

School Systems THAT LEARN

Improving Professional Practice,
Overcoming Limitations,
and Diffusing Innovation

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Introduction

Transformation

Moving a School District Into a Learning System

A seasoned educator has just become the new superintendent of a district that has 3,100 students in one preschool, three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. About 10% of the families qualify for free and reduced lunch, and the quickly changing student population is about 20% students of color. For the past five years, the town government did not have sufficient funds to match the rising costs of contractual obligations, special education, utilities, and health benefits. The increases in these budget areas often averaged 4% to 10% annually, while the school revenues remained constant or increased by 1% to 2%. This yearly gap between revenues and costs frequently resulted in staff reductions and program eliminations.

Most recently, the district eliminated 22 positions, and class sizes approached 30 students in most elementary classes. Families were burdened with a \$400 fee for bus transportation and nearly \$300 per sport for students to participate in high school athletics. There also were fees for student drivers to park their cars (\$150), for elementary students to participate in an after-school play (\$50), and for middle school students to enjoy after-school activities (\$100).

The middle school had so few enrichment courses that the one remaining art teacher had over 600 students. In order to fill the holes left in the schedule from staff reductions, study halls multiplied, with the largest containing 120 students during the lunch block. This "study hall" was in the gymnasium, where young adolescents sat on the gym floor for the period.

The funding gap also affected contract negotiations. Five different union contracts expired right before the superintendent started. In order to prevent further staff reductions, the school board couldn't offer a cost-of-living increase

to teachers, custodians, secretaries, or food service workers. Morale was low, particularly among the custodians, who manned a picket line because the school committee was considering outsourcing their jobs. In the face of such a stark outlook, many veteran administrators and teachers retired early, and the new superintendent had to hire three principals, five department chairs, and a director of curriculum, instruction, and technology. This represented a significant upheaval for a relatively small district.

One of the schools in the district was placed in corrective action by the Department of Education because it had not met its adequate yearly progress (AYP) scores for several consecutive years.

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This real scenario (D'Auria, 2009) contains elements that are typical of the problems that confront superintendents in small, medium, and large districts. And while there are no easy formulas or guaranteed approaches to ensure a successful turnaround, the process will nonetheless resemble the efforts and interventions of skillful teachers working with students in their classrooms. Similarly to a teacher, the superintendent will have to apply good instruction, personal relationship building, collaborative inquiry, careful planning, best practices, and dispassionate examination of the data. And, like any good teacher, the superintendent needs to *check for understanding* and, where warranted, reteach.

Superintendents need to convey lots of information to a variety of constituencies. Most members of these groups (parents, taxpayers, and elected officials) do not have a background in education, though they all experienced school. In the scenario outlined above, increased funding was clearly the district's most daunting and most pressing need. While there is no doubt that efficiencies could be found in the budget, the schools needed more money. The superintendent discovered that a recent ballot initiative to raise taxes to gain additional revenue for the schools lost by only 300 votes. Further examination showed that a number of parents had not voted in that election. Why was that? An initial hypothesis was that not enough parents were invested in the state of the schools. However, results of focus groups showed that there was not a shared understanding of the hallmarks of a quality school system. Interviews with various town constituents led the superintendent to realize that significant animosity and mistrust existed among and between stakeholder groups. From this new data, the superintendent and his educational team shifted their strategy from one that just focused on getting out the vote to a three-step action plan:

1. Establish forums where community members can air their different perspectives openly and respectfully,
2. Provide multiple opportunities for community members to learn about the educational issues facing the schools, and
3. Publicize criteria used in university research to assess the quality of education within a district.

One strategy the superintendent utilized, as a result of this new thinking, was to *teach* the *curriculum* of the budget by translating it into lessons that would engage the audience and bring about an understanding of the important ideas, rather than simply convey information. For example, due to budgetary constraints, elementary class sizes were exceeding 30 students. The superintendent realized that a simple graph showing the data would not help those community members who experienced class sizes of 40 or 50 students when they were in elementary school to understand the problems posed by large class sizes today.

