

*"The only person who is educated
is the one who has learned how to
learn." Carl Rogers*

Seeking Success

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Introduction

The education of human beings is personal. Unlike the manufacture of a product where the processes to make it are well defined and its uses in the marketplace are clearly understood, what to learn and how to apply what someone knows is dynamic and exponentially varied. When thinking about education today and tomorrow what does success look like? For generations the answer was literacy headlined by the 3R's. While the importance of that answer remains, the wholeness of it seems shallow in a 21st century world. To "know" what to know and do requires the wise application of what has been learned. Discernment, collaboration, and a fundamental respect for diversity are on stage as part of the definition of what success in educating our youth (now) demands. However, these too are just headlines, we continue to seek a simple definition for what success is when it is applied to the K-12 education enterprise. We need to accept there is no longer a formulaic answer.

Even in the 21st century the teacher and her/his classroom are going to be an important aspect of K-12 education and its success. This structure (teacher and classroom) is almost timeless. No two individuals in this role are alike in their personalities nor how they relate to and interact with students. However, their abilities to react to situations, student behaviors, and communicate with parents are also "self" centered. Effective teaching requires a myriad of skills and sound content knowledge. Teachers bring themselves (often alone) to the classroom. The learning which takes place turns on the student/teacher relationship axel they establish. Who that teacher is as a person is an essential part of what will or won't happen in their classroom.

To the extent that K-12 education remains a human enterprise, developing relationships is critical to success. Parker Palmer¹ defined three aspects of relationships when he thought about teaching. The three were:

- *The relationship a teacher has with her/himself.* The person responsible for a classroom must bring through the door a mentally and physically healthy self. This begs a series of questions about the individual and the organization attending to this need. HR practices must be examined with this factor in mind.
- *The relationship a teacher develops and continues with the content they teach.* Are they active learners themselves? What role should the enterprise play in that process? Teachers must respect the content they teach and know how to effectively deliver the curricula associated with their work. They are expected to design well thought-out content lessons each day. They also must be able diagnostic tacticians when students are confused or unable to comprehend what is being taught. Often aspects of this work are acquired over time as their depth of classroom teaching experience (tacit knowledge) increases. It also requires a commitment to learning best practices and the support of an employer who understands the importance of an educator's professional relationship to their work.
- *The relationship a teacher develops and sustains with the students they are charged with educating.* The importance of this cannot be minimized, to be known is a fundamental human need that does not cease to be important when a child passes through the school's door. This requires a diligent and ongoing effort. At the middle and secondary school levels where daily

student loads can be one hundred or more this is a formidable challenge. Think about having to quickly learn more than one hundred students' names and then make the content being taught relevant to their lives. While all of this is happening a teacher must be a master of routines that promote student well-being and safety. This is the real-world dynamic that is happening each time students enter a teacher's classroom.

When we place these three different ways to think about the relationship should it be a surprise too many teachers are facing burn-out and/or a lack of sufficient support from a school's leadership team? But let's look at the leadership team as they too are facing a huge challenge. Building principals are first in line when their school's results are being criticized. They also are first in line to meet parents who are upset or concerned about something that has occurred at school. At a moment's notice they must effectively deal with angry, dysfunctional students when a teacher needs additional support or help.

Principals are expected to meet with every teacher to set goals and observe their teaching. This requires planning, meetings, and then writing summaries of these events. However, the burden doesn't end with just what happens under their school's roof. They are accountable to the superintendent and her/his staff. District administrators often place further demands on a principal's time by adding district goals and programs to be implemented at their schools. They also must attend district meetings which may require significant time on their already overwhelmed calendar. No wonder they don't have time to mentor new staff or implement major reforms without more help!

An emerging layer on the cake is the politics of education. This includes assertive school boards, book banning, school safety, gun violence, and LGBTQ rights. These cultural issues along with an explosion in social media and the overall reach of technology place demands on school staff that were not mainstream everyday issues even a decade ago. Navigating this host of new challenges and concerns requires the undivided attention of all engaged in the K-12 public education enterprise.

Now enter writers like me who provide advice on how to improve student progress. When do principals or their staff have the time to give meaningful attention to any reform advice? Just keeping their heads above water is a full-time effort. Also, do we really think we can reach into every classroom and fundamentally change the unique student/teacher relationships that are the backbone of education as we know it? Those relationships are a dynamic synthesis of human interactions that can lead to success or not; however, believing we can easily reshape practice is not realistic. This does not mean we are without tools and suggestions which can improve student learning. The key is to understand what is realistic and respect what are the teaching and leadership time demands of those on the front line of delivery.

Culture

“The culture of a workplace - an organization’s values, norms, and practices – has a huge impact on our happiness and success.”

Adam Grant

Today we use the term “culture” as an overarching label. It is a macro-descriptor of traditions, values, and beliefs. I think of a river which appears calm on the surface, yet there is a powerful current that continuously flows towards the sea. Every organization has a culture which lives inside the enterprise controlling what and how things are done. Like a river’s current it is extremely powerful, an unrelenting constant force that defines expectations and behaviors. There may be sub-cultures within the main organizational culture; however, these cultural “islands in the stream” still recognize and generally remain within the main culture’s expected norms.

