



# The F. M. Duffy Reports

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Quarterly reports on the challenges of creating and sustaining  
whole-system change in school districts

## PROLOGUE TO REVOLUTION <sup>1</sup>

By Francis M. Duffy

Though we often prefer to believe that nothing can be done about the...problems we face, there comes a time when we have to take on the system because the system needs to change. There comes a time when we need to “just do it.”

~Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (1996)

The historical chronicles of the United States of America are replete with examples of episodic revolutions. One of those revolutions was enacted by arms-bearing revolutionaries seeking freedom from tyranny (the American Revolution, 1776). Other revolutions in our history were driven by frame-breaking innovative ideas and technologies (e.g., airplane flight, computers, and the Internet). Even the field of education experienced a revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when the Agrarian Age paradigm for educating children shifted to the Industrial Age paradigm, a paradigm that still controls the design, performance, and outcomes of school systems.

The societies of most modernized countries and their organizations and institutions have moved far into a new societal era—an era commonly referred to as the Information Age, the Knowledge Age, or the Conceptual Age. The name of this era notwithstanding, one thing is clear—this era is significantly, substantively, and qualitatively different from the Industrial Age.

Because the requirements for success in the Knowledge Age are so different from the requirements for success in the Industrial Age, America’s children deserve and need an education that prepares them to succeed in this new age. An education cast in the mold of the Industrial Age cannot and will not help America’s children succeed in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century society. An education cast in the mold of the Industrial Age does and always will leave children behind.

### *Driving Out Four Industrial Age Paradigms*

Providing America’s children with an education that satisfies the requirements of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Knowledge Age requires a paradigm-shifting revolution that drives out four old inter-connected Industrial Age paradigms that influence the design and performance of America’s school systems. The four paradigm shifts are:

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<sup>1</sup> This article is from Duffy, F. M. (2010, in press). *Dream! create! sustain!: Mastering the art & science of transforming school systems*. Leading Systemic School Improvement Series. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

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**Paradigm 1:** the way teachers teach and how children learn (shift from group-based, teacher-centered instruction to personalized learner-centered instruction); and, transform the way academic and non-academic support services are designed, managed, and delivered (redesigned to ensure that these services are aligned with the requirements of personalized learning);

**Paradigm 2:** the design of the internal social infrastructure of school systems (shift from a mechanistic, bureaucratic organization design to an organic, participative design; and, transform organization culture, the reward system, job descriptions, and so on, to align with the requirements of the new core and support work processes;

**Paradigm 3:** the way school systems interact with external stakeholders (move from a crisis-oriented, reactive approach to an opportunity-seeking, proactive approach); and,

**Paradigm 4:** the way in which educators' create change (shift from piecemeal change strategies to whole-system change strategies).

There are several reasons why a revolution in thinking, believing, and working in school systems is needed (rather than relying on evolution or depending on the continuous improvement of the status quo). The reasons are:

- The existing four paradigms that control the field of education are hammered in hard and are extraordinarily resistant to change;
- The existing four paradigms are locked in place by popular mental models, change-resistant mindsets, and careers and reputations built on the old paradigms and mental models; and,
- The existing four paradigms are protected by institutionalized policies, procedures, laws, reward systems, tradition, the organization design of school systems, and organization culture.

If America's children are to receive the education they deserve and need to succeed in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century society, then the four old paradigms need to be driven out, not tweaked, not continuously improved, and not fixed piecemeal. Driving out these old paradigms requires a revolution and requires revolution-minded change leaders.

### ***Revolution Requires Political Advocacy, Courage, Passion and Vision***

Although a revolution to drive out the old paradigms requires muscular political advocacy, if you step forward to lead or join this revolution on the front lines of change you will require much more than political advocacy. Fighting this revolution requires significant courage, passion, and vision. You must have courage to stand and fight for that in which you believe. You need passion to give you the emotional energy and resilience you need to persevere. And, you must have a vision to serve as your North Star to keep you and your school system moving in the right direction. Further, these three traits—courage, passion, and vision—must be simultaneously present in each change leader. A change leader can have courage, but lack passion and vision. A change leader can have a powerful vision, but lack the courage to fight for it. A change leader can have courage

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and a vision, but lack the passion to pursue the vision relentlessly. All three traits must be present all at once in each man and woman who steps forward to lead this revolution.

