



The F. M. Duffy Reports

July 2005

Volume 10, Issue 3

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

The Destination of Three Paths: Improved Student, Faculty and Staff and Whole System Learning

This edition of these Reports focuses on the challenge of creating and sustaining whole-system change in school districts to create unparalleled opportunities to improve student, faculty and staff, and system learning. The article begins with a strategy for defining the “system to be improved,” which is an important early step in a transformation process. Next, readers will read about three paths that must be followed to transform an entire school system.

Although it is important to know the system to be improved and to recognize that three paths need to be navigated, that knowledge is insufficient for effectively leading whole-system change. Educators also need a methodology especially created to make that journey. Therefore, readers will find highlights of a methodology for creating and sustaining whole-system transformation called *Step-Up-To-Excellence™*.

That methodology requires the existence of certain organizational conditions if it is to be used effectively. These conditions are laid out for readers following the description of the methodology. Using the methodology to move along the

three change paths requires attention to eight principles for navigating the change process. These principles are provided next.

Some readers will have objections to the idea of whole system change and the way this article proposes to enact it. The section following the explication of the eight principles anticipates these objections and responds to them. Finally, in the conclusion, readers will find a collection of random thoughts about creating and sustaining whole-system change in school districts.

Defining the System to Be Improved

Systemic school improvement has a mysterious sound to it. Some people have a hard time getting their minds around the idea and cannot envision a school district as a system. All they see is a collection of unconnected individual schools.

Some people catch a glimpse of a district as a system, but cannot hold onto the image. Still others define a school system as a classroom inside a school inside a cluster of schools inside a district inside a community inside a state inside a region inside the

country inside the world inside the universe. This mental model is often referred to as a “nested system” (Bronfenbrenner 1977; 1979). Though theoretically correct, this model is notably useless for informing the practice of school district improvement. How can anyone improve a system that complex?

Emery (in Emery & Purser, 1996) provides a more actionable definition of the “system to be improved.” She says that the system to be improved is that collection of people, processes, and tools that must collaborate to deliver a product or service to a customer. To define that system, people literally make a map of all those interrelated elements and draw a circle around them. Everything inside the circle is the system to be improved. Everything outside the circle is that system’s external environment, including its community and its state department of education.

For improving school systems, the circle goes around all the people, processes, programs, buildings, and so forth inside a school district. That’s the system to be improved. Within the system to be improved, there are smaller subsystems that

can be used to kick-start and sustain district-wide change. These smaller subsystems are called clusters. A cluster is a set of interconnected schools that must collaborate to educate children. A cluster must contain a school district's entire instructional program. For example, in many school districts, the instructional program is preK-12th grade. In other districts, the instructional program is K-6th, K-8th, or 9th-12th. The length of the instructional program is irrelevant. The relevant principle is that, regardless of the length of the instructional program, to engage in whole-district change, the clusters must capture the entire work process of a school district.

Three Paths Toward Improvement

Using clusters as the starting point for whole-system change, educators move along three winding paths all at the same time. These three paths lead to improved student, faculty and staff, and system learning.

Path 1: Improve a District's Relationships with Its External Environment

A school district is an open system that interacts with its environment by exchanging a valued product or service in return for needed resources. If educators want their districts to become high-performing school systems, they need to have positive and supporting relationships with stakeholders in their districts' external environments. They can't wait until they improve their

work processes and social architecture, however, to start working on these relationships. They need positive and supporting relationships at the same time they begin making the important changes they desire. So, they also have to improve their district's environmental relationships at the same time they start improving their work processes and social architecture.

Some authors (e.g., Michael Fullan, date unknown) are suggesting that systemic change in school districts must occur within a mega-system defined by three levels: the district system, the community system, and the state department of education system. The tri-level solution, as Michael calls it, seems reasonable and intuitively correct.

I agree that all three systems must be engaged in any effort to transform a school system. Although I agree with this tri-level concept, I would like to tweak it using principles from systems theory, in particular principles from Ackoff (1981, 1999), Emery (Emery & Purser, 1996), and Banathy (1996) that link the tri-level concept to *Path 1: Improve a district's relationships with its external environment*.

