

From Competitive Edge to Collaborative Advantage: The Promise of Change Networks
Dennis Shirley
www.dennisshirley.com

Abstract

When viewed from an international perspective, recent US reforms, such as the *Race to the Top* and the *Blueprint for Reform* for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, have involved the infusion of business practices into schools in ways that override older traditions of democratic governance. US reforms have been predicated on our confidence in market forces and state interventions and our distrust of educators and local communities as agents of change. These perspectives have led to the popularity of closing schools, dismissing staff, and shifting displaced students to other buildings that are key components of the administration's "turnaround" model. One can worry that such models are *perfecting unsustainable change*—building in *instability and competitiveness* into our change architecture rather than *stability and collaboration*.

Is it possible that such models overlook models that uplift the profession, engage local communities, and stabilize rather than disrupt schools? In this presentation I draw upon my first-hand research in England with Andy Hargreaves to describe a model that "professionalizes schools learning from schools." When supplemented with community organizing as practiced in the US, such a model provides us with an optimal calibration of professional uplift and civic engagement.

The English network was entitled "Raising Achievement Transforming Learning" (RATL) and was affiliated with the Specialist Schools Academies Trust. To participate in RATL, schools had to have low value-added measures based on their pupil intake. 300 secondary schools were in the network at the time of the study (2005-2006).

The student achievement results of schools in the RATL network were impressive. Two-thirds of the schools improved at double the rate of the national secondary school average in two years. Rather than demanding and imposing change vertically, RATL drove improvement laterally through heightened professional engagement and deepened professional inquiry and reflection. Specifically, RATL:

- *Invited participation* by underachieving schools which were identified by quantitative indicators of performance dips or declines in examination results, standardized test scores, and measures of value added achievement.
- *Networked schools together* through conferences and programs of inter-visitation and exchange, so that schools experiencing difficulties began to learn from and support each other in their quest for improvement. They discovered there are many others facing the same problems and that underperformance is a common challenge, not a symptom of individual inadequacy.
- *Made available mentor schools and school leaders* to participants in the network as providers of coaching, support and available solutions. Mentor schools were not assigned to struggling partners, but a group of them displayed their practices at RATL conferences so that participating schools could contact, visit and

communicate with them in their own way, at a time of their own choosing. The ethic of RATL was that *the strong help the weak*—by invitation and choice, not compulsion and assignment. Importantly, mentor schools were offered compensatory resources so they did not lose capacity and performance as a consequence of devoting time to others.

- *Provided visionary inspiration and motivation* through speeches from outstanding school leaders and leading edge thinkers at network conferences and through project leadership, which energized schools in the change process by addressing the necessities of and achievable possibilities for improvement.
- *Supplied technical systems and assistance* for analyzing student achievement and other school-level data, especially in relation to value-added measures and data that took into account factors in the local context, such as degrees of family and community deprivation.
- Injected into the network an array of experience-driven and practically proven strategies, of a *short, medium and long-term* nature, for raising achievement and transforming learning—which schools adapted to their own situations.
- *Incentivized participation and improvement* through modest funding (equivalent to \$16,000 per annum) to be spent entirely at the principal's or school's professional discretion in relation to improvement goals.
- *Used technology effectively* to connect participating schools through a popular web portal and to link students so they could exchange study strategies.
- *Established accountability* through transparent processes of participation as well as public visibility of measured outcomes. Underachievement was numerically evident and so too were the efforts that schools made to seek help in rectifying it. There was peer pressure as well as peer support.

Underlying and driving these strategies, RATL leaders invented a sophisticated model that yielded early and measurable benefits in student achievement in two-thirds of project schools. The model was based in experience yet also intelligently informed by evidence. It valued inside-outside engagement of development and research undertaken by, with and for schools in energetic, peer-driven networks focused on student learning. RATL combined a sense of urgency and a push for success with a culture of optimism and inspiration which led educators to understand that, with some outside assistance, the solutions to raising achievement lie within their own professional hands. RATL replaced the *fear factor* with the *peer factor* as the prime instigator and motivator of change.

For more information on RATL and network models of change, see Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2009) *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin; Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2007) *The Long and Short of School Improvement*. London: Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

The RATL model enabled parent and community engagement but was not predicated upon it. For this reason US-based innovations in community organizing for school reform provide an excellent complement to RATL. For studies on this model of change see Mediratta, K., Shah, S., & McAlister, S. (2009) *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press;

Shirley, D. (1997) *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.