This course has three primary goals:

- Inform students about some of the key issues and debates in school improvement and reform,
- Build their knowledge of the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for school reform in practice,
- Develop their capacity to contribute productively to reform efforts in a variety of school contexts.

To do this the course is designed in two sections – a general introduction to some of the key issues and concerns in past and current school improvement efforts and an examination of current school-based strategies for reform and redesign.

Throughout, students will have opportunities to build their skills in analyzing and critiquing school reform efforts, familiarize themselves with the kinds of information and resources available to support reform efforts, and develop their own perspectives and approaches to school reform. The products for the course will include a personal letter describing their own views on school improvement, several weekly assignments, and a major group project that describes a design for a new school or redesign of an existing school in the New York City area (or in other areas with the permission of the instructor).

The course is intended for students from a range of backgrounds and interests including those who have or would like to participate in reform efforts as teachers, administrators, policymakers, evaluators or as members of reform organizations.

**Part 1 – Key issues and concerns in school reform and school change**

**Week 1: Why change? Why not?**
Overview of the course and key issues in school change. Participants will be introduced to the debates around whether or not schools have improved.

**Week 2: What’s involved in change?**
- Senge, P. *The Fifth discipline*. (excerpt).

**Due: 2-3 page letters**
Letters to the presidential candidates, a mayor, superintendent, principal, teacher, or parents that describes what you think needs to change in a particular school or schools in general in order for improvements to be made. In addition to describing some of the key changes that need to be
made, the letters should also address why these changes are the most important and provide a sense of the aspects of your own background or experience that contribute to your beliefs.

For class: Please come prepared to discuss a time when you had to make a significant change in your life or you were involved in an organization that carried out a change effort: How did you respond? How might Senge and Fullan explain what happened?

Students will also have a chance to share their letters and discuss them with a partner.

Week 3: What has changed? What hasn’t? A brief history of key events and issues in school reform: “Incremental” vs. “radical” change; how reforms change schools and schools change reforms; predictable failures, forgotten changes, and the grammar of schooling.

Due: 1 page reading reflection:
Drawing both on the readings and your own experiences in schools, list some of the major changes in schools over the past 100 years and some of the aspects of schools that have not changed. In one page or less, reflect on why some things have changed but others have not.

In class, we will share these lists and reflections and attempt to come up with joint explanations.

Week 4: What should change? Examining how the assumptions behind school reform efforts have changed.

Goals 2000; Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program; NCLB. (see handouts and websites)

Due: Lists of group members for school design.

Due: Reading reflection/Theory of action analysis
Please bring to class a 1-page reflection that describes the theory of action of one policy:

What’s the problem the policy is designed to solve?
What is the primary strategy or key set of activities?
What resources are required? Where do they come from?
What outcomes are expected (over what period of time)?
How are outcomes measured?

These reflections will be used as part of group discussions that examine any key differences in the theories of action over the past 30 years.

Week 5: Why don’t schools change? The perils and the promise of school reform.

Payne, C. & Kwabe, “So Much Reform, So Little Change.”

Due: 1 page reading reflection.
What are the significant similarities and differences between these author’s views of recent school reform efforts? Do they focus on the same problems? Who do they see as the key participants? What do they see as the key resources or strategies for improvement?
Part II – How can we change schools? Whole schools, small schools, and comprehensive reform

Week 6: Setting the stage for school design: Participants will research the context/setting/community of their school.

Due: 2-3 page context and vision statement.
Initial statement should include descriptions of the key problems and opportunities in the setting and an outline of the vision.

In class presentations of contexts and initial visions.

Week 7: What are the essential elements for changing whole schools? What does “radical” redesign entail? Discussion of the key elements of small schools and radical redesigns.

Selected school proposals and designs (handouts and websites).

We will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of several design proposals in order to develop criteria for judging school designs/reforms.

Groups should also come prepared to discuss their key design ideas: What is your overall theory of action? What are the key elements of your design that will enable you to carry out that theory of action?

Week 8: The culture of schools and the problems of change.


We will compare Berger and Cone’s descriptions of key contributors to cultures of “high quality” and “low achievement” -- what ideas cut across them both? What do they tell us about school culture in general? What lessons are there for efforts to change or create new school cultures?

Design groups will also meet to discuss the cultures in their schools and communities now: How can you create the kind of culture that will enable you to achieve your vision? What kinds of resistance can you expect?

Week 9: Curriculum, instruction, and “whole-school” reform:

Selected readings from reform programs

We will explore diverse curricula from programs and approaches that offer “whole-school” designs for new and existing schools. Approaches will include core academic approaches like Success for All or Core Knowledge; standards-based approaches like America’s Choice, and understanding-based approaches such as Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound. One member of each design group will prepare a summary of the assumptions and strengths and weaknesses of one of the approaches to share with their design team members.

Week 10: Staffing, teacher learning, and professional development.


In class, we will draw on the readings to discuss staffing plans and plans for professional development for the school designs. What will the staff consist of? How will designs ensure staff members have the skills they need? How will staff will be evaluated and compensated? What rewards and incentives will be available?

Week 11: Initial design overviews.

Due: 3-5 page design overviews.

Design overviews should describe the school context, the theory of action, and the key design elements that will make it possible to carry out the theory of action.

In class, overviews will be presented in a “poster” format. Each student will be expected to provide written feedback on one design.

Thanksgiving break (No class)

Week 12: Community involvement and school change: What roles are there for parents and community members in schools? What role is there for schools in the community?


