

Standards-Based Reform and Small Schools of Choice: How Reform Theories Converge in Three Urban Middle Schools

A Research Report

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CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Two Urban Reform Theories in Conception and in Practice	4
Sources and Assumptions of the Two Reform Theories	5
Potential Interactions Between the Two Theories	6
Methods	7
Implementing the Two Reform Theories	8
The First Reform Theory in Action: Establishing Small Schools of Choice	8
Layering on a Second Reform Theory: A Centralized Push for Standards-based Instructional Improvement	10
Why the Reform Theories Coexist	12
Leadership and Organizational Support for Professional Learning	13
A Focus on Knowing Students Well	15
The District’s Approach: Sophistication and Flexibility, with Some Tensions	18
Conclusion	21
Endnotes	25
References	26

ABSTRACT

The convergence of two apparently opposite theories of urban educational reform is analyzed as it occurs in three middle schools in a New York City school district. The first theory, emphasizing small schools of choice, promotes close relationships between students and adults in distinctive school programs. The second—centralized, standards-based instructional improvement—seeks to standardize instruction through demanding curriculum, an emphasis on standard-bearing work, and investment in professional learning. Using in-depth case studies developed over three years, the authors argue that the reform theories complemented one another in this case, but their coexistence varied based on how the schools organized themselves for professional learning, knowing their students well, and taking joint responsibility for learning outcomes. The sophistication and flexibility of the district’s policies facilitated the convergence process. The authors conclude that, although tension producing, the first set of reform ideas can create the conditions in which rich and complex versions of standards-based practice can develop.

INTRODUCTION

Urban school reform strategies diverge sharply over the role that school and district leaders or central offices can play in stimulating, guiding, and supporting substantive changes in teaching and learning. In fashioning these strategies, leaders at both levels struggle with what high-quality teaching in urban settings looks like. Questions center on the locus of authority (how much to encourage and nurture school-level discretion and innovation?), variable capacity (how to accommodate the substantial differences across schools in capacity to realize reform?), and equity (how to ensure all children get served well?). District leaders overseeing schools with substantial inequities, highly varied capacity, and endemic low performance, while functioning within state reform contexts often preoccupied with testing and accountability, not surprisingly lean toward a theory of action with regard to reform that centralizes control and initiative and seeks to assert a clear and compelling theory of instructional improvement. To find at work a classic example of this theory of reform—in which change is driven by strong leadership from the “top” and guided by the district leaders’ explicit theory of learning, instructional improvement, and system change—one need look no further than the dramatic attempts to renew teaching and learning in San Diego (Hightower, 2002).

Interestingly, San Diego’s district-driven reform was led, in part, by Chancellor of Instruction Anthony Alvarado, who earlier in his career had embraced a reform theory that emphasized *differentiation* at the school level. As superintendent of District 4 in New York City during the late 1970s, Alvarado promoted school-level innovation and the creation of “small school” communities, a theory of reform strikingly different from that mentioned above though one thought to be especially good at engaging young children and developing strong teacher and parent commitment to the renewal of teaching and learning. During his tenure in District 4, marvelous examples of powerful urban school communities emerged (Fliegel, 1993; Meier, 1995). But later Alvarado rejected this strategy of “letting a thousand flowers bloom,” on the grounds that not enough of them did bloom. In well publicized work within New York City’s Community District 2, and in what would be a precursor to his San Diego strategy, Alvarado switched gears and opted for an approach designed to promise greater equity, guided by a strong, district-level vision of learning and professional work.

While Alvarado moved on from a strategy that placed great reliance on school-level innovation and differentiation, others have not. Throughout the 1990s, experiments have continued with reform strategies that feature decentralization, choice, and encouragement of initiative in schools (e.g., Henig, 1994; Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 1995; Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Hill, 2002). Such strategies place their faith in the devolution of decision-making authority to the school site, the sharing of decision making among school-level stakeholders, and the benefits of a local-level “market” for good schooling. Central to all these efforts is the assumption that, given discretion and strong incentives, educators can develop innovative, responsive school programs that serve the needs of urban children well.

More recently, reformers have begun to explore a third possibility: hybrid strategies that combine school differentiation *and* strong central leadership. Emerging from a line of thinking that seeks a merger of “top-down” support and “bottom-up” change, such strategies assume that different reform theories have complementary strengths (Fullan, 1994, 2001). An instructive example—and one that is the focus of this study—resides in another of the New York’s Community School Districts, which we refer to hereafter as District M (pseudonym). District M pursues a standards-focused instructional improvement strategy with many resemblances to the San Diego and District 2 approaches, but it also touts a policy emphasizing parental choice among the

District's 14 middle schools, most of which are small alternative schools, reminiscent, indeed, of the thousand flowers approach that Alvarado once championed.

District M's juxtaposition of apparently opposite theories of reform—the development of innovative, small schools of choice versus centralized control for standards-based instructional improvement—raises immediate questions that we attempt to answer in this paper: Can these two seemingly-at-odds reform theories coexist, or do they get in each other's way? In what ways, if any, do the two complement each other? Separately or together, how do they affect instructional practice and the school-level conditions that support teaching and learning? These questions are best answered in the context of the school, for there educators faced with the daily urgencies of educating urban children make sense of the conditions under which they work and forge their own theory-in-practice. These conditions are, in part, a reflection of policies and leadership exercised from outside the school. The ultimate question is whether two such different reform theories can provide mutually supporting conditions for teaching and learning in urban schools.

This paper takes us inside three middle schools within District M to understand, from the schools' vantage points, how the two reform theories converge and interact with one another, to the benefit or detriment of teaching and learning. The schools we describe were studied over three years (1998-2001) in the context of the Study of Policy Environments and the Quality of Teaching, an ongoing investigation conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP).¹ This paper draws together data collected at schools and from the District over that time period.

Our thesis is that the two reform theories (again, the development of innovative, small schools of choice versus centralized instructional improvement) can and do coexist in this instance and, to some extent, complement each other's strengths and, likewise, compensate for weaknesses. Even so, it is clear that, when juxtaposed, these two theories of reform can and do create tensions in the system and, thus, obstacles for educators' work. On the whole, however, we argue that this is a constructive tension.

We unfold our argument in several stages. First, we examine in more detail what the two reform theories presume about instructional improvement and systemic change and consider how each might complement or interfere with one another. Next, we look at how the two reform theories manifest themselves in the district in question by offering brief portraits of the three schools we studied. In this section, we also give examples of how instruction reflects the district's insistence on standards-based practice and evidence that student learning has improved over time. We then explore and discuss reasons why the two reform theories appear to coexist comfortably in this case, yet we note as well difficult-to-resolve tensions that the interaction created. We conclude by offering observations about the meaning of reform convergence in this case and suggest what may be implied for other attempts to combine strong district leadership with school-level discretion and innovation.

TWO URBAN REFORM THEORIES IN CONCEPTION AND PRACTICE

Our analysis concentrates on two sets of ideas about urban school reform that have at their heart the same, or similar, goals—that is, they both aim to provide equitable and high-quality learning experiences to traditionally underserved urban students. But they go about the task in very different ways. The first theory of reform, emphasizing small schools of choice, seeks to capitalize on energies of teachers, students, and parents who form distinct learning communities through voluntary association and collaborative work. The second reform theory, featuring centrally-defined learning standards, professional development, and accountability, places its

bets on clear guidance from authoritative sources, along with supports and incentives for improving learning and teaching performance.

Sources and Assumptions of the Two Reform Theories

The idea of small schools of choice has deep roots in New York City and in the district we studied. With the encouragement of district leaders such as Alvarado (when he was in District 4), innovative school leaders across the City started small schools in the 1970s as alternatives to what they saw as overcrowded, bureaucratized, and failing inner-city schools (Fliegel, 1993; Meier, 1995). As a response to the challenges of urban education, these attempts rested on four interlinked premises.

