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Quarterly reports on the challenges of creating and sustaining whole-system transformational change in school districts

A Personal Vision for Transforming America's Education System and 20 Laws of Transformation to Guide the Process By Francis M. Duffy

I've learned that one-shot silver bullets don't work. It's a comprehensive systemic approach that works, based on the right psychology and the right outcomes for children.

Jerry Weast, (Monday, June 13, 2011).

Retiring superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland

What You Will Learn in This Edition of the Duffy Reports

In this edition of the Duffy Reports I reflect on my personal vision for transforming America's education system—a vision that explains why I am interested in transformational change, how I envision that change happening, and what the outcomes of that change might be.

Why I Want to Transform Our Education System

When it comes right down to it, here's why I want to transform America's education system: I want each child to be educated as though he or she is the only child to be educated. I want each child, even those with intellectual and physical disabilities, to experience the joy of learning. I want each child to be prepared to live a life of joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction given their innate potential and capacity to do that. I want each child to receive a personalized, customized education.

Making My Desire to Transform Our Education System Even More Personal

I have a deeper personal reason for advocating for the transformation of America's education system and the more than 14,000 school systems that are part of it. That reason is seen in the faces of my three grandchildren ages 5, 2, and 1. Our five year old grandson will be starting kindergarten in the fall (2011). His two sisters will be following him there in 3 and 4 years, respectively.

Our grandson is a delightful, joyful, caring, and intelligent boy. He is inquisitive about many things, especially about dinosaurs (a particularly well-defined interest of his). He knows the names of many dinosaurs. While he pronounces those dinosaur names effortlessly, my 62 year old

pronunciation mechanism (brain, mouth, and tongue) struggle to get those names out. I also can't remember which dinosaur name goes with which dinosaur while reading a book about dinosaurs with him. He knows them all. His next younger sibling, our 2 year old granddaughter, is particularly interested in aesthetics. She takes in and appreciates the beauty in her environment often saying with joyful awe, "Papa, that's pretty!" Our 1 year old granddaughter is still trying to make sense of the world in which she "lives" and has not yet developed a well-defined, and more importantly, understandable, lexicon for describing her world, but we can see the learning in her eyes and facial expressions as she sizes-up, analyzes, and evaluates her world as she toddles around.

I want my grandchildren to receive an education that recognizes and values them as individuals. I want educators to know these children—their needs, interests, and abilities. I want those children to receive an education that is customized to respond to their needs, interests, and abilities and, at the same time, I want them to learn important knowledge that will help them to succeed as adults and to live a happy, fulfilled life in our 21st Century society.

Aspirations versus Reality

I'm a realist, however, and that perspective informs my cynicism about the willingness and capacity of the school systems in our education system to transform. Realistically, I expect that most of America's school systems will not transform to provide children with the kind of education that I desire for my grandchildren and for your children and grandchildren. Those systems won't be transformed for one or more of the following reasons (Duffy, 2010, pp. 3-4):

1. Some educators, consultants, and policymakers do not understand the meaning of systemic transformational change;
2. Some educators, consultants, and policymakers have a difficult time "seeing" school districts as intact systems; instead, viewing them as a confederation of loosely coupled schools that can be fixed one classroom, one school at a time;
3. Those educators, consultants, and policymakers who do understand the meaning of systemic transformational change and those who do see school districts as intact systems are uncomfortable with the complexity and messiness of transformational change;
4. Those educators, consultants, and policymakers who do understand the meaning of systemic transformational change and who do see school districts as intact systems are uncomfortable with the amount of time it takes to create and sustain transformational change; or,
5. Those educators, consultants, and policymakers who do understand the meaning of systemic transformational change and who do see school districts as intact systems do not know how to create and sustain transformational change so they avoid doing it.

My realistic cynicism and prior experience as a high school teacher tells me that my grandchildren will be educated within the framework of the old industrial age paradigm that guides teaching and learning. They will be educated in groups of 25-30 students with one teacher "on stage" controlling the pace and flow of instruction for the group. They will be expected to learn a fixed amount of curricular content in a fixed amount of time. If they do not master the content in that specified period, they will still be forced to move forward with the group. The curricular content they learn will not be informed by their intellectual curiosity, learning styles, or level of native

intelligence. Rather, the curricular content will be pre-determined by their state's department of education in the form of "research-based" learning standards that assume that all children can master these standards within the instructional framework and timeframe into which they are intellectually and temporally squeezed.

