

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO

Improve Your School

by William G. Ouchi

So, where do you take the first bite out of the elephant? Is it the trunk, the tail, or a leg? And how do you get an elephant into a pot to cook it, anyway? Rhetoric about change is easy, but bringing about broad, lasting change poses practical challenges. You'll have to have a plan. In this final chapter, we'll address the practical issues that you will encounter as you set about to revolutionize your school and your school district.

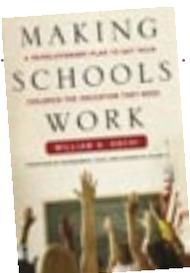
We'll cover several topics that will help you to put together your blueprint for revolution. First, we'll review seven rules for change. These are time-tested lessons that come from several decades of experience of changing schools, businesses, and other kinds of organizations all over the world. There are some ways in which all large organizations are similar, and there are other ways in which schools are unique. These change processes have been studied by many people, and I've boiled them down into the essence that you need to know. Next, we'll go through three topics that will give you guidance on each of several strategies of change. First will be how to take on a revolutionary change of your entire school district. Second, we'll ask, what about the unions? Third will be some final thoughts as you

struggle to cope with what you have while creating what you want.

You should keep in mind one basic distinction whenever you think about changing any organization. That is the difference between trying to change a *person* and trying to change an *organization*. Actually, it's even more basic than that. Ask yourself whether you believe that the basic shortcoming of your school is due to the inadequacies of the principal, the superintendent, or the teachers — or whether it's the *organization* that needs repair.

Most of us are tempted to blame the individual, and we miss the role that is played by the organization. We get angry that the darn principal is so pig-headed, that the teacher is too set in her ways, or that the bureaucrats are self-serving and narrow-

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minded. Let me ask you a question: When you've seen an inept or unqualified person get removed from their job, how good was their replacement? More often than not, the replacement fares no better. The reason is twofold: first, the system that picked the first incompetent also picked the replacement. It used the same faulty selection methods and probably drew from the same talent pool as before. Second, and more important, both employees had to work in the same, probably dysfunctional organization. Once in a great while, you will get lucky and find a new principal or teacher who is enough of an entrepreneur and contrarian to fight the system. That, however, is a long shot, because those people are rare. Most of the time, an able person will succeed when placed in a positive structure and will fail in a negative structure.

It's not possible to change the underlying character of an adult. That's not to say that all of the adults in a failing school system need to be thrown out because they can't change. But their basic values and predispositions were formed when they were children, and it is true that those won't change appreciably. However, as we've seen in Edmonton and elsewhere, these same people will rise to the occasion and become

top performers when the system around them — the decentralization of control, the quality of the data on student performance, and the accountability systems — becomes positive rather than negative.

Some businesspeople are fond of saying that unless you have only A-class players, you can't have a winning team. I disagree. As one example, having top-class individual players didn't work for the Los Angeles Lakers until they got Phil Jackson as a coach. Then they became the NBA champions. In the second place, no one — not a company and not a school — can afford to hire only the best of the best. The key to success in building any organization is in teamwork. When you have teamwork — which means having a positive organization — all of the players soar, and you end up with an A team, which is what you want.

The Seven Rules of Change

During the past thirty years, I've had the chance to serve as a management consultant to companies that wanted to achieve revolutionary change to

Seven Rules of Change

- 1** *People don't fear change — unless they're kept in the dark*
- 2** *Revolutionary change requires the perception that there's a crisis*
- 3** *Structure must change before culture can change*
- 4** *Change must be top-down*
- 5** *Change must be bottom-up*
- 6** *Follow the money!*
- 7** *School reform isn't partly politics — it's all politics!*

It's the principal who is accountable, and it's the principal who should have the final say in these decisions. That doesn't mean that the principal should be allowed to become an emperor or empress — he or she should be expected to consult with and listen to all parties.

become more successful. I've worked with companies as small as one hundred employees and as large as General Motors, IBM, and Amgen, the world's largest biotechnology company. Although I can't say that I succeeded entirely at my efforts, I did learn something from each of these engagements. More recently, I've worked with small school districts as well as some of the biggest ones in the United States. I've taught business school courses on organizational change, and I've studied the research of many scholars on how to change organizations. I've reduced my hard-won lessons into seven basic rules that I believe guide most successful attempts at change. Follow them, and you are more than likely to succeed, too:

Rule One: People don't fear change — unless they're kept in the dark

Rule Two: Revolutionary change requires the perception that there's a crisis

Rule Three: Structure must change before culture can change

Rule Four: Change must be top-down

Rule Five: Change must be bottom-up

Rule Six: Follow the money!

