

Urban School Reform and the Strange Attractor of Low-Risk Relationships

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Abstract

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, school leaders in a newly decentralized school system were forced to reach out to external organizations for partnerships- a job that has resided primarily in the central office before the storm. The necessity of these contacts and the quantity of newly independent schools make a unique context for studying how school leaders think and act in relation to external partnerships. Iterative interviews with 10 New Orleans principals reveal a range of external partnerships that can be classified into a three part taxonomy consisting of charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. A discussion of low-risk relationships and the importance of utilizing feedback relationships concludes the paper.

Introduction

While the call for schools and other organizations to be sensitive to feedback from their environment is not new (Ackoff, 1974; Banathy, 1991; Halpin, 1966, Senge, 1990), it has gained increased attention with the rise of chaos and complexity theories as important paradigms for explaining and examining organizational behavior (Fullan, 2000; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Morrison, 2002;). The mixed results of recent government-led reforms in many industrialized countries (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2008) should give us pause in our quest to create educational change with business models of performance quotas. Hopkins (2007) recognizes that policies as levers of change have had at best spotty success in changing our schools, and thus lists four alternative drivers for school system reform: *personalized learning, professional teaching, intelligent accountability, and networks and collaboration*. This paper seeks to establish some empirical basis for both the benefits and challenges of Hopkins' last concept. The perspectives of ten school principals in the New Orleans Public Schools show that they have forged charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships, with the majority of examples coming in the first two levels.

Nationally, all schools have a myriad of connections to the outside environment ranging from vendors, to the district office, teachers unions, parent groups, business partners, and athletic conferences. I do not argue that schools need to find *completely new* partnerships, but that they must be strategic in the types of partnerships they engage in. Having too many partnerships results in information overload, a lack of coherence (Fullan, 2001), or shallow implementation of multiple reforms- what Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow & Easton (1998,) term “Christmas tree schools.” Instead of succumbing to information overload, schools must foster “just enough” (Doll, 2008) of this external information so that they remain open to change without losing its “unique personality” (Tye, 2000). Even though these external relationships can be difficult to establish and maintain, they have, in some forms, the potential to give schools the ideas, resources, and feedback that they need to be viable social institutions. Muncey & McQuillan (1996), while drawing conclusions from their 5 year ethnographic study of several schools working with Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools reform, implore schools to:

seek informed and supportive outside perspectives while developing, implementing, and assessing any efforts at change... outsiders may be able to see, and to clarify for others, the multiple perspectives that are informing (and perhaps impeding) discussions about and efforts at reform (p.283).

While they referred to their role as external researchers embedded in a study of school reform, it seems logical that external organizations, instead of external individuals, could provide a similar benefit to schools engaged in change. Troublingly, the results reported here show that while schools in this sample *are* establishing external relationships, they tend towards establishing low-risk relationships that are more likely to provide donations or technical support rather than feedback relationships that consist of ongoing communication, an instructional focus, and a certain level of collective investment in the success of both parties. This analysis of the types of relationships schools enter into with external groups provides a basis for further examination of how these relationships can best further the

process of change.

The Research Context

Between August 2005 and March 2009, the New Orleans Public Schools have undergone perhaps more structural change than any other district in the modern history of the US. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Public Schools was a district with 127 schools under the leadership of an elected school board. A handful of magnet schools served a small middle class and white student population, but the overwhelming majority of schools in the district were poor and African-American. During the 2004-05 school year in New Orleans, 63% of the public schools were labeled *academically unacceptable* by the state due to low test scores and attendance rates (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). In terms of student achievement, the most recent pre-Katrina published results show that 55% of the city's 4th graders scored below a basic level in reading and 59% of them scored below basic in math. For the high school students in the district, 59% scored below basic in language arts while 61% were below basic in math (*ibid.*).

