

So Much Reform, So Little Change: Building-level Obstacles to Urban School Reform

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the disappointing results of most attempts to reform urban schools, especially bottom-tier urban schools. Based on observations of schools in Chicago, it develops a typology of impediments to change and then suggests that reformers ordinarily underestimate the salience of social, political and organizational factors in the change process. Reformers seem to learn little from past attempts at reform.

So Much Reform, So Little Change: Building-Level Obstacles to Urban School Reform

Many observers of big city school systems will sympathize with the observation that in recent years, a "cacophony of reform proposals has produced a great deal of activity but little real change in urban schooling." (Hess, 1998, p. 24) Several systems can point to positive changes but overall the schools of urban America are depressingly similar to what they were in 1983 when the current wave of school reform began by most reckonings.

Since 1988, when the state legislature of Illinois passed a comprehensive act for the reformation of Chicago's schools, Chicago has occupied a central place in the national discussion of what can be done about urban schools. (Ayers and Klonsky, 1994; Mirel, 1993; Katz, Fine and Simon, 1997). Thirteen years later, there seems to be a consensus that the system has improved, at least at the elementary level and that the changes have been impressive in some important respects (Bryk et al, 1997; Catalyst, 2000) Learning gains though, seem to have peaked in 1996 - 97 and been relatively stagnant since. (Easton, Rosenkranz and Bryk, 2001). In Chicago as elsewhere, the gains which have come have done so a good deal more slowly than school reformers anticipated. The original legislation envisioned transformed schools within 5 years. In the early years of school reform, the Dean of one of the local schools of education was saying there was no school in the city that couldn't be turned around in a year. No one in the city talks that way now.

What makes urban schools so resistant to reform, almost reform-proof, it sometimes seems? Why do so few innovations live up to their billing? This essay will suggest some ways of thinking about that, at least in terms of those obstacles that are visible from the school building level. That perspective leaves out a great deal that is important, including questions about state and local politics and resource inequities. What we can "see" from the building level is only a part of the problem but even that is enough to suggest a disconnect between the thinking of school reformers and the stubborn realities of urban schools. The paper has two sections. The first will develop a typology of impediments to change, a map of possible stumbling blocks, putting particular emphasis on the social impediments, still among the least appreciated. The second will discuss some of the implications of the typology for developing and implementing policy in urban schools.

Since 1990, the authors have had a number of perspectives from which to observe school reform in Chicago. Charles Payne has been the director of an ethnographic study of the Chicago implementation of James Comer's School Development Process and of another study of the most improved bottom -quartile schools in the city. He has also been a member of the Citywide Coalition for School Reform, a member of the group that brought the Algebra Project to Chicago, a member of a group that tried to create a support network among external agencies rendering assistance to schools, and a consultant to local foundations involved with school reform and to the Chicago Board of Education. Mariame Kaba has been an ethnographer on the Comer and improving schools project, has studied the implementation of service learning in Chicago and the experience of being a student Local School Council member. She has also studied the emotional aspects of being a change agent in schools and has worked with local foundations on school reform issues. This essay will draw on that range of experience; it should be remembered that most of our experience has been with bottom quartile schools as measured by pre-reform test scores. Thus, the essay is more a commentary on the problematics of change in the toughest urban schools than in urban schools in general.

Towards A Typology of Impediments To Change

Think of yourself as a principal considering implementing an innovative I program like that of the Coalition for Essential Schools or James Comer's School Development Process or perhaps something more limited like a new afterschool reading program. Whatever the innovation, what might you anticipate as possible problems? We have had numerous conversations with building-level leaders about the progress of the various reform initiatives they had under way. Table 1 (following page) began to emerge in those discussions. It summarizes some of the issues which arose repeatedly in those discussions and it also takes into account some of our own observations about what was happening in the schools we visited regularly. The table is more illustrative than comprehensive; it leaves out, among other things, a whole set of issues about the characteristics of students and communities; for example, the table says nothing about the violence that surrounds and permeates many schools and nothing about how deeply disengaged from school many adolescents are. It also fails to reflect some of the sources of disorganization peculiar to high schools. Limited as it is, the table may help us better appreciate the series of battles that building leaders have to fight to make reforms stick.

The first category, and probably the least appreciated, is "Social Infrastructure." In one –

IMPEDIMENTS TO CHANGING *URBAN SCHOOLS*

A. Social Infrastructure

- Distrust, lack of social comfort among parents, teachers and administrators; low mutual expectations.

- Predisposition to suspicion of "outsiders."

. - Tensions pertaining to race, ethnicity, age cohort; predisposition to factions. - Generalized anger; various patterns of withdrawal as major coping strategy. - "Happy Talk" culture; tendency to put the best face on everything.

- Poor internal communications.

-Institutional inability to learn from experience.

- Ego fragility/emotional fatigue

B. Building-level Politics

- Perception of patronage, favoritism; tendency to give new programs to "safe".

people.

- Tendency to protect existing power arrangements, formal or informal.

- Pattern of contested or stalemated power among principal, teachers, union, others.

- Pattern of autocratic power or vacillation between autocratic and collaborative styles.

- Staff not willing to take part in decision-making.

- Principal not open to criticism; inability of principals to understand how they are perceived by staff.

- Reluctance to talk about certain issues for fear of offending the principal, other powerful people.

- More generally, the tension between the need for positive PR and the need for realistic assessment.

C. Instructional Capacity- Teacher skepticism about students' learning capacity; weak sense of teacher agency.

- Inadequate instructional supervision of teachers; absence of accountability for instructional program.

- Teacher isolation: "What goes on in my classroom is my business." - Rigidity of teacher attitude about how students learn.

- Fragmented staff development; "Drive-By" staff development.

