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Reconstituting Schools: “Testing” the “Theory of Action”

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This article identifies key elements of the “theory of action” embodied in reconstitution reforms and examines them in light of findings acquired from a two-year study that documents what happened when a particular rendition of reconstitution was enacted and implemented. The evidence from this study suggests that the “theory of action” embedded in reconstitution reforms may be seriously, if not fatally flawed. On every critical count, the dominant patterns of implementation ran counter to the major premises (and promises) of the policy. This article considers alternative interpretations of the data and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: *accountability, implementation evaluation, school reconstitution, theories of action*

Select state governments and local districts have embraced reconstitution as an education reform strategy (Mintrop, 2000; Hendrie, 1997; Education Commission of the States, 2000). Although the impetus for and the design of reconstitution policies vary, at its core, this strategy involves removing a school’s incumbent administrators and teachers (or large percentages of them) and replacing them with educators who, presumably, are more capable and committed (Malen, et al., 1999). Advanced as a bold, “results-based” action that will “turn around” troubled schools, reconstitution is a prevalent but understudied strategy, even in settings that have relatively extensive experience with this approach to education reform (Fraga, Erlichson, & Lee, 1998; Ladd, 1996; Fuhrman, 2001).

Because reconstitution reforms represent uncharted terrains, the study reported here was conceived as an open-ended search for intended and unintended effects of a reconstitution venture as well as a more focused search for evidence regarding the “theory of action” embedded in this particular approach to education reform.¹ Reflecting that orientation, this article identifies key elements of the “theory of action” embodied in re-

constitution reforms and examines them in light of evidence acquired from a two-year study that documents what happened when a particular rendition of reconstitution was enacted and implemented. We begin with a discussion of the “theory of action” concept and our application of it. Following a description of the study and the reconstitution initiative, we “test” the reform’s “theory of action” and highlight several implications of this analysis.

“Theories of Action”

The General Concept

This notion is frequently associated with Argyris and Schon (1982), who argue that individuals espouse “theories of action,” or sets of principles and propositions to describe, assess and defend the effectiveness of their behavior. While these “theories of action” may be incomplete, untested, or even contradictory, they constitute a framework that individuals use to guide, interpret or justify their actions.

The “theories of action” concept is also deeply embedded in program evaluation research. Proponents of the notion suggest that the concept

can help analysts and actors articulate and appraise the relationship between a program's aims, activities and, outcomes (Patton, 1978). A number of scholars have drawn upon this concept to analyze programs, to clarify "how program staff believe what they do will lead to desired outcomes" (Patton, 1990, p. 107; Weiss, 1998). They have capitalized on Argyris & Schon's (1982) distinction between "espoused theories" and "theories in use" to compare "the official version of how the program or organization operates" with "what really happens" (Patton, 1990, p. 107). They have also used the concept to "construct the chain of objectives" ascribed to a program, that is, to identify the "immediate, intermediate and ultimate aims" and to "make explicit the assumptions about all of the linkages necessary for the accomplishment of the ultimate outcomes" (Patton, 1978, p. 183).

Some writers contend that like particular programs, broad policy initiatives embrace "theories of action," or sets of principles and propositions, orientations and assumptions that can be used to illustrate and assess the efficacy of these interventions (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Massell, 1998; Elmore & Rothman, 1999; Nave, Miech, & Mosteller, 2000). In applying this concept to broad policy initiatives, scholars have derived a policy's "theory of action" from both the particular rationales that are articulated by policy actors and the internal logics of the policy that are identified by the analyst (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). In this approach, "theories of action" are not just properties of actors; they are also properties of policies.

Adopting this expanded view, we use the "theories of action" concept as a sensitizing device, as a way to uncover and inspect the officially stated and logically related assumptions regarding the means-ends relationships embodied in reconstitution reforms. Closely aligned with rational approaches to policy analyses, a "theories of action" perspective focuses on the premises of a policy in order to gauge the substantive viability of that policy. While potentially instructive, a "theories of action" analysis is limited because the substantive promise of policy is only one of many factors shaping the selection and implementation of education reforms. Other factors like the "political utilities" (Malen, 1994) or the "political-institutional" properties of policy alternatives also come into play (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Cuban, 1990; Hess, 1999, Jones &

Malen, 2002). Here, the capacity of a policy to regulate conflict surrounding organizations or to lend legitimacy to them takes precedence over more rationally rooted calculations of a policy's ability to ameliorate the problems to which it has been attached (Malen & Knapp, 1997).

Clearly, the "theories of action" concept does not capture all that is important about understanding or appraising policy alternatives. Nonetheless, this perspective is critical because these theories and the benefits they promise, provide the public justification for the human and fiscal costs of reform and the analytic mechanism for tracking actual policy effects and comparing them to stated policy aims. This perspective unearths information on the "substantive promise" dimension of policy, which can be useful to those who design, enact, and implement education reforms and to those who wish to "test" the underlying theory of school improvement embodied in a reform.

The Application of the Concept to Reconstitution Reform

Reconstitution reforms, like other policy interventions, rest on a set of assumptions regarding the relationship between policy actions and policy outcomes. These interrelated, often implicit assumptions form the policy's "theory of action" and provide the conceptual map of the underlying logic that links the actions taken with the outcomes sought. Viewed from this perspective, the reconstitution reform we studied rested on a number of assumptions. We focus on the most prominent and fundamental, namely, (a) that reconstitution would meet the immediate aim of creating more capable and committed faculty and staff, (b) that the resultant changes in the composition of the faculty and staff would advance the intermediate aim of redesigning schools, and (c) that the redesigned schools would realize the ultimate aim of improving student achievement. In this article, we analyze each of these assumptions in light of evidence acquired from a study of a particular reconstitution reform.

The Study

General Design

Since little is known about why reconstitution reforms are selected or how they play out in schools, an interdisciplinary research team that included the authors and others adopted an ex-

ploratory case study design to describe reform developments and to seek data regarding the premises and promises of this initiative as an education reform strategy.² This case study of a large, metropolitan district's experience with a reconstitution reform examined policy enactment but concentrated on implementation developments. While the reconstitution initiative targeted six schools, our study focused on "nested" case studies (Yin, 1994) of policy implementation in three (two elementary sites and one middle school) of those six schools. The schools we studied in depth were selected largely on the basis of their willingness to participate in this research venture.

Data Sources

To map reform developments across levels of the system and across stages of the process (from the initial adoption through the first two years of implementation), the research team collected documentary, interview and observational data on multiple aspects of the reconstitution initiative.

Documentary Data

We reviewed press releases and an array of district and site documents, meeting minutes and print materials.³ We used these documents to develop an understanding of the context, clarify policy provisions, and to trace how implementation issues were, or were not being handled.

Interview Data

We acquired primary data from over 360 formal and informal interviews with various district officials, building administrators, classroom teachers, program specialists and support staff, and 36 interviews with parents and community residents who were involved as PTA members and-or volunteers in the schools.⁴ Table 1 provides a general profile of the interview sources we consulted to secure information about the forces precipitating the enactment of the reconstitution reform, educators' expectations of and experiences with the reform during the first two years of implementation and parent and community perceptions of the reform during the second year of implementation. At the elementary schools, the interview pool included all administrators and nearly all teachers and specialists. At the middle school, the interview pool included administrators and a cross-section of teachers representing the various grade levels and curricular and special program areas in that site.

