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DOCUMENT 3**Contemporary Ideas about a Third Age of School-Improvement Practice**

This extract, from a paper by two leading experts in the field of school improvement, summarizes the characteristics of successful system-wide attempts at school improvements. The authors define this as a Third Phase or Third Age of school-improvement practice, which stresses the increased focus on pupil outcomes and teachers' professional development.

Third-age school improvement practice and philosophy attempts to draw the lessons from these apparently limited achievements of existing improvement and reform ... There are course variations among these programs that make any global assessment difficult. Nevertheless, if one were to compare these exemplars of third-wave school improvement as a group with the groups of programs in evidence in phases one and two of the school improvement enterprise, it is clear that:

- There has been an enhanced focus upon the importance of pupil outcomes. Instead of the earlier emphasis upon changing the processes of schools, the focus is now upon seeing if these changes are powerful enough to affect pupil outcomes.
- The learning level and the instructional behaviors of teachers have been increasingly targeted for explicit attention, as well as the school level.
- There has been the creation of an infrastructure to enable the knowledge base, both "best practice" and research findings, to be utilized. This has involved an internal focus on collaborative patterns of staff development that enable teachers to inquire into practice, and external strategies for dissemination and networking.
- There has been an increasing consciousness of the importance of capacity building. This includes not only staff development, but also medium-term strategic planning, change strategies that utilize "pressure and support," as well as the intelligent use of external support agencies.
- There has been an adoption of a mixed methodological orientation, in which bodies of quantitative data plus qualitative data are used to measure quality and variation in that quality. This includes an audit of existing classroom and school processes and outcomes, and comparison with desired end states, in particular the educational experiences of different pupil groups.

- There has been an increased emphasis on the importance of ensuring reliability or fidelity in program implementation across all organizational members within schools, a marked contrast with the past when improvement programs did not have to be organizationally “tight.”
- There has been an appreciation of the importance of cultural change to embed and sustain school improvement. There has been a focus on a careful balance between vision building and the adapting of structures to support those aspirations.
- There has been also an increased concern to ensure that the improvement programs relate to, and impact upon, practitioners and practices through using increasingly sophisticated training, coaching, and development programs.

These third-age practices and philosophies of school improvement (more fully described in Hopkins 2001), have only been in development for perhaps the last seven or eight years. Although it is possible to find small-scale elements of some third-age principles in the school improvement enterprise in its first and second phases. Nevertheless, taken together, these practices represent an innovative approach to generating and sustaining improvement in the context of substantial external pressures upon schools to improve, and of a more limited range of support to resource them in the task.

Source: Hopkins, D., and D. Reynolds. 2001. “The Past, Present, and Future of School Improvement: Towards the Third Age.” *British Educational Research Journal* 27(4): 462–63.