

The Challenge of School Variability: Improving Instruction in New York City's Community District #2

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How do we reconcile the goal of high academic performance for *all* children with the reality of variability in the conditions that schools face in promoting academic learning?

The idea of systemic improvement works against traditional notions that it is the idiosyncratic conditions of students, communities, and families that are the chief determinants of aggregate student performance in schools. While the specific conditions of students, families, and schools might be important in shaping aggregate outcomes, systemic improvement suggests it is possible to realize significant gains in student performance by focusing on the fundamentals of teaching and learning in a sustained way over time.

Community District #2, one of 32 community school districts in New York City, includes 24 elementary schools, seven junior high or intermediate schools, and 17 theme schools of varying grade configurations. The district includes affluent and middle class neighborhoods, diverse neighborhoods, and neighborhoods with substantial concentrations of lower-income families and recent immigrants. The district's 22,000-student population is extraordinarily diverse: 29 percent white, 14 percent African-American, 22 percent Hispanic, 34 percent Asian, and less than one percent Native American. About half of the students come from families with incomes below the poverty level, and for 20 percent of students, English is a second language.

District #2 has moved from the middle ranks (sixteenth of 32 districts) to become the second-ranked district in the city. This marked aggregate improvement, however, masks considerable variability in school-by-school performance within the district.

Systemwide instructional improvement is District #2's first priority. Principals are expected to play a strong role in this process, and the main vehicle for improvement is heavy investment in teacher professional development focused on curriculum and pedagogy in basic academic content areas. District #2 is interested in moving beyond its current strategy to a strategy more explicitly focused on standards of instructional practice and student performance standards to guide and motivate instructional improvement.

The central tenet of standards-based instructional improvement is that entire systems of schools can move collectively in the direction of more ambitious teaching and learning. Juxtaposed to this standards-based view is what we might call "the real world of school." From this perspective, everything is defined in terms of particularities. Schools view themselves as serving very particular groups of students and very particular communities; schools tend to develop their own internal processes and cultures; principals and teachers have particular competencies, levels of expertise, and ideas about instructional practice for the particular children they serve. In most school districts, the particularities of schools tend to overwhelm any attempt to create systemwide improvement.

Two Theories of Improvement

Conversations with district administrators and school principals revealed District #2's *theory of action* about systemic improvement and school variability. Principals are the key agents in adapting and orchestrating district expectations to the particular conditions of schools. Schools constitute unique bundles of attributes, and skillful systemic improvement depends on district administrators developing a deep understanding of school-level particularities and tailoring their actions accordingly. Bilateral negotiations between district administrators and principals, where principals represent their schools'

particularities and district administrators represent district expectations, resolve tensions. Increasing reliance on the quality of student work as the standard by which schools' success will be evaluated creates a language between principals and district administrators that focuses attention on a common attribute of classrooms, rather than characteristics that distinguish one school from another.

There is in District #2, however, another, less explicit *theory in use* about systemic improvement and school variability. District administrators face serious time constraints in their work. District administrators cope with this challenge by making hard choices about how to allocate their time.

Some District #2 schools present problems that make them more amenable to immediate improvement, and others present problems that are more formidable and less susceptible to immediate improvement. District administrators must decide which schools require more immediate and concentrated attention among the array of all schools at any given time.

District #2 administrators seemed to group schools into implicit categories in order to direct and focus their attention. They gave certain schools and principals more intensive attention than others. Critical to understanding how *differential treatment* works is the idea of the *zone of indifference*—the amount of latitude or discretion a subordinate administrator is allowed by a higher-level administrator in the performance of a task. A broad zone of indifference means a high degree of discretion, a narrow zone means low discretion. Differential treatment means that district administrators allow different zones of indifference, depending on the immediacy and seriousness of the schools' problems. Schools judged to be high-performers and low-performers were given a broader zone of indifference, for different reasons, than schools in the middle, which are judged to be, again for different reasons, at a critical phase of improvement.

Based on the comments and actions of district administrators, we identified four categories of schools:

Free-Agent Schools are close to District #2's ideal model of continuous instructional improvement and professional development. The principals embody most characteristics wanted in school leaders; the schools have a clear identity and instructional focus; the teaching staff is largely the product of an extensive winnowing and selection process by the principals; the quality of instructional practice and student work are consistently high from one class to another; relations with the community are supportive; and student performance is high relative to national, city and district norms.