To make this predictable scenario even more deplorable the joy of learning that my grandchildren and other children possess now and that they will take with them when they enter school will be driven out of them by the tedium of group instruction managed by less than inspiring teachers and by the relentless testing that is required by law (Hentoff, 2011; Berliner & Nichols, 2008). Of course, if they are blessed, in their 13 years in school they will experience one or two truly superior teachers who will inspire them with joyful moments of learning. But the experience of being with those one or two inspirational teachers will not be enough to compensate for the lost joy of learning.

Why This Deplorable Situation Is Allowed to Continue

Some well-intentioned educators, policymakers, and consultants interested in reforming the education system seem to suffer from the illusion that short-term, quick fixes respond to their long-term desires to see the education system and its school systems improve significantly. They seem to want the quality of education raised to superior levels only to find that their "silver bullet" quick-fixes fail to achieve their aspirations for change. It seems that whatever the issue or problem these educators, policymakers, and consultants are always drawn to the quicker "solutions" focusing on individual schools over the better and more effective long-term solution that focuses on transforming entire school systems. They seem never to have the time or money to do the right thing the first time, but they always have the time and money to do the wrong things again and again while expecting different outcomes.

Sometimes it seems like some educators, policymakers, and consultants are addicted to the quick-fix—the "silver bullet" approach to education reform. They seem to search for the next fix faster and faster. Even though the high they experience from the quick fix feels good because it produces what appears to be improvement, the original problems they "fixed" almost always return and become worse (Kim & Lannon, 1997). Addicted to silver bullet quick fixes, education reform today has largely become a series of short-term solutions that are added on one after another to the more than 14,000 school districts that are part of the education system. This short-term approach to education reform has become so sophisticated and pervasive that the federal department of education, state departments of education, education associations, and a horde of education consultants provide "guidance" for school reform that is informed by quasi-science (Berliner, 2002; Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Kaestle, 1993; Lederman, 2003) and failure to comply with the "research-based" solutions often meets with state sanctioned punishment.

Transform America's Education System, Not Reform It. Why?

There is a systemic crisis in American education. It's not new. Many know it. Some deny it. Some are blissfully unaware of it. Some don't want to resolve it because their careers are built around trying to resolve it. Repeated attempts to resolve the crisis have failed and will continue to fail because the approach to resolving the crisis (short-term quick fixes otherwise known as piecemeal change) is outdated and ineffective.

Many of us believe that the crisis is causally linked to the paradigm driving America's education system and its school systems, which is commonly referred to as the industrial age paradigm. This paradigm has reached the limit of its performance capacity and there is nothing that can be done to improve its effectiveness in any significant way. But educators, consultants, and policymakers continue to shoot their "silver bullets" at the systems thinking that this time, this one last time, the silver-bullet solutions will work and the systems will significantly change. But they cannot and never will significantly change as long as the systems are driven by the old paradigm. The old paradigm has run its course. It ran it well, but now it has reached the end of its usefulness and it must be replaced if we want to ensure that the America's children receive the education they need and deserve.

This crisis in the education system has created a very real mess (a term coined by Russell Ackoff, 1974, to describe a complex, seemingly unsolvable problem) in America's more than 14,000 school districts (which are also systems) and failure to transform America's education system to dissolve the district-level messes could create a society that is unfit for success and prosperity in the mid- to late 21st Century. The crisis-mess is that our school systems are not designed to educate children for success in our 21st Century knowledge society; that is, there is a huge gap between what and how we teach children during their thirteen years in school (kindergarten through 12th grade) and what and how we could be teaching them.

The paradigm guiding teaching and learning and influencing the design of America's education system and its school systems is composed of a set of theories, concepts, principles, mental models, and mindsets that influence the performance of the entire education system. The dominant paradigm influencing the performance of school systems is one that emerged at the beginning of the Industrial Age in the late 1700s. This Industrial Age paradigm created a factory model for educating groups of students by requiring them to learn a fixed amount of knowledge in a fixed amount of time. That paradigm continues to control the performance of school systems throughout the United States.

There is no place in the controlling paradigm for providing each child with an educational experience that is tailored to his or her needs, interests, and abilities. Because of this significant feature, that paradigm always has and always will leave children behind. Leaving children behind is an unavoidable consequence of the Industrial Age design of America's education system and its school systems. The systems are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting.

