

December 1, 1999

TO: [xxxx, xxxx, xxxx:

Until I can get initial reactions to the preceding thoughts, I'll just overview this without loading it with some of the additional details I've got. Since one strength of this type of strategy is an *inside-out* development process that creates district-wide ownership, I did include three initial tasks in my *Baldrige* contribution to the Reorganizing Assets TrendBender that can serve as a placeholder.

Also, due to the synchronicity that seems to be driving a lot of our interaction, AASA will be mailing this week the December 1999 School Administrator which has an article by me [on pp. 25-27] that attempts to present the *scaffolding* concept in a "lighter" (if not, shorter) framework.]

Closing the Gap

Between

Rhetoric [Talking the Talk] and *Reality* [Walking the Walk]

A SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY

What I'm hearing:

What's really different this time...

We've heard it all before...

We were asked to contribute before and nothing happened...

...same ol' same ol'!

The concept of the *Call to Action* as a "Plan-to-Plan" provided an excellent shell or frame for the ideas. In other words, it was user-friendly. Its name suggested its nature, and it provided a "container" for a lot of ideas, strategies, beliefs, and principles that still lacked integration.

The next public piece should meet the same requirements and suggest an answer to the above doubts. It has to have a user-friendly "handle" that can provide an initial boundary or frame for understanding, and which captures its nature and its reason for being. It should fit the actual purpose of the next step which is to move from a "Plan-to-Plan" to a new, fundamentally different way of doing work -- while the present ways of doing work continue.

To me, this means that the document has to be more than a lot of words and concepts at various levels of abstraction that people have heard before and which are held together only by a budget line or a common belief that "all children matter."

It has to have a framing concept that make just enough sense for one who is familiar with past efforts to consider that this time it *could* be different. And also, based upon one's own experience, that it might actually be possible here in MCPS...*now*. They need to sense that this approach could provide a way to change how MCPS "fundamentally works," even if one can't envision those specific changes up front.

My suggestion for this is to consider a name that includes the word "Scaffold." People already know this as:

- *a temporary structure for holding workers and materials during the repair of a building that enables work to go on as usual.*

They may not be as familiar with its related meaning for learning:

- *a temporary support reinforcing a new behavior that fades out as new ways of acting become internalized and natural.*

Examples of this type of scaffold range from weaning, to training wheels or an adult running alongside as a child learns to balance and ride a two-wheel bicycle, to apprenticeships.

In both of its meanings it meets MCPS's exact requirements to have something that teachers, parents and principals can see fits around their *present* "needs," and which offers them a way to learn from overcoming the problems constraining the effectiveness of their present work.

In answer to the question -*What is different this time?*-- can be the intention to establish a process across the full district that touches directly on the below the surface parts of the iceberg that have limited prior initiatives to partial results -- *some* kids, in *some* classrooms, in *some* buildings. And which connect with daily work in the *now*.

The following is a broad outline of such a process as it currently appears here at *20, 000 feet*.

It is designed to build upon the timing and processes already underway in MCPS, while adding several tested components that have never been brought together systemically at this scope in education. It involves

1. Leveraging the current *Baldrige* interest among business and political leaders to focus attention and effort on a raising a *bar* that can bring "new," previously untapped, resources into the *closing the gap* initiatives. And to provide, among other things, a "safe space" among policy-makers and the business community from which "different" actions can be taken.

2. Optimizing the *organizational* development requirements of the new OD Deputy's role which call for approaches that have as their "customer" the entire organization.

3. Developing the new regional staffs as gap-closing "connective tissue" -- teams that provide problem-solving support for schools that enables them to learn from what they do.

4. Developing *Vertical Teams* as links between the new larger *Baldrige*-facilitated system map, and daily actions in buildings.

5. Developing the support infrastructure for *Co-Leadership [or Co-Management ?]* based on *shared responsibility for results*, and *individual accountability of the processes of achieving them*.

Leveraging the current Baldrige interest.

As one component of its *Trend Bender: Reorganizing Assets for School Success*, MCPS has made a commitment to Use the *Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence* to focus and accelerate building the organizational culture around student success.

Several conditions support this approach as more than a culture builder.

1. Cultural change is often thought of as some end-process consequence rather than a condition that must be the focus from the beginning of a change process. Since the culture shapes the ways we think, it determines our present actions. This mindset of the community, as well as staff, is formed around *beliefs and assumptions* about *Why* and *How* schools do their work. These becomes the primary target for culture change.

The methodology called "Baldrige" can be a major tool for accomplishing that purpose, because first, and foremost it is a set of *beliefs* and *values* that shape a way of thinking about people and how they connect to common purposes. Associated with it are an accompanying set of *processes and tools* for acting on those common beliefs in ways that focus an entire system's assets on its "results." But method and mindset have to develop together.

Not only is this approach sound in terms of the way human mind's learn, but there no longer is time to wait for the total effects of *either-one-or-the-other* approaches. Parents, the corporate sector, and policymakers are demanding -- "Change it all - the whole and its parts - and do it now!" As Governor Roy Romer put it,

"If you've got a guy who's got a bad heart, and bad kidneys, and bad lungs, what are you going to do -- cure him one piece at a time?"

This approach can allow a school system to respond directly to those underlying demands.

2. MCPS also has as one of its priorities - to "improve the educational design and delivery of instruction and curriculum by utilization of *proven best practices*." The ways of thinking and acting embedded in the Baldrige approach are the process standard of every *World Class* organization. They, in effect, provide a *standard for meeting standards* - a proven way of thinking about, and organizing, work around the *process of learning* so that results continually improve both quantitatively and qualitatively.