A world-renowned social psychologist, Geert Hofstede² has written extensively on cultures and organizations. He notes, *“Culture is always a collective phenomenon because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the game.”* Hofstede’s theory on culture includes six different dimensions where one or more may be descriptive of a particular culture. One of the dimensions applicable to the culture of K-12 public schools. Is entitled, “Uncertainty Avoidance.” Using CHAT-GPT this characterization of it is provided, *“...Uncertainty avoidance dimension is a cultural dimension that measures the extent to which a culture is comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Cultures with a high uncertainty avoidance tend to prefer clear rules and structure and may be more resistant to change and risk-tasking.”* Sound familiar? A cultural dimension is meant to be descriptive, not necessarily a positive or negative commentary. Recognizing a culture’s dimension(s) illuminates the leadership challenges and advantages when working within it.

When developing school reforms leaders need to consider how the culture will react to what is being proposed. K-12 public education’s values and beliefs have matured over the course of 100 years or more. The vast majority of our nation’s citizens attended public schools and were immersed in its culture. Considering this common experience most people see the enterprise as a basic part of America’s way of life. The organization of K-12 education has survived world wars, deep political divisions, and remained a stable force despite the changes in work and the dynamic nature of technology’s impact both nationally and globally. Its stability and the broad acceptance of its purpose are key strengths when judging K-12 public education’s culture. Therefore, it is no surprise the culture flowing within public education in America steadfastly guards stability and sees its purpose centered on educating children in citizenship and the 3-R’s.

At the same time there are some other common cultural attributes that can be seen as inherent parts of K-12 public education’s culture. The culture is:

- **Competitive:** School is a place where students compete for grades (a GPA) and class rank. Student collaboration (cooperative learning) to solve problems and answer important questions may too often be the exception to normal classroom practice. This even comes down to classroom furniture arrangements where desks in rows are still the “normal” setting rather than

tables and other furniture pieces that would foster a different approach to teaching and learning. Think about it, in schools when students collaborate (especially at the secondary level), we (many times) call it cheating!

- **Adversarial:** The work setting is frequently adversarial where teachers and administrators may view each other with mutual distrust and union contracts govern nearly every working relationship. In their book Radical Collaboration James Tamm and Ronald Luyet³ label this type of destructive setting as a “Red Zone” environment.
- **Calendar Bound:** The yearly calendar is fixed and largely non-negotiable. Sorry, we are closed for the summer is its sacred mantra. The calendar is locked in not only in terms of the time of year, but it also operates within strict daily time periods.
- **Distant from Power:** This is another dimension on Hofstede’s listing of dimensions associated with organizational cultures. In the K-12 public school setting this is readily apparent in the budgeting process. Priorities for funding happen at a significant distance from the classroom. The business administrator, superintendent and Board of Education are the primary decision-makers on funding strategies. Teachers and students are distant from power. In some instances, the entire district is distant as state funding and federal resources are provided based upon non-negotiable formulas that must be applied in very prescribed manner(s). The *money* culture in K-12 public education is most often hierarchical and distant from students and staff.

In his book, *The Culture of Education*, Jerome Brunner⁴ talks about culture’s impact on students in this way, “If ...school is an entry into the culture and not just preparation for it, then we must constantly reassess what school does to the young person’s conceptions of his own powers (his sense of agency) and his sensed chances of being able to cope with the world both in school and after (his self-esteem). In many democratic cultures, I think we have become so preoccupied with the more formal criteria of ‘performance’ and with the bureaucratic demands of education as an institution that we have neglected this personal side of education.” I believe Brunner’s observation is spot on today despite the fact he said it nearly 30 years ago! A significant aspect of K-12 public education’s culture is its bureaucratic composition.

Theories aside, you cannot talk about the dominant cultural factors in a K-12 school setting without recognizing the substantial (sometimes overwhelming) influence of teacher unions. The impact of collective bargaining and the political power of the NEA and AFT and their state and local affiliates is significant. Union positions related to substantial school reform vary based upon how they may apply to their members, not necessarily the students. If the reform is judged to hurt teachers’ terms and conditions of employment, the union becomes a formidable force against reform. Todd Demitchell⁵ describes the influence this way, “In those states that have collective bargaining laws, governance has become bilateral on issues of wages, benefits, and terms and conditions of employment. Reform strategies must also come to the bargaining table because real reform impacts terms and conditions of employment. The trend over time has been to expand subjects of bargaining, thus increasing the impact of collective bargaining and the influence of unions.”

Peter and Edgar Schien’s⁶ book entitled, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, speaks to a culture’s DNA and the taken for granted assumptions that are a basic part of it. They note: “...beliefs, values, and desired behavior becomes nonnegotiable and turns into taken-for-granted basic assumptions that subsequently drop out of awareness. Such assumptions become very stable, serving as the source of later ways of doing

things and elaborating the culture. What needs to be understood here is that these elements, learned early and composing the cultural DNA, are the source of the group's stability and cannot be changed without changing the group altogether. This point must be understood at the outset because culture-change programs can work only if they are consistent with the group's cultural DNA."

