

*Professionalization,  
Partnership,  
and Power*

Building Professional  
Development Schools

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Chapter Six

*Why Do Schools Cooperate with  
University-Based Reforms?*

THE CASE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOLS

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Educational reform has proven to be “steady work” in the words of Elmore and McLaughlin, because it has been so routinely unsuccessful in bringing about significant change within schools. As they put it,

Reforms that deal with the fundamental stuff of education—teaching and learning—seem to have weak, transitory, and ephemeral effects; while those that expand, solidify, and entrench school bureaucracy seem to have strong, enduring, and concrete effects (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988, p. v).

This is the core insight one can distill from the dismal literature about American reform efforts: that schools have shown an amazing capacity for accommodating their organizational form to the latest reform initiative while refusing to adopt its substance. According to Cusick (1992), the formal organization of schooling responds to such initiatives using standard techniques of specialization, moderation, and cooptation, which “combine to turn educational reform into organizational reform” (p. 211). And such a transformation of the original thrust of the reform effort can, in turn, appropriately be interpreted as a failure—what Sarason (1990) called, in the title of his recent book, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. School reformers fail so predictably, in Sarason’s view, in large part because of their chronic inability to tailor reforms to a particular educational context. The message seems to be that unless you understand the unique structure of relationships that defines a par-



particular school and community, you will never be able to bring about substantive reform in school practices. If reformers in general have a problem of being cut off from context, the difficulty is particularly acute when they hail from the university. School reforms that draw upon the personnel and perspectives of the university, as so many do, run into predictable problems of implementation because of the gap separating the universalistic concerns of university people from the particularistic concerns of school people. Education professors and educational researchers are removed from the necessity of responding to the daily barrage of practical problems that confront practitioners in schools, and at the same time they are constrained by academic career incentives that put a premium on making contributions to the theoretical literature. As a result, they can and must look on schools as sources of data for the construction of general theories about teaching, learning, and the functions of schooling. Meanwhile, teachers and administrators, who cannot escape the practical demands of running classrooms and schools, tend to look on each classroom and each school as a unique site for educational practice that is inextricably embedded in local issues and relationships. Therefore, whereas university people see reform as an effort to apply general principles in schools, school people see such reforms as simply inapplicable to their own problems of practice or as usable only if radically adapted to fit the local setting.

Given these differences, the remarkable thing is not why schools resist university-sponsored reforms but why they ever agree to participate in such reform initiatives in the first place. Yet they continue to do so. Educators still call on university professors and draw on educational research when they consider making changes within schools; they still are willing to sign on, albeit cautiously, to reform efforts supported by the university. Why is this so? What benefits do K-12 educators feel they may gain from such association with higher education? It is these questions that I will explore in this chapter. I will attempt to sketch some of the reasons that motivate administrators and teachers to pursue reform of existing practice within schools and classrooms in cooperation with university faculty and in line with university research. In exploring these reasons I will draw on the example of one current educational reform movement that has emerged recently from the university, the effort by the Holmes Group to professionalize teaching and restructure the school. First, let me provide a little background about this particular reform effort, and then I will turn to the question of why schools might be willing to go along with it, and other university-based reform efforts, at least for awhile.

The Holmes Group is an organization of about 100 colleges of education in research-oriented universities in the United States. It has defined its goals in two reports, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (1986) and *Tomorrow's Schools* (1990). (A third report, tentatively titled *Tomorrow's Schools of Education*, is being released this year.) Arguing that educational research has now developed a

solid knowledge base for teaching, the teaching should be elevated into a full-fledged profession. One of the goals of the teaching would be an increase in status. The advantage to students would be an increase in the quality of instruction. These reports lay out a two-stage professionalization process—asking colleges and universities to increase the breadth and depth of professional education for school teachers and to give schools a more prominent and influential role in regulating school operations. The effort is operationalized as the current effort by the Holmes Group, what are called professional development schools. In *Tomorrow's Schools*, a PDS is intended to be a partnership between university faculty members and the teachers in a school for the purpose of rethinking and reforming school practice.

In this chapter, I will be using the example of the Holmes Group as a part of the larger problem of school cooperation with the university. The efforts of the Holmes Group initiative is made up entirely of university people; it emerged from its own ranks and not from the ranks of school people. The idea for PDSs also developed initially from the ranks of the Holmes Group institutions have been tried in a number of schools. The question, then, is: Why have some schools

## ADMINISTRATORS AND UNIVERSITY

There are at least two reasons why schools might be willing to sign on to a university reform effort. One is that it is useful for them to draw on ideas and personnel from the university to gain leverage in dealing with the public, and in dealing with teachers.

