Searching for Coherence

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"For every complicated problem, there is a solution that is direct, understandable, and wrong."
— H. L Mencken

We have overwhelming data that while our nation's high schools serve some students well, they serve yet more students poorly, and many others not at all:

- About 70 percent of the nation's ninth graders graduate from high school four years later, but far fewer students of color, or students who are raised in low-income families;

- Four of ten white students, fewer than a quarter of African-American students, and only one fifth of Hispanic students leave high school college-ready;

- About half of the students who go on to further education need to take at least one remedial course in math or English;

- Based on race, family income, or where students live, we can predict with disappointing accuracy who will succeed or fail in high school.

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Since *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, one conclusion is clear: in this increasingly fractious society, even if we could reach substantial agreement about what the problems facing K-12 education in America actually are, no single – or simple – solution will solve them. We understand that multiple strategies are needed, but the absence of a coherent approach frequently results in educators working at cross-purposes at every level of the system.

In the end, of course, all that matters is what happens in the classroom among teachers and students. Pragmatically, however, our strategy in both our CES work and small schools work has been to focus our energies on the school as the primary unit of change, knowing that teacher practice is profoundly affected, for good or ill, by the culture and structure surrounding the teacher. Good schools are a prime example of an institution where the sum is greater than its individual parts. Every student needs and deserves a school full of fine teachers who have a coherent approach to teaching and learning, supported by a culture that builds and relies upon teacher judgment to promote both excellence and equity.

Our experience over the past five years is that strong small schools will not thrive without the active support of their districts. They may survive after a fashion, but schools that have vibrant, effective cultures and designs typically find themselves spending increasing amounts of energy simply surviving in the face of the current wave of standardization and recentralization of authority.

A few years ago, observers spoke often of "Christmas tree" schools or districts – schools or districts proud of incorporating almost every new reform idea or package on the market or in print. Sometimes the strategy was deliberate, representing attempts to be "eclectic." More often, no overall strategy existed to guide decision-makers. While each program or approach might have been fine on its own merits, taken together, they often resulted in uncertainty and confusion, if not chaos.

That approach persists in many districts today, heightened in many cases by the rapidly increasing percentage of the nation's schools on one "failing school" list or another. Other districts are becoming better at focusing their resources in fewer areas. Some of those districts also understand that increased student learning depends foremost on increased adult learning, not on the use of prepackaged curricula and tests.

What these districts appear to struggle with most is, not surprisingly, how to differentiate between and among schools with varying needs – just as they expect teachers to differentiate between and among students with varying needs – without sacrificing the twin goals of equity and excellence.

Background
The Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest/Small Schools Project (CESNW/SSP) works with schools and districts to help them shape and then implement a coherent strategy that will lead to a redesigned system that "treats all students as if they were precious," to paraphrase Bill Gates, Sr.

Since 2001, CESNW/SSP has provided technical assistance in the form of professional development and on-site coaching to grantees of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Washington State that agreed to redesign their existing high schools so they are characterized by a high degree of personalization and a commitment to graduating each student ready for college, work, and citizenship. We now work in Georgia and North Carolina, as well. Over the past six years, we have collaborated with three dozen comprehensive high schools converting into small schools or smaller learning communities (SLCs). Of those schools, 30 are in one of 11 multiple high school districts.

Two powerful influences have shaped our work. The CES Common Principles serve as our touchstone, even though the majority of schools we have collaborated with are not affiliated with CES, nor are they particularly aware of the principles. But "Coalition ideas" – a high degree of personalization, common goals for all students, teachers as collaborators and generalists, a focused curriculum, placing the locus of authority for decision making in the hands of adults closest to students – permeate every aspect of our efforts.

Most visibly, our work also reflects the Gates Foundation's early commitment to promoting the development of small schools, either starting them from scratch or "converting" existing large, comprehensive high schools into a set of separate small schools sharing the same site. The Foundation developed a set of "seven attributes of high achievement schools," derived in large measure from the CES Common Principles, to guide the work of grantees. It also identified "essential components of teaching and learning" – its gloss of the work of John Bransford and colleagues in How People Learn – and used language anyone from a CES school anywhere would recognize immediately.

