IMPROVING SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Edited by
ALMA HARRIS and JANET H. CHRISPEELS

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES
School improvement has become a dominant feature of educational reform and has gained prominence and recognition on the international stage. The pressure upon schools to improve performance has resulted in a wide range of school improvement programmes and initiatives. The most successful projects have systematically collected data and disseminated their findings through a wide variety of publications. Consequently there is a wealth of evidence concerning effective school improvement in many different countries, yet in-depth, cross-cultural comparisons of ‘what works’ to improve both system and schools are fairly rare.

This book considers the collective school improvement research base from different countries. It draws together accounts of school improvement projects, programmes and interventions that have been successful around the world in the last two decades. The broad international range of contributors, each an acknowledged expert, discuss case studies from Europe, North America, South Africa and Asia. The outcome is a considered reflection on the different phases in the development of the field and a consolidation of the main messages emanating from its broad empirical base.

In addition, *Improving Schools and Educational Systems* highlights the increasing shift from individual school improvement initiatives to system-wide (i.e. state, national or district) change. The tensions that this shift can and does create are thoroughly explored through the study of well documented examples.

This important new book will be inspiring and enlightening reading for anyone interested in effective school improvement: academics, practitioners, students and policy-makers alike.

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Part 1

Setting the Context
Introduction

Alma Harris and Janet H. Chrispeels

Over the last 20 years, the school improvement research base has gained prominence and recognition on the international stage. In both a theoretical and empirical sense it has matured through generating a wide range of successful projects, interventions and innovations across many countries in Europe, North America, South Africa and Asia. While many publications crowd the field of school improvement, contemporary comparative reviews of the international field are hard to find. This book is intended to bring together accounts of school improvement projects, programmes and interventions that have been successful around the world in the last two decades. The aim is to reflect and represent different phases in the development of the field and to draw together the main messages emanating from its broad empirical base. In addition, the book highlights the increasing shift from individual school improvement initiatives to system-wide (i.e. national, state or district) change. The discourse of site-based management and local school improvement, typical of the early phases of school improvement, frequently run counter to the discourse of systemic change. The tensions created by these potentially conflicting discourses have yet to be resolved in many systems. In this introductory chapter, we provide the background and context for the chapters that follow. First, we examine the recent history of the school improvement field. Second, we highlight some of the lessons learned from early school improvement initiatives and the policy attributes seen as necessary for sustained school improvement. Finally, we describe the current state of the field and the struggle to balance site autonomy and initiative with systemic
Phases of School Improvement

A review of the last two and a half decades of school improvement suggests that the field has evolved in a number of distinctive phases as practitioners and researchers gained experiences in implementing and studying school change. Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) have provided a powerful analysis of the field and have identified three phases of school improvement. These three phases will be used to frame our initial analysis and introduction to the school improvement terrain. We acknowledge that we draw heavily upon Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) in the sections which follow and regard their framework as both informative and helpful in delineating between different forms of school improvement. The boundaries between the phases are not mutually exclusive as the characteristics and qualities found in one phase often are carried forward into the next but they represent a demarcation between different types of intervention that are potentially useful.

Phase 1: focus on the individual school, groups of students or teachers

In its early phase, during the 1980s, school improvement tended to be mainly practitioner-oriented, located in the work of those involved. This work was typified by the ‘teacher as researcher’ (Elliott, 1980; 1981), school self-evaluation and school self-review movements, particularly but not exclusively in England (Clift and Nuttall, 1987). School improvement was often defined as implementing an innovation or engaging in action research projects. In several countries, especially the United States and Australia, it was also driven by federal funding to address the needs of schools serving disadvantaged students, which mandated the establishment of school-based improvement councils. This ‘bottom-up’ approach to change in schools manifested itself in small-scale programmes or projects focused sometimes only on select groups of students, individual schools or groups of teachers. In the United States, toward the end of this phase, the emergence of the Effective Schools Research (ESR) began to inform the work of many local school improvement efforts (Chrispeels and Meany, 1989; General Accounting Office, 1989). In addition to providing funding for individual school improvement efforts, state and national governments played an interesting role in this phase. They enhanced the power of individual schools by diminishing the power of intermediate or local educational authorities (LEAs) and agencies. For example, the national government in New Zealand pursued this path and dissolved its local education authorities. Various state governments in Australia, with Victoria leading the way, also dissolved the LEAs in that country. The province of New Brunswick in Canada experimented with eliminating its local school districts but later reinstated them (Anderson, 2003). In the United States, where local boards of education were the primary educational decision-makers, many school boards

