

CHAPTER 2: BUILDING CONSTRUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

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DURING THE BEGINNING years of the Houston Annenberg Challenge, constructive partnerships (Schön & McDonald 1998) helped tremendously in the design and refinement of this reform initiative for public schools. Schools teamed up with evaluators in innovative ways to reflect on their reforms and improve their effectiveness. This chapter describes the context of the reform; the philosophy of the evaluation team; examples of constructive partnerships; unanticipated outcomes; and the lessons learned in this process.

“AN ACADEMICALLY RICH AND PURPOSEFUL EDUCATION”

The Houston Annenberg Challenge was launched in the greater Houston area in 1996 through the collaboration of several individuals from local foundations, educational institutions, and corporations. These key individuals expressed concern about the quality of public education in the greater Houston area and sought to develop an organization capable of initiating and nurturing systemic change. They committed to conducting a “multidistrict, citywide campaign that focused the community’s energies, political will, and financial resources on a strategic investment in networks of public schools that with

their community partners would thoughtfully work toward whole-school change” (Child-Centered Schools Initiative 1996).

The broad-based community group, led by representatives from the Brown Foundation and Houston Endowment Incorporated, created a vision for the public school reform initiative and in March 1996 formed a nonprofit organization named the Child-Centered Schools Initiative (CCSI) of the Greater Houston Area. The mission of this newly formed organization was “to promote an academically rich and purposeful education for more of our children and to demonstrate how such an education could become possible for all children” (CCSI 1996).

Because the accomplishment of this mission would depend on a major infusion of public and private dollars, CCSI prepared a proposal for funding from the national Annenberg Challenge. The proposal addressed three key issues: teacher learning, reducing schools’ isolation, and size (that is, creating personalized learning environments for children).

The vision for the Houston Annenberg reform effort became a reality with a one-to-two matching grant from the Annenberg Foundation, which contributed \$20 million with the stipulation that Houston raise \$40 million in public and private matching funds. This funding led to the creation of the Houston Annenberg Challenge.

The CCSI planners designed the Houston Annenberg Challenge work using the national Annenberg model of school reform and lessons learned from other Challenge sites.¹ They focused on building each school's capacity to promote an academically rich and purposeful education for more of Houston's children. The planners focused their vision of local reform at the school level on the three key issues of isolation, size, and, in particular, teacher learning:

This reform will confront directly the role of the teacher as key to the education of the children.... In short, the distinctive component of the Houston Child-Centered Schools Initiative that sets it apart from and makes it a valuable model for reform in other cities will be its broad commitment to provision for teacher learning. (CCSI1996)

Our research on the reform confirms that teacher learning did, indeed, become the centerpiece of the Houston reform as the planners had intended (Reyes & Phillips 2001).

While the three key issues identified in the original proposal remained at the core of the Houston work for the entire five years of the Houston Annenberg Challenge, initiative planners also envisioned including parents and community members in the reform program. The proposal identified potential community partners such as universities, community organizations, cultural institutions, and corporations. To foster a culture of inclusion, planners invited participation by representatives of dozens of community organizations including the arts, health care, children's services, neighborhood organizations, parents' groups, social service agencies, and private businesses. Furthermore, the planners proposed establishing a regional faculty to provide technical assistance to

reforming schools in an effort to reduce isolation among schools and to help sustain reforms generated during the Houston Annenberg Challenge. The regional faculty concept was modeled after the National School Reform Faculty.²

A Commitment to Collaboration

In many ways, initiative planners recognized the critical role of collaboration in the work that lay ahead. The original proposal frequently mentioned the collaborative nature of the reform plan; collaboration was identified as a crucial process, especially with regard to addressing two of the three key issues: breaking down isolation within and among schools and between schools and communities, and dealing with issues of size by personalizing the learning environment. Planners most likely anticipated that creating collaborative relationships across multiple sectors in Houston – a city known for diverse interests and strong political differences – would not be easy. Our research confirmed the difficulty of that task, particularly in the later stages of planning and in the early stages of implementation.

Despite the emphasis on collaboration, we suspect that even the planners did not anticipate the richness of the collaborative relationships that would emerge among teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between practitioners and community-based researchers. While many of these collaborations began as attempts to implement strategies to reduce isolation and personalize the learning environment, our data reveal that collaboration among partners developed into a key mechanism in teacher learning. Furthermore, administrators' and teachers' efforts to reduce size and personalize the learning environment often grew out of collaborative professional development activities, such as site visits to model programs. We believe that these "collateral effects" began with the evaluation philosophy adopted by educators and external evaluators.

1. The original proposal from Houston to the Annenberg Foundation reported that preliminary planning work began in 1995 through a newly formed 501(c)(3) community organization called the Child-Centered Schools Initiative. This organization began doing business as the Houston Annenberg Challenge after being named one of the eighteen national Annenberg Challenge projects. At the time of this writing, the organization was selecting a new public name to reflect its post-Challenge work.
2. The National School Reform Faculty was created in 1995 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. In July 2000, it relocated to the Harmony School Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana. For more information, see <www.harmonyschool.org/nsrf/default.html>.