Rule Seven: School reform isn't partly politics — it's *all* politics!

Think about how each of these rules applies to your local situation and what you can do to start the process of change or help it along.

Rule One: People Don't Fear Change — Unless They're Kept in the Dark

Most of us aren't really opposed to change, contrary to what business books often assert. In particular, business gurus are fond of saying that the top leaders often advocate visionary change, but the middle managers gum up the works because they fear change. The implication is that the people at the top got there because they are a superior class of human beings — an assertion that, in the light of Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, and Arthur Andersen, is patently false. Based on personal experience, I conclude that everyone *favors* change as long as they're in charge of who and what will change. It's equally true that no one likes to be told to change without having had the chance to influence the new direction.

Seeing this point, if you agree with it, is easier than living it. Not only does it mean that you should include the targets of change in your discussion from the outset, it means that you have to listen to them. It doesn't mean that you have to accept all of their views, but it does mean that you'll have to listen to their views seriously, even when you've already decided that the targets of change are the cause of the problems. Often you'll find that the teachers, principal, and district staff will point out important facts that you didn't know, and you'll adjust your plans accordingly. Other times, you may end up simply agreeing to disagree, but at least you're not trying to sneak up on them, and they'll be more open to you as a result.

You need to gather together the detailed data on your school or school district, compare it to successful schools and districts, and make an undeniable case that your school is in crisis.

Business groups that get involved in the school reform process often stumble over this elementary point. They're accustomed to blaming their own workers' unions for their company's problems, so they assume that the teachers' union is at the root of the failure of the schools. Having reached this conclusion, they never invite the union leadership into their dialogue, and by leaving them out, they leave out one of the deepest wells of experience — not to mention a major potential ally.

In fact, if there is a favorite target for laying the blame for the failure of our public schools, it's the teachers' unions. Teachers are more universally unionized than are most other groups of workers. Stanford University political scientist Terry Moe estimates that 80 percent of all teachers, public school and private, are members of unions, compared to an estimate by Claremont Graduate School professors Charles Kerchner, Julia Koppich, and Joseph Weeres that only 11 percent of the private sector workforce is unionized.¹ Teachers' unions are blamed for corrupting the independence of state and local officials with their large campaign contributions, for supporting rules that protect bad teachers, and for handcuffing principals by denying them the authority to assign teachers to the schools and the classrooms where they are most needed. Some of that criticism is fair, but a lot of it is not.

Think about it this way: if the unions are running the school district, then what are the school board and the superintendent there for? It's true, as we will see in a moment, that unions have often become part of the problem, but it's simply not credible to argue that they should bear the lion's share of the blame. It's a truism that, in the United States,

adversarial unions typically arise in response to abusive managements. Playing that countervailing role unfortunately places unions in the position of counterbalancing what is wrong, rather than helping to create what could be right.

To the typical principal, an all-powerful teachers' union often seems to have identified him or her as the enemy. The principal has not had an opportunity to visit Seattle and Edmonton, which have very strong unions of teachers and principals, or Houston, which does not, but has managed to create successful school districts. The typical principal has not had the chance to visit the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, an independent school whose teachers are unionized. Instead, the principal sees only the trees that are just outside the window, not the entire forest.

Of the districts in our study, Los Angeles is the most centralized and bureaucratic. It's no surprise, then, to find that it also has developed the most contentious relationship between the teachers' union and the management. Over the past twenty years, the teachers' union has steadily increased its power over a variety of school-level decisions. Manual Arts High School has a required site council of twenty-one members. Eighteen of the members are from the teachers' union, along with one parent representative, one student representative, and one representative of the union that represents teachers' aides, clerical, and other noncredentialed employees. The principal is a nonvoting member of the council. The council must approve the appointment of assistant principals, program coordinators, and the expenditure of any discretionary funds. The principal has no say in the appointment of department chairs, and

the teachers by seniority decide what courses they would like to teach.

At Garfield High School in heavily Latino East Los Angeles, there is an eighteen-member council that consists of the chapter chair of the teachers' union, eight teachers' union members, one noncredentialed union representative, six parents, one student, and the principal. Here, too, the teachers have a seniority right to teach what they want, and the principal has no involvement in the selection of department chairs. It's not unusual for a teacher with long seniority to demand a particular class even though someone else has a graduate degree and more training in that subject.

