

# Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

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## Systems Thinking: Untangling the Gordian Knots of Systemic Change

There is no question that those who are leading school districts in systemwide reform face enormous challenges. They must be skilled at maneuvering political shoals, untangling intermingled problems, building consensus among divergent groups, motivating “the troops” in the face of demoralizing setbacks, managing the media, sorting through educational innovations and fads, and redesigning the human systems through which students are educated. Not only are the aims and processes of systemic reform complex in and of themselves; but the reform context — that is, the school system — is also complex, and it is dynamic, arguably more so than almost any other institution.

A number of district leaders are finding that the disciplines of systems thinking (see box on page 2) provide a framework for clarifying and deepening their under-

standing of dynamic systems and for organizing their thoughts and strategies in leading and managing school system change.

Most organizations face the paradox of good people with basically good intentions nonetheless working at cross purposes. Systems thinking helps us understand that the problem usually lies not with the people but with the system — behavioral norms, organizational structures, uncommunicated assumptions, and relationship patterns — and provides tools for rooting out these deep-lying problems.

In his highly influential book on systems thinking, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge identifies organizational “learning disabilities” that prevent many corporations from successfully carrying out change initiatives. These disabilities are equally common to schools and school systems. Recognizing them can be a significant first step toward developing the capacity to undertake and sustain systemwide changes aimed at improving student and school performance. “Learning disabilities” that plague school systems, adapted in part from Senge, include the following:

■ **Narrow job or role definition and compartmentalized structure.** Most districts are organized into departments. This fosters compartmentalization and an inability to see whole-system issues, needs, and concerns. This in turn works against organizational flexibility and a culture of collaboration around a common purpose.

■ **Blame shifting.** Compartmentalized structure and narrow role definitions feed the tendency to shift blame to another person or department. Until individuals see the larger system and their place within that system, it will be difficult for them to assume responsibility for addressing problems within their spheres of influence and within the system at large.

■ **Staring at events but missing the patterns.** When a crisis erupts in a school or central office, we tend to look for the immediate “cause,” put out that “fire,” and then go on to the next one. Systems thinking shows us that, in complex organizations, cause and effect are often separated by considerable distance in time and space, and what has been identified as “the cause” is, more often than not, a symptom of something much deeper. By developing a long, whole-system view, we can learn to see trends or patterns that point to

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# Five Disciplines of Systems Thinking<sup>1</sup>

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**Systems thinking.** Systems thinking is referred to as the *fifth discipline* because it underlies, unifies, and sustains efforts to make progress with the other four. It involves developing the ability to “see” systems holistically. It is, as Senge observes, “a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us see how to change systems more effectively, and to act in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world.”

**Personal mastery.** In essence, personal mastery is continuous individual growth and development, which is necessary to the growth and development of the organization. It is “the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision,” notes Senge, “of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality

objectively.” It requires a commitment to lifelong learning.

**Shared vision.** The typical school or district vision statement or mission statement — to which everyone nods assent as they get on with “business as usual” — is a far cry from “shared vision” as used in systems thinking. Developing shared vision is a long and demanding process that begins with identifying and clarifying the personal visions of stakeholders. Senge believes that each individual in the educational community has deep-lying images of the ideal school and school system, and these need to be brought forth, clarified, and shared. The most demanding part of the process can be the comparing and coalescing of these images, because if done honestly and effectively, the diverse visions that emerge will engender points of tension, if not outright conflict. But with patience, the group can find common ground, a vision that is genuinely shared and owned by all.

**Mental models.** Mental models are deep-seated assumptions or generalizations that shape individual perceptions and actions, thus influ-

encing group dynamics. Part of what makes them so ingrained is our unconscious tendency to “select” evidence that supports an assumption and to downplay contrary evidence. These mental models strongly affect behavior in teams and other organizational activities; yet they are often inaccurate, and their influence can undermine efforts to develop open, trusting, and collaborative relationships. But as team members develop proficiency in “working with mental models,” communications that promote such relationships can be greatly enhanced. An example of a mental model common among district administrators is the assumption that teachers unions are exclusively concerned with salary and benefits issues. Administrators holding this view are likely to miss opportunities to work collaboratively with unions to improve teacher and student performance.

**Team learning.** The level of intelligence and creative energy of a team can be greater than the sum of all its members’ intelligence and creative energy *if* certain key distinctions are recognized, including the distinction between *discussion*

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the underlying systemic causes. As one superintendent put it, “The systems thinking approach offers the chance to deal with the real genesis of problems and seize opportunities you might not be able to otherwise get a hold of. Do you go to the headwaters and divert the river, or do you just wait for the flood?”

■ **The illusion of taking charge.** Our conceptions of leadership and management tend to be deeply influenced by the “lone ranger” myth of the hero who single-handedly takes control and solves difficult challenges. These conceptions

lead to such ironic and impractical — but nevertheless widespread — practices as mandating site-based decision making. But as Michael Fullan points out in his book *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Change*, “You Can’t Mandate What Matters (The more complex the change the less you can force it).” Complex change is successfully accomplished in a system or organization with widespread commitment to a common purpose, or what Senge and others refer to as “shared vision,” along with strategies and structures that bring coherence to collective efforts to realize that purpose or vision. It is the development

of shared vision that leads to widespread commitment.

Few, if any, school systems have cured all of their learning disabilities. But to identify and reduce them, by applying the tools of systems thinking, is to open the way for significant progress on whole-system reforms.

## Systems Thinking in Action

What are the key characteristics of a school district that is transforming its culture and practice through the application of systems disciplines and tools? Because systems approaches are fundamentally flexible and adaptive, no generic answer

and *dialogue* and between *advocacy* and *inquiry*. According to Senge, discussion is what typically takes place at team meetings, where team members advocate for their positions based on underlying assumptions and political dynamics that too often remain unseen and unquestioned. In dialogue, on the other hand, assumptions are surfaced and held in suspension so that members can explore ideas together in an inquiring, generative mode. Discussion is closely associated with critical thinking and decision making. Dialogue is closely associated with creative thinking and collective learning. Both are necessary, but only skilled teams know how to effectively use each, when to use one over the other, and how and when to shift from one to the other. When these skills are developed and successfully exercised, what results is a *learning community*. ◀

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge. New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990.

applies, but many districts, schools, and communities begin with the development of their shared vision of how the school system would ideally be performing and interacting with the community it serves. Ownership of the shared vision produces the commitment that is critical to overcoming the norms and practices that block change; and this ownership must be inclusive of all stakeholders. The shared vision is often manifest in a set of “guiding principles” or “guiding ideas” that inform decisions, planning, and thinking at all levels of the system.