- Reluctance of teachers to accept leadership from colleagues: "She must think she knows more than we do."

- Content knowledge of staff/classroom management skills.

- Fit between curriculum and assessment procedures; being made to teach one thing while being tested on another.

- Ineffective discipline, atmosphere not conducive to teaching.

- Generalized belief in program failure; "We've seen programs come, we've seen 'em go;" generalized disbelief in professional development.

- Inadequate informal staff knowledge about students' backgrounds and interests.

- Resource needs - personnel, material and space. - Instability of good instructional staff.

D. Environmental Turbulence.

- Perception that patronage, favoritism and cronyism drive many Central Office practices: "Either you have to know somebody or you have to kiss somebody's behind."
- Instability of leadership at Central Office.
- Lack of respect for the day-to-day work of teachers and principals. – Hierarchical culture, discomfort with collegial interaction.
- Absence of accountability for Central Office personnel.
- Political, organizational and resource issues at the district or state level. - The rapidity with which Central Office develops new initiatives.
- Inadequate, uncoordinated support services from Central Office, including its inability to function as information resource
- Inability to communicate with Central Office: " You can't get a straight answer from those people."
- Tendency to issue seemingly contradictory, arbitrary directives, taking building leaders away from the substantive work.

E. Structure of Support for Implementation

- Lack of time, including time for training, for planning, for reflection, for key people to exchange information in a timely fashion; competing time demands made by different programs.
- Inappropriate pace and scale of change; tendency to try to do too much too quickly.
- Not enough leadership; tendency for everything to fall back on the principal and the faithful few.
- Narrow base of support; lack of ownership/ false buy-in.
- Inability to offer appropriate blend of top-down and bottom-up incentives/sanctions.
- Absence of realistic assessment, consequent inability to make mid-course corrections; tension between desire not to hurt anyone's feelings and honest assessment.
- Ambiguity of roles introduced by new programs.
- Leadership's lack of deep understanding of particular innovations; lack of comparative knowledge re innovations.
- Instability of key administrative personnel.
- Absence of follow-through.

--of its most instructive studies, the Consortium on Chicago School Research surveyed staff at 210 schools in an attempt to identify those characteristics shared by schools that were getting better. When the 30 most highly-rated schools were compared with the 30 poorest, a battery of questions about the quality of relationships proved to be one of the best predictors. While teachers almost unanimously agreed that relationships with their colleagues were cordial, that did not always mean they respected or trusted one another. Forty percent of teachers disagreed with the statement, "Teachers in this school trust each other." How teachers in a given school felt about that correlated very well with whether the school was improving or stagnating. Social trust is a highly significant factor. In fact, it may well be that social trust is the key factor associated with improving schools. Teachers in the top 30 schools generally sense a great deal of respect from other teachers, indicating that they respect other teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts and feel comfortable expressing their worries and concerns with colleagues. In contrast, in the bottom 30 schools, teachers explicitly state that they do not trust each other. They believe that only half of the teachers in the school really care about each other and they perceive limited respect from their colleagues. There were similar patterns in terms of teacher-parent trust: In the bottom 30 schools, teachers perceive much less respect from parents and report that only about half of their colleagues really care about the local community and feel supported by parents (Both quotes from Sebring, Bryk and Easton 1995, p. 61).

In our worst schools, the basic web of social relationships is likely to be severely damaged. Such schools can be angry, discouraged places, where people trust only those in their personal clique - which is ordinarily defined at least partly in terms of race or ethnicity - and where people can be quick to interpret the behavior of everyone outside that clique in the most negative way. One important reason Chicago school reformers underestimated how long it would take to change the system was widespread under-appreciation of the salience of social issues. For many programs the first two years of implementation were almost wholly given over to clearing away the social and political underbrush.

James Comer's School Development Program is among the reform models most concerned with the problematics of human relationships, sensitive to relationship issues, but even the staff doing the Chicago implementation of Comer that initially underestimated their depth and tenacity of those problems. They were aware, for example, of the tensions between teachers and parents and of the very strong sense among Chicago teachers that inner city parents "don't care" about education. Thus, in their first schools, they put a great deal of energy into increasing the visible participation of parents in schools, thinking that would reduce some of those tensions. In fact, in almost every case, increased parental involvement led to increased parent-teacher tension, at least temporarily.

(Teachers: "They're only coming to spy on us.") Merely interacting more didn't change the deeply-ingrained tendency of one group to interpret the behavior of the other group in the most negative way possible.

The negative climate in schools is fertile ground for the development of factions - older teachers versus younger ones, primary grade teachers versus upper grade, third floor teachers against first floor teachers, constructivist, inquiry oriented teachers versus traditional ones, teachers in the annex against teachers in the main building, Spanish-speaking teachers against English-speaking ones, U.S born Spanish-speaking teachers against Spanish-speaking teachers born elsewhere. Race and ethnicity are powerfully implicated in these divisions as well as in most aspects of school interpersonal dynamics but they are rarely acknowledged, the 800-pound gorilla that everyone pretends to not see. Lipman says of one of the schools she studies in a Southern city, "All of the students identified by teachers as 'problems' were African American. However, the teachers assiduously avoided discussions of race and racial identification." (Lipman, 199B, p.112)

New programs coming into a school may be racially coded almost immediately. The people who did the introductory workshops for the Comer process at Tuckahoe School in Chicago, for example, were Black. They impressed teachers, particularly some of the African American teachers. The race of the presenters and the fact that Dr. Comer himself is African American led many Black teachers to think of the process as a "Black" program and they supported it on that basis. They then felt betrayed when a white facilitator was assigned to their school. They cold-shouldered "the white girl" - they seldom used her name, she was just "the white girl." At Tuckahoe, "the white girl" was eventually able to work through the hostility and become accepted as an individual with a great deal to contribute but that is probably not the way these scenarios usually end. It takes enormous emotional resources and/ or an effective support system to weather being marginalized in this way, all the more so since most outside change agents are going to be caught unawares. Almost without exception in our experience, outside agencies rendering assistance to schools were unable to prepare their staff for the emotional beatings they were going to suffer.

