

**2001 correspondence with the director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform *School Communities that Work* national task force on the future of urban district about what they could learn from the Montgomery County MD Public Schools, and a proposed strategy for translating their systemic effectiveness into reproducible benchmarks.**

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Here's another way to capture some of what I sent you yesterday...and shorter, too.

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Two major problem-solvers in our society -- doctors and auto mechanics -- seem to know something that people who try to fix schools don't. You can't permanently fix something you don't understand.

Whether it's a person or a car, knowing how it is put together -- how each part must relate to all the other parts in order for the whole system to function and survive -- is the assumed frame within which they work. That invisible knowledge is the starting point for figuring out how to respond to the visible symptoms that show themselves and which must be "treated."

It's not that we educators haven't been trying to find that same sort of "big picture." Something that would make sense of the whole body called a school system so that we can fix it in ways that can sustain its survival. We collect and analyze data about results that surface, and work backwards trying to figure out what is causing the bad ones. We also fund research to figure out what's causing the good ones.

Our hope is to find a theory that might make sense in explaining them both. We believe that with that in hand (or more appropriately "*in mind*") , we might more effectively target our improvement "treatments."

It should be easy, excellent thinkers have suggested what those theories ought to be. (Among current ones, Fullen, Resnick, Wagner, Elmore, Senge, Wheatley, et al.) And they even offer ways to embed their acceptance in practice through training, preparation programs and other approaches that influence learning.

But they also acknowledge two seemingly contradictory beliefs:

(1) Reaching a level of system-wide learning to really make a difference will be a long, slow process. The "culture" of schooling seems to reflect other theories; and practitioners are running so fast within the structures and relationships that reflect that culture that they have little time or energy left for questioning their underlying theories.

(2) Dealing with schooling's present problems and survival needs can't wait.

### **But do they have to be contradictory?**

We want to suggest a complementary strategy based on an alternative sense-making hypothesis that deals with both the time demands and the nature of the culture-changing problem. The alternative hypothesis is that:

**(1) the most important “theories” are already there -- within the system -- and are formed by common beliefs that most have given up hope of ever being able to act on.**

**(2) the theories that drive the work of teachers’, administrators’, board members’ (as they create structures to support practices or policies) all fit together within a larger theory. The frame this offers can meet the larger sense-making need to understand how it all fits together before determining how to fix its parts.**

To validate this alternative hypothesis, we propose using MCPS’ continuing experiences as they have undertaken the systemic transformation of three system-wide processes -- governance, leadership, and instruction.

With them, we will use the screen of this different sense-making theory to reflect on what has happened over the past three years, and use that knowledge to plan the next. Together we will:

- Identify the common principles that seem to underlie them.
- Describe what has happened in terms of actions and their context. The *whys*, *whats*, and *hows* of these actions -- and more important, their consequences for others in the system - i.e., what they enabled them to do differently, and how they affected how they think.
- Help them translate this view of their experiences into a common map of their work. Use it to make sense of what they’ve done so far, and as a plot board to see possibilities for what yet needs to be done.
- And from this, identify practices and products other systems can use to translate their systemic visions into practice.

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