Systems Thinking for School System Leaders

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The AASA Center for System Leadership is the professional development arm of the American Association of School Administrators.

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Systems Thinking for School System Leaders – An AASA Toolkit

This toolkit, brought to you through the AASA Center for System Leadership, is designed exclusively for AASA members. It provides information, resources and tools to help build the leadership capacity of school superintendents and other school system leaders who are guiding the transformation of public education to meet the expectation of universal success for all children.

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Introduction to the Toolkit…by Paul D. Houston

Dear AASA Members:

The 2008 Systems Thinking for School System Leaders Toolkit is the newest resource for AASA members from the AASA Center for System Leadership. I hope you will use it in your work and in your school system to become more familiar with the basic tenets of systems thinking, to stimulate discussion with your leadership team about the value of systems thinking, to identify opportunities to implement a systemic approach, and to promote the value of systems thinking to key school system stakeholders.

As you are intimately aware, education serves our nation and as our nation is challenged, it is expected schools will address the challenges. That is why our curriculum is often more crowded than the highways at quitting time. It is also why our schools seem to weave and veer from one new program to another.

Over the past decade schools have seen a major shift in what they are being asked to deliver to our society. Since the beginning of public education in America, schools were asked to provide access to an education for all children. The idea behind that was as simple as getting a child to the dinner table. The feeling was that if we got enough children to the table, they would have the opportunity to be fed. In fact, most of the landmark decisions affecting education have been about access and opportunity. Our goal, in essence, was universal access – a place at the table for everyone.

The public education system is built around this goal and virtually every aspect of the current system supports it. But now, assuring universal access is no longer enough. While everyone has a seat at the table, there is a demand to ensure that all the meals being served have the same nutritional value. Further, society has changed so that a basic education is no longer enough to ensure an individual’s economic success.

This shift to the goal of universal proficiency requires a different kind of education, a different kind of educational system and a different kind of system leader. The challenge currently facing us is that the goal has changed, but the system has not.

Reform efforts such as the standards and accountability movement have not adequately addressed the underlying issue. Even when you change the expected results and the systems for tracking those results, you still have not changed the system itself.

As the world economy shifted and businesses faced a similar need for restructuring they came to realize they could not get the desired results simply by setting higher production goals and different rewards. They had to fundamentally change the way they were doing their work.

If we are to succeed in moving education to a new paradigm of high performance by all children, we will need a similar massive overhaul of the system itself. If we truly expect public education to yield a different result, we will need to change our most basic assumptions and practices. It has been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. Public education must be remade to have that different result.

That starts with leadership. Superintendents of schools must become superintendents of education. We need to retool our current leaders to remake the system top to bottom and side to side.

When business made its transition, it didn’t throw away all its current managers – it retrained them, as it simultaneously prepared the next generation with a different set of skills. Educational leadership needs that same dual effort – the creation of a new generation of leaders and the remaking of the current leaders into superintendents of education and learning.

To get a different result will require us to behave in different ways. That starts at the top, with you, today.

Paul D. Houston, Ed.D.
Executive Director
American Association of School Administrators
The AASA Center for System Leadership is the professional development arm of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The Center is a learning organization that fosters, develops and supports superintendents of schools and other school system leaders who can lead the transformation of public education systems in order to meet the new expectation of universal success for each and every child, while ensuring universal access and equity.

Through the work of its five Institutes, the Center:
- Provides programs focused on a systems approach to the transformation of public education, including programs that are particularly relevant for new and aspiring superintendents.
- Is the hub for a network of learning organizations that share the same core beliefs and convictions regarding public education.
- Advocates within and through the national community for the systemic transformation of public education.
- Leads and encourages inquiries into various public education designs that might be appropriate as vehicles to transform public education.

As systems thinking approaches are implemented, transformed school systems will emerge. A few of the characteristics of those transformed systems include:
- Ongoing, continuous improvement of policies and practices.
- Aligned curriculum throughout the system.
- Performance-based accountability sub-systems that drive and ensure sustainable change.
- Interconnectivity to other community systems.
- Clear priorities for attaining universal success, with resources allocated to match those priorities.
- Children who are prepared to be responsible and productive citizens.

In short, transformed school systems will be capable of meeting the new expectation of universal success for each and every child, while continuing to provide access to public education for all children.

In this transformed public education system, the role of the superintendent of schools is significantly altered in the following ways.
- The superintendent is a superintendent of education.
- Within the school system framework, the superintendent is a moral and intellectual leader who is the chief learner and who is a composer and conductor instead of a commander.
- Within the community, the superintendent is the person who leads the effort to connect interdependently the education system with the other community systems that either serve children and/or have an impact on the delivery of services to children.

Core Beliefs
Since 1865, AASA has been the national organization for superintendents and other school system leaders. As the professional development arm of AASA, the AASA Center for System Leadership is founded on the following core beliefs:
- Public education must be transformed to meet the expectation of universal success. The American public education system, as it is designed and functioning today, provides equal educational access and opportunity for each and every child. It is not necessarily designed to promote the new expectation of universal success. Universal success is defined as the expectation that each and every child, regardless of any racial, ethnic, economic, physical, mental or cognitive condition, will learn to the same relatively
high standard. In order to achieve the result of universal success, the system of public education must be transformed to meet the new expectations.

- **A society of highly competent workers and responsible citizens needs a strong public education system.** Today, the United States functions in a very complex and competitive global political and economic environment. Our children must not only compete domestically for jobs but also internationally to maintain this country’s international standing and standard of living. This requires a strong, vibrant and flexible educational system to insure the development of highly competent workers and citizens.

- **Strong social support systems are necessary for the healthy growth and development of children.** The family structure, the basis for the care and nurturing of each and every child, must be reinforced and fostered by the American citizenry. The sources of support for children must be delivered on an equitable and consistent basis.

- **Educators must believe in and exhibit behaviors that support the concept of universal success for each and every child.** The foundation of these behaviors is the twin belief that each and every child has sufficient learning ability to become academically proficient and that school systems are responsible for educating each and every child so that each can meet high standards.

- **To positively affect the growth and development of each and every child, public school systems must operate effectively within networks of systems.** The public education system must integrate services to children and raise community expectations both for the education system and for the other systems that offer services to children and their families.

- **Educational leadership programs must engage participants in systems thinking so that education leaders have the knowledge and skills necessary to lead systemic change.** Traditional educational leadership programs must focus on systems thinking. It will take nothing less than new thinking and action to transform public education to meet the goal of universal success.

- **Systemic change requires extensive public engagement and understanding of the reasons for change.** Systemic change in education cannot take place in isolation from the public. The public needs to be integrally involved and needs to know why changes must be made. The public and school system leaders must support rhetorically and financially the strategies that will produce change.

- **Effective leadership is essential for building the capacity for systemic change resulting in universal success.** Systemic change and systemic thinking is not easy. Change does not take place without building and nurturing sufficient capacity for change. Effective leadership is possible through the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that are necessary.

**Leadership Matters**
The facts and figures are well known: In the United States, each year more than 48 million children are enrolled in public school system. More than 13,000 individuals are engaged as school system superintendents charged with:

- Leading their school system’s instructional programs.
- Building healthy relationships between their school system and other governmental agencies that serve the same geographic entity.
- Building healthy relationships with the citizens who live in their school system, especially the parents of the children who are served by their schools.
- Managing the operations of their school system.
- Representing their school system in local, statewide and national arenas.

The superintendent works at the center of a network of systems that operate in, and in relationship to, the school district. Critical to the success of the system is the leadership of the superintendent. AASA believes that **Leadership Matters.**

Additional information on the Center and its programs can be found at [www.aasa.org/AASACenter](http://www.aasa.org/AASACenter).

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“**It's about time that a national focus is being placed on approaching the improvement of public education through systemic change. So many reform efforts have emphasized specific programs without any attention being paid to designing the system to support these reform efforts. The AASA Center of System Leadership is meeting a true need.**”

Dr. Joan M. Raymond
Superintendent
South Bend Community School District
Tips for Using this Toolkit

There are several ways that you can use this toolkit – in whole, or in parts. You and your school system team can use it to:

- Become familiar with the basics tenets of systems thinking.
- Examine opportunities to apply the concepts of systems thinking within your school system.
- Promote the value of systems thinking to school system stakeholders including administrators, teachers, students, parents and board members.
- Gain buy-in for a systems thinking approach from school system stakeholders.
- Stimulate discussion about the value of systems thinking in leading and sustaining school improvement.

“The AASA Center for System Leadership solicits and encourages the voice of every school system leader in the support of systemic change; change that results in sustained school improvement. When we speak with a singular voice, we have a strong impact on the discussion and decisions regarding school improvement taking place at the national level. When that discussion takes place at the local level, the AASA Center for System Leadership helps me become a more effective leader through advocacy and by providing cutting-edge research.”

Dr. Randall H. Collins
Superintendent
Waterford Public School District
AASA President-Elect
Systems Thinking
Learning Tools

• Tools for you to use with staff and school communities

• Articles from The School Administrator
A system contains interconnected parts, which function like dynamic and complex webs of interactive loops.

The notion of systems thinking is not a new one; it has been around for decades. In large part, systems theory owes its origins to the study of ecology, through which scientists have discovered that complex webs of life exist throughout nature. They observed that seemingly minor changes or additions to natural systems can have dramatic and unforeseen effects. For example, in Hawaii, the introduction of feral pigs has severely altered the island’s ecosystem. The pigs eat rare plants that native birds depend on for nectar. Through their digging, the pigs create large puddles, which breed diseases-carrying mosquitoes, which further decimate the bird population. To make matters worse, the pigs spread the seeds of non-native vines that eventually choke out trees in the forest (Dolan, n.d.).

Similarly, small changes in human systems, such as schools, often have complex and unforeseen effects. For example, a seemingly straightforward change from grade-letter student report cards to more detailed reports on student competencies may have numerous ramifications. For starters, teachers may need training to ensure they adopt the new format as intended. District assessments may need to be revamped to ensure they measure the elements of student progress that will be reported. And parents may need guidance on how to interpret the new format. As a result, resources may be required to train teachers, modify assessments, and communicate with parents. Moreover, new processes may need to be developed for recording, reporting, and communicating data as feedback to teachers, students, and parents.

Despite the neat, pyramid-type structure often ascribed to schools through organizational charts, schools tend to operate much more like living systems. The parts of a system function more like dynamic and complex webs of interactive loops, rather than as compartmentalized units following clear chains of command, like cogs in a machine. Thus, a major component of systems thinking is looking for the connections in the system, that is, the ways in which changes to one part might affect, and be affected by, other parts of the system.

Although systems theory describes the inner-workings of school communities, Patterson (1993) notes that “the language and tools of systems thinking have been by and large obscured in complex and intricate formulas and diagrams”. In short, it is easy to get so wrapped up in the complexity of school systems that one ends up with an overly complicated vision of school improvement, like one of cartoonist Rube Goldberg’s “inventions” - rather than a clear vision to guide a school through change.

So, how do you avoid getting wrapped up in the complexities and use systems thinking to guide change and continuous improvement? Start by using the tools in this toolkit.

**Online Link:** Get a superintendent’s perspective on systems thinking. Hear from Don Phillips, superintendent of the Poway Unified School District in Poway, Calif., regarding the importance of systems thinking for superintendents. (Windows Media) (QuickTime)
Learning Tool:
The Laws of Systems Thinking
From *Think Like Peter Senge* in November 2004 issue of *The School Administrator*.

In *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, author Peter Senge explains why well-intended solutions to problems may actually make matters worse over the long term: “Opting for ‘symptomatic solutions’ is enticing. Apparent improvement is achieved. Pressures, either external or internal, to ‘do something’ about a vexing problem are relieved.”

But easing a problem symptom also reduces any perceived need to find more fundamental solutions.

Meanwhile, the underlying problem remains unaddressed and may worsen, and the side effects of the symptomatic solution make it still harder to apply the fundamental solution. Over time, people rely more and more on the symptomatic solution, which becomes increasingly the only solution. As a result, without anyone making a conscious decision, they have shifted the burden to increasing reliance on symptomatic solutions.

By understanding the patterns that shape behavior, we can avoid using symptomatic solutions and other actions that, in many instances, feed our problems and cause us to fail. The discipline of identifying these patterns is called systems thinking.

Senge has identified certain patterns that occur again and again. He calls these reoccurring patterns the laws of systems thinking.

It is imperative that educational leaders internalize at an intuitive level Senge’s laws of systems thinking. Once internalized, they can then use these mental models to build workable, long-term solutions and avoid generating unwanted and counterproductive unintended consequences.

To resolve the growing number of wicked problems facing our schools and communities, educational leaders must transcend just being creative and coming up with a new angle or technique. They must shift their thinking to a new dimension in which they see things in a new light where unforeseen possibilities appear.