A common experience among school reformers is going into a new school, quickly establishing a beachhead but then finding themselves unable to move off the beach. That is, they find right away a small group of teachers open to trying whatever the innovation is but two or three years later, they are still working with that same little group. Other teachers don't come aboard as anticipated. A common reason for this is that the favorably predisposed teachers are socially defined by other teachers as a faction so the mere fact that they have endorsed any program guarantees that other factions will shy away. In Chicago, the eager adopters are often young, primary grade teachers, fresh out of college where they have been immersed in the language and theory of reform. School reformers from the outside, typically rejected by most staff because they are outsiders, are glad to find a receptive group talking their language. Becoming involved with that group, typically a low-status Social clique, immediately embroils the reform in pre-existing cleavages of race, cohort and teaching philosophy, often before the reformers are aware that such cleavages exist.

A longstanding racial issue in Chicago schools has to do with differing standards and styles of discipline. African American teachers often see their white colleagues as too lax about discipline - because they are afraid of the children or because they don't care about the children or because they don't understand African American culture - while white teachers may see some of their Black colleagues as rigid and punitive. When white staff members propose or endorse reforms, the reactions of Black staff may be conditioned by the perception that the white teachers who are so quick to talk about new programs have been unwilling to shoulder their share of the load when it comes to maintaining discipline.

If one asks about the state of race relations in a building, teachers almost always initially deny any racial tension at all and in fact will normally deny that there are relationship problems of any kind: "We get along just fine; always have." One of the ironies of weak social infrastructures is that they can contribute to the development of "Happy Talk" public culture. In public discussions everyone accents the positive, even if it has to be made up. In schools where only 5 or 6 percent of students are reading at grade level, teachers sit around talking about how well they're all doing, considering, and how professional they all are. Even in the poorest-performing Chicago schools, the great majority of teachers traditionally received either a superior or an excellent rating every year. (Chicago Tribune Staff, 1988) If a school is already doing well, of course, there is no need to talk about how to do better, no need to talk about who is not doing their job, stressful conversations in any environment, but especially so where there is little underlying trust and respect. Where every suggestion for improvement can get construed as a personal attack, it's best to keep conversation light.

Pervasive distrust means that schools cannot make use of financial and technical resources even when they become available. Inner-city schools are criminally under-resourced; still, in demoralized schools making resources available doesn't mean they will ever be brought to bear.

Expensive teaching materials sit on a shelf because teachers don't believe they will make any difference or they wind up in the room of a teacher who has political pull but no notion of how to use the materials. Outsiders with potentially useful (and sometimes expensive) expertise are rejected just because they are outsiders.

Social demoralization also means that communicating the simplest information accurately is difficult even when no one is deliberately sabotaging the flow of information. People read things into messages that were never intended. In environments like this, programs which are inherently complex may operate at an extra disadvantage. The sheer complexity of the program may militate against the development and communication of an accurate shared understanding of what the program is about, all the more so in high schools where size and departmentalization further frustrate communications. This has been a problem for both the Coalition of Essential Schools and Comer schools. Essential Schools have found that staff members in a given school may have significantly different understanding of what the program does. In Chicago, Comer facilitators comment frequently on the number of people who still say they don't understand the program even after years of exposure.

A climate of distrust also contributes to one of the most frustrating characteristics of these institutions: their inability to learn from experience. What does it mean when a school has implemented 10 or 15 different programs within the space of a few years - not unusual numbers at all- none of which have gone particularly well- and continues to implement more programs in ways which reflect little or no learning from the previous attempts? Why doesn't experience count for more? In part, the inability to learn from experience has to do with the lack of time for shared reflection and pooling of information, but even if there were time, distrustful people have difficulty learning from one another. Some teachers in bottom-tier schools consistently produce better student outcomes than their peers. In more rational social environments, people would be able to learn from that and build on it.

Inadequate social infrastructure may also mean that inner city schools are distinctively personality-driven institutions. In socially chaotic environments, strong personalities may find a kind of leverage not available in more structured environments. Suburban schools have plenty of staff personality problems of their own but it is a reasonable hypothesis that the lack of structure in urban schools leaves them particularly vulnerable to strong, aggressive personalities. That is, given a weak professional culture, inadequate evaluation of personnel, protectionist unions and dauntingly complex procedures for disciplining uncooperative teachers (Chicago Tribune Staff, 1988, pp. 61-85; Vander Weele, 1994, pp. 61-74), there are fewer institutional constraints on individual behavior than one might find elsewhere. Thus, the constellation of personalities associated with a particular reform effort may be a more critical predictor of how implementation will fare.

We want to stress the emotional toll exacted by demoralized environments. People become a little touchy, egos become more fragile. Schools "can, indeed, should be regarded as emotional arenas" (Fineman 1993, p.10) and, in the inner city, as arenas of constant emotional edginess. One year an experienced, deeply concerned teacher coordinates several programs and participates on a number of committees. The next year, she does none of that. Asked why, she explains that she had her "feelings hurt" by a principal who "is constantly telling people what they are not doing." She told the principal to find someone else to coordinate programs. An observer coming into contact with her the second year would write her off as another disengaged teacher. The emotional culture of schools is such that is extremely unlikely that the offended party will ever explain her wounded feelings outside of her clique, whim means nothing can be done about them, even if someone were so inclined. What was most likely an oversight by an overworked principal alienates a valuable staff member. The weak social webbing of bottom-tier schools makes it difficult for the schools to use resources from the outside but it also degrades the human resources already there. In the toughest schools, change agents would be well- advised to proceed as if operating in a place suffering from collective depression.