How to Transform and What Outcomes Should Be Expected

Providing America's children with an education that satisfies the requirements of our 21st Century Knowledge Age society requires a paradigm-shifting revolution that drives out and replaces the dominant Industrial Age paradigm by making four inter-connected transformations using a methodology specially designed to transform school systems (Duffy, 2011):

- Transform the way teachers teach and how children learn by replacing group-based, teacher-centered instruction with personalized, learner-centered instruction (if a child receives a personalized learning experience that is customized to respond to his or her needs, interests, and abilities and if that child is given the time he or she needs to master the required content, how can that child ever be left behind?);

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- Transform the quality of work life for teachers, administrators, and support staff by transforming a school system's organization culture, its reward system, job descriptions, and so on, to align with the requirements of the new teaching and learning processes (if teachers and staff are de-motivated and dissatisfied, they will not use the new teaching and learning paradigm effectively. The quality of work life has a direct and significant impact on motivation and satisfaction);
- Transform the way school systems interact with external stakeholders by moving away from a crisis-oriented, reactive approach to an opportunity-seeking, proactive approach (if a school system wants to transform as many of us change-minded advocates believe they should they will need political support and financial resources from their communities); and,
- Transform the way in which educators' create change by replacing piecemeal change strategies with whole-system change strategies (piecemeal change cannot create transformational change).

Making the Need for Transformation Personal for You

Imagine that your school system was seized yesterday by your state department of education and that it was completely shut down. The next day you learn that your system has been given a reprieve, but only if you completely transform the system. You are in charge of the transformation. You want to lead your entire school system into the 21st Century Knowledge Age. Imagine that you have a large cohort of bright-eyed kindergarten children excited by the prospects of learning, including your child or grandchild. It's your and your colleagues' responsibility to decide how those children will learn and what they will learn over their next 13 years in your transformed school system. How would you transform your school system so that it is significantly and substantively different than the one you have now? Would you want teachers to know and understand each child's learning style, academic interests, and intellectual strengths and weaknesses? Would you want each child to be given the time he or she needs to master important knowledge and to satisfy important standards of learning?

If you were or are a teacher and if you had the opportunity to transform the work environment of your school system, what changes would you make? Would you create a more democratic work environment? Would you design ways to stimulate motivation, boost morale, and increase commitment to the overall success of the school system? Would you reshape your school system's reward system to recognize and value high performance?

If you were or are a senior administrator in a school system and if you had the opportunity to transform the way your district relates to its external environment, what changes would you make? Would you create a relationship between your district and its environment that was mutually beneficial? Would you design ways to engage members of your community in constructive conversations about your system's future?

If you were or are a parent, teacher, or administrator and if you had the opportunity to transform the way you and your colleagues create change, how would you ensure that important and meaningful changes are sustained? Would you replace "silver bullet" quick fixes with changes based on principles of systemic change? Would you figure out creative and effective ways to sustain important and effective changes no matter how often leaders come and go in your system?

Transforming the Education System: The Greatest Challenge of the 21st Century

Will you join me in meeting what I believe is America's greatest challenge of the 21st Century? Will you become allies to advocate for the transformation of America's education system in ways that will educate each child as if he or she is the only child to be educated? If you aspire to transform our education system, I invite you to affiliate with the *FutureMinds: Transforming American School Systems* initiative (www.futureminds.us) that is sponsored by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). You do not need to join AECT to affiliate with the FutureMinds initiative, but you might consider doing that because AECT has a Division for Systemic Change whose members are active in the FutureMinds initiative.

Perhaps affiliating with FutureMinds is something you are not prepared to do. Would you consider forming a personal learning community within your school system where you and like-minded educators could learn about how to create and sustain transformational change? You might consider reading and discussing books like the ones found in the Rowman & Littlefield Education Leading Systemic School Improvement Series (<http://www.rowmaneducation.com/bookseries/LSI>).

Maybe you already have a systemic change learning community in place in your district and now you want to engage them in more formal training on systemic change. Would you consider bringing a team-based Change Leadership Academy to your district as an in-service opportunity (the April, 2011, edition of these Reports presented a possible design for this kind of academy)?

If you work in a state department of education you might consider developing a license for change leaders based on a set of research-based standards such as those described in an article titled "National Framework of Professional Standards for Change Leadership in Education" (<http://cnx.org/content/col10638/latest/>).

Maybe you are a faculty member in a department of educational leadership. You might consider designing a new degree program specializing in preparing change leaders.

Perhaps none of the options described above suit you. But if you believe, truly believe, that our education system and its school systems need to transform, then what will you do to advance the transformation agenda? How will you help? This is a fight worth fighting. It is a cause worth your time, effort, and leadership.

