

Implications for Systemic Education—and Societal—Reform: A Discussion of McGranahan, Hobbs, Nachtigal, and Stephens

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My task was to analyze these four articles with regard to their implications for rural school improvement. I began by asking, first, what are the major approaches to school improvement, and, second, how do the trends that were identified in rural America converge with or diverge from these approaches?

In the 1990s, when one talks about approaches to school improvement, the two related concepts heard most frequently are “restructuring” and “systemic reform.” There is, as we know, a rapidly growing knowledge base of some research—and a great deal of speculation—about these concepts. For the purpose here, I have reviewed a number of papers (to which I refer in the text) in order to understand the many dimensions of restructuring and reform and to help construct a framework with which to review the four trend-analysis papers. I soon discovered that systemic educational reform cannot be separated from broader societal reform. In fact, the latter is necessary if the former is to have any chance of success.

Implications for Systemic Educational Reform

Stephens (1994) directly addresses a number of major developments in education during the past five years that have potential impact on rural school districts. I believe he is on target when he identifies such key developments as the shifting focus of control for policy development, restating the national interest in education, instituting more rigorous accountability, restructuring governance and collaboration, improving instructional practices, and (of course) redirecting the school reform movement itself.

All of these trends that Stephens identifies are consistent with Shaskin and Egermeier’s analysis (1993) of systemic educational reform. For example, they include the following four dimensions in the “fixing the system” (systemic educational reform) change model. The first is re-

forming the entire enterprise—from national goals, to state curriculum frameworks, to the district, the building, the classroom, and the teacher. The second is incorporating three previous strategies (“fix the parts,” “fix the people,” “fix the school”) into a broad context that extends to the national level, state education agencies, professional development institutions, communities, and school districts. The third is incorporating various elements of school restructuring, including decentralizing authority (site-based management); providing authority consistent with responsibility (accountability); changing governance patterns (empowering parents and community members); and uniting parents, educators, businesses, universities, foundations, and the public into a collaborative force in order to transform relationships between schools and communities. The fourth is developing more integrated and cohesive curricula, state curriculum frameworks, achievement and performance standards in all curricular areas, and improving instruction by developing more authentic ways of ascertaining what students know and can do and by increasing the “professionalization” of teaching.

In my opinion, Stephens’ conceptualization clearly converges with Shaskin and Egermeier’s analysis. Moreover, Stephens’ view of the major education trends of the last half decade is generally upbeat. Although I share his overall optimism, I temper it with the realization of, as he noted, the deteriorating condition of this nation’s children and youth, an issue to which I will return.

Nachtigal’s (1994) analysis of political trends also has major implications for systemic educational reform. Although the terms that he uses and those Shaskin and Egermeier use to describe systemic reform do not match one-to-one, I believe convergence is evident when Nachtigal speaks of political empowerment and Shaskin and Egermeier talk about the cultural perspective, i.e., a bottom-up approach that seeks to influence change by encouraging value changes within organizations. Thus, when Nachtigal talks about a “Rural Rights Act,” about people wanting more say about how issues get resolved, and about a face-to-face and hands-on approach to problem solving, he is clearly talking about empowerment, a major dimension of systemic educational reform.

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Implications for Broader Societal Reform

In my view, both McGranahan (1994) and Hobbs (1994) extend the implications for systemic educational reform to another level: broader societal reform. In presenting pertinent socioeconomic data, McGranahan, for example, reports that current changes in both earning opportunities and family structure made the life situations of rural children difficult in the 1980s and 1990s. Rural poverty rates, he indicates, which had fallen rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, rose in the 1980s. In the South, the poverty rate in the 1980s was 21%—nearly twice that of the Northeast. Poverty also rose more quickly among rural children than among the general rural population and the level of poverty is now considerably higher among children. McGranahan also notes that increasing stress on the system comes from three sources: the background of the students; the resources of the family and community to support the school system; and the need to improve educational attainment, particularly in preparing students to go beyond high school.

Hobbs also relates highly informative data on the dimensions of rural poverty in nonmetropolitan counties with 25% or more of (a) the general population and (b) children below the poverty level. Equally important, as Hobbs (1991) has written elsewhere, is the realization that “what is revealed as declining student (school) performance is highly associated with changes in family, community, and economic structure outside the school” (p. 152). He reported that by 1987, rural poverty rates were 50% higher than metropolitan rates and even higher than inner-city poverty rates. “This statistic is highly relevant because student socioeconomic status has repeatedly proven to be the most powerful predictor of student academic performance” (Hobbs, 1991, p. 152). Hobbs further asserted that “how well a student performs academically is attributed to a combination of individual abilities, the quality of instruction, the measures of academic performance used, and the social and economic environment both within and outside the school” (p. 157) and that the effect of social class on student performance is particularly germane to rural areas because of the inordinately high poverty rate. Hobbs concluded that evidence clearly shows that reducing the number of rural poor would significantly improve educational outcomes and that such efforts be targeted especially toward persistent poverty locales and populations.