These schools are treated by district administrators as Free Agents in that they have a high degree of control over their internal processes, they exercise broad latitude and discretion in how they put together budgets and professional development plans, and receive little direct inspection of their internal processes. They bear a disproportionate share of the district's showcase activity for observers from within and outside the district. They are managed by exception from the district level; they do pretty much what they choose unless a highly visible problem arises. They have an exceptionally broad zone of indifference. No more than five or six schools fall into this category.

With-the-Drill Schools. These schools manifest strong leadership but are in the early or middle stages of the developmental path that district administrators see as leading to schoolwide instructional improvement. These schools demonstrate reasonable progress on student performance measures. Teachers may reflect a significant range of practice, but virtually all are involved in professional development and, with few exceptions, making progress toward high-quality instruction. The amount of high-quality student work is highly variable, but present in most classrooms.

These schools are With-the-Drill in that they are engaged in a multi-year process of providing focused staff development, evaluating and winnowing out teachers, and developing a strong school culture. These schools receive moderate to high levels of support and scrutiny from district administrators. Budget and staff development plans receive close examination and principals are asked about plans for specific, usually problematic, teachers. The principals are likely to be paired with other principals in mentoring relationships. The schools are less likely to be showcased or to help other schools. These schools have a moderate-to-narrow zone of indifference. Nearly 20 schools fall into this category.

Watch-List Schools generally manifest strong leadership and are on a developmental path in instructional leadership, but are singled out for special attention and intensive scrutiny because of lower-than-acceptable student performance on standardized tests and highly variable quality of student work. Most are located in poor sections of the district and serve large numbers of students from high-poverty and immigrant families. The district takes an active role in introducing staff development and instructional initiatives, principals are likely to receive frequent visits and consultations, and teachers receive intensive professional development focused on specific domains of student performance. These schools are open to outside visitors and most are involved in activities outside the district, but their primary task is intensive improvement of instruction within a relatively short time frame.

Watch-List Schools include the district's seven lowest-performing elementary schools in citywide reading, which receive district assistance to improve literacy skills of low-performing students. Watch-List schools operate under a relatively narrow zone of indifference. A total of 13 schools fall into this category.

Off-the-Screen Schools are seen by the district as presenting formidable problems for improvement, usually because they lack strong principals, and the district has found it difficult to change their leadership. They are in a kind of limbo. Their principals participate in principals' conferences and they receive regular visits from district administrators. They have low-to-moderate teacher participation in district-sponsored professional development activities, but district administrators find them difficult to engage in sustained improvement. They present low or highly-variable quality of student work.

Some schools are Off-the-Screen because the district has not yet developed an instructional improvement strategy that fully includes them. Some are closely knit into their communities in ways that district administrators see as counterproductive to high-quality instruction and the district's improvement agenda. At least two schools are relatively high-performers by national, city, and district norms, but are judged by district administrators to be weak in the quality of student work, and therefore low-performers relative to what they should be. About five schools are neither particularly effective nor particularly engaged in the district's instructional improvement strategy. In some domains, such as participation in districtwide professional development activities, these schools are granted a relatively broad zone of indifference. In other cases, district administrators focus their attention on limiting the zone of indifference in specific areas, such as hiring new teachers.

These four categories illustrate how differential treatment works. Not all schools can be treated equally in a system of diverse school characteristics and capacities. Groups of schools in District #2 receive significantly different types of treatment from district administrators, and this differential treatment is a key factor in the overall strategy of instructional improvement. The With-the-Drill and Watch-List Schools seem to attract the most attention and resources from district administrators, but all schools are touched in some visible ways by the district's strategy. The Off-the-Screen schools pose a particularly difficult set of problems for district administrators; they represent the remaining exceptions to the district's leadership-driven theory of instructional improvement.

How District #2 confronts the problem of differential treatment is an issue for system-level administrators in other districts too. Learning how to treat schools differently in the context of a common set of expectations for improvement and performance is central to systemic school reform.

