

What Does it Really Take to Improve Schools?

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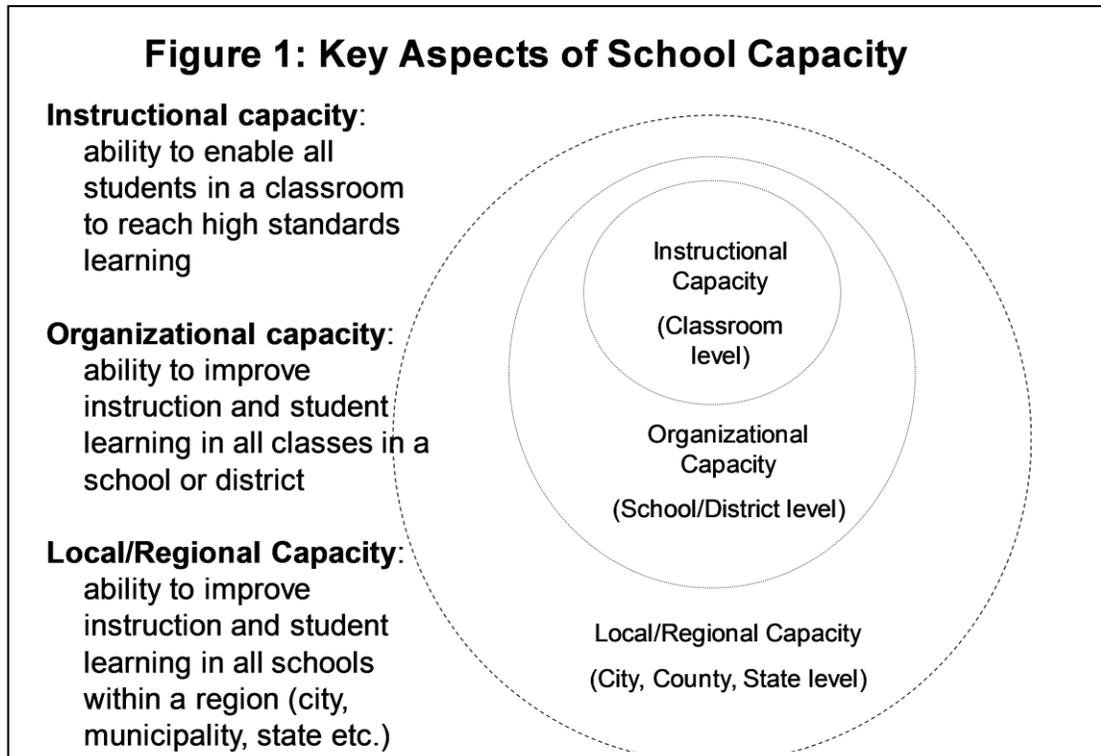
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What does it really take to improve schools? In this short paper, I argue that the answer cannot be reduced to particular individuals, new policies, new programs, or new technologies. The answer lies in developing a better understanding of term that it is often used in used in education but rarely carefully examined: capacity. In general, “capacity” in education, refers to the amount of resources and effort needed to achieve a particular goal (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Hatch, 2009; Newman, King & Youngs, 2000; Ravitch, 2000; Stein, 2004). Thus, schools that require substantial new investments of resources, time and energy in order to improve student outcomes or that need to make major changes in structures or routines are said to have low capacity; conversely, schools that do not require significant new investments or changes to enable students to meet those standards are said to have high capacity.

The simplicity of this definition, however, masks aspects of capacity that have critical implications for schools and educational reform. First, the capacity needed to achieve one set of goals may not be the same as the capacity needed to meet another set of goals. Thus, the resources, practices, and personnel necessary to foster student improvements in basic skills on standardized tests are not be the same as those needed to enable students to develop higher-order thinking skills, to become responsible citizens, or to reach world-class standards in multiple subjects (Gardner, 1991; Koretz, 2008). Similarly, even schools that have demonstrated the capacity to increase student achievement overall may lack the capacity to close achievement gaps between African-American and Latino students and their White and Asian peers (Henne & Jang, 2008). Furthermore, efforts to improve student performance overall may do little or nothing to build the capacity for addressing issues of equity more broadly.

