Strengthening Schools Through Collaboration

On Sept. 16, 2009, Florida A&M University’s Teachers for a New Era and Teaching & Learning Institute held another in a series of colloquia designed to present the ideas of leading thinkers on school reform before an audience of teachers, students, and teacher educators. Following a series of brief, stimulating presentations, the audience engaged in a lively discussion of key issues on the strengthening of schools.

Patrick Mason—The Uses of Data

The Use of Data

The debate about educational data is being driven by economists, most of whom are male and white, and 35 percent of whom are foreign born. Thus, the people driving the discussion on education reform—the people who handle and present the data used for that reform—are people who have not spent a lot of time at school.

There is a crucial need for the statisticians and analysts to leave the abstract purity of their numbers and spend more time talking to people who work in education day by day.

The Florida Data Warehouse

Contains data covering the... (Cont’d on page 4)

Ruth Hall—Common Concerns of Schools

Ruth Hall spoke about some common concerns shared by schools and teacher educators, in particular:

- Children are not meeting certain requirements
- Some schools are not succeeding enough

In an effort to address these concerns, many educators have placed their focus on what happens at home. They are asking: Where does the disconnect occur between school and home?

More specifically, Why doesn’t the literacy/numeracy experience continue beyond school?

Hall’s approach has been to set up programs that move “past parental involvement to parental engagement.” (Cont’d on page 2)
Nathaniel Johnson—Value-Added Modeling

As producers of education, we are adding value, so the total value of our efforts at the end of a student’s education is the equal to the sum of the value added at each stage.

The idea is easy to state, but it is rather difficult to carry out. How, for example, do we measure value added from stage to stage? Do we measure changes in a student from grade to grade? Do we compare teacher to teacher? Do we compare student to student? Do we measure the overall achievement of entire schools?

Current statistical models used in value-added assessment are quite complex. They have to take into account so many variables that it can be difficult even for experts to be certain what the results mean—and it is even more difficult for regular teachers and administrators to interpret these results.

Johnson’s research uses the Data Warehouse not just to assess students, teachers, or schools, but to improve the very techniques used to make this analysis. He hopes to find a way to attain reliable and useful results using a simpler model of value-added assessment.

Ruth Hall, cont’d

Parental “involvement” means “come to the PTA meeting.” Parental “engagement” means “you go to the community where the parents and students live and win their confidence. Find out who they listen to. Connect with parents through those community leaders.”

It is not a simple thing to set up community organizations that coordinate well with schools. “You have to train grassroots people how to function in the bureaucratic world, where there are many more rules and procedures.”

Parents often have no idea, Hall said, what the educational system is about and what its requirements are. It is necessary to educate parent on what they need to know to help their children in school.

The need of parents (and teachers!) to know about the schools is about to increase dramatically, as Florida moves to the next generation of Sunshine State Standards.

New teachers are graduating from college now who were taught under the old standards. But they will have to teach under the new standards. Even for these new teachers, the schools they enter will not be the same as the schools they graduated from.

And that gap will be even greater for the parents of children who learn under the new standards.

That leaves two groups who will need to be educated about the new standards: Current college students who will become the new teachers, and the parents of children who will learn under the new standards.

“You have to train grassroots people how to function in the bureaucratic world, where there are many more rules and procedures.”
range from Kindergarten through college — including such things as test scores, grades repeated, disciplinary actions taken on individual students, overall GPA, and more.

This data can be used to match individual students to individual teachers; it can match students and teachers to a particular school. This matching creates an outstanding opportunity to investigate an extraordinary range of questions.

What do we mean by low-performing schools?

This is a question that can be investigated through the Data Warehouse. There are lots of ways to measure performance. Should we consider only academic performance? How about success in the labor market after schooling? Or the number of interactions with the criminal justice system? Or the number of disciplinary actions?

And which students wind up with disciplinary actions, and for what reason?

What effect do disciplinary actions have on a student’s academic performance?

What reading level do students need?

Another interesting question that might be answered through the Data Warehouse is: What reading level do students need to attain at the end of high school in order to be able to graduate from college in four years?

Why do some bright students fall behind?

Here’s another good question: How do some bright students fall behind in school when they succeed at things outside of their academic programs?

What will be cost-effective?

The big question is what will produce the best results for its cost?

Workable solutions

You have to base policy on what is true for the average parent in the average school under average conditions. You can’t count on having exceptional teachers or parents.

Who makes the better teacher?

Who makes the better teacher — a grad of a college of education, or someone with a bachelor’s degree in a subject who goes on to teach it. The data show that education grads do better in the earlier years and have a much lower dropout rate.

