

ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

KAREN SEASHORE LOUIS

CONTEXTS OF LEARNING

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Karen Seashore Louis

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ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

Improving education is a key priority for governments around the world. While many suggestions on how best to achieve this are currently under debate, years of academic research have already revealed more about how to encourage change than is sometimes assumed. This volume brings together for the first time some of the most significant work of Karen Seashore Louis, one of the foremost thinkers and researchers in the field. *Organizing for School Change* presents a unique variety of research-based results from studies conducted over the past 25 years. What emerges is not a simple blueprint for change, but a realistic picture of what needs to be done if we want to make schools better.

The book is organized into the following four sections, each of which has a different specific emphasis:

- The course of change: what we know about how to enact it.
- The central role of teachers as both innovators and keepers of a school's culture.
- How schools function as organizations, and the organizational characteristics that need to be addressed as part of effective and lasting change.
- The gap between research and practice, and what needs to be addressed in order for effective policies to be developed and put into practice.

Drawing on a wide and comprehensive list of sources, the ideas brought together in this collection will prove invaluable and insightful reading for practitioners of school change and academic researchers alike. Pulling together the themes that are threaded throughout Karen Seashore Louis' work will stimulate both newcomers and veterans of the field of school change and improvement to consider research and craft in new ways.

Karen Seashore Louis is the Rodney S. Wallace Professor of Teaching and Learning, Department of Educational Policy and Administration, at the University of Minnesota. She has more than 30 years' experience of studying school improvement.

CONTEXTS OF LEARNING
Classrooms, Schools and Society

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This book is dedicated to my daughters, Margit and Erica, who were still at home when much of this work was being conducted but who rarely complained when Mom was busy writing, and to my husband, Dan, whose keen editorial eye and slashing red pen have consistently improved my prose.

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Preface

In all English-speaking nations, and in other countries too, we live in a world of accelerating and intensifying educational reform. Economic competitiveness, international comparisons in educational test results, and parents' growing concern for their children's futures feed and fuel political senses of urgency and panic about how to raise educational standards, cut educational costs, or do both at the same time within single election terms. The modern result is successive waves of, and sometimes ideological and political wars over, top-down educational reform initiatives and directions. Some of these reforms have benefited schools and students to greater or lesser degrees, but cumulatively their impact on the educators responsible for implementing them has been to subject them to what management expert Eric Abrahamson (2004: 2–3) terms *repetitive change syndrome*, which has two components:

- *Initiative overload*: “the tendency of organizations to launch more change initiatives than anyone could ever reasonably handle.”
- *Change-related chaos*: “the continuous state of upheaval that results when so many waves of initiatives have evolved through the organization that hardly anyone knows which change they’re implementing or why.”

The consequence is what Seymour Sarason (1990) calls “the predictable failure of educational reform.”

It is clear that most reformers just do not understand the reformed, or the political and organizational realities of the work that the reforms disturb. Yet it is not as if this failure of reformers to improve teaching and learning is a recent affliction. In other periods and times, the tone of reformers may sometimes have been softer, and their political intentions may not always have been quite so suspect, but there is no Golden Age of successful and sustained educational change to which we can or should return.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the proliferation of many innovation movements and projects across the world, but the dissemination was uneven and few of the projects ever fully spread. In the 1980s, and in some places into the 1990s, efforts to focus on the school as the center of change, by altering the structures and cultures of teachers' work, succeeded where leadership was strong, resources were abundant, and teachers' capacity for improvement was sufficiently high. But success in spreading improvement beyond a

few such centers of promise in particular schools or districts to places where teachers were less qualified, leadership was weak or resources were in short supply, was less impressive. Across the years, through different historical periods of reform, most educational change efforts have either been unsuccessful, or their successes have been localized or short-lived.

The reason for this ultimate tragedy of change in education has best been captured by the educational change field's most widely known theorist, Michael Fullan. Over the years, Fullan has identified and communicated many important lessons about change that have deeply affected the world of practice. However, the insights and strategic directions for which Fullan is famous would not be possible or credible without the existence of an extensive body of rigorous research on educational change, on which his and others' syntheses draw.

Foremost among the researchers who have produced this evidence base for the field of educational change is Karen Seashore Louis. Over a quarter-century, working alone and in collaboration with a range of research partners, Louis has created a prodigious body of quantitative and qualitative research on educational change in elementary, middle, and high schools that has marked her out as a leading thinker and front-line researcher in this distinguished field. Working at all levels of policy development and implementation, and (with her Swedish ancestry and as a speaker of Dutch) outside her native USA as well as within it, Louis' work makes a profound contribution to the knowledge base of educational change and school improvement that stretches across time and space.

This long overdue book brings together some of Karen Seashore Louis' most important work, for the very first time in a single place. It is work that is always empirically solid and often strategically inspired. With her background and training in organizational studies, Louis fully understands and persistently communicates how reform efforts impact on schools and school systems as complex organizations, and how these organizations and the reform processes meant to change them can be redesigned to create better learning and higher standards of achievement for the students they ultimately serve.

The work of Louis' that has been collected in this book addresses six key areas of educational change: knowledge utilization, planning and implementation, organizational learning and development, collaboration and community, teacher commitment and capacity, and overall sustainability.

Contemporary improvements and reform efforts pay increasing (but not politically consistent) attention to the evidence-base for intended reforms, and to ways in which teachers might and should make use of evidence-based practices (Hargreaves and Giles, *in press*). The historical precursor to this movement is the less fashionably labeled field of "knowledge utilization". In her earlier chapters especially, Louis' foundational research in this area demonstrates how people do not adopt or reject research knowledge in a technical or rational way based on the general dependability of the evidence. Rather, knowledge is a social process, shared and distributed among communities whose perceived practicality of the evidence, credibility of sources, impact on opinion leaders, and fit with current norms of work all influence how and whether research-based practice will ever be adopted in the ways their developers wanted.