Cases of community organizing including:

Design team members will review one of the three cases to identify key issues that may need to be addressed in their own designs and to identify key strategies or approaches to community involvement that may facilitate the work of their school.

Design groups will also discuss the roles that community members will play in their school: How will you ascertain and take into account the concerns of the community? What kinds of community resources and support will you seek? What resistance might you encounter and how will you respond to it?

Week 13: Assessment and Accountability. Participants will consider different aspects of assessment and accountability including assessment for students and teachers and accountability to the community and relevant authorities.

McDonald, J. The dilemmas of planning backwards. Providence, RI: Coalition of Essential Schools.


In class, design groups will develop a plan for assessment and accountability: how will you determine whether or not students are making adequate progress? How will you assess the work of teachers? How will you demonstrate the value of your approach and build support for your school in the wider community?

Week 14 & 15: Final design presentations: Poster presentations and discussions of the evolution and key changes made in the school designs.

Due December 22nd by 5 PM: Final school design proposals.
Expectations and Assessment

This course is designed to build the knowledge and understanding of each participant and to develop a deeper collective understanding of key aspects of school-based reform. In a number of instances, participants will be reading different pieces or reviewing different programs and will be expected to share their observations and findings with the rest of the class.

Initial assignments include a 2-3 page letter describing participant’s views on school improvement and three 1-page written reflections. The primary assignments revolve around the preparation of a proposal for the design of a new school or the redesign of an existing school. These assignments include a 2-3 page initial design plan, a 3-5 page design overview, and a final design proposal. Proposals and analyses can be produced in a standard essay format, but those interested in experimenting with different formats (such as a web-site) are also encouraged to discuss the possibilities with the instructor.

Because of the complexity of developing a school design, the need for a variety of kinds of expertise and background knowledge, and the limits on time, all students are expected to work in groups of 3-4.

Grading will be based on the timely completion of all readings and assignments and:

Participation in class (30%)
(Including regular and timely attendance, preparation for class, contributions to discussion, and respect for and responsiveness to the contributions of others)
Weekly reflections (25%)
Vision statement, design overview, and final proposal (45%)
(Criteria to be discussed in class including: evolution and logic of plan or analysis, responsiveness to feedback, clarity of ideas, and power of presentation)

Each participant in a group project will receive their own grade. No incompletes will be given.
Structure of the assignments

Introductory letters.
Write a 2-3 page letter that you could send to the President, the mayor, a superintendent, principal, teachers or parents that describes your vision for school improvement and reform. What are the key changes that need to be made in schools in order to improve them? Why are these important? What aspects of your own background or experience contribute to your beliefs? A particular school or schools in general can be the focus of the letter.

This assignment is designed to give participants a chance to share their initial thoughts on schooling and schooling improvement and introduce themselves to the instructor and other class members. Participants are encouraged to make the letters as engaging and creative as they wish. The letters will be shared with classmates and the instructor. No grades will be given, but all assignments that are completed on time and are in good order will be considered satisfactory.

Reading reflections.
Reading reflections including the theory of action analysis should be no more than a page. They should be written to be shared with other members of the class. Reflections that are late, incomplete, or unsatisfactory will receive a 0.

School design documents
2-3 page context and vision statement: Succinctly describe the school and/or community where your school will be located. What are the most important characteristics? The key problems that you design will address? The key resources, assets, or opportunities you can build on? What are two or three of the key aspects of your vision for the school? How does your vision respond to and fit the needs and interests of the setting and community where your school will be located? This statement should be written as if it could be shared with other educators, funders or community leaders to help build support for your ideas. If you wish, you may include appendices of additional data or information that may help to illustrate your assessment of the setting or your plans.

3-5 page design overview: Succinctly state your theory of action and the key design elements that will enable you to carry out you theory of action. What is your vision and how will it address the key problems and accomplish your key goals? Overviews should provide an initial discussion of some (though not all) of the key aspects of their school design.

Final designs: The final designs should be no more than 25 pages. They should include descriptions of all the key aspects of the school including:

- School organization and culture (size, management structure, decision-making process, staffing; hiring, students selection process, etc.)

- Teaching and learning (curriculum requirements, pedagogical approach, professional development, scheduling etc.)

- Assessment (nature of classroom assessments, accountability strategy, etc.)
• Community involvement (roles of parents and community members in teaching and learning, decision-making etc.; role of the students and school in the community)

Recognizing that no design can address all critical issues, the final designs should also include a discussion of any key challenges or issues that have yet to be resolved. A detailed budget is not required for the final design, but designers should take into account the amount of money likely to be available for a school in their community (by looking at budgets for comparable schools or sample budgets from the School Redesign network etc.) and demonstrate that their design can be carried out within that context.

In addition to written descriptions, students are encouraged to include artifacts or illustrations that will help the reader to get a sense of what this design will look like in practice. These could include blueprints or photographs of possible school facilities or sites, schedules, course catalogs, guides for prospective parents and students etc. These could be created by the authors or drawn from those used by other schools or organizations. The final designs should be prepared as if they could be submitted to a funding agency or school board for approval for further development. Thus, they should demonstrate that the design is thoughtful and has the potential for success in the future; designs are not expected to be ready for immediate implementation!

Final reflections: As a cover memo for their final design or analysis, each student should prepare a brief personal reflection that contains their assessment of their final product and their contribution to its development (if they were part of a group). What are its strengths? How would you improve it if you could? The reflection should also describe any key “takeaways” from the course and any suggestions for improving the course in the future.