McGranahan and Hobbs are not alone in pointing out the nature and extent of poverty in rural America. Hodgkinson (1994), for example, cites numerous data relating to what he terms the “hyper-poor,” i.e., the “poorest of the poor” (p. 14) who live in extreme poverty conditions—at half the poverty level. Even more troubling is the primary generalization that he draws, i.e., poverty and

disadvantage among rural youth is truly “an invisible issue” in the United States. A recent U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) report also suggested that increases in poverty challenge the rural schools’ ability to help their children meet high educational standards. Dudenhefer (1993) cited significant data on the working rural poor who he indicates may very well be locked into “a culture of poverty” (p. 20). Lastly, Sherman (1992) in his often-cited study for the Children’s Defense Fund, presents a volume of distressing data on child poverty in rural America, noting that rural child poverty is much higher currently than in the 1970s; that rural children suffer more than their share of long-term poverty; and that for African American children, poverty rates are even higher in rural areas than in cities.

Although Winfield and Woodard (1994) were not speaking solely of rural schools, their insights are particularly relevant when they state that promoting equity and valuing diversity are necessary components of any educational policy that ensures that every citizen, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or national origin, can obtain the education required to be productive in an increasingly technological society. They maintain that

The national standards and assessment proposed in Goals 2000 will not effectively change inequitable education and employment opportunities, in part because they focus primarily on the outcomes of schooling. In fact, unless commensurate effort goes into addressing antecedent instructional conditions and guarantees the provided-for opportunity to learn standards, the bill will actually exacerbate existing inequalities by creating additional barriers and limiting opportunities for upward mobility out of poverty. . . . As currently construed, national standards and assessment will only ensure that those students and individuals who have historically been disenfranchised and underrepresented remain in a subordinated position and bear the burden of proposed school reform. (pp. 21-22)

Moreover, changes in national standards and assessments—key components of systemic educational reform—are not necessarily the only conditions for improving student and school achievement. Winfield and Woodard (1994) contend that

policies and practices that directly address conditions of current inequities in opportunities to learn at the school, district, and state levels have a greater probability of improving school learning and achievement. Such policies include: equitable school financing, funding curriculum devel-

opment, increasing training and staff development for teachers and administrators in content area assessments, and improving assessment course content and requirements in universities. These policies, which directly affect teaching and learning, are more closely related to practice in schools and classrooms. . . . Only when policy makers consider opportunity to learn standards as important as implementing national standards and assessment will we ensure that those students and individuals historically disenfranchised will share in the American dream of opportunity for educational achievement and economic success. (p. 22)

Smith and O'Day (1991a) were not speaking only of rural schools when they declared that exclusive reliance on school-based change is likely to disadvantage minorities and the poor. "Districts and schools with large numbers of such students," they contend, "often have less discretionary money to stimulate reform and more day-to-day problems that drain administrative energy" (p. 3). Elsewhere, Smith and O'Day (1991b) note that "it is important to recognize that [proposed reforms that solely emphasize higher-order thinking and more challenging curriculum] could also place minorities and the poor at a new disadvantage because the less powerful in society are typically the last to benefit from state and district generated reforms—if they benefit at all" (p. 258). More recently, O'Day and Smith (1993) contend that "students from poor and minority groups face a very uncertain time. . . . Their economic and social conditions are deteriorating without relief in sight and the progressive curriculum reforms, if carried out one school at a time, will almost certainly place them at an even greater relative disadvantage" (p. 298).

Conclusion

Unquestionably, we must attempt to "fix the parts," "fix the people," "fix the schools," and "fix the system." There is an expression often attributed to rural folk: "If it isn't broken, don't fix it." I believe the authors of these four articles point to a number of strengths of rural schools and communities, as well as to a number of things that "still need fixing." I believe, moreover, that the notion of "fixing the system," as presented by Sashkin and Egermeier, seemingly undervalues such external factors as socioeconomic status and poverty levels of, in this case, rural children, youth, and their families.

A broader conception of systemic reform, in the rural context, must include (a) enhancing the infrastructures and "technological highways" in order to overcome geographic, social, cultural, and professional isolation; (b) refining, as Nachtigal asserts, "the way we think about and practice political action" and "changing the political trend lines" in

order to overcome the disempowerment of rural citizens; (c) increasing the levels of educational resources and services (equitable opportunities to learn) in order to bring equity—as well as quality education—to rural schools and communities; and, most importantly, and (d) eradicating the massive levels of poverty that overwhelm so many of this country's rural children, youth, and families.

It seems to me that we can systemically reform education all we want, but unless we get to the root of the problem, few long-term changes will occur. Fixing the parts, the people, the schools, and, indeed, the system are important; yet all of these approaches may not amount to much unless we declare a second War on Poverty. Last time poverty won. This time we need to make it a real fight, not a minor skirmish. The War on Poverty never received more than \$2 billion in any given year. In contrast, "the cold war absorbed the nation's resources from 1950 onward at roughly \$300 billion per year in constant 1992 dollars for a staggering total of some \$12.6 trillion" (Jansson, 1993, p. 331). As an unrepentant believer in a Great Society, my recommendation may not sit well with some, but I honestly believe that the data on rural poverty reported by McGranahan, Hobbs, and others would support the view that perhaps War on Poverty II is long overdue. In short, I am suggesting that the problems that need "fixing" are multidimensional and that we must attempt to decrease poverty and increase the socioeconomic status of rural children and their families. Enhanced educational outcomes, I believe, will follow.

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