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whole-system change in school districts

## BRINGING CHANGE TO A SCHOOL DISTRICT THROUGH A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONFERENCE

BY  
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### *Overview*

In May, 2010, I graduated from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. with an Education Specialist degree in Change Leadership. The program includes an intensive six-week summer residency followed by an internship or field experience, as well as the design of a five-day training institute focusing on transformational change. One of the four courses I took during the six-week summer residency was "Redesigning Organizations." The final project for this course was to create an action plan to transform a real or fictitious school system using the Duffy-Reigeluth School System Transformation Protocol methodology and tools.

My action plan for the Redesigning Organizations course focused on improving African-American student achievement in the school district within which I work. The reason I chose this improvement intervention was because some people in the African-American community do not trust the school district with their children. As a result, some of these parents transferred their children to different school districts. Some of the parents also reported their concerns about the school district to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Following those complaints, school administrators were required to provide training to staff and students on cultural sensitivity.

My action plan for the Redesigning Organizations course was approved by the course professor who is also the Director of the Ed. S. Program in Change Leadership. I then decided to use the action plan as part of my 360-hour internship.

One of the core principles of whole-system change I learned in my program at Gallaudet is that a child's education is more than what he or she learns in any particular grade or grade-level. His or her education, instead, is the cumulative effect of pre-Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade learning. A corollary principle is captured in the statement "upstream errors flow downstream." This principle means that mistakes made early in a work process, if not corrected or ameliorated, become worse over time and produce significant negative consequences later in the process. In education, the "upstream errors flow downstream" principle is clearly seen in a preK-12<sup>th</sup> grade instructional program where mistakes made in the early grades, if not corrected or ameliorated, cause significant negative consequences later on in the downstream grades (9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade); for example, we know that if children do not master basic math and

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reading skills by the time they leave elementary school, they will struggle with math and reading for their remaining years in a school system.

Another proof of the “upstream errors flow downstream” principle is found in student achievement scores of high school students. If high school students are not achieving as expected or as desired, it is highly probable that the less than expected achievement can be traced back to “upstream errors” in a school system. Thus, for example, if African-American high school students are not performing academically as well as other students, then it is highly probable that the lower achievement levels can be traced back to mistakes made in their early years in a school system.

The implication of the “upstream errors flow downstream” principle is that if efforts to improve student achievement focus only on the high school program, those efforts will more than likely fail to create any significant improvements. They will fail because the causes of the lower achievement are likely rooted in the early grades in an instructional program. To address low academic achievement in a high school population, then, what is required is a whole-system, preK-12<sup>th</sup> grade approach to improvement—an approach that examines the entire instructional program to identify where errors are occurring and then result in effective interventions to correct or ameliorate the errors.

The strategy of choice for engaging a preK-12<sup>th</sup> grade school system in an effort to improve student achievement is to organize the district into preK-12 academic clusters (feeder patterns). A cluster is composed of a single high school and all of the middle and elementary schools feeding into that high school. Then, a team of change leaders collaborate with educators in that cluster to identify where errors are occurring and to create ways to correct or ameliorate those errors.

The director of my Ed. S. program advised me that if I was to implement the action plan, I had to work with a preK-12<sup>th</sup> grade cluster (that is, a high school feeder pattern) for the reasons presented above. The cluster I was able to work with was composed of five schools.

Prior to implementing my action plan, I had to get permission from the district’s superintendent. I also was able to gain the support of a mentor during the implementation of my action plan. My mentor was the principal of the high school in the preK-12<sup>th</sup> grade cluster within which I was working. My mentor accompanied me to the meeting I scheduled with the superintendent to discuss my action plan.

After sharing my action plan with the superintendent, he was excited and he even loaned me books related to the education of African- American boys. The superintendent informed me that he had hired a deputy superintendent who was African-American, and this person would be in charge of Learning Services in the school district. He suggested that I work with this new deputy superintendent while I implemented the action plan.