A Commitment to Evaluation

One of the most important aspects of these collaborations was the philosophy of evaluation. The overall theory of action was simple, yet elegant. School administrators and teachers would construct the particular theory of action that would guide the education reform at their school. At the same time, they would work with the external evaluators to design strategies and activities. Thus, the first step in the reform implementation process was to build a common perspective on the reform among all stakeholders.

External evaluators made the evaluation process less intimidating for school staff by using formative feedback as the preferred strategy to help implement

the theory of action. Formative feedback meant communication between evaluators and schools around strategic and performance plans, evaluation activities, feedback to the school in the form of performance reports, and program improvement activities. Formative feedback required a commitment to methodological pluralism, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain information. In addition, evaluators focused on person-referenced evaluation and participatory action research, which meant that all stakeholders participated in the evaluation design and data collection. Finally, evaluators emphasized decision-oriented knowledge and context-specific results – that is, findings that the schools could use.

Evaluation of the Houston Annenberg Challenge

The Houston Annenberg Challenge Board of Trustees commissioned a three-year (1999–2002) independent evaluation to be conducted by researchers from the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Houston, and Rice University. The purposes of the research and evaluation study included determining

- how the funded schools put the reform initiative in place;
- what the schools did as a result of the initiative;
- what apparent impact the initiative had upon schools and teacher learning;
- what apparent impact the initiative had upon students' academic performance.

In our evaluation, we drew upon multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data to assess progress of reform efforts, using two major strategies: a macroanalysis of all funded schools and a microanalysis of a subset of schools.

At the macro level, we compared student test data from Annenberg-funded schools with the academic performance of each school's own students in prior years and with the academic performance of comparable peers at other schools. Also, we designed a set of surveys for administrators, principals, teachers, students, parents, and community members across all funded schools.

At the micro level, we searched for evidence of campus changes in teaching and learning. We selected twelve schools – six elementary, three middle, and three high schools – for intensive

case study. We considered the reform's impact in three broad areas: student outcomes, school development and teacher learning, and the building of support for systemic change.

Student Outcomes

- Academic achievement in reading and mathematics as assessed by using the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test, reported in the Texas Learning Index, to compare campus-level performance longitudinally within and across schools (Texas Education Agency 2003)
- Alternative assessment of student work – including portfolios, anthologies, artwork, oral defenses, and performances – to evaluate depth and breadth of student knowledge
- Survey data collected

from students, teachers, parents, and school partners to describe stakeholders' perceptions

School Development and Teacher Learning

- Campus-level changes in teaching and learning
- Relationships within and among funded schools
- School organizational structure

Building Support for Systemic Change

- Sustainable impact on funded schools
- Observable impact on greater Houston area

We believe the process of building cohesion among stakeholders in the evaluation program helped tremendously in negotiating the political tensions typically associated with evaluations. Many times participants in school reform are threatened by the evaluation process and, as a result, build resistance to change. In this case, however, teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the community worked together to design evaluations, collect data, and make sense of data with the external evaluator. Therefore, the evaluation philosophy helped to implement and successfully modify the theory of action.

The Houston Annenberg Challenge made a commitment to assess and modify its initiative through evaluation at several levels: participation in a national cross-site analysis of Annenberg projects, comprehensive evaluation of the Houston initiative, and network- and school-level evaluation. When the first cohort of schools was selected for funding and formed into a network called the Beacon schools, the Houston Annenberg Challenge required these schools to include evaluations and documentation of their work in their plans.

The significant investment in network- and school-level evaluation proved valuable to many of the reforming schools, and it is the primary focus of this chapter. These evaluations were intended to provide accountability for funds and to assess student performance and progress toward reform goals. Additionally, the evaluations were intended to reduce school isolation by increasing collaboration among schools, within schools, and between schools and the community. For instance, principals, teachers, and parents were invited to make site visits to other schools to observe classes, interview staff and children, review children's work, and examine the schools' documentation of reform efforts. The planners encour-

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aged schools and networks to use both standardized and nonstandardized data collection instruments.

Funded schools were expected to design comprehensive evaluation plans to measure progress toward the three key issues – improving teacher learning, restructuring all aspects of school size, and reducing isolation – as well as providing evidence of increased student learning. To help with this formidable task, reforming schools were allowed to recruit external evaluators who could provide technical assistance and assist the schools with evaluation design and implementation. Using these guidelines, Houston reformers created a mechanism unique among the national Annenberg projects: the Planning and Evaluation consultant.

CREATING CONSTRUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Applying their philosophy of evaluation to school reform in the greater Houston area, reform organizers created several mechanisms for constructive partnerships between school insiders and outside researchers. Schön (1983, 1987) and Argyris and Schön (1992) have described a constructive partnership as a type of formative research and evaluation conducted between an initiative's insiders and outsiders who have been invited to explore the inside of the initiative.

