

Introduction

Caroline T. Chauncey

The advent of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the announcement of the Obama administration's \$4 billion Race to the Top initiative marked a radical shift in the federal government's approach to education reform, one whose impact is likely to be felt for years to come. As Robert B. Schwartz points out in the Foreword to this volume, the four criteria for winning funding under the Race to the Top program provide a framework for "the next level of work" in standards-based reform. These four pillars of strategic reform—standards and assessment, using data to improve instruction, teacher quality and effectiveness, and a commitment to turning around failing schools—along with district-based improvement, also constitute the organizing framework for this book.

Strategic Priorities for School Improvement, the sixth volume in the *Harvard Education Letter* Spotlight series, brings together 18 recent articles that carefully examine key elements of success in each of these core areas of education reform. Bringing together the voices of leading education journalists, practitioners, and scholars, the articles collected here offer a blend of insight, evidence, and practical information

aimed at helping school and district leaders navigate the demands of this challenging new era.

Part I opens with a thoughtful and provocative analysis by noted assessment expert W. James Popham. Looking back over his long career, he identifies six “unlearned lessons”—key mistakes that continue to inhibit schools’ success. Prominent among these problems are the proliferation of curricular targets (too many standards) and the ineffective use of assessment, issues that are highly relevant to the recent move toward common academic standards and student assessments.

Two chapters by veteran education journalist Robert Rothman flesh out the discussion of assessment. In chapter 2, Rothman offers a pragmatic guide to the effective use of formative assessment, a powerful classroom tool for improving teaching and learning. In chapter 3, he addresses the technical challenges involved in value-added assessment, a hotly debated technique that offers the potential to hold both schools and teachers accountable for growth in student performance. The chapter takes a close look at the promises and limitations of this approach, particularly when applied in the context of existing accountability systems.

The discussion of assessment in the opening section of the book paves the way for part II, “Using Data to Improve Instruction.” Chapters 4 and 5 introduce and describe the Data Wise improvement process. This widely successful approach, pioneered as a joint venture between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Boston Public Schools, brings teachers together to examine and evaluate student data as they strive to find more effective ways to teach. In addition to providing an overview of the process, the authors take the reader into schools that are implementing Data Wise to learn from their experiences. Finally, in chapter 6, Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty member Lee Teitel describes the process of instructional rounds—an innovative approach

to classroom observation based on medical rounds. Designed to help school leaders develop their skills in observing and talking about instruction, this process is critical to creating a shared vision of effective teaching.

Effective instruction is the core issue taken up in part III, “Developing Great Teachers and Leaders.” In chapter 7, Robert Rothman takes a detailed look at hiring practices that enable schools to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. Beyond hiring, however, school and district leaders need to provide support and guidance to help new teachers develop their skills, and to evaluate experienced teachers and to direct their professional growth. In chapter 8, Ellen Moir and her colleagues at the New Teacher Center lay out the principles of a high-quality, instructionally intensive mentoring program for new teachers. In chapter 9, journalist Andrea Downs takes a close look at the Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools’ nationally recognized standards-based system for teacher evaluation and professional development. The last chapter in this section, by Robert Rothman, draws on a series of studies about effective principal preparation to focus on the role of mentorship in preparing qualified school leaders.

“Turning Around Struggling Schools” is the theme of part IV. In chapters 11 and 12, journalists Nancy Walser and Chris Rand, respectively, interview author Karin Chenoweth about her research on “It’s Being Done” schools—high-achieving schools with high-poverty, high-minority populations. In the first interview, Chenoweth describes her research identifying schools like these across the country; the second interview, focusing on her subsequent research, digs deep into the factors that account for some of these schools’ success.

In chapter 13, Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty members Richard F. Elmore and Elizabeth A. City step back to examine the big picture of school improvement. Contrary to the No Child Left Behind Act’s expectation of a

straight path toward adequate yearly progress—or, more recently, the pressure to achieve an instant turnaround—the authors describe instead a “hard, bumpy” process that is iterative, developmental, and requires sustained, timely, and appropriate external support. City follows up in chapter 14 with a close look inside schools at the beginning of this process, identifying the kinds of resources such schools are able to draw on—such as hope and trust, as well as people, time, and money—and how best to invest them. Despite their popularity, she argues, investments like coaching may not pay off as effectively as smaller activities that build a shared vision of and commitment to change.

In chapter 15, principal and author D. Brent Stephens takes up Elmore and City’s depiction of the developmental nature of school improvement. Given the persistent failure of external intervention, he argues for a new approach that assesses struggling schools’ responses to four “foundational dilemmas.” These include the *attribution of cause* (where does responsibility for poor student performance lie?); the *control of instruction* (is it centralized or distributed?); the *location of the response to intervention* (out-of-class initiatives versus efforts to improve classroom instruction); and the *definition of the challenge* (is it perceived as a matter of compliance or one of professional learning?).

The final chapter in this section examines the “unorthodox relationship” between charter schools and unions, penned by veteran education journalist Alexander Russo. Although policymakers at the highest levels have looked to a partnership between charters and unions as a potentially groundbreaking approach to school improvement, Russo also points to the many tensions and questions inherent in this approach.

Part V closes the book with two provocative chapters that examine the role of the district in supporting school reform. In chapter 17, authors Rachel E. Curtis and Elizabeth A.

City emphasize the importance of strategy as the backbone of school improvement efforts, focusing particularly on the difference between strategy—“a few high-leverage ways to improve instruction and student learning”—and strategic planning, the accumulation of unrelated initiatives that bog down improvement efforts in so many districts. Chapter 18 draws on the work of the Public Education Leadership Project, a joint initiative of the Harvard Business School and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to present a framework for creating coherence in district administration, so that a district’s improvement strategy is supported at every level and by every stakeholder and constituent.

Taken together, these articles are intended to provide a useful guide for school leaders, education advocates, and policymakers as they seek to navigate the next generation of education reform in the United States.

I would like to thank my colleagues at Harvard Education Press for their ongoing support and in particular to acknowledge with appreciation the assistance of Katrina Swartz in preparing the manuscript.