- *Personalized relationship between teacher and learner.* Central to this theory was the notion that students must be known and appreciated by adults, and this would only happen in settings that ensured extensive contact between learners and teachers, with whom the learners could form lasting relationships.
- *Teacher collaboration in, and ownership of, school design and curriculum.* Teachers would engage learners more deeply, it was assumed, if they participated in creating the curriculum—and indeed, the design of the school as a whole. In this way, this approach to urban schooling sought to tap into teachers' creative energies and their sense of ownership over the work of educating an often-challenging school clientele.
- *Distinctive school character and mission.* By virtue of the teachers' involvement in creating the school curriculum and in order to attract students, the school would develop a distinctive character that reflected a clear and compelling mission.
- *Parental engagement and choice.* At the same time the school would reach out to parents, who often feel alienated from city schools, and attempt to draw them into the school community in various ways. In addition, as alternatives to conventionally organized schools, the school would seek to attract a voluntary clientele, and would only be able to do so if the school offered what parents and students valued; conversely, if they failed to attract "customers," the school would be, appropriately, "out of business."

The theory of action that underlies a strategy emphasizing small schools of choice says little about teaching and learning per se other than to assume that engaged teachers who collaborate in the development of curriculum in relation to a distinctive school mission will likely teach well. Similarly, students who aren't allowed to "slip through the cracks" and who develop relationships with adults in the building are likely to learn more than they otherwise might.

Alongside the first reform theory, a second and very different theory of reform evolved in District M and elsewhere during the 1990s; it addressed more explicitly questions of learning and teaching. At the heart of the second reform theory is active instructional leadership from the district level (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Peterson, 1999; Resnick & Glennan, 2002), wedded to notions of "standards-based reform." The District's efforts aligned with initiatives by both City and state, which were actively promoting high learning standards, associated assessments, and accountability mechanisms since the mid 1990s, in step with a national wave of standards-based reform activity (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995; Fuhrman, 2001). The District's reform strategy features ambitious learning standards, assessments related to these standards, and strict accountability mechanisms that track performance on mandated assessments and other indicators (such as attendance), alongside extensive investment in professional development. The following features characterize currently popular versions of this strategy:

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- *System-wide commitment to high learning standards for all students.* The linchpin of this theory is consensus across the district on the importance of bringing all children to a set of demanding learning standards. These standards make clear the goals for instruction and (through assessments linked to the standards) the desired levels of learning in relation to each.
 - *Priority on foundational, “gateway” subject areas.* By concentrating attention on subjects on which future learning in many subjects depends—especially language arts and, to a lesser extent, mathematics—educators across the district, it is assumed, will be able to maximize their effort at improving essential learning experiences for students.
 - *Investment in teachers’ professional development.* Teachers up to speed in the priority subject areas, the theory holds, need extensive and varied opportunities for professional learning.
 - *Attention to the professional learning of school leaders.* The theory further holds that strong, school-level instructional leadership is essential to realizing and sustaining instructional improvements (Fink & Resnick, 2002). The district is assumed to be in a good position to structure and provide opportunities for school leaders to sharpen their instructional leadership skills.
 - *An emphasis on professional accountability.* Finally, the emphasis on standards, professional development, and instructional leadership communicates a sense of responsibility for improving professional work. District leaders and staff are an essential part of the accountability structure, and all members of the system (school and district) commit to holding each other accountable for their respective roles in helping students learn.

This reform theory rests on a logic that posits a greater role for the district in directing the activities of school-based educators and providing them with support for their work. In short, it presumes that school staff want and need a clear sense of direction and incentives (other than those that originate within the school or in its relationship to a client population).

Potential Interactions Between the Two Theories

The two reform theories converge in schools, where educators approach their work within the conditions created by broadly espoused reform theories and associated actions. This convergence is alive and well in District M’s middle schools, and it is here that we situated our study. As a product of the small schools of choice policy that has been in place in a number of years, each middle school we studied is guided by structures and traditions that have become well established within New York’s small schools movement. At the same time, teachers and leaders within these schools are receiving repeated messages and various forms of support from district leaders aimed at nurturing standards-based practice across the schools. Teachers and other school staff are in a position to integrate, accept, reinterpret, or reject these messages. The net result is the working theories-in-action embodied within the efforts of individuals and groups within the school.

Given the substantial differences between the reform theories, there is a distinct possibility that their two sets of ideas for improving urban education would collide. As an earlier line of research has established, multiple reform programs and policies from the federal level can interfere with one another at the local level (Kimbrough & Hill, 1981). We also know from studies of ambitious state and local reforms implemented in recent years that teachers can find multiple agendas frustrating and confusing (Hatch, 1998, 2002); recent work on the “multiple accountabilities” facing local educators

reinforces the point (Firestone & Shipps, 2003). Teachers embracing the first theory will likely play a critical role in developing the school's curriculum and mission and, in doing so, may run afoul of the common, district-wide instructional improvement mission and curricular priorities pushed by the second reform theory. Similarly, while the first theory encourages schools to become different from one another, the second urges them all to aspire to the same goals and pursue the same or similar practices. The first reform theory leaves the details of teaching and learning up to the school staffs; at the same time, the second gives district leaders a major voice in consideration of these details. The first is likely to encourage a great deal of school-initiated professional development; the second, professional learning experiences designed for teachers across the district.

It is also possible that, within these three schools, the two sets of reform theories simply coexist or even complement each other. Synergistic effects of multiple government programs have been documented (Knapp, Stearns, Turnbull, David, & Peterson, 1991), and, in principle, the school-level activities set in motion by the two reform theories could be compatible with one another. Seen this way, the first set of reform ideas might create a "shell" in which standards-based practices promoted by the second reform theory might develop. By this argument, small, flexible structures that enable teachers to fashion alternative ways of meeting high learning standards, while drawing on the resources of the school and district, might actually enhance the chances that these standards would seep into practice.

Whatever the effects, it is clear that teachers and others in schools are faced with the prospect of sorting out "converging reforms" (Knapp, Bamberg, Ferguson, & Hill, 1998). How the two reforms come together in the minds and practice of school staff and leaders depends on various things, among them, the way the district sends messages about desirable practice, the sophistication of its notions concerning "good" teaching and learning, and the manner in which the school staff receive and interpret them. The interaction between the theories also pertains to how the schools configure themselves to address the problems of daily work; the kinds of staff the schools are able to attract, and the ideas about reform these staff bring to their work. Another crucial element in the teachers' sense making and response—and, indeed, in the overall balance of top-down and bottom-up supports for instructional improvement—is the manner in which district players *engage* the school in matters of teaching and learning. Here, the balance struck by the district between flexibility and directive guidance is likely to influence the interaction of reform theories. Inflexibly or mechanically applied, a standards-focused improvement strategy can surely negate the benefits of differentiated small schools of choice. But carried out with close attention to the strengths and weaknesses of each school, and to the possibility that the schools themselves may be able to realize the district's goals in heretofore unconsidered ways, such an improvement strategy may bear fruit.

METHODS

Over the three years of this study, we visited each of our three schools² three times per year for 3-4 school days each visit. During the site visits we interviewed the principal (2-3 interviews per year), classroom teachers, and other specialized school personnel (between 14 and 23 total interviews per school). We collected field notes in classrooms (between 14 and 33 classroom observations per school) and in other school settings, and we collected a variety of documents including items such as Comprehensive School Plans, test score data, master schedules, and staff rosters, as well as a variety of curriculum artifacts and student work. Simultaneously, time was spent during each of our field visits interviewing district staff, observing their work, and examining a range of documentary evidence assembled by the central office. This data

collection focused on a number of topics—at the school level, predominant patterns of instructional practice, students’ access to content and response to instruction, as well as teachers’ engagement in professional development and instructional planning, the allocation and use of resources in the school, school leadership and organizational issues confronting the school, and the interface with the district central office. To get at patterns of instruction and student response to it, we visited a variety of classrooms and returned repeatedly to a small number so that we could understand how instructional practice evolved over time. At the district level, we concentrated on learning about the reform strategy, the roles and activities of central office personnel (especially those involved in direct work with the schools), the allocation of resources to support reform, and other salient leadership issues confronting the district.

