

Managing the Reform: Racing to the Top

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When I first considered writing this article, I focused very narrowly on THE REFORM (Race to the Top)! I nearly fell into the trap of pursuing a target without stopping to examine what this really meant. Then I remembered, I was a student of change management. After all, my doctoral advisor at U Mass, Amherst, was Kenneth Blanchard. If you know anything about Dr. Blanchard's work, he is one of the leading national consultants on leadership and change management. That's when it hit me! Much of my study and work experience centered on change management, as did my dissertation. This reform is all about CHANGE! Yet, I hear little about the notion of change as it relates to it. I have experienced the change challenge with a significant innovation, and I know the success or failure that may result. More than this, I must acknowledge, it's been a long time since real change has haunted American education. Perhaps, it's time for educators to examine the nature of managing change with all its challenges and possible pitfalls. There is more value in this than merely following prescriptions. Having gotten change off my mind, let's look at THE REFORM.

Current education reform has gripped nearly all states from east to west. While it contains multiple dimensions, the central focus is on accountability, both teacher and principal. Let's hope that reform accountability with its central focus on the educator doesn't forget the student. However, at its base are Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The focus of this initiative is to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare students for college and the workforce. In addition, Achieve, one of the most influential education policy organizations in the nation led by governors and business leaders, is a prominent voice for the concept of "college and career readiness for all students" and education standards.

A significant element of the accountability is assessment, which factors into the ultimate rating of a teacher and principal's effectiveness. To assist in this part of the reform, consortia have been established on both coasts. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, better known by its acronym PARCC, is a 22-state consortium working together to develop next-generation K-12 assessments in English and math. PARCC assessments will be implemented in NYS in 2014. That is the plan. PARCC's next-generation assessment system is to provide students, educators, policymakers, and the public with the tools needed to identify whether students from grade 3 through high school are on track for postsecondary success. Where gaps may exist, PARCC will examine how they can be addressed well before students enter college or the workforce. Again, that is the plan.

Therefore, managing the reform begins with understanding it. That, in and of itself, may be a Herculean effort because the literature about this reform is immense. Information in the reform pipeline is thick enough to choke the channel. However, what needs to be known may be acquired rather rapidly, and perhaps superficially, from state and national sources. While components of the reform exist in various education institutions, a facsimile or prototype of the entire reform may yet be realized. Why might this be so? Well, let's look at the magnitude of the reform and the challenge of managing it.

In reviewing system capacity, a district and/or school must examine all the components that need to be developed and managed within the educational enterprise. Said another way, this is comparable to an extreme makeover or to quote a saying, "It's like redesigning a 747 in-flight." Unlike a corporation that may send its executives to a think-tank to plan for change, our schools are functioning entities that cannot stop! This reform will not work using the business model. Please remember, in education we are not producing widgets! Therefore, the extent and nature of the change should inform the manner in which it is put forth. Anything is possible, if given the TIME and RESOURCES. But, beware. If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.

Realistically, what does a listing of the reform components look like? Below are key components, some of which need to be negotiated between the district and union.

1. Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
2. New state assessments aligned with the CCSS
3. New or modified curriculum aligned with the CCSS and text/material base
4. New assessments (e.g., baseline, interim, and summative) aligned with the CCSS
5. Student-centered, data reporting system with item-specific data analysis
6. Professional learning
7. Establishing student learning objectives (SLOs) from data
8. Selection of observational criteria
9. Establishing an observational system with calendar and feedback
10. System monitoring with interventions

From a change management perspective, each component needs to have its implementation plan, which may, of course, be integrated with the other components. However, an attempt to implement the entire system in a holistic manner is absolutely daunting, if not unreasonable or impossible.

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Core beliefs about leading change begin with the notion that organizations don't change until individuals change. Leadership at all levels is required with genuine collaboration and concerns addressed. Collaboration must be based on expanded involvement throughout the change process. In particular, change efforts must build in change capability. At the foundation of all institutional change is the need to address school climate and culture. To a limited extent some aspects of organizational culture exist within some teacher observational criteria.

As school leaders follow the reform mandates, they also need to follow sound reasoning. Where do we begin? My response is the curriculum! It is the education compass that provides the foundation and direction for teaching, learning, and assessment. And, of course, the curriculum must be based on solid research and best of practice, as well as being aligned with the CCSS. For many districts this may require a total overhaul. From my experience, a challenge of this magnitude will take from three to five years. However, access to aligned and tried instructional lessons, episodes, and units would provide teachers with practice and insight as they acquire best ways to teach the new and rigorous shifts in English and math. Also, this is a fine time to introduce educators to Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels in designing lesson plans and assessments.