Therefore, the culture of an enterprise can amplify the strength of an organization or become the basis for profound failure. Look no further than Kodak and its film culture. The enterprise failed to adapt with catastrophic results. Therefore, I believe those seeking to make substantial changes (reforms) in a public education setting (and most other organizations as well) need to carefully consider the culture in which such changes are sought. If they run counter to the culture, there is a high likelihood their implementation will fail unless the cultural factors impeding reform efforts are addressed. Simply put, culture first, reforms second.

Change

Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be.

John Wooden

What does the face of peril look like when we hold K-12 public education up to the mirror? We see increasing violence, high absenteeism and poor graduation rates in urban settings and say this is what a crisis looks like. However, if we see a child's face looking back at us in a suburban district, we think his/her school district is a *good* one. Its students attend school regularly and graduate on time almost without exception. But what if we are looking into a mirror where peril lurks in the background in both cases?

To be clear the face in the mirror in an urban setting has been terribly victimized by historical racism, generational poverty, and neighborhoods plagued by crime and violence. Schools in these settings have been underfunded and marginalized by public policy actions for decades. Therefore, I don't want the reader to believe I am taking these issues for granted. However, what if public education in America is more and more out of step for every student? A February 2023 essay by Thomas Dee⁷ noted: *"...Across the states with available data, increased homeschool enrollment and population loss each explain 26 percent of the public-school enrollment decline, while the more modest increase in private school enrollment explains 14 percent. But more than a third of public-school enrollment loss cannot be explained by observed changes in nonpublic school enrollment and the school-age population. This indicates the pandemic may have shaped learning opportunities, particularly for the youngest children, in additional ways (e.g., skipping kindergarten, unregistered homeschooling, and truancy) that merit further scrutiny."*

The *walk-away* from public schools doesn't stop with just a significant decline in eligible student enrollment. Absentee data is especially disturbing. It is reported that 41 percent of New York City students were chronically absent from school last year.⁸ Pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism was significant as well at a rate of 25 percent. The decline in student enrollment combined with high rates of absenteeism, especially in urban/poverty settings indicates a generation of youth is in great peril regarding the attainment of a sound (basic) education.

Political forces have also placed schools center-stage on controversial and polarizing topics. A PEN America Report stated there were 2,532 books banned from schools during the 2021-22 school year. 96 percent of those actions did not adhere to the American Library Association's Best Practices for challenges. 41 percent of the books banned had LGBTQ topics/characters. 40 percent had significant characters of color. This activity places schools in the crosshairs of cultural politics, adding controversy and stress. Therefore, is it any wonder that a recent National Education Association (NEA) survey of its teacher members found that 55 percent of those surveyed said they have considered quitting their work as teachers.

Many may say. "Yes, those are alarming statistics, and something needs to be done, but they do not describe my district;" therefore, we don't need to change. In addition to the applicability of cultural issues highlighted previously, should all districts be concerned about the dramatic changes in technology taking place, especially now with the far-reaching impact of AI on the horizon? What about implementing some of the positive aspects and insights gained from the pandemic's distance learning implementation? Is it important to consider content relevance in light of the age in which students are and will be living? Recognizing the research that has given new insights into cognition and "knowing" should the impact of

that affect curricula, assessment, and professional practices? The list could go on to include school safety, cyber security, parent involvement, virus protections, and a host of other issues.

When you consider the significant cultural topics that could warrant attention and then add to it a number of reform topics one must consider the capacity for the enterprise to cope with and address change. When one adds all the management and leadership needs that are demanded of the team on a regular basis it is hard to imagine adding anymore to the “to do” list. As I write the suggestions which follow, I am cognizant of this. In fact, I have a deep concern over the lack of human and fiscal resources to effect change even on a small scale. At the same time, I believe K-12 public education is at a crossroad where 21st century needs are still being attended to with 20th century strategies and norms.

Paul Reville, a Harvard School of Education professor and the former Massachusetts secretary of education had this to say about our schools. *“Despite the cacophony over the Common Core State Standards, new assessments, teacher evaluation, portfolio districts, and other hot-button issues, education leaders are bearing down ever harder on tried-and-true school reform strategies. Whether employing higher standards, tougher accountability, choice, or deeper professionalism, we are desperately attempting to force our early-20th-century school system to do the education work of the 21st century.”*

I am reminded of a 1957 Chevy, a real classic. I can restore its luster, add chrome wheels and a host of other customized goodies; however, in the end it is a 1957 Chevy and not a Tesla. One can ask is the Tesla simply an evolution from that old Chevy or is it a revolutionary change? It can drive itself; its engine is different, and it is able to be updated in many ways without returning to the factory. Yet it still moves through the larger world conforming to the rules of the road.

When we listen to prestigious educators at Harvard and Stanford who anchor their graduate schools of education they tout digitally enabled teaching, personalized learning, teacher collaboration, a global curriculum, brain-based practices and numerous other suggestions and ideas that align with the 21st century world in which students must thrive and live. They are not wrong, yet they are trying to add these changes to a school enterprise that resembles a 57 Chevy much more than the Tesla.

As a baby boomer I recall the first telephone in my parents’ house. It was a single rotary dial phone on a party line. That home phone evolved first to a private line, then to a touch tone instead of rotary dialing, wow! Then that home phone became cordless, and we could walk around the house no longer tethered by a phone cord. We added an answering machine and marveled at the changes that occurred. However, the real leap began when cell technology and the iPhone arrived. Again, was this evolution or revolution in what simply was a home phone a few generations ago? Schools have moved along like that old Chevy through the revolution in phone communication basically unchanged.