After the storm, President Bush offered \$21 million in federal aid to rebuild schools with the caveat that it could only be used for charter schools (Ritea, 2005). A number of schools quickly converted to charter status to get access to the rebuilding money. In November, the state legislature took over all public schools in the city that had performed poorly on achievement tests and placed them in a the Recovery School District (RSD) which was to be run by the state and whose superintendent was to be appointed by the state's highest education official (Anderson, 2005). Almost four years later, this series of structural changes has left the district as the nation's most charter-intensive district. A recent report indicates that when students return to school in Fall 2009, they will have 54 charter schools to choose from, along with 38 non-charter schools operated by the RSD (33 schools) or the school board (5 schools) (The New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools, 2009).

Despite these massive structural changes, the makeup of the student population and the challenges they face in receiving a quality education are familiar to those involved with the district before the storm. There has been no influx of middle class white students to the district as one official initially predicted (Inskeep, 2005). While the post-storm student population is 57% of the pre-Katrina figure, there is little debate that the city's public schools serve a population that is overwhelmingly poor and African American. A 2008 report states that 83% of students in the district (regardless of which type of public school) qualify for free and reduced lunch, while 95% of the students are non-white (The State of Public Education in New Orleans, 2008). This report also indicates the large number of students who are performing below grade level, struggling to get required special education services, and suffering from unaddressed storm-related mental trauma.

As this long-struggling public school system recreates itself in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a number of outside organizations have entered the educational arena in the city (Beabout, 2008). Offering everything from facilities management, to special education services, to teacher professional development, these organizations have moved into the void created by the collapse of the mammoth central office operations of the pre-Katrina district. This inquiry examines these new relationships between urban public schools and external organizations in hopes of finding lessons that schools can efficiently leverage these partnerships for the improvement of their schools.

Conceptual Framework

This inquiry applies social systems theory and complexity theory to the relationships that schools in post-Katrina New Orleans have forged with external organizations. All social systems are *open* systems in that they are not machine-like constructions that operate unchangingly based up on preset rules (Banathy, 1996). Open systems operate on systemic feedback which gives information to the system from its environment. There are two types of systemic feedback: positive feedback and

negative feedback (Hutchins, 1996). Negative feedback (or regulatory feedback) works like a thermostat by sensing current conditions and suggesting changes to keep the system on its present course. Positive feedback (or amplifying feedback) assesses whether the course which the system is on is a good or not. Positive feedback can offer suggested changes in system performance to avoid organizational decline or death. This study is premised on the notion that external partnerships have the potential to provide both regulatory and amplifying feedback to schools. As sources of this important information, these external organizations can potentially have vital roles in educational improvement. This is not to say that once the system decides to change course that the problem of implementing change is trivial. Both selecting new methods of operating urban schools and implementing these methods are extremely arduous tasks (Sarason, 1990; Vibert & Portelli, 2001). Principals must attend to the multiple, conflicting elements in the cacophony of feedback and interpret these messages collaboratively to guide practice (Riley, 2004). Nonetheless, access to this feedback is an integral part of the educational change puzzle.

Literature on Schools and external relationships

Recent literature on school-community partnerships describe the immense challenges and huge benefits that are a part of the process of schools connecting with their environments. While much of this literature surrounds the important relationships between parents and schools (Epstein, 2001; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg, 2005), I will focus here on the group-to-group relationships instead of the group-to-individual relationships often involved when individual parents interact with the school. Thus, I will deal here with the role of parent groups (PTO, PTA, etc) but not the interaction of schools with individual parents. I do this because of my interest in the ability of these groups to provide more sustained and forceful feedback to schools than single individuals.

In the arena of educational change, relationships with external organizations have been used by

schools to buffer a change process from the constantly changing social and political environment.

