

Defying Gravity: Literacy Reform in Urban Schools

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For the past eight years, I've been working on a collaborative effort with key personnel within the Chicago Public Schools and faculty members from several Chicago-area universities. The project was supported by a grant from the Searle Funds of The Chicago Community Trust. The goal of the project, initially conceptualized by the late Becky Barr in conversations with Terry Mazany and Peggy Mueller from The Trust, was to build capacity in Chicago Public Schools for improving literacy teaching and learning, with a specific emphasis on low-performing schools (ARDDP, 2008). The close collaboration with district leaders was in response to what was seen as the failure of the Annenberg initiative—a multiyear and multimillion-dollar project—to sustain effective practices once the funding period ended.

Having just arrived in Chicago, I was tapped by our dean, Vicki Chou, to lead the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) portion of the new project. Not only had I no school contacts in the city, I'd never been involved in a project of this scope in my career as a literacy instructional researcher. Not surprisingly, I felt that I was in over my head. Many metaphors came to mind as I was preparing this Oscar S. Causey presentation: initially, drowning was at the top of my list! But, I kept gravitating (pardon the pun) to “defying gravity” as the most hopeful and, in fact, the one that best captured my feelings over the project's eight years.

I liked *the idea* that it conveyed, both literally and figuratively. Literally, human beings have been defying gravity for centuries, beginning in the 1780s with the first hot air balloon flight carrying a duck, a sheep, and a rooster, continuing into the turn of the last century with the first manned airplane flight, and ongoing today with routine air travel and maintaining a multi-national space station. Those who defied gravity in the literal sense had a vision of the future where the challenges holding us down were overcome. In Chicago, we defy gravity figuratively when we overcome challenges that hold us back from sustainable, high-quality literacy education for all students.

In 2001, when we began this work, my colleagues and I knew a lot about differences between more and less effective schools, but not much about turning around public, neighborhood, urban schools, working with the existing administration, faculty, and staff members. Over time, I saw that the things I knew and thought might be helpful from 30 years as a researcher studying literacy instruction—strategy instruction, QAR (Question Answer Relationship), Book Club, volunteer teacher networks like the Teachers Learning Collaborative—turned out not to be the things that have mattered most.

It's been a steep learning curve. It started when I learned what it meant to have a pilot project in Chicago schools—I imagined a pilot meant working closely for a year or two in one school, and if successful, scaling to another one or two. When I shared my plan with our dean, Vicki responded, “That's not the way it works in Chicago.” I heard words to that effect repeated over the past eight years. In contrast to my version of a pilot study, my collaborators and I, from the beginning, have worked with at least 10 schools each year. All the schools serve students living in poverty, with over 95% eligible for free or reduced lunch. Each year our project has supported at least 10 principals,

12 literacy coaches, and 360 classroom teachers working with over 8000 students, primarily African American or Latino. What a contrast from where I started—researching the effects of my teaching small groups of randomly assigned fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-graders about QAR (Raphael & Pearson, 1985).

From research I've read about school reform, and based on our own extensive data collection, I stand convinced that if we work together, we *can* create new cultures for schooling and improve opportunities for literacy learning for urban students in high-poverty settings. However, *it takes a focused and sustained effort*. It *requires a team with members who cut across traditional work groups*. And, most of all, *it is fragile*. Gravity—or school failure—can be successfully overcome, at least for a time. But we must be mindful that our efforts can easily and all too quickly come crashing down.

I've organized this paper into four sections. First, I present some background about school reform in literacy. Second, I describe the reform approach, developed by Kathy Au (2005), that my colleagues and I adapted for our work in Chicago. Third, I describe how our work scaling Kathy's approach to Chicago was embedded in a longer history of school reform in the city, what Charles Payne and others (Payne, 2008; Simmons, 2006) have characterized as a play in three acts. Act IV began in fall 2009, marked by the hire of a new superintendent replacing Arne Duncan. The changes this new superintendent is enacting have helped crystallize lessons we've learned, the focus of the fourth section.

BACKGROUND FOR SCHOOL REFORM IN LITERACY

Considering just the contributions of members of our organization to understanding literacy teaching and learning, it is an understatement to assert that we know a great deal. Together, we have created a research-based body of knowledge for high-quality literacy instruction—what to teach, how to teach it, how to prepare teachers to teach it, how to support practicing teachers, and how to monitor our progress. But, despite all that we know, when we look at the results in terms of the achievement gap, it is frustrating. The knowledge we have generated, the programs we have produced, and the coursework we have provided have not closed the gap between our high- and low-achieving students. If history is any indication, this gap is tenacious, and from many indications, is not going away. Its tenacity can be traced to an array of factors.

A number of scholars—David Berliner (2006) and the late Gerald Bracey (2009) among them—point to poverty and all the factors associated with poverty that impact students' ability to learn, such as high stress, poor health and lack of health care, family relations, nutritional quality, exposure to pollutants, and the summer loss that is not seen in students who do not live in poverty. Bracey (2009) argued that simply saying that 'all children can learn' ignores the factors that challenge some children and not others. He pointed to the tendency in the public press to pit the "education establishment"—those of us who recognize that school reform is embedded in this larger context—against those labeled "reformers" by public commentators such as David Brooks in his *New York Times* column on May 7, 2009. "Reformers" view schools as *the* solution to societal improvement. Educators are characterized as part of the problem, when we are simply pointing out that education alone is unlikely to lead to sustainable improvements for all children.

Within this context, we also see solutions recommended that do not address the problems—within and beyond the school boundaries. For example, we've seen demands for rigorous content standards but without accompanying opportunity to learn content associated with the standards, including both allocation of resources and support for *meaningful* professional development. This misuse of standards has been a consistent problem and one unlikely to change based on the newest federal agendas. Glass (2008) points out that requiring rigorous standards can convey the appearance of doing something while not really allocating significant resources where it could make a difference—professional development, better schooling conditions, improving the lives of those living in poverty. How many times have we, in literacy education, seen the push to more rigorous standards and the implementation of new tests? They have not solved the problem in the past and I do not think they are the solution for the future.

A second problem stems from what Newmann, Bryk, and their colleagues (Newmann, Smith, Allenworth, & Bryk, 2001)—along with literacy educators such as Dick Allington (Allington & Walmsley, 1995)—describe as the fallacy of the 'quick fix.' This plays out in various ways in Chicago. For example, we've observed district administrators requiring schools to enact what they call 'quick wins:' implementing quickly what they suggest are 'easy' solutions. I've heard quick wins refer to everything from posting standards on the classroom walls to establishing a leadership team to enacting Writers Workshop to using QAR. Yet, we know there are no quick fixes—if there were, they would have been enacted already.

