

Book Review

*Successful School Change:
Creating Settings To Improve Teaching and Learning*
By Claude Goldenberg
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School reform, like so many aspects of education, is one of those things that almost always feels right and necessary from the outsider's perspective, and feels inevitable, if not necessary, from the perspective of the educators whose livelihoods demand participation. The push-pull of public expectations and school realities has always been with us, and indeed outside scrutiny seems endemic to the work of all public agencies, whether its the overhaul of state government through the California Performance Review, the accountability debacle in the national intelligence community or the latest crisis of purpose in NASA. From the 9/11 families issuing warnings to congressional leaders in newly found stentorian tones to the California State Board of Education executing 'no waivers' orders to school districts with the precision of a drum roll, holding public workers' feet to the accountability fire is a time-honored tradition in US society. Gosh, there's a crisis to be found if only we look hard enough.

This is cheerfully acknowledged by Claude Goldenberg in the introduction to his new book, *Successful School Change*. Subtitled "Creating Settings to Improve Teaching and Learning," this compact volume examines the process of school change through the lens of a single school's experiences during the early 1990s. Goldenberg deftly weaves a reality tale that engages the reader through the power of voice and

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personal experience as we follow the fortunes of Freeman School and its principal Jesse Sullivan as they try to build an environment and culture that supports students' academic performance and teachers' engagement with that endeavor. While this book reaches into realms of school change professional educators easily recognize—setting clear goals and outcomes, creating new organizational settings, sustaining lively collaborative partnerships with universities, and working effectively with families and community—its unique strength is the vivid presence of Goldenberg himself on nearly every page.

As one moves along through this first person narrative, the interpersonal and emotional experiences of all the participants capture the reader's interest, effectively rendering the intellectual and scholarly material incorporated into this treatment as necessary to our understanding of what happened during each phase of the change process. This is no small feat. We are more accustomed to turgid scholarly volumes, well researched and annotated, or perky informal 'tales from the front.' *Successful School Change* manages to combine aspects of both, giving the experienced professional plenty of fodder for rumination while enticing the more novice reader with story. If you have had the opportunity to listen to the author engage in scholarly conversation, as I have, you can hear him speak in this text. While this results in the frequent and annoying intrusion of parenthetical expressions, it also brings authenticity. A tough editorial choice.

Freeman School and Lawson School District are pseudonyms for a school and small elementary school district located in a largely Latino community within metropolitan Los Angeles. Goldenberg began working and doing research in this district as a graduate student in 1983, though the book focuses primarily on his experiences from 1989 to 1994 when he and colleagues from UCLA worked with Freeman's principal and faculty to confront and change a pattern of low achievement at the school through an explicit funded project. As the change process unfolded, Goldenberg served primarily as coach and mentor to Jesse Sullivan, a new principal though experienced educator struggling to focus the school on setting and meeting academic expectations, while Bill Saunders, a fellow researcher, was facilitator and coach to the faculty.

It is clear as this narrative unfolds that both men are deeply engaged with the school, sharing both its best and its most challenging moments as fellow travelers with the staff. The success of this collaborative partnership, treated in a chapter of its own, is attributed by Sullivan to shared goals, a common agenda and the understanding that honest disagreement is one part of any long-term relationship. Yet we also learn that Goldenberg and his colleagues had taken the time to clarify their own

roles throughout the partnership, so that they became valuable resources to the school, part of the basic support structure, stepping far away from their ostensible “powerful university professor” status. Readers about to embark on such a relationship, or those struggling through one, can gain from spending time learning about the insights and experiences of everyone at Freeman.

Success at Freeman over the four years of the project was unequivocal. Using state and district assessments available at that time (1992-95), students’ performance in language arts improved on a variety of measures. Not only did Freeman students outperform their district peers, they exceeded the performance of their peers statewide in both English and Spanish language competencies. This is nicely documented with simple graphs, as is the less stable pattern of growth that emerged after the project ended. Because the substance of this text describes the process of change, with major chapters focusing on creating the settings for change and the settings for teacher and student learning, it is important to know that this change led to documentable student success. Too often attention to process and attention to content are presented as separate endeavors, especially in the current era of data-driven school accountability. At Freeman we see the inextricable linkage between the two. At the same time, the author is candid about the sustainability of this success. In the final chapter, “School Improvement Never Ends,” he acknowledges that these improvements are fragile, closely tied to both the individuals involved and the extra efforts put forth to make them happen.

Adequacy of resources to both initiate and sustain school change is something we have all learned to wring our hands over. It’s right up there with time as a necessary element for change that is often shortchanged in school organizations. This book treats both the personnel and time resource questions richly, but is less than satisfactory in its description of the nature and amounts of additional funding available during this period. It would be interesting to know whether Freeman was a member of California’s funded school reform network, known as SB1274 schools, which provided not only funding but emphasized school teams and provided regional and state professional development networks, or perhaps received funds distributed through the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) which had many of the same features. Goldenberg espouses both outside resources and networking as preferable circumstances for sustained school improvement in his final remarks, so it is curious that he does not share more details on the funding streams available to Freeman and their relative contributions to the school’s work.

For this reviewer, the most compelling reading is in Chapter 7, “Settings in Children’s Homes for Improving School Achievement.” A cogent synthesis of the author’s own research on how parents and families understand their own roles and participate in their children’s schools combines with an offensive tackle on the notion of a ‘culture of poverty’ to illustrate what is both intuitive and elusive—that parents of school-age children have their children’s social and academic success foremost in their thoughts, no matter what their cultural or linguistic background or the school setting. Connecting schools and families effectively is a challenge largely unmet in public schools today. Goldenberg shares how parent involvement at Freeman was a deliberate factor in raising academic achievement, offering powerful testimony from both parents and teachers who participated at different times in a homework liaison program. At the same time he is sanguine about the challenges such initiatives face, including those of class and culture. For novices or those wanting to know more about this professional dimension, these 27 pages offer a solid basis for dialogue and an argument for action.

With a forward by Michael Fullan and cover accolades from Ann Lieberman and Guadalupe Valdes, it’s not hard to conclude that Goldenberg has added to his already considerable reputation as a literacy researcher and bilingual educator. His contributions to national research efforts that have examined the ‘literacy diet’ of America’s English learners are large and candid. I have heard him on one occasion challenge the notion that only bilingual education will do—“So if we have no qualified bilingual teachers these kids should learn....nothing?”—to an audience of fellow bilingual educators, and on another bemoan the lack of research evidence to support cross-language transfer from home to school literacy. His unique ability to combine an orientation to the practical while keeping a firm eye on the research literature has now turned to the arena of school improvement. Your child, my child, everyone’s children are at the forefront of his scholarship and conviction. We all can learn from this book.