In all cases, the pools were comprised of men and women of different races and ethnicities who varied in terms of their years of experience as educators and their length of employment at the reconstituted schools.

At the start of the third year of implementation, members of the research team conducted 31 additional interviews to update information about staff changes and follow up on emergent patterns. Table 1 includes a breakdown of these interview sources.

The research team provided anonymity and confidentiality assurances to all individuals who were interviewed. Most interviews were carried out with individuals; a few were carried out with small groups who requested that option. Interviews were taped when possible. In all cases, detailed notes were taken.

Observational Data

The research team conducted over 150 formal and informal classroom observations⁵ and invested over 350 hours observing team meetings, faculty meetings, in-service sessions, testing days, special events, teacher appreciation events, lunchroom activities, library sessions, and the "everyday" staff-student and staff-staff interactions that occur in the corridors, in the faculty lounges and on the playgrounds of schools. Carried out during the second year of the reform, these observations were used to secure data regarding the correspondence between reform expectations and experiences and between site actors' conceptions of school improvement and their efforts to engender it.

Data Analysis

Reflecting the inductive character of exploratory case study designs, data analysis involved scrutinizing sources to (a) identify prominent patterns as well as exceptions to them, (b) lay out the "chains of evidence" that supported, contradicted or qualified emergent themes and interpretations (Yin, 1994), and (c) develop narrative accounts of the participant's expectations of and experiences with the reform during the first and second year of its implementation. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, we worked to corroborate or correct our interpretations by checking the detail, accuracy and consistency of information received from individual interviews and by comparing the extent to which themes were evident in, absent

TABLE 1
General Profile of Interview Sources

Source	First Year Reconstitution		Second Year Reconstitution		Start of Third Year Reconstitution	
	Number of interviews	Number of individuals ^a	Number of interviews	Number of individuals	Number of interviews	Number of individuals
District officials ^b	20	12	19	17	3	3
Principals at reconstituted schools not selected for case studies	3	3	1	1	1	1
Administrators at reconstituted schools selected for case studies ^c	23	11	44	13	5	3
Classroom teachers at reconstituted schools selected for case studies	44	44	76	55	9	7
Program specialists at reconstituted schools selected for case studies ^d	45	26	73	36	10	6
Paraprofessionals at reconstituted schools selected for case studies	6	6	10	10	0	0
Parents-family members at reconstituted schools selected for case studies	0	0	36	36	3	2
Total	141	102	259	168	31	22

^a Number of individuals who participated in one or more interviews. For example, in the first year of reconstitution, we conducted 20 interviews with 12 different district officials.

^b Includes district administrators, board members, and union leaders.

^c Includes principals and staff designated as part of an administrative team.

^d Includes staff assigned to special programs or classes (e.g., media, technology, music, physical education, ESOL, special education, and reading recovery).

from, or challenged by the information provided by multiple informants who occupied different roles, had different levels of professional experience, and who varied along the dimensions of age, race, sex, and ethnicity. We also cross checked information secured through interviews with data from observations and documents. As a further check for bias and error, the research team, key informants, and two colleagues who have expertise in education policy but were not involved in this study reviewed the research reports.⁶

Data Limitations

Although our research capitalized on multiple sources of data collected over an extended time period, there are limitations. First, while the individuals we interviewed were in the best position to know how the reform was actually un-

folding in the schools, their perceptions are not necessarily representative of the broader school community. Second, many individuals said they were comfortable talking with us, but others were reluctant to be interviewed, especially at the school site.⁷ Thus we can not be fully confident that we got the “whole story” from all informants even though we secured detailed and on face candid data from most informants. Third, to protect the anonymity of research sites and study participants, we describe the policy context and policy effects largely through narrative descriptions rather than numerical profiles. This decision sacrifices some specificity; but it enables us to communicate the patterns and nuances in the data in ways that honor rather than jeopardize our anonymity and confidentiality commitments. Finally, the scope of the study does not permit

firm generalizations about the viability of reconstitution reforms that may be designed differently or launched in contexts that are not comparable to the one we studied.

While these limitations call for caution in rendering judgments, there are reasons to have confidence in the analysis that follows. First, the information secured is exceptionally detailed at all sites and is fairly comparable across sites. Second, data acquired by different researchers working in the same site are remarkably consistent, as are research team member interpretations of the themes and patterns that evolved at the sites where they anchored data collection. Third, data secured from administrators, from novice and veteran teachers, and from racially diverse educators working in different programs and at different grade levels in the schools revealed and reinforced similar, compatible themes within and across study sites. Fourth, study participants who were asked to critique drafts of our findings and interpretations indicated that the research reports “captured the story” of the reform at their schools.

Even though the district we studied has much in common with school systems that may become the targets of reconstitution reforms, our intent is not to argue that our findings lead to precise predictions about how reconstitution reforms will play out in other settings. Rather, our aim is to identify and inspect the underlying premises of the reform and offer provisional, “analytic generalizations” (Yin, 1994; Firestone, 1993) that can be revised, refuted or reinforced through further research that focuses on the critical means-end linkages embedded in this reform strategy. Given this objective, the data provide a reasonable, albeit imperfect basis for “testing” the “theories of action” in reconstitution reforms.

The District-Mandated Reconstitution Reform

In order to unpack the reform’s “theory of action” and provide a context for understanding reform developments, we describe the formal policy provisions and the context in which the reform was developed, justified, and implemented.

Policy Provisions

Cast as the first step of a new, determined effort to “redesign” low-performing schools in the district, the reconstitution initiative was confined to four elementary and two middle schools (a fairly

small proportion of low-performing schools in the district).⁸ New principals were appointed in five of the six schools. Teachers who wanted to continue to work in those schools, no matter their experience, preference, or history, had to (a) reapply for their position, (b) sit for a formal interview with a committee comprised of the new principal, district administrators and/or intermediate-level administrators, and (c) accept the verdict of that selection committee. Displaced teachers were guaranteed positions within the district. Staff members who wanted to retain their posts in these schools also had to go through reselection processes. The district asked all employees hired at the reconstituted schools to make a three-year commitment to the school and to attend special staff development meetings prior to the opening of school as well as during the first year of the reform.

When the reform was launched, the district created an office comprised of three individuals who were to assist site personnel and budgeted \$1.2 million to support the office, staff development programs, and school improvement initiatives. Only a small portion of this money actually flowed to schools in the form of direct fiscal outlays. At the end of the first year of the reform, the new office was disbanded and responsibility for oversight and support was transferred to an office that monitored school improvement plans in “low-performing” schools. Evidence of special allocations in any form, disappeared.⁹

Policy Formulation and Justification

By all accounts, the reconstitution reform was the superintendent’s initiative. Although the superintendent was the major architect and advocate of this reform, the documentary and interview data reveal that this initiative was a response to a complex web of forces that went beyond the superintendent’s belief that dramatic action was required to secure dramatic changes in student performance (Jones & Malen, 2002).