Further, those items identified as quick fixes—often programs brought in to solve specific problems from discipline to comprehension—end up leading to what Newmann and colleagues have termed Christmas tree schools. In Chicago, a Christmas tree school is one that has amassed many different programs, just like a family might collect many unique ornaments for their tree. Family members needn't worry if new ones fit in with the others. Some may even reflect very different perspectives on holiday decorations.

In a Christmas tree school, like ornaments, each program is separate and stands alone. Unfortunately, what may be great for the Christmas tree is not so good for the school. Newmann and his colleagues argue that instead, a curriculum must be coherent, with consistency within grade levels and progression in depth and complexity across grade levels, building each and every year toward a clear vision of excellent readers and writers. Such coherence is particularly critical for students living in poverty who depend on school for learning. The Chicago Consortium's research has shown curricular coherence is not common in Chicago schools.

In short, these problems drag us down, and solutions such as changing standards, bringing in a new test, specifying national standards, or adopting a new program don't do much to address the challenges.

OUR APPROACH: THE STANDARDS-BASED CHANGE PROCESS

Fortunately, my colleagues and I did not have to start from scratch. Kathy Au, my colleague and friend of many years, had developed an approach to whole-school reform that aligned with The Chicago Community Trust's vision (Au, 2005; Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008). Consistent with The Trust, Kathy had taken the approach of building schools' capacity to engage in reform, helping

each school create its own set of solutions. The process she developed and tested in Hawaii—the Standards Based Change (or SBC) Process—was based on schools’ developing their own coherent curriculum, strategically selecting resources and programs based on their students’ needs (Au, 2005, 2010). The curriculum builds from year to year like a staircase, each step representing a grade level, with stairs that are steep enough to achieve the vision of the graduate, and with no gaps between stairs through which children might fall.

Instead of bringing in programs developed by outsiders to be followed with fidelity, Kathy’s SBC approach uses a change process that could be adapted by insiders within the school to build on strengths and correct weaknesses. Through networks and on-site support, Kathy used a gradual release of responsibility model applied to the professional learning of the participating adults—teachers, administrators, and staff.

Kathy and I saw our collaboration as mutually beneficial, and my colleagues in Chicago (such as Susan Goldman) agreed. Scaling Kathy’s approach to Chicago gave us a head start in laying out our scope of work, an obvious benefit. In turn, Kathy believed that Chicago would provide a rigorous test of the approach in a very different context, and the opportunity to extend the work in what we all hoped would be interesting ways. Our 8-year collaboration on school literacy reform spans the 10th and 3rd largest districts in the United States, with schools from the highest poverty settings to the most affluent, and using conventional to language immersion curricula. Our work builds on a long history of research on school reform in general and literacy in particular.

SCHOOL REFORM RESEARCH BASE

When I first started reading about school reform, I was reminded of Sheila Valencia and Karen Wixson’s NRC 2001 review of research on policy and literacy—they found that the two areas barely intersected, with scholars in each publishing in almost totally different venues and participating in completely separate organizations. For school reform researchers, the *subject area* of the reform is almost incidental; in turn, literacy researchers certainly recognize that our work is nested within classrooms, grade-level teams, schools, and districts—the very focus of school reform researchers, but for us, the reform itself is not an emphasis—witness the lack of a chapter on school reform in literacy in any of the first three volumes of the *Handbook of Reading Research*.

As we moved deeper into the project, we read the literature on school reform extensively. Eventually Kathy and I teamed with Barbara Taylor to create the first chapter on this topic for the upcoming fourth volume of the *Handbook of Reading Research*. Barbara, Kathy, and I used three categories to distinguish the research literature on school reform. The earliest and probably most extensive body of research is that on *effective schools*, addressing the question, “What distinguishes effective from unsuccessful schools?” (e.g., Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983). The second category contains studies of *curriculum reform*. This research focuses on promoting coherence through the adoption or implementation of defined programs or organizational frameworks. Examples include Comprehensive School Reform programs like *Success for All* and *America’s Choice* (e.g., Borman, Slavin, et al., 2007; CPRE, 2002). The third and most recent category emphasizes reform through professional development—how to move unsuccessful schools to become successful, effective sites for literacy teaching and learning (e.g., Au, 2005;

Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Rush, 2004; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003, 2005).

Effective Schools Research

Effective schools research identifies features that distinguish successful from failing schools: (1) strong principal leadership, (2) high expectations for teachers and students, (3) teaching emphasis on cognitive development and warmth toward students, (4) teach choice in approaches, (5) teacher-developed tests and teacher judgment, and (6) students' self-efficacy, all brought about through policy, changes in teachers knowledge and practices, and changes in leadership approaches and school organization. But, while the features may be clear, this body of research was not designed to, and thus, could not demonstrate how these features could be developed in sites where they did not exist. Further, Purkey and Smith (1983, p. 439), in their review of effective schools research, noted that "it is one thing to demand that all schools be effective; it is an entirely different matter to assume . . . that what has positive effects in one setting will invariably have the same effects in another." In fact, in studies of the effect of Michigan's changing policies to improve literacy teaching and learning, Dutro, Wixson, and their colleagues (Dutro, Fix, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002) demonstrated that enacting policies does not unequivocally, nor uniformly, change practice in desired directions.

Curriculum Driven Reform

The second section of our review, on curriculum-based reform, found that the Comprehensive School Reform initiatives had both strengths and weaknesses (CPRE, 2002). These programs do provide stability, are relatively easy to implement, and have built-in accountability. But, even when gains are demonstrated in student achievement levels, students who had been at low levels tend to remain below national norms. Further, sustainability is a problem—even initially strong implementation tends to deteriorate over time, which Linda Darling-Hammond (2003) hypothesizes may be due to lack of teacher ownership. The programs lack flexibility, and this reduces the ability of the program to adapt to particular needs of schools, teachers, and students.

Professional Development-Driven Reform

The effective schools and curriculum reform research gave us the pieces of the puzzle, but it was in this third category, reform based in professional development, that researchers focused on determining how these various pieces come together. Research in this area includes those studies conducted by Jim Mosenthal and Marge Lipson's (Lipson, et al., 2004; Mosenthal, Lipson, Mekkelsen, & Thompson, 2003; Mosenthal, Lipson, Torncello, et al., 2004) studies in Vermont, Barbara Taylor and David Pearson's within the Beat the Odds studies of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (Taylor, et al., 2003, 2005), Kathy Au's work in Hawaii (Au, 2005, 2010), Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey's in San Diego (Fisher & Frey, 2007), and Stuart McNaughton (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, et al., 2009; McNaughton, MacDonald, Amituanai-Toloa, et al., 2006), and Helen Timperly and Judy Parr's in New Zealand (Timperly & Parr, 2007). All of these projects focused on how to move unsuccessful schools to become successful, effective sites for literacy teaching and learning, and all focused primarily on professional development.

