Preface

The Problem of Continuous School Improvement

For decades, a series of cyclical reform efforts have been fueled by doomsday criticism and reports, followed by an intensive search for workable solutions. In most schools, innovations tend to appear and disappear with predictable regularity. Few reform initiatives are systemic, and they result in short-run gains rather than building a capacity for continuous improvement.

Increasingly, educational researchers and policy analysts agree that the organizational structures and cultures of schools can either enhance or hinder their effectiveness. There is growing recognition that quality teaching and conditions that support it, such as supportive leadership that builds learning communities within schools and communities, evidence-based decision making focused on student learning, and collaborative problem solving and action, are essential foundations for continuous school improvement.

This book offers a series of essays by prominent researchers that identify the rationale for strategies that parents, educators, and policymakers can use to create conditions in schools that facilitate the learning of all students. These concise, research-based chapters are written around the framework of the KEYS initiative of the National Education Association (NEA). KEYS, or Keys to Excellence in Your Schools, is a program based on a careful and thorough investigation into how the organizational and cultural characteristics of a school can affect student achievement.

Although this book was originally commissioned to support the adoption and implementation of the KEYS initiative, the

lessons in the chapters apply to any effort to improve schools in fundamental ways.

THE KEYS INITIATIVE

From the research that undergirds KEYS, we learned that quality schools consist of many characteristics, and we identified indicators that can be used to measure quality. Ways of identifying how schools measure up provide schools with tools they can use to improve teaching and learning conditions. Schools that consistently display multiple characteristics of quality, which we call *indicators of school excellence,* promote high student achievement. But we also learned that to achieve total quality, all of the characteristics must be present, and in large quantities. These characteristics, or indicators, cluster into six broad factors, which we call *keys.* Each key factor will be addressed in whole or in part by one or more of the chapters that follow. The six keys are as follows:

- Authentic, Learner-Centered Instruction
- Shared Understanding and Commitment to High Goals
- Open Communication and Collaborative Problem Solving
- Continuous Assessment for Teaching and Learning
- Personal and Professional Learning
- Resources to Support Teaching and Learning

The KEYS initiative provides participating schools with a survey and follow-up analysis that enables them to measure conditions in their schools that affect teaching and learning, identify barriers that may be blocking change, and initiate an improvement effort based on systematically collected data. Part of KEYS is a self-assessment tool that helps schools focus on what works, for whom, and under what conditions. Part of KEYS is a school-based improvement strategy concerned with an organization's enabling conditions and relationships, not specific programs. Finally, KEYS is a strategy to involve the NEA in school quality improvement through collegial networking, collective action, and association capacity building. This is an improvement effort that focuses on using NEA resources to lead in establishing the enabling conditions that let schools improve and students learn.

ORIGINS OF THE KEYS INITIATIVE

The NEA, which today represents over 3.2 million teachers and other education employees, has been deeply involved in improving the quality of public education since its inception in 1857. The approaches have varied from highly academic pedagogical studies to practical self-help projects for individual classrooms, but the common goal has remained: to provide effective schooling for America's children.

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the NEA launched numerous efforts to enhance education quality. Among them were the Mastery in Learning Project and the NEA Learning Laboratories. The primary focus of Mastery in Learning was to enhance learning through school-based reform of teaching and curriculum, emphasizing the importance of making critical decisions as close to the classroom as possible regarding the education of children. The Learning Laboratories project, launched 3 years later, was dedicated to creating a network of school districts engaged in "learning" to improve learning for students and educators. It could be said that the project began to focus on the building of learning communities.

The KEYS initiative built on the NEA's long-standing tradition of innovation. KEYS was NEA's first attempt to quantify dimensions of *school quality* and focus on student achievement. The KEYS initiative demonstrates one of many appropriate roles for teacher unions: achieving conditions in schools that enable school systems and educators to make good decisions in a knowledge-oriented society.

THE RESEARCH-BASED FOUNDATION FOR KEYS

The NEA research that developed the KEYS initiative began with an analysis of recent research on schools as professional communities and other components of effective schools. Key findings provided the building blocks for KEYS, and these are consistent with the findings of more recent research summarized in this book. Of particular importance to the development of KEYS was evidence from several studies of school change indicating that unless

school improvement efforts truly touch the minds and hearts of teachers and become manifest in their behavior and attitudes, the ultimate aims of school reform will go unmet. On average, teachers have been teaching 17 years, working in their current districts for almost 14 years, and serving in their current buildings for 10 years. Contrast this to the average stay of a superintendent (3 years) or even a principal (3 to 5 years), and it becomes apparent that in a long-term process like creating a quality school, teachers must play a central role.

