

Districts, Local Education Authorities, and the Context of Policy Analysis

Karen Seashore Louis¹

It has been a privilege to participate in the development of the papers included in this volume, each of which peels a layer of the opaque onion of systemic school reform initiatives in the U.S. As I read them, both in earlier drafts and in their current forms, I was struck by their insight into current policy and administrative dilemmas facing districts in the U.S. – and also by their uniquely American perspective. The special issue should challenge readers to consider the common image of schools and local educational agencies that lies at the foundation of the papers. I draw upon my own recent experiences in the national study of U.S. district leadership for school improvement (Leithwood and Louis, 2011), my recent engagement with one specific U.S. district’s improvement efforts, and work with colleagues in Europe on how a nation’s culture mediates global policy trends (Louis and van Velzen, 2012a).

One striking feature is the degree to which the language of “New Public Management” (O’Toole and Meier, 2004, Hood, 1991) is suffused within all of the papers. This is not surprising because the studies were conducted in a country in which NPM language, with its focus on efficiency, SMART goals, the application of private-sector models to improve public sector performance, has been consistent across both of U.S. political parties as they scramble to “do something” about underperforming schools. The prevalence of this language and approach to public sector reform originated in New Zealand but spread rapidly to England and Europe because of the strong influence of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Lawn and Lingard, 2002) before it captured U.S. discourse during the middle of the 1990s. The key underlying assumption of NPM initiatives has been the belief that the role of “central agencies” is to set goals and accountability measures, and then to allow “lower/subsidiary units” flexibility in meeting the goals coupled with clear consequences for failure to do so. The notion of

¹ Karen Seashore Louis is Regents Professor and Robert H. Beck Chair of Ideas in Education at the University of Minnesota.

radical school autonomy, which is implied or explicit in several of these papers, is fundamental to some versions of NPM but has rarely been embraced.²

Also fundamental to the NPM ideal is the importance of consequences for performance. If not privatized, so that Darwinian competition delivers good and bad news, then the consequences are the responsibility of government. England, one of the first European countries to fully embrace NPM in education, shocked the nation when a newly empowered Inspectorate recommended closure of underperforming schools, an authority that has increased in recent years (Ouston et al., 1997). The idea that a failed school should simply be closed has not been fully embraced in the U.S., which substituted a business model of “turnaround” or “fresh starts” that involved the functional equivalent of closure by removing the principal, and requiring all teachers to reapply for their former positions. District-managed turnaround has a peculiarly American quality, because it allows a veneer of local autonomy for districts on how best to manage “failure” that is consistent with our Constitutional assumption that the responsibility for education belongs to states which, in turn, have traditionally delegated this role to districts.

But decentralization has not been linked to serious consequences in most countries, even those in which the language of NPM is very evident. Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands, Austria and Belgium all demonstrate similar political rhetoric calling for high standards and assessments – but none have chosen “hard consequences,” and some (Austria and Belgium) do not even permit public access to the results of school assessments. Turnarounds and closures are not on the agenda.

Why is this? In all of these countries it is possible to point to the central role of local education authorities (LEAs) of various kinds in providing a significant challenge to the ideal model of NPM and

² New Zealand, where NPM originated, engaged in radical decentralization of education in 1989, and there is no governing unit between individual schools and the Ministry of Education. It currently has the most decentralized system in the OECD, and school accountability mechanisms are limited as there are no student tests until the later years of secondary school.

systemic reform as it has emerged in the U.S. In Sweden, for example, the past 65 years have seen two major reforms which were slowly implemented over several decades. The first involved a national effort to substitute a uniform and fully comprehensive system for the pre-WWI “German” model. The second reform occurred when it was decided to decentralize responsibility for determining both the goals and the allocation of resources for most major social services to the Kommuns (which act as LEAs) (Ekholm and Moos, 2012).³ While challenging, no coalition has been willing to deviate significantly from the principle of vesting more policy and decision making in the hands of municipalities, which are free to mingle fund to support health, child and family welfare, and education. So tests – yes; Accountability – fully in local hands. In the Netherlands, the strong press toward NPM and inspections in a country in which 70% of the schools are “private” (but government subsidized) has produced a different response: The rapid growth of new voluntary associations that represent clusters of previously separate schools and the subsequent development of national bodies representing all “private schools” to provide a new kind of intermediary governance unit that act as a counterweight to government demands. The consequence has been to maintain a century-old tradition of incremental and piecemeal reform (Louis and van Velzen, 2012b).