### *The Intervention Process*

Before implementing my action plan, I met with the building principals in the preK-12<sup>th</sup> grade cluster within which my action plan was to be implemented. This meeting happened after the new deputy superintendent started working. Looking back at the timing of this early meeting, I realize now that I should have met with each building principal individually before the new deputy superintendent arrived to provide each one with an overview of what I hoped to accomplish. Instead, my mentor sent an e-mail to the principals inviting them to attend this meeting, but the principals who attended the meeting didn’t know its purpose in advance.

*The First Meeting with the Principals*

The following administrators attended the first meeting:

- three of the five principals in the targeted academic cluster
- the District Superintendent and the Deputy Superintendent
- the Curriculum Coordinator
- the Executive Directors of the elementary and secondary schools

At this meeting, I provided participants with an overview of the change process that I was recommending—a process called the School System Transformation (SST) Protocol (Duffy, 2010; Duffy & Reigeluth, 2008; Reigeluth & Duffy, 2008). The SST Protocol, which is a field-tested transformational change methodology, was created by Francis Duffy and Charles Reigeluth. It has five phases:

- Phase 1: Prepare
- Phase 2: Envision
- Phase 3: Transform
- Phase 4: Sustain
- Phase 5: Evaluate

The protocol also has several key leadership roles:

1. A Pre-Launch Preparation Team (provides early leadership to get the system ready to transform)
2. A Strategic Leadership Team (provides on-going strategic leadership for the transformation)
3. A Change Leader (who provides daily tactical leadership for the transformation)
4. A District-Wide Change Leadership Team (that collaborates with the Change Leader to provide tactical leadership)
5. Cluster and Building-Level Improvement Teams (that provide operational leadership for the transformation)

My action plan called for an activity that occurs near the end of Phase 1 and the beginning of Phase 2 of the SST Protocol. That activity is called a Community Engagement Conference—a conference designed using principles of Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008). At this meeting, I also explained the vision for my project using the “flow of data” map displayed in Figure 1.

Following the initial meetings with building principals, meetings were scheduled with the various change leadership teams. Before each meeting with the teams, I met with the Deputy Superintendent to share my agenda for the meeting. The members of each team are listed in the tables 1 and 2, below.

I reviewed the data flow map shown in Figure 1, above, at each meeting. Also, instead of focusing on only African-American students, the team decided to focus on “Bridging the Achievement Gap” for all students.

