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No. of pages transmitted (including this cover) 2

The One-Room School District

When my wife or others ask me why I'm doing whatever it is I'm doing with you in MCPS I tell them that I started after you got here and I began to notice that here was somebody who seemed to be acting as if he saw the same world that I had been seeing for a number of years, but one which I had not been able to convince others was real.

Occasionally I would jot my thoughts down in articles, some of which would get published, but others I hesitated sending anywhere for fear that they were too far out. Two of these came to mind last Thursday when I heard you talk about the derivation of your "beliefs and commitments" -- specifically that your mother had been a teacher in a *one-room school house*, and that you considered yourself "*a teacher-on-special-assignment*."

In one -- The One-Room School District -- I had noted that the one-room school house was not a one-size fits all learning environment, but rather a one-size fits *each*. A way to manage available resources to respond to the range of obvious differences it contained within it.

This is why the one-room school is held up as an ideal from the past. Children were in the care of someone who knew them and their particular situations, and who could match resources [even if scarce] to their needs. And with subsequent increases in numbers of students, it changed only the management problem, but not the fundamental nature of the process of responding to individual differences.

At times over the past year I would pull out those notes and add thoughts in terms of what you seemed to be doing here to create a "one-room school district" in which there is a shared responsibility for the *teaching* process. In fact there is a theory base for it in Russ Ackoff's stuff on "idealized design" along with a process for acting on it that pretty well parallels your actions. For example, "... first design the system you control, then figure out what changes in the next larger system would enable your system to do better."

Your description of your role as "*a teacher-on-special-assignment*" fit perfectly then with the idea that *teaching* is the job of the school system, not just the one "teacher" at the end of a string of interdependent decisions and actions. And again, it matched what I had tried to communicate through irony a few years back in a draft article and some presentations called "Please Empower Us!! -- An Administrators Plea to Teachers". The presentations would begin with an overhead transparency with one word on it -

--TNEMREWOPME--

Naturally, people would start calling out that I had it backwards. This set them up for the point that, in the way that we had been dealing with “empowerment,” *they* had it backwards.

I tried to make the point that teachers had the only important power -- the power to *make a difference ...and know it.* When sociologists say that schools are “loosely-coupled” systems, they miss the point that *psychologically* we’re “tightly-coupled.” *Everyone* is in the game because they want to make a difference.

I then tried to make a case for how much “administrators” should be pitied because they have to leave this nest of relative control over one’s own actions and outcomes and move into the distant world of decision-making of an entirely different nature. Here, they may have more resources to decide about, more time to consider and weigh alternatives, and to seek research “guarantees” before acting. But they have to live with few opportunities to know how, or whether, their decisions ever impact children.

And to make it worse, if they had the "helping" nature that made them a good teacher, when they returned to the school buildings and said "*Hi, I'm from the central office and I'm here to help...*" they found (after the laughter subsided) that the culture and processes of schools provided few ways for them do it.

Then, after raising the question-- “How can you as teachers, help those trapped in this other system?” -- I began to lay out a series of answers that, as I read them now, strangely parallel the processes you are trying to set in place here. And that included a process of “Shared Accountability & Responsibility” in which the resource-providing decision-maker and the response-providing decision-maker are jointly accountable for specific outcomes they both influence. E.g.- holding the principal and teacher accountable for effectiveness of the teaching in the classroom; the teacher and student for effectiveness of learning; and the district office and principal for the effectiveness of the school.

The draft ends with: “If the ultimate power in schools is to know each day that you personally influenced the growth of children - then both teachers and administrators must be empowered, or in the long run, no one can be.”

oOo

Having said all this, your idea of recognizing how everyone is “*a teacher-on-special-assignment* fits perfectly. Maybe we need to dump the term “administrators” because it sets-up “we”-“they” polarization. While this may cause problems for the “unions,” it offers the necessary framework for effective collaboration as a “system.”