20 Laws for Transforming School Systems

I bring this article to a close by offering you a summary of what I have learned over almost a quarter of a century of teaching, consulting and conducting formative research on the art and science of transforming school systems. My advice is offered in the form of 20 laws for transforming school systems, which I call T-laws. The T-laws are derived from research on creating and sustaining transformational change in all kinds of systems, including school systems. If you are leading transformational change in your district or if you aspire to that kind of leadership you should find the T-laws to be informative and valuable for understanding the nature of complex adaptive change that focuses on transforming entire systems.

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It is often said that Dakota tribal wisdom believes that when you discover you are riding a dead horse the best thing to do is to dismount. I don't know if Native American Dakota tribes ever espoused that wisdom, but I do know that change leaders can use that "wisdom" to make a point about current approaches to school reform—it's like riding a dead horse and instead of dismounting educators and policymakers:

1. Change riders.
2. Seize the horse farm. Fire all the workers. Rehire new workers to ride the dead horse.
3. Create a federal law requiring educators to use a research-based dead horse improvement strategy—or else.
4. Use 21st century learning skills to revive the dead horse.
5. Arrange to visit other schools to see how they ride their dead horse.
6. Create a training session to increase the ability to ride dead horses.
7. Blame the horse, or better yet, blame the horse's parents.
8. Provide additional funding to increase the horse's performance.
9. Hire consultants who tell educators that their dead horse is not permanently dead, just temporarily dead until they can revive it by using their methodology.
10. Believe the consultants.

School reform in the United States has been driven by a rock-solid paradigm built on a foundation of continuous improvement, quick fixes, and a "fix the broken part" mentality. That paradigm has failed to create substantial change in the design and functioning of America's school systems. Educators and policymakers stubbornly refuse to dismount that "dead horse" and replace it with one that is driven by principles of design thinking (e.g., Brown, 2009) and transformational change.

To create school systems that will prepare our children for the challenges of the 21st Century change leaders need to transform those systems, not tinker with the "broken parts." Students do not need 21st century skills that are taught within the context and principles of a 19th century instructional paradigm. They need a 21st century learning paradigm that fosters self-guided learning, learner-centered teaching, and customized learning experiences. To create that new instructional paradigm change leaders need to practice whole-system transformation, not piecemeal school-by-school improvement.

Duffy's 20 T-Laws

T-Law 1: Revolutionary ideas seem to go through several stages before a paradigm shift occurs. The stages are:

- Stage 1: Complacency and freezing-out—at first the new idea is seen as off-the-wall; people essentially ignore it and freeze it out of the literature supporting the dominant paradigm;
- Stage 2: Derision—as the new idea refuses to go away it is ridiculed by those who have a vested interest in maintaining the dominant paradigm (see T-law 2);
- Stage 3: Criticism—as the new idea continues to gain favor among professionals those with a vested interest in maintaining the dominant paradigm attack the idea with vigor (see T-law 2);

- Stage 4: Acceptance—after a critical mass of people accepts the new idea it begins to gain both psychological and intellectual acceptance among professionals. It reaches a tipping point and a paradigm shift occurs. Those proponents of the new paradigm are no longer outliers on the extreme perimeter of their profession.

T-Law 2: The degree of resistance to a new idea for change is positively correlated to the degree to which a person's career is built around the old way of doing things (the more a person's career is built around the old way, the higher the resistance).

T-Law 3: Not all change that is said to be systemic is. Not all change that is said to be transformational is. Systemic transformational change satisfies two, and only two, criteria: the transformation must change the entire system and the new system must be substantially different from the current one.

T-Law 4: When presented with an idea for change if the "Who else is doing this?" question is asked, that question immediately forecloses on the opportunity to be innovative. By definition, an innovative idea is not being widely used or used at all.

T-Law 5: When presented with an idea for change if the "How do we pay for this?" question is asked that question immediately shuts-off discussion of valuable and effective ideas that may cost more to implement but have greater potential to create significant positive change and shifts the focus to inexpensive silver bullet quick fixes that are temporary.

T-Law 6: Doing more of the same, only a little different, is not transformational change. That's called continuous improvement and all it does is maintain the status quo.

T-Law 7: Continuous improvement within a failing or low performing system is death by a thousand quick fixes.

T-Law 8: School districts are often perceived as a confederation of loosely coupled entities (schools and classrooms). But an individual school or classroom cannot and never will achieve what the entire system can achieve. It is only when schools and classrooms are treated as interdependent parts of a whole system that the entire system can be transformed.

T-Law 9: Focusing transformational change efforts on fixing parts of a low performing system almost always results in the further deterioration of the whole system.

T-Law 10: Learning to lead continuous improvement and school-based reform does not prepare someone to lead whole-system transformation just like learning to fly model airplanes does not prepare a person to fly an airplane.