As Albert Einstein has said, the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we used when we created them. Teaching yourself to think like Peter Senge will help you make that shift and reach the level of thinking where the solutions to many of the wicked problems facing public education will begin to emerge into the light of a new day.

**Law #1 – Today’s problems come from yesterday’s solutions.**
We often are puzzled by the causes of our problems, but remembering solutions to past problems provides insight. For instance, why are educators struggling to reduce class sizes today? One answer is because efficiency experts convinced them in the early 1900s that increasing class sizes would make their schools more efficient and save them money.

**Law #2 – The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.**
We have all felt it. The more you try to improve things, the more effort is required. For instance, the harder you try to convince some teachers they need to improve their teaching methods, the more they resist and the harder it is to get them to change.

**Law #3 – Behavior grows better before it grows worse.**
If we intervene to improve things, we succeed, but only in the short term. For instance, when teacher salaries are frozen, short-term financial pressures are relieved. However, the mood of the teachers is often negatively affected by the salary freeze, and staff morale begins to falter. When our short-term success of saving money turns into a gradual long-term decline in staff spirit, it may be hard to recognize the connection between the two.

**Law #4 – The easy way out usually leads back in.**
When we stick to what we know best and apply familiar or textbook solutions, we find comfort. Relying on familiar solutions even while problems persist indicates nonsystemic thinking, or the “what we need here is a bigger
hammer” syndrome. For instance, when student performance is static or declining, the typical reaction is to tighten the screws by raising the threshold for meeting educational standards. However, in doing so, the unintended consequences are to mask incremental improvements in student achievement, frustrate the teachers and principals and further increase demands for more stringent standards.

**Law #5 – The cure can be worse than the disease.**
The familiar solution is sometimes not just ineffective but also dangerous. For instance, eliminating educational programs to balance the school district budget not only masks the need for more money, but it also lowers the quality of education and can trigger a long-term dismantling process.

**Law #6 – Faster is slower.**
All natural systems, whether ecosystems or organizations, have an optimal rate of growth that is far slower than the fast pace most of us think is desirable. For instance, the current drive to reform our public schools is running headlong into the natural tendency for teachers, principals, school board members and parents to adjust slowly to change. As Daniel Yankelovich states in his book, *Coming To Public Judgment*, the process of working through change can take months or even years.

**Law #7 – Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.**
Most of us assume that cause and effect occur closely together. That makes it hard to find the causes that effects, such as sagging public trust of school officials and other public officials, indicate exist. The first step in learning how to view reality systemically is to dispense with simple cause-and-effect thinking and learn to see that sometimes we – and not external adversaries or events – are at the root of our problems. For instance, the propensity for school officials to try to convince residents to feel good about their public schools can in the long run lead to public distrust because these residents over time feel they are receiving only part of the truth.

**Law #8 – Small change can produce big results, but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.**
Small, well-focused actions can produce solid improvements, but only if done in the right place. This is called leverage. For instance, when school officials make the decision to introduce educational reforms, simply sitting down with teachers one-on-one at the outset and easing their concerns about the impact these reforms will have on their lives can go a long way toward paving the way for a smooth transition to new, more effective teaching methods.

**Law #9 – You can have your cake and eat it too, but not all at once.**
Sometimes knotty dilemmas, from a systems point of view, are not dilemmas at all. Once you change from a “snapshot” to a “process” mode of thinking, they appear differently. For instance, it is possible to use computer technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to do it efficiently. However, the early stages of implementing this technology can be time consuming and expensive as computers are purchased, buildings are wired for the technology and teachers are trained to use it. After the startup period, the educational and economic benefits begin to gradually kick in.

**Law #10 – Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.**
Systems are alive, and their character depends upon the whole. To understand difficult problems or plot strategy, you will have to see the whole system that creates the issues. For instance, when a school system runs out of money, the school district’s treasurer may see the problem as a financial one, while the board of education and the superintendent may view the problem in terms of the educational cuts that will have to be made if more money is not generated.

On the other hand, some school district residents may feel the lack of state funding is the root cause of the financial problems facing their district. All see a different dimension of the problem and have trouble seeing how they interact.
The Leader's Role in Reaching Universal Success for All

By Claudia Mansfield Sutton

Public school leaders across America are working individually and collectively to reach the goal of universal success for all children. But accomplishing this requires a different way of thinking about education and education systems.

To help our members in their work, the American Association of School Administrators has launched a major initiative designed to give the nation's school leaders the 21st century knowledge and skills necessary to shape public education using systems thinking.

This initiative, the AASA Center for System Leadership, was founded on the conviction that school leaders must think about the disparate pieces of a school system's work and pull them together—in essence to connect the dots.

Seeking Harmony
A system such as a school district is a dynamic, complex whole comprised of distinct elements. These elements function alone, yet also interact with the other elements in various ways.

To borrow from the thoughts of W. Edwards Deming, who developed the theory of continuous improvement through a systems approach, systems thinking is like conducting a piece of music for an orchestra. While the flute solo may be pleasant, the percussion powerful, the strings in perfect harmony, it is the work of the conductor who pulls all the parts together into one beautiful song. Only then do the musicians—and the audience members—get the full and intended effect.

In essence, school leaders are conductors. For optimal performance, they must know the music, understand the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument and each musician, be trained in conducting and ensure all the musicians play together. For example, some of the elements of an effective education system include high standards and a rigorous, connected curriculum; accountability systems that are useful and make sense; community involvement and support; safe, clean and healthful learning environments; adequate student transportation and pupil support services; and strong and effective leadership at the board, district and school levels.

Each element can function apart from the others, but when the parts are working together as a thriving whole under the direction of a skilled school leader, the school district becomes more effective.

A Continuous Process
Systems thinking is an ongoing, continuous process that requires understanding and practice. It is not a quick-fix solution. It takes time, energy, experience and knowledge. When education leaders view their districts as a system, with myriad parts that affect each other, they can focus on how to make that system better.

The AASA Center for System Leadership develops and supports school leaders who are committed to connecting the dots in their school systems to transform public education. The center is founded on a set of core beliefs, including:

- Public education must be designed to meet the 21st century expectations of universal success for all children.
- A society of highly competent workers and responsible citizens requires a strong public education system.
- Strong social support systems are necessary for the healthy growth and development of all children.
• Educators must believe in and exhibit behaviors that support the concept of universal success for each and every child.
• Public school systems must operate efficiently within networks of systems.
• Educational leadership programs must engage participants in systems thinking so that education leaders have the knowledge and skills necessary to lead systemic change.
• Systemic change requires extensive public engagement and understanding of the reasons for change.

As a learning organization, the AASA Center for System Leadership develops and supports those school system leaders who will drive the transformation of public education. Through its programs, the center will support school system leaders as they build and sustain capacity for change, provide leadership in a diverse and highly political environment, work within the present system while leading the change process, bring local leaders and stakeholders together to support the school system and become effective community leaders.

Transforming Education
The nature of a system as a whole is different from the sum of its individual parts. For example, a car is comprised of mechanical and electrical parts that are responsible for steering, lighting, braking, and so forth. Each of these subsystems connects with the others to make the car function properly.

But a perfectly tuned car is useless without a competent driver—someone responsible for making certain all parts are functioning separately and together, and for ensuring the car has the fuel to reach the desired destination.

The AASA Center for System Leadership is a vehicle for promoting systems thinking to drive the transformation of American public education. Through the center’s programs, AASA is encouraging superintendents to think carefully about their 21st century roles as systems leaders and is working to provide them with the tools and resources they need to create more effective public education systems. Only then can we move beyond equal access and equal educational opportunity for all children and move steadily toward universal success for all children.

I invite you to become involved in the AASA Center for System Leadership. Visit www.aasa.org to read more about the center’s plans.

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Systemic Improvement To Raise Achievement
By Mary Jo Kramer

Strategy, coherence, culture and capacity are key concepts of systems thinking. Yet unless they are embedded in reform practices that improve learning, they will become, in Yogi Berra's words, "Deja vu all over again."

Two principles provide a framework for raising achievement by applying systems thinking to districtwide reform:

- Raising achievement requires a coherent, strategic focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms, and
- Transforming school and district cultures by developing the instructional capacity of teachers and administrators is essential to accomplish this goal.

Strategy and Coherence
Superintendents face the challenge of raising the achievement of all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The starting point is identifying the most pressing student learning needs to set goals that exceed the district's current performance. Using data to determine priorities is the cornerstone of an effective strategy to raise achievement.

In crafting a strategy, the most important question superintendents can ask is, "What initiatives will be most likely to raise achievement by improving teaching and learning within a reasonable timeframe?" Superintendents who think strategically adjust and evaluate their strategy by applying the ultimate measure of success, as expressed by Harvard Professor of Education Richard Elmore: "If it doesn't happen in the classroom, it doesn't happen." District initiatives raise achievement when daily instruction produces high quality student work.

This standard is difficult to meet for three reasons:

- Well-meaning educators often pursue structural reforms that have a minimal or indirect effect on teaching and learning. Grade or schedule reconfigurations, for example, will not raise achievement unless the quality of instruction improves. While restructuring may be necessary, it can become an end unto itself.
- Less is more. Districts usually have more initiatives than can be implemented effectively, leaving staff with a sense of initiative fatigue. Being strategic requires unpacking the layers of initiatives to concentrate on those most likely to raise achievement.
- Unless a strategy is coherent, disconnected initiatives vie for attention. No one is in a better position than a superintendent to align district functions and operations with the goal of raising achievement. Coherence is essential among the functions that most directly affect teaching and learning: curriculum, instruction, in-service, personnel, supervision and assessment. Aligning other operations and practices is equally important.

Culture and Capacity
Superintendents who sustain a coherent improvement strategy understand the political and organizational dynamics that shape a district's culture as well as the beliefs that drive behavior and school practices. Reform-minded superintendents inevitably face a two-fold cultural challenge:

- Creating a sense of urgency among either school boards, staff or constituents, and
- Transforming the district and its school cultures into ones where professionals embrace the goal of enabling every child to achieve.
Superintendents who meet this challenge pursue an improvement strategy that builds a consensus for change by engaging staff and public alike.

Professional development is vital to sustaining a culture of improvement. We tend to underestimate the in-service teachers need, particularly when new programs or methods are introduced. Without sufficient attention to developing their knowledge and skills, widespread variability of practice inevitably occurs. Initiatives become homogenized when professionals lack a common understanding of purpose and approach.

Adults need time and opportunity to learn, most effectively in the context of instructional practice within schools through job-embedded in-service, such as lesson studies, student work reviews and walk-through observations.

Developing the instructional leadership capacity of principals is equally critical to creating a culture of improvement that results in achievement gains.

Instructional leadership requires an understanding of school and teaching practices that raise achievement. School leaders need to recognize that the effectiveness of a lesson, however interesting or organized, depends on whether the students are engaged in learning that integrates higher-order thinking skills with challenging, meaningful content. Instructional leaders provide supervision and in-service to promote this definition of learning in every classroom, and they align curriculum, assessment and other school practices to raise expectations for all students.

**Superintendent Stewardship**

Systems thinking, when focused on raising achievement, provides a framework for district improvement through a coherent strategy that results in high quality teaching and learning, develops the instructional capacity of professionals and creates a culture of improvement in every school. These principles for effective systemic reform are grounded in the belief that all children can achieve at higher, if not exceptional, levels.

Superintendents are stewards of human potential. In Maya Angelou's words, "The educator is a lifesaver. ... It's an amazing power. It's an honorable calling."

*Mary Jo Kramer, a superintendent for 20 years, is now an associate professor in Southern Connecticut State University's Department of Educational Leadership and a national consultant for AASA's Center for System Leadership. Address: 501 Crescent St., New Haven, CT 06505. E-mail: maryjokramer@optonline.net.*

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Bureaucracies and Learning Organizations
By Phillip C. Schlechty

If student performance in America’s public schools is to be improved in any significant way, school leaders must transform their organizations from bureaucracies into learning organizations.

The bureaucratic model has outlived its usefulness. The model of the learning organization is much more apt for the challenges that now face public education and American society. Bureaucracies simply cannot develop the kinds of thinkers and innovators that are now required for our common future.

Such a transformation will depend, however, on the insight and courage of leaders who understand systems and the dynamics of systemic change, for the systemic properties of schools are what sustain their bureaucratic tendencies, just as systemic properties are what can and will develop and sustain schools as learning organizations. Furthermore, leaders at the local level must begin to exert pressure upward to diminish the negative effects that bureaucracies have come to visit on our schools.

Profound Differences
The differences between bureaucracies and learning organizations are important and profound. They are “differences that make a difference” in the way schools operate. Ultimately, they make all the difference in the capacity of schools to embrace the types of innovations required if schools are to be adept at the business of continuous improvement.

In bureaucracies, impersonal evaluations drive the system. In learning organizations, disciplined dialogue and conversations that are informed by values and data drive the system.

