DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 825 UD 030 745

TITLE	The New American Urban School District.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colo.
PUB DATE	Sep 95
NOTE	83p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States Distribution Center, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427 ($10 plus $3 postage and handling, discounts available for bulk orders. No. UE-95-2).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - General (020) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Futures (of Society); Public Schools; *School Districts; School Restructuring; Urban Education; Urban Problems; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

The Education Commission of the States has found that urban school districts face enormous problems. This document looks at a variety of ideas about how to re-engineer the urban school district. These essays encourage educators and the public to think about the nation's urban school systems and how they might better meet the needs of children. The following essays are included: (1) "The New American Urban School District" (Chester E. Finn, Jr.); (2) "The New American Urban School District: We Can Have It Now with the Knowledge We Already Have" (Kenneth J. Tewel); (3) "The Future of Public School System Central Offices: Why Seek a New American School District" (Paul T. Hill); (4) "How the State Should 'Break Up' the Big-City District" (Ted Kolderie); (5) "Redefining the Role and Responsibilities of Local School Boards" (Michael W. Kirst); (6) "Embracing the Challenges, Opportunities and Spirit of Leadership for the 21st Century" (Stephanie Pace Marshall); and (7) "The New American Urban School District: A Conclusion" (Christine Johnson). (SLD)

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THE NEW AMERICAN
URBAN
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Education Commission of the States
707 17th Street, Suite 2700
Denver, Colorado 80202-3427

September 1995

CONTENTS

Over the last two years, through its Urban Initiative, the Education Commission of the States has reviewed the status of reform in selected states and urban districts to determine whether policy nurtures or hinders education reform. Because no two urban districts are alike in demographics or in political and economic environments, precise comparisons are difficult. However, we found that urban systems do share common characteristics and problems:

- The public is estranged from urban school districts, resulting in a serious loss of public confidence and lack of support at a time when urban children face greater and more severe problems than ever before.
- Many public urban school students are underachieving, and too few are engaged in rigorous, high-level academic experiences; many of the underachieving students are minority youth.
- Too few urban high school students are prepared enough to enter college and succeed in college-level work; again, many students in this category are minority youth.
- Not enough public urban high school graduates are prepared to enter the high-skill/high-wage internationally competitive economy of the 21st century.

Urban districts have made modest gains in raising students' achievement of basic skills, but few urban districts as a whole are working well. Good programs, good teachers and administrators, and some good schools can be found, but few urban school districts can be pointed to as successes.

In some areas, the problems have become so dramatic that governors, legislators and mayors have stepped in to address the challenges of troubled urban districts.

For example, the Illinois legislature in spring 1995 empowered the mayor of Chicago to replace the elected school board with a "superboard" with broad authority.

In Washington, D.C., the 103rd Congress appointed a Finance Authority to oversee the District of Columbia Schools. In Cleveland, the federal courts mandated a state takeover of the school district.

City districts across the country, ranging from Denver to Milwaukee to Boston to Buffalo to Kansas City to Albuquerque, have been the subject of studies and legislation to break up, take over, dissolve, privatize or give parents vouchers to choose the schools their children attend. Political, civic and business leaders are pressuring states and districts for radical alternatives to current operations.

Can it be that urban school districts as currently designed and operated have the capacity to make only marginal improvements? What would it take to make major changes that would help urban districts and their students succeed?

This document looks at a variety of ideas about how to re-engineer urban school districts. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Paul T. Hill and Ted Kolderie explore new entities that take school systems out of the public utility model. Michael W. Kirst and Kenneth J. Tewel argue for improving the existing model. Stephanie Pace Marshall addresses the critical topic of leadership for the 21st century.

The essays that follow will inspire and encourage education reformers and others concerned about the nation's urban schools to think of different kinds of school systems that might do a dramatically better job of meeting the needs of today's children and tomorrow's society.

INTRODUCTION

THE NEW AMERICAN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

An honorable old maxim advises against fixing something that is not broken. The converse is also true. That is precisely why this nation must now repair and renew the enterprise of public education, particularly in our great cities. That is why it is time to consider the idea of a "new American school district."

The old arrangements simply are not working well enough to serve the interests of society today. In truth, they are broken. They do not satisfactorily serve children, families or communities. They do not prepare nearly enough people for good jobs in the information age or, in many cases, for responsible citizenship.

Perhaps they were suitable for yesterday's society, one in which a small corps of highly educated people could handle the "important" tasks, while everyone else acquired the rudiments of literacy and the skills to earn a middle-class wage. But not today.

The evidence is bountiful. Consider, for example, the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading results. Only one high school senior in three was a "proficient" reader. Almost as many, 30%, were "below basic" — essentially nonfunctional as readers — even though the young people taking this test were within a few months of graduating from high school.

For minority youngsters, the data are bleaker still: only 12% of black high school seniors were "proficient" readers in 1994. Fewer than 1% percent were "advanced." Fifty-four percent were "below basic." The figures for Hispanic students were 1% advanced, 18% proficient and 48% below basic. Young people who read so poorly are not qualified for most of today's jobs, much less for college-level work.

Weak performance is not confined to poor and minority youngsters or inner-city schools. In upscale Montgomery County, Maryland, where nearly everybody graduates from high school and goes on to higher education, the local community college found last fall that 71% of students entering from the county schools were deficient in math and half of them failed to meet the English standards. "When I saw the size of the numbers," said newly elected county executive Douglas Duncan, "I was shocked. I had to ask, 'Why hasn't somebody done something about this?'"

The rest of the world knows American education is not getting the job done. The Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development conducted one of its periodic "economic surveys" of the United States last year. It concluded that, while the nation's higher education system remains a "major competitive strength, the effectiveness of the primary and secondary education system ... can be characterized as mediocre."

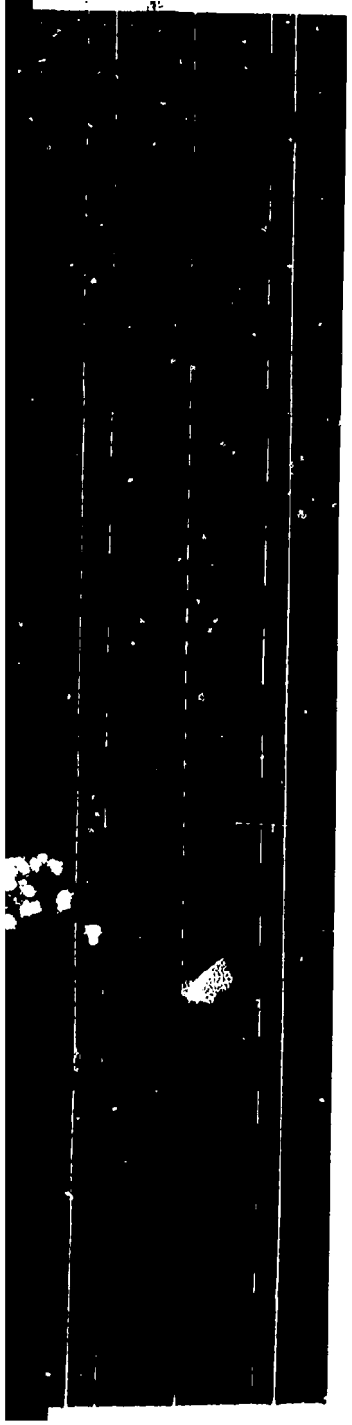
It has been 12 years since the release of the celebrated report declaring America a "nation at risk." This year's high school graduates were in kindergarten when that celebrated report was released. Much reform has occurred in the intervening years. Perhaps some of it is working and simply has not yet shown up in test scores and other indicators. But odds are that very little of it has succeeded or is now succeeding.

As a result, many Americans are ready for bolder and more fundamental changes in our educational arrangements. They are ready to overhaul the basic structures, replace the old and create wholly new institutions and institutional relations.

Such promising changes — and the subject of this booklet — bear on the nature of the "school system" itself. The present structure is a product of the 19th century. Some of its most prominent assumptions, features that we have taken for granted for many decades, appear antiquated and dysfunctional at the dawn of the 21st century. Consider these:

- **The school system is geographically bounded and corresponds to a specific community.** This feature probably made sense when Americans lived their whole lives in specific places, usually in small towns and middle-sized cities, and when communications and transportation were limited to the distance one could physically move in a few hours on foot, horseback or carriage. Now, however, Americans inhabit a global community. They reside in many different places during their lives (often in vast cities) and routinely work with people thousands of miles away. Communications are unbelievably easy and fast. Travel is speedy and frequent. Many domains of life function as "virtual" communities rather than geographic places. Outside the field of public education, the word "system" itself has come to mean a set of relationships and interactions that seldom takes place in close physical proximity.
- **The components of the school system are essentially identical and unified by a bureaucratic management structure.** Public education is defined in terms of who runs it, who works in it and whose rules it follows, rather than whom it serves. This is the old government model, of course, and the old industrial model. It has strikingly little resonance in today's culture, economy and demography. In other sectors of community life, Americans have come to cherish diversity, pluralism, decentralization, delayering, choices and an approach to management that stresses results rather than procedural compliance. How odd that as the nation is moving toward 500 channel television sets, it is also running school systems that resemble Henry Ford's scheme for automobile manufacturing.
- **The school system's responsibilities are confined to cognitive learning.** This may be fine if families, churches, neighborhood associations, Scout troops and social agencies look after other vital parts of a child's upbringing. It is less fine when the 91% of a child's life spent outside school is in poor repair. And today, that is often the case, not just for disadvantaged children but also for millions of other "latchkey" youngsters — youngsters who have nobody waiting at home at 3 o'clock to give them a snack, listen to their tales of triumph and woe, drive them to music lessons or the pediatrician, and keep an eye on what they see and do. Americans engage in lively arguments today about whether it is possible to restore yesterday's familial and social arrangements.

"Why not redefine public schools in terms of the public they serve, the public to which they are open and accountable, rather than in terms of who operates them?"



