



# The F. M. Duffy Reports

October 2005

Volume 10, Issue 4

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

## Transforming School Systems

*“If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t complain.”* ---Maya Angelou

Organization transformation is a change strategy that aims to create significant changes in a school system’s 1) relationship with its environment, 2) core and supporting work processes, and 3) internal social architecture. This article explores the concept of organization transformation within school systems.

### *The VUCA Environment*

Not too long ago, the environment for school systems was rather simple and stable. Not any more. Federal legislation such as *No Child Left Behind* and the triple societal engines of standards, assessments and accountability have increased the instability and complexity of school districts’ environments to extraordinary levels. Add to this frenetic mix our mobile society with its transient families who expect that their children’s education in their next hometown will be at least as good as the education they receive in their current hometown, even if the new school district is 3,000 miles away. This complexity and instability puts significant demands on senior leaders in school systems

with responsibility for determining both the function and future of their districts.

Many contemporary authors writing about organization transformation (e.g., Wheatley, 1999, 2001; Hock, 1995) rightly point out that those who manage organizations and try to improve them are locked inside an outdated and unhelpful mental model—a mental model often characterized as Newtonian or mechanistic. Yesterday’s organizations were able to use and benefit from the mechanistic metaphor because the environments they existed within were relatively stable and simple. Today’s organizations, including school systems, find themselves in environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) (Murphy, 2002). Organization designs best suited for unstable and complex environments are those using contemporary metaphors often characterized as organic (Daft, 2001).

Some authors characterize a VUCA environment as chaotic. Dee Hock (1995) is one of these people. He coined a new term to describe this kind of environment. The term is *chaordic*—the combination of chaos and order. If school superintendents want to provide strategic leadership to

transform their school systems using a conceptual framework like Hock’s notion of chaordic organizations and the VUCA model, these transformation-minded superintendents must accept the premise that their school systems are self-organizing, adaptive, nonlinear, complex systems that exhibit characteristics of both chaos and order.

Change leadership within a chaordic, VUCA environment occurs within a strategic arena. The strategic arena for transforming school systems extends over at least three levels—local, state and federal. Strategic leadership to transform a school system must focus on anticipating, identifying and coordinating hopes, aspirations, policies and legislation from all three levels. At the local level, strategic leadership focuses on a school district’s community’s hopes and aspirations for its youth. At the state level, strategic leadership to transform a school system focuses on the policies and requirements of state departments of education. At the federal level, strategic leadership to transform a school system focuses on interpreting and responding to the requirements of federal legislation affecting education (e.g., **No Child Left Behind**). In my opinion,

ion, if school superintendents are “blind” to this three-level strategic arena then they will fail to transform their school systems.

The turbulent environments within which many school districts exist also create metaphorical “white water” (Vaill, 1991) To navigate this white water, some superintendents are awakening to the need to transform their school systems in fundamental ways by creating simultaneous changes in three key areas: the work of their systems, their systems’ internal social architecture (which includes organization culture, organization design, job descriptions, and the district’s reward system), and how their systems interact with the outside environment (Duffy, Rogerson & Blick, 2000; Duffy & Dale, 2001; Duffy, 2003a). These fundamental changes result in an examination and a redefinition of a district’s basic purpose; its identity as an agency of its community; and its relationship with parents, community members, and other external stakeholders.

Fundamental, transformational change is required to navigate the “white water.” Incremental change, or as it is sometimes called, continuous improvement, is grossly ineffective for functioning effectively within a “white water” environment. It is ineffective because of the focus of continuous improvement. The focus is on tweaking the status quo to make it incrementally better. There is, however, a role for continuous improvement in a transformation process: **it must follow, not precede, transformation.**

Organization transformation is often required in response to complex and unstable environments. This kind of fundamental change is often associated with significant modifications in an organization’s grand strategy, which, in turn, requires changes in an organization’s core and supportive work processes, its internal social architecture, and in its relationships with its external environment. Deep and broad fundamental change requires a new mental model for organizing and managing organizations that leads to qualitatively different ways of perceiving, thinking and behaving in organizations (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p. 498).

#### *What it Takes to Transform School Systems*

Organization transformation requires fundamental and radical changes in how people in organizations perceive, think, and behave. Evolutionary change like continuous improvement isn’t a transformation strategy. Tweaking the organization and continuously improving the status quo won’t work if you are trying to create fundamental, transformational change. To achieve transformation, you and your faculty and staff need to extensively alter your collective assumptions, beliefs and values about what your district stands for, how it functions, how it is designed, how it treats people, what its management philosophy is, and the numerous processes, procedures, policies and so forth that shape people’s behavior at the individual, team and organizational levels.