### *Deflecting Public Control*

School administrators feel intensely that public education in the United States is comfortable criticizing schools because public education is the most visible and most thoroughly open to public view and influence. Schools are intensely local, and as such they are deeply embedded in the lives of the community and thoroughly integrated in their lives. Schools play a central role in the social, cultural, and intellectual life of the community during their formative



solid knowledge base for teaching, the Holmes Group reports propose that teaching should be elevated into a full-fledged profession. The advantage to teachers would be an increase in status, rewards, and autonomy, while the advantage to students would be an increase in the quality and competence of instruction. These reports lay out a two-part plan for carrying out the professionalization process—asking colleges of education to increase the breadth and depth of professional education for teachers and simultaneously asking schools to restructure themselves in order to give teachers a more autonomous and influential role in regulating school practices. The latter aim has become operationalized as the current effort by Holmes Group institutions to create what are called professional development schools (PDSs). As spelled out in *Tomorrow's Schools*, a PDS is intended to be a collaborative project between university faculty members and the teachers and administrators in a particular school for the purpose of rethinking and redesigning the way schools work.

In this chapter, I will be using the effort to create PDSs as a case in point of the larger problem of school cooperation with university-based reform efforts. The Holmes Group initiative is certainly such an effort: the group is made up entirely of university people; its call for teacher professionalization emerged from its own ranks and not from teachers or schools; in like manner, the idea for PDSs also developed initially within the university; and now the Holmes Group institutions have been trying to sell this idea to schools. My question, then, is: Why have some schools been willing to buy?

#### ADMINISTRATORS AND UNIVERSITY-BASED REFORM

There are at least two reasons why school administrators may feel that it is useful for them to draw on ideas and personnel from the university and even to sign on to a university reform effort. Such a strategy may give them some leverage in dealing with the public, and it may also give them some leverage in dealing with teachers.

##### *Deflecting Public Control*

School administrators feel intensely vulnerable to public pressure. Most Americans are comfortable criticizing schools and second-guessing educators, because public education is the most public of all American institutions. Unlike the economy, family, and even perhaps government, public schools are thoroughly open to public view and influence. One reason for this is that they are intensely local, and as such they are both accessible to ordinary citizens and thoroughly integrated in their lives. After all, public schools play a central role in the social, cultural, and intellectual development of most members of the community during their formative years. In their youth, local citizens



spend a total of about 15,000 hours in these classrooms, and after graduation the affiliation continues. Schools sit prominently in the middle of every neighborhood, acting as community centers and civic symbols. Adult members of the community go there to vote, to attend public meetings, to see a play, and to learn CPR.

A lifetime of close association with the schools means that what schools do is quite visible and understandable to the public. This point is underscored by the fact that schools are governed by boards of ordinary citizens, not professional educators. School board meetings are places where individuals feel free to come and speak their minds and where administrators have to sit and listen. Superintendents and principals, in particular, as the front-line representatives of the school system, must become accustomed to receiving unsolicited advice and criticism from the general public and doing so with reasonably good grace. These administrators need to keep the public happy. If they fail to do so, citizens reassert their right to reject major actions by the administration with every vote of the school board, every millage election, and every bond issue campaign. As a result, schools are remarkably sensitive to local expressions of concern about how they carry out their functions, or at least they need to appear that way.

This sensitivity is one of the engines driving the continuing waves of reform in American education. Administrators need to deflect public discontent by showing that they are doing something about whatever problem the public sees as currently afflicting the local school, so they subject schools and school systems to one reform effort after another in order to demonstrate their willingness to make necessary changes. Drawing on the authority and expertise of the university can be quite helpful in this effort to deflect criticism. Whether administrators ground their actions in research findings or forge a direct alliance with university faculty, the university connection gives them a powerful political tool. It allows them to tell the public that their reform efforts are not merely examples of political pandering but that these efforts constitute *authoritative* remedial action.

Past failures by local officials, and their identification with an institution as familiar and understandable as public education, may well undermine their credibility with the public as agents of change for schools. But the university retains a distance and prestige that the school administration does not, and it has a reputation for generating expert knowledge that is both obscure to the average layperson and apparently imbued with special authority. Therefore, tapping into the social and intellectual resources of the university can invest actions by local officials with a degree of both authority and mystery that would otherwise be lacking. These qualities serve both to reassure the public that something serious is being done and to block further public inquiry, since the measures taken are beyond the ken of ordinary citizens. Rowan (1984)

labeled this use of educational research as a "the stylized knowledge we call 'science' fur. When local officials invoke this power in su is frequently a kind of "healing ritual" (p. 7) sense of educational well-being and its confi.

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In light of these kinds of considerati find that allying themselves with the Holm teachers is a potentially useful way to all local schools and protect themselves agair munity. The first Holmes report spelled o ment is firmly grounded in the science of at the university (Labaree, in press). Led t oriented colleges of education, the moven link themselves to the full authority of th agreeing to collaborate with the universit development school within their district. statement to the public about the technic on the problems in the local schools and forms of incremental remediation. They ingness and ability to build one of "to community, based on the latest in educa high priests themselves.

#### *Promoting the Control of Teachers*

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labeled this use of educational research as a form of "shamanism" in which "the stylized knowledge we call 'science' functions much like magic" (p. 78). When local officials invoke this power in support of reform efforts, the result is frequently a kind of "healing ritual" (p. 79), that restores the community's sense of educational well-being and its confidence in the officials.

