



LEADS

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LEADS, a publication of the Center for Education Policy and Leadership (CEPAL) at the University of Maryland, College Park, features research by university faculty and students that addresses contemporary education policy and leadership issues.

LEADS aims to provide educators and policy-makers with research they can use to strengthen the education of all students. We call this publication LEADS to highlight the importance of research in suggesting ideas, resources, and actions for educational improvement.

This issue of LEADS is based on research conducted by an interdisciplinary team led by Dr. Barbara Finkelstein, Professor of Education, at the University of Maryland. Other members of the team were Bob Croninger, Betty Malen, Donna Muncey, Jennifer Rice, and graduate students from the University of Maryland. The team examined the effects of a reconstitution initiative over a two-and-one-half year period in three schools (one middle and two elementary schools) in a large metropolitan school district. This issue of LEADS draws on that research to provide insights for educators and policymakers considering reconstitution as a strategy for "turning around" troubled schools. CEPAL thanks Bob Croninger for his significant assistance with the preparation of this issue.

Reconstitution Reconsidered

Some state governments and local districts have embraced school reconstitution as a reform strategy for low-performing schools, and the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind, promotes broad-scale replacement of staff if schools fail to make adequate gains in achievement for four or more years. Although the details of reconstitution vary by state and district, policies typically feature the removal of incumbent administrators and teachers (or large percentages of them) and their replacement with educators who presumably are more capable of improving school performance. While the research base on reconstitution is new and relatively narrow, the findings from this study caution against the widespread use of reconstitution as a reform strategy.

Things Can Get Worse

Advocates assume that reconstitution can be used to turn around "troubled schools" by replacing weak administrators and teachers with more talented educators who will make better use of new resources to stimulate school improvement. But that doesn't always happen. In the schools studied by the University of Maryland team, the central office released more than two-thirds of the principals and teachers from their positions. Some transferred to other schools in the districts while others retired or sought employment elsewhere. Even though the district attempted to retain and recruit successful teachers, many declined to return or relocate to a school designated as among the worst in the state. The district struggled into the subsequent year simply to fill positions because there was neither a surplus of highly-qualified educators within the district nor additional resources to attract them from outside the district. More than three-quarters of the educators eventually hired had no experience in the district and most were novice teachers or administrators. Although educators made significant efforts to restart their schools and to create collaborative relationships with new colleagues, students, and parents, many reported that they were overwhelmed by these tasks. The challenges confronting educators were so great that roughly one-third of the new administrators and teachers left their new school assignments just two years after reconstitution.

Making the Best of Reconstitution

Future studies may show that reconstitution can work as its advocates hope, but this study provides limited support for optimism. University of Maryland research team members recommend that before educators adopt reconstitution as a reform strategy they consider the following:

- The more scarce the resources in a district, the more likely that reconstitution will make matters worse. If a district is struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers before reconstitution, it will find recruitment and retention even more difficult after reconstitution. These problems are further exacerbated when districts reconstitute multiple schools simultaneously.

- Instead of clearing schools of the majority of its personnel, limited reconstitution approaches (e.g., replacing the weakest educators first) may prove more successful (if not more manageable) than sweeping reforms that attempt to “start over”.
- States and districts may need to offer substantial incentives to experienced and skilled educators to attract these educators to reconstituted schools. Possibilities include salary increases or financial rewards (e.g., hiring bonuses for educators with a history of success) and structural changes that help educators to be more successful (e.g., exceptional professional development opportunities or reductions in class size).
- Communities have valuable expertise about their local schools and may be able to provide assistance to educators in addressing the challenges of implementing reconstitution, including establishing higher expectations for performance and promoting relationships between schools, families, and various community groups that support these expectations.
- The success of state and federal reconstitution mandates may depend on the provision of additional state and federal resources for implementation. Additional resources may ease the burdens associated with reconstitution, even if they do not guarantee its success. Resources might include supplemental funding, regional assistance centers or cadres of highly trained educators who can assist staff on site at struggling schools.

This issue of **LEADS** is drawn from:

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- Rice, J.K., & Malen, B. (2002 May). The human cost of education reform: The case of school reconstitution. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Finance Association.