Additionally, key players will have collected data to develop a

clear, honest picture of the school system’s current reality. The gap between vision and reality should serve as a focal point and impetus for creating and implementing strategies for change and improvement. Both the shared vision and the picture of current reality are continually revisited and refined, and this process helps to improve the implementation of change strategies.

Other features of a district that is using systems thinking might include the following:

- Replacing a compartmentalized, rule-driven culture with a culture that is characterized by cross-functional decision sharing, collaborative working arrangements in flexible teams, and individual and collective reflection on what constitutes effective practice.

- An all-pervading, relentless preoccupation with student learning and student outcomes as well as a recognition of and commitment to the fact that improving student learning depends on the continual investment in and improvement of adult learning.

- The formation of dialogue groups or what a number of districts are calling “learning communities.” These are groups or teams that apply the discipline of *team learning* (see box) in creative, collective explorations of issues and ideas that can contribute to school and school system progress.

### In This Issue

This issue of *Strategies* profiles four school districts that are applying the concepts and tools of systems thinking to the struggle of whole-system change and improvement. They are Clovis Unified School District, near Fresno, California; the School District of Clayton, on the outskirts of St. Louis, Missouri; West Des Moines Community Schools in Iowa; and Collier County Public Schools in Naples, Florida. ◀

— Scott Thompson, Editor

## About the PANASONIC FOUNDATION

The Panasonic Foundation was established in 1984 by the Matsushita Electric Corporation of America. It provides direct technical assistance in long-term partnership with a select number of school districts to help bring about systemic, school-based, whole-school reform.

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# Strategies

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# Clovis, CA:

## 4 Thirty Years and Counting — Sustaining Continuous Improvement

Superintendent: Walter Buster  
District Size: 31,000 students

### Abstract


Elements of systems thinking were evident in the Clovis Unified School District in California some 30 years ago, long before systems thinking had the recognition that it enjoys today. Clovis is a place where data, rather than assumptions, drives thought and action; where structures support the diffusion of knowledge throughout the system; where power and responsibility are dispersed; where accountability maintains a balance between focusing on results and providing an atmosphere of trust and support; and where vision is not only shared, but defines the very organizational culture.

### Background

At one level, Clovis feels like a place time forgot. Nestled in the fertile San Joaquin Valley near Fresno, it exudes the values of clean living, family, and hard work. Many parents send their children to the schools they themselves attended. Some of the district's top administrators and many of its teachers are

products of Clovis schools. But while the district goal of nurturing the "mind, body and spirit" of its students may seem evocative of America's past, the goal actually focuses on *every* student in the system and thus represents a departure from the past, when students were routinely "sorted" into those who were expected to complete high school and those who would drop out to join the labor force.

Floyd Buchanan, Clovis's superintendent from 1960 to 1991, developed what he called the Sparthenian philosophy, combining the action, power, and austerity of Sparta with the intellectualism and culture of Athens. At the heart of this philosophy is Buchanan's concept of "competition with honor," which is not about winners and losers, but the challenge and reward of high performance. Another facet

 **Clovis is a place where data, rather than assumptions, drives thought and action.**

revolves around the district's longstanding emphasis on character development, which now takes the form of Character Counts, a national program that the district adopted a few years ago.

As Clovis grew from cow town to sprawling suburb, Buchanan made sure that the district kept its promise to citizens to educate all their children, regardless of background. Buchanan was responsible for building the spacious campuses and instilling the spirit of competition in a culture of trust. Reverentially referred to simply as "Doc," he coined aphorisms that are still

spouted by employees at all levels: "a child's right to an education is not negotiable," "people, not programs," "a fair break for every kid," "be the best you can be." Buchanan's notions are so embedded in daily practice that eight years after his departure, the current superintendent passes out pens inscribed with the same sayings.

According to Michael Schmoker and Richard Wilson, authors of *Total Quality Education*, a book that includes a chapter on Clovis, Buchanan was not directly influenced by management guru W. Edwards Deming, but his focus on improving quality by measuring results was so strong that one principal dubbed him "Floyd Deming Buchanan." Buchanan made a system of accountability the centerpiece of his district. And because he was more a visionary than a manager, he delegated responsibility for achieving results directly to schools, long before site-based management became a slogan. Parents and community were encouraged to rate their schools and guide them, long before "public engagement" was on the radar screen.

To guide everyone's thinking, Buchanan made sure that the goals were unambiguous — clear enough to capture on a pen. Schools were encouraged to compete against each other to achieve the expected results. Dick Sparks, director of assessment, was a school principal during the Buchanan era. He says the most important goal — one that still holds today — was that 90 percent of children be able to read at grade level "or you better be able to explain why. He was a formidable man who would not accept excuses. A culture was born from this."

# Clovis by the Numbers

Of its 31,000 students, about 13 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 10 percent are English language learners. Thirty-seven languages are spoken in the district. Less than 65 percent of students are non-Hispanic white, and nearly 20 percent are Hispanic; the rest are Asian, African American, Pacific Islander, and American Indian.

## Stanford Achievement Test Results

(Percent of Students At or Above 50th Percentile)

Grades	Reading	Language Arts	Math
2–6	61%	67%	70%
7–8	68%	73%	65%
9–11	50%	59%	61%

Note: Clovis students took the Stanford Achievement Test for the first time in March of 1998 — the results depicted above — and the March 1999 results are not yet available. Associate Superintendent Virginia Boris believes that the drop in scores between middle school and high school is attributable to the fact that 8th graders for some years have been more heavily tested than students at other levels in California. For many years the only universal data concerning the student performance levels of California high schoolers came from minimum competency tests that were calibrated at an 8th grade level. “Without data,” Boris notes, “you’re flying blind.” While the results of the Stanford Achievement Tests in Clovis represent a level that many districts of comparable size and diversity could only aspire to, they have caused a systemwide reevaluation among high school English teachers of the balance between literature-based and skill-based instruction. In addition to informal meetings at individual schools, the issue has been addressed in forums involving district leaders as well as school-level faculty and administrators. Also, based on disaggregated data, high school teachers have been meeting regularly to discuss strategies that have proven successful with particular socioeconomic groups.

