

Bright Ideas

Philissa Cramer | May 27, 2010

Experimenting With iSchools

When New York City educators Alisa Berger and Mary Moss were developing their new school, they knew they wanted to integrate online instruction into the traditional classroom setting. But they were blown away by the poor quality of existing Internet-based learning programs.

So they built their own, cobbling together off-the-shelf lesson plans and homegrown projects into a comprehensive online curriculum.

Two years later, Berger and Moss's high school, the iSchool, is the crown jewel in New York's new "Innovation Zone," or iZone. iSchool students download assignments their teachers have uploaded to the Internet, and even when they're in the same classroom as their teacher, they're frequently plugged into the web. When the National September 11 Memorial & Museum asked iSchool students to create an exhibit for teenagers, for example, the students produced audio based on interviews with teens in Afghanistan, Israel, England and Louisiana.

New York is counting on the iSchool's approach as one way to boost student achievement.

"A lot of kids struggle in school because the school is not teaching them where they are," says Berger. "Technology allows us to do exactly that."

This fall eighty-one schools, mostly in low-income neighborhoods, will launch programs that blend online and real-time instruction, and the city will begin a randomized study of a subset of these schools to see which helps students advance fastest.

District officials see promise not just for the high-performing high school students the iSchool enrolls but also for struggling students in elementary and middle grades. The new technology speeds up the process of instruction, practice and assessment from several days to a few minutes—keeping easily bored students engaged, officials say. With students working on computers, teachers can administer a quiz, then follow up instantly with one assignment for students who struggled and another, more complex task for those who aced it. The technology also lets teachers customize assignments based on students' needs without the stigmatizing effect of dividing a class into groups by ability.

Good teachers have always differentiated instruction, says John White, New York's deputy chancellor for innovation. But doing it well takes superhuman quantities of time, effort and information, making it a struggle for even master teachers, much less novices juggling 125 students with a wide range of abilities.

Critics charge that moving instruction online reduces the teacher to an automaton and deprives students of human contact. But using technology as a support system doesn't take away from the craft of teaching, argues Yosi Ben-Dov, who runs Time To Know, an Israeli company participating in New York City's pilot. Time To Know allows teachers to compile lessons from a menu of options, and intrepid teachers can upload plans of their own for others to use.

"We're not trying to replace the teacher," Ben-Dov says. "We're trying to empower her.... Our belief is that computers can help the teacher do her job better." The innovations all come with a price tag, but the program's supporters believe the cost is worth it.

"The fundamental question is, Are we going to continue to do things the way we've always done them, or are we making decisions to accelerate learning?" says White. "There's an enormous amount of invention and creativity in our school system, and it's imperative that we harness that."

Helping Students to Think—and Act—Locally

Lawrence Barnes Elementary School had been sitting near the bottom of Vermont's school rankings for years. Enrolling many recent

immigrants, the Burlington school posted low test scores and used a curriculum that bored students.

Then the school reached out to Shelburne Farms. Over six years the nonprofit farm and education center helped Lawrence Barnes remake itself around the theme of sustainability. Doing so meant more than just teaching about environmental issues or encouraging students to recycle, says Matt Dubel, who heads Shelburne Farms' Sustainable Schools Project. It meant fundamentally reorienting teaching and learning at Lawrence Barnes around the idea that the school is part of a local ecosystem—political, economic and, yes, environmental—that students can influence.

Now, instead of writing five-paragraph persuasive essays that only their teachers read, students identify problems in their community—and appeal to Burlington officials to make changes. They've had success: a neighborhood guide for new immigrants written by third graders is now distributed to all refugees who arrive in Vermont. Test scores are up, there's a waiting list to enroll and this past August, Lawrence Barnes became a full-fledged sustainability-themed magnet school—according to Shelburne Farms, the first in the nation.

Lawrence Barnes's transformation happened without a single teacher being fired. Instead, the achievement boost followed naturally once teachers united around a shared purpose and students got hooked on the local focus, according to Dubel.

"We lose a lot of learners because they're disengaged, and they're disengaged because school doesn't seem to have anything to do with life," he says. "If we really connect academic learning with the life of the community—nearby, outside the doors—we connect academic learning to something that's relevant and meaningful to students."

A small but growing group of environment-oriented educators is pushing this vision in schools across the country. Some, such as Seattle's Facing the Future and the New York-based Cloud Institute, produce sustainability-infused curriculum materials. Others, such as California's Green Schools Initiative, train teachers about how to work sustainability into their lessons. Berkeley's Center for Ecoliteracy last year released *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability*, a guidebook to more than a dozen exemplary programs, including Lawrence Barnes.