Here's how I am thinking about how the tri-level concept could be enacted by following *Path 1*. Each school district, community, and state department of education interacts with each other and to some degree depends on each other, but each also functions as an intact, self-managing system. When the three are

combined into a mega-system for the purpose of systemic change, the complexity of that system may countervail any effort to improve that mega-system or its sub-systems (the districts, communities and state department of education).

As a case in point, consider what a mega-system of education would look like in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. That Commonwealth has 99 school districts, each inside a community, thereby adding 99 additional systems to the mega-system. There is one state department of education. The total number of self-functioning, relatively autonomous sub-systems in that mega-system would therefore add up to 199 complex sub-systems (99 communities, 99 school districts and 1 state department of education), each with its own special characteristics.

How would you go about changing that tri-level mega-system? Who would lead that transformation? How would the special characteristics, needs, and demands of each of the 199 sub-systems be addressed? How long would it take to transform a mega-system of this size if, indeed, it could be changed at all?

I think it would be impossible to change a mega-system of that size and complexity. So, what do change leaders do instead?

As mentioned earlier, Merrelyn Emery (Emery & Purser, 1996) gave us a different strategy for identifying "the

system to be improved.” She said that we should draw a circle around every unit, department, person, and so on that must collaborate to deliver a complete service or product. For school system transformation, the “circle” circumscribes everything we call a school system. Everything inside the circle—the entire school system—becomes the system to be improved. Everything outside the circle is part of a school system’s external environment.

Michael Fullan’s idea of involving three system levels in any effort to improve a school district is correct. How to involve those three systems is where I disagree with Michael. Instead of creating a single tri-level mega-system to involve a school district’s community and state department of education, if we used Emery’s principle for defining the system to be improved those two “external” systems would be considered part of a school district’s external environment. Then, change leaders in school districts would engage those external systems while moving along *Path 1*.

Path 2: Improve a District’s Core and Supporting Work Processes

A school district’s work process is a sequenced instructional program (e.g., a K- 12 instructional program) conjoined with classroom teaching and learning (Duffy 2002; 2003). In the lexicon of systems improvement, the term for this work process is **core work**.

Core work is maintained and enriched by supporting work. In school districts, supporting work roles include administrators, supervisors, education specialists, librarians, cafeteria workers, janitors, bus drivers, and others. Supporting work is important to the success of a school district, but classroom teaching and learning is the most important work.

When trying to improve a school system, the core and supporting work processes must both be improved. Further, entire work processes (e.g., preK-12th grade) must be examined and improved, not just parts of it (e.g., not just the high school program or the reading curriculum). One reason the entire work process must be improved is because of a systems improvement principle expressed as upstream errors flow downstream. This principle reflects the fact that mistakes made early in a work process flow downstream, are compounded, and create more problems later in the process. For example, consider a comment made by a high school principal when he first heard a description of this principle. He said, “Yes, I understand. I see that happening in our district. Our middle school program is being ‘dumbed-down’ and those children are entering our high school program unprepared for our more rigorous curriculum. And there’s nothing we can do about it!” Upstream errors flow downstream.

Improved student learning is an important goal of improving the core and supporting work

processes of a school district. But focusing only on improving student learning is a piecemeal approach to improvement.

Teacher quality is probably one of the more important factors influencing student learning; e.g. two bad teachers in a row can be devastating to a student’s education (Education Week, 1997). So, taking steps to improve teacher knowledge and skill must be part of any school district’s efforts to improve student learning.

Improved student and teacher learning is an important goal of improving work in a school district. But this still is a piecemeal approach to improving a school district. A school district is a knowledge-creating organization and it is, or should be, a learning organization. Professional knowledge must be created and embedded in a school district’s operational structures, and organizational learning must occur if a school district wants to develop and maintain the capacity to provide children with a quality education. So, school system learning also must be part of a district’s strategy to improve its core work.