The reality of transforming your school system is never a sum of the visible changes you create. The reality of transformation is found in a compelling idea that is sown and grown inside the minds and hearts of your colleagues; that is, to transform your district you and your colleagues must be liberated from the constraints of the past and present. Once liberated from these shackles you and your colleagues will have the capacity and creativity to fashion unparalleled opportunities for improving student, faculty and staff, and whole-system learning.

For the promise of school district transformation to become powerful enough to unleash emotional and psychological energy and collective imagination, your change leadership must aim to 1) crystallize the hopes and dreams of your people around a strategic vision that creates unity of purpose for your district; and, 2) provide the means and resources to achieve that vision. Your people must see, understand, and embrace the vision and then believe that there are ways and resources to achieve it. **People need to believe that the vision before them is within their grasp, not beyond their reach.**

Establishing unity of purpose does not require uniformity of thought and action. Walking arm in arm does not require seeing eye to eye. You can have a shared vision and still encourage and support divergent points of view about how to arrive there. In the field of organization development encouraging divergent paths toward a single, unifying vision is called the “principle of equifinality.”

*Approaches to Fundamental (Transformational) Change*

All approaches to creating fundamental change have five common features (Cummings & Worley, 2001, 499-501). These features are described below. I added to this list two features (6 & 7) that I think are needed. Transformation:

1. is triggered by disruptions in an organization's environment or within itself
2. is systemic and revolutionary
3. requires a new organizing paradigm
4. is driven by senior executives and line management
5. requires continuous innovation and learning
6. requires a reshaping of a school district's organization culture
7. requires courageous, passionate and visionary leaders

Let's take a closer look at each of these features.

*Transformation is triggered by disruptions.* Tushman, Newman and Romanelli (1986) suggest that transformational change is stimulated by disruptions in an organization's external and internal environments. These discontinuities, interpreted for school systems, are summarized below.

1. Industry discontinuities: in education, these discontinuities are found in legal, political, economic, and technological conditions that affect how a district operates. The federal legislation called *No Child Left Behind* is an example of an "industry" dis-

continuity in the field of education.

2. Product life cycle shifts: in education, teachers are knowledge workers and school districts are knowledge-creating organizations (Duffy, 2002). One first-level outcome of their work—their "product"—is the information they learn, organize and present to students. The second-level and primary outcomes of their work are educated students. Product "life cycle" discontinuities significantly affect their first-level outcomes—the information that is learned, organized and presented to students—and ultimately the second-level outcomes. Teachers are inundated with the latest "flavor of the month" teaching method, they are swarmed by the latest developments in how to tap into students' learning styles, and what they thought was state of the art suddenly becomes passé. If these discontinuities are perceived as valid and significant they can trigger transformation.
3. Internal company dynamics: in education, these discontinuities include changes in an organization's culture, changing student demographics, changing teacher demographics, and superintendent turnover.

Disruptions like these can severely shake-up a school district and push it to alter dramatically its grand strategy and, in turn, its mission, values, organization design, systems and procedures. Of course, this is not always a bad thing. Sometimes these kinds

of disruptions are required to break a system's inertia and start it moving toward transformation.

*Transformation is systemic and revolutionary.* Transformation requires fundamental and deep changes in a school district's core and supportive work processes, its internal social "architecture," (which includes organization design, mission, vision, information systems, human resource practices and strategic direction) and in its relationship with its external environment. Changes of this kind and of this magnitude are often characterized as systemic and revolutionary.

Transformation requires different tools and techniques for making a successful transformation (Burke, 2002), which include total system events such as the Community Engagement Conference and District Engagement Conference that are part of the **Step-Up-To-Excellence** methodology (Duffy, 2002, 2003a, 2004). Transformation also should occur rapidly so that it doesn't get bogged down in organizational politics, individual resistance, or other forms of organizational inertia (Tushman, Newman & Romanelli, 1986). In making the same point, Cummings and Worley (2001, p. 500) say, "The faster an organization can respond to disruptions, the quicker it can attain the benefits of operating in a new way."