Corcoran and Lawrence (2003) describe a K12-corporate partnership that worked to improve science teaching. The authors were positive about the role of the external organization that sponsored the program, noting that:

Reform support organizations can help school districts stay focused. They can legitimate strategies and policies, build public support, and buy the time to make them work... Intermediaries often are able to shape the stakeholders' definition of the "problem" and build a more stable reform agenda. Unlike schools and districts, they are not subject to direct political authority and are more focused in their aims. (p. 34)

Notice here that while the external partnership is serving as a source of new information (new teaching techniques and content knowledge), there is also an element of buffering as this relationship provides continuity and political support to the effort. Bodilly, Chun, Ikemoto, & Stockly (2004) identify negative consequences to schools of the opposite case: when too many uncoordinated reforms are allowed to work at cross-purposes. While there is some reason to be wary of excessive business influence on our public schools (Apple, 2001; Cuban, 2004), schools and their leaders should be able to weigh the benefits and risks of such a relationship.

In a unique organizational partnership, Lane (2003) describes the influences that change oriented student teachers had on their mentor teachers while student teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The external supports these student teachers received from the university (emotional support, critical dialogue in courses, etc.) are shown to have been important parts of their ability to act as change agents in their placement schools.

Parent groups can also serve as important external partners. Arriaza (2004, p. 10) notes "that school reform initiatives have higher chances of becoming institutionalized when the community actively participates as an empowered change agent." Arriaza traces one example of a community exerting tremendous force on schooling practices. This group was not invited by the school to form a relationship, indeed they were an activist group of parents petitioning against the schools, but they were

nonetheless able to create lasting changes in their school system. After some tension, two-way lines of communication between the community and its schools were created and undoubtedly led to a healthier system. Notice, of course, that there is also a heightened state of uncertainty in this case. Changes in the economic, social, or political landscape put pressure on schools that might not be comfortable.

Reaching out into the environment presents some danger in that schools will be working with groups (parents, businesses, universities, funding agencies, etc.) with divergent views of what education can, and should, be (Fullan, 2000). This case exemplifies the messiness inherent in school change from a post-Newtonian, complexity perspective. In lieu of planning and compliance monitoring, this school took in data from the external environment, and while there was a period of uneasiness and resistance between the two groups, initial tension gave way to collaboration and co-evolution in which both the school and the parent group were changed from the interactions about the education of students.

A more obvious mode of collaboration between schools and external organizations are the myriad of connections between reform organizations (Accelerated Schools, High Schools that Work, Working on the Work, Coalition of Essential Schools, etc.) and the schools they serve. While the schools in this study were all in some form of *start-up* or *rebuilding* mode, and none had fully operational school reform partnerships, this literature is included here as an important extant source of information about schools and their external relationships.

One essential element of the relationships between external reform organizations and schools, is that they are likely to be supported by some members of the school staff and resisted by others. Muncey and McQuillan's (1996) study of the Coalition of Essential Schools paints a clear picture of the tensions that emerge when institutional relationships intersect with the micropolitics that exist at the school site, and the individual history of specific schools. The result can be official school relationships that appear healthy, but in which implementation of a specific reform doctrine is highly contested and implemented unevenly. Similarly, Blase & Blase (2001) share the results of their study of the League of

Professional Schools, in which schools were supported to develop shared governance and empower teachers to take greater roles in school leadership. They found that even an schools with official support for teacher empowerment and specific activities to enable this transformation, the process of teachers learning to take leadership roles was a highly individual process that required support, guidance, and patience on the part of school leaders. This gap between the individual and the group remains a central challenge for schools in maximizing the benefits of external relationships. This tension is well-treated by Olson (2003) who identifies this “chasm between what the society through its institutions defines and what teachers and children make of it in their subjective and intersubjective mental lives (p.4).”

This brief review of literature centered on school’s external partnerships in contexts of change identifies theoretical and empirical support for schools to forge long-term relationships with external partners as part of their overall change strategy. Among the benefits cited are: accessing community feedback, being buffered from political forces, gaining access to new information, and discovering broader bases of community engagement with schooling. Challenges to this approach, however, include inviting too much conflicting information to the school, the varied ability of schools to manage these relationships, and the individual-group tensions that persist when organizations agree to come together. All if the empirical work cited above, however, is situated in pre-existing schools operating in a range of conditions we might call “normal” in contrast to the schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. The rapid decentralization of the district affords a unique opportunity to examine how individual school leaders prioritize and engage in these relationships without the intervening variables of central office directives and relatively stable institutional history. This study examines the external partnerships of 8 schools as they were creating (or in some cases re-creating) their identity as organizations within the broader societal context.

