

Systemic Learning and Acting

I had gone to bed frustrated ... and woke up thinking of elephants. That's not surprising because elephants are my favorite metaphor—both for the continuing presence we can't see, as in the ancient Sufi parable "The Blind Men and the Elephant," and for the presence we choose not to see, as in the "elephant on the dining room table" that has been there so long that everyone ignores it, even though they must continually work around it.

That night I fell asleep more frustrated than usual with what was happening to schools and the people I knew in them.

First, an old friend was moving on from (or out of) the superintendency of a major school district. I guess from his occasionally glazed eyes I should have seen it coming. (I had seen this look in others when their internal commitment to make a difference was confronted by continuously disempowering systemic pushback from all sides of the elephant-like "system" for which they were accountable.)

Compounding my distress was that my work over the years had revealed the frustrations of not only education's frontline practitioners, but also those who for several decades have been help-

An up-close observer finds a Maryland school district behaving as if it were a system

ing them from the outside: foundations, government agencies and business groups. Now all the major foundations were threatening to get out of the systemic change business and leave the elephant at the center of the dining room table for someone else to deal with.

While many of their efforts to improve education were considered successful in the short-term, none had created sustained differences. School systems had been unable to integrate proven, effective ways of working into the daily business of schooling. And, most seriously, the foundations did not really know why.

Based on their present beliefs about the nature of schooling, their search for understanding how to apply their resources more effectively led them to conclude two things:

- *The district as unit-of-change is too large and complex.* For some frontline practitioners and outsiders this meant focus resources on smaller units such as buildings where they at least could see some differences ... even if their experience told them changes couldn't be sustained for long.

- *A connection seems to exist between the superintendent's role and the sustainability of improvements in the school system's work.* Noting that most of their funded efforts withered away when superintendents changed, some began to protect their investments by reserving the right to halt funding if top leadership turned over.

Accountable for Learning

Even more frustrating was the fact that four years earlier I had taken note of a large school district that was having unexpected successes. Outside observers described these successes as "unusual," even as "miracles" because of their broad systemwide scope and relatively short time to bring about in such a large, complex school system. Some of those same foundations and reform groups even sent researchers to poke and probe the whats and the hows of particular changes.

I observed from a unique inside-outside vantage point this large urban



school district, with most of the learning and teaching problems of other major school districts, acting as if it knew something the other districts did not. This was the Montgomery County, Md., Public Schools, and as a district it was addressing the seemingly intractable cultural conditions others blamed for the failures of systemic change. Educators in this district were performing as if

community and school district getting so smart so fast? Was there a connection between the ways the organization and the individuals in it were learning?

If organizational actions that influence all children are the measure of organizational learning, then who and what was the teacher?

And what was it that those seeking the secret of this district's systemic

question—why?

Could it be that because this elephant—a school system operating as a system—was something most had never experienced and therefore did not believe could be successful, they weren't looking for answers in the right places?

Inside-Out Learning

The right place was the Montgomery County Public Schools, a district that borders Washington, D.C., with nearly 139,000 students in 191 schools with all or more of the demographic, cultural and financial challenges of other large districts, including achievement gaps between its poor and middle-class students, rapidly increasing numbers of poor and non-English-speaking children and shrinking resources. I knew it quite well—not as a professional but as a tax-paying stakeholder and as a parent whose four children had experienced its influence.

Four years ago I noticed things happening in this major school district that didn't fit what I expected. Like many of my peers, the products of my learning emerged from a synthesis of personal experiences given meaning by the perspectives offered by wide-scope thinkers such as Peter Drucker, W. Edwards Deming, Peter Senge, Russell Ackoff and Mar-

“Why and how were so many people within this community and school district getting so smart so fast?”

a disconnect between future visions and current systemwide practice did not have to exist.

If I applied today's accountability logic model to this school system's performance—the notions that performance is the result of learning and learning is the product of teaching—I had been observing a learning organization. Society expects and wants effective teaching for all children, not just some. Judging by their systemic performance and actions that would affect all children, this school system was getting smarter at a faster rate than I had ever experienced. Why and how were so many people within this

learning and acting could not see and therefore did not understand about the fundamental nature of this learner, the school system? Apparently, the scope and nature of this district's performance was so outside the box of accepted belief about what is possible—and therefore can be expected from school districts—that it couldn't be seen.

