

Examining Renewal in an Urban High School through the Lens of Systemic Change

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ABSTRACT *Researchers collaborated with an urban high school community to help provide direction for school improvement efforts. The results of a series of focus group interviews involving more than 150 members of the school community were analyzed using an urban schools systemic change framework. Researchers identified three common themes across students, families, teachers and administrators: (1) missed connections and disconnections, (2) learning and teaching, and (3) community building. These themes reflected other urban school research efforts that connect families with their students' school success and identify culturally responsive teaching and shared governance as features of successful school improvement. By viewing the themes through a systemic change framework, researchers were able to assist the school in its efforts toward reform, targeting specific areas of work that would leverage more coherence in improving student learning outcomes.*

Introduction

Diversity of culture, class, ethnicity, language and ability is nowhere more evident than in the public schools found in the great cities of the USA (Epstein & Dauber 1991; Keith 1999; Lutz & Merz 1992). A vast range of beliefs, ideas, customs, language and worldviews creates a tapestry of assets that has the potential to meet the challenges confronting today's urban schools. Yet in many urban communities, creating vibrant, multicultural high schools where all students achieve their full potential is a vision, not a reality (Duvall 2001). The barriers to attaining this vision are many: (a) poorly prepared teachers (Haberman & Post 1998); (b) teacher shortages (Darling-Hammond 2001); (c) racial, socioeconomic and cultural tensions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 1999); (d) resource deficits (Anyon 1995); (e) decaying infrastructures (Kozol 1991; Bowers 2000; Cooley & Shen 2000), (f) diminishing public support (Kozol 2000); and (g) expanding public expectations (Gratz 2000).

These challenges test the will and capacity of urban school faculties, students,

same patterns. By exploring patterns of activity within and among each of the concentric activity arenas within the Systemic Change Framework, researchers can locate assets and constraints within systems and help identify arenas for further action. The Systemic Change Framework represents a way of thinking about school communities that blends systems theory with current research in learning and development for adults and children, leadership, critical pedagogy, and school reform (see Figure 1).