Many principals in Los Angeles said that they feel abandoned by the central office, and that conflicts between the central office and the head of the teachers' union are frequently transferred to each school. Both principals and the central office staff speak of the teachers' union as a powerful body that they simultaneously fear and resent. The result of this gordian knot of political interests is a system in which all of the parties — teachers' union, principals, parents, and central office — feel powerless.

If your district has descended into a negative relationship with the teachers' union, you'll hear lots about how the union is the real source of all problems. Be skeptical. Don't believe all that you hear from any one side. It is true that systems that grant budgetary and personnel control to committees of teachers and parents rather than to the principal are unlikely to work well. That's because parents and teachers aren't accountable for either student performance or budget performance. It's the principal who is accountable, and it's the principal who should have the final say in these decisions. As we've pointed out, though, that doesn't mean that the principal should be allowed to become an emperor or empress — he or she should be expected to consult with and listen to all parties.

Your teachers' union may well have become locked in a death grip with the school district, as was the case in Edmonton and Seattle. Don't be overcome by an

apparently unsolvable problem. Just stick to the Seven Keys to Success. They will lead you to solutions that will result in a gradual melting away of the hostility and toward a mutually productive relationship with the unions.

So, as you begin your revolution, be truthful with everyone. Don't hide your intentions or desires, even from those you assume will oppose you. If the opposition won't come around to your view, at least you'll know in advance rather than finding out at the end. Don't be stopped by the worry that you'll be giving the enemy advance warning. They've been at this a lot longer than you have, and they already know what you're about. The only unknown in their minds is whether you are going to be open with them or try to sneak around them. If you are sneaky, they'll feel entirely righteous about being sneaky with you. The school board and the local and state politicians whom you'll ask for help will want to know that you've talked to all of the major parties. They won't insist that the principals and teachers' unions agree with you, but they're unlikely to agree to help you unless you've at least confronted all of these important players.

Rule Two: Revolutionary Change Requires the Perception That There's a Crisis

This is a tricky one. Generally speaking, people are skeptical of reformers. Even though they're not fully satisfied with their schools, they fear even more the chaos that your group might unleash. They're afraid that your idea of utopia could turn out to be their idea of hell.

Many observers find this situation puzzling. They think people are negative about all schools except their own. I don't think that's it at all. Instead, I'd argue that people are inclined to accept what they have if they don't believe that a better option is available to them. They don't want to be whiners. Rather than complain constantly about their school — which they don't believe can be improved from its current dismal state — they try to look at the bright side.

In order to get things moving, then, you've got to do two things. First, you need to gather together the detailed data on your school or school district, compare it to successful schools and districts, and make an undeniable case that your school is in crisis. Compare graduation rates, attendance rates, numbers of central office bureaucrats, test scores, and measures of teacher quality. Once you've done this, you'll be certain that every parent and teacher will react to your data with horror and anger and will demand revolutionary change. Unfortunately, you'll be wrong.

In order to motivate people, you'll need to prepare a detailed plan that has two elements. First, it will have to show what your school will look like after the revolution — present a *vision* of the future. How much local autonomy schools will have, for example, how they will be held accountable for student achievement and financial performance, and how their budget will balance within the existing budget limits. Second, you'll want to include an *implementation plan*, a step-by-step analysis of who will have to grant approvals, vote on your plan, allocate funds, and so on.

What you want to do is to get together the studies that arm the politicians with the facts that they can cite to support their call for revolution, then put together the plan that convinces the public that they do have a better option, that it's not just a pipe dream. Once your plan has visible public support, political support, and solid research, others will believe it could actually happen. At that point, the people who don't want to be seen as whiners will be roused into action. When you have all of these pieces in place, you'll in effect lead a mass parade of revolutionaries down the street to your school board. Everyone has the same innate response to a parade — they want to be part of it!

Rule Three: Structure Must Change Before Culture Can Change

Anthropologists define “culture” as consisting of a community's unspoken traditional ways of doing things. We learn what the culture of a school is by

watching how the people in it actually behave, not by reading a set of rules about how they are supposed to behave. A negative school culture in which teachers are isolated, students are treated as objects rather than as people, and the principal hides in his or her office can be deeply embedded in people's habits and difficult to change.

