

We have to be thinking much more in our school improvement efforts about what kids need, rather than what teachers and schools need.

# School Improvement: An Interview with Susan Loucks-Horsley

Gerald D. Bailey

**Q:** It has been nearly five years since *An Action Guide to School Improvement* was published by ASCD and The NETWORK. In general, have you changed your ideas about school improvement and/or the school improvement process?

**A:** There's a couple of ways I'd like to respond to that. One is that the *nature* of change has become more important to us. When we wrote the book, we did not address the question of what people would be wanting to change. We were promoting the idea that people take a look at their setting, a look at their kids, a look at the data and then decide what they were going to do. We were then suggesting the best ways to get the job done. Over time, I think one of the things that has struck us is that it's rather important what people decide to do.

First of all, some of our schools are desperately in trouble. Some of the "quick fixes" of the past simply haven't worked and are not likely to work in the future. So one of the things school people have to do is think very clearly about what the problems are and how to respond to those problems. As a consequence, some solutions are going to be better than other solutions.

Another thing is that we are learning much more about learning, especially through recent cognitive research. Much of the research that is being done suggests that our learning environments have to be totally different than they presently are. In some school systems where learning is not occurring, there may need to be a rather major transforma-

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tion of what is going on in classrooms. In fact, the term "classroom" may have become outdated. Redesigned settings for learning are not treated in the *Action Guide*. When we wrote the book, we thought about school improvement as generally *improving* settings for learning. Now, more and more people are defining school improvement as something that is more like tinkering with the current system or changing it in ways that still allow you to see the current system operating: In other words, changing within, rather than redesigning or restructuring the system. The book was about the former; although we thought we knew something about large-scale change, many of our experiences and the research we drew on were not of the transformational sort. Rather, we were focused on helping people work within the system. Now, I think we have some new questions about exactly what process helps us transform systems and change teachers, administrators, and all educators. We have new paradigms about learning and about teaching and instruction. So I think that, related to the magnitude of change required in today's systems, we've started to think somewhat differently.

With that said, I think it is likely that all of the steps in the book are still relevant to improving education, even when we talk about more transformational kinds of changes in education. But it's hard to say because there are few, if any, cases where schools have actually undergone transformation and are out the other end of it. The knowledge base is really thin on restructuring or redesigning schools, and so the question of what processes help the most is still unanswered and will be unanswered for a number of years. I still recommend the process that was outlined in the book because I think it is very basic. It is rather simple, in that you have to attend to each of the steps in order to move from where you are now to where you want to be. Maybe sequencing or overlapping of the steps has to change, or the intensity with which we concentrate on one step over another. Basically the steps have proven to be the ones that need to be undertaken and so I think their value has lasted over time.

**Q:** When you used the word intensity to describe the process of school improvement, what does that mean?

**A:** One of the things we said in the *Action Guide* that was a bit heretical at the time was to put emphasis on acting rather than planning. That means we have to stop spending all of our time and all of our resources "up front" before we even try anything new in schools. That was one thing we had observed and continue to observe over and over. People spend inordinate amounts of time planning without actually trying anything, and they run out of resources, energy or time before they do anything. We were involved with a school improvement program years ago that had a two year planning cycle before participants even started to do anything new. That goes against the literature on effective organizations which talks about the effectiveness of a "ready-aim-fire" strategy.

Action is so important to organizations that want to keep moving and progressing. So, when we wrote the book we had a very strong feeling about not overplanning, but planning within a certain time frame and saying "let's move" because we know enough about what we need. "Let's do something, try it out, monitor, watch how we're doing, reconvene often to consider whether the direction we've taken is the right one or whether we need to adjust our course. But let's do something quickly!"

One of the questions I have about the new restructuring and redesign efforts relates to the enormous change that they're talking about. Undergoing massive change might require spending somewhat more time working through the issues than it does when we're talking within-

system change. It means working through new images of an organization, getting as many people as possible involved in the dialogue up front because we are asking for a transformation in what people do, how they think about school, and how they think about learning. So that may be one of the things that might need to have more emphasis: the initiation phase. It is not just planning, but building a community around a new direction. That might need more attention.

**Q:** You talked about contradicting conventional wisdom in school improvement activities. Is there anything else you want to add about that concept?