To illustrate, the district has a long-standing, broadly publicized record of low student achievement as gauged by various district and state tests. For the past three decades, the district has been the object of intense regulatory pressures from the courts, the federal government, and state agencies. These pressures focused initially on issues of equity and racial balance but more recently on issues of academic achievement and organizational performance. The state has threatened to

take over schools and has intensified oversight by commissioning a study of the district's management practices and appointing a board to monitor district operations. In the minds of many we spoke with, reconstitution was, in part, an effort to "preempt further encroachments" by the state. A union leader and a district official captured the dominant view:

[The superintendent] had no choice but to do something drastic . . . The state's label of failing schools had put people in a panic mode . . . The testing environment was creating anxiety . . . The state had been pressing hard . . . [he] had to do something dramatic . . . We were in a fish-bowl with the state . . . We had to find a way to fend them off . . . [the superintendent] had to find a way to be victorious.

The real deal was that [the superintendent] did this hoping that the state wouldn't come in and name schools [to a state takeover "watch" list].

Pressured to take drastic action, the superintendent decided to launch his own reconstitution reform. He would require staffing changes but would permit and encourage educator and community involvement in the development of new structures and responsive programs. A district official summarized the superintendent's thinking:

[He] understood the politics of what was swirling around the state . . . and determined that instead of having someone impose their own structure on a district, it made more sense to . . . come up with your own remedy and give people an opportunity to participate in that and get more bang, if you will, for the effort.

This general strategy allowed the superintendent to incorporate an idea that had currency with state officials and with local officials who were concerned about "changing the image of the [school system]," improving its performance and halting state "intrusions." As a board spokesperson put it:

The state was reaching into [the district] . . . so any concept that would have us in an advance posture, identifying those schools ourselves and designing the procedures and personnel changes that would help them would obviously be accepted by board members without exception, which was the case.

Even with board acceptance, enacting such a controversial reform would not be easy. Since the pressure to act was intense and since reconstitution reforms can be explosive, the superintendent elected to proceed in a rapid and essentially unilateral fashion. He shared his idea in private meetings with a few key staff members in mid-March. Since his idea rested on restaffing schools, he would have to unveil his plan to school employees by the end of May in order to comply with contractual rules regarding the reassignment of staff. During this ten week time period, the superintendent consulted with a small cadre of staff members, union officials and board members. But these consultations focused more on the politics than the substance of the initiative (Jones & Malen, 2002).

For example, central office staff were instructed to compile information that could be used to defend the choice of schools to be reconstituted. They were not instructed to seek information regarding the efficacy of the proposal. Conversations with union officials and board members were designed, as one district official put it, "to reduce the chances that his plan would blow up in his face." These exchanges occurred late in the process and focused on how the superintendent's plan complied with contractual agreements and fell within his span of control, not on whether the plan constituted a robust approach to school improvement. In essence, the reconstitution initiative was created and instituted by the superintendent who relied on "insider politics" to quickly and quietly move his initiative through the district's decision-making channels (Jones & Malen, 2002).

Even though the reconstitution initiative was an outgrowth of politics marked more by desperation than deliberation, the superintendent hoped that this action would improve school performance and he set out to justify his plan on those grounds. While statements that addressed how reconstitution was to engender school improvement were not well developed, the general rationales offered by the superintendent and the underlying premises of the policy derived by analysts of it, converge to form a "theory of action."

On its face, the decision to reconstitute schools suggests that the superintendent assumed he could replace incumbent staff with individuals who would be more effective educators and that such an adjustment was an essential first step in improving

school performance at the targeted sites. Statements of district officials provide support for that inference. As one recounted:

[The superintendent's] first thought was to have individuals in those schools who really wanted to be there with those students . . . [He believed that] if you have people that care about you, you learn.

The superintendent not only saw reconstitution as a mechanism for removing those individuals perceived to be less dedicated and replacing them with individuals who were more committed but also assumed that this action would enable new staffs to “transform” the six schools and establish models of school improvement for the district and state. In formal documents, the superintendent described the initiative as “an extraordinary opportunity” to develop “model” schools. For example, he stated: “It is my hope that teachers and support staff will . . . examine other programs for alternative solutions to solve problems; that they will willingly risk breaking the mold to pose unique and inventive solutions to problems.” To accomplish these ambitious goals, the superintendent envisioned a school improvement process that, as publicized in district documents: (a) “involves school staff in the design and implementation of new programs;” (b) “provides unprecedented professional development opportunities;” (c) “engages the community in discussions of school priorities and practices;” (d) “promotes innovation” and “encourages alternative solutions to school problems;” (e) is “supported by all individuals in the school system;” (f) “uses empirical data to evaluate programs and practices;” and (g) “focuses on the best interests of children.” The superintendent held that these elements would, in turn, “improve academic achievement” in these schools.¹⁰

Policy Implementation

The process through which the reconstitution reform policy was enacted as well as other features of the context challenged policy implementation.¹¹ Over the last decade the district's student population has changed dramatically in terms of race, ethnicity, and economics. Like many metropolitan districts, this district has a complex mix of cultures, growing numbers of English as Second Language students, high percentages of African-American and Hispanic students and relatively

high percentages of families eligible for free school lunch programs. High student-mobility rates, low teacher salaries, high faculty turn-over rates, high percentages of uncertified or provisionally certified teachers, and pent up demands for new and refurbished school facilities compound the prospects for meaningful improvements in school programs. The district has sought various grants and additional funds from the state, but their requests have been only partially honored. Amidst these conditions, tensions among local constituencies who compete for the limited resources available to support school improvement have intensified. As the following sections demonstrate, these broad contextual forces along with the closed processes through which the policy was developed and the key decisions made regarding the policy's design all shaped the responses to the reconstitution reform we studied.

“Testing” the “Theory of Action”

The documentary, interview and observational data we acquired suggest that the “theory of action” embedded in reconstitution reforms may be seriously, if not fatally flawed. On every critical count, the dominant patterns of implementation we discovered in the three schools we studied in depth ran counter to the major premises (and promises) of the policy.

Immediate Aim:

More Capable and Committed Staffs

A major premise of reconstitution is that requiring all staff to reapply for their positions can both rid schools of weak staffs (often by transferring them to other positions in the system) and replenish schools with strong staffs (by hiring other educators and selectively rehiring incumbents). This premise rests on related assumptions about the availability of teachers and administrators who may be more talented and dedicated and the probability that those individuals will elect to work in reconstituted schools.

The evidence from our study demonstrates that reconstitution reforms may engender sweeping staff changes. Table 2 indicates that all six reconstituted schools experienced numerically significant staff changes. Individuals new to the district replaced a high percentage of school staffs.

