

Schlechty

An in-the-trenches guide to leading
and implementing educational reform

"All those committed to the hard work of initiating educational change and implementing significant school improvement will find Phil Schlechty's new book a thoughtful, convincing, practical guide for improving teaching and learning for all students in the nation's schools."

Thomas W. Payzant, superintendent, Boston Public Schools

*"This is a book for those who put kids rather than politics at the center of our school reform debates and for those who are serious about reforming school systems so that all students can succeed. Characteristically Schlechty, *Inventing Better Schools* contains insightful analysis, bold ideas, and clear prose."*

Tony Cipollone, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

"This is a major contribution to our work in school revitalization. I like the wisdom that Phil Schlechty shares in every chapter—from a wonderful view of school design and quality student work to system restructuring and accountability. He shows passion and commitment, but also tough-mindedness and a systems view that makes sense. You can tell he has been there and that he has honed his ideas in interaction with others."

David Marsh, professor, school of education, University of Southern California

Inventing Better Schools

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*An Action Plan for
Educational Reform*

Phillip C. Schlechty

Author of *Schools for the 21st Century*



after these questions have been answered can teachers begin to figure out what they can get the students to do.

The way time, people, space, knowledge, and technology are organized clearly determines what students will be likely to do. If schools were centered on the work of students, these factors would be organized to support what teachers want them to do. Unfortunately, schedules are more often designed with the doings of adults as the focal point. It is small wonder, therefore, that teachers often feel obliged to perform for students and that, for many students, the primary task is to watch their teachers work and perform and to take careful notes so that impressions can be reported later on a test. Thus the idea that great teachers are also great performers, even actors, is usually well received by many teachers, for acting is so much of what they are required to do. It will always be so, at least until schools are organized around the performances of students rather than the performances of teachers.

Teachers as Leaders and Inventors

I do not intend to disparage teachers or teaching, to diminish the importance of teachers, or to start once again the quest for the "teacher-proof curriculum" when I argue that *not much in the way of improving our schools will occur until we abandon the assumption that the work of adults, particularly teachers and other educational personnel, is the key determinant of the quality of student learning*. The basis for reorganizing America's schools is to be found in understanding the implications of the fact that what students learn is determined by what the schools are able to get them to work at and with.

One of the most basic implications of organizing the schools around the work of students is that the role of the teacher will need to change in dramatic ways. Rather than being performers on the stage or psychiatrists "treating" the young, teachers will need to be viewed as leaders and inventors. The focus of leaders is on what they can get others to do, and their effectiveness is realized through others. The focus of inventors is to create products, systems, and services that solve problems and meet needs.

The concern of teachers as leaders is properly on what they are attempting to get the students to do: to engage in purposeful activity (work) that leads to the desired learning. Teachers invent in-

tellectually engaging work for students and then lead them to do it. This simple idea, which has profound implications, will guide the remainder of this book.

Knowledge Work as the Product of Schools

Knowledge work involves transforming information into usable propositions, organizing information in ways that inform decisions and actions, producing products that require others to apply knowledge or use information, or arranging and rearranging concepts and ideas in useful ways. Writing a theme or an essay is a form of knowledge work, as is preparing a lesson and presenting it to students. Writing plays and skits is a form of knowledge work, and essays are products of knowledge work, as are all academic and artistic exhibitions.

Knowledge work has always been central to education. Students who are motivated to produce the kind of knowledge-work products that are valued in schools are also those who learn the most in schools. Students whose living rooms and dining room tables are places of lively debate and discussion, where they are expected to perform and where their performances are taken into account by parents and siblings, are likely to find well-conducted classroom discussions exciting and inviting. Those who come from families where such activities do not occur or are devalued as a waste of time are less likely to find the production of such performances attractive. Until the advent of the computer, the video-cassette, the audiocassette, the CD-ROM, and other electronic imaging and communication systems, the range of knowledge-work products that schools could expect students to produce was very limited. Students who found the creation of this limited range of knowledge-based products compelling learned much that the schools were designed to teach. Those who were less enthusiastic about producing such products learned less. Consequently, the correlation between social class and academic achievement should not be surprising. The culture of poverty generally does not place great emphasis on producing the kind of knowledge-work products that are available in the traditional school.

Today, the range of knowledge-work products students can be called on, encouraged, and permitted to produce has expanded

Chapter Seven

Creating the Capacity to Support Change

In education, the changes that count most are those that directly affect students and what they learn. To produce such changes, school districts, communities, and state agencies must be changed in ways that will support and sustain the changes needed in classrooms and in schools. Enhancing the capacity of the school district to support change at the building and classroom levels is the most critical work of the superintendent and those who work in the district office and should be the central concern of boards of education as well. In the preceding chapter, I discussed issues related to describing and assessing the district's capacity to support change. Here I will discuss ways to increase this capacity where it is found to be lacking.