In bureaucracies, evaluation is the primary means of controlling subordinates and justifying the distribution of rewards and punishments. In learning organizations, formal evaluations are simply a means of providing data to discipline conversations and to check on progress toward shared goals.

In bureaucracies, rewards accrue to the compliant and to those who master routine. In learning organizations, rewards accrue to those who develop or acquire new knowledge and who use this knowledge to contribute to the common good.

In bureaucracies, command, control and compliance are primary concerns. In learning organizations, persuasion, consensus and engagement are of great importance.

Social Systems
Six social systems shape the life of schools and school districts:

- The power and authority system governs the use of sanctions, defines the proper exercise of authority and gives structure to status relationships within the organization.
- The evaluation system defines the way merit and worth are determined, status is assigned, and rewards and punishments are distributed.
- The boundary system defines who and what are inside the organization and therefore subject to the control of the organization — and who and what are outside the organization and therefore beyond its control.
- The recruitment and induction system defines the way new members are identified and attracted to the organization and brought to understand and embrace the norms and values required for full membership in the organization.
The knowledge development and transmission system defines the means by which knowledge related to moral, aesthetic and technical norms is developed, imported, evaluated and transmitted. The directional system shapes the way visions are developed and shared, goals are set, priorities are determined and corrective actions are initiated.

Changing Mindsets
In bureaucracies, the systems of most concern are the power and authority, the evaluation and the boundary systems. In learning organizations, the systems of primary interest are the directional, the knowledge development and transmission and the recruitment and induction systems.

Too many school improvement efforts have to do with strengthening the systems upon which bureaucracies depend. As a result, power and authority have shifted from local communities to state and federal agencies, evaluation has become an exercise of authority rather than a means of assessing quality, and the boundaries of local education agencies have been made increasingly permeable to influence from state and federal agencies.

The problem is that these changes do not touch on the systems that are likely to make a difference in what students learn in school or in how they are taught. Moreover, the ham-fisted use of blunt bureaucratic instruments, such as heavy reliance on standardized testing, has given “systemic reform” a bad name among educators, parents and community leaders concerned about the welfare of children.

Until policymakers stop tinkering with the power and authority system, the evaluation system and the boundary system and begin to support strategies to help local leaders develop better ways of establishing and maintaining direction, ensuring a disciplined approach to knowledge development and innovation and recruiting and inducting imaginative new staff, there is little likelihood of any significant improvement in schools.

Policymakers, however, will not be encouraged to respond to this challenge unless conversations at local school board meetings become more about direction and less about control, more about quality and less about compliance with mandates, and more about transforming the systems that sustain learning organizations and less about the practices that support bureaucracy. Local control is, after all, at the heart of the learning organization.

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Picture yourself as the coach of a football team. You missed a game for reasons beyond your control, but you of course want to know what happened. You know the score, but not how many yards your team gained, how many it gave up or any other information to help you determine why you lost and what you need to do to win in the future.

So often school system leaders are in the same position. They have data that tells them whether students are winning or losing but little data that tells them why.

**Benchmark Data**
Benchmarking is an important tool in systems thinking and in managing organizations of all types and sizes. It is a tool by which organizations can measure their internal processes against those of other, similar organizations, and against the best practices of their sector.

This analysis plays a key role in strategic planning and continuous improvement activities through which an organization increases effectiveness and efficiency.

Wikipedia says: “Benchmarking opens organizations to new methods, ideas and tools to improve their effectiveness. It helps crack through resistance to change by demonstrating other methods of solving problems than the one currently employed and demonstrating that they work because they are being used by others.”

School system leaders often recognize the value of using data to make decisions, but the results can be even more powerful when also benchmarking processes to reveal ways to be more effective and efficient. Benchmarking a district’s processes can provide leaders with ideas for improving in ways never imagined.

Process improvement can mean increased efficiencies (e.g., cost savings that can be reallocated) and increased effectiveness in how a district services its students (e.g., more highly qualified teachers).

Benchmarking can provide data behind the data that is helpful in evaluating and measuring the processes that constitute the subsystems of a school district. Those processes are often fundamental activities and include planning, developing, delivering and assessing instruction; designing and delivering student support services; designing and managing operations; or managing financial resources.

If school system leaders do have data on these processes, they likely do not have a complete picture of what it means because they have no way of comparing it with similar data from other districts. They have no way to benchmark their process data.

**Examining Processes**
There are many ways to benchmark performance. The AASA Center for System Leadership has partnered with APQC (formerly known as American Productivity and Quality Center) to bring one method to school system leaders. The Process Improvement and Innovation in Education initiative, or PIIE, collects and analyzes benchmark data and best practices. Data from this effort provides districts with information for accountability, instructional improvement and data-driven decisions.
In the pilot phase of the PIIE initiative, 23 school districts, ranging from 10,000 to 747,000 students, collected process data in three areas: district hiring practices; student learning assessments; and instructional technology management processes.

The results of this study produced several interesting findings. A major overall finding is that improvement in district processes can mean significant cost savings. In addition, the study found:

- academically high-performing districts spend more than double on professional development for instructional technology personnel than the average district;
- nearly 60 percent of districts that are top performers in recruiting and hiring tend to allow resumes in lieu of applications, compared to 33 percent of average districts; and
- districts with efficient assessment programs spend a much higher percentage (23 percent) of their assessment budget on technology than the average district (6 percent).

**Classification Processes**

PIIE is built around the APQC Process Classification Framework, a taxonomy of all processes in any organization.

The taxonomy allows APQC to compare district measures and metrics among all participating districts in 12 categories that comprise the top level of the classification framework. The first five are core operating processes of districts such as: develop a strategic plan; develop curriculum and deliver and assess instruction; and design and deliver student support services.

The remaining seven categories represent supporting or enabling processes such as: develop and manage human resources strategies; manage financial resources; and acquire, construct and manage facilities.

Each of these 12 categories is further broken down into process groups, processes and activities. Altogether, there are 12 categories, 72 process groups, 314 processes and 537 activities.

That’s a lot of measures, but in benchmarking, you have to know where you (and similar organizations) are to plan where you want go.

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System Problem or People Problem?
By Lee Jenkins

Most followers of systems thinking literature are probably aware of W. Edwards Deming’s estimate that 94 to 97 percent of our problems stem from the system with the remaining problems caused by human error or poor judgment.

Sometimes when leaders of an organization hear this percentage they misunderstand Deming. Mistakenly, they assume the problems are either in the legislative or the societal systems. They further rationalize that since they have little effect on either society or legislation, they can do nothing to really improve the situation.

This is the attitude of a victim and couldn’t be further from Deming’s teachings. Leaders are responsible for working on their system. Yes, there are systemic problems with society and legislation — problems with a huge impact upon public education. However, education owns its own set of problems that cannot be solved by either society or legislation. Only leaders can fix the education problems that education owns.

Rating Scale
Cecilia McCain, writing in the September 2006 issue of Quality Progress magazine, provided an “Occurrence Rating Table” that can be of significant help to leaders in determining whether something is a system problem or a people problem. People problems would be rated at the top of the scale and system problems at the bottom.

Further, the table can help leaders determine which system problems to address first. McCain’s scale ranges from 1 to 10 with 1 meaning the problem has a chance of occurring once in 30,000 attempts and a 10 meaning the problem has a 1 in 3 chance of recurring.

For example, you could use this scale to examine the use of illegal drugs by school bus drivers as measured in random urine samples. Suppose the district has 25 bus drivers driving 180 days a year and another five drivers who work 240 days a year for a total of 5,700 bus days per school year. If a bus driver was found with illegal substances in his or her system once every six years, on the average, this is a problem rated at level 1 or almost never. It does not mean that random drug testing should halt, but when the one incident does occur, it does not suddenly push this issue to the top of the superintendent’s priority list.

On the other hand, when an administrator stops by a classroom for an observation, there is a 1 in 3 chance the teacher will be re-teaching something students should have learned in a prior grade level. This is not a people problem (parent, student or teacher). It is a system problem that is owned by education.

Case Applications
I can use three of the education system problems described in my book Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration with Education to demonstrate how McCain’s rating scale can assist leaders in separating people problems from system problems. In each instance, I rate the severity of the problem based on questionnaires provided to me by seminar participants.

System Problem No. 1: Beginning with 1st-grade spelling, students soon learn they have permission to forget almost everything that is taught. They transfer the cram-forget cycle from spelling to chapter tests. On the average, teachers tell me they spend a third of the year teaching content students should know prior to entering their classroom. The students “learned the content,” wrote it down for an exam or quiz, and promptly did a brain dump. (Rating: 10)
System Problem No. 2: Data typically are used to rank students, classes, grade levels/departments or schools, not to inform them whether they are improving. Examples of ranking include stickers on walls, forced bell-curves and other student-to-student comparisons.

Students rarely see data constructed so that a classroom is considered a team working together to have as many as possible meet standards. Simple addition is the solution: How many words can our classroom read in a minute? How many ions can the chemistry class identify? If a classroom has 25 students and papers are scored on a 1-4 scale, how close to 100 points can we all earn in writing? Certainly at least 1 of 5 teachers and 1 of 5 schools use data in ways that discourage rather than encourage students. (Rating: 9)

System Problem No. 3: Students are losing their enthusiasm for school at an alarming rate. This problem needs a new level of scoring — an 11. There is a two-thirds chance a student by the end of grade 8 will have lost his or her enthusiasm for school.

Teachers do not wake up in the morning and ask, “Who can I discourage today?” It is a system problem I first reported in 1996 in Improving Student Learning. In their respective books, Continuous Improvement in the History/Social Science Classroom and Continuous Improvement in the Science Classroom, Shelly Carson and Jeff Burgard describe how to stop this loss of enthusiasm. Their advice was an important aspect of the Palatine, Ill., school district earning the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2003.

Of course leaders of organizations must deal with people problems. However, people often attempt to solve a system problem as if it were a people problem. When teachers spend a third of their time in review of prior grades, when data is used to rank and demoralize rather than to energize teams and when students have their intrinsic motivation removed, system problems are dominating.

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Lonely at the Top
By Joan M. Raymond

It is lonely at the top! That is an axiom long used to describe leadership positions in both the private and public sectors. It is accepted as fact because after all the study, research, recommendations and counsel given to any problem or issue, the final decision must be made by the individual responsible for the management of the organization.

Often the decisions are difficult and unpopular, and the chief executive officer stands alone, sometimes without support and under attack from within and without the organization. That is particularly true of the school superintendent because of the public nature and high-profile status of the position.

Certainly, a wide range of resources are available to assist the superintendent in making critical decisions: staff, research, data, technology, board members, community leaders, elected officials, university contacts, professional organizations and a plethora of other support services. Those are invaluable assets in the decision-making process, but the burden, responsibility and accountability for the final action sit on the desk of the superintendent and nowhere else.

If for no other reason, the superintendent must develop a network of colleagues beyond the school community and seek unbiased, detached professional opinion. Other superintendents can do that since there are few issues or crises that they have not experienced, and they can provide insight, direction and caution.

Networking Chances
Several levels of networking are available. The first is local. Every school district belongs to some regional association of superintendents that meets regularly. In some states, attendance at these meetings is mandatory, but mandatory or not, superintendents should attend these meetings to establish contacts with their neighboring superintendents. I built and maintained friendships for almost three decades with superintendents whom I met in these regional groups in four different states. Most all of them have moved, but many reappeared during my career in other settings, and the network grew and the experiences we shared grew as well.

Those superintendents who often say they are “too busy” to attend and who flash in and out of these regional meetings are probably the loneliest at the top because they have not nurtured the professional networking system. The support won't be there when they need it the most. Some probably don't even know they need a network.

Of course, there are the state associations. Interestingly, the regional networks feed into the state conferences for superintendents and administrators. In each state where I've worked as a superintendent, I always found it interesting that the regional group of superintendents stuck together and rarely mingled with superintendents from other areas. This is a huge mistake.

The state association conferences provide a platform to expand a network and should be actively pursued, not only during the business part of the meeting but during the social side as well. Superintendents love to tell stories, and since the local and regional stories are pretty well known, the state meetings provide exposure to issues and incidents that sometimes are almost unbelievable, but can be stored away for future reference.

Most superintendents belong to several national organizations and each provides networking opportunities. AASA is the premier networking organization for superintendents. The AASA national conference provides unlimited opportunities for superintendents to learn from each other and to develop contacts throughout the country. In addition, the focused AASA conferences, such as the summer leadership meeting, are great networking occasions. There are several other
national associations that offer invaluable resources for the superintendent, but smaller and more focused groups may be more helpful.

**Peer Groups**

Early on in my career, I was a member of the mid-urban superintendents association. At one time, it was known as the 100-300 group, identifying superintendents of districts in cities with a population between 100,000 and 300,000. It was a wonderful group of superintendents who met twice a year on a rotating host basis. Lasting friendships were formed during those eight years that I belonged to the 100-300 group and I, along with many in the mid-urban group, moved on to larger urban districts and joined the Large City School Superintendents organization.