Figure 1: The Flow of Data Map for the Academic Cluster

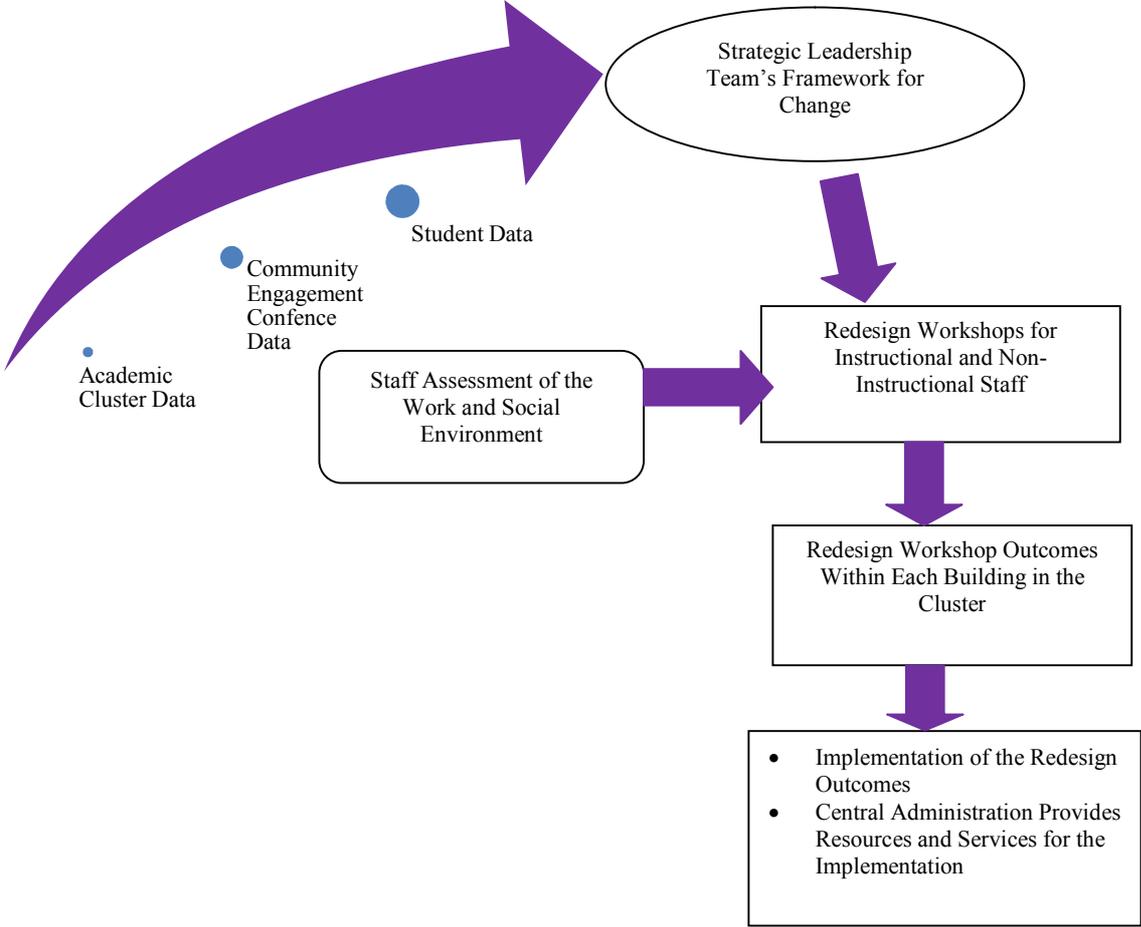


Table 1: Members of the Pre-Launch Preparation Team

1. The Deputy Superintendent and the Superintendent	6. Positive Behavior Support Coach
2. Executive Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education	7. Middle School Success Project Coordinator
3. Executive Director of Curriculum Instruction and Assessment	8. Teachers on Special Assignments (TOSAs)
4. English Language Learner (ELL) Lead Teacher	9. The five principals in the cluster
5. Coordinator for Grants and Funding	

### *The Pre-Launch Team*

Within the School System Transformation Protocol framework a Pre-Launch Team is required to lay the groundwork for systemic change and to prepare the system to launch the transformation process. Specific responsibilities for this team include:

1. Identify an academic cluster within the district that will start the transformation process.
2. Determine the academic cluster's readiness for change and identify the resources needed to support the change; and,
3. Determine the data to be collected from the faculty and staff in the academic cluster.

After one of the meetings with the Deputy Superintendent, she asked me to serve on the district's Inclusivity Committee. She believed that the committee and I could collaborate to envision how best to transform the district to be more inclusive. The Inclusivity Committee was formed subsequent to a complaint filed by African-American parents with the state's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

At one of the Inclusivity Committee meetings, I met a Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Independent Consultant. He provided advice on cultural proficiency within our district. He also wanted the district to pilot an "Equity Toolkit" that he developed in collaboration with Colorado Department of Education. After I briefed him on my project, he offered to help because he was an advocate of whole-system transformation to improve student achievement.

After one of the Pre-Launch Team meeting, the Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction and the Deputy Superintendent introduced me the School Improvement Coordinator, and asked me to work directly with this person. I was told that her responsibility was to coach school principals in the district.