A spate of books about leadership and management twenty years ago advocated learning the culture of a company and then changing it in planned ways. People don't listen to that advice any longer, because they've discovered what anthropologists knew all along, that while you can learn to analyze an organization's culture, you can't change it — at least not directly. For example, if the culture is one in which people avoid taking risks on behalf of the children, you cannot advocate more risk-taking and expect it to happen. If the culture is one of giving all children passing marks in order to avoid difficult confrontations with their parents, you can't change that aspect of the school culture by attacking it.

However, culture is greatly influenced by the structure of an organization. If you alter the structural arrangements and then have patience, within a year or two the culture will begin to change. For example, Superintendent Angus McBeath eliminated all of his assistant superintendents in Edmonton who had schools reporting to them. He altered the structure of the school district by having all principals report directly to him. As a result, his central office staff has learned a new culture in which the principals are to be respected and served — in part because they have a direct line to their boss. Before, the central office staff treated the principals as low-level managers. Today, the principals are at least the equal of that staff in rank and influence, and they are treated accordingly.

You'll want to study the culture of your school and district to determine what needs to change and what should be preserved. The culture is the part that you can see, and it's more readily visible to you than the structure, so start with that. By including the teachers and the principal in your planning group, you'll have ready access to the natives who know

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the culture well. Once they've learned to trust you, they can tell you all about it. Because you've already decided that the problem is the system rather than the people, they will be inclined to trust you and to want to work with you. Your next step will be to figure out which structural elements have caused this culture to come into being. Focus your energy on changing the structures, and you'll see the culture change, too.

Rule Four: Change Must Be Top-Down

In Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston, the change came from the top. It was led by the school board and, above all else, the superintendent. Within a school, change comes from the principal — whether it's at Mabel Wesley in Houston, Sawyer Elementary in Chicago, or James A. Garfield in Seattle. In a sense, that's what a leader is supposed to do — lead change. Another way to look at it is that change that begins in the middle or at the bottom of any organization will sooner or later run into a lack of support or downright opposition from someone up above.

The only principle that you need to follow in evaluating the leader of your school and district is this: No excuses! It's their job to figure out how to overcome the obstacles that are in the way of improvement and to come up with solutions. If they can't do it, then they'll have to find another job. In school after school that we've learned about, the principal walked into an impossibly negative situation and successfully turned it around. In Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston, the superintendent did the same. It can be done — no excuses. This is the one exception to the rule (actually,

rule #1 should be that every rule has an exception) that it's the system rather than the person. The top leader creates the system in which everyone else will either succeed or fail. If he or she can't fix the system, you owe it to your children to put the pressure on until that top person leaves.

There's another very important subtlety to what happened in our three successful school districts. In each case, the new superintendent came into a situation in which a powerful coalition of citizens was willing to stand behind someone who had the courage to lead revolutionary change. If your community is broken into warring camps, you first need to heal those divisions and get everyone together.

Everyone means just that — *everyone*. For example, although the business community is a critical source of influence in almost every city, it cannot succeed in school reform if it shuts out the neighborhood associations, the parent organizations, and the ethnic leadership. If there are rival business associations or if the ethnic organizations are in conflict with each other, you've got to get them together for their common good, and for the good of the children. You'll never get everyone to back your moves, but you need to be willing to talk with all sides. In our democratic society, elected officials won't usually act on a controversial issue unless the proponents of change have made real efforts to include everyone, including their opponents, in the dialogue.

Every skilled top leader is in demand and has lots of options. No leader will accept the job unless the community is unified in giving him or her its full support. If you'll read the histories of revolutionary

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change by Don McAdams about Houston and by John Stanford about Seattle, you'll find that those communities had to go through a period of getting their act together before they could attract a real leader to the top job.² If you conduct a search for a new principal or a new superintendent with a divided community, the only kind of leader you'll attract will be one who either is so dense that she doesn't see the rift in the community, or so arrogant that he doesn't care what the community thinks. That's *not* what you're looking for.

As you lay your plans for revolution, reach out to the broader community. Don't assume that others have agendas that are in conflict with your goals. Talk to people, reach out to them, and listen. You'll have many positive surprises. You'll find that all of you want the same thing — a quality education for all children. You'll discover that differences of opinion often stem from incorrect assumptions about what each of you wants. Once you've reached a state of unity, you'll be able to attract the kind of top leadership that your children deserve.