Therefore, it is not surprising that major conceptual changes in the form and function of a 21st century school enterprise are nearly impossible to implement on a significant scale. Managing the current enterprise where hardening doors, dealing with significant mental health needs, bullying problems, and many other fundamental physiological and safety needs is almost all consuming. Then add serious fiscal and regulatory demands plus a political climate that is intemperate and difficult if not impossible to manage.

Therefore, it is obvious change is a complicated concept. No matter if it is short or long-term. It can be profound or just the next easy step. Change can be sudden or well-planned. No matter its timing, scope, or implications change demands attention. In an enterprise like K-12 education the why, what, and how

aspects of the change equation will be shaped by the culture, leadership quality, and the overall capacities inherent within the organization. However, despite these and other major challenges we need to ask ourselves another question, what if we don't do anything to effect change? Can public education simply carry on as is? What if the enterprise does not respond to the conditions in which public education finds itself. The 21st century world students are a part of cannot be ignored. It is significantly different from what preceded it. As the Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga sang, "we are far from the shallows now."

What follows in this final section are some changes to consider. It is far from an all-inclusive list. In fact, it will be easy to point out changes that are not on the list. I hope this will occur and each reader will be engaged enough to cherry-pick what might be some things to consider as you develop your own possible "to do" change summary. Once compiled you will have to come full circle back to culture, integrity, trust, leadership, and organizational capacity as serious considerations to determine the why, what, and how of change at a district-by-district level. Is it something the organization has the capacity to do on its own or do the changes require support that is beyond the reach of the enterprise? If they are beyond the reach of a single district, should we simply wait for something to happen or do we develop strategies to change those factors (political, legislative or financial) beyond public education's current reach?

If a 21st century school enterprise is to be set in place, then one must consider the depth and breadth of change that is required. For example, personalization of student learning can be combined with digitized learning and the use of AI to create learning experiences for students heretofore not possible. School could become more conceptual; no longer place or time bound. AI software will respect all the learning theory one can imagine, it will correct student work, offer advice, and allow them to pursue tangential ideas whenever they wish. It will be tireless and patient. It also can be exceptionally cost-effective. The downside is that teacher unions will likely oppose it. The change will eliminate jobs and reshape content delivery. Unions will howl about the need for students to be brought together in the social (human) setting that schools provide. A list of other concerns will surface, and grievance and contract issues will multiply. Union controlled state legislatures will step in, and all manner of community appeals will be initiated. Think not, think again. It would be easy to claim this paragraph minimizes the importance of teachers and their work. That is not the case, but 21st century schooling demands we be open to change in the K-12 enterprise's sole delivery model, its purpose, and curricula.

Yet embracing change in the way K-12 education is conceptualized and delivered is a task beyond the grasp of the enterprise. It requires tremendous support and conviction. But to do nothing to improve teachers' practices, enhance leadership and find common ground is not an option either. So, let's continue to do more custom work on the Chevy. It is worthwhile and can improve the conditions and outcomes for student learning while we seek to build the necessary resources and support for the more extensive changes current and future learning needs demand.

Chevy work...

Avoid singular stories:

- The description of public education's challenges too often aggregates into one story, a story of failure. I came across an extraordinary TED talk. It was by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It's had more than thirty-three million views! In the talk she shares "The Danger of Singular Stories." Think about some of the singular stories used to define nations, places, people, races, religions and more. These singular stories have tremendous power. They shape policies, and behaviors. Singular stories aren't necessarily totally untrue, but neither are they close to capturing a wider more diverse truth. Educators need to identify the singular stories that define kids and/or adults in school settings. We can deliberately initiate reforms and/or inadvertently teach or act on these singular stories placing schools in greater peril as a result.

One of the singular stories that often exists is the pejorative use of the label, "administrator." Too often it conjures a notion of an ineffective, unfeeling bureaucrat who does more damage than good within the system. The power of this singular story embeds an adversarial tone that exists not only within the system but in the larger community as well. Teachers versus administrators creates a Star Wars image of administrators controlling the "Dark Side" of the Force. There are some action steps which can be taken to turn down the heat and open the door to more collaboration and cooperation.

- *Develop a mindful use of different vocabulary.* Instead of using the word "administrator" deliberately use the word, "educator." If words matter, then use them to advantage. This may seem like a minor (shallow) effort; however, using the term is more inclusive. Dropping administrator as a reference term helps move a singular story off the deck when referencing the leadership group.
- *Reduce the adversarial temperature.* Jim Tamm's³ work on reducing what he calls a "Red Zone" environment is a good place to begin the learning process. Creating the right conditions for learning is a sound labor relations strategy. This does not mean one group concedes and the other dominates. The work is to develop new skill sets all around which make it easier to find common ground. As a superintendent I had seven different recognized bargaining units (unions) with which I needed to work. They included not only the teachers' union, but bus drivers, food service, paraprofessionals, custodial, office workers and yes, the administrative group. As an enterprise we were in constant negotiation with one or more of these groups. We (too often) governed through contracts and a formal grievance and arbitration process. Our annual legal bills were always in the six figures.