The Planning and Evaluation Consultants

During the early days of the initiative implementation, organizers decided to require each of the eleven Beacon schools to use part of its Annenberg funding to contract with university- or community-based researchers. These researchers, hired as Planning and Evaluation consultants, quickly became known within the reform as P & Es. Because each consultant perceived the role differently, the consultants' services to funded schools varied considerably. In this section, we highlight examples from the work of three consultants. These individuals, according to many sources, contributed positively to their schools' reform work during the five-year initiative.

Some participants believe the concept of the P & E consultant was borrowed from the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. The Chicago project used the

concept of external partners as a framework for a potentially broad set of relationships between schools and community organizations. According to the Chicago plan (Newmann & Sconzert 2000), possible partner functions included

- helping schools develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment techniques;
- providing and structuring professional development opportunities;
- providing and facilitating leadership development opportunities for local school councils, parents, and community members;
- brokering other outside resources;
- providing coalition or networking support;
- organizing community involvement;
- advocating on behalf of the schools.

All participants interviewed agreed that implementing the P & E consultant process was an unstructured, although not chaotic, course of action. Initially, the eleven Beacon schools held half-day organizational and content meetings every month. The principal, the school's Annenberg grant coordinator, and the P & E usually attended together.

Different visions surfaced immediately. Some of the initiative planners advocated for a more traditional, structured approach to implementation, documentation, and evaluation of the reform process. Practitioners from the funded Beacon schools resisted this approach as excessively top-down and formed a coalition to lobby for a school-based approach. Beacon school practitioners argued that their schools had been chosen because they were already engaged in innovative reform strategies, and that they were therefore capable of figuring out the best way to capture the new Annenberg-funded work. The process, they thought, was formative; they would invent new strategies as they went along.

As the P & E consultants began working with the funded schools, they put the idea of creating a constructive partnership between administrators and

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teachers into practice. Schön and McDonald (1998, p. 13), building on the work of Argyris and Schön (1992), explain how a constructive partnership differs from traditional evaluation.

If the insiders are an initiative's architects and actors, and the outsiders its evaluators, then the constructive partnership implies an evaluation methodology quite unlike the common variety, in which evaluators work in a relatively "hands-off" way and seek to objectify causal connections between program interventions and their outcomes. . . . It does not seek to hold "treatments" stable but to subject them to continuous reflection. And its boundaries are the boundaries of the action situation it studies, leaving open the relationship between what it may discover in the situation and what might be discovered in others. Illuminating this relationship requires additional inquiry and reflection, or what we call reflective transfer.

Shortly after the initiative formally began in the spring of 1998, the first Reforming Schools Summer Institute introduced the theory of action concept to administrators, teachers, and P & Es. Helping practitioners within reforming schools to create a theory of action and guiding them to reflect continuously about their work became a primary mission of the P & Es. Schön and McDonald (1998) define theory of action as an analytic tool used in evaluation "to help practitioners (including designers and implementers of reform) reflect upon and make explicit the knowledge that shapes what they do; in other

words, it is a tool that helps them inquire into and learn from their own practice” (pp. 10–11). Reform implementers always construct a theory of action; they can never borrow one from another setting because it must be based upon each individual school context.

A theory of action has three phases: what reformers say they would like to do, what plans they design to help them achieve the goals they’ve set, and what actions they actually take. Schön and McDonald describe these three phases or facets of the concept as espoused theory, design theory, and theory in use. Ideally, reform implementers demonstrate coherence among the three dimensions; but, in reality, reform work ranges along a continuum from little coherence to a great deal.

The theory of action approach became the framework around which the funded schools created action plans for the reform. It was used as a way to document the work of the initial years of funding, generally in evaluation documents that the P & E consultants wrote for their schools at the end of the first and second funding years.

The P & E consultants created unique constructive partnerships with their school partners, the nature of which depended upon their skills and strengths. One of the three consultants was particularly interested in teacher knowledge and school context and was well grounded in the use of qualitative methodology. The other two, trained in educational psychology and statistics, drew on their more traditional meas-

urement and evaluation backgrounds. However, all three shared a willingness to work without a super-imposed evaluation structure, preferring, instead, to design with their school partners a localized process based on the school’s context. All seemed comfortable embarking on a journey of exploration with their schools without any preconceived notions about what lay ahead.

All three P & Es believed strongly that part of their role was to connect their school partners to relevant academic literature. The consultants believed that by helping practitioners reflect upon their own tacit knowledge while connecting them with current literature, they could facilitate conversations that would help the practitioners move their schools forward. Many P & Es also became deeply involved in a second reform mechanism: accountability and peer review.