"What we wanted to do [with *Smart by Nature*] was to reinforce how much creativity and innovation is occurring across the country," says Zenobia Barlow, the center's co-founder and executive director.

While some schools start by writing sustainability into their mission statements, others don't have to do it that way, Barlow says. "Sometimes it can start with one school garden, with one teacher," she says. "There's no one right way."

A handful of small-scale studies support the idea that a sustainability focus can turn schools around, but for now most of the evidence comes from stories like Lawrence Barnes's. That could soon change: through the national Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative, dozens of schools are teaming up to evaluate their own progress. Proponents of sustainability-focused schools say they expect favorable results because the movement rests on firm pedagogical footing.

"Schools are the ecosystems where our children live, where they spend most of their waking hours," says Deborah Moore of the Green Schools Initiative. "Using the school campus as a learning tool is developmentally appropriate for a lot of ages."

"You can do exemplary instruction in literacy and math and science and social studies, but when we help students integrate and apply those skills, we help them build better models of how the world works," says Dubel. "The more the disciplines come together, the better the learning."

Teachers' Last Stand—or a New Start?

Some see the Obama administration's education policies as forcing a "last stand" for teachers' unions. But what if they augur a new beginning?

As a requirement to win its \$4.3 billion Race to the Top, the administration wants states to be able to judge teachers in part according to their students' test scores. Some advocates of accountability contend that at least half of a teacher's evaluation should depend on test scores. Teachers whose students don't measure up ought to be fired, they argue, and unions exacerbate the problem by protecting weak teachers.

Although it's true that unions are pushing back against the idea that standardized test scores can adequately measure a teacher's effectiveness, they're also not defending the way teacher evaluations have long been done. In many districts, teachers are judged according to a single observation, often by an administrator who lacks expertise in the subject. Instead, forward-thinking unions from Rhode Island to Los Angeles are seizing the moment to push for more comprehensive evaluations that allow teachers a hand in the process. Some of them are even willing to stake tenured teachers' jobs on the outcomes.

The movement isn't new, but its proponents say it has quickened because of the Obama administration's policy priorities.

"It's certainly forcing us to look at our work and start assessing it differently," says Mary McDonald, who works for the Illinois nonprofit Consortium for Educational Change. "They've got our attention."

Many teachers have long believed that their unions should make improved student achievement a primary goal. More than a decade ago Adam Urbanski, a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and then as now president of the union in Rochester, New York, founded the Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN) to promote that view. "A lot of the unions are getting on the train for the right reasons," Urbanski says. "They know that their presence in these deliberations will help to make the final outcome much more realistic and much better for teaching and learning."

Membership in TURN's most robust subgroup, in the Great Lakes region, has jumped from about thirty, two years ago, to about 200 this spring, according to McDonald, an active member, and union members have reached out to district administrators to promote collaboration. Labor-management collaboration is a hallmark of "peer assistance and review," one approach to improving teacher quality that unions embrace. Launched nearly three decades ago by union leaders in Toledo, Ohio, peer assistance and review connects new teachers and struggling teachers with "consulting teachers" who help them improve. The mentoring process can result in dismissal for tenured teachers who don't get better over time.

The model, which is almost always initiated by a union leader and negotiated in side agreements to union contracts, can be effective at helping weak teachers improve, enticing good teachers to stay in the profession and moving the most ineffective teachers out of the classroom, according to Susan Moore Johnson, a Harvard professor who has studied it.

"What's happening as the policy context changes and demands for better assessments increase is that some of these local unions are recognizing that they have to become very involved in developing a teacher evaluation system that works," she says. "They know they have to take part in that before these decisions about re-employment are made simply by test score data or administrative judgment."

The AFT, one of the two national teachers' unions, launched an "innovation fund" last year, with Urbanski at the helm, to encourage local unions to develop school reform initiatives. Among the fund's first recipients: New York's and Rhode Island's teachers' unions, which plan to build a peer assistance program together. They'll have an advantage over other districts that, until recently, have developed and implemented peer assistance and review programs in a vacuum, McDonald says.

"We realize there's quite a bit that we can learn from each other," she says.

Peer assistance and review has started to pop up in some high-profile places, such as in the new teachers' contract for New Haven, Connecticut, which drew praise from Education Secretary Arne Duncan and AFT president Randi Weingarten. But the model mostly continues to fly under the radar, in part, Johnson says, because it doesn't offer a quick fix for the thorny issue of teacher quality.

"It's not like doing a statistical analysis of student test scores and making a decision," Johnson says. "It requires a great deal of human investment.... But although the costs look like they're substantial in the beginning, actually according to administrators the programs do pay for themselves."

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