These literacy researchers confirmed and extended existing research unpacking challenges faced by schools attempting reform—problems Payne (2008) outlines so powerfully in his book, *So Much Reform; So Little Change*. Across these studies, researchers asked:

1. How can you scale what worked in one setting to others, whether very similar or significantly different? and
2. How can you move a school that does not have the characteristics of effective schools to develop what it needs to become successful?

The data from studies that have attempted to address these questions suggest the importance of six features. First, external partners provided some of the professional development on effective literacy curriculum and instruction. Second, schools developed school-based learning communities. Third, within this community, professional learning was ongoing, deliberate, and well planned. Fourth, there was an emphasis on reflection on practice to inform instructional change. Fifth, professional learning was tailored to schools' unique needs, and sixth, there was an emphasis on ongoing learning for literacy leaders.

SCHOOL REFORM IN CHICAGO

Chicago, one of the most researched districts in the nation, has engaged in reform since 1987. I begin with some demographics to give you a feel of the city's school district, and then describe the acts that frame the reform focus (Payne, 2008; Simmons, 2006) and influence what happens today.

In terms of demographics—the sheer scale of the school district is mind-boggling when I think about the level of support needed for effective reform. It *is* the third largest district in the country with 482 elementary schools and 122 high schools. In Chicago, elementary is defined as pre-K through eighth grades. Elementary schools enroll nearly 242,000 students, 45% of whom are African American, 41% Latino, with the remaining 12% White, Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American. Eighty-five percent of the students are from low-income families. The district employs over 23,000 teachers—one-third of whom are African American, almost half White, and 15% Latino. For the 2009-2010 school year, its budget exceeded 4 billion dollars (Chicago Public Schools, 2009).

Reform in Three Acts

As described in accounts of school reform in Chicago (e.g., Payne, 2008; Simmons, 2006), Act I of Chicago's school reform—the 1980s through 1994—was the era of *decentralization*. The era established 12-member Local School Councils: 6 parents, 2 community members, 2 teachers, the principal, and a student. The Local School Council legacy remains today. This first Act raised the need for school accountability; however, only about a third of the schools benefited from increased local control. Many of those that did not were in low-income areas with parents and community members lacking the skill set needed to make informed decisions about school practices, position hires, and so forth.

Act II, orchestrated by the 1995 mayoral appointee, Superintendent Paul Vallas, (now head of the New Orleans schools), was known as the era of accountability. Vallas' accountability reform left a legacy, which includes high-stakes testing and threats of school closure if students are consistently low performing.

Act III began in 2001, led by Barbara Eason-Watkins following Arne Duncan's appointment as superintendent. This act focused on curriculum and instructional support within the district, "the synthesis—leadership that comes in talking the language of human-capital development and instruction and organizational transparency" (Payne, 2008, p. 13). This is where most of our project was situated between 2002 and 2009.

Act IV: The Current Context

Act IV began in spring 2009, led by Ron Huberman—a former policeman, then the Chicago mayor's Chief of Staff, and most recently, head of the Chicago Transit Authority—who is now our superintendent. His approach is grounded in Performance Management Review, using hard evidence of student achievement from our state's achievement test, the ISAT. Unfortunately, like many of the state tests, the ISAT overestimates students' achievement levels when compared to the national assessment (NAEP, 2009). As Valencia (personal communication, e-mail November 2009) has noted, "depending on a single measure ... is problematic, and there is good reason to worry about relying on only a high-stakes state test, especially one that reports significantly more kids at proficient level that does the NAEP." Our project is completing its final academic year (2009-2010), as Huberman does not believe The Chicago Community Trust-sponsored effort and district collaboration with area university literacy faculty align with district needs. So, perhaps we should not be surprised at what Payne (2008, p. 4) has had to say about school reform. "After a couple of decades of being energetically reformed, most schools, especially the bottom-tier schools, and most school systems seem to be pretty much the same kind of organizations they were at the beginning."

As I mentioned earlier, during Act III we began our work with the first 10 participating Chicago schools. Since we believe that higher expectations are necessary, but not sufficient, our reform effort focuses on addressing those factors that facilitate and those that can impede what it takes to meet higher expectations.

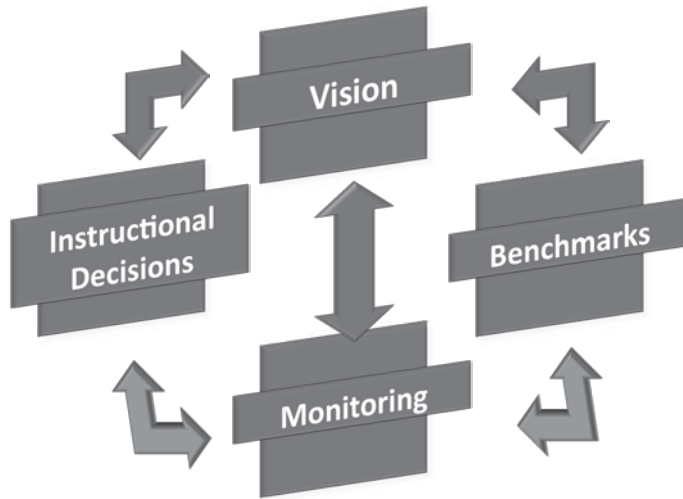
ENACTING THE STANDARDS-BASED CHANGE PROCESS IN CHICAGO

Our approach consists of: (1) the Standards-Based Change Process for guiding schools in their reform effort, (2) a set of dimensions that schools must address, and (3) progress levels that can be used to identify components of the process to focus on in a given academic year.

The Process

Conceptually, the process is simple and straightforward. All members of the school's professional community—administrators, teachers, and other staff—collaborate to construct a vision of their excellent graduating reader or writer—this vision is the top of the staircase. With the overall goal in place, each grade level or school subject team constructs its end-of-year goals or benchmarks, in effect its step on the staircase to the vision of the graduate. The benchmarks capture each group's responsible contribution to student progress. The teams then develop common assessments to form a monitoring system for tracking students' progress and informing instructional decisions throughout the year. Progress and instructional decisions are shared with the whole school at the beginning, the middle, and end of the school year to inform school-wide planning, identify issues, and examine progress (Au, et al., 2008).