### *The Failure of Piecemeal Change*

Many education reformers have left (and continue to leave) a legacy of failed or unsustainable change in the field of education. Although well-intentioned, their efforts failed (and are failing) because of the dominant paradigm (the fourth paradigm that must be driven out of the field of education) controlling how they seek to create and sustain change in school systems. That change paradigm is pejoratively characterized as “fix the broken parts,” or as “fix one school, one classroom at a time,” or more commonly as “piecemeal change.”

Piecemeal change is driven by a powerful need for the “quick fix.” Quick fixes produce temporary results but the original problem that was fixed more often than not returns and returns with a vengeance (see Kim & Anderson, 2007). Fixing the broken parts is a failed change strategy, yet, almost inconceivably, reformers continue to use that strategy with the hope—the one last desperate hope—that this time, this one last time, it will work. But, it won’t! It can’t! Quick fixes don’t work because problems they attempt to solve are a complex web of cause and effect loops that resemble elaborate Celtic knot work. Quick fixes also don’t and can’t create transformational change because the four old paradigms have reached the upper limits of their performance ceiling (Branson, 1987; Handy, 1998) and no amount of tinkering with the old paradigms can create significant improvements. Breaking through the constraining performance ceilings requires the creation of whole new systems—school systems transformed to meet the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Knowledge Age; and, creating whole new systems is a revolutionary proposition.

### *The Past Before Us Is Not the Future*

Our society cannot afford to carry its old education paradigms forward. It does no good to dream of an idealized future for education if that future is just a projection and continuation of the past. Instead, change-minded revolutionaries should imagine that the four paradigms controlling the design and performance of school systems were destroyed last night and now they must invent four new paradigms. What would be the main features of those new paradigms? How could educators change the mental models supporting the old paradigms? And, importantly, how can they design new school systems driven by the four new paradigms and the new mental models required by the paradigms?

For years, progressive thinkers have called for systemic transformational change in America’s school systems. And for the same amount of time the dominant paradigms have not yielded their control of education. I think there are at least five reasons for this stubborn resistance to change:

1. Some educators, consultants, and policymakers do not understand the meaning of systemic transformational change;
2. Some educators, consultants, and policymakers have a difficult time “seeing” school districts as intact systems; instead, viewing them as a confederation of loosely coupled schools;
3. Those educators, consultants, and policymakers who do understand the meaning of systemic transformational change and those who do see school districts as intact

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- systems are uncomfortable with the complexity and messiness of transformational change;
4. Those educators, consultants, and policymakers who do understand the meaning of systemic transformational change and who do see school districts as intact systems are uncomfortable with the amount of time it takes to create and sustain transformational change; and,
  5. Those educators, consultants, and policymakers who do understand the meaning of systemic transformational change and who do see school districts as intact systems do not know how to create and sustain transformational change so they avoid doing it.

Given the above five reasons for resisting transformational change, creating and sustaining a revolution to drive out the four controlling paradigms will require change leaders who are masters of transformational change. Masters of transformational change influence the design, performance, and outcomes of their school systems by making innovative, but feasible, choices about how to teach children, about how children learn, about how to treat the professionals who work in their systems, about how their systems interact with the external environment, and about how to create and sustain transformational change. Masters of transformation possess knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are organized into three broad competency sets:

- Mastery of Awareness
- Mastery of Deliberate Intention
- Mastery of Methodology

***A Call to Action—  
Join the Revolution to Transform Your School Systems***

As you near the end of this article, I want to ask you five questions. Please consider your answers carefully and please answer them with an unqualified “yes” or “no.” If you feel a need to qualify your answer, then that qualification is considered a “no.”

1. Do you believe that our society has evolved into the Knowledge Age?
2. Do you believe that the field of education has not co-evolved with our society?
3. Do you believe that entire school systems need to be transformed if we want the field of education to align with the requirements of the Knowledge Age?
4. Do you believe that school-aged children (present and future) deserve an education that prepares them for success in our nation’s Knowledge Age society?
5. Do you believe that it is unethical, and perhaps immoral, for school systems to leave some children behind as they participate in the systems’ teaching and learning processes?