Path 3: Improve a District’s Internal Social Architecture

Improving work processes to improve learning for students, teachers and staff, and the whole school system is an important goal, but it is still a piecemeal approach to change. It is possible for a school district to have a fabu-

lous curriculum with extraordinarily effective instructional methods but still have an internal social “architecture” (which includes organizational culture, organizational design, communication patterns, reward systems, and so on) that is demotivating, dissatisfying, and demoralizing for teachers and staff. Demotivated, dissatisfied, and demoralized teachers cannot and will not use a fabulous curriculum in remarkable ways. So, in addition to improving how the work of a district is done, improvement efforts also must focus on simultaneously improving a district’s internal social architecture.

The principle of simultaneous improvement along three paths is absolutely essential for effective organizational improvement (Trist, Higgin, Murray, & Pollack 1963; Emery 1977; Pasmore 1988). In the literature on systems improvement, this principle is called “joint optimization” (Cummings & Worley 2001, 353).

A Map and Compass to Navigate the Three Paths

The traditional approach to managing change was developed by Kurt Lewin (1951). Lewin said that to change a system, people first envision a desired future. They then assess the current situation and compare the present to the future looking for gaps between what is and what’s desired. Next, they develop a transition plan composed of long-range goals and short-term objectives that will move their system toward its desired

future. Along the way, there will be some unanticipated events, but it is assumed that the pressure of anticipatory intentions (i.e., goals, objectives, strategic plans) will keep those unexpected things under control and keep the system on a relatively straight-change path toward the future.

The problem with this approach, however, is that it doesn’t work!

The change path for today’s school systems is more like a winding river with class 5 rapids. And, to make the journey even more challenging there are three change paths (identified earlier) that must be followed simultaneously if educators want to transform their school systems.

If change leaders in school systems assume that they need to follow a single strategic path from the present to the future that is relatively straightforward when there are actually three winding paths, they will soon find themselves off the true paths and lost. And when off the paths and lost, people and systems predictably move in one direction—right back to where they started; thereby enacting the French folk wisdom, “the more things change the more they stay the same.”

To move an entire school system along the three paths described earlier, change leaders in school districts need a whole-district redesign methodology that provides a map, compass, and landmarks to find and navigate the three nonlinear paths to higher stu-

dent, faculty and staff, and system learning. One example of this kind of methodology is *Step-Up-To-Excellence* (Duffy, 2002, 2003, 2004a).

Step-Up-To-Excellence

Step-Up-To-Excellence is a whole-system change methodology especially created for school systems.¹ It has 5 steps preceded by a Pre-Launch Preparation phase; each of which is briefly summarized below.

Pre-Launch Preparation.

Change leaders must prepare their school systems for a transformation journey. Preparation focuses on helping educators in a district recognize the need for change; building internal and external political support; identifying potential sources of financial support; and identifying “best practices” in the field of education that might benefit the districts.

¹ Here are two examples where *Step-Up-To-Excellence* is either being used or being considered. The methodology has been blended with Reigeluth’s (date unknown) *Guidance System for Transforming Education* (GSTE) This blended methodology is currently being used to transform the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township, Indianapolis, Indiana. Change leaders who graduated from Gallaudet University’s Education Specialist Program in Change Leadership in Education who work in the California School for the Deaf at Riverside and Fremont are currently considering using the methodology to transform those schools.

During this phase, two large-group events are convened. The first event, called a Community Engagement Conference, invites key external stakeholders to attend a conference to talk about the future of their school system. This conference is organized using principles of Open Space Technology (Owen, 1991, 1993). People attending this conference self-organize into small discussion groups. A summary of each discussion is collected and compiled to create a large data-base about stakeholder needs, interests, dreams and aspirations for their school system. These data are then fed-forward to a second large group event.

The second large-group event is for faculty and staff from within a district. This event is called a System Engagement Conference. This conference is based on Search Conference (Emery & Purser, 1996) or Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 1999) principles. A carefully selected sample of faculty and staff are invited to attend. The people invited to attend must be from all parts of the school system, thereby bringing the whole system into one room. The outcome of this event is a new vision, mission, and strategic plan for a school district. These three documents comprise the district's new strategic framework, which will guide the transformation journey that commences at the conclusion of the System Engagement Conference.