A recent Washington Post article ("Reinventing Xerox") cited such a process as the key to Xerox's success in recent years.

"... they have figured out ways to hard-wire the process of adaption [sic] and reinvention into the corporate culture and to take what began as a one-time revolution and make it ongoing."

[I can't help but jump ahead here to the strategy, but this "best practice" opening makes it possible to think of one of the OD department's "products" as a process for "hard-wiring" a "trial and error" process of "adaptation and reinvention" into the "on-going" ways the MCPS do their work. This would be a *capacity-building scaffold* that "fits" over the teaching process, not just the isolated individual teacher at the critical end of the process. It could involve the daily work of everyone in the school system whose actions are intended to "make a difference" in the learning lives of children. In this way, it could tap into already available human resources within a district and community.

It would, in effect operationalize the second MCPS objective: "*Organize and optimize assets for improved academic results.*"]

3. Nationally, there is renewed interest in applying Baldrige criteria in education settings. Maryland is one of six states involved in an initiative to further this. But when one surveys the national scene for examples, there are few communities where the systemic capacity of the process to empower *inside-out* change across an *entire* school system has been tapped. This offers the MCPS an unique opportunity to be the "cutting edge."

What makes this possible is the sound base upon which MCPS can start. Beliefs and values consistent with those of the "*Baldrige*" are already incorporated in its Board goals and priorities, and many of its principles shape the *Call to Action*. Moreover, many of the same improvement tools and processes are already incorporated in its contract with its teachers.

And most recently, the district reorganization established critical elements of a supportive, more interactive infrastructure that can provide the connective tissue to allow the MCPS to accomplish its purposes as a school *system* rather than a system of schools. This has been missing in most full district change efforts -- *Baldrige*-related or not.

This established base of prior actions can make it possible for MCPS to address its challenge of *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap* in ways that can lead to sustained changes in the fundamental ways that MCPS does its work.

Using the Baldrige Criteria won't do that alone, however. The Baldrige principles and practices must be embedded in a larger approach "owned" by MCPS. One which can provide a single, coherent transition process involving a way of thinking and interacting that can enable the school system to make a difference in results for *all* children by enabling its people to make a difference in the results for *each*.

The research base for the strategy

To take advantage of the present window of opportunity requires a strategy whose scope and nature matches that of the range of conditions currently facing the district and all of its practitioners. For credibility - internally as well as externally -- it must meet MCPS's criterion for *research-based* approaches. What principles does research tell us should shape the strategy's design?

That following strategy's design principles are similar to those recently summarized by the Pew Forum on Educational Reform in its "Strategies for Fixing Failing Public Schools." Clearly, MCPS is not a failing system, but those principles also represent a consensus of cutting edge thoughts of reformers such as Linda Darling Hammond, Michael Fullen, Deborah Meier, and Tony Wagner (Institute for Responsive Education) in particular, in his "Change as Collaborative Inquiry: A Constructivist Methodology for Reinventing Schools."

These principles include: [my emphasis added to indicate the places where the strategy adds particular value.]

- **All** parts of the system should be focused on improving the learning of **individual** students, and that function should be the highest priority in the school budget.
- Every adult should be held accountable for performance, but the **accountability**, while rooted in learning and teaching, **should be process-oriented and designed to help teachers and administrators improve their practice.**
- **Professional development** should be a **transparent part of the work environment** and should take place in classrooms **while** teachers work with students. Professional staff should be judged on the degree to which they attend seriously to instructional goals and strive to improve their practice
- In order to build trust, enhance human relationships, and share expertise, professional staff should be encouraged to collaborate, and schedules and **working conditions should be arranged to facilitate collaboration.**

- The needs of students must come first and student learning should dictate the actions of the school and all of the adults in it.
- Relevant data should be collected, assessed, and provided to school staff in a feedback loop to encourage continuous progress.
- School staff should extend themselves to **involve parents and community in the rehabilitation of the school**. Data should be shared with the community and its counsel should be sought.

The reality base for the strategy

The above principles can serve as initial design criteria for the capacity represented by the “scaffolding.” But the scope and nature of the natural environment in which this parallel infrastructure must function also “imposes” requirements. This includes a culture of mistrust of “planned change,” and experienced-based disbelief that this form of systemic change is even “possible.”

This requires a strategy that can start in that environment, and engage it in a way that makes sense to those who create the system’s daily results. This means it:

- **Must focus on needs of children presently in schools**
- **Must not require resources that draw services away from children.**
- **Must be part of everyday school operations, not an add-on**
- **Must engage and interact with the “work” of present classroom, building, and district operations by providing a “safe” way to question practices, purposes, and eventually assumptions and beliefs; and from there try new approaches, learn from what doesn’t work well, and try again.**
- **Must enable curriculum design and delivery to be interactive, continuous and developmental, by anchoring it in classroom experiences, and then providing the means for the tacit learnings from classroom experience to be translated into explicit new knowledge for the system to apply to its own continual growth and survival.**
- **Must allow the need for solutions to current problems to serve as the “drivers” for training, professional development, and use of new technologies. And these processes must provide learning scaffolds to support the continued professional and personal growth of those involved.**
- **Must sustain the *district* as the *unit-of-change*; and provide a continual knowledge base that allows those changes to be *developmental*.**

[More to come, if interested.....]