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## A Message From the Editor

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**O**ne of the high priority issues for the American Association of School Administrators is to promote systems thinking in the administration of school districts.

To attain this goal, they established the AASA Center for System Leadership™ was as a vehicle that fosters, develops and supports superintendents of schools and other school system leaders who are leading the transformation of public education.

The AASA Center for System Leadership™, therefore, is not a place to which leaders come to receive services. Instead, the Center addresses the leadership needs of school leaders through partnerships with AASA state affiliates and established national and regional networks.

In this role, the Center is a catalyst for the revision of administrator preparation programs and for the offering of in-service programs so that both present and future school system leaders will have the knowledge and skills necessary to lead the transformation of public education. To view the many activities that AASA is conducting related to systems thinking, please go to:  
<http://www.aasa.org/leadership/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2301>

This issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is theme-based on systems thinking and its application to school district administration. The Journal issued a call for papers to AASA members and professors of educational administration last spring to submit a proposal for consideration of publication in this winter issue. We received a gratifying response! Thus, this issue is devoted to the topic. Upcoming issues of the Journal, including spring 2008, will also contain systems-related articles.

Enjoy!

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## Think Systemically, Act Systematically

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In an effort to be comprehensive, schools often outline sweeping plans for improvement in multiple goal areas. Although well-intended, the efforts may be either too diffuse to have much impact, or so overwhelming that staff become immobilized. A school that chooses to proceed in too limited a manner, on the other hand, may run the risk of obtaining only partial or temporary success, without the necessary system supports in place to support long-term sustainability.

How can schools strike a balance between these two extremes? School improvement specialists at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) suggest that schools can begin operating from a systems perspective while tackling real, pressing challenges by designing and implementing a “fractal improvement experience” – a manageable, carefully designed change initiative that is meant to help staff members gain skills in thinking systemically and acting systematically while building a sense of collective efficacy and making measurable progress.

### What is a fractal improvement experience?

A “fractal” is a mathematical term that refers to a repeating geometric pattern that is reproducible at any magnification or reduction within the whole (e.g., clouds, snowflakes, ferns). McREL uses the term *fractal improvement experience* to describe a small, systemic improvement experience because encapsulated within this experience are all the required procedural parts of a major school improvement initiative.

The use of the term fractal reflects an understanding that school improvement efforts are “nested” and occur at many levels within an organization. It also implies that “big,” or systemic, school improvement is made up of many smaller efforts, but is also greater than the sum of those individual efforts.

The focus of the fractal experience should have broad impact and require wide participation by staff members, yet be narrow enough to implement and see results in a short

period of time (e.g., 4-6 weeks). During the fractal experience, schools quickly make their way through an entire improvement cycle (see Figure 1 below) by:

1. Taking stock of current needs using data
2. Focusing on the right solution
3. Taking collective action
4. Monitoring implementation and the impact of efforts on students
5. Maintaining momentum by identifying sustainability strategies

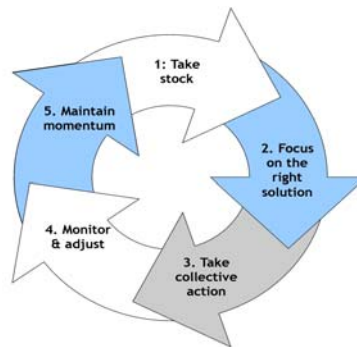


Figure 1. Improvement cycle.

Since fractals are limited in scope and completed in a relatively short period of time, they offer the potential for the designer of the experience to assist those involved in “connecting the dots” between the steps of initial assessment, planning for and taking collective action, post-testing, and attribution of ultimate success.

### Why use a fractal improvement experience?

A common image of schools is that of a series of one room school houses connected only by a common hallway. Given the prevailing culture of independent practice, it is not uncommon to find school faculties who have *never* experienced measurable success that they attribute to working together as a team.

Changing the culture of a school to one of shared responsibility and collective action is

foundational to improvement, but is a complex and lengthy process. Engaging in a fractal experience provides a vehicle for a school staff to begin changing the culture of their school while making real, measurable gains for students in a short period of time.

The fractal experience also allows the school to experience an initial small success, the power of which is described by Jim Collins in *Good to Great* (2001):

Tremendous power exists in the fact of continued improvement and the delivery of results. Point to tangible accomplishments – however incremental at first – and show how these steps fit into the context of an overall concept that will work. When you do this in such a way that

people see and feel the buildup of momentum, they will line up with enthusiasm (p. 174-175).

As the school staff begin to see real changes that result from their actions, the staff will build collective efficacy; that is, “the perception of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can execute the courses of action necessary to have positive effects on students” (Goddard, 2001).

A strong sense of collective efficacy actually outweighs characteristics over which practitioners generally feel that they have no influence. Researchers Hoy, Smith, and Sweetland (2002) note that a high level of collective efficacy can have a greater effect on achievement than student socioeconomic status. Goddard finds similar effects concerning race (Goddard, 2003).

Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) suggest that collective efficacy can be developed by providing mastery experiences – successful teaching and learning experiences that engender even more successful experiences. A fractal improvement

experience is a type of mastery experience designed to involve teachers in acting systematically to achieve focused results, while thinking systemically about how the interrelationships among individuals, structures, and processes affect the initiative.

The fractal improvement experience is central to McREL’s *Success in Sight: A Comprehensive Approach to School Improvement* (<http://www.mcrel.org/successinsight/>).

### **A fractal improvement experience in action**

School teams who use systems thinking to facilitate change recognize that a change in one part of the system affects and is dependent upon other parts of the system. They can anticipate potential barriers and unintended consequences of initiatives. They also use feedback loops and make ongoing adjustments.

The following is a snapshot of one school’s fractal improvement experience in action.