Second, simply having resources does not mean those resources will be used well. This is why giving schools more money (or a new curriculum or a new assessment or evaluation system) isn't sufficient to enable them to meet ambitious goals for all students (Malen & Rice, 2004). Funding, resources, policies, programs, and technologies that may be effective in one community and one context, may be ineffective or even problematic in other communities and contexts where the conditions are different. In other words, the capacity to reach valued educational goals reflects a complex interaction between the resources available and the conditions and demands that exist in different levels of the educational system. As a consequence, large-scale school improvement efforts have to go beyond generic notions of

capacity and recognize the need to build at least three different kinds of capacity: instructional capacity at the classroom level, organizational capacity at the school and district level, and local/regional capacity at the system level (See Figure 1).



Instructional Capacity

At the classroom level, instructional capacity – the ability to enable all students in a class to reach high standards of learning – depends on the relationship between the:

- Understandings, experiences, and attitudes the teacher brings into the classroom.
- Understandings, experiences and attitudes the students bring into the classroom.
- Content (the type and quality of the instructional materials, technologies, and tasks used in the classroom). (Cohen & Ball, 1999)

As Richard Elmore (2000) argues, if school reform efforts do not ultimately address this “core of instruction”, then meaningful and lasting improvements in students’ performance cannot take place.

Organizational Capacity

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to influence the instructional core in all classrooms throughout a school and to make significant improvements in student learning school-wide unless schools also have organizational capacity – the ability to enable to all classes and all

schools within a district to reach high standards of learning. Organizational capacity depends upon:

- Technical capital (money, resources, facilities available to the organization etc.)
- Human capital (such as the skills, knowledge and dispositions of the personnel involved)
- Social capital (including the relationships, social networks, norms of trust and collective commitment among individuals and groups in the organization)

Historically, many of the major initiatives to improve schools on a large scale focused initially on providing schools with additional technical capital (in the form of funding, compensatory programs etc.), while more recent efforts have focused particularly on human capital (Cohen & Moffit, 2009). However, these efforts have often ignored the power of relationships and social capital. Thus, schools where school staff have developed good working relationships, share a common understanding of what they are doing and why, and who trust one another, have more opportunities to share expertise and information, to develop new and innovative practices and are more likely to be effective with their students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Goertz, Floden & O'Day, 1996; Leanna, 2011; Putnam, 2002; Spillane, Hallet, & Diamond, 2003; Spillane & Thompson 1997). Without these kinds of relationships, giving schools and districts money (or a new strategic plan, a better curriculum, or a new set of assessments) is much less likely to have a significant, positive, organization-wide impact on student learning (Hatch, 2002).

The need for schools to develop both instructional and organizational capacity, however, creates a fundamental paradox: many schools and districts that lack instructional capacity also lack organizational capacity. They lack the capacity to meet their instructional goals in the classroom for all students, and they also lack the capacity to make significant changes in their organizational structures and practices that could contribute to large-scale improvements in instruction. In other words, it takes organizational capacity to build instructional capacity, but, conversely, it is much easier to develop organizational capacity if a school or district already has the instructional capacity to support high levels of student learning (Hatch, 2001). As a consequence, low-performing schools and districts face a serious catch-22 in which the disregard for the complexity and demands of building technical, human and social capital leads to a cycle of failed improvement efforts (March, 1995; Payne, 2008).

Local/Regional Capacity

If developing instructional and organizational capacity were not difficult enough, schools and districts also rely on a host of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions in the surrounding environment for the technical, human and social capital those schools and districts need to be successful. Schools and districts depend on government agencies, philanthropies,

businesses, and research institutions for technical capital like funding, facilities, textbooks, assessments, curricula and relevant technologies. For human capital, schools and districts depend teacher preparation, principal preparation, and professional development programs developed by universities, for-profit and not-for profit organizations and consultants. Furthermore, just as social capital is a key element of organizational capacity, it is also a key part of local and regional capacity. Thus, relationships with all of these organizations and other groups and individuals in the external environment are key mediators of information, resources, and political and public support that schools and district need to build instructional and organizational capacity. Unfortunately, these relationships and the social capital that goes with them are often invisible, and many low-performing schools and districts, those with large percentages of students of color, and in low-income communities do not have access to the same powerful network of relationships as others. Consequently, efforts to “scale-up” programs that have succeeded in one context or one community often ignore the reliance of those efforts on external relationships and the inequitable distribution of social capital that often undermines successful spread and replication.

