

MODELS FOR REFORM

BY LYNN OLSON

WHEN RESEARCHERS asked teachers in Memphis recently what they thought about some of the school reforms they were being asked to try out, the academic experts got an earful.

Teachers complained, in particular, about approaches that required them to rewrite the entire curriculum or create instructional materials themselves.

Said one frustrated teacher: "There is no model for me to make a prediction about. How can we put into practice a design that has not been developed, explained, or modeled for us?"

They can't, a growing number of experts have come to believe. Teachers, they say, need more than philosophy if they are to overhaul the way their schools work and the way they do their jobs.

"It is unfair and unrealistic to expect America's overburdened teachers to reinvent their roles and redesign their organizations without providing explicit and proven means of doing so," said John A. Nunnery, an associate research scientist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, who worked on the Memphis study.

Mr. Nunnery is one of many researchers who are beginning to question the usefulness of reforms that fail to provide teachers with the nuts and bolts. Reforms work best, they argue, when they come with explicit teaching techniques, curriculum materials, and instructional tools attached.

"Reform strategies that work are curriculum-based, have extensive and ongoing professional development that helps teachers deal with classroom instruction, and have clear goals that are well-matched to school goals," Mr. Nunnery said.

To improve student achievement markedly requires changing what happens in classrooms every day, said Sam Stringfield, principal research scientist with the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins.

"You basically have to replace what's going on and make it more difficult for teachers to go back to what they were doing before," he said. "There has to be specificity about what the teacher does on Tuesday morning, if you want to change what happens on Tuesday morning."

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Mr. Stringfield was the lead researcher for the Special Strategies Studies, a congressionally mandated effort that tried to determine which of 10 popular school reform strategies work best for poor children.

The study focused on 25 schools as models for their particular reform programs, ranging from the School Development Program, a whole-school strategy developed by Yale University psychiatrist James P. Comer, to tutoring programs designed by individual schools.

The study found a wide variation in how faithfully schools carried out reforms, with the greatest variety in quality coming among programs that provided guiding principles but expected teachers to fill in most of the details.

Those findings are echoed by the Rand Corp., the Santa Monica, Calif.-based research organization, in a study it is conducting of how schools are implementing the design sponsored by New American Schools. NAS, a non-profit group based in Arlington, Va., supports the dissemination of seven reform designs in communities across the country.

Seeing It Clearly

Susan Bodilly, the social scientist in charge of the Rand analysis, said schools have had the most difficulty carrying out designs that expect teachers to construct their own curriculum and instructional strategies.

"They need strong curriculum models, and they need people who can show them how to use those models, and who will be available to do follow-up with them," she said.

"Some of it is 'seeing is believing,'" Ms. Bodilly added. "But some of it is that teachers need to see what they're supposed to be doing in very clear terms—and then they can take it, innovate with it, and be adaptive on their own."

A smaller study on the use of whole-school designs in Memphis, by researchers at Johns Hopkins and the University of Memphis, reached similar conclusions.

During the first few months the designs were in use there, the researchers found, the four that teachers viewed most positively also had the lowest percentage of teachers who complained that their training lacked explicit techniques or sample instructional materials.

Designs that required teachers to rewrite the curriculum and develop new pedagogy had by far the largest proportion of teachers who reported feeling overwhelmed.





'Focused Creativity'

Stanley Pogrow, an associate professor of educational administration at the University of Arizona, has accused the education policy and research community of lacking interest in finding "effective, focused tools" to improve schools.

Mr. Pogrow—the creator of HOTS, or Higher Order Thinking Skills, a supplemental curriculum for middle school students—has argued that too many reforms are based on small-scale experiments, a reaction to failed innovations of the past, and the philosophical leanings of their designers.

He contrasts such approaches with a handful of programs—including his own—that were extensively field-tested and that give teachers specific tools and techniques to use in the classroom.

"The problem with the 'teacher proof' curricula of the 1960s is that they were terrible," he said in a recent interview. "But that doesn't negate the use of tools."

To illustrate the point, he compares teachers using such tools to actors reciting written dialogue: "The existence of a present script does not deter human creativity. Rather, it allows for focused creativity."

'A Dynamic Environment'

One of the programs that has taken the heaviest hits for providing schools with only vague reform principles is the Coalition of Essential Schools, the high school reform network pioneered by Theodore R.Sizer.

Though the coalition has reported some positive effects on student outcomes such as attendance and graduation rates, several studies have suggested that the amorphous nature of its guiding principles makes it difficult to carry out.

None of the five coalition high schools examined in the Special Strategies Studies, for example, had achieved more than partial implementation of its ideas.

Coalition officials have argued that schools and communities must be free to adapt its principles—such as making learning more personalized, teaching fewer subjects in more depth, and awarding diplomas based on demonstrated performance—to fit local needs.

They also say that teachers need to craft reforms in order to feel ownership of them.

But researchers such as Mr. Slavin, an education professor at Johns Hopkins, question whether many schools have the capacity to create so much innovation from the ground up.

Mr. Slavin is the founder of Success For All, a relatively structured program for raising achievement in the elementary grades.

He argues that only a handful of schools—perhaps less than 5 percent of elementary or secondary schools in the entire country—have the capacity to translate reform guided by general principles into reality.

Kenneth G. Wilson, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who wrote a 1994 book called *Re-designing Education*, compares the need to develop specific technologies for schools with recent advances made in science and technology.

"If you look at the Fortune 500 companies, in the 1980s they all developed their own software systems to support their companies," he said in an interview. "But now, they all buy it from outside."

"And the reason is that even the Fortune 500 companies couldn't af-

ford the constant improvement that goes on with operating systems or with word-processing software," Wilson added.

But at least some experts suggest that schools need a larger vision to give meaning to the more structured, specific approaches.

"You need to have an underlying philosophy," said Michael Fullan, the dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Ontario in Canada. "But coupled with that you need to be much more specific about the nature of the work and about your own practices and be able to explain it to others."

"Schools don't have the luxury of poking around with some general guidelines," he said. Given the increased pressures on them to improve, "they have to be a lot more articulate about what they're doing." □