Rule Five: Change Must Be Bottom-Up

This isn't really such a contradiction. A good superintendent knows that great ideas are out there in the schools. A revolution in your neighborhood school can ultimately influence the entire school district. It happens in business all the time. At Procter & Gamble during the 1950s, one factory experimented with self-managed teams of workers who ran a large, high-speed machine. The results were so outstanding that other plants adopted the idea, and eventually it became standard in all of the company's plants.³ At the Chrysler Corporation during the 1980s, a parts-supply depot

experimented with a radical approach to managing its workforce by giving people more autonomy, and it, too, spread to all of the parts depots in the company.⁴ Edmonton experimented with a radical new way to manage a school district, and now that system is spreading to districts in the United States. In addition to Seattle and Houston, Cincinnati is implementing Weighted Student Formula, along with at least some of the other elements of the Seven Keys to Success.

It would be more accurate to say that change should be *initiated* bottom-up and *supported* top-down. That is to say that the central office should not be imposing new ways to run a school top-down on principals. Instead, a successful central office is one that gives principals the freedom to experiment for themselves. When a school comes up with an innovation that really works well, other principals and teachers will want it, too. At that point, the central office can provide the financial and other forms of support that will enable the schools that want it to get it. Seattle superintendent Joseph Olchefske said it best: "Every school's got to find its own way."

One final point in your favor: in a large, bureaucratic school district, the people at the central office visit the schools rarely, and they really don't know what your school is up to. That means that you have a lot of running room. If your parent group is united behind your principal and teachers, you can innovate in lots of ways, and it will be a while before the central office finds out. By then, you'll have had time to implement the innovations and produce some measurements that show that they work. Once you've got the data to show that what you're doing is helping the children, no central office bureaucrat will have the courage to tell you to stop simply because it's

different. If they do, you've got the ammunition you need to go directly to the superintendent, the school board, the mayor — and the press.

Don't wait for new ideas to trickle down from the top of the district to your school. There aren't many good ideas there to start with. The good ideas typically come from principals, teachers, and parents who deal with students every day, and who are reading about new education ideas, going to conferences on education, and looking for creative new approaches. There are many, many more of you than there are people in the central office, no matter how bloated it may be. It stands to reason that you'll come up with more new ideas than they will. So go to it!

Rule Six: Follow the Money!

Antonia Hernandez is president of the largest civil rights organization for Hispanics in the United States, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Foundation, or MALDEF. She's long been a school reform activist, because good schools are the key to a bright future for Hispanic children — as for all children. She's been through the school reform wars in Los Angeles, and her advice is worth hearing: "If you can figure out where the money goes — follow the dollars — then I think you'll be able to fix it."

That might sound like a tall order. But you don't need to plow through the school district budget, which is impenetrable even to the people who put it together. Hernandez is reminding us of the golden rule of education: She who has the gold makes the rules. What you need to do is to put tremendous emphasis on getting local control of the money. Then you can make the rules about how to run your own school.

Your school board and superintendent undoubtedly have told you that they support your local school councils, that they've long had school-based decision making, and that they even have student-based budgeting. It all sounds wonderful, but you've got to ask the question: So who has control of the money? Unless your school district means to follow the Seven Keys to Success, they'll hem and haw at

this point. Either that, or they'll give you a rehearsed, smooth reply in an attempt to put you off.

You'll hear time and again from central office bureaucrats and some principals that they're in favor of creating local school decision-making councils, that they want parent input, that they're in a partnership with the community. Just smile, listen politely, and ask when they are going to give your neighborhood schools control over their own money. Without that local financial control, you gain nothing. Don't settle for the promise that financial control will move from the central office to an area superintendent. Don't accept the promise that principals will be included in the process of making up the district's budget. Seek out strong central office accountability over what you do with the money once you have control of it, but never, ever accept less than local control of the budget.

Sonia Hernandez is the former secretary of education of the state of Texas and former head of instruction of the California State Department of Education. Despite that background, she has always been a full-blown revolutionary. Sonia — no relation to Antonia Hernandez of MALDEF — cut her teeth on radical school reform programs in the late 1980s. She served as head of the main education reform group in Los Angeles, The Alliance. Here's her experienced view on the subject of getting straight answers to tough questions: "Every school district has on its staff someone who spins press releases for them — which is to say, they obfuscate the truth."

Don't bother to try to engage an experienced school district spinner in an argument. They've had a lot more practice at it than you have, and you'll just leave with your head in a fog. You don't need to argue with them, anyway. All you need to do and the one thing that you should do is to ask them when they're going to give your school control over its budget. My advice is that you pay no attention to anything else that they tell you on the subject of local control, because it's all smoke and mirrors. Only the money matters when it comes to local school autonomy. They know it, and they'll try to avoid the subject. Once they realize that you know it, too,

they'll know that they're going to have to give up the head fakes and start planning for some real change.