## Effects

In an essay called “Moving Forward: Thinking Strategically About Building Learning Organizations,” Peter Senge identifies the “architecture of learning organizations” as comprising (1) guiding ideas; (2) theory, methods, and tools; and (3) innovations in infrastructure. Without all of these components in place, Senge argues, organizational change and improvement cannot be sustained. Certainly Clovis had all the components. Buchanan’s guiding ideas were translated into words that hit home with bus drivers and cafeteria workers as well as teachers and administrators, and they were reinforced by his actions. His Spartenian philosophy was linked to methods and tools aimed at the continuous improvement of

the performance of all students and all employees. And, finally, infrastructural changes were instituted so that these methods and tools were systematically employed throughout the district.

Today standards remain high for all students and employees. The accountability through competition approach has evolved into a model in which teachers and administrators compete against standards, not one another. A continuing insistence on attention to data makes the resemblance between the new model and its forebear indisputable. These continuities are all the more remarkable given that they are evident eight years and three superintendents later. On the other hand, Buchanan led the system for 30 years.

**Assessment and improvement.** Experts on systems thinking say a learning organization is a place where vision and guiding ideas are translated into performance and where performance is continuously assessed and improved. Further, these processes need to be visible and operative throughout the system as a whole. In such a place, the role of data becomes paramount. Instead of relying on assumptions or anecdotes about a few successful students, leaders and practitioners use data to engage in continuous problem solving with the understanding that results must be demonstrable.

Clovis is such a place, and nowhere is it more apparent than in its approach to accountability. The award-winning CLASSI system (Clovis Assessment System for Sustained Improvement) was implemented five years ago as an ongoing means for measuring the ability of schools and teachers to achieve stated teaching and learning goals.

CLASSI is based on the understanding that no single measurement can adequately evaluate school quality. Therefore, the system measures three components:

- Student and school academic achievement
- School management, community involvement, and co-curricular program (Extracurricular activities are so highly esteemed in Clovis that they are called “co-curricular.”)
- School process

“CLASSI is how we stress to schools what’s important, even if it’s not to say these are the only things that are important,” Sparks says.

In the first component, student performance is measured using a matrix of indicators for elementary, intermediate, and high school students. Student results on a variety of norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and performance assessments are used to compile a profile

for each school. A district standard is established for each assessment, and results for each school are then calculated as the percent of students who meet or exceed the district standard. The district goal is that 90 percent of students meet or exceed the standard in every area — the same goal Buchanan established many years ago.

In the second component, each school is evaluated for the quality and extent of such things as cleanliness, athletics, parent involvement, choral and instrumental music, and scores on annual parent surveys. Each area is graded according to well-defined criteria. For example, a school cannot receive a superior grade in instrumental music unless a certain percentage of students are participating and able to pass tests in playing skills. Schools scoring well in the second component become eligible for a highly coveted school recognition award. Schools that score poorly must develop action plans for improvement.

The third component looks at the process a school uses to achieve the results measured in the first two. This is a reflective assessment based on a self-evaluation by school staff and an evaluation by an external team. The external team includes a district administrator, a principal from another school, a mentor teacher, and one of the following: a community member, parent, faculty senate member, or classified employee. This team prepares a report based on a site review focused on vision and goals of the school, teaching environment and staff development, student environment and climate, and parent and community outreach and involvement. They explore such questions as “How is collaboration for making decisions that affect teaching and learning being ensured?” The scores of the outside and inside teams are

compared using a common rubric. “Most of the time the review team rates the school higher than the school team,” Sparks says.

#### **Professional development.**

Among the principles that Senge propounds as the core of organizational learning and development are personal mastery, which involves a deep commitment to continuous personal and professional learning, and adaptability to change.

Clovis exemplifies both principles in its induction and professional development program for new teachers and administrators. The program, known as BEST — Beginning Educator’s Support in Teaching — was the National Staff Development Council’s 1998 award winner for exemplary staff development practice. BEST helps transfer knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization, introduce participants to values and beliefs that are integral to district culture, and continue adaptation to external changes, such as state-designed standards and assessment tools. Although elements of BEST have been around for as many as 12 years, BEST as a comprehensive program began in 1996. Following are its main components.

- **Demonstration Learning Academy** — This six-week summer learning academy is open to all teachers, but especially new teachers. It includes the opportunity to observe exemplary teachers in action.

- **Administrative Training** — This three-day session was offered for the first time to all administrators last year and will be available to new administrators in the future. It includes reflective conversations about standards, how to support teachers, and a standards-driven observation program.

- **Beginning Teachers Support and Assessment** — A two-year state program offered throughout California, BTSA targets new teachers with credentials. The state goal is to

improve teacher retention by 40 percent. The state gives districts \$3,000 per teacher to pay for Saturday workshops for new teachers, among other things. Clovis developed its own design, which is currently supporting more than 100 new teachers.

- **Dear Beginning Teacher Program** — This week-long August orientation includes workshops and discussions about standards, curriculum, beginning year activities, and the culture and expectations of the district.

- **New Teacher Orientation** — The week before school starts, new teachers meet with people in the district office and hear veteran teachers talk about their passion for teaching.

- **Support Provider and Mentor Program** — New teachers are partnered with a mentor or exemplary teacher for up to two years. Support providers and mentors must apply for these positions. Successful applicants are trained and receive stipends for their work.

- **Friant Learning Academy** — Clovis converted an unused building in the Sierra foothills into a learning academy for second-year teachers, who are invited to come twice a year to observe and discuss model teaching.

**Sharing leadership.** One way to support growth and learning in a system is to disperse power and shift responsibility away from traditional lines of authority. Author Margaret Wheatley talks about shifting power to allow a free flow of information throughout the organization. She believes that the traditional barriers between teachers unions and administration have no place in a learning organization: “Unless management and the union leaders learn to think of themselves as a system working for the same purpose, they are going to stay in their present negotiated settlements, which, in many places, are

## What Is a Fractal?

**W**ebster's *Dictionary* defines a fractal as "any of various extremely irregular curves or shapes for which any suitably chosen part is similar in shape to a given larger or smaller part when magnified or reduced to the same size." A simple example is that the shape of a magnified floret of broccoli is nearly identical to that of a head of broccoli.