Step 1: Redesign the Whole-District. Clusters of schools and supporting work units are

engaged in a group process called a Cluster Engagement Conference that resembles the System Engagement Conference that occurred earlier. Each cluster examines the strategic framework that was developed in the System Engagement Conference and they figure out how they can best support and implement that framework. The Cluster Engagement Conferences are facilitated by Cluster Improvement Teams.

Inside each cluster there are individual school buildings, support units, or departments. Each of these smaller subsystems form a Site Improvement Team. The Site Improvement Teams are engaged in Redesign Workshops, which are designed using Participative Design Workshop principles (Emery & Devane, 1999) in which they create innovative ways to improve the relationships they have with the rest of the district and with the district's external environment, improve their work processes, and improve their internal social architecture.

Although the Site Improvement Teams are encouraged to be innovative in thinking of ways to improve what they do, all ideas for change must be aligned with the district's strategic framework.

Steps 2-4: Create Strategic Alignment. The work of individuals must be aligned with the goals of their teams. The work of teams must be aligned with the goals of their buildings or units, the work of buildings and units must be aligned

with the goals of their clusters, and the work of the clusters must be aligned with strategic framework of their district. This is called strategic alignment.

Strategic alignment begins with *Step 2: Align the cluster's performance.* Change leaders examine what clusters are doing in the name of change to make sure the improvements are aligned with the district's strategic framework.

In *Step 3: Align school performance.* During this step, change leaders examine what school buildings are doing in the name of change to assure that their performance is aligned with the goals of their clusters and with the district's strategic framework.

Finally, in *Step 4: Align team and individual performance,* change leaders examine what people are doing at this level of analysis to assure that their work is aligned with higher-level goals.

Creating strategic alignment in this way is called "outside-in" analysis (Beckhard, 1983). By doing it this way, obstacles to change (e.g., obstructive policies and procedures), are progressively removed so that people at each subsequent level will not have any excuses for not implementing improvement goals.

Step 5: Evaluate whole-system performance. Whole-system transformation requires both formative and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation is conducted periodically using "On-Track Seminars"—special seminars

based on principles of evaluative inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1998).

Summative evaluation occurs at the end of the transformation period. These data are reported to internal and external stakeholders. The data also become front-end data for the next round of transformation that begins at a time predetermined by change leaders in district.

A methodology like Step-Up-To-Excellence will work only if certain conditions exist within the school system and if the methodology is based on key principles for navigating whole-district change (Duffy 2004b). These conditions and principles are presented next.

Conditions for Effective Whole-System Change

Effective whole-system change stands on a foundation created by the following conditions:

- Senior leaders who act on the basis of personal courage, passion, and vision, not on the basis of fear, self-survival, or self-interest.
- Leaders and followers who are willing and able to break or circumvent rules to create powerful innovations.
- Senior leaders and followers who conceive of their districts as whole systems, not as a confederation of individual schools and programs.
- Leaders and followers who have a clear view of the opportunities that systemic redesign offers them, not a

view of “we can’t do this because...”

- Leaders and followers who possess the professional intellect, change-minded attitudes, and change-navigation skills to move their districts toward higher levels of performance; not people without an inkling of the requirements of navigating systemic change.
- Human, technical, and financial resources that are available to sustain a large-scale improvement process over 5-7 years. (Large-scale change can take this long.)

Low-performing districts typically don’t possess the conditions necessary to engage in whole-system change. However, if the preceding conditions begin to emerge within a low-performing district, then a whole-system change methodology may have a chance of producing desirable improvements. Instead of depriving low-performing districts of opportunities to engage in whole-system change, change leaders first should focus on developing the necessary conditions as part of their efforts to prepare their districts for whole-system change.

Eight Principles for Navigating Whole-District Change

Over the past 30+ years I have had many opportunities to learn about whole-system change, including an opportunity to serve as an honorary faculty member in the Harvard Graduate School of Education—a position that was sponsored by Professor Chris Argyris. Some of this learning helped me to identify the fol-

lowing eight principles that I think are critical for the success of any change methodology created to transform entire school systems (Duffy, 2004b).

Principle #1: A school district’s external environment is complex and unstable.