One consequence of particular benefit to administrators is that their appeal to the shamans of the university helps to mystify a situation in the schools that may otherwise be all too clear to the average citizen. Put another way, when the kind of expert knowledge embedded in educational research and embodied in the university researcher is applied to a local school concern, it serves to transform a touchy *political* problem into an administratively manageable *technical* problem. This transformation helps to buffer administrators from future interference by the laity. After all, now the problem is no longer amenable to solution through the application of political skills, which are widely held, but instead a solution calls for the kind of technical skills that are only possessed by a few experts—who are already on the administration's side. Instead of having voters make educational decisions based on values, the administration can assert, we need to have specialists make these decisions based on science.

In light of these kinds of considerations, school administrators may well find that allying themselves with the Holmes Group's effort to professionalize teachers is a potentially useful way to allay public fears about the quality of local schools and protect themselves against political intrusions from the community. The first Holmes report spelled out that the professionalization movement is firmly grounded in the science of teaching as developed by the experts at the university (Labaree, in press). Led by the most prestigious and research-oriented colleges of education, the movement offers administrators a chance to link themselves to the full authority of the university and of science itself. By agreeing to collaborate with the university in the construction of a professional development school within their district, administrators can make a dramatic statement to the public about the technical wizardry they are bringing to bear on the problems in the local schools and their willingness to go beyond minor forms of incremental remediation. They are vividly demonstrating their willingness and ability to build one of "tomorrow's schools" right in their own community, based on the latest in educational technology and overseen by the high priests themselves.

#### *Promoting the Control of Teachers*

University-based reform can be useful to administrators not only because it helps them blunt efforts by the public to control schools but also because it helps them sharpen their own efforts to control teaching. As Lortie (1975) and others (Bidwell, 1965; Weick, 1976) have pointed out, school



administrators have considerable power in dealing with the noninstructional realm of schooling but have remarkably little ability to shape the way teachers teach. In part, this is the result of the difficulty administrators have in acquiring direct knowledge on how instruction is being carried out. The way schools are spatially organized, instruction goes on in relative privacy behind the doors of the self-contained classroom. The problem is also the result of the weak mechanisms available to administrators for the control of teacher behavior. Standard forms of reward and punishment used by supervisors in other organizations to regulate how employees do their jobs—the promise of pay increases for the compliant and the threat of firing for the noncompliant—are simply unavailable to the school administrator, who is bound by union contracts and tenure rules. Thus, administrators often do not know how well a teacher is teaching and cannot do much about it even if they have this information. The result is that administrators often experience chronic frustration, feeling that they are being held accountable by the public for carrying out the competent instruction of students when they do not have the direct power required to fulfill this expectation. Curriculum mandates, standardized testing, and merit pay plans are all methods they have used to gain some control over teachers and teaching, but these methods have not been very successful. One key reason for the relative ineffectiveness of such methods is that they are often seen by teachers, quite accurately, as efforts to reduce teacher autonomy and therefore lead to various forms of active and passive resistance, such as when a merit pay proposal meets union opposition or when a new curriculum package ends up in the teacher's desk drawer.

However, drawing on the expertise and authority of the university in support of a local effort to reform instruction offers administrators the possibility of augmenting their own modest powers in this area. This approach allows the administration to present the proposed reform as something other than a bald effort to gain top-down control over the classroom. By grounding the reform in educational research and drawing on university personnel to help in its implementation, school administrators help to establish the idea that this reform is a simple application of the latest and best ideas about effective pedagogical practice rather than another example of bureaucratic intrusion in the classroom. The administrator takes the role of facilitator in this scenario, in which reform is presented as an effort to aid the teacher in carrying out what "research says" are the most effective means of accomplishing the teacher's own educational goals.

The advantages of the university's involvement for school administrators come not only from its authority and its expertise but also from its image as a disinterested party. Since university people are not part of the school system's power structure, they can make suggestions (directly as consultants and indirectly through their research findings) without appearing to take sides in

the local power struggle over the control of schooling. Teachers are more willing to take advice from this neutral party if backed only by the bureaucratic principal. However, the effectiveness of this approach in this regard depends on its credibility about teaching and schools and also on the politics of a particular school or school system.

The teacher professionalization movement concerns quite nicely. It focuses on teacher quality and the need to upgrade it, so in the name of supporting teacher autonomy there is ever going to be a reform effort. Outside guidance in rethinking their own practice. After all, the Holmes Group is offering teachers themselves (what occupational professional?) and to involve the university in coming to allay suspicions about another actor's involvement with a very attractive opportunity for the construction of a school dedicated to teacher development. Administrators, this potential for enlistment creates the opportunity to tear down the current instructional control and to institute new norms of teaching practice and establish new norms—all under the banner of professionalization.

Of course, teachers and administrators are not the only reformer (and the PDS proponent) two sides of the same coin. The knowledge going to be in resolving our interests are you really serving in your community, the administration, or the teacher. But first let us examine some reasons for the value in the university perspective on involvement in local reform efforts.

## TEACHERS AND UNIVERSITY

There are at least two reasons why teachers are more willing to draw on ideas and personnel from a university reformer. First, they become involved with a university reformer because they have some leverage in dealing with the school system. Second, they also give them a useful perspective in this