Intentionally build integrity and trust:

- Integrity
I used the word *intentional* because this requires effort and attention. It also will go a long way in addressing a reduction in the adversarial temperature. Stephen Carter⁹ has written an excellent book on integrity. He defines integrity as having three stages/parts. The first is "*Discernment.*" I like the definition of this noun. It is, "the ability to judge well." When looking at organizational change it is not just the leader who needs this ability it is the entire organization. This is why a

significant effort needs to be made to create a learning environment where discernment of best practices, an understanding of 21st Century challenges and the identification of the forces impacting the organization are understood by everyone. This sustained effort will enable the organization to judge more wisely.

Next, following discernment Carter provides the second of his three parts of integrity, “*Action.*” So many times, when we face significant enterprise change efforts, we skip discernment and begin by acting. Strategic planning is a profound example of this. A group within the system develops (often with a consultant) a set of action plans believing everyone will understand and accept the wisdom of this plan. The fact is they most often don’t and change efforts fall flat on their face. I am not opposed to planning, but the lack of a sustained effort to learn first then act on needed reforms requires a growth mindset rather than a fixed one, and an enterprise-wide investment of time and resources to create an environment where adult learning is valued and consistently supported should be a primary leadership concern.

The final aspect of Carter’s definition of integrity is “*Declaration.*” I believe another word that could be used for this final step is ownership. In our current state of being we see leaders fail to own their decisions. They blame others or point at outside forces when the heat is on, or reforms fail. There is a point when a decision to change is made and the process is grounded by integrity that leaders must own the process.

- Trust

When contemplating substantive change the professional literature regarding it consistently reminds us of the importance of relationship building. I believe trust forms the foundation for any change initiative. Building relationships requires sincerity, effort, and time. Relationships are built in community. It is not something you do to people it is something you can only do together.

The Power of Trust, by Sandra Sucher and Shalene Gupta¹⁰ notes that the foundation for building trust is competence. They shared the research of Daniel McAllister a professor at the University of Singapore who explained, “...people will not invest in others or develop deep relationships unless there’s a baseline of trust in one’s ability to do one’s job. Once that baseline has been met, people will start to develop other more complex types of trust.”

We know trust in a leader is a prerequisite for any change effort. It seems obvious that this would be the case yet too often too little effort is spent on developing it. In part because this five-letter word is complex when thinking about what engenders it. Trust is hard to build and easy to lose. We toss around terms like trust, competence, integrity, and fairness as if they were easily defined and practiced. * Whatever the term(s) change agendas cannot be implemented without trust. With the constant changes in school leadership as leaders move from one district to another the time it takes to build requisite levels of trust and confidence are too often short-circuited.

Promote/Support the development of a learning organization:

- Another challenge is to create a system where educator learning and repertoire development of best practices leading to student success are shared and examined by the practitioners themselves. Jal Mehta, Louis Gomez and Anthony Bryk¹¹ have written about building professional knowledge. They note, “...teachers need a deep, multidimensional knowledge that allows them

both to assess situations quickly and draw upon a variety of repertoires for intervention..." They also state, *"...many teachers conclude that they are not part of a shared enterprise..."* We need to step back and look at the system and recognize how shallow the pond is related to staff learning and professional sharing of expertise. If we are seeking success, we must wrestle with the fact that school systems are not developing their staff enough on a deliberate and consistent basis.

- Jal Mehta, Louis Gomez, and Anthony Bryk underscore the need to create and sustain practitioner learning inside the K-12 school enterprise. *"Conspicuously absent from these systems are an infrastructure and a consistent set of practices that would develop teachers' expertise – the ability to draw upon a knowledge base to recognize patterns of problems, develop repertoires of solutions, and make informed judgments about how to handle particular cases. Professions systematize this process – they develop knowledge, train and license practitioners, and create ongoing standards of practice. As education developed with teachers at the bottom of a bureaucratic hierarchy rather than as a full-fledged profession, it did not create the core of practical knowledge, process of significant training, and apprenticeship to develop expertise that characterize other more fully developed professions. Thus, each teacher essentially has to figure out how to teach on her own, resulting in wide variation in teaching skill from school to school and even from classroom to classroom within a single school. Some teachers and schools do well, but the overall quality of the system's performance is highly variable. In comparison to more highly developed professions, education, especially teaching lacks internal mechanisms to develop genuine knowledge about practice, to train novices in its use, to articulate the arc of development from novice to expert practice, and to continuously test all of these components against efficacy in action. Consequently, the field is highly vulnerable to repeated movements for external control."*
- Charles Handy describes a learning organization in this manner, *"...The learning organization is built upon an assumption of competence that is supported by four other qualities or characteristics: curiosity, forgiveness, trust and togetherness."* Handy stresses the importance of an assumption of competence. However, is the current system/culture built upon an assumption of incompetence? Inside the enterprise teachers are observed. We criticize, offer praise, and set goals through an evaluative process that does little to improve student learning. It creates a huge burden on the leadership team which must conduct classroom observations, often multiple times in a school year. Bottom-line, administrators (educators) observe the act of teaching through a formal observation process but given the time an effort expended does it improve (significantly) what the students are learning? Would it be more productive if a teacher and administrator (educators) developed a plan and delivered instruction as partners utilizing it? Through the formal observation process commonly undertaken a teacher and administrator (educators) are not very collaborative regarding what students are learning, they are separate and apart, one watching and the other doing.
- Consistently building and sharing effective professional practices can be underfunded and haphazard. Therefore, if I were serving as a superintendent today, I would begin actively funding and building a learning organization. It would be a five-year process where I would begin funding the effort. In year one it would be funded by a resource equal to one percent of the district's budget. Over the next four years it would grow by an additional one percent a year until the budget resource grew to be five percent of the annual budget.