Methods

As part of a larger study examining the lived experiences of New Orleans principals during the

2006-2007 school year, the results reported here emerged from the constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of transcripts from 29 interviews with ten principals. Interviews took place between March of 2007 and September of 2007 and lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to over 2 hours. One principal was interviewed twice, all others were interviewed three times.

The use of iterative interviews (Seidman, 1998) allowed for a relationship to be built up between the interviewer and the participants. The three-interview format suggested by Van Manen (1997) was utilized for this phenomenological inquiry. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed manually by the author.

Findings

Principals in the post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools spoke at length about a variety of new relationships with the external environment. This is partly due to the lack of a centralized bureaucracy which, for better or worse, had a large influence over most schools before the storm. The explosion of charter schools and the state takeover left the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) with direct control of only five schools, down from over 100 (Ritea, 2006). This created a “relationship vacuum” in which charter schools, and to a lesser degree, the state-run Recovery School district (RSD) schools and the five remaining Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools, had to find supports for things ranging from extra-curricular activities to payroll processing, curriculum, and personnel. While forming relationships with outside organizations is a central facet of school improvement under a complexity paradigm (Fullan, 2001; Morrison, 2002), some principals had more experience with this than others. The principals in this study formed connections with external organizations that can be classified as charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. An examination of these varied experiences with external organizations follows.

Charitable relationships

In the aftermath of Katrina, charitable private donations poured into the region, making up for the relative lack of federal and state emergency preparedness (Buras, 2007). Nationally, donations to the American Red Cross increased 129% in the year after the storm (Annual Report, 2006). Schools received much of this attention, with some groups and individuals sending funds from a distance and others making the trip to New Orleans to literally lend a hand in reconstruction. One charter school principal tells the story of being adopted by a middle school in suburban Chicago:

They found us on the Internet and they adopted us... She contacted [us] last year and we have this ongoing, *to this day*, relationship with them. She got her friend to spend their entire spring break at our [school] teaching art classes...her sister sent this like \$1500 donation, for faculty -- you know, to treat them for something... at the end of the school year I took the money and I treated everybody to Ralph's on the Park, which is one of the [upscale] Brennan's restaurants.

This charitable relationship was formed out of the blue, a result of a blind Internet search in Chicago, and the charter school has received both financial and extra-curricular supports from the relationship.

Another charter principal explained the financial and public relations support her school received from the Green Cross, an international environmental group:

October 5th Mikhail Gorbachev is coming to visit our school. He is in the Green Cross and he works with Global Green, and we... are going to receive a grant to be a green seed school and the Global Green people have been checking out schools- Right now they're just going to replace our windows and make them more energy-efficient. But that's nothing to sniff at. So we'll take that...it's going to be... on CNN. We are going to get a lot of press.

Schools also received resources from individuals throughout the country, from foundations, from educational publishers, and from the more traditional grant-based programs that had previously been centered at the district level, but were often now pursued at the school level. These gifts were appreciated both for their impact on school operations as well as symbols of support from the outside world that were significant to principals when Katrina began to leave the national headlines and the challenges schools faced seemed overwhelming:

one of the things that surprised me from the beginning, and continues to surprise me, is the generosity of people all around this country who have never seen us, never heard, you know,

they've never met us- not from here. So many people willing to help- and that's a wonderful feeling. (Charter principal)

These charitable relationships that blossomed in the post-Katrina period were mostly one-way relationships, with the New Orleans schools receiving resources and the other party providing them. While these relationships were certainly emotion-laden, the power differences between the donors and the New Orleans schools prevented the relationship of relative equals that could produce trust and a focus on improvement. While the process of rebuilding after the flood certainly required (and still requires) injections of outside resources, it is clear that these are not the type of relationships that lead to co-evolution, nor do they seem to approach the description of *networks* and *collaboration* that Hopkins (2007) cites a useful lever for reform. These are impoverished external relationships, and while perhaps necessary in this specific case, do little to enhance the long term prospects of the school receiving the charity.