Data analysis was ongoing over the three to four years that the study was conducted. Individual case summaries were developed annually for each school case and for the district case study. The summaries were descriptive in nature and were developed using a common framework (referred to as a data “debrief guide”) based upon constructs that were drawn from the overall CTP Core Study research questions.³ This paper is based upon a cross case analysis of school data and comparisons of those findings with the findings from case analysis of the district level data.

IMPLEMENTING THE TWO REFORMS

In District M, the two reform theories have been implemented sequentially and gradually in such a way that each is realized in daily practice within the schools, with apparent positive effects on student learning. In this section of the paper, we briefly introduce the schools that we studied, providing evidence that the first reform theory (the development of innovative, small schools of choice) is at work in District M. Next, we describe the ways that the second reform theory (the district’s centralized push for standards-based instructional improvement) is playing out in the schools.

The First Reform Theory in Action: Establishing Small Schools of Choice

In the District M case, the innovative, small schools of choice theory preceded the centralized instructional improvement theory. Making a serious effort to institutionalize the premises of a small schools of choice model on a system-wide basis, District M, since the early 1990s, has encouraged and supported the development of small, alternative schools within its boundaries, in part to draw middle-class and white families back into their public schools. In fact, since 1991 small schools have been sanctioned through an official choice policy that operates across all middle schools in the District, whereby all 5th grade students apply by indicating ranked preference for up to four middle schools. District leaders report that approximately 80% of the students are placed in either their first or second choice school. By 1992, 24 schools of choice had been established (Fliegel, 1993), and by 1998, when we began our study, all middle schools in District M were choice schools. The three middle schools on which our research concentrated illustrate the range and unique character of the schools—and the contrasts among them—that have resulted.

The James B. Conant Education Complex (pseudonym) is simultaneously a single school and collection of four semi-autonomous mini-schools under the same roof. Each mini-school acts as a “school of choice,” with its own name, thematically organized academic program, and distinctive student population. The building’s mini-school organization, well established over several decades, helps to preserve the separate identity and largely separate operation of the small programs. In many respects the school is the sum of its parts and no more. Yet there is a constant tension between the parts and the whole that plays out in many aspects of the school’s leadership and

organization, teachers' work, and students' learning experiences. The four mini-schools are housed in a large and significantly overcrowded city school building that is also shared with two other, completely autonomous schools. There are a total of 1,300 students in the building, and each of the two mini-schools that we describe serves about 300 students.

In keeping with District M's choice policy, the students at James B. Conant come from all over the District. The programs draw differentially from more and less affluent sections of the District. As a whole, the student body is relatively poor—about three-quarters of the students receive free- or reduced-price lunch—and comprises predominately students of color (about 86% African American and Latino; 10% White).

The Conant Complex can also be understood as a sharply tracked group of mini-schools, with programs and curricula representing differentiated and stratified tracks. To best reflect the range of what Conant as a school has to offer, we focused our study on its two largest mini-schools—the Alvin Ailey School and the Discovery Institute (both pseudonyms). Alvin Ailey serves mostly African American and/or Latino students who come disproportionately from the northern ends of the District in and near Harlem. In contrast, Discovery Institute (DI) draws the majority of its students from the middle and southern portions of the District, home to a somewhat more affluent population with a larger proportion of White students. Alvin Ailey offers performing arts courses and other arts offerings that attract some talented students, but, overall, it is a rather typical example of a low-performing urban middle school. The Discovery Institute, on the other hand, has a long tradition as a small school of choice that offers a strong science education. It is generally considered a good option for students who have shown strong abilities in math and science during their elementary school years.

Cisneros Middle School (CMS) (pseudonym), the third school in our study, contrasts sharply with both Alvin Ailey and Discovery Institute (and indeed the whole of the Conant Complex). Created 10 years ago under the direction of a strong school leader with a vision of providing academic rigor for bilingual students, the program combines instruction in both Spanish and English in a school atmosphere that values close relationships between students and teachers. Housed on the third floor of a large school building located in a desirable section of the District, space has been a perennial problem for CMS—teachers are often without their own classrooms and the small office serves as office, faculty room, planning room, copy room, and reception area. The school serves approximately 200 students. Nearly all of the students are Latina/o children who typically hear Spanish spoken at home, although the majority of students are English language dominant. All of the students qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch.

The atmosphere at Cisneros Middle School is warm. The emphasis on personal relationships is readily apparent in the students' casual and friendly demeanor. Special organizational attention is paid to classes and activities that foster the family-like tone of the school (such as advisories, Friday Clubs, and weekly whole school community meetings). Simultaneously, the teachers hold high expectations for their students' academic success (especially in the traditionally important content areas of reading, writing, and mathematics), and they function as strict taskmasters. Overall, Cisneros is considered one of the better choice middle schools in the district—particularly for students who would not expect to enter the more accelerated programs.

Parkside Alternative Middle School (pseudonym), the final of our researched schools, has yet another character, emphasizing the restructuring of time and other resources to support both smaller class sizes and increased teacher collaboration. While turnover among the young staff has created some gaps in expertise in areas of classroom

pedagogy and management, the school is characterized by a strong professional culture and high standards for practice. Like Cisneros Middle School, Parkside is nestled on the third floor of a building that also houses an elementary school. It is located at a midpoint in the District between the low-income neighborhoods to the north and the gentrified sections to the south. Parkside serves about 200 students including about 50% Latino/a and 40% African American students. Approximately 80% of the students receive free- and reduced-price lunch. The students come from primarily stable housing projects and working class neighborhoods.

Parkside's current principal was brought into the school in 1995 to revitalize a "chaotic" program that was then a middle school extension of the elementary school. The principal, and a core group of four teachers that she brought to the school, spent the next three to four years restructuring the program with a mission of serving students of color in the tradition of progressive and humanities-based curriculum.⁴ In a manner similar to Cisneros, the staff at Parkside places priority on close relationships with their students. This small school is one school within the District generally considered to be successful with a typically underserved population of students.

Layering on a Second Reform Theory: A Centralized Push for Standards-based Instructional Improvement

The second reform theory grew gradually over time, as District M's central office increasingly sought to assert instructional leadership from the district-level. The District elaborated its standards-based, instructional improvement strategy by drawing on ideas about learning, instructional improvement, and system change often associated with Community School District 2 and the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Resnick & Glennan, 2002). Drawing on these sources, among others, District M has fashioned an approach to the challenges of urban education that emphasizes system-wide commitment to high learning standards for all students, especially in literacy and mathematics. Referencing New York City standards primarily, this District places emphasis on standard-bearing work and on a set of learning principles that assert all learners' capacities to meet such standards. The District has a particular form of literacy and mathematics curriculum in mind: it promotes "balanced literacy" and a conceptually-oriented, experiential form of mathematics teaching (exemplified by the text series *Connected Math* favored by the District at the middle school level). The priority between the two, however, is clear: literacy comes first.

To help establish standards-based ways of approaching literacy and mathematics teaching, the District invested heavily in professional development. It provided resources to the schools (e.g., school-based coaches), accompanied by periodic district-wide inservice activities and support for participation in teacher education courses in nearby training institutions. At the same time, the district went to considerable lengths to work with principals (and often assistant principals) through monthly all-day meetings devoted largely to instructional issues. Also, an additional study-group for leaders of lower performing schools was made available. Professional development was tied explicitly to an accountability system that emphasized professional responsibility for student learning aligned with New York City and state standards. To set the tone, district leaders conducted highly visible "walk-through" visits to each school and its classrooms once a year, followed by extensive and detailed written feedback and often accompanied by other forms of coaching. Schools that were struggling were generally visited more frequently. The large cadre of on-site professional developers further reinforced the messages that district leaders were trying to transmit concerning the improvement of instruction.