Because school districts are systems, all of their features and components tend to connect to each other by complex cause and effect loops and tend to reinforce each other through a system phenomenon known as balancing equilibrium (or status quo). These

complex and mutually reinforcing system dynamics make it difficult to improve a system in a piecemeal manner (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p. 500). All of these dynamics fall into three broad categories (work procedures, internal social “architecture,” and environmental relationships) and must be improved simultaneously and in a coordinated fashion (Duffy, Rogerson & Blick, 2000; Miller, Friesen, & Mintzberg (1984).

*Transformation is driven by senior and line managers.* The literature and real-world experience is clear that senior executives and other line managers must drive transformation (Waldersee, 1997; Pettigrew, 1987). In school districts, the senior executives are the superintendent and his or her immediate assistants. The line managers are building principals. Without the unequivocal and highly visible leadership of these leaders, transformational change in school districts will fail.

Tushman, Newman and Nadler (1988) explain three key roles for executive leaders during times of transformational change:

1. Envisioning: articulating a clear and credible description of a new strategic orientation for the organization; setting new and challenging performance standards to move toward; appreciating the organization’s past accomplishments.
2. Energizing: demonstrating personal excitement for and unequivocal commitment to the new strategic direction and its related goals; communicating early success to

build energy to support the transformation.

3. Enabling: providing resources needed to complete the transformation; rewarding performance that supports the transformation; building a new management team to lead the transformed organization; developing management systems to support the transformation process.

*Transformation requires innovation and learning.* Transforming a school system means that the way the district is organized and how it operates is significantly different than in the present or past. To create this kind of transformation, significant innovation and learning is required. One of the most insidious obstacles blocking this kind of innovation and learning are personal and organizational mental models.

In organizations, there are generally two broad categories of mental models—personal and organizational (Duffy, 2003b). Changing personal mental models is greatly facilitated, I think, by using a knowledge-creation process (see Duffy, 2002). Knowledge-creation in school districts surfaces personal knowledge and mental models, makes that knowledge and those models explicit, and then converts the best of these into organization-wide knowledge and mental models while simultaneously helping people unlearn ineffective or inappropriate mental models.

Your school district’s organizational mental model is found in the way people in your district think about it as an entity. To

transform your district educators in your district, including you, have to change the way you think about it because every behavior in your district is shaped by its mental model and every key action taken is prompted by that model.

In many ways, your district’s defining mental model is like the autopilot on an airplane. Imagine that a plane you are piloting is stuck on autopilot and you want to change direction. You and your co-pilot can wrestle the steering yoke toward the direction you want to go, but eventually you will both tire and release your grip. The autopilot will then re-take control of the plane and move it back to its original flight path—the one that was internally programmed into the autopilot computer.

This is what happens when you try to transform your school district without changing your district’s defining mental model. The mental model is the district’s autopilot. You can wrestle with change until you tire and when you surrender to your fatigue, the district will move back to its original flight path—the one internally programmed into your district’s culture. This is the experience behind the old French folk wisdom, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

There is a more effective way to transform a district—re-set your district’s autopilot—its mental model. This is important because transformational change must start first in peoples’ minds. The way they think determines how they feel, the way they feel determines how they act, and the

way they act determines whether or not transformation is achieved. Another of the key changes in how people think in your district is for them to stop thinking thoughts that are self-centered and self-seeking. Everyone needs to start thinking about others. Administrators think about teachers and staff. Teachers and staff think about students. When everyone starts thinking about others instead of about themselves, transformation can begin.

Thoughts influence feelings and feelings influence behavior. This set of cause and effect loops implies choice. People choose to think a certain way, choose to feel a certain way and choose to behave in a certain way. What people often fail to realize, however, is that all choices have consequences. Many difficulties in transforming school systems occur because people base their choices on several frequently unreliable sources:

- Organization culture (everyone is doing it). Just because “everyone” (which usually isn’t really everyone) is doing it is not the basis of a good choice. What was it my father used to ask me, “If your friends went and jumped off a cliff, would you?”
- Tradition (we’ve always done it this way). Tradition is a manifestation of balancing equilibrium, otherwise known as status quo. It often is expressed in the question, “What’s the precedent for this”? If you want to transform your district in new and innovative ways, there is no precedent.

- Reason (it seemed like the logical thing to do). Human thinking processes are notoriously flawed. Many people do not use well-structured reasoning processes and prefer to use mental heuristics for making their decisions—heuristics that are frequently linked to emotion.
- Emotion (It just felt right). Some folks rely on how they “feel” about something when making decisions. These feelings are often rationalized as intuitive insights or common sense.

