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## Lessons Learned:

Based on work with the UNS schools, the researchers draw the following lessons:

- Providing schools with data does not guarantee they will learn from it.
- A district can enhance school opportunities to learn when it maintains a balance between too little structure and too much structure.
- The principal is the key to a school's development of the capacity to learn.
- Coherence and stability result from teachers' professional community.
- External incentives may constrain organizational learning.
- High-stakes testing policies have unintended consequences for interaction between teachers and students in schools.
- When high-stakes accountability systems are in constant flux, the resulting change and ambiguities frustrate educators. Somewhat paradoxically, however, change and ambiguity can stimulate organizational learning to improve school performance.
- Organizational learning for school improvement requires a communal sense of urgency.

## Organizational Learning in High-Stakes Accountability Environments: Lessons from an Urban School District

*By Helen Marks, Ed.D. and Susan Printy*

### Abstract:

The study investigates whether the high stakes accountability environment in Ohio and one of its urban school districts threatens the potential for organizational learning among a sample of 13 low-performing schools. A descriptive analysis compares the capacity for organizational learning—tapped by measures of participative decision making, shared commitment and collaborative activity, knowledge and skills, and leadership in two sets of schools. One, the 13 urban elementary, middle, and high schools operating under stringent state and district accountability mandates, demonstrates less capacity for organizational learning than the other—a sample of 24 elementary, middle, and high schools selected to participate in a study of school restructuring in the United States. An analysis of school district responses to state policies shows that well-intended initiatives resulted in unintended consequences capable of undermining the capacity for organizational learning in schools.

### Data and Sample:

The Urban Neighborhoods Study (UNS) focuses on a sample of thirteen schools located in a large Ohio urban school district. The UNS sample includes 196 teachers from twelve UNS schools.

The data used for this study is both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data came from observations in the schools as well as interviews with principals, faculty members, and other school personnel. Researchers also analyzed multiple documents including school continuous improvement plans and a Phi Delta Kappa curriculum audit of the district.

The School Restructuring Study (SRS) focuses on 24 schools that made significant departures from conventional practice (e.g. heterogeneous grouping, team teaching, interdisciplinary curriculum, coordinated social services on site, school governance councils) in their efforts at school reform. The SRS sample represents 910 teachers in 24 elementary, middle, and high schools.

### Measuring the Capacity for Organizational Learning:

The researchers use a modified version of the capacity for organizational learning index developed for the studies connected with the SRS schools. There are five measures:

Reference:

Marks, H. & Printy, S. (2002). Organizational Learning in High-Stakes Accountability Environments: Lessons from an Urban School District. Theory and Research in Educational Administration 1 (1).

*The P-12 Project is a university-wide partnership developed to strengthen the scope and effectiveness of OSU's commitment to P-12 education, with a special emphasis on the education of underserved children and youth.*

*Through these briefs, The Ohio State University hopes to assist the state's decision and policy makers with relevant research and information.*

*Opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the P-12 Project or The Ohio State University.*

- (1) Accountability—Teachers were asked if they were likely to receive consequences as a direct result of their students' academic success or failure.
- (2) Participative Decision Making—Constructed as an index, this measures three domains: influence over school policy; influence over teachers' worklife; and influence over students' school experience.
- (3) Shared commitment and Collaborative Activity—Also constructed as an index, this measures teachers' professional community and collective responsibility for student learning.
- (4) Knowledge and Skills—Professional Development serves as the measure of knowledge and skills for the analysis.
- (5) Leadership—This measure reflects the extent to which the school administrator facilitates teachers' work and organizational development.

**Results:**

- Accountability: Compared to their SRS counterparts, teachers in the UNS schools at all grade levels reported greater accountability, including being subject to rewards and sanctions based on student performance.
- Participative decision making: Teachers in the SRS schools exercise more influence in their schools than do the teachers in the UNS.
- Shared commitment and collaborative activity: While professional community is stronger in the SRS school overall, the elementary schools in both groups report about the same measure of community. SRS schools score higher than the UNS schools on collective responsibility for student learning, especially at the elementary and middle school levels.
- Knowledge and Skills: Teachers in the UNS elementary schools reported more favorably on their professional development than teachers in any other group, even their SRS elementary peers.
- Leadership: Both the UNS and SRS elementary school teachers found their leaders more supportive than did the teachers in the secondary schools. While the SRS secondary teachers were mildly unenthusiastic about their leadership, on average, the UNS teachers reported negatively on their leaders.

**See Figure 7 on page 3: The Unintended Consequences of State and District Accountability Policies**

Figure 7. District Response to State Accountability Policy: Unintended Consequences and Resulting Tensions

**State Senate Bill 55**

Institutes 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Guarantee (with retention)

Moves high school exit exam from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade

Increases course requirements for graduation

Increases performance indicators

Requires continuous improvement

Subjects non-improving schools to intervention

Initiative	Details	Intended Consequence	Unintended Consequence
<b>School Continuous Improvement Plans</b>	Year 2, focus on core competencies	Align school efforts to identified district goals	Diminish local discretion in improvement planning
	Year 3, ABC responsible for SCIP as negotiated in teachers' contract	Ensure willing participation of teachers	Diminish external participation in planning process
<b>Curriculum Management Audit</b>	Target Teach	Align and integrate curriculum Allow data-based decision making	Narrow curriculum Diminish professional discretion Contribute to unproductive teacher/student relationships
	Reading Programs	Standardize instruction Provide equity response to student mobility	Deskilling teachers Contribute to unproductive teacher/student relationships
	Professional Development	Improve teachers' instructional competencies	Reduce opportunities for individual development
<b>Principal Accountability</b>	Raises tied to results Transfer if school does not improve	Motivate principals to focus on proficiency improvement	Discourage principals to give up control and grant teachers discretion
<b>Teacher Accountability</b>	Gain-sharing reward system	Motivate teachers collectively to improve building proficiency performance	Discourage good teachers from teaching at low-performing schools
	Individual incentive system	Motivate teachers individually to improve student proficiency performance	Reinforce teacher autonomy Impede development of professional community and collective responsibility