How did all these district messages regarding curriculum and instruction play out in actual practice? Our data suggest that all three schools had responded, at least to some degree, to District M's focus on standards-based instruction in English language arts. For example, across all the language arts and literacy classes that we visited in the schools, we observed instruction that contained elements of balanced literacy (such as students reading independently, participating in guided reading sessions, and responding to literature through group discussions and writing assignments). We saw evidence of classroom "libraries" in most of the rooms that we visited, and schools had generally organized their schedules to include up to two hours of literacy-related instruction. School leaders and teachers reported that these practices were a response to the District's explicit and oft-stated desire to see evidence of these, and other elements of balanced literacy in all schools and classrooms. Even at Alvin Ailey, where the tendency toward isolated practice and idiosyncratic attention to reform attempts was quite prevalent, messages from district professional developers were getting through to teachers. For example, according to one English teacher, choral and round robin reading were not favored, class sets of books were "verboten," and classroom libraries were in.

At all of the schools, bulletin boards both inside classrooms and in hallways displayed curriculum standards and examples of standard-bearing (student) work. In general, staff expressed annoyance with what they perceived to be a *directive* from the district to use their wall space to facilitate student performance toward standards. In all cases, the schools primped and spruced these displays prior to the superintendent's infamous 'walkthrough.' However, the bulletin boards in all schools offered clear evidence that principals and teachers were paying attention to the district's messages about curriculum and instruction.

Across the schools, there was also evidence of concern regarding the instruction of mathematics, in part because math instruction was not as much of a focus as was balanced literacy. Although the District has promoted the use of "constructivist mathematics" through its use of *Connected Math* curricular materials, the schools lagged in terms of their capacity to implement these instructional strategies. Although there were scattered attempts to use constructivist techniques across the classrooms that we visited, these attempts were mixed with test-oriented and traditional mathematics instruction using curricula such as *Sequential One*. School leaders and teachers described the choice of *Sequential One* materials as a response to parent requests and to the pressure to prepare especially 8th grade students for the upcoming New York State High School Regents' exams.

The District's attention to issues of teaching and learning in math and literacy through its focus on complex instructional techniques coupled with strong messages about professional learning had yielded results in terms of student performance on state and City assessments. Over the past decade or more, District M moved from a ranking of 31st out of 32 community school districts in reading achievement to 16th place in 1997 and to 15th place in 1998. In mathematics achievement, District M moved from a ranking of 29th (of 32 districts) to 15th place by 1998. In January of 1999, District M was ranked 10th in the City on a new 4th-grade English language arts performance-based assessment. These impressive results, district leaders reported, were achieved through a combination of strong centralized messages about instructional practices, as well as consistent attention to school level professional accountability.

For their part of the larger district picture, the four schools that we studied performed reasonably well in terms of student learning outcomes. As shown in Table 1 (displaying scores for 2000) performance levels in each instance were at or above the median for the District, with one clear exception in language arts and several in mathematics, which can be accounted for by looking more closely at the priorities, leadership, and nature of instruction in these schools.⁵

Table 1. City and State Test Scores, 2000

City and State Test Scores, 2000 Four Middle School Programs Percent of Students at Level 3 and Level 4			
Language Arts	Grade 6 (CTB-R)	Grade 7 (CTB-R)	Grade 8 (State ELA)
Cisneros	20.4	34.0	48.1
Parkside	39.6	51.1	43.1
Conant: Ailey	20.3	10.3	19.8
Conant: Discovery	51.8	60.2	38.8
Mathematics	Grade 6 (CTBM)	Grade 7 (CTBM)	Grade 8 (State)
Cisneros	20.8	34.0	48.1
Parkside	18.5	34.0	14.0
Conant: Ailey	20.5	5.8	0.0
Conant: Discovery	36.8	44.8	38.1

WHY THE REFORM THEORIES COEXIST

At first glance, these reform theories appear to coexist comfortably with one another. There were few signs of subversion or overt resistance at the school level. By and large, teachers sought to implement a version of balanced literacy with which they felt comfortable and that fit with their school’s particular vision of instruction. The district’s math curricula were less completely implemented, with many teachers feeling unsure how to realize this in the classroom, though overall, each of the schools had heard the District’s messages about constructivist practice and was at minimum engaged in conversation with professional developers regarding the district’s agenda for mathematics.

To get at the heart of our inquiry, we asked ourselves, “Exactly how do these two reform theories coexist or complement each other in the middle schools we studied?” What might explain a response pattern to different, potentially competing sets of reform activities? A closer look at particular features of these schools and the manner in which District M engaged each school supports the following claims. Overall, as understood and acted upon at the school level, each reform theory set the stage for the other in guiding attempts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, the result was not the same in each school: *the degree to which the two reform theories complemented one another varied across schools, in ways that could be traced to how fully the reform theories were implemented. Specifically,*

1. The schools managed the interaction between the two reform theories in proportion to how they *organized themselves to support professional learning* in order to support and enhance student learning. The variation in the schools’ management reflected the quality and focus of school leadership activity, the professional culture and capacity among staff, and the presence of structures for professional interaction.
2. The schools’ *focus on knowing students well* and taking joint responsibility for their learning facilitated their attempts to teach to high standards while tailoring instruction to students’ individual needs. Here, the variation across schools reflected the clarity of mission, the creation of advisory structures, the organizational use of their school size and teaching schedules, the strength of professional community (once again reflecting school leadership), and the use of classroom time for high quality teaching and learning.

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3. The *sophistication of the District's ideas about teaching and learning, and the flexibility with which it promoted them*, enabled schools to make the most out of both reform theories. Here the District's relationship with each school varied and did not necessarily reflect a consistent investment in the relationship. The performance level of the school, the nature of the school leadership, and the extent to which the schools sought and made use of the extensive variety of professional support mechanisms that the District made available to them all were factors that shaped this relationship. This relationship was not without tensions.

We discuss these assertions more fully in the following sections of the paper. We draw on our extensive observations and discussions with principals and teachers at the schools introduced above in order to illustrate the ways in which the two reform theories coexist—with varying degrees of success—across these very different small school programs.

Leadership and Organizational Support for Professional Learning

Here we proceed under the assumption that *leadership* is an important component for the establishment of a strong professional culture within a school community. One might consider, as has Murphy (2002), three broad leadership functions that have the potential to enhance school professional culture: moral stewardship, or leadership toward a strong sense of school mission and values; educative leadership, or the development of a focus on professional learning; and, community building, or empowering leadership and sense of mission among faculty and the broader school community (e.g., parents). In order to accomplish these important functions, the theory of small school reform suggests that the organizational use of size and time in support of professionals is critical (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2003).

In terms of leadership and organization for strong professional cultures, we saw considerable variation among the schools we studied. For example, at Conant Educational Complex, leadership was fractured and responsibilities were dispersed among a mix of personnel. Each mini-school maintained its own mission, admissions criteria, teaching faculty, and program leadership. However, the larger organization was led by a building principal whose primary responsibilities seemed to fall in the realm of management and operations (not, for example, mission-setting, educative leadership, or community-building). Not surprisingly, there was significantly less clarity of purpose at the school-wide or building-level than within the individual mini-schools.

Each Conant mini-school is led by an assistant principal who reports to the building principal. Beyond the general thematic focus of each school (Alvin Ailey has a performing arts theme and Discovery Institute focuses on science education), at neither of the two mini-schools did we get the sense of a vision for practice, an image for a school philosophy or adherence to a type of pedagogy. At Alvin Ailey, assistant principals traditionally have had a friendly and supportive relationship with their staff, but they have played little role in conceptualizing or developing program-wide curricula or pedagogy. Discovery Institute has a more focused and purposeful program that has achieved significantly more success on standardized measures of achievement (in part attributable to a more academically selective student population). At DI, we observed the assistant principal to be focused and business-like, but similar to Alvin Ailey, program leadership at Discovery was detached from curricular and pedagogical issues at the school.

Given the fractured leadership structure and the lack of school-wide mission and focus, the conception of professional learning at the Conant Complex was fixed and limited—teachers were considered either experienced and capable or not—and

there were few opportunities for veteran teachers to continue developing their skills. This view was in direct contrast to the District's view of the teacher—indeed, of all educators—as evolving and continual learners. Teachers at Conant generally taught five periods a day and had two periods of preparation time. None of the teachers interviewed reported that they used common prep time (or common lunch) to plan collaboratively. The individualistic culture at Conant (especially evident at Alvin Ailey) and the lack of support structures to nurture collaboration resulted in a relatively stagnant curriculum and pedagogy offers one plausible explanation for the generally lower level of performance in the Conant small school programs (here, Discovery Institute is somewhat of an exception, but its higher performance levels probably reflect differences in its student population as much as on the power of its instruction).

