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

Dream! Create! Sustain! Mastering the Art and Science of Transforming School Systems By Francis M. Duffy

“All indications point to the need for a thorough transformation of our schools—from administrative bureaucracies to organizations for the learning of teachers as well as students—if we are to pull public education out of its current undistinguished status.”

(Stein & Spillane, 2005, p. 44)

The way we view our worlds is very much like a dream. But this dream is not like the hallucinogenic sleeping dreams we all enjoy (or fear). Instead, our views of the world are wide-awake dreams that are shaped by our personal beliefs, attitudes, and values. In each waking hour we enact those dreams in real-time and call what we experience our reality.

When educators come together in their school districts they act out a “collective dream” that they call their “system.” That constructed reality is manifested in their school system’s relationships with its external environment, in its core and supporting work processes, and in its internal social infrastructure (which includes organization culture, policies, procedures, communication processes, job descrip-

tions, power relationships, political dynamics, and so on). That reality is reinforced by a district-wide program of rewards and punishments, both formal and informal. This collective reality compels current and future members of a school system to conform to its requirements.

The power of human imagination to construct reality enables educators working in school districts to create dysfunctional school systems. They also have the converse ability to dream a different dream for their school systems; one that creates unparalleled opportunities for student, teacher, staff, and whole-system learning.

So, why don’t they dream that different dream? Why don’t they envision and create a school system that is substantially different and better than the one in which they work today? Ackoff (1979) suggests that the key reason people fail to envision an idealized system to work in is because “...the largest obstruction between man and the future he most desires is man himself” (p. 193); in other words,

people lack the opportunity or the ability, or both, to dream of an idealized future for their organizations and without opportunity and ability nothing significant changes.

Educators have the power to envision an idealized future for their school systems; but power left unused is notably useless. To unleash their power to create the school system of their dreams, they need to test old assumptions, discard old beliefs, and reshape old attitudes. Stated differently, they need to let go of the past and unlearn their old mental models for improving schooling (Duffy, 2003b). And, their school systems need leaders who are masters of school system transformation who can lead their system toward an idealized future using a transformation methodology driven by principles of participative planning.

An idealized future created through interactive planning does not result in a utopian system design. Ackoff (1979) explains why it is not utopian. He says,

The idealization process involves several design principles that significantly differentiate its product from a utopia. First, the design is subject to continuing change by its designers, particularly as a result of what is learned from efforts to implement it. Second, for those design questions which have no clear answer the designers should incorporate into the system design an ability to determine experimentally how they should be answered. Thus they design into the system an ability to learn from its own experience and a capability of redesigning itself continuously. Third, because the system designed will have to face conditions not anticipated in its design, it should have designed into it an ability to monitor its environment and its own performance, so it can detect changes from expectations and improve its performance under these unexpected conditions. These abilities are necessary for adaptation to changing internal and external conditions. . . . Because of these three characteristics of the idealized-design process, its product is not a utopia, an ideal system, but the best ideal-seeking system its designers can currently conceptualize. (p. 3)

Some educators as individuals do dream of an idealized school system. But as individuals they are unable to do anything about those dreams because individual dreams cannot prevail against the “collective dream” that is driving the performance of their school systems. Instead, they need a special class of leadership to facilitate the shaping of their individual dreams into a “collective dream” for the future of their school systems. They need change leaders who have developed into masters of the art and science of transformational change and who possess the courage, passion, and vision to lead that kind of change (Duffy, 2003a). It is only through a process of transformational change

that spirals continuously upward toward higher and higher levels of system performance that educators will be able to construct a new reality—a new wide-awake dream—for their school districts.

