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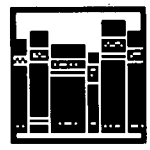
Book Review



Elementary Change: Moving Toward Systemic School Reform in Rural Kentucky. P. Kannapel, L. Aagaard, P. Coe, and C. Reeves. Charleston, WV: AEL, Incorporated, 243 pp., ISBN 1-891677-09.

Reviewed by

Nancy Jennings
Bowdoin College

This book is a well-researched, well-written, and clearly organized qualitative study of six elementary schools' responses to Kentucky's decade-long school reform, KERA. Like much of the research that has been published on KERA (e.g., Whitford & Jones, 2000), this account offers readers both interesting information on the relationship between school practice and state reform, and a good story about an ambitious state policy. Although the authors do not break new theoretical ground with their findings, their exceptionally detailed analysis of schools undertaking comprehensive reform offers even the most informed reader a vivid road map of the difficulties schools face in implementing state reforms.

The authors analyze KERA as an example of systemic reform using Smith and O'Day's (1991) conceptual framework. Even though, as the authors point out, KERA precedes the coining of the term "systemic reform," Kentucky's efforts clearly fit with Smith and O'Day's vision of all-encompassing and coherent change. Using components of systemic reform, the authors develop four research questions to guide their data collection in the six schools. The questions are as follows:

1. To what extent and under what conditions did schools help *all* students achieve KERA goals?

2. To what extent and under what conditions did the schools implement curriculum, instruction, and classroom assessment practices consistent with reform goals?

3. To what extent and under what conditions did the schools make key decisions about how to improve student learning?

4. Did the implementation of the primary program [a feature of KERA] contribute to KERA goals?

The authors state these four research questions throughout the book. This helps the reader keep them in focus, and it is one of many examples of how the authors make clear paths for the reader through their ample data. Another example is the wise choice the authors make to present detailed case studies of only three of the six schools they studied. Because the three schools differ greatly in their responses to KERA, they allow the authors to discuss a variety of factors that shape school implementation efforts without having to include massive amounts of data that, as the authors suggest, would be repetitive rather than informative. The authors do not simply overwhelm readers with evidence as a way of making compelling arguments. Rather, they proceed through their data in a logical and clear way and, as a result, present a convincing report.

The authors collected data in their schools for over 9 years—another strength of the study. For the first 5 years, the authors conducted observations and interviews in 20 rural Kentucky schools; but to gain a greater depth of knowledge, they limited the study in 1995 to six elementary schools in four districts. The research reported in this book is based on observations of more than 300 hours of classroom instruction; more than 400 interviews with 140 people; and countless hours of analyzing documents such as student work, school-based decision making (SBCM) council meeting minutes, and school transformation plans. Given that implementation of any reform takes time and manifests itself differently in different contexts (i.e., classroom practice, educators' thinking, school documents), the longevity and comprehensiveness of this study add a great deal to the credibility of their findings.

The three case studies offer "good" and "bad" implementation stories, although in all cases KERA affected what happened in the schools. KERA has clearly not been a non-event. Orange County Elementary School is a rare find—a school that embraces the real intent of KERA to educate *all* children, in circumstances where educating *all*

Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to Nancy Jennings, Bowdoin College, 7400 College Station, brunswic, ME 04011. (njennings2bowdoin@polar.bowdoin.edu)

children is not an easy task. The other two schools—Kessinger and Dyersburg Elementary—offer more typical implementation stories of compliance rather than embrace, and tinkering around the edges rather than fundamental change.

The authors conclude that five conditions shaped implementation in the six schools: the features of the policy itself (e.g., increased funding, new assessments, mandates); educators' beliefs about learning and the primacy of basic skill instruction; stable and effective district and school leadership; the receptiveness of existing school culture to reform ideas; and the availability of teacher time to make changes outlined in a reform. Given these findings, the authors offer Kentucky policymakers six recommendations, including such things as using individual student improvement as the unit of measure rather than school improvement, and creating ways to provide teachers the time necessary to learn about and implement reform ideas.

All the recommendations make sense, and they highlight two critical obstacles to school change. The first has to do with time. The fact that this study is looking at a reform that a state has sustained for over 10 years is remarkable in itself. In an age where new ideas about improving schools rapidly gain political currency, having state policymakers and the general public remain stalwart for a decade is amazing. The fact that Kentucky policymakers set a 20-year target for accomplishing their goals, and believe that that is reasonable, is even more amazing. Yet, the recommendations—more teacher education, more time, better leadership— are ones that might be written about most state reforms that tend to be in play for much shorter time periods (e.g., see Guthrie, 1990).

This study, then, begs two sets of questions. First, does the long-term orientation of this reform make any difference? Even though the authors may have come up with the same general findings if they had completed this study 5 years ago, are Kentucky schools different now from where they were at earlier stages in the reform process? Second, if time is the *sine qua non* for reform ideas to take root in classrooms, what can the Kentucky story tell us about sustaining a consistent focus for the time that is needed? Perhaps the most important questions this study begs is how policymakers from other states can read this book and become encouraged rather than exhausted by the story. It seems few could—or would choose to—navigate the politically choppy waters of sustaining a reform agenda for 20 years.