Until this occurs, however,the education system will be called upon to shoulder broader responsibilities — and provide very different kinds of schools — if the nation's children are to reach adulthood in good shape.

- **The tools for teaching and learning consist of what can be placed in a classroom — and contained in the teacher's head.** It has been said that if Rip Van Winkle fell asleep 100 years ago and awoke today, only two major American institutions would look familiar to him: churches and schools. The typical classroom has little more technology than an overhead projector and perhaps an aging computer or two standing alone at the back. The typical lesson today still consists of a large person talking and a lot of smaller people listening, often bored to tears. It's completely out of sync with what we know about effective learning — and with the ways people learn things outside school. The world has changed, except in our school systems.
- **School systems are run from the top down, by layers of professional administrators employed directly by the system itself.** This management structure blends the "civil service" model of 1895 with the "latest thing in scientific management circa 1925." (It also smacks of the kind of centrally planned, top-down governance that went out of fashion in Eastern Europe about five years ago.) It is not how we organize and run much else — certainly not anything that prizes performance, productivity and efficiency. It may have been reasonable when the primary challenge was quantitative and could be met by replicating services. Today, however, the main challenges facing U.S. education are qualitative.

Meeting those challenges calls for very different assumptions about how we organize, govern and manage our education delivery system. Why do school systems, for example, need to run the schools themselves? Why not contract with others to do so? Why should public schools emphasize uniformity when knowledge about how children learn and the predilections of a free society lead toward diversity and choice? Why must geography define school systems. How many ways can they deliver instruction that do not rely on face-to-face interaction? In how many places can people learn other than classrooms?

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How could the potential of today's technology be applied to teaching and learning? How could services that today's children need be delivered at the school site — not necessarily by school district employees — or coordinated through a system that focuses on whole children rather than just cognition? Why must those who deliver education be direct employees of the school system? Why must they be "supervised" by "professional managers"? Why not redefine public schools in terms of the public they serve, the public to which they are open — and accountable — rather than in terms of who operates them?

These ideas are bold, perhaps even radical. But they are not unprecedented. The distinguished psychologist Kenneth Clark was thinking this way a quarter century ago when he offered these observations in the *Harvard Educational Review* in an article entitled "Alternative Public School Systems":

The rigidity of public school organization and the concomitant stagnation in quality of education and academic performance of children may not be amenable to any attempts at change working through and within the present system.... Our urban public school systems seem muscle bound with tradition. They seem to represent the most rigid forms of bureaucracies which, paradoxically, are most resilient in their ability and use of devices to resist rational or irrational demands for change.... Alternatives — realistic, aggressive and viable competitors — to the present public school systems must be found.... With strong, efficient, and demonstrably excellent parallel systems of public schools, organized and operated on a quasi-private level ... it would be possible to bring back into public education a vitality and dynamism which are now clearly missing.... American industrial and material wealth was made possible through industrial competition. American educational health may be made possible through educational competition.

It was clear to Clark in the late 1960s that the customary arrangements were broken. It is far clearer to many more people today. Fixing them is the great challenge of the years ahead. Part of that challenge is to imagine arrangements that do not yet exist and to visualize models not based on yesterday's assumptions.

The point of this booklet is to help serious reformers think of very different kinds of school "systems" that might do a dramatically better job of meeting the needs of today's children and tomorrow's society. This is a worthy undertaking, indeed vital, for the future well-being of American society. The essays that follow open some long-shuttered windows and invite fresh breezes to enter. They repay attention.

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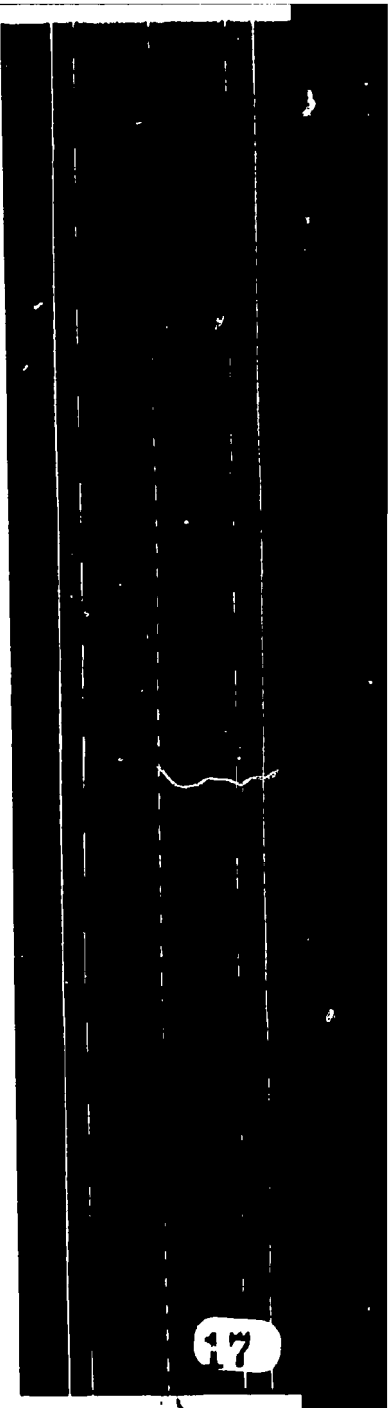

THE NEW AMERICAN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT:

We Can Have It Now With the Knowledge We Already Have

Kenneth J. Teevl

It is difficult these days to find anyone who believes that education agencies as currently organized at the school, district or state levels are the most efficient way to provide a quality education for students. Increasingly, the focus of the reform community is shifting from the individual school to the local school district. Why? School district policy and practice in areas such as finance, curriculum, operations, accountability and program development affect every aspect of teaching and learning. Central office action can erase extraordinary efforts by capable staff members.

Some argue that the only way to reform public school districts is to tear them down and start over. That approach requires a complete re thinking of the current structure from the state legislative framework and state department operations to the monitoring and support systems at the regional and local levels. It means confronting the political power of school boards and unions representing classified and certified personnel. It means addressing the concerns of a suspicious public that has grown tired of short-lived reform efforts that do nor produce results.

Others believe the creation of new districts with new approaches will best stimulate fundamental and comprehensive reform at the district level. The "learning zone" approach in New York City, for example, will create autonomous entities free of the usual district-level instructional and managerial control. Still others point to Kentucky as a state-level model of the way to approach district-level reform. Some argue that more choice in the system will fix everything and make school districts more functional.

A variation of these approaches may work in a few places under specialized circumstances, but, overall, none offers a complete solution. The tear-down-and-start-over approach, which may be inevitable in the end, is not a realistic alternative in the immediate future. Other states are not rushing to emulate the Kentucky example. New and radically different districts play an important role in challenging assumptions about education governance, organization and management. Such "break-the-mold" districts will not necessarily lead to systemic and comprehensive change in districts serving the majority of America's students.

In the short and intermediate terms, the task is to produce more functional school districts, with only limited modifications to the legislative structure, within existing resources and with the skills, knowledge and people already in the system. Meaningful district reform can happen under these conditions. It is useful to begin the discussion with some observations about how conventionally organized districts operate. The first section of this chapter provides some observations about how conventionally organized districts operate. The second section provides some ideas

about how districts can work more effectively. The third section offers strategies to manage the transformation process.

The Limitations of Conventional School Districts

Most conventional districts have structures that act as a brake on reform efforts at the school level. The central office typically develops goals, procedures and operational requirements that prescribe what schools are to do and how they are to do it. Personnel spend their time developing systems for monitoring the implementation of programs rather than building the district's capacity to improve teaching and learning — the district's first order of business. At the upper levels of the district, the focus is on the procedural compliance of those at lower levels of the reporting ladder.

This approach denies school personnel the discretion to exercise their expertise and professional judgment and the flexibility to develop a coherent education program for all their students. Moreover, it prevents the development of true accountability systems that align responsibility with authority. Bureaucracies do not adapt easily to new ways of working, especially those that conflict with central control and uniformity.

Most staff members are not intellectually or emotionally prepared to provide the technical support to schools interested in genuine experimentation. They are more likely to stifle and resist creativity. The typical American school district, designed for another age and another task, is in deep trouble, deeper trouble than most people are willing to acknowledge.

How New and Restructuring Districts Can Work More Effectively

A new and more effective district is driven by the belief that effective education depends on unleashing the productive potential already present in schools. Schools are where the district's most important business — teaching and learning — takes place. No one knows the educational needs of students at a particular school better than the teachers and administrators who spend their workdays there. That simple premise has the potential to change everything. The critical element of any district reform, therefore, is the creation of structures, policies and procedures that allow schools to create the best educational opportunities possible for every student. Such a transformation would improve chances for student and teacher success.

New districts must be administratively leaner, less bureaucratic in their habits, and more entrepreneurial. Real-world practicality must inform these efforts, supported by close two-way communication with the civic/business/parent communities.

The creation of a new type of district requires, first and foremost, the forging of a collaborative and collegial relationship between district-level personnel and those working at schools. To achieve this, each subsystem must be aligned so that everyone associated with the district is working to achieve the same goals. The roles and responsibilities

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of all district personnel must change so dramatically that the functions associated with the traditional title at every level — teacher, principal, central office supervisor or director, superintendent, board of education member — will no longer be recognizable.

This new model of a school district will have very different dynamics than conventional districts, notably:

- **The new district obtains and uses power and influence in very different ways.** Success depends on the district's ability to decide whose collaboration is needed to act on good ideas and to build the necessary partnerships.
- **Districts and schools are administratively leaner and flatter.** They also use many more channels for action. Cross-department and cross-school projects, joint ventures with other social agencies such as the health department or legal services bureau, and partnerships with unions and professional associations operate outside the mainstream reporting lines and ignore the traditional chain of command.
- **More potential centers of power exist.** As opportunities for great flexibility naturally increase, they naturally undermine hierarchy. The tasks taking place in the district's traditional line organization decline in significance.
- **Everyone at every level of the system, including the schools, is responsible for environmental scanning.** The environment to be scanned for new ideas and opportunities includes many potential outside partners, including the private sector.
- **Every person involved thinks cross-functionally because each person plays a role in dealing with systemwide and school-level problems.** The ability to get tasks accomplished depends more on the number of team networks in which one is involved than on job title. This is true for both central office and school-based people.
- **As people spend more time working across former boundaries, their interpersonal negotiating skills are essential assets.** Power evolves from personal strength, not from organizational structure. Good deal-making depends on the capacity to understand and appreciate the perspectives, interests and goals of others.