Even those attempts at school improvement that find a way to cope with the social morass may not be able to avoid the snares of "Building-Level Politics," the second major category in Table I. Sarason quotes one teacher as saying 'In schools, no good idea ever goes anywhere; it gets buried in endless discussion and power plays that make you sorry you ever got involved in the first place. (1996, p. 336) The tendency for the decision-making process to be corrupted by the desire of those in power to hold on to it and augment it may be nearly universal but, again, may be especially salient in inner city schools. In wealthier schools, again, political considerations are likely to be offset to some degree by a higher level of professional consensus, by a greater availability of resources (and thus less need to fight over who gets what), by a more even distribution of social capital among actors and by more stable power arrangements. Where restraints are less evident, any reform has potential for destabilizing distributions of power, prestige and privilege. Someone gets more resources, someone gets fewer. Whether the reform takes root depends in part on whether someone negotiates those politics. Principals, for example, can hardly be faulted if they want to put people they can depend upon in charge of a new initiative but in conflicted buildings, any program run by one of the principal's pets will be given a wide berth by other teachers.

Nationally, from the mid-1980s through the mid -1990s many of the most popular reform models involved some form of decentralization of decision- making, including Chicago school reform in its initial phase. In retrospect, it is clear that researchers and policymakers, once again, oversold a model they only half understood. In practice, schools often found they still had little control over some of the things that mattered most to them- union contracts, fiscal policy and curriculum. (Hill, Pierce and Guthrie, 1997) Even when that is not true, there are real difficulties at the building level. Teachers don't necessarily want democratic involvement in the way that reformers shape it. They may find that sharing in decision-making means too much time, too many meetings with ill-defined outcomes. Teachers clearly want to have a sense that they are listened to on the issues they care about but they don't necessarily equate that with formal involvement in a shared decision-making process designed by outsiders. (Malen, Ogawa and Kranz, 1992; Wohlstetter and Mohrman, 1994).

On the other hand, principals in demoralized schools know perfectly well that some of the people being invited to share power are going to use it in vindictive and disruptive ways, at least at first. Small wonder that many principals go through a stage of democratic pretense during which they mouth the rhetoric of sharing power while in fact finding a variety of ways to control what actually happens, reinforcing staff skepticism about reform rhetoric.

We have seen enough cases where schools have had real success in, sharing power to know that if schools can work through the difficulties, sharing decision -making really can help move schools to a higher level of functioning. Many reform efforts, though, greatly underestimate the difficulty that bottom- tier schools are likely to have working through the problems. This is a specific case of the more general problems of reformers trying to put something into a school without thinking about the structure of power in schools. By far the saddest cases are not those where a school is doing a poor job of implementing some trendy model of school governance but those where no one has much power to get anything done, where the various factions and interest groups exist in a state of permanent checkmate.

Turning to the table's third category, Instructional Capacity, we might say that reformers also greatly underestimate the salience of what Anyon (1997) calls the "degraded professional culture" that inner city schools can develop, one crucial aspect of which involves teachers' collective beliefs about their own ability to have an impact on children. In our toughest schools, the model teacher belief is that by the time students start school, the great majority of them have already been so damaged that only a handful can be saved; thus, it doesn't matter what teachers do. (e.g., Anyon, 1997; Chicago Tribune Staff, 1988; Lipman, 1998; Gouldner, 1978) With luck and hard work, teachers say, some of them can learn some basic skills, but the kind of conceptual, abstract learning that many reformers advocate is out of the question altogether. This is an

ideology in the sense that teachers are clearly invested in the idea of the ineducability of most children and the apathy of their parents, so much so that when teachers encounter evidence to the contrary there is a predisposition to reject it. (Kohl, 1967; Rosenfeld, 1971) Within the context of school reform, teachers may try new methods, but they do so with the same old attitudes.

We don't fully understand the ways in which negative attitudes and poor teaching skills reinforce one another but there is no doubt that the skills of urban teachers are problematic. In 1999, 48 percent of Chicago principals said lack of knowledge and skills among teachers were at least "somewhat of a roadblock" to school improvement and we can safely assume that such teachers are clustered in the poorest schools. (Martinez, 2001) Whatever deficits teachers have are unlikely to be fixed by professional interaction with colleagues. In a 1997 survey, 68 percent of teachers said they get meaningful feedback from a colleague less than once a month; 25 percent reported they had never visited a colleague's classroom. (Duffrin, 1998).

Urban principals have not been known for their skills at instructional supervision, and in Chicago reform hasn't changed that (yet). Principals who haven't been comfortable supervising traditional instruction are being asked to lead the implementation of all kinds of new, often more complicated, instructional initiatives. Principals claim with much justice that the other things they are required to do leave them with little time for classroom supervision, but other factors seem to play a role - fear of confrontation with individual teachers or with the union, a sense that such classroom observations don't really do any good, a lack of confidence among some principals in their own instructional skills (i.e., a weak sense of principal agency). Richard Elmore concludes that research on administrators shows that "direct involvement in instruction is among the least-frequent activities performed by administrators of any kind at any level and those who do engage in instructional leadership activities on a consistent basis are a relatively small proportion of the total administrative force." (Elmore, 1999, p. 11)