I have been a member of the LCSS for more than 20 years and it has been the greatest professional support of my career. Not only have the superintendents of these large urban districts become close professional associates, they became a family of close-knit friends. They offer intellectual stimulation, emotional support and expert counsel. Our meetings are topical and informative and provide a basis for socializing on a highly collegial scale. Every superintendent needs such a peer group.

A systems approach to networking is critical for the leaders of our public schools. Frankly, they need a web of networking if they are to survive. There have never been easy answers or simple solutions to the problems in our profession. Now, however, there may be no answers and no solutions and the superintendent stands more alone than perhaps ever before. Build a network. It is lonely at the top.

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Moving as One in the Same Direction

By Mark Keen

Systems thinking requires an analysis of the various parts of an organization and how those parts impact results. Knowing what impacts results is how improvement can occur.

Doug Reeves of the Center for Performance Assessment has developed an excellent Leadership and Learning Matrix that shows a relationship between antecedents of excellence and organizational results. He divides these into four quadrants: Losing (don’t know why you are getting the results you are and don’t know what to do); Learning (know why you are getting the results but don’t know how to get better); Lucky (getting good results but don’t know why); and Leading (getting good results and know why and how to get better).

I’ve found Reeves’ framework to be highly applicable to school system leadership. As my district has progressed along the systems journey, we’ve been fortunate to have begun in the Lucky quadrant and moved more and more into the Leading quadrant. What has that journey been?

In 1996, Westfield Washington Schools had four schools and 2,400 students. In 2007, there are eight schools and 5,300 students, with this level of growth projected to continue. As the new superintendent in January 1997, I recognized this marked growth would need to be addressed effectively.

The school district was building schools but was not ready to effectively deal with growth in any other way. Hiring was totally decentralized. Each building principal screened, interviewed and recommended individuals based on his or her own criteria, usually hiring people who had worked as instructional assistants for a year or two.

Realizing that with the coming growth, many additional teachers would be needed, we instituted a structured interview process where everything flowed through the central office. Applications were screened using the same criteria. Those selected were given the same questions at their first interview. Those candidates whose responses most closely mirrored what we wanted in teachers then went through the building interviews.

This was a critical component for the district’s future as we realized we would be hiring the teaching staff for essentially the next 30-35 years. We had to ensure a consistent standard of excellence. The district will spend more on salaries over the life of the building than on the building itself, yet more attention usually is given to the design of the building than to the staff inside.

A Team Approach

Next we looked at curriculum development. Until then, curriculum was designed at each level and then put together with little regard to how well the pieces connected. We changed that to a K-12 team approach so the various levels could align standards within subject matter to ensure continuity, avoid gaps and/or repetition and ensure not too much was expected to be covered in any one grade level or subject.

Fortunately at this time, software on the market enabled us to expedite this process. We still use this software today as it incorporates state and national standards as well as professional association work, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics recommendations, and information from the national standardized testing providers.

For a time, that was all we did. The 1990s was a time for site-based management and a focus on schools, not school systems. It wasn’t until we went to a meeting with the Schlechty Center for
Leadership in School Reform that we really began thinking about systems and how systems and their interaction affect student learning.

The work we did with the Schlechty Center allowed us to think about ourselves as “a school system” rather than “a system of schools.” We had to look at how the systems functioned and how we could increase our effectiveness. We developed a focus on student engagement, a districtwide focus that endures.

**Continuous Adjustments**

Our indicators of student growth over the past five years have shown an upward trend. However, we knew going from very good to great would require an extra push akin to losing the last five pounds to reach a weight goal. We broadened our understanding by taking a look at the Baldrige criteria and working with consultants from the AASA Center for System Leadership.

Through this work, we’ve maintained our focus on student engagement while transitioning as much as possible from a bureaucracy to a learning organization. We set up data points to measure and adjust along our continuous systems journey. Our supportive board of education members worked with administrators, using the McREL research connecting superintendent leadership to student achievement, to craft what I believe is a manageable process for moving our district to the top echelon of student achievement.

The only way this will happen is if all systems within the organization are aligned to the same end. A leadership design team within the district monitors the systems and analyzes the systems, making adjustments when necessary. We have linked our strategies, objectives and action plans to ensure all are aligned to our vision and our mission. How we do this can be seen on our website (www.wws.k12.in.us).

For a systems approach to have maximum impact on student learning, all key players must work together as a team and look for developmental activities that build the team. There is a greater potential for success when people work together. We don’t need to think alike in development but think together when a direction is established.

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Much To Celebrate on 2nd Anniversary

By Claudia Mansfield Sutton

The AASA Center for System Leadership, the professional development arm of AASA, has just celebrated its second anniversary, and I am devoting this column to sharing the great progress we’ve made.

The AASA Executive Committee and Governing Board founded the center by allocating a portion of each member’s dues to this new and engaging professional development initiative. Additionally, their leadership helped to shape the mission statement: “The AASA Center for System Leadership is a learning organization that fosters, develops and supports superintendents of schools and other school system leaders who are leading the transformation of public education systems.”

Why did the AASA governing bodies create a center? Almost from the time of its inception in the mid-19th century, American public education’s key mission has been to provide access to quality educational opportunity for all children. For more than 100 years, the leaders of American public education pursued this goal. The major accomplishments were the extension of access to equal educational opportunities to minority children, women and children with physical, emotional and cognitive disabilities. For the most part, public education has met this goal of access and equity.

Now public education must ensure each child learns to the same relatively high standard. This is universal success. The AASA governance structure concluded that unless the public education system is designed to achieve universal success, the goal will never be fully reached. And the system will never be adequately redesigned unless those who lead the system know how to redesign a school system. Today’s leaders must be able to think and act with a systems perspective.

The AASA Center for System Leadership completes its primary work through five institutes.

- **AASA Institute for Leadership Development and Systems Thinking**
  This institute provides programs based on a systems approach to transforming public education. These programs help school leaders frame problems and opportunities in systems terms; develop a new vision for a redesigned school system; and build and sustain the capacity for change. Specific programs include the Executive Consultants Program; the Superintendents Knowledge Series (Blueprints: A Guide to Public School Plans 403(b)/457(b), the Safe and Secure Schools Conference, and Student Achievement: Superintendents Lead the Way); and the Leadership Matters Virtual Seminar Series.

- **AASA Institute for New and Aspiring Superintendents**
  Because we must continue to attract top quality professionals into the superintendency, the content of these programs is particularly relevant to new and aspiring superintendents. The annual *New Superintendents Journal* and the quarterly New Superintendents e-Journal provide insightful articles, information and resources for new superintendents. Five state affiliates worked with us in 2006-07 to develop innovative programs for superintendents in their second and third year in the chair through the Leading Learning Program.

- **AASA Institute for Leadership Networks**
  The center has become the hub for a network of learning organizations sharing core beliefs and convictions regarding public education. The institute facilitates regular meetings of the leaders of these organizations so they can learn from one another and
leverage the strengths of each organization. This institute is creating new networks of superintendents and supporting existing networks as they work together to implement systems thinking.

- **AASA Institute for Professional Advocacy**
  The mission of this institute is to stand up for public education and those engaged in public education by demonstrating that leadership matters, by advocating for the profession, and by promoting systems thinking in the transformation of public education. To achieve this mission, this institute shares research that supports the finding that superintendent leadership has a positive impact on student achievement. It also collects and publicizes case studies highlighting successful school system leadership. The institute is also involved in developing and promoting rigorous standards for licensure of superintendents.

- **AASA Institute for Leadership Research and Design**
  AASA leads and encourages inquiries into various public education designs that might be appropriate as vehicles to transform public education. Several highly successful initiatives have been created to support this work, such as the Research Roundtable program and the “AASA State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study,” which produced a profile of the profession that will serve as a resource for those leading the nation’s schools as well as those charged with preparing and supporting current and aspiring school leaders.

The AASA Center for System Leadership is off to a strong start. If you would like more information about the work of the center, access the leadership development section of the AASA website or contact me.

As with any new undertaking, there have been successes, challenges and opportunities for the AASA Center for System Leadership over its first two years of existence. Many thanks to all AASA members who have supported the center’s work and who have given of their time and talents to guide the development of programs and resources — and have attended its many programs.

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Avoiding Death by a Thousand Cuts
By Robert S. McCord

The ancient Chinese metaphor, death by a thousand cuts, aptly describes the journey of some superintendents who fail to clearly appreciate the political nature of the system they are trying to lead. Systems thinking requires us to focus on understanding and influencing the relationships among the organization’s constituent parts rather than addressing the needs of each part separately. That interrelationship is, by its nature, complex and political.

Lee Bolman and Terry Deal’s Reframing Organizations reminds us to view systems through a series of frames.

A Political Lens
The political frame views the organization as coalitions of individuals and interest groups, where enduring differences exist between the coalitions over the allocation of scarce resources, producing conflict and making power the most important resource, and where goals are set and decisions made through bargaining, negotiating and jockeying for position.

To a new superintendent, leading in the political frame while being true to the tenets of systems leadership presents a formidable challenge. However, ignoring the realities of the political frame invites the thousand cuts to commence.

Departing from the theoretical constructs of Bolman and Deal, I draw from five unconventional sources to address the political frame — Hardball by Chris Matthews; Sidewalk Strategies: Seven Winning Steps for Candidates, Causes and Communities by Larry Tramutola; All Politics Is Local by Tip O’Neill; Buck Up, Suck Up and Come Back When You Foul Up by James Carville and Paul Begala; and Getting to Yes by Roger Fisher and William Ury. Each work provides decidedly streetwise counsel.

Matthews writes: “It is not who you know, it is who you get to know.” This is an essential theme of building coalitions and alliances. Superintendents must engage in an unending search for emerging coalitions and alliances through careful listening (O’Neill).

Coalitions and alliances are short-lived if there is limited evidence of a true passion to win (Tramutola; Carville and Begala). The new superintendent must encourage that passion in emerging coalitions/alliances.

The loyalty so essential to maintaining alliances and coalitions is developed by learning the interests and ambitions of those involved, determining what is needed to sustain that relationship, and cementing that relationship with reciprocal support (Matthews).

O’Neill’s famous comment, “All politics is local,” reminds us coalitions and alliances are built one person at a time. They are supported by the adage that to succeed in the political frame you must work at the retail level, not the wholesale level (Matthews).

Differences Exist
Enduring differences are magnified by the scarcity of resources the new superintendent may have the power to allocate. Sometimes sustaining competition for those scarce resources proves counterproductive by intensifying those differences. Superintendents must learn planned timing to leverage resources and manage the differences productively (Tramutola).

Letting others frame the debate erodes the superintendent’s power to leverage the issue and control the enduring differences between developing alliances and coalitions (Carville and Begala). Regardless of how intense the differences, the battle is lost if you fail to “always be able to talk” (O’Neill).
Keeping those with enduring differences “aboard” ties them to the new superintendent’s successes and failures (Matthews).

Nothing intensifies the differences and emboldens the opposition more than public pronouncements. “Never say anything you don’t want to see on the front page of the paper” (O’Neill). Linking with this the impenetrable language of educators, including acronym code-talk, invites naysayers and perpetuates the differences new superintendents so desperately attempt to manage. It also produces distance between the leader and those with whom alliances and coalitions are built (Tramatola).

**Jockeying Activity**

Carville and Begala remind us of U.S. military cadet training: The objective is the broad goal, the strategy is the plan of action for achieving that goal and tactics are the various steps to be taken to get there. Using this reasoning, the political frame can be considered part of the strategy, and the bargaining, negotiating and jockeying for position are the tactics.

Essential to bargaining, negotiating and jockeying for position is the new superintendent’s ability to promote what Fisher and Ury identify as problem solvers who constantly strive for wise outcomes reached efficiently and amicably.

Fisher and Ury advocate a four-step process. First separate the people from the problem — constantly focus on the problem, not the people. Second, focus on the interests, not positions — constantly work to keep parties from becoming fixed on their particular position, thus failing to achieve the great goal. Third, invent options for mutual gain — constantly create options from which to choose. Fourth, insist on using objective criteria — constantly work to establish an objective metric upon which to base decisions.

Learning to maneuver through the political frame of their organizations is an essential skill to be mastered by a superintendent. Failure to do so dooms efforts for systems leadership to suffer death by a thousand cuts.

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From Random Acts to a System of Safety and Security

By Jane Hammond

Millions of parents send their precious children to school daily with the hope they will return home safely. We live in a world where we are searching for safety and security in very trying and challenging times. There is tremendous pressure on school district staff members to do the right things by taking the correct actions to establish a safe and secure environment.

This pressure often results in schools and school districts pursuing a variety of individually positive actions, but too often it does not result in a systemic approach that leaves the staff, students and community feeling safe.