Technical Support Relationships

Principals also described forming relationships with groups that could support the school's functioning in terms of curriculum, counseling services, extra-curricular activities, and for students with special needs. These groups provided more than just resources; they provided people and expertise which added to the educational offerings of the school. One RSD principal referred to a partnership with New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), and looked forward to the building of that relationship:

I think that they are going to place- on this campus next year ... an administrative intern...I think they are going to put eight interns in eight schools, and I think one might be placed at this site. In which case, that would be a big help to try to get some more creative things going.

And while NLNS is certainly focused on long term impacts on the schools in which it works, it is by no means clear that this principal views this relationship in the same way. This RSD principal described this organizational relationship quite positively, but framed it in terms of what the school will get out of it, not on the dialogue or mutual benefit that will result. The extra staff member is described as a good

way to enable the school to achieve the principal's goal of instituting more "creative things" at the school, but there seems to be no scrutiny of pre-existing goals (see Argyris and Schon's (1978) concept of single and double loop learning). Given what appears to be a relationship that means one thing to NLNS and entirely another to the school, I categorize this relationship in the way it is described by my participant.

Two of the eight schools in the study (both charters) were in negotiations with both the New Orleans Public Library and the New Orleans Recreation Department to create new libraries and recreation centers in collaboration with the schools. One of these schools had even loftier goals in terms of shared services:

Well I have four... buildings... that I don't want to use as classrooms. They are portables... I want to put a mental health unit in one of them, and the medical doctor in another one, social worker in another one, and a dentist in another one. That's what I envision for the community... then we still have the fitness center right across from the area. Then the public library...

This type of community-based schooling was much more challenging pre-Katrina because principals had to navigate the public school bureaucracy to get permission for all of these relationships. Principals interested in this type of a school are having a much easier time moving forward under the new, flatter, system. This example ably demonstrates the difference between charitable relationships and technical support relationships. The library, the recreation department, and the medical professionals are not merely writing checks or donating classroom supplies, they are engaging in a long term relationship with the school to provide specific professional services that the school feels will enhance the lives of its students. Most of these are not services the school could provide with its own budget and/or staff. But nonetheless, these relationships, precisely because they do not focus on the core instructional mission of the school, are unlikely to lead to reflection on the part of the administration and teachers on how they approach teaching and learning within the classroom context. If we accept changed teaching and learning practice as the gold-standard of educational reform (Eisner, 1992; Elmore & Burney, 1997), then these relationships may not have the legs to carry school reform forward.

Some of these technical support relationships were not contractually-based, but were much more serendipitous- as this RSD principal explained:

I saw this in the newspaper. [hands me a clipping offering psychological services offered by Tulane University] So, I called Tulane. And I said, 'I wanna support this, I want it for our kids. So, can I send this information out to all our children and encourage them to take advantage of it?' 'Oh, absolutely' [they said] and they gave me little brochures.

It does appear that creating external relationships is indeed easier with a flat organizational structure, especially in the post-Katrina context where schools and community organizations are reaching out to help stabilize each other. But forming new bonds is still not a trivial undertaking. Principals in New Orleans now have to reach out into the world a bit more than they did under the old administration, and this takes time and effort that takes away from working with teachers and tending to classroom instruction. One charter principal, described setting up for a one-day NASA demonstration that his school was calling 'Space Day':

The day they brought it, I had to hire a security guard... the night before... everybody was there, I was there until 12:30 that night... I was parked in the back of the school, somebody stole my front tire... I had to get a ride home.

This is the very real transaction cost of establishing external relationships. Even the most beneficial external relationship carries with it a trade-off or opportunity cost, and this transaction cannot always be properly evaluated at the outset. What can be assessed, however, is whether or not the partnership is likely to be instructionally focused or not. While the aforementioned technical support relationships certainly contributed to the broad goals of the school, it was clear in each case that changing instructional practice was not viewed by participants as a goal of the partnership.

