

Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need by William G. Ouchi (with Lydia G. Segal). New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 284 pp. ISBN 0-7432-4630-6

William Ouchi's thesis is simple: "If the district is run properly, all of the schools in it will be successful. If not, all schools will suffer, and only those principals who are willing to buck the central office will succeed" (p. 11). In his latest book, *Making Schools Work*, the UCLA management professor argues that the effects of decentralized decision-making and a culture of entrepreneurship will be powerful enough to stimulate district-wide gains in student achievement.

In keeping with the business management genre to which this book belongs, Ouchi contends that seven key elements can propel any mediocre school district to success. They are: every principal is an entrepreneur; every school controls its own budget; everyone is accountable for student performance and budgets; everyone delegates authority down the line; there is an intense focus on student achievement; every school is a community of learners; and families can choose from a variety of schools.

Ouchi and his researchers derived these seven elements from a comparison of a range of school districts, their principals, and their decision-making systems. His sample includes three large, centralized school districts (Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago); three decentralized districts (Houston, Seattle, and Edmonton, Canada); three large Catholic school districts; and six independent schools. He and his team interviewed principals, observed classrooms, and visited district headquarters. They studied their management systems, budgets, and student performance.

The author's general premise is a worthy one. Attention should be paid to the powerful role of the district. Attempting to reform individual schools without considering the district context may ultimately be in vain. Yet when embarking on new reforms, such efforts must be tempered by the lessons to be learned from decentralized school systems at the turn of the century, which, left unchecked, grew rife with corruption, nepotism, and objectionable hiring practices (Tyack, 1974). While it is not perfect, we need to appreciate the underlying rationale behind today's centralized school districts when evaluating school management proposals like Ouchi's.

Educational researchers and practitioners often jump at the chance to criticize businesspeople for contending that if districts looked more like commercial enterprises, they would see improvement. Clearly, both educational and business institutions have important lessons to offer one another. More troubling to me, however, are the assumptions implicit in Ouchi's argument. As with most reforms that promise sweeping change in our schools, the devil lies in

the details. This case is no exception. Ouchi's theory of action is undermined when specific circumstances are not already in place – ones that he does not address when sharing his findings and drawing conclusions. Below are some elements of Ouchi's proposal whose success hinges on the presence of necessary, but rare conditions in schools:

- 1) *Grant principals considerable authority over their own budgets.* Implicit in this idea is an assumption that principals have the knowledge, skills, and even the desire to effectively manage a budget. However, without proper training, many principals lack such a capacity, making this increased responsibility more of a burden (and maybe even a risk) for the school (Wohlstetter & Van Kirk, 1995).
- 2) *Design a staffing plan that fits your needs.* The effectiveness of authorizing principals to decide which teachers to hire depends on the availability of qualified teachers. As we have already learned from early reconstitution and re-staffing efforts, there is a finite number of qualified teachers – usually not enough to go around (Hess, 2003; Malen, Croninger, Muncey, & Jones, 2002). Moreover, research shows that this shortage is worse in hard-to-staff areas (Ingersoll, 2003).
- 3) *Focus on student achievement through the systematic use of data.* While data-based decision making is enjoying a certain status as the reform du jour, early evidence suggests that the capacity of teachers and principals to collect, organize, analyze, and use data to inform decisions is minimal (Chopin, 2002; Creighton, 2001; Mason, 2002). Credentialing programs generally do not train most educators to be data-driven in their practice or to understand the measurement principles behind testing. Furthermore, the data that are usually available to educators are from standardized assessments that only come once per year, and if they don't find this information to be timely or valid, such data-driven efforts quickly prove unproductive.
- 4) *Enable parents to choose their school and schools can adapt to meet every family's needs.* Ouchi assumes that parents can and will seize every opportunity to shop around and select the school that best meets their child's needs. Of course, without proper transportation, parents' options are quite restricted. Limited access to information about other schools also means that parents are not truly free to make fully informed choices (Levin, 2002; Levin & Driver, 1997). Thus, without parents having full awareness of their options or the power to act on them, this competitive system breaks down.
- 5) *Empower parents with negotiation principles and they can influence the structure of a district.* Ouchi's "Parent's Guide to School Improvement"

(p. 211) at the end of the book overlooks the complex realities of disempowered families and the barriers to their full participation in schools. Such families are in this position precisely because of the complex social and institutional obstacles that inhibit their participation (Valdés, 1996). Relying on simple rules like “follow the money” (p. 252) or remembering that school reform is “all politics” (p. 254) to equip marginalized families with the resources needed to effect change is impractical and discounts the importance of social, cultural, and economic capital in facilitating parents’ participation in schools.

Surprisingly, Ouchi’s book includes little discussion of how his proposals will be influenced by these contextual issues and other pre-existing conditions. Although it may not have been the author’s objective to discuss these conditions, acknowledging their significance is essential in order to help readers recognize the limitations of his proposals. The school reform literature teaches us that many improvement efforts are highly context-bound and that endeavors that ignore the norms, politics, and conditions of the local context often fall short, leaving their designers wondering where they went wrong (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998). Yet upon finishing this book, readers are left guessing about the local conditions in the districts and schools that Ouchi studied. What dynamics may have contributed to the effective implementation of such policies as the school finance model that Ouchi advocates, the Weighted Student Formula? The success of this innovative method, which distributes funds according to the needs of each school’s population and grants principals greater responsibility to manage their own budgets, may be greatly influenced by contextual factors unique to each district. What unusual circumstances might explain the outcomes in these schools? What specific challenges does Ouchi anticipate for efforts to replicate such initiatives in different locations? On these questions, *Making Schools Work* provides few answers.

Since no review of a school reform proposal framed by market theory is complete without addressing the business principles upon which it is based, consider this: Failure is endemic to the business world. The market is grounded in a faith in healthy competition and the benefits of “creative destruction.” If a business does not meet the demands of its consumers, it can eventually liquidate its assets, close its doors and fail. But schools cannot liquidate their assets and they do not simply close their doors when they fail. When schools fail, they leave a sizable number of students without the basic skills and competencies necessary to compete in society. If children attend an underperforming school for even a short time, they can develop academic deficiencies that take substantial time to remedy – if the next school is good enough to do so. The costs of these failures

are too high to endure in the time it would take market forces to eliminate weaker schools under Ouchi's plan.

Practitioners who follow Ouchi's seven keys to turn around their schools without considering what other conditions must already exist, or what checks and balances must be in place for underperforming schools, will quickly discover that these proposals address only one of many crucial dimensions of school reform – school site management. And in the end, these reformers are likely to be left asking themselves why the status quo remains and why they have not achieved the educational revolution that Ouchi promised.

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Reviewer

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