Transformational Change in School Systems

There is a resurgence of interest in the challenge of creating and sustaining whole-system transformational change in school districts (e.g., Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006; Reigeluth, 2006; Reigeluth & Duffy, 2007; Stein & Spillane, 2005). Trailing behind the revival of interest in this challenge is substantive, actionable guidance on the practicalities of transforming entire school systems. The inadequacy of actionable guidance creates a situation where systemic, transformational change is a fascinating topic of conversation, articles, and books with very little being done to create and sustain it. In fact, in spite of the multitude of change efforts in school systems over the past 30 years, there are only a handful of districts that claim to have engaged in transformational change.¹

Transformational change means different things depending on who

¹ e.g., the Fresno, California school system at <http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us/>; the Christina School System in Wilmington, Delaware; <http://www.christina.k12.de.us/Transformation/index.htm>; the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township, Indiana, at http://www.indiana.edu/~syschang/decatur/about_msd.html; and, the Chugach School District, Anchorage, Alaska, at http://www.chugachschoools.com/sharing_the_model/index.html.

is talking about it. The phrase is often used quite loosely to describe a broad range of changes, most of which are really not transformational. Here is a working definition of transformational change with which I agree: “Transformation (1) alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products; (2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; (3) is intentional; and (4) occurs over time.” (Eckel, Hill, & Green, 1998, p. 6) The following two requirements were added to this definition: (4) transformation must create a school system that continuously seeks an idealized future for itself; and (5) that future system must be substantially different than the current school system. If a change process does not satisfy these five criteria then that process is not transformational.

Transformational change should not be confused with other forms of district-wide or school-based change. Transformational change is not school-based improvement. Transformational change is not curriculum development. Transformational change is not high school reform. Small, piecemeal changes cutting across an entire district are not examples of transformational change. Instead, transformational change creates for tomorrow a school district that is substantially different than what it is today. Transformational change creates frame-breaking improvements that move an entire school system well-beyond the boundaries of its current performance paradigm (e.g., A common performance paradigm in school systems is to sort children into grades and then provide mass instruction in classes. A substantially different

paradigm would be to tailor instruction to the individual needs, interests, and abilities of each child. Moving from the sorting paradigm to the customization paradigm would represent substantial, transformational change.)

Transformational change is an approach to improving an entire school system that requires dramatic frame-breaking, paradigm-shifting change. Transformational change also places value on identifying emerging high-leverage solutions to the wicked problems (Conklin, 2001) associated with the challenge of creating and sustaining transformational change in school systems. Reigeluth, Carr-Chellman, Beabout, and Watson (2006) summarize how an emergent, high-leverage transformational process works:

In transforming an existing system to a new paradigm, it is hard to change everything at once. When you change one part of the system, it becomes incompatible with the rest of the system, which then works to change it back. Therefore, you must first change a part or parts of the system that can exert powerful leverage on the remaining parts of the old system – to overcome the force that the old system will exert to push the new parts back to what they were. Starting with a few high-leverage changes can make the whole systemic change process considerably quicker and easier. (Note that this is not piecemeal change even though you start by changing a small number of high-leverage pieces, because the changes will, if done right, result in a different paradigm of education, just as if the idealized design approach had been used.) (p. 4)

Transformation is a Three-Path Journey

It is my belief that Reigeluth, et al.'s emergent design process can

be blended with Ackoff (1979) and Banathy's (1992) idealized design process by applying principles of whole-system transformational change to create simultaneous improvements along three change-paths: **Path 1**—improve the system's relationships with its broader environment; **Path 2**—improve the system's core and supporting work processes; and, **Path 3**—improve the system's internal social infrastructure. Making simultaneous improvements along the three paths is a core principle of systemic change (Ackoff, 2001; Cummings & Worley, 2001; Pasmore, 1988).

Although Reigeluth et al. argue that emergent change can start just about anywhere in a school system, I believe that the appropriate unit of change for emergent, high-leverage change along the three paths identified above is an intact academic cluster (Duffy, Rogerson & Blick, 2000). An intact academic cluster is a grouping of schools that must collaborate to educate children; for example, in a PreK-12th grade school system with multiple high schools an intact academic cluster would be a single high school and all the middle and elementary schools that feed into it. The transformation journey would start with a high-leverage cluster. The starting cluster must not be the worst performing cluster, because the worst performing cluster will not have the capacity to succeed with transformational activities, and therefore, it would predictably fail in its effort to transform. Nor can the starting cluster be the highest performing cluster, because others will look at that cluster's successful transformation and attribute its success to it having "the best teachers," "the brightest kids," "the most favored principals," and so on. The ideal

starting point for emergent transformational change is an average performing cluster where the educators working within the cluster 1) recognize the opportunities that transformational change presents; and, 2) are willing to make that journey.