While reconstitution may bring new people into the schools, our study suggests that reconstitution reforms which are carried out in contexts

TABLE 2
Percent New Staff and Within-District Transfers to Schools Before and After Reconstitution^a

School	Two Years Prior Reconstitution		One Year Prior Reconstitution		First Year Reconstitution		Second Year Reconstitution	
	New staff ^b	Within-district transfer ^c	New staff	Within-district transfer	New staff	Within-district transfer	New staff	Within-district transfer
A	22	30	23	18	64	0	30	27
B	— ^d	— ^d	20	33	69	29	23	21
C	27	29	37	30	75	24	10	33
D	29	9	27	27	67	27	37	25
E	24	20	20	21	73	17	25	38
F	36	22	46	8	66	39	38	17
All	28	22	29	20	69	23	27	29

^a Staff includes administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and teacher aides.
^b The percent of staff in a given year that did not work at the school the prior year. For example, during the first year of reconstitution, 64% of the staff employed at School A did not work at the school the year prior to reconstitution.
^c The percent of new staff in a given year that transferred to a school from within the district. For example, during the first year of reconstitution, none of the new staff in School A came from elsewhere in the district; all of the new employees came from outside of the district.
^d No data available.

characterized by chronic teacher shortages and pervasive educational challenges and through plans which rely largely on the rhetorical appeal of “a new opportunity” may not secure more capable and committed staffs. Rather, insofar as certification, experience and reputation are valid indicators of staff capacity, reconstitution may weaken rather than strengthen that component of schools. Further, insofar as willingness to work in a reconstituted school is a valid, albeit primitive proxy for staff commitment to the school or the system responsible for it, reconstitution may undermine commitment. Data from our in depth studies of three schools substantiate these claims.

Loss of reputedly effective, experienced teachers

When faculty and staff at the three sites we focused on learned their schools would be reconstituted, most were “shocked”, “insulted,” “angered,” and “deeply hurt” for many reasons. First, the action was taken without clear warning. While test scores were generally low in the targeted schools, some schools had demonstrated encouraging improvements on select tests and received reassuring comments from district administrators and, in one case, from an external review team. Second, the requirement that *all* faculty and staff who wished to remain at the school had to

reapply was seen by many, as an indefensible response to quality concerns. As two stated:

How can we be told we are not good enough to teach here but we can still teach somewhere in the [district]? If we are not doing our jobs we should be fired, not transferred.

If teachers are weak, you can remove them or retrain them or even transfer them . . . You don’t have to annihilate a whole faculty to deal with a few bad apples who may mean well but do not teach well.

Moreover, teachers and building administrators characterized the reapplication process as “disrespectful,” “humiliating,” and “inhumane” treatment. The reform was viewed as a blanket indictment of teacher competence and commitment. The common perception that “the teachers had all been fired” and that “people who have proven their worth [were required to] beg for their jobs” contributed to “the pain and anguish” many teachers felt at the outset and continued to feel two years later, when they thought about how their faculty was “torn apart,” and “destroyed.”

While the precise impact of these sentiments on teachers’ decisions to reapply for their positions is difficult to gauge, comments suggest that the negative sentiments prompted some reputedly excellent teachers to accept positions in other

schools and in other districts. Comments from both teachers who departed and teachers who were rehired capture the dominant view:

Lots of dedicated professionals who knew the curriculum and the students and had their classroom management strategies in tact left because they would not succumb to the insult; they would not tolerate the disrespect, the mistreatment.

We lost some wonderful, experienced teachers . . . We got rid of a few bad ones too, but we lost some real jewels.

We lost lots of good teachers. The approach was all wrong. It was not respectful. People who had proven their worth did not want to reapply. They were hurt. They left . . . The school lost out.

Whether valued, veteran teachers left because they were insulted, apprehensive about “what would be happening at the schools” or otherwise put off, teachers and building-level administrators maintained that one immediate effect of reconstitution was that “outstanding teachers left” and “outstanding teams were blown apart.”

This loss was not just an initial, arguably inevitable fall-out of the reform. As Table 3 illustrates, at the end of the first year of the reform, in five of the six reconstituted schools, between one-fifth and one-third of the school staffs did not return to these schools. At the end of the second year of the reform, the departure rates increased in all six schools and exceeded the prereform departure rates in all but one school.¹² While many factors influence whether or not staff remain in schools, administrators, teachers and parents as-

sociated with the three sites we studied in depth maintained that the reconstitution initiative contributed to the loss of reputedly strong teachers long after it was announced.

At the end of the first year, in our sample schools, about a quarter of the teachers who had been hired elected to depart the schools for a number of reasons, including lingering discontent and growing disillusionment with the reconstitution reform. Most who left were characterized, by building administrators, colleagues and PTA members, as the more experienced, “talented,” “effective,” or potentially “promising” teachers. At the end of the second year, faculty turnover subsided somewhat in one sample school but many teachers at the other sample sites continued to elect to leave, often for reform-related reasons. Even teachers who were initially enthusiastic supporters of the reform left their schools in part, because, as many noted, “The promises [the district made about redesigning schools, hiring master teachers and providing small classes, materials and other supports] never materialized.” Here, as in other settings (Ingersoll, 2001), the absence of sufficient and dependable organizational supports contributed to teacher turnover in the reconstituted schools. The resentment engendered by the district’s “broken promises,” the tension that accompanied a massive and exhausting change effort, and the pain associated with the loss of a cohesive staff and an established support system took their toll.¹³ The words of one capture a prevalent view:

It’s been too much to take. I’m not coming back.
It’s been a ‘push me back over the edge’ year.

TABLE 3
Percent Non-Returning Staff Before and After Reconstitution

School	Two years prior reconstitution	One year prior reconstitution	First year reconstitution	Second year reconstitution
A	20	65	19	31
B	23	60	19	32
C	35	74	7	21
D	16	64	31	41
E	15	70	22	47
F	44	62	34	46
All	25	66	22	36

Note. Staff includes administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and teacher aides. The percent of staff in a given year that did not return to the school the next year, for example, during the first year of reconstitution, 19% of the staff in school A left and did not return to the school the next year.

The continued loss of reputedly effective, experienced teachers is not to say that the reconstitution reform had no appeal. Some teachers were attracted to the notion of a “new beginning” and stated that “the opportunity to create a model school,” “the opportunity to be part of a groundbreaking event,” actually “swayed” the employment decisions of some and weighed heavily on the employment decisions of others. Whether the reform was a tilting factor or a critical determinant, the widespread perception that the reconstituted schools would be given additional resources and real opportunities to develop distinctive programs played a role in some teachers’ decisions to join the faculty.

That general appeal, however, was short-lived. As noted above, during the first year, many educators in our sample schools became disillusioned and departed. During the second year, virtually no returning teachers in our sample schools said the reform had inspired them to remain at the schools. Indeed, most returned in spite of their experience with the reform. Having survived the first year, several said they came back because “it could only get better.” Some “felt needed” or simply wanted to “stay in the same school for more than one year.” Others identified the three-year “unwritten contract” embodied in the reform and the risks associated with trying to transfer as a non-tenured teacher as reasons to stay. Select but representative comments indicate that the early appeal was gone:

I came with high hopes . . . Now I am not sure how long I can get myself to stay here.

I came because it sounded good. The way it was billed, I thought I would be working with the best and the brightest [master teachers]. That hasn’t happened . . . It’s a stigma to work at a [reconstituted] school. But I promised them three years, so I’m back.

As one staff member cautioned, “You never know the whole reason people leave or stay.” Still, the words of those directly involved with and affected by this reform make it clear that, for them, the reconstitution initiative created multiple incentives to leave the reconstituted schools and no material incentives and few, if any intrinsic inducements to continue working in them.

