

Transformation in the Era of Reform: A Case Study of PAGE's High School Redesign Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This is a summary of our ten-month long study of two Georgia high schools and their participation in the High School Redesign Initiative (HSRI), a transformational effort of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) that grew out of its work to promote the development of teacher leadership and schools as learning organizations. The results of this study confirm positive change at both high schools and demonstrate that substantial portions of this change can be linked directly to each school's adoption of the HSRI framework.

Overview of the Study's Design

In order to investigate the effect of HSRI on schools, we conducted a case study of HSRI, which included two high schools who joined the initiative when it was first launched. Case study method is the preferred research strategy when studying how and why change has occurred in complex organizations. These two schools were recommended for inclusion in the study by PAGE staff because they were thought to exemplify the benefits of HSRI. The two schools also had similarly robust levels of participation in HSRI professional learning opportunities, but existed in notably different policy contexts, especially in terms of the relative emphasis on standardized tests. This combination of very similar levels of participation with different policy contexts allowed us to more clearly differentiate the effects of HSRI from the effects of factors such as poverty level or how a school's host district responds to state and federal mandates. This analysis, in turn, helps establish the degree to which a school or school district might expect its adoption of HSRI to yield similar outcomes.

The study focused on changes in school culture (e.g., what teachers and administrators believe and value) and school structure (e.g., how the school structures the roles of teachers and administrators), and was organized around four research questions. The first set of questions focused on documenting cultural and structural change at each school, while the second set of questions focused on documenting the cause of cultural and structural

change. To answer these questions, we conducted a total of seven interviews, 11 focus groups and reviewed more than 400 documents. Focus groups and interviews were designed to elicit participants' experience of cultural and structural change at each school, and included educators new to each school and those who had been at the school since the beginning of the school's involvement with HSRI. We interviewed four PAGE staff members familiar with HSRI, and PAGE's executive director, Dr. Allene Magill. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded. Interviews, focus groups and documents were analyzed to determine the degree to which they provided evidence in support of or counter to 33 propositions — statements representing the outcomes predicted by HSRI. Propositions were organized into cultural or structural themes; 12 propositions predicted that positive cultural and structural change was caused by the school's participation in HSRI. Results were summarized in tables and graphical form. We compared the results for each school, not to evaluate which school is "better," but rather to discern the effect of HSRI relative to that of its policy context.

Findings

To succinctly convey results, schools are distinguished by keywords that best represented the way each school adapted HSRI to their context. Thus, we have dubbed them Success School and Engagement School.

Question 1 focused on cultural characteristics of the school and how they have changed since joining HSRI. It included three sub-themes: "beliefs and values," "meaning and commitments" and "lore and tradition." These sub-themes included communication, collaboration, school purpose, and views about students and teachers. The most robust change at both schools documented by the study occurred in the "beliefs and values" sub-theme. We found clear and extensive evidence at both schools indicating that consistent communication about the school's purpose exists, that teachers and administrators are collaborative and focused on student engagement and/or success, and that students and parents are respected and viewed as key agents in successful education. Slightly more robust and consistent evidence of this change was evident at Engagement School in comparison to Success School, a variance attributed to differences in policy context. Policy context also affected conceptions of engagement at each school. Success School tended to foster engagement using extrinsic motivators such as grades, while Engagement School tended to foster engagement using intrinsic motivators, such as the inherent value students found in the work being assigned.

Question 2 focused on structural change since joining HSRI, and examined the work of teachers, students, administrators and parents. Three sub-themes comprised Question 2: "roles," "rules and norms" and "relationships." The second most robust finding documented

by the case study was in the “relationships” theme. Key to the HSRI framework is the importance of relationships. Strong relationships with students and their community enabled teachers at each school to design meaningful lessons for students that engaged them, fostering learning and commitment to schoolwork. A clear focus on relationship-building developed at both schools, evidenced by how both schools see students and families as their customers, with educators seeing themselves as responsible for designing learning experiences that meet each customer’s needs. This finding was equally strong at both schools. Trust was analyzed as especially important at both schools for establishing the strong relationships between teachers and students, among teachers, and between teachers and administrators. Thus, HSRI’s emphasis on teachers as leaders and principals as leaders of leaders both requires and gives rise to trusting relationships that create the conditions for transformation and effective adaptation. These results suggest that trusting relationships are key for solving some of the problems identified by advocates of test-based accountability, such as fostering teaching excellence and deep learning.

