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NewSchools Performance Roundtable: Reflections and Next Steps

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“The ability to ask good questions and use data to help answer those questions is a sophisticated intelligence that is in thin supply in school districts. [School systems need] a theory of organizational improvement.”

~Performance Roundtable Participant

INTRODUCTION

NewSchools believes it is imperative that school districts become performance-driven systems in order to attain and sustain better educational outcomes for *all* students. Performance-driven systems have many characteristics of “learning organizations,” which constantly question the “why” and “how” behind their results and are well-positioned to learn from their successes and failures as a platform for continuous improvement.

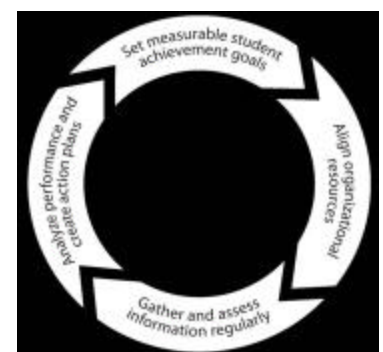
In May 2005, NewSchools Venture Fund released a report about the adoption of performance-driven practices in public school systems and convened a roundtable of advisors to discuss the report’s implications. This paper presents the background on the report, themes from the wide-ranging conversation at the Performance Roundtable session, and some of the next steps NewSchools is currently taking to further knowledge development work in this field.

BACKGROUND ON THE REPORT AND ROUNDTABLE SESSION

In order to gauge how educators are embracing performance-driven practices to transform public education systems into learning organizations, NewSchools partnered with the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) to investigate the practices of 28 large urban school districts. Through interviews with four senior cabinet members at each district surveyed, the interview team probed on how districts use data to inform their decision-making, how districts react to real-time information, and what barriers school systems encounter in implementing performance-driven practices. The findings from this research were synthesized in a report entitled, *Anatomy of School System Improvement: Performance-Driven Practices in Urban School Districts*, released in May 2005. The report was designed to be the first installment in a multi-year examination of the adoption of performance-driven practices in urban school systems.

The definition of performance-driven practices used throughout the research includes implementing:

- Clear, rigorous, and measurable student achievement goals
- Efforts to gather and assess information
- Action plans based on performance results
- An ongoing feedback loop



Shortly after the release of the report, NewSchools convened a group of twenty-five advisors in a half-day roundtable session to discuss the study’s implications. Participants included thought leaders in the field of public education, superintendents of large urban school districts and other school system leaders, foundation leaders, and education policymakers (see page 8 for list of advisors). The conversation provided valuable insights into the ways in which the report resonated with participants, recommendations for improvement, and the knowledge development work needed to support the continued adoption of performance-driven practices in public school systems.

KEY THEMES

The Performance Roundtable participants found the definition and exploration of performance-driven practices useful for thinking about how to transform school systems into learning organizations. General themes from the report that resonated with the participants included:

- There is no single model or solution for all districts as they implement performance-driven practices.
- Many of the school system leaders interviewed seem to have the “right idea” about what should happen, but barriers to the adoption of performance-driven practices keep them from being implemented.
- We need intelligent transparency at all levels in order to get leverage for change; in other words, the right information about student performance and program effectiveness needs to be shared broadly in order to motivate action.
- People, resources, and organizational capacity are critical factors in the transformation process.

Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

No Single Model or Solution

The conversation began with participants highlighting that “no one approach or model is right... [each school system’s approach] needs to be based in its unique culture, politics, etc.” For this reason, the performance-driven practice approach is particularly valuable in that it is, as one foundation leader put it, a “methodology, not a reform. It’s a way of doing business... and whatever your problem, this methodology can be applied in an enabling and sustainable way.” Thus, it can be used as an organizing principle – a way to encourage coherent practice and dialogue – across subjects, grade levels, and functional areas system-wide.

Right Idea, But Significant Barriers to Overcome

“These best practices aren’t new,” many participants noted. “They’re late-coming to public education, but they’re not new ideas. So why is public education so slow to adopt them?” What are the root causes of resistance to these practices? Where do we get leverage for change?

Participants felt that some barriers contributing to the resistance to change include the complexity of education, discontinuity of leadership, lack of a policy vision, and how we think about and frame the problem we are trying to address.

Complexity of Education

Education is an extremely complex process. Its contexts are social, political and cultural. By necessity, education is concerned not only with intellectual development, but also with emotional and physical well-being. Further, the processes of teaching and learning – the “work” of the school – are founded in a body of knowledge that is very complex and not yet well-understood. This has led to a multitude of both effective and ineffective traditions and practices in public education – and the two are not easily separated. As a result of all these factors, the change process in education is very difficult; it requires changing behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge.