In another context, the Education Reform Act of 1988 in England dramatically altered the power of local education authorities (LEAs), which previously ‘were responsible for almost all educational services’ (Woods and Cribb, 2001: 1). These changes, which allowed schools to opt out of the LEA control (i.e. grant-maintained status) created considerable stress for LEA staff who struggled to redefine their role and function.

Schools were to offer open enrolment, parents were to be offered real choice in terms of the schools available for their children, a National Curriculum was to be taught and most schools were to be managed through a system of delegated budgeting or Local Management of Schools (LMS), although there were mandatory and discretionary exceptions (Woods and Cribb, 2001: 1).

According to Hopkins and Reynolds (2001), the first phase of school improvement was encapsulated by the holistic approaches of the 1980s and was epitomized by the OECD’s International School Improvement Project (ISIP). Hopkins and Reynolds (2001: 12) note, however, that this first phase of school improvement tended to be ‘loosely conceptualized and under-theorized. It did not represent a systematic, programmatic and coherent approach to school change’. There was also in this phase an emphasis upon organizational change, school self-evaluation and the ‘ownership of change’ by individual schools and teachers, but once again these initiatives were not strongly connected to student learning outcomes. They tended to be variable and fragmented in both conception and application. As a consequence, these improvement practices struggled to impact significantly upon classroom practice (Hopkins, 2001).

Phase 2: school improvement focused at the classroom as well as school level

The second phase of development began in the early 1990s. In these years, the school improvement tradition was beginning to provide schools with guidelines and strategies for implementation to promote classroom level change. This approach resulted from more systematic interaction between the school improvement and the school effectiveness research communities (Vinovskis, 1996; Desimone, 2002). There was a greater focus upon organizational and classroom change reflected in approaches to staff development premised upon models of teaching (Joyce and Showers, 1995). A desire to link school improvement to student learning outcomes was the main goal during this phase, which was pursued with varying degrees of intensity. In addition, there were two trends that emerged during this phase. The first trend was the expansion of site-based management within schools, which resulted in the reduction of power of local authorities and local boards of education. In England, New Zealand, Australia and the United States, national and state governments started to play a more active and central role in school improvement. The second trend during this phase, especially in the United States, was the growth of comprehensive models of school reform.
that could be adopted by individual schools. These include approaches such as the Comer School Development model (1988), Glickman’s *Renewing America’s Schools* (1993), Levin’s Accelerated School model (Hopfenberg, Levin and Associates, 1993), Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools (1992, 1996), and Slavin’s *Success for All* (1996). These ‘whole-school design’ approaches combined elements from the school effectiveness and school improvement research bases to focus upon curriculum and instruction as well as management and organizational variables. Some of these approaches were designed to meet particular curriculum needs such as Reading Recovery or *Success for All* (SFA), which has subsequently been adopted in many other countries. Others, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, tended to reflect a broad set of principles for organizational change and development and were not targeted at any specific curriculum or subject area. Comprehensive accounts of the first two phases of the school improvement movement can be found in Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) and in Fullan (1991).

**Phase 3: programme refinement and issues of scalability of reform initiatives**

In many countries numerous resources have been targeted at programmes and projects aimed at improving schools and raising standards of performance. The evidence to date, however, suggests that many of these external interventions, although very well intentioned, have had patchy and variable success. The evidence supporting the relationship between school improvement and increased student achievement remains weak and contestable. The emphasis on ‘performativity’ in many systems generated a form of school improvement premised on the twin components of accountability (inspection, test scores and league tables) and standards (target setting, monitoring and raising achievement plans) which, despite dominating the educational landscape, have largely been unable to yield the increases in school performance sought. More importantly, its net effect has been to render those schools in disadvantaged communities, where progress had most been sought, less able to raise and sustain performance. As Hopkins and Reynolds (2001: 15) note, ‘the achievement gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds that seemed initially to narrow in the late 1980s, stayed the same or widened again in the 1990s, raising alarm among national governments in Canada, England, and the United States’.