The Accountability and Peer Review Process

Another important mechanism of the Houston reform was the accountability and peer review process. Although initiative planners believed strongly that accountability strategies were essential, they disagreed on how such strategies should be designed and implemented. Some planners favored creating a traditional, structured evaluation system for the funded schools to follow. Others advocated for school-level autonomy, allowing practitioners at each funded school to create independent evaluation strategies. Principals at the eleven initially funded schools – the Beacon schools – objected strongly to the idea of being given a template. These principals, who characterized themselves as having very strong personalities, argued, “We were chosen to be these top [Beacon] schools because we have some great ideas of what we want to do and how we want to do it. . . . We are more than just a collection of standards.”

Out of these lively discussions came the idea of each school telling its own story (Craig 1997, 1999). For several schools, telling their own story meant developing school portfolios. For administrators at one elementary school, an Educational Toolkit became both the reform strategy and the evaluation mechanism. The founders of an experimental high school used their ideas about authentic assessment to design strategies for tracking the reform progress. Faculty

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from each school, working with their P & Es, ultimately created evaluation models that took into account each distinctive school context.

In 1998, the fledgling Houston Annenberg Challenge created the School Accountability Report (SAR), a reporting document to help the newly funded schools implement accountability measures. One staff member recalled developing the first SAR.

That very first year we decided we needed a more definitive rubric for the schools to use, because if we were asking them to change their performance, we had to have some way to measure the change. This rubric began to form the basis for what we were looking for in the schools. The report [SAR] has three elements that we ask the schools to demonstrate: partnerships, leadership, and sustainability. These three elements also incorporate the three imperatives of improving teacher learning, reducing size, and reducing isolation.

Thus, the reporting format asked schools to detail their progress on each of the three imperatives through partnerships, leadership, and efforts to make change sustainable. In addition to describing specific actions and outcomes, each school rated its activities on a continuum of the reform process, from “beginning” through “emerging” and “systematic” to “sustaining.”

To introduce the SAR format and the concept of theory of action, the intermediary organization sponsored a training event, the Reforming Schools Summer Institute (RSSI). The intermediary staff used annual RSSIs and periodic Action Labs to provide intensive training about reform to funded and non-funded schools in the greater Houston area. For example, one Action Lab focused on the use of evidence in reform documentation. According to the objective for the training, “educators will acquire a deeper knowledge of monitoring educational outcomes by collecting, analyzing, and applying a variety of data to make strategic decisions to improve teaching and learning.” Staff used documentation ideas from the Coalition of Essential Schools such as common and uncommon measures (Cushman

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1996). They also incorporated a “cycle of inquiry” approach to continuous improvement, adapting the approach taken by the Annenberg-supported Bay Area School Reform Collaborative.

Another strong component of the Houston Annenberg Challenge accountability system was the peer review process, which was linked closely to the SAR documentation. Peer review teams consisting of two teachers, one administrator, and one community person (e.g., a P & E consultant, parent, or business representative) brought people together across districts. The teams conducted daylong site visits using the school’s SAR documentation as their guide. They used Critical Friends Group protocols,³ including warm and cool feedback, to structure their visits. Team members could do walkabouts, interview faculty, and examine student work.

A principal participating in the initiative’s Principals Academy reflected on a site visit:

The opportunity to tour the school in a large group and also the opportunity to tour in a smaller group focusing on a particular question worked really well for me. As a result of this experience, I will use this format in my Learning Community to gain vital information on how we can improve student engagement.

Intermediary staff recalled that early site visits were informal – designed, for the most part, for looking at model programs. Gradually, as the site visits

3. Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a form of teacher-led study group that originated in 1995 at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform as a program of the National School Reform Faculty.

became connected to the accountability system, the visits became more structured. However, participants stressed that the visits were always about learning and sharing information rather than monitoring compliance. As one staff member observed, “It’s as if the peer review process was just a huge, giant P & E.”

The Case Study Researchers

A third mechanism of collaboration to emerge from the Houston Annenberg Challenge was the close working relationship that developed between case study researchers⁴ and the practitioners at the case study schools. Like the P & E relationships, these relationships varied according to the individual. We spotlight two relationships between case study researchers and practitioners in this section: one in a middle school and one in an elementary school.

The middle school case study researcher joined the project in the second year of the study. She described her data-gathering role as “all about establishing relationships.” Since she considered the principal’s support crucial, she began by spending quite a bit of time with the principal, “getting to know each other.” This researcher believed that establishing trust was essential to gaining access to the classroom teachers. As a former middle school science teacher herself, the researcher bonded immediately with the principal. Always on the lookout for good teachers, the principal even offered the researcher a teaching job “on the spot.”

The graduate student assisting this case researcher expressed concern at the onset about proceeding without a structured research plan that included interview and observation protocols. Believing in the formative nature of the process, the lead researcher recalled, “She was worried and asked me, ‘What

are we going to do?’ I was comfortable in replying, ‘I don’t know. Let’s just go talk with the principal and see what develops.’”

Shortly after beginning her work at the school, this researcher was invited to give a keynote presentation at a district-sponsored conference on implementing project-based learning. Many teachers from the middle school attended the conference. The researcher reported that, after the presentation, the teachers’ perception of her changed “from one of them [an outsider from the university] to one of us [an insider, a teacher].”