As one researcher and thought leader pointed out, “It’s a profound shift to do business [in a performance-driven way] in a school. The ability to ask good questions and do good analysis requires a lot of intelligence about how to use information thoughtfully and act on it appropriately. This is really a theory of organizational improvement.”

Further compounding the complexity of education is the question of motivation. As a school system leader pointed out, “In the report, you propose a model for how school districts should work. But are there reasons for school systems to want to do this? And if not, will it ever change?”

Discontinuity of Leadership

One element that adds significantly to the lack of motivation for change is the discontinuity of leadership. “Institutional memory disappears as the top turns over. It’s as if nothing happened for the last five years. This is so discouraging to teachers.” In addition, there is often “no follow up on initiatives to measure if they are really working.” Finally, the reality is that the “levels of hierarchy don’t talk to each other. At the ground level, what’s occurring is so different from what’s being discussed at the executive level.”

While the reasons for high and frequent turnover are not always clear, some solutions are. Where possible, longer tenure for superintendents should be encouraged, so long as leaders are being effective. School system governance structures must also be reviewed. Shifting governance structures from a focus on political agendas to a focus on student achievement is critical – whether that means appointing school boards, putting systems under mayoral control, or finding public ways to hold leaders accountable for outcomes.

Another way to improve continuity is to institutionalize performance-driven practices throughout a school system. These practices, if adopted broadly by all staff – from the central office to the classroom – can create mechanisms for sustaining reform and improvement efforts even in the face of leadership turnover.

Lack of a Policy Vision

Another core element of the lack of motivation is that “we don’t have a compelling vision for change, like Kennedy’s moon shot or the Great Society.” Participants wondered what they could do to “move the policy conversation from the trivial to the deep, complex cultural change that has to occur.” For example, “Is there something policymakers need to do to make educators embrace new practices?” Are there new ways we should structure incentives for individuals and systems? How do we prevent this idea of performance-driven education from being consigned, like so many before it, to being an “island of change,” rather than being a systemic, sustained improvement throughout public education?

Framing of the Problem

Beyond internal motivation for change, another significant barrier may be the way people are framing the problem, leading to limitations on possible solutions. For example, one foundation leader talked about the potential value in allowing school systems to fail, and wondered “Why do we act as if all schools must succeed? Why don’t we acknowledge that some will fail, and shut them down when they do?” It was noted that a high percentage of small and large businesses fail, and that the very real threat of failure creates a powerful external motivation for continuous improvement.

Another participant encouraged people not to be constrained by the current model of a district, commenting that “a more robust definition and model of a district is needed. What a performance-driven system would look like differs tremendously based on what a district is and what its theory of action is.” Another participant concurred, stating that “We need a more robust set of models about what a district’s organizational structure looks like today, because many of today’s district models are systematically and differentially dysfunctional.”

Transparency as Leverage for Change

The conversation then shifted to ways to take action and get leverage for change, recognizing the strength of the barriers, but also reflecting confidence that there are ways to overcome them.

According to many participants, “transparency should be the battle! Shine light on how we do – department-by-department, school-by-school, teacher-by-teacher, kid-by-kid – then people get uncomfortable and are motivated to take action” Providing this transparency is key to getting past many of the barriers, some participants argued. “What

motivates people most is making transparent what we really care about. State accountability and NCLB help this, since parents, media, teachers all know about it,” but it is not enough. So, the question is, “how do we have more intelligent transparency?”

This question raised the importance of determining *what* data to measure and *how* to measure it. With respect to *what* to measure, participants warned that one can implement performance-driven practices and still end up with mediocrity or worse. “We will get what we measure – that is, by measuring, we will incent certain behaviors and force certain emphases on classrooms – so we must be sure we are measuring what we care about.” The consequences of measuring the wrong factors can be significant. As one participant pointed out, “What corrupts the system? A system of accountability that focuses on minimums rather than maximums, and doesn’t prepare kids for college or life. You get the systems organized around the wrong things!”

What are the right things to measure? In talking about the types of information needed to inform continuous improvement efforts, participants highlighted the importance of gathering frequent snapshots of student mastery and achievement. They also emphasized gathering information on other facets of student performance, since focusing only on student achievement “misses the complexity of what it means to be performance-driven.” Participants advised that we need to “get a multi-layered framework out there” for performance measurement, and that “policy, tools, and practices all need to work together.”

Participants emphasized, too, that better ways are needed to inform and reflect the performance of all people in the system. Performance-driven practices should be applied, for example, to finance, human resources, and operations in order to ensure that these functions are providing quality service that supports the district’s student achievement goals. Participants urged further thinking and research in this critical area.