How important is class size?

Here’s another question that can be studied through data in the Data Warehouse. If you said, “we find out that things are not true, or not as important — contrary to what we first thought.”

And although it is possible to draw conclusions based solely on an analysis of what is in the Data Warehouse, those conclusions will be improved by a collaboration between the data analysts and those who work in schools.

The quality of schooling is central to a number of other major issues — ranging from health care to crime to social security to international competitiveness. All these issues are influenced by the quality of education.

That is why increasing the quality of schooling is such a central concern today.
Discussion

During the discussion, Hall noted that there are schools around the country that have implemented exactly what the research says should work, but they turn out to be no better than other schools. The results still include low-performing students and low-performing schools.

Among other factors, sometimes while a school is improving, the standards also rise, and, in the end, the school is no better off than it was before it improved.

She strongly supported the need for data analysts to be engaged in the day-to-day life of schools. “To write a good query, you’ve got to understand where the data came from and what it means.”

*Gennifer Bell, Dean, Florida A&M University School of Education*

Many teachers shy away from conducting research, Bell said, because they feel they don’t know how to do it, or how to analyze the results of other studies, or how to distinguish the quality of different research studies.

Dr. Gennifer Bell praised Patrick Mason for taking the effort to learn how to interact with teachers. “Most data analysts,” she said, “don’t interact much with teachers or schools.” Mason, she said, invested time in trying to understand education as it is actually practiced, and not just as it is represented by a collection of data.

Mason’s approach, Bell said, is a refreshing change from what you so often see — outsiders who act as if they know more about education than the people who have worked in education all their lives.

Many teachers shy away from conducting research, she said, because they feel they don’t know how to do it, or how to analyze the results of other studies, or how to distinguish the quality of different research studies.

Bell emphasized how important it is for educators to conduct their own research.

Susan Martelli spoke of the need for training material on how to help your child at home. Without such training, “a lot of parents will not be able to help their kids at home.”

And teachers need training on how to make use of data, because “even well-trained teachers sometimes don’t know how to use data, even when they have an enormous amount of data at their finger-tips.”

How, Martelli asked, can teachers get trained to use data to track the performance of students? Classes? Schools? How can they learn the practical uses they can make of the Data Warehouse and other sources of data?

*Sheila Jackson – who has*

*Susan Martelli, Consultant, FAMU College of Education*
Discussion, cont’d

served as a teacher, a parent-teacher coordinator, and a parent trainer—spoke of the importance of getting parents involved not just in schools but in students’ lives.

“Even though teachers have to take children from where they are, she said, schools still need to engage parents.” But, she asked, “how can teachers get administrators to understand the importance of parent engagement?”

Ruth Hall on “Safety Nets”

Ruth Hall led a successful grant to put activity centers—called safety nets—in the neighborhoods where middle school and high school students live—centers where students continue to practice literacy, so learning does not stop when they leave the classroom.

These safety nets—set up community centers and churches—let people in the community take leadership roles while educators provide the expertise. The program is built upon the people in each community who have the knowledge and trust of the students and parents living there.

The most important changes started to take place after parents became engaged. And this happened, in many cases, when parents first understood that these centers exist to help parents and children with their lives—including job hunting, budgeting, and everyday concerns—and not just to get some academic another publication.

The findings were interesting to Johnson: Parents who want their child to be happy tend to have children who perform lower in school than parents who want their child to be rich.

Parents who want children to be happy tend to let the children do what they want. Parents who want the children to be rich tend to discipline the child to do homework, plan for the future, and prepare themselves.

The study is an example of using data to arrive at what may be a useful strategy for motivating children: Focus parents on aiming children toward getting a good job in the future, which will empower them to earn a good salary, have the things they want, and thus to be happy (then).

In the discussion that followed, others pointed out that success does not guarantee happiness, as some recent celebrity cases have illustrated.

Happy or Rich?

Nathaniel Johnson recounted a research project conducted by a Morehouse professor, who asked parents, “Do you want your child to be happy or to be rich?”

This is, Johnson said, the kind of question economists like: It deals with what people want, and with the constraints people face in getting what they want.

The World Is Changing

Ruth Hall pointed out that “the world students go to school in is not the world the parents remember from their youth.” But, she said, “once parents understand this, they can become powerful advocates for the student.”

Cont’d on page 6
Discussion, cont’d

Studying Parental Involvement

Patrick Mason has a graduate school studying the effect of parental involvement on the educational outcomes of students through the fifth grade.

The study has raised a number of questions: Is the household achievement oriented? How much does the parents’ class background influence the student’s achievement?

