COMMENTARY

Improving Large-Scale School Reform

By Donald J. Peurach

While nothing about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Act can be called certain, the good news is that a successful large-scale-reform approach remains somewhere in the mix. The bad news is that this approach hinges on a novel category of educational practice we are just now beginning to acknowledge and understand. The challenge, then, lies in the education reform community doing precisely what it expects of schools: learning to understand and improve its own practice—specifically, the practice of large-scale school reform.

Despite uncertainty in the reauthorization, it's worth pondering this approach to large-scale reform, particularly in light of research that colleagues and I have conducted and conversations being facilitated by the philanthropic community.

Draft ESEA legislation approved late last year by the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee identifies six strategies for improving the nation's lowest-performing schools. Two of the strategies—the "whole-school reform" strategy and the "restart" strategy, which involves relaunching a failing school in a charter, magnet, or other "innovative" format—would provide federal support for schools and districts to collaborate with external partners with a record of success either in re-engineering existing schools or creating new schools. Potential partners include external "hub" organizations, such as comprehensive-school-reform providers, charter management organizations, and education management organizations.

Both strategies depend on a network-based approach to large-scale reform in which a hub organization collaborates with large numbers of schools to enact a shared model for schoolwide improvement. Over the past 20 years, this approach has benefited from billions of dollars in public and private investment, beginning with the New American Schools initiative and running through the Investing in Innovation, or i3, program. This approach has also produced instances of remarkable success. Consider two leading comprehensive-school-reform programs, Success for All and America's Choice, which have accumulated formidable evidence of positive program effects in state-size networks of schools.

This approach depends on the work of hub organizations in establishing, managing, and sustaining large networks of schools enacting common organizational designs, with particular focus on the interdependent practices of school leaders, teachers, and students. This work is, itself, a novel category of educational practice, one that state and local education agencies have rarely (if ever) attempted (let alone enacted successfully). It is also a category of educational practice about which we know very little. While many
researchers have focused on examining program implementation and effects, few have examined the core work and capabilities of the hub organizations themselves.

As part of the Study of Instructional Improvement at the University of Michigan, my colleagues and I conducted what, to our knowledge, is the longest-running study of hub organizations pursuing network-based, practice-focused approaches to large-scale school improvement. From 1996 through 2008, we used extensive participant observation, interviews, and document analysis to examine the core work and capabilities of Success for All, America's Choice, and the Accelerated Schools Project, another leading comprehensive-school-reform provider.

As detailed in a series of articles and books, our findings challenge widely held assumptions about the work of these hub organizations and the structure and function of their networks. For example, proponents often argue that these hub-centered networks can function as conduits for moving research to practice. However, our findings suggest that rather than existing in advance of scaling up the network, detailed knowledge of effective, schoolwide practices emerges through the work of scaling up the network, via collaborative, experiential learning among hub organizations and schools.

Further, critics often argue that hub-centered networks function as bureaucratic, top-down initiatives that usurp local control and professional autonomy. However, our findings indicate that their success depends heavily on underperforming schools' engaging as active partners, with school-based experimentation and adaptation functioning as key resources for collaborative, experiential learning.

Finally, proponents often assume that these hub-centered networks can effect rapid improvement in large numbers of schools, and critics are quick to point out when they don't. However, our findings suggest that it can take decades for hub organizations to emerge and mature, and that it can take five years or more for schools to develop the capabilities to participate as full members of a network.

Such findings are not anomalous. Rather, they are consistent with findings in leading research on franchise-like commercial replication, on the design process, and on the innovation process. They are also consistent with findings in a small body of research that examines the management and scale-up of comprehensive-school-reform programs and charter management organizations.

As long as provisions for whole-school reform and school restarts are included in the ESEA reauthorization conversation, the policy community must recognize that its aspirations for improving large numbers of the nation's weakest schools are tied tightly to a new and weakly understood category of educational practice. As such, making good on continued public and private investment depends on engaging all members of the educational reform community—schools, reformers, researchers, philanthropists, and policymakers—in collaborative learning aimed at improving the practice of large-scale school reform.

Such initiatives are already under way. For example, the W.T. Grant Foundation and the Spencer Foundation have initiated an effort to develop an "i3 Learning Community," one goal of which is to broker the exchange of knowledge and capabilities among i3 grantees with help from researchers experienced in the study of large-scale school improvement. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is supporting comparable learning opportunities within its "Deeper Learning" initiative.
While such collaborative learning is both unusual and difficult, it is also imperative, as learning about (and from) the work of hub organizations will create new potential to improve the practice of large-scale school reform—and, with that, the education and life chances of many, many students.

Donald J. Peurach is an assistant professor in the University of Michigan School of Education, in Ann Arbor. He is also the author of Seeing Complexity in Public Education: Problems, Possibility, and Success for All (Oxford University Press, 2011).