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Standards Deviation: How Schools Misunderstand Education Policy

Standards Deviation: How Schools Misunderstand Education Policy, by James P. Spillane (Harvard University Press).

Spillane argues that problems in implementing education policy are due primarily to insufficient attention to the "sensemaking" needs of educators, by which he means the ability of teachers and administrators to understand the task assigned to them. He reaches this conclusion after interviewing administrators and surveying teachers about the implementation of new math and science curricula and other instructional material introduced in Michigan between 1989 and 1996.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The author makes sense when he notes that people find it easier to implement ideas with which they are familiar and that they commonly interpret new policies through a lens conditioned by existing routines. But he ignores what previous studies have repeatedly shown: Local self-interests and perverse institutional incentives are the main obstacles to reform. The author instead takes the naive view that roadblocks are merely "cognitive" and can be overcome by more training and trust.

Unfortunately, Spillane does not sufficiently acknowledge that the lessons learned from Michigan are limited to just a few of the needed reforms. **It is easier to change curricula than to alter administrative or teaching practice.** →

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This is a perfect example of a common, but inadequate, conception of "curriculum." In most of the school districts included in Spillane's study, what he found (in my view -- not necessarily the same as his) is that the real curriculum had not actually changed. There were new scope and sequence documents, some new district- and school-level procedures, etc., but *the course of learning experience that the students actually experienced* (i.e., the actual **curriculum**) had not been transformed substantially (or, at any rate, where there may have been some changes, in most of the districts studied, the curriculum had not been transformed in the ways intended by the standards reform movement).

For the purposes of a class on Curriculum Inquiry, one of the most important things to see here is that the people involved in these schools and districts did not have ways of understanding, thinking about, and communicating about curriculum that would be needed for them even to be aware of this problem, much less pursue inquiry into the nature & causes of the problem, and what can be done about it. (Beyond that, I will be proposing in this course that Inquiry that is more grounded in curriculum principles would enable a more adequate understanding than even Spillane's own framework can provide.)

What do you think? -- Tony