**Table 2: Members of the Strategic Leadership Team**

1. Executive Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education	7. Five principals of the schools in the academic cluster
2. Communication Specialist	8. English Language Learners Lead Teacher
3. Executive Director of Curriculum Instruction and Assessment	9. Grant Writing Specialist
4. Five Teachers on Special Assignments	10. Professional Development Coordinator
5. A Curriculum Specialist	11. Positive Behavior Coach
6. Special Education Administrator	12. Middle School Success Project Coordinator
	13. School Improve Coordinator

### *Agenda for the Strategic Leadership Team Meeting*

The agenda for the first meeting of the Strategic Leadership Team was:

- Review the flow of data map
- Explain the purpose of the Strategic Leadership Team:
  - Plan the Community Engagement Conference to collect data from the external stakeholders;
  - Develop a framework for the “Bridging the Achievement Gap” vision for all students, create guiding principles for the transformation journey, and create an outline for a new strategic plan to improve student achievement; and
  - Review the redesign proposals created by the Cluster and Building-Level Improvement Teams to ensure that they are aligned with the vision.

At the end of the meeting, we decided to divide into two groups, the Data Review Team and Community Engagement Conference Planning Team.

#### *The Data Review Team*

The Data Review Team consisted of:

- Five principals in the academic cluster
- The Middle School Success Project Coordinator
- The Executive Director of Curriculum Instruction and Assessment
- The Executive Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education

The purpose of the Data Review Team was to:

- Develop surveys for student learning and school environment (grades 3-9)
- Analyze student data for learning and school environment
- Analyze standardized and state assessments, including:
  - Colorado Student Assessment Program
  - Scantron (District Assessment-Grades 3-12)

- Graduation rates
- Pre K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade assessments
- Behavioral data
- Advanced Placement classes
- Analyze the data collected at the Community Engagement Conference
- Analyze the data collected from staff

At another meeting of the Strategic Leadership Team the Executive Director of Curriculum Instruction and Assessment shared the standardized and state assessments data with the Data Review Team. Sharing data encourages collaboration between and among so that school administrators can know each school's strengths and needs. The Data Review Team focused on providing explanations about why the scores of certain sub-groups of the student population were lower than desired.

### *The Community Engagement Conference Planning Team*

The Community Engagement Conference Planning Team consisted of:

- The principal of high school that was part of the academic cluster targeted to sponsor the Community Engagement Conference
- The Professional Development Coordinator
- The Communication Specialist
- Teachers on Special Assignments
- English Language Learner Lead Teacher

The purpose of the Community Engagement Conference Planning Team was to:

- Plan the Community Engagement Conference, which is designed using principles of Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008)
- Develop a list of internal and external stakeholders to invite to the Community Engagement Conference
- Send invitations to attend the conference
- Plan for food, facilities, and so on
- Organize communication with community members (invitations, media release, and so on)

### *Planning for the Community Engagement Conference*

At the first Community Engagement Conference planning meeting, the team agreed that the Colorado Department of Education consultant would facilitate the conference. Also, I informed the School Improvement Coordinator that I would be responsible for contacting the consultant because he understood the Duffy-Reigeluth School System Transformation Protocol process. When the consultant attended the second meeting, he demonstrated the Community Engagement Process with members of the Conference Planning Team. In addition, he worked with us in selecting the theme of the conference which was "*How Can We Link Together for Student Success? Are You the Missing Link?*" The Planning Team then scheduled the Community Engagement Conference for April 10, 2010. The theme for the conference was later changed to "*Raising the Bar & Closing the Gap.*" We did not have a budget for the conference, so the Communication Specialist and I drafted a letter to seek donations to support the event from different businesses and organizations in the local community.

After the Deputy Superintendent and the Superintendent approved the design of the Community Engagement Conference and the new theme, the Planning Committee agreed that the conference design be demonstrated to members of the District Accountability Committee (DAC) and educators in the schools within the targeted academic cluster for which the Community Engagement Conference was designed.

During the conference planning committee meetings, we came up with lists of the community members we could invite to the conference. They included:

- College professors
- Faith-based leaders
- Staff members from organizations that serve children with disabilities
- Teachers and non-instructional staff
- Parents
- School Board members
- Administrators from other school districts
- Organizations that serve minorities
- Politicians
- Students attending the high school that was part of the academic cluster participating in the Community Engagement Conference

The committee members collected contact information for the people we wanted to invite to the conference and then we contacted those people to notify them about the first-ever "District-Wide Community Engagement Conference." The Communication Specialist also drafted a letter and with the District Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent's approval we mailed it to the community members we wanted to invite and to district employees.