"I believe that fractals also have direct application for the leadership of organizations," states Margaret Wheatley. "The very best organizations have a

fractal quality to them. An observer of such an organization can tell what the organization's values and ways of doing business are by watching anyone, whether it be a production floor employee or a senior manager. There is a consistency and predictability to the quality of behavior.

"How is this quality achieved? The potent force that shapes behavior in these fractal organizations, as in all natural systems, is the combination of simply expressed expectations of acceptable behavior and the freedom available to individuals to assert themselves in non-deterministic ways. Fractal organizations, though they may

never have heard the word *fractal*, have learned to trust in natural organizing phenomena. They trust in the power of guiding principals or values, know that they are strong enough influences of behavior to shape every employee into a desired representative of the organization. These organizations expect to see similar behaviors show up at every level in the organization because those behaviors were patterned into the organizing principles at the very outset."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992.

far inferior to what could be created if they thought of themselves as being connected."

A teachers union or association never developed in Clovis; in fact, it is the largest district in California without one. Carl Tomlinson, principal of Clark Intermediate School, says a union vote has been taken two or three times over the years but was "always overwhelmingly defeated." A faculty senate, which meets once a month, takes on many of a union's functions, but with a heavy emphasis on instructional issues and without collecting dues. Perhaps representing a common teacher sentiment in Clovis, Jim Robinson, an elementary school teacher and faculty senate representative, says that he believes "a union separates the administration from teachers, creating opposition rather than a team working together."

Another forum that meets quarterly brings faculty and principals together to discuss common issues and solve problems. "The administration has always worked well with the faculty senate," says elementary school principal Debra

Parra. "We work as a team rather than 'us against them.'"

Superintendent Walter Buster says the sense of collegiality is one reason he came to the district a couple of years ago. He noted that the district rarely fires teachers but puts them through an exhaustive interview process before hiring. Teachers are selected by building principals, not by the superintendent. But every incoming teacher must interview with the principal, the area superintendent, and finally the superintendent. "The difficulty with a belief system is that you either believe it or you don't," he says. "When I heard that the superintendent was the final part of the interview process for teachers and that there was no collective bargaining agreement, I never needed to be convinced."

### Conclusion

Associate Superintendent Virginia Boris says the district has achieved a high level of success because it understands and practices the concept of fractals (see box), something Wheatley relies on to explain organizational behavior. In nature, the ubiquity of fractals — in clouds,

ferns, and rock formations — suggests that both predictability and randomness play critical roles in the creation of patterns, scale, and order.

Boris says that in Clovis the "what" of education — standards, norms, values, and systemwide goals — are held tightly by the district, but the "how" of education — school-level goals, strategies, and practices — are loosely held, giving school-level leaders authority over their own personnel, budget, and programs. District leadership provides a unifying focus and system of accountability, while at the same time leaving schools free to innovate and develop new approaches.

"The concept of a fractal is that any individual in the company who really understands the goals and values and their part of the mission can be given a lot of freedom to operate," Boris says. "You get to a self-organizing concept. As an employee you are given a piece of ownership. You don't have to worry about violating the cultural norms because it's within all of us."

# Clayton, MO:

## 8 Learning and Leading at All Levels

Superintendent: Donald Senti  
District Size: 2,300

### Abstract

The School District of Clayton, Missouri, has used systems thinking to tackle a number of pressing problems, including changes in leadership, redesigning professional development programs, and overhauling curriculum. In each case, organizational learning disciplines and processes have helped stakeholders understand the importance of viewing challenges in the context of the whole system. Often the approach has helped defuse potentially damaging situations.

### Background

Clayton is a relatively wealthy and homogeneous suburb of St. Louis. The district is high performing, and per pupil spending is around \$10,000. It serves 2,300 students, about 12 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Because Washington University, whose faculty come from many countries, lies within the district, about 6 percent of the students are from outside the United States.

The district's reputation for excellence has been a benefit — and a challenge. Linda Henke, assistant superintendent of curriculum, says satisfaction with student performance has on occasion been a barrier

to change, with staff and administrators often opting to play it safe in the face of parent and community resistance to whatever might undermine high levels of student achievement associated with the status quo.

But since 1981, as a result of a court decision addressing the racial isolation of African American students in St. Louis public schools, Clayton — and other suburban districts surrounding St. Louis — has integrated African American students from the city into its schools. This was one of several catalysts for rethinking how the district works. "Suddenly we had this diversity in kids, and I think we had to get a lot better," says Barbara Kohm, principal of Captain Elementary School. The influx of minority students, for example, surfaced concerns about the district's reliance on academic tracking. "I could see that the kids who were grouped in lower tracks never got out of them," Kohm says.

Some within the district also began advocating for changes in curriculum design, professional development practices, and teacher evaluation processes. These changes did not come easily and, according to Henke, might not have come at all had the district not taken an interest in systems thinking.

In the early 1990s, after reading Peter Senge's best-seller *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Henke contacted the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT's Sloan School of Management, where Senge teaches. As a result of the conversation, she signed up for a workshop on systems thinking.

When she returned to her district, she got fellow administrators interested in the topic and helped

them organize voluntary study groups. The groups read and discussed *The Fifth Discipline*, *Leadership and the New Science* by Margaret Wheatley, *On Dialogue* by David Bohm, *The Constructivist Leader* by Linda Lambert, and other books on organizational change. The study groups have continued, and Henke says they are the single most important factor in the district's progress. She attributes success in generating and sustaining interest in study groups to the fact that the topics were specifically tied to issues participants were grappling with.

A number of Clayton administrators continue to regularly attend conferences on systems thinking. Experts also have been brought to the district, including Lambert and Michael Fullan, to discuss their work and conduct seminars.

### Effects

The district's systems thinking approach has helped pave the way for dramatic changes in how the district operates, especially in the areas of curriculum development, professional development, career development and teacher evaluation, and team learning.

■ **Curriculum development.** In 1993 a K–12 science study group was looking at teaching materials for science and in the process began exploring questions relating to how people learn scientific concepts and facts. Before long the district as a whole was rethinking its heavy reliance on textbooks in curriculum design. Some school and district administrators felt a need to move toward a more constructivist approach to curriculum, especially at the elementary level. Within the Clayton community, parents and

others initially resisted talk about curriculum changes. To address the dissonance, the district made fundamental changes in how it develops the curriculum and how it communicates to the public about it.

