

Education Week

Published: October 30, 2002

Letters

Impossible Dream? More on the 'Team Sport' of Teaching

To the Editor:

If one accepts, as I do, the premises of Bob Barkley's recent letter ("Blaming Teachers: All Alone in a Team Sport," Letters, Oct. 9, 2002), that leads to three unanswered questions: Who else is on the team? What is the nature of the game? And, if it is a team sport, who is to blame when it loses?

Back when he was a school superintendent in Virginia, Stanford University professor Larry Cuban once noted: "Teaching is impossible, yet teachers teach. Expected to give individual attention to each child, the teacher knows that it can't be done."

The fundamental belief that a teacher can make a difference in the life of a child has always been the internal engine driving education. But just to remain sane, it's been necessary to hide the knowledge that, in the typical classroom setting, it really can't be done.

Not acknowledging that impossibility keeps hope alive, and draws educators to almost any new ideas that offer promise that "some day" it might be possible. That impossible dream continues to drive us until we burn out, drop out, or, like the Starfish-saver in the popular parable, fall back to being satisfied that "at least I made a difference for this one."

Accepting that impossibility has two, more serious consequences. First, if one assumes that any one teacher, by her- or himself, can have the knowledge, skills, and experience to respond to the learning needs of all the children whose lives he or she touches, then it seems logical that the way to "fix" teaching is to focus on preparation and in-service training programs, so that "some day" every child may have the opportunity to interact with a fully capable adult.

Second, it masks the similar predicament of two other required members of the team needed to make the dream possible: the principal and the superintendent. They, too, go to work every day knowing that they can't do what they need and want to do; or, if they think they can right now, they know they can't sustain it for long.

They share similar, unquestioned "impossibility beliefs": Principals' "know" that, by themselves, they can't meet the individual instructional-support needs of each and every teacher; and, similarly, superintendents "know" that supporting the differing and unique needs of each building's instructional process "can't be done," or at least not for long.

I suggest that these three "impossibility beliefs" are connected, and offer a key understanding needed to drive systemic change. Without understanding how they relate, fixing the entire system does seem impossible.

Mr. Barkley notes in his letter that no other professional is asked to serve all of his or her clients simultaneously. Why? Simply because other professions recognize that the core work that defines one as a professional (think nurse, doctor, lawyer) is structured around interactivity. In fact, a Texas judge recently banned sales of a do-it-yourself, legal-software package because it "ventured into the unauthorized practice of law." The reason: its interactivity.

The work in the professional's "game" is structured around a fundamental interaction with an individual. Without that non-negotiable element, it's a different game. A game that professionals can't win.

As that different game is played out today in classrooms, schools, and districts, those at the points where the system interacts with the child (primarily, teachers and principals) are expected to be accountable for the system's results as isolated, autonomous practitioners.

In other professions, such as health care, the organization is responsible for the outcomes of that core interactive process, and is held accountable for its effectiveness. For example, the hospital, as a total organization, is accountable for informing and supporting the interactions at the end of the process managed by the individual doctor or nurse. These have been recognized as moments of truth because that is where the quality of results are shaped.

No one expects a hospital staff member to function without the organization's providing the means to continually monitor and do something about his or her effects on a patient. The organization's flow of information and support informs that interaction, and time and tools are provided to support the interactivity of the process. In these other organizations, results become a shared responsibility. Individuals are held accountable for creating, managing, and sustaining the processes for achieving them.

Mr. Barkley is right about the general public, policymakers, and the profession itself needing to become more informed about the effects of what we "know" on what we believe we should be doing. To paraphrase the old comics- page character Pogo, "We have met the problem, and it is us." Specifically, in how we think about the work required by the "game" of teaching and learning, and who the players are.

Why, of all the professional- service organizations, does education continue to play a different game? If the team that is already on the field is playing a game in which we know winning requires the effective interaction of all of its players (students, teachers, administrators, and parents), then why does playing that game seem impossible?

The answer, again, seems simple. In these other organizations, participants believe they have no choice. The fundamental nature of the players and the game sets the boundaries within which they think about how to win. In schooling, a fundamental characteristic of the human mind's mental wiring limits acceptance of similar common beliefs.

As we've known for centuries, we tend to believe what we see ... because we see what we believe. From the nature of our personal experience in playing that "different game," we have developed a base of assumptions and beliefs that keep us from seeing and accepting three conditions over which we, as in those other organizations, have no choice.

- * That every child comes prewired to learn; and therefore students want to learn, and will take a responsible role in doing it.

- * That teaching requires the active involvement of more than one person called a teacher.

- * That the district is the playing field on which the game is played. It is the minimum unit of sustainable change, and when it becomes a coherent unit of work, fundamental districtwide change is actually possible. Effective teaching and learning can happen in every classroom, in every school building in a district. We don't believe that districts can be natural systems of collaborative relationships that optimize the success of each of their parts.

If "winning" for all children requires that each child interacts with a process that starts from his or her unique learning strengths and needs, and then takes them to "content" ends that society prescribes, then the interdependence of these three beliefs needs to be understood—in particular, that for sustained systemic change, the third is most critical, because it is the container for the other two.

Unfortunately few have experienced school systems (with all the dynamics and conditions that they encompass) that can create and sustain their improvements regardless of changes in personnel and community politics. But they are there and can be observed but only through a lens shaped by the above three beliefs.

Ironically, the need to document and portray what this lens reveals comes at a time when major foundations are pulling back on systemic reform efforts. They've given up on "whole-school reform," "scaling-up," and other ways they once thought would offer pathways to district wide change. Here again, the failures to do that may have less to do with schools than with the ways reformers think about them, and about the work that they do.

For example, one finds consistent references to this work happening at just two levels: the school level and the policy level. District-level work apparently goes on the "policy" side, and is not seen as an integral, connected part of the work of instruction that surfaces at its end in the school and classroom.

It appears that the box these reformers and their funders can't think outside of is a school building full of individual teachers (and a principal). The larger box they haven't been able to simultaneously see and address with their strategies is a school system full of people-connecting processes that support the requirements for quality teaching in each classroom.

That frame for understanding might provide the missing handle on sustained, systemic instructional improvement for all classrooms that foundations have been looking for. In it, the unit of improvement is the instructional/teaching process ... and the district is accountable for it.

On that playing field, the team that is already there can finally win.

Lewis A. Rhodes
Silver Spring, Md.