

## The Stimulus Package Proletunity: *Unpacking the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act*

-- by Jan O'Neill & Anne Conzemius

Educators have seen reforms come and go, but the newly-signed stimulus bill has more potential for improving public education than anything so far. Before leaping into the opportunities presented by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (A.R.R.A.), however, perhaps decision makers should *slow down to go fast*, and take a look at the proletunity—the problems as well as the opportunities—presented by the bill.

The stimulus bill provides resources for **rewarding excellent teachers** and increases support for **charter schools**. It also exhorts states to **raise expectations** for student performance. These are very good things!

*But does it focus on the root causes of students dropping out  
and good teachers burning out?*

*What is in place to ensure knowledge of how to improve?*

*What is in place to ensure transparency of practice and results?*

A considerable amount of organizational research substantiates that the difference between high performance and low has very little to do with pay or star performers\*, new structures or “raised bars.” Instead, it has everything to do with an orientation toward continuous learning and improvement which includes:

- the knowledge and skills people have for improving their organizations
- time to reflect together, to make meaning of the data they have
- shared measurable goals for improvement with specific timeframes
- commitments to next actions for which they—as a team—will hold themselves accountable
- visible ways by which they are monitoring their progress toward those commitments

No matter the industry, good people with a passion for their work will inevitably fail in systems that lack the knowledge of how to improve. (The late Dr. W. Edwards Deming called this “profound knowledge.”)

### **Rewarding Teachers for Improving Student Achievement**

The intent behind this provision is admirable. We know from educational research (and from experiences that all of us had in school), a highly skilled, experienced teacher can improve student performance as much as two grade levels. We also know that students

\* NOTE: For an interesting look at the fall-out that can occur when we reward “stars,” see “The Talent Myth” by Malcolm Gladwell, *The New Yorker*, July 22, 2002.

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who are assigned to a poorly skilled, incompetent or inexperienced teacher can fall behind as much as two grade levels. As Kati Haycock at Education Trust says, “Good teaching matters—a lot.” Unfortunately (and heartbreakingly) there has long been a disgraceful pattern in our country of assigning students of poverty and color, as well as English-Language-Learners (especially Hispanic children), to the most inexperienced teachers.

So how does one become a “good teacher”? And how can we keep good teachers teaching?

Intuitively one might think that providing “performance bonuses” to teachers who improve student performance on standardized tests and other measures would ensure that these teachers stay and that other teachers would work harder to get these rewards. But the money proposed in the bill to reward teachers for performance may actually be better spent investing in leadership development for principals and teachers. Not only is there a very human tendency to either “fudge the data” or distort the system when monetary incentives are in place, but individual performance bonuses can actually destroy the teamwork that is at the heart of continuous learning and improvement, especially if the bonuses are competitive and limited.

Teaching is as high stakes a profession as being a doctor. It’s hard to imagine a system where rewards incent doctors to work harder or smarter to improve the health of their patients. Doctors improve results by improving their practice: attending medical conferences, meeting with their colleagues to discuss cases, reading about the latest research in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, etc. But a big difference between doctors and teachers—apart from their salaries—is that in the medical profession data are highly visible and provide an ongoing stream of information. These data are the source of all decisions about patients’ health. If teachers and administrators were knowledgeable implementers of continuous learning and improvement, the instructional process would be as visible as the medical process is today.

Like doctors, educators have a strong commitment to their mission. They don’t go into the profession for money; they become educators to make a difference in the lives of children. If teachers and administrators have the right tools and methods, with time to reflect collaboratively with their colleagues, student learning will improve. As with doctors whose reward is saving lives and helping people heal, for teachers, increasing students’ achievement and self confidence is the most valuable reward of all.

This isn’t to say that teachers shouldn’t get well compensated for their challenging and important work! But using extrinsic incentives as key motivators for improvement is no substitute for developing strong collaborative cultures of learning and improvement— and may even detract from that aim.

## **From No Time to Learn to Learning All the Time**

It’s encouraging to hear President Obama and Secretary Duncan speak of the need to break from the old agrarian model where students have three months off each year. We do need to explore new timeframes for learning, including year-round school. But if “more time for school” translates into just more time for students to be in school without rethinking how that time is used, in another few years we will be faced with the same achievement gaps

and low international performance that we have now, and the dropout and teacher turnover rates will be the same if not worse.

Policy makers should promote innovation in the school calendar **if** time for adult learning is scheduled between weeks of instructional time. In our current manufacturing model where teachers work for the most part in isolation, they are highly stressed, trying to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners while attempting to digest—much less implement—new and better instructional practices. There is very little time for collaborative reflection. Moreover, because teachers aren't equipped with the skills and tools they need to study and improve their practice (when can they learn these?) their meetings with colleagues are much less productive than they should be.