Figure 1. Standards-Based Change Process “To Do Cycle”

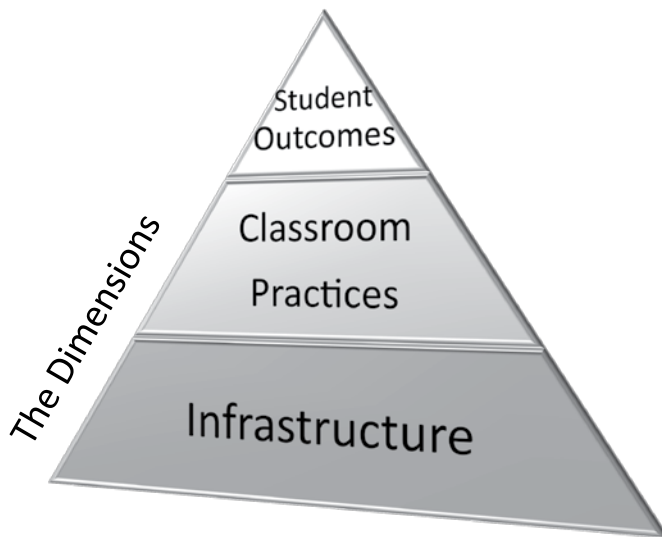


The Dimensions

To do this work effectively, schools focus on the core dimensions critical to sustainable change (Raphael, et al., 2009). Figure 2 conveys the relationship among the essential areas of infrastructure, classroom practices, and student outcomes.

First, schools construct an infrastructure that includes attending to the way the school is organized for collaborative work, the administrative and curriculum leadership to support the work, the professional learning community and relevant work teams, and the quality and coherence of

Figure 2. Dimensions for Successful School Change



in-school professional development. With this foundation in place they can focus on the form, quality, and coherence of their classroom practices—assessment, instruction, and curriculum resources—for improving literacy teaching and learning. Student outcomes focus on both student engagement and achievement.

The Seven-Level Model

Documentation across schools in both Hawaii and Chicago helped us refine Kathy's original model of school progress. Kathy, Susan Goldman, and I described the seven-level Developmental Model of school change in our chapter in Jim Hoffman & Yetta Goodman's edited book published by Routledge (Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2009). In the chapter, we describe the three phases of research that led to its construction.

The first phase began with Kathy's research in schools in Hawaii (Au, 2005) that detailed four levels that capture schools' progress beginning with their work through the To Do Cycle conveyed in Figure 1. The second phase began when we scaled the Standards-Based Change (SBC) Process to Chicago. Over a period of 3 years, we observed, interviewed participants, videotaped, and gathered artifacts of our school's attempts to engage in the SBC Process. Together with colleagues from the other Chicago-area university projects (ARDDP, 2005), we identified a set of indicators that conveyed what schools needed to put into place (i.e., the infrastructure) before they could begin to sustain the reform activities required for creating a coherent literacy curriculum (i.e., the To Do Cycle). As a result of what we learned from the second phase of research, we expanded the original SBC Process developmental model (Au, 2005) to its current seven-level version.

In the third phase of our research, we worked with principals, literacy coaches, and teachers in Hawaii and Chicago to test and establish the construct validity of the model. The seven levels frame what the staff members work on to create and use what Kathy termed the school's Staircase Literacy Curriculum. The levels are: (a) recognizing the need for change, (b) organizing for change, (c) working on the building blocks, (d) pulling the whole school together, (e) sharing results, implementing the staircase curriculum, and (f) engaging students and families (Au, 2010). Schools with few or no leaders and/or staff who see any need for change or those that do not believe that curricular change is possible in their schools (e.g., too many discipline problems to consider work on curriculum, despair that their school may be closed no matter what they do) are not placed on the developmental continuum and thus appear as a "0" in school ratings. Data from initial needs assessments from 27 schools working on literacy reform revealed that urban schools like ours in Chicago tend to start 1 to 2 levels below those in suburban and small-town settings on their overall ratings (scale from 0–7) across the dimensions (Urban Schools [n=12]: 1.58; Rural [n=2]: 2.00; Suburban/Small Town [n=13]: 2.75).

For a more detailed window into the developmental model, I describe four of the levels in terms of what educators say and do, and how our staff supports them within each level. *Emerging Schools* are working on Levels 1 and 2; *Aspiring Schools* are working on Levels 3 and 4; *Progressing Schools* are working on Levels 5 and 6; *Inspiring Schools* are working at Level 7.

Emerging schools. Educators in Level 1 schools make comments such as, "What we are doing isn't working," "I don't know what to do," and even, "This will be too much work." They work mostly on infrastructure: a first-time literacy coach who is learning about her position and how to be effective; establishing a leadership team that for the first time has teacher representatives on it. And

critically important, the principal is often learning what it means to lead in a more constructivist way, take a more active role as an instructional leader, and learn new ways of engaging with his or her staff.

Overall, these educators are working to establish a new culture in the school emphasizing teacher voice, ownership, and responsibility for instructional decisions. They are overcoming less productive approaches, such as requiring teachers to faithfully follow the many programs adopted for the school. Blaming the students if they didn't succeed, with little to no reflection about using evidence to guide needed adjustments in their own classroom practices. Our support for these schools focused on guiding infrastructure development and helping the participants learn how to be effective in new roles.

Aspiring schools. Educators in schools at the Aspiring levels tend to ask questions about improving their infrastructure and working as a whole school community, such as, "How do we make the leadership team more effective" and "Does our vision of the graduating reader represent the highest levels of achievement?" They are starting to use their infrastructure to develop their components of the SBC Process, from vision of the graduate through the monitoring system. Adjacent grade levels are particularly focused on alignment between the end-of-year expectations at one grade level and the beginning of the year expectations at the next. Our professional development support focuses on knowledge building about the SBC Process, about literacy, and about leadership strategies.

Progressing schools. Comments from educators in schools at Progressing levels focus on the need for more time, examples, and specific strategies as they work to make their benchmarks and monitoring system components more rigorous. They are using their infrastructure and systems to monitor students' progress and use this information to adjust classroom practices. Grade level and disciplinary subject teams are active within their groups and across the whole-school sharing sessions. They focus on both within grade level team and vertical curriculum alignment. Professional development support at these levels focuses on rigor for benchmark alignment, monitoring system components, and instructional decision-making based on student data. At Level 6, teacher ownership of the curriculum is established and stable.