SYSTEMIC CHANGE FRAMEWORK

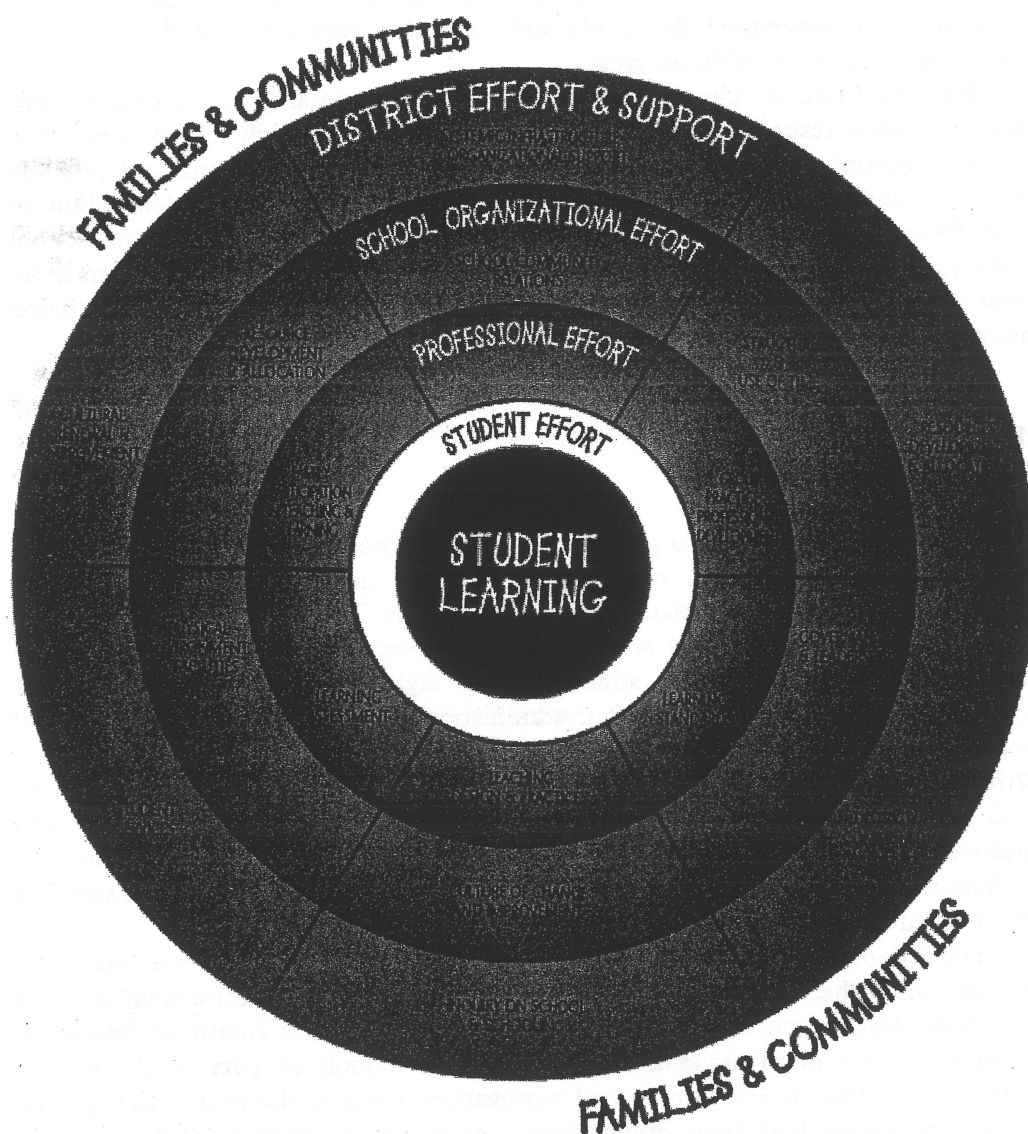


FIG. 1. The Systemic Change Framework.

attendance area that was predominantly middle class and white; and (c) a school for the arts that was specifically designed for artistically talented students. After the policy change, boundaries for CHS were redrawn and students came only from the surrounding neighborhoods.

Prior to the policy change, the CHS population was relatively evenly divided ethnically between African-American and European-American students. Within a year of the policy change, the student body had shifted from a predominantly African-American student body to a majority Hispanic population ($n = 51.5\%$), with students of African-American descent comprising about 41.3% of the population and only about 7.2% of the student body of European-American descent. At the time of this study, 32% of the student body was identified as English Language Learners and 75.5% of the student population received free or reduced lunch.

The average ACT overall score was 17.7 at CHS. ACT is one of two tests that are taken by high school students as part of their application packet for college. ACT is administered by a private, for profit, testing company and is designed to assess high school students' general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work. The tests cover four skill areas using 216 test items: English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. The year of this study, the national composite test score average was 21 with the highest possible score being 36. In the same year, only 1% of the test-takers nationally scored 36, 59% of the test-takers scored between 20 and 35, while 29% of the participants scored in the 16–19 point range and 12% scored at 15 or below. In Colorado in 1999, 62% of high school graduates that year took the ACT and earned a composite score over all four skill areas of 21.5 with a standard deviation of 4.5.

The CHS graduation rate was 67.4% with a dropout percentage of 7.9%. The average graduation rate in the state of Colorado is 80.9% with an average dropout percentage of 3%. For graduation rates, the district identifies the number of seniors who enter at the beginning of the school year and then compares that with the number of seniors who actually graduate. That calculation yields the graduation rate. The dropout percentage is based on the number of students who formally withdraw from school, after the age of 16.

At the time of the study, 18% of the teachers had three years of teaching experience or less, 23% had between four and ten years of teaching experience and 60% of the teaching staff had 11 or more years of teaching experience. Only 5% of the teachers were on emergency authorizations and 48% had master's degrees. About 75% of the faculty were European-American heritage, 12% were African-American, 10% were Hispanic and 1% Asian-American. Like many urban schools, CHS was in flux and its leadership was seeking a way to harmonize the needs of its community and the demands of external mandates to make progress on student learning outcomes.

Inquiry Stance

Understanding school communities through the lens of systems theory has important implications for the choices that researchers make in how they examine schools.