Instead of choices being made on the basis of the above sources, what school districts need are shared standards of organizational, team, and individual performance that are developed through a highly participative process that engages community members, faculty, and staff in structured interactions to create those standards. Then choices are made against the standards of performance. Therefore, one of the most important steps you will take to transform your district is to settle the issue of what the standards of performance—organizational, team, and individual performance—will be.

There are also three key attitudes that block the unlearning and learning of mental models: a closed mind, a superficial mind, and a distracted mind. A closed mind is one that proactively blocks new learning. A superficial mind is one that resists details and complexity in favor of superficiality. A distracted mind is one that is “out to lunch” and preoccupied with matters other than the ones at hand.

To facilitate the unlearning and learning of mental models educators in your district must:

1. Receive new information
2. Read that information
3. Research the information
4. Remember what they learn
5. Reflect on what they learned
6. Apply what is learned

The first five actions are useless if people fail to put their learning into practice (action #6). People fool themselves if they think that just because they learned new information that they have internalized it. Since internalization is the key to unlearning and learning new mental models, application is an absolute requirement for transformation. One way to apply what you learn is to write an implementation plan and then follow-through. Given what you learned, what steps must you take next? Effective action steps are written so they are personal (written in the first person), practical (something people can do), and provable (leads to directly observable behavior).

*Transformation requires a new organizing paradigm.* Organization transformation, by definition, is an example of second-order change (also known as gamma change). Gamma change creates stunning shifts in individual and organizational mental models or paradigms. Metaphors are often created to help people understand the new paradigms (Duffy, 2003a). Examples of these defining paradigms in school systems include “learning communities,” “system of excellence,” and “education for all.”

A new mental model (i.e., paradigm) for transforming systems is defined by features such as high

participation of faculty and staff in determining the future of their district; a central office that functions as a central service center; leadership roles that are less complex, less stressful and more focused on true leadership behaviors; and an organization design that is more democratic, more agile and more flexible, thereby creating a school district that has the capacity to seize opportunities at the intersection of anticipatory planning and unanticipated events (Duffy, 2003a). The **Step-Up-To-Excellence** methodology is built upon this paradigm.

**Transformation requires a reshaping of a school district's culture.**

Changes in the culture support changes in a district's strategic direction, mission and vision. Cultural change focuses on the "people" part of a school system—the part called the internal social "architecture." The internal social architecture supports (or constrains) people doing their work. It is composed of organization design, policies, power and political dynamics, procedures, job descriptions, and so forth, all of which are artifacts of a district's culture.

Internal social architecture includes your school district's culture. Culture is what Duck (2001) calls "The Change Monster"—that collection of human forces that either facilitate or prevent transformation. Culture is most often captured in the phrase, "This is the way we do things around here." Culture is a complex, interwoven fabric composed of people's assumptions, beliefs and values. A direct, head-on approach to changing culture will meet with difficulty,

resistance and strong human emotion (Burke, 2002). Culture change is one of the most important early outcomes of transformational change. In fact, I would say that if you cannot change your school district's culture (which is part of its internal social "architecture") your transformation effort will fail—no culture change, no transformation. One of the reasons that organization culture is so powerful is that it is driven by your faculty and staff's collective basic assumptions about the purpose of your district, the norms that govern behavior in the district, and the values you all have for educating children and for how you treat the adults who work in the system (i.e., the organizational mental model). These basic assumptions, beliefs and values, when enacted individually and collectively, produce cultural artifacts. These artifacts include observable behavior, management systems, policies, procedures, organization design, and the physical design of your buildings.

School districts do their work within an increasingly complex and changing environment. To adapt effectively to this complexity and rate of change, school districts need to redefine their strategic direction through organization transformation. However, implementing a new strategy aimed at transformation can meet serious resistance from a school district's existing culture. In this way, an organization culture that was once a source of strength for a district becomes a major liability. Reshaping a district's internal social architecture, which contains many artifacts of its culture, therefore, is an impor-

tant part of your school system's transformation.

*Transformation change requires courageous, passionate and visionary leaders.* Courageous, passionate and visionary leadership must begin at the highest level of a school system and then spread throughout a school district (Duffy, 2003a). Courage helps leaders stand their ground in the face of adversity. Passion gives them the psychological and emotional energy they need to persevere toward the goal of transformation. A vision marks a destination to move toward.