Within two weeks, fifty-four staff members and thirty-four external stakeholders and parents signed up including the president of the *African-American Voice Newspaper*. The president of the newspaper offered to recruit more external stakeholders to attend the conference. He also informed me that he had advertised the conference in his newspaper.

To supplement the data that we expected to collect from the Community Engagement Conference I also received permission to collect data from the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in the high school that was part of the academic cluster targeted to participate in the conference. I gave the collected data to the high school principal, the School Improvement Coordinator, the Deputy Superintendent, and the Superintendent.

During the district's spring break, I continued to look for donations to support the Community Engagement Conference. Also, I contacted the people whose names the president of the African-American newspaper suggested we invite to participate in the conference. In addition, I attended several African American meetings and events to encourage the African American community to attend the first-ever District-Wide Community Engagement Conference. As a result of the recruitment efforts, the number of participants for the conference increased to 115 internal and external stakeholders. We also received many food donations for the conference and different departments in the Central Administration Office donated funds to pay for the consultant and to buy more food for conference participants. Students in the Culinary Department of the high school in the targeted academic cluster prepared the some food and set-up the dining arrangements for the conference.

### *The Week Before the Conference*

The week before the conference, the Conference Planning Team, the Consultant, the Building Manager, the teacher of the Culinary Department and the Information Technology staff met to finalize the conference design and logistics. The team came to a consensus that members of the School Board were not to welcome the participants at the conference because the focus was on student achievement not politics, and it would not be fair for other politicians who were participating in the event. Also, it was agreed upon that participants who wanted to share information about their agencies would include it in notes and action plans within their small discussion groups. Participants were also asked to assign note-taking responsibilities to someone in each small discussion group. All notes would then be put on the District website and everyone would have access to them.

### *The Day of the Conference*

The day of the conference was rainy and foggy and members of the Conference Planning Team were unsure if many people would show up at eight o'clock in the morning for the conference. However, by 8:30 AM, there were more people than we expected. The participants included teachers, parents, students, faith-based leaders, community leaders, politicians, the Colorado Commissioner of Education, the Colorado Assistant **Commissioner of Innovation of Transformation, and several university professors**. Two of the participants were deaf and one was blind. One of the security employees informed me that she had counted 200 cars in the parking lot.

The Commissioner of Education arrived before 8:30 AM. The Community Engagement Conference facilitator introduced him to me and told the Commissioner that I was the one who initiated the conference and responsible for bringing all the participants together. The Commissioner told me that he was surprised that I could bring these many people together because from his past experience as a school district superintendent in a local community it was challenging to gather that many people in one room to discuss student achievement. Then, he proceeded to say that he would like to get to know me better; and he suggested that I collaborate with the Colorado Department of Education in the future.

### *The Agenda for the Conference*

The Communication Specialist introduced the District's Superintendent who presented a short PowerPoint presentation on the District's mission, beliefs and goals.

- In the Superintendent's presentation, he announced that it was my idea to have the Community Engagement Conference. The audience applauded, and I felt good because I wasn't sure if I was going to get any credit for my hard work.
- The Commissioner of Education spoke for a few minutes and talked about the importance of having the community collaborating with schools for student achievement. He also said that he drove all the way from Denver for the event because he believes that the district is moving in the right direction of collaborating with the community. He had to leave immediately because he was on a panel of successful African-American adults in Denver.
- The Conference Facilitator explained the process and the norms of the conference.
- Participants developed the day's agenda by identifying topics they were passionate about. The topics were announced to the entire audience and then posted the walls around the room. Participants went around adding topics they wanted to include in group discussions. There were so many discussion topics generated by the group that we had to narrow the list to make it manageable. The final topics the participants agreed to discuss were:

