

Basic Questions About the Work of Schools

Unless teachers and administrators can develop a common framework for understanding the interdependence of their work, they will be unable to make the changes that will result in higher quality learning by students.

Here are some of the preliminary questions and answers about the work system called schools viewed from a Deming perspective.

Q. What is the system?

A. This simple question is usually the hardest to answer because schools for so long have been viewed as very loosely connected organizations—the only professional work setting where it is still acceptable for practitioners to work in relative isolation from each other, relying on their own experience and resources to cope with daily decisions.

In other fields, it's easier to identify the system: the outer dimensions of the work setting that bring together all required inputs to best generate intended outcomes.

In schools, however, we sometimes confuse a work setting with the system (for example, a classroom or school building), or we include all the influences on schools as part of the system (for example, state agencies, higher education, business, etc.).

To improve the organized work of public educators through better management, we first have to agree on the system to be managed. What is our core production process and the organizational processes necessary to support it?

This system must be a legitimate, manageable entity—one that has the authority to transform human and material resources into learning outcomes and which encompasses at least the minimum elements or relationships required to do it.

If quality learning can only be assured in the interactive core instructional process itself, then a support system is needed in which all relationships and roles make that possible. This means that if we want more permanent, pervasive changes in the work processes of schooling, the school district is the minimum unit of change.

(Note: This concept may initially create dissonance among those who rightfully see the building as the unit of change for the core instructional process or whose experience contributes to their view of district administrators as bureaucrats on the backs of principals and teachers, instead of as possible creators and maintainers of the system's connections or supporters of the core process.)

Q. What is the nature of the work?

A. Because the image of schools carried by most adults was formed when they were students, the work of schools is seen as an information delivery process. Missing is any perception that the work actually takes place through a responsive process of informed interaction between teachers and students.

The real work of adults and children in school districts has been largely invisible because it is mental work. We see the acts of the adults in the schools, but not the continuing thought processes behind them.

Recognizing this continuous thought process as work applies the currently popular "information constructivist" approach for understanding human cognition to everyone in the process, not just students.

The actions of all human beings are directed by their own sense of the meaning of the situation they're in. Meaning is constructed in their own minds through repetitive interaction and refinement between what they know and new situations they confront.

Q. What is the aim of the schooling work processes?

A. Many concepts of what schools should do and be exist today. In a Deming-like framework, we can say the school system's work processes should serve to develop each student's intrinsic abilities to learn, think, act effectively, and function successfully in a changing world.

Q. What is the work of district leaders?

A. Today the private sector is only beginning to realize the key to quality and productivity lies not with labor but with management.

In that framework, the superintendent provides constancy and connections. He or she is responsible for the quality of the system (does it respond to the needs of the staff?), and the staff for the quality of the results (do they respond to the needs of the clients?)

Thus the staff works *in* the system, but leaders work *on* the system. Leaders must provide the connections to purpose, and to other interdependent functions that maintain systemic, systematic support.

Middle management provides the support processes and connections. The need for such connections becomes more critical as districts grow larger and as new circumstances grow in scale and complexity almost to the point of unrecognizability.

A chief form of this support is information. The core instructional process has been functioning without adequate information to inform its decisions—information about the "present state" of the student and information about more appropriate ways to respond to them.

But when the quality of results depends on the instructional processes' ability to "self-correct"—to modify and adjust its actions in response to needs—then the flow of information in the district shifts 180 degrees.

Information flows "down" instead of just up, and district staff become information brokers helping building personnel understand and use the sea of information surrounding them. Moreover, site-based management becomes an issue of making better decisions rather than different decisions.

— Lewis A. Rhodes