*Annette Cole, the new principal of Jefferson High School, pondered the results of her introductory interviews with staff members as she prepared for the start of the school year. Repeatedly teachers described themselves and their colleagues as hard working and dedicated, yet unable to overcome barriers to improvement that they attributed to serving students within a community of “working class families too busy to participate in the education of their children.” Dr. Cole wondered whether the teachers at Jefferson understood the extent to which collective, team-oriented actions could improve the learning of their students*

*During the first meeting with her leadership team, Dr. Cole proposed a short, beginning-of-the-year improvement project. The team agreed, but wondered where to begin. Dr. Cole offered that in her conversations with teachers, she heard many complaints about students having poor writing backgrounds and claims that students, in general, “can’t even write a good paragraph.”*

*The team quickly agreed that this was a common problem, and decided to do a quick but thorough review of the data to shed more light on the potential causes. After considering the issue from many angles, the team hypothesized that one of the most*

*likely reasons that students were unable to write high quality paragraphs was because they were never provided with explicit instruction and common expectations.*

*“What if,” one team member proposed, “we collect some data about paragraph writing ability the first week of school, and all of us, regardless of our subject area, incorporate instruction on paragraph writing into our first two weeks of teaching? Then, we could give a quick post-test to determine our progress.”*

*The team agreed that the proposed intervention was manageable, yet likely to make an impact. But in order to be successful, they knew that they would have to step back and view the larger picture, carefully considering anything that might make or break this initiative. For example, they discussed what exactly the intensive writing instruction would look like in the classroom, who would participate, ways to support content area teachers in developing paragraph writing activities, and strategies for communicating about the initiative with families and other stakeholders. Some team members wondered whether they should adopt a whole new writing program, but Dr. Cole encouraged teachers to instead stay focused on their smaller, more immediate goal of improving students’ ability to write coherent paragraphs. They designed a quick and easily administered assessment and a common format for recording students’ progress. And they developed a set of talking points that would help them explain to their colleagues the advantages of this kind of shared, systemic action.*

*When the team reconvened to examine the results of their fractal improvement experience, they were excited to see increases in student proficiency. They discussed the importance attributing their success to their own collegial efforts toward the shared goal of improved writing instruction. Finally, they took time to reflect on the structures and processes they believed helped make this effort a success so they could carry those forward with the next initiative.*

Jefferson High School’s story illustrates the power of using a fractal improvement experience to think systemically and act systematically in improving student outcomes. Jefferson’s team is now ready to take on another challenge, perhaps of a slightly larger scope and complexity. Each time they work through a new change initiative, they will stay focused on a common goal and make sure that

all parts of the system (e.g., professional development, schedule, instructional materials, assessments, parent initiatives) are aligned to support the goal. Over time, their efforts to strike a balance between systemic thinking and systematic action will lead them to increased collective efficacy, capacity, and ability to sustain improved outcomes for students (see Figure 2).

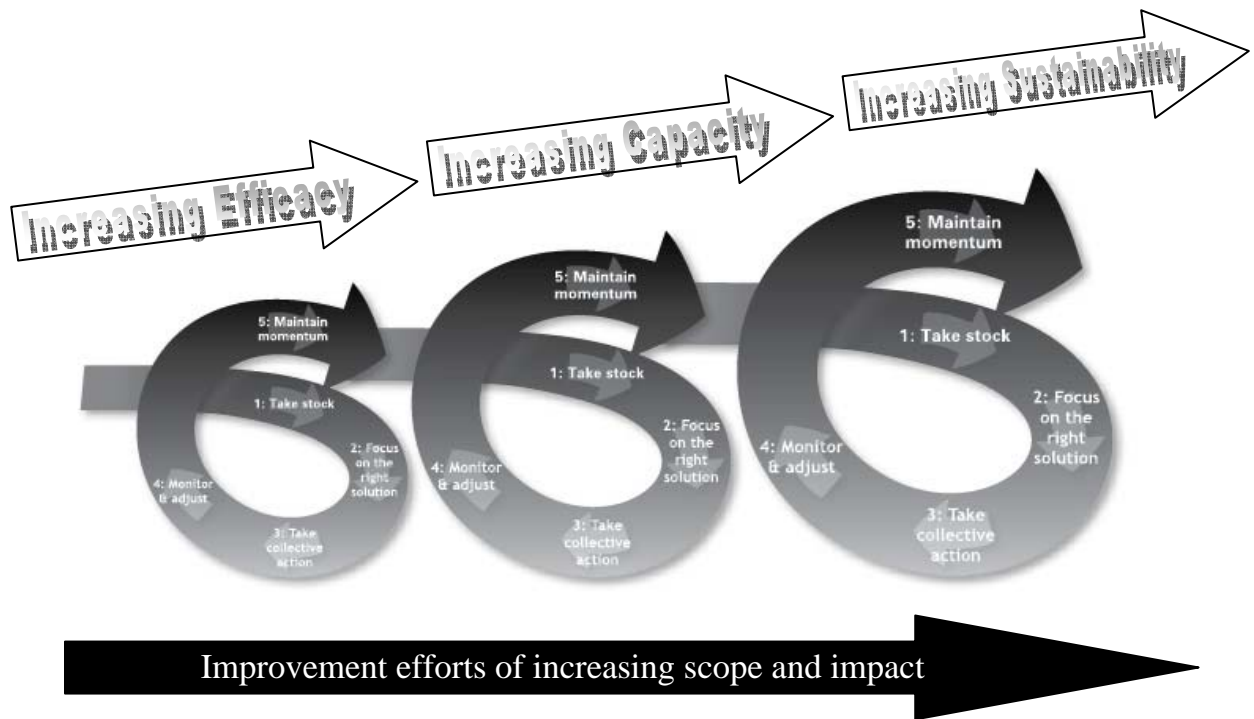


Figure 2. Improvement efforts of increasing scope and impact (McREL, 2006).



### **Tips for Designing and Implementing a Fractal Improvement Experience**

- Design the fractal to take advantage of existing energy within the system: *go with the energy*.
- Select a goal (or small portion of a goal) from the existing school improvement plan and a strategy that lends itself to a short-term effort.
- Design methods for monitoring the intervention.
- Develop simple, easily administered assessments that can be used for both pre- and post-measurement.
- Develop common record keeping systems that allow you to track the implementation and results of the effort. Ensure that the system allows for easy data aggregation and manipulation.
- Gain agreement from all before moving ahead.
- Ensure that all staff members are absolutely clear about expectations for their individual roles in the improvement effort.
- Debrief and learn from the experience together. Be sure to attribute the success or failure to the collective effort and identify steps to either sustain successful change or improve results during the next improvement cycle.

### **Author Biographies**

Danette Parsley is a senior director at the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) and leads McREL's field work in systemic improvement. She has extensive experience providing professional development and technical assistance to schools, districts, and state departments of education, and in developing products and tools to assist schools and districts engaging in continuous improvement. Parsley supports all areas of systemic improvement, including data-driven decision making, purposeful communities, standards-based curriculum and assessment systems, and afterschool teaching and learning practices. She also organizes and directs McREL's work with two regional technical assistance centers. Before coming to McREL, Parsley was a classroom teacher and adolescent counselor. She is pursuing her doctorate in education in organization change at Pepperdine University.