The universal answer to problems of instruction is staff development, this despite the fact that as ordinarily done, it nearly universally fails, probably the best testimony to the inability of the profession to learn from experience. Miller (1995) has argued, that there is a new consensus emerging about the nature of effective professional development. Among other things, it should be responsive to teacher-identified needs, be school-based and built into basic school operations and not another add-on, be content-rich, be on-going and help teachers develop a theoretical understanding of their work. (See also King and Newman, 2000; Lee, Smith, and Newman, 2001; McDiarmid, 1999) In fact, what Edward Joyner of the Comer Project calls "drive-by" staff development still seems to be the modal type of development in troubled schools. One study of four urban districts found that "the traditional model- short-term passive activities with limited follow-up- was still common, even though teachers generally found such training boring and irrelevant." (Miller, 1995, p. 2) As much as 90% of what teachers "learn" in such activities is quickly forgotten. In a 1999 Chicago survey, over two-thirds of elementary teachers and almost 80 percent of high school teachers found the professional development at their schools to be of minimal, low or moderate quality. (Martinez, 2001)

One of the things that make it difficult for schools to concentrate on the core issues of teaching and learning is the class of problems Table 1 labels "Environmental Turbulence," all those things in the institutional environment that can't be controlled from the building level, from protectionist unions to the unfunded and often unclear mandates that rain down from Washington, the state legislature and the local district, mandates which, from the viewpoint of building leaders, often have a dubious relationship to education. Like the weather, the only thing certain about such mandates is that they will soon change, if only because the leadership of city systems is so unstable, the average tenure of a superintendent being about three years. Policy normally changes with every change in the superintendent's office, but, from the viewpoint of reformers, it may be even more important that personnel ordinarily gets reshuffled, so that reformers who have managed to develop effective working relationships with key middle managers repeatedly find those relationships disrupted.

The pace at which superintendents try to implement reforms is staggering, almost as if, knowing they are not long for this mortal world, they decide to try everything they can think of while they have their shot. One study of 57 urban districts found that between 1992 and 1995 the typical district launched 12 significant initiatives, which averages a new reform every three months, a rate of change that better-resourced and better-organized institutions wouldn't even contemplate. "The great irony of school reform," says the study's author, "is that the sheer amount of activity impedes the ability of schools to improve." (Hess, 1998, p. 27).

In one survey, about 30% of Chicago principals felt that their priorities were in tension with those of central office (Smylie, 1998) but central administrations may not be able to adequately support even those reforms they themselves initiate, let alone those that come from the bottom up. The problem runs deeper than limited resources or even limited professional capacity. Intellectually, central administrators may be fully committed to a set of reforms but their own occupational culture may make it difficult for them to effectively support those reforms, decentralized decision-making being the easiest case to illustrate. It should be easier to implement such models well in situations where people value collegiality and collaboration as ends in themselves and have a certain tolerance for democratic ambiguity. Those hardly seem to be the values dominating the occupational culture of most central offices, where the core values seem to have more to do with respect for hierarchy, predictability, cronyism and procedure (Rogers 1969). Good intentions notwithstanding, the culture of central administrations may consistently lead them to act in ways that undercut the programs they are trying to support.

Much of what Table I lists under "Structure of Support" is at least implied by some of the problems above, but everything here takes on such importance as to be worth discussing separately. Change agents in bottom-tier schools learn very quickly what a precious resource time is in an environment where all the key people are trying to do too much with too little. The leadership spends so much time responding to the crisis of the moment, that it can be very difficult for them to find time to reflect even informally on what is going on. Schools adopting new programs typically have a very murky understanding of how much time it takes to do them well- and the proponents of new programs are often unable or unwilling to give schools realistic expectations about time commitments.

All apart from the way central administrations proliferate new initiatives, in Chicago where schools have considerable programmatic autonomy, individual schools are trying to push change at a pace that doesn't make sense for their level of organizational development. It is not at all remarkable for a school with no track record of successful implementation to be trying to implement 3 or 4 new instructional programs simultaneously. In the early years of school reform,

Chicago foundations encouraged reform organizations to grow rapidly. They used to talk about wanting to see some "bang for the buck," a stance most seem to have backed away from now. By the middle '90s, the MacArthur Foundation, which had once been perceived as equating growth with success was letting its grantees know that it was interested in "deep change."

Time pressures are among the many reasons schools find it difficult to do real assessment of the programs they are implementing, even if someone else is doing the data-gathering. The Consortium on Chicago School Research has produced very revealing profiles on most of the city's schools but even in some of those schools where the social atmosphere does not prevent assessment, the leadership does not have time to wade through thick research reports. Many reform programs now are aware of the need to encourage teacher buy-in but that turns out to be more difficult than it looks. Some programs - the Algebra Project, Accelerated Schools - require that teachers vote before the programs come into a school. Even so, a few strong personalities may unduly influence the voting or the principal may have twisted arms or teachers may agree to a program only to learn that they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. A traditional math teacher may get very excited by a training on inquiry-based math but not be able to really understand what the transition entails until they've tried it for a substantial period of

time. Bob Moses of the Algebra Project thinks that it takes a year of exposure before a teacher can make a really informed decision about buying-in. As a part of that process, it is very useful for teachers about to implement a new program to have substantial contact - preferably including classroom visits - with other teachers who have implemented the same program recently. In practice, urban principals rarely have the resources, including the substitute teacher support, to make this possible so teachers continue trying to implement programs of which they have a superficial understanding. It's only after they've made an earnest effort to change their teaching that they can understand the cost in terms of extra preparation time, disruption of classroom routines and threats to their sense of intellectual adequacy.

