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PUBLISHED ARTICLE

"Threat Rigidity, School Reform, and How Teachers View Their Work Inside Current Education Policy Contexts"

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RESEARCH FOCUS

The impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and how ensuing reforms adopted by schools influence instruction, flow of information, and assessment practices.

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

This article reports on a study of teachers at a high school and discusses the ways current federal and state policies influence schools as well as how those schools adopted corresponding reforms that influenced teachers' work. Schools that see the reforms as a threat, often centralize and restrict the flow of information, constrict control, emphasize routine and simplified instructional and assessment practices, and apply strong pressure for school personnel to conform.

KEY FINDINGS

- The policy culture in education at large has engendered significant change in how schools operate, including teacher preparations, how state tests are viewed, instructional practices, and curricula.
- The study examined the interrelationships among teachers, current reform approaches, top-down policy pressures, and the school context.
- The federal and state education policy climate appears to be pressuring local school administrations and school boards in ways that produced an identifiable kind of threat mentality.
- Attempts at school reform efforts were met with a rigid administration and teaching staff, defensiveness coupled with a psychological myopia, both of which sabotaged the reform attempts and created a hostile work environment for the teachers.
- Recent wholesale attacks on the legitimacy of schools as effective learning organizations (e.g., the current press for accountability, teacher quality concerns, etc.) compel different levels of an educational organization to respond in particular ways.
- An organization, when perceiving itself under siege (i.e., threatened or in crisis), responds in identifiable ways: Structures tighten, centralized control increases, conformity is stressed, accountability and efficient measures are emphasized, and alternative or innovative thinking is discouraged.
- School leadership can reduce the effects of threat rigidity if they consider the effects beforehand, plan its course of reform, open communication, encourage innovative thinking, support teachers, and strive to put forward a climate of cooperation and trust.

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