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About This Issue
A special issue on paradigm change in education; plus several regular magazine features
Transformational Dialogue for Public Education: Moving from Tweaking to Transforming at the State Level

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The importance of public education has never been greater as we enter the dawn of a new millennium. Innumerable efforts have been focused on improving public education, but the unfortunate result has been an array of fractured, piecemeal efforts. What is needed is a systemic approach to go from tweaking to transforming through a process known as Transformational Dialogue for Public Education (TDPE). This approach is based on four core tenets: (1) going to the root of the root; (2) re-conceiving and optimizing at the state level; (3) no organizational transformation without personal transformation; and (4) enduring revolution through persistent evolution. Using these four tenets as the foundation, the TDPE approach is designed to provide coherence to the current piecemeal efforts and help produce results that are far-reaching and sustainable.

Introduction

Public education forms the foundation of our democratic society, and the importance of that role has never been greater as we enter the dawn of a new millennium. We are facing global challenges today that are unprecedented in our history, and, as Einstein advised, “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” We must look to the next genera-

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Using these four tenets as the foundation, the TDPE approach described in this article is designed to provide coherence to the current piecemeal efforts and to help produce results that are far-reaching and sustainable due to their common roots in shared purpose and shared values.

**A Systemic Approach**

1. **Going to the Root of the Root**

   The approach being proposed here requires us to go back to the basics of what public education is all about. What is needed is a clear and coherent core purpose and a set of core values—a shared core ideology—to which all the stakeholders in the education system are aligned and which would form the foundation on which to re-conceive and rebuild our public education system for the future. To do that we must go back to the root of the root and ask fundamental questions like “What is the purpose of public education in our democratic society in the 21st century?”

   The Hierarchy of Choices framework (see **Figure 1**) helps us establish a commonly understood hierarchy of priorities in making choices, thereby enabling a group to have a consensus on an essential piece of logic: purpose precedes core values and vision; vision precedes strategy. Purpose must come first, and then all other organizational decisions grow out of a commitment to that purpose.

   Without this kind of understanding, what happens all too often is that education reform efforts tend to gravitate towards the level of Strategy. And when there are disagreements at the Strategy level, people tend to move up the hierarchy (because it’s generally easier) and try to get some kind of agreement at the level of Tactics or Activities (because the stakes are lower).

   **Creating the DNA of Public Education: Purpose and Core Values.**

   Going to the root of the root means to start at the bottom of the Hierarchy of Choices and then to move up the levels in such a manner that each subsequent choice is guided by the level below it. To go beyond traditional “reform” efforts that are relatively superficial and piecemeal means addressing the issue of Purpose (core reason for being) and Core Values (a clear and deep sense of identity as an institution) by working to answer questions like “What is the primary purpose of public education?” and “What values must we live by in order to pursue our purpose most effectively?” We need to tease apart all the varieties of purposes that have been layered onto this thing called public education and ask ourselves the deeper questions about what we as a democratic society really need our public school systems to be in the 21st century.

   When we have a firm foundation of Purpose and Core
Values that is agreed upon by all the critical stakeholders of the educational system, it is analogous to having established the DNA equivalent for our public education as a living system. It provides the genetic blueprint for creating an endless variety of manifestations of what great public schools can look like, each of them unique, yet each one recognizable as being part of the same great public education system. We can then move to the level of Vision and make primary choices by asking questions such as “If we were truly committed to pursuing our Purpose, what kind of a system would more accurately reflect all that we have learned about learning? What would it look like to have all that learning embodied in the curriculum, the structures, the policies, and the teachers?” We can then move on to Strategy, Tactics, and Activities.

2. The Need to Re-conceive and Optimize at the State Level

Because the causes of our current national educational “crisis” are so complex and deeply embedded, only changes at the most fundamental levels of the system will have lasting results. So, where do we start? How do we even begin to tackle the whole system of public education when it is so enormous in size and complexity? What is needed is a more holistic, systemic approach in which we recognize some important systems principles about the proper level at which to optimize performance.

Systemic We Succeed—Fragmented We Fail

When we engaged with education leaders in many states, virtually everyone agreed with the diagnosis that their states were not failing due to a lack of attention and effort, but due to fragmentation. While every stakeholder cared about the education of their state’s children, each was operating in ways that were designed to “optimize” their piece of the system rather than the whole system.

In the early history of the United States, during the War of Independence, Americans understood the deeper truth of our situation from an intuitively systemic perspective when they rallied around the call “united we stand, divided we fall.” They may have been acknowledging the truth of these two systems axioms:

- **Systems Axiom 1**
  Everything is connected to everything else.

- **Systems Axiom 2**
  If you optimize the parts of a system, you are guaranteed to sub-optimize the larger system. If we optimize the larger system, we are guaranteed to sub-optimize (or re-optimize) some of the parts some of the time.