Until two years ago, most of our work was at the school level, in large part because of the nature of grants awarded in Washington State, where we focused on changes in culture, structure, and practice. Over time, the Foundation's leaders came to understand more fully the complexity of the changes its goals require, and its focus is now more fully on systemic reform. The current round of grants in Washington State is focused on systems alignment and went to districts to ensure that all aspects of districts' operations support the goal of graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship. One of the results of setting this goal is an increased focus on instruction at all levels of the system.

While we draw on our experience across all of our conversion work, this article highlights efforts taking place in two multiple high school districts we currently work with. We don't think of them as successful districts, yet. We don't know any better than they do what tomorrow will bring, or whether they will have the wisdom, skill, and courage to make the right moves at the right time, or the stamina to see this effort through to its logical end: a system of schools that delivers on the promise of an excellent and equitable school for each student. What we do believe is that a coherent strategy is emerging in each of these districts, and that they have two key characteristics in common: replacing large, comprehensive high schools with highly personalized schools, and concentrating on adult learning.

Both districts now speak in terms of a portfolio of high schools from which families may choose. Cascades School District will move from two comprehensive high schools to a combination of high school options: a complex housing three separate schools, an SLC school with seven academies, and a new small secondary school. Olympic Public Schools has moved from four comprehensive high schools to two three-school complexes, two SLC campuses hosting eight academies, and two new small schools on their own sites.

Adult Learning in Service of Student Learning
Much of our work with district leaders parallels our work with school leaders. We see district leaders who are every bit as intellectually clear and as passionate as school leaders about the need to change their systems

to create and support excellent and equitable schools. District leaders are eloquent and relentless in making the case for substantial change in the ways high schools operate. They agree without hesitation that districts, too, will need to change before high schools can serve each student well. And, like most adults in high schools, they think that change really means that other people in the system need to change. Their own job is to help those other people change.

Why would we expect anything else? The one thing we know with relative certainty about change is that most of us resist it. As limiting or confining as present circumstances may be, most of us have found a way to manage within those boundaries. If we think about changing those circumstances, we mostly think about how to remove the impediments we believe keep us from doing better, or more readily, what we're currently doing. Change is for other people.

In "The Other 3 R's," a recent article for the *Journal of Staff Development* based on a three-year study of instructional change in seven small schools, we maintained that for students to learn deeply, the adults who teach them must also learn and continue learning even while they are teaching. We also argued that it is only in the examination of beliefs and practices challenged by the need to adapt to changed structures and expectations that adult learning becomes a transformational experience – one which challenges or changes a person's beliefs and behavior.

We make the same argument in our systems work. Commitment to the goal of graduating each student college-ready forces districts to examine the various structures, practices, and cultures that define them. It is the "each student" as much as the "college-ready" that declares old ways of working unacceptable. To be successful, these districts will need to bring about a significant change in the beliefs and behavior of all members of the system (e.g., board members, administrators, support staff, teachers, students, and parents). Leaders must recognize that the old Ted Sizer dictum that "everybody stays, but everybody changes" applies at the district as well as the school level.

Our recent work has uncovered issues that elicit new questions about systems. For example:

- How can a system build coherence while simultaneously granting authority and responsibility to individual schools to make significant decisions that affect student achievement?

- What does "district support" mean and what does it look like when schools take diverse approaches to ensure that their students learn? What is an equitable distribution of resources when both students and schools have different needs, and how will this be calculated?

- What structural changes need to be made as instructionally diverse "best practices" take hold across the system? How will the system meet non-traditional logistical and learning demands arising when, for example, a school adopts inquiry- or project-based learning initiatives as a primary mode of instruction?

- What cultural changes need to be made as teaching, learning, and leading become increasingly collaborative? How will the system incorporate time for collaboration and the development of adult learning communities at all levels of the system during the normal work day?

- How can a system build a culture of mutual accountability that is not primarily hierarchical, and that recognizes accountability as multi-directional rather than vertical?

- What data matters to whom, and how can we collect, analyze and distribute data effectively to people at all levels of the system?

A key aspect of understanding the complexity involved in systems change lies in recognizing systems change as largely a problem of adult learning. Starting from that point, both the CES Common Principles and our growing knowledge of how people learn suggest a set of strategies for moving forward. In what follows, we outline four areas in which a systems refocus on instruction creates a deeper understanding of the challenges of systemic change.

Differentiation vs. Standardization
Personalization is one of the defining features of both CES schools and small schools, and is a key element in changing culture, structure, and practice across a system as well as within a school. We define

personalization in a way that connects it directly to student learning: students have a sense of belonging, adults know students well enough so that instruction can be tailored to individual students, and students trust teachers sufficiently to grant them moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners.