It is well known that “children whose parents have advanced degrees tend to do better in school than children of parents who don’t.”

It is also true that “money helps.” If a family has money but is not musical, for example, they can buy private lessons in music for their child.

Curriculum Issues and Parental Involvement

Patrick Mason pointed out that parents and students need to understand when the curriculum requirements are crucial. For example, “algebra is one of the critical courses in high school.” According to Mason, if students are going to earn a higher degree in a technical field like economics, they need to complete algebra by the seventh or eighth grade, so they can complete all the other math courses required in technical fields.

In other words, some graduate degrees are the end of a multi-step track process that starts as early as the seventh grade. If students – and their parents – do not understand the importance of getting on this track and staying on it, those students will have great difficulty earning higher degrees in technical fields.

Ronald Burnett told about success working with low-performing students in a program at Bond School. He taught these students how to set up and maintain computers. They he and the students set up the computer labs at Nims Middle School. The students, who had not been doing well in school, rose to the challenge and learned to do more than others expected they could. “Sometimes,” he said, “schools limit how hard they press students on the basis of some data about them.”

“These kids see through you,” he said. “If you are not real, they won’t respond to you. To get their attention, you have to show them you care. You have to include the church. And you have to keep track of them. You can’t just let them wander off: You have to know where they are and what they are doing.”

“Before we could get parents in-
volved," Donald said, “we had to invent activities to get the parents out — workforce training, for example — until parents got the message that the program is ‘about you and your child.’”

Gerald Grow, retired professor of journalism and adjunct with TNE, looking for the words to make his point.

Gerald Grow urged innovative programs “to be sure they collect the kind of data that makes it possible to evaluate their results and generalize from them.”

Everyone, Grow said, works on two time scales. They are developing programs, reforming schools, increasing parental involvement improving teacher training, of working on some other long-term program to improve education.

Meanwhile, every teacher faces tomorrow morning: What is that teacher to do with the existing problems, unsupported students, disruptions, attitudes, and needs of the moment, when there is no more funding staffing, or program improvement, or training to help. When it’s just this teacher, just these students, and just now?

Teachers more important than class size

Errick Farmer made the case that a dynamic teacher is more important than a smaller class size. This leads him to understand why someone might oppose the limit on class size.

An important question is, How do we engage a very different kind of parent than we knew?

Another important question: Can you devise programs that will continue after the funding is over?

Errick Farmer made the case that a dynamic teacher is more important than a smaller class size. This leads him to understand why someone might oppose the limit on class size.
Summary

What can we do to strengthen schools?

After the presentations and discussions, Gwendolyn Trotter asked participants to sum up their thoughts about what we can do to strengthen schools? What are some solutions? Here is a synopsis of what they said:

- Strong leadership
  - Parent engagement
  - Student engagement
  - Community involvement (which may include developing a sense of community)
  - Stronger collaboration between K-12 and universities
- Better teacher preparation
  - Highly qualified, effective, caring teachers
  - Real training for real classrooms
  - Make learning relevant
- Use data to help change or drive policy
- Huckaby: Interns reported many difficult situations they did not know how to handle. So we need to provide better support to interns and new teachers.

- Marvin Henderson:
  - Education is here and now. It is highly variable. It changes from day to day. It always happens today, and any improvement must be applicable today.
  - Our ability to change, to meet the needs of the child that comes in next week or month or year will be critical to our success.
  - If we can fix the teacher, we help ourselves tremendously.
  - The value system taught in the home is crucial
- Burnette: We should be focusing on the full range, pre-K through 20.
  - Public education is not as bad as people have been saying
  - We need a stronger administrator and teacher evaluation system so we can put out those who are ineffective. It takes 2 years to get rid of a teacher.
  - You can walk into an empty classroom and tell immediately what kind of teacher works there.
- Mason: For new teachers, there is a lot of improvement the first and second years, then it levels off; and they are tenured the third year.
  - Is there a connection between a teacher’s improvement plan and the performance of that teacher’s students?
- Hall: Create a day when university people come in and spend a day teaching second or ninth grade, using the strategies and theories they teach about in college.
- Bell: My job is to train effective teachers. If we haven’t impacted public education, we have not done our jobs. There is no distinction between our work and the success of public schools.
  - We already know what we need to know to teach the children we choose to teach.
  - It all starts with teachers who care.
  - We don’t know how to teach teachers how to handle what they will face 10 or 15 years in the future. What do we do?
  - Train people to be problem solvers
  - Teach them how to ask questions
  - Give them the skills to research and solve the problems they will face