Three Factors

Three major components define a comprehensive plan for establishing a system of safe and secure schools: Developing a comprehensive definition of what safety and security means in your community; having the central-office departments working as a system rather than in silos, and balancing site and central decision making and support.

- A community definition of safety and security.

When we developed the definition in Jefferson County, Colo., eight years ago, we involved a wide variety of community members including teachers, administrators, board members, parents (including some of the parents of students who were murdered at Columbine High School), students, representatives of county agencies and experts in safety and security such as law enforcement, first responders and the Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance.

It took time to clearly define what safety meant for us, including prevention, intervention and crisis response. What I have learned in working with school districts across the country is that there is no one right definition. It must fit the context of the community being served. For example, we decided that to create an environment where parents felt safe in sending their children to school and students felt safe enough to learn that our community did not want to have metal detectors in the schools. But in some communities, metal detectors are required for the community and students to feel safe.

- The district as a system.

Too often various offices and departments in school districts individually decide what to do and take action, not checking or coordinating with other parts of the organization. For example, the facilities construction department designs and constructs the facilities, the district safety office secures the facilities, and the curriculum and instruction department provides prevention programs such as anti-bullying.

The senior leadership team must begin with the community definition of safety and security and identify how the various departments operate as a whole, connecting their work to the work of the rest of the system with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. During the recent AASA Safe and Secure Schools Conference the following examples were identified describing ways the school districts could have worked in a more systemic way:

- The curriculum and instruction and security departments working together to make sure the skills and terminology taught to the students in the anti-bullying program are known, understood and appropriately used by the campus security and school resource officers.
• The facilities construction department getting input from the security department to ensure, where possible, the facilities are constructed in ways that are more easily secured.
• The security department soliciting input from principals to ensure that the decisions made in that department can be realistically implemented at the school building level.

• **Site and central decision making and support.**

Again, it is important to begin with the community definition of safety and security and identify the balance between central and site decision making and support (see table below).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Central Office</th>
<th>Site Administration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify highly effective prevention programs</td>
<td>Select the prevention programs that best fit the school from the centrally identified ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify the guidelines for school safety committee(s) and the minimum required stakeholder involvement</td>
<td>Determine the school’s leadership safety committee structures that involve the right people for the individual school and meet the centrally identified guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide training for leaders in the school safety committees that includes the needed information</td>
<td>Select the key committee members to attend the district training programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish guidelines for required school safety plans</td>
<td>Develop a school safety plan that meets the district guidelines and the needs of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify the required school safety drills</td>
<td>Prepare for and conduct the required safety and security drills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just as with the definition itself, no single correct balance of central and site decision making and support exists. What is finally decided must fit the context of the individual school district.

**A Best Effort**

To move from random acts of safety to a system of safe and secure schools, the three components of a community definition of safety and security, the central-office departments working as a system and a balance of site and central decision making and support must be aligned to ensure the strength found in a systemic approach to safety and security.

The world is too dangerous and our kids are too important to do anything but our best.

*Jane Hammond, former superintendent in Jefferson County, Colo., is director of Results Based Systems in Marysville, Wash. E-mail: janeslatehammond@aol.com*

Reprinted from *The School Administrator*, January 2008
Systems Thinking
Success Stories

- Westfield, Ind.
- Cecil County, Md.
- P-E-M School District, Minn.
- Lexington, Neb.
Success Story:
Westfield Washington Schools, Westfield, Ind.

Mark Keen has been superintendent for Westfield Washington Schools in Westfield, Indiana since 1997. He was named State Superintendent of the Year for 2006 by the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents. The vision for the district is that “Westfield Washington Schools will be the world-class learning organization focused on continuous quality growth for all.” The district uses the categories of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Criteria to benchmark its progress toward that vision. keenm@wws.k12.in.us

Q: How are you using systems thinking in your district?

A: We’ve used the system standards from the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform for seven years, plus we have now augmented that with a quality focus associated with the Baldrige standards. We submitted a Baldrige application this past year in order to check where we were and receive specific feedback from the Baldrige examiners.

Q: How has systems thinking helped/changed/improved your district and/or affected student achievement?

A: The systems approach has had an impact in a number of ways:

- A common focus for all staff.
- A common language so that district personnel have a better understanding of what each is trying to say.
- Student outcomes and achievement have increased in a consistent way over the past six years. I would also say that I have had more focused conversations about student learning than previously.

We have become better at trying to develop leading indicators rather than just looking at trailing indicators. We also realized how little we really know about applying statistical measures to really help analyze effectiveness and stability. Our achievement continues to improve, but we’re more excited about future growth as we become better.

Q: How did you get buy-in from your stakeholders (staff, board, teachers, community, students, etc.) for a systems approach?

A: I think a great guide is Leading Change by John Kotter (a speaker at the 2007 AASA National Conference on Education). It is a great roadmap on change and using a systems approach is certainly a major change. Our surveys show us that we have the buy-in to continue evolving. It doesn't happen overnight, but takes planning and patience. Also, John Conyers’ book, Charting Your Course, is an excellent guide.

Q: How do you stay focused on the system perspective and avoid being swept up in the day-to-day?

A: You have to have a “guiding coalition” or “leadership design team” that is responsible for moving the system approach along. It cannot be a one-person effort, for one person can’t do it and one person will get caught up in the day-to-day. A team, with a set schedule of meetings and a well-thought-out time line, has a much better chance of being successful.

One meeting we have monthly is focused specifically on our systems work. We also report progress monthly to our entire staff, so the work stays in front of them.
Q: For someone interested in using systems thinking, how would you recommend they get started?

A: I would read some of Phil Schlechty's books. I would look at the American Society for Quality (ASQ) website and perhaps attend one of their meetings. I'd talk with the people from the AASA Center for System Leadership and get put in contact with consultants or superintendents in districts that are doing systems work from their perspectives. Better to have too much information before proceeding than not enough.

Q: Other thoughts you’d like to share?

A: I would hope the AASA Center for System Leadership would put interested people in contact with people like Carl Roberts [see “Systems Thinking in Action – Part 2”] and myself. We've had successes and failures, and knowing Carl, we're not afraid to share both sides.

We've learned that we are good at introducing an initiative, but not very good at aligning it nor implementing it deeply. To do this is the hard work, but the work that will pay off for student learning.
Success Story:
Cecil County School District, Md.

Carl Roberts is superintendent of the Cecil County School District in Maryland. The theme for the Cecil County Public Schools is “Continuous Improvement: Everyone Every Way Every Day.” He has introduced a systems approach to Cecil County’s instructional process that has teachers clamoring to be next in line for training. carlroberts@ccps.org

Q: How are you using systems thinking in your district?
A: Two major initiatives are associated with systems thinking in our district.

- Systems thinking for leadership. All mid- and top-level leaders received formal training in systems thinking using the Baldrige criteria. A Systems Thinking for Leadership Committee monitors school leaders’ implementation of the improvement process, and the school and department improvement plans now rely on data to set goals, implement strategies and provide ongoing evaluation to determine effectiveness through performance or productivity.

  Every principal, assistant principal and department supervisor self-assesses his or her understanding and degree of implementation of systems thinking with the school or department improvement process and identifies additional training needs.

- Classroom systems for learning. Over the past two years, approximately 25 percent of our 1,300 teachers have been trained in the use of classroom learning systems. The training helps teachers understand that systems can enhance the classroom learning environment and increase the performance of all students. In classroom learning systems students are the primary component, and their performance is influenced by their degree of active participation in their own learning.

Q: How has systems thinking helped/changed/improved your district and/or affected student achievement?
A: We have come a long way in the past three years. The training and tools associated with implementing the Baldrige criteria and the systems thinking process have led to more efficient and effective problem solving districtwide. Walking into a classroom where students can articulate the classroom mission, goals and strategies they will use to achieve personal and class learning goals is exhilarating. The classrooms where students take responsibility for their own learning are alive with activity.

Q: How did you get buy-in from your stakeholders (staff, board, teachers, community, students, etc.) for a systems approach?
A: Five years ago, the Maryland State Department of Education offered grants to school systems willing to work with a consulting organization to use the Baldrige Criteria for Excellence in Education to study and implement systems thinking. I didn’t know much about systems thinking but understood that we needed a process to guide us through the maze of challenges confronting public education and to ensure that all of our students were receiving a quality education.

The beginning was a bit rocky. About a year and a half into the process we still had not articulated how we were going to use the Baldrige criteria to implement a systems thinking process. Two things happened to change that situation:
First, the grant ran out and our consultant withdrew. We hired a new consultant who helped us focus on what we needed and wanted, not on what someone else thought we needed.

Second, we decided if the system were to incorporate a consistent improvement process, it must be an expectation in every school, department and classroom, not a choice.

Today, we are well on our way to implementing the systems thinking approach.

Q: For someone interested in using systems thinking, how would you recommend they get started?

A: First, you must go slowly in order to go fast, but you must go!

Second, the process must be both top down and bottom up.

Third, visit and learn from others who have ventured before you.

Fourth, you will have to spend the time and money necessary to learn about and implement systems thinking.

Fifth, as with other initiatives, support those who take risks. You do not want them looking over their shoulders.

Sixth, change brings challenges. You cannot stop striving for excellence.

Seventh, as superintendent, you must model systems thinking every day.
The Plainview-Elgin-Millville School District in Minnesota is called the “miracle on the plains” by members of the Minnesota legislature because of how well this newly merged district is responding to systemic change. Restructuring the schools started with making Elgin High School the district’s middle school and Plainview High School now serves Plainview, Elgin and Millville. AASA Executive Board Member Eric Bartleson was recruited by the board of Plainview to be the first superintendent of the new, consolidated district.

1. **How is systems thinking used in the district?**
   Systems thinking started with engaging stakeholders in strategic planning for the school system. Collaboration between staff, community and the school board gave the new district the rare opportunity to look at issues from a fresh perspective. The first issue from our leadership team and communities was to increase student achievement. Increasing student achievement requires the measuring and collection of data plus using the continuous improvement process. Systems thinking helped the school system to create a new, unified district rather than one torn apart by geography.

2. **How has systems thinking helped/changed the district or affected student achievement?**
   The teachers in P-E-M see the power in being a part of a system and not separate, isolated self-sufficient entities. The teachers are asking for the administrators to provide time to align learning expectations grade by grade for each subject. Systems thinking has changed their perspective. They see the potential for greatly increased learning when this alignment and data collection process is fully realized. The school system’s focus is more directed now and the arrows are all beginning to point in one direction: toward the students’ learning.

3. **How did you get buy-in from your stakeholders for a systems approach?**
   The leadership of P-E-M received buy-in by listening, listening and following-through on priorities. The beginning of the consolidation planning was the impetus for the district to reevaluate what stakeholders were thinking as important qualities in all communities. The beginning of this process involved many stakeholders and multiple meetings, but listening to what the communities told the district was vital. Strategic planning sessions were done on multiple occasions and will continue as a process.

4. **How does the district stay focused on the system perspective without being swept up by the day to day?**
   Data review and charting priorities is becoming an expectation of presentations throughout the district. The leadership team meets once a week for three hours, focusing on communication, support and district issues. The data presentation has frequently become a part of the leadership meetings, but the school board expectation has increased since the process began in the district. In a recent meeting we discussed the shift in our attention from facilities and personnel issues in previous years to instructional related topics. A key aspect of helping the board stay focused on learning is teacher presentations to the board on their continuous improvement process with growth toward end-of-the-year expectations measured week by week.

5. **For someone interested in systems thinking how would you recommend they get started?**
   The entire system requires initial professional development or training. System individuals process the data at various rates, and it is recommended that everyone from the superintendent to the
kindergarten teacher sit at the same table. This model shows commitment to the system for the process. Follow-up or continued training is also important to the system and the individual staff members recognize this as a priority. Dialogue and networking with other systems involved in the same process is also helpful.
Success Story: Lexington Public Schools Lexington, Neb.

Julie A. Otero, Ed.S., is director of education for Lexington Public Schools. Her responsibilities include overseeing the K-12 curriculum; staff development; school improvement; district CRT and NRT assessments; Title I, II and V grant management; and state reporting for staff and students. She is also the principal of two rural elementary schools: Principal Windy Acres and Horseshoe Bend in Lexington, Neb.

Systems thinking is being used in Lexington Public Schools as an intervention tool in the School Improvement Process for staff K-12 and as part of the district’s regular math instruction.

First of all, collaboratively using information from Robert Marzano’s *Building Background for Vocabulary Knowledge* and from Lee Jenkins’ book, *Permission to Forget and Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration*, grade level teachers (K-12) met and identified the must-know key content vocabulary words and Key Math Concepts for each grade level. The lists/concepts do not repeat as only new learning is identified, and students are responsible for remembering previous grade level information. Once the grade level lists of vocabulary with definitions and Math Key-Concepts were developed they were published for teachers, parents, and students.