The Challenges of Organizational Transformation

The transformation of the district will place added burdens on everyone — especially people in leadership positions. Once the change process begins, the new organization will not be immediately functional. While the old organization, with its traditional roles and responsibilities, will no longer exist on paper, it will continue to influence the minds, habits and performances of staff. People will work in situations where the old rules no longer apply and the new ones have not been written.

Instead of working with clearly defined units, people at all levels will find themselves in a work environment that looks, sounds and feels like chaos. The likelihood is that people will experience their new work as loss of power. As roles, reporting lines and job descriptions become clouded, confusion about working relationships will prevail. Most people in the system will find it difficult to imagine how the changes can become an opportunity for greater personal influence and professional satisfaction. To add a further complication, few districts are far enough along in this process to provide models of practice from

which others can learn. Such an effort challenges everyone's traditional notions about his or her role and damages people's feelings of self-worth. As with all change, the process will bring dilemmas and frustrations.

Leadership Strategies To Manage the Process of Transformation

Leaders can employ these strategies to give staff incentives to weather the turbulence of the transformation process:

- **Create an environment conducive to mutual trust and risktaking.** Discussing ideas, discovering new ways of thinking and experimenting under conditions of trust and respect enhance commitment and increase receptivity to new viewpoints.
- **Develop a shared mission.** It is essential for people to believe in the importance and value of their work, particularly when other forms of security have evaporated.
- **Empower staff members at all levels of the system to use their professional discretion in making decisions.** People need to feel some control over their professional lives. Leaders can provide this by encouraging central office and school staff to develop pet projects and by seeing to it that they have time to carry these forward. A second strategy is to foster a results orientation by working with staff members to develop outcomes and then letting them decide how to achieve them.
- **Provide opportunities for learning.** The chance to learn new skills or apply them in new ways is important in a restructuring district. In a turbulent environment, learning enables people to create roles for themselves in the new organization.
- **Afford professional visibility.** Leaders can provide public recognition by acknowledging the innovations of school and central office staff members and by helping people connect with professional networks outside the district.
- **Create new internal and internal/external coordinating structures** that eliminate fragmentation and serve as the district's engine for reform.
- **Eliminate barriers to change.** Barriers can be individual and organizational. Organizational obstacles include narrow rules for accomplishing work, rigid job definitions and lack of a common language for articulating goals. Individual barriers include lack of awareness about the need for change and an absence of the skills necessary to make reform efforts succeed (for example, skills in problem solving or participatory management).
- **Stay focused and consistent over time.** Developing a new organizational form and culture takes a long time. A leader can erase years of progress in just a few weeks through inconsistent behavior, especially during times of stress. Staff members can see through glossy programs and superficial efforts. The change process must be ongoing and constantly renewed.

The process of transforming conventional public school districts into new organizations is difficult work. But the work must be done to regain public confidence in and professional support for public schools. The result of this work will be a new kind of district — one that can support an innovative system of autonomous and high-performing schools.

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM CENTRAL OFFICES: Why Seek a New American School District?

Paul T. Hill

Like most organizations, public school system central offices do pretty much what they are designed to do, and they are not much good at doing anything else. What they do well is administer state and federal programs and local school board policies; implement the terms of the district's contractual relationships with the teachers' union; and mount districtwide improvement efforts, such as installation of a new curriculum or retraining of teachers.

Until recently, administration of K-12 education has focused on the inputs affecting all schools (e.g., financing, teacher training, district wide curricula, textbooks, teacher hiring and work rules, and special subsidies and regulations for instructing disadvantaged students). Current reform initiatives, in contrast, have focused on strengthening individual schools as organizations. Proposals such as site-based management, charter schools, contracting and even vouchers have emphasized releasing schools from many externally imposed rules.

Since the mid-1960s, increasingly explicit rules governing nearly all activities have been placed on teachers and administrators. School focused reform is a natural reaction to the perceived failure of those policies. But current reforms seek more than a reduction in external constraints. They also aim to increase individual schools' focus on instruction, their integrity as organizations and their capacity for self-improvement.

School-focused reforms are based on the simple idea that schools cannot be responsible for performance unless they have full control over their budgets' real dollars — and can select, hire, train, evaluate and fire their own instructional staffs. In the words of former Milwaukee superintendent Howard Fuller, school-focused reforms intend to create a system of strong individual schools, rather than a uniform school system.

After nearly 10 years of effort intended to encourage teachers and principals to take initiative and responsibility for their individual schools, it is clear that existing public school system central offices are not good at promoting such reforms. Starting with the path-breaking site-based management initiative in Dade County, Florida, and continuing through the recent re-regulation of such supposedly decentralized school systems as Bellevue, Washington, the story is the same. School boards and central administration

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have vacillated between promising greater school-level autonomy and reacting to problems by creating new requirements and mandates. This ambivalence between the intention to encourage school-level initiative and the reflex to increase regulation whenever problems or controversy arise is an inevitable result of the traditional role, mission and organization of the public school system central office.

Current school boards were created to make policies of general applicability affecting all schools. And, that is what they do, typically responding to problems that might occur in one or a few schools with a new policy or regulation that constrains all schools. The roles of the superintendent and central office bureaucracy complement that of the board. The *superintendent* advises on and carries out policies that affect all schools. The central office staff administers state and federal categorical programs and manages districtwide programs, including curriculum, program evaluation, staff development and curriculum improvement. None of these traditional roles inclines the board, central office or superintendent to see an individual school as a distinct entity with its own needs, problems and strategies for improvement.

If existing central offices are not well-designed for the needs of a system of schools, what other arrangements are necessary? Such is the focus of this short paper. It identifies the kinds of support and oversight that semi-autonomous public schools will need and suggests how public and private agencies might combine to meet those needs.

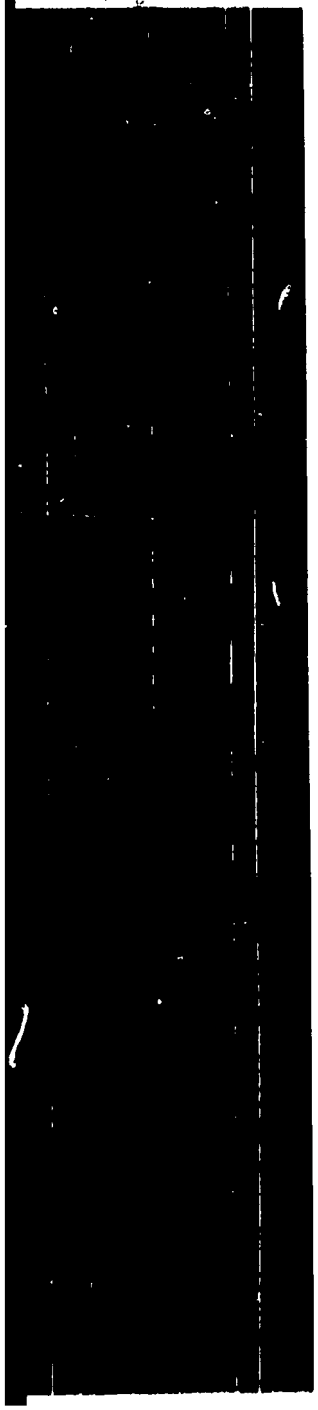
The analysis stems from six assumptions:

- **Public schools are not private schools.** They remain accountable to authorized representatives of the public, e.g., a local school board.
- **It is possible for schools to differ from one another yet all be accountable to the same public school board.** But all schools need not be measured and judged in exactly the same way.
- **To be initiative-taking and accountable organizations, individual public schools must have significant control over the key instructional resources,** particularly selection of teaching methods, teaching staff and staff development initiatives.
- **Few if any schools can be totally self-sufficient,** either in providing quality instruction or performing more basic organizational maintenance tasks. Most require some forms of advice and assistance.
- **There are economies of scale in providing some forms of assistance to schools.** But a conventional civil-service-run district central office is not necessarily the appropriate source of such assistance. Many sources, some public and some private, and some in competition with one another, can provide extra-school services.
- **Some schools may not make effective use of freedom and may not take good advantage of existing sources of help.** In such cases, public officials have responsibility to provide alternatives for the children whom a failed school has put at risk.

Together, these assumptions form an overall vision for a local school system's central office and for the roles of key actors, including the school board, superintendent, central administrative organization and teachers' union.

A New Vision

Within the past several years, the statement, "the mission of the central office is to assist schools, not to control them," has become a



cliche. Virtually every school system that makes any pretense at decentralization has adopted it, even if nothing else is done to empower individual schools or weaken the existing central office's grip. The statement is hollow because the people making it normally assume that the central office will continue performing all extra-school functions and being staffed by large numbers of appointed executives and civil servants.

There is an alternative vision — that the central office will exist for the sole purpose of performing irreducibly public functions. These functions include authorizing schools to receive public funds, assessing the productivity of individual schools and the district as a whole, ensuring there is a large enough supply of effective schools to permit every student to attend one, and helping students whose schools have failed them find better alternatives.

This vision is developed in detail in the author's recent RAND monograph, *Reinventing Public Education*. That publication proposes a radical alternative form of governance for public education — contract public schools. Unlike the traditional concept of public education, under which schools are managed, funded and operated by a government agency, contract public schools would be run by a variety of public and private organizations. These organizations would operate according to school-specific contracts that define each school's mission, basis for public funding and grounds for accountability. Contracting separates responsibility for funding and establishing general policy for public schools (which remain in the hands of state and local public education agencies) from the responsibility for operating public schools (which is put into private hands).

