accomplished in a system that is designed and operates based on the profound knowledge of how humans learn, as contrasted with the profound knowledge of how teachers teach. There are several fundamental principles of human learning that must provide the underlying knowledge on which the new system must rest. Some of those principles are listed below:

1. Virtually all learning is an act of choice on the part of the learner.
2. Individuals differ in learning rates, some need more time than others
3. Chronological age has little to do with a learner’s prior knowledge or readiness to learn new material.
4. Other things being equal, increasing the amount of time on a task generally increases the learning of the task.

5. Virtually all new learning builds on and connects with prior learning.
6. Guided practice with immediate feedback is a powerful tool in assuring learning.

To summarize these and other related principles of learning, it is safe to assume that schools of the future are going to have to offer individualized and customized services to a level that could only be previously imagined. It is clearly an open question as to whether the current school system will be able to manage the changes needed to design and deliver the new learning-centered system.

It would be presumptuous to claim that effective schools research and practices has all the answers to the challenges schools face when it comes to systemic reform. On the other hand, this body of work and the associated practices implemented by these effective schools does offer a body of work that has proven itself in a wide variety of settings.

I would like to conclude this paper with a rather lengthy quote from Lawrence Cremin, noted educational historian and scholar.

*For most of human history, men and women have believed that only an elite is worthy and capable of education, and that the great mass of people should be trained as hewers of wood and drawers of water, if they were to be trained at all. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth that popular leaders in Europe and America—the Marquis de Condorcet in France, Thomas Jefferson in the United States, and Lord Brougham in England—began to dream of universal school systems that would give everyone a chance to partake of the arts and sciences. Not surprisingly, they had their most immediate successes with the children who were the easiest to teach – those who through early nurture in the family and other institutions had been prepared for whatever it was that the schools had to offer.*

*Now, in the twentieth century, we have turned to the more difficult task, the education of those at the margin—those who suffer from physical, mental and emotional handicaps, those who have long been held at a distance by political or social means, and those who for a variety of other reasons are less ready for what the school has to offer and hence more difficult to teach.*

(Cremin, 1990)

For me this quote summarizes where we have been, where we are now, and where we need to go. I feel deeply privileged to have been a part of the effective schools movement over the last quarter century. To the extent that our efforts have helped districts, schools and teachers to move forward on the Cremin vision, I feel especially blessed.

I don't know how long I will be given the opportunity to continue to be an active part of the effective schools movement and the school reform efforts, but I can truly say that everyday is a gift and I hope I can share those gifts with others so that more and more of our children, especially the children of the poor and disadvantaged, will have choices and options that they won't have without an effective education.

## **Suggested Readings on Effective Schools Research**

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