Next, school personnel were taught how to conduct weekly random vocabulary testing sessions using the LtoJ® assessment process. After the weekly random testing is completed, the results are then documented in several ways to use instructionally. For example, vocabulary achievement through individual student achievement, class student achievement, school building achievement. District results are then documented. In math, grade level teachers identified “key concepts” under 7 math strands that students are accountable for knowing at the end of each grade. However, in an effort to save teachers time, the teachers who created the key concepts also created weekly LtoJ® math questions that are used in making the weekly math quizzes given to students at all grade levels. Once again the results are used at the student, teacher, building, and district level.

Systems thinking has helped ensure that all students in the school system have multiple opportunities to learn what our teachers have deemed as necessary and nonnegotiable in vocabulary and math. Systems thinking has changed student achievement by helping our students realize that they no longer have the permission to forget; rather they are accountable for what our teachers have asked them to learn. Additionally through the use of the LtoJ® process, the students have opportunity for continuous review and preview of important material.

The buy-in from our stakeholders for a systems approach was done through acknowledging teacher frustration and then implementing a system that alleviates their frustration. And, our school system stays focused on the system perspective because of the success our teachers and students demonstrate.

In order to get started in using systems thinking, reading the following books written by Lee Jenkins would be helpful: *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming’s Quality Principles in Classrooms* and *Permission to Forget and Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration* as well as attending his two day conference.

The goal of leaving no child behind is honorable and the right thing for which educators should aim. However, according to Dr. Jenkins, the current structure of education systems does not allow for all students to be successful with high standards. By incorporating a systems approach such as identifying the non-negotiable learning for each grade level for each subject level, then employing the LtoJ® assessment method of learning, Lexington Public Schools’ students are proving it is indeed possible to have high success along with high standards.
References


Systems Thinking
Action Tools

- Applying Systems Thinking
- Root Cause Analysis
- Alignment Plans
- Planning Checklists
- Systemwide Transformation
Action Tool: Applying Systems Thinking to Any Issue

Adapted from An Invitation to Systems Thinking: An Opportunity to Act for Systemic Change, a publication of the LCWR.

When approaching an issue or problem systemically, it is important to take time to reflect on the “big questions.”

STEP 1
Identify systems of which you are a part.

STEP 2
Select one of these systems. Identify and describe an issue with which you are dealing in this system.

STEP 3
Apply systems thinking to the issue by answering the following questions. Note that not all of these questions may be applicable in every case.

What is your vision for how things might be in the future related to this issue?

What system(s) and parts of the system(s) are at work in this issue?

What are the relationships among system components?

How does the issue with which you are dealing reveal trouble in the system?

How are you a part of the system(s)? How do your behaviors affect the system and how does the system affect your behaviors?

How do you want to influence the system(s) and parts of the system(s)?

What experience, skills, relationships, and resources do you bring to this effort?
Action Tool:
Root Cause Analysis Introduction

This tool is made possible by Lee Jenkins, Ph.D., president of From LtoJ Consulting Group in Scottsdale, Ariz. He is a former superintendent who now works as an author and consultant focused on standards, assessment and data-based decision-making. He is the author of Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration with Education. Most recently he has worked with the Jenks Public Schools (Oka.), which was awarded the coveted Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in April 2006.

Dr. Jenkins is an Executive Consultant for the AASA Center for System Leadership.


What Is Root Cause Analysis?

Appendix A from Permission to Forget and Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration with Education

At least a dozen books exist that describe how to conduct root cause analysis. One can become an expert in this process alone because there are so many insights to be gained by organizations and their leaders. Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration with Education does not attempt to rewrite or compete with the excellent titles already available on the techniques of root cause analysis.

This short appendix is written to give the reader a little deeper understanding of the definitions and process. John Dew wrote, "Root cause analysis is a structured questioning process that enables people to recognize and discuss the underlying beliefs and practices that result in poor quality in an organization. A root cause is a basic causal factor, which if corrected or removed will prevent recurrence of a situation."

He further wrote, "What some practitioners are reluctant to admit is that root causes reside in the values and beliefs of an organization. Until the analysis moves to this level, an organization has not begun to grapple with root causes. An appropriate rule of thumb for knowing how deep to dig in conducting a root cause analysis is to dig until you reach the point of admitting something really embarrassing about the organization, but don’t go so far that you are in the field of theology."

Dave Nelson wrote, "A why-why diagram says, 'Slow down. Before we find a solution, let's find the root cause.' A team using this approach begins with a problem and relentlessly asks why until the root cause or causes, not just the obvious cause, are found. Every answer turns into another question, and the exercise continues until the team cannot reasonably ask why anymore."

A graphic that can be used for root cause analysis is the tree diagram. Begin with one question and several answers are discovered. Each answer becomes the branch of the tree with its own question. Then, when these secondary questions are answered, even more branches appear. In my sample analysis, I ask, “Why does America have such frustration with its education system.” I discovered four answers:

1. Students are apathetic.
2. Students don't remember content taught in prior grades.
3. All of the changes that have occurred in education don’t seem to have helped.
4. It seems employees are not doing their best.

Each of these four main branches then is divided into other branches with even more branches.

Dean Gano would have us ask why like a three-year-old who never stops after one or two questions. People performing root cause analysis need to keep on asking why.

Appendix B is my sample root cause analysis. The root causes at the end of each series of whys are the chapters of this book.
The Search for the Root Causes
Appendix B From Permission to Forget and Nine Other Root Causes of America’s Frustration with Education

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Students forget what they were taught in prior grades and time is wasted reteaching it.

  Question: *Why* did students forget what they were taught?
  Answer: They never really learned it in the first place.

  Question: *Why* didn’t they learn it in the first place?
  Answer: They crammed.

  Question: *Why* did they cram?
  Answer: They needed a grade or a 100%.

  Question: *Why* is the grade so important?
  Answer: People falsely believe grades equal learning.

  Question: *Why* do people equate grades and learning?
  Answer: They have no understanding of how to base grades on long-term memory rather than on short-term memory.

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Students are apathetic.

  Question: *Why* are so many students apathetic?
  Answer: They received the message that they didn’t quite have what it takes to be successful.

  Question: *Why* did they receive this message?
  Answer: Normal data systems caused ‘public humiliation.’

  Question: *Why* is data used to discourage so many?
  Answer: Educators have been convinced grades must match the bell curve.

  Question: *Why* do educators use the bell curve?
  Answer: There is no knowledge that educators’ desire to create as many winners as possible is being undermined by ill-advised adoption of athletic statistics.

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Students are apathetic.

  Question: *Why* are so many students apathetic?
  Answer: They gradually lost the enthusiasm they had in kindergarten.

  Question: *Why* have they lost their enthusiasm?
  Answer: Students seem to no longer care about school.

  Question: *Why* don’t they care any more?
  Answer: Incentives that used to work, no longer work.

  Question: *Why* don’t incentives work?
  Answer: After hundreds of incentives, all intrinsic motivation for school work is gone.

  Question: *Why* is intrinsic motivation gone?
  Answer: They are normal kids and the system uses poor educational psychology.

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Students don’t want to do the work.

  Question: *Why* don’t students want to do the work?
  Answer: They are bored.

  Question: *Why* are they bored?
  Answer: They are not learning from assigned work.

  Question: *Why* aren’t students learning from assigned work?
  Answer: There are too many normal kids who want to learn their own way.

  Question: *Why* cannot kids learn their own way?
  Answer: Focus is based on teaching, not on learning.

  Question *Why* is the focus based on teaching and not on learning?
  Answer: State laws require that teachers be evaluated on teaching, not on learning.
Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Nothing seems to get better.
Question: *Why* does nothing seem to get better?
Answer: It is true: "Been there; done that."
Question: *Why* do educators say, "Been there; done that"?
Answer: Each change only lasts a few years, if that long.
Question: *Why* only a short time?
Answer: The educational pendulum swings from focus on basics to focus on deeper understanding to focus on basics back to deeper understanding, and so on.
Question: *Why* this pendulum?
Answer: Educators push for deeper understanding and the public pushes for basics.
  Question: *Why* this difference of opinion?
  Answer: Neither group believes schools can excel in both.
  Question: *Why* not both?
  Answer: Too much content for both basics and deeper understanding.
  Question: *Why* too much?
  Answer: Basics are full of trivia.

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Nothing seems to get better.
Question: *Why* does nothing seem to get better?
Answer: It is true: "Been there; done that."
Question: *Why* do educators say, "Been there; done that"?
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  Question: *Why* this difference of opinion?
  Answer: Neither group believes schools can excel in both.
  Question: *Why* not both?
  Answer: Too much content for both basics and deeper understanding.
  Question: *Why* too much?
  Answer: Basics are full of trivia.

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: The last five changes improved nothing.
Question: *Why* no improvement?
Answer: There are no baseline data. Educators don't really know for sure if the change improved anything or not.
Question: *Why* are there no baseline data?
Answer: In a big hurry to make the change.
Question: *Why* in a big hurry?
Answer: There is no understanding of rule one in change, which is, determine how we will know if the change actually results in improvement.
Question: *Why* are we missing this understanding?
Answer: The focus is on leverage, not on teamwork.
Question: *Why* leverage?
Answer: Leaders are taught to blame people and not how to improve the system.

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Employees are not doing their best.
Question: *Why* are employees not doing their best?
Answer: They have too much to do.
Question: *Why* do employees have too much to do?
Answer: Bosses keep piling it on.
Question: *Why* do bosses keep piling it on?
Answer: Their bosses keep piling it on.
Question: *Why* do the top bosses keep piling it on?
Answer: Bosses don't know their job is to remove barriers.
Question: *Why* don't they know this?
Answer: They never ever heard a boss say, "What barriers can I remove to help you to do your very best?"

Question: *Why* is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Employees believe they are doing their best now and can do no better.
Question: *Why* do employees believe they can do no better?
Answer: Their experience tells them so.
Question: *Why* do they rely so much on experience?
Answer: They have been taught from childhood that experience is the best teacher.
Question: *Why* is this belief not challenged?
Answer: Employees lack the knowledge of how easy it is to test theories as a better way to learn.
Question: Why is America frustrated with education?
Answer: In spite of best efforts, nothing gets significantly better.
Question: Why is nothing getting better in spite of all this hard work?
Answer: Efforts are uncoordinated.
Question: Why are efforts uncoordinated?
Answer: Everyone has their own objectives.
Question: Why does everyone have their own objectives?
Answer: People rebel at "do it like I tell you" management.
Question: Why do managers attempt "do it like I tell you" styles?
Answer: Leaders don't know about the power of a common aim for either students or staff.
Question: Why don't leaders know this?
Answer: They have been told management by objectives is ultimate. They don't know fourth generation management (common aim, teamwork) exists.

Question: Why is America frustrated with education?
Answer: Teachers are not using data to inform their instruction.
Question: Why aren't teachers using data to inform their instruction?
Answer: There's no time for item analysis.
Question: Why is there no time for item analysis?
Answer: Spending time on 100 percent inspection.
Question: Why so much time on inspection?
Answer: They falsely believe they can inspect quality into student work.
Question: Why do educators persist in trusting inspection to improve quality?
Answer: They don't know about or trust sampling techniques that create the time for item analysis.
Question: Why don't educators sample to create time for item analysis?
Answer: Statistics, probability, and sampling techniques are taught by math and science teachers for how "the rest of the world works:" but are not used in education.
Question: Why are these "rest of the world" techniques not used in education?
Answer: I wish I knew! Maybe my two books, the Continuous Improvement Series, and seminars will help.
Action Tool: Root Cause Analysis Worksheet

Use this worksheet to guide and record your analysis of any issue that requires root cause analysis.

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

**Question:** Type Your Question Here

**Answer:** Type Your Answer Here

Continue with additional questions and answers as needed.
Educational organizations are a system of systems, hopefully all with the same mission. As Deming clearly states, senior leaders have the responsibility of optimizing the entire system, rather than the performance of individual parts. To do that, you have to align customers, feedback, the aim of the organization, suppliers, input/output, and processes to manage the organization and continually improve. [The following graphics represent the interaction of these concepts in a district, a school, and a classroom.]
A radical concept to think about is to view the classroom itself as a system. It is a revelation to many teachers, and to a lot of administrators, to hear the classroom defined as a system. The classroom has outputs, customers and feedback, and exists within a school and district system with common aims. It also has suppliers, inputs and processes. The components under each system category may vary from district to district, but the categories of the system will be the same. [*PDSA* stands for “Plan-Do-Study-Act” and is described fully in the “PDSA” section of this toolkit.]
**Action Tool: Alignment Plan Worksheet – Part 1**

Use this worksheet to think through and describe the key components of the system on which you are working. When you are finished, transcribe your answers on the graphic in Part 2 of this worksheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alignment Plan for:</th>
<th>Type Name of the System/Organization Here</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the AIM (goal) of the system?</th>
<th>Describe the goal of the system here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who are the CUSTOMERS in the system?</th>
<th>List the system’s customers/stakeholders here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What FEEDBACK mechanisms are in place?</th>
<th>List the system’s feedback mechanisms here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who are the SUPPLIERS in the system?</th>
<th>List the system’s suppliers here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the INPUTS going into the system?</th>
<th>List the system’s inputs here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the desired OUTPUTS from the system?</th>
<th>List the system’s desired outputs here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What PROCESSES are in place to manage the system and continually improve?</th>
<th>List the system’s processes here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Action Tool:
Alignment Plan Worksheet – Part 2
Transcribe your notes from Part 1 of the worksheet onto this graphic for easier visual reference.
The plan–do–study–act (PDSA) cycle, also known as the Deming cycle or the Shewhart cycle, is a four-step process improvement framework that has been in use for more than eighty years. PDSA can be used throughout a school system – from the district administration level to the classroom – to organize and manage any improvement project.