If we rephrase for our education context, it would say that “fragmented we fail, systemic we succeed.” That is why lengthening school days won’t help, if students are not learning during the time they already spend in school. Testing teachers won’t improve their skills, if they are not well trained, just as tightening standards will not make any difference if the standards are irrelevant to today’s needs. Engaging in high-stakes testing will only lead to a focus on teaching to the test, with everything else going by the wayside. Pouring more resources into the system will not necessarily improve the quality of teaching or the level of student learning, if the additional resources amplify the bad with the good. Each effort tends to focus on a narrow part of the system in pursuit of that ever-elusive silver bullet solution that will somehow fix everything.

Perhaps the biggest silver bullet myth of them all is the belief that more money will cure all ills. Yet, how many billions of dollars have we poured into the existing system since the Nation at Risk report came out in 1986, with little to show for it? This is not to say that money is not important. It’s just that the infusion of money is rarely enough, on its own, to make any substantive and lasting change. A case in point is the self-assessment by a major national foundation that concluded that their biggest funding failure in their organization’s history was the hundreds of millions they poured into education initiatives that produced no real lasting impact.*

Optimizing at the State Level

So, what will it look like to take a systemic approach that works in harmony with the two systems axioms? It will require all the key stakeholders of a given system to pledge that their individual purposes are subordinate to the larger purpose of the whole system to which they are all committed. In other words, an important part of everyone’s purpose (or role in the system) is to optimize the purpose of the whole system.

This is why the basic belief underlying this approach is that the proper level at which to draw the system boundary for school transformation belongs squarely at the state level. For true transformation to take place, state education, political, and community leaders need to go back to the root of the root and personally engage in a fundamental re-examination of the basic assumptions on which their current public education system is based. Thus, we will need to convene these multiple stakeholder groups in education in each state to engage in a process of deep dialogue to re-conceive together what the purpose and core values of the public education system ought to be for the 21st century.

The intent in creating these state-level dialogues is not to form yet one more committee whose task it is to problem-solve our way to the future. Nor is it to create a

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* The Annenberg Challenge spent $1.1 billion on public school improvement over more than eight years. The final report, *The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Reflections on Public School Reform* (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2002) recounted difficulties including “repeated setbacks, rapid turnover in leadership and sudden changes in direction” (p. 9), stating, “We encountered problems and policy reversals in some places that took everyone by surprise” (p. 9).
bureaucratic body through which all coordination and/or approval must flow. The primary purpose is to provide a place where all the relevant stakeholders can come together, suspend their individual organizational objectives, put our children and their future (and by extension our own future) in the center of our attention, and co-create a new future by collectively working to optimize the whole system. Once everyone understands his/her unique role as a part of the larger whole (rather than seeing his/her specific work as a system unto itself), each can begin to operate in ways that do indeed put our children first in our priority as a society. This is the way out of the fragmentation trap.

3. No System Transformation without Personal Transformation

There is an old adage that says, “if you are not part of the solution, you are a part of the problem.” Unfortunately, this puts an overemphasis on the “solving” part and not enough on the “problem” part, so everyone tends to focus on and rush to put forth their solutions. These are often done from a stance of “I am above the problem or I am not a part of the problem, therefore I can provide a ‘clean’ objective solution to your problem.” Most of these solutions, however well intentioned, tend not to produce sustainable long-term results, as numerous studies of such interventions can attest (Senge, 1999).

A colleague in the field of organization development, Bill Torbert, turns the traditional adage on its head by saying “if you are not a part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution” (Kahane, 2004, p. 105). This is a much more systemic approach to addressing change in complex systems, because it recognizes that the changes to any system must be carried out by those who are a part of the system. So, if you do not identify yourself as part of the system that you wish to change, you will be blind to the ways in which you yourself are a contributor to keeping things the way they are.

Any true transformational journey must always be comprised of two parallel journeys of organization development and leadership development. By definition, a transformational journey must be a learning journey: otherwise, each of us is simply rehashing what we already know and nothing new can be created. The organization/system changes because the individuals in the system change, and the leaders must lead by example by learning and developing themselves first. Gandhi was right when he said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

It is not enough, however, for the individual leaders involved in the process to learn and grow. They must, in turn, lead the change in their respective organizations by creating a similar parallel learning and development process with their own people. For true transformation to occur statewide, every organization in the system must be engaged in its own transformation work.

4. Enduring Revolution through Persistent Evolution

In Good to Great, Jim Collins (2001) identifies a number of myths about what it takes to achieve greatness. One of them is the “Myth of Revolution: Big change has to be wrenching, extreme, painful—one big, discontinuous, shattering break.” He states rather emphatically that “dramatic results do not come from dramatic process—not if you want them to last, anyway. A serious revolution, one that feels like a revolution to those going through it, is highly unlikely to bring about a sustainable leap from being good to being great.”

