

Susan Moore Johnson (2012) *Having It Both Ways: Building the Capacity of Individual Teachers and Their Schools*. Harvard Educational Review: April 2012, Vol. 82, No. 1, pp. 107-122

Analyses and strategies that are based on individuals rather than organizations offer little guidance about how to improve schools, even though we know that those organizations substantially affect teachers' work experience and chances for success with their students. Surveys and qualitative case studies by various researchers document the ways in which differences among schools influence teachers' opportunities and motivation for success (Chenoweth, 2009; Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010; Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Allensworth et al., 2009) studied one hundred Chicago schools with chronically high rates of teacher turnover and found that organizational characteristics, not student demographics, explained the mobility. Specifically, teachers stayed in schools where teachers collaborated, school administrators were supportive, parents were engaged, and the learning climate for students was safe and orderly. They left schools where teachers remained isolated in their classrooms and resisted schoolwide initiatives. We reached similar conclusions in a recent analysis of Massachusetts teachers' responses to a statewide survey of working conditions (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, in press).

The working conditions that mattered most to teachers were those that shaped the social context of teaching and learning in their school—the school culture, the principal's leadership, and the teachers' relationships with their colleagues. Teachers who worked in more favorable work environments reported being more satisfied and less likely to plan to transfer or leave teaching than their peers in schools with less favorable conditions, even after controlling for student demographics and other school and teacher characteristics. Notably, across all communities, schools with better work environments for teachers also achieved greater growth in student learning.

One thing is clear: the expectations of this new generation of teachers cannot be realized within the traditional school organization, which isolates teachers and assesses them only as independent contributors to a school's success. The characterization of the school as an "egg crate" is decades old, yet it is no less apt today. Teachers continue to work with their assigned students in separate classrooms, seldom having meaningful interaction with other teachers, and doing little to adjust to their colleagues' efforts. Scholars such as Elsbree (1939), Tyack (1974), and Lortie (1975) tell us that this compartmentalized structure took hold because it was convenient and efficient. When enrollments grew, the school could grow, one classroom at a time. When enrollments shrank, school officials could close classrooms and dismiss teachers with



little of the disruption that would occur in a more interdependent organization. However, schools that change students' lives are more than a collection of independent units, each of which may have a good, mediocre, or poor teacher.

Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that successful efforts to improve failing schools are deliberately school based. They recognize that, because students move through many classrooms from grade to grade and subject to subject, the curriculum and teachers' efforts must be coordinated. If a student's education is to be coherent, then her teachers must work in concert. Teams of teachers, rather than collections of teachers, build instructional capacity within a school over time. Within any school, there will always be a range of effectiveness among teachers as a result of differences in their teaching experience, subject-matter knowledge, or specialized expertise. A strategy for school improvement that focuses primarily on identifying, assigning, and rewarding (or penalizing) individuals based on their effectiveness in raising students' test scores fails to capitalize on the potential of some teachers to improve the performance of other teachers and, therefore, will always be limited, since the benefits of greater expertise will be concentrated in individual classrooms rather than extended throughout the school. Instead, the goal of school improvement should be to ensure that all students have access to excellent teaching each year, rather than being subject to the luck of the draw in teacher assignment.

However, individuals cannot be supported or their talents sufficiently nurtured if the school itself does not change from a collection of independent classrooms to an interdependent organization in which individuals routinely contribute to others' improvement. Many factors will contribute to improved schooling—promoting and supporting collaboration among teams of teachers, reviewing the success of schoolwide interventions, creating differentiated roles for expert teachers to serve as instructional coaches, and redesigning pay systems so that they compensate teachers well and promote rewarding careers that align with the welfare of students. Needless to say, this is not easy work; nor is it work that can be done piecemeal.

