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(Most) Everything You Want to Know About District-wide, Small School Reform: An Essay Review of *Against the Odds*

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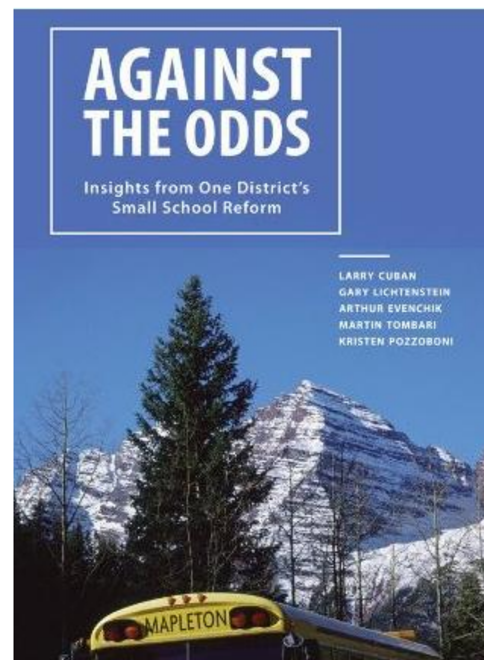
For anyone hoping to enact substantive school reform, I strongly recommend *Against the Odds: Insights from One District's Small School Reform*. While the title highlights the book's applicability to small school reform, the authors touch upon issues and topics that seem endemic to many reform endeavors—tensions between local control and centralized authority, the need to create a shared vision for reform, and strategies for enlisting broad support for change. As a result, this study offers "insights" for those considering most

any type of educational change. That said, I also believe there are topics the authors did not address which could have further enriched this study.

To begin, I should briefly describe my background. In general, I support small school reform, having found that smaller schools are often more effective at enacting change, promoting equitable outcomes, and creating a healthy school climate for students, faculty, and administrators alike (McQuillan, 2008; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996), though this has certainly not been true in every case (McQuillan, 2004). In addition, I twice visited the Mapleton Public School (MPS) system, which is located just outside the city of Denver, during the course of the reform documented in this study. I also worked for the Colorado Small Schools Initiative, which supported much MPS-related research and development, and in doing so collaborated with Gary Lichtenstein, one of the book's co-authors.

To introduce this study, the authors set a theoretical framework for what follows by examining many common assumptions underlying educational reform, including those endorsed by the political left, such as small school reform itself, as well as those embraced by the political right, including the value of choice and competition as driving forces behind educational change. In so doing, they highlight the tension that can arise when a district attempts to honor both small school change and the tenets of No Child Left Behind, a development that often generated difficulties between the district and the Colorado Department of Education (CDE).

The authors also offer a rich description of the local context and how that shaped this initiative. One learns, for instance, about Superintendent Charlotte Ciancio, a product of the school system herself, and her tireless efforts to promote this reform. Further, the authors document MPS' changing demographics, the impact this shift had on schools, and the district's ongoing willingness to embrace change as well as its inability to significantly impact student achievement, defined largely as performance on the state standardized assessment.



In Chapter Four, "Experiencing Small Schools: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives," the authors document those aspects of school life that changed for students and teachers as a result of this reform. Overall, the authors observed that both groups collaborated more, gained increased power, and took on new responsibilities in the classroom—all of which generated problems, but ultimately led to positive outcomes. Drawing on interview

data, the authors also describe various concerns raised by students. Some are confused by a lack of letter grades, saying, "I find it hard to motivate myself" (p. 99). Others maintain that shifts in grading criteria left them "confused about how to demonstrate mastery of the material" (p. 99). For the most part, however, change is presented in a positive light, with students saying, "I am constantly thinking," "I have learned more here," and "What we learn here is what we want to learn" (p. 97-98). In something of a summary of the student perspective, the authors write, "Students approve of most of the instructional changes because they believe they are learning more and the material seems applicable to life outside of school" (p. 97).

As with students, one hears two sides to the teacher experience, though the authors again present this experience in a positive light. Some teachers, for example, struggled to incorporate constructivist lessons into their teaching. Others were uncertain how to shift greater responsibility to students, and many spoke of the difficulty associated with an increased workload. Yet the new-found power that accompanied the reform, such as the input teachers had in shaping professional development, and teachers' improved relations with students and parents, all worked in concert to improve the overall experience of teaching in MPS. Alluding to a study conducted by Professor Kevin Welner from the University of Colorado (2006), the authors write: "school directors and teachers generally had no desire to return to a more traditional way" (p. 81). While the authors observe that both students and teachers resisted aspects of the reform, and the additional work and higher expectations that often accompanied them, as a whole, both groups viewed the reform favorably.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of this study derives from the authors' diligence in identifying and exploring both the victories and tensions encountered by Superintendent Ciancio and the MPS district while enacting small school reform. Given that Mapleton had no existing model for district-wide change to draw upon, its achievements seem notable: Over four years the district dismantled its existing comprehensive high school while simultaneously creating multiple small schools, each of which embraced a different reform model, including such national initiatives as The Big Picture Company, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, New Technology High School, and two small schools designed to reflect the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Further, in contrast to the more typical strategy of first identifying a mission and focus and then recruiting relevant personnel to support that mission, from the outset Superintendent Ciancio "mobilized the school board, stakeholders in the school community, funders, union leadership, and state officials to embrace the vision of inventing a network of small schools that offered curricular choices and met the learning needs of a variety of students" (p. 40). Working with these groups and a cadre of district personnel, the superintendent and her backers promoted a vision of reform that emphasized student-centered learning and constructivism while offering an "enticing menu of learning opportunities" to all students (p. 29). As the

reform moved forward, this well-laid foundation proved crucial to maintaining support for change.