Mike Galvin, formerly a lead consultant at the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), works as a consultant with Focused Leadership Solutions. He specializes in the areas of leadership, organizational development, and school improvement. Before consulting, Galvin served for twelve years as an elementary school principal and was recognized nationally for his efforts in school improvement and character education. As a consultant, he works with state departments of education, school districts, and school sites in both rural and urban settings, assisting school leaders and leadership teams in implementing practical strategies for shared leadership and improvement, and in coordinating the efforts of districts and their schools in working together toward shared goals.

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## Where Does Conflict Management Fit in the System's Leadership Puzzle?

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Superintendents are faced with conflicts every day. The conflicts arise around issues of personnel, community roles, funding, politics, and work/life balance. Good leadership involves an understanding of how to deal with conflict, whom to involve in the conflict resolution, how to set up structures and processes that ensure conflict doesn't reoccur, and the ability to use conflict in a positive manner.

This pattern of solid leadership is required at a time when school systems are easy targets for legislators, the community, parents, and have casually been labeled as a modern day social problem since a "A Nation at Risk" was accepted by president Reagan in 1983 (Bracey, 2003).

In 1995, Kowalski (1995) investigated the conflicting situations that affect the decisions made by superintendents. Kowalski's list included the conflict of resources, values,

education research, counsel from school personnel, socio-economic conditions, school board member opinions, counsel from teachers, community politics, union pressures, and concern for personal success. In a parallel study, Cook (2005) identified similar job stressors that created conflict in the community college presidency.

Skills related to finding resources in financially strapped districts, personnel consistencies, politics at the local and state levels, and the development of board members' efficacy were all noted as necessary for successful leadership tenures.

Superintendents look to current literature to assist with the development of positive conflict resolution skills. These skills are not only preferable for current superintendents, but necessary for positive career development of future superintendents.

Several authors have examined the various types of conflicts that leaders typically encounter. The Sphere of Conflict model, proposed by Moore (2003), offered five types of conflicts: Data, Interests, Relational, Structural, and Values-based. Brief descriptions of these types of conflicts and possible interventions are worth an explanation here.

### **Data-based conflicts**

Moore (2003) has suggested the following definitions regarding these conflicts. Data-based conflicts are those that are caused by lack of information, misinformation, different interpretations of data, different views of what is relevant, or different assessment procedures. Possible interventions in data-based conflicts include deciding which data are important to examine and agreeing on a process of collecting and accessing data.

### **Interest-based conflicts**

Interest-based conflicts are caused by perceived or actual competition, or interests based on content, substantive, procedural, or psychological criteria.

Possible interventions in interest-based conflicts include focusing on the interests and not the positions, agreeing on objective criteria, looking for integrative solutions that meet the needs of all the parties, developing tradeoffs that satisfy particular needs, and mutually searching for ways to expand options and/or resources.

### **Relational-based conflicts**

Relational-based conflicts involve strong emotions, misperceptions, stereotypes, poor communication or miscommunication, and/or repetitive negative behavior. Possible interventions in relationship-based conflicts include controlling expression of emotions through ground rules, legitimizing feelings,

clarifying perceptions, building positive perceptions of the other, improving the quality of communications, blocking negative and repetitive behaviors, and encouraging positive mutual problem solving techniques (Moore, 2003).

### **Structurally-based conflicts**

Structurally-based conflicts are caused by destructive patterns of behavior or interaction; unequal control, ownership, or distribution of resources; unequal power of authority; geographic, physical, or environmental factors that hinder cooperation; and time constraints. Interventions in structurally-based conflicts include defining and/or changing roles, replacing destructive behavior patterns, reallocating the control of resources, establishing a fair decision-making process, modifying the means of one party influencing the other, changing the physical or environmental relationship, modifying external pressures, and altering time restraints (Moore, 2003).

### **Values-based conflicts**

Values-based conflicts are those where people have different criteria for evaluating ideas or behaviors, exclusive intrinsically valuable goals, or different ways of life, ideology, and religion. Interventions in values-based conflicts include avoiding defining the problem in terms of values, allowing the parties to agree to disagree, and creating a super-ordinate set of values and goals for the organization (Moore, 2003).

The value of understanding how these types of conflicts function and occur becomes readily apparent to the observer. Research (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Weick, 1976) has indicated that education organizations tend toward a loose coupling of positions and processes within organizations. This concept of

loose coupling of positions and processes provides a model that limits the connection between the superintendent, the principal, and the teaching staff.

This limited connection allows for natural conflicts to occur. Exploration of these connections allows us to move to the next step toward solving those conflicts and creating the environment for a positive systems leadership approach. In addition, research reported by AASA (Chapman, 1997; Glass, 1992) included a number of stressors that new superintendents identified as significant job indicators. This research indicated specific conflict stressors as similar among the participants including:

1. high visibility
  2. diverse constituencies
  3. employees who were incompetent or charged with sexual assault
  4. pressure from right-wing political groups
  5. becoming acquainted with the district and community
  6. deciding who to trust
  7. lack of people in whom to confide
- (Czaja & Harman, 1997).

As superintendents review interventions for conflicts with which they are faced, it is useful first to determine the type of conflict they are dealing with. Generally speaking, data, interest, and relational conflicts are the easier conflicts to resolve: structural and values-related conflicts often involve an alteration or change in someone's worldview in order to mitigate the dispute.

Drastic worldview changes are very rare and often involve a major event in someone's life. It is more likely in the case of structural and values conflicts that people would come to recognize the validity of the other person's point of view rather than adopt it or markedly change their own.

Each case a superintendent faces will require a different set of tools and interventions. The superintendent should be ready to modify their activities according to the situation.

These modifications will depend on several factors: the extent to which the conflict has enveloped the organization, the timing of the superintendent's involvement, the capacity of others in the system to deal with the conflict, the procedures others have utilized before the problem reached the level of the superintendent, the complexity of the issues in the conflict, media involvement, and which parties need to be involved in the final resolution of the issues.

In viewing the role of the superintendent in the overall school system, it is important to note that the superintendent should structure a systems-leadership approach that will enable conflict to create positive change within the system regardless of the type of conflict.

A strong visionary approach to the school can be examined through a review of specific leadership literature. Rosborg (2003) noted that the problems that beset schools must be approached in a confrontational manner. The canny superintendent will understand that their organizations are constructed of multiple systems that feed into the overall organizational structure.

Knowledge of how to both educate and inform the constituencies of the school district is critical to success. Empowering those at the lowest levels of the organization to handle disputes as they occur will not only increase their effectiveness, but will free the superintendent to deal with the more complex issues facing the school or community as a whole. Specific knowledge of how to handle

various types of conflicts adds to the leader's toolbox and strengthens the skills of all those in the organization. This process will lead to fewer conflicts arising.