Influx of new, inexperienced teachers

Despite the district’s assurances that reconstituted schools would be staffed with experienced

teachers who would stay at their schools for at least three years, the faculties of reconstituted schools were neither experienced nor stable. In the three schools we studied, approximately 75% of the teachers hired during the first year of the reform were new recruits; most were first-year teachers; many were not yet certified and had to enroll in after-school and weekend courses to complete certification requirements. At the end of the first year when many of those who were initially hired departed, the district had to secure replacements. Most of the replacements were relatively new, often first-year teachers who also were working to complete certification requirements. During the second year of the reform, one of the schools we studied was able to secure some experienced teachers and curb faculty turnover, but even in this best case scenario, at the start of the third year of the reform, the majority of the faculty had less than three years of teaching experience. In the most extreme case, at the start of the third year of the reform, approximately two-thirds of the classroom teachers were first-year teachers. Thus the reconstituted schools we focused on in our study were staffed by new cadres of new teachers.

The new staffs, by their own accounts, often felt “ill-prepared” for and “overwhelmed” by the many classroom management, instructional development and major organizational challenges confronting them. Although administrators and teachers typically characterized new hires as “talented” and “promising,” they had reservations about the degree to which the reconstituted schools had to rely on first-year teachers.¹⁴ Select but representative comments from teachers and building administrators reflect the general concerns about instructional quality and classroom management:

I don’t care how good you are, the first year of teaching is hard. There are so many things you just have to learn on the job. When you have so many beginning teachers . . . there is a lot of trial and error, and that can be costly to the kids.

[Most] of my teachers are brand new . . . That means we still have a lot of work to do. Most of these people have potential, but like any profession, it takes time to develop.

We have a lot of new faculty but I question whether we have better teaching . . . New teachers have a lot to juggle. The curriculum is hard to master. Classroom management is hard, especially when you don’t know the kids and par-

ents. Then you have to learn the system. Even the basic things take time to learn.

In addition to these classroom-related concerns, teachers, principals, assistant principals and parents expressed concerns about the impact of faculty turnover on the ability to engender commitment to the schools. Again, select but representative comments from a teacher, a building administrator, and a parent make the point:

It's like we are always going back to square one. We have almost as many new teachers this year as the first year. We keep replacing, not advancing . . . It makes you wonder, 'why keep at it?'

This school requires true commitment. Unfortunately we are developing a profile here that says 'Why commit?' Every year is a first year. We just keep starting over. It is hard to build commitment . . . It is like we are experimenting and every year we start over.

We keep losing teachers . . . It's like a revolving door over there [at the school] . . . Some of us [parents] are really worried . . . What's wrong over there? Who will be left to teach our children?

To be clear, the large influx of new teachers brought some benefits. For example, in some schools, the faculties were more closely aligned with the student population on gender, race and ethnicity dimensions. In some cases, the new teachers were viewed as "more talented" than their predecessors. But even among those who acknowledged that the reform had some redeeming features, nearly all reported that reconstitution failed to create the cadres of master teachers and the stable staffing patterns associated with the promise of more capable and committed faculties.

Influx of new, inexperienced administrators

In all three schools we studied in detail, the principals were not only new to the school but also relatively new to this role. Although all had some prior administrative experience, they were consistently characterized as "novice" administrators by teachers and by district officials. Generally speaking, both beginning and veteran teachers considered their limited experience a serious liability. The words of a first-year teacher convey a prevalent view:

We were all so new and ill-prepared for what we were being asked to do . . . We needed a

strong leader . . . We needed someone more experienced, someone who knew how to get things done in the school and in the system.

The assignment of new principals to the reconstituted schools was not a one-time occurrence. At the end of the first year of the reform, the principal at one of the six reconstituted schools was reassigned; at the end of the second year of the reform, three principals were replaced by relatively inexperienced individuals. Thus the principal replacement rate increased from 17% the first year to 50% the second year.¹⁵

Many believed that the principal reassignments indicated that, "you can't depend on the district to keep its word." Since teachers had been asked to make a three-year commitment, they assumed their principals would have at least a three-year appointment. In this context, the reassignment of principals undermined trust in and commitment to the district. As a teacher and a principal put it:

The district doesn't keep its commitments, why should I? I will, but things like this do make you wonder.

It just reminds you not to get too attached to a school. You just never know where you will be, one year to the next.

As the preceding patterns indicate, reconstitution may precipitate staffing changes that run counter to the premises and promises of this reform, at least when introduced in a context of chronic teacher shortages and in the absence of incentives that might attract and retain new and veteran teachers in challenging schools. Under these conditions, a dramatic effort to bolster capacity and commitment may weaken staff capacity and undermine staff commitment to the schools and the district that struggles, each year, to fill its teaching and administrative vacancies.

Intermediate Aim: Redesigned Schools

Reconstitution reforms assume that the reconfigured staffs will redesign schools. The particular version of reconstitution we studied further assumed that redesigned schools would be characterized by community-based governance, faculty collaboration, tailor-made professional development, and teacher-initiated, inquiry-based approaches to instruction. Indeed, much of the reform's initial appeal was rooted in the promise that teachers and administrators would be granted the freedom and the support required to create "model schools for the 21st century." Since

reconstitution reforms need not adopt this particular orientation to school improvement, the overarching assumption that restaffed schools will be redesigned schools, is more critical than the secondary set of assumptions regarding the specific characteristics to be engendered in these schools. For that reason, we focus on the link between restaffing schools and redesigning schools.

Our data suggest that this critical link may not hold. Reconstitution creates major changes in the personnel component of the schools, but these personnel changes may not be sufficient to overhaul a school. Rather reconstitution may create disruptions and intensify pressures that consume new staffs and deny them opportunities to redesign schools. As data from our sample sites indicate, new staffs may be quickly and repeatedly “swept into a survival mode” that necessitates the restoration of familiar routines and stifles the prospects for meaningful reform.

Restoration of familiar routines

By virtually all accounts, the reconstitution reform “threw the schools into a frenzy.” In the three schools we focused on, administrators and teachers alike talked often about the “confusion,” “chaos,” and “pressure” the initiative generated. Part of the pressure emanated from the timing of the reform. Schools had less than three months (end of May to end of August) to complete the school year, finalize summer programs, and restaff and redesign their schools. But, part of the pressure emanated from the disruptive character of the reform. Given the many vacancies created by the reform and the shortage of certified teachers in the region, the schools were scrambling just to fill essential positions and deal with the opening day logistics. As an administrator and a teacher recalled:

We were still trying to hire people in late August . . . We didn't have schedules or room assignments . . . We had to put classes in store-rooms because we didn't have enough classroom space . . . We had so many new teachers that had never set up a room. They needed a lot of help. Supplies had not been ordered so people didn't have much to work with . . . Some of the new teachers were in a real bind and bought stuff with their own money . . . It was wild . . . Some of us were working around the clock just so we could open school . . . Planning? That was a shot in the dark. All we had was test data . . . We didn't know the kids, the school . . . We

didn't have the people we needed or the time we needed to do it right . . . We were scrambling and we have been playing catch-up all year.

I thought we would be meeting as a staff and talking about how we were going to change the school . . . [But] they were hiring people 'til like the day before school started . . . We didn't know what grade levels we were teaching; closets were not unpacked; there were no reliable class lists; supplies had not been ordered . . . It was crazy.