That same definition can be applied across a system, with adults as well as students. At the classroom level, personalization typically leads to greater differentiation of learning experiences for students. As leaders grapple with building capacity among adults in their systems (including themselves), there is a growing sense in both the Cascades and Olympic school districts that professional development opportunities for teachers and school administrators need to be differentiated based on the needs of the individuals in those positions. All teachers do not have the same knowledge and experience in their content and pedagogy. Nor do all administrators have the same knowledge and experience in providing instructional leadership or in working in collaborative groups. Two related factors appear to be making differentiation difficult. The first is the lure of standardization (a field full of red tulips can indeed be stunning) and its illusion of predictable outcomes. The second is the capacity and will of each district to provide differentiated support, when the prevailing presumption is that the necessary expertise and leadership reside at the district level.

Administrators in the Cascades school district are struggling to find ways to build coherence across the system and yet allow for different approaches to teaching, curriculum, and site-based management. The district has convened a working group charged with creating a set of common expectations and characteristics for course syllabi across the district yet leaving room for individual teacher creativity and initiative. As one administrator described it, "We don't want to tell you what every course has to look like, but these are the things that we expect to see in every syllabus, the common threads that we expect all teachers to include."

In another example, the district has created documents that lay out the vision of quality instruction for the district. This set of documents includes six elements that focus learning on such factors as disciplinary understanding and ongoing relevant assessment. The intent of this work is to develop a common understanding without dictating how these elements are incorporated into the classroom. According to one district administrator, "[We created these documents] so that we all understand what 'understanding' means and what a performance of understanding means. But [the performances of understanding] in your classroom are really going to be unique to your classroom. ...We are really not trying to create cookie cutter teachers."

For several years, the Olympic School District has invested heavily in developing a common approach to literacy instruction across the district. While the approach has required quite substantial changes in teaching practice for most teachers, the approach also expects that teachers will exercise considerable judgment in determining what individual students as well as classes need to improve their literacy. The approach has taken hold at many sites, but has not yet spread much beyond those language arts teachers who have received intensive support.

The district also recently finished a curriculum audit, which showed that "everybody does whatever they want." Administrators recognize that "some people are taking advantage of that benign neglect to do some amazing things." But district administrators also recognize that to address their equity agenda to prepare all students for college, career, and citizenship, they need to build principal capacity as instructional leaders "so that when [schools are] doing their own thing it's good. If we leave it up to people completely, we'll get a very mixed picture of what people think rigor looks like as they try to implement it in the classroom." Plans for addressing this are undecided at this point, but the issue highlights the ongoing coherence-standardization tension already in play.

While schools seek authority to make critical decisions at the school level, and district leaders see that some principals have the capacity to do that, the urge to standardize across schools remains strong, and often serves as the "default" strategy. In the Olympic school district, the superintendent's instinct is to decentralize as much as possible because she believes those closest to the kids are the best decision makers. But she still needs to feel confident about offering equitable educational options across the district. She stated, "If we are not able to connect our strategies together, and if I can't articulate what School A is doing to get to the goals and what School B is doing to get to the goals, then it begins to look like this 'not connected' chaos. An organizational development theorist might say that's what you need...but when you're trying to pass a levy or a bond, some other theories start to emerge about the way schools should function."

Capacity Building
With a refocus on instruction, school and district administrators are realizing that they need instructional leaders who can coach teachers as well as hold the vision for the reform/redesign. At the school level, capacity building concentrates on encouraging teachers to take responsibility for their own continuous learning and for being part of a collaborative learning community. For the past five years, the small schools in one conversion high school in the Cascades school district have taken responsibility for their own professional development, creating a professional development plan based on their needs and the needs of their students and then implementing the plan with the assistance of school-based coaches.

At the building and district level, capacity building focuses on having the right person with the right skills in the right job – as principal, instructional leader, or administrator in charge of instruction. This is particularly important when dealing with issues of school authority and site-based decision making. In the midst of reform/redesign, schools and districts need leaders who can successfully balance the district's need for coherence with the school's need to exercise judgment and authority over matters of teaching and learning. How do systems build capacity for that? Both districts have taken some early steps to do so, primarily by seeking to deepen the understanding of district leaders.