Contrast that scenario with the strong and stable leadership story at Parkside Alternative. There the faculty, an in-house professional developer, and the principal were focused on a strongly articulated and widely held mission: to provide a progressive, humanities-based, project-oriented education that meets the needs of their students. To ensure that professionalism and strong norms for collaborative work and professional learning were realized, the principal organized the school such that the faculty had time each day to meet in grade level teams and/or as subject teams. Teams of three to four teachers per grade level met during their prep periods, during their common lunch periods, and often after school hours. The teams were responsible for developing curriculum and instructional strategies for the core humanities course as well as for managing the overall educational program for their grade level.

Staff meetings at Parkside were largely devoted to sharing instructional strategies (teachers shared their work, for example, on the development and use of rubrics or a literacy unit on memoirs). The principal assigned common reading related to middle school education during the summer months; teachers discussed and planned curriculum based on these commonly developed understandings. At Parkside, faculty scrutinized and supported each other's work—both newcomers and old timers—through the course of the school day (as well as during extensive team meeting time and faculty meeting time). The team structure allowed the school, in the view of the school principal, to successfully socialize the new teachers, even those who were not traditionally prepared teachers. The principal also relied on staff developers, both in-house and district “coaches,” as well as on her own energies to bring her new teachers up to speed.

If Conant were characterized by individualistic practice and a lack of leadership that focused on teaching and learning and Parkside by collaborative practice, strong sense of mission, and high standards for professional learning, then the third school that we studied presented an interesting contrast that placed it somewhere between the two other schools. Cisneros Middle School had lost its school principal through reassignment the year before we began our study. During the years that we visited the school, a succession of three interim acting principals came and went. Even under those conditions, however, it was clear from our interviews and observations that the largely Latina/o and well-qualified staff at Cisneros had internalized the strong mission of the small, dual language program. Two of the acting principals during this period came from the Cisneros faculty and, together with strong informal leadership exercised by members of the school's teaching staff, these individuals maintained the overall mission of the school.

The professional community at Cisneros was grounded in the *individual* competence and collaborative sense of mission (to provide a high quality education for the Latino/a student) that existed among the staff. Although we did not see team structures, rescheduled time for meetings, or specific instructional foci at faculty meetings (as we did at Parkside), the strength of the Cisneros community was apparent

among the individual teachers' commitment to their students and pride in the Latina/o culture. The strength of the faculty was something that the first principal had ensured through the hiring of well-prepared Latina/o teachers.

Although responsibility for curriculum and instruction was less a collective process and knowledge sharing tended to be serendipitous at Cisneros, our data suggest that the faculty are collegial. Perhaps driven by their collective mission that focused on students, the teachers often shared instructional strategies and information about student learning needs in the hallways, during breaks, before and after school. Further, the district provided staff developers who worked closely with the faculty at Cisneros, especially in the content areas of math and science and tended to fill the leadership void in the areas of curriculum and instruction.

The interaction of the two reform theories works well, it seems, when school professionals are predisposed to ongoing learning and engaged with the improvement of teaching and learning at their schools. On some level, faculties at all of the schools we studied knew of and were responding to the ideas promoted by the District. However, in the schools with the stronger sense of purpose, such as at Parkside and Cisneros, there was fertile ground in which high standards for teaching and learning could take root. At Conant, where the staff was struggling to grasp a sense of mission or overall purpose, the District policies were often perceived by individual teachers as troublesome directives that were difficult to implement given the isolated conditions under which they worked.

A Focus on Knowing Students Well

Flowing from the logic of small schools reform theories, all four schools in this study were deliberately organized to be relatively small learning communities aimed at fostering relationships among students and teachers. In line with the research on small schools (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995; Lee & Smith, 1995; McDonald, 1996; Newmann, 1996) and the middle school movement (Atwell, 1998), these schools took as a pre-condition to successful operation that students have the potential to be known by their teachers and that in small schools a clear sense of purpose can develop. In other words, the schools operated from the assumption that *size matters*.

In addition, all of the middle schools that we have described had made some structural changes (beyond the given of small size) with the intention of building stronger student-teacher relationships, influencing patterns of instruction, and consequently improving student learning outcomes. Our data suggested, however, that in order to support the integration of the District's vision for high quality teaching and learning, the structural changes had to be made with coherence and purpose in mind (supporting the mission of the school and the learning of both students and professionals). For example, at both Cisneros and Parkside, daily schedules were altered and class sizes were reduced in an explicit attempt to ensure that students were known well by their teachers thereby enhancing the possibility that they would be successful with academic tasks. In both cases, these decisions were made with the schools' overriding sense of mission in mind.

At Cisneros, the organizational groupings of students were constantly evolving—sometimes students were grouped by grade and/or by ability, sometimes completely heterogeneously—but decisions were always guided by the drive to build strong relationships among teachers and students. Classes tended to be small for math and literature (about 14-18 students), and teachers were also responsible for a 45-minute weekly advisory class for 12 to 15 students. The focus of the advisory class, in keeping with the school mission, was on the affective needs of students, parent contact, and socialization and academic support. Daily homeroom periods supplemented this

structure. Classes at Cisneros were generally 45 minutes long, although literature and math classes lasted 50-60 minutes. There were weekly whole-school assemblies, which were likewise designed to reinforce and build connections among students and teachers.

At Parkside, students were organized along grade-level teacher teams for most subjects, and class periods extended to 90 minutes although there was flexibility based on curricular priorities (for example, a math test prep met for only 35 minutes on three days of the week and the project-based, 90-minute classes did not meet daily). Teachers saw fewer students per day and they changed classes fewer times during the day than in a traditional middle school structure. Within teams, teachers were given wide latitude to develop grade level schedules. They were generally responsible for 70-75 students per day, although some of that responsibility was shared among team members. Class sizes varied with agreed-upon configurations, generally ranging between 15-20 students per teacher or 30-40 students for two teachers.

Team-taught classes gave students a home base, which the principal believed functioned like an advisory (though they do change year to year); some classes were heterogeneously grouped (such as social studies, arts, and science) and some were ability-based (there were three levels of math and literacy classes). Support was provided to students informally through close relationships with teachers and through "extra" classes for strugglers and for students who were accelerated. These classes were offered both during and after school (for example, lower ability classes were generally smaller than were those for middle and high ability achievers).

In contrast to the purposeful changes made at Cisneros and Parkside, decisions at Conant lacked consistency and often appeared to be management-oriented (such as organizing rowdy, entering 6th graders into self-contained classes at Alvin Ailey). Across the mini-schools at Conant, students were organized by grade levels and cycled through teachers and subjects in traditional 42-minute periods. Teachers generally taught five periods a day of 30 students each for a daily total of approximately 150 students. There were some exceptions, notably at Alvin Ailey, where there was some experimentation with double-period humanities classes and the self-contained 6th grade classes mentioned above. And, at Discovery Institute students traveled weekly per grade level to a nearby natural history museum for a two-hour session. However, these attempts to modify the traditional schedule were truncated by the tendency to use time during the extended class periods as if the original schedule were still in place (for example, within an extended block of teaching time, teachers at Ailey tended to change activities based on the 42-minute class schedule, even when they had the option to extend projects or activities into longer time periods).

By virtue of the size of the mini-programs, teachers and students knew each other but not well. Besides the self-contained 6th grade classes at Alvin Ailey, teachers at the Conant Complex faced large student loads as well as large class sizes. There were few school-wide structures to support teacher and student interaction outside of class and virtually no support mechanisms for struggling students. These supports were sometimes provided informally by individual teachers who "took needy students under their wing," but there was no systematic way that all such students were attended to. While there were some exceptions, overall, the organizational structure of the mini-schools did not appear to support the development of strong relationships among teachers and students.