T-Law 11: The only thing harder than trying to introduce innovative ideas to an existing system is trying to remove old ways of doing things that are hammered in hard within the system and sustained by inertia.

T-Law 12: One way to make a big change in a school system is to start by making a well-placed small change. That small, well-placed disruptive change is called a “high leverage starting point.”

T-Law 13: Whole-system transformational change requires simultaneous changes along three paths: Path 1—transform teaching and learning and the services that support teaching and learning; Path 2—transform the system’s internal social infrastructure—its quality of work life; and Path 3—transform the system’s relationship with its external environment.

T-Law 14: The situations in which some American school systems find themselves can be characterized as a “mess.” A mess is a web of interconnected problems and symptoms that cannot be addressed one by one by using a single, simple non-systemic approach. The methodology to dissolve this mess must be web-like, systemic, transformative, multi-faceted, flexible, and adaptable to fit changing circumstances.

T-Law 15: To continue to do what has always been done to improve a school system is to continue to do more of what will not work in the future.

T-Law 16: The starting point for transformational change is to focus on expanding mindsets (which are defined as attitudes). Focusing on attitude change to help people develop an “open mind” about ideas for change is a crucial strategy for gaining support for transformational change. Once minds are “open” then people become willing to consider ideas for change that are significantly different from what they already know (i.e., their mental models).

T-Law 17: The first step toward an idealized school system is always down. When people and systems try something new for the first time, they are unskilled at using that new idea. Becoming skilled requires movement through a learning curve that first moves downward, bottoms-out, and then moves upward.

T-Law 18: All systems have life cycles. In a life cycle, all systems mature and eventually bump-up against the upper limit of their capacity to perform. This is called a performance ceiling. A system can skirt along the bottom edge of that ceiling for years. If nothing is done to breakthrough the performance ceiling, the system will eventually begin a slow fade toward inferior performance. Breaking through the performance ceiling requires transformational change that creates a new idealized system that is not a clone of the old system with a few cosmetic changes.

T-Law 19: All school systems are powered by the people working in them. During times of great change, people will be caught up in emotional cycles of change. The emotional cycle for those leading change is different from the emotional cycle for those being asked to change.

T-Law 20: School districts are living systems that are subject to the laws of system performance and systemic change. Often, school districts are not conceived of as living systems; rather they are thought of as mechanistic entities composed of loosely connected parts that can be fixed one broken part at a time. This mechanistic mental model almost always fails to improve the performance of any living system.

Concluding Commentary

Advocating for the transformation of school systems is very much like advocating for a revolution—a revolution to overthrow the dominant 19th Century paradigm that controls the design of school systems and the ways in which teachers teach and children learn. Calling for a revolution is also a dangerous thing to do. Therefore, leading transformational change requires extraordinarily competent and visionary change leaders who have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to lead that kind of change.

Leading transformational change also requires significant courage, passion, and vision. Change leaders need courage to stand their ground in the face of resistance and adversity. They need passion to give them the emotional energy they need to sustain the transformation journey. They need vision to keep them moving in the direction of their idealized school system. Further, all three traits must be present simultaneously.

Our society cannot afford to carry its old education paradigm forward. It does no good to dream of an idealized future for education if that future is just a projection and continuation of the past. Instead, change-minded educators should imagine that the dominant paradigm controlling the design and performance of school systems was destroyed last night and now they must invent brand new school systems. To align with the requirements of our society's 21st Century Knowledge Age those new systems must be transformed in response to the learning needs, interests, and abilities of individual children if we truly never want to leave any child behind.

The time is now. The need is great. The past before us is not the future. We need to create a brand new future for America's education system and its school systems—a future created through transformation not reformation. In the literature on education reform the silver bullet recommendations we are hearing and reading about—one more time—cannot and never will be able to achieve this vision for the future of education in the United States. It is time to dismount the dead horse!

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Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

Francis M. Duffy



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In the past, these reports often contained articles written by readers. If you would like to write an article for these reports on a topic related to whole-system change in school districts, please send a copy of it to me as an E-mail attachment to duffy@thefmduffygroup.com.

The Rowman & Littlefield Education *Leading Systemic School Improvement Series* is a collection of books about "why" systemic change in school districts is needed, "what" some of the desirable outcomes of systemic change should be, and "how" to create and sustain systemic change. You can visit the website for the series by going to <http://www.rowmaneducation.com/bookseries/LSI>.

The FutureMinds: Transforming American School Systems initiative seeks to create a shift in the teaching-learning paradigm in school systems. You may visit the FutureMinds website by going to www.futureminds.us