Equally important is the superintendent's approach to a work-life balance. Conflict between work responsibilities and a healthy lifestyle are similar to other highly stressful occupations. Accountability to a partner or friend, an example of a possible relationship-based conflict, is necessary to maintain a high level of work-life balance. Mayo Clinic staff (*Work-life balance: Ways to restore harmony and reduce stress*, 2006) provided excellent information on managing a work-life balance that will help manage the stress of a superintendent.

Wheatley (1999) included the concepts of taking stock in one's own place within the universe. This "centeredness" or knowing of oneself will allow the superintendent who may be struggling with work-life balance to find equilibrium. Leaders who effectively deal with work-life balance do not project unnecessary personal stress on to others in the workplace.

In a qualitative study (Durso, 2006), superintendents from two northern California K-12 districts participated in addressing the perceptions of life-work balance and subsequent conflicts identified through the expectations of their careers and their personal lives.

Incongruence between core personal values and expectations of the job performance created an environment in which job enrichment could not occur. Only through the balance achieved between the expectations and the individual's perceptions of core personal values being met was job satisfaction achieved (Durso, 2006).

The correlation of job satisfaction with

actual job performance was not, however, readily identifiable in this study. One conclusion may be to view the job of superintendent as a system. A system built on stratification of approaches to conflicts and perceptions may allow a superintendent to align personal values with the expectations of the position.

Applying a systems thinking approach to the superintendency may suggest a return to the garbage can metaphor of an educational organization (Cohen et al., 1972). This metaphor indicated that educational systems are only loosely connected. Each department or interest group relies on this loose connection to add to the overall perception of connection through disconnection of ideas.

Decisions are made based on assumptions that do not necessarily address a specific problem and may be counter-productive to the overall organization. However, this may be only partially true.

In reviewing the systems thinking process, one must look beyond the educational organization of the past and review the needs and expectations of the educational organization of the future (interest-based). In doing so, we move from the loose coupling concepts espoused by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) and by Weick (1976) into a tightly interconnected organization defined by systems thinking (Wheatley, 1999), rather than data-based thinking alone.

Sterling (2003) provided extensive research in the area of systems thinking in education. Sterling's work reflected that systems thinking in educational change processes is crucial. Additionally, Sterling concluded that a participative learning environment (values-based) must be present to create a sustainable environment where teaching and learning occur.

Sterling's concerns addressed current assumptions that are held about our education environments that may create internal conflicts as we engage in a systems thinking process, but will inevitably provide an environment where needed change may occur. At the very least, systems thinking will provide leaders with a framework to decide the type of conflict being dealt with and how best to handle the conflict.

Best practices in using systems thinking must include a process of learning for the

organization. Each member of the organization must be introduced to the concepts of both systems thinking and conflict resolution, and learn how each system is interdependent upon the other. Each system and process must be re-engineered to reflect the mission of the school district. Best practices in systems thinking and conflict resolution encourage the development and education of each member of the school community and the accountability of each member toward school success (NCREL, 2004).

### Author Biographies

Vickie Cook's research interests include the effects of intergenerational learning in the classroom and workplace and the effects of literacy on lifelong education. She has published work in *Journal of Postsecondary Leadership* and *NCPEA Connexions*, as well as others journals. She received the 2006 research scholarship grant from the Illinois Council on Continuing and Higher Education for her research exploring Illinois Family Literacy projects. Cook has made numerous presentations at national, regional, and state conferences including 2006 presentations at the Teaching Professor Conference, Illinois Family Literacy Conference and National Association of Secondary School Principals Conference within a Conference. She has conducted leadership seminars for commissions of the Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Adult & Continuing Educators Association, America Association of Libraries, and other educational groups. She is an assistant professor in the department of educational leadership at the University of Illinois in Springfield.

Linda Johnston is the director of the Center for Conflict Management and the masters in science in conflict management at Kennesaw State University. She serves on the executive committee of both Hands Along the Nile and the International Peace Research Association (IPRAF). She administers the Senesh fellowship program for the IPRAF. Her current research interests include racial and ethnic conflict, conflicts in health care, conflicts in sports, narrative and discourse analysis, and world view conflicts. Her most recent work included a year-long fellowship with Hands Along the Nile to develop dialogues between Egyptians and Americans, administering a state department funded grant to develop a peace institute at Tavrishesky National University in Ukraine, worked with the Alternative Dispute Resolution Association of Barbados, and conducted workshops in the Republic of Georgia. Johnston co-authored a report on the viewpoint of employers on the current status of jobs in the field of international conflict resolution and authored a chapter on "Narrative Analysis in Doing Research: Methods of Inquiry for Conflict Analysis" (Sage Publications, 2005).

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## One District Account of System-wide Renewal

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The literature on school reform is very extensive (e. g. Cuban, 1990; Darling-Hammond, L. 1996; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Marzano, 2003; O' Day, 2002; Ouchi, 2003; Reeves, 2006).

An interesting addition to it are reports on broad-scale system reform describing how primarily large urban districts are restructuring in an effort to close the persistent achievement gaps existing among students of different racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006; Fullan, Bertrani, & Quinn, 2004; Iatarola & Fruchte, 2004; McBeath, 2006).

As compared to reform at the individual school level, system-wide changes are more difficult to implement because of the need for coordination but, if carried out adroitly, they permit the educational betterment of a larger number of students. Successful whole-district efforts improve teaching, learning, and administration through the identification of best practices in individual schools, their application system-wide, and the realignment of the entire organization so that every component works toward achieving the same goal.

This article describes briefly the steps the Elmont school district leadership took to

raise the achievement level of its students in all six schools, while at the same time improving the management of the entire system.

The Elmont elementary school district is adjacent to New York City, with demographic characteristics resembling those of the largest city school system in the United States. In 2005, according to data available through the New York State Education Department, 40% of the Elmont students qualified for free and reduced price lunch, 84% were counted as racial and ethnic minorities, and 7% (representing nearly 70 languages and dialects) were identified as English language learners.

During the years in which the turnaround took place, Elmont was also characterized by steady increases in student enrollment, high student mobility, and the lowest per pupil expenditures in the county.

The strategy employed during the span of seven years under the leadership of a new superintendent was to confront the district's numerous challenges in three separate stages.

The first stage centered on the tackling of the most urgent problems. Among these

there were: a) a severe shortage of classroom space b) failed budgets c) unsettled labor contracts, and d) a general climate of distrust between the administration and the plurality of district constituencies.