The intense strains that marked the start of school persisted throughout the first year of implementation. Administrators and teachers in all our sample schools talked candidly about feeling “swamped,” “inundated,” and “overwhelmed” by all that had to be done to figure out and carry out the day to day operations of schools. They talked frequently about “making it through the day” and keeping their sights on “avoiding major disasters.” District administrators also acknowledged that new staffs were feeling “dazed,” “shocked,” and “overwhelmed.”

In addition to describing the demands imposed by the reform, teachers and school-level administrators often spoke about the “promises” the district had made in various public and private meetings with school faculties and staffs. They had been told that the reconstituted schools would have lower class sizes, more instructional assistants, ample amounts of interesting and appropriate materials and supplies, substantial if not sophisticated computer supports, the opportunity to work with master teachers, specially tailored professional development programs, and other supports. While some sources acknowledged that they may have engaged in “some wishful thinking” and consequently embellished the slate of district promises, the uniformity and consistency of accounts gives credence to the claim that “teachers were led to believe that we'd get a lot of things—veteran teachers, small class sizes, computers, aids, materials—but that is not the case.” Our data are replete with references to the “frustration,” “overload,” “exhaustion,” “disillusionment,” and “betrayal” teachers and building administrators experienced as they tried to cope with the demands the reform imposed without the supports they had anticipated. Under these conditions, the staffs in our sample schools, like others who work in strained organizations (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; Lipsky, 1980), focused on reestablishing basic operating procedures and

reverted to prior, familiar practices. Nearly all informants made comments like the following:

We were all shooting in the dark . . . When that happens you go back to what you know . . . We went back to things we had done before, to the things we knew how to do . . . There was a lot of pressure on people who had some experience at the school . . . We needed to learn how things had been done.

We spent the whole year trying to get back to where we were before reconstitution.

Although the initial strain of the reform subsided during the second year of implementation, the pattern of administrative reassignments and staff departures in our sample schools meant that site-level actors repeatedly had to “reinvent the wheel.” They continued to focus on restoring the organizational infrastructure and establishing the routines required to manage the day to day operations and routine activities of the schools. Reflections of site-level educators at the end of the second year of the reform capture a prominent sentiment:

The [reconstitution] reform . . . was one big upheaval. We continue to go in circles . . . We take some baby steps, but mostly it’s been a disruption we could have all done without.

We have so many new people it’s like we start over every year . . . We struggle just to get the basic routines in place.

Here every year is a new year . . . It is hard to make any headway when you don’t have the basic systems [schedules, attendance and discipline programs] in place.

Evidence of marginal adjustment versus comprehensive redesign

In part because site personnel had to focus time and attention on the day-to-day operations of the schools, they did not redesign their schools. The promise of unique models and distinctive alternatives was not realized. Generally speaking, administrators and teachers in our sample sites maintained that at the end of the second year of the reform, the reconstituted schools were “no different than any other school.” There were signs of small-scale, often short-lived attempts to modify school schedules, incorporate team teaching, make better use of technology, and, at one site, form a group to discuss education-related issues. One informant maintained that “our school is better off.” But the comments of nearly all others mirrored the general appraisals cited here:

We have a new title . . . there is a lot of talk, but we have no new, compelling curriculum or pedagogy . . . We have made some progress . . . in spite of it all. But we are not a new, innovative, forward-looking school . . . We are no model for the 21st century.

We haven’t transformed anything, not yet anyway . . . I doubt we will.

Our documentary, observational and interview data suggest that these general appraisals are valid.¹⁶ As elaborated elsewhere, the reconstitution reform we studied did not alter governance arrangements, engender the collaborative structures, provide the professional development, foster the creation of teacher-initiated, inquiry-driven instructional programs or otherwise augment school capacity in ways that the chief architect and advocates had hoped (Finkelstein, et al., 2000; Muncey, Jones, & Croninger, 2000; Malen, 2000; Rice & Croninger, 2001; Rice & Malen, 2002). Rather, the reconstitution experiment may have made it even more difficult to actively and systematically engage the school staffs, parents and community residents in the design of new organizational repertoires and instructional practices that might improve the quality of life and learning in schools.¹⁷

In sum, the presence of intense pressures to restore familiar routines and the absence of compelling indications of extensive or enduring organizational change suggest that the link between restaffing schools and redesigning them is tenuous, particularly when the reconstitution policy does not provide sizeable, dependable sources of support or sufficient amounts of time for administrators, teachers, parents and community members to envision a collective agenda let alone to reconstruct a troubled school. Taken together, these patterns call into question one of the most fundamental premises of reconstitution reforms.

Ultimate Aim: Improved Student Achievement

The ultimate aim of reconstitution reforms is a substantial and sustained improvement in student achievement, as measured by gains on the state or district tests used to identify “low performing” schools. In our study the ultimate aim became dramatic gains on the state’s tests in reading, writing, language usage, mathematics, science, and social studies. During the second year of the

reform, comments like “[the state test] is the big push” and “bring up [the state test scores]” were often the first and only responses to questions about the school’s mission. Select but representative comments illustrate:

Now we know what we were hired to do. All those things that were said and promised don’t matter. It’s the test scores, pure and simple. That’s what matters. We have no choice.

It’s a lot different than what we were told. Now its [sic] just raising test scores.

Given the multiple forces that can influence student achievement, it is extraordinarily difficult to establish that a particular policy initiative is a contributing cause, let alone the proximate or primary cause of any increase or decrease in student achievement. The first step in the intricate line of argument required to substantiate such causal claims is to demonstrate that following a policy intervention, the targeted schools registered substantial, widespread and stable improvements on student achievement measures.¹⁸ In our study, changes in student achievement measures did not meet even this basic standard.

At the end of the first year of the reform, two of the six reconstituted schools showed an increase in the percentage of students scoring satisfactory on the state tests; four of the six registered declines in performance. At the end of the second year of the reform, three of the schools recaptured or slightly surpassed the “pre-reform” performance level; one school had not regained its “pre-reform” performance level even at the end of the third year of the reform. One school registered notable gains in student achievement at the end of the first, second, and third year of the reform; one school registered dramatic gains at the end of the third year of the reform; other schools registered fluctuations that left them near or below the “pre-reform” performance level. These erratic patterns suggest that the relationship between reconstitution, at least as executed in this district, and gains in student achievement is neither direct nor dependable.¹⁹

Implications for Understanding Reconstitution Reforms

Our analysis is a partial, empirical “test” of select components of the “theory of action” embedded in reconstitution reforms. It focuses on the most fundamental premises, not on the full set of assumptions nested in this strategy and

draws on a case study of one district’s experience with reconstitution, not on a large scale, comparative examination of this reform strategy across different locales. While limited, the analysis is both provocative and instructive. Although subject to different interpretations, the analysis casts doubt on the efficacy of reconstitution reforms. The analysis also suggests directions for future research that might bolster our knowledge about the substantive viability of this reform strategy.