Low-Risk Relationships

Both charitable relationships and technical support relationships can be classified as *low-risk* relationships in that there is little chance that the core operating procedures of administrators and teachers will be called into question. Even the savviest donors or social workers are not in a strong position to influence how professional educators go about their work, especially if this goal of

instructional change is not established at the outset of the relationship. Of course, low-risk relationships should not be understood as inherently harmful to a school, many of the examples above indicate that schools stood to benefit immensely from what these relationships could offer them: from staff development money, to extra staff, to special learning opportunities for students. But what is important about low-risk relationships is that they have little chance of engaging the educators at the school in an honest and critical examination of teaching and learning processes. This is precisely what is needed if our under-performing schools are to seriously begin the process of sustainable change (Davies, 2007; Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006).

Low-risk relationships are unlikely to upset the current mindset or the current trajectory of schools. While they were often viewed positively by the principals here, they are not likely to help the schools move towards sustainable improvement. At best, these relationships might provide information or other resources for progress toward pre-defined goals (Argyris and Schon's (1978) single loop learning), but it is unlikely they would give information about the appropriateness of these goals in the school's ecological context (double-loop learning). Feedback relationships seem much more likely to do this. The benefits and challenges of feedback relationships are discussed next.

Feedback Relationships

Several principals in this study described external relationships in which provided more than goods, services, or expertise, they offered feedback on the progress of the school and engaged holistically with the all operations of the school, including teaching and learning processes. The core advantage of a feedback relationship is that it can include the trust and professional collaboration to address classroom teaching, which is unfortunately deemed a private affair in many American schools (Cuban, 1993; Tye, 2000). I will refer to these types of relationships as *feedback relationships*, due to the potential they have to disrupt the status quo with regard to teaching practice. I view the idea of

disruption *positively*, as a means to scrutinize and improve current practice which can become routinized and implicit (Morrison, 2002; Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 2000). Hearing principals' perspectives on their feedback relationships is helpful to understanding the differences between feedback relationships and low-risk relationships.

As one example of a feedback relationship, one participant's school was a part of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which is a national group of charter schools that have had notable success in improving test scores for low-income students. He explains the "first-year visitation" process that this group uses:

they send a first-year inspection team, which is another school leader from another KIPP school somewhere and someone from their instructional support team. [They] come in for two full days and assess everything that they can in two full days... Getting to sit down, talk with another school leader and say, what about this? And this? And this? ... But, then getting to get all of those things out and then getting to hear from other folks... having them help me see the forest through the trees, and that- and while we had some things we could work on and tighten up in different regards, that what we're creating was -- was pretty solid for our kids.

This KIPP principal experienced some nervousness relating to this "evaluation" of his school, but in the end, relished the opportunity to have a respected group of educators look at his school with fresh eyes. His use of the phrase "get all of those things out" invokes images a socially safe space reminiscent of a counseling session or a supportive interpersonal relationship. This principal implies that school-related stressors were often *held in* and not shared with other staff. This repression is consistent with notions of charismatic leadership (House, 1976) or coercive leadership (Goleman, 2000) in which differences between leaders and followers are emphasized. This is difficult to reconcile with leadership under a complexity paradigm (Morrison, 2002; Wheatley, 1999) in which dialogue and shared decision making result in leadership that is shared and distributed throughout the organization. External feedback relationships certainly can provide a space for sharing these challenges given appropriate levels of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and shared purpose.

Another formalized feedback relationship observed was the connection of one of the charter schools with a local university. The school, chartered only after the storm, reserved two spots on its

board for university faculty, and set up a formal partnership shortly after the storm. But the principal, still scrambling to reopen a storm-displaced school, reported some initial apprehensions about making this connection:

I needed expertise in... accounting, I needed expertise in human resources, and I needed a legal person. I turn around and... the chancellor is standin' right behind me... He said, 'I can help you do all of that. [our university] is there for you... let's open this school.' And I thought to myself, this is great, but I was scared because [they] run two other schools very much in depth... to the point where the teachers have like 8 ½ hour school days, they are involved in all this professional development, and I knew that the problem [with us] wasn't with teachers, it was just because of the district and the facility issue... So I said, ya know, lets explore our options and see what kind of relationship we can have... I didn't want them running us.