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If you answered “yes” to all of these questions then I have two more questions to ask you:

1. Given your answers, what are you going to do about it?; and,
2. When will you start?

Before you take action, please be warned that you should not accept lightly this call to action. Leading or participating in a revolution against the four dominant paradigms controlling the field of education will require substantial courage, passion, and vision because you may be scorned, you may be ostracized, you may be ridiculed, and you may be punished for your heresy. If you are unwilling to endure these consequences or if you do not have the emotional and physical stamina to persevere to help achieve the strategic goals of the revolution, then please consider other ways of helping.

But....

If you do have courage, passion and vision to endure the consequences of rebellion and if you answered “yes” to all of the first five questions, those of us who are advocates of a revolution to displace the four old paradigms need your help. We need you to join with us to drive out the old paradigms.

Here’s what you can do—right now—to become part of this revolution. Think of one person—just one—whom you believe shares your dream for transforming your school system for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Call or E-mail that person and make an appointment to visit with him or her for 30 minutes or less. During the meeting share highlights from what you learned in this article. Communicate the need to transform your school system. Ask for his or her support to help build a coalition for change. Then, do it! Make it happen! Start to prepare your system for a journey unlike any other it has experienced in the past—start dreaming, creating, and sustaining transformational change built on the principles of the four new paradigms discussed in this article.

Once you have a powerful and committed coalition in place, start moving toward an idealized design for your school system that educates students by providing them with a personalized, customized, learner-centered education experience; that provides the faculty and staff in your districts with a satisfying and motivating work life; that helps your district create and sustain proactive, opportunity-seeking relationships with its external environment; and that introduces into your district a methodology for creating and sustaining whole-system change.

If you are already engaging in a revolution to drive out the four dominant Industrial Age paradigms that influence the design and performance of school systems, or if you are intending to join the revolution, then I also encourage you to consider collaborating with other revolutionaries so we can coordinate our efforts to create effective strategies and tactics for transforming school systems.

By taking the above three actions (talk with a colleague, start transforming your district, and affiliate with other revolutionaries), you will be joining with colleagues who are striving to drive out the old paradigms influencing the design and performance of school systems to create and sustain new school systems designed to align with four new Knowledge Age paradigms. Can you

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think of a more important dream to turn into reality for our children, grandchildren, and generations of children yet unborn?

### *A Parting Reflection*

Finally, I leave you with a parting reflection from a book by Olive Schreiner (1998, originally published in 1883), a South African peace and anti-apartheid campaigner. In her book titled "The Story of a South African Farm" there is an allegory about "The Hunter." He has been hunting for the white bird of truth for his entire life. As part of his search he built a stone staircase into the sky. There is a point in the story where he is about ready to give up his search because of fatigue from the hunting and building; and he says...

My strength is gone. When I lie down worn out, others will stand young and fresh. By the stairs I have built, they will mount. They will never know the name of the person who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh, when the stones roll, they will curse me. But they will mount, and on my work, they will climb, and by my stair.

That staircase was the Hunter's legacy for future generations. What will your legacy be as a change leader who envisions transformational change in your school system? What will your "staircase" be? So, if you chose to dream, create, and sustain transformational change, if you are willing and able to join the needed revolution, then you must do so with courage, passion and vision. Build that stair toward a desirable future for your district; and, keep hope alive!

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Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

*Francis M. Duffy*



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For references to this article, please use the following:

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The Rowman & Littlefield Education *Leading Systemic School Improvement Series* is a collection of books about “why” systemic change in school districts is needed, “what” some of the desirable outcomes of systemic change should be, and “how” to create and sustain systemic change. You can visit the website for the series by going to <http://www.rowmaneducation.com/bookseries/LSI>.

In the past, these reports often contained articles written by readers. If you would like to write an article for these reports on a topic related to whole-system change in school districts, please send a copy of it to me as an E-mail attachment to [duffy@thefmduffygroup.com](mailto:duffy@thefmduffygroup.com).

The *FutureMinds: Transforming American School Systems* initiative seeks to create a shift in the teaching-learning paradigm in school systems. You may visit the FutureMinds website by going to [www.futureminds.us](http://www.futureminds.us)