



# Sabu, Inc.

Helping those  
who must deal with  
*whole elephants*

Lewis A. Rhodes

# M E M O

814 Lamberton Drive  
Silver Spring, MD 20902-3037  
Phone/Fax: 301-649-1296  
E-mail: lewrhodes@AOL.com

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TO: (Foundation Executive interested in  
possibly studying MCPS' approach to systemic  
change)

RE: **Fishing in MCPS waters**

I don't know if your reading schedule has permitted you to see a *Commentary* in the 11/14/01 EdWeek-- "**Lessons From a Fish Market: *The Burdens and Joys of Professional Teamwork***" by Deanna Burney, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's school of education.

I'm citing this as an example of a direct tie-in to MCPS, and the type of "project" that needs to, and can be, developed to mine the unique knowledge-base under development here.

If you have read it, you know she writes about what can be learned about the applicability to schools of the ways a Seattle fish market coherently organizes its work and thinking around its work and goals. And that neither the nature of the work nor the particularities of the goals are what it's all about. Instead there are some universal foundations across all organizations that involve *communication, leadership, and self-evaluation*.

Burney is totally correct in her views of its "content-free" relevance to schooling, and what its implications are for the different actions that need to be taken. But, like others, she has no "method" attached for how to do it, except to start by changing one's own behavior. Thus, her concluding lines:

*"So what can we learn from "FISH"?"...That we need to take time to know ourselves, and to share with colleagues what we know and don't know, by making our practice public everyday.*

**But how? That's the only option she has to offer for "learning" from *Fish* because she's never seen the principles she cites playing out in educational practice..** As an example she asks:

*"Why is it that 56 years after the Atwell survey, many of us are still talking about this wish list instead of doing something to make it a reality? Why is it that we seldom experience the kind of daily conversations and observations of practice with colleagues that those in many other professions enjoy?..." [In 1945, 60 percent of teachers surveyed said they wanted access to a professional library, a supervisor who acts as a consultant or technical adviser, demonstration lessons, grade conferences to discuss common problems, visits to outstanding schools, participation in the formulation of school policies, individual conferences with the supervisor, intervisitation of teachers, after-school conferences for open discussion of problems, and in-service courses and workshops.]*

**She has never seen and experienced it happening. She has no model that even suggests it all can be done.**

So I wonder how much more powerful her beliefs and writings might be if she, and others, now had an opportunity not only to see how the *principles* she cites (below) are being applied across a complete school district, but also a district that provided *Fish* - the book and tape -- to all buildings, central administrators and Board early in the process. Some personnel even visited the market during trips to Seattle.

If one accepts my premise that her principles are visible in some degree of application systemwide in MCPS, then consider:

- Would she be interested in exploring what is emerging here in terms of the *principles* she sees *must* happen in schooling. That is:

*"They know each other's strengths, and they have the opportunity to learn simply by observing one another's "practice" on a daily basis."*

*"...they are connected to a coherent set of goals that provide direction, meaning, and a measuring stick for their work. ... the values, behaviors, and norms of its employees are well-aligned."*

*"... Through a subtle but nonetheless powerful social code of expectations, participants in this ... community learn the nuances of the work and keep it "fresh."*

*"The key to success lies in coherence around the work and goals. While it is true that reaching a consensus on mission may be more difficult in some contexts than others, the foundations needed to realize that mission coherently--communication, leadership, and self-evaluation-are universal."*

*"Everything we do needs to focus on the core of schooling: how children learn, how teachers teach, what gets taught to whom, and how schools are organized to support teaching and learning."*

- **To what extent are each of these principles playing out in practice? What are the consequences, and how are they being dealt with? What are they learning?**

- **Where she sees examples of these principles in practice, would she be interested in what processes, tools, and strategies are supporting them so they can be sustained?**

- **What might she write if she could look at MCPS to see actual effects of "*Fish*" on learning-based teamwork -- effects that show up in new organizational procedures?**

- **As for the book and film, to what extent did they connect in people's minds to what they do? If they didn't, did it kick in later, and why?**

- **And for MCPS, how could her principles be used as a template or lens for MCPS to use right now for self-assessment? What connections can they now see in their experiences, to what they were exposed to in *Fish*?**

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So, as I noted at the top, here's a good example of the knowledge-mining potentials residing in MCPS right now. Any thoughts about how to start the digging...?

Lew