**A:** Yes, all of the items that we thought contradicted the conventional wisdom are still very important for people to consider. I've just talked about the issue of protracted planning. A couple other issues are especially worth noting. One of our issues with some of the literature is that many people seem to be deifying the principal. The importance of the principal is clear, but in fact there are a lot of efforts that can move effectively forward without a superhuman principal. By superhuman I mean having all the wonderful characteristics we know principals are supposed to have, including being very strong instructional leaders, very good facilitators of change, and capable of orchestrating a collaborative decision-making process. As it turns out, the majority of principals do not have those characteristics and what this message often does is paralyze people. I often hear, "We don't have the right kind of principal, so we clearly can't succeed." In fact, there have been many situations where principals' leadership was not critical—as long as they didn't work *against* the change or innovation. We have seen many instances of successful improvement where principals were unengaged. This happens when leadership comes from somewhere else, such as the central office or outside the school. It can also be from teachers within the school. So this is an item of conventional wisdom which we continue to point out to people. Lack of principal leadership need not paralyze efforts to change.

Another statement that continues to be conventional wisdom is that mandates are all bad. I think that we see many instances where there has been a positive effect when a person, agency, or legislature has said "here is where we are going to go and you had better come along." In some cases mandates can be highly motivating to people. They can provide the kind of push that some people need to "get off the dime." They can also provide some opportunities and ways of prioritizing that people heretofore did not have. Mandates can unfreeze organizations and institutions that have been frozen in the past, as well as allow or promote dialogue.

Now that does not mean that all mandates are good or that specific ones have the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." But in fact, I think we have seen that the combination of some strong direction-setting by an informed body or individual, plus a lot of help and support for people who are needing to make the change, can be a powerful means to successful change. Those people who say that no mandates are good have to look at some of those from the past, especially related to equal opportunities for handicapped and minority children. Without them, there simply would not be the opportunities for people in our schools that there are at present.

**Q:** What does the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) have to offer to the school improvement process? Why is it important? How should it be used?

**A:** I would say with conviction that, whether we're talking about changes within the current system or redesigning schools from scratch, the CBAM model is relevant. There are several things that the model can do. First, it can put

into perspective what the change process is all about and what people can expect—both in themselves when they are encountering a change and also in those people for whom they have some responsibility. We all know change is a process. The model elaborates that idea. It tells us that there are certain stages people go through when they encounter a change: (1) when they think about changing something, (2) when they are learning about a specific change, (3) when they try it out, and (4) when they make it part of their day-to-day practice. We know that there are certain stages that people go through, both in their feelings about the change and in how knowledgeable or skillful they are in actually using innovation. If we know that the people with whom we're working will go through these stages, it makes us much more sensitive to what needs to happen and the kind of help we need to give them.

The model also gives us a better time horizon. Back in the 1960s when people were trying to make an enormous number of changes in schools, they thought "introduce something to a teacher one day, tomorrow he or she uses it. Six months later we can do an evaluation and decide whether it's worth continuing." I think all of our experience has contradicted this notion that effective change occurs overnight. In fact, we know that people probably get worse before they get better and that they need a lot of support, including moral support, material support, and "elbow to elbow" help. The aim is to help them really master the practices that will make them feel good about what they are doing and enable them to see impact on their students. And this takes time. That is one of the ways I think that the Concerns Model can be helpful in both our improvement and our restructuring efforts: to give us a better and more informed time horizon and then guide us in the different kinds of help and support people need over time.

**Q:** In your first step of the seven-step model, you focus on resources, relationships and team building. How important is the school improvement team?

**A:** In the *Action Guide*, we recommended that there be a team, but I think we have gained much insight since then. I would say it's not a *recommendation* anymore—it's a requirement for a number of different reasons. First, there is no other way that all the different perspectives in the school community can be represented. If we don't have a group that is making the decisions or at least a good part of the decisions, we have to find some other way to represent the different perspectives and the different constituencies. Through a leadership team, each constituency can understand a little bit more about the point of view of the others and make better decisions about meeting the needs of students.

Another reason to have a team is that there is simply too much work to do. This also relates to the notion that the principal is the key person. Some people think this means that the principal needs to do everything. When we list all of the roles for leadership and support in any improvement effort, the list is just enormous. So, there must be sharing, and that is where a team is really valuable. It also allows a lot of other people to be involved who may not be on the team but are connected through members of the team. When each team member is responsible for relating to a certain number of additional people in the organization, a much larger critical mass for change is created. This means getting more opinions in, more information out, more engagement around the new ideas to allow for more dialogue about the change.

The final point about teams is that it is very important to have a champion or an advocate for change—somebody who really goes "above and beyond," who is sort of a hero.

But that importance has to decrease over time for the change to really permeate an organization and become part of the daily life of its people. The hero or champion can't be depended on forever, simply because he or she is often quite a wonderful person who will soon move on to something else. Champions typically will either get a better job or are reassigned to something that needs their kind of energy. At that point, we often lose new programs. This makes a team even more important. We need to diffuse the leadership, not spread it around and make it any less, but share leadership among people so that the effort will carry on even if a wonderful leader moves on.