The third phase of school improvement has arisen because of the relative failure of existing school improvement approaches to make a difference to schools on a large scale. Pockets of success could be seen and were duly celebrated but scaling up from the one to the many proved to be elusive. In particular, success seemed to elude schools in large urban areas serving the most disadvantaged and the evidence from major programmes such as ‘New American Schools’ confirmed the limitations of ‘off the shelf’ improvement or whole-school designs to secure long-term, widespread system and school improvement (Berends, Bodilly and Kirby, 2002). Furthermore, some national initiatives such as the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies in England, seemed to show only partial success at the lowest levels of basic skills in closing the achievement gap (Fullan,
In response to previous limitations, the third phase of school improvement attempted to draw upon its most robust evidence and to produce interventions that were solidly based on tried and tested practices. Programmes such as Improving Quality of Education for All (IQEA); High Reliability Schools (HRS), the Manitoba School Improvement project (MISP) and the Dutch National School Improvement project were all examples of projects in this third phase (see Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994; Reynolds et al., 1996; Harris and Young, 2000; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000; Hopkins, 2001). The specific components of several of these programmes will be explored in ensuing chapters of this book and the lessons learned from the most successful forms of improvement will be explored in the concluding section.

A number of analyses seem particularly informative in understanding the types of approaches and reforms being undertaken in this third phase of school improvement. First, is identifying some of the programmatic components that reflect lessons learned from researching the first and second phases of school improvement initiatives. Second, is recognition of the policy attributes that may contribute to successful implementation of Comprehensive School Reform (Porter, 1994; Berends et al., 2002; Desimone, 2002). Third, is the growing acknowledgement that school improvement is exceedingly complex and policymakers, researchers and practitioners need to be more sensitive to contexts and political dimensions of reform, especially for school communities facing extremely challenging circumstances (Desimone, 2002; Harris, 2002).

Lessons Learned from Prior School Improvement Initiatives

Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) are keen to point out that there are variations among the programmes identified in Phase 3 that make any overall assessment difficult and any formulation of a ‘blueprint’ based on these programmes unwise. Nevertheless, they suggest that a comparison of third-wave school improvement as a group points toward certain key features that typify the third phase of school improvement projects. First, there has been an enhanced focus upon the importance of pupil learning outcomes and classroom-level change. While previous projects sought to change the organizational conditions within schools, the latter projects also focus on changing classroom-level conditions. Related to this, the second feature of third-wave projects is the attention paid to the learning levels and the instructional behaviours of teachers. The third-wave programmes are carefully targeted at changing teachers’ skills, attitudes and behaviours in order to positively affect classroom change.

Third, Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) argue that there has been the creation of an infrastructure to enable the knowledge base, both ‘best practice’ and research findings, to be better utilized, especially through the development of more sophisticated and user-friendly computer programs. This they suggest has involved an internal focus on collaborative patterns of staff development that enable teachers to enquire into practice, and external strategies for dissemination.
and networking (Fielding and Eraut, 2003). Emerging from these patterns of collaboration has been the latest development in the school improvement field of networks and networking between schools as a mechanism for change and transformation. We suggest later in the book that this latest phase of networking is in fact part of a fourth phase of school improvement.

Fourth, the school improvement field has recognized and embraced the importance and potential of capacity building. Building capacity essentially involves building relationships, building trust and building community. But development of individuals is not enough. Capacity building is about ensuring that the school is a ‘self-developing force’ through investing in those school and classroom level conditions that promote development and change (Harris and Lambert, 2003).