Courage, passion and vision are useless in isolation. They must be simultaneously present in a district's change leaders. A leader can have courage, but not have passion or vision. A passionate leader might lack the courage of his or her convictions and cave in to political pressure to give up the dream. A visionary leader without courage and passion is a person with a dream but without the strength of character or emotional energy to make that dream real. Courage, passion and vision are powerful when they exist as a triad.

Courageous, passionate and visionary leadership must also be transformational. Burns (1978) distinguished between traditional managers (transactional leaders) and leaders who work to transform their organizations (transformational leaders). Tichy and Devanna (1986) expanded on Burns's ideas, asserting that managers engage in very little change but manage what is present and leave things much as they found them when they depart; i.e., they become masters of

the status quo. Transformational leadership, they observed, is marked by leadership for change and innovation and that is provided in the spirit of entrepreneurship. These transformational leaders transform organizations by moving them toward a vision of a desirable future for the organization.

It is important to note, however, that transformational leaders do not abandon transactional management tasks. Instead, their leadership uses transactional skills as a foundation for providing transformational leadership. Their transactional management practices are required to complete daily routines. (Leithwood, 1992, p. 9). Leithwood, however, maintains that these transactional practices "...do not stimulate improvement... [rather] transformational leadership provides the incentive" (p. 9).

Who are the transformational leaders who stimulate fundamental change in their school districts? I believe that these leaders must exist first at the superintendent's level and then they must be distributed throughout a school district. If superintendents' courageous, passionate and visionary leadership is a leadership "tree," to totally transform their district they need a "forest" of courageous, passionate and visionary leaders. Therefore, transformational leadership is not restricted to a single person. Anyone can deliver this kind of leadership. Leadership of this class can emerge from the ranks of building principals, teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, janitors, central office staff, school board members and students. Anyone who is proactive

in the process of "... translating intentions into reality" (Block, 1987, p. 98) can and should be identified and then developed into a transformational leader.

### Conclusion

**Shaping your district's future** must be guided by the knowledge that good school districts must move toward higher levels of performance. There are many good school systems in the United States and throughout the world. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, however, good is not good enough to bring our children to the knowledge they have a right to and with which they will bring us and themselves to the future. Not only is good not good enough, but as Collins (2001) says,

*Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life. The vast majority of companies never become great, precisely because the vast majority become quite good—and that is their main problem.* (p. 1)

**Shaping your district's future** also entails identifying and exploring the controlling mental model that influences all aspects of life in your district. That mental model is often reflected in your district's current vision statement and strategic plan. It is always embedded in your district's internal social "architec-

ture"—that collection of system features that support (or inhibit) people at work, which includes organization design, organization culture, policies, procedures, communication patterns, and so on.

**Shaping your district's future** necessitates the direct and meaningful involvement of your district's customers (parents and students) and key external stakeholders (community groups, influential individuals in the community, and state department of education people, for example). Your district's faculty and staff must also be directly and meaningfully involved in shaping your district's future.

**Shaping your district's future** means you must know, understand, and apply effective approaches to strategic planning so you can get to the future you envision. When engaging your district in strategic planning you must aim to create a district significantly different from the one you have now. If you don't, the planning will not be strategic (Cook, 2000).

**Shaping your district's future** requires you and your colleagues to learn and become skillful at using an organization transformation methodology that is systemic, systematic, comprehensive, and organic; e.g., **Step-Up-To-Excellence**. The reason you need this kind of methodology is because organization transformation is complex and messy. A methodology with the aforementioned characteristics can help you sort out the complexity and work through the mess. A methodology to create and sustain systemic change also has to be

embedded into your district's organization design so that it becomes a permanent part of how your district operates. Even when your current superintendent leaves, the next superintendent and all after him or her should be required by school board policy to use that same methodology to create desirable and valued improvements in your district.

**Shaping your district's future** takes you on a fascinating and sometimes confusing journey. Along the way you will be surprised by unplanned opportunities and unanticipated threats. You need to reshape your district's organization design to create flexibility and agility so your faculty and staff can respond quickly and effectively to these surprises.

**Shaping your district's future** means you improve not only the academic side of your district but also the nonacademic supporting units. Children are in school to learn, but their experiences on the bus going to school, on the athletic playing fields, or in the cafeteria can add value to their educational experience or they can make their lives in school miserable.

**Shaping your district's future** demands attention to aligning all parts of your school system to support a superordinate goal—the unifying goal, the big dream, the grand vision for your district. This alignment must be vertical up through your system and horizontal across teams, departments, schools, and clusters of schools.