**Q:** What suggestions do you have for those school administrators who are encountering resistance from primary stakeholders (teachers, school board members, etc.) in the school improvement process? As a secondary question, there appears to be substantial disagreement and conflict in the process of school improvement—is this troublesome to you?

**A:** The issue of what to do about resistance is the most common question people have about the improvement process. In my opinion, this is one of the places where leadership has to be artful. You can know all the science, you can know all the research, you can know everything everybody says is tried and true and works, but in fact it is the particular context that dictates what combination of all those prescriptions works in a given situation. It has a lot to do with how sensitive leaders are to the situation. In terms of the "science" or what we know, I think there are a number of different things to consider. One is to recognize resistance for what it is. When we work with administrators and they ask, "What do we do about resisters?", they are personalizing their question. They have some teachers in mind who are resisting and want to know what to do with them.

Because of my background in the Concerns Model, my first response is that there are different kinds of resistance. Some resistance comes because people feel their competence is threatened. They feel inadequate for the job, or if there are too many changes, they don't feel comfortable. They feel personally threatened by change. I think that is one of the easier kinds of resistance to deal with. Encouraging people to be involved in formulating what it is we're going to do together, showing them in real terms the kind of help and support that are available for them to change, convincing them in a genuine way that this is not going to affect their tenure or their evaluation or whatever it is that people feel threatened about, and really coming through with all of those things helps diffuse a lot of resistance. I think people (mainly teachers) feel very put upon by what's been done in the past. They've been told they have to do a lot of things and they are never given the time or resources. I think we have to change this. We have to build in the time and the wherewithal for people to get involved, to feel like they are learning and that it's okay to learn, and to take the time to learn and spend the time moving in the right direction.

One of the other sources of resistance is that people think that they're already doing a good enough job. They ask, "What's the problem?" I think you have to be very well armed with a response. It doesn't necessarily mean you have to give them irrefutable evidence; rather together you can explore what the problem is. There are two ways of doing this. One is to point out that students simply are not learning, or that they're not learning well enough, or that *all* of them aren't learning. The approach should be "We've got a common problem. This isn't one person's problem or another person's problem. We all have a problem to deal with and let's figure out some ways of dealing with it."

In some cases people are indeed doing a good job—for the present time. Then the approach is to look at projections for the future. Twenty or thirty years from now, in a large percentage of the schools in this country, there is simply going to be a whole different set of problems than those we are facing today.

We have to start doing some long-range planning. The community situations aren't going to be the same. We know a lot more about learning and that dictates some things that will need to change. So helping people uncover and explore the implications of future projections can also point out a direction for change; it helps answer the question "why change?" which is a critical question. They say people won't change unless they feel a need. Well, you can get pretty scared by some of the projections concerning the future.

One other answer to that question about dealing with resistance is that you have to do everything right. That sounds flip, and it's not meant to be. Managing the change process well can decrease the number of people who feel disconnected, put upon, inadequate, and so forth. This means engaging people early, creating realistic expectations about what will happen and when, providing lots of opportunities to learn new knowledge, practices, and programs. Helping people get educated about what's possible, what others out there are doing, is critically important. People need to know what programs are available, what other schools are doing to improve, and what some of the "big thinkers" are saying schools need to look like. We need to create many opportunities for people within the schools to grow—to feel like the directions they choose are valid and that their continuing growth is critically important. It is not just the system that needs to change. So there are a lot of things we need to do right in managing change and these things can offset resistance, can show that we're serious, and that we've "got our money where our mouth is."

Finally, I think that having good policies can help with resistance. Good policies set a clear direction, but they don't dictate down to the smallest, most specific classroom behavior. Instead they allow "wiggle room" for practitioners: some authentic opportunities for teachers and administrators to make decisions about those things that they are in the best places to decide. At the state level and school board level, some general directions or general goals are set. Then district people, principals and teachers should be able to make most of the decisions about how those policies will be achieved. That is not to say that everybody needs to be making every decision about what they're going to do every day of their lives; that would be pure anarchy. There is something to say for standards. There is even something to say for standardization of some programs and practices across the district and certainly across the school, if only for cost reasons. But in fact in every single policy and every single regulation, there can be some room for decisions of autonomy and independence and for using professional judgment that will help people feel ownership.

**Q:** One of the major contentions made in the *Action Guide* is that adopting an existing program is more economical (sometimes better) for schools than creating their own. Specifically, what implications does that statement have for school improvement?

**A:** One of the ways we help people understand the research on school improvement is by asking them to take an inventory of their beliefs about change. We ask them to respond to a set of statements about some of the things we've been talking about today.

One statement says you can successfully adopt a program or a practice that has come from some place totally outside your district or school. The statement doesn't trick

people any more, i.e., they believe it and buy into it. And they're right. In fact, it's become conventional wisdom that a program that somebody developed and tested in California can be brought to another similar setting across the country and work quite well. It can also save a lot of money, especially compared to another one.