The curriculum development process used to occur at regular intervals. A district-level committee, consisting of teachers and possibly an administrator, would study for two years, adopt textbooks, make a recommendation to the board, and then disband. The work was incremental, not continuous, and the participation was limited.

Today the curriculum work is ongoing, it occurs at each of the district's five schools, and its participants include stakeholders both inside and outside the school building. Committees arranged by subject area function as learning

communities. These learning communities, which meet regularly throughout the year, are study groups that practice collective exploration, analysis, and dialogue. The district describes the process as "collaborative study of important issues." Its goal is to develop a common language and purpose among participants, or what the district calls "shared understandings" — a concept closely allied to "shared vision," one of the five disciplines that Senge delineates.

Each year the committees set goals for what they need to learn and to do. The frequency and length of meetings depend on a given committee's goals for the year. The committees include teachers, parents, and administrators. Each spring they advertise openings on committees in school newspapers, and

more parents are interested in making the three-year commitment than the committees have space to accommodate.

In a typical meeting, committee members might study and discuss current research and practice, analyze district data about teaching and learning, and explore possibilities for networking with other professionals in the field. Parents and students on the committee are charged with gathering input from their respective stakeholder groups through surveys and other means.

The work of these curriculum committees is coordinated by a curriculum council, which, like the committees, meets as a learning community. The council convenes monthly for study sessions to review the change proposals of the  
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## Weaving a Web of Shared Leadership

Change in leadership is inevitable in every organization, often bringing uncertainty and anxiety about the ability to sustain organizational changes initiated by the outgoing leader. At the Captain Elementary School in Clayton, when teachers learned that their principal, Barbara Kohm, would be retiring this year, they became concerned about the future of their school. Would a new leader, for example, support the good work they had been doing in their study groups on reading, writing, and computation?

Kohm shared their concerns. As a systems thinker, she understood that sharing a vision also meant sharing ownership for problems and problem solving. In her school, she had already laid the foundation for sharing ownership

by sharing leadership responsibilities. She and her teachers had created ad hoc committees to manage issues about space, time, home-school relationships, and the budget. They had built relationships with parents by inviting them to think through solutions on issues affecting how their children learn. "The staff as a whole had been setting schoolwide goals for a number of years," Kohm says.

Now she wanted to ensure that shared leadership was deeply embedded before her departure. She remembered a seminar that author Linda Lambert had conducted in Clayton in 1997 on how to build teacher leadership. Kohm called Lambert and asked if she would work with her teachers. Lambert agreed.

Lambert held a seminar on how to increase what she calls the density of the "web of leadership." The teachers worked on a variety of exercises to help them examine

ideas about leadership behavior. They talked about their different learning styles and agreed on norms about how they should work together. Each teacher committed to a goal of providing some kind of leading behavior.

Teachers have since divided up leadership positions more explicitly. Monthly staff meetings include time for dialogue on the state of the school. Through this process, they also are addressing the sticky problem of how to downsize the teaching staff to accommodate a drop in enrollment.

"We are weaving a rich, dense 'web of leadership,'" Kohm says. "As a result, our whole is much greater than the sum of our parts. Because the whole now belongs to all of us, we feel confident that the work we've done and the culture we've built will continue to grow and develop in a logical, consistent way." ◀


10 curriculum committees, to make recommendations to the school board, and to provide guidelines and direction for the committees. Its members include the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, all school principals, all curriculum coordinators, the community relations director, and other key personnel. The curriculum council is the means by which conversations at the committee level become districtwide. Through this process, school-level autonomy is honored without sacrificing systemwide coherence and leadership.

In sum, Clayton's approach to curriculum development incorporates the very important principle of attacking challenges in the context of the whole system. In the old approach, a few people met periodically to determine the curriculum for the district. Now, stakeholders throughout the system meet on an ongoing basis, study, converse across levels, and continually refine the curriculum so that it meets the individual needs of teachers and students, as well as the overall needs of the district.

■ **Professional development.** Professional development for teachers occurs on three levels: personal mastery, school level, and district level. The district has built six professional development days into its school calendar in addition to six days in August for professional development, planning, and preparation.

On the personal level, teachers are expected to engage in continuous self-study. The district reimburses tuition and provides stipends for graduate course work, and encourages teachers to participate in professional organizations, workshops, and visitations to exemplary programs.

On the building level, teachers meet in study groups to discuss professional readings or reflect on student work and engage in collegial planning to develop their skills through cognitive coaching. At the district level, study groups, a mentor program, new teacher orientation, and other professional development activities are available.

 **All district- and school-level staff members essentially were put in charge of their own learning.**

"This year we decided to push ourselves further and try an experiment in self-organizing," Henke says. All district- and school-level staff members essentially were put in charge of their own learning, on the theory that they would learn best that way. The staff was encouraged to form learning teams aligned to the district's goals. As leadership consultant Margaret Wheatley observes, "Self-organization succeeds when the system supports the independent activity of its members by giving them, quite literally, a strong frame of reference."

Thirty-five teams are now operating, ranging in size from a couple of 3rd grade teachers who are exploring reasons for low achievement in math, to a group of 12 administrators who are looking at implications of systems thinking for the district and individual schools. The administrators, for example, began their exploration with a case study of one school. They informed their exploration with a review of the literature and held discussion groups to probe different aspects of the process.

The learning teams receive resources from the district, includ-

ing books and materials. They meet four days over the course of the school year. To ensure that their work matches the professional development goals of the district, someone in each group writes up their learning plan and submits it to the professional development director. "This way we know where they are meeting, what they're meeting about, what kinds of materials they need, and how we can support them," Henke says.

Overall the work must also meet the district's professional development standards, which require that it be cumulative, continuous, and collegial. It must acknowledge teacher needs in implementing the curriculum and reflect a balance of current theory, research, and practical application.

Personal mastery, one of Senge's five disciplines, undergirds the professional development program in Clayton. Through its structure, the program fosters the growth of individuals. Through activities such as cognitive coaching and the learning teams, Clayton's professional development helps staff build relationships among peers, across both functions and age levels. And by improving relationships, these individuals improve their own performance, which in turn contributes to improved performance across the system.