District M went to some length to offer expertise and support to these mini schools in order to help them realize high standards for instruction and for student learning. To the extent that the structural changes made by the schools were part of a coherent attempt to support student learning, the reform theories complemented

each other and the result was enhanced teaching and learning. In practice, it turns out; this was not always the case.

In the absence of a strong sense of purpose and curricular coherence, the teachers at Conant tended to fall back on their individual interpretations of the materials they had available. Although there were discernable differences at the mini-school level between Discovery Institute and Alvin Ailey, overall teaching practice across the two programs tended to be traditional—teacher-driven and text-reliant—and highly individualized by a particular teacher’s strengths or goals. The teachers at Discovery Institute were loosely guided by a set of ideas emphasizing interdisciplinary study of thematically related subject matter that promoted student investigation and project-like assignments. However, the standards for these practices were not consistent and depended on the expertise of individual staff members.

Highly structured and teacher-directed instruction was the pedagogy of choice for most teachers at Ailey, based on a perceived need to teach a “basic” curriculum.⁶ The ability to manage student behavior was generally perceived as the sign of a successful teacher at this mini-school. One teacher did say that she thought good instruction occurred when students were “engaged”—that is, focused, participating, and interested—during a lesson. However, the same teacher commented, “There is no school-wide vision for pedagogy in the building.”

By contrast, the core of the curriculum at Parkside was a social studies course that was designed to integrate the humanities subject areas of history and nonfiction literature with political and social sciences. The project-based course, which was at the heart of the school’s vision for progressive education, was developed and taught by grade-level teams of teachers (with close guidance from the principal). It consisted of three to four long term, student centered projects per school year that focused on consecutive periods of U.S. history.

Literacy was also highly prioritized at Parkside—in part as a response to the district’s push for literacy instruction. The *Readers and Writers* course was taught in small, extended period grade-level classes (about 15 students to one teacher). The curriculum was geared especially for the middle school learner and was developed through the staff’s shared understanding of *In the Middle* by Nancy Atwell (1998). The emphasis in these classes tended to be on student interpretations of literature and on the development of writing skills. For example, in one *Readers and Writers* class of 8th graders, the students read a memoir chosen from a number of selections previewed by the teacher. Over a period of a few weeks, the students developed a list of “criteria” for writing memoirs based on their reading and then wrote a series of their own memoirs. Selections were published in a class book of memoirs made up of the students’ best work. In general, the pedagogies of choice at Parkside tended to favor student responsibility for knowledge-building or problem-solving activities.

Although in practice about two-thirds of the curriculum was taught in English at Cisneros Middle School, there was a strong feeling among staff for the lived experience of the Latino student body. The development of students’ Spanish language abilities was therefore an explicit goal, alongside instruction for literacy and other subjects in English. Much of the instruction at CMS was focused on “rigorous academic training” and preparation for the state and City tests that were the markers for academic success. The staff prioritized access to and success in traditional academic language and texts. And, as there was in the other schools described here, there was a focus at Cisneros Middle School on English language arts and mathematics curricula.

Language arts content at CMS ranged from basic skills curriculum for struggling readers to classes that focused on advanced writing across multiple genres. The staff articulated and practiced the widely held belief in rigorous instruction and much of the instruction at the school was organized and delivered in a rather traditional manner.

Observations of lessons in 6th grade social studies, writers' workshop, and 8th grade social studies indicated that teachers relied on either a textbook or a photocopied page from a textbook as the foundation of the lesson. The lessons were accompanied by teacher guidance, direction, and plenty of talk. The teacher talk that we observed, however, was not characterized as much by traditional-style lecture as it was by building upon and expanding students' use of content and academic language. In essence, teachers' talk focused on providing a language "bridge"—comprehensible input—from the academic texts to students' understanding of the content. As one teacher explained, she believed that students need to know the English language of textbooks and she wanted to help them have access to that language and cultivate the ability to use the [textbook] language themselves.

There was, then, considerable variation among the small schools that we studied. District M, for its part in this attempt to layer one reform theory upon another, faced several challenges. How to successfully impose a standardizing set of instructional ideas upon schools that have traditionally taken responsibility for such matters? And, how to account for the variability among the schools and their practices in crafting an approach to standards-based instructional reforms?

The District's Approach: Sophistication and Flexibility, with Some Tensions

As described earlier in the paper, since the mid-late 1990s, District M has endeavored to improve the quality of its (middle) schools by coupling its small schools of choice strategy with its clear messages about curriculum and instruction. This effort was not a complete departure from past district practice because this was a district which had long had a reputation as having an "activist" central office. What was different about this strategy was (a) the scale of the emphasis (this effort was far reaching and was perceived as "serious" compared with previous efforts), and (b) the exclusive focus on the learning experience for students, teachers, *and* principals—what were considered good practices to promote children's learning now were viewed as good practices for adult learning as well. These were not formulaic attempts to improve classroom practice *nor* to promote professional growth. They were sophisticated and well-developed notions regarding powerful learning for both students and adults.

Flexibility was an important part of District M's approach, especially given their commitment to small schools of choice. The superintendent undertook the push for standards-based instruction because she believed in the instructional practices—indeed, as the District's former assistant superintendent for curriculum & instruction during the first half of the 1990s, she had been responsible for the development of the in-house staff development model. It was during those years that District M institutionalized the choice policy for middle school students. Inherent in that policy was the assumption that small schools, each with its own character, would provide the student population with greater opportunities than they would receive in their neighborhoods from traditional, large urban middle schools. The superintendent looked at the second reform theory (centralized push for standards-based instructional improvement) as a means to enhance the first theory. As she put it: "School cultures are important, but you also have to embrace a district-wide effort, and develop a community of learners—or, pride in your community." Thus, the small schools of choice were valued by the District, and new initiatives were implemented with flexibility.

To the extent that the schools were performing well (i.e., reasonably good student learning outcomes) and could make a case with district leaders for their specific approach to teaching and learning (here, strong school leadership was a factor), the

District took a hands-off approach toward them. In cases like this, the district seems to pause to allow schools time to develop a response to their centralized initiatives.

In this case, for example, the staff at Parkside spent much of their collaborative planning time developing and critiquing their own performance assessment systems. Therefore, their response to the District's standards-based portfolio system (during the second year of our study) was qualitatively different than the responses at our other schools. Parkside's capacity in this area provided an interesting example of the way in which district-initiated, standards-based policies interacted with locally developed standards for practice.

The staff at Parkside (including the principal), after attending several summer institutes at Harvard University, had developed and implemented a process-based portfolio system for the school. When the District participated in a city-sponsored pilot of a standards-based portfolio system, the staff at Parkside strongly resisted the change. They felt that the District's presentation of the new system was a poor fit with their well-developed understanding of performance-based assessment systems. However, the principal at Parkside saw an opportunity to think deeply about the school's portfolio process. Under her leadership, they reconsidered the standards-based system and worked hard over a two-year period to integrate it into their own process. Students in all grades were guided in presenting two portfolios at the end of the school year. They were aware of the difference between the two portfolios and able to articulate that one system was about their "best (standard-bearing) work" and one highlighted their learning in several thematically based areas of growth.

The District, to its credit, exhibited respect for Parkside's efforts. District leaders let Parkside's principal take the lead with her staff in developing a response to the district policy. In the end, the District invited the school to present their process to school leaders and staff developers across the District as a model for thinking deeply about assessment practices. This example highlights two important points about the District's policies: (a) the policies upheld and promoted complex ideas about teaching and learning and (b) the district approached the implementation of these ideas with flexibility across the schools, depending on the schools' needs, response, and capabilities.

As suggested by the discussion of the variation among our case schools, including this example regarding Parkside's portfolio system, the interaction among the two reform theories was not tension-free. In fact, tensions manifested themselves in particular ways across all of the schools that we studied. Perhaps inevitable—but not by our estimation crippling—the tensions seemed to arise in at least the following areas: (1) the developing assessment and accountability pressures, in large part City and state-level pressures, interrupted and perhaps overloaded the District's single-minded focus on instructional improvement in literacy and mathematics; and (2) the ongoing struggle to spread limited resources (especially human resources) across a large number of urban schools with typically high needs.