How we measure performance is equally important. Measuring tools must be sharp enough to provide accurate, relevant, timely, and actionable data. Today’s standardized testing tools are blunt instruments, sufficient perhaps for broadly ranking and categorizing schools and districts, but ill-suited to informing instruction and driving system-wide continuous improvement.

People, Resources and Organizational Capacity

Identifying, measuring, and sharing information is necessary to create transparency, but is not sufficient to bring about results for students. To achieve results, the information must be used effectively, which requires having the appropriate people in place and robust support for those people in implementing performance-driven practices. Similarly, school systems must understand what resources – tools and materials, infrastructure and practices – people need in order to achieve results, and must create or supply those. Finally, school systems must develop the ability to transform and adapt. Developing this ability is especially valuable because it can help institutionalize capacity, enabling it to be sustained over time, continuously improved upon, and less dependent on specific individuals or leaders.

REPORT-SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

In addition to the cross-cutting themes, the Performance Roundtable discussion also included some direct feedback on the report itself, including some recommendations for elements to integrate into future reports. Participants would like to see multiple levels of the school system included in the research. They felt the language and intentions of cabinet-level officers were interesting, but advisors were equally curious about what was occurring in schools and classrooms. Participants wanted more tangible examples – evidence of what is actually happening as the visions of system-level leaders get implemented, and stories and studies of what great practices look like. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of correlating performance-driven practices to improvements in student achievement as the ultimate measure of their effectiveness.

NEXT STEPS

NewSchools plans to continue to study both the adoption of performance-driven practices and the barriers that inhibit the implementation of these practices in large urban districts. Our goals are to inform our own investment and convening activities, better inform the field at large, inspire foundations and researchers to focus efforts in this area, and thereby contribute to the transformation of districts into learning organizations aligned around achieving results for all students.

NewSchools Plans for Phase Two of the Research

With respect to the next year of this multi-year study, we have developed some guiding questions and broad goals based on lessons we learned from Phase One, feedback from the Performance Roundtable participants and other advisors, and NewSchools' core competencies. In Phase Two of the research, we will be conducting case studies on data-driven instructional decision-making at the system, school, and classroom levels. We will be focusing on three to five high-performing school systems – including districts, for-profit educational management organizations, and nonprofit charter management organizations – that have successfully begun to implement performance-driven practices with the specific goal of continuously improving student outcomes.

Focus questions for this research include:

Key Practices: **What** do practitioners measure; **how** do they measure it; how do they **share** it; how do they **use** data to drive instructional decisions; and how do they **evaluate** decisions and incorporate lessons learned into future actions?

At each level (system, school, classroom):

- **Goals:** What are the student achievement and performance goals? How are they set? How frequently is progress toward goals measured? How is responsibility for meeting goals allocated and assigned?
- **Data:** What do practitioners measure? How do they determine what to measure and how do they ensure that what they measure is aligned with their goals for student achievement and performance? How do they actually measure the data? When do they measure it? Why do they measure it?
- **Action:** What do they do with this data once they get it? How do they look at the data in order to interpret it most effectively? What analyses or reports do they use? What does each tell them? How are course-corrections made? (e.g., How does instruction change? How do interventions change?)
- **Evaluation:** How do they know if their course-corrections worked? What do they do if they haven't? How does this evaluation influence future decision-making (e.g., instructional strategies, curriculum choices, professional development)?

Support Mechanisms: What **support** is provided to principals, teachers, and students to enable them to use data to bring about desired results?

- **Structure and Processes:**
 - **Time:** How are schedules created? Is time allocated for grading and analyzing data? Is time allocated for collaboration among teachers, with respect to analyzing data and developing action plans? Is time allocated for implementing action plans (e.g., reteaching particular standards, working with struggling students)?
 - **Content:** What meetings take place around data? What are the agendas? When do teachers receive student achievement data (e.g., from interim assessments, state assessments)? What data do teachers bring to meetings and what deliverables do they take away?
 - **Decision-making:** What decision-making is centralized at the system level and why (e.g., curriculum, scope and sequence, pacing)? What decisions are decentralized and why? How clearly do staff members understand their decision-making responsibilities and boundaries?

- **Tools:** What tools are used (e.g., assessment, data analysis, data warehousing)? How are they used, and by whom? What tools are most effective, most helpful? How do they determine the effectiveness of implemented tools?
- **Professional Development:**
 - How does staff learn to use data? How do they determine what to focus on at the system-wide, school, and teacher levels – to enable educators to use data? How does staff get “acculturated” to processes and tools? How does staff work together to support each other in ongoing learning and decision-making?
 - Is data used to inform professional development decisions? If so, how and when is it used, and by whom?