21% of teachers leave urban schools in their first five years not because of low salaries, but because “working conditions” are so difficult. These difficult conditions include<sup>1</sup>:

- Lack of time to collaborate, plan, and reflect with other teachers
- Lack of support for professional learning
- Lack of feelings of efficacy (The feeling that “I can't be effective with students.”)

Teachers stay in schools where there is a **clear focus on student learning, high expectations**, shared **measurable goals, time for collaboration**, a culture of **trust and respect**, and a practice of **continuous improvement**. Good teachers stay when they have opportunities to continue learning so they can be even more effective with kids. Teachers who are inexperienced or who lack skill or confidence, can improve their practice when they work as a team in a culture where data are visible and constantly monitored. Teachers are leaving—and will continue to leave—unless they have the time and the tools to know they're being effective.

## Increasing Support for Charter Schools

Although innovative programs and school designs, often exemplified by charter schools, hold great promise for helping students achieve at higher levels, we know that restructuring alone is not the answer. Without the knowledge and skills needed to continuously improve, these schools rarely fulfill their promise. Researchers from the University of Wisconsin who investigated restructuring and student achievement in one of the most comprehensive research studies ever conducted concluded that

“The quality of education for children depends ultimately not on specific techniques, practices or structures, but on more basic human and social resources in a school, especially on the commitment and competence (the will and skill) of educators, and on students' efforts to learn.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Understanding and Reducing Teacher Turnover*. Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review, v73 n9 p22-26 May 2008

<sup>2</sup> Newmann, F.M., Wehlage, G.G. (1995) *Successful School Restructuring*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. Page 1.

These researchers found that when schools are organized and led as “professional learning communities”<sup>3</sup> where there is shared vision, mission, and goals, strong teamwork, and a focus on student results, student learning improves. Unfortunately, even though the “professional learning community” movement has swept the country, we’ve rarely seen “regular” schools or charters fully implement this philosophy. As a result, in spite of the significant investment in “small learning communities” using federal grants and funds provided by the Gates Foundation and other organizations, students are still not making the progress they could and should be making.

## Raising Student Performance Expectations

Every year the gap widens between National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) results and states’ results.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, many states have been lowering the bar on their standards for student performance. Without solid knowledge of how to improve, when faced with a high-stakes goal, it’s human nature to resort to other ways to get there. Improvement knowledge has nothing to do with specific programs or innovations. Improvement knowledge builds the capacity of educators to deliver better and better results.

We need a deep level of change in our public education system if we’re going to move from wishful thinking about our goals to actualizing the long-term vision of 100% of students being successful learners by 2014. 100% is a lofty goal, a goal worthy of commitment, and it requires a fundamental change in how we think about our work. Without a methodology for improvement, 100% is only a wishful thinking goal. To get beyond this, policy makers and educators need to raise their sights. If meeting AYP targets and achieving requirements on state tests are the goals, then we’re not asking enough of our systems. AYP goals and state requirements don’t require the deep level of improvement—in our curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, technology, and leadership systems—needed for 100% of our students to graduate successfully.

When implementers of new programs and innovations lack the context and solid knowledge base of continuous improvement, those programs and innovations have limited impact. “Response to Intervention” (RtI) is the most recent educational initiative that may become the next casualty. The intent of RtI is to meet each child’s learning needs and move him/her to the next level, but implementation in most cases is falling far short. As with the school improvement planning movement that swept the country years ago, RtI is being implemented *programmatically* rather than as a *cultural shift* in expectations and actions. Were RtI to be implemented as a methodology in the context of building teachers’ capacity to continuously improve their instructional practices, one could have more confidence that it would have a significant impact on student results. Title I and special education students clearly are targets for RtI, and while the A.R.R.A. bill’s emphasis on

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<sup>3</sup> Hord, S. (1997) *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

<sup>4</sup> Koretz, D.M. (2008) *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*. Boston, MA: Harvard College President and Fellows.

these students' achievement is highly welcome, without a more fundamental systems thinking approach, the money won't have the intended effect.

## **The Opportunity Side of the "Probletnuity"**

The good news is that continuous improvement knowledge, tools and methods are easily taught, readily available, and immediately useful. When teachers and students together set specific, measurable goals, and assessments are used for ongoing feedback and improvement, progress and results become visible, accountability becomes shared and transparent, and motivation to strive for more grows without the need for inspection and extrinsic rewards. At the same time, *teacher quality improves* as teachers work together as teams to focus on student learning and help each other improve their practices. Best of all, *students own their education*—they become active leaders of their learning rather than passive recipients. At the end of the day, isn't that what it's all about?

The bottom line? If we're willing to use the stimulus monies as an opportunity to invest in learning a new way of working, we can transform American public education.

Yes, we can!