Inspiring schools. In Chicago, no school has yet reached Level 7, although schools from suburbs and small towns in Hawaii have. Comments from educators in these schools reflect their sense of independence and control (e.g., "We manage to balance our own goals and district mandates.") and their satisfaction with their work environment (e.g., "I love my job! We are a great faculty."). Educators focus on reflection and revision, and involving parents in their children's learning. While these efforts begin earlier in the process, they are formalized at Level 7 through student portfolios, students leading parent conferences, and so forth. Support for Level 7 schools emphasizes student portfolios and helping bring teachers new to the school up to speed.

SCALING THE STANDARDS-BASED CHANGE PROCESS TO CHICAGO

As should now be clear, it takes a team working together to bring these changes about. From UIC, core team members included Kate Weber, MariAnne George, Susan Goldman, Erin Koning, Jackie Popp, Mary Pat Sullivan, Shelby Cosner, and Kay Fujiyoshi. Also on the core team was Susan

McMahon from National Louis University. Over three dozen other educators have contributed to the work. Staff has changed as graduate students completed their degrees and moved into academic positions or moved onto different projects, while various representatives from CPS have worked with us as interns or liaisons from the district curriculum and school services offices.

Though we were funded primarily as a service project, we had a small amount of support for documentation, justified because it provided critical information to inform next steps and improve our service to the schools. In any given year 10–14 of us engaged in service and documentation activities.

We used Kathy's SBC Process approach (Au, 2005) because of its potential to address problems related to instructional practices in Chicago. Researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, formerly headed by Tony Bryk (now at Carnegie), had found that too frequently the same topics were being taught year after year, without appropriate development in content, depth, or complexity. Instructional tasks focused primarily on review and repetition, rather than reasoning, thinking, or problem solving. And, faculty members neither shared in the overall conception of their schools' instructional program, nor had a clear sense of their own responsibilities for students' progress. Three foci of the SBC Process directly address these issues: development of a coherent, shared, school-wide vision of the graduating student; vertical alignment of the curriculum; and the use of evidence of student progress in instructional planning and decision making.

Thus, knowledge building was key to our capacity-building charge. We worked in two primary sites. First, we organized monthly network meetings for participants in key roles: principals, literacy coaches, and teacher leaders. These meetings focused on developing knowledge of the SBC Process, of literacy, and of leadership. Second, we worked on-site in each school, collaborating with literacy coaches, supporting the leadership team and grade-level meetings, and providing or co-leading professional development sessions on restructured and professional development days.

When we began working with our schools, we found fairly consistent patterns of: (1) low student performance on standardized tests, (2) school infrastructures that reflected a top-down system emphasizing delivery of district mandates, (3) professional development comprised of one-shot workshops, (4) infrequent grade-level team meetings or none at all, and (5) non-functioning or non-existent leadership teams. Many of these schools had not been particularly interested in the reform aspect of the work, but joined the project for some of the resources it provided to their schools (e.g., a half-time literacy coach). However, in the latter four years of the project, as schools discontinued and new schools joined the project, we have seen a specific desire on a key school leaders' part to work with the SBC Process to improve their students' literacy achievement.

Over eight years, we have worked with 30 schools, continuing to average about 10 a year; with variation in how long any one school participated, from 1 to 8 years. Figure 3 provides a snapshot of schools per year, looking vertically. Looking horizontally lays out the length of time with each individual school. The number in each cell indicates school's level on the SBC Process Developmental Model for that year, with a few schools joining the project but without engaging in the reform activities indicated with a '0.' All school names are pseudonyms.

Our project has had three funding cycles, each with a slightly different goal. The first two years—the lightest shading on the chart—focused primarily on adaptations of Kathy's approach for urban schools; learning for example, about our schools' need to begin with a strong and

comprehensive focus on infrastructure. The second cycle—the middle years on the chart—involved elaborating on how to best guide schools through the SBC activities within the relevant levels. In the third cycle, the district’s Area structure became very relevant. Each Area, headed at the time by

Figure 3. Chart of School Participation

School	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Saylor			2	3	4	4	5	5
Denver				1	2	4	4.67	5.33
Chambers				1	1.67	2	4	5
Somerset	1	2	2	3	4	4	2.67	2.67
London	2	3	4	4.67	4.67			
Weldon	1	1.67	2	2	0			
Reid			1	1.67	2	2.67	2.67	
Sheffield				2	2	2	2	
Barnes	0	1	1.33					
Damon	0	0	0					
Parsons	0	1	3					
Renalde	1	2	2					
Temple	0	0	0					
Williams	1	1	1					
Nexus	1	2				2		
Newman				1	1			
Piper				0				
Sears				0				
Danbury						2	2	3.33
Britt						1	1	2.67
Mulberry						1.67	2.67	3.33
Melville						2	2.33	2.67
Hartley						1	2	3.33
McMac						2	2	
Farmer						1	2	3.33
Tarrington						0	0	
Helms						0	0	
Pine							2	3
Avery							2	3
Jeffrey							2	2

Figure 4. Data Streams

Interviews	Classroom Visits	Professional Development Events	School Updates
22 Literacy Coordinator: Interviews (n = 76)	Classroom observations (n = 60)	Whole School Data Sharing (i.e., “Gallery Walks”) 3 times per year (n = 90)	Initial Analysis of School (i.e., Needs Assessments) (n = 10) Annual School Reports, 2006 – 2007) (n = 20)
292 Teachers: Interviews (n = 72) Surveys (n = 248)	Partnership READ Environmental Snapshot: 2 times / year 2004 – 2008; all schools, all classrooms (n = 2000)		Network Monthly Seminars: (1) principals, (2) literacy coaches, (3) “Fellows” (i.e., selected teachers): 8 each per year X 5 years (principals, teachers) and 7 years (literacy coaches)
19 Principals: Interviews (n = 66)			Monthly updates for each school during staff and documentation meetings.

the Area Instructional Officer, consists of about 30 schools. Schools receive support from Area staff like the Reading and the Math Coaches. In this cycle of work, we were asked to scale up within the Area, working with Area staff in anticipation of turning the initiative over to the district as the Trust scaled back on their support.

We used four primary data streams, and as Figure 4 suggests, our biggest challenge has been data reduction with 8 years of data within and across these different streams.

We analyzed data using primarily qualitative methods, with quantitative used as appropriate. Qualitative methods applied follow conventions of constant comparative methods; within, then across data streams depending on the question addressed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Overall, we created an audit trail of data analyses conducted by small teams (2-4 people) from the project staff (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Each team constructed thick descriptions laying out the overall themes identified within their data stream. Each team engaged in multiple passes through their data set to: (a) compare/define emerging categories within data streams, (b) analyze the degree of support, and (c) identify non-examples. Teams then met for cross-team data analyses to: (a) compare/contrast categories across streams, (b) define school progress levels across time, and (c) examine role enactment across time within and across roles.

