

Book Review
Living Faithfully:
The Transformation of Washington School
by Frances Schoonmaker
Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012

Reviewed Kathryn Ado
Fairleigh Dickinson University

The transformation of Washington School, a small-town upper elementary school in Clinton, Oklahoma, from a dangerous place that provided unequal learning opportunities for students outside of its gifted and talented program to a welcoming school environment where children and adults work productively together toward meaningful learning is described in Frances Schoonmaker's (2012) recent book. In *Living Faithfully*, Schoonmaker provides an analysis of reforming schools, educating diverse student populations, and supporting ongoing teacher learning in a small town that struggles with issues of racial diversity, child poverty, and schooling equity. Schoonmaker's analysis of the changes that occurred at Washington School is guided by a lens that emphasizes the notion of schools as caring communities, but also integrates the ideas of overcoming the challenges of schooling in moral or ethical ways.

Through this book, Schoonmaker tells the story of how one school developed a supportive culture, with high academic expectations for all students, as a result of the school's leadership, a deliberative approach to professional development, and support from the central office. However, unlike much of the current popular literature on school improvement or student achievement that emphasizes simplistic formulas (e.g., Lemov, 2010; Silver, Dewing, & Perini, 2012) and increased accountability (Bill

Kathryn Ado is an assistant professor in the Sammartino School of Education at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, New Jersey. Her e-mail address is ado@fdu.edu

and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013), or blames educators for failing schools or a poor economy (Rhodan, 2013; Thomas, 2010), Schoonmaker specifically addresses the complexity of accomplishing school improvement in a high stakes era. Schoonmaker argues against the stance that school improvement will directly follow from “inspiring leaders, higher standards, uniform objectives, and firm programs of accountability” (p. 117). In fact, Schoonmaker directly states that “there are no recipes” (p. 158) for the powerful leadership, powerful teaching, or professional development that lead to school improvement. Instead, the layered analysis presented of the changes at the Washington School detail how “dialogue, relationship, encouragement, mutual respect and interdependence, active learning and caring, along with rigorous attention to crafting an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum to meet the needs of their diverse students, drawing on district and state guides, a variety of published materials and their own interests and inclinations” (pp. 158-159) contributed to the improvements at the school.

For example, at the start of the transformation process, one set of leaders at Washington School focused on addressing the challenges to discipline at the school by “restoring limits” (p. 15) for students, which resulted in increased suspension rates and fewer student fights, but did not attend to issues related to learning, such as creating a developmentally appropriate learning environment or meeting the needs of students who were performing below grade level. Schoonmaker points out that while feeling safe at school is essential, supporting learning must be “anchored in curriculum change” (p. 15) and that changing school culture requires “a process that allowed people to see differently and engage with each other and children in new ways” (p. 16). In most cases, simply adopting a new approach to discipline or purchasing a new set of textbooks will not provide educators and students with the strategies necessary to shift their habitual ways of being. Instead, at Washington School, a combination of top down changes (e.g., a move towards an interdisciplinary curriculum, team teaching, and disbanding the gifted and talented program by moving these students into regular classrooms with push-in support from the gifted and talented teacher) and bottom up changes (e.g., longer blocks of instructional time) contributed to the school’s overall transformation. All changes were supported by collaborative professional development. These types of shifts are often messy as they rely on the interaction of teachers in each other’s planning and teaching, a marked contrast from implementing a “teacher proof” (Apple, 2008) or scripted curriculum that some current reformers advocate (Curwin, 2012; Russell, 1997).

Later, the difficulty in addressing school improvement from the school

leaders' perspectives is examined. This is particularly relevant when we consider the current public narrative about school improvement. For example, a preponderance of national- and state-level educational policies rely on punitive approaches to school change, including closing "ineffective" schools (Fruchter, 2012; USDOE, 2010) or removing "ineffective" teachers from classrooms (Kumashiro, 2012; Winters & Cowen, 2013). However, Schoonmaker points out that at Washington School, where the district still had autonomy to determine what type of change they would undertake, the leadership at the school collaborated with the teachers and school staff in developing and instituting change instead of proceeding as if they were the root of the problem. This perspective is missing from much current dialogue about school improvement.