Trying to explain how special education costs affect the school budget requires teaching minilessons on state and federal mandates, explaining autism and its very dramatic increase in school populations, and explaining why inclusion is worthwhile although it requires more initial expense. To *teach* about class size, the superintendent wrote an article for the local newspaper. With it, he included a class photo from his own elementary school years and asked:

Can you spot the future superintendent of Canton in this 1959 photo of my 4th-grade class? There are 61 students who were part of my classroom that year. Given the fact that I was able to attain an advanced degree and gain a leadership position, one can easily conclude that such a large class size did little to limit my ability to succeed in school and ultimately secure a reasonable job. While this is a logical conclusion, as an educator, I must also point out that not everyone benefited from this one-size-fits-all model that allowed class sizes to be this large. If you look “behind the scenes” of this photo, you will not be able to detect anyone with a learning disability or with special needs. If students had such needs, they would not have been able to be part of this class. They would have had to attend a special school or be educated at home. If you happen to be one of the girls in this class, your career options would be limited to the basic three: homemaker, teacher, or nurse. You also would have had little opportunity to play organized sports. Also absent from this

photo are any nonwhite faces. Again, if you happened to be a person of color, you more than likely would have had to attend a different school. I mention these “exceptions” because we often remember fondly the benefits of a previous era of schooling, while not viewing the limitations that also existed during this time. Education was not as adaptive and responsive to the range of needs and backgrounds that we are currently responsible to meet and support.

While I am proud of the progress we have made in the field of education over the past half a century, I know that our expanded expectations require a different model than the “one size fits all.” We expect and demand from our teachers more personalization, communication, and attention to individual needs. In order to accomplish this, class sizes must be within reasonable limits.

As the superintendent in this case began to convey these *lessons* about the school district, some stakeholders reacted with strong arguments against more funds going to the schools. Some of their statements were caustic. Because of what the superintendent and his team had learned earlier about the corrosive effects of mistrust and anger, the superintendent responded to the critiques in a calm and dispassionate manner, recognizing that the tone of his responses was just as critical as the content of his words. Dispassionate responses to vitriolic critiques began to shift the tenor of the exchanges in the newspaper. Additionally, because of what his team learned from community forums, instead of avoiding those who opposed increased funding, team members reached out to those who had conflicting views. This collaborative approach that engaged the community in a learning cycle led to a political victory that increased funding for the schools.

The story offers one example of how a leader should operate within a learning school system to bridge differences and build a shared understanding of the challenges and goals of the district. While the specifics will differ in each case, educators who utilize a learning cycle that nimbly responds to the root causes of a problem raise the likelihood of achieving success.

Every adult member of a learning school system demonstrates learning, teaching, and collaboration. While there are distinct and specific roles and focus points for each employee—finance officer, director, coach, assistant principal, department head, teacher, paraprofessional, and others—all adult members of the system play the roles of learners, collaborators, and teachers within their distinct job responsibilities, asking questions, collecting data, facilitating teamwork, implementing strategies, assessing impact, and, where necessary, recycling through these phases until goals are achieved.

A LEARNING SCHOOL SYSTEM SHIFTS THE WORK FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE TEAM

Every school district strives to serve all its students well. The capacity of the district to ensure that every individual student learns the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that represent excellence is traditionally thought of as a function of the abilities of individual teachers and principals. It is our contention that the capacity of a school district to provide all students with a gold-standard education is directly proportional to the system's ability to function as a learning unit. The more that teachers, principals, and central office staff act as individuals rather than as members of a collective whole, the less likely that all students will be educated well. As marketing consultant Simon Sinek points out, "Success always takes help. Failure you can do alone." Sinek continues in a recent blog post,

There is something to be said for being the smartest or the most talented one in the room . . . too bad it doesn't help much in reality. Success, by any definition, is a team sport. I learned this little detail the hard way. There was a time in my life that I thought that if I wanted to make anything out of myself, I'd be responsible for all of it by myself. I thought I could do everything primarily because I thought I should do everything. I needed to know how to be the boss, the accountant, the creative director, the marketing manager, the HR director, set the strategy and do the work with my clients. Even if I hired or worked with others, I wanted to be the final say on everything. This was a brilliant strategy until three things happened.

1. I learned I wasn't good at everything
2. I didn't have the energy to do everything
3. I failed

The human animal is a social animal and our survival and success depend on our ability to find communities of people who share our values and beliefs. When these communities form, trust emerges. It is then that the human animal will adapt from a survival instinct by self-preservation to one of working for the good of the community. Both are designed to help the individual survive, but it is the community that has the greater chance of not only survival but success. (2010)