Introduction

So much has been written and said about urban school reform. On one side, ever-growing numbers of advocates have proposed measures to transform mediocre classrooms, rescue low-performing schools, and turn around failing districts. Those who promote these reforms are motivated by several compelling objectives: to save children from dismal futures, bolster the economy, combat social injustice, and foster democratic values. Yet the abundant exhortations for urban school reform are counterbalanced by a massive literature that documents failed efforts and paltry results.We are very much aware of that literature. In this book, we seek to sidestep the hype of reform's most ardent proponents, on the one hand, and the doom-saying of its severest critics, on the other.[1]

Against the Odds documents the launching of a fundamental school reform, the cheerful promise of change, and its zigzag implementation in a small, urban, largely minority and low-income district near Denver, Colorado. The Mapleton Public Schools struggled for nearly twenty years with declining test scores and graduation rates; by 2001, the district was one of the lowest-performing in the state. In response, a new superintendent spearheaded the conversion of Mapleton's comprehensive high school (and, eventually, of ten elementary and middle schools) into a network of small schools. The results of this transformation are simultaneously surprising, hopeful, uneven, and, in some instances, still uncertain.

In this book, we focus on the initial phase of the Mapleton reform: the creation of several small high schools.[2] The story we tell is filled with successes, but also with mishaps and persistent dilemmas. For just this reason, we think it is a story with valuable lessons for other districts contemplating small school reform.

In some respects, the circumstances in which the Mapleton reform occurred may appear singularly favorable. The school board was firmly and unanimously committed to improving the district's performance. It hired a homegrown superintendent and gave her carte blanche to implement a plan that would raise student achievement. The district had a $10 million budget surplus to fund the reform, as well as the promise of millions of dollars of support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is rare for the stars favoring reform to be so nicely aligned.

Yet even with this fortuitous combination of luck and leadership, the district faced both predictable and unexpected obstacles in dismantling a comprehensive high school, revising nearly all of its standard operating procedures, and importing seven national school models within three years. The superintendent and her executive team constantly faced situations in which they had to make trade-offs between competing values. They struggled to preserve the ideals of the reform, and to maintain enthusiasm among teachers, students, staff, and community members, even as they responded to disappointments and setbacks.

Mapleton is one of more than four hundred small, urban school systems in the United States.[3] Any of these districts, we believe, would have encountered similar dilemmas while trying to implement genuine, pervasive reform. Indeed, we would argue that such dilemmas are inevitable in any district, large or small, committed to the kind of transformation that Mapleton achieved.

No amount of money or hope can spare districts the challenges associated with fundamental reform. Business-inspired policy makers and foundation leaders talk about return on investment and incubating innovations, only to discover that making substantial changes in schools is more complicated than running Microsoft or Intel. Mayors take over school districts from elected school boards, only to find themselves constrained by a welter of stakeholders, laws, and policies more difficult to negotiate than they

had imagined. Dynamic, tough-talking superintendents quickly institute dramatic reforms, then exit just as quickly because they lose political capital or lack the endurance to tackle day-to-day issues arising from those reforms. Private foundations set out believing that millions of dollars and elite teams of consultants can overcome the systemic problems that plague urban schools, only to discover that their interventions have yielded little or no improvement in academic outcomes.[4]

What makes school reform so tough—even in a small district of sixteen schools and roughly five thousand students? The short answer is that devising and implementing reforms in public schools, and securing the resources to fund those reforms, is a political process open to many stakeholders who have strong value differences about what ought to happen in schools and classrooms. These differences in strongly held values produce the tensions and dilemmas that accompany reforms, including those aimed at creating small schools.

Unfortunately, reformers and other stakeholders often interpret these dilemmas as evidence of resistance and failure, rather than as the inevitable concomitants of major systemic change. As a result, the energy and funding required to sustain reforms begin to wane. Yet these dilemmas cannot be prevented—instead, they must be anticipated and carefully managed. Any public school district that seeks, as Mapleton did, to reinvent its schools will confront dilemmas such as these:

- Does small school autonomy trump adherence to district standards?
- Can a district uphold a lofty vision and yet effectively manage the conflicting imperatives and logistical challenges of its daily operations?
- Does pressure by state officials for improved student achievement on standardized tests preclude thoughtful implementation of reforms and allow sufficient time to accurately assess whether the reforms are working?

These dilemmas and others lie in wait for reform-minded leaders eager to move ahead with small schools.

Putting new policies into practice in schools and classrooms—whether those policies are formulated by the president and Congress, a state legislature, a local school board, or a city mayor—is a far more complex, fragile, and tricky process than most observers expect. It is a process that mocks, rather than mimics, the chain-of-command structure so neatly articulated in district and state organizational charts. Multiple constituencies influence public schools, complicating decision making in ways that leaders in other fields, from business to the military, rarely have to confront.

This book confirms that implementing major reforms in an urban school system is intense and unrelenting work—not only for district administrators, but also for school leaders and teachers, central office staff, service personnel, and students themselves. As obstacles proliferate, too many districts lose heart and return to the status quo. In Mapleton, on the other hand, a small district developed a reform plan and has stuck to it. Its story offers lessons to other similar districts, and even to larger ones, about how to implement major reform and negotiate expected and unexpected challenges along the way. We believe that other districts can benefit from seeing how Mapleton reconfigured its policies and procedures in order to make small schools a reality. And we hope the Mapleton story will help other districts anticipate the dilemmas associated with small school reform and manage them successfully.

In telling this story, we have quoted at length from interviews with Superintendent Charlotte Ciancio, district personnel, students, board members, private foundation staff, and state officials. Actual names were used for Ciancio and foundation staff. All others are identified by pseudonyms, which appear in parentheses following each quotation. The use of pseudonyms enables us to honor pledges of confidentiality we made to those we interviewed, while allowing readers to tell when quotations dispersed through the text have come from a single source.

Chapter 1 sets the Mapleton experience in a national context, examining the growth of standards-based reform since the mid-1980s and the expansion of the small high school movement in the past decade. We describe how these two approaches to school improvement converged in Mapleton.

Chapters 2 and 3 sketch out early efforts by a string of superintendents to improve Mapleton's one comprehensive high school. When the school board appointed a reform-minded superintendent in 2001, new plans and policies were converted into concrete actions. We describe how district leaders chose small school models, hired teachers and principals, and restructured district administration.

Chapter 4 documents teachers' and students' perspectives on the new small high schools. In particular, we describe efforts to move from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction in Mapleton classrooms.

Chapter 5 asks the question: is the reform working? Here we look at test scores and other indicators, many of which discouraged district leaders in the early years of the reform and prompted them to make midcourse corrections.

Finally, chapter 6 summarizes the challenges involved in sustaining the reform as well as the lessons that other districts can draw from Mapleton's experience in creating a system of small schools.