Under a contract system, a local school board would hold many different contracts. Different contracts would provide secondary schools, elementary schools, schools with special themes (e.g., Montessori schools and high schools that focus on health careers, great books, foreign languages, cross-cultural studies, etc.) and conventional college preparatory and vocational programs.

Every school's contract would specify the amount of public funds it would receive (based primarily on the number of students enrolled), the type of instructional program it would provide, its criteria for admitting students and the student outcomes it expects to produce. The district could terminate contracts for failing schools or schools that did not attract students. It might offer new contracts to groups or organizations that have run successful schools or which propose programs deemed likely to succeed.

Contracting is a way of clarifying the relationships between individual schools and public authorities. It ensures that schools can pursue their instructional missions free from the continual changes in policy and mandates. It also leads to definition of the exact performance grounds on which public authorities will hold schools accountable, including the circumstances under which schools might lose standing to receive public funds.

Contracting almost certainly would attract new providers of public schools, including groups that now run private schools and neighborhood public-service organizations. Contracting might introduce

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some profit-making firms into public education, but its most likely effect is to stimulate innovation and clear self definition among schools in the public sector. The people who teach in and administer traditional public schools are likely to run many contract schools.

Contracting can stabilize the regulatory environment for all schools, whether existing public schools, public schools that transform themselves under the opportunities offered by greater control of their programs and resources, or entirely new schools.

Contracting is not an entirely new idea. Public school boards have purchased private contract services for many years, for school construction, maintenance, student transportation, specialized instructional programs (e.g., foreign language) and education for handicapped children. Some privately owned schools now derive all their income from contracts with public education authorities. These programs, however, usually serve other than mainstream students, e.g., the severely handicapped or students who have dropped out of regular schools. What is new about this version of contracting is that it would become the method by which public education authorities provide instruction to all students.

The public school contracting proposal reflects a simple insight about effective schools. Schools whose students learn quickly and deeply are not uniform products of a bureaucratic culture. This is true for schools that educate the most advantaged children and those most at risk. Virtually all schools that make a dramatic difference in their students' knowledge and abilities have something that sets them apart: a warrant to be different. This warrant supersedes many of the rules that govern the public education system as a whole.

"Virtually all schools that make a dramatic difference in their students' knowledge and abilities have something that sets them apart: a warrant to be different."

Effective schools often select, train and evaluate staff differently than other schools and make rigorous academic and behavioral demands on students. The warrants for being different in these ways are sometimes explicit and sometimes based only on tacit agreements among the local superintendent, school board, the school staff and outside financial supporters.

But, in any case, the agreements on which such schools are based are essentially contracts, specifying what mission the school will perform, whom it will serve and how, and on what grounds the school's special status will be continued or revoked. The public school contracting proposal would apply these principles to all public schools, not just a few.

Under contracting, each school becomes an independent organization with its own staff, mission and approach to instruction. In contrast, traditional public schools are bureaus in a larger bureaucracy. Currently, a public school is not a legal entity or a cost center. It is a node at which a central administrative organization assembles many discrete instructional assets. Schools receive staff from the pool of personnel available to the whole public school system. They use curricula mandated for all schools. Central school system administrators choose inservice training for teachers.

Under public school contracting, the local public school board and central office, in effect, would be investors and portfolio managers. They would cause new schools to be organized in place of failed ones, support expansion or imitation of

successful schools, and terminate spending on failed schools. Under this vision, the central office would lack the power or administrative capacity to micromanage schools or compete with school staff members for control of curriculum, instructional methods, inservice training or teacher selection and evaluation.

What would such a central office look like? It is best explained in terms of the new roles for key actors.

School Board

The most dramatic difference between the public schools as they now operate and contract schools is not what school boards would do, but rather what they would *no longer* do. They would no longer have responsibility for directly hiring, evaluating, paying or dismissing teachers, administrators or other employees for individual schools. In essence, neither school boards nor central office administrative staff would be responsible for managing day-to-day practical operations of the schools within their jurisdiction. They would not mandate districtwide curricula or instructional methods or provide standard staff development programs for all district schools.

The two main objectives of the board would be to offer a range of programs and services that meet the diverse needs of the local student population and to ensure that all children receive a quality education. To meet these objectives, the board would determine the needs of the district, create and maintain a diverse portfolio of schools to meet those needs, evaluate schools and provide information about all schools' performance, and close and replace schools that consistently fail their students.

By consulting with members of the community and studying the requirements of the district, boards will determine the range of educational alternatives to provide. The board would identify the need for particular schools: for example, a district with a significant population of Spanish-speaking children might decide to run a bilingual elementary school, or a district containing a new software industry might want to provide a school whose curriculum is built around software development. The board then would seek providers for the schools, through requests for proposals or by negotiating directly with a uniquely qualified provider.

"In essence, neither school boards nor central office administrative staff would be responsible for managing day-to-day practical operations of the schools within their jurisdiction."

The board would monitor schools to determine that all admit students fairly, that no child is obliged to attend a bad school and that students attending failing schools have viable alternatives. For children whose parents do not take the initiative to leave a bad school, the local board would provide other protections against school failure. A board could replace contractors who fail to honor their promises or force schools to make substantial quality improvements when performance fails below acceptable levels. A school board also could maintain quality by "pruning" its portfolio of schools, meaning the lowest-performing schools could be closed and replaced. The board also would hire and fire the superintendent.

The Superintendent

With the school board functioning as a portfolio manager, the superintendent would become the chief executive officer of a highly diversified organization. Under any scheme that makes schools more autonomous and accountable, schools are likely to become more varied and distinctive. The district would evaluate plans for proposed contract schools in terms of their match to

the needs of a particular neighborhood or group (e.g., immigrant settlement areas or students with special interest in art or technology). Performance would be assessed separately for each school in light of the special needs and prior academic preparation of students.

Though school boards would have ultimate authority, superintendents would probably be their main advisers. Superintendents might suggest the need for particular schools, identify appropriate performance measures for particular schools, supervise their evaluation (normally by independent evaluation contractors rather than permanent central office evaluation bureaus), interpret evaluation results for the board and recommend whether the board should continue to fund a particular school or encourage formation of an alterative.

Playing this role, the superintendent would be heavily engaged in long-range planning and analysis of the match between the community's needs and the mixture of schools it provides. Superintendents no longer would have direct responsibility for the day-to-day management of schools or for the management of a functionally organized central office that has the status of a monopoly provider of such services as personnel recruitment and selection, teacher evaluation, curriculum advice, transportation, food service and warehousing. A superintendent would supervise a few central office staff responsible for writing checks to schools on the basis of their enrollments, hire independent evaluators of schools and independent organizations to publish information about all schools' programs and performance, and assist the school board and others in interpreting results of school evaluations.

The Central Administrative Staff

Central offices would not wither away entirely. However, the central office as we now know it would be obsolete, the schools themselves having taken over the tasks of establishing teaching methods. In accordance with its stated mission, a school would be responsible for structuring its own staff, education program and school day. The district no longer would dictate such things as the number of teaching aides in a school, the titles of books in its library or the discipline policy enforced by its staff. These decisions would be left up to the school. The district, however, would be able to offer some of its services, such as maintenance, food service or payroll, on a fee basis and at the discretion of individual schools.

The central office would support the superintendent's long-range planning activities, allocate funds to schools on a strict per-pupil basis, and hire and supervise contractors who would collect and disseminate information on schools and school performance. Independent organizations, not permanent central office staff, would design school evaluations and collect data to ensure that evaluation methods reflect the instructional methods and objectives of the district's schools. Some central offices may staff or sponsor parent information centers to help parents understand what is going on in schools and inform the school choice process.

Without the responsibility for instructional coordination, administration and school building operations, central offices would need relatively few employees. The superintendent would have some discretion to decide how many people would work in the central office. To ensure that future superintendents are not limited by past staff choices, most central office employees would serve at the pleasure of the superintendent, not as tenured civil servants. The money saved by trimming district administration would go directly to the schools.

Teachers' Unions

Removing the school board and central office from the process of delivering instruction and defining school operations makes schools the primary managers of education. Schools would hire teachers, either on the open market or from a registry of certified teachers, depending on the terms of the contract.

These reforms would create a true labor market for instructional and administrative staff. School leaders would make decisions about hiring, evaluating and terminating their own staff members. On the other hand, teachers and administrators would be free to assess and select their workplaces. The market would set the salaries and schools might compete for good staff by providing incentives to prospective teachers, such as a good benefits package or training programs. Teachers could demand higher pay for difficult situations or heavy responsibilities, and schools could offer bonuses for high performance.

State and federal laws specifying employment conditions, such as minimum wage and health and safety laws, would apply to schools. Local school boards also might set minimum qualifications and pay scales for teachers and principals. However, districts would have to be careful to preserve the decision-making power of schools by not mandating staff composition.

Unions' roles would change, but they would be unlikely to disappear. The bargaining unit would no longer be the school districts because teachers would be employees of individual schools. Unions, if they were to represent teachers at all, would represent them in their relationships with schools.

The need for a professional association of teachers would not disappear. Teachers' unions would continue to engage in activities such as arranging insurance and other fringe benefits for teachers. They might also offer training for prospective teachers, skills upgrading and act as hiring halls or guilds from which schools could find teaching talent. Unions might even accept full management responsibility for certain schools. If awarded a school contract, a teacher union would no longer simply be "labor." Unions would become providers and managers of services, like professionals in other fields such as law, medicine and accounting.

Key School Support Functions

How would key management functions be performed under contracting? Schools would perform many such functions for themselves or by forming associations and pools. The functions still performed by the local district central office would be done through highly flexible arrangements that would not establish a permanent civil service structure. Some examples follow:

- **Teacher hiring.** Individual schools would perform this function. Some schools might form recruitment and training pools. Specialized independent teacher employment agencies would be likely to form. Teachers' unions also might perform this function for schools on a fee basis.
- **Curriculum.** Schools or groups of schools would decide curriculum. Some schools might choose, as the charter schools movement intends, to create their own unique curricula. Others might seek a "label" (such as Montessori, Comer, Slavin, etc.) that makes their public image clear and gives them access to well-established forms of assistance on curriculum, staff development and evaluation.
- **Staff training.** Schools or groups of schools would provide staff training for their own teachers. Teacher unions may offer training opportunities for

members having trouble finding or keeping jobs on the professional labor market.