Developing a Focus on the Future

Three conditions must be present if schools are to maintain a focus on the future:

1. Local leaders (board members, superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders) must be in general agreement regarding the problems that give rise to the need for the change and must have a common commitment to the idea that the best and perhaps the only way to address the problem is to change the way the organization goes about doing business.
2. Local leaders must be in general agreement regarding what they believe about the purpose of the schools they lead. They must also be in agreement regarding the system of rules, roles,

and relationships they will support to pursue this purpose, and they must agree on the values that will guide their work and the commitments they will make in support of these values.

3. Local leaders must be in a position to market their framing of the problems and issues and their view of the future to those whose support will be needed if that future is to be realized.

If they are carefully designed, the assessment processes discussed in the preceding chapter can do much to lay the groundwork for enhancing the capacity to focus on the future. More can be done as well.

Creating a Common View

If real change is to occur, top-level leaders, including board members, the superintendent, principals, key central office leaders, and union leaders must be willing and able to spend enough time together and engage in enough dialogue and analysis that they come to share a general understanding about the educational landscape, both locally and nationally. They must also share a common understanding of the problems they face, and they must learn to frame these problems in common ways: for example, top-level leaders need to have a clear understanding of how the present performance of schools in general and the schools in their district in particular compares to the performance of schools in the past. Is the dropout rate really higher today than in the past? Has student performance deteriorated? Or is the source of dissatisfaction with schools a result of a change in expectations? Such serious matters cannot be addressed as an afterthought or an add-on.

Educational leaders must also come to a common understanding of what they believe about school and life in schools, and this activity, too, requires commitment and resources. At a minimum, these leaders must develop a consensus around answers to questions such as the following:

- What is the purpose of education? For example, is it to select and sort students on the basis of their capacity to do particular forms of schoolwork, or is it to develop the capacity of students to do high-quality work?

consensus document known in human history was created. It would not have happened without the presence of leaders who knew what they believed, who were willing to articulate those beliefs, and who were also willing to listen to others who disagreed with them.

Leaders must ensure that everyone participating in the discussion understands what it is about and what its intended result is to be. The result in the case of the discussion of beliefs that should guide schools must be *a well-articulated belief structure, that is, a publicly communicated (and communicable) set of statements and propositions that is complete, comprehensible, and compelling and that if endorsed by parents and other relevant constituencies could serve as a guide for all district operations.*

Beliefs That Compel Action

To be complete, the beliefs that guide the system must address at least the areas suggested in Chapter Five: beliefs about purpose, beliefs about the capacity of children to learn, and so on. Without answers to the questions associated with these areas, the organization will have an inadequate moral compass and structural map. To be comprehensible, the statements and propositions must be available in documents, videotapes, recordings, and handbooks that, taken as a whole, serve to communicate and illuminate the set of beliefs and to enlighten effectively all who are concerned with their meaning and implications.

Many consultants argue that the key documents that communicate beliefs can and should be stated in brief and simple form. I do not disagree with this view; however, it sometimes leads to the mistaken notion that the beliefs themselves should be simple and that what is said about them should not take much time in the life of the organization. The key principles that guide the school, or any other organization, should be capable of being summarized in brief statements, perhaps so brief that their content can be brought to mind with reference to the key words or elements of these basic propositions. But the beliefs stated will not have the power to give direction to the system if all that is meant, contained, or implied by them can be understood by reading a single-page memo or the back of a business card. The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution are illustrative of what I mean here, as is the Constitution itself.

The first ten amendments, which are statements of belief about liberty, justice, and the relationship between individuals and government, are simply stated, so simply stated that it is commonplace to have schoolchildren memorize key words that refer to each of them. Indeed, some individuals suggest that to be culturally literate, an individual should be able to call to memory the substance of each of these amendments, and the other sixteen as well. Yet innumerable additional documents guide our nation's government, including many complex, cumbersome, and sometimes contradictory Supreme Court decisions intended to illuminate these statements and make their meaning more comprehensible to those who are called on to adhere to their principles.

The content of the Constitution, excluding the first ten amendments, has much more to say about rules, roles, and relationships than about the core values that will guide the government (that is why the radicals insisted that the first ten amendments be added). But the Constitution is certainly not a simple document; its ratification required that what was intended be clearly communicated and explained. As a consequence, numerous documents and pamphlets—not the least of which were *The Federalist Papers* ([1787–1788] 1981)—were created to make the meaning of the Constitution more comprehensible to those who were not in on the original drafting of this profound statement of national belief and intention, which is as well a profound statement of values and commitments.

If belief and believing are to be central to the reinvention of America's schools, then those who lead the schools must do much more than is now being done about the beliefs that guide—or purport to guide—these systems. An occasional weekend retreat where individuals go to “get a vision” will simply not do. Neither will an occasional goal-setting conference nor a spasm of strategic planning. *Beliefs must be constant, and they must constantly be attended to in the literature of the organization and in the symbols of the system as well as in the public expressions of those who occupy leadership positions therein.*

For beliefs to be compelling, they must be articulated in language that stirs the heart as well as engages the mind. Unfortunately, throughout history, scoundrels and demagogues who understand the power of symbols to compel action have persuaded men and women to do horrible things by employing such symbols. This has caused many to distrust the purposeful use of symbols to