Action and Theory:

A Simple Test of Essential Connections

At one level, our analysis can be viewed as a relatively straightforward, albeit clearly provisional “test” of an action (a district’s decision to reconstitute select schools) and a theory (a set of assumptions regarding the relationship between the action taken and the aims sought). As such, it challenges key tenets of the strategy and suggests that reconstitution, in and of itself, may do little to improve staff quality, school organization or school performance. Indeed, reconstitution may impede progress on those fronts. In so doing, this analysis exposes the fragile, tentative character of the cardinal assumptions that undergird this approach to education reform.

Whether our findings are indicative of the impact of reconstitution reforms carried out in other contexts remains to be seen. Although the context of our study has much in common with the other urban and metropolitan settings where reconstitution is receiving consideration (e.g., chronic teacher shortages, un dependable fiscal supports, pervasive educational challenges), exploratory case study findings are not readily transferred to other educational settings or to different policy designs. Anecdotal data suggest that the patterns we discovered are not unique (Ruenzel, 1997; Christiansen, 1998; Hendrie, 1998). But, given the dearth of empirical evidence on actual experiments with reconstitution, additional research is required to determine whether the patterns we identified are typical or inevitable and whether the “theory of action” that undergirds reconstitution initiatives constitutes a valid and viable approach to school improvement.

Theory Without Action: The Familiar Problem of Insufficient Support

Another way to interpret our analysis is to say that the reconstitution experiment we followed

was not a fair test. Perhaps the disappointing, at times counterproductive results reside not in the idea of reconstitution itself, but in the implementation of that idea. The reconstitution experiment we studied was certainly plagued by insufficient institutional support which slipped from modest at the outset, to undetectable by the second year of implementation. Perhaps this development derailed a potentially robust reform.

Experience with reconstitution in two settings lends some credence to this view. In one setting, the initial reconstitution efforts, which were accompanied by class size reductions, additional human and fiscal resources, time to plan for the transition and other forms of assistance, appeared to be more effective in addressing student achievement than later attempts, which paid less attention to these organizational accommodations (Khanna, et al., 1999). While the data here are quite limited, they do point to the necessity of providing appropriate supports (Fraga, Erlichson, & Lee 1998). In another setting, reconstitution experiments which appear to be less dramatic in scope than the one we studied and are accompanied by class size reductions, time to plan how the reconstituted schools will be redesigned, and an array of extensive and dependable district supports may be faring better than the initiative we studied (Archibald & Odden, 2000; Odden & Archibald, 2000). More general evidence for this view can be found in numerous studies of policy implementation, which demonstrate that without institutional supports, substantial organizational improvements are unlikely (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin, 1987). Under these conditions education reform remains an elusive notion, a nonevent.

This suggestive evidence notwithstanding, whether reconstitution reforms can realize their aims if the sponsoring institutions (a) incorporate incentives to attract and retain experienced administrators and master teachers, (b) grant staffs the time, autonomy and opportunity to envision alternative organizational designs, and (c) dedicate sufficient financial, informational and human resources to the experiment, remains an open, empirical question. Even impressive levels of institutional backing may not be able to counter the disruption and stigma the reform engenders (Finkelstein et al., 2000; Wong, et al., 1999; Rice & Malen, 2002). Research that examines the interaction between reconstitution initiatives and

institutional supports could help us determine whether reconstitution with particular packages of supports, or whether packages of support alone, might foster school improvement.²⁰

Theory Without Opportunity: The Relative Power of Contextual Contingencies

A more somber interpretation of our study is that the “theory of action” nested in reconstitution reforms is untenable because it fails to address the broad contextual forces that mediate the capacity of schools to fundamentally alter their performance. Several examples illustrate the problem.

Reconstitution reforms either assume that large pools of talented and dedicated people are awaiting the opportunity to work in troubled schools or that such pools can be generated by the appeal of a “fresh start.” Our study demonstrates that these replacement assumptions did not hold when a district elected to reconstitute only a relatively small percentage of its “low performing” schools. It further suggests that these replacement assumptions may underestimate the power of labor-market forces that shape supply and demand, and overestimate the capacity of local districts to compete in these tight markets. Given the array of intense, potentially debilitating human costs associated with reconstitution (Rice & Malen, 2002), districts may not be able to secure the requisite personnel for small-scale, let alone large-scale reconstitution ventures, even under favorable market conditions (Wong, et al., 1999; Finkelstein, et al., 2000). Reconstitution reforms also proceed on the assumption that teachers and administrators are responsible for the low performance of schools and in control of the factors that might make progress on various measures of school improvement inevitable. Such a diagnosis ignores the underlying issues of poverty, ill-health, student mobility, parent availability and other conditions that shape the life chances and the learning opportunities of children and youth.²¹ Reconstitution does not address, directly or indirectly, any of these broad socioeconomic realities and inequities. It is, at best, a one-dimensional solution (restaffing) to a multidimensional problem (school performance).

Research that seeks to uncover how reconstitution can affect school performance in various contexts is necessary in order to determine whether this strategy can withstand the contextual challenges that both necessitate and complicate

education reform. Since reconstitution is advanced as a remedy for inadequate levels of school performance in impoverished social settings, this line of research should receive highest priority.

*Putting the Theory to the Test:
A Call for Restraint and Research*

We have highlighted three interpretations of our effort to “test” the “theory of action” embedded in reconstitution reforms. All three underscore that reconstitution is a risky reform not only because the underlying theory may be suspect but also because the actual effect may be to harm rather than help “low performing” schools. Since the potential for harm may overshadow the hope of improvement, reconstitution is not a benign experiment. Hence our analysis argues for restraint in the deployment of this strategy.

All three interpretations also underscore that reconstitution requires more conceptual and empirical scrutiny than it has received to date. The “theory of action” notion could guide the development of a knowledge base on the substantive viability of this approach to reform. Carefully crafted studies of reconstitution experiments, even if done retrospectively, could help policy actors identify the underlying assumptions and inspect the critical links that must hold if this strategy is to have any chance of realizing its stated aims. Such studies could also help policy makers assess the educational promises that have been attached to this reform and weigh them against the programmatic and personal costs that accompany this policy option.

Such rational, research-based appraisals are not the only forces that may influence policy decisions.²² But, that observation does not negate the importance of examining the substantive viability (as well as the political utility) of this (or any other) policy option. In some instances, “as evaluative evidence piles up confirming or disconfirming [our theories], it can influence the way people think about issues, what they see as problematic and where they choose to place their bets” (Weiss, 1995 p. 71). The evaluative evidence we have offered suggests that, for now, we ought to resist the temptation to gamble on reconstitution and capitalize instead, on opportunities to retest the reform’s “theory of action” to more definitively determine whether this strategy is a sensible and defensible way to “turn around” troubled schools.

Notes

¹ The “theory of action” idea is associated with the work of Argyris and Schon, 1978, Patton, 1978, and Weiss, 1998. Since others coined the phrase, we set it off with quotation marks throughout the article.

² This study was supported by a partnership between the local district and a university-based interdisciplinary study team. The partnership was initiated and developed by Barbara Finkelstein, principal investigator. Other members of the research team included the authors of this article, Robert Croninger, Donna Muncey, Donna Redmond Jones, Liza Briggs, Kim Thrasher, Reem Mourad, and Jean Snell. Richard Hopkins, Heinrich Mintrop, Takao Kamibepu and Ryoko Kato Tsuneyoshi also assisted with various aspects of this research project. The research team collected data between March 1998 and December 1999 and issued an interim and final research report (See Finkelstein et al., 1998, 2000). We are grateful to the informants, administrative assistants, and office managers who invested a considerable amount of time participating in interviews, locating documents, reviewing records and otherwise supporting the data collection process. We are also grateful to the district and the University of Maryland for their support of this research. While we are indebted to others, we take sole responsibility for the interpretations we set forth in this article.