Olympic's district administrators are still "in the murky waters of autonomy," trying to figure out where they can provide schools more authority that is aligned with accountability. At the same time, they realize they need to build leaders' capacity to handle authority and move their schools forward in agreed-upon parameters. The superintendent explains, "Having a system with autonomy requires that you have a healthy interdependence of the adults who work here. If autonomy is something you grant or give permission around…[first] you have to build a healthy organization, where that interdependence exists, all in the name of student achievement."

The Olympic superintendent realized she needed to learn more herself. In particular, she felt that she needed a better understanding of her schools, in part because she recognizes the limitations of not having teaching experience herself. She asked a CESNW/SSP district coach (a former teacher) to join her on walk-throughs of each school to help her think about what she saw, and what teacher needs appear to remain unmet. She hopes to make walk-throughs a regular part of her senior staff's agenda this year in order to keep district administrators "connected with what classroom practices look like."

Cascades's district administrators are each members of a particular school site council and attend monthly meetings at schools. Each administrator also belongs to a professional development study group with school level administrators and coaches that meets monthly to read texts, conduct classroom walk-throughs and discuss instruction. The district goal is to infuse district-level planning and actions of administrators with a current understanding of their schools' daily realities.

Allocation and Use of Resources
Significant systems change – "each student college-ready" – requires different resources. As these two school systems continue to align their practices with their college-ready goal, demands for resources shift, and allocation of resources can become an impediment to instructional improvement. Resources include such elements as professional development and coaching as well as funding for special programs, transportation, and support materials in different subject areas. Increasing differentiation between and among schools in the two districts challenges traditional methods of resource allocation and raises questions of equity, illuminating the ongoing tension between district standardization and school-based differentiation.

As part of a district-wide literacy initiative, for instance, every high school campus in the Olympic district received the same number of embedded coaching days, regardless of school size, the number of schools on a campus, or the number of struggling readers. Several principals balked. As one put it, "there are no clear indicators of how and why embedded coaching is determined, except that we don't want to piss people off. If we don't do it all the same, someone is going to be mad." Even in districts working to differentiate based on need, old habits of resource allocation die hard.

Allocation and use of resources also became an issue in the Cascades school district with regard to their district-wide professional development model based on six elements of quality instruction laid out by the district. Although each school chooses one of the six elements to work on each year, at the end of the last

school year district administrators explained that the district could only support three elements at one time and asked all of the schools in the district to focus on one of these three elements regardless of the school's site-based needs. When asked whether this was an issue of resources, the district administrator in charge of teaching and learning explained that it was a question of the capacity of the delivery model. Professional development in the Cascades school district is delivered through colleague groups that meet across schools. The district could not support a single school working on an element by itself. The Cascades district administrators chose to allocate their resources toward a professional development model driven by the central office (albeit with some room for individual school choice) rather than support a more decentralized model.

Use of Data
During the initial push for reform/redesign efforts in school districts, data points (e.g., graduation rates, failure rates, drop out rates, achievement rates measured by standardized assessment scores) are often used to build a sense of urgency for making transformative changes. As reform efforts have continued and schools and districts refocus on instruction, primary data needs often shift to reflect new efforts to differentiate among learners (student and adult) and new kinds of administrative decision making.

Both personalization and differentiation increase teachers' need for accurate and timely student data. Heightened attention to raising student achievement levels and meeting NCLB targets has increased district administrators' need for data. While teachers may realize some benefit from looking at the large-scale (and usually outdated) data that district leaders need, their more important needs are for fine-grained and almost-overnight data beyond the in-the-moment data they might gather on their own.

For example, in the Cascades school district, standardized test data is collected and analyzed intensely at the district level, but that same data does not seem to inform teacher practice as much. In a small school team meeting, Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) scores from the past year were handed out to teachers to look at and comment on. Teachers looked at the scores for about five minutes and that was the end of the discussion.

A teacher in this same school was struggling to gather information about whether or not her students understood the work they were turning in and did not know how to gather that information. She used one-on-one conferencing but was still not sure if her students understood. She said, "I conference with [the students] to make sure they're on track but I'm not really assessing their understanding at all. So I'm trying to figure out a way to create an authentic, quick, easy way for me to check. They write a paragraph, and show it to me and we read through it and talk about it and I sign off but I'm not really sure how they're understanding it." The data she needed in that moment to improve her practice was not WASL scores provided by the district.

