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DATE: 9/9/00
TO: (name) Jerry Weast

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Jerry:

Maybe it's just my need for perspective, but when I enter a mall or the Metro I always get comfort from the poster that tells me where I'm starting from and how far I have to go. In a way, I saw 4 items in the 9/6/00 Gazette offering that same sort of help.

One was an article - "On the Fast Track," one a related interview, and one an editorial - "The Amazing Dr. Weast. They provide a pretty good summary of what my "data" was suggesting about the nature and scope of the effects of your leadership, and where you and MCPS "are."

Then came the editorial cartoon - "Year 2 for Jerry Weast" - raising [appropriately] the issue -- not of where you are all "going" -- but *how* you are going to get there from where you "are." I found the artist's metaphor very astute, and wondered if he had read any of Russell Ackoff's thoughts on problems like that. Ackoff points out that even if one brings together all the best automobile "parts" -- e.g. engine from a Mercedes, transmission from a Rolls, etc. -- they could never work together as the "system" called an automobile.

"...the essential properties that define any system are properties of the whole which none of the parts have. For example, the essential property of an automobile is that it can take you from one place to another. No single part of an automobile--a wheel, an axle, a carburetor--can do that. Once we take a system apart, it loses that fundamental characteristic. If we were to disassemble a car, even if we kept every single piece, we would no longer have a car.

Why? Because the automobile is not the sum of its parts, it is the product of its interactions."

So, knowing it or not, the Gazette cartoonist pretty well defined the underlying nature of many of the next year's tasks -- developing productive interactions aligned to the *system's "essential property."* What he may not see, however, is what that "property" is, and the unique way you captured it last year in a single concept -- "*Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap.*"

I wasn't aware of it myself until the cartoon brought me back to Ackoff and something I had written for AASA in a 1997 planning paper -- *Connecting Leadership and Learning*. Naturally, I had used far more words than you....

"... what are the essential properties of a single, coherent *learning-centered* school district that none of its parts can effectively duplicate? Where, as a product of its *internal interactions*, can a school system "take us" that none of its parts can?"

"...and so these men of Indostan
disputed loud and long.

Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong.

Though each was partly in the right,
They all were in the wrong!"
The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant

“...We propose that the capacity to provide for both equity and excellence is the essential property of the school district or system. This school *system* and local *community* is the minimum unit in which that capacity can be created and sustained in today’s society.”

“...That two-faceted, *single purpose* -- to provide for both equity and excellence -- is the foundation of American public education. Yet it has become increasingly impossible for isolated educators working in fragmented systems to deal with it as anything but an either-or proposition.”

So, You are HERE ➡

All this is to say that from “up here” at *20,000 Ft.* you seem to be continuing the journey from a good base.

Although few people really understand yet how to address the *Bar and the Gap* as part of a coherent system-wide process [or believe that it even is possible,] you seem to have the “destination” firmly implanted in the developing mindset that is influencing people’s commitment.

As well as the beginning infrastructure to support “productive interactions aligned to the *system’s essential property*” through the developing community support teams, and the *Shared Accountability / Responsibility* processes

Good start!

(Lew)

P.S. If we can ever figure out a way for me to formalize some of these thoughts, we may find that your intuitive “blueprints” for the MCPS “automobile” have been presented as a “theory” by the Annenberg Leadership Development initiative in the September 2000 KAPPAN [“Leadership for Student Learning”].

Do you have any connections at Brown? I think you and I both agree that there’s a potentially valuable base of practical knowledge developing here in MCPS to support their theories. And I believe it can provide feasible answers to the four “larger questions...about the nature and challenges of leadership today” that they raise in the article’s introduction.

1. How do traditional school and district organizations need to be changed to remove any roadblocks to improved student achievement?
2. Where will sufficient numbers of strong effective leaders for our nation’s schools and district’s come from?
3. What kinds of preparation do educators need in order to assume leadership roles?
4. What needs to happen to help schools, districts, and communities conceive of leadership in a way that extends beyond job titles and functions?

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