The PDSA cycle can be used:
- As a model for continuous improvement.
- When starting a new improvement project.
- When developing a new or improved design of a process, product or service.
- When defining a repetitive work process.
- When planning data collection and analysis in order to verify and prioritize problems or root causes.
- When implementing any change.

From ASQ [http://www.asq.org/learn-about-quality/project-planning-tools/overview/pdsa-cycle.html]

The Four Steps in the PDSA Cycle:

**Step 1 – Plan**
Identify an opportunity for improvement and plan a change by:

- Defining the system.
- Assessing the current situation.
- Analyzing causes.
- Creating an improvement theory.

**Step 2 – Do**
Try out the improvement theory.

**Step 3 – Study**
Study the results.

**Step 4 – Act**
Standardize the improvements and plan for continuous improvement.
Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle for: _________________________________

Next Steps: Enter your information here

Background: Enter your information here

Actual v. Desired Results: Enter your information here

Root Cause Analysis: Enter your information here

Action Plan: Enter your information here

Improvement Theory: Enter your information here

Plan for Continuous Improvement

Define the System

Assess Current Situation

Analyse Causes

Try Out Improvement Theory

Study the Results

Standardize Improvements

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Worksheet – Part 2

Action Tool:
From a systems thinking perspective, an important part of organizing for process improvement and innovation is selecting the right project on which to focus time, attention and resources.

What Are the Basic Ground Rules for Project Sponsors/Champions?
- Data and information must be collected. Processes must be mapped and analyzed. New, more efficient ways must be implemented to get the job done. The improved process must be controlled to sustain the gain. Then the new processes must be improved…continuously.
- Barriers that impede or prevent the change must be identified and removed.
- Teamwork … multiple skills and competencies … fading job boundaries … decisions made at the appropriate level with minimum bureaucracy … elimination of unimportant activities. These become new ways of getting the job done.
- People development and continuous education are fundamental elements critical to improved and sustainable results.

What Are the Do’s and Don’ts of Project Selection?
**Do**
- Base project selection on solid criteria and data.
- Balance efficiency projects with projects that directly benefit the external customer.
- Prepare for an effective hand-off from sponsor/champion to process improvement team leader.

**Don’t**
- Boil the ocean.
- Fail to be able to explain why a project has been chosen.
- Inundate the organization with projects.

How Should I Select and Prioritize Projects?
- Review the current position of the organization using available data and develop a list of critical success factors.
- Develop a list of candidate projects, listing the pain or gain, goal and reasoning for each.
- Screen out those that do not support the critical success factors (CSF).
- Operationalize the screening criteria for the final candidate projects by measuring project desirability (see Project Desirability checklist).
- Evaluate the set of projects selected.
Draft a team charter for each selected project.

**How Desirable is the Project?**
After culling the list of initial projects using criteria developed from the list of CSFs, consider two more attributes when evaluating the desirability of a project:

- Effort Required – This includes not only your own time, but also the time that will be required of your team members, and any expenditure of money.
- Probability of Success – Take into account the various risk factors:
  - Time – uncertainty of the completion date
  - Effort – uncertainty of the investment required
  - Implementation – uncertainty of roadblocks

**Is the Project a "BAD" Project?**
"Bad" projects rate poorly on one or more of the three attribute scales:

- Little or No Business Impact
  - Creating or revising a report
  - Quantifying the performance of a process
  - Improving a supplier's performance WITHOUT any arrangement to share the benefits
  - Reducing cycle time of a non-bottleneck operation

- Extensive Effort Required
  - Installing a new computer system
  - Improving the performance of an entire school district
  - "Fixing" the annual planning process

- Low Probability of Success
  - Won't show the benefits for several months
  - Depends upon completion of other risky projects
  - Requires help from extremely busy people
  - Is not aligned with management objectives

**How Should I Define and Charter a Project?**

- A brief description of the issue or problem and its symptoms
- A broad goal or the type of result to be achieved by the project
- A business case that clearly states the value and need for the project
- Project scope, constraints and assumptions
- Resources
- Milestones
- Agreements in the form of sign-offs

**What are the Benefits of a Formal Charter?**

- Responsibility
- Accountability
- Known boundaries
- Buy-in
- Authority

**What Typical Push Backs Should be Considered?**

- Too many initiatives
- A commitment to full time resource
- Not allowed to practice
- STP (same three people)
- Project size/scope
- Giving up the best people
- Corporate demands & requirements
- Commitment
What Should I Consider When Building a Team to Tackle Tough Issues?

- Team player
- Motivation
- Time
- Knowledge
  - Process
  - Organization
  - Culture
- Credibility/Respect
- Innovation
- Communication skills

By assigning a specific individual do you feel you are losing a resource? If YES, then you are selecting the wrong project. Select a project with true impact to the organization.
Imagine it is the year 2020. The Class of 2020, who entered first grade back in 2008, is preparing to graduate. What are your fondest hopes for their future? As students walk across the stage on graduation day, have they become confident, self-directed, life-long learners? How have you ensured that the optimal conditions for effective teaching and learning have been provided in your schools to prepare your students for the future they face? What systemwide networks of support across the district have been developed to sustain and advance the work of your school system in making a difference for students each and every day?

To answer these questions requires a commitment to systemwide transformation, and leading systemic change requires a 20/20 focus. Developing a 20/20 systems focus for your schools can bring a “20/20” degree of clarity about where your schools are now, as well as provide the focus for where your schools need to be headed, through the process of developing a future-focused vision of the Class of 2020 - the children who are in kindergarten today.

An overview of a four-part research-based planning framework for developing a 20/20 systems focus is outlined below. The framework is grounded in the research on high performing school systems, collaborative planning models, and systemic change, and has been designed to support the work of school leaders committed to systemwide transformational change. Many school systems have found the framework to be helpful in either launching a strategic planning process or updating their current planning process. One of the school systems currently developing a 20/20 Systems Focus is the Clarkstown Central School District (NY). Here is how they describe their experience:

“Over this past year the Clarkstown Central School District has been engaged in the 20/20 Systems Focus planning process to support the development of the district’s first comprehensive strategic plan. The planning framework and process maximizes the input of internal and external constituencies, provides a solid research-based orientation to the work and results in measurable goals toward which the district, employee groups and individuals will be working to attain. As we have developed a 20/20 focus and plan of action, multiple stakeholders have had the opportunity to create a future for our district that is responsive to changing societal, economic and educational trends.”

Dr. Margaret Keller-Cogan, Superintendent of Schools

As school systems engage in the process of developing a 20/20 Systems Focus, they begin by establishing a clear (i.e., 20/20) picture of where their school system stands today. In the second phase of their work they engage the stakeholders of their schools in not only developing a compelling vision for the students in the Class of 2020, but also developing a clear vision of the defining characteristics and qualities of what their schools and district will need to become if they are going to be successful in achieving their vision for the Class of 2020.

The following two phases of the process focus on identifying key design components that need to be considered in bringing the shared vision for the district to life and the development of comprehensive plans of action by engaging stakeholders in co-constructing the future for their school system. A description of the guiding questions and key components of this four-part planning framework for developing a 2020 Systems Focus is provided below.
Developing a 20/20 Vision for Your School System

Focus Question #1: Where are we now?

The first phase of the planning process begins by engaging stakeholders of your school system in a process of collaborative inquiry, with the goal of sharpening your collective hindsight and depth perception in developing a comprehensive picture of your district.

Sharpening Hindsight
To be able to develop a 20/20 degree of clarity about where your school system stands today requires hindsight based on evidence drawn from mission-critical measures of your schools and district. Mission-critical measures are those that are directly aligned with your vision, core values, and your goals for both student learning and for system performance. This dual focus on the quality of student learning and the quality of the work of your school system and each of your schools is essential to the development of a comprehensive picture of where your school system stands today.

A sample set of mission-critical measures is provided in Figure 1. The measures are organized within three categories, beginning with a student focus, followed by a focus on the quality of the work of each school on behalf of student learning and the quality of critical systemwide organizational functions. The analysis of pertinent data and information that can be drawn from the measures within each of these three categories can help you begin to develop a shared understanding of where your school system stands today. However, to fully reveal the current picture of your school system requires depth perception.

Developing Depth Perception
Although we like to think that our hindsight is 20/20, typically we do not reap the benefits that hindsight can offer us. Often it requires depth perception to uncover the buried treasures of knowledge and insight that are available to us, if only we really knew what we know.

Two key tasks can help sharpen our depth perception. The first task is to develop a synthesis of the evidence you have collected (i.e., pertinent data and information drawn from your mission-critical measures) and determine the implications of the evidence. Given the sets of data and information that you have, as you bring all these pieces of evidence together, such as in constructing a mosaic, what picture does it reveal? What are your school system’s areas of strengths and limitations? What are the lessons learned from the analysis and synthesis of the evidence about your school system?

The second task in sharpening depth perception is developing a root cause analysis of not only areas in need of improvement, but also a root cause analysis success. For instance, based on any areas in need of improvement that you have identified, what may be some of the root causes (i.e., contributing factors) of these problem areas? Likewise, based on your analysis of the areas of strength you have identified, what are the root causes of success of your school system? How can you plan to build on those strengths?

In short, sharpening the hindsight and depth perception of your school system not only yields new knowledge and 20/20 insights to inform your work, but also can lead to the discovery of the positive core of the work of your school system, which in turn can lay the foundation for leading positive change in your district.

Focus Question #2: Where do we need to be headed?

Defining Your 2020 Vision
The process of defining the 2020 vision for your school system needs to maintain a dual focus on developing a compelling picture of the graduates of the Class of 2020 and a focus on envisioning new possibilities for transforming the work of your school system to achieve your vision for student learning. While the contributions of hindsight and depth perception about your school system are valuable sources
of knowledge in helping to define your vision, the role of peripheral vision and foresight are also critical to the development of your 2020 vision.

**Peripheral Vision and Foresight**

Based on your analysis of internal knowledge about your school system, you were able to sharpen your hindsight and depth perception and uncover new knowledge and insights. As you begin the process of developing your 2020 vision you need to also sharpen your peripheral vision and foresight by examining key sources of external knowledge.

To strengthen the peripheral vision of your school system, begin by surveying reliable sources of professional knowledge about current research findings and benchmarking studies of high performing schools and districts. Particularly over this past decade, we have seen significant breakthroughs in our understanding of what can make a difference for student learning and for school and systemwide performance. By engaging staff and other key stakeholders in making meaning of these research findings, discussing the implications of the research, and translating the findings into practical applications that can make a difference in your own school system, you can lead with greater clarity about the most promising strategies for positive change.

Likewise, 20/20 foresight in your school system can be expanded by engaging stakeholders in reviewing and discussing futures literature and research studies that have implications for the Class of 2020. Examples of future studies and reports released over this past year that are helpful in building an understanding and appreciation of the research on future trends include *Sixteen Trends: Their Profound Impact on Our Future*, by Gary Marx, the *Map of Future Forces Affecting Education*, developed by the Knowledge Works Foundation, and the report from the Partnership for 21st Century Schools, entitled *Results That Matter: 21st Century Skills and High School Reform*. Engaging your stakeholders in discussing the implications of these and other similar studies can significantly enhance the clarity of the foresight of your school system.

**Putting Your Hindsight, Depth Perception, Peripheral Vision and Foresight to Work**

The combined power of these four dimensions of your vision can yield valuable knowledge and insights to guide the development of the 2020 vision for your school system. By sharpening the hindsight and depth perception of your school system, you now have greater understanding about critical lessons learned and the positive core of the work of your school system that you can build on in leading positive change. By strengthening your peripheral vision you can now put to work the best of what we know as a profession, and by expanding the foresight of your school system you can now engage your stakeholders in developing a future-focused, 2020 vision.

**Leading with a 20/20 Vision and Systems Focus**

**Focus Question #3: What will it take to get there?**

**From Foresight to Insight**

Once you have defined your “2020 Vision”, the next step is to define set of essential design principles to guide your work in bringing your vision to life. As with any design project, good design begins by building a solid foundation. Among the design principles that can strengthen the integrity of your plan are ensuring that the core values and beliefs of your school system are honored throughout each stage of the planning process and establishing research-based best practices and the success factors that contribute to the positive core of the work of your school system as the cornerstones for your plan.