As the teachers became more comfortable with her, they were willing to open up and talk about reform implementation. She saw her role not only as a data collector, but also as a resource person. As she observed teachers in their classrooms and met with them individually, she shared relevant information about curriculum sources such as Web sites. Some teachers began to see her as a mentor. This researcher described the case study relationship as ultimately “very personal.” For the formative process to be effective, she believed, practitioners must trust the researcher’s motives.

A member of another research team conducted his study at an elementary school ethnographically. For the second year of the study, he literally moved into the community where the school was located. A former early childhood teacher with a strong literacy background, he worked closely with the principal and teachers. He helped guide implementation of literacy-focused professional development, tutored in an after-school reading program, and substituted in classrooms.

This researcher was especially interested in studying teacher identity and teacher knowledge in the context of school-based reform. He believed that establishing a trusting relationship was key to understanding bigger issues of how localized school-based reform strategies interact with systemic reform strategies, such as state and district accountability measures. In this collaborative relationship, the researcher became a quasi member of the faculty.

4. University-based researchers were asked to conduct case studies in twelve funded schools. These schools – elementary, middle, and high schools – included Beacon and Lamplighter schools. Generally, teams of one university faculty person and one graduate student carried out the case studies.

COLLATERAL EFFECTS AND OUTCOMES

The mechanisms discussed in the previous section provided the infrastructure that helped school reform take root in the schools. The work facilitated by P & Es, case researchers, and others involved in the accountability process helped create some unexpected outcomes. In this section, we describe these outcomes, which we call “collateral effects” of the reform.

Portfolio Group: Writing Outside the Lines

One P & E was asked by five Beacon schools to serve as their consultant. Initially shocked at the idea, this P & E decided she would consider it only if the schools’ representatives agreed to work together as a group. The practitioners – a collection of principals and teachers – agreed. The group coalesced around their shared conviction that they had the ability, at the school level, to create effective methods for documenting and evaluating their work. This collaborative group of Beacon practitioners came up with the idea of school portfolios.

Initially, these school portfolios resembled coffee-table scrapbooks. One or two people at each school typically constructed the first portfolios out of artifacts and photographs from school events, achievements, and, occasionally, student work. The practitioners saw these early portfolios as devices to justify their Annenberg funding and to enhance other grant applications.

Over the five years of their work, however, teachers from the five Beacon schools⁵ watched their process and product change. Gradually, their portfolios began to capture more of the complexity of school change. The portfolios increasingly included teacher reflections, student growth, and individual voices. Teachers said, “As our buildings are being reconstructed, so are we.”

More and more faculty became involved in the process of building the annual portfolio, and in the process, the documents moved from artifacts to voices. The portfolio group summarized their collective insights about the value and validity of the process in which they had been involved at a symposium presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans in April 2000.

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Some teachers were involved with the portfolio group from the outset. Others joined as the process unfolded. Still others moved in and out of the process. One member of the last group described his intermittent participation as an expression of frustration. A middle school language arts teacher, he had initially resisted the idea of journal writing as too structured. Working with one student, he had an insight that “you don’t have to write on the lines.” His student had a habit of submitting assignments on scraps of paper, fast food bags, or napkins. Despite the unorthodox materials, this teacher recognized growth in his student’s writing as the boy moved from “entries full of anger with very little elaboration” to “descriptive, well-organized essays.” As this teacher began to understand the power of individual style, he also began to relax in his own writing. Gradually, his own journal entries “outside the lines” revealed

5. An additional school eventually joined the first five schools in the portfolio group. This school, an Annenberg-funded middle school, is a member of the Lamplighter school network. Teachers at this middle school recognized the value in the portfolio process and asked to join the group. Although funded at a different level and therefore in a different phase of reform, this school was welcomed by the other five into the portfolio group and has presented publicly with them about their work on numerous occasions.

The teacher team concluded that portfolio development created value for individual teachers, groups of teachers, and the entire school.

increasing understanding of his students and the effects of his pedagogy on his students' work.

Based on his journal, I allowed him to sit by himself and write independently if he chose. I think he feels safe that way. He is always first to class, and I have tried to speak to him and encourage him daily. He really seems to focus and take constructive criticism well now. (And I have to do less and less encouraging and more and more discussion of his increasing strengths as a writer.)

This teacher described the school portfolio and his journal as dance partners in the writing process. As a member of the school portfolio team, he agreed to keep a reflective journal. This journal became part of his personal teacher portfolio. Portfolio team members kept journals in a variety of styles and forms. Most faculty used their portfolio experience to guide students into journal writing and student portfolios. This teacher experienced the portfolio process as an important guide for developing writers; even he, already an accomplished writer, continued to improve. Ultimately, all these forms of portfolios found their way back into the school portfolio.