Also evident in Clayton's professional development is what Senge calls the fifth discipline. The learning teams allow teachers to self-organize around the big picture — the district's goals and learning standards — thus maintaining a creative tension between individual innovation and whole-system unity. "Everything is connected to everything else," Henke says. "We post the teams on the district Web site so everyone can see what everyone else is doing. This helped us to start looking at leverage points."

■ **Career development and teacher evaluation.** The value of continuous learning, an important component of systems thinking, is embedded in the career development and teacher evaluation process. In Clayton, it takes four to five years for teachers to achieve tenure, but the learning does not stop there.

In the first four to five years, the teacher must demonstrate skills to evaluators including the principal, designees of the principal, and others. Students and parents also have the opportunity to evaluate the teacher, a provision that at first was very contentious.

After receiving tenure, teachers must complete an “associate experience,” which includes activities that emphasize reflective practice, inquiry, and an increased knowledge of the district and the community. Reflective practice is developed through such activities as dialogue journals and action research projects.

“Career teachers” are those who complete these two levels of experience. Once they reach this level, however, they must still demonstrate professional growth. They are expected to develop a time line for implementing personal goals that are aligned with district and school needs.

Henke says the program is designed to ensure that all staff members stay committed to continuous learning. “The infrastructure of the career development plan says that learning is one of the most critical kinds of work we do here.”

■ **Team learning.** Putting the career development and teacher evaluation program in place was not easy. It required continuous negotiation with the school board, the teachers association, teachers, and administrators over a period of three years. Early in the process,

parties on both sides of the issue had dug in their heels. A committee of 35 individuals, including board members, teachers union representatives, teachers, and administrators, had been working together on the plan, with limited success. The board wanted to support teachers but also felt responsible for ensuring that “bad” teachers would not be allowed to teach in the district. On the other side, the teachers union was concerned about issues of job security and due process.



**Today, the art of dialogue is deeply embedded in much of the district’s work.**

Clayton educators decided that dialoguing was a skill that was missing from personal interactions among staff, administration, and other stakeholders. Here again, the disciplines and tools that Henke and her colleagues learned from Senge came into play; in this case the discipline of team learning was the point of focus.

To move the process forward, some group members attended workshops on dialoguing. They then brought these skills back to the larger group. At one point, team members participated in a retreat with an outside facilitator that focused on the development of consensus and shared decision making. Over time, the focus of the conversations shifted from trying to solve a problem to trying to understand perspectives. “Once we decided not to solve a problem, a huge weight was lifted,” Henke says.

From this experience, the district began to appreciate the value of dialogue. “We have found that when we come to something very emotional and sticky, one of the best ways to do that is to go to a dialogue group,” Henke says.

Today, the art of dialogue is deeply embedded in much of the district’s work. Two or three times a year board members, administrators, and teachers union representatives spend an evening in so-called communication laboratories. Before the sessions, each group writes up questions they want to discuss. The questions become the agenda.

## Conclusion

Over the last decade, systems thinking has become deeply embedded in the way Clayton operates. As a result, the district is better able to cope with challenges as they arise. The new ways of thinking and working are having a tangible impact on teaching and learning, according to Henke. Students in the district had generally been scoring high on standardized tests well before systems thinking was introduced. In the last couple of years those scores have climbed a bit higher for all students, although a gap remains between the performance level of African American students bused from the city and their suburban peers. Most importantly, says Henke, “teaching has changed dramatically,” from surveying subject areas to engaging students in in-depth study. Now, students are performing well on a variety of assessments that capture a broader range of learning than standardized tests can measure.

The specific ingredients of systems thinking that have served the district well — continuous learning, dialoguing, self-organization, and shared leadership — have prepared Clayton to engender learning and leadership at all levels, both inside and outside the system, and thus to become more flexible and adaptive in a rapidly changing world. ◀

# West Des Moines, IA

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## Fixing What Ain't Broke

Superintendent: Les Omotani  
District Size: 8,525

### Abstract

Building on its 26 years of experience in community education programming, West Des Moines Community Schools has — over the last 6 or 7 years — used systems thinking to develop a culture of stakeholder engagement focused on collaboration and continuous improvement of school, district, and community practices. This effort has fundamentally changed how the district operates.

Five guiding principles inform decisions and processes throughout the system. A multistakeholder steering committee serves as a forum for exploring ideas, testing innovations, communicating to the wider community, and monitoring the progress of educational reforms in the district. The most fundamental change is a shift in culture and the development of an expanding critical mass of stakeholders inside and outside the system. These stakeholders are committed to a new vision for the district, its community, and the relationship between the two, and to the long-term, anything-but-linear process that they believe can make the vision a reality.

### Background

West Des Moines is a prosperous community where combined SAT scores last year averaged 1215 and scores on the Iowa Test of Basic

Skills put the district in the 88th to 97th national percentile ranking, depending on the grade. The trophy racks at Valley High School make it clear that students excel not only in athletics, but also in national academic competitions. Less than 10 percent of the district's mostly white students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

With such performance, it is not surprising to find an undercurrent of “don't fix what ain't broke” thinking. The district's success in mobilizing a significant segment of the community, along with its own staff and students, around an agenda of fundamental and continuous change is remarkable, especially since the status quo was delivering such satisfying results. But a significant number of stakeholders in this system have come to believe that success according to traditional, standardized measures doesn't equate with the preparation of students for the demands of the 21st century. “We're saying let's be proactive,” says Superintendent Les Omotani.

Several district leaders — school board members as well as system-level administrators — at the urging of then superintendent Dale Grabinski, read and were deeply affected by Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* when it was published in 1990. But a foundation for building a broad learning community was established long before then. The district passed a levy 26 years ago allowing its resources to be used for community purposes identified in periodic needs assessments. It began making school facilities available to the community during nonschool hours for a wide

range of activities, including adult education courses.

Although many of these activities were traditional, they helped foster the proposition that the schools are genuinely *public* — that the relationship between a school system and its community is vital and should be active and mutually beneficial. On this bedrock, the district is now building a culture of shared ownership, shared vision, and shared leadership.

In 1991 Grabinski formed a committee to implement the school board's wishes to explore a new strategic direction for the district. He presented the following argument for using systems thinking as the operating rationale: “We are and will continue to be a global society. This changing world environment impacts us culturally, economically, and politically. We are and will continue to be a knowledge-based society. This changing environment impacts those who prepare the workers of tomorrow with different skills than those of the past. . . . with all of the challenges facing education today, it is imperative that we take a systemic or holistic look at what this district needs to do to remain effective in the 21st century.”

