The process of School Improvement

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Introduction

This paper is a summary of a longer research document in the field of educational management. It is based on an analysis of the work being undertaken at Osaka International School for the accreditation process for WASC, which began in 1998 and continues today. It concerns the subject of change and improvement within schools and the process by which this can be successfully achieved.

Those who have worked in government school systems around the world will probably have been on the receiving end of large-scale changes, many imposed by governments looking for greater accountability. Many of these changes have tended to produce a lot of work for seemingly little return. Yet while the teaching profession might understandably be skeptical of change for change's sake, there are some compelling reasons to continually examine the way a school operates and seek ways to improve.　Not least for Senri International School Foundation is that the two schools were set up to articulate and provide a new approach to international and domestic education.　There were no models on which to draw for guidance. Therefore constant evaluation, change and improvement would seem almost part of our remit.

In this context, while school improvement would seem to involve all schools, it is especially relevant to our own. Stoll and Fink highlight this point in their work on school culture and school improvement.

> *Schools are either getting better or they are getting worse, because the rapidly accelerating pace of change make standing still impossible.* (1995:85)

Improvement and change does not necessarily imply what went before was wrong or substandard, more that if an accreditation process spans six years it can be expected to bring about change and improvement on what Brighouse refers to as the 'previous best'(1999). What follows is a brief account of school improvement that was the model for change at OIS.

Osaka International School's interpretation of school improvement:

Improvement is a systematic effort

Velzen et al defined school improvement as

> *a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively.* (1985:48)

Such a definition gives us a number of indications as to what school improvement should focus upon. There is considerable agreement among researchers in the field that at the heart of this is the enhancement of student learning. Drawing on a wide range of sources Stoll and Fink saw 'a series of concurrent and recurring processes that take place if a school is to improve.

Enhances pupil outcomes

Focuses on teaching and learning

Builds a capacity to take charge of change regardless of its source

Defines its own direction

Assesses its current culture and works to develop positive cultural norms

Creates strategies to achieve its goals

Addresses internal conditions that enhance change

Maintains momentum during periods of turbulence

Monitors and evaluates its process, progress, achievement and development.

(ibid: 43)

Whilst such a list provides the map by which to direct a school's attention, a list alone does not ensure the means by which school improvement can take place.

The need for good research

As this was the first time that OIS had undertaken accreditation in this way, there was a need to draw on the experiences of other schools and school systems for direction, Huberman outlined this point.

> We need to draw on studies that can actually demonstrate the causal relationship between adoption – implementation - enhanced technical capacity – revised institutional arrangements – measurable impacts on pupils in line with the 'thrust' of the innovation. Without that casual chain, we have no 'social technology ' of implementation, Nor shall we be able to talk of 'school improvement' with a straight face.(1992:11)

For this work at OIS we drew heavily on case studies for school improvement in the Halton Schools Project outlined in Stoll and Fink (ibid:13-25) and the case studies in Ontario by Leithwood et al., which demonstrated that real improvement took place when the following conditions were being met.

The active engagement of teachers

Challenging but comfortable pace

When authentic activities were being undertaken

When teachers were involved in non routine problems such as data analysis

When there was a supportive and collaborative school culture

When teachers were able to assess their own growth needs and gain access to sources of help from both inside and outside the school

Three phases of improvement

Miles (1986) in Preedy et al (1997) outlines three phases that influence the improvement process: initiation, implementation and institutionalization. The *initiation phase* involves the decision to embark upon the process of change and improvement. In this phase we would presume that accurate and relevant evidence is available to guide both the decision to improve and also what improvements need to be made. Other factors that come into play in the initiation phase are access to information, pressures from within and without the school, availability of resources and consultancy support, and the quality of the school's internal conditions and organization. The WASC's 'Focus on Learning' approach had provided the motivation behind the initiation phase; schools are left with the task of implementing and institutionalizing the findings from the report.

It is during the *implementation stage* that the attempted use of the innovations begins. The key factors for this stage are the following of action plans, the development of commitment and the solving of problems that arise as a result of changing practices. To succeed at this stage, according to Miles' findings, requires clearly delineated responsibilities; shared control over implementation; a mixture of pressure and insistence; adequate and sustained professional development; and rewards for teachers who push forward with the process.

Institutionalization is the stage when the changes are no longer regarded as new but have become a part of the culture of the school. Miles' emphasis here is that the changes should affect student learning.   It has been essential to understand these phases as part of the improvement process

Leadership and school improvement

Underpinning this whole process is the understanding of the effect of leadership and its role in promoting change and improvement. If we accept the above, teachers themselves have a key role in school improvement. Brighouse points out that,

> all the research, confirmed by HM,I and more recently OFSTED, suggests that leadership in schools is **the** key factor in improvement and success… And yet our contention is that leadership is extremely complex: it is simply not enough to say profoundly 'it is all down to the head teacher' and with a shrug…. walk away... The first rule of leadership is that it is shared. (ibid: 45)

These findings have been confirmed in a number of studies.

Wallace discussed this in relation to the work of Derr and Gabarro.

> *The more effective of two school districts facing a similar change had a management structure that better facilitated joint-decision making and conflict resolution.* (1992:115.)

This is not to say that the responsibility for developments within the school should be neatly passed from the Administration on to others. It is more recognition that, if the central purpose of school improvement is to positively affect student learning, real change has to take place in the classroom; therefore, teachers needed to be involved in those changes. This required processes that could efficiently handle teachers' input and time, plus an approach to leadership of the Administration that attempted to create an atmosphere where the unsettling reality of change and analysis could be handled positively. Fullan supports this view:

> *Control at the top as many reform minded leaders have found, is an illusion. No one can control complex organizations from the top....Similarly it is a mistake for local units, even operating under decentralized schemes to ignore the centre... Put differently the centre and local units need each other. You can't get anywhere by swinging from one dominance to another. What is required is a different two-way relationship of pressure, support and continuous negotiation.* (1993 p 30)

Conclusion

While each of these areas warrant much more explanation, possibly the most interesting point to consider is that *if a school is not getting better then it is getting worse.* 'Getting better' means simply continuing to enhance student learning in the learning outcomes a particular school has chosen. If this is so, then it is a thought that is of concern to all of us at SISF. What is being suggested here is that schools in general and our school in particular, should continue to look for ways to improve on their 'previous best'. The last WASC accreditation was an attempt to develop an ongoing and effective means by which to evaluate the school's performance and create mechanisms for improvement. It certainly has not been problem free, and it is only one interpretation of a process. However the ideas of school improvement, I would suggest, have applications to the workings of the two schools together whose successful futures are so dependent on each other.

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