

## **Understanding School Improvement**

Raymond S. Hackett

Anyone who has lived through the 1950s to the present time would find it difficult to deny that the world has become increasingly turbulent over the last five decades. This has been particularly the case with politics, economics, sociology, religion, law, and technology. Unfortunately, the education system—the institution that should help to prepare us for change—appears to be operating with apparent indifference to this escalating turbulence. While it can be argued that successive governments since 1959 have tried to improve our education system through massive school building programmes, a proliferation of training initiatives, and a multiplicity of staff development initiatives, to a great extent, the perceptions and culture of schooling have not changed significantly.

Our schools today still tend to implement curriculum in more or less the same chalk and talk mode that existed in the 1950s. Our society still reveres the “crammer” who can easily regurgitate the knowledge presented to him or her. Lip service continues to be applied to such concepts as student learning styles, critical thinking, Howard Gardner’s concept of multiple intelligences, and the integration of technology with curriculum.

We all need to cope with the imperatives of change. This, to my mind, cannot be achieved if we continually fail to accept the need to permanently put our schools into school improvement mode. First of all, it is important that all our schools recognise that they cannot sit back and expect the Ministry of Education to do everything for them. Of course, the Ministry will always be responsible for national education policy and the allocation of most of the necessary finance for education. However, schools must be prepared to engage in effective school-based management and action research, if they wish to generate sustainable school effectiveness. To achieve this, however, they will have to engage in ongoing school improvement.

For principals and teachers to successfully pursue school improvement they must: 1) agree to base decisions and implementation on objective data, a strategic plan, and a development plan; 2) view students as individuals rather than just an amorphous group; 3) establish a common vision; 4) facilitate professional development activities as a form of investment in the school, and not merely see them as taking up too much of teaching time; 5) allow skilful, committed, and transformational leadership to prevail; and 6) understand that in today’s world, the school can no longer educate its students alone. It needs strategic allies to help it perform the tasks society has entrusted to it. As a result, principals must see themselves as super coordinators whose tasks include mobilising the different stakeholders to generate relevant, meaningful, and effective schooling.

Experience has shown that school improvement requires more than just a positive attitude. Schools must also have the capacity to change at both the individual and organisational levels. Teachers must have the knowledge, skills, and efficacy to deliver improved instructions and guide students. Individual capacity, however, will develop only in a supportive environment that includes a culture of commitment; a thriving

professional community; and an organisation that has the vision, structures, and resources to support reform. Clearly, considerable support is expected from the Ministry of Education and its relevant agencies in this regard.

Generally, school improvement calls for additional resources and requires new ways of looking at things and a new culture with new beliefs. For it to succeed, it must begin within schools and among teachers. Principals must strive to create a new and more productive-oriented culture in their schools, which emphasises inclusiveness, a dominant team spirit, and collegiality. Above all, it must be recognised that school improvement—like a pregnancy—has a gestation period. It cannot deliver overnight. It needs time to produce results.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine