

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP for SITE-BASED DECISION-MAKING:

New Roles & Relationships

PURPOSES & PREMISES

*"We are not living in an 'age of enlightenment,'
but an age of not knowing what to do."*

Walker Percy
Thanatos Syndrome

*"Its not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with old ways . . .
but it's that place in-between that we fear. Its like a trapeze artist between trapezes . . .
or Linus with his blanket in the dryer -- there's nothing to hold on to!"*

Colorado
Teacher

The American Association for School Administrators (**AASA**) - with the support of the American Federation of Teachers (**AFT**), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (**NAESP**), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (**NASSP**), and the National Education Association (**NEA**) - believe that a large measure of the *power* to revitalize American education lies relatively untapped in the common values and potential relationships of currently isolated school practitioners at all levels. These can provide solid "handles" as we navigate through the spaces in-between old, accustomed roles and relationships.

This meeting offers opportunities to test that hypothesis. In times like these, when schools must respond to needs of children whose life experiences increasingly differ from those upon which teaching and schooling have traditionally been based, we seek new answers. Lost or overwhelmed by the increasing flood of new conditions and ideas may be some old questions -- questions about basic values and relationships that make schools different from other organizations.

Our specific purposes during this meeting are to help you and your district :

- Explore the shifting relationships, roles, and responsibilities that connect purposeful human beings who want to *make a difference* in the lives of children
- Develop a common language and framework for working together
- Focus on actions for *today*, rather than "after restructuring comes."

To achieve these purposes, you will be able to draw upon:

- *workshop staff*: Pat Dolan, who brings to this program a unique perspective on the work processes of human organizations; and representatives of the 5 national organizations.
- *in-process case studies*: four districts of different sizes will openly share their experience of restructuring-in-process;
- *each other*: although we join together as learners, few come without relevant experience of potential value to others;
- *materials*: a workshop resource notebook that can serve as a continuing source of related information at this meeting and after you return home.

P R E M I S E S

Hi! I'm from the Central Office . . . and I'm here to help!"
District Administrator

"(Snicker, snicker. . . chuckle)". . .
Building personnel

John Goodlad was correct when he suggested that the school building is the smallest unit of change. It has taken several decades to begin to discover a complementary truth -- if we want **permanent** change, then the school system or district must concurrently change itself. Only at this level can relationships be framed and supported so that individual parts of the system can interact functionally, learning from and contributing to each other as they simultaneously address their individual and school objectives.

Until now, much of the current discussion about school restructuring has been conducted as if no meaningful roles were needed between the front-line jobs of Teacher and Superintendent. In some cases even Principals have been considered among disposable middle-management. With resources scarce, powerless staff positions considered "middle management" have appeared as a ripe source for redeployable resources. It hasn't helped that, in the ways districts have been run, these human resources have been only indirectly influential on the quality of classroom instruction.

Today, because districts must increase effectiveness and grow as part of their everyday work, we may find in "middle management " a key to district revitalization --the important *connecting roles and processes* needed to maintain responsive and responsible schools in times of dynamic change.

That is the premise upon which this meeting starts. . . and there are several others:

"Like the proverbial blind men trying to describe an elephant, educators who feel around for a definition of the latest stage in the reform of schools--restructuring--see the situation differently."

Ann Lewis
Restructuring America's Schools

Among today's "blind men" . . .

- Within the past months, federal and state policymakers have suggested that the "elephant" doesn't know where it's going. *Their answer : new goals.*
- American business and industry, troubled by loss of markets and increasing competition from other countries, look up from their "bottom line," to wonder where more productive workers will come from. *Their answers: more school accountability, more deregulation, more choice.*
- Others, closer to the daily work of running "elephants," may have no broader perspective. Often their attempts to fix schools stop at fixing blame -- *teachers don't care any more; parent's aren't involved; administrators are bureaucratic blobs; and politicians won't provide adequate support.*

Truly, we do sometimes act like a society "not knowing what to do." Desperately searching for reasons and causes while simultaneously trying to solve the problems that face us, we eventually reach a point of frustration and cry --*change the whole damn thing . . . all at once!* Restructure!

Yet, after three decades of *innovation, change agents, dissemination/diffusion, and improvement strategies* we may feel that is impossible. It will take too long, be too costly and, anyway, total school districts can't change.

Or can they?

What those who recall the Blind Men and the Elephant fable may forget is that, in the end, while each was right from his own perspective, "*they all were in the wrong.*" They couldn't perceive before them an organic entity functioning as a *whole*, parts interconnected and interrelated through certain basic processes. They knew the parts, but not that it was the connections and processes that made it possible for the elephant to do its work and, in fact, *grow*.

Are there, in the nature of the daily work of schooling, fundamental processes that can be connected and supported through more satisfying *relationships and roles*, and which will allow both schools and school practitioners to *grow* as they become increasingly effective?

It's our premise that there are!

*We fix the blame, and not the process . . .
because we don't know how the work gets done."*

Myron Tribus (MIT Economist,
ABC Special on *American Productivity*)

They can't see the forest for the trees . . .!
Anonymous

It may be hard, in the midst of current pressures for "site-based management and decision-making," "teacher empowerment," and "slimming down the bureaucracy," to recall that historically we may be experiencing just another periodic swing of the centralize-decentralize pendulum - alternately responding to demands for increased efficiency or increased effectiveness. Unless the public perception of *the work of schools* can be changed, schools may lose once more the common-sense notion that decisions can be more appropriate and responsive if they are made closer to the needs to which they respond.

An unquestioned belief underlies the public's perception of our *work*: that the power of the organization flows through a single decision-making system or process. But what if there really were two decision-making processes operating simultaneously -- one (metaphorically) dealing with the *forest* while the other with the *trees*? What if centralization-decentralization could be a "both-and" instead of an "either-or," situation? What if (like Weyerhaeuser, *The Tree-Growing Company*) we could manage schools in ways that were best for the forest and the trees?

We can, but this requires recognizing how the work of schools involves *two* decision processes -- one functioning to produce the organization's decisions; while the other functions within individuals at all levels, as they fulfill the organization's (and their own) purposes. One process (administration) ensures societal responsibility - i.e., the responsible use of public resources and remaining responsive to society's needs. The other process (instruction*) ensures client (student) response-ability. It responds to *what is* -- the changing situations that present themselves each day in the classroom and building. Within this dual perspective, site-based decision making becomes less concerned with *who* makes what decisions, and more with everyone making *better* decisions.

In fact, were the two processes recognized and supported, the debate over *participative decision-making* in schooling would turn around. Instead of fearing (or hoping) that teachers will be making administrators' decisions, all would be seeking ways for district personnel to play more meaningful roles in support of more responsive, appropriate, and effective daily decisions about meeting children's learning needs. The concern would be for shared decision-*influencing* aimed at student learning, rather than shared decision-making about resources.

* We use "instruction" rather than "teaching" because, in the structure of loosely-connected isolated practitioners that characterizes most schools today, teaching has become synonymous with "teacher." This definition automatically blinds us to the potential support and contributions of others who share accountability for, and can influence, the learning of children.

Can we see these *forest & trees* decision processes at work in schools? Yes, usually at their extremes, where it is relatively easy to make a decision responding to some universal need across a district, or at the other extreme to respond to one child's needs. But these two "systems" do not exist apart, separated by a moat between the central office and the buildings. Tens of thousands of *daily* decisions and choices fall in-between -- e.g., a teacher tries to deal with one student's behavior while keeping in mind the needs of 27 other equally unique individuals; a principal, wanting to make the best placement for a child, also recognizes the effect of an overload on the teacher in that classroom; or a superintendent, knowing that changes must impact *all* children in the district, concentrates her time on the developing the political support necessary for efforts of that dimension.

Here is where the daily work of schooling takes place: in the forest, among the trees as education's *workers* attempt to do what's best for each child, and *simultaneously*, all children.

Only the size of the forest changes.

"... we need each other. If schools are to change, adults talking to other adults about the nuts and bolts of educating children must be part of the regular, daily work of school problem solving and decision making."

Ideas Into Action Symposium, AASA

The work of *learning* is the student's responsibility. The work of *schooling* is what educators are paid for. What characterizes the nature of this work and its workers?

School practitioners share one basic characteristic with all other human "workers." They are purposeful, self-correcting beings who -- if committed strongly enough to the purpose, and are provided feedback about the effects of their actions -- will *self-correct* and change as part of becoming increasingly more effective.

Unfortunately, most school practitioners operate isolated in space and time. In space, functioning primarily as isolated practitioners - one teacher to a classroom, one principal to a building, one superintendent to a district. In time, operating largely *in-the-flow-of-the-moment* as they respond to both anticipated and unanticipated events as they unfold. This isolation could be tolerated, in fact used as a framework for "professionalism," as long as the conditions to which practitioners responded remained relatively constant. One's personal experience could be relied on for the "answers." Today however, the walls of isolation that have served to protect, define, and confine our lives as educators are rapidly moving in on us.

Space and time may not necessarily be the fixed resources we sometimes think they are. Once understood as barriers, imprisoning practitioners rather than protecting them, they can be modified. Other professions, also responding to dynamic changes in their worlds, break through these barriers with processes and technologies allowing interaction with both peers, and outside knowledge, as part of the regular workday.

Yet, at the building level particularly, school practitioners may not be considered "working" unless they are involved with children. When they most need interaction and support from peers and others, they are alone. Critical functions, such as continuing reflection on experience to generate learnings in anticipation of tomorrow's purposes and problems usually must take place outside of the workplace -- while driving to work, jogging, showering, trying to sleep, etc. Times that have the benefit of few interruptions, but which are limited to the resources of one's own experience.

Today district leaders are challenged to develop strategies that bridge space and create time as *part of* the daily work of schooling. If restructuring and site-based decision-making are not to become ends in themselves, school districts must develop connections, capabilities and processes that

- focus and align classroom *and* district office decisions on teaching and learning;

- create a fundamentally different structure of opportunities for dialogue, interaction, and discretion; and
- capitalize upon the positive, and common, values that underlie what school practitioners do.

But creating these relationships, roles, and processes requires mutual trust. Developing and maintaining this trust is the mutual responsibility of teachers, administrators, and policymakers who want to make a difference in the lives of America's children.

Let us begin

Lewis A. Rhodes
Associate Executive Director
AASA

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