- **School evaluation.** Private organizations or universities would evaluate school performance under contract with local school boards.
- **Public information on school performance.** The central office would distribute this information, possibly via contracts with independent organizations. In large "education markets," entrepreneurial organizations might participate, hoping to build reputations for providing reliable information.
- **Administration of federal and state categorical programs.** The central office would administer such programs, but its emphasis would be on the transfer of funds — not pre-purchased resources or teachers — to eligible schools. Schools would use the funds on a schoolwide basis to hire teachers, buy instructional materials or contract for specialized services to help disadvantaged students succeed within the regular instructional program.
- **Payroll.** The central office would administer payroll for those schools that choose to purchase its services. Otherwise, schools or groups of schools might contract with private firms for this function.
- **Transportation.** The central office (either directly or via contracts with private organizations) would provide transportation for those schools that consent to pay for services. Other schools or groups of schools might prefer to keep the money themselves and enter their own contracts with transportation. Some might decide they could serve students best by not offering transportation and spending the savings on instruction.
- **Purchasing and warehousing.** Private supply organizations would provide this function on a competitive basis. Although these functions might involve economies of scale, there is no reason to assume that a single public bureaucracy for a whole school system is an efficient mechanism.
- **Food service.** The central office would provide food services to schools that consent to pay through contracts with private organizations. Other schools or groups of schools might prefer to manage their own food services or contract directly with private providers.

Conclusion

The foregoing vision is radical when applied to public school management, but it is perfectly commonplace in most other contexts. It assumes, as do the contract-based systems that define productive collaborations in the private sector, that clear goals and flexible resources lead to efficient arrangements. It rejects the "governmentalist" assumption that a large number of civil servants must oversee in detail an enterprise seeking a public good. It embraces the idea that professionals and the families they serve should control schools to the greatest degree possible. Yet, it provides for a residual public authority that can adjust its portfolio of schools in response to new needs and can take action to replace unproductive schools with better ones.

)W THE STATE SHOULD "BREAK UP" THE BIG-CITY DISTRICT

Ted Kolderie

The impulse to do something radical about the big urban school district is now visible in cities all across the country. Sometimes the impulse comes from within the board. More and more frequently, however, it is coming from the state.

- In May 1995, the Illinois Legislature removed the Chicago board of education and superintendent and gave the mayor sweeping powers to change and improve the schools, free of many of the usual constraints. The law also strengthened the local school councils. The legislature created the councils in 1988 at the urging of neighborhood groups and business/civic organizations over the objections of the board, superintendent and union.
- In New Jersey, the state previously took over school systems in Jersey City and Paterson and now is taking over Newark. Illinois has taken over East St. Louis. In Ohio, the federal court has ordered the state to take over Cleveland.
- Baltimore has hired a contract manager for a part of its system. Hartford has put its entire system out to private contract management. In Minneapolis, the board has gone to contract for "district leadership services."
- In California, the 1995 legislature passed a bill to break up the Los Angeles Unified School District. The State Board of Education will have authority to decide how action will be voted on — by county commissioners, by Los Angeles residents only, by the local board of education, etc.
- In Boston, the schools were moved back into the framework of general local government.
- The Pittsburgh area is debating a plan for a countywide board with oversight for autonomous schools.
- In New York City, the chancellor and local community districts are creating small, new high schools, working without legislation and around the bureaucracy.

This activity is not the product of coincidence. There are strong and widespread feelings that the big-city district is too large and too bureaucratic, itself an obstacle to the improvement of learning. Too much has changed: the city, children and the youth culture; the economy, parents and technology. New models of organization are appearing in almost every other sector of society. People no longer believe that the corporate-public utility model — a unitary organization that hires everybody and owns everything — is the best or the right way to organize public education in the city.

Local elected officials increasingly call for change. Problems in the schools create problems for them. Mayors know that if costs drive the school tax rate higher and if families lose confidence in the public school system, their cities are in trouble. Under present arrangements, most mayors cannot much affect the schools, costs or quality. They have found that a new board or new superintendent makes little difference. Increasingly, they are looking for radical change. Their

growing involvement increases pressure on the state to act.

The Search for a New Model

Initial efforts to restructure the big city district were not radical. These efforts assumed the corporate model but brought in someone new to run the district or tried to reduce its size or change its organization. Not surprisingly, these efforts have not been particularly successful. Only recently has the discussion begun to challenge the traditional model itself.

"Reform" Within the Traditional Model

The first reform impulse is to change the people — to fire the superintendent or to elect a new "reform" board. Legislative reforms alter school district representation from at large to district elections (or vice versa) in the hope that this will produce "better people."

It looks radical when the state intervenes to turn over the district to the general city government or to take over itself. But this approach does not necessarily change the basic model either. Asked what it meant to take over Jersey City, a state official said, "We sent in four people."

The idea of breaking up the district geographically sounds radical. Again, however, the traditional model remains. The corporation becomes smaller, but smaller is not necessarily more responsive. There are also significant barriers to this approach. Cutting up a city into smaller pieces creates new fiscal, social and racial disparities. This approach is likely to fail on equity grounds, either politically or in the courts.

The old appeal for fewer mandates ("give us the money and leave us alone") recently has become a cry for "home rule." Texas may try such an approach under pending legislation. It is not clear, however, that this approach will move districts out of the corporate model. It simply will allow those corporations to operate free of regulations. The model is essentially the same as an unregulated public utility. Whether it will work is not clear either.

An Alternative: Breaking Up the Old Model Non-geographically

The other idea is a non-geographic breakup of the school corporation. The board of education would get out of owning and running the learning-company. More than one organization could be operating public schools in the city.

Educators have been talking for years about the school being the unit of improvement, and the idea of autonomous schools is implicit in school-based management. There is broad agreement on this as a goal. "A system of schools," some are saying, "rather than a school system." Essentially, it is a contract model.

Board, administration and union, however, are not always eager to delegate authority to the school. And schools do not always want the problems that come with making their own decisions. If the legislature presses, the organizations in K-12 resist. "Leave it an option. We're not ready yet. We need more time, more training," they said in Minnesota this year.

When a board of education moves to become a buyer rather than a provider of educational services, the resistance can be fierce. In Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, the reform board elected in 1993 decided to bring in an outside firm to run

"When a board of education moves to become a buyer rather than a provider of educational services, the resistance can be fierce."

Turner Elementary School. The board concluded that improvement required accountability and that accountability required the board to have some distance from the operation of the school. The president of the National Education Association went to Wilkinsburg (population 20,000) to try to back the board away from its decision, but the board voted to proceed. The battle continues in the courts, in the legislature and in the campaign for board seats this fall. Similar battles occurred in Chelsea, Massachusetts; Baltimore, Maryland; and Hartford, Connecticut.

For a district organized as a corporate public utility, change is simply unnecessary. It is unrealistic and unproductive to exhort — or to try to order — an organization to undertake difficult and stressful work that it does not want to do and that it knows it does not have to do. To achieve change and improvement, a different model is needed — one that makes performance necessary.

Talking about the different and better model is not enough. The critical discussion is not what ought to be, but how to make change happen.

The "Challenge and Response" Strategy for Change

One approach is for the state to act directly and put the new model into law. An alternative is for the state to act indirectly by making the new model available for the district to adopt if it wishes, and giving the district a reason to adopt it in its own interest.

The first approach is easy to understand. The second requires some explanation. Dan Loritz, deputy chief of staff for the late Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich from 1987 to 1991, put it this way:

> "Over the years, the state tried everything. We tried money. We tried mandates. We tried demonstrations in the hope good practice would spread. Nothing really worked. We concluded the state can't make 'em improve. So we decided we'd try giving districts a reason. [Under the strategy evolving in Minnesota since 1985] ... nobody will have to do anything. The state will simply make it possible for people to offer new and different and, hopefully better, programs. And the state will make it possible for students to go to these new programs if they wish. If you as a district want to add new and better programs, that's great. We hope you will. If you don't, that's all right, too. Nobody has to do anything. But there will be consequences now, for what you do and don't do."

"The real barrier to change is not people or lack of resources. It is the structure of the system itself."

This is the first part of the indirect strategy: to give the district a reason to change. The second part is to design the new and different model the district can adopt when it decides to move.

The Challenge: Creating the Pressure

The most effective way to create the pressure is to withdraw the district's traditional exclusive franchise to offer public education in the city. The state does this by chartering other public bodies to run — or to sponsor teachers, parents or others to run — public schools that students can attend without charge.

The state can withdraw the exclusive in several ways. Minnesota uses three. First, it makes the schools of other districts available to students through open enrollment. Second, it lets 11th- and 12th-

graders finish high school in a college or university. Third, it allows a district, the state board of education (or, as of 1995, a public postsecondary institution) to sponsor teachers to set up and run a public school of choice.

The major education organizations have resisted the "charter" laws or at least strong laws that create real dynamics. Legislatures this year supported the charter idea only if it remained within the traditional model -- with only the local board authorized to sponsor a school and with the schools remaining a part of (or the teachers employees of) the local district.

When a state does enact a charter law that contains real dynamics -- providing for an alternate sponsor and for the school to be a discrete entity with its own teachers — the behavior of districts tends to change. It is easy to see why.

Before, if teachers or parents came in with a proposal and the district refused, that was the end of it.

"Within the traditional model, it is hard to make the changes that improvement requires, and districts themselves cannot change that model."

(The school district, as American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker said in Minnesota in 1988, has been "an organization that can take its customers for granted.") With a strong charter law on the books, the district's rejection of a proposal will not be the end of it. The law provides a way for the teachers, parents and students to get the programs they want within the framework of public education.