In this first stage, it was essential to confront the “brutal facts” as Collins (2001) so eloquently states, and to develop a plan that would meet the district’s immediate needs, while at the same time moving toward a higher long-term level of trust and credibility. The new superintendent did not yield to the temptation of doing what “one wants to do.”

Heeding Peter Drucker’s advice (2006), she opted instead for doing “what needs to be done”. This meant in the first place that the superintendent had to reassure various constituencies that the curriculum and instruction changes being sought would be pursued in a systemic context being readied to receive and adequately monitor them.

Thus, the superintendent reached out to community leaders, parents, and residents, seeking their input, and promoting a climate of total transparency. The community responded positively to the administration’s efforts to make information easily available and to explain its decisions.

School budgets benefited from the transparency and forthrightness and were approved with comfortable margins by the voters. Labor negotiations were also successfully completed and the community approved overwhelmingly a 12 million dollar bond that allowed for expeditious and successful completion of the needed classroom space.

In stage two, efforts were made to convey the truly high expectations the district leadership had of staff and students. A cohesive administrative team was assembled to guide the

implementation of instructional initiatives system-wide. A comprehensive system of accountability was developed. For all administrative functions, the district identified criteria and measurements for assessment and worked constantly to meet and exceed them. School and district administrators were aligned in terms of the direction to take.

Similarly, great care went in the selection and assignment of all staff and teachers. In a frequently quoted analogy, Jim Collins (2001, p.41) describes the restructuring of the staff as getting “the right people on the bus”, moving “the wrong people off” and ushering “the right people to the right seats.”

In a public school setting, where tenure protects the rights of personnel to a given position, moving people in and out of their jobs is nearly impossible. But the district filled every new opening with the best possible candidate it could attract. Where appropriate, very capable teachers were promoted to administrative positions.

Most importantly, teachers were reassigned within the district to match more closely their strengths with the needs of the children they taught. New teachers were selected with great care and evaluated diligently so as to avoid retaining those who were least suitable for the needs of students.

With the administrative team in place and a strong educational staff, we moved to stage three and focused fully on curriculum and instruction. The decisions arrived at followed different time paths and oftentimes strategies and tactics evolved and were implemented contemporarily.

To minimize the effects of the high mobility of the student population, who moved not only from district to district but also from school to school within our own district, the

curriculum had to be standardized and clearly understood by all teachers so as to minimize gaps in instruction.

Curriculum maps in all major subject areas, designed by some of Elmont's master teachers, brought to teachers the content to be covered in each of five phases in which the academic year was divided. Beyond the required curriculum, teachers had the choice to include additional content or to enrich the content provided.

A standard lesson plan format that compelled teachers to commit to paper each day what they expected students to learn as a result of the lessons they taught was introduced. The lesson plan made clearer to teachers themselves and principals the difficulty and at the same time the importance of planning for effective instruction. Extensive training in lesson development ensued, using primarily the work of Wiggins and McTighe (1998), and Danielson (1996.) These efforts were supported by a mentoring program and many opportunities for ongoing professional development.

Students were not expected to merely meet basic standards; rather they were to strive for the highest possible level of performance. The main academic subjects were enriched by instruction in, among others, music, the arts, sciences, and languages.

The intent was to make available to all students a well rounded program to help them develop a love for learning that would grow with them. The emphasis on learning helped reduce the pitfall of focusing too much attention on test scores. Other changes included the systematic reduction of class size which was brought down to levels similar to those of most other districts in the county.

While the changes in curriculum were designed to be adopted district-wide, principals were encouraged to pursue a special focus for their schools and to share their knowledge with each other.

For instance, one of the principals had already begun years earlier her own school improvement program by focusing on carefully selected instructional goals and by providing superior professional development to her staff.

For the superintendent it was important to tap the expertise of the most capable professionals in the district, extend their successful approaches to the whole system while helping each school meet higher and higher goals by raising the bar gradually and adroitly.

Segments of the administrative council meetings for discussions on educational practices were often used. Encouraged by the public acknowledgement of their achievements, school principals intensified their efforts and personal commitment to their students, generating a virtuous circle of accomplishment. The turnaround was widely recognized and schools received various prestigious awards.

In an effort to ensure continuity beyond the first three years, a group of teachers, parents, administrators, and community members worked with the superintendent to design a plan for the continuation of the eleven initiatives that had been outlined during stage two and three of the district renewal.

In the spring 2007, teachers and administrators were asked in a survey to give their opinion about the years during which the changes took place. The feedback was essentially positive, with great emphasis placed on the benefits derived from the collaboration

among stakeholders and the climate of clear guidance and high expectations in which they worked. The responses also revealed clearly teachers' resistance to document in detail their lessons.

Throughout the years there were many challenges. Among them: discrepancies in top administrators' evaluation of teachers and other personnel, the constant need to raise the level of performance among principals and central office administrators, the ongoing effort to balance the needs of the students with the

limited ability of the community to support them, and the ever present threat to cohesiveness among the various district constituencies stemming from their very diverse nature.

Still, the work and focus on the goal of bettering schools and ourselves continued. The results obtained in terms of much higher student achievement scores were the most visible and tangible result of pursuit of administrative and instructional excellence.

### Author Biography

Maria Palandra is associate professor of administration and supervision at Hunter College. Prior to joining CUNY's faculty in 2005, Palandra was superintendent of schools in the Elmont school district. As superintendent, she established a climate of high educational expectations, excellence, and optimism. She promoted significant cooperation among parents, teachers, community, and political and education officials. Palandra improved all areas of management and conceptualized, restructured, and enriched the instructional program. Under her leadership there were sustained and widely recognized increases in the academic performance of a racially and culturally diverse student body.

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## **Building Capacity for Professional Learning Communities Through A Systems Approach: A Toolbox for Superintendents**

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**P**inciples for professional development policy, practice, and initiative that come from nearly two decades of U.S. education reform underscore our conclusion that teacher learning communities constitute the best context for professional growth and change (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p.135).

Professional learning communities will not be sustained unless the district and other levels of the system actively foster and maintain their development (Fullan, 2006, p.88).

### **Introduction**

The quotations cited above point superintendents to several conclusions:

1. It is essential that schools and school districts evolve as learning organizations.

2. The development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is an essential step in creating and sustaining a learning organization.

3. District leadership must be involved in the change process; individual schools attempting these changes are not enough.

### **Hard Work of Developing PLCs**

The research that is emerging from PLC implementation across the country points to the challenge of that work, and the time that it takes for successfully navigate the changes in culture needed to impact those transformations (Capers, 2004; Fleming, 2004; Fullan, 2006; Lashway, 1998; Wells & Feun, 2007).