The second obstacle to reform that this study highlights has to do with the bluntness of state assessments as tools to change classroom practices. Like many states, Kentucky policymakers chose to use state assessments as the primary driver of change. Yet, the stories in this study point out clearly that as a driver, state assessments can only do so much. Two examples will serve here. Dyersburg Elementary School is a classic case of a school that has the luxury of not responding much to a state reform because its students test well. Dyersburg's scores on the state test (KIRIS) continued to improve throughout most of the 1990s, even though most teachers had changed little in the direction state policymakers envisioned. What this resulted in was *less* incentive to change, and a certain smugness about the traditional instructional practices most educators in the school advocated. The second example is the primary program, a feature of KERA that advocates for ungraded classrooms in the primary grades, and assessment of continual progress for individual students rather than assessment at a fixed point in time. Because this program did not seem to lead to improved scores on the fourth grade assessments, many schools abandoned their commitment to this program and returned to single-graded primary classrooms and limited adoption of continual progress reports.

When state assessments drive the rewards and sanctions, educators will pay more attention to the test than to reformers' ideas about curriculum and instruction. Without some system that rewards how and what teachers teach, not just the outcomes of their teaching, it is unlikely that policymakers' intentions will be fully realized. The authors recommend that state policymakers find ways to balance the rewards and sanctions tied to state assessments with incentives that encourage and guide teachers toward the ambitious classroom practices needed to achieve KERA goals. But this is very different work from what state policymakers are used to doing, and there are few successful examples of this work for policymakers to draw on. Just as teachers may need guidance to make fundamental changes in their classroom practices, state policymakers may need much more than recommendations to change the ways in which they attempt to foster change.

A final comment. The title of this book suggests that the study addresses rural schools' implementation efforts connected to a state reform. Although the six schools that the authors report on are indeed rural schools, it is not clear that the issues raised in the book are in any way unique to rural schools. If the authors had done their study in Lexington or Louisville, would they have reached the same conclusions? It seems likely. A valid question to ask these authors—and a question asked often of studies published in this journal—is whether this study is "rural" only because the sites under investigation were in rural areas or whether it truly has identified conditions that are unique to rural schools. I sense that the former is true. The next set of interesting questions to ask is how the findings of this study would differ from one conducted in suburban or urban schools.

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Reviewed by

Kristine Reed
Augustana College

Paul Theobald
Wayne State College

Elementary Change is a report on research conducted by the authors over an extended period—10 years, in fact—although the bulk of the volume reports on work conducted between 1996 and 1999. It is, essentially, an evaluation study purported to answer four key questions related to Kentucky's implementation of the court-mandated Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA) of 1990: Did KERA help all students achieve specified, high level outcomes? Did teachers change their curriculum, instructional approaches, and assessment strategies? Did schools take on the burden of educational decision-making? Did the implementation of an innovative "primary program" help the state's schools achieve KERA goals?

Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to Kristine Reed, Augustana College, 2001 S. Summit, Sioux Falls, SD 57197. (reed@inst.augie.edu)

After hearing from Kentucky's Supreme Court, in clear terms, that the "entire sweep" of the state's educational system was "unconstitutional in all its parts and parcels," the legislature was left with the charge to rebuild it. To do so, they passed KERA a year after the court's verdict. Surprisingly, with so little time to build a new system, the 1990 law called for some interesting, innovative, and promising reforms. Several resonated with current theory related to learning at the level of understanding. There was also a good indication that teachers might be given more autonomy to (a) develop locally responsive curriculum and (b) make decisions with colleagues at the building level—something Kentucky refers to as "school-based decision-making" (SBDM). The law also seems to promise dramatically increased resources for the state's schools—in particular, more funds for technology and the professional development of teachers. Last, assessment related to KERA goals was to be done in two ways: one assessment procedure for school-wide accountability purposes, and one to track the growth and development of individual students. Both were to be based on student performances.

Regrettably, the quickly passed KERA became the subject of ceaseless political debate in the years that followed. Two of the more innovative reform goals were dropped because opponents claimed they were too liberal. The innovative multi-age primary program faltered. The assessment system that was to track the progress of individual students never materialized. The accountability assessment system began to dominate discussion of KERA as if it were the alpha *and* the omega, the beginning and the end of reform.

Of course, it was the goal of Kannapel et al to chronicle the success, or lack of it, of KERA. They chose six schools in four rural districts across the state of Kentucky for in-depth qualitative analysis. For the purposes of their report—turned book—they focused on three schools in particular. One of the schools embraced KERA in ways that impressed the authors of *Elementary Change*. The other two were largely indifferent to KERA reforms, if not opposed to them across the board. All three, however, were changed to some extent by the sweeping 1990 legislation.

It is probably fair to paraphrase the authors' assessment of KERA as a "mixed bag." The law did create a substantially increased revenue stream that found its way to the level of teachers. There is some indication that learning levels at the elementary grades have improved. School curriculum has been streamlined to be better aligned with assessment mechanisms. Parents interviewed by the authors believed, on the whole, that the changes were resulting in increased learning.

On the other hand, almost across the board, teachers recognized the tension between the request for innovative