Targeting an average-performing academic cluster as the emergent, high-leverage unit to start the transformation process makes sense because the core work process of a school system is represented in its instructional program. That whole work process must be improved, not pieces of it (Ackoff, 2001; Duffy, 2001, 2003a; Pasmore, 1988). If the transformation process focuses on fragments of the instructional program by starting change in a single building, or aims to make improvements in a single academic program (e.g., a reading program), or is used to improve a single level of schooling (e.g., high school reform) then the change process is piecemeal and it violates core principles of systemic, transformational change (Ackoff, 1979; Duffy, 2003a; Pasmore, 1988). Further, an intact academic cluster is a powerful high-leverage element of a school district that has a greater chance of countervailing any pressure from the rest of the system for it to revert to its pre-transformation ways.

Mastering Transformation

Mastery of transformation is a level of performance marked by a sophisticated and unwavering level of knowledge (the science of transformation) and skill (the art of transformation). A master truly knows something by heart. He or she has learned specific knowledge and has worked diligently to convert that knowledge into skills. A

master can also teach his or her skills to others, lead them in applying those skills, and be innovative in using those skills.

Since school district transformation is not a goal or destination, but rather a journey—a never-ending journey—masters of transformation must also be skilled navigators of rapid, complex change (Duffy, 2004). Skilled navigators of transformational change have a metaphorical map (knowledge of core concepts and principles of whole-system transformation) and compass (a specially designed methodology to transform their systems) to guide them on the journey; and they possess the treasured abilities to adapt quickly to unexpected “ground-level truths” while simultaneously tolerating the ambiguity that is created when systems are transforming into something significantly different than what they are.

Mastery of transformation is not, and should not be, the domain of a few. It can and must be achieved by anyone in a school system willing to lead the journey. Mastering transformation begins with *mastery of awareness*—an awareness of a school system’s crippling beliefs, awareness of its dysfunctional norms, and an awareness of exciting technologically feasible and operationally viable opportunities that can be seized by engaging in transformational change. Mastery of transformation continues with *mastery of deliberate intent*, which results in an ideal-seeking (Ackoff, 1979, 2001) school system. And, mastery of transformation is turbocharged by *mastery of methodology*, which results in change leaders learning and applying a special methodology for navigating a transformation journey.

Let’s examine each element of mastery as summarized above.

Mastery of Awareness

It is a fact. People and systems will not change unless the reasons for change are recognized and accepted as valid. This principle requires change leaders to become masters of awareness. They do this by honing their ability to scan the external environment of their school systems to identify emerging trends that can be either threats or opportunities. They also master awareness by sharpening their ability to collect data about their school system’s current performance—data that identifies their system’s strengths and weaknesses. Further, opinions about why change is needed are insufficient for motivating people to support a transformation journey. Data are required to validate the need and opportunities to which transformation can respond and the data must be valid and widely accepted as “truth.”

It is insufficient for change leaders simply to possess raw data gathered from their scan of the external environment and their assessment of their system’s current performance. Those data must be converted into information, which in turn is transformed into knowledge, understanding, and ultimately into wisdom. This knowledge-creation continuum (data→information→knowledge→understanding→wisdom) is used to depict a school system’s current performance paradigm and the factors that influence it. This depiction is what Ackoff (in Ackoff, Magidson & Addison, 2006) calls the system’s “mess.” Describing and understanding this “mess” is the first step in creating an idealized design for a transformed

school system. The “mess” is then communicated to internal and external stakeholders in ways that stimulate their motivation to transform their school system and build their internal commitment to the transformation process. Communicating the “mess” in this way is called strategic communication (Duffy & Chance, 2007).

Change leaders also need to focus their awareness on their school system’s beliefs, attitudes and values—the ones that created the wide-awake dream representing their current school system. Then, all of the self-limiting, fear-based, dysfunctional beliefs, attitudes and values must become targets for elimination or modification. In effect, the change leaders and their colleagues will seek to “reprogram” their collective mental model of what their school system is (Duffy, 2003b) and then collaborate to create an idealized vision of a new system.

