

Preface

The fate of this nation rests on many shoulders—but none more heavily than those of our public school educators. It is the talented youth they discover and nourish who will become the entrepreneurs in business and conscientious citizens in our communities.

For educators to carry such a heavy weight, they need an opportunity to reframe how professional life in schools is organized. Schools need, for once, to be a place where other organizations look for guidance in how to make things work—how voices are heard, how innovation occurs, and how lives are transformed.

Many schools are on the cusp of such a transformation. Professional learning communities are bubbling up within and across schools—looking at student work, digging deeper into the underlying concepts of various disciplines, and gaining a better appreciation for how students learn. Some meet weekly in their school, others twitter daily about some immediate concern, and yet others work online with fellow educators in far flung places.

These energetic silos of innovation and reflection will accomplish much but not all that is essential for the needed transformation of our public schools. They cannot surmount the concerned parents who inadvertently make school more difficult for their children or the taunting that some students dole out to the more vulnerable in their midst. Most schools are not organized to help willing, but clueless, staff adopt new technologies or get the data they need to help the students they serve. Educators seldom have the crosscutting ties they need to look at instructional issues in different ways or to see talents in the young that remain invisible in their own classroom.

This book is about the conditions needed to use systems thinking in schools. Applying a systems thinking approach

allows organizations to uncover and adopt solutions that avoid unanticipated consequences. For schools, systems thinking provides a strategy for tackling the multiple roadblocks to improving student learning. For instance, high rates of absenteeism in a school may occur not simply because parents are unaware of the fact that their children never get on the bus, but also because some students are bored, others fear the taunting of their peers, and yet others just need to study for a tough exam. For meaningful change to occur, schools need to address all of the roadblocks, not just one of them.

Here we introduce structures and processes that allow teachers to improve student learning and well-being and principals to enable voices to be heard beyond the classroom walls and provide support for innovative classroom practices. It will be most appreciated by administrators whose responsibilities make it difficult to interact daily with teachers. They may confront issues of communication and coordination that limit their ability to provide personal support to each teacher, find innovation languishing for lack of support, or find that expertise never seems to be where one needs it.

Our interest in reorganizing school life in ways that allow educators to work smarter, not harder, began in the early 1990s. We began our journey as part of the New American School's effort to design "world class" models for schools in the 21st century—working to pilot and bring to scale the Modern Red SchoolHouse (MRSH) design. While we both had a passion for building thriving public schools in our nation, one came to the challenge with more bookish knowledge and the other was blessed with more seasoned and practical knowledge of both public schools and business practices. The piloting and bringing to scale of the MRSH design allowed us the opportunity to assess which organizational infrastructure makes a difference for both students and educators.

While our comprehensive design had a number of components, the organizational framework we chose proved to be one of the more significant aspects of our design for 21st-century schools. We introduced a simple structural change in how school administrators garner advice from school staff, coordinate changes in practice, and develop expertise among their educators. While leadership teams were common in the 1990s, teachers' voices remained muted. Yet, all teachers could and should contribute to school life outside their classrooms.

Unleashing the hidden expertise and commitment of teachers created a synergy of great proportions. One Florida teacher, commenting on her experience said: “There is a huge difference in school culture when a staff feels that what they say actually matters. An idea they have could actually come to fruition. The school stops being a place where things happen to you and starts being a place where you can make things happen.”

In those modest, but visionary, beginnings, we were fortunate to have colleagues who advised us. Finlay McQuade provided us with a practical as well as scholarly understanding of the challenges in developing transformative instructional programs. Rob Melnick and Lou Ann Bierlain gave us insight into the potential of technology, not simply in terms of instructional resources, but in ways that technology could improve communication and productivity. Susan Barker, who led MRSH’s development at the elementary level, helped us see the need to distribute expertise within grade levels or departments. Tim and Paula Gaddis not only took risks as innovators but also ensured a commitment to excellence permeated our work. Genie DePolo and Marci Kozinn’s practical experience and persistent questions about most everything (we are smiling) gave us both wisdom and inspiration.

The effort to create this manuscript benefited greatly from our assistants, Chrisynthia Ferrell and Judy Lyles. Their commitment to “doing it right” in terms of details, style, and format made our tasks much easier. We could not have done this without them. For any manuscript prepared by someone in a Kilgore family, nothing is final until Carol Kilgore puts her critical eye over each page. We were beneficiaries of this tradition.

Laci Coppins, Roxie McBride, Suzette Brown Miller, Anne Mitchell, Joyce Pully, and Maryanne Roesch—wise and experienced practitioners all—gave us invaluable feedback as our work progressed. Our husbands, Tom and Bill, were patient cheerleaders. Most important of all, though, are the hundreds of principals and teachers who worked with us—taking risks and providing the evidence that with the right structure and processes, the quality of professional life can become invigorating and greatly increase student learning and well-being.