The environments in which school districts find themselves are increasingly complex and unstable. The complexity and instability are driven by the triple engines of standards, assessments, and accountability (Duffy, 2002). In complex and unstable environments, school districts need to be able to plan for the future while also being able to respond quickly to unanticipated events.

Principle #2: The capacity to anticipate the future and respond quickly to unanticipated events is partially a function of a school system’s internal social architecture.

A school district’s social architecture includes its culture, communication patterns, power and political dynamics, reward system, policies and procedures, and organizational design. Social architecture has a significant influence on educators’ capacity and willingness to plan for the future and respond to unexpected events. A new social architecture for school systems that would increase capacity and willingness would have these distinguishing characteristics. It would:

- Favor skill-based work, professional knowledge, and networked relationships.

- Be anchored to a network of teams with their collective knowledge, talent, and resources.
- Support and encourage flux (discussed later under principle #7) rather than linear change.
- Create broad and easy opportunities for participation and communication.
- Connect people to one another and to resources in ways that help the school district take charge of its own destiny (as opposed to being externally regulated and externally forced to improve).

Principle #3: Biological metaphors most accurately describe how school systems function.

The biological metaphor that seems to work best for school systems with a networked internal social architecture is “ecosystem.” In nature, some ecosystems offer scarce opportunities for life, while others offer overflowing opportunities. A school system also can offer scarce or abundant opportunities for success, depending on its collective vision for its current and future capacities and competencies. This collective vision guides people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. If most people in a district choose to think, feel, and act like they have the creative potential to move their district toward breathtakingly higher levels of performance, they can and will make that journey. On the other hand, if most people in a district choose to think, feel, and act like they do not have the creative potential to move their

district toward breathtakingly higher levels of performance, they cannot and will not make that journey. The power of belief, either individually or collectively, has been proven repeatedly to have an extraordinary effect on human performance.

Principle #4: Creating a web of accountabilities using networked teams doesn’t mean that authority and control are surrendered to the networked “mob.”

In all school districts, the voice of leadership still must be present and heard even if significant steps are taken to redesign leadership positions so that incumbents can practice effective transformational leadership instead of being caretakers of the status quo. Without the voice of leadership, people will freeze in place when there are many change options to be considered. The creation of a social architecture that honors and uses formal leadership roles, while simultaneously creating and sustaining networked teams, provides powerful moments for creating innovative ideas to improve student, faculty and staff, and system learning.

Principle #5: A networked social architecture stimulates creativity and innovation.

Creativity and innovation present breathtaking opportunities for improvement. As opportunities for improvement emerge and are taken, still newer opportunities will begin to emerge at a faster rate. This is somewhat like the fi-

nancial principle of compounded interest. Change leaders, therefore, need to find ways to help educators seize opportunities, succeed at using them, and then help others build their success on earlier successes. This creates compounded organizational learning.

Principle #6: Peak performance is an illusion.

In the 21st-century environment of a school district, there are multiple performance peaks that evoke images of the Rocky Mountains where some peaks are lower than others. What if the peak a district sits atop is low compared to others, but folks inside the district don’t realize it? Wouldn’t the perception of being a peak performer be an illusion?

Another problem for school districts is not too much success, but too little perspective. Great success creates a perceptual wall that obstructs the view of opportunities to move toward higher levels of performance. If educators in a district cannot see the next higher peak of performance, how can they go there? They cannot go to what they cannot see.

A third problem for school districts is that successful districts become remarkably creative in defending their status quo. They argue against the need to improve because they see themselves already at their peak. Yet, sitting too long on any performance peak when there are higher peaks to climb will not

be tolerated by our 21st-century society.

All school districts sit atop a performance peak, regardless of their level of performance. The path to the next higher performance peak is not a straight line, nor a straight shot forward and upward. There is only one way to get to the next higher peak: a district has to go downhill before it can go back up. In other words, it has to become temporarily less effective, less skilled, and less successful.