PLCs are places where teachers work with intentionality to improve their own craft



for the benefit of students. Teachers and administrators study collaboratively and analyze student learning results to improve academic achievement for all students.

In a PLC, the phrase, all students, means every student. “Success for every student” sounds familiar because it is a phrase that is probably used in most mission statements of school districts. In a PLC, there is action behind the rhetoric, with intentional effort to work for the success of every student (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The rise in the importance of PLCs as generators of improved schooling continues to recognize. MacGregor & Smith (2005) summarize, after surveying 56 colleagues from the four-year National Learning Communities Project, “Learning communities have arrived as a national movement” (p.2).

While the literature exalting the promises and importance of PLCs increases, the road to actual implementation of the PLC is less clear. What is clear, however, is that the path to actually changing a school’s culture is slow, deliberate, and elusive.

Fullan, (2006) writes, “Thus we have many examples of superficial PLCs-educators simply calling what they are doing professional learning communities without going very deep into learning and without realizing they are not going deep” (¶2).

For purposes of this paper, Hord’s (2007) five characteristics of PLCs are used. Hord, of the Southwest Educational Development Center, provides the philosophical foundation for PLC concepts. She demonstrates that the PLC concepts provide incredible potential to a school system, while acknowledging that they are challenging to create.

Her five attributes of PLCs are the following:

1. supportive and shared leadership
2. collective learning and its application
3. shared values and vision
4. supportive conditions
5. shared personal practice

Administrators working to implement PLCs seek to expand leadership roles for teachers. They protect time needed for the deep reflection about learning results and their causes. They encourage and expect that teachers begin to collaborate by sharing and studying best educational practice.

### **Role of superintendent in creating PLCs**

Superintendents are the conductors of the district orchestra, inspiring movement and alignment of all the forces within the school system.

A systems approach is, by definition, essential in the guidance of a school system. Where and how does this journey begin? What are the insights and wisdom from systems thinking that can assist superintendents in implementing PLCs in their districts?

Senge’s landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (2004), has some advice that can be applied to the challenges of creating PLCs.

Senge places a high value on understanding the history or the patterns that happen in organizations; he calls these the “laws” of systems thinking.

The relationship of these insights to the successful development of PLCs is explored below.

*Today's problems come from yesterday's solutions*

The hard work of transforming bureaucratic cultures into organizations that emphasize collaboration must confront the privacy and isolation that have traditionally been ingrained in schools; that is, the mechanistic solution to the rapid growth of schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, there is an acknowledgement that educators contributed to and are also empowered to change what no longer works; in essence, all systems are involved in the resolution of problems.

Understanding of the efforts of teachers to create a new paradigm of how schools should function is an important and often overlooked step in the change process (Hall & Hord, 2006).

*The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back*

In PLCs, as in all other forms of “deep change,” there is a natural resistance to a new way of doing things (Fullan, 2001, 2006). Teachers are not used to working collaboratively to study student learning results; the structure of schools has promoted isolation and autonomy (Joyce, 2004). It takes time, persistence, and patience to develop PLCs (Capers, 2004). From a systems perspective the task is not to change teachers but to help them want to change, thereby eliminating the natural pushback against change processes.

*Behavior grows better before it grows worse*

In PLC work, the initial interest in collaboration can generate into one of disillusionment as teachers encounter the difficult conversations that result as they address the reality of students who are not learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001). They may begin with an open mind toward this “next new thing,” the PLC, but may well resist when they find that they must share

what is and isn't working in their own classroom.

*The easy way out usually leads back in*

Habits are mental models of the way things have always been done; as such, they have a long and often seemingly intractable shelf life (Senge, 1990). In PLCs, teachers learn new behaviors and skills that interrupt the tendency to look for a simple solution; instead they work with intentionality to discover together root causes of learning difficulties and the improvements needed for student learning to move forward (Hord, 2007).

*The cure can be worse than the disease*

Effective PLC work includes habits of deep reflection, working to avoid the “quick fix” approach to problem solving. A fast solution can be a particular challenge to finding a sustainable answer. Senge, (1994) explains, “Relying on our present ways of thinking, it is very difficult to develop tools that change that way of thinking. For this we must generate new theory” (p.31).

If, for example, teachers work to study student learning exclusively by the use of summative assessments, as has been done in the past, there is little chance for intervention to improve learning along the way. Summative assessments are assessments *of learning*, instead of *for learning* (Stiggins, 2004). Approaches to collaboration are well-intended, but without the deeper, theoretical appreciation for the purposes of collaboration, they will miss the mark, and be regress toward more comfortable patterns of behavior.

*Faster is slower*

The danger in the rush to implement PLCs can result in superficial compliance with little of consequence being accomplished (Fullan, 2006; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Capers (2004) found that it takes more than three years of deliberate work to create PLCs.

*Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space*

As school officials look for reasons for student failure, there can be a tendency to look for blame, instead of causality. Viewing the situation from a place of systems thinking would mean that leaders look beyond the blame mode, and look instead to the interrelatedness of issues that can contribute to low achievement.

In PLC work, there can be a natural tendency to think that a structural component of a school, such as a bell schedule, is the cause of student difficulty. Instead of changing a schedule, the PLC method would expect that teachers look more closely at the type of culture that exists, to see what can be done to change the patterns of reflection and interaction, focusing on developing a school with high expectations for learning for every student in the school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

*Small change can produce big results, but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious*

Joyce (2004) asks educators to be aware of the lessons that history has taught with regard to school reform. Many failed efforts can be understood in terms of the approach that was taken to put them into effect. For example, people led the change efforts as mandates, often without appropriate time, resources, and conviction of the length of time needed for the transformation.

A smarter, more efficient way to approach PLC work is in the gradual steps of high leverage areas. An example is in the way many leaders approach the reasons for PLC work. Rather than trying to get everyone on board philosophically, administrators can allow teachers to experience the new behaviors first. Kotter & Cohen (2002) indicate that it is

important for participants to experience, analyze, and then feel, as they approach change; people are convinced by what they see and experience first hand, rather than the reverse of being called into action because of hearing about it first.

*You can have your cake and eat it too, but not all at once*

In PLC work, as in systems thinking, there is no simple recipe to follow. Issues are interdependent; traditions are longstanding. PLC formation requires that educators begin to study together and build a shared knowledge base from which to grow a shared vision. The work, if done correctly, means that time becomes the enabler, not the enemy. Time, as a variable, is used to allow people to move forward with expectation for results, as opposed to wanting to “get it over with, so we can move on.”

*Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants*

The ecosystem of a school district is full of life, ranging from the lives of students, to all the workers that contribute to educational growth. To artificially cut either programs or positions does not ensure that they can flourish. PLCs are careful to define learning as the first priority and the learning of educators is as important as the learning of students.

Killion (2002) advocates, “To produce greater results for students, professional learning must be embedded into a system of comprehensive reform” (p.11). Killion further calls for “...rigorous content standards, assessment programs that inform teaching and measure student progress toward standards... and leadership that advocates for high-quality professional learning and communities of learning” (p.11).

As teachers grow in their knowledge base, they are better able to serve students and

avoid the risk of dividing programs as a means for generating what looks like immediate results (Hord, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). The system of a school demands careful attention to the most important elements, without sacrificing the ability of educators to come together to build shared knowledge and learn to deprivatize their practice.

### Road to PLCs Through Systems Thinking

The tasks needed to transform schools or school districts to a PLC are complex, and they require unique knowledge, skills, and behaviors for the administrators leading those changes. In addition to the “laws” of systems thinking Senge (1994) offers some philosophical considerations that integrate leadership strategies with systems theory. He reminds readers that he and others have been working to understand learning organizations for many years, and he invites his audience to test and improve upon the ideas inherent in his work.

Superintendents are in a position to do just that, following the wisdom of systems thinking, applying it to PLC work, and becoming involved in the action research of the district to analyze and monitor the efforts of those actions.

Senge (1994) offers metaphor that resonates for most people, being a member of a “great team,” (p.17) whether it is in the sports arena, performing arts, or the world of work. Great teams, Senge argues, rarely begin as such; the collection of individuals builds the team, developing synergy from each other.

When this happens, people begin to “see the world differently, new beliefs and assumptions begin to form, which enables further development of skills and capabilities” (p.18). This is the cycle of the PLC and superintendents can be the catalysts to promote

this change by developing the capacity for teachers to begin to build great teams.

The question that superintendents face is identical to the questions most asked of Senge (1994): “*How do we get started in practicing the learning disciplines?*” (p.21).

He reminds readers that transforming to a learning organization is difficult work and developing the new ways of thinking and interacting takes considerable time to master. To do that, he suggests utilizing three guiding principles that are the core of the systems work:

1. “*The primacy of the whole suggests that relationships are, in a genuine sense, more fundamental than things, and that wholes are primordial to parts (p.25).*”

Consider how school districts divide themselves; for example, by grade, elementary, middle, high school level; by academic subject, history, English, and science and math departments.

Senge implores, “What makes an airplane cannot be found in the parts” (p.25). Likewise for schools: what produces a well-educated student cannot be found in the parts.

When working with PLCs, the emphasis is on the interrelatedness of the goals and vision for success for every student. Instead of looking for the quick fix approach to solving a problem in isolation, the system is reviewed for its connections and solutions are formed from that deeper understanding.

2. “*The community nature of the self challenges us to see the interrelatedness that exists in us (p.26).*”

In PLC work, teachers collaborate to learn about best practice and ways to maximize student achievement.

Superintendents advocating for PLCs must continually reference the importance of, and offer support and resources for, teachers and administrators working as teams to collaboratively analyze student learning.

3. *“The generative power of language illuminates the subtle interdependency operating whenever we interact with ‘reality’ and implies a radical shift in how we see some of these changes coming about (pp. 26-27).”*

Senge cautions people from regarding information, especially views concerning beliefs, as attacks. Superintendents can help educators see how systems that continually protect themselves from honest information, do not ultimately serve students or the faculty. Superintendents are the keepers of the vision that is grounded in honesty and transformation, and they model that behavior as they seek out and accept and, in turn provide feedback, not criticism.

### **Final Thoughts**

Senge (1994) reminds us, “Ultimately, learning – whether it is learning to walk, ski, or compose symphonies – is judged by results” (p.44). Superintendents play a central role in expecting and watching for results. When they deliberately integrate PLC work with what is

known about systems thinking, they think and frame problems in systems terms.

Superintendents build a capacity for change by empowering teacher leaders and administrators to work together with them. They work tirelessly for the success of all students. Superintendents think about the desired outcomes for the district and they work with both structure and culture to ensure that the changes happen. They build authentic, job-embedded professional learning activities like the process and content standards advocated by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC).

Superintendents who are successfully leading PLC efforts are able to have an eye on the environment outside of the system because their work is always about adaptation and transformation, adaptation to a changing ecosystem and transformation to another level of excellence.

Simultaneously, they must look inward to keep the entire district working together in response to the same understanding of the environmental pressures. It’s a delicate balance of looking within and looking outside, while respecting the interrelatedness of the entire system.

Senge provides additional insights for superintendents about the element of time needed for transformation. He says, “We need patience precisely because deeper learning often does not produce tangible evidence for considerable time. ‘You don’t pull up radishes to see how they’re growing,’ says Bill O’Brien (1994, p.45).”

### Author Biographies

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## Systems, Not Superheroes

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**J**anuary 2008 marks the sixth anniversary of No Child Left Behind, the landmark reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the consequences of its accountability provisions are becoming clearer with each passing week.

In California, 99 school districts are in the final stages of program improvement; nationally as many as 2,000 schools have reached that same milestone, meaning that drastic action is required to turn these schools and districts from failures to meeting the needs of every group of students.

Clearly, the time has come to abandon the notion that “Superhero” leaders are the solution to all of our ills. In district after district, state after state, we have seen competition bidding up salaries to hire a leader

who has a proven track record, while at the same time districts and states have failed to invest in the systems that are needed for any leader, superhero or not, to succeed.

One urban leader known to us both found a district with no real personnel system, no system to track books and supplies, a primitive maintenance system and so many curricula being used that calling it a system would be farcical. And this was after that same district had gone through a succession of superhero leaders in the last decade, none of whom had tamed the bureaucratic beast.

In our view, what must happen if we want to move from the era of superheroes to an era where high performance is a given and not an exception, we must invest in complete and interlocking systems to support reform.

In our view, the education system must be organized around four goals:

- clear expectations for students
- the capacity to teach well
- holding both individuals and systems accountable for results
- becoming a high performing, adaptable organization focused on continuous improvement.

To achieve these goals, a variety of subsystems must be developed – each part of a highly complex, interrelated organization. (See Figure 1.)

Each system is essential to achieving the goal of graduating students who are high performing and capable of handling both the world of work in a competitive global economy and successful completion of programs of postsecondary education.

We see these critical systems within education as interdependent relationships among the instructional system, and the human, fiscal, and community resources that surround it– with all subsystems holding everyone accountable for the achievement and improvement of student learning.

