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...Connecting some dots...

XXXXXX (Superintendent):

I've had several of these "connecting-the-dots" type notes swimming round in my head the last week or so, but my work with Pam took precedence over writing them up. Now I find that these separate ideas, too, seem to be connected. I'll try to extract them from this web of dots by writing them up individually to see if they make any sense to you over the holiday.

The three attached deal with:

- What *walking the talk* really means when you are accountable for the results of a system.
- Finding a better "handle" for the significant changes you've already made across the system that get lost in a maze of *TrendBender* initiatives that don't seem to connect directly to the test scores that are seen as the principal measures of gap closing and bar raising.
- Turning "Charter Schools" from a problem into an opportunity to address a "real" systemic *learning* problem in MCPS.

Walking the “systemic” talk.

About a week ago I was talking with one of your admirers among the principals, but who then expressed a complaint about your not “walking your talk.” I followed up to see what that meant, and found “greatest respect ...for bringing change and sharing what he believes is good for children.” The “concern” was “about the lack of linkage” he/she sensed between your actions and some of your staff’s.

Our interchange helped clarify for me a critical, and necessary, facet of *system* leadership. It’s one that seems to come so naturally to you that you might not be aware of how few others have it, or apparently even understand it as a basic requirement. Moreover, its importance does not seem to be recognized by many of those trying to support *systemic* change.

Specifically, it is that the visible way *system* leaders “walk the talk” shows up, not just in their personal words and actions, but more significantly, in the sustainable, system-connecting processes they create.

This then hit home for me during last Thursday’s discussion of preliminary ideas for an “Executive Staff Evaluation System” and the role that “student results” were perceived as playing in terms of *individual* accountability in a district-wide work-setting that is becoming increasingly *interdependent* and *collaborative*.

When I went back to the idea that system leaders are accountable for *results-producing processes*, it seemed that this is where XXX’s insistence on keeping the “R” word -- *responsibility* -- linked to *accountability* in the *System of Shared Accountability / Responsibility (SSA/R)* takes on increased importance. And we need to develop a critical understanding of how student “results” data can serve as both an “accountability” and a “responsibility” measure.

First, they can be a powerful measure of “shared responsibility” across and at many levels of the system. As such they can be a *motivator* and *criterion* for collaborative work, and then drive learning when used as a reference point for formative feedback. Here they offer a way for each person to sense how one’s efforts are contributing to the “big picture.”

But when used as an indicator of accountability for one’s actions or “performance,” it seems to make sense that only those directly involved with the continual actions and interactions that create those results can ultimately be held “accountable” for them.

But for that to happen (in any scenario except the feared, and often assumed, “gotcha” model), everyone who shares responsibility for those end -results must then be held “accountable” for the means -- “processes” -- that enable effective and productive results-producing actions to take place. For example,

- *Teachers* accountable for creation and management of the common (content-free) learning management processes we now know bring students into the co-management of their own learning.

- *Principals* accountable for creation and management of the common (content-free) communication and collaboration processes that bring teachers and support staff into the co-management of the building's learnings, and the actions resulting from them.
- *Community superintendents* accountable for creation and management of the common (content-free) communication and collaboration processes that bring their principals and support teams into the co-management of the clusters' learnings.
- And *you*, and the *Executive team*, accountable for implementing -- system-wide-- the common (content-free) *communication and collaboration processes* that enable all of the above to *continually learn as they continually improve* their work.

This way of thinking could have two immediate consequences for current developments of at least the Performance Measurement process and the SSA/R.

1- Executive staff --as *system* leaders - have to know that effective processes that link systemically to the quality of what happens between students and teachers are the "performance results" for which they will be held accountable. This could provide a critical criterion for them to understand, develop, and improve their support and planning processes.

2- And then the SSA/R will have to provide ways to *measure, monitor, and feed back* -- for formative continual improvement uses -- data from those processes.

This process measurement component is not yet a priority for SAS/R development because of the "seemingly-logical" focus on student outcome data first. (See next thoughts)

The good news is that some of the understanding of how to do it already resides in XXXX's shop because "process measurement" is a key function of many quality management processes they have implemented system-wide..

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The “other” *Bar and Gap*

During the Rockville Cluster presentation at last week’s Leadership Team meeting, one couldn’t help but notice their unique logo displayed across their materials and T-shirts -- “Building Bridges Together.”