The System Matters

All in all, this multidimensional view of school capacity helps to explain why so many improvement efforts fail: they focus on “one-shot” solutions and ignore the need to build capacity at every level of the system. From this perspective, there is no one “right” answer to the question of how to improve learning for all students. Significant improvements depend on a long-term commitment to the development of the technical, human, and social capital both inside and outside schools. My recent work analyzing relatively high-performing educational systems like those in Singapore, Finland and the Netherlands reinforces this systemic perspective. While advocates for almost any reform idea in the United States seem to be able to find a correlate in some “higher-performing” system, sustained examination of education in “higher-performing” countries reveals many ways in which they are investing in the development of technical, human and social capital: producing high-quality facilities, rigorous curricula, high quality textbooks, and sophisticated assessments; developing exemplary preparation and professional development programs; and supporting the development of a common commitment to education and the individual and group relationships that make schooling a communal and societal endeavor rather than an individual pursuit.

While this view of the significant demands of large-scale school improvements cautions against the dangers of simplistic, short-term, solutions, there are some key steps that can be taken to build instructional, organizational and local educational capacity in communities in New York as well as around the country. First, in cases where schools are stuck in a cycle of failure, investments in and support can begin with community development. Even small investments in building or repairing educational and community facilities and in community organizing efforts can provide relatively quick, concrete evidence of improvements for real problems at the same

time that they can help to provide jobs, build skills, and develop relationships. In turn, these efforts help to create the technical, human, and social capital that can serve as a foundation for improvement efforts inside schools (Hatch, 1998; 2009).

Second, rather than focusing the on the distribution of individual teachers and leaders, human capital strategies in education have to be accompanied by efforts to build social capital at the same time. Thus, efforts to infuse organizations with new leaders or new staff and even those to replace those who are ineffective have to take into account the relationships and cultures in which those individuals are embedded. That means engaging in deliberate efforts to create and sustain productive work environments and not assuming that those environments will emerge when some individuals come and some individuals go. One critical means of supporting productive and collaborative work environments in schools is to shift from a focus on the performance of individual students and teachers in one year to the performance of both individuals and groups over three, four, or even five years. Putting in place assessment systems, like those in Finland that sample the performance of groups of students each year, rather than testing every student in multiple subjects every year not only reduce the substantial costs of testing, but they can also create incentives that help to promote relationships, collaboration, and the development of the common commitment so essential to social capital.

Third, sustained support for real improvements in educational outcomes for every child depends on the development of a wider understanding of what “good” teaching and learning looks like and what it takes to support it system-wide. In the United States, when we think of systemic reform, we often think of aligning goals, curriculum, assessments, and rewards and incentives, but, whether educational systems are centralized or decentralized, “higher-performing” countries often have tremendously powerful social networks of people, organizations and institutions that make it possible to share information, ideas and expertise, and, in turn, help to create coherence and common understanding of the purposes and procedures of schooling. These social networks also help people, organizations and institutions to engage in meaningful dialogue when they disagree and to build the political stability and support needed to make sure schools are funded adequately and that teachers are treated like professionals. Correspondingly, efforts to promote systemic reform in this country have to go beyond alignment to support the development of connections and relationships among groups at every level of the educational system. In particular, beyond publicizing test scores, many students, parents, and teachers would benefit from opportunities to see and examine what real “college-level” and “career-level” work looks like and to discuss how it compares to the kind of classwork and homework students in their school are being asked to do. By creating opportunities for students, parents, educators, policymakers, and the wider public to see and discuss what powerful teaching and learning with diverse students look like, we can begin to build a demand for high quality learning experiences for all students. But until we all have a better sense of what “high quality” or “highly effective” teaching looks like, almost anything that leads to improved

test scores will suffice. As long as that is the case, we have to expect that students from different backgrounds and different communities will continue to find themselves with learning experiences of vastly different kinds and vastly different quality.

In the end, there can be no doubt that effective teachers and principals are crucial to ensure successful educational experiences for every child. In the United States at this point, almost every policymaker and many members of the general public know that some research shows that teachers make more of a difference in student learning outcomes on current tests than any other school-related factor. But those results should not be a surprise in a weak system overall, and one in which there are massive inequities in the distribution of technical, human and social capital. If we really want to enable large numbers of students to reach high levels of learning, we have to come to terms with the fact that effective education takes more than the efforts of individuals. It takes a system to enable every child to reach high levels of learning, and effective systems depend on sustained attention to the technical, human and social capital both inside and outside schools. We cannot neglect the classroom level, the organizational level or the local level in our improvement efforts, and we can neither simply blame individuals nor reward them for what we all must do together. We have to take collective responsibility for the effectiveness of our educational system and for the performance of every student within it.

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