Process and content are inseparable. …The separation between the issues we are interested in and the processes we might use to learn about them may be the primary obstacle to potential breakthroughs."

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Peter Senge
"Creating Quality Communities",
<u>Executive Excellence</u>, June 94

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Scaffolding* Sustained School System Change

> **** Scaffold:***
>
> 1. A temporary structure for holding workers and materials during the repair of a building that enables work to go on as usual.
>
> 2. In learning, a temporary support reinforcing a new behavior that fades out as new ways of acting become internalized and natural. Examples of this type of *scaffold* range from weaning, to training wheels or an adult running alongside as a child learns to balance and ride a two-wheel bicycle, to apprenticeships.

Overview

Does it make sense? For over three decades dedicated educators, along with foundation, government, and business leaders have been attempting to develop an improved American education system that can be sustained for all children...*and nothing fundamentally has changed?*

Put aside for a minute test score comparisons, successful demonstrations of what can be done for some children. Look only at changes in the fundamental ways that most children "receive" an education. Even take away today's random pieces of technology, and it becomes hard to see many differences between the school of today and the school of the 1950's. This paradox has had two consequences.

First, an unacknowledged assumption grounds many change efforts: this is just the way schools (and more specifically educators) are -- *unchangeable!*

And second, in light of that condition, those who have been trying to find handles on "fixing" this total, unchangeable system have focused their efforts at its *edges*. After all,

it seems to make sense that if you want benefits for the greatest number, *systemic* policy and structure changes must <u>first</u> take place. But most reform energies today focus on parts of the system -- vouchers, charters, standards, teacher education reform, etc. While all of these are valid parts of the larger problem, they don't connect directly to the <u>core work process of daily student-teacher interaction</u> that is the system's fundamental purpose. Although these wholesale reforms intend, in the end, to positively impact that core process *someday*, their overall effect is to raise hopes and expectations for fundamental change for children in today's schools. But they never do. Because they are seldom systemically connected to all the other functions of the system that must interact with them, their "implementation" processes take too much" time." And the belief that educators won't change becomes more deeply embedded.

    The following strategy is grounded by an "assumption" missing from that current reform agenda.:

    ***It is possible* to effectively impact the *everyday* fundamental <u>interactions</u> -- between teachers and <u>individual children</u> -- at a scale that can make a difference for <u>*all* children</u> in a school system.**

    Instead of starting with the hope of "someday" influencing that core process, this approach starts at that other "end." **It outlines an organizational <u>operating</u> strategy to directly improve the ways school practitioners can meet the learning needs of *today's* school children AND at the same time, directly improve the school system that supports today's and tomorrow's teachers.**

    This approach has many similarities to what a recent Washington Post article ("Reinventing Xerox") cited as the key to Xerox's success in recent years.

    "… they have figured out ways to hard-wire the process of adaption (sic) and reinvention into the corporate culture and to take what began as a one-time revolution and make it ongoing."

    This strategy similarly involves a process for "hard-wiring" a "trial and error" process of "adaptation and reinvention" into the "on-going" ways schools do their work "at all levels" of a school system. It creates a *capacity-building scaffold* that "fits" over the *teaching* <u>process,</u> not just the isolated individual teacher at the critical end of the process. It involves the daily work of everyone in a school system who intend their actions to "make a difference" in the learning

lives of children. In this way, it taps into the motivations of already available human resources within a district and community.

Moreover, because school systems must navigate through an inseparable local and state political, economic, social environment, it provides a functional way for them to separate their support for the fundamental diagnostic-prescriptive work of teaching and learning from the ebb and flow of the larger wholesale issues that must occupy policymakers. This is similar to the ways hospitals, regardless of other issues, align and sustain the processes that support its core work of *responding to individual needs.* The public knows, and accepts without question, that in health care the individuality of the "customer" requires that the core of all services must derive from an <u>interactive, diagnostic/prescriptive process</u> that attempts to match treatment to need. Health policymakers debates over funding, health standards, treatment options, etc. take place *outside* that process.

This scaffolding process is intended to link -- in real time -- the work processes of a school system's many *communities-of-practice* into a single *community-of-interest* -- a <u>school district</u> that can both plan and act to support the knowledge work of its "workers" and "customers." Because it deals with *power-tapping,* as opposed to *power-shifting,* this might be considered an *out-of-the-box* solution that draws its strengths from what's already in the box.

The *Difference*

The key feature -- the difference that makes the difference -- of this approach is the nature of the "internal" partners "inside-the-box." It optimizes two significant resources already within almost every school district, but which are usually considered "non-functional" and even "hostile" to what's good for children. These are the "teachers' unions" and the "blob" -- the "bloated bureaucracy" of the central office.

"Hi! I'm from the Central Office . . and I'm here to help!" -- District Administrator

"(Snicker, snicker. . . chuckle)".. . --Teachers.

"Hi! I'm from the Union. . and I'm here to help!" -- Teacher

"(Snicker, snicker. . . chuckle)".. ---District Administrators

For many, just considering this as a possibility will immediately appear counter-intuitive because of personal "*power* battles" with one and/or the other. Nevertheless, my experience with both unions and central offices suggests that both are driven by the same "good intention." That is, the educators (almost always former teachers) in these

two different organizations already are committed to effective daily learning for *each* child, but their organizational roles and actions lead people to deduce just the opposite. Both have an organizational accountability measured by what they do that has impact on *all*, rather than *each.* For the union, this is in terms of what it does for "all teachers," for the central office, they are usually accountable for ways to address needs of "all students."

Yet individuals in either role share a common value -- they are in education because they want to "*make a difference.*" And it is the loss of evidence that they still have the "power" to do that which contributes to an increasing sense of helplessness, and in terms of public education, hopelessness. Unfortunately, most current attempts to regain that "power" address the issue as "power OVER…," not "power TO…" This plays out as polarizing power battles which take the form of charter schools (or other approaches to site-based management), labor vs. management, and *top-down* vs. *bottom-up* change strategies. In terms of natural systems, these would be considered evidence of an *auto-immune disease* in which the parts eventually destroy the whole. But until now, these have been the only alternatives that seemed to make sense.

Systemic Governance

An assumption driving this "scaffolding" strategy is that "power" issues can't be addressed through *governance* power sharing alone. Leaders require ways to release, align, and maximize the other "power" already resident in each member of the system. This is why it is described as an *inside-out* (as opposed to *top-down* or *bottom-up*) change strategy.

It can provide a complementary, separately-functioning process that fits around the present school *governance* and *management* structures. Rather than competing with them, it adds value by enabling oversight with insight –and linking seemingly "non-productive" resources to the classroom through a <u>collaborative knowledge-building infrastructure</u> that supports what happens in schools on a daily basis.

For a community it becomes a *value-adder* by developing a <u>sustained capacity</u> to achieve future results from already in place resources that tend to have more permanency than do individual leaders and teachers.