Mastery of Deliberate Intent

There is something very powerful about creating an intent—a new wide-awake dream to become something different than you are. This same power applies to school systems. I believe that educators in successful school systems have a very clear sense of who they are as professionals, what their system stands for, and what they envision as an idealized future for their system. And, they develop a passion for achieving their collective intent, which reflects Hoffer’s (1951) concept of religiofication that he defined as the “...art of turning practical purposes into holy causes.” (p. 15)

A deliberate intent to become an ideal-seeking school system conjoined with a passion for making

that journey gives educators a clear and vivid direction to move in as they start their transformation. Educators face uncertainty about the future of their districts when they do not have a deliberate intent for its future. Uncertainty about the future is a powerful barrier to transformation and it can have other dysfunctional consequences that affect the people working in a school system; e.g., people can:

- become less committed to the goals of the school system;
- experience lower job satisfaction;
- experience lower motivation;
- become unfocused and easily discouraged from taking action to improve; and,
- spend more time dreaming about the future but spend less time taking action to make their dreams real

Mastery of Methodology

Transformation is not an easy journey. Its challenges are complex. The ambiguity that emerges during the journey can be almost unbearable. The emotions experienced will feel like an exhilarating (or scary) rollercoaster ride. The school system's equilibrium will resist the journey. The negative politics of personal destruction may surface to undermine the transformation journey as people realize that change leaders are serious about leading their system through a transformation. The toll it can take on change leaders, their colleagues, and the system can be significant if the journey is not navigated artfully.

Given the complexity and challenges of transformational change

it is important for change leaders to master the art and science of a transformation methodology—a methodology specially designed to create and sustain transformational change. One example of this kind of methodology is called *Step-Up-To-Excellence* (SUTE) (Duffy, 2001, 2006). Other transformation methodologies include:

- Reigeluth's *Guidance System for Transforming Education* (GSTE) (Jenlink & Reigeluth, 2000; Reigeluth, 2006);
- Ackoff's (1979) and Banathy's (1992) idealized design;
- Emery's *Search Conference* and *Participative Design* methodologies (Emery & Purser, 1996);
- Weisbord and Janoff's (2000) *Future Search* methodology; and
- Dannemiller's *Real-Time Strategic Change* (Dannemiller & Jacobs, 1992; Dannemiller-Tyson Associates, 1994).

Only two of the above methods were specially designed to create and sustain transformational change in school systems; i.e., **Step-Up-To-Excellence** and the **Guidance System for Transforming Education**. The other methods can be modified to transform school systems (e.g., see Emery, 2006; Schweitz & Martens with Aronson, 2005).

Conclusion

Truly remarkable change can happen when whole school systems are transformed. Exciting, powerful, and proven transformation methodologies invite educators working in a school system to imagine an idealized system, to

participate in planning to create that system, and then actively collaborate to make their dreams real. The journey is challenging, but worth it. So, the question I leave you with today is this, "Do you have the personal courage, passion and vision it takes to create and sustain system-wide change in your school district"? If you are not courageous, passionate and visionary, then when will you be? Can you afford to wait?

While considering your answers to the above questions, please reflect on the words of Olive Schreiner in her book *The Story of a South African Farm* (published under the pseudonym Ralph Iron, 1883). In her book there is a character called the "Hunter." He is on a lifelong quest for the "white bird of truth." His quest inspired him to build a stone stair into the sky in search of the white bird. It took a lifetime to build the stair. Old and tired from working a lifetime to build that stair the Hunter rests at the precipice and says,

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

That stone stair was the Hunter's legacy for future generations of truth seekers. In your efforts to improve your school system what will your legacy be? Will your "stone stairs"—your legacy—be a transformed school system that creates unparalleled opportunities for improving student, faculty, staff, and whole-system learning?



As a master of transformational change you can build a stair toward an idealized future for your school system. So, become a master of the art and science of transformation; lead that journey with courage, passion and vision; and keep hope alive!

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Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

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