At first glance, there were several important congruencies among policies emanating from state, city, and district offices. All three levels, for instance, had actively promoted high student learning standards and aligned assessments and accountability for student performance against these standards. All three levels were actively seeking to improve school and classroom performance and to ferret out obvious pockets of incompetence. For example, at the state level, low performing schools were at risk of placement on the Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) list and at the city level that meant placement in the chancellor's district—and takeover by the city of all instructional practices. At the district level the superintendent also focused on the high "priority" schools, which received increased district attention.

During the time of our study, several new state and City tests were implemented. These included new state-level performance assessments in 4th and 8th grade (first, English language arts and mathematics, and later social studies and science). The City also administered standardized assessments in 5th, 6th, and 7th grades and performance assessments in 3rd and 6th grades. The net result of these assessment and accountability pressures was evident at both the district and school levels, creating mixed messages regarding the importance of complex instruction in the face of pressure for test preparation activities. The District was caught in the middle here, mediating state and City messages with its own.

We saw evidence of that increasing accountability pressure in the changing tenor of comments by district leaders regarding their focus on instructional practice. The assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and professional development faced new demands each year that drew time and resources away from her desire to focus on literacy and mathematics. One year it was the standards-based portfolio system, and the next year she noted:

I think the biggest shift for us is that we're focusing on social studies this year. Three years ago we focused on literacy almost entirely. Last year we started including math more deeply in our thinking. This year it's social studies, and it's really a state initiative. They are going to test in social studies, and we need to be in alignment with the testing.

The superintendent and her assistants also changed the way they spoke about "success" over the course of our study. One assistant said early on, "What I look at is school environments, teaching practices, student engagement. I look at practices of assessment. Ongoing. I don't mean standardized tests, but assessment that is embedded in instruction." A year or so later, the superintendent noted, "The [state] test scores came back about a week and a half ago and they did not yield the results that I expected and that I demanded. And I went crazy...we did increase by 11% last year in 4th grade, but just 1% this year. It's in the right direction, but I'm devastated by it."

This pressure also played out in the schools that we studied. Especially in the last two years, the schools focused on social studies and science as the new 8th grade state tests in those subject areas were brought on line. At Alvin Ailey School, the science teacher spent nearly a month preparing students for the new state test in science, which covered a broader set of science knowledge than is typically taught at the school. At Cisneros Middle School, there was a considerable amount of time spent on test preparation curricula, including after school classes devoted to such activities. Teachers commented in our interviews that the tests were affecting their decisions about instruction. At Parkside Alternative, the grade level schedules had been manipulated to intersperse short (generally, 35 minute) periods for math test preparation across the grade levels. Teachers were rethinking their core humanities course to make sure that it prepared their students for the new social studies test. During the 2001-2002 school year, the principal at Parkside began serious work with a district math staff developer with the intention of rethinking instruction in that content area.

Although schools such as Parkside, Cisneros, and Discovery Institute were staying at least in the middle of the pack (of district schools) on test scores and thus felt less district pressure, school leaders and teachers expressed tension regarding these policies. A teacher at Cisneros said, for example, "Unfortunately, one of the things that helps organize the priority is all this testing that the kids get. It's always in the back of my mind. I want to do all these great things in writing workshop, but they have to pass that math and literature exam." At Parkside, the principal felt supported by the district leaders. However, when a test preparation "test" arrived unannounced

one morning requiring immediate attention, she uttered, “This year the system is just squashing schools.”

Another source of tension in the interaction between these two reform theories was the inevitable lack of resources to meet the many needs of some very troubled schools. The District prioritized its neediest schools (based on student assessment results) providing additional leadership meetings and professional development for them (some schools had twice as many on-site professional development days as others). However, even with this increased attention, schools such as Conant Complex were difficult to penetrate to the district’s satisfaction. District staff developers found it hard to work with the veteran teachers at Conant. Teachers there disliked the District’s push for constructivist mathematics instruction, for example, and complained about the lack of attention to basic skills. They perceived *Connected Math* as weak on the rote repetition of algorithms necessary for their students to succeed in math. One district staff developer said that the only teachers she could work with were new and the content of her support was primarily classroom management.

From its viewpoint, the District faced a constant turnover of teachers (for example, teachers leave the district to go to suburban districts which offer higher salary schedules) and a lack of qualified school leaders. The superintendent noted in May of 2001 that she would face nine vacancies for principals the next year for her 33 school programs. Even given these dilemmas (typical in urban settings), this district felt that they were providing more than typical support for their schools. Given the independent mentality and built-in variability of the small choice schools, however, a tension existed between what the district provided (school faculty often complained about increased district requirements) and what the schools produced in return. Among the middle schools that we studied, the flailing Alvin Ailey program provided the starkest example of this tension. It’s possible that the District was not direct enough in its work with Conant and that a more direct intervention regarding the school’s organizational features was in order. At minimum, it seems that the provision of two district staff developers was insufficient to make a difference in either the school’s instructional practice or its poor student performance. And, at the level of the whole school, District M policies were far from solving the obvious ability-based (and, to an extent, race- and class-based) tracking that existed among the mini-programs.

CONCLUSION

We present here compelling evidence that two different and potentially conflicting theories of educational reform can and do coexist together in an urban school district. We argue that, as conceived and enacted in this instance, the two theories-of-action complemented each other, each compensating in particular ways for the other’s weaknesses. This phenomenon has taken place in a mid-sized city school district that struggles with the challenges of many contemporary urban settings (such as teacher turnover, shortages of well-prepared school leaders, the “flight” of middle class families, and changing governance structures), but here the *purposeful combination of reforming ideas* has coincided, over the decade of the 1990s, with substantial district-wide gains in student learning outcomes. While our analysis cannot demonstrate a conclusive causal connection, it is plausible that the joint effect of these reform activities has contributed much to the improvement trend.

The way that the theories were implemented was critical in realizing these successes. The introduction of the reform theories in this instance was accomplished gradually, sequentially, and with some degree of sophistication and care. The first theory—emphasizing small schools of choice as an answer to the needs of urban schoolchildren—grew out of broader New York City school reform traditions and

was officially sanctioned in the early 1990s by District M through a choice policy embracing all of its middle schools. Taking care to respect the tenets and sustain the accomplishments of its small, alternative schools, the District layered on a second set of reforming ideas in the mid-1990s—through a centralized set of standards-based reform policies aimed specifically at the improvement of teaching and learning. Using three middle schools as our test cases, we demonstrate that this purposeful combination of reform theories in large part *worked*, with each theory setting the stage for the other in guiding educational reform efforts across the district’s schools and classrooms.

These cases make tangible an emerging argument concerning the power and limits of urban educational reform strategies. This line of analysis asserts that reform strategies are inherently limited: by highlighting certain actions and conditions as essential to the renewal of teaching and learning, they simultaneously assume that other conditions (not targeted or touchable by the reform theory) are supportive of the targeted changes (Hill & Celio, 1998). In effect, the strategy in question—whether it emphasizes comprehensive school reforms, vouchers, or intensive investment in professional development—presumes a “zone of wishful thinking” in which events that the strategic theory does not consider work for or against the theory’s premises. A voucher strategy, for example, shifts the allocation of resources from institutions to “consumers” (parents), thereby empowering them to select and support schools that are responsive to their preferences, and thereby creating a compelling set of incentives for schools to perform well. But it presumes “an adequate supply of teachers willing to work in competitive environments, parental diligence in choosing schools, and mechanisms to guarantee a supply of good schools in areas serving less-demanding parents” (Hill & Celio, 1998, p. 22). These conditions, the zone of wishful thinking for this strategy, are not included in its theory of action, yet without them, a voucher strategy is very likely to fail. A similar analysis can be done with virtually any reform theory.