David Graham, a corporate executive who chaired the effort, observes, “The challenge was to think in terms of systems and how they interrelate and work together, rather than focus on isolated parts.”

Everyone involved in the incipient stages of the systemic process says it was painstaking. “At first I thought this was very nebulous,” says Mary Kay Rhodes, a committee member and former school board member. “We were all going together, but nobody knew where.”

The sessions took the form of dialogues without agendas. Adds John Ambrosion, a banker and committee member, "Initially we needed to find a balance between those who were very task-oriented and those who were very cerebral." The committee broke into three task forces to concentrate on (1) curriculum, (2) maximizing resources, and (3) "ways we work with one another." Because of the use of free-flowing dialogues around complex issues, what was originally expected to take one year took three.

The outcome was a report that laid out five principles to guide the district in all planning and decision making and in its struggle to "build a community of learners." The guiding principles are presented here in condensed form:

- Continuous improvement (feedback, assessment, and accountability)
- Personalized learning (emphasis on meaningful learning for each individual aimed at the development of lifelong learners)
- Maximum availability, utilization, and effectiveness of human resources (volunteerism encouraged and district allocation of resources targeted at best opportunities for all learners)
- Integration (coordination of resources, programs, and services; curricular integration; student integration into multiage, multiability groups; integrating technology into the curriculum)
- Diversity (curricula and relationships reflecting the valuing of human diversity; seeking multiple perspectives before decisions get made)

In 1995 Grabinski retired and Omotani left an associate superintendency in Alberta, Canada, to lead the continuing work of transforming West Des Moines Community Schools into a learning community. Omotani, already familiar with Senge, says it was the systems focus that attracted him. He believed all

<h2>Before and After in West Des Moines</h2>	
<h3>Old Way of Doing Business</h3>	<h3>New Way of Doing Business</h3>
Programs and policies mandated by the school board and top administrators, with minimal stakeholder input	Major programmatic and policy decisions made only after the community and school staff have weighed in through new structures that facilitate participatory decision making
Decisions made by a few, and budget centrally managed	Participation by dozens of stakeholders in numerous budget-shaping committees; school control over portions of the overall budget
Short-range strategic plans with 12-month implementation cycles	Long-term strategic and systemic direction established; change and continuous improvement pursued as a "neverending journey"
Short-term training	Ongoing learning: systems thinking, quality tools, how children learn

the pieces were in place to make it work: a committed administration, a committed board, and a supportive, engaged community.

### Effects

Today the systems thinking effort is driven by the guiding principles, a group called the Building a Learning Community (BLC) Steering Committee, and Omotani. The 40-member BLC includes 10 more people from the community than the district. Formed initially to infuse the guiding principles into the district's day-to-day work, it has functioned as a study and dialogue group, a planning and monitoring cadre, and the driver for the development of a systemwide and communitywide shared vision.

The BLC meets six times a year. In the first year, 1995, banker Ambrosion says the group "stumbled along," not knowing how to

approach its mission. It steeped itself in the systems thinking literature and developed the habit of genuine listening. It gradually became the sounding board for new ideas and works in progress, institutionalizing the integration of resources, as well as sharing information and promising practices. Omotani describes the BLC's mission as monitoring, learning, advocating, and guiding innovation.

The BLC strives to monitor progress on major initiatives while sustaining community and system engagement in those same initiatives. In the process, a number of the guiding principles can be seen at work, as illustrated by a BLC meeting that took place in 1998.

- **High school restructuring initiative.** At the meeting, Valley High School presented a draft of an improvement plan that is part of a

whole-school restructuring initiative. The initiative began in 1996 through the efforts of the Valley Teaching and Learning Committee, a group of 49 parents, students, teachers, administrators, and other school staff members. With the district's guiding principles as a framework, the group went through a process of extensive study, dialogue, and data gathering and analysis to rethink the high school's educational philosophy. This was the starting place for outlining significant changes in the educational program and corresponding changes in practice.

Five key elements of the overall restructuring initiative became the basis of the Valley High School A+ Plan, which was awarded a \$400,000 Iowa+ Initiative Grant by the Iowa Department of Education. The five components are (1) the personal adult advocate program, in which each certified staff member meets weekly with a group of 15 students to help with effective communication, personal development skills, and student academic plans; (2) the development of interdisciplinary curriculum; (3) performance standards and assessments (an effort that will eventually be merged with a districtwide effort to develop content and performance standards and assessments); (4) the junior portfolio, which will require 11th graders to demonstrate "their ability to be self-reliant, lifelong learners"; and (5) senior seminar, an apprenticeship/internship program that will aim to give seniors "first-hand knowledge of the worlds of work and community service."

At the meeting, more than 100 people — including students, faculty, the administration, community members, and the media — discussed the A+ initiative. Instead of sitting through presentations, the participants rotated through a series of roundtables, where team mem-

bers who are leading the efforts laid out objectives, issues, and questions relating to a particular piece of the initiative and then invited dialogue.

While some pieces of the restructuring are already in place, others are still being formulated. At one table, Valley Teaching and Learning Committee members presented cases for and against the proposed model. At another, presenters advised that a number of fundamental questions about implementation remain. The conversations were lively, and afterward participants filled out forms so that the leaders of the restructuring effort had written reflections on the dialogues as well as the ideas, questions, and reactions that surfaced during the event itself.



**Having a school board that buys into systems thinking and operates by the same rules as everyone else has helped keep the vision alive.**

Jane Bell, a communications consultant who sits on the BLC, says Valley High School's presentation demonstrates the new learning community model at work. "Under our old approach," she says, "you would not see a work in progress, where they might say they are having a horrible time integrating something into the curriculum. It would never have been admitted publicly. Now it is, which is much more healthy. They can seek help before people boil over in anger."

One interesting outcome of the high school restructuring effort was the opening of a new freshman high school for 700 9th graders in the fall of 1997. Students and teachers are organized into interdisciplinary teams. Donna Wilkins, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, says that although surveys

show students in the first class to make the transition into 10th grade at Valley High School are doing well, the district will continue to monitor this critical transition point.

■ **Budget.** In addition to restructuring initiatives, the BLC is inviting community participation in budget planning. "For years this was done in a vacuum," says Jamie Ferrare, a dean of education at Drake University and a BLC member.