As in the case of a parent group organizing to improve the education of students discussed earlier (Arriaza, 2004), there was some initial apprehension about this external relationship. Therefore, this partnership engaged in lots of technical activities (collaboratively establishing financial procedures and composing legal documents) during the first year and slowly added more feedback-focused activities were undertaken:

I've requested a middle school institute for my middle school teachers and they're putting that together for me. They've put together a gifted cohort... they're starting in April. Intersession, they're taking an online "Introduction to Gifted" course.

With the university faculty members on the charter school board, a number of teachers engaged in custom tailored graduate coursework, and with a large number of the university's student teachers placed in the charter school, it is hard to imagine the university not having a compelling stake in this school's success. This shared sense of responsibility between organizations is a hallmark of a feedback relationship. Not incidentally, it has also been noted that teachers' shared responsibility for student success is an important characteristic of individual schools who successfully navigate the change process (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Feedback relationships can also take the form of school-to-school partnerships which is where Hopkins (2007) centers his discussion of networks and collaboration as drivers of school change in a post-policy context. One RSD high school principal discussed his commitment to Washington

Elementary¹, his feeder elementary school:

we doin' a lot of programs with Washington across the street. I have a creative writing program here... and we send kids... across the street once a week to work with the English classes to help them develop learning how to write... I'm not gonna do anything here without including Washington because that's my kids. And I gotta grow a better product so I can take the whole further.

Apparent here, once again, is the shared responsibility that can come from a feedback relationship. This example is included to draw attention to the fact that school-to-school partnerships include some special advantages that make them particularly good candidates. First, both partners are well-versed in the complexities of the teaching/learning process and the challenges of improving instruction on a large scale. The desire to hide their weaknesses might be minimized when both parties face the same complex instructional challenges. Second, if similarly situated schools (in terms of student population, teacher population, accountability challenges, etc) are paired, then there is more likely to be a trusting relationship than in cases when the partners have very different social standing. A corporation or a high performing school that partners with a troubled school will have to prove that it does not buy into the stereotype of the hopeless urban school in order for the relationships to thrive. Third, when schools partner with other schools, the vast majority of adults in the partnership are classroom teachers. These are people with the classroom experience and teaching expertise which are prerequisites to engaging in productive dialogue about teaching and learning which is the central focus of a feedback relationship (and school reform more generally).

Discussion

Under a complexity paradigm, schools *must* take feedback from the environment in order to gauge expectations, and to adjust operations. This can result in negative feedback which provides information about a school's progress towards its goals, or positive feedback, which gives information about the appropriateness of a school's goals (Hutchins, 1996; Senge,

¹ Washington Elementary is a pseudonym

1990). Without both types of feedback, schools might cheerily check-off items on their to-do lists, without realizing that important items aren't even being considered.

Given the importance of feedback relationships to a healthy system, the relative lack of them presented here is a bit troubling. Every principal that participated in this study had multiple examples of low-risk relationships, but the majority of principals did not cite an example of a feedback relationship. As relationships go, low-risk relationships are more of the passionate one-night-stand variety as opposed to the productive give and take of a long-term relationship. Low-risk relationships offer short term gains, with little effort upfront. A school gets a new athletic field or a new science lab by jumping through some bureaucratic hurdles or writing a compelling grant application. These are positive developments and school leaders should certainly be encouraged to pursue these leads when they are aligned with school needs and goals.