When this pressure exists, districts have become noticeably more responsive to proposals for change. In Minnesota and Colorado, local boards that earlier had resisted proposals by teachers and parents were suddenly offering to work with these groups. Less than a year after Massachusetts enacted its charter law, the Boston schools had come up with an in-district charter program of their own. High schools in Minnesota began offering more college level programs once the state challenged the district's ability to take the students for granted.

Attitudes have changed as well. In 1993, the Colorado legislature passed a charter law over the opposition of the state association of school boards. This caused the director of the association to reflect: A few months later, in his column in the association magazine, Randy Quinn suggested to members that this might be a blessing in disguise. If the board were a purchaser rather than an owner/operator of schools, he argued, its ability to provide a quality program of education for the community would enlarge greatly. "I began to see it during the legislative debate," he said.

A district that decides it wants to change finds itself restricted. Within the traditional model, it is hard to make the changes that improvement requires, and districts themselves cannot change that model.

Cities long have had the freedom to choose the plan of organization they prefer for their municipal government or to write a "home rule" plan of their own. This flexibility is not available to public education. There are no "optional forms," and there is no concept of "home rule."

This is a serious policy omission. The state should make available an alternate form of organization that the district can adopt if it wishes.

The Response: Divestiture and Unbundling

Under the strategy proposed by this paper, the key idea on the policy side is to get the board out of owning and running the learning-organizations. It is **divestiture**. The key idea on the operating side is to make available a variety of organizations, among which the board may

choose, to operate the schools. It is **unbundling**.

This is a radically different model. But the legislation to authorize its use can be simple. Legislation can create the essential dynamics of the model and leave the specifics to the board and to the new operating organizations.

The board of education will have to decide:

- **How many learning-organizations should the district have?** A board might have a single contract with its former school administration. At the other extreme, it might want to have a contract with each of its schools. More likely, perhaps, it would decide to work with some number in between. For example, it might divide the old administration into three to five groups. Each group would become a discrete organization with its own teachers. Each would offer its program in every part of the district.
- **What method of accountability should apply to these learning-organizations?** A district might use what the Carnegie Forum report in 1986 called "administrative" accountability. Under this approach, the board would measure performance and enforce consequences itself. It would assign students to schools. Over time, the board would give more students to the groups it judged more successful and reduce the size of groups it judged less successful.

  Alternatively, the board could decide to take the Carnegie Forum's other option and use parent choice as the mechanism for accountability. The size and distribution of the offerings would vary with the pattern of student enrollment over time. (While contract arrangements often involve choice, they do not have to involve choice. In Wilkinsburg, for example, the board of education proposes to contract out the operation of one school, but the district will continue to assign students to that school under an attendance-area concept.)

The operating groups will have to decide:

- **Structure.** One group might set up on the traditional centralized basis. Another group might decide to move decisions to its schools. Some might want to be membership organizations. One might choose to have its sites headed by a conventional principal. Another might want its sites to have, separately, an administrator and an instructional leader.
- **Learning program.** Some groups might emphasize basic approaches to learning. Others might move to student-centered methods or to the new digital electronic technologies. Some might employ teachers. Others might allow teachers to form professional partnerships and enter into agreements with those partnerships to run the learning program.
- **Location.** Some groups might prefer to operate in buildings owned by the district. Others might want to operate smaller programs at a larger number of sites, leasing space from other owners in the community.
- **Support services.** Some organizations might buy accounting, purchasing, food service, insurance, etc., entirely from the district office (to the extent the district is able or willing to sell these services). Other groups might prefer to buy services elsewhere in the community or to provide them directly.

What If the District Does Not Respond?

The strategy suggested here creates the incentive and the opportunity for the district to restructure. The district may respond and adopt

the divestiture and unbundling plan, but it may not.

In that event, the state has several choices. First, the state can increase the pressure. It can enlarge the number of schools "alternate sponsors" may create or "charter" more alternate sponsors. The state also may make it easier for teachers and others to get approval from these alternate sponsors, for example, by allowing teachers and others to apply directly to them.

If the district still does not respond, the state will have a further, more basic, decision to make. The state could let the district live with the consequences of its decision not to unbundle. The state then would continue indefinitely to expand and diversify the range of other public organizations chartered to offer public education in the city.

Or the state could act directly to put the alternate arrangement into law, that is, do the divestiture and unbundling itself. The British make a good distinction between "agreed" solutions and "imposed" solutions. Sometimes "agreed" solutions are not possible. New York state acted directly for New York City in 1969. Illinois acted directly for Chicago in 1988 and again in 1995.

State-Mandated Divestiture and Unbundling

Where a state already has taken over a district, as in Newark or Cleveland, it may be able to do the divestiture and carry out the unbundling without new legislation. As long as good state management is assumed to be the answer to bad local management, the implication is that the state will run the district indefinitely. By unbundling the district, however, the state can create a workable basis for returning the schools to local control.

When legislation is required, the key will be for the state to keep it simple: to set up just the framework and to leave it to the people involved to work out the specifics. The state needs to leave room to allow the dynamics to play out over time. This is what it means to be systemic.

In carrying out this strategy, the hardest thing may be to get people to see that performance depends on system structure. Many people are impatient with talk about structure. They want to move directly to issues related to high standards, good teachers and better learning. They are critical of talk about structure as not dealing with what is really important.

The impatience is understandable. Of course it is the results that are important. But results are not obtained just by affirming their importance and by agreeing on their substance. There has to be a way to get there, so we have to talk about method. The real barrier to change is not people or lack of resources. It is the structure of the system itself.

Attendance in schools is mandatory. Geography divides the system into districts and students go to the school near where they live. Within each set of boundaries, there can be only one organization offering public education. The district does not have to earn its revenue; the revenue is appropriated to it, usually on a per-pupil basis.

This structure assures the district of its success — its students, revenues, jobs, security, even existence. This guarantee by the state of the district's success in no

"It is unrealistic to expect the districts and the people in them to do the hard things involved in change — in excellence — as long as they receive almost everything important to their material success whether they change or not."

significant way depends on whether students learn. This reward structure explains almost everything about the way K-12 institutions behave: why change is resisted, why failure is tolerated, why standards and measurements are lacking, why adults' interests are put first, why change is a risk, why the solutions offered are always "fewer mandates" and "more money."

It is unrealistic to expect the districts and the people in them to do the hard things involved in change -- in excellence — as long as they receive almost everything important to their material success whether they change or not. Public school districts simply are behaving as the state built them to behave. To change the behavior, the state must change the structure.

The heart of the problem is the conflict of roles in which state law presently traps the board of education. It requires board members to promise the best education possible, but it denies them the ability to do any such thing. The board must put the children into the only learning business in town, which the state requires it to own and run and in which its members serve as the officers and directors. It is a self-dealing arrangement, arguably corrupt.

Inevitably, the board's "producer" interests dominate. Realistically, it must worry more about its employees (who can leave) than about its students (who cannot). The board sees the choice that parents so clearly want as competition for the schools owned by the board and so resists choice. When problems appear in the learning business, the board is drawn deeper into management. This creates conflict with the superintendent. As superintendents come and go more rapidly, the potential to take on the changes that can take a career to accomplish disappears.

This structural problem is a feature of state law. Changing state law cannot fix it. The state has to make the board's interest, like the public's interest, a consumer interest. It can do this by making the board of education a buyer of educational services — by opening up choice for the board of education.

Until this structural problem is a feature of state law. Changing state law cannot fix it. The state has to make the board's interest, like the public's interest, a consumer interest. It can do thisby making the board of education a buyer of educational services — by opening up choice for the board of education.

Until this structural problem is fixed, reform efforts will simply play at change. Public education could be lost in the process. It is wrong now not to be radical. The burden of proof is not on those who advocate the new model that the system needs but has not tried. The burden of proof is on those who would stay with the old model that is failing.

"The burden of proof is not on those who advocate the new model that the system needs but has not been tried. The burden of proof is on those who would stay with the old model that is failing."

REDEFINING THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

Michael W. Kirst

Local school boards, like so many major American public institutions, find themselves increasingly under attack as the nation struggles to reform the structure, organization, content and outcomes of public schooling. These largely volunteer and elected lay boards served the nation well through its development. The slow pace of reform raises serious questions about whether this 18th century institution can govern today, in a divisive society facing major social, economic and technological changes.

School boards, particularly in large urban school districts, suffer from an increasing crisis of confidence in their capacity to provide farsighted leadership, improve student achievement and carry out education reforms. Yet, the idea of separate citizen governing boards at the community level for the public schools runs deep in grassroots American political values. The American public is not ready to turn over education policymaking to professional educators or to political officeholders in units of general purpose government for whom public education is but one responsibility.

The trend toward giving individual schools greater autonomy to make decisions about education is positive. However, local governing boards that represent and are responsible to all citizens must continue to play an important role. School staff and parents do not represent all the people with a stake in the public schools. Only 25-30% of U.S. households have school-age children. Citizens in the other 70-75% of households are not likely to become involved in or responsible for the public schools in their communities if they have no role in the political process for governing schools.

This paper advocates the continuance of local school boards but calls for fundamental changes in their roles and responsibilities. At a time when public education faces a constant stream of new and demanding challenges, local school boards need to become **education policy boards**. They need to be freed from the many time-consuming routine decisions that distract them from the hard, serious work of designing and overseeing an education program that serves the needs of their students and communities.

These recommendations reflect the management practices that school boards will need to use in order to act as policy boards — practices that already are widely used in business and the nonprofit sector. They focus on the way school boards use their time and how they relate to the communities they serve. These recommendations provide a framework for what boards must do — and what they should refrain from doing — to become effective policymakers and educational leaders.

Recommendations for Redefining the School Board

- **Develop the vision for the school district and engage in strategic planning to reach consensus on district-level and school-level goals,**

objectives, performance indicators and student assessment outcomes.

A vision and strategic plan offer a path the school district can follow in making decisions about budget, curriculum, student assessment, employee and personnel policies and staff development. A vision and strategic plan also provide a yardstick by which the school board, individual schools and the community can measure the district's progress toward its goals.