We used quantitative lenses to examine trends and patterns in data sets such as a teacher survey, and the ISAT data. For teacher survey data, we used frequency counts and simple t-tests where appropriate; while for all students for whom we had permission, we examined trends in achievement. For students, we focused on trend data within schools across years, using students' scores on the ISAT, because in Chicago that remains the gold standard. We first examined patterns of students' achievement for each school participating during 2008-2009, tracking the percentage of students over four years who met or exceeded expectations for their grade level. This analysis included students who may or may not have been present during the four years, however, as it used publicly available group data from the state Web site, rather than individual student data from each school. While the trends were generally positive—the longer the school worked with the SBC Process, the more improvement was visible in their ISAT schools, we were curious as to whether the trend would be reduced or magnified if we controlled for the students' actual presence during the time the school engaged with the SBC Process, since mobility rates for students were rather high. In a single year, student turnover in participating schools ranged from 11.1% to almost 24%; over four years mobility rates within a single cohort of students ranged from 25% to 36%.

Because of limited resources, we could not obtain the individual student data for all schools, so selected two that represented the demographics of schools in the larger pool for further examination. For these two schools (Saylor, Denver), we identified students who were present during the period of time that the SBC Process was used in the school. Those students in grades 3 through 5 for the first year of the school's engagement with the SBC Process formed the cohort that was then tracked using their ISAT scores each year for a total of four years, at the end of which the cohort of students were in middle school, grades 6 through 8.

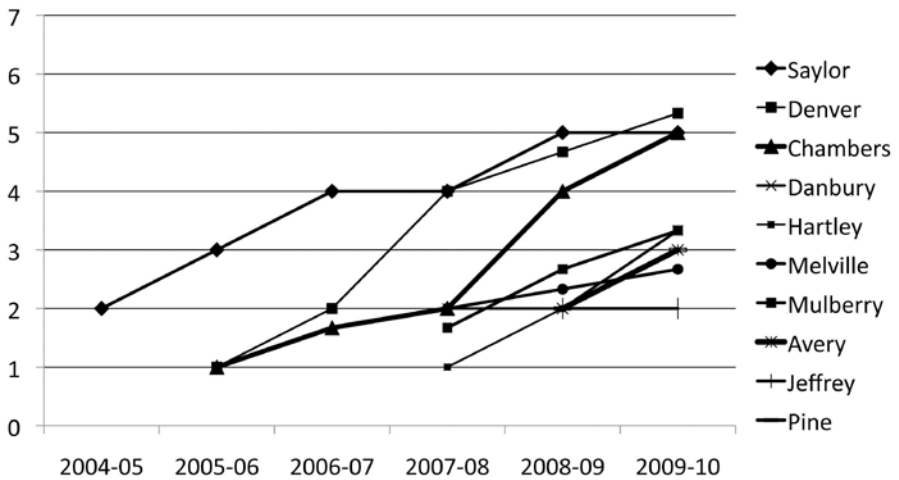
What We Learned

As I've noted above, we derived three key findings from the data: it can be done, it takes a team, but it's fragile. I will discuss each, in turn.

It can be done: school progress. Analysis of our data streams indicates that literacy reform efforts in urban schools can help schools move from lower to higher levels of success looking at school progress and at student achievement levels. To examine school progress, we tracked individual schools on their movement through the SBC Process 7-Level Developmental Model. To examine students' achievement, we used the percentage of students meeting or exceeding grade level expectations based on ISAT scores.

Despite all the challenges that faced our schools, about one-third of our schools experienced steady growth across years reflected in their rise in levels on the developmental model for the SBC Process (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. School Progress: Continuing Schools

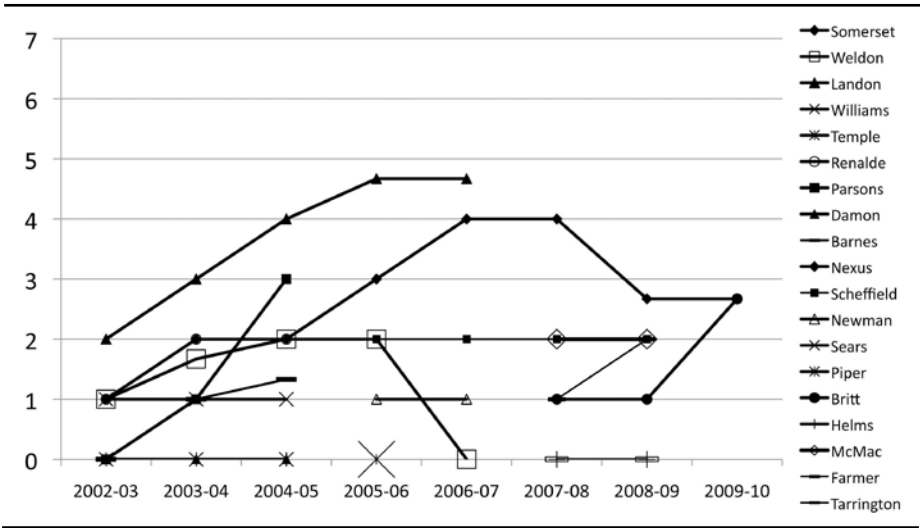


Note that for individual schools, specific patterns of growth across the levels varied. Some schools show steady progress each year, moving through the development of their infrastructure to working through the To Do Cycle, to sharing their results and analyzing student evidence for trends and patterns within and across grade levels. No Chicago schools have yet to begin Level 6 work, constructing their grade level's curriculum guides and developing a system for mentoring new teachers though several are on track to do so in the coming year.

However, steady progress was not characteristic for two-thirds of the schools that discontinued their activities within the project after a few months to a few years of efforts.

We have identified four primary causes for school attrition, visible in varying combinations within each school. First, there are failures in school leadership (e.g., a principal who defined his job as bringing the most possible programs to his school; a literacy coach who told us, with pride, that she would be hard to work with; literacy coaches who described having no support within their schools). Some schools are rated at the 0 level, as they actually never really began to participate in any way other than superficially (e.g., assigning someone in the school to attend network seminar meetings, accepting the funds for a literacy coach but assigning them to duties outside the realm of

Figure 6. School Progress: Schools that Discontinued



literacy work, such as substituting for absent teachers or lunchroom duties). Others show a flat line at lower levels on the developmental model (e.g., multiple years at Level 1).