The teacher team concluded that portfolio development created value for individual teachers, groups of teachers, and the entire school. Individual teachers benefited by developing a voice in the reform process, experiencing an increased capacity for reflection about teaching and learning, and passing their new knowledge along to their students by changing

their pedagogical styles and their techniques for student assessment and evaluation. Groups of teachers benefited by becoming aware of other teachers' practices, sharing their knowledge of individual students, and collectively creating new knowledge about their shared school context and reform. Finally, the entire school community benefited as fragmented agendas became more unified, student participation in school portfolio making increased, and grant writing became easier.

The Angelou Toolkit: It's About the Children

In another P & E consultant–school collaboration, the university-based researcher worked primarily with the principal. This consultant already had a working relationship with the principal from an existing reading initiative. When the opportunity to serve as the school's Annenberg P & E occurred, she was a natural choice.

This consultant saw her role as helping the principal develop a systematic plan for the school. She recalled early conversations among initiative organizers and funded school representatives as sometimes heated debates about the purpose of the reform and the localized school-based evaluations. Some people believed the reform – and thus the measurement tools – should focus on student outcome data (e.g., scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, Stanford Achievement Test, or daily grades). Others argued that the evaluation should focus more on telling the story of how the reform was happening in the schools.

This consultant began by trying to demystify the language of traditional research measurement and evaluation. Her priorities were to help her principal focus the reform and understand how to collect evidence of the work. From these efforts emerged a school plan dubbed the Angelou⁶ Educational Toolkit.

The toolkit began as a reflective, qualitative exercise. As this P & E recalled, "It was done as a qualitative study because we wanted collaboration and buy-in from everyone." Large pieces of paper, posted in the school cafeteria, listed probing questions across the top and grade levels down the side. The questions were designed to help participants think through what goals they envisioned for the school,

6. All school names are pseudonyms.

Impact of the Houston Annenberg Challenge

School Development and Teacher Learning

- The Houston Annenberg Challenge invested heavily in teacher and administrator professional development.
- Annenberg schools provided a range of activities to foster teacher learning, including Critical Friends Groups, literature study groups, writing groups, teacher action-research teams, and professional academies.
- Substantial evidence demonstrated that the Houston Annenberg Challenge investment in professional development positively impacted teaching and learning in funded schools.
- Teachers reported that using Annenberg funds to attend conferences helped them to “raise the bar” in their teaching, forcing them to think on a conceptual level and to assist their students in doing the same.
- Teachers collaborated with each other to improve their instructional practices and to create innovative, integrated curriculum lessons.
- Teachers engaged students with active learning strategies by encouraging them to explore and experiment in natural settings.
- Teachers integrated art into the curriculum to engage students in visual, kinesthetic, and auditory ways of learning.
- Teachers used familiar and relevant examples drawn from students’ daily lives to connect students to new knowledge.
- Teachers exposed students to complex subject matter and skills while holding them to high achievement standards.
- Teachers helped students to develop critical thinking skills that ultimately deepened students’ understanding and expanded their knowledge.

Building Support for Systemic Change

- The Houston Annenberg Challenge provided support to Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) in the metropolitan Houston area by training CFG coaches, principals, and CFG members.
- The Houston Annenberg Challenge implemented a Principals’ Leadership Academy to enable area principals to create personal professional development plans and to develop leadership skills.
- The Houston Annenberg Challenge developed new educational programs by creating partnerships such as
 - K–5 Mathematics Specialist Partnership with Exxon-Mobil and the Houston Independent School District to strengthen teachers’ content knowledge and instructional strategies;
 - Partnership for Quality Education with four local universities, six school districts, and one community college to restructure teacher preparation programs;
 - Schools for a New Society with the Carnegie Corporation and the Houston Independent School District to improve the district’s twenty-four comprehensive high schools;
 - Passport to Success with the Annenberg Foundation

and the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast to design and implement an after-school program providing an enriched learning environment.

Student Outcomes

- Annenberg-funded schools usually outperformed non-Annenberg-funded schools in the Houston Independent School District.
- Beacon schools led all other schools in reading and mathematics achievement.
- Students in Lamplighter schools exhibited significant positive increases toward mastery.
- Trend data analysis on Beacon and Lamplighter schools indicated that these schools have narrowed, in some cases considerably, the gap between minority and nonminority students in reading and mathematics.
- Beacon and Lamplighter schools also have narrowed, in some cases considerably, the achievement gap between students of different ethnicities and socioeconomic status in reading and mathematics.
- There was little, if any, change, however, in closing the gap between students whose native language is not English and native English speakers.

what strategies (i.e., programs or activities) they wanted the school to adopt, and how they would measure progress toward improved outcomes for students and the school. Administrators, teachers, parents, and even some of the fourth- and fifth-graders responded to the questions by posting sticky notes in the appropriate boxes. After two weeks, the P & E removed the charts, typed the responses, and reposted the results. After another round of reactions and responses, the toolkit emerged.

