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After I left MCBRE’s *Accountability & Assessment* meeting last Friday, I was thinking about the nature of our discussion, and how hard it is to understand the connection between *curriculum* and *instruction*, *content* and *process*, and even *accountability* and *responsibility*... and then try communicate that understanding to others.

As a possible help to developing that understanding, I’d like to move upstream a bit to suggest how they all may have their roots in the same “problem.”

And, as you will see on the next pages, it is one that goes a lot deeper than this committee’s current discussion. In fact, the drawing at the top suggests that the nature of this core issue has plagued all human services delivery from “the beginning.”

So, attached are some thoughts about the *problem*...and then, if that makes sense, how the work of the *A&A* committee might relate to developing *solutions*.

Let me know if you think this might be helpful, and if so, how we might use it.



What I like about this picture is that it illustrates two critical, and related, conditions.

First, the fundamental difference in the nature of the purposes driving the daily actions of those at the two ends of people-serving institutions. Some are accountable for what happens to *all*, others to *each*.

And then, notice the small, disconnecting gap between the two fingers. Critics sometimes expect that somehow policies will miraculously flow smoothly across that gap to emerge as practices at the other end. (The late John Gardner termed this a “*Penny Gumball Machine*” belief -- i.e., a coin inserted at the top produces gumballs at the bottom.)

Usually we don't have opportunities to think much about the *each* or *all* nature of the purpose to which daily decisions in school systems respond, especially when those who have to deal with *each* child, and those who have to deal with *all*, work in relative isolation from each other.

But even when we do think we know that this condition exists, we still have trouble figuring out what to do about it -- e.g., what has to happen within the organization to convert the “all-ness” of *curriculum* to the “each-ness” of *instruction*. The only thing manageable seems to be to take them on one-at-a-time on an *either-or* basis. Why? Because, on a practical level, we “know” we don't have the time and resources to deal with them both at the same time, even though at some level we feel they are inseparable sides of the same problem.

And as last week's committee discussion suggests, *curriculum and instruction* isn't the only issue where we face this *either-or* dilemma. It seems evident that it also affects the "problems" of:

- *content and process,*
- *accountability and responsibility,* and most important in the end...
- *equity and excellence.*

And interestingly they all need to be part of a *both/and* "solution."

- If you are with me so far about the nature of the condition the district is asking MCBRE for help in thinking about, then here are some thoughts about what we "know" that may relate.

1. *Content and process:* What we *know*, for example from the management of other people-serving organizations such as hospitals, is that the units at the "all" end must be held accountable for creating and sustaining the "content"-free *processes* that enable those at the "each" end to continually respond to the needs of "each."

That is the *yin/yang* fit of content and process. One would not go to a hospital that forced its professionals to work in isolation without access to information that continually enabled them to individually diagnose and appropriately prescribe. Similarly in schools. There must be a core structure for supporting continual instructional decision-making that-- regardless of curriculum area or student age -- ensures that each decision reflects the requirements of the curriculum and the needs of the individual student. And only the district, as a whole, can create and sustain that.

2. *Accountability and responsibility:* At one time, MCPS' *System of Shared Accountability (SSA)* had the words "*and Responsibility*" attached to it. The above *content-process* relationship suggests that this still is appropriate. That is, the district shares responsibility with its buildings for "learning *results*." Their accountabilities, however, are interdependent, not shared. They each are accountable for providing the other with something they need in order to be effective.

As you may sense in the last paragraph, one of the difficult, and hidden, problems the SSA has been dealing with is in the language -- especially the easy way we sometimes interchange the two terms *accountability* and *responsibility*. I find it a lot simpler to go back to the fiscal sources of the concept of *accountability* where one can only be asked to "account for" what one directly "controls" -- the "means" to hoped-for "ends."

To me that means people can only be held accountable for two things that they can "control." In terms of the organization, these tend to be the "inputs" that feed one's "job." In terms of the individual, this means one's "self."

And still, even with that simple logic, understanding is confounded by the fact that *responsibility* and *accountability* have a "*yin/yang*" relationship. Each decision made at

work has both dimensions. And accountability, by the above definition, deals with just half that "action" equation. The other half recognizes that, at the same time and in many of the same actions, we "influence" (via our "controllable means") the accomplishment of the "ends" by others. These are ends (usually because they involve other human beings) that we can only *influence*, but not control. Through our actions though, we share "responsibility" for those outcomes.

So...by these definitions, people can be held "accountable" for means they control, and at the same time held "responsible" for using those means in ways that influence ends they don't (or cant) control.

- And that is the real challenge for the SSA, as they begin to consider how and where "process" information fits in their design. What the MCPS staff is really doing is building a bridge across that "gap" between the two fingers.

Do you see some ways we might help?

- (If your head is beginning to hurt by now, go down to the Kennedy Center and see "Copenhagen" while it's still there. It deals with a comparable metaphor in quantum physics when they were dealing with an *either-or* understanding of light. It could be understood at times as composed of "particles" or at other times as "waves"...but not both at the same time.)

Also, if you'd like to play with another metaphor for the "*Each*" and "*All*" conditions, here's how Peter Senge puts it in the context of the complex interrelationships of *Forests* and *Trees* by building from the simple, *natural principles* about how trees grow.

"...the art (of seeing the Forest and the Trees) lies in seeing through the complexity to the underlying structures generating change.

...it means organizing complexity into a coherent story that illuminates the cause of problems and how they can be remedied in enduring ways. ...

What we most need are ways to know what is important and what is not important, what variables to focus on and which to pay less attention to."

Enjoy...

Lew