Reduce the distance from power:

- Some first steps to reduce the distance from power could include:
 - The learning organization budget (described above) could be controlled by a collaborative group of employees. It's not just teachers who require skill building. It is every employee's relationship to their work which must be valued. Training and improving skills and practices should be a cultural effort focused on creating the right conditions for learning throughout the system.
 - Student-based funding at the classroom level could be a consideration. At each level (elementary, middle, and high school) a per student allocation would be calculated. Teachers would have complete control of this allocation with some clear basic rules outlined for the use/application of funds. For example, no stipends or wage consideration would be allowed. Further, as superintendent I would engage the union on the allocation amount and rule development; however, under no circumstances would I agree to it becoming a contractual item. The common ground equation is one which works and depicts a cycle of trust, not a one-way street to only be memorialized by contract language.
 - Principals may also be distant from power (especially in larger systems) when it comes to funding. Another consideration would be to develop a per student allocation for the principal to control. Too often, from my experience they come hat-in-hand pleading their case regarding school needs to the superintendent and district office staff. Like teachers, these lead educators need to have greater discretion regarding fiscal priorities and needs within their school.

Accept uncertainty:

- Alvin Toffler said this, *"The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."*²¹ Talk about accepting uncertainty! As superintendent I often found myself in situations as the leader where others expected me to have the answer. It is okay to not meet this expectation and to wrestle with ambiguity. There are times when we need to relearn (discern as Carter would say) before an action(s) is taken.
- *"Differences often bring with them unevenness, expense, tensions, even conflict. But the objective of our work as educators is not to create a dissonance-free environment but rather to create a learning-full environment, to build a community of learners. I choose unevenness, tension, even conflict for what they may bring to reflection and learning, over homogeneity and calm accompanied by less reflection and therefore less learning."*¹² Think of this viewpoint expressed by Roland Barth and Toffler's comment. They are both challenging us to accept and nurture uncertainty when it affords a context for learning or unlearning.
- In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge¹³ noted, *"One indicator of a team in trouble is when in a several hour meeting there are few, if any, questions."* Inviting questions is a leadership skill that needs to be cultivated. When seeking success our passion for an idea can

shut down conversation and challenge. When we are most enthused about an answer do we keep a light on for questions to find their way into the process?

Respect the Importance of tacit knowledge:

- Adults
 - In their book, *Enabling Knowledge Creation*,¹⁴ Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka describe knowledge this way, “...knowledge is a construction of reality ...not simply a compilation of facts but a uniquely human process that cannot be reproduced or easily replicated. ...Some knowledge can be put on paper, formulated in sentences, or captured in drawings. ...Yet other kinds of knowledge are tied to the senses, skills in bodily movement, individual perception, physical experiences, rules of thumb and intuition.”
 - I had to learn on my own the tacit knowledge associated with teaching. I recall my first day as a first-grade teacher as a scary one. I was truly alone with little or no support. As I moved through my first year of teaching, I developed my own chops and management practices. I succeeded or failed on my own with no mentor to talk with about what I was doing and if it was sound practice. After learning how to teach on my own there were no vehicles for me to share what I learned with the next rookie who came along. If there was any place where you’d think work-related training and support would be paramount, you’d expect it to be in an education setting. The truth is schools are often terrible learning organizations for the adults who work within them.
- Students
 - In a knowledge-based economy where factual knowledge is at our fingertips isn’t it time for K-12 education to revisit what knowledgeable graduates need to know and be able to do? Shouldn’t tacit knowledge gain in importance? Robert Sternberg¹⁵ takes us further down this road when he makes the distinction between knowledge versus wisdom. He writes, “*While specialized knowledge shows immediate effects, the benefits of wisdom are by definition slower to appear and less obvious. Knowledge is expressed in declarative certitudes, whereas wisdom must compare, raise questions, and suggest restraints. Hence wisdom rarely gets much respect and is seldom popular. Yet an evolutionary analysis suggests that unless we cultivate an interdisciplinary knowledge of our systemic needs, we shall not be able to understand what is happening, and we shall not be able to see what is good or bad for us in the long run.*” While it is hard to think of a teenager as wise, youth’s impulsivity and lack of time on the planet lead us to think it is too soon for wisdom to blossom. However, deploying instructional strategies that cultivate wise thinking are too often minimized or absent from the standard pedagogy of educational practice at the K-12 level.
 - Elliott Eisner¹⁶ in his book, *Arts and the Creation of Mind* said it this way, “*The world students now live in and that they will enter as adults is riddled with ambiguities, uncertainties, the need to exercise judgment in the absence of rule, and the press of feelingful (Eisner’s word) as a source of information for making difficult choices... education is a process of learning how to become the architect of your own experience and therefore learning how to create yourself...*” The freedom to create yourself in a school setting is difficult to accomplish. We often view the purpose of K-12 education is to prepare a student for life and the self-discovery process as a