The toolkit became the centerpiece of the school's Annenberg reform work. As a working plan, the toolkit's matrix focused the school's reform work around six interrelated strategies centered on literacy: a schoolwide instructional focus on literacy; resident staff developers; literacy lab; writer's workshop; phonemic awareness, guided reading, and literature circles; and parents as partners.

The toolkit defined each strategy, identified key activities, cited evidence of work, and detailed measurement of progress. For example, the schoolwide instructional focus on literacy was described as "vertical and horizontal teaming that allowed for discussion, planning, and implementation of literacy goals and objectives." The key activities to support this goal (e.g., resident staff developers or literacy lab) made up the substance of the rest of the plan and were intended to build a campus culture to support literacy development. The toolkit offered

The school developed a toolkit that defined each strategy, identified key activities, cited evidence of work, and detailed measurement of progress.

additional activities, such as principal networking and training, vertical and horizontal teaming across the curriculum, and teachers becoming writers of all genres. Evidence of these activities would be ongoing dissemination of new research to staff, individualized reading with the goal of all students becoming independent readers at grade level and then moving to literature circles, and the presence of writers actively engaged in the writing process. Finally, progress would be measured by professional development documentation, yearly standardized testing, and nonstandardized measures, including Accelerated Reader and literacy lab assessments.

The school's plan succeeded as demonstrated by higher standardized-test scores, including dramatic gains for previously low-achieving students and an extraordinary reduction in the number of children labeled as learning disabled – from eighty to nine in five years.

As the consultant recalled:

We were always focused on the children. It's about the children. What do we need to do to help all of them? To meet each of them where they are? We all had this intense support of children. It's about children. It is not about self-aggrandizement.

The P & E recalled how the toolkit matrix led to the idea of resident staff developers:

We knew we needed more than just literacy. We needed a resident staff developer, and so we conceived this notion of "just-in-time" staff development – [the principal] coined it – because we knew we couldn't do the reform initiative if we waited for whichever day that in-service was scheduled. And we couldn't always justify spending a whole day on whatever it was that the teachers might need. A particular teacher might need help in a content area right now; she might not need it in May when an in-service day is available. So [the principal] used zero-based budgeting to design a way to have a staff developer in each of the content areas.

These resident staff developers met with grade-level teams and content area teams so that the training could be vertically and horizontally

integrated. Sometimes they would meet daily or as needed. They helped to tie everything together and make everyone in the school responsible for outcomes for each and every student. It's everyone's responsibility. It's not just your responsibility because the child happens to be in your classroom right now.

Authentic Assessment: “Deprivatizing” the Work

A third P & E consultant worked with a newly formed experimental high school. Designed around the ten Common Principles advocated by the Coalition of Essential Schools,⁷ this small high school focused on developing an environment of personalized learning, using an integrated curriculum, and incorporating service learning for all students. The school's founders created a philosophy for the school based on the idea of authentic assessment rather than traditional graded classes. The faculty initially found this innovative approach very exciting. However, by the second year, many administrators and teachers became overwhelmed as they began to understand the enormous scope of the task they had taken on.

Declaring that she was “single-mindedly focused on the restructuring” at the high school, the P & E was particularly interested in the espoused school goal of creating a professional community that would blur the lines between traditional teacher and student roles. The faculty selected five elements to characterize their vision of professional community: shared norms and values, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, “deprivatized” practice, and reflective dialogue. The P & E began by interviewing the school's sixty faculty and staff members, summarizing the results, and presenting the findings to them as a group. She saw her role as helping the faculty continue to think through the process of putting their vision into practice. She helped the faculty see how their theory of action was evolving, especially in terms of how professional community connected with authentic assessment or espoused theory.

According to her interpretation, the design theory changed each year as new issues arose. The theory in use was best reflected, she said, by the yearly Campus Improvement Plan required by the district. She explained, “I think of theory in use as a way of saying,

The newly formed experimental school's founders had created a philosophy for the school based on the idea of authentic assessment rather than traditional graded classes.

‘Did this happen, what happened, what *really* happened, and how do those three things hang together?’”

By the end of the second Annenberg-funded year, the founding principal retired and a new principal was named for this school. The P & E worked closely with the new principal for three years. She described one of her roles as a confidant or “gadfly” for the principal.

We meet once a month at least and have conversations wherein [the principal] tells me everything that's going on and what she's thinking. And then she asks me to tell her what I think about what she's thinking. I would say I'm her gadfly. Mostly, [she] and I have conversations about her efforts to sort through different ways of encouraging staff to experiment in new ways. Sometimes we talk about how to make them accountable, how she can make them accountable without being overwhelming.

By the time the second principal arrived, a “disconnect” had occurred among the faculty between the philosophical vision for the school and actual practice. Given the extraordinarily complex task of

7. The ten Common Principles are: learning to use one's mind well; less is more and depth over coverage; goals apply to all students; personalization; student-as-worker and teacher-as-coach; demonstration of mastery; tone of decency and trust; commitment to the entire school; resources dedicated to teaching and learning; and democracy and equity. For more information, see <www.essentialschools.org>.