The “first down, then up” principle applies to organizational performance too, especially as informed by Seyle’s (1956) general adaptation syndrome theory. This theory suggests that when an organization is stressed (e.g., by the requirements of change), performance will go downhill before it climbs back up to a new level. The problem for school districts is that the more successful a school district is, the less inclined it is to let go of what it does and move down the performance curve toward the edge of chaos—a phrase coined by Lewin (1992). This capacity to let go has to be built into a school system.

The “first down, then up” journey happens when educators start questioning their success. Not everything they do has to be abandoned completely, but everything they do needs to be questioned completely. During this questioning, educators must be open to stunning opportunities for innovative ideas to improve student, faculty and staff, and system learning.

Principle #7: School district improvement models must move from the concept of change to a concept of flux.

In the natural world, flux is found in the roiling white waters of Class 5 rapids. The field of organizational improvement is moving away from the concept of change to the concept of flux (Kelly 1998). While change focuses on creating new programs and ideas, flux is about creative destruction followed by rebirth. Flux breaks down the status quo while creating a temporary foundation for innovative puzzle solving and the rebirth of an organization. Innovation destroys the status quo by introducing breakthrough changes to a system. The quest for innovation in a school district must be unending. Robust innovation is sustained only by a school district moving simultaneously along three change paths that resemble rivers with rapids.

Despite the gut-wrenching prospect of spinning out of control in the white-water rapids of whole-system transformation, there is a need to sustain this journey so that school districts can move closer to their desired futures and higher levels of performance. By moving through the rapids of transformational change, school systems can find stunningly creative solutions to the puzzles they are trying to solve—puzzles such as, how do we provide children with world-class instruction, how do we provide our teachers and support staff with a motivating and satisfying work life, and how do we establish posi-

tive and productive relationships with our community?

Sustaining innovation is tricky particularly because it is inextricably linked to a school system being out of balance and at the edge of chaos. Thus, a school district wanting to sustain innovative thinking and puzzle-solving must create for itself a state of controlled disequilibrium, which is somewhat like a skater skillfully dancing on ice while being on the verge of tumbling, but repeatedly recovering and never falling down. To be innovative and move to the next higher peak of performance, a school system cannot anchor itself to its past or current performance peak. Change leaders in school districts must build into their districts the capacity to exploit flux, not outlaw it.

Principle #8: Don’t solve problems, seek opportunities.

Focusing on seeking opportunities instead of problem-solving builds and sustains creative and emotional energy for organizational renewal and implies a positive approach to innovation. Lippitt (1980) confirmed that people tend to perform more productively and develop better long-term plans when working on positive goals and visions rather than focusing on solving problems. Focusing on exciting opportunities releases creative energy and keeps people engaged over a longer period of time. Thus, instead of asking what’s wrong, educators seeking opportunities to improve their school systems can ask these questions: (1) what future do

we want for our system, (2) where are we now, and (3) what do we need to do to create that desirable future?

In Anticipation of 'Yes, Buts'

One of the greatest “innovation killers” in the history of humankind is captured in the question, where is this being used? Or its corollary, who else is using this? I can imagine Senge (1990) being asked these questions when he first proposed his Fifth Discipline ideas, or perhaps Cogan (1973) when he first described the principles of Clinical Supervision in the late 1960s.

New ideas, by definition, are not being used anywhere, but the ideas are ready for use. However, being the first at doing anything, especially doing something that requires deep and broad change, demands a high degree of courage, passion, and vision.

Many change leaders in education have the requisite courage, passion, and vision to be the first to try innovative ideas for creating and sustaining systemic school improvement. All these heroic leaders need is a methodology especially designed to create and sustain whole-district change.

Further, new methodologies (like *Step-Up-To-Excellence*) to create and sustain district-wide change are not perfect and they never will be. Educators should not even try to find a perfect methodology. Instead, they need to examine these new methods for navigating whole-district change, study how they work, find

glitches in the processes, and search for logical flaws in the reasoning behind the methods. Then, assuming that a method is based on sound principles for improving whole systems, educators should think about how they might correct the flaws to make the method work for their districts.