TABLE I. Vignettes and focus group questions

Vignettes	Associated questions and probes
<p>1: Central staff and students have been working hard to improve the school the past few years. They have already decreased the dropout numbers and increased the graduation rate. But much work still needs to be accomplished. The school knows that it needs to know more about the students and community in order to better serve the students, staff, and community. Students, staff, and the community need to feel that Central High School is the school where they can achieve whatever they desire or dream about achieving.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe some of the different groups of students at Central and give an example of activities or beliefs that are important to each group. 2. What does the school need to know about each of these groups to increase their educational success? 3. What kinds of influences do you think [focus group] have to improve the education at Central High School? 4. Who decides what is to be learned and what it means to be successful at Central High School? 5. If you could advise the school to improve one characteristic at Central High School, what would that be?
<p>2: Students attend schools for a variety of reasons. Some students attend primarily for academic reasons. Some students attend primarily for the social support peers and adults provide. Some students attend primarily because they feel that they have to, i.e., because school is compulsory. Yet, each day, large numbers of students choose not to attend. They miss assignments, learning opportunities, and the chance to socialize with peers and school faculty.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why do students frequently decide not to attend classes? 2. Do any of the school's routine practices, or does the organizational structure of Central, contribute in some way to the decision of many students to skip school? 3. What could adult members of the school community—teachers, staff, administrators, and family members—do to keep kids in school regularly?
<p>3: One way to build closer and more personal relationships among students, families, staff, and community members is to think about the way a school is organized. Some very successful urban high schools have organized themselves into career clusters or groups of students and staff organized around subjects like: math, science, and medicine; business and entrepreneurship; cultural studies, law and government; and arts, humanities, and communication. Students who attend these small "schools within a school" say they feel more connected to their teachers, more involved in their own learning, and more motivated to achieve.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What reactions do you have to Central being reorganized into small "schools within a school" focused on subjects? 2. What kind of subjects would you like to see included? 3. Are there already students at Central who feel involved, motivated, and connected to their teachers?

After compiling, analyzing, and synthesizing the evidence, the researchers spent time in a series of two-hour meetings gathering feedback on our initial data analysis. For this member check, we spent time with administrators and teachers.

research team divided into four groups and read through all of the focus group transcripts coded for one of the four specific themes. In this pass, the teams completed a more finely grained analysis of each theme, looking for explanations of what constituted resistance and facilitation within each theme. As we examined the data, organized into multiple categories, we found three overarching themes that emerged: (1) misconceptions and disconnections, (2) teaching and learning, and (3) community building.

Within two months, the writing team shared a first draft of their findings with a group of CHS faculty, administrators and community members. On the basis of that participant check, the researchers then made some changes to the narrative, including removing some quotes that were traceable to particular individuals and reframing some of the narrative. Furthermore, by reporting preliminary findings to the school, we provided them with the opportunity to consider and perhaps deepen their understanding of the multidimensional components of their community as a system.

Discussion

The three themes that emerged captured both the progress CHS has made as it tried to implement a reform agenda and the problems the school community currently faces. In the findings, particular constituent groups from which quotes were taken are not always specifically identified in this paper. We made this decision so that the opinions of the participants would be equally valued. This decision was troublesome to the school participants; they wanted to attribute quotes to particular members of the community. Here, you will find that we have fluctuated between recognizing a speaker's role (e.g. student, teacher, family member) and allowing a particular quote to represent a collective voice that transcended a particular group. We identify the speaker's role where the opinion was representative particularly of one of the groups. In each of the following sections, we interpret the prevalent discourse and relate it to elements of the Systemic Change Framework (Ferguson *et al.* 2001).

Missed Connections and Disconnections

Apparent in the focus group conversations was the highly diverse and dynamic nature of the current CHS community. While the term 'community' or 'school community' was often used by our participants, it had different meanings that were, at times, confusing. When used by community members, the community included the neighborhood surrounding CHS, residents and businesses, and families with and without students who attended CHS. Teachers and some administrators focused more on the school participants as community.

Regardless of their definition of community, many study participants described the school and surrounding neighborhood as in demographic transition from a predominantly African-American population to one that was primarily first-generation Latino. The transitory nature of the neighborhood seemed to play into the degree to which CHS students and families reported feeling a sense of belonging.

So it's kind of hard, in one way we say diversity is great and we like to have all these different experiences and you should get to know as many different types of people as you want which is hard to argue against that. And on the other hand you say that we should really focus on certain particular things; and so I think that you're kind of trying to do two things that might not work together with each other.

There was the perception on the part of students that the faculty and some of the students were unsure about the change in the majority and minority make-up of the school:

I think the Americans are scared, because the majority of the schools are Mexicans, Blacks, and other nationalities other than Americans.

CHS seems to be struggling to locate unity of purposes, shared values, and locally constructed norms. Students and family members emphasized both their own needs for psychological safety and security and concerns about family matters that weighed on their minds. These concerns speak to the disconnection between the focus of the school personnel on formal education and the life chances of members of the community:

Because many times we have problems at home, we feel lazy. Many times it's because we have problems that we don't have to stay in school. We say what for, if I am going to flunk. I rather don't go. I argued with the teacher, or he said this, or the class is very boring or we just don't go.

On the other hand, participants in general expressed a firm commitment to students' completion of an education. Nevertheless, they recognized that other agendas often conflicted. For example, monetary concerns sometimes undermined both students' academic goals and parents' confidence that they could provide for their adolescent's future education:

I have a son that takes things apart and is very good at putting them back together. He would be a great mechanic someday and maybe even learn electricity. But how am I going to be able to put him through school, to learn this?