Last year, for the first time, the district invited community residents to attend facilitated conversations about the budget. About 120 people showed up. They broke into committees to discuss the pieces of the budget that most interested them. Many committed 40 to 60 hours to the task. "This really opens up the process to new ideas," says board member Peter Leo.

■ **Broad ownership.** Having a school board that buys into systems thinking and operates by the same rules as everyone else has helped keep the vision alive. Former board member Rhodes says it was difficult to ignore the guiding principles, because they were printed on every agenda. "As a board member you saw them so much that they became part of your fiber," she says. "I realized that I was making decisions based on the principles."

Keeping the language of systems thinking front and center is one of Omotani's passions. Four years after approval of the original guiding principles, he continues to carry with him a dog-eared copy of *The Fifth Discipline*. He is the reason why the district's annual report, which is distributed to the community, is organized around the guiding principles. His columns in the district's newsletter are nearly always imbued with the content and vocabulary of systems thinking, replete with quotations from Senge.

Omotani recognizes the distinction Senge makes between  
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# Collier County, FL

## A Cautionary Tale

Interim Superintendent: Dan White  
District Size: 29,175

### Abstract

The Collier County Public Schools began using systems thinking in its work with business and community representatives four years ago to raise expectations for student learning. With state funds, the district developed an infrastructure for continuing the effort with its own personnel. But a change in district leadership has weakened the work. At the district level, participation has slackened and efforts have slowed.

### Background

The communities of Collier County on south Florida's Gulf Coast span extreme ranges of wealth and poverty. In 1994 two parallel initiatives took aim at helping the county and the school system meet the challenges of the future. One initiative, begun by the local Chamber of Commerce, sought to transform the district into a "world class" learning organization. Participants in World Class Collier included the school district and business and community leaders.

The other initiative was spearheaded by 13 organizations that banded together to develop a plan for improving the county's future. The effort, called FoCuS (The Future of Collier County Created by Us), used an outside facilitator to engage 1,300 residents in a collective visioning process. Over a three-month

period these individuals, working in small groups, generated more than 2,000 ideas, 175 of which related to improving education. The ideas were further refined and then assigned to task forces charged with creating strategies to achieve them.

In the spring of 1996 the FoCuS and World Class efforts joined forces to apply for \$100,000 in Break the Mold funds, which the state of Florida made available to



**New principals meet as a learning community to support each other in becoming more effective school leaders.**

help organizations improve education systems. In the fall of 1996 the state awarded the money to the Collier groups. The two organizations then formed a Break-the-Mold Community of Learners organization, to further refine the ideas that emerged from the FoCuS group.

The merged group ultimately produced a long list of common expectations for the school district, the schools, the students, and the community. In addition, the process spawned planning for a professional development center and recommendations on improving assessment techniques in reading, writing, and math. Also, task forces produced position papers on improving prekindergarten service and instructional areas.

### Effects

Participants credit many of their accomplishments to the process of collective visioning they used. The group hired Ray Jorgensen, a consultant who is a student of the

methods and tools of Senge and W. Edwards Deming, to lead workshops on team learning. Participants learned to apply systems thinking strategies, such as how to suspend assumptions that interfere with open and deep communication, clarify goals, and rethink the roles of leaders in organizational change.

About two years ago, similar "learning communities" (as Collier County calls them) formed — one for assistant principals and another for deans. They continue to meet monthly in dialogue sessions. As word of these first learning communities spread, others began experimenting with them. Today, of the district's 35 schools, 5 elementary schools and 1 middle school are developing learning communities, as is a parent advisory group. The dialogues among assistant principals have focused on administrative leadership development, and when the district recently needed to hire seven principals, the successful candidates came largely from this group. The new principals now meet as a learning community to support each other in their efforts to become effective school leaders.

The work in other areas is also proceeding. For example, a professional development center that will provide educational and training opportunities for business as well as school professionals was scheduled to open in June.

Despite the initial progress in reculturing — developing a culture that values and supports deep communication at all levels of the system — and in launching new initiatives, the district is now at a

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compliance, enrollment, and commitment. Traditional inducements can bring about stakeholder compliance, and perhaps even enrollment, but not commitment or ownership. Yet commitment is the essential ingredient of large-scale, lasting change.

The high school restructuring proposal included a quotation from author and educator Thomas Sergiovanni that typifies the district's multiyear efforts: "In building a community what matters most is what the community together believes in, and what the community together wants to accomplish; and this idea structure, this community of mind, becomes the primary source of authority for what people do . . . community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort."

In terms of pace, the change process in West Des Moines looks more like evolution than revolution, but what is arguably more important in sustaining long-term organizational change is breadth and diversity of stakeholder inclusion in the process. If this is true, West Des Moines has established a solid foundation for ongoing educational change and improvement. ◀

crossroads. The original Break-the-Mold group, which ran out of funding a year ago and has been renamed, is still lumbering along, but with lapsing enthusiasm.

Most of the advocates for the district's learning communities say that the departure of superintendent Robert Munz last year has left the district without strong commitment to the process from the top. Assistant Superintendent Frederick Tuttle, a proponent of systems thinking, says the interim superintendent and the school board see the initiative as having a school-level rather than a system-level focus. The current superintendent's stance toward the learning communities is characterized as one of support more than participation.

According to Tuttle, the learning communities, together with the initiatives that emerged from their dialogues, constituted the beginnings of an infrastructure that needed to take root for systems thinking to accomplish its potential in Collier. "We had an umbrella organization, but now we don't have the rods to hold it up," he says.

Tuttle says the major lesson for other districts embarking on

systems thinking is to prepare for next steps. "We got our expectations and our reports completed," he says, "but we should have built in a plan to move from initial successes to where we should go next."

Tuttle and other systems thinking proponents in Collier have by no means given up hope. In the absence of strong commitment from the top, they seek to strengthen efforts in the schools by training more learning conversation facilitators and bringing parents into dialogues involving school staff.

Whether this more diffusive approach succeeds or not, what systems thinking proponents in the district now acknowledge is that the pursuit of a couple of key strategies would have left their overall effort in a stronger position:

■ Greater attention should have been paid to the development of shared vision, and these efforts should have extended to include the school board.

■ There should have been less celebration when the FoCuS report was released and more preparation for sustaining momentum once the euphoria surrounding that event had died down. ◀

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