By using educational research developed from documenting the whats and the hows of isolated changes to discover what made the district different, reformers and researchers were missing what made them the same: the context of district actions that answered the larger

garet Wheatley. This was the sense-making lens through which I explored the world of people in organizations—especially those labeled schools.

Then I was offered an opportunity by Montgomery County Superintendent Jerry Weast to use my embedded lens to help a school system's leaders see and understand actions and their consequences for the district's connected levels and dimensions—classrooms, buildings, central office and community. It was my chance to bring to life the wonderful learning metaphor that pre-eminent educational psychologist Seymour Sarason created three decades ago. He depicted a Martian in a space capsule hovering over a school with the task of determining *why* people acted as they did only by observing *how* they acted.

I liked that role initially because in my work with AASA's Quality Network I had seen the effectiveness of the Japanese management tool of asking "why" five times to get to the root cause of a problem. What I didn't realize at the time was that I would be asking "why" not to get to the root causes of a problem but to a solution.

As a participant-observer at management and other meetings, I saw the ways those involved influenced each other and how the development and support of this results-focused interaction was a necessary part of a leadership strategy, a management structure and organizational learning. I also saw over time that answers generated from inside this system were better than I, or anyone else, could have offered from the outside—better in terms of their scope and immediate practicality and their potential for future sustainability.

I also discovered that many of the unexpected results that outsiders were noting were shaped by a common context they seemed blind to. These "miracles" in Montgomery County included:

- Atypical functional collaborations between those who, in other districts, have less positive, if not adversarial, relationships: unions and administration, school board and administration, and state and county policymakers and school boards.

- People with different roles and responsibilities acting as if they appreciated and respected the other parts of the system that influenced the system's results. People had an understanding of the interdependent nature of their individual roles and functions.

- Employee unions in roles that went beyond their members' self-interests.

- Meetings during which one could hear school board members who sounded as if they were the employee union leaders, and union leaders whose perspectives were similar to board members.

- Board members and local government policymakers—away from the action of the daily running of schools—acting as if they believed they had made a difference for children, not just in talk but in walk.

- Collaborative development approaches producing new processes that affected the interconnected work of both teachers and administrators.

" ... I could see how effective teaching and learning can happen in every classroom, in every school building in a school district."

- Alternative approaches to the daily work of teaching and learning seriously researched and tested as a system, not a building, responsibility.

How and why were these visible indicators of systemic change all happening here, at this time, in this way? How were these indicators connected and, equally important, how could people make sense of them?

Seeking the Elephant

My search for answers drove me to delve deeper into a condition underlying my frustrations—a system blindness—and led to some surprising discoveries that when addressed offer positive consequences for education as a whole.

What if the Sufi elephant's blind men didn't recognize they were blind? What if the villain was a fault in the wiring of the way they see and make sense of it? What if they could not see what they did not believe because what they did believe was based on what they had seen and experienced in the past?

And if they can't see the elephant already on the table, they can't fix it, especially since seeing means understanding the elephant as it already is—a single system in which no one part is the key to the system's success. As counterintuitive as it might seem, it is the interconnectedness of its parts that enables an elephant to do what an elephant does.

Accepting this nature would mean this already-connected total elephant is always the unit of change of any improvement process. As a connected sys-

tem, improvement in student performance results is integrally connected to the district's performance results. The system's healthy growth and development is an inseparable component of the results it produces, and improving this whole elephant's health involves fixing its presently dysfunctional connections.

But if the elephant is not understood as already-connected, then those whose work influences or is influenced by the elephant will lack the tools and support to deal with the interconnectedness of its relationships. And those foundations and government agencies that could of-

fer that support would, because of their system blindness, continue to leave that elephant on the table.