Finally, there has been an adoption of a ‘mixed’ methodological orientation by programmes in the field, in which both quantitative and qualitative approaches are combined. The Effective School Improvement project in England is an example of an attempt to look at classroom and school processes and outcomes and to model a more comprehensive framework of intervention. Accompanied with attention to both process and outcome has been the emphasis upon fidelity implementation which, it is suggested, is an important determinant of subsequent project success. For example, programmes such as Success for All and High Reliability insist that implementation is carefully controlled to guarantee the maximum effect. It is clear however that this is unlikely to occur without some attention to cultural change and the way in which improvement programmes relate to, and impact upon, practitioners and their everyday practices. Many projects therefore have developed increasingly sophisticated training, coaching and development programmes for staff (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001).

The last five years have seen quite dramatic changes toward programmes that embrace these features or principles. In this time school improvement has become increasingly multi-faceted, complex and diverse, embracing research and researchers not traditionally located within the field, and including significantly more overt policy action. Understanding the policy attributes needed to support school improvement represents a second level of analysis that is helping to inform such improvement efforts.

Policy Attributes of Successfully Implemented School Improvement Models

Researchers, policy-makers and programme developers recognized that the variability in levels of implementation often made it difficult to assess the merits of a particular school improvement design. Nevertheless, until recently, many have given insufficient attention to the policy factors that could enhance implementation of any design. Desimone (2002) argues that principals and teachers’ perceptions of five policy attributes will influence the level of successful implementation. These policy attributes, which interact and may create unique interdependencies, include:
the level of specificity: the more specific the reform in terms of curriculum and lesson plans, professional development provided, role of the principal, and the information and monitoring guidelines, the more likely the reform will be fully implemented.

• consistency: the greater the consistency of the reform model, especially in terms of curriculum and assessments, with other school, district or state reforms, the easier it will be for the school staff to implement the various reforms.

• authority: the greater teachers perceive the model’s authority because of their own decision-making and buy-in and because the model is supported by the principal and district, the more likely the model will be successfully implemented. This normative authority is also supported or diminished by perceived individual principal authority in relationship to the model. The more knowledgeable the principal is of the change process, capable of marshalling resources and expert in the reform model’s fit to faculty, the greater the level of implementation.

• power: the more districts or state authorities rely on rewards and facilitate the adoption of reform models rather than use sanctions and mandates, the more likely the models are to be sustained and faithfully implemented.

• stability: policy and implementation environments characterized by stability in relationships and change concepts (i.e. low turnover of staff and students, limited volatility in the policy arena, and commitment to a steady and consistent pace of reform) enhance successful implementation of school improvement models that will yield continuous improvement over the long term.

As policy-makers, reformers and practitioners developed a greater appreciation of the components of effective improvement models and the policy attributes that assist the implementation of individual school reform efforts, schools involved in the third phase of school improvement initiatives have benefited. However, even the best designed school improvement strategy can be influenced by context and politics in ways that undermine or compound implementation challenges.

Role of Context and Politics in School Improvement

Another evolutionary aspect in improvement initiatives that is seen in this third phase of school improvement is a deepening awareness of the critical nature of context and political influence on school improvement. Recently, the school improvement field has recognized the need for more differentiated and finely grained approaches to school development and change. Previously, there was a relatively limited focus on examining and evaluating the effectiveness of different change strategies used by schools in different socio-economic contexts with variable internal change capacity. Only in the last few years, for example, have researchers located within the school improvement field focused their attention upon significantly improving ‘failing’ or ‘ineffective’ schools (e.g. Stoll and Myers, 1998a; Gray, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2001; Hopkins 2001; Harris and
Chapman, 2002). The call for context specific improvement is well established but relatively little attention has been paid to generating the differential strategies needed to improve individual schools. For example, in England only recently have policy initiatives directed resources to those schools labelled as Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances. As Stoll and Fink (1996) argue:

For a school that is ineffective and just starting the process of development, the strategies may be different from a school that has been developing for some time: the former may need an ‘apprenticeship’ orientation involving giving the school knowledge from outside, while knowledge of the latter may be sufficiently professionally competent to develop its own good practice and the development based upon it. Likewise, the strategies would be different for an individual school at different phases of the development cycle, with beginning provision of information from outside being progressively scaled down until the school is capable of its own knowledge generation.

