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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.

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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?

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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

instructional approaches, locally developed curriculum, etc., when so much emphasis has been placed on school-wide accountability assessments. Consider the words of one elementary teacher:

> We have a contradiction between what we're doing and what [the innovative, primary program] was supposed to be doing. It was to have these wonderful hands-on activities and time for learning, then [the state] forced down the curriculum on us. We have heard numerous complaints that the kids spend too much time on thematic approaches, hands-on, what have you—so they couldn't perform on the [Kentucky Instructional Results Information System] test. (p. 66)

For a time, the state of Kentucky stood ready to dismiss teachers who worked in "schools in crisis," that is, schools where the proportion of successful students declined by 5% or more in any 2-year period. Although it has backed away from this kind of ignorance, the high stakes ethos lingers in the state of Kentucky.

While the expanse of this research project is indeed impressive and it is hard to be critical of such tireless effort, we believe the volume has a few shortcomings. For one, while there are KERA-related developments that deserve praise, there is much more that deserves stern rebuke. The reader doesn't get this out of *Elementary Change*, partially, perhaps, because the book is actually a report. It reads like a report, beginning with the "executive summary" on page vii. Its value-neutral, "objective" tone renders it of little use to either supporters or detractors of KERA.

Perhaps more troublesome still is the fact that the book purports to be about a systemic reform effort in rural Kentucky; and yet beyond brief descriptions of three rural locales containing the three schools chosen for in-depth study, rural is not a part of the analysis—it is not a variable used to evaluate the pros and cons of KERA. Furthermore, beyond a couple of references to the work of Alan DeYoung, a quick glance at the book's bibliography reveals that extant research related to rural schools was almost completely ignored. As a result, the book does not say all that it could.

Generally, the work seems to lack what we have chosen to call a "critical edge." The authors have a propensity to make statements that, upon even cursory examination, seem to call for serious reconsideration. Perhaps the most annoying is the assertion that KERA brought a philosophy that included learning for *all* students. One can't help but wonder if this new philosophy replaced an old one that was *opposed* to learning for all students? While admitting that teachers, administrators, and parents may have questions about student capabilities—sometimes reprehensibly tied to racial, gender, or ethnic prejudices—it would be a stretch to assume that any school functioned within a philosophy that looked upon the absence of learning as a legitimate option. And it would be an equal stretch to claim that KERA's published philosophy might alter reprehensible prejudices.

The authors applaud the fact that school curriculum in Kentucky has become more "focused and aligned" with state standards. There is no reference to whether it might be fair to say, at the same time, that the curriculum has become narrow and disconnected. Is there a rural dimension to rural school curriculum as a result of KERA? Can we say that alignment with 57 standardized learning expectations improves a curriculum?

Last, there is little comment about the value of KERA given its well-documented devolution into multiple accountability assessments. Instead of condemnation, the authors recommend the full development of the assessment trajectory promised early on, the one that promised to monitor individual student growth and development—as if this would ameliorate the damage done by increasing the stakes tied to accountability assessments. Even if the authors were not of the opinion that so much emphasis on accountability was counterproductive, they might have made at least passing reference to the research that suggests that it is.

Shortcomings aside, *Elementary Change* is an impressive qualitative evaluation of a highly convoluted reform effort. Painstaking effort went into this volume. As a report of what happened in Kentucky, this is a valuable book. And for that, the authors should be complimented. However, as a guide for future direction or as a point of departure for questions surrounding curriculum, instruction, and assessment in rural schools, regrettably *Elementary Change* says little.