In addition, an assessment system with both formative and summative dimensions provides a "dip sticking" process to determine in-process growth and challenges. These would be new assessments, which may not be presently available commercially, particularly with the need to reflect the new shifts in English language arts and math. District-developed models may be more applicable than the older, standardized products. Keep in mind that good assessments may function as good learning devices. Therefore, the need for timely data is absolutely critical for curricular modification, professional learning, and academic intervention, along with proof of goodness.

With the touted need for data-driven decision making, it is astounding that school staff does not have access to item-specific information from state testing in grades 3-8 for English language arts and mathematics! These new tests, which must be destroyed after use, could provide tremendous understanding and insight for the educator, student, and parent regarding the new challenges. What is more astounding is that a portion of the measured effectiveness of teachers and principals will be based on the results of these secured assessments! So, that while an educator is to be held responsible for the learning residing within the assessments, the educator is not allowed to know specifically where students had difficulty with any or all items on the test! For this reason many educators and members of the public find it unbelievable that this valuable information is so restricted. Below is a statement from the 2013 Grades 3-8 Common Core English Language Arts and Mathematics Test School Administrator's Manual:

*Test books may not be used for instructional or staff development purposes. Instead, they must either be returned to the *Department contractor using the shipping label provided by the Department or retained securely at the school for one year, then securely destroyed. See the table below for details on which materials to return promptly after scoring has been completed and which to retain securely at the school for one year.*

Destruction of Secure Test Materials

For Secure Destruction: Return immediately to the *Department's Secure Destruction Contractor

All **used** and **unused** English Language Arts and Mathematics Book 1s and Book 2s

All used and unused English Language Arts and Mathematics Book 3s and Book 4s

All unused Mathematics Book 3s

All scoring CDs, including any copies made by schools

All scoring materials printed from CDs

Store Securely in School or District for One Year, Then Securely Destroy

All used English Language Arts Book 3s and Book 4s

All used Mathematics Book 3s

All used answer sheets after their return from the scanning center

**do not send to Pearson, Inc.*

Good assessments are powerful instructional tools. To examine the state's cost for 2013 test development and related school costs for printing scoring materials, substitute teachers, et al., it is quite disturbing to see the waste in not using the assessments to inform learning, instruction, curriculum, and professional learning. The common core is built in a fashion that does not support teaching the test. However, well-constructed test items, aligned with CCSS, can inform all aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment with a diagnostic dimension. Think for a minute, how powerful it would be for classroom teachers to lead their students back through the test just taken in ELA and math to demonstrate how the shifts have changed the way we teach and learn. Why is the state's approach designed to keep us in the dark? And, why is it that a test publisher may field-test items in NYS schools that will be used across the nation? Is current state policy regarding test destruction designed to protect the test publisher? It would appear that way.

Word is out that student scores on the 2013 state testing will demonstrate a serious need for improvement in preparing students to meet the new standards with their increased rigor. So, the unwillingness of state officials to make item-specific information available causes one to wonder why well-intentioned people would implement such bad policy. Was the incredible cost to the state in designing these tests based on the sole purpose to acquire simply a number without the related possibility of helping the schools to improve? The newly designed tests have incredible power of influence to move the change challenge. These are tests that most educators have never experienced, not to mention the challenge they presented to their students. This includes the examination of the shift to authentic text with emphasis on evidence-based learning. As said earlier, the tests need to be reviewed and used instructionally with students to demonstrate the nature of the new shifts and what it will take to prepare students to meet this new challenge.

Leading and managing the reform will rest squarely on new curriculum, new in-district testing, test data for analysis, professional learning, and in-process adjustments and modifications. Beyond these elements, the mandate for systemic observations of educators will certainly assist in the improvement of teaching. However, time and timeliness of observations is proving to be another gigantic challenge for school leaders. A reexamination of current requirements may need to take place, possibly an expansion of selected teacher-leaders who can provide legitimate support within the observational process.

In addition, the use of Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) may prove to be important in improving student performance. The jury is still out regarding the value of such an approach. However, the generation of SLOs without comprehensive analysis of prior and current student performance may result in an exercise in futility. SLOs simply used to focus on moving a percent of students to proficiency miss the original intent, which is to address specific areas of challenge grounded in careful data analysis of student performance. Here is where item-specific state assessment DATA can inform the generation of SLOs in the subsequent school year. Also, data analysis and related SLOs should be the basis for professional learning opportunities.

Finally, to manage this enormous change, the reform initiative almost requires the adoption of an APPR management system to derive the benefits of efficiency and powerful on-demand information access by all stakeholders. The need for planning and managing of systemic change is more important than ever if this initiative is to succeed. ●

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