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who must deal with
whole elephants*

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WORKING SMARTER

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I don't know if *PollyAnna* also worked from a 20,000 ft. cloud, but from this viewpoint it's possible to see some positive connections among several of the critical budget cutting challenges you're facing right now. So here, to feed your strategic mind, are some of what I "see" and some thoughts about their connections. I'll just highlight them, and save additional thoughts in case you ask me to share them.

(1) Obviously, your primary challenge is how to make budget cuts that don't impede the momentum and sustainable progress of the last 8 years. Or, as you've called for several times over the past couple years – how to *work smarter*.

(2) And as you noted today, it's not as much a fiscal crisis as a crisis of *mind*. People can't understand the relationships among the "already-working-smarter" processes here that in the end are already influencing the more visible "results." These need to be reinforced and facilitated, not cut.

(3) I attended last week's conference of this year's *Baldrige* winners and came away with two of my beliefs about what's been happening here more strongly validated.

- First, the key – across all organizations regardless of the sector" the organization served -- is the CEO's thinking and the 3 beliefs that tie it together coherently. But, interestingly, no one is "benchmarking" the CEO's mindset. Yet, this is where the answers to "Why" and sustainability can be found.

- Second, was that to a great extent Baldrige, and Jack Grayson's AQPC, are being used to make *processes* visible so they can be benchmarked. But they are dealing with organizations as the sum of their processes, not their product.

And the reason that I can now illustrate what the latter looks like is that I can point to where and how MCPS has been creating the missing level of "process" that is needed to integrate and sustain the others processes. I think I've mentioned it before that I've been capturing how your staff has been developing most of the elements of this missing process level that makes student achievement the product of *everyone's* work.

Now, as you are beginning to think about reconfiguring the leadership structure, my hope is that I can find a way to share with you (or someone) what I've been seeing coming together as a collaborative-problem-solving scaffold of regular and *just-in-time* cross-functional and cross stakeholder nodes that has been supporting and generating the district's developing capacity to "Work Smarter" so far.

(4) Meanwhile, I don't know what you've heard lately from the Stupski Foundation folks, but their leadership has wisely called a time out to "rethink" their approach to discovering and promoting district-wise changes that impact children today.

They're not the first foundation to reach a point of frustration and call a time-out when their ways of applying what they thought they knew about how to respond to the needs of children didn't end up making any timely or significant difference for those children they felt most committed to help. Unfortunately, the "rethinking" of many of these others (e.g., Annenberg, Edna McConnell Clark, Gates, New American Schools, et al) almost predictably led them to the conclusion of the "*Starfish Saver*" in the well-known parable who, when told that there were too many for one person to save, declared: "*Well, at least I can save this one.*"

Rather than letting their sense of *helplessness* translate to a final acknowledgment of *hopelessness* for public education, they sought an area that might be more open to "help."

Consequently, they ended up downshifting from their actually accurate initial belief that a *school system* had to be the unit of sustained systemic improvement -- to a more "manageable" (short-term but non-sustainable) approach of "at least" saving some *schools* one-building-at-a-time. (Or as this week's new Gates/Broad initiative suggests -- to take a one-*politician*-at-a-time route.)

Even though they all were well-intentioned, at the root of that response was that they did not believe that changing a school system *as-a-connected system* was possible (they had never seen it happen.)

And what I'm currently trying to help the Stupski Foundation see is that this is what MCPS' 8-year journey now can offer. As you noted today, Harvard and others will be studying the district a lot over the next few years so that others might learn, but the need I hear you expressing is for action research that first informs the immediate improvement of your efforts to continue the journey.

So my intention is to keep trying to lay the groundwork for this. I believe they want to do something but want it to be something that helps.

(5) You mentioned today something about needing, over the next few years, to monitor what's working and isn't and figuring out why.

My premise, again, is that a lot of that answer can be found in the opportunities that have been provided here for people to *think* differently and learn from it. John Porter's new job as Oklahoma City's Superintendent is a direct product of this process. And his transformation process was similar to what happened at the teacher level last year with Kimberly Oliver. She came to the district as a new teacher and within 5-years was named *National Teacher-of-the-Year*. He came to the district as a "non-educator" with a background in business and technology and ended up as Deputy for Organizational Systems...and now a superintendent. This approach to *embedded leadership development* is too important to consider an incidental by-product. It needs to be fleshed-out and understood as a major strategy that helps sustain the district as a learning community.

(6) Finally, I sense that one of the interesting strategic elements in your mix right now could be Jamie Virga's needs to get his hands and mind around the expanded scope of his new responsibilities. The same principles he successfully applied as a principal and then PLCI leader now have to be applied to an entire district so it can continue to learn from its work. But, at the same time, he's being challenged by threats to cut funds that impact many of his areas because of old ways of thinking about "Professional Development" as a separable delivery system.

If you're serious about re-thinking and re-casting the district's management structures, then I'm a big fan of going with your *Working Smarter* as an umbrella concept under which all the initiatives can be seen as making sense. I've got some thoughts about this, too.

Enough for now.... Lew