Some people will read this article about whole-system change and exclaim, “Impossible!” Impossible is what can't be done until someone does it. Whole-district change not only is possible, but it is being done successfully in school systems throughout the United States (e.g., in the Baldrige award-winning Chugach Public Schools in Anchorage, Alaska and in the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township, Indianapolis, Indiana). Other districts engaged in district-wide change identified in a study by Togneri and Anderson (2003) were:

- Aldine Independent School District, Texas;
- Chula Vista Elementary School District, California;
- Kent County Public Schools, Maryland;
- Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota; and
- Providence Public Schools, Rhode Island.

The improvements these districts experienced were guided by many of the principles described in this article. If educators read about a whole-system change methodology that seems impossible, they should ask, “If other school districts are using ideas and principles like these, why can't we”?

Some people will read about whole-system change and say, “Impractical.” Not only are the core principles and change tools based on these principles practical, but many have worked in school districts and other organizations throughout the United States. If educators think that trying to improve an entire school system is impractical, they should ask, “If other school districts have used these principles effectively, why can't we”?

Some people will read this article and proclaim, “Wow, this guy is really far out with his thinking. He is way outside the box.” Hopefully, readers will say this. If they do, that means they have some innovative ideas to think about and apply. And, if they see something that seems “way outside the box,” they should ask, “If this idea is outside the box, what box are we in”?

And, “Do we want to stay inside this box of ours”?

Conclusion: Random Thoughts, Deeply Felt

Random thoughts that represent deep feelings I have about navigating rapid, nonlinear, and complex change in school systems are provided here.

- Twenty-first-century school systems need a new kind of internal social architecture that can create capacity for anticipating the future (through planning) while also responding quickly to unanticipated changes in their environments.

- Educators should not seek a “perfect” methodology for creating systemic change. There isn’t one. An effective change methodology centered on the change principles described in this article will illuminate a general direction for a school district to take toward high performance. But, like a flashlight, the beam will run ahead only so far, and the darkness beyond will not be illuminated until practitioners move farther down the path they’re on.
- A new social architecture to help school districts manage complex, nonlinear change should create deep and wide opportunities for participation and collaboration.
- There is a downside to creating more information for people. Herbert Simon (in Kelly 1998, 59) said, “What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” With the wealth of information that comes with a networked social architecture, change leaders in school districts have to figure out creative ways to capture people’s attention and keep it focused on what needs to be done.
- When people are connected in a networked social architecture, each individual becomes a node—a connection point—in that network. The connections among the nodes form a matrix through which flows the professional intellect of a school system. When this matrix is fully functioning, it transports an extraordinary amount of human energy, ideas, commitment, and learning.
- Social networks don’t eliminate individuality. School districts will continue to have teachers and staff members, each with his or her individual mental models, individual decision-making styles, and individual ways of doing things.
- The individual participants in a networked web of accountabilities create a collective professional intellect. Each individual contributes what he or she knows, and the resulting exponential growth of organizational knowledge creates an incredibly “smart” school district. There is no way one person can be as smart or as skilled as the “whole.”
- The goal of creating a networked social architecture is to create, as much as possible, a school system that is self-regulating and self-optimizing.
- New change theory is based on the concept of flux. It recognizes that change is nonlinear and requires school districts to function on the edge of chaos as educators seek continuous disequilibrium to create innovative opportunities for improvement.
- New change theory tells us that to improve the performance level of a school district, the system first must move downhill before it can move up to a higher level of performance (see principle #6).
- New change theory requires school districts to use a networked social architecture where innovations are grown from within and used to create systemic change.
- New change theory requires a simultaneous ability to anticipate the future and to respond quickly to unanticipated events.
- New change theory requires a methodology specifically designed to enact the concepts and principles that are part of the theory.
- Most importantly, new change theory requires change leaders who are courageous, passionate, and visionary. Heroic leaders work their magic by helping others to see the invisible, to do the seemingly impossible, and to create new realities heretofore only imagined. Creating world-class school districts that produce stunning opportunities for improving student, faculty and staff, and system learning can be accomplished only under the stewardship of these kinds of leaders.

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Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

Francis M. Duffy



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Duffy, F. M. (2005). The destination of three paths: Improved student, faculty and staff, and whole-system learning. *The F. M. Duffy Reports*, 10 (3), 1-8.