

## SUPERINTENDENT'S IMPOSSIBLE JOBS

(In early 2003 Education Week reported that a survey of superintendents in the 100 largest US school districts revealed that they believed their job was “Impossible.” This response was submitted as a letter-to-the editor in August 2003)

### Impossible Jobs?

Is the superintendent job impossible? No!

How do I know?

I've seen almost all of its “possibilities” become “probabilities” in a racially and economically diverse urban school system of 140,000 students. A superintendent directly influenced changes in the methods and mindsets of policymakers and practitioners so that improved “results” and the “means” to achieve them were visible district-wide in less than three years. That is, policies and practices -- that influence all children in the system -- were being implemented that had the common purpose of supporting those who have to respond to the unique needs of each child every day.

Then why don't superintendents of the 100 largest districts agree with me?

Their sense of what is possible is shaped by their experiences, and they've never seen interconnected district-wide change happen in a time frame that had meaning for the community-wide scope and “*everything's-connected-to-everything-else*” nature of their job.

Interestingly, this “Impossible Job” report came out within two months of publication of an article about that district I had written for The School Administrator -- *Systemic Learning AND Acting*, May 200 -- And also within a month of a policy briefing at the National Press Club on June 12, 2003 that focused on the national implications of this school system's experiences as they systemically and systematically began to close the gap for disadvantaged students while raising the bar for all students.

At that briefing researchers from Harvard, Yale, and Georgetown Universities, and the Institute for Educational Leadership, pointed to the implications of research findings from this school system for those concerned about urban education in this No Child Left Behind era. And Charles E. M. Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development, stressed the need for federal and state education policy to recognize the lessons being learned there.

In their concluding remarks, the panelists, through their individual perspectives, all seemed to reinforce my original article's concluding paragraph that this community and school district offered a unique opportunity to experience how to connect three critical “discovery” moments necessary to believe that systemic change is possible, and from that different base, begin to understand how to create and sustain those changes.

Without repeating the content of the article here, it's logic comes from the connection between "beliefs" and "perceived" possibilities.

Many years ago when Stanford's Larry Cuban was a superintendent, he noted that "*Teaching is impossible, yet teachers teach. Expected to give individual attention to each child, the teacher knows that it can't be done.*"

Cuban might also have added (as these 100 of today's superintendents had): " School system leadership is impossible. Expected to address the needs of ALL children, the superintendent knows that it can't be done."

In both cases, he would have been talking about human beings whose actions are based on what they *know*, which is based on what they *believe*, and which has to a large extent been influenced by what they have *experienced*.

In my article I cited three "impossibility beliefs" that had become the outer limits of our visions of what's possible. And that these beliefs were hidden in the area of our minds that psychologists call "*Things we don't know we don't know.*" These *given* "facts-of-life" dealt with children's *learning as an individual process, teaching as a collaborative process, and school districts as already-connected systems.*

In each case, the "truth" of the nature of a situation had to be denied in order to manage it. Learning already is an individual process, the process of teaching to affect that learning already involves more than the one professional at its moments-of-truth, and the school district is already a connected (albeit many times dysfunctional) system of parts intended to accomplish common ends.

This creates a conflict for educators whose experiences have seldom allowed them to act on what they have experienced about the nature of the subject of their efforts. Teachers "know" that they must respond to the whole child" but have to deny that and downshift to "Starfish-saving" roles ( "*...at least I can for this one!*") As Cuban suggested, they do that because they think anything else is *impossible*.

In the case of the superintendent, our society is just now learning that the organization, too, is a "whole", connected system that must learn --as a whole-- because it can only improve as a whole. Much as the teacher, the superintendent's in the research report have found that, by themselves, they could not handle the simultaneous needs of the "whole."

**And they haven't been offered models of what's 'doable' that match the scope and nature of their accountabilities and responsibilities.**

My experience from a unique inside-out vantage point with this district suggests that there is at least one such model. And, if the new study you cite of the "undoable" nature of the superintendent's job is an example, researchers who are looking for answers for developing and supporting systemic leadership need to get out of their "box."

For instance, the study argues that superintendents need authority commensurate with their responsibilities so they can act as true educational CEOs in order to lead and change their districts. It outlines a constellation of changes required to empower superintendents, ranging from more authority over central office staff and hiring to more stable and effective school boards. And, they conclude that even if were possible, the barriers to school reform are too numerous to overcome just with new and better leadership. Preparation must be improved and district governance should be reshaped.

Ironically, without an experience-based understanding of how it can actually be possible, their recommendations also turn out to be *systemically* "impossible."

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One final note: It may seem strange that to this point I haven't "outed" the school system I've been referring to. This, too, is because of an "impossibility belief."

The school district -- the Montgomery County MD Public Schools -- sits just outside the Washington DC Beltway. As the largest district in Maryland, the 18th largest and 12th fastest growing district in the US it is a container for all the conditions of urban, suburban, and rural education today. And they must all be addressed simultaneously. In 2001 half of all statewide births of Asian American children and 43 percent of all statewide births of Hispanic children occurred in Montgomery County. The county's immigrant population has increased at nearly half of Maryland's English-language learners. One of every four to five students in the system receives federal meal support because of poverty -- in some schools, it is nearly every child.

The most urbanized region of the school system represents 48 percent of the county's elementary school enrollment but 75 percent of all African American and Hispanic students, 75 percent of all English-language learners and 80 percent of all low-income children receiving meal support in those grades.

Nevertheless, most foundations, and the reformers they support, don't believe that what has been, and continues to be, learned in this county is relevant to "urban" education. Their belief's seem to be a barrier to seeing and understanding that the conditions that MCPS leadership seems to be effectively responding to are common to *every* school system -- regardless of funding base -- and every child -- regardless of ethnic or economic class.

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