All of the problems mentioned in this part of the table - lack of time, inappropriate pace of change, absence of assessment, false buy-in, role ambiguity - contribute to one of the most important characteristics of bottom-tier schools, their inability to follow-through. A school will set clear priorities at the beginning of the year and then never talk about them again after December; the priorities get lost in the daily shuffle, pushed aside by crisis or by new initiatives. It is instructive that many Chicago schools, after deciding they would have children wear uniforms, had difficulty actually getting that done. The idea of uniforms was normally met with considerable enthusiasm by parents, teachers and administrators. It's a policy that requires no extra resources and no professional skill. It doesn't challenge the core beliefs of any important constituency. It does require the adults in a school-community be able to collectively follow through on something they've agreed to. The fact that something that appears to be so simple to do turns out to be difficult for some schools speaks volumes about the level of organizational development we have. We need not be surprised if they struggle with cooperative learning.

Implementation As a Learning Process

This very partial - very partial-listing of obstacles should be enough to remind us that the problems of urban schools are multidimensional, intertwined and over-determined. The worst schools suffer from deeply rooted cultures of failure and distrust, are politically-conflicted, personality-driven and racially- tense, have difficulty learning from their own experiences, have difficulty communicating internally, have difficulty following through even when they achieve consensus about what to do, have shallow pools of relevant professional skill, unstable staffs, and exist in a larger institutional environment that is itself unstable and ill-equipped to do much more than issue mandates and threats.

If this is the organizational context, we should assume that most program implementations are going to be superficial. There are just too many problems and too few resources. Harried principals are going to work on this for a little while, then that for a little while, unable to give most problems meaningful or sustained attention. Thus, school reform brought Chicago a remarkable outpouring of reform activity, but many schools never get past the outward structures of the reforms they are trying to implement - the committees, the meetings, the materials, the specialized vocabularies. New educational programming is constantly being erected over weak social, political and professional scaffolding. When troubled schools do manage to put something worthwhile in place, we have to be skeptical about how long they will be able to hang on to it.

The last point should be amplified. As Chicago schools begin to experience some success, they are learning how fragile it is. The Chicago Comer program has learned that even when schools develop high-functioning teams, they may not be able to sustain them, often because of personnel changes. Other schools are finding that teachers who experience success with a given instructional program do not necessarily want to go back to that program the next year. Nationally, the Coalition for Essential Schools has found that even when teachers have invested a great deal of effort into transforming their f- teaching style "by the third, fourth or fifth year a lot of teachers slowly started reverting back to their traditional ways of teaching." They also find their efforts undermined by high turnover among administrators. (Viadero ,1994) Dr. Comer feels that at least a third of Comer schools make gains but then have difficulty sustaining them. (See also

Muncey and McQuillen, 1996 and Payne, 1984, pp. 59- 67.) We have a very adequate basis for expecting that our toughest schools will have as much trouble sustaining successful initiatives as they do establishing them. Reformers typically expect that once teachers have had some success using new methods, they will buy into those methods. That now looks naive. If schools continue to improve, positive synergies may develop at some point, but they seem to take longer than most of us supposed. These schools have been failing for so long that little bits and pieces of success don't immediately take root.

Table 1 may also suggest ways for contrasting the strengths and limitations of various models of reform. All of the major reform models address some of the important issues raised by the table. If we take the chart as guide, Comer is certainly right to stress the salience of social climate; Total Quality Management is right to stress the managerial and administrative deficits of schools; the Coalition for Essential Schools is right in its critique of schools as lacking intellectual coherence. On the other hand, none of them fully anticipate the realities of low-capacity schools. Comer has never had a clear curricular component or method for supporting teachers in the classroom; TQM and the Coalition both seem to consistently underestimate the social and political implications of their work. Most models have what Paul Hill calls "zones of wishful thinking," areas of predictable problems that go unaddressed. (Olson, 1997) Blind spots don't mean that programs can't be effective. There are thousands of "medium-bad" schools where there is enough infrastructure in place that the focus provided by a reform model, the energy provided by its proponents, may be enough to help. In the hardest schools, though, failure to anticipate the lack of capacity will consistently prevent anything real from being implemented, unless leadership on the ground is somehow able to compensate.

Right now, we can only make rough guesses about the success rate of different models but the little we do know is suggestive. Ted Sizer says that his biggest disappointment is the small number of schools that have broken through. Giboney (1994), a sympathetic observer, isn't sure that by 1993 any of the Coalition's schools had achieved thorough, whole school reform, despite many cases of excellent work in some part of the school. His standards may be too stringent but Sarason (1996) comes to essentially the same conclusion, partly on the basis of the detailed ethnographic work of Muncey and McQuillen (1996), who note that all of the change efforts they studied contributed to "increased political contentiousness within faculties and between teachers and administrators." Given the literature we have right now, it's not clear that even 10% of the implementations in urban areas have produced sustained change in schools by any of the usual measures.

As originally conceived, the Essential Schools model may have been an especially difficult model for dysfunctional schools. On the one hand, urban schools in the Coalition have adopted some good policies -lower teacher- student ratios, more reading and writing requirements, more active learning activities and generally higher standards. On the other, the Coalition has traditionally not had a clear model of implementation. Giboney (1994) thinks the major weakness in the Coalition's approach is that "it severely underestimates the quality and depth of supportive education that teachers, administrators, school board members, and key community leaders require to mount and sustain their fundamental reform initiative;" the support offered is "too thin and too superficial." (pp. 68,70; see also Sarason, 1998, p. 100) The lack of a support structure was deliberate to some degree. According to Muncey and McQuillen, "the Coalition central staff does not offer member schools a model or even a starting point for change but rather emphasizes local control and autonomy." (p. 8) While it is easy to appreciate the philosophical basis for that position, in the inner city it can be an invitation to disaster. Some schools have enough leadership talent -d other infrastructure to make something out of the vision but in general one would think that bottom-tier schools need a great deal more support in the early stages, and without it, even if they start moving in positive directions, they are especially likely to founder, which seems to be what is happening. More recently, the Coalition has been very actively in the process of re-examining its implementation style and is putting more emphasis on making a "coach" available to schools.

