

## **The SERP Approach to Education Reform**

The mission of the SERP Institute is to improve teaching and learning through an ambitious program of research and development focused on urgent problems of practice identified by school district leaders. The SERP model of education reform is rooted in long-term “field site” partnerships. Like teaching hospitals in medicine, school district field sites create the opportunities for careful observation of, and strategic thinking about, important problems of practice. Those problems are then addressed through a program of research and development that evolves to address the multiple, related issues required to support sustainable improvement. Highly interdisciplinary field site teams bring together the expertise to support the design and development of new tools and protocols, and to conduct analyses of causal outcomes. As in the teaching hospital model, the assumption is that productive field sites will produce new knowledge, tools, and capacity that will feed the productivity of the entire sector.

Since it received its first field site grants in 2005, SERP has successfully established a field site model, and has structured three partnerships according to that model. In each site the agenda is focused on the problems district leaders identified as most urgent. In Boston, the work addresses multiple aspects of middle school literacy across the content areas, and simultaneously targets improving the internal coherence of schools in order to support the efforts at instructional improvement. In San Francisco the work is focused on middle school science and mathematics learning, and on the literacy and language challenges of accessing content in those areas. In the MSAN (Minority Student Achievement Network) site, the work is focused both on Algebra 1 and on the motivation of adolescent students to engage academically.

### **The Partnership Context**

Life inside a complex school district makes a sustained focus on continuous improvement difficult. District professionals are closely focused on problems that require immediate attention. Teachers worry about controlling their classes and covering the requisite material. Among the jobs of principals is keeping order in the hallways, hiring and firing teachers, securing resources for their schools, and making adequate yearly progress (AYP). Superintendents worry urgently about hiring and firing administrators, pacifying boards and/or mayors, negotiating with unions, devising budgets, and tracking data on AYP across schools. In a modern, well-functioning district, all these individuals and their colleagues would consider teaching and learning to be the core of their work, and instructional improvement to be their number one goal. But in the daily lives of school district professionals, few are able to set aside

the time and space to step back from the immediate concerns to invest time in the ambiguous work of long-term improvement.

When district leaders do engage in long term planning, they have few places to turn for support. The research offices in many school districts have shrunk in size, with their staff responding primarily to short term demands for analyses of accountability data. Education researchers in universities often have relevant expertise, but little experience in shaping that expertise to make a productive contribution to solving problems as they appear in school settings. As a consequence, school systems are frequently being reshaped in minor ways to respond to external pressures and internal personnel shifts, but they are rarely engaged in the work to support strategic thinking and planning.

By strategic thinking and planning we mean, for example:

- Using available data to identify and analyze student difficulties and successes
- Introducing innovations sparingly but thoroughly, so that new practices have a chance to be learned well, deeply rooted, and adapted to local needs
- Keeping track of innovations that work and those that do not
- Organizing assessment activities systematically, such that every assessment is selected to serve a specific purpose, and with a plan for how the information collected will be used
- Tracking students longitudinally as a way of evaluating instructional and intervention opportunities they have been offered, and identifying strengths and weaknesses in the system.

Remarkably few school districts do this kind of analysis on a regular basis. Innovations are often introduced with the expectation of success, and with the perceived need to convince teachers and principals that they will work well in order to ensure implementation—a goal that is at odds with testing whether the innovation has an impact. Assessments often multiply, with little thought about whether they duplicate available information or are worth the investment of money and instructional time. Even if, as is increasingly the case, assessment information is archived in usable databases, the primary focus of analyses performed on those databases have to do with accountability, not with answering the key strategic questions: what instruction is working, for whom, under what circumstances, and what additional instructional resources are needed? How can problems prevalent among high school students be traced back to middle and elementary years, and their sources identified and addressed? How can gains made from efforts in one year be maintained and extended in future years?

Because school districts are by and large lacking internal engines for innovation and reform, efforts to improve student achievement are often predicated on the assumption that reform efforts must be externally driven. External accountability, resources for restructuring, outsourced management, and comprehensive school reform all attempt to deliver a jolt to systems that appear to operate at too low a voltage. But despite great effort, evidence of

sustained success is hard to come by. Accumulated experience suggests that infusions of energy and resources aimed at major reform can produce short-term gains, but fail to produce sustained high performance.

The challenge is not unlike one that Richard Nelson described decades ago in his book, *The Moon and the Ghetto*.<sup>1</sup> Nelson sets out to explain why, when a nation can achieve the extraordinary feat of landing a man on the moon, it cannot eliminate poverty. An interpretation of Nelson's view is that technical feats, even when they are exceedingly complex, can be solved by a small group of highly trained individuals and a commitment of the needed resources. But goals that involve changing the behaviors, beliefs, ideas and incentives of masses of people living ordinary lives are far harder to achieve. In education, major reform ideas and a commitment of resources to restructuring may have little long term effect because student learning, in the end, takes place in the interactions between more than three million teachers working with fifty million students. And reform efforts rarely touch the beliefs and behaviors of those teachers or their leaders in a way that changes what and how students are taught every day.

If fundamental reform does indeed require that teachers and administrators in droves go about their work differently, then it is unlikely to be successfully imposed from outside. It will not emerge from solutions to problems that neither teachers nor administrators see as critical. At the same time, the educational requirements for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century mean that a reform agenda is critical—to students, their families, and to the nation. Abandoning the challenge is not an option for a nation unwilling to surrender the global position it has achieved in large part because of its historic leadership in the arena of public education.