Rule Seven: School Reform Isn't Partly Politics — It's All Politics!

Keep one thing in mind — no school district has the ability to change itself from the inside. If the political forces that are acting on the district do not change, it will not change. The school district got the way it is by responding to the forces that are now in place. David Tyack and Larry Cuban put it succinctly in *Tinkering Toward Utopia*: “Educational reforms are intrinsically political in origin.”⁵ You and your allies have to provide the new force that will bring about the change. It won't be easy, and it won't be quick, but it will be worth the effort. Above all, be prepared for twists and turns in the road and for setbacks along the way. Know that success will ultimately be yours.

When you undertake revolutionary change, you're committing yourself to hand-to-hand combat. It won't be pretty at times, but you've got to stick with it. There's nothing magic about Edmonton, Seattle, or Houston. Mike Strembitsky sees it this way: “What happened in Edmonton could have happened I'm going to say in hundreds of other places on the continent. We had absolutely nothing going for us that other people don't have.” Strembitsky points out that Edmonton has a conservative, agricultural population of immigrants who value stability and security. As far as he's concerned, if they could get the public support for revolution, you can do it, too.

One caution. Don't get kidnapped by the school reform industry or by the school district. When you begin to work with the schools, they'll see you as a potential source of new money. They'll try to co-opt you by convincing you that the problem is that they don't have enough money. If you're like most people who care about children, you'll feel sympathy for them and want to help. Many foundations have been led down that road and have put millions into paying for teacher training, books, or new curriculum. If you go along, the district will have succeeded at sending you on a wild goose chase. While you're off trying to

help to solve a problem they already have the money for, you're out of their hair. Don't fall for it.

Stick to your goal. It is not to rewrite the curriculum or to choose a new reading program for the elementary grades. It is to get school authorities to implement the Seven Keys to Success. That means getting them out of their current patterns and into a set of more constructive habits. Your tools are not those of educational specialists but of politics. In our society, that means pulling together the majority of parents into agreement on one plan and then using your collective power to make the schools change their ways whether they want to or not.

It's also important to keep in mind the distinction between single-issue politics and the building of a political party. Your goal is not to gather together a group of people who agree on a wide range of issues, from the environment to tax policy to the death penalty. You have a single issue and a single goal: revolution in the way your school is managed. Many people who might not be your allies on other issues will be your allies on this one, and you need each other. You want to have a big tent, in which people who might otherwise be your opponents on a variety of issues can come together. For example, you'll find that the business community, the ethnic organizations, and the teachers' union will want to reduce central office bureaucracy, increase local school autonomy, and encourage the development of learning communities.

Ideally, you'll create a political position for your effort that has only one, or at most two, powerful opponents, the most likely of those being the central office bureaucrats. However, even some of them will be disgusted by how things run now, and even though they won't want to lose their jobs or their power, they'll be secretly sympathetic to your cause. Take care not to broaden the scope of your efforts beyond the Seven Keys to Success, which target changes in the relationship between the central office and the schools. If you broaden your scope much beyond those goals, you're in danger of picking up more opponents, which is to be avoided.

The concept of local school autonomy in a democratic society like ours is politically bulletproof.

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Opposing it would be like opposing the Boston Tea Party. No official or politician can afford to be against it. You can make use of this fact by making every attempt to push for local autonomy in the most public ways available — at school board meetings, in the press, and in letters to politicians. In private, these same people will want to keep centralized control and freeze you out; but if you can get them in public, they'll have to support your position. Eventually, you'll be able to corner them into making hard commitments to give your school its freedom.

When revolution begins, you can expect to see real progress in a school within a year, two years at most. It may take four or five years for the changes to be stable and resistant to unexpected hazards, but you'll see results pretty quickly. If your goal is to revolutionize the district, expect to be in a fight for two to four years, perhaps more. It may help to remember that you don't need to convert everyone in the district central office, just enough people that the new direction is perceived as permanent. That may mean as few as one third of the senior staff. The final rule, though, is *don't give up!* Even if it does end up taking fifteen or even twenty years to bring revolutionary improvement to your school district, don't you wish that someone had begun the effort twenty years ago?

Changing the Whole School District Means Changing Community Attitudes

In the end, a public school district belongs to everyone in the community, and thus the community must undergo a shift in its basic attitude toward the

public schools if you are to succeed. As we've said, the first step in bringing about that change is to bring into sharp focus the crisis of the failing schools. That, in turn, means that your group needs to pull together the facts on student achievement and be ready to run a communications campaign to put those facts constantly before the public. The second step is to hold out a vision of achievable reform.