1. Racism in the Schools in the District and Collaborating with the Minority Community Members
  2. Hiring and Retaining Minority Teachers and Administrators
  3. Empowering Minority Students
  4. Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities
  5. Lack of Parent Involvement
  6. Passing the Buck-Footing the Bill. How Do We Pay for All This?
  7. Back to the Basics, Away from Expensive Curriculum
  8. Dismantling of English Language Learners' Program and How It Affects Children
  9. Gender Gap
  10. Problem Solving
  11. The Importance of Arts in Schools
- The participants then organized themselves into small discussion groups that were facilitated by the participants who posted their discussion topics.
  - Participants in the small group discussions brainstormed ideas related to the specific issues discussed in their circles. A note-taker recorded important points made during the discussion. At the end of the section, the note-takers typed their notes on a laptop.
  - At 11:30 AM, lunch was served and people could eat while they continued their discussions.
  - After lunch, participants developed action plans based on the ideas they had brainstormed.
  - Each group chose one or two people who shared their action plans with the full audience at 1:30 PM.
  - The superintendent made his closing remarks, and mentioned that he would set up task force groups and invite community members to be involved.
  - The superintendent also said that he would like to have similar conferences three or four times a year because at the current community meetings only teachers and support staff attend.
  - Participants were encouraged to complete evaluation forms.
  - The Deputy Superintendent gave me her evaluation and she wrote that the district "...needs innovative ideas and the time was used wisely."
  - I asked one of the Board members whose children attend one of the elementary schools for her feedback and she said that it was a good meeting because parents shared the same information they have been telling her on playgrounds.
  - I asked for feedback from Colorado's Assistant Commissioner of Innovation of Transformation, Colorado Department of Education. She told me that she learned that her department needs to improve communication with schools, parents and the community.

The conference was over at 2:30 PM, and all support staff, some parents, members of the community and teachers congratulated me by letting me know that the conference was a great success. The feedback from the participants about the format of the conference was very positive. However, most of them wanted to know what the next step would be.

#### *After the Conference*

A week after the conference, the Data Review Team, the Colorado Department of Education Independent Consultant, and the Conference Planning Committee met to discuss the next steps. At the meeting we:

- Discussed about sending e-mails to thank the conference participants.
- Discussed the deadline for e-mailing the notes from Community Engagement Conference to the participants.
- Analyzed surveys from community and staff and conference notes.
- Planned presenting the action plans to the School Board and the District Accountability Committee

At the next board meeting, the data from the conference was presented to the School Board.

After the conference, I met with the District's Deputy Superintendent and the Superintendent gave me permission to continue the transformation process as a pilot project in the academic cluster targeted to participate in the Community Engagement Conference.