The authors also detail critical issues and problems that arose in the course of reform, many of which derived from various manifestations of autonomy. There was an ongoing tension, for instance, between the district's desire to offer a student-centered, constructivist education and the necessity of adhering to the demands of standardized assessments imposed by CDE. While CDE allowed the district some leeway in meeting state standards, the state ultimately held MPS schools to the same standards as all other schools. In addition, as the district embraced multiple reform models, concerns arose as to whether individual schools implemented these changes with fidelity and about the balance between model fidelity and district control. Here, the district prevailed. Tensions also emerged between the desires of individual schools and the district's need to maintain consistency in its policies. Some schools, for example, wanted extra early-release days, but doing so would have disrupted other schools' routines. In these cases, while the district sought to be flexible, individual schools ultimately had to adhere to district mandates.

Overall, *Against the Odds* offers a frank exploration of one of the more ambitious small school reform endeavors I know of, perhaps the most ambitious. Moreover, the authors' descriptions and analyses align with the work of Kevin Welner (2006, 2007), who conducted a formal and even more in-depth study of the district. And though I only visited the district twice for a total of six days, what the authors say certainly accords with what I observed.

That said and fully respecting the work of these authors, I would like to add a "Yes, but…" To do so, I raise three questions, and related sub-questions, that if addressed would have further strengthened this study:

- *Did the state standardized exam aid or undermine reform?* Often, the authors refer to district concerns with raising student scores on the state exam. I would therefore ask whether consequent efforts to do so complemented or undermined the constructivist, student-centered approach to reform embraced by MPS. Could the district's progressive vision work in concert with state concerns for accountability and standardized achievement? Or, was the exam a necessary evil that, in the present political context, had to be addressed? What about the positive developments in student performance and teacher instruction the authors describe? Could the state exam gauge such improvements? In a section entitled "Good Reasons for Poor Results," the authors get at some related issues. They observe, for instance, that if students come into 9th grade reading and doing math well below grade level, they may improve their performance on the exam but still not achieve a rating of "proficient."

- *What about teacher reactions to this reform?* Overall, I consider teachers the most important actor in secondary school reform. I therefore would like to hear more about their reactions to this

initiative. At one point, for example, the authors write that "the school day was extended, and teachers were expected to work 20 extra days for credit but no pay" (p. 57). The authors go on to say, "Yet the teachers union, far from putting up roadblocks to the reform, actually became a partner with the administration in advocating for it" (p. 57). Still, 20 extra days seems like a lot of additional work, and I'm not even certain what working for "credit but no pay" means. Yet the authors say nothing further about this matter, aside from maintaining that the initiative was attractive to many teachers "who were promised a great deal of control in the design and governance of their schools" (p. 58). Moreover, I was concerned that the different small school models were treated as uniform entities. While MPS schools embraced multiple reform models, the authors present student and teacher reactions to these different initiatives as essentially comparable, as if, for example, personalized learning in one school was much the same as in any other. In a related vein, when they offer quotes from students and teachers, they seldom identify specific schools, perhaps to preserve confidentiality. Still, such an approach to representing the experiences of these key actors in reform causes me some concern and leads into the final question.

- *Was this overall reform a success?* In summarizing much of their research, the authors write: "From our own interviews, and from evaluation reports commissioned by the district, we conclude that, overall, Mapleton's small school reform was successfully implemented" (p. 77). Given that MPS dismantled its comprehensive high school and created a complex of small schools, this claim seems quite valid. However, I would have liked them to address a related question: Beyond implementation, was this reform a success? Was it a good idea? And if so, for whom? Yet that would have been a highly complex matter, given the nature of MPS reform. Teachers had to revise their practice and assume new roles and responsibilities. Understandably, turnover was rather high, at least at first. At the same time, students had to choose a new school, which could mean abandoning friends and family, and "re-learn" their role in the classroom while embracing new approaches to curriculum and assessment. In the realm of extracurricular activities, some popular sports teams and activities were adversely affected by reform, while those more "school-based," such as student government, experienced a resurgence in membership. Scores on ACT exams improved slightly but the district seemed constantly under the gun to improve exam scores for CDE. And these are just some of the outcomes engendered by this reform.

Addressing these questions could fill volumes. But educational researchers must not lose sight of such challenges. Indeed, I consider Superintendent Ciancio's willingness to allow this team of researchers, and others, to closely examine the difficult work undertaken by her district as clear signs of

"success." In this sense, the work of Mapleton Public Schools represents but one more stepping stone in helping practitioners and researchers unravel the complex business that is educational reform.

This is a good book. If you want to gain a richer understanding of the complexity of school reform, read it.

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Patrick J. McQuillan is an Associate Professor in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. His professional work has primarily focused on educational reform, urban schooling, teacher education, qualitative research, and complexity theory. His most recent writing includes "Understanding small-school reform through the lens of complexity theory: It's 'good to think with'" published by *Teachers College Record* (2008) and "Some pieces that matter in teacher education: The synergy of social justice, inquiry-into-practice, and meeting the needs of diverse learners" published by the *Asian Journal of Educational Research & Synergy* (2009).

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