What's more interesting right now, though, is to consider the implications for school restructuring and redesign efforts, since so many people are heading in that direction. At this point there are not a lot of programs or practices that are "tried and true," as there are for innovation on a smaller scale. There are not as yet a lot of successes that you can point to, capture, and describe, especially because restructuring efforts are context-bound. What works in Dade County, Florida may not work in Manhattan, Kansas. On the other hand, I think one of the things we've learned is that we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We don't have to make it up from scratch. We can be much more informed and be much more cost-effective by doing that. One of the key things we have to ask is what are the core elements of each of these different efforts that made them work in *their* setting, and would those core elements work in *our* setting. We have to ask questions about transferability that we're not used to asking. I think if we do that carefully it will save us time and energy in the long run.

**Q:** Are you seeing many districts and buildings where school improvement is becoming institutionalized? What are the variables or factors that explain this happening?

**A:** When I look at places where school improvement is really successful, improvements that people have made are institutionalized or incorporated into their everyday lives. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, I see clear, helpful stable leadership. And that doesn't mean, as I said before, that one person has always been there. More often than not, the mantle has been passed on in a well-crafted way. Leaders in these places are clear about their priorities. They give a lot of attention to helping people, creating environments where those people feel helped, where they are nurtured, where they have time to think and learn new things, and where the expectations are realistic about the time it'll take to master something new.

Another thing I see in places that have been successful is that they have selected good things to do. They have given careful attention to the question of what to implement. People just didn't sit around and say, "let's change something and let's do something tomorrow." They have chosen activities that are research based or that have been shown to be effective. Also, in these places a critical mass is involved in the improvement activities. It's not just one isolated teacher or a couple in a school who are involved. It's many people working together, supporting each other's efforts to change. It's as if their connecting to each other weaves a tight fabric that hold the new practice in place.

Finally, I notice that there is still a lot of good help and support for the programs. The easiest way of losing something you've spent a lot of time implementing is to turn off the "support faucet." One of the messages we give to school administrators who are doing budget planning is that if you've got a program or practice you want to implement that has some training involved in it, think about using half of your resources through the initial training and then reserve the other half for afterwards. Unless you keep the resources flowing, unless you continue to have opportunities for peo-

ple to get better and better, the changes will not endure. Coaching, some problem-solving opportunities, and an occasional "shot in the arm" from an expert can be critically important. Unless we keep reminding people that something is important, we are going to lose it and our investment will have been lost.

**Q:** Where do you see school improvement heading?

**A:** I like to think about school improvement as improving environments for learning since this is a direction that demands our attention right now. We have to be thinking much more in our improvement efforts about what kids need, rather than what teachers or schools need. We need new definitions of student success that carry us far beyond the conventional achievement test scores. When these discussions are informed by the current research on learning, we'll get a better fix on optimal learning environments for students. Then we can start to do what we're calling "mapping backwards." We can ask, "if kids learn this way, what does the most immediate learning environment need to look like? What does what we now call instruction and teaching need to look like?" (At some point, I think we may be calling these different things). "Who is in the immediate learning environment? What can kids get from individuals, teachers? What can they get from technology? What can they get from experiences in the community?" And then we need to move back one more step and say, "What does the organization need to look like that allows for those individuals, for those experiences, for technology to be in the immediate learning environment of the kids? What do those things we now call schools and districts need to look like?" We need to design our education systems like this if we are to really meet the needs of our students.

As I noted earlier, I think another thing we really need to ask ourselves is what constitutes success in learning? Surely we've all come to realize that passing or doing well on a standardized achievement test or SAT is not the only indicator of success in an educational setting, but few educators have really hammered on what it is that we should be calling success and then in what ways we can monitor that success throughout a child's and young adult's learning experiences. So the idea of creating clear images of success and then being able to assess or measure those over time is a very important direction that we need to be, and I'm sure we're going to be, taking in schools.

That kind of transformation is not going to be done by legislative mandate or even by a school board saying this is the way it is going to be. It has to be done by the educational community working together. So another direction I see is a lot more collaborative direction setting and problem solving. In all of this change—or maybe we should say transformation—I think we can still rely on the simple truths about how individuals experience the change process and what it takes to change behaviors. It's one thing to participate in a collaborative structure, with an opportunity to form goals and directions together. But once we start to actually make the changes, we will need to use all we know about supporting improvement. We'll need very good training. We'll need very good systems for coaching each other to help each other make those changes. We'll need very clear expectations about how people will be supported so that they can feel good about their own change and their own learning. In short, we'll need to call on our knowledge of successful school improvement to help us change our systems to meet the needs of the next generation.