NEA RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE KEYS INITIATIVE

Although the development of the KEYS initiative is based on a strong foundation of research by scholars, the NEA has conducted its own research examining the relationship between organizational characteristics of schools and student learning. This research led to the development of the KEYS instrument and provides evidence that the indicators of school quality that are the focus of the KEYS assessment instrument are predictors of high student achievement. The essential findings from this research are the following:

- Quality schools are multidimensional environments, characterized by many factors that, in total, make them quality teaching and learning environments. There is no one aspect that should be the focus of policymakers in attempting to raise the quality of schools or student achievement. Although not every characteristic contributes directly to student achievement, there are indirect effects, as these characteristics are interrelated.
- Student achievement is high when school goals, mission, and objectives are clear, explicit, and continuously developed and shared with all concerned.
- Student achievement is higher in schools in which there is a shared understanding about achievable student outcomes and there is parent and school employee commitment to long-range, continuous improvement.
- Student achievement is high when central and building administration are committed to long-term, continuous improvement.

- Student achievement is higher in schools that exhibit the belief that all students can achieve under the right conditions.
- Student achievement is higher in schools that understand and use assessment of students on a regular basis and use a variety of assessment tools.
- High-performing public schools are places in which teachers are involved in choosing teaching materials and resources.
- High-performing schools are places in which all school employees, students, parents, and the community are involved in seeking, identifying, and eliminating barriers to improvement and academic success.
- High-achieving schools are places in which employee training is based on analysis of student performance and is used to improve job performance. Emphasis is placed on developing teamwork and on improving teaching techniques.
- In high-performing schools, continuing evaluation is focused primarily on the system, not on individuals, and the overall quality of the school is rated.
- In high-achieving schools, two-way, nonthreatening communication is constantly occurring. Emphasis is placed on developing a climate for continual improvement.
- In high-achieving schools, there is concern for the appropriate and cautious use of standardized tests. Multiple forms of assessment are used to identify needs for and strategies of improvement.

In short, an impressive amount of important theory, research, and practice leads one to the conclusion that the organizational characteristics of schools affect the conditions of teaching and learning and, in turn, these conditions significantly influence student achievement.

GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Research by the NEA and others provides several guidelines for actions that provide direction for schools that wish to increase their capacity for continuous improvement:

- Strive for shared understanding about achievable education outcomes. Work collaboratively to define a purpose and goals and to determine quantifiable outcomes along with the best methods, strategies, and actions to achieve those outcomes.
- Involve the total learning community—teachers, education support personnel, administrators, parents, students, and community and business organizations—in quality improvement planning and problem solving the implementation of necessary changes.
- Engage in continuous, ongoing assessment of teaching and learning and base decision making on this assessment. Establish accountability at all levels to motivate and give direction to improvement.
- Emphasize personal and professional learning and development. Create a learning environment for the organization. Establish regular, needs-specific staff development focused on solving problems related to student needs.
- Professional development for teachers and administrators should be an integral part of any plan to decentralize management practices. As much as possible, this training should be designed to meet the needs of students in individual schools.
- Don't play the quality game unless you are willing to keep score. Be ready to show quantifiable "before and after" data on your change efforts. Focus on assessing the system and its programs.
- Build two-way, nonthreatening communication channels among all stakeholders.
- Frequently clarify the expectations, purpose, and progress related to school improvement for the entire learning community.
- Ensure that materials and social support for continuous improvement are provided.

CONCLUSION

Many of those who would reform our schools continue to seek prescriptive, simple, and inexpensive recipes for what works in

schools. All too often, they neglect vital structural and cultural characteristics of schools that affect student outcomes. The chapters in this book show that any comprehensive approach to educational improvement needs to address the challenges involved in creating and sustaining conditions in schools that fundamentally influence the quality of teaching and thereby the opportunities students have to achieve at high levels.

—Donald L. Rollie
Quality Schools, Research, and Policy
National Education Association