What we're doing in this process is deprivatizing; we're forcing people to talk about things that historically don't get talked about on a campus.

creating such a school environment, this disconnect is not surprising. After analysis, the P & E consultant concluded that “clearly defined structures for professional dialogue and continual investigation and analysis” were in place, but the time was not being used productively. Despite the goal of building curriculum and designing instruction and assessment, the faculty did not really seem to know what to do with the designated time. The principal decided to refocus the faculty and staff around the questions, “Who are we, and how good are we at who we are?” These questions proved to be an effective way to launch a collective inquiry process.

As a result of their inquiry, the faculty decided to use Annenberg funding to bring Fred Newmann⁸ as a consultant to help them work through their dilemmas with implementing authentic curriculum and instruction. Newmann and his colleague Bruce King from the University of Wisconsin–Madison began three years of consulting by observing staff meetings. The principal remembered Newmann's feedback:

He and Bruce would sit in meetings, and they would listen. Even though they came to help us understand how to see the world through authentic intellectual work and rubrics, he didn't, because we weren't ready. That fall they showed us disconnects between our goal of authentic instruction

and our actual curriculum delivery. Remember our focus on “Who are we?” We believed we were about personalized learning and integrated curriculum. He helped us understand we were not integrating curriculum. Instead, our curriculum was multidisciplinary. Actually, our delivery was developmentally inappropriate because we had ninth through twelfth [grades] combined. If we set the expectations too high – instruction, curriculum, and assessment – then the eleventh- and twelfth-graders could do it, but the ninth- and tenth-graders could not.

Another example was our assessment. We had lots of rubrics, but he showed us our reliability was nonexistent because we never talked about the same rubric. Additionally, our rubrics tended not to tap into substantive, qualitative, authentic work. So what we're doing in this process is deprivatizing; we're forcing people to talk about things that historically don't get talked about on a campus.

We were asking people to come forward with lessons they had designed and student work, and we were scrutinizing it. We were actually talking about it. Fred helped us develop a common language and a common understanding about what we were doing and how we could improve.

As Fred Newmann and Bruce King worked with the faculty, the P & E continued her conversations with the principal. The P & E recalled their discussions:

She's very wonderful to talk to. I mean she's just full of ideas. She's very open, very reflective. Fred – who's a very down-to-earth, accessible person – was stimulating conversations about instruction and learning that hadn't been there before. The principal was trying to rework her role as an administrator by engaging in real shared leadership. And she was concerned about how to encourage instructors to document their instructional practice in such a way that you could tell that changes are taking place. So a lot of our conversation was about that.

For example, during one session I remember she was anxious about evaluating staff. So she talked with me about doing classroom observations. I would ask her questions like, “Is it your intent to have the staff person reflect on what

8. See Newman, Secada, and Wehlage 1995 and Newman and Wehlage 1995.

he/she is doing? Is that your primary motive?”
By the end of the conversation, she was seeing things in a broader way. She invited the staff person to come in and give her/his own reflection of the lesson.

All three P & Es believed strongly in connecting the faculty with current literature. As this consultant explained: “My goal is to think from a theoretical perspective. I try to connect what she [the principal] is saying to literature. She’s certainly widely read, but it may be that I have a different sort of theoretical take than she. I try very hard to read enough so that I can bring in something different. My sense is that that enlarges the conversation so she can go with her thoughts to a whole new venue. I think at the end of our conversations she understands better what she is thinking, which is probably the most valuable thing I do there.”

WHAT WE LEARNED

We have learned that, for constructive partnerships to work, practitioners must understand that reform is a developmental process. It is a process that takes many turns and leads to unpredictable outcomes. Even though practitioners use guides and specific goals, change is always constant, regardless of activities and strategies. These activities sometimes yielded unexpected positive (or negative) results, and teams learned from their mistakes as well as from their successes. We learned that leaders build feedback loops for constructive criticism and minimize negative personal consequences. Often these strategies resulted in profound shifts in the school organizational culture. When educators experienced these cultural shifts, they were more likely to sustain reform and to engage in continuous improvement activities.

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We have also learned that researchers and practitioners need to understand fully the reform program. They cannot have different sets of operating assumptions. The reform may not work if the researchers and practitioners do not have a similar frame of reference or if the frame of reference is not comprehensive. Both practitioners and researchers need advance training about the nature of the reform, general expectations, and theoretical assumptions. Moreover, they have to agree on a pluralistic methodological orientation – the use of many methods – to yield significant outcomes. Finally, both have to assume that the researchers will provide candid feedback to help with design and implementation of the reform. We believe that these shared assumptions are essential to building successful partnerships.

Finally, we believe that each school needs to have latitude and autonomy in selecting partners. Educators need to trust their schools’ partners and to believe they are committed to making serious recommendations for school improvement. Trust and credibility are crucial to the success of the reform effort.

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