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Planning for Failure?

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The irony is just too much. Your school, labeled "underperforming" or an equivalent term, has to develop an "improvement plan." And yet, unfortunately, it is just such "improvement planning" that currently accounts for a large share of school failure.

There are straightforward, proven means for enhancing achievement in virtually any school. But school improvement planning, like its sister, school "reform," too often merely distracts us from our real task: the hard work of improving teaching.

Too much of schools' 'improvement planning' misses the mark.

More than a decade ago, the educational researcher Michael Fullan began to wonder at the havoc wrought by improvement planning. It fails, he wrote, because it so quickly becomes elaborate and complex, "a source of confusion and burden to teachers," on whom improvement primarily depends. Where schools saw grand plans, he saw what has become a useful phrase in educational circles: "overload and fragmentation." Most important, he and others saw clearly how these plans themselves come to supplant what *does* improve instruction and raise levels of achievement: a team of teachers meeting regularly—and continuously—to design, test, and then adjust their lessons and strategies in light of their results.

Boatloads of truly improving schools attest to the power in this simple formula. To cite only one recent case, schools in Chicago were found to be four times as likely to improve academically where such "frequent teacher collaboration" created "strong professional communities."

And yet, the typical school or district improvement plan takes us in an entirely different direction. I've reviewed hundreds of these "strategic"

or "comprehensive reform" plans from around the country. Almost none of them make these simple collaborative structures the soul of their improvement planning; most don't include them at all.

More typically, strategic plans contain a dizzying, incoherent abundance of activities and responsibilities within columns and categories reading, "Goals"; "Action Plan" (or "Action Steps"); "Objectives"; "Timeline"; "Resources Needed"; "Evaluation"; "Target Areas"; and more. Superficially, they are large, handsome documents; school boards, district offices, and accreditation agencies love them.

But behind the graphic elegance, and the best intentions, lies a bankrupt model awaiting slow discovery. The first casualty is clarity. The key terms themselves— "goals," "action steps," "evaluation"—get confused. They wind up being used almost interchangeably. This accounts for a phenomenon that dooms real improvement from the start: For all the planning, many teachers can't remember what their goals are.

How could they? The best schools and organizations know that no one can pursue more than about two goals at once and expect results. The plans I see set an average of half a dozen or more. These, in turn, unleash—and become confused with—a torrent of promises to implement an exhaustive array of popular but unproven programs, initiatives, and name-brand teaching fads.

Many administrators admit privately that they know the plan itself is the problem, and that they and their teachers get saddled with an impossible number of goals and processes. The length and complexity of these plans ensure that no one really knows if or how well anything is being implemented.

In the end, these plans are more political than practical. They represent, as one team of researchers observed, a school or district's "futile bureaucratic attempt to 'demonstrate' that they are doing everything possible to improve achievement."

The business community concurs. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, two widely published organizational thinkers, say that the research is in, and that "strategic planning doesn't work." Their verdict: "It's a process that detaches strategy from operations, thinking from doing." Or, as the management scholar Gary Hamel recently wrote, strategic planning "is about as effective as dancing naked around a campfire."

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But there's hope. A growing number of educators in our schools and districts are resisting the institutional inertia behind this failed model. And they are succeeding mightily with simple plans that focus **on the collaborative structures**

essential to improving instruction.

This is no pale theory. Researchers in both the business and education communities have been saying this for decades; thousands of successful schools, from urban to affluent, attest to it.

- It is time to close the gap between what we know and what we do to promote learning. It is still the rare school that recognizes that teachers, working together, have the capacity—right now—to improve instruction. We need to give them this opportunity. We need to ditch much of what we now do, in exchange for regular times, at least monthly, for teachers to design, refine, and assess their instructional strategies. And then, just as regularly, we need to honor and celebrate each team's success as its members develop and share better lessons and strategies with their colleagues. It is no overstatement to say that in most schools, such practices would yield immense, often immediate benefits.

All of this is within our reach. School districts, state departments of education, universities, and accreditation agencies, all with their considerable clout, could lead the way. Our schools, teachers, and students deserve no less.

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On the Web

The [National Center for Research on Teacher Learning](#) offers useful brochures including, "[Learning To Walk the Reform Talk: A Framework for the Professional Development of Teachers](#)" and "[Learning From Mentors](#)". (Require [Adobe's Acrobat Reader](#).)

[Teachers Helping Teachers](#), a panel where teachers can communicate about new teaching methods, offers a variety of [classroom management techniques](#) and lesson plans for inexperienced teachers.