Question 3 examined causes of identified cultural change at each school; sub-themes mirrored those used to organize Question 1. As was the case with the results reported for Question 1, HSRI had the largest effect on “beliefs and values” of each school. And while Success School had slightly less robust evidence in support of propositions for this theme, we found very similar levels of evidence at both schools that their relationship with PAGE through HSRI caused a substantial portion of the changes documented by the results for Question 1.

Question 4 examined causes of identified structural change at each school; sub-themes mirrored those used to organize Question 2. The most significant results were found with respect to the sub theme of “roles” for both schools. Both schools had similar levels of support for propositions in the “roles” theme, with Engagement School having slightly more manifest evidence than Success School; virtually no evidence contrary to this theme’s propositions was found. Again, the focus was on determining the degree to which structural factors — such as the formation of teams of teacher leaders to design engaging lessons — could be traced back to HSRI. While more evidence that parents and students notice and appreciate the focus on student engagement was found at Engagement School, Success School produced slightly more evidence that the emergence of teacher leaders or Design Teams can be traced to PAGE.

School Transformation: The HSRI Effect

There is no doubt that HSRI brought about qualitative change at both high schools. But what is more important is the relative importance of policy context in determining the

extent and nature of transformation, and the ability of HSRI's framework to have an affect in difficult contexts.

This study revealed that the difference in the amount of evidence demonstrating cultural and structural change at each school is greater than the difference in the amount of evidence demonstrating that HSRI caused these documented changes at each school. This is significant for at least two reasons (see Figure 1). First, it suggests that the different effect sizes are a result of the different policy contexts in which each school operated. As each school participated in very similar ways in a single initiative (HSRI), we determined differences in outcomes were most likely related to difference between school contexts, and not some other school-level factor, such as student demographics or teacher characteristics. And while there was less evidence of change at Success School compared to evidence of change at Engagement School, a greater portion of documented change at Success School can be attributed to HSRI than is the case with Engagement School. This difference indicates that while it may take "more HSRI" to achieve similar results in less hospitable policy contexts, transformation can occur across an array of contexts.

Other findings are noteworthy. While the evidence that documented change was a cause of HSRI tends to be more evenly distributed between the cultural and structural domains, evidence of change at both schools is weighted to the cultural domain. There was more change in terms of the "beliefs and values" than there was change in terms of "roles" for both schools. This suggests that beliefs and values may be easier to change than structural features such as the roles of teachers and that policy contexts may have a greater influence on structural elements such as roles than they do on belief systems.

A single word — trust — may signify why HSRI had the positive effects that it did. We believe that one of the key benefits of HSRI for schools is the development of *trust* as a key feature that enables the school to work on *transformation* in a challenging policy context, guarding against the damage to school culture and structure that can result from punitive and simple-minded policies. In this sense, trust is not about being "touchy-feely" but rather a distinctive feature of the organization. Trust, we observed, was required for collective problem solving and fostering the initiative and accountability of individuals and groups, including students, and thus the development of a true learning organization. Our research suggests that trust at both schools formed the kernel of positive organizational functioning in the form of relationships with students and their families, among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Trust is central to relationships. We observed the second largest change in the relationships category; these changes were fostered and reinforced by changes in beliefs and values regarding engagement and school purpose. Thus, we conclude that these trusting relationships are a necessary condition for teachers to collaboratively design meaningful and engaging work for students, and for students to be willing and able

to demonstrate what they have been expected to learn in ways that are both meaningful and motivating to them, that in turn cause them to be truly prepared for their many adult roles.

Conclusion

We offer this report as initial but substantial and verifiable evidence that HSRI can lead to school transformation that ultimately leads to students being ready to assume their myriad responsibilities in the 21st century. Our findings provide support for expanding HSRI in some form, and suggest the effect of the framework may be greater if adopted district wide, from the beginning. The HSRI framework should be given serious consideration by educators and policy makers as an alternative to faltering efforts to improve public education in Georgia and across the United States through test-based accountability regimes.