A move toward more collective and transparent administrative decision-making has also increased the need for a different kind of data (feedback, reflections, surveys, student work) to inform leaders about how well things are working (e.g., professional development activities, new instructional initiatives, etc.). In general, both schools and districts are inconsistent and inexperienced at collecting and using this kind of data.

In the Olympic School District, the challenge to define, collect, and access data is exacerbated by a pressing request from the school board for information on how small schools are working. The district's policy calls for assessments of student achievement and various stakeholders' satisfaction as a way to determine if the small schools strategy is the best investment of resources. The board is particularly concerned about student outcomes, and they consider lack of rigor to be an issue in the schools. The superintendent feels pressure to get some data back and show results in the 2007-2008 school year. As she put it, "We've got to determine a set of student achievement metrics that we're going to monitor. Then, how are individual teachers making the progress toward those metrics? WASL is not going away, so that will be one of them. But there are the interim assessments like MAP [Measures of Academic Progress, a state-aligned computerized adaptive assessment program]. Are kids gaining over the course of time?"

While the Olympic School District is committed to the rigorous goal of graduating all students ready for college, career, and citizenship, the district has yet to identify a common definition or understanding of what rigor looks like in the classroom. Nor has anyone determined which data can measure rigor. Reporting quarterly grades or Advanced Placement (AP) class offerings and test results conflicts with small school

schedules and with several small schools' decision not to offer AP classes. Because the district cannot describe rigor in a specific and clear way, administrators end up accepting proxies like AP classes and quarterly grades in place of specific data about rigorous teaching and learning. This use of proxies brings the district into conflict with decisions made at the small school level. How the district will measure student achievement is still undecided. Clearly, the WASL will remain one important metric. But, what interim assessments will measure students' progress? How will data be gathered, both informally and formally, and by whom? How will data be disseminated and will it be used?

Conclusion

What we see in these two districts is both encouraging and daunting. Both districts, and their high schools, appear committed to the goal of serving all students well, and graduating them with the skills and knowledge they will need to have real choices after high school. They believe strongly that they can end the educational inequities that plague their – and our – schools. They work hard, and sometimes wisely. They have good leaders, by and large. At times, they are able to overcome the challenges of changing practice.

They also seem, at times, to be held hostage to their own histories and to expectations of others about the roles that district leaders, building leaders, and teachers play in a system. Their efforts at more collegial relationships – the "healthy interdependence of adults" that one superintendent describes – still bang up against older practices based on hierarchy. Schools and districts are working to develop more useful descriptors of student accomplishment – in both districts Exhibitions play a prominent role in several schools – but are limited by a narrow description of what is acceptable evidence in their own communities as well as in the larger world.

Both districts struggle as they move toward differentiation. Images of district-level differentiation of policies and practices that allow and support schools in taking different paths to the same end – that is, meet a common standard – remain tantalizingly elusive. As a consequence, we see district and school leaders resist, with only partial success.

The focus in both districts on creating smaller, more personalized high schools and on supporting adult learning holds considerable promise and has moved these districts forward in substantial ways over the past five years. Their skill in carving a path based on differentiation rather than standardization may determine whether they are able to reach the standards they have set for themselves, their school, and their students.

The Small Schools Project, part of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest, was created in 2000 to promote the understanding and development of small schools committed to providing rigorous, relevant learning experiences for all students, based on powerful relationships that support this learning. We provide support and assistance to high schools and districts committed to high school redesign and graduating all students college and work-ready.

The Project offers a range of services, including school and district coaching and professional development activities for educators and administrators. We create a variety of publications about small schools and produce hands-on tools to use in the classroom, school, district, and community. For more information, visit us at www.smallschoolsproject.org.

Seven Attributes of High Achievement Schools

- Common Focus
- Time to Collaborate
- High Expectations
- Performance Based
- Technology as a Tool
- Personalized
- Respect and Responsibility

Essential Components of Teaching and Learning

- Active Inquiry
- In-Depth Learning
- Performance Assessment

Information for this article is drawn from data collected in the two districts during the 2006-2007 school year. CESNW/Small Schools Project researchers conducted classroom observations, job shadowing, and interviews, and attended professional development activities as well as administrative planning meetings. We've changed the names and minor details about the districts in an effort to provide anonymity, since they are a part of ongoing research at this time.

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