post-graduation expectation. This is not to say talents and interests don't reveal themselves during a child's school years. However, think of the talented musician who could be asked to compose a piece and perform it about the US Civil War battle at Gettysburg rather than being forced to write an essay about it on a final exam. When do we afford the opportunity for a student's talents and interests to become an outlet for creation of the self within the core curriculum? Is a 21st Century purpose of education is to guide students on a path ... "to become architects of their experiences and in so doing to learn how to create themselves?"

Improve mindsets:

- Carol Dweck¹⁷ is a psychology professor at Stanford and the author of *Mindset*. Dweck talks about the profound effect a person's mindset can have on how they view themselves and their abilities. She says it this way, *"...For thirty years, my research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life."* Dweck explains the negative impact a "fixed mindset" has on how you view your ability. On the other side of the coin is what she calls the "growth mindset." *"...The growth mindset is based upon the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in every which way-in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, and temperaments-everyone can change and grow through application and experience."* Dweck's TED Talk and her book got me thinking about an entry point for organizational change. Does the enterprise have a growth mindset? I believe K-12 school organizations have some fixed mindsets which combined with singular (stereotypical) stories can create serious disconnects from the students schools are charged to serve and educate. For example, an overly competitive environment can tell kids if they are capable, the system grades them, places them, and ranks them. We measure IQ's and tell some kids they are smart. I believe these organizational behaviors create increasing student isolation.
- Parker Palmer¹ spoke about schooling's "hidden curriculum" this way: *"...In the conventional classroom the focus of study is always outward-on nature, on history, on someone else's vision of reality. The reality inside the classroom, inside the teacher and the students, is regarded as irrelevant; it is not recognized that we are a part of nature and of history, that we have visions of our own. So we come to think of reality as "out there," apart from us, and knowing becomes a spectator sport. At best the classroom is a platform from which to view the subject."* When we force everything to be graded and judged and dictate the course of instruction from kindergarten through twelfth grade, we isolate both educators and students. There are not many opportunities in today's regulated public schools to loosen the reins; however, looking for those opportunities is a worthwhile quest.

Examine curricula relevance:

- When creating K-12 content standards a great deal of effort was expended to determine what students should know and be able to do. With the exponential growth of technology and now AI it begs the question, are the content standards we worked to develop still relevant? A "global" curriculum with an emphasis on diversity and collaboration must be provided to students.

Define Quality

- Nearly twenty years ago the district where I served as its superintendent was, like almost every other district across the country, defined by a singular story; how were the test scores? The local newspaper published the scores of every district in the region lauding those with the highest scores as the best examples of success. But school quality isn't a singular story, it has multiple dimensions and descriptors. We worked hard to change the lens we looked through to define success. This did not mean test scores weren't important, but looking at quality through a wide-angle lens afforded deeper conversations and a basis for goal setting that wasn't just demanding that we get the scores up!

I believe the *"Quality School Rubric"* that was developed was a meaningful effort to change the viewpoint related to success. If I were serving as a superintendent today, I'd view the rubric as an organic document which would need to change with the times. However, readers can find that document on my website. I hope it can serve as an exemplar and basis for defining school quality. It can be found at rickstein.net.

Building something new...

What if... what if we could recreate public education today? Would you just change the tires on that 57 Chevy and go on or would you respect it as a classic car but not the answer for transporting your children down 21st century roads? I believe most of us would say no I want something better for my family and their needs. Most of what I have written about to this point would not upset or alienate most readers. That is because I have endeavored to respect what is and offer suggestions which represent adaptations versus a complete reconceptualization of public education. Frankly, through most drafts of this narrative I did not include this section. Most would say that it is a pipe dream. I don't disagree. But if you believe the current K-12 public education enterprise is in peril across-the-board, should we simply stay silent? In this century is there a Kodak moment awaiting public education?

Rethinking the K-12 public school enterprise is entirely different; it requires revolutionary thinking and sweeping support. What follows are some ideas, not always original ones; but after serving 38 years in public education and 31 of them in various leadership positions I think they could be worthy of consideration. Because they represent an overall change in how things are done one cannot be optimistic about the possibility any (or others) will be implemented without the outside culture(s) demanding reform.

- Paraphrasing Bill Gates, the first five years of life shape what the next eighty years may be. The research related to early childhood learning definitively supports this observation. Therefore, from pre-natal support(s) through five years of age federal and state governments should rewrite the book and literally "explode" funding for programs that attend to this part of life. The long-term benefits of doing so could make a huge difference in the development of each individual and their abilities to become accomplished architects of their potential.