Comer (1997) has expressed some frustration with the fact that, in his opinion, after three years "only" a third of the schools he works with are demonstrating significant gains. If that is accurate, it is probably quite good, considering. As compared to the Coalition, the Comer program has a fairly clear implementation process. The facilitator gives it an on-site person with a deep understanding of the program who can help problem-solve. In some districts, facilitators clearly speak with the authority of the district superintendent, giving them substantial leverage. In the early phases of implementation, much of their problem-solving has to do with social and political issues. There is also the team structure, with pretty elaborate guidelines for how teams ought to operate and a series of New Haven-based trainings for building and district leaders. They offer some follow-up support nationally, but that is clearly one of the weaker areas of implementation and the program has begun working out a series of partnerships with universities under which the universities will be able to offer some of that support. The curriculum component is still evolving. The mode of implementation is not static but there is a clear framework of implementation in place.

Other programs go well beyond a general framework. Early childhood reading programs - Reading Recovery, Reading One on One, Success for All- seem to be among the most replicable programs we have, and some of them have very precisely articulated implementation procedures. Success for All (Madden et al., 1993; Slavin, Madden, Dolan and Wasik, 1995; Progrow 1998), for example, was operating in 1,500 schools by the 1999-2000 school year. It has its own reading curriculum featuring both phonics and literature-based instruction along with cooperative learning. Student progress is assessed frequently. Weaker readers have tutors, certified teachers given additional training by the program. There is an on-going staff development program that conforms in some respects to what we know about good development. A family support team offers parenting education programs, tries to get parents more involved in school and helps solve problems concerning individual students. All of this is overseen by a facilitator who is at least half-time, who supports teachers, coordinates the various program components and generally troubleshoots. I think of this as representing the opposite end of the spectrum from early versions of Essential Schools. The program comes with curriculum, pedagogy, new staff roles, professional development, social supports and lots of trouble-shooting capacity. It imports so much infrastructure of its own that the organizational and cultural weaknesses of schools matter less.

In contrast, most of the well-known urban reform models, even those led by experienced and dedicated people, assume more social and organizational infrastructure than exist in fact in the bottom-tier schools and most programs continue to learn that by butting up against it. Comer and Sizer have both indicated that they initially underestimated the difficulty of making real change. Noting that it took eleven years longer than he expected to reach certain program goals, Comer explains "We did not anticipate the multiple and complex problems we encountered in and beyond schools." (Comer, 1997, P. 72) Similarly, Sizer, reflecting on 12 years of reform work, says "I was aware that it would be hard, but I was not aware on how hard it would be, how weak the incentives would be, how fierce the opposition would be." He now has a finer appreciation of the salience of school culture and governance. (Miller, 1996, P. 4)

In a sense, it ought not be possible for anyone to underestimate the difficulty of changing schools. The record of institutional intransigence, for schools in general and urban schools in particular, is ample. "The history of education during the 1960s and 1970s is replete with examples of superior curriculum and instructional programs, developed in and for urban schools, that were rejected one by one by urban school cultures in favor of more traditional approaches." Even when schools were changed, "Transformed schools do not have long lifespans. They appear on the scene, bloom, and rather quickly revert to the old school culture." (Parish and Aquila, 1996, p. 303) In 1965, Lawrence Cremin argued that one promising reform after another failed because we were not developing a teaching force capable of the kind of pedagogy reform requires. In 1971, Seymour Sarason (1996 [1971]), cautioned that we should expect little or nothing from school reform efforts because reformers so consistently failed to understand schools as organizations

with their own cultures and their own power arrangements. In a recent retrospective, he notes that for fifteen years, he kept a file of letters from people who had mounted failed reform efforts. One of the strongest themes in those letters was that reformers "had vastly underestimated the force of existing power relationships and had vastly overestimated the willingness of school personnel to confront the implications of those relationships." (1996, p. 340) Even before Sarason, David Rogers (1969) produced a thorough analysis of leadership in the public schools of New York and its profound inability to promote positive change. Some years later, Berman and McLaughlin (1978) studied nearly 300 federally-funded educational innovations, concluding that successful implementations were rare, that they had difficulty sustaining their success over a number of years, and that their replication in new sites usually fell short of their performance at their original sites. Again, most of the innovations were in less troubled environments than the inner city. Much Federal spending on educational innovation, the study concluded, was being wasted. A few years later, Larry Cuban (1984) took a detailed look at high school pedagogy and concluded that it has hardly changed over the last century, surviving wave after wave of school reform. (See also Gibboney, 1994.)

We have had plenty of very visible work, pointing to the intractability of schools yet the point seems not to have been adequately appreciated by contemporary reformers, despite the fact that virtually all reformers claim their work is "research-based." It's not clear what they mean by that but they apparently don't mean research on the history of past reforms and their implementations.

Richard Elmore (1996) has revived the discussion in a much discussed article, pointing out that school reforms tend to be either short-lived or shallowly implemented, in part because "curriculum developers proved to be inept and naive in their grasp of the individual and institutional issues of change associated with their reforms. They assumed that a 'good' product would travel into U.S. classrooms on its own merits, without regard to the complex institutional and individual factors that might constrain its ability to do so." (P. 14) Interestingly, with the exception of extensive references to Cuban, Elmore cites little of the history of this discussion and much of the commentary stirred up by Elmore proceeds as if he is saying something new. As Muncey and McQuillen conclude, "research on educational reform often rediscovers the wheel, finding out what has already been learned in previous studies." (p. 288) As much as the schools they are trying to change, the reform community seems to have some institutionalized inability to learn from experience. We should have learned far more than we have from thousands of schools that have been restructured over the last several years. Sarason rightly points out that part of the reason we haven't is that many reformers act as if they don't have anything to learn. Engineers, Sarason points out, think of models as learning devices. You implement a model with the expectation that you will learn from the attempt, not with the expectation that it will "work."

