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In the Classroom: Karen Mapp's "Innovations in K–12 Education"

by Elizabeth Gehrman



As a graduate student at HGSE in the 1990s, Karen Mapp took a class titled "Innovations in K–12 Education" with Eliot Professor, Emeritus, Charles V. Willie, and was so impressed that she decided to bring the class back when she returned as a lecturer in January 2005. "In graduate school, I was interested in studying the factors that led to successful partnerships between families and schools," Mapp recalls. "One of the innovations featured in Professor Willie's class was a very successful program on family and community engagement for children from struggling economic environments in Boston's O'Hearn Elementary School and Hernandez Elementary School."

After the principals of both schools spoke to Willie's class, Mapp approached them to ask about the possibility of doing her thesis on their programs. She settled on the O'Hearn School, working with Principal William Henderson to complete her requirements for the administration, planning, and social policy doctorate she eventually received.

Looking to give her own students similar opportunities, Mapp has developed a syllabus that uses in-depth guest lectures in conjunction with readings that examine innovation theory and the abstract framework behind "innovative, provocative, and sometimes controversial" education reform strategies. "It's a little different from Professor Willie's class in that students read about the circumstances that allow innovation to occur," she says, "as well as what stifles innovation."

The students seem to appreciate the diverse perspectives offered. "The first meetings of this class were very different in



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terms of the way we looked at education," says Genevieve Lau, a master's candidate in education policy and management. "We took a little bit of a business perspective, reading from business texts about innovation and thinking about how that could help us make changes for the better in education." Lau also mentions an early emphasis on technologies that could make education more efficient or even revolutionize it.

The first guest speaker of the semester, HGSE senior lecturer James P. Honan, discussed the origins of the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), a joint initiative between the Ed School and Harvard Business School that is working to improve educational outcomes in nine urban school districts around the country. "One thing I like about this class," says Bill Madden-Fuoco, also a master's candidate in education policy and management, "is that it features the opportunity to dialogue with folks who are on the ground trying out the innovations we're exploring. That can help HGSE students on virtually any career path--not only school leadership, but research and evaluation and teaching as well."

The first two weeks of Mapp's course this year focused on the development of principal leadership. The first week, Mapp introduced the topic with a discussion on the logic model behind programs like the Boston Principal Fellowship, a one-year urban principal preparation program offering intensive training through hands-on school leadership and coursework. She used the blackboard to outline challenges in developing quality principals--poor retainment, little practical experience for principals coming up through traditional routes, and the difficulty of finding both the time and money to get credentialed--and asked students to discuss possible responses to these problems and the competencies school leaders need to have. Though eight of her dozen or so students said they had worked as teachers before coming to HGSE, not a single hand went up when Mapp asked whether their principals had been "strong instructional leaders."

The second half of the class was given over to Rachel Curtis, assistant superintendent of the Boston Public Schools and director of the Boston School Leadership Institute (BSLI), who discussed the specifics of the program, which is gaining visibility nationally as a promising model. BSLI started, she said, because the city noticed it took new principals a year or two to "get up to speed," and decided it could help streamline the process by reinforcing practical, mentored experience with theory. The program's foundation is the idea that classroom instruction is the most important thing to developing proficiency in students; that everything else must support instruction; that principals "are the most important lever" in impacting that; and that there are specialized skills principals need to support teachers in instruction. She discussed the challenges and successes of the program, and answered so many questions that the class went over time.

Several students stayed after to continue their conversations

with Curtis or with Mapp, as they did after the following week's class, in which they heard from a fellow who had been through the BSLI program. "It sort of kindled the idea among the students," says Madden-Fuoco, "that the principal fellowship is something they might want to get into at some point."

Getting students excited about various programs is one of Mapp's goals for the class. "One of my real commitments to the Ed School is to do what I can to blend theory and practice," she says. "It's nice that they can hear about these initiatives in an intimate setting, where they can talk to people who are immersed in the work." Other guest speakers included experts on superintendent leadership, alternative school cultures, the small-schools movement, and "data-driven schools."

Students say they see the class not only as a way to help them clarify their own goals and possibly identify research opportunities, but also as a sort of morale booster. "So much of the pedagogy is about the deficits in public education," says Lau. "But there's no point in talking about the problems if you can't ultimately come up with solutions--and this class is all about solutions. Having the speakers makes it a little more concrete, more real, less theoretical. It's inspiring, hearing them talk about innovations that are working."

About the Article

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