### **The SERP Approach to Reform**

The Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) provides a different model for reform. In the districts with which SERP is partnering, it provides school district leaders with the venue, and the support, to step back from daily demands and think strategically about the big picture of reform. SERP brings broad-ranging, interdisciplinary expertise from outside the district to the table, but focuses that expertise on the problems that school and district practitioners define as important. In discussion, these problems get redefined as new perspectives from both practice and research are offered and as the issues are informed by the district's own data. The work of reform is focused on the district's priorities, and the content of the discussion focuses on what needs to happen to change what goes on in schools and classrooms. The field site structure provides routine times and venues for interaction among

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<sup>1</sup> [The Moon and the Ghetto: An Essay on Public Policy Analysis.](#)

The Moon and the Ghetto: An Essay on Public Policy Analysis by Richard R. Nelson. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1977

district leaders, lead researchers, and SERP staff to ensure the productive use of time and effective steering of the agenda.

The engine of innovation in the SERP model is the regular meetings of the interdisciplinary team of practitioners, researchers, designers, and SERP staff who reshape challenges into solvable problems, and identify or design tools and protocols to help solve those problems. Unlike many approaches to reform, the working assumption is not that a problem will be “fixed” because a potential solution has been identified. Reform (as Richard Elmore is often heard to say) is not an event. Instead, it is assumed that innovations in practice must be tried out, studied, adapted, evaluated, and revised. With the expectation of sustained attention to an important problem, failure to achieve an intended change in practice becomes an invitation for further problem solving. The breadth of knowledge resources recruited by SERP supports a productive and efficient shaping and reshaping of the collaborative agenda.

Broadly interdisciplinary teams involved in SERP collaborations create a unique environment for innovation. Experienced school practitioners and leaders are quick to point out challenges that must be addressed to make an idea workable in a school setting—chief among these is the need to provide well developed examples and concrete models of how a desired practice looks in action. They call attention to the training and resources teachers will need if a new practice is to take hold, or the change in the management structure or existing incentives required to support new practices and behaviors. The multiple problem dimensions that must be addressed simultaneously to support change—such as identifying student needs, developing new instructional programs, providing in-service or pre-service training for teachers who will engage in the new instruction, supporting schools to develop schedules that respond to students’ instructional needs, ensuring that the standards for evaluating principals incorporate the goals of the reform effort—all have a place in the interdisciplinary, problem-solving approach.

Seasoned experts in learning, research, and design are able to identify resources already available in the field, and false starts in past efforts to improve learning. They can offer design principles based on research knowledge when new tools are needed. School organization experts from both research and practice infuse discussions, and later innovations, with attention to the work that needs to go on at the school level if the practices and beliefs of those in the classroom are to change. The hard work of reform requires that many people from the district to the classroom level be engaged in an effort to think about their work differently. The best approach to ensuring that effort is not to impose reform from the outside, but to create contexts in which external resources can accumulate and intensify the impact of a multitude of individual internal decisions to do the work in a new way.

If the SERP approach to partnership stands in stark contrast to the problem solving approach that landed a man on the moon, it is nonetheless true that much of the improvement that SERP

sets out to support will benefit from, and at times be dependent on, intensive investments in solutions to technical problems. For example the development of a psychometrically sound assessment tool that provides practitioners with critical information on student needs and achievement gains can spur a commitment to working in a new way and/or support the transformation of that commitment into changes in practice. On-line video footage of teachers engaged in a targeted practice with voice-over descriptions of what makes the practice effective can provide a technical solution to the challenge of making an abstract concept more concrete. But the technical solutions in the SERP model feed the process of innovation; they are not themselves the innovation.

### **The Challenge of Scale**

Reform strategies inevitably entail a tradeoff. Changes that have broad reach across many school districts are blunt tools for reaching down to the classroom level where learning happens. But changes that focus on the classroom level can be difficult to support on a meaningful scale when there are three and a half million public school teachers. The bet SERP is making—one that will be tested in the years ahead—is that by working deeply with a limited number of districts, understanding how problems play out in practice settings, co-designing needed tools to address problems of practice, and learning from their use and adaptation over time, the products of the work will be of high value to many other districts as well. SERP is developing communications efforts that speak to teachers (via web video, for example) about our understanding of a problem, our approaches to solutions, and the use of newly developed tools. This will not obviate the need for districts not directly involved with SERP to have external partners themselves. But the conversations districts can have (with or without those partners) and the tools at their disposal will be different as the SERP work expands. By building field site partnerships in areas where district leaders are very experienced and outward looking, and where area universities and partnering organizations provide a rich pool of expertise on which to draw, field sites can provide models and tools for reform to partnerships in many other locations. As it matures, SERP will seek to play a supportive role in these outside partnerships.

The SERP approach decidedly does not deliver a jolt to the entire education system; but it does promise to magnify the changes in its partner districts, in both senses of magnify: amplifying the reforms, and increasing their visibility to other educators. The knowledge base that emerges can provide the foundation for other reform efforts that shift incentives on a large scale. As in medicine, pay scales matter, public policy regarding standards of delivery matter, and accountability matters. SERP sees large scale reform emerging from the combination of efforts that use policy levers intended to have more immediate impact, and the sustained, visible, partnered work on the wide array of challenges that must be addressed if school teachers and administrators are to think about their daily work in radically different ways.