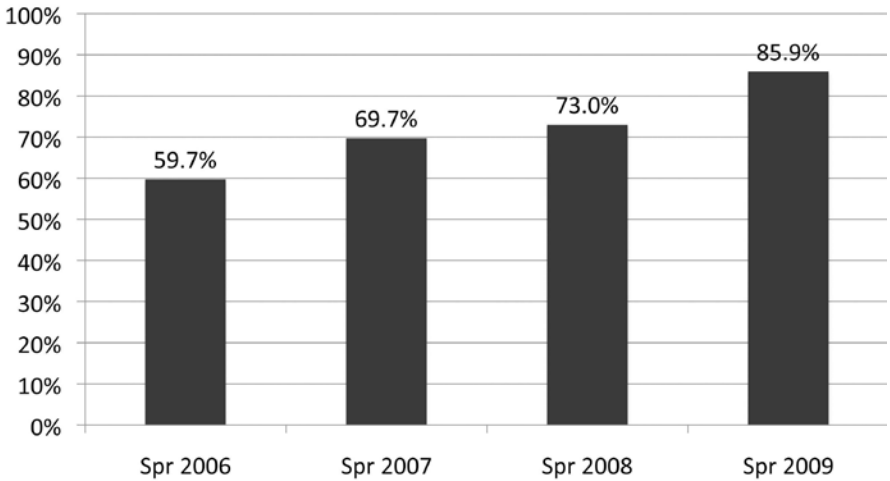
Second, there are the ever-present competing mandates (e.g., schools that want to continue but find themselves at odds with their Area leaders; schools who want to continue but in the end, decide to follow the dictates of an adopted basal reading program or a required set of district- or area-mandated assessments). Such schools show patterns of growth followed by decline in level of progress. Third, over the course of the eight years, our project has had shifting priorities impacting funding for individual schools. For example, some schools were making progress but lost funding for key personnel to lead the initiative in the Area Scale Up year, since they were located in Areas no longer within the UIC project’s boundaries. Their progress lines look similar to those who ended because of shifting mandates described above.

Fourth, some schools were simply dysfunctional, with such fundamental problems that they were unable to see their way to focusing on curriculum (e.g., severe discipline problems, likelihood of school closure, extensive distrust among the staff). These schools had patterns that typically showed initial growth as an infrastructure was created, but little to no progress thereafter as the infrastructure was not able to be used to support collaborative work groups and existed primarily on paper.

It can be done: student progress. I turn now to student achievement and our cohort analysis, drawing on findings from two of our schools, Saylor and Denver, represented by the first two lines in Figure 5. The bar graphs on Figures 7 and 8 represent the achievement gains of a cohort of students from each school—both PreK through 8th grades—over the four most recent years of their work with us. Saylor is one of the largest elementary schools in Illinois, with just under 2000 students. Denver is one of the smallest ones. The two schools represent the demographic populations of the district. Within each school’s graph, each bar represents the same students as they move through from intermediate grades to middle school.

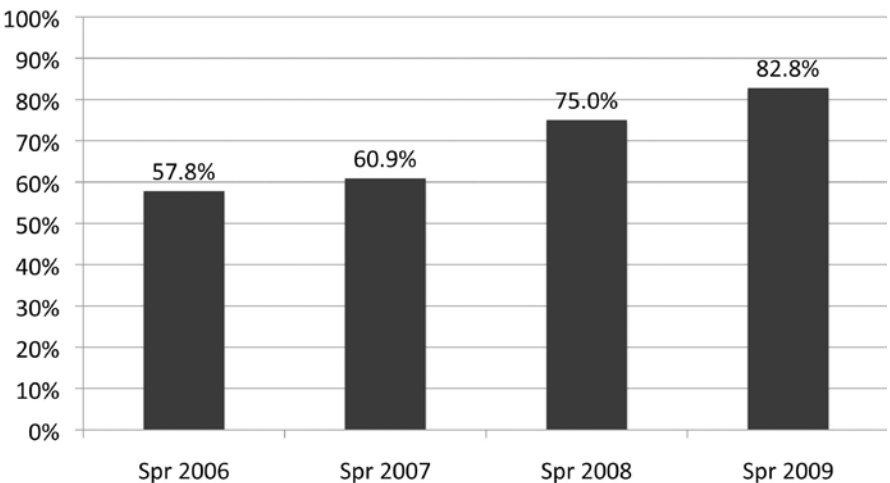
Figure 7 shows the progress of Saylor School’s students across four years, beginning when students were in intermediate grades, 3 through 5. Prior to working with us (not pictured on the graph), less than half (46.5%) of Saylor’s students were meeting or exceeding expectations.

Figure 7. Cohort Analysis: Saylor



By Spring 2006, they had already experienced one bump up, with almost 60% of the intermediate grade cohort meeting or exceeding expectations. Four years later, in Spring 2009, almost 86% of the students in this same group, now in middle school, grades 6 through 8, were meeting or exceeding expectations. A similar pattern is seen in Denver’s cohort analysis, a pattern that Kathy also saw in her work in Hawaii as reported in her 2005 *Journal of Literacy Research* article.

Figure 8. Cohort Analysis: Denver



It takes a team. The second major area of findings relates to the critical importance of the team—within the school, and between the school and the external partner—us. Quotes from interviews and comments made in reflective journals reflect differences in the nature of the collaborative environment in the emerging and progressing schools. Teachers in emerging schools, for example, saw grade-level teams as wasted time and felt they lacked voice in school policies and decisions. The following entry into one teachers' reflective journal was typical,

"Teachers in my grade level team do not feel that we have a voice in what the meetings should be about. We are not asked what we would like in the agenda and our meetings are led by either the principal or reading coach. Due to this, we as teachers dread to be in the meetings and have a negative attitude when we have our grade level meetings." (Fellow Reflective Journal, 11/5/08)

AND

"I have been in countless grade level meetings when I have felt like there has been a large amount of wasted time. Instead of discussing ideas related to instruction and curriculum, much time is focused on less important topics like where should we hold the eighth grade luncheon?" (Fellow Reflective Journal, 11/5/08)

Literacy coaches note a lack of coherence in the work, consistent with findings from the Chicago Consortium researchers. They saw a need to come together, but efforts to do so had not yet come to fruition. This is reflected in a principal's description of "a significant divide in teachers" (Interview, 9/08).