The emerging research evidence concerning improving schools in difficult contexts demonstrates quite clearly that a diverse range of school-level factors and characteristics is the norm. Each school within this grouping exhibits a unique organizational mix of cultural typology, improvement trajectory and level of effectiveness. Unlike effective schools, which have been shown to exhibit similar characteristics, schools in the low-performing grouping may look homogeneous but in practice exhibit very different characteristics. Therefore, it seems important that the school improvement field moves to consider more highly differentiated and context specific programmes.

The interaction of context and politics also can create conditions that undermine or weaken local school improvement work (Desimone, 2002). As stressed earlier, school improvement, especially in schools facing challenging circumstances, is highly complex and requires sustained work over a period of several years. Yet politicians’ terms are of limited duration. They want quick fixes and standardized measures that do not take into account the poverty and deprivation faced by many inner city schools. The authority and specifications of a particular reform can be quickly diminished when state policies prescribe curricula that are contrary to the reform model and require assessments that are misaligned to local efforts. Teachers can become discouraged and fail to fully pursue needed implementation strategies that will ensure a reform’s success if countervailing policies are also imposed. The failure to address the socio-economic conditions of particular school catchment areas tends to perpetuate savage inequalities in the larger community that even the best school improvement programme and efforts are not likely to overcome. Unfortunately, attention to the larger school community issues is not on most policy-makers’ agendas; their focus continues to be on improving schools in order to raise standards, implying a new shift toward system changes.
Improving individual schools through system-wide or systemic changes

We would argue that in some countries, a fourth phase of school improvement is underway: improving individual schools through system-wide or systemic changes. In this phase conflicting forces and discourses can be seen as national and state education systems struggle to find the right balance between top-down and bottom-up reforms that will accomplish national educational goals. This phase also reflects the growing recognition of the nested nature of schools in systems and the frustration, especially of policy-makers, of scaling-up and transferring more quickly the touted success stories of individual school reform.

To speed the school improvement process, system changes are occurring at two levels: (1) system changes at national or state level and (2) renewal and redefinition of the role and work of local education authorities.

Systemic Efforts to Enhance Individual School Improvement

Systemic change is being pursued at national, provincial or state policies levels as a way to direct local improvement processes. The strengths of national and state educational systems and the rules and regulations they impose on schools, of course, vary considerably across countries and range from highly centralized systems in terms of curriculum to be taught, personnel selection, financing and budget decisions, and assessment (e.g. France, Greece) to very decentralized systems with most decisions residing at the school level (e.g. New Zealand and Australia). In countries such as the United States and England where the tradition of local control is stronger, there has been considerable movement to strengthen the national role at the expense of local educational authorities or school districts. The enactment of the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies in 2002 represents an example of the centralization of authority and curriculum in England.

The United States federal government began gradually to increase the federal role with the adoption of Goals 2000 (adopted in 1989) and culminated in the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, which has radically altered the federal government’s reach into education policy that was previously under the purview of state and local governments. Although there are no national curricula, each state is now required to adopt state curriculum content standards (a process started before NCLB, but greatly accelerated by it) as a way to ensure systemic reform. Furthermore, the power of a few states (e.g. Texas, California and New York) in adopting textbooks and particular standardized tests to hold schools accountable has considerably narrowed the range of curriculum choices available to schools in the United States, which has a textbook driven approach to schooling. Although each of the 50 states and their 115,000 local school districts are still vested with the primary responsibility for education, the power of local boards of education has been considerably diminished by these new federal and state policies. The standards-based reform movement has systematized what
students are expected to learn, and state prescribed testing, textbooks, and the accompanying required teacher professional development designed to ensure implementation of state standards greatly diminishes the arena and scope of local decision-making. Although the intent of the federal and state legislation was also to give local schools and teachers greater autonomy in how they organized instructional programmes, the discourse of accountability has tended to constrain and confound many local school-based reforms that were begun during the first three phases of school improvement described above (Chatterji, 2002).