When I was a classroom teacher, I recall fondly the day that our school's new computer lab equipment, purchased with money from the estate of an external donor, was delivered. I stayed at school into the evening for weeks to get the computers and desks set up so that students could come to the lab. I wrote grants to improve our software selection and to staff the lab in the evenings so students wouldn't have to wait in line to use computers at the public library. My motivation and commitment to the school increased tremendously because of the low-risk relationships my principal had formed with the donors. But I was just one teacher. Our school still suffered from pockets of poor teaching that were allowed to carry on unexamined. A feedback relationship might have helped shine a light into some of these classrooms.

It is my opinion that schools ought to have a mix of external relationships from all three of these broad categories. All have their benefits. But what seems essential is that schools, particularly those with a history of poor performance, have at least one feedback relationship that *will* support educators

in the process of improving practice. The schools in this study tended to have low-risk relationships, but not have feedback relationships. It seems reasonable to call this tendency the strange attractor of *low-risk relationships*. Reigeluth (2004) defines strange attractors as “a kind of fractal that has a powerful influence over the processes and structures that emerge in a system undergoing transformation” (p.7). These ideas or cultural beliefs, often implicit, guide the functioning of school system. Reigeluth identifies empowerment/ownership, customization/differentiation, and shared decision making as fractals that exist in some schools. If urban schools are to co-evolve with their environments, and engage meaningful reform, then they will need to fight against this strange attractor of low-risk relationships. These are relationships in which schools interface with other organizations, but do so with notions of *their school* and *their plans* held rigidly in place-seeking affirmation, but not critique. .

Fullan (2000) discusses the “inside-out” portion of educational reform in which schools reach out to their environments for information that can help them improve. Sometimes this learning requires questioning ingrained practices and carries with it the risk of upsetting the status quo. This learning process is not straightforward or clear from the outset, but school leaders should be aware that:

Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one. (*ibid.* p.583)

I would add that the principals, situated at the boundary of the school and its environment, are the best-suited individuals to undertake this type of sense-making work. But a principals’ primary responsibility is for what happens *inside* the school. That is, these probes into the external environment are primarily a means towards the goal improving teaching and learning within classrooms. A school leader has to weigh the costs of engaging in external relationships to ensure that they do not pull more resources away from instructional improvement than is necessary. Good indicators of potential partners might be: possession of useful pedagogical or content knowledge, a basic understanding of the challenges faced

by the school, belief that all students can learn at high levels, lived experience with the organizational change process.

Conclusion

Schools in the US face an external environment changing in ways that would have been difficult to predict a generation ago: the rise of standards based reform, the charter school movement, huge influxes of English language learners, and accountability for all groups of students. Public schools have been somewhat immune to these changes as they still represent a subsidized monopoly that controls over 90% of the K-12 education students in the USA receive. A vital component of sustained school improvement is the ability of schools to reach out into their external environment for new ideas, information, and resources. Feedback relationships may be an important source of these. They can result in large changes to the operation of the school resulting in short term disruptions that give way to long term success. In fact, entering only into low-risk partnerships is certainly the riskier approach if sustainable long-term change is the goal. Seeking out feedback relationships based trust and a commitment to improving teaching and learning appears to be a prudent investment for schools. This is important in those schools (urban, high poverty) that feel threatened by the current policy environment which can lead to rigid, reactive teaching practice that focuses on short term gains rather than creating rich opportunities for students (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). Future research in this vein should qualitatively document the functioning of various feedback relationships and identify strengths and challenges to guide schools in the formation of such relationships.

With all of this talk about internal and external, it makes sense to close with a thought about how we think about the boundaries of school systems. Traditionally, we might think of teachers, students, and administrators as internal components with parents, elected officials, and the business community as external components. Feedback relationships force us to think about boundaries in a much more tentative fashion. When organizations that physically exist outside of schools become

trusted partners in the improvement of teaching and learning, it seems sensible that we ought to redraw the boundaries delimiting who is *in* and who is *out*. A benefit of this more inclusive view is that the problems of schools become the problems of everyone. To tackle the complex challenges faced by schools, particularly those serving high-poverty populations, there is a dual responsibility for schools to reach out to external partners and for external partners to reach out to schools. This type of collaboration among equal partners may be just the relationship our schools need to sustain improvement.

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