In contrast, comments made by educators in progressing schools reflect the functioning infrastructure and progress toward teacher and student ownership and responsibility for high-quality literacy teaching and learning. For example, a teacher from Saylor noted that:

"Teamwork is key at Saylor. Since our staff is so large, meeting with our grade level teams help us to give everyone a chance to have their voice heard. It also allows us to communicate our ideas and reflect on our instruction and assessment. This teamwork allows teachers to take ownership of their ideas, count on one another, as well as to achieve goals." (Fellow Reflective Journal, 11/5/08)

And from Denver, a teacher wrote in his reflective journal,

"Through our weekly grade cluster meetings, we are able to co-construct agendas that are meaningful and directed to our needs as a learning community. There are a handful of people anyone can turn to in the building when they are in need of additional help or support. They include fellow colleagues, administrators, and ancillary staff. No one person is given the role or title of leader at our school; rather it invokes an ethos of shared responsibility where professionalism is respected and expertise is invited to be shared." (Fellow Reflective Journal, 11/5/08)

Similarly, literacy coaches and principals value the collaborative professional community focused on insuring students achieve at high levels (Weber, Raphael, Goldman, Sullivan, & George, 2010). And while all are concerned about the state test, the language in these schools focuses on their vision of the excellent reader and writer graduating from their school.

Success is fragile. And, like successfully defying gravity, we know that success is fragile. In this article, I hope to have underscored the extensive collaboration among schools and between schools and the university partners. Given limitations of time and space, I didn't even touch on the collaboration among the partner universities (e.g., National Louis University, Roosevelt University), The Chicago Community Trust project officers, and the Area- and District-level personnel. Throughout our project, the emphasis has been on ownership at every level—from the Trust's mandate that our projects all focus on capacity building, not dependence; to our work with schools engaging parents, students, and the community. Our approach emphasizes schools' responsibility and power to devise solutions to their problems, scaffolding educators at different levels as they engage the whole staff in this effort. We emphasize rigor in working toward goals of high levels of literacy, including attention to the allocation of resources to support the unique needs of each school and the individuals within.

Summer 2009 marked the end of Act III and its emphasis on curriculum and instruction at the district level. It marked the end of a collaborative relationship that valued district-university partnerships toward improving literacy teaching and learning in the district. It has been replaced by a return to decentralization—this time at the Area level. The emphasis is on accountability through performance management review from the district to Area to individual schools. The district's curriculum offices have been largely dismantled. The Area Instruction Officer position no longer exists. It became the Chief Area Officer—the removal of Instruction from the title quite deliberate.

We are no longer collecting data from our schools or the Area, so I turn now to simply sharing my own personal experiences. Admittedly, in the midst of change it is difficult to bring a neutral, analytic eye to interpret what I am seeing. Thus, I would be the first to say it is too early to tell the impact these changes and resulting approaches may have. I share with you three different approaches I have observed in conversations with Chief Area Officers and school personnel.

One Area is beginning what the Chief Area Officer (CAO) sees as the start a 10-year plan that emphasizes attention from birth through high school. The Officer is explicit in emphasizing the importance of and support for high-quality teaching, the involvement of local community organizations, and building a technology infrastructure. Throughout the document, we find an emphasis on the construct of developing talent, resonating with The Trust's and our commitment to building capacity. This CAO is using what is called within the district a "vendor approach" where each school may select from a pool of identified service providers to support their efforts to improve.

A second Chief Area Officer is drawing on the logic of building a *team theory of action*. The Area team—consisting of the Chief and staff members such as the Area math and literacy coaches—has visited every school within their Area, gathering information to inform the Area action plan. The plan addresses three components. The first is improving each school's core instructional program. The Area's action plan promotes instruction based in standards, a foundational set of instructional strategies (e.g., scaffolded instruction, models of differentiation), and attention to instructional time and materials. The second is improving the school's system for professional development, which includes helping school leaders establish their own theories of action for their schools and developing related plans for improvement. The third component is improving school environments from better access to technology to a consistent approach to behavior issues. If

designed appropriately, the Area Officer believes these action plans will result in much-needed gains in literacy, language acquisition, and learning of school subjects such as science.

In a third Area, following visits to each of the Area schools, the Chief Area Officer distributed a checklist of expectations to all principals, including items such as posting class schedule and standards addressed; lesson plans opened to current lesson; guided reading, shared reading, active word walls, writing journals, workshop approach: folders or notebooks, workshop approach: teacher-made charts; some prompt writing. The principals, in turn, have shared the checklist with their staff, with the explanation that items on the checklist must be in place by March 1. In some cases, principals were told that if these items are not in place, the principal will be fired and the school will move into what is called 'turnaround.' This means that the school can be taken over by the Area, the principal and staff replaced, and new approaches enacted, ranging from changes to programs to redistricting. One principal has been removed as warned.

The opposite of the Standards-Based Change Process—as well as the approaches enacted in the first two Areas I described—is to treat all schools the same, present goals and standards without looking at support needed to achieve them, and use a transmission model for delivery without interpretation, construction, or adaptation of the process. This is what the research literature suggests we have been defying in large urban districts...this is not unusual—it's how it has always been. But when we see signs of this returning in *our* district and in some of the Areas we have worked with over the years, we see the fragility of school reform.

CONCLUSION

What do I take away from this experience as a literacy researcher primarily focused on instruction? First, I believe sustainable school reform requires working with a unit that is neither too small nor too large, but just right. For sustainable reform—reform that is desperately needed in many urban schools serving children who depend on them totally for their education, my thinking has changed—I now believe that the classroom or the teacher unit is just too small. For years I believed in 'going with the goers'—insuring that students at least get some great years of the best education possible. This is not enough. The district, however—especially when it's as huge as Chicago—is just too large. The right unit to me is the school, ideally with support from its next unit up—the Area in Chicago, perhaps the district in a smaller geographic region. We've seen it can be done, and it can be sustained across years.

Second, I believe it takes a team that involves members both internal and external to the school, working closely together; we saw benefits from working directly with a combination of administrators, curriculum leaders, and teachers. We understand and appreciate the unique role that each group plays, and their unique contributions.

Third, I see the fragility—how quickly a reform effort can simply go away. I remain optimistic for some of our schools—especially those in the first two Areas I described. My observations of schools in the third is that they are currently backtracking—driven by top-down, externally mandated foci and a focus on maintaining their employment or finding another job, rather than continuing their work to improve the school's literacy curriculum.

In closing, decades of instructional research have given us a vision of wonderful classrooms—children who can think creatively, respect one other, and so forth. Making these classrooms a reality, especially for children in high-poverty urban schools, won't happen by instructional researchers alone. We have to think more strategically about partnerships, ownership, reaching out to policy-makers, and programs that educate administrators. And while this is challenging, to say the least, it can be done.

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