Turnaround management – another idea borrowed from the business literature of the 1980s (Whitney, 1987) – has been an element of most large U.S. district policies for some time.

Unfortunately, as reviews have suggested and the papers in this special issue also demonstrate, turnaround has a spotty record of accomplishing its goals either in industry or education (Murphy and Meyers, 2007, Pandit, 2000). In fact, most management theorists decry the emphasis on “re-engineering” in the private sector that was based on radical structural change to produce short-term returns. Few in the private sector mourn the departure of “Chain Saw Al Dunlap,” whose drastic efforts

³ In this regard, it appears that they were following the lead of their fellow member of the Nordic Union, Denmark, where responsibility for most educational policies has been firmly vested in the municipalities for much longer.

to produce shareholder value in lagging companies turned out to be temporary miracles with lasting human consequences.

Districts in the U.S. and elsewhere have typically taken a different perspective on low performance, even when they use NPM-like language. Instead of slashing and closing, they have focused on combining accountability with support for improvement, often using theories and assumptions about organizational learning and/or knowledge management, also adapted from the private sector. The vision of a global networked organization, where individuals and groups did not need to be in the same office with a filing cabinet in order to exchange and use new ideas was set forth as a vision in a number of management journals in the early 1990s (Jarvenpaa and Ives, 1994, Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1993). The idea of organizational knowledge-networks dovetailed nicely in education with the parallel development of teacher networks for professional development (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995).

Creating administrator networks to share promising practices and develop new ones are a solution that has been tried in other countries. External assessments of English and Swedish experiments with networks of principals showed them to be quite effective (Earl et al., 2005, Scherp, 2011, Scherp, 2008). Recent work examining the development of school governors' networks among Islamic schools in the Netherlands suggests similar results (van Velzen, 2013). All of these networks operated under conditions in which (1) immediate improvements in school test results were a background feature of the network's purpose; (2) the major focus was on mutual learning and experimentation; and (3) all were dependent on effective network leadership. The same positive results seem to occur in the case of New York City's efforts to restructure around voluntary networks. The European experiences suggest that an effective network focuses on "intrapreneurship" – the creation, investigation, and sharing of new ideas within the network (Alipour et al., 2011) – but with an external

facilitator to ensure that knowledge is obtained and disseminated to solve problems. Leaderless networks in England (personal communication, Chris Day) and New York, either dissolved or became less effective as vehicles for learning and innovative thinking.

The use of district-managed networks, when combined with high accountability and limited network leadership can, however, be problematic. In both business and school settings, high levels of fear can undermine trust and the ability to create authentic joint work. Not surprisingly, district efforts to create a more trusting and decentralized support system, when launched in the context of severe and increasingly punitive state policies, may undermine efforts to shift responsibility for accountability to network leaders. Networks function effectively when the focus on learning is maintained and the emphasis on consequences is less obvious (Lee et al., 2012). Thus, a top-down approach to “knowledge management” in which districts determine the content and purposes of learning, or link learning to increased test scores, may become counterproductive.

An interesting new assumption derived from corporate imagery is the “portfolio management” approach. In business – and apparently in Los Angeles – the image of the district is that of a flexible investor with a diversified set of offerings that accepts that failure may occur in one area as long as overall returns/growth are acceptable. The image, if pursued to its origins, is inherently flawed when applied to education. An investor, whether an individual or a holding corporation, is willing to jettison stocks/companies that don’t perform as they should; growth demands risk. Willingness to accept risk is lower in public agencies, particularly those dealing with vulnerable populations, than in corporations or individual investors, and the public will question decisions based on a multitude of factors other than performance on limited-indicator outcomes. Furthermore, investment portfolios require skilled research and economic analysis if they are to thrive: Institutional and individual investors do not make decisions based on the offerings and prospectuses of the companies they are interested in, but rely on

multiple layers of specialized expertise – the kind of information and expertise that school districts simply don't have, and have not got the means to acquire (even if it exists, which is doubtful given the state of knowledge about alternative school models). Asking districts to become portfolio managers is more-or-less like asking your grandmother to manage your retirement accounts. The Los Angeles case represents only one instance of what is, apparently, emerging as a trend, but it is reasonable to ask whether more attention should be paid to this well-documented case rather than to the theorists who advocate portfolios as a “solution” to “the problem of districts.”

