Abstract: Primary Experience

Title: High Reliability and Leadership for Educational Change

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Principle

Government policies challenge public schools to operate without failures, but typical performance is far from this ideal. Strategies for high reliability organizing may help guide the changes necessary for reducing school failure, but the structure of schools as public institutions and professional organizations, together with longstanding cultures of autonomous operating within classrooms, pose challenges to the use of concepts from HRO research. This presentation builds on a four-part conceptual framework for “high reliability schools” developed by Bellamy (2010): (a) dual bottom line, (b) skeptical standardization, (c) constrained improvisation, and (d) routines that support paradoxical operations. In essence, this approach emphasizes that high reliability research can offer a general theory of action for leading school change with equal commitment to what schools should achieve and what they should avoid. Reaching these dual goals requires an ability to operate simultaneously in two operating modes, one centrally controlled and standardized, the other distributed and improvisational.

Situation

We are exploring this high reliability schools framework in two parallel situations and strategies. The first is a qualitative study of one exceptionally high achieving school, where we have used the framework as a lens for studying the organizational and social processes that support the school’s high achievement and low failure rates. The second is a technical assistance with a district instructional leadership and support team of 60 central office administrators and instructional coaches from a large suburban school district who was interested in applying concepts from high reliability in their work.

Methods of Implementation

The qualitative study involved interviewing all teachers and administrators in an elementary school that has been recognized by both state and national agencies as achieving exceptional results in a high-poverty community. Interview questions were based on the four-part high reliability schools framework. Standard qualitative methods were used to identify and refine themes in the interview transcripts, and interpretations were subsequently checked with professionals in the school for accuracy.

The technical assistance project consisted of a year-and-a-half engagement with the district’s extended instructional leadership and support team. Senior administrators in the district were especially interested in the application of high reliability principles applied to their Response to
Intervention (RtI) process. Constructive conversations developed about district non-negotiable goals for instruction and achievement, and the tension between standard operating procedures for identification and intervention strategies and leeway for improvisational responses.

Results

In both contexts, practices appear to be shaped by efforts to balance competing goals for what students should achieve and what failures should be avoided, and between centrally controlled and standardized procedures for improving instruction on the one hand with flexibility for decision-making and situational adaptation on the other. Both the qualitative study and the technical assistance project offer encouragement for applying concepts from high reliability research in managing these tensions. But they also caution against uncritical adoption of practices that have worked in contexts where goals might be less a matter of constant political negotiation.

Initial results suggest that Bellamy’s high reliability schools framework could help educational leaders apply HRO concepts in their efforts to lead school change. Taken together, the four broad strategies in this framework comprise an approach to school-change leadership that manages the paradoxical demands associated with both goals and methods in public education.

Conclusion

While application of high reliability in public schools faces significant challenges, the need for increased reliability in the education sector is urgent. The results of our initial technical assistance and research efforts offer encouragement for further development of technical assistance models and additional research on how the various components of high reliability organizing can best be adapted in educational institutions.

Reference: