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Educational Consulting LLC

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Quality Improvement or Continuous Improvement?

Recognizing The Place for Each - The Need for Both

The pressure to improve public education continues to be among the top priorities of Americans. It occupies national, state and local political agendas and is headline material in the media. Among educators, it is forefront in the minds of all. The expectation for improvement, here and now, is the prism through which everyone looks at the public education system, the local school district and professional educators. And while educators have made improvements in learning, the gap is still significant. Unacceptable proficiency differences still exist demographically and the learning levels for 21st century world competitiveness continue to be challenged. Charter schools, school choice and home schooling continue to be touted as alternatives. Financing at the national, state and local levels is additional fuel for the whole debate.

While one may argue the myriad claims and arguments made, educators cannot escape the need to continue to demonstrate significant improvements. And while current efforts are commendable and all improvements are valuable, there continues to be an unrelenting pressure for more improvements. The challenge to the education professional may well be captured in this fundamental question: Why am I not able to satisfy the public's criticism when we are all working so hard and we are showing improvements in our results?

In part, the answer can be found in the approach being taken by educators and the approach being expected from the public. On the one hand, the public expects bigger improvements and sooner. In fact, it can be argued that they are seeking a new model, not radically new but refreshingly new, with new features and functions to achieve their learning vision. And on the other hand, educators recognize the fragility and human aspects of children and the learning process and seek a more incremental approach to improved learning. Without being judgmental of the approaches, one can observe the disconnection.

At what point do I move from maintaining, repairing and fixing my asset to investing in the newest and most up-to-date version?

At the heart of these two approaches, and the inherent disconnection, resides a question that humans ask all the time about their assets and investments: At what point do I move from maintaining, repairing and fixing my asset to investing in the newest and most up-to-date version? Individually, we are called to consider this decision with our major assets of house, automobile, appliances and technology. Corporately, leaders consider this question constantly as competition, economics and consumer demands require adjustments be made to their product models.

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The answer, of course, is that there is no textbook formula for determining when. In reality, the system – personal or corporate - must recognize that the process of improvement by maintaining, fixing and repairing is fundamental and necessary; and so too is the process of improvement that creates new and up-to-date versions. However, both improvement approaches must constantly coexist and integrate with each other in a way that facilitates a seamless evolution when it is time to move to the next level.

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When considering the two above approaches, it is important to differentiate the underlying models of each. The maintaining, fixing and repairing approach is fundamentally a quality improvement process. That is, it is purposeful in problem solving, dissecting for root causes, and modifying the base process for maximization of its original design and intent. The evolution to next level approach is fundamentally a continuous improvement process. It relies on a detailed understanding of current processes and how and why the current processes operate systemically, together with a clear vision and design plan for the next level. Whereas the maintaining, fixing and repairing approach relies on those closest to the problem to analyze, design and implement the improvements, the evolution to next level approach requires all components of the organization to be involved and interrelated as a total system in designing, planning and implementing the next level process.

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Peter M Senge highlights the importance, indeed the requirement, of organization interrelationships, or as he terms it “systems thinking.” That is, visionary results achieved through a whole system methodology that simultaneously focuses on each of the organizational components while structurally tying the separate components into a pattern of interrelatedness. It is a whole system methodology that lifts your entire organization by systemically enhancing each part in a way that is interrelated and creates corresponding enhancements to other components of your overall system.

Senge states in his book The Fifth Discipline, “From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our action; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole.”

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Senge further states, “Without a systemic orientation, there is no motivation to look at how the disciplines interrelate. By enhancing each of the other disciplines, it continually reminds us that the whole can exceed the sum of its parts. Business and other human endeavors are also systems. They, too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are a part of that lacework ourselves, it’s doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved.”

While there are a multitude of challenges that districts face, and which require a quality improvement approach, there are many opportunities for continuous improvement lost because of lack of attention to the interrelation of all the functions of a school district. Working to make systems of curriculum, instruction, finance, human resources, or pupil personnel perfect unto themselves is what allows for these missed opportunities. While sophisticated school leaders may understand Senge’s thinking, moving an entire district to that thinking requires careful analysis and definition of the relationships *between* often independently held departments and linking those relationships to the whole. Interestingly, there are not administrators in

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charge of the areas *between* departments and domains in districts. Consequently, leadership most often occurs within the lines but not *across* the lines.

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Key to the continuous improvement model is a platform of seamless and integrated planning and thorough data collection. By tying together audit studying and planning as a single, interrelated system, plans no longer appear as top-down, arbitrary and unenthusiastic. Rather, widespread stakeholder commitment is gathered from the outset as the audit study endeavors to understand individuals' documentaries of how and why the separate components of the district operate. The purpose of the audit study is to accumulate the explicit knowledge base of current practices, as well as stakeholder thoughts, feelings and attitudes; all of which are critical to establishing improvement plans that are destined for results worthy of your stakeholders' commitment.

Compare this to the more prevalent model of audits and planning wherein audits are generally conducted separate from the planning function, and planning is largely a separate top-down exercise.

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Planning, which should be an investment of long-term thinking centered on the shared educational vision of a district, more often becomes a process to elevate the short-term needs and gather up the current problems and hurdles. Rather than establishing an orientation for the future and identifying new opportunities for growth improvement, planning is more often used to showcase today's issues and problems. In effect, planning tends to be a top-down process to accumulate the problems of today for acknowledgment, prioritization and short-term resolution.

We have all participated in the annual planning exercises and brought with us our laundry list of problems and issues. After discussion, the group agrees upon those that are most urgent and the plans are listed. Missing is the explicit knowledge base regarding current practices, as well as stakeholder thoughts, feelings and attitudes, that provides a reliable picture of current state and the starting point for real growth improvement and your stakeholders' commitment.

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Audits, which should detail without prejudice the practices employed in the operation of the district, often become focused on uncovering practices that have the potential to be problematic. In the extreme, some audits are conducted to build a case against behaviors that have been identified as unacceptable. Rarely are audits used to objectively detail the practices with equal focus on the stronger practices as well as those that are weaker. Again, missing is the acquisition of the realities of current practices as well as stakeholder thoughts, feelings and attitudes that provide the starting point for real growth improvement and your stakeholders' commitment. Instead, a list of problems or issues, current or potential, is created. Audit results that are less suited to feed into a planning process of long-term thinking centered on the shared educational vision of a district, but rather more aimed at elevating the short-term needs and gathering up the current problems and hurdles.

Keeping in mind Senge's words, "Without a systemic orientation, there is no motivation to look at how the disciplines interrelate. Since we are a part of that lacework ourselves, it's doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved."

In education, many are now looking to the area of curriculum. A thorough examination of that area can yield essential information as to the development processes for curriculum, the standards against which curricula are written, the outcomes that are sought from such curricula, and the degree to which current curricula are available to teachers. However, curricula exist in a vacuum as a single entity until instruction is closely examined; not only via observing teachers in the classroom, but also by talking to teachers to understand their application of curriculum. And this only defines the relationship between curricula and one other system - instruction.

Consider the supervisory process which helps form the key relationship between successful, consistent curriculum development and successful, consistent delivery in the classroom. Without a supervisory model that insists on a tight relationship between curriculum development and instruction, little is to be gained from having a perfect curriculum, just as little is to be gained from having highly effective instruction occurring in the classroom if that instruction does not reflect the desired curriculum. While curriculum and instruction are often perceived as the systems that should have a close relationship, it is only through the supervisory process that curriculum implementation can systematically occur. Given that those in charge of curriculum are typically not directly in charge of the supervisory process, there is a potential loss of connectedness to the larger whole of improved student performance.

Frequently, too, district leadership will ask for reports from the functions of human resources, curriculum and instruction, and pupil services. Rarely are these reports indicative of the systematic, ongoing interactions of human resource functions with staff development functions. Is this relationship obvious? Not likely, as this relationship passes through the functions of curriculum and instruction and, more importantly, through building-level leadership. How tightly interconnected staff development and human resources functions are often tilts student performance results between what does occur and the higher levels of performance that might - and should - occur.

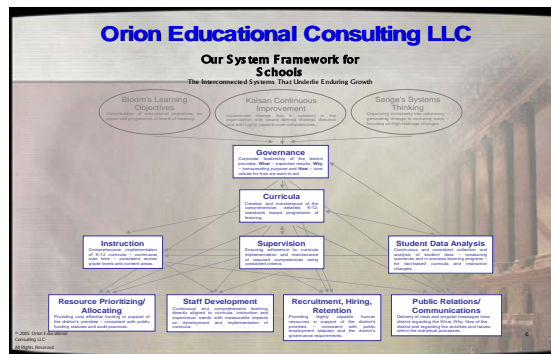
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Also, the continued focus on current problems and hurdles, especially raised as snapshots within isolated parts of the system, distracts the governance responsibilities of the board of education and superintendent. When the governance role is focused on long-term thinking and visioning, board of education members are not tugged out of their appropriate roles. When short-term needs, current problems, and hurdles appear continually on the agenda of the district, then board of education members are much more susceptible to a micro-managing role rather than long-term visioning, planning, and system accountability.

There are many more interrelationships that weave together a district's components and functions and demonstrate the power of Senge's thinking. For example, are the school board's goals directly connected to student performance? If so, are those performance indicators directly impacting the activities of all supervisors and teachers?

The Orion 9 Systems Approach® details the patterns of interrelationships in school districts and is the blueprint for our audit studies.

We recognize, as Senge points out, there are many more patterns of relationship that make the difference between districts moving forward on a path of continuous improvement or staying stagnant. These interrelationships are detailed in our **9 Systems Approach®** which forms the blueprint for our audit studies, audit studies designed and executed to systemically study each part of your district for overall district improvement.



Our (Audit Studying+Planning)=Results® model is a whole system methodology that helps you lift your whole district by systemically enhancing each part of your district in a way that is interrelated and creates corresponding enhancements to other components of your overall district system. It is built on a platform of seamless and integrated audit studying and planning.

Our **(Audit Studying+Planning)=Results®** model helps clients realize their visionary results through a whole system methodology that simultaneously focuses on each of the district's organizational components while structurally tying the components into a pattern of interrelatedness. Practically, we help you lift your whole district by systemically enhancing each part of your district in a way that is interrelated and thereby creates corresponding enhancements to other components of your overall district system.

Our **(Audit Studying+Planning)=Results®** model is built on a platform of seamless and integrated audit studying and planning. We tie together audit studying and planning as an interrelated system so that plans no longer appear as top-down, arbitrary and unenthusiastic. Widespread stakeholder commitment is gathered from the outset as our audit study seeks to understand individuals' documentaries of how and why the separate components of the district operate. The purpose of our audit study is to accumulate the explicit knowledge base of current practices as well as stakeholder thoughts, feelings and attitudes; all of which is critical to establishing improvement plans that are destined for results worthy of your stakeholders' commitment.

Orion Educational Consulting is the premier provider of total solutions; ones that improve the learning accomplishments of all students and educators in all content areas. We assist educational leaders in creating reasonable pathways that continuously raise the level of accomplishment.

- **With our systemic orientation, you will be motivated to look at how your functions and disciplines interrelate.**
- **By creating plans to enhance each, you will be assured that your whole district performance will exceed the sum of what otherwise will occur by focusing on each alone.**
- **Your deepest problems will not only be solved, but your whole district will be lifted to a higher level of accomplishment and will achieve sustainable results.**
- **Your public will appreciate that you are providing them the new model they expect; not radically new, but refreshingly new, with new features and functions to achieve their learning vision.**