Renewed Appreciation of the Importance of LEAs

In spite of the move to centralize more authority through federal and state policy, there is parallel and contrasting acknowledgement of the importance of a second level of school system change agents: LEAs or school districts. There is growing recognition and research on the role these intermediate agencies can play in facilitating, supporting, directing and even mandating school improvement (Elmore, 1993; Spillane, 1996; Elmore, 2000; Woods and Cribb, 2001; Marsh, 2002; Anderson, 2003). The work of these researchers indicates that districts can foster school improvement by:

- interpreting, mediating and buffering schools from state and/or federal legislation, and
- enhancing teaching and learning through curricular choices, staffing, professional development and support for site-based reform initiatives (Marsh, 2002; Anderson, 2003; Grubb, 2004).

Although the policy-mediating role between district and state is an important one (and is addressed in chapter 7 on reform in San Diego Unified School District by Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues), the primary focus here is the second – the LEA’s role of supporting school improvement.

As mentioned earlier, frustrations with local education authorities led several systems to treat LEAs as ancillary to the change process or to disband them altogether. For example the Illinois State Legislature (USA) in 1988 delegated almost all authority to local schools in the city of Chicago (Bryk et al., 1998). Although there was considerable euphoria surrounding the bold restructuring move, the local councils ‘failed to produce significant widespread gains in student learning’ (Anderson, 2003: 4). Schools in Chicago only began to show improvements and gains on a large scale when the district reasserted its role in providing capacity building, accountability, and innovation support to schools (Anderson, 2003: 4). The Chicago story is unique in that the drastic action of the state legislature forced the district to redefine its role and relationship to its schools and to break some of the previous bureaucratic interactional patterns with local schools that were no longer productive. Research about Chicago Public Schools by Bryk et al. (1998) and the report on the work of District no. 2 in New York City (Elmore
and Burney, 1997, 1998) rekindled interest in the potential of school districts to support school improvement.

Research was beginning to show that standards and accountability systems alone were not sufficient to ensure the desired learning gains. Children will only meet challenging standards if schools consistently create high quality learning in every classroom every day. Yet many urban schools serving large populations of low-income and diverse learners fail because of lack of resources (adequate facilities, materials, time and highly qualified teachers), lack of technical knowledge (curriculum expertise) and unstable operating environments (high leadership, staff and student turnover as well as missing leadership skills and collaborative time). These schools are not able to create high quality learning environments without considerable outside support and assistance. LEAs or school districts represent one mechanism for providing the needed help.

**Potential Roles and Responsibilities of LEAs to Support School Improvement**

A review of current research on school district reform suggests a variety of roles and responsibilities that LEAs, school districts or other intermediate agencies might undertake to support school improvement (Woods and Cribb, 2001; Anderson, 2003). These responsibilities fall into several critical leadership categories including setting direction, providing professional development, especially for school leaders, providing data to guide the change process, and marshalling resources to meet needs and ensure equity (Togneri and Anderson, 2003; Leithwood and Riehl, 2004).

**Setting direction**

Research on successful LEAs suggests that establishing a clear focus on teaching for powerful learning and communicating the focus to all shareholders, including students, is key (Elmore and Burney, 1997; Togneri and Anderson, 2003). To carry out this direction, central office administrators often found they were the ones who had to alter practices first. The administrative team representing all areas (instruction, personnel, facilities, transportation, maintenance, categorical and special education) may need to meet frequently to address educational issues and discuss what might be hindering educational advancement at each school. Agullard, Huebner and Calisi (2004) also found that when the superintendent or head of the LEA articulated and shared a coherent theory of action, this helped the central office to be more focused in assisting schools and enabled schools to make greater sense of the reform demands.

A concurrent challenge facing school districts as they attempt to set direction is the need to create coherence among competing reform agendas (Hatch, 2002; Honig and Hatch, 2004). Goertz, Floden and O’Day (1996: 7) described the challenge as:
achieving a delicate balance between old and new goals, greater coherence across a wide range of policies and levels of education, maintaining momentum in a rapidly changing political environment, achieving needed increases in capacity of the education system, and ensuring that the changes benefited all students.