- Recognize school to be a concept and not a place. The integration of technology and AI software can no longer be haphazard and seen as an add-on option to basic schooling. The dimensions of what school is needs to be redefined. It does not need to always be place-bound. As stated earlier in this essay the use of technology advances both those already in place and what will be coming in the future redefine what it means to “school” each person.
- Reject the firm held belief that all children must experience school from kindergarten through grade twelve. This rigid grade-by-grade structure is a hidebound tradition. Too often a high-school diploma represents little more than clock time in a chair. I realize this is a harsh judgment and, in many instances, it does represent more than that ...but not universally. Therefore, are certificates and demonstrations of competence a better representation of what students know and can do? Must each learner wait to grade twelve before they can progress along a career pathway?
- Reject a ten-month calendar and a six-hour school day. No pun intended, they come from a different time and conception of what school is (was). Why do we lock everyone into this schedule? All alternatives need to be discussed as possible “right” answers for individual learners.
- Conceive of a teacher as a mentor. This conception thinks of the teacher/student relationship in an entirely different manner. A mentor meets the student’s interests and skills and helps further their knowledge on both a factual and tacit level. Personalized instruction and mentors don’t always have to be certified teachers. Mentors can come from all walks of life.
- Rethink current student progress reporting and consider eliminating report card grades. For those who think this is diving into the cold deep end of the pond, I would challenge us to think about why grades are important. What purpose do they serve other than to rank and sort students. If a student demonstrates competence what is the real difference between one grade and another? If we couple the seeking of competence with seeing mentoring as the backbone of later learning then the nuances, aptitudes and skills of a learner can be defined and reported on an individual basis.
- Deliberately provide complex problems and establish student teams to consider possible actions. Collaboration, judgement and yes ethics must imbue the learning process. An ungrounded mind which does not respect a diversity of thought will be an easy victim for the 21st century plethora of media and technology that will seek to shape and dictate their points of view.
- Reconsider how education is funded. Currently, real estate taxes form the backbone of how public education is funded. This promotes tremendous inequality of opportunity with real estate wealthy areas having the upper hand in providing a wide range of resources leading to

student success. What if a whole new approach to funding public education was considered? One where real estate wealth did not form the basis for school funding?

- Daniel Webster said, *“The intelligence of the people is the security of the nation.”* His observation was profound in his time and clearly is today. If we believe this to be the case, we must reinvent more than the funding strategies for public education, we must see in the 21st century that education must be restructured. A call to all the states should be made to consider education as no longer a function of the states alone. It must be constitutionally accepted it is also a federal responsibility. The disparity between the quality of education across state lines varies to the detriment of our security and the rights of every child. State regulations need to be reconstituted from the ground up as they often constrain change and adaptation while fiercely maintaining special interests and the overall status quo. I realize how difficult this call to arms would be to accomplish; however, what if we sought to do it? What if the best minds in the nation gathered to rethink what it means to be educated in this world and the one that is coming. Could we generate a clarion call for change that engaged us across cultural, political, and economic barriers? I believe more than any other issue Americans in all walks of life would engage in this effort. If Webster is right, can we afford to do any less?

In 2014 I wrote and self-published a novel entitled, [Running on Empty](#). It is a story about an urban school district and the need for a whole new approach to instructional delivery. I wanted real characters to be the basis through which some of the challenges related to rethinking the enterprise could be depicted. I believed then and continue to believe now that deep reforms need to be seen through the eyes of real characters from all levels within the system. While I would update (change) some of the scenes due to the changes in technology and the cultural expectations for today’s learners, I still believe much of what was depicted amplifies many of the salient points within this essay.

Sadly, I am not optimistic that K-12 public schools can reinvent themselves without outside forces demanding it. I fear that this will not happen until the outcry for a new approach reaches across all political aisles and among many constituent groups. Until it does, we are destined to do our best to keep that old Chevy in the best shape we can. However, given the culture and overwhelming expectations which are placed upon educators from the classroom to the superintendent, even that may be more than we can accomplish on a broad-based level.

End Notes

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- ² Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations* (New York: McGraw Hill 2010)
- ³ James Tamm, *Radical Collaboration* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc 2nd Edition 2019)
- ⁴ Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996)
- ⁵ Todd Demitchell, *Teachers and Their Unions*, (New York, New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2020)
- ⁶ Edgar and Peter Schien, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Hoboken, New Jersey John Wiley and Sons 2017)
- ⁷ Thomas Dee, Urban Institute, Where Kids Went (web address: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Where%20the%20Kids%20Went-%20Nonpublic%20Schooling%20and%20Demographic%20Change%20during%20the%20Pandemic%20Exodus%20from%20Public%20Schools_0.pdf February 2023)
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- ⁹ Stephen Carter, *Integrity* (New York New York HarperCollins 1996)
- ¹⁰ Sandra Sucher and Shalene Gupta, *The Power of Trust* (New York NY.: Public Affairs 2021)
- ¹¹ Jal Mehta, Louis Gomez and Anthony Bryk, *The Futures of School Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press 2021)
- ¹² Roland Barth, *Learning By Heart* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass 2001)
- ¹³ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York, New York Doubleday 1990)
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- ¹⁵ Robert Sternberg, *Wisdom Its Nature, Origins, and Development* (New York, NY.: Cambridge University Press, 1993)
- ¹⁶ Elliott Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New London, Connecticut: Yale University Press 2002)
- ¹⁷ Carol Dweck, *Mindset* (New York, New York: Random House 2016)