These subsystems can interlock and align at the federal, state, school district, and school building levels, creating coherence throughout the entire public education system.



Figure 1. Complex, interrelated organization with subsystems (Ohio Department of Education).

## Instructional Management

The heart of education is the instructional system and at its core, the standards, curriculum, and assessments that must be developed to guide teaching. Regrettably, we are still emerging from a fragmented, splintered educational system where the quality of instruction and the content taught and tested can vary from state to state, district to district, and even from school to school within the same district.

In many states, where you live is what you get. When we have a public education system where, quite literally, people with enough money move to a community where their children will get the best education, we create incredible gaps in achievement among students throughout the nation – especially minority and low-income students.

What is taught in classrooms should be built upon clear expectations of what we expect our students to know and be able to do at every grade level and in each subject. This standards-based instructional system simply says that we must align what we expect of our students with how we teach and what we test.

When other components of the broad educational system also feed into this instructional system, we can build educators' capacity to teach well by providing them with the resources they need to help all students achieve.

## Human Resources

The human resource system truly involves the career life of our educators –superintendents, principals and teachers. Without a system to hire the best teachers, evaluate them on an ongoing basis, provide rigorous, focused training, and dismiss those who can not make

the grade, no instructional system – indeed, no educational system – can succeed.

Studies have demonstrated that many districts, especially the larger ones, are not operating effective recruitment and induction programs. Job offers are often not made until late summer, principals may not get to select their own staff, and induction is a seeming luxury that often gets eliminated.

While we talk a great deal about what we want students to know and be able to do at various points in school, we rarely talk about what teachers need to know and be able to do to teach students displaying a variety of characteristics.

The human resource system must provide a coherent set of policies and programs for educators from recruitment to retirement, so that the educators have the knowledge, skills, and professional development they need to do help all students learn.

Teachers must be able to climb a career ladder so the best and brightest can become mentors to less-experienced educators. Administrators must manage shared planning times, as well as opportunities for coaching from fellow teachers and higher education faculty. The human resource system for educators must also reward teachers for climbing that career ladder.

## Fiscal Resources

Often neglected in any movement to bring about coherence in the educational system is our system of raising and spending the dollars required to support schools. While there is some financial transparency within educational systems, what is not transparent is how much of

an impact that money makes on student performance.

For example, we can track how much money is spent on professional development, but we do not know if it is getting results. Financial decisions to purchase textbooks may be based on getting the best deal, rather than finding the right books.

What return on investment are we getting? Is it improving student learning? Are we getting the most bang for our buck? That is the kind of transparency our educational systems need. To effectively and efficiently fund schools, the fiscal system must feed back into the instructional and accountability systems. The fiscal system must ensure that funding is aligned to a plan, based on data, focused on clear goals, grounded in research-based practices, and provides effective job-embedded professional development.

### **Community Resources**

The least tapped system for most schools is right at its doorstep – the community. Traditionally, school districts have been reluctant to open the schoolhouse doors to the community, unless it involves fundraising, ticket sales, or scholarships. Our public education system has yet to create a coherent, systemic way to engage the community in student achievement and school improvement. This system of community resources involves parents and families, business and industry, local community organizations, state and local health and human service agencies, and the media.

When schools are open to the community, they can set up relationships with parents and families that bring them into the real academic and social problems encountered by their children and involve them in making the changes that must occur to improve schools. The system of community services can

be complete when schools connect directly with the health and human services agencies at the state and local levels – to provide the behavioral and mental health services that children and their families need.

When community resources are linked to all other systems, great economic and academic results can take place, both for students and surrounding communities.

### **Accountability**

It is hard to imagine a system that did not benchmark its achievement and progress to measurable outcomes. Even our superheroes are tested against external criteria. Without a system, then we will continue to assault the ears and brains of parents, taxpayers, and policymakers with a cacophony of seemingly incoherent messages

We believe three touchstones are key – good targets, symmetry, and fairness. Good targets require the identification of valued knowledge, skills, and abilities that anchor the instructional core. These targets include performance expectations that are attainable with effort but require students, schools, and districts to stretch to meet them.

Symmetry refers both to students and adults in the system, as well as to local, state, and federal accountability requirements. A sound accountability system holds adults and students responsible for meeting the same goals – thus ensuring that students and educators have incentives to work toward the same outcomes.

Fairness has multiple dimensions. The technical qualities of validity and reliability are necessary but insufficient components of fairness. Fairness requires that students and schools are held accountable for performance and that districts, states, and the federal government have an obligation to provide the

resources and support to help them achieve success. High quality educational options must exist for students in persistently low performing schools.

### **The Need is Now**

Crises create heroes. But just as superheroes are always fighting crime, educators spend too much time putting out fires. And often, do not get to the root of the problem that would have prevented the situation in the first place. With long-term, interdependent systems, educators can move from crisis management to instructional leadership. From teachers to superintendents, leaders across the nation can then emerge naturally, not supernaturally.

Change can only occur with the buy-in of those involved in creating and carrying it

out. Even with all of these systems in place, a cultural transformation must occur within with the educational community if real, adaptive change is to happen.

The culture of schools at all levels of the educational system reflects the attitudes, values and norms of the larger community. Business leaders, policymakers, and higher education are shaping today's political climate with a fundamental change in vision: expanding education from a system of universal access for all students to one of universal *success* for all students.

A systems approach is the first step toward achieving this new vision. There just are not enough superheroes to go around.

### **Author Biographies**

Before becoming the first female state superintendent of public instruction in Ohio, Susan Zelman served as deputy commissioner of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education from 1994 to 1999. She also served for six years in the Massachusetts Department of Education, and chaired the department of education at Emmanuel College in Boston. Zelman was named one of the 10 most powerful and influential women in Ohio state government by Gannett Newspapers in March 2003. Recently published articles are found in the *Ohio PTA News*, *Principal Navigator*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Columbus Dispatch*, and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

Christopher T. Cross is chairman of Cross & Jofus, LLC, an education consulting firm. He also serves as a consultant to the Broad Foundation and the C.S. Mott Foundation. He has served as a member of the advisory board for Standard and Poor's school evaluation service program. Cross is a former assistant secretary of education in the U.S. Department of Education. A recent article titled "In search of victory in service to children" appeared in the *Sacramento Bee*.

## Author Guidelines

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**Length of manuscripts should be as follows:** Research and best-practice articles between 1,200 and 1,800 words; commentaries, book and media reviews between 400 and 600 words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations, and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, latest edition. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

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