Performance indicators of your vision for student learning and system performance can provide another strong set of building blocks for your plan. Think about what would be the types of evidence you would look for to know whether or not you are making progress in achieving your vision. For example, if your vision for student learning includes the ability of students to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, what would be some of the types of evidence of students’ progress in demonstrating these skills? What would be some of the critical attributes of their performance? Once you have identified a core set of performance indicators of your vision, you can then use the indicators to guide the design of your plan and to gauge your progress in achieving your goals.
Developing design possibilities maps is another means of strengthening the effectiveness of your plans. This mapping process can help stakeholders begin to visualize and build on potential high impact strategies for your plan. Among the resources on which you can draw in developing your design possibilities map include the lessons learned that you identified with hindsight, the root causes of success in your school system that you discovered through depth perception, the implications of research-based findings that you identified by sharpening your peripheral vision, and the future trends that you studied in developing foresight within your school system.

**Focus Question #4: What is our plan of action?**

**From Insight to Action**
It is now time to capitalize on the 20/20 clarity your school system has developed, focus on the 2020 vision you have defined, and move from planning to action. To do so requires a commitment to both strategy development and people development to advance the vision of your school system.

**Strategy Development**
As you develop the strategies for your action plan, your goal is to ensure that the strategies and action steps you develop offer the greatest promise for achieving your goals. Here is a short checklist to consider as you develop the strategies for your plan.

Does your plan…..

- align directly with your priority goals and 2020 vision for your students and your school system?
- honor your stakeholders' highest hopes for the future?
- reflect the core values of your school system?
- build on the positive core of your school system?
- incorporate strategies grounded in research-based practices?
- include a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of the plan if/when mid-course corrections may be required?

**People Development**

While strategy development is essential to building your plan of action, equal attention needs to be given to people development. To lead systemwide transformation, you need to make a commitment to strengthening collegial working relationships, enriching professional and organizational learning, and expanding collaborative inquiry across your school system and community. Further, you need to ensure that sustained support and sufficient resources are provided for developing and implementing your plan of action.

In addition, you need to assess the degree of change required to achieve your 2020 vision. Leading systemwide transformation more often than not requires deep (i.e., second order) change. Your leadership role is critical in building understanding of organizational change across your school system, with the knowledge that your staff and stakeholders will have varying levels of readiness and acceptance of the initiatives for positive change in your school system. Given this likelihood, it is all the more important that you focus on building momentum for your plan by supporting the change champions within your school system and community, and by creating opportunities for short-term wins. By doing so you can encourage those committed to making a difference in advancing your 2020 vision, as well as provide those who may be skeptics with evidence that indeed positive changes are being realized.

**Leading Systemwide Transformation**

The needs of the children entering our schools today are significantly different from those of students in the past, and the future they are facing will be vastly different from today’s scene. Moreover, the performance expectations for our schools today are far more challenging than in years past. Consequently, leading systemwide transformation is no longer an option. It is an imperative for today’s school leaders. By developing and sustaining a 20/20 systems focus, and engaging stakeholders in co-
constructing the future of their school system, leaders can develop strong networks of support for positive change, leading to the genuine transformation of their school system in the service of student learning.

Figure 1

Developing a 20/20 Systems Focus:
Sample Set of Mission-Critical Measures

Student Focus
- Student Demographics
- Student Achievement Measures
- Student Engagement

School / Classroom Focus
- School Effectiveness Factors
  - Quality and safety of the environment for teaching and learning
  - Guaranteed and viable curriculum focused on challenging goals
  - Multiple assessment measures aligned with learning goals and a timely feedback system
- Teaching Effectiveness Factors
  - Instruction aligned with standards and goals for student learning
  - Instructional strategies grounded in research-based best practices
  - Data-driven instructional decision making
  - Differentiated levels of support to address student learning needs

System Focus
- Continuous Improvement System
  - Culture of continuous improvement
  - Organizational learning and knowledge management systems
  - Leadership of systemwide improvement
  - Systemwide leadership support for school improvement
- Operational System
  - Community-building: *Internal and external networks of support & trust*
  - Support Services:
    - Student Services and Student Activities
    - Operational support functions (*e.g.*, information technology systems, library and media services, business office services, transportation, food services, facilities, equipment, maintenance, security functions)
  - Stewardship of Resources:
    - Human Resources
      - Staff Resources: (*e.g.*, recruiting and hiring practices, induction procedures, professional development, performance review, recognition systems)
      - Community Resources (*e.g.*, meaningful and productive involvement of individuals and agencies within the community in support of student learning)
    - Fiscal Management (*aligned with vision, mission, and goals of the system*)
      - Budget Development
      - Allocation and use of financial, instructional, and physical resources
  - Governance Functions:
    - Operational Policies & Procedures (*aligned with core values, vision, and mission*)
    - Governing Board Leadership (*e.g.* focused on vision, standards, assessment, accountability, resource alignment, climate, collaboration, and continuous improvement / *Key Work of School Boards*, NSBA, 2002)
Systems Thinking Resource Guide

- Expert Consultants
- Book Citations
- Online Resources
Books

*Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation* by Phillip C. Schlechty

*Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools* by Tony Wagner, et al.

*Change Without Pain: How Managers Can Overcome Initiative Overload, Organizational Chaos and Employee Burnout* by Eric Abrahamson

*Charting Your Course: Lessons Learned During the Journey Toward Performance Excellence* by John G. Conyers, Robert Ewy

*Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good* to Great by Jim Collins

*Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap … And Others Don't* by Jim Collins

*Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms* by Lee Jenkins

*Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action* by Michael Fullan

*Leading Change* by John Kotter

*Leading Strategic Change: Breaking Through the Brain Barrier* by J. Stewart Black and Hal Gregersen

*Management of the Absurd* by Richard Farson, Michael Crichton

*Our Iceberg Is Melting: Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions* by John Kotter, Holger Rathgeber


*Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America's Frustration with Education* by Lee Jenkins

*Priority Leadership: Generating School and District Improvement through Systemic Change* by Robert T. Hess and James W. Robinson

*Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education* by Peter M. Senge

*Shaking Up the Schoolhouse: How to Support and Sustain Educational Innovation* by Phillip C. Schlechty

*The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge

*The Innovation Paradox: The Success of Failure, the Failure of Success* by Richard Farson, Ralph Keyes

*The Quality Toolbox, Second Edition* by Nancy R. Tague

*Tools and Techniques for Effective Data-Driven Decision Making* by Philip A. Streifer

*School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* by Richard Elmore

MEET AASA’s EXECUTIVE CONSULTANTS

The AASA Center for System Leadership™ Executive Consultant Program links nationally recognized experts in the use of systems thinking with school districts and school system leaders.

Each executive consultant has unique expertise and offers different programs and services, including customized consulting services and educational programs.

The Center promotes its cadre of executive consultants and their unique services to school district leaders, with the ultimate goal of helping school system leaders transform their systems in order to improve student learning.

For more information about the Executive Consultant Program, please contact Jessica Smat, Program Manager, at jsmat@aasa.org or 703-875-0765.

**John G. Conyers, Ed.D.** — Under John Conyers’ leadership as superintendent of Community Consolidated School District 15 (III.), the district was awarded the 2003 National Malcolm Baldrige Award for Excellence. Conyers has been recognized locally, regionally and nationally for his leadership role in public education. He is a Malcolm Baldrige Examiner, a speaker and conference presenter, an author and a consultant.

His consulting services focus on:

- Guiding the Baldrige process
- Aligning systems; reviews and recommendations
- Executive coaching
- Plan-do-study-act problem solving process
- Developing effective systemic processes

**Lew Finch, Ed.D.** — A superintendent for 35 years in school systems in three states (Minnesota, Colorado, Iowa). Finch serves as the superintendent-in-residence with the AASA Center for System Leadership. He is also executive director of the Urban Educational Network of Iowa. He has received numerous accolades for his leadership in support of public education and frequently serves as a national spokesman for educational issues. Finch was a former AASA Executive Committee member and was named 2004 Iowa Superintendent of the Year.

His consulting services focus on:

- Superintendent-board relations
- Leadership during a crisis
- The role of district leadership in student learning
- Conducting successful bond and levy elections
Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Ed.D. — Kathleen Fitzpatrick is the founding director of the Leadership for Learning Alliance, building on her 30-year career working in and with K-12 education. As a consultant, she has worked with state departments of education in more than 30 states, regional educational laboratories and local school districts across the country. She has written extensively on educational leadership, program evaluation, systemic reform, and research-based frameworks for school and system-wide improvement focused on student learning.

Her consulting services focus on:
- Program evaluation services
- Consultation and process review
- Identifying mission-critical measures
- Facilitation of leadership events and planning sessions
- Systems thinking

Lee Jenkins, Ph.D. — Lee Jenkins is president of From LtoJ Consulting Group in Scottsdale, Ariz. He is a former superintendent who now works as an author and consultant focused on standards, assessment and data-based decision-making. Most recently he has worked with the Jenks Public Schools (Oklahoma), which was awarded the coveted Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2005.

His consulting services focus on:
- Understanding trend data
- Root cause training
- Establishing simple strategic plans that work
- Using effective process data to drive the system
- Quality tools for leading change

Mary Jo Kramer, Ed.D. — Mary Jo Kramer served as superintendent for 20 years in three Connecticut communities of varying sizes and demographics. She also served as an assistant superintendent and as a senior policy planner and coordinator of school improvement at the Connecticut State Department of Education. Since 2005, she has been a consultant and an associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Southern Connecticut State University.

Her consulting services focus on:
- Strategic planning
- Program design, evaluation and data-based assessment
- Professional supervision and evaluation processes
- School improvement reviews and initiatives
- School board/community relations
- Executive coaching
- Group facilitation
**Robert McCord, Ph.D.** — Bob McCord is associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and directs UNLV’s Center for Education Policy Studies. McCord worked for more than 30 years in public education, including as a school principal, a lobbyist and an assistant superintendent. He joined the Center as Professor-in-Residence and works with several programs offered through the Center, including the new and aspiring superintendents programming.

His consulting services focus on:
- Government relations and capacity building
- Key administrative staff recruitment and selection
- Assessment of alternative education programs
- Policy development and review
- Research and development services
- Community engagement

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**Joan Raymond, Ph.D.** — Joan Raymond has more than 40 years of experience in public education. During her career, she served as superintendent in Yonkers, N.Y.; Houston, Texas; Elmhurst, Ill., and South Bend, Ind. She has been named on four separate occasions by the National School Boards Association as one of the Top 100 Executive Educators in North America.

Her consulting services focus on:
- Administrative and organizational infrastructure
- School Finance
- Curriculum alignment
- Employee negotiations
- Planning and implementing school system desegregation plans

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**Karla Reiss** - Karla Reiss is a certified professional empowerment coach, and a former coordinator of professional development and director of planning for educators for more than 50 school districts. She is the recipient of the National Staff Development Council Book of the Year Award for authoring *Leadership Coaching for Educators: Bringing Out the Best in School Administrators.*

Her consulting services focus on:
- Executive/leadership coaching and speaking engagements
- Leading change consulting
- Leadership and organizational assessments
- Strategic and school improvement planning
- Peak performance strategies
- Communication planning and implementation
James D. (Jim) Wilson — Jim Wilson, who is known as the "Colorado Cowboy" is a tremendous resource for rural and small school districts. A former Rural/Small School Administrator of the Year, Jim uses his 40+ years in education to assist rural and small districts with many pressing concerns, including human relations, systemic change and financial restructuring.

His consulting services focus on:
- Human relations programs
- Systemic change initiatives
- Security assessment and planning
- Interest-based bargaining
- Fiscal restructuring
Other Resources

The Creative Learning Exchange (CLE) is an organization dedicated to helping elementary and secondary schools implement systems education.

The Leader to Leader Institute (Formerly the Peter F. Drucker Foundation) is dedicated to strengthening leadership in the social sector.

The MIT Systems Dynamics in Education Project is a group of students at MIT working with Dr. Jay Forrester, creator of systems dynamics, to develop tools to encourage systems dynamics education and "learner-centered learning."

Pegasus Communications provides resources that help individuals, teams, and organizations understand and address the challenges they face in managing the complexities of a changing world. Since 1989, Pegasus has served the community of systems thinking and organizational development practitioners through its conferences, newsletters and other publications, and audio and video materials.

A Primer on Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning is a site developed and maintained by John Shibley, a consultant in the areas of Organizational Learning and Systems Thinking.

The Public Education Leadership Project, a joint initiative of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard Business School, aims to drive student achievement through improving the leadership and management of complex urban school districts.

The Sustainability Institute is an organization that uses systems thinking and modeling as a tool to analyze systems and their sustainability