This line of thinking leads naturally to another conclusion: “Some reform proposals are specifically designed to cause the events that are found in other proposals’ zones of wishful thinking” (Hill & Celio, 1998, p. 23). Thus by combining reform theories, leaders may be able to create mutually reinforcing conditions for improvement. Though there is no guarantee that this complementarity will pertain in all instances of converging reform theories, it appears to be the case in the instance we have been examining.

In each of the four small-school programs that we observed over this three-year period, we saw evidence of the combined effects of these reform policies. The district had pushed a set of standards-based ideas vigorously, making strategic use of a cadre of professional developers and insisting on professional accountability on the part of all personnel in the district. In response to district-level leadership, educators in these schools directed a great deal of energy toward teaching a form of “balanced literacy” they deemed appropriate to middle school students, and more powerful forms of mathematics teaching that fit their views of what diverse, middle school students needed. Where the small schools’ efforts had been most successfully implemented, school leaders and staff made the greatest use of the requirements and resources afforded by the second reform initiative. That energy resulted, at minimum, in a high degree of content alignment across the schools (such as the balanced literacy practices). It was clear that staffs had made, at the very least, surface-level attempts to implement the district’s curricular messages. And, in some cases, the combination of small school reform energies and district-initiated mandates and instructional support resulted in productive, synergistic improvements in instructional practice. Recall the ways in which the staff at Parkside Alternative Middle School integrated the District’s standards-based portfolio system into their already well-developed use of performance assessment systems.

Constructive coexistence, it seems, requires a balancing act between district and school initiative and sources of ideas about good teaching and learning. Although we argue here that both of these reform theories have at their heart the same goal—the improvement of learning outcomes for a typically underserved population of urban students—in neither case does one reform theory presume the necessity of the other for the accomplishment of its goals. In other words, the proponents of small schools assume that such things as personalized relationships between teachers and learners and strong teacher collaboration in the development of curriculum will lead to improved student outcomes. The choice policy is intended to ensure that failed schools would do just that: *fail* to attract a parent and student clientele. And, likewise, the district’s set of strongly articulated initiatives regarding instructional practice does not, in and of itself, require small schools in order to succeed.

What is unique about this case is that District M realizes benefits from these theories by combining persistent pressure for results, attention to standard-bearing work, and district-wide support for professional learning, on the one hand, with flexibility and respect for the different characters of the schools, on the other. This is a case of the *flexible* combination of a set of potentially competing reform theories. The success of the combination, then, reflects a balance between district and school initiative, a balance between the inherent strengths of each individual theory of action, and the fact that each theory’s weaknesses can be offset by the other’s strengths. Both sets of reforming ideas are fully articulated in this district. This is not a classic case of educational pendulum swinging in which the small, alternative programs were mandated to uniformly take up a prescribed or narrowly defined set of instructional practices. Rather, these schools were encouraged to make local sense of complex instructional ideas and to take advantage of the district’s support in that process.

Our data suggest, however, that the potentially positive effects of this combination of theories were not realized equally across the schools that we studied. The unequal outcomes can be traced to (1) differences in the ways that the schools organized themselves to support professional learning; (2) variation among the schools in their use of small size and restructured time for knowing their students well; and (3) the degree to which the district and the schools were able to successfully resolve the tensions between the competing reform theories.

At Conant Education Complex, for example, we observed less organizational use of size or time and less overall professional capacity-building. We saw more individualized and variable efforts on the part of classroom teachers and considerable variation among student outcomes. A variety of forces and conditions accounted for these problems, among them, ineffective leadership structures and the difficulty of district professional developers in penetrating the individualized professional norms that reigned in this school’s hybrid organizational structure. Conant was a large, urban school redesigned to accommodate four mini-school programs. District staff developers struggled at Conant to engage in productive work because the conditions that promote whole-school involvement in professional growth and development—the taking up of complex new ideas about the work—were largely absent at that site. This was a point at which the district could rightly have pressed harder for school-level structural changes, facilitating the liaison-like role of the professional developer, and insisting upon school conditions that encourage ongoing conversations among teachers, school leaders, professional developers, and district leaders.

By contrast, both Parkside and Cisneros Middle Schools made considerable effort to shape their school practices in ways that supported professional growth and development, knowing their students well, and taking advantage of district supports and initiatives. These school staffs balanced their own interests, skills, and preferences, on the one hand, against the demanding expectations of the District, on the other. This required of school staffs the willingness to treat demands from the

outside as opportunities, a potential resource, as much as an intrusion. As District M maintained a flexible and respectful stance, the schools, on their part, treated that stance as an invitation to interact with, and adapt, the reform messages coming from the central office, shaping them to work most effectively for their particular conditions and clientele. In order for the balancing act to result in high-quality outcomes, however, it was incumbent upon strong leadership exercised by school administrators (as at Parkside) or teacher-leaders (as at Cisneros) to engage with the complex ideas espoused by the District. That required staffs at both schools to examine materials, communicate with staff developers, and produce compromises that maintained the integrity of local programs while working toward the kinds of student outcomes desired by the district.

On balance, the approach taken here—the launching of a centralized, but complex, set of curricular and pedagogical ideas along with support and encouragement for small schools and restructured school conditions—challenges urban policy approaches that offer packaged formulas for achieving immediate (and perhaps short-lived) increases on student outcome measures. The case suggests caution, even resistance, against the urge to fall solely in one camp or the other between strong centralized theories of reform and highly decentralized schemes. Given these data, we note, for example, the possibility that neither the strengthening of centralized accountability policies *nor* abandoning them in favor of a wholesale market approach will achieve the overall goals of urban school reform. The caveat, and a key lesson suggested by this case, is the critical nature of the district’s role in flexibly guiding the creation of school conditions that can support the professional growth necessary for realizing the powerful instructional practices espoused by the second reform theory.

We conclude that some divide between the centralized reform theories promoted by a district and the small schools tradition is inevitable and that the tensions resulting from the interaction of these two theories of reform are unavoidable. The ability of a district to maintain sufficient flexibility in meeting the needs of its schools *and* to keep the pressure on for high-quality standard-bearing work is a tricky balance that is only complicated by the typical problems facing urban districts. And for small schools, the work of negotiating district demands must be accomplished simultaneously with local creative endeavors and the day-to-day urgencies of classroom teaching. To simplify their lives, if nothing else, educators might tend to reject one theory in favor of the other. The challenge is to engage both, accept the tension, and to struggle productively within it.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The CTP Core Study is a five-year study of four state teaching policy environments that includes the study of an urban district in each state and a set of schools in each district. The four states are California, New York, North Carolina, and Washington.
- ² Since the late 1990s, the New York City Board of Education has made official distinctions between (1) "small schools" that are run by a principal, but serve small numbers of students (such as Parkside and Cisneros); (2) "big schools" that are run by one principal and may (or may not) be divided into smaller programs that have coordinators and that are created by the principal (such as Conant Education Complex); and (3) academies that are semi-autonomous schools run by an s
- ³ The reader is referred to www.ctpweb.org for a description of the broader CTP Core Study.
- ⁴ The term "progressive" is used here to describe an educational tradition that emphasizes the discovery of knowledge, the development of habits of mind and problem-solving skills, and favors student-directed, project-or problem-based, hands-on learning experiences. The role of the teacher in this tradition tends to be that of a facilitator of a mix of individual or small group, student-directed learning experiences interspersed with teacher-led small or whole-group discussions of relevant materials.
- ⁵ The trends across the three years of our study indicate considerable volatility in these schools' scores: the substantial shifts in scores from year to year, both up and down, were inconsistent across subjects and grades within school. This probably reflects the relatively small number of students in the testing pool, among other things, and the difficulty of getting a stable school score with such small samples, in addition to any "real" trends that were occurring. Therefore, these trends are probably not a clear indication of the evolution of the instructional program over time.
- ⁶ Here, "teacher-directed" instruction refers to practice in which teachers provide whole groups of students with extensive explanations and factual information; knowledge is treated as fixed, to be transmitted from teacher to student. Generally, the teacher structures class time to include teacher-led, whole-group discussions and/or individual completion of teacher-assigned lessons.

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