This set of papers supports the need to develop an alternative to the current narrative of system reform, which gives primacy to the role of districts in managing what states have belatedly acknowledged is largely beyond their capacities in an environment where they have been bombarded with conflicting policy trends and demands for several decades (Louis, 1998). The grounding of the new emphasis on districts in the effective schools research suggests that the path from identifying common features of high performing outliers to a policy that can reproduce these results in underperforming schools is at best winding, and at worst a possible dead end. Trujillo's review points to another important consideration: the focus of almost all research uses both the NPM image of schools as producers of a uniform high quality product and often employs a highly technocratic set of assumptions about organizational change. But one thing that we know about schools and school reform at the local level: decisions are not usually rational, and are fraught with layers of local politics that cannot be ignored.

One of the most obvious insights that emerged from four years of working with colleagues from other countries on the problem of educational reform was that we researchers, like policy makers, are often blind to our own cultural assumptions about “how things work” at home. U.S. policy makers rush to Finland or Singapore to try and find the lessons that can be implemented in Florida or California

without considering important differences of culture and size; The same phenomenon is at work when Singapore visits Virginia to learn how American schools foster creativity, or when the system-wide reforms in China, a high performing country, aspire to promote more critical thinking in schools.

As these papers suggest, if we are to understand the continuing role of districts (LEAS) as central actors in the current drama of school reform, it is necessary to go more deeply into an understanding of the politics of competing values and images at both the national and local level. This should not replace the traditional focus of policy analysis power and control, or a managerial focus on improved effectiveness. It represents, however, a important alternative because it helps explain the difficulty of mandating change, whether in structures or accountability mechanisms, and the weakness in adopting business models that have questionable results even in business. As my comments suggest, this special issue is rich in insights from the individual papers. Collectively they point to future research that challenges underlying assumptions about the image of schools and districts that is embedded in current system-wide reform initiatives. Frustrating as it may be, this does not mean that system change is impossible but that current policy rhetoric inevitably fails when it does not fully account for the complexity of the educational system which, in the U.S. in no way resembles the over-simplified corporate-derived metaphors that are common among policy makers of all political stripes.

References

Alipour, F., Idris, K., Ismail, I.A., Anak Uli, J. & Karimi, R. (2011), 'Learning organization and organizational performance: Mediation role of intrapreneurship', *European Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 547-55.

Bartlett, C.A. & Ghoshal, S. (1993), 'Beyond the M-Form: Toward a Managerial Theory of the Firm', *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 14, no. ArticleType: research-article / Issue Title: Special Issue: Organizations, Decision Making and Strategy / Full publication date: Winter, 1993 / Copyright © 1993 Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 23-46.

Darling-Hammond, L. & McLaughlin, M.W. (1995), 'Policies That Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform', *The Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 76, no. 8, pp. 597-604.

Earl, L., Watson, N., Levin, B., Leithwood, K., Fullan, M., Torrance, N., Jantzi, D., Mascall, B. & Volante, L. (2005), *Watching and Learning.*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Ontario.

Ekholm, M. & Moos, L. (2012), 'Examining the myth of Nordic Uniformity: The production of educational policy in Denmark and Sweden', in K.S. Louis & B. van Velzen (eds), *Educational policy in an international context*, Palgrave/Macmillan, New York, pp. 156-70.

Hood, C. (1991), 'A public management for all seasons', *Public Administration*, vol. 69, no. Spring, pp. 3-19.

Jarvenpaa, S.L. & Ives, B. (1994), 'The Global Network Organization of the Future: Information Management Opportunities and Challenges', *Journal of Management Information Systems*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 25-57.

Lawn, M. & Lingard, B. (2002), 'Constructing a European Policy Space in Educational Governance: the role of transnational policy actors', *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 290-307.

Lee, M., Louis, K.S. & Anderson, S. (2012), 'Local Education Authorities and Student Learning: The Effects of Policies and Practices', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 123-38.

Leithwood, K. & Louis, K.S. (2011), *Linking leadership to student learning*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco.

Louis, K.S. (1998), 'A light feeling of chaos: Educational reform and policy in the United States', *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no. 4, pp. 13-40.

Louis, K.S. & van Velzen, B. (eds) (2012a), *Educational policy in an international context: Political culture and its effects*, vol. Palgrave/MacMillan, New York.

— (2012b), 'Political cultures in England and the Netherlands: Similar discourse, different results', in KS Louis & B van Velzen (eds), *Educational policy in an international context*, Palgrave/Macmillan, New York, pp. 139-53.

Murphy, J. & Meyers, C. (2007), *Turning around failing schools: Leadership lessons from the organizational sciences* Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.

O'Toole, L.J. & Meier, K.J. (2004), 'Parkinson's law and the new public management? Contracting determinants and service-quality consequences in public education', *Public Administration Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 342-52.