The View from the Schools

Interviews with principals revealed preliminary findings of how their views complement or conflict with those of district-level administrators.

- Principals clearly and consistently reported the values and goals of the District #2 strategy for instructional improvement, even while their implementation of the strategy is variable. Consensus was strongest among principals of Free-Agent, With-the-Drill, and Watch-List schools, but even principals of Off-the-Screen schools gave consistent accounts of district expectations.
- Most principals perceived a high degree of differential access to district administrators and to resources for instructional improvement, and for the most part they approved of this differential treatment. Most principals perceived that they were in a negotiating relationship with district administrators, one in which they had the main responsibility for instructional improvement and student performance in their schools and for working out agreements for district resources that reflected the particular needs of their schools.
- The principals perceived a more or less explicit matching of leadership to schools in the district's assignment of principals, and they saw themselves as having skills and aptitudes that are tailored to their settings. The principals spoke consistently in the language of the district's instructional improvement agenda—the culture of support among the staff, the focus on instruction, working hard, doing whatever it takes to support student achievement. Most said their effectiveness should be judged by what goes on in their schools.
- Principals perceived that they were participating in a vertically integrated structure of values and learning opportunities designed to create a common culture. The principals understood that they were responsible for professional development and instructional improvement in their schools, regardless of individual teachers' competence or willingness to take this responsibility.

- Principals saw themselves as among the key purveyors of an increasingly explicit and widespread technical culture around instructional improvement that has a distinct set of norms, a professional language, and a set of practices. Most principals have developed a common language with teachers about instructional practice and participated with them in an array of activities that reinforce a technical culture of instructional improvement.
- Principals endorsed, for the most part, the application of high standards across all schools and the view that school staffs should be held accountable for attaining these standards. Many principals argued that you do a disservice to students by lowering standards for special populations, but many asserted that high standards should be accompanied by fair accommodations.
- Principals reported substantial variation in their relationships with their school's teachers union representative, but they did not use union relations as an excuse or explanation for their own performance. Many principals expressed the view that their own position and performance as instructional leaders in their schools overcame even poor union relationships.

The district picture revealed in the principal interviews was one of powerful system-level norms operating in highly variable school contexts. Even in schools considered highly problematical by district administrators, principals were able to give a thorough account of district norms, although they often struggled with their application in their schools. We observed the development of a powerful technical culture within schools, in which the discourse between principals and teachers was heavily focused on the requirements of high-quality instruction and student work, and much less on the individual backgrounds and attributes of teachers and students.

Questions about Systemic Improvement and School Variability

We conclude with several questions which, we think, apply to Community District #2 and other districts working on the problem of systemic improvement.

How should we think about *good* and *bad* variations among schools in the context of systemic improvement? Not all variations are equal, and variations are not evidence of inability or incapacity to engage in instructional improvement. To learn how to make judgments about which kinds of

variation are signs of success, which are signs of weakness, and which are simply background conditions that have to be addressed in tailoring district resources to school, it would be helpful to know what different types of school variability mean to systemic improvement.

What are the most effective ways to teach district administrators and principals the skills of tailoring, bilateral negotiation, and the creation of common norms-setting activities that are at the core of reconciling systemic improvement with school variability? We could treat the District #2 experience as an unique product of charisma and circumstance—the way of explaining success favored by most educators—or we can think through how to develop the requisite skills in administrators in other settings. Observing, consulting, and advising may be more effective in teaching skills like these than lectures and discussion.

What role should student performance standards play in an overall strategy of instructional improvement? District #2 is trying to integrate student performance standards into its overall strategy of instructional improvement. Other districts must decide whether to develop serious instructional improvement strategies or simply impose student performance standards on schools, then leave principals and teachers to cope.

What are the implications of the increasing demands of instructional improvement on school and district personnel? Hard work is not the issue; the sustainability of the work as the strategy gets more complex, however, is a major issue. District #2 financed its investment in professional development largely by stripping overhead in the district office and limiting non-instructional positions in the schools. District #2 appears to be at the point where the success of its strategy will depend on attending to workloads and capacity and on inventing new ways for administrators to handle the complexity and the growing demands of the work, while still staying the course.