What did it mean that the district I was observing was behaving as if it knew something other districts didn't and were operating as if it was sighted? How was it the staff had already moved out of the box of what people believe a school district is supposed to do and were now producing what, in the minds and words of outside observers, were "miracles" and "unexpected results?"

Meaning of Miracles

Studying the district's common context, I noticed its content fit together and made sense in three ways I hadn't considered.

- *Systemic governance.* The inherent governance problem of oversight without insight plagues many school systems. This problem assumes that policymakers must stand outside and apart from the district's work to objectively judge it.

This different governance perspective for policy development counters the educational system's traditional autoimmune disease where adversarial battles among its parts end up immobilizing and destroying the health of the whole.

- *District as instructional leader.* Typically, when everyone gets back on the treadmill of their organizational lives, strategic plans and action plans end up on the shelves. But that wasn't happening here.

A strategic management process was evolving in Montgomery County that



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provided both a strategic map to understand the best paths to results and, at the same time, offered tools to navigate toward them. Underlying it all was a coherent instructional management process that, in effect, made the district an instructional leader.

This role played out as they developed connecting processes that engaged the primary decision makers as co-managers in the system's critical work processes. Teachers and learners were decision makers in the learning process. Principals and teachers in the teaching process. The superintendent and principals in the schooling process. And the

board and the superintendent in the governing process.

● *Superintendent as a teacher on special assignment.* Everyone says leadership is key, but something about the way we think about the role of the leader is not working, at least for schooling.

An early clue about the nature of the leadership model I was observing in Montgomery County came at a meeting at the National Education Association's national headquarters where a major foundation was praising the district's model of labor-management collaboration.

In his remarks, Weast, who has been

Montgomery County's superintendent since 1999, referred to himself as a "teacher on special assignment"—a politically correct choice of words, I thought, considering the locale. Yet his description showed insight.

The circumstances of superintendents and teachers are the same. Both deal with a whole learner. As part of their responses to what they see before them, each looks at what is influencing that whole—the systemic influences of the environment in which the child or organization lives and develops. And both are accountable for their learner's sustained capacity to learn from their work.

Responding to needs of a whole learner has been easier to understand as it relates to teachers. However, society now recognizes that the organization, too, is a connected system. It must learn as a whole because it can only sustain improvements as a whole. And as system leaders, superintendents find that their teaching can't be done by one individual operating alone.

The missing partner for both effective leadership and teaching, as counterintuitive as it might be, can be found in the learner. No one wants to be taught, but everyone likes to learn. That *aha!* moment—the personal product of overcoming a challenge—is the joy of learning and the reason for wanting more of it. The satisfaction this offers can become addictive because the process that produces it is part of the mind's pre-wired, trial-and-error software. This may be why the measure of a truly great leader (and teacher) is that when he or she is gone, people say, "We did it ourselves."

From this perspective, both system leadership and teaching require organization-supported processes whose product is people who can do it themselves. Experts in learning and teaching call this process teaching. We know all human beings construct their knowledge and sense of meaning through interactions with the world around them. Good teaching provides an environment that informs and manages that interaction and allows an individual to learn from the consequences of his or her acts.

Teachers create and manage environments where others can learn from their own work. In education, these key teachers are classroom teachers, principals and superintendents. This view of leaders' and teachers' role similarities makes sense as the context for developing a common co-management process as a scaffold underlying all school system's work.

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Seeing and Believing

People in the Montgomery County schools and its community now think and believe differently. That too ran counter to what I knew. Beliefs are supposed to take a long time to change. They are the critical framing element in seeing because we're wired to see what we believe and believe what we see. Beliefs got there in the first place from experience, and no new theory or science can quickly override those roots.

But I had seen it happen. I thought changes in beliefs had to start with theories. I thought we had to master systems thinking before we could see the elephant of schooling. But now I saw people who were at a different level of seeing, and the path they were on had been much shorter.

I was seeing systemic understanding coming near the beginning of a learning process for everyone who needed to understand their fit in the whole. Something I thought impossible to see in my lifetime was happening in a light-bulb moment—an epiphany after which one understands differently because things don't seem the same.