The planning and implementation of education change efforts, Louis shows, is equally imprecise and non-rational. Successful planning, her research reveals, is flexible enough to respond to the complexity and uncertainty of organizations and the contexts that surround them. Successful planning is evolutionary, not linear; improvisational rather than pre-fixed or locked-in. In a world of prescribed programs, and overconfident top-down reform, Louis' encouragement for reformers to think "beyond managed change" remains timelessly important.

In opposition to purportedly teacher-proof processes of top-down change, Louis takes the research on organizational learning and adaptation to ask "how can we get knowledgeable, well-educated, professional people to cooperatively obtain, share, and act on information effectively in increasingly uncertain settings" (Chapter 6). Her answer is to be found in her work on professional communities in the mid-1990s, which set the early foundation for another current movement to develop schools as professional learning communities. The structures, cultures, and leadership of schools that work as professional communities, she shows, enable outsider and insider knowledge of effective practices to be accessed, shared, cross-fertilized, and adapted in ways that lead to improved quality of teaching and learning.

Collaboration is a central component of professional communities, and Louis pays close attention to it, especially in her research on teaming and team-building. Shared values, a focus on student learning, transparency of practice, and reflective dialogue to evaluate it are essential elements of effective professional collaboration, as her research clearly demonstrates.

No reform will ever be effective unless the teacher can do or learn to do what the reform requires. Louis' research therefore points to important connections in the relationship between student achievement, student engagement, and teacher engagement. Part of this engagement, in turn, depends on the quality of work life that teachers experience. Once again, on the basis of her evidence, Louis appeals to reformers who want to raise student achievement by asking them to also attend to the quality of the work life of teachers who are responsible for bringing about these improvements. Reform designs and implementation processes that respect teachers, opportunities to participate in improvement efforts, experience of stimulating professional interaction, helpful feedback about performance, and having sufficient resources are among some of the key factors behind the professional engagement that will ultimately lead to sustainable school improvement.

Sustainability is one of Louis' remaining key themes. Few reforms are sustainable in the deep environmental sense (Hargreaves and Fink 2006). They do not last, they do not spread, and while they benefit some schools this is often at the cost of other schools around them. Louis' early work on "permanent innovation" gives some warning signs about the threats to sustainability – especially excessive or ill-considered turnovers in school leadership.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, America epitomizes arrogance and overconfidence in war (Johnson 2004) and arrogance and overconfidence in educational reform (Hargreaves and Fink 2006). It is not entirely alone in either domain, but in other

parts of the world there is a realization that just as political overconfidence cannot secure the long peace that follows a deceptively swift war, so can overconfident, heavy-handed reform initiatives fail to secure lasting improvement in real learning after initial, then quickly plateauing surges in superficially tested performance. Other nations and organizations are therefore beginning to combine the rightful sense of political commitment and urgency to improve public education, with a recognition that the means for achieving this must address and include the professionals responsible for delivering the results, along with the complex organizational realities in which they must do their work.

The extensive evidence base of Louis' long-lasting work reminds us that organizational change is not simple, but neither is it ineffable. Organizations can be made to work for improvement, not against it, but for that to happen we must work respectfully with the very organizations that themselves need to change. Students matter, people matter, organizations matter. Their undeniable agency can be harnessed to bring about the improvement we need, or that agency will perversely and persistently defeat all change efforts that ignore it. Learning is not just the goal of change, but also its soul and its spirit. This is the essential message of Louis' book and also of her impressive research legacy.

Andy Hargreaves,
Boston, August 2005

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Foreword

In this impressive book, Karen Seashore Louis bridges two of the yawning gaps in educational reform.

The first is the gap between the desire to carry out reforms and the capacity to put them into lasting practice. The second is the gap between the vast amount of valuable academic research on this topic, and the very limited amount of time that busy educational practitioners have to learn the lessons of this research.

Policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic will find this book an essential guide to the distilled academic wisdom on how to improve schools.

The unique quality of this book is that Karen applies her rigorous approach as an organizational sociologist to the problem of applying the reforms that she espouses as a passionate educationist. She does not waste time repeating the many, many bright ideas for school reform that have emerged since the 1970s. She focuses on the questions about how to implant them effectively in schools, and how to ensure that they take root and continue to flower perennially in those institutions.

Several of the most impressive chapters are drawn from papers or articles she has published since the mid-1980s. But these chapters are in no way dated. They acknowledge that Karen and her co-contributors have already found some of the answers, that some of the wheels do not need to be re-invented.

The retrospective mode also enables us to witness how Karen's thoughts and perceptions have developed as she helped to assemble the building blocks that go towards a secure foundation for lasting educational reform.

She does not claim to have found all the answers yet. But she rules out simplistic notions, for example, that the key just lies either in individual teachers, or in schools only, or in central directions from the state. She knows that all these elements have to be included in a successful strategy.

Most important of all, she is convincing in her belief that a successful strategy is possible. One of her chapters is entitled "Reforming Schools: Does the Myth of Sisyphus apply?". She believes that, for educationists, it can indeed be only a myth. Reformers are not necessarily doomed eternally to struggle to push the boulder of reform up the steep sides of the canyon of institutional resistance. They can get over the top and onto the plateau of real and lasting school improvement.

Kathryn A. Riley,
Institute of Education,
London, November 2004

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