Divergent expectations, fears, and family concerns pointed to disconnections among CHS community members. Nevertheless, focus group members recognized that many strengths and opportunities were beginning to exist at CHS that would help to attract students and families and potentially improve student attendance, a significant goal identified by the school community. Typical of perceptions that some school initiatives were working were these comments by a teacher:

I've been really impressed with our freshman class. For the past two weeks and with the exception of one or two students in each class, most of those kids are there every day or they're never there. I mean you have these names on the list that you have a little box by every single day or there are those kids that have a pretty regular attendance rate and they're really for the most part just occasionally a little bit of prodding, I mean they're there.

difference in perception is a disconnection between the experiences of different groups in the same milieu.

Frequently, students and families voiced the belief that students needed clear reasons for being in school and specific goals or outcomes that could have clear exit criteria. Employment outside of school had those clear rewards that school seemed to lack. Teachers confirmed this uneasy tension between students' jobs and school. Yet when asked, some students were able to identify the sets of behaviors they needed to succeed in school.

I guess it's different for every person. Some people think being successful here is just being popular, being known, getting out of high school and let people be, remember you. People remember you even though you're gone. And for other people mean success, it might mean being good enough here that you could still continue your education or if you're not going to go to college or anything like that, you could still do something with their life. So there's like different meanings for success.

Several groups had ideas for improving feedback to students and exciting them to become academically focused at school:

Last year I flunked a class and this year I had it again with the same teacher. So I said to myself, 'This time, I have to pass. Let's see what I can do. I have to pass.' Then I started talking with the teacher. I had a free hour and I went to visit him. I would ask him to explain things I did not understand. I felt really embarrassed because I don't like to ask questions. He explained to me and I talked to him about this and that and I passed the class.

Throughout the interviews many community members expressed a need for more recognition and appreciation of each other's efforts. Students wanted recognition of their efforts to attend school. Teachers wanted more recognition for their efforts on behalf of students and parents. Parents wanted teachers to appreciate the efforts they were making to see that their children got an education.

Student effort and learning is at the heart of the Systemic Change Framework and is deeply impacted by what is happening at other levels of the framework. Many students were unclear about their future aspirations, in part because neither parents nor the school staff were able to articulate a clear vision and set of expectations for students. CHS provided an important lesson. That is that professionals, as caring and committed as they might be, cannot speak for families and students, nor can they know what families and students need without listening. Connections and relationships remain the fundamental building block for community development.

Learning and Teaching

At the time of the study, a substantial part of the CHS's reform agenda concerned school and professional efforts to implement standards and achievement tests mandated by district and state authorities. Teachers felt the pressure to focus on

Parents and students also felt there was that school faculty and staff needed more cultural education, so that they might be better equipped with knowledge of students' needs and differences. Indeed, many community members and students advocated increased student involvement in the design and selection of curriculum for self-determination including peer counseling, peer mediation, and peer court. Students also wanted to help select the curriculum so that they might pursue some of their own academic and educational interests. Additionally, they wanted teachers to design lessons that actively engaged them. At times for both teachers and administrators, these student wishes seemed at odds with the constraints of standards-based curriculum. Further, the lack of discourse around issues of racism and other forms of discrimination that students perceived diminished the synergy needed for renewal and improvement.

The CHS community made several recommendations for instructional improvement:

because of the teachers not realizing that all minorities are not the same, they are only teaching them one way, the way they were taught. So they are humiliating the rest of the children by telling them you listen here or go to the office or go do this or go do that and they do not call the parents and let them know that they dismissed their children while their children is running out somewhere.

The discussion about instructional strategies was lively. Community members noted that instructional approaches that got students actively involved in solving relevant problems seemed to work best.

I think if they do, do stuff here, it should be hands on instead of always having to be in the book. I mean where you're like actually experiencing it instead of always in the book. People are bored. Like if you're in science or something and you're learning about the butterfly, how it spins a cocoon or something like that, maybe you could go outside and find caterpillars or whatnot and you can make them, when they spin a cocoon, like watch them how they, from step to step like week to week how it goes and then develops in a butterfly or something like that. You should be more experienced.

Some faculty reflected this opinion:

I think that the days when students were doing a lot of rote stuff, our kids don't do that, they don't care. But if you can engage them, they will do about anything for you. I just think the whole topic of student engagement and how one really focuses on that and how one tunes into that. If it's the teacher or how you tune into it if you're a kid, if you know, if you can ask yourself am I engaged? How do you know to ask yourself those questions and how to challenge a situation so that you can be part of it? I think that would just turn the whole school around.