Because public schools serve the community and not just their students, members of the public should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to the plan. In urban districts, the plan should include substantial flexibility for individual schools to fashion their own strategies for meeting the board's goals.

- **Hire, evaluate and redefine the role of the superintendent and define the roles, hiring and evaluation of cabinet-level administrators.** The board should establish personnel policies to guide the hiring of principals and other district personnel, but should not become involved in other individual personnel decisions.

The board should define clearly the role of the superintendent, attempt to hire the best person for the job and conduct periodic evaluations to improve the performance of the superintendent. The board should establish appropriate personnel policies and conduct periodic reviews to confirm that the superintendent is following those policies. In general, the board should not hire, fire or promote personnel other than the superintendent.

- **Approve the district budget, ensuring that spending priorities are consistent with the goals and objectives of the strategic plan.** The board should establish policies to guide the administration's decisions on individual expenditures, but should not take action on individual contracts, purchase orders or change orders.

This recommendation will have a major affect on how school boards spend their time. Many boards are used to making individual decisions on even very minor expenditures. This practice distracts the board from its policy role and places financial management decisions in a political environment. To ensure proper financial control, the school board should establish clear priorities and procedures, monitor budget decisions and require the school administration to provide regular reports on the status of the budget.

- **Decide policies and guidelines for negotiating employee contracts and approve negotiated contracts.** The board should not negotiate directly with representatives of employee organizations.

In developing the strategic plan, the board should consider the plan's implication for salaries, promotions and other working conditions. With these in mind, the board should establish a framework for the collective-bargaining process and parameters for the final agreement. Board members, however, should not sit at the bargaining table.

It also is important for the board to adopt policies and clear guidelines for reporting to the public during negotiations and to follow them. The policies should specify who has authority to speak for the board and should apply to both formal and informal communications with the public.

- **Approve curricular frameworks and standards for student achievement.**

This recommendation will engage school board members in the substance of their most important responsibility — ensuring students in their district receive a good education. The impact of this provision will vary depending on existing state law. Some states have detailed

curricular frameworks, within which boards must work to establish curricular priorities that meet the needs of the district. Other states may not specify the curriculum at all, leaving the local board the task of creating frameworks that are consistent with the goals and objectives of the districts. Similarly, some states already have student performance standards in place that local boards can enhance, but not lower. In other states, local boards themselves must set the standards to measure student progress in meeting the district's education goals and objectives.

- **Provide policy coherence by linking policies and reform efforts to objectives for student performance, curricular frameworks and assessments.**

An education system is a complex entity with parts that interact in ways that might not be immediately apparent. It is not enough to "fix" one part of the system with a new program or increased funding.

With overall responsibility for education policies and results, the school board is in a unique position to link the many different programs and functions of the school district. Few people on the district staff have a working knowledge of the entire spectrum of programs, how they may be duplicative, how resources are assigned to them or how they relate to the district's goals. This lack of coordination may be a factor in the limited success, or even failure, of education reform initiatives.

Once the board has agreed on a strategic plan, the board should examine how various programs and policies interact, complement or duplicate each another and how they might be combined to be more effective. To accomplish this goal, the board should consciously link policies such as categorical funding, accreditation, distribution of instructional resources and staff development to the agreed-upon outcomes for student learning and to the curricular frameworks.

- **Establish policies for staff development that ensure coherence with the district's education goals and objectives.**

Typically, education staff may enroll in almost any staff-development course or program they choose. It is rare for school districts to require that time or money devoted to staff development relate directly to the state member's responsibilities within the school or system.

Staff development efforts also are deficient in other ways. They are often one-shot events, available to staff only when they are already tired from regular duties. They usually do not offer participants either individual coaching or an opportunity to followup on what they have learned. School boards should take a more active role in defining staff development policies to ensure that the time and resources invested in staff development achieve their maximum benefit in terms of improved teaching and learning.

- **Develop a system for reviewing individual school performance on a regular and systematic basis.**

The school board should assess its education program at the individual school level. The school performance reports might include dropout, attendance and retention rates by grade, a summary of student assessment results, financial and budget data, and information about school staff and the condition of the school building. This information will give the board, the administration, parents and other citizens objective information to measure how well schools are meeting district goals.

The review also should focus on how schools set and make progress toward their own goals and objectives within the framework of the district's strategic plan. The board should give schools maximum flexibility in how they meet district goals, holding schools accountable

for results, not for the components of individual school plans.

- **Hire a qualified third party to hear and decide complaints and appeals on issues that affect individual students or staff, including disciplinary actions and grievances.**

In some districts, school-board members actually conduct classroom observations of individual students being considered for placement in special education. Boards frequently are enmeshed in disputes arising from administration of employee contracts. School boards must remove themselves from this often time-consuming, inappropriate, quasi-judicial role.

- **Establish a procedure outside the school board to hear and decide constituent complaints.**

Some parents see the school board as the ultimate course of appeal for all of their concerns, including the location of school bus stops and the food served in the cafeteria. As a result, many boards spend hours listening to and dealing with these constituent issues. These hours could be much better spent developing and overseeing the district's education policies.

- **Establish policies to facilitate and encourage cooperation and collaboration with appropriate units of general government and other agencies, organizations and institutions serving children, youth and families.**

An increasing number of students have complex health and social needs that affect their ability to succeed in school. States should require school boards, units of general government and other agencies to collect common demographic, needs assessment and service data and to plan jointly to meet identified needs. The state also could require school boards to meet regularly with other local governmental units to consider creating children policy councils to collaborate in meeting the needs of children in the community.

- **Convene community forums to discuss major education policy issues and provide leadership for public discussion.**

Community forums provide opportunities for the public to learn more about education issues, to have a say in how the district shapes its programs to meet both national and local needs and to receive progress reports on the district's efforts. The community meetings allow school board members an opportunity to provide leadership for educational change. This will help change public expectations about the role of the board.

- **Conduct a regular self-assessment of the school board, including community opinion.**

The board can focus the self-assessment on its progress toward achieving objectives in the strategic plan. The process allows the board to identify problems before they become serious and make necessary mid-course corrections. Community participation in the assessment process is important both to inform the board about public reaction to its work and to educate the public about the role of the board. The process will reinforce consensus on the community's education priorities.

- **Commit the school board to an ongoing process of learning and development based on the results of the self-assessment and on the need to keep pace with new developments in education policy and practice.**

Studies show that school boards spend very little time reflecting on the effectiveness of their practices or developing their expertise in education. As school boards become true education policy boards, its members need to make conscious and sustained efforts to be well-informed.

The State Role

There are few incentives and many disincentives for school districts to reform themselves. There is little evidence that most boards will commit to sustained training to improve their effectiveness. Urban boards are least likely to commit time and resources toward that end. Further, substantial turnover in board members occurs each year (approximately one-third across the nation). Training alone cannot produce sustainable reforms over time.

States must assume responsibility for school board reform. School boards are creatures of state law, and only the state can redefine the roles and responsibilities of boards. The degree and nature of state action needed to move school boards from old roles and practices to new, more productive ones will differ because of unique state contexts. In all cases, however, state policymakers should begin school board reform as a positive move to strengthen local governance, not as a punitive reform.

States are well-advised to involve the school board community, representatives of municipal and county government, superintendents, teachers, the business community and citizen groups in shaping this reform. States also should commit to transitional support for boards as they change into true education policy boards. Finally, states must undertake activities to educate the public to new expectations of their local school boards.

School-board restructuring will be politically difficult, perhaps the most volatile of all reforms. The process holds enormous potential, however, to create more highly functioning, more knowledgeable boards that are capable of meeting the challenges of school governance and reform.

"School-board restructuring will be politically difficult, perhaps the most volatile of all reforms."

EMBRACING THE CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND SPIRIT OF LEADERSHIP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Stephanie Pace Marshall

Leadership is the subject of more writing than any other aspect of organizational life and change. This paper attempts to define the critical components of this essential quality.

The scientists' view of the natural world always has had profound implications for how people construct their world and ground their institutions. When a paradigm shift occurs in science, the scientist's conception of the world changes. This is precisely what has happened with respect to our knowledge about organizational leadership.

Partially due to advances in computer technology, it is now possible to simulate the dynamics of complex adaptive systems. These are nonlinear systems that, because of their capacity to store and process information, can continuously learn, change and evolve in response to internal and external environmental conditions. Complex adaptive systems are the kind of system that must be created to ensure organizational viability over the long term. Leaders must be able to establish and maintain the conditions necessary for the emergence of these systems.

The Newtonian Legacy

For three centuries, the dominant scientific world view has been the image of a static, repetitive, predictable, linear, externally controlled universe. Sir Isaac Newton defined classical physics, the laws of gravitation and mechanics and the description of a deterministic world. This Newtonian world view supports linear systems and an exclusively rational course that have controlled almost every dimension of culture and organizational life.

Leaders constructed and operated Newtonian organizations as they understood the world. Leaders efficiently managed organizations by reducing them to discrete, observable and measurable parts. They created divisions, departments and rigidly closed systems. They focused on predictive cause and effect models of human behavior. Leaders designed formal hierarchies and linear structures, dividing people into management and labor. They forced compassion to compete with intellect. Most fundamentally, leaders believed that they could understand the behavior of the whole by studying its parts and that this understanding would lead to synthesis.

The applications of Newtonian ideas to organizations created learning-disabled institutions that suppressed individual creativity and the inherent human desire for growth and learning. They destroyed the organizational capacity for growth and change and diminished its capacity to harness the collective intelligence and spirit of the entire system.

The Quantum Age: Relational Order

The beginning of the 20th century brought an end to Newtonian domination. It presented a picture of an ecological universe — a holistic and dynamic system in which everything seems to affect everything else. The new view of science reveals a universe of order grounded in the interrelatedness and interdependence of things and designed for teaming.

The order that emerges from complex adaptive systems is relational. It is a function of a simple set of rules that govern the interaction of the components of a system to one another, and not the total system itself.