Nearly everyone already knows that the schools are in crisis. However, most people also believe that the schools can't be fixed on a districtwide scale. If your goal is to reform one school, your task will be to create confidence among the parents and teachers of that school that others have succeeded and that your group will, too.

It might be instructive to review what happened in the revolutions in Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston. In Edmonton, there was no widely perceived failure of the schools to educate the children. Instead, according to Mike Strembitsky, there was a constant sniping between the central office and principals, with each side criticizing the other in public. In the very weak schools, the families who were most dissatisfied decided to home-school their children. The conflict grew to the point, though, where the public and the school board wanted to see the fighting stop, and they pushed out the superintendent and reached down into the ranks for a young person who had not been involved in the controversy, Mike Strembitsky.

Thus, when Strembitsky took office, there was a crisis, though it was not at quite the fever pitch that exists in so many U.S. school districts. Everyone acknowledged that things had to change, and Strembitsky had a vision clearly in mind: he would

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pass control of the money down to each school and transform the central staff from one that gave orders to principals to one that would assist principals when they asked for help. His vision was concrete; it was easy to explain and simple to understand; and it was pretty obvious that there would be a way to monitor progress, to determine that control of the money had actually been decentralized. Your plan would do well to have these same characteristics. You need to be able to explain its essence in simple terms, the public must be able to understand it, and there should be a simple way to measure the progress of your revolution.

In Seattle, as we've said, many families had fled the urban public schools by moving to the suburbs. People point to the consulting report commissioned by the state legislature as the straw that broke the camel's back. That report revealed, in stark terms and with corroborating data, the terrible failure of Seattle's public schools. The report had enough inflammatory specifics to feed the media for many months. After that, no one was willing to argue that change wasn't necessary.

When General John Stanford and Joseph Olchefske took over, they crafted a set of positions that they could present to families and teachers. They crafted ten shifts in philosophy; for example, "We would stop believing that some children would learn and start believing that all children would learn. . . . We would stop abandoning teachers and give them total support."⁶ They also created a strategic plan which had six goals that were concise and straightforward, such as: "Goal #1: Increase academic

achievement for all students . . . Goal #2: Close student achievement gaps."⁷

The Houston story is similar in several respects to that of Seattle. Years earlier, H. Ross Perot had led a citizens' group that widely publicized the failure of the public schools throughout the state of Texas. In Houston, the revolution began in fits and starts. The reformers suffered major setbacks, and the school board at first was not unified on the direction of change. Only after a united school board was elected and Rod Paige was persuaded to become superintendent did things really start to move. Like General Stanford in Seattle, Paige saw that until the entire community was together, the public schools could not undergo revolutionary change. I interviewed Dr. Paige in his office in Washington, D.C., after he had been appointed secretary of education in July 2001. This was his summary of what enabled Houston to succeed:

The civic capacity must exist in a city to have a successful school system. You have all these interest groups — each with their own agendas — but for this one idea, like putting the Olympics in Atlanta or Los Angeles, they have to be willing to put those agendas aside for that one big idea. I tried to do that for education in Houston.

Because Houston had no experience at running a decentralized organization made up of entrepreneurs, Paige relied on local business leaders for advice. If you aren't part of the business community, you may wonder whether to trust its advice or not. Paige was unusual in that he had enough

confidence in his own ability to judge people that he was willing to trust others. One of the people he decided that he could trust was the head of a Houston insurance company, Harold Hook. Hook played a major role in bringing to the school district business leaders who knew how to run large, complex organizations. Paige also had the conviction to decide for himself what advice to follow, what to modify, and what to discard. Often, a new superintendent is flattered by the attention that he gets from business leaders and makes the mistake of taking all of their advice, not realizing that what works in a business won't always work in a school system. Sorting through the many elements of the community takes a leader who has the rare combination of strength and willingness to listen.

The board appointed a three-person committee, with Paige as its chair, to come up with a vision statement that would let everyone know what the reformers wanted to achieve. The result was a simple, straightforward four-point plan: Beliefs and Visions. "I. HISD exists to support the relationship between the teacher and the student. . . . II. HISD must decentralize. . . . III. HISD must focus on performance, not compliance. . . . IV. HISD must require a common core of academic subjects for all students."⁸

These elements appear consistently across the cities that have undergone revolutionary change. Other aspects of the situation may be quite dissimilar, but there is always a widespread perception of crisis, and there is always a clear vision of the desired result. In large part, your success depends on your keeping the agenda tightly focused. If you give in to the pressures of the many interest groups, from the superintendent to the teachers' union and various parent groups, you'll end up with unfocused chaos. The public can spot the same old mess in a second, and they won't support an ill-prepared program.