Cracking Beliefs

This was where I had my epiphany. First, I saw these belief-changing moments all dealt with the fundamental nature of learning, of teaching and of the organization that must sustain an environment to support that learning.

Then, as I looked more closely, I saw why it was so difficult to tap into that inherent nature—a *possibility gap*. What we don't believe possible has the power to trump the soundest theories of teaching and learning. The box framed by those "impossibility beliefs" imprisons those whose work must take place inside it.

But in Montgomery County, I was seeing personal epiphanies cracking open that box of three interconnected impossibility beliefs as people discovered ways to deal with them for every child, not just some.

● *No. 1: All children already are learning; every child comes pre-wired to learn.*

In those Montgomery County Public Schools where students and teachers were co-managing the learning process, corporate CEOs, parents and district administrators experienced what they termed "miraculous" results. They called them miraculous because they had not believed all children as early as kindergarten can take some responsibility for their own learning and that this role can be reinforced by their interactive relationships with their teachers and parents.

Of more long-term importance, this understanding opened up an untapped resource and a critical missing element in the teaching-learning process—a way to focus, align and support student time and commitment for learning. This was most evident at MCPS schools that started working with an integrated learning management process based on co-management.

● *No. 2: Teaching already is a collaborative process of interdependent functions that requires the active involvement of more than one person called a teacher.*

The epiphanies came here when people inside and outside the schools saw that when those connecting links are re-

inforced and supported, teachers, principals and central-office staff will work together to make more of a difference for children because they can. This became evident in the methods of involvement used by the district to develop new processes for information support, professional growth and development and data-driven decision making, and in the ways they supported task-driven information exchange within schools and across buildings, clusters and areas.

● *No. 3: The school district already is a system in which effective teaching and learning can happen in each classroom, in every school building.*

I knew others had experienced

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epiphanies similar to the first two before. In fact, for decades these have driven the support of many classroom and building improvements. But in the end, those improvements faded away with the departure of the teachers and principals who held the beliefs.

Over time, this inability for effective practices to remain rooted and spread to others has, in itself, produced the most powerful impossibility belief—public schools are systemically unchangeable as presently structured and therefore require alternative ways, outside of public education, to tie it all together.

Though policymakers and reformers aiming at systemic change desire it, hope for it and promise it for someday, they do not believe this is possible in the relative short term as an answer to today's problems. And this is the critical non-belief because it's about the invisible elephant—the only sustainable context for the other two.

Still Invisible

No wonder I had gone to bed frustrated. Right before me was the strange Catch-22 situation that creates and sustains system blindness. I've had my epiphany

and now I believed. I could see how effective teaching and learning can happen in every classroom, in every school building in a school district.

But at the same time, this possibility remains almost totally invisible to outside observers and to many inside ones as well. The possibilities that can be released by the critical third epiphany can't be envisioned because few people believe it is possible. They don't believe in the possibility because they have not encountered a major school district that can create and sustain its improvements regardless of changes in personnel, community politics and resources.

Yet Montgomery County is well on the way to making that happen.

In spite of severe cutbacks in funding presently experienced by all major districts, the school board and community policymakers have maintained their commitments to the fundamental process changes of the past four years. One reason: They believe in the possibilities because they have seen results of these changes show up at two levels—changes in relationships (between students and teachers, teachers and principals, parents and schools, and principals and central

office) and the effects of those changes on students' capacities to learn as evidenced in conventional test results.

A Teaching Organization

Based on most national reform strategies today, the first two epiphany-producing experiences will produce random acts of effectiveness in most school districts until the system's role in creating and sustaining their continual learning structures can be seen and understood.

Finding a cure for system blindness can start in Montgomery County, Md., where the community and school district offer a unique opportunity to experience and connect those three lightbulb moments necessary to believe that systemic change is possible.

This can provide opportunities to ask questions and to find answers that match the scope and nature of the problems most major school systems face.

Most importantly, it offers an opportunity to see the leadership practices that teach what an organization must learn. ■

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Coming Attractions



The School Administrator is seeking editorial contributions for future issues on the following topics:

- Executive Coaching
- Measuring Student Progress
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