Culture: What elements of the culture reinforce use of data to drive improved instruction and student achievement results? Do adults take responsibility for student results? Is it acceptable and actively encouraged to discuss weaknesses and needs for improvement? How are students engaged in taking responsibility for improved results? What evidence is there that data-driven decision making with the goal of improved student achievement results is at the core of everything they do?

Outstanding Needs: What works? What doesn't? Why? What's still missing? What do practitioners wish they *knew* that they cannot find out today? What do they wish they were able to *do* (if they had the information, tools, practices, decision-making authority, etc.)?

Recommendations for Action: What solutions and next steps could address the outstanding needs identified through the research? What actions can researchers, policymakers, foundation leaders, educators, and entrepreneurs take to create and address these?

How Others Can Contribute

We encourage people interested in this area to investigate any of the key questions that have arisen as a result of this work – and there are many. Here are but a few:

- What key indicators – student achievement and beyond – should we measure and why?
- How should we measure student performance reliably, accurately, and in relevant and timely ways?
- How do we make data more actionable? How can we make data reports so actionable that interpretation is barely needed?
- What knowledge, skills and capacities do key “actors” in schools need in order to be successful? How do we select for these during hiring? How do we improve teacher and leader credentialing programs to better prepare teachers and leaders for their jobs? How do we further develop necessary knowledge, skills, behaviors and attitudes on the job?
- What kinds of incentive structures could be used to motivate appropriate behaviors in performance-driven education systems – for students, teachers and administrators?
- What do effective cultures look like in performance-driven school systems? What practices reinforce and institutionalize these?
- What tools are needed to support the use of performance-driven practices? How can we create and supply them?

- What forms of governance and types of leaders are best suited to guide and hold accountable performance-driven school systems?
- What types of policies – at both state and federal levels – could most effectively support and accelerate this movement?

CONCLUSION

This is an exciting moment in time where we have the opportunity to help public school systems become performance-driven and deliver better educational outcomes for *all* students. The work is in its infancy, but there is much we can do to ease the load and accelerate the transformation. We encourage researchers to address the questions above and further the knowledge development work in the field; educators and practitioners to share lessons learned from implementation and adoption, and continue seeking to improve student achievement while more system-wide solutions are developed; entrepreneurs to create solutions to enable and accelerate performance-driven practices; funders to turn additional resources and attention to this under-funded area; and policymakers to push the conversation forward and create an environment conducive to high levels of achievement for all students – and to hold schools accountable for these results. As one participant emphasized, “We can’t use the political, economic, and cultural challenges as an excuse for not building the infrastructure around education performance. The time is now to strengthen education.”

PERFORMANCE ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES

Advisors

Phoebe Boyer, Executive Director, Tiger Foundation
Anthony S. Bryk, Professor, Stanford University School of Education and Graduate School of Business
John E. Chubb, Chief Education Officer, Edison Schools, Inc.
Elise Darwish, Chief Academic Officer, Aspire Public Schools
Leslie Fausset, Interim Superintendent, San Diego Unified School District
Libia S. Gil, Senior Fellow, American Institutes for Research
Frederick Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute
John J-H Kim, Managing Director, District Management Council
Lynn Liao, Director, The Broad Foundation
Cathy Minberg, Chief Operating Officer, Portland Public Schools (Founder & CEO, Center for School District Effectiveness at time of session)
Thad R. Nodine, Vice President, Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education
Jennifer A. O'Day, Managing Research Scientist, American Institutes for Research
Ray Pecheone, Academic Research and Program Officer, Stanford University School of Education
Lisa Petrides, President & Founder, Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education
Roger F. Pfeuffer, Superintendent, Tucson Unified School District
Lory Pilchik, Program Officer, Michael and Susan Dell Foundation
Linda G. Roberts, Former Director of Office of Educational Technology, U.S. Department of Education
Jonathan Schnur, Co-Founder and CEO, New Leaders for New Schools
Shivam Mallick Shah, Senior Program Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Warren Simmons, Executive Director, Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Mike S. Smith, Program Director, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Carroll Stevens, Senior Fellow of Foundation Legacy Development, Stupski Foundation
Deborah J. Stipek, Dean, Stanford University School of Education
Merrill Vargo, Executive Director, Bay Area School Reform Collaborative
Dale W. Vigil, Superintendent, Hayward Unified School District, (Superintendent, Local District 6, Los Angeles Unified School District at time of session)

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