Most “revolutions” fail because they attempt to impose an artificial set of systems in an arbitrarily short period of time. Neither the systems nor the schedule is sustainable without the infusion of massive amounts of resources to prop up the so-called revolution. This is why demonstration sites prove to be of limited use—they work under the artificial conditions for producing a demonstration, but very little about a demonstration has the basis for building something sustainable. Or, there is no willingness to do what it really took to produce the demonstration, and a diluted form of “roll-outs” follow that cannot replicate the success of the original demonstration. We keep trying to get others to “buy in,” which means we have to do a lot of selling. We would achieve more success inviting people to a process of engagement that built true ownership, because they would arrive at their own understanding of the need for change.

There are no shortcuts to producing lasting change. Stated another way, the shortcut is to not take short cuts. When we take shortcuts, what gets “cut” are the very things that are required to sustain the change over the long term. So, in the end, the shortcut takes longer because the results are short-lived, requiring us to keep applying more shortcuts.

By way of analogy, let’s say you admire the beautiful tree that your neighbor has in his backyard, which has taken years to grow to its present size, and you wish to have one of your own. There are several options. You could plant a sapling, which would be easy to do, but it would take years for it to grow to the same size. You could transplant a fully grown tree, but that would entail a lot of money and effort to transport the whole tree, root system and all, not to mention the excavation required to dig the appropriately sized hole. Or, you could take a shortcut and simply cut the tree at the base just above the ground and prop it up with supporting poles and guy wires. You would instantly have that full-grown tree to enjoy by watering and fertilizing it regularly. The tree would look fine for a few days but we know that the tree will eventually wither and die because it has no root system to sustain it. However, in the short

term, it appears as if we have successfully transplanted the tree without expending a whole lot of money and effort.

The above tree shortcut analogy illustrates how most benchmarking and best practices end up being used, because it is always easier and quicker to focus on copying the results (the ends) produced by the organizations that succeed at change without necessarily understanding the process (the means) by which they achieved those results. This is not saying that benchmarking and adoption of best practices are in and of themselves bad. Indeed, when done well, with a deep understanding of the underlying processes that led to the benchmarked successes, it can be one of the most effective ways to transfer learning from others’ successes.

Unfortunately, in the name of expediency, people often pursue what will produce the quickest visible results, without attending to what will produce lasting results. This is also how most change efforts get “rolled out” to the rest of the organization. If we refer back to the Hierarchy of Choices framework, the root system is like the Purpose, Core Values, and Vision levels, while the trunk, branches, and leaves are like the Strategies, Tactics, and Activities. All too often, people try to take the shortcut of simply copying strategies, tactics, and activities without really understanding that those were effective because they were rooted in and emanated from a deep shared sense of purpose, core values, and vision. So, if we are truly interested in enduring change, we must resist the temptation to take such superficial shortcuts and attend to developing the root system of our change efforts.

**Transformational Dialogue for Public Education**

The above four tenets were put into practice under the initiative we called the Transformational Dialogue for Public Education (see “The Ohio Experience” sidebar). Why dialogue? Most people make the mistake of believing that dialogue is nothing more than just talking, so it is worth clarifying here what we mean by dialogue. Too often, the practice of communication involves just two modes: talking and waiting to talk. In talking, there is often very little listening, and, according to Adam Kahane (2004), the biggest obstacle to listening is knowing. The discipline of dialogue is as much about creating the space inside ourselves to listen as it is about creating the space outside ourselves for others to speak. It requires suspending what we believe we know so that we can truly hear what others might have to say on the same subject. If we go back to the root meaning of the word, we find that it is made up of two words, *dia* (meaning *through* as in diameter) and *logos* (meaning *word* or *meaning*). Thus, to engage in dialogue means allowing the word or shared meaning to flow through us. When we truly engage in dialogue, where shared meaning flows through us, our view of the world is affected, which, in turn, affects the actions we take.

If we listen from a different place, the conversation itself becomes transformative. We will become a bit different, act differently, and make different decisions. Our day-to-day actions will change because we’ll start to talk to and interact differently with people. In other words, true dialogue is action.

**Core Theory of Success Flywheel**

The core theory that undergirds our dialogue approach is depicted in Figure 2. This core theory of success posits that an increase in the quality of relationships (all else being equal) causes an increase in quality of collective thinking, which, in turn, causes an increase in the quality
of actions and results. This, in turn, reinforces the quality of relationships. This success loop can be likened to a flywheel, in which each successive lap around the loop increases the momentum of the wheel such that it becomes almost self-sustaining, requiring very little external input to keep it going. The transformational dialogue initiative provides the initial investments needed to get the flywheel going and then sustains the momentum with regularly scheduled sessions.