Honig and Hatch (2004: 16) argue that ‘coherence is a process, which involves schools and school district central offices working together to craft or continually negotiate the fit between external demands and schools’ own goals and strategies’. This task is greatly complicated if there is not a level of trust to support the work (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Daly, 2004).

LEAs often place principals and teachers in a problematic situation by asking them to pursue multiple reforms, some of which may not be in alignment with a school-based reform initiative, without sufficient negotiation and mutual sense-making by the different actors. District level administrators and programme improvers similarly struggle to balance fidelity to programme implementation with local needs of the district and the local schools (Hatch, 2002). Spillane and Thompson (1998) found that districts varied in their interpretation of state and federal reform policies based on their human, social and financial capital. In other words, if the district staff lacked an understanding or a commitment to the reform agenda (human capital), they were much less likely to successfully assist their schools in implementing the reform. They also found, in the case study of maths and science reform, that the level of human capital was also reflected in the level of social capital, especially in terms of the district’s engagement with professional networks and relationships with external agencies promoting the reform (Spillane and Thompson, 1998).

Providing professional development
A second key role of the LEA or school district is providing professional development for instructional renewal (Elmore and Burney, 1997; Anderson, 2003). Anderson (2003) found that school districts where learning gains were being made tended to focus on two types of professional development: intensive long-term development of instructional leaders, especially principals or headteachers and districtwide job-embedded professional development for teachers. In the United States, such district guided professional development has largely focused on literacy. In England the focus has been on both literacy and numeracy. LEAs in England are expected to play a role in disseminating best practices to schools in their areas through such strategies as a register of expert practitioners, involving associate heads and deputies as mentors, publishing research or models of best practice in a variety of formats, providing in-services, linking and networking schools to promote learning from each other (Woods and Cribb, 2001: 80–99). Fullan and Watson (2000) also found that professional development for school leaders in Africa proved to be central to achieving school improvement on a wide scale.

An emerging aspect of job-embedded professional development is the creation
of professional learning communities both within and across schools. ‘Communities of teachers in schools help teachers make sense of multiple messages about instruction, not only from districts but from states and professional associations as well’ (Honig and Hatch, 2004: 21). District-encouraged collaboration among teachers within their schools and across the district helps to develop and sustain goal consensus, foster shared beliefs and increase commitment to reform (Anderson, 2003). Districts can strengthen school-level collaboration by assisting schools to restructure the school day and the allocation of time, which may require negotiations with the teacher union and building support in the parental community. Honig and Hatch (2004) also maintain that district consultants, coaches or professional developers who facilitate regular dialogue among school staff and teachers’ engagement with multiple professional communities can expand the number of scripts and logics available to school-level actors to use in interpreting and making sense of multiple reforms.

Providing data to guide the change process
Research of successful school improvement efforts have consistently shown the importance of the school staff’s ability to collect and use appropriate perceptual and achievement data to guide their improvement plan (Chrispeels, 1992; Datnow and Stringfield, 2000; Chrispeels, Castillo and Brown, 2000; Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy, 2003); however, frequently schools tend not to have people skilled at using data for decision-making (Datnow and Stringfield, 2000). Thus school districts and LEAs can play an important intermediary function in providing the data, especially regarding disaggregated student achievement, in forms understandable and useful to teachers. Anderson (2003: 10) found in his review that:

Successful districts in the current era of standards, standardized testing, and demands for evidence of the quality of performance invest considerable human, financial, and technical resources in developing their capacity to assess the performance of students, teachers, and schools, and to utilize these assessments to inform decision-making about needs and strategies for improvement, and progress toward goals, at the classroom, school and district levels.

As more districts adopt benchmark assessments to determine regular progress toward achieving standards, the district’s ability to get timely information to schools is critical as is the assistance and training in how to use the data. Particularly useful is the practice of district leaders modelling open discussions around data on student performance and developing an inquiry stance to enable them to find ways to continuously improve district support for schools. LEAs in England have been tasked with the responsibility of monitoring and evaluating the school improvement programme and assisting schools in their own self-evaluation (Woods and Cribb, 2001).