They had distilled a *core message* about the basic nature of what “systemic” change requires that had not come through as the effective, but separately implemented, infrastructure and role changes you’ve initiated across the system have been put into place. These mostly seem to end up viewed within separate *TrendBender* silo’s such as *Workforce Excellence*.

As I focused on their words, it occurred to me that MCPS is actually engaged in two simultaneous *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap* processes. For example, the *Call to Action* focused on those two purposes in terms of student learning. In order to meet those dual criteria though, the district had to re-assess how it “does-its-business,” and consequently realized (without using those terms) that to raise the bar and close the gap for MCPS’s children also required raising the *bar of expectations and accountability* for its adults. And to do that fairly, effectively, and as quickly as possible, required closing the *gaps between those adults* that have kept them isolated and ineffective in their separate work for children.

As an example of how the initiatives might fit this “model,” under the “Raising-the-Bar” umbrella would be the efforts to develop and raise common expectations and understandings of what is *needed* and what is *possible*. These include (among others)the *Baldrige* process initiation intended to develop a broader understanding of the system *as-a-system*, and the *Trend Bender* “best practices” sessions.

Under the “Closing-the-Gap” category might be all the significant changes in the ways that people are beginning to “work-the-work” that, as the Rockville folk realized, “close the gaps” between adults that keep them from acting on their mutual responsibilities and purposes. These include the significant new roles and structures -- from community superintendents to clusters to SPST’s to SDT’s, etc., etc.; the vertical teaming structures for planning and problem-solving, and even the MCEA contract fits here. (And has become a model “Bar-raiser” for other districts.)

I guess what I’m getting at here is that there is a *real need for a coherent concept or metaphor* that links these processes to student “bar” and “gap” results. This would give meaning to the interdependent nature of what I see as the real significant and sustainable “results” of your leadership so far, so that a board and community commitment to them can be sustained regardless of budget changes.

Do you see some way to play with the *yin/yang*-ness of these two “Bar/Gap” tracks? Or do you have some other ideas?

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Charter School(s) -- Opportunities or Problems.

This last one may seem too far out, but at *20,000 feet* the connectedness of the dots are evident between two seemingly unrelated issues that surfaced at last week's meetings. One, in a Community Superintendent's comment about principals' asking "which is the *real process*" they are supposed to focus on? At present, they are supposed to be juggling ideas from Max, Resnick, Comer, Project Achieve, Slavin, and soon-to-come "Baldrige pilots." And the other issue, the discussion of the new Charter School application.

I'd like to suggest how I see those two linked, and a possible way to use the latter to address the former.

Which "model?" What the principal's are rightly noting is a consequence of one the greatest barriers to organizational learning in education. It is an unquestioned assumption that leads to "random acts of innovation" -- i.e., change takes place through projects in single buildings. With the building as the *unit of change*, all results have to be a consequence of how they spend *their* time and *their* resources. No one learns from them until some later time when the "evaluators" descend.

There doesn't seem to be any alternative to this "project/building"-centered model though -- even though in half a century it has yet to produce any significant sustainable system-wide change. It is so deeply accepted as a belief that even the *Baldrige*, which promises to end "random act's of innovation," ends up being "deployed" in its educational applications in a way that produces "random acts of *Baldrige* innovation" -- in one or more disconnected "pilot" schools.

But for the district to be the *unit of change* requires first that it be the unit of learning. Without that mindset, changes at the building and classroom level will continue to lack the connected system support necessary to sustain them.

For the district to learn from any different "model" - whether its *Comer*, *Project Achieve*, *90/90/90*, the *Baldrige* "pilots"... or a charter school would require regular linkages and opportunities to exchange ideas with others across the district interested in the content and/or processes of a particular approach. There could be a variety of ways to do this once a commitment is made to the intention. ...And a responsibility assigned,

Charter schools -- "Charters" as a concept aren't going away. MCPS has an advantage in its policy of keeping them under the MCPS umbrella. But as I observed the discussion around the present review process for the application this time, it seemed as if the present process sets up the Charter school as an adversary...in-your-face evidence that "you guys aren't doing the job for our kids."

What if, instead, it could serve as an opportunity to learn something the district might need to know? (As the district does in accepting formally-approved models such as *Comer*, etc.]) It would be easy do do this if it had a common process that could be applied to all of the different new and old site models that could facilitate continual idea exchange and learning.

I could imagine that with such a process in place, the present application review would include asking reviewers to note particular strengths they felt might have application in other schools or areas.