Why should any effort at innovation be expected to be other than a first approximation of what needs to be done? What permits an advocate for such an effort to assume that his conceptual rationale and implementation strategy will not be found wanting in some

important respects when they run up against institutional realities? ...The educational reform movement has been almost totally

unaware that its initial models never should have been regarded as other than just that: first approximations that would be found

wanting in very important respects. On the contrary, each discrete effort at change seemed to assume that its rationale was ~ model, not an initial one that would lead to better ones. (1996, pp. 354-55)

If the educational research and policy-making community were a child, it would be labeled learning disabled. What accounts for the inability of these constituencies to learn from experience? We can only speculate but we would like to mention three possibilities. First, perhaps we need to re-examine the professional culture of school reform groups. It may be that reformers simply come to take their own models too seriously, get too invested in their own ideas to think critically about their implementation. They come to be communities of true believers (Gibboney, 1994, p. 71), forever reassuring themselves of the rightness of their model and sneering at every other model. Secondly, we need to understand the role that pressure from political sources and funding sources plays in encouraging non-reflective implementation. The Coalition of Essential Schools made a decision to expand rapidly because they found that foundations would only take them seriously if they were growing (Muncey and McQuillen, j 1996), a pattern replicated by foundations in Chicago, as we noted earlier. In the current context, rapid expansion makes it less likely than anyone will learn anything from the process.

Finally, we need to take very seriously the possibility that widespread

I disrespect for professional educators reinforces our collective tendency to think simplistically about how change happens. In the Chicago case, groups who could agree on little else had a fairly high degree of consensus that educators were at the root of the city's educational problems. The businessmen who created Chicago's corporate-supported inner city demonstration school and the left-of-center community-based activists who advocated the 1988 reforms were both prone to see the problems in terms of teachers and principals who didn't care, weren't trying, didn't appreciate "good" models of practice. The implication always seemed to be that once ~ come to power, we'll be able to set things to right quickly. We understand now that teachers who reduce their students to j their deficits cannot understand how much potential those students have. Similarly, so long as researchers and reformers reduce educators to niggers- lazy, incompetent and too dumb to recognize a good idea - we are likely to continue forcing underdeveloped reforms on already over-burdened teachers and then blaming those teachers when reforms fail to produce the promised miracles.

Whatever the causes of the failure of reformers to better appreciate the complex causes of failure in inner city schools, the consequences are familiar enough. Reformers develop morally-compelling visions, well-supported with intellectual rationale but under-conceptualized with respect to the day-to-day realities of inner-city schools and how to work through them. The reformers have some early successes, perhaps in smaller schools or in schools where there is particularly good leadership or in situations where the program founder is actively involved in implementation. They sell the vision on the basis of those early successes and expand, probably cheered on by the funding and political establishments. As they go into more schools and tougher schools, they find that their earlier experiences did not fully prepare them for dealing with the array of problems urban schools present. With dozens of schools - or hundreds - they cannot adjust to problems the way they could with two or three. Program results become more mixed. Some of the original success stories start to deteriorate. The same people who encouraged rapid expansion - the policymaking community, the foundations, the media - become disappointed. The intellectual and humanistic premises of reform are called into question. Traditionally, at this juncture, we start off on another cycle of collective despair about inner-city schools.

If we cannot depend on institutional leaders to take seriously the over determination of failure in inner city schools, it is all the more important that building-level leaders do so. There are three points we would like to mention with respect to that. First, we think the analysis here makes it quite clear that a great many inner city schools are trying to do too much at once. Such schools would do well to heed to admonition of Essential Schools to do less but do it better. The current political climate, of course, and the multiple needs of students, encourage the opposite; principals are being pushed into more and more frenetic behavior. In their very important study of the coherence of schools' instructional programs, Newmann" Smith, Allensworth and Bryk (2001) find that, over a three-year period, schools that increased their instructional coherence achieved test

scores that were almost one-fifth of a year of learning higher than when they began. (p. 21). Schools can achieve program coherence in different ways, but not if they are trying to do everything at once. Yet, the authors, note, for very good reasons, principals often feel they must do just that: "Even when principals recognize that their teachers are stretched in too many directions, they seem unable to cut programs, believing strongly that they need all of these extra resources to help the children." (P. 10). As commendable as the motives may be, it becomes a deal with the devil. Doing a lot of good things superficially is unlikely to have real impact on the lives of children.

The discussion here may also imply that the heroic model of urban principalship has run its course and may even be dysfunctional. Many of the most impressively changed schools we have seen have been the product passionate principals who found a way around obstacles, often at great personal cost to themselves. These cases have been important because they show us what is possible but one person is too narrow a basis for sustained, deep change in toxic environments.

The over determination of failure implies a need for multiple leadership.

Although this is in some tension with the last point, perhaps we should start encouraging principals to not just provide leadership but to see developing leadership in others as a core responsibility. That is hardly a small task, but if it doesn't happen somehow much of our best leadership is going to get burned out and the work they've done will be uprooted.

The final point is the most important. Even over determination isn't always determinative. The obstacles notwithstanding, during the nineties, Chicago raised the percentage of its elementary school children reading at or above grade level from 23% to 35% and reduced the percentage reading in the nation's bottom quartile from 46% to 28%, despite the fact that the student population became more impoverished. If that is less than various reform camps anticipated, it is enough to offer hope that schools are giving a few more children each year a chance to lead productive lives. The record of reform over the last 15 years counsels great caution, but not despair. Pessimism, as Du Bois wrote, is cowardice.