**Shaping your district's future** compels you to counter the illusion of peak performance. In na-

ture, successful organisms adapt to their environments by evolving to peaks of success. Successful school districts are like this too because they evolve to their current performance peaks. For school districts, however, there are multiple peaks that evoke images of the Rocky Mountains, where some peaks are lower than others. What if the peak your district sits atop is low compared to others, but folks inside the district don't realize it? Wouldn't this lack of perspective create a false sense of success?

**Shaping your district's future** requires a new mental model for the meaning of "organization change." The new mental model transports you from the world of "change" to the world of "flux" (Kelly, 1998). While change focuses on creating differences, flux is about managing creative destruction followed by nascent. Flux breaks down the status quo while creating a temporary foundation for innovative puzzle-solving and rebirth. Innovation destroys the status quo by introducing creative improvements to a system. The quest for innovation is amaranthine. Robust innovation sustains itself by poising on the edge of constant chaos.

**Shaping your district's future** requires all people working in your district to take deliberate actions to sustain the improvements you create. Sustaining innovation is particularly tricky since it emanates from a system being out of balance (in a state of creative disequilibrium). Thus, a school district wanting to sustain innovative thinking and puzzle-solving must create for itself a state of controlled disequilibrium

whereby it remains suspended in an almost falling state—inclined to fall, but continually catching itself and never quite toppling. To be innovative, to move to the next higher peak of performance, a school system cannot anchor itself to its past or current performance peak.

**Shaping your district's future** requires you to give up trying to solve problems and focus instead on seeking opportunities. The power of compounded results (e.g., compounded interest) is one of the most potent physical forces on earth. Each opportunity seized in a school district can be compounded if it becomes a platform for launching yet other innovations. Like a chain reaction, one well-placed innovation can trigger dozens of innovation progeny. New opportunities are created in a combinatorial fashion just as people combine and recombine the same twenty-six letters of the alphabet to write an infinite number of books.

**Shaping your district's future** demands strategic alignment. Strategic alignment has two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. Vertical alignment assures that the work of individuals supports the goals of their teams, the work of the teams support the goals of their schools (or supporting work units), the work of the schools supports the goals of their clusters, and the work of the clusters supports the grand vision and strategic direction of the district. Horizontal alignment connects individuals, teams, schools, and clusters with your district's customers and stakeholders. Horizontal alignment connects individuals, teams, schools, and clus-

ters with your district's customers and external stakeholders.

You and your colleagues can shape the future of your school district by engaging in transformational change. Your district's future, however, is not sitting out there in time and space waiting for your arrival. You must be proactive in shaping that future by influencing events, making strategic decisions, and taking strategic action that moves you ever closer to the future you and your colleagues envision for your school district. Along the way, your district has to be flexible and agile enough to respond to unanticipated opportunities and threats. Responding to these will then reshape the future that you envisioned for your district. This reshaping is normal and it is to be expected. Organizations of all kinds never perfectly achieve the future they envision for themselves.

#### A Parting Reflection

In closing, I'd like you to reflect on the words of Olive Schreiner. Ms. Schreiner was a South African peace and anti-apartheid activist. She lived from 1855-1920. She wrote a book titled the "Story of a South African Farm" (Schreiner, 1883)

In the story there is a character called "The Hunter." The hunter has spent his entire life on a quest to find the "white bird of absolute truth." As part of his quest, he built a stone stair into the sky in search of the "white bird."

There's a point in the story where the hunter is old, tired, and ready to abandon his quest and he says these words,

"...my strength is gone. Where I lie down worn out, others will stand, young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built, they will mount. They will never know the name of the man 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 stair was the hunter's legacy. If you seek to improve your school system, your legacy—your stair—will be a transformed school system. But building that stair will require your personal courage, passion and vision.

Your courage will help you stand your ground in the face of adversity; your passion will give you the emotional energy you need to persevere; your vision will be your and your district's North Star guiding you toward a bright future.

If you are serious about leading the transformation of your school system, here's what I want you to do on Monday. Identify one person—just one—who you think will be a superior ally. Call or E-mail that person and set-up a 15 minute meeting to talk about the idea of transforming your system. During that meeting, make a commitment to each other to get the transformation journey underway. Identify who else to involve right away.

Then, get started. Lead with courage, passion and vision—and go build that "stair"!

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*Francis M. Duffy*