³ We reviewed formal policy statements, school improvement plans and district reports on reform ventures, teacher characteristics, teacher turnover, school climate and student achievement. We also reviewed district regulations and instructions for developing school improvement plans and addressing state and district testing requirements, as well as official correspondence between district and site actors, teacher journals, logs and files of district and site employees, budget proposals, agendas and minutes of relevant meetings, school calendars and schedules, staff development materials, site generated newsletters, fliers, and internal memos.

⁴ The vast majority of these interviews were semi-structured exchanges that ranged from 20 minutes to three hours, with most falling between 45 and 90 minutes. These semistructured interviews were augmented by informal exchanges, which ranged from 10 minutes to more than two hours, but averaged about 55 minutes.

⁵ Observations were carried out in virtually all classrooms in the elementary schools and in 19 classrooms in the middle school.

⁶ Many discuss these various checks for bias and error in data analysis as well as the multiple checks for bias and error we incorporated during data collection. See especially, Murphy, 1980.

⁷ Comments such as “things come back” indicate some informants did not believe it was safe to express their views. Multiple counter comments such as “No

secrets here” or “We feel like we can tell you anything and everything,” suggest most were willing to be candid.

⁸ The district-articulated criteria for selecting the six schools included low test scores, uneven performance on state-mandated tests, inadequate attendance, high absentee and suspension rates, and a number of poverty indicators and diversity factors. In addition to these factors, the district considered the availability of special grant monies that might be reallocated to support comprehensive improvements at each site.

⁹ The loss of support for the reconstituted schools can be explained at least in part, by the pressure to reallocate resources to other low-performing schools that the state was targeting for take-over and by the erosion of support for the superintendent who was, by the second year of the reform, no longer in a position to champion this initiative. For a detailed analysis, see Jones & Malen, 2002.

¹⁰ As we have elaborated elsewhere (Malen, et al. 1999), the reconstitution initiative was a hybrid reform, reflecting elements of what Brian Rowan termed “commitment” and “control” approaches to school improvement. Mandated changes in the composition of faculty resemble options that fall under the rubric of “control” strategies. Engendering a school improvement process that relies heavily on collegial orientations, local capacity, collective ingenuity and collaborative relationships between schools and communities is more closely aligned with the central tenets of the “commitment” strategy. While it is not unusual for policies to incorporate elements of these two broad approaches, it can be difficult to do so, since the approaches operate on different, and at times contradictory assumptions.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of how the politics of enactment complicated implementation, see Jones & Malen, 2002. The manner in which contextual forces affected implementation is addressed in subsequent sections of this article.

¹² The reconstituted schools had been plagued by high staff turnover prior to the reform. That is one of the reasons the superintendent asked those who were hired or rehired, to remain at the reconstituted schools for at least three years.

¹³ Most educators did not exercise the exit option easily. Teachers talked about “being torn,” about “deserting” the school, about “betraying the Hispanic community” or “letting down my [meaning African America] people.” But they did depart, especially when they realized they could still, as one put it, “keep my dream of working with needy kids,” but do so “in a district that supports its teachers.” In a context characterized by intense competition for certified teachers, the exit option became a viable and attractive option for many who left the reconstituted schools to take teaching positions in other schools or in neighboring

districts. For others, the exit option meant leaving the public schools altogether, to pursue other career paths.

¹⁴ As one anonymous reviewer added, these concerns may have been well founded. This reviewer maintains that first year teachers tend to be in a “survival mode.” They may not be able to cope simultaneously with the demands of teaching and the demands of redesigning a school, even if they receive additional professional support. The reconstitution reform we studied intensified the strain that first year teachers tend to experience but provided only minimal professional support.

¹⁵ One anonymous reviewer added that, given what we know about the “primacy of local leadership in shepherding and championing school improvement efforts,” this turnover rate may have had “devastating” effects on this reform. As we note in the text, this turnover rate did undermine trust and commitment. It may also have undermined capacity for school improvement as well.

¹⁶ There were no indications in our interview transcripts, in our observations of meetings and classrooms or in district or site documents, that the reform precipitated fundamental changes in the schools’ governance structures, organizational processes or instructional programs. For example, in terms of governance, only a few of the parents we interviewed had received any information about what the reconstitution initiative was supposed to accomplish or how they could be involved in the school improvement process. When asked if they were involved in school decision making, the typical response was “Can we be?” or “I didn’t think we could do that . . . I’d love to be part of deciding what we do. I never knew we could help with that.” We did not see groups of parents actively involved in the school based management or school improvement team meetings we observed. Documents indicated that parents were encouraged to attend special events, monitor homework and otherwise support the efforts of educators in the schools. References to less traditional roles, such as equal partner in policymaking were not evident in these materials. For more detailed documentation regarding the reconstitution initiative’s inability to engender the types of changes the superintendent had identified as key, see Finkelstein, et al., 2000; Muncey, Jones, & Croninger, 2000; Rice & Croninger, 2001; Malen, 2000; Malen, et al., 1999.

¹⁷ We are not trying to support or refute the relevance or importance of the characteristics the superintendent hoped to engender in reconstituted schools. We are simply noting that reconstitution may have made it more difficult to engender these qualities in the schools we studied. For example, some argue that collaborative structures and professional communities may be critical components of school improvement (See, for example, Bryk, Cambrun, & Louis 1999; Louis &

Marks, 1999). Insofar as this view is valid, reconstitution may pose problems. This reform, by design, disassembles established professional networks. In the sites we studied, the reform made it more difficult to create a new, collegial infrastructure.

¹⁸ Many discuss the criteria for establishing causality. See, for example, Asher, 1983.

¹⁹ Our study design does not allow us to say whether the increases or the decreases in student achievement occurred because of or in spite of the reconstitution reform. What can be said is that in the best case scenario (the school showing steady gains), neither of the prerequisite conditions addressed in this article (more capable and committed staffs; redesigned schools) were evident in this site. In fact, this site had the highest turnover rate (34%) at the end of the first year of the reform, and the second highest turnover rate (46%) at the end of the second year of the reform.

²⁰ Case studies of reconstitution experiments that are accompanied by reductions in class size, opportunities to identify and assess alternative approaches to curriculum and instruction, and other forms of support do not attempt to determine whether the “effects” attributed to reconstitution flow from changes in staffing or from the package of supports provided. (See, for example, Archibald & Odden, 2000; Odden & Archibald, 2000; Fraga, Erlichson, & Lee, 1998.)

²¹ Many discuss these factors. (See, for example, Anyon, 1997; and Sadovnik & Semel, 2001.)

²² As this case illustrates, a reconstitution initiative may be a political response to a host of pressures that are threatening the legitimacy of the system and the tenure of its leadership (Jones & Malen, 2002). In this case, reconstitution did not yield either the political or the educational outcomes that the superintendent and others sought.

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