If you do stick to your guns, though, you'll find that soon, the opposition will lose its steam. What you're proposing is largely common sense, and people will recognize it for what it is. They'll support your group, and they'll support your revolution.

Some Final Thoughts

If parents, teachers, and principals don't want to put in the time and effort to figure out for themselves what their school should become, we'll remain in our present quagmire. The uncomfortable truth is that the world is constantly changing, and we've got to change with it. When it comes to designing any organization, schools included, no one way is best for all; school systems must allow for individual variation and flexibility. As we've seen, that doesn't mean that the central office should be all-permissive or that accountability should be lax. To the contrary, as with the proper governance of companies, so it is with schools. We need tough accountability from the central office and flexibility at the level of each individual school. These two forces are not incompatible; both are necessary for healthy schools.

What we see happening now is a dramatic increase in the number *and* variety of schooling options. In some states, home schooling is rapidly rising. Charter schools and voucher programs have appeared within the past decade. Around the country, reform is in the air, and future innovations such as cyberschools, privately managed public schools, and branded charter schools may each find a permanent place in the world of education. Independent schools have maintained their market share at about 10 percent, but that stability masks great internal changes. Over the past forty years, Jewish schools have increased in numbers while Catholic schools have declined. State governors are now running city schools — as the governor of Pennsylvania is doing in Philadelphia — while mayors in Cleveland, Chicago, and New York City have assumed the role of head of their public school systems.

Twenty years ago, these changes would have seemed unimaginable. Twenty years from now, we'll wonder how we ever could have had as few options as we do now. It's an exciting time. Whether as teacher, principal, or parent, you have an opportunity to be an active participant in what may turn out to be the great revolution of our times: To bring about a change in the way that we think about and run our

schools. Education in America is about our children, it's about racial equality, and it's about the future vitality of our society.

When you embark on the path of revolution, you will be helping others to help their children, which is a plus because they already care deeply about the subject. It's a minus, though, because parents tend not to be rational about their children or to regard issues surrounding them in a calm, objective way. They're totally, irrationally committed to their offspring, and that's good. What an awful world this would be if it were otherwise! Keep in mind, though, that you, like everyone else, are not always the best person to think objectively about what your own child's school should become. You're passionate about having a great school. But remind yourself that you should listen seriously to the teachers, the principal, and the other parents with whom you may disagree on some points. They care about your children; but they also care about all children, including those not yet born who will someday attend their school.

Now you have the evidence that you need in order to be convinced and to convince others that your schools can be changed for the better. Others have done it, in large and small school districts, where unions are strong and where they are not. They've succeeded in mostly minority and low-income school districts and in largely white and middle-class districts. They've done it way up north, in Canada, and way down south, in Houston. They've done it in the Far West in Seattle, and in the East in District 2 in New York City. They haven't had to be perfect; they've only had to be persistent enough to get up after a setback, dust themselves off, and go to it again.

You've heard the best advice from reformers and from successful schools and school districts all around the country. Now it's up to you. Don't let your children down. There is no one to lead this change other than you. Go for it. Tell the bureaucrats that you're fed up, and you're not taking it any more.

Revolution!

Footnotes

1. See Terry M. Moe, "Teachers Unions and the Public Schools," in Moe, ed., *A Primer on America's Schools*, p. 152; and Charles Taylor Kerchner, Julia E. Koppich, and Joseph G. Weeres, *United Mind Workers: Unions and Teaching in the Knowledge Society* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 9.
2. See McAdams, *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools . . . and Winning!*, and John Stanford, *Victory in Our Schools* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999).
3. These changes at Procter & Gamble were described to me by former faculty colleagues at the Anderson School of Management at UCLA who had served as consultants to Procter & Gamble on those changes.
4. The innovations at the Chrysler Corporation were undertaken during the 1970s by Charles W. Joiner, Jr., who was general manager of the division involved. I had the privilege of advising him.
5. Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, p. 8.
6. Stanford, *Victory in Our Schools*, p. xix.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
8. Cited in McAdams, *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools . . . and Winning!*, p. 8.

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