The students and family members' responses suggest that the faculty need far

found a strong sense of common purpose, a multicultural curriculum, shared practice, and high expectations for student success (Meier 1995). At CHS, this level of coherence remained elusive, at least from the focus group participants' perspectives. For instance, many community members felt that more direct discussion needed to occur about how decisions are made. Even getting to the table to participate in democratic decision-making processes was difficult. Hispanic community members were most concerned that they are made fun of because they do not speak English well:

We have to start a group for everyone. But many of us don't speak English well. Then we can't get together with the Blacks, or the Whites, because we can't communicate with each other.

There was agreement that school leadership needed to evolve, especially among teachers and students, so that a more democratic school community could be achieved. Several participants discussed a continuing need for the school leadership team to work as a well-informed body constructively involved in decision-making.

Consistency is my thing. The school feels chaotic to the teachers. The parents often feel like they don't really understand what's going on at school. The students feel like things change on them week to week. Graduation or rights passage requirements [these are the rubrics and cut score requirements to pass one's portfolio review for graduation] change on them from month to month. There's a lot of chaos as a staff developer that's part of the cabinet [an advisory group to the principal made up of how school administrators, professional staff, and department chairs] and you actually want to be glad you're not on the cabinet. They don't really decide anything they just sit through meetings. There's very low consistency in the goals, purposes, methods of staff development. There's a lot of money flowing into the school for extra allocations of teachers for all sorts of events but there's not really a consistent purpose or follow through and that the entire staff just kind of ducks every time we're asked to do something different or new or change something. Because you know if you duck for about a month, it'll go away. In the meantime, you'll have been asked to do three or four new things. Because there's so much new, so much being asked for that's not being followed up on, you end up with kind of almost a resistance that doesn't need to be there. I think that the entire faculty is just fabulous but they're not getting a clear message or consistent message on what to do.

Creating a common educational vision and coherent, complimentary practice requires collective effort among all school members (Fine 1994; Epstein 1995; Royal & Rossi 1996; Abrams & Gibbs 2000). Organizations that practice collective inquiry, learning, collaborative leadership, and collaborative decision-making—key features of community building (Lambert 1998)—enhance professional effort. When the individuals within a community are moving in and out as rapidly as those in CHS, the creation and maintenance of unity and common purpose amidst

marginalized or excluded groups (Keith 1999). In CHS's situation, in spite of the evidence available, administrators and staff seemed unwilling or unable to grapple with the underlying issues. From a policy perspective, the impact of top-down mandates (Fullan 2002) enlists superficial compliance without deeper understandings that lead to change in practitioner beliefs and practices. Further, without time to delve into the particular contexts of any given school, building-level leaders are left to cast about for structural fixes that often reorganize incoherence rather than provide more thoughtful supports for sustained growth and improvement. Thus, the very notion of systemic change in which multiple levels of a system operate simultaneously to support learning and growth is antithetical to the nature of most mandated change efforts.

So much needs to happen at once to make things better. You can't change everything at once—you've got to focus on specific items and then allow for the ripple effects and outcomes of change to occur without leaping to a new solution to the same problem. Each year that I was at CHS, this became more true. Rollover of faculty, new to the profession and new to the environment creates havoc with the process of moving forward since the turnover creates the need to tread water while renorming occurs.

The research team had the delicate task of balancing its commitment to the school community to help them move forward in their work while also trying to understand the data in the context of a broader systemic change framework. Mapping the activity connections between the evidence and a systemic framework could help to organize effort and focus energy. Researchers were able to explore the intersection of the values and beliefs of families and students and those of the professional community at CHS. Yet creating community requires an understanding of how community might evolve in settings where diversity exists on multiple dimensions and issues of power and privilege remain misunderstood, ignored or veiled (Lomotey & Simms 1996).

Urban high schools like CHS are complex social milieus where administrators and teachers often engage in their own dances of authority and resistance, knowledge and power, and cultural hegemony (Rocco & West 1998). This dynamic is complicated by similar sets of tensions among students themselves, between students and faculty, and among the faculty, the administration, families and community members. Disconnects, crossed purposes, conflicting views of reality, and unexamined perspectives all operate within the system (Keith 1999). Without balances that support common ground, cohesion and collective purpose, urban schools stagger under the politics of these dynamics. Complicating the picture still further are the outside attempts to reform and improve results for students. Reform efforts themselves whether they come from district, state or federal mandates or, from parents, community members, nonprofits or universities trying to leverage change, make setting and maintaining courses of improvement difficult to manage.

Dedicated urban educators believe in the rich, multicultural contexts of high quality urban high schools that nurture the talents of all students. They see these schools as seedbeds of democracy in action and as a symbol of hope for the future

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