The flywheel analogy helps explain the role of dialogue and why it can lead to the “slower is faster” phenomenon. When a group of people takes the time to slow down and talk intensely with each other about what really matters to them and what they deeply value, they end up building a deep common base of understanding upon which they can engage in other conversations in and out of the dialogue process. When they do this, they discover that the spin-off conversations and actions (represented by the smaller wheels) can go much faster and that all the different members’ actions are in sync and together as if invisibly orchestrated. What people notice is that their interactions with each other in the day-to-day work environment go more smoothly. Within the dialogue process space, things may look as if they are going slower—but that slowing down can actually spur the external actions to go at a much faster and more aligned pace.

Just as a flywheel at rest will require a fair amount of force to break it free from its inertial state, the “wheel” of dialogue will also require a substantial amount of effort to get it moving from a standing start. With each rotation of the flywheel, the angular momentum builds, and it requires less and less energy to keep the flywheel turning. So, too, with each “turn” of our dialogue flywheel, the progress we are able to make increases, while the effort required decreases (relative to the complexity and difficulty of issues we are trying to address).

Another way to think about the dialogue effect is to see the core dialogue wheel as producing a dialogic field (analogous to a magnetic field) which helps all the parts of the larger system align towards a common vision (depicted

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**Figure 3.** Flywheels of dialogue.

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The Ohio Experience

We initiated the TDPE process in three states—Ohio, Kansas, and North Carolina. The first one was Ohio, which lasted the longest. The second one was Kansas, in which the initial group of state leaders (state commissioner of education, governor's office, and the teachers' union) were whole-heartedly in favor of the approach. However, shortly after the first meeting, the collapse of the U.S. financial system occurred and the state became overwhelmed by its own financial crisis. The third one was North Carolina, where again there was great support for the concepts by the key stakeholders, but the Great Recession that had set in also took its toll in that state as well. That one lasted one year, after which funding ran out. Ohio was the longest-lived, lasting from June of 2007 to the end of 2012. It was able to weather the financial shocks primarily due to the sustained funding by the KnowledgeWorks Foundation with additional funding by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as well as the member organizations and individuals themselves. However, when the incumbent governor was not re-elected, the TDPE could not remain effective when the new administration did not sustain the same level of engagement and commitment.

All of the tenets and principles described in this article were fully implemented in Ohio. We started with a nucleus group that included the governor's education policy person, the state superintendent, and the leadership of the two teachers' unions. They fully embraced the logic of the TDPE initiative and experienced the value of the dialogues through the improvement in the quality of their relationships. They then identified a wider circle of key educational organizations (20 or so) that also needed to be a part of the dialogue so that we could bring all the fragmented parts together into one whole system conversation. This group came to be called the Core Stewardship Team (CST), whose purpose was to provide steadfast commitment to continually strive to put the optimization of the state education system above that of their individual organizations. By their own assessment, the CST believed that the TDPE process was instrumental in accomplishing several things collectively that they likely could not have done in their old fragmented ways.

However, in the end, the TDPE flywheel was not able to establish enough momentum within one governor's term to be able to sustain it through an administration change. The politicized nature of our education system makes it too vulnerable to shifts in direction whenever there is a change in administration. As one state senator then pondered, if that is the biggest impediment to sustained focus, then perhaps the first step should be to work on de-politicizing public education in our states. That would be a worthy goal and one that may need to be the first focus of a future TDPE.

by the concentric circles radiating outward in Figure 3), even as individuals are pursuing their own objectives within their own part of the system. As each part of the system takes its own local action, it is aligned with the greater whole and so is more likely to add to the common vision (vs. canceling out movement toward the common vision by taking actions going in different directions).

Concluding Remarks

Although this initiative is squarely being focused at the state level, we also know that we are a nation of 50 united states. So, even as each state pursues its own questions of purpose, core values, and vision, we must also help the states link up together so that they can learn from each other and begin to get a sense of the commonalities among them in order to form a more perfect union. What may emerge from (not be imposed on) the learning and sharing process is a clearer picture of what is needed at the federal level. This will be a case of the states becoming clearer about what needs to be owned by the states and what is better handled at the federal level. As the states collectively become clearer about the federal government's role, this may in turn call for a policy change—perhaps even a constitutional amendment—regarding the federal responsibility for public education.

If we extend the systems axiom about optimizing systems to the larger context of our interdependent global community, we can ill afford to simply view public education as another dimension of competitive advantage with respect to other nations. Ultimately we must shift our frame from creating the best public education system in the world to helping each nation pursue the creation of the best public education system for the world. Therefore, this initiative should be conceived of as operating within the multiple contexts of the local, state, national and global levels, even as we begin by pursuing transformation at the state level.

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