#### *Reflecting On My Experience: Things I Would Do Differently*

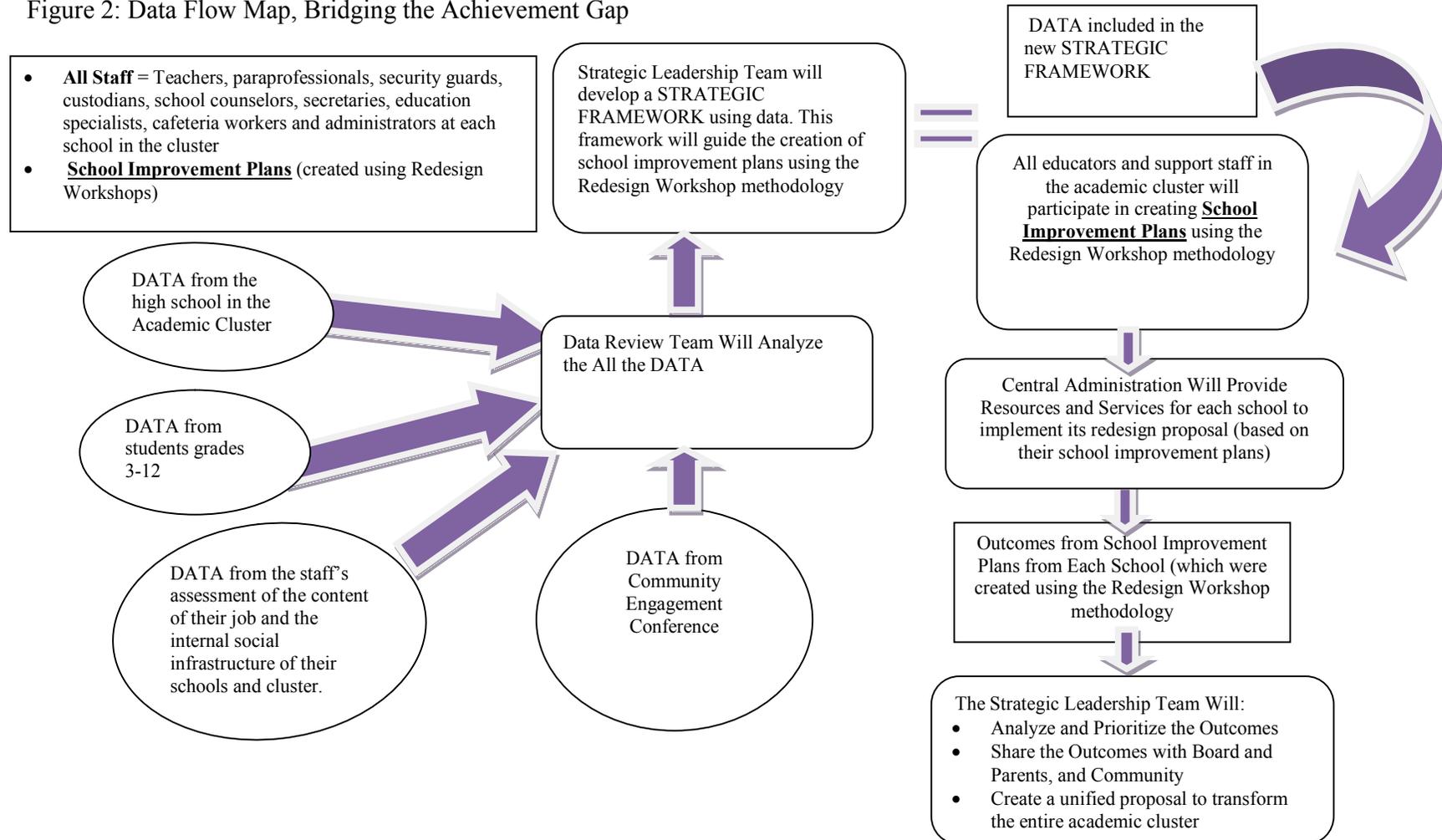
After completing my internship project, I reflected deeply about what I experienced and what I would do differently in the future if given the chance to apply elements of the *Duffy-Reigeluth School System Transformation Protocol*. Here is a summary of my "what I would do differently" thoughts:

- Meet with individual school's administrators, teachers, and non-instructional staff from each school in the academic cluster to explain my project before having a meeting with all of them in a group.
- Encourage the Central Administration to have influential teachers from each school to participate on the district's Change Leadership Team and Data Review Team.
- No one from the Hispanic community participated in the Community Engagement Conference. Therefore, I would work with the Communication Specialist to come up with ideas on how to involve the Hispanic community.
- Instead of collecting survey data about organization culture and the learning environment from the 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the high school that was part of the Community Engagement Conference I would use the conference methodology with those students.
- Follow up with the principals on how they implemented the data collected from 3<sup>rd</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

As we progressed with the transformation process in the high school's feeder pattern, I modified the Data Flow Map (Figure 2) using the terminology used by the District.

I am also pleased that the district's Deputy Superintendent approved the use of the Community Engagement Conference to collect data from the community. I hope the Central Administration will collaborate and implement the action plans the internal and external stakeholders developed to improve student achievement, especially during these tough economic times. In addition, I was pleased to learn that the data collected from the Community Engagement Conference and the 10-12 graders about their learning and social climate is being shared with National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Figure 2: Data Flow Map, Bridging the Achievement Gap



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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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