In *Living Faithfully* Schoonmaker provides a clear counter-narrative to much of the current negative discourse about teachers, teaching, and public education. Politicians, policy-makers, and much of the public believe that teachers and principals are to blame for low academic achievement and the problems in public education (Ravitch, 2010, 2013; Rhodan, 2013). Instead of pointing blame at teachers and principals, Schoonmaker's analysis addresses the complexity of what happens in schools. For example, she describes how factors like teacher resistance develop and she explains how collaborative and deliberative professional development can support teachers in continued growth, thereby changing resistance into cooperation. She notes that teacher resistance, while frequently perceived as negative behavior, "may also be seen as strategies for coping that teachers adopted in their attempt to balance their idea of what school ought to be with the realities of an increasingly aversive school environment" (pp. 112-113).

However, even in this climate, where national educational policy is seemingly developed in a vacuum, in places that have formerly supported this type of approach to educational reform like New York City, there are signs of a changing tide that corresponds with the recent change in mayoral control in January 2014. Evidence of this shift are Mayor de Blasio's statement that he will no longer support school closure as an improvement strategy and his appointment of Carmen Fariña, a seasoned New York City educator, to the key role of Chancellor of Education (Milligan, 2013). While much of current educational policy may not reflect the ideas outlined in *Living Faithfully*, a counter-narrative that resonates with Schoonmaker's text may be gaining traction (Taubman, 2014).

And while many policy makers are unlikely to read this type of work or even engage in conversation with education leaders, Schoonmaker's counter-narrative is helpful for developing school leaders and practitioners who are considering school improvement without massive staff turnover

or ceding control to an outside agency. Although it can be frustrating to work against national educational policy trends, there can be power in the voices of educators and community members, as evidenced by the recent state level changes in connection to implementation of the assessments and teacher evaluation linked to the Common Core Learning Standards (NYSED, 2014). Developing school leaders and current practitioners who hope to engage in the work of school improvement through a collaborative approach will find this book helpful.

References

- Apple, M. (2008). Curriculum planning: Content, form, and the politics of accountability. In F. M. Connelly, M. He & J. Phillion (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of curriculum and instruction* (pp. 22-45). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (2013). *Ensuring fair and reliable measures of effective teaching: Culminating findings from the MET Project's three-year study*. Seattle, WA: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.
- Curwin, R. (2012). *How to beat "Teacher Proof" programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/beating-teacher-proof-programs-richard-curwin>
- Fruchter, N. (2012). *Alternatives needed to New York City Department of Education school closure policy*. Retrieved from <http://annenberginstitute.org/commentary/2012/04/alternatives-needed-new-york-city-department-education-school-closure-policy>
- Kumashiro, K. (2012). *Bad teacher!: How blaming teachers distorts the bigger picture*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach like a champion: 49 techniques that put students on the path to college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Milligan, S. (2013). *Bill de Blasio understands schools aren't a business*. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/susan-milligan/2013/12/31/bill-de-blasio-appointing-carmen-farina-as-new-york-schools-chancellor-is-a-good-sign>
- New York State Education Department (NYSED). (2014). *Regents adjust common core implementation: Full implementation delayed until 2022: Teacher, Students protected from impact of assessment transition*. Retrieved February 12, 2014, from <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/regents-adjust-common-core-implementation.html>
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rhodan, M. (2013). *Testing teachers: States struggle to evaluate educators* [2014]. Retrieved from <http://swampland.time.com/2013/11/18/testing-teachers-states-struggle-to-evaluate-educators/>
- Russell, S.J. (1997). The role of curriculum in teacher development. In S. N. Friel & G. W. Bright (Eds.), *Reflecting on our work: NSF teacher enhancement in K-6 mathematics* (pp. 247-254). Latham, MD: University Press of America.

- Schoonmaker, F. (2012). *Living faithfully: The transformation of Washington School*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Silver, H. F., Dewing, R. T., & Perini, M. J. (2012). *The core six: Essential strategies achieving excellence with the common core*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Taubman, P. (2014). *The real state of the union: Education*. Retrieved from <http://america.aljazeera.com/features/2014/1/the-real-state-oftheunion0.html#featureArticle-chapter--2>
- Thomas, E. (2010). Why we must fire bad teachers. *Newsweek*. <http://www.newsweek.com/why-we-must-fire-bad-teachers-69467>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Guidance on school improvement grants under section 1003(g) of the elementary and secondary education act of 1965*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Winters, M. A., & Cowen, J. M. (2013). Who would stay? Who would be dismissed? An empirical consideration of value-added teacher retention policies. *Educational Researcher*, 42(6), 330-337.