This systemic and interconnected world view challenges conventional assumptions about organizational leadership. The current context of organizations — reflecting the belief in a linear, hierarchy-controlled and rigidly structured world — must be reframed so that self-organizing, complex adaptive systems can emerge. Complex adaptive systems are held together by a compelling and shared vision of what they can become, a deep set of core beliefs and values and a commitment to common goals.

The conditions necessary for organizational transformation are individual freedom of choice and collective responsibility for the whole; autonomy and interconnections; increasing diversity and differentiation and integration; and increasing organizational complexity derived from the establishment of simple relational "rules."

Making Organizational Transformation Possible — Becoming a Self-Organizing System

Growth and evolution in living systems do not result from the maximum use or leveraging of system components. They emerge from the whole system's natural desire for self-organization. What creates self-organization in living systems? Research in natural systems suggests that self-organization will emerge from the dynamic connections of three domains: **self-reference** (organizational identity), **information** and **relationships.**

To build the adaptive capacity of everyone in an organization and to ensure the organization's future through continuous learning, leaders must engage in new work. They must create the conditions that connect identity, information and relationships to the system's larger purpose.

Self-reference encompasses the organization's identity, meaning and purpose. It provides the coherence around which system stability emerges. Self-reference promotes order and transformation even in turbulent environments because it provides the constant frame of reference (strange attractor) for organizational integrity and self-renewal.

Organizations and people have the capacity for self-reference when purpose and meaning are clear and when leaders create the following conditions:

- **Bring people in the system together to think about the system and to make decisions for the system.** Often people are not aware of their connections to others. Leaders must engage the system members in problem-posing and problem-solving. People must understand who "belongs" to that system.
- **Involve the expertise and experience of everyone in the system** in creating the organization's fundamental beliefs, values and shared purpose (mission) and encourage people to organize around them.
- **Clearly and continuously "identify" the patterns in the organization** — what the organization is trying to accomplish and how each individual is connected to that future.
- **Promote an organizational mindset** and a sense of belonging to a larger purpose.

- **Make decisions at the "local level"** based upon a strong sense of organizational identity.
- **Promote individual and organizational freedom and efficacy.**

The second domain is **information.** According to author Meg Wheatley, "[information] is the self-generating source of organizational vitality." Without a constant flow of information both to excite and disturb the system, the system will become closed and isolated. Information is, therefore, the life source of human systems. What conditions can leaders create to ensure its vigor?

- Create open and multiple pathways for communication.
- Infuse the organization with abundant information.
- Welcome paradoxical and disturbing information into the system and encourage people to publicly discuss it
- Allow information to move everywhere in the system.
- Continually generate and share new knowledge based on the constant flow of information to everyone in the system.
- Promote honest debate, reactions and interaction.
- Keep the rules simple for detecting, processing and integrating information within the system.
- Seek out information that is complex and ambiguous.
- Encourage frequent and rapid experimentation.

The third domain is **relationships.** This domain represents the "neural network" of the organization and establishes its capacity for participation, engagement and interconnectedness. The relational capacity of organizations determines their degree of resiliency.

Unless people feel connected to the organization and its members, they cannot identify with its purpose or generate and use its information for growth. Leaders can create the following conditions to ease relationships.

- Create networks and webs of exchange and generative communication.
- Establish open access to everyone in the system.
- Promote diversity of all kinds.
- Seek opportunities to engage as many people as possible in debate to reinforce their interdependency and sense of shared purpose.
- Distribute power throughout the system.
- Encourage people to act simultaneously and to coordinate their actions with one another.
- Establish internal and external alliances and partnerships.
- Cultivate mutual interdependence.
- Build capacity for reflective collective inquiry and collaborative accountability.
- Make organizational boundaries permeable and flexible.
- Build organizational capacity to adjust to discontinuous change.
- Avoid "neatness," tolerate "messiness" and enable relationships to be redundant and overlapping.

After establishing the conditions for self-organization, leaders can focus the organization on the creation of structures and processes that will allow information, work and people to interact. It is this interaction that ensures the capacity for continuous system adaptation. The structures created must support both organizational purpose and interactional conditions. Therefore, they must reflect the rules that establish organizational identity, access to information and collaborative relationships. Imposed structures create artificial boundaries that inhibit natural adaptation to change. Structures must be

organized around naturally occurring processes and relationships.

Dialogue is an essential condition in each of the three domains of self-organization and their interaction. It is a process that leaders must understand well.

As leaders commit themselves to creating shared meaning, generative information and effective relationships, dialogue is the means by which an organization can develop a common language, clarify assumptions, pose problems and extend understanding. The practice of dialogue creates the common ground for both organizational discernment -- understanding "who we are" — and coherence — understanding "why we belong together."

As leaders create self-organizing systems, they must ask several questions of their organizations:

- What are the sources of organizational identity and where do they come from?
- What structures can be built that will support and celebrate learning, enable rather than deplete, evoke rather than direct and be fluid and flexible over time?
- How can individual need for autonomy and freedom be connected with the organization's need for purpose and identity?
- What simple "rules" might enable complex teaming, creativity, experimentation and growth to occur?
- What are the "strange attracters" of the organization? Are these forces understood by all? How can the organization sustain their power?
- Is the organization fully engaging its capacity to develop?
- What old skills does the organization need to discard to support self-organization?
- How can the organization ensure that environmental information is invited into the system?
- How can organizational boundaries be made more permeable while maintaining security and trust?
- How are networks created to sustain relationships and meaning?
- How does the organization permit failure and what does failure look like in the organization?

New Visions of Leadership

Leaders cannot change what they do until they change how they think. And they cannot change how they think until they change who they are. Rather than create "to do" lists of discrete tasks to accomplish, 21st century leaders must create "to be" lists of relationships to build.

Understanding the interdependence of the natural world creates the intellectual and conceptual coherence for a new vision of leadership. The vision remains incomplete, however, without the authentic engagement of the leader's heart and soul. In *Leading with Soul*, authors Terry Deal and Lee Bolman affirm this essential connection. "Leadership is a relationship rooted in community." Its essence is "not giving things or even providing visions. It is offering one's self and one's spirit."

"Rather than create 'to do' lists of discrete tasks to accomplish, 21st century leaders must create 'to be' lists of relationships to build."

The world of new science suggests that in order to create learning organizations for the 21st century, leaders must see their organizations as dynamic, self-organizing systems, designed to renew themselves by relationships from within. Leaders need not re-engineer a new organizational structure, but simply enable the creation of structures and

processes that adapt to the dynamics of life. Leaders do not need to have all the answers. What they do need, Wheatley suggests, is to "trust that something as simple as a clear core of values and vision kept in motion through continuing and purposeful dialogue can lead to order."

The Newtonian world view created a mechanistic and machine-based metaphor for leadership. Now we know better. Today, the metaphor for leadership comes bnt from the "biologic" of living systems and the ways they organize, adapt and change. Wheatley s.:tes the challenge well when she says, "I believe that we have only just begun the process of discovering and inventing the new organizational forms that will inhabit the 21st Century. To be responsible inventors and discoverers, though, we need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we have cherished and to abandon our interpretations about what does and does not work."

Leaders must:

- Seek to gain insight from the paradoxes that continuously confront their systems.
- Create comfort with ambiguity.
- Facilitate authentic debate.
- Promote diversity of all kinds.
- Bombard the system with information (sometimes even to create temporary confusion).
- Establish communal relationships of meaning by inviting the hearts and souls of people into the workplace.
- Look for patterns and relation ships and explicitly identify them in order to promote the organization's sense of "self."
- Celebrate the power of community and the human spirit.
- Create common language to build common meaning.
- Create trusting, "response-able" and "love-able" organizational communities.

Until recently, the threats to organizational survival were largely external in nature, driven by events that leaders could strategically defend against. Now the threats are mostly internal, and their dynamics and complexity require leaders who can think and act in integrative, systemic and "spiritful" ways. The vision of leadership has changed from knowing how to control to knowing how to unleash the synergy of the system. This isboth the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity of leadership in the 21st century.

"The vision of leadership has changed from knowing how to control to knowing how to unleash the synergy of the system. This is both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity of leadership in the 21st century."

THE NEW AMERICAN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT: A CONCLUSION

Christine Johnson

The earlier ECS document, *A Framework for Urban Hope*, asserts that states are obligated to take action when an aspect of the education system is struggling. Further, the document argues that states have the responsibility to design education systems that provide a continuum of discernible options to meet the diverse needs of children who learn in different ways and at different rates.

Nowhere is the need for such state intervention more evident than in the urban setting. School districts as legal entities of the state were created for a different time to carry out a different role than the one required today. School districts were created to deliver a standard, uniform education that met the needs of agricultural and industrial societies. Today, the needs of an information society demand highly customized, flexible delivery systems that current school districts simply are not designed to implement.

America's increasingly international character, cultural and economic fragmentation, the bewildering pace of change and growing estrangement with public institutions have heaped responsibilities on urban education systems that push them beyond their capacity to serve the public well. The result is urban districts are under siege, widely acknowledged to be too broken to respond adequately to even the immediate challenges. No one questions that the challenge in city systems is amplified by poverty, hopelessness and a crumbling social compact, but the public recognizes that urban districts are largely untouched by reform and that traditions submerge and undercut fragile change efforts.

The bottom line is that so little accountability for student achievement exists that the system itself has been reluctant to embrace necessary change and too often embraces practices that should be abandoned if students are to succeed. This erosion of public trust has resulted in diminished political and economic investment at a time of greatest need.

It is becoming obvious that a wholesale redesign of urban districts is needed to support multiple models of high performing schools. A "New American School District" is needed to change education in urban areas. Policies and procedures must facilitate change, not hinder it. All aspects of the enterprise must be challenged to build urban systems that interact with parents, students and communities in stronger, more responsive ways.

Citizens across the country are ready to meet these challenges, and bold policymakers are creating the environment to make the necessary change. Much challenging work lies ahead if urban districts are to be dramatically different from current ones.

"We have it in our power to begin the world all over again."
— Thomas Paine

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