

## Professional Insights

# A Discussion on School Improvement with Dr. Phillip C. Schlechty



DR. PHILLIP C. SCHLECHTY

**Dr. Phil Schlecty will be a featured presenter at the PAGE Summer Conference, June 19-21, 2009. See the ad on page 26 for additional information.**

*This article represents the views and opinions of the author.*

**P**AGE ONE recently asked Dr. Phillip C. Schlechty, president and CEO of the Center for Leadership in School Reform, Louisville, Ky., to respond to a series of questions about school reform. The Center for Leadership in School Reform is an organization that provides high-quality and responsive support to those who are leading school reform efforts across the nation. The Center's staff primarily works with public school leaders to transform schools from organizations that produce compliance and attendance to organizations that nurture attention and commitment at all levels in the system. Schlechty's research and work form the basis of PAGE's High School Redesign Initiative, now active in 14 schools across the state.

The Schlechty Center allows five basic assumptions to guide all of its work and creates partnerships with school district leaders that share these beliefs.

1. There is an urgent need for dramatic improvement in the performance of America's public schools.

2. The key to improving schools is the quality of the work students are provided. To improve the quality of the work students are provided, schools must be organized around students and the work provided to students rather than around adults and the work of teachers.

3. Students are volunteers. Their attendance can be commanded, but their attention must be earned.

4. The changes required to organize schools around students and student work cannot occur unless school districts and communities have or develop the capacities needed to support change, capacities that are now too often lacking in even the best-run school districts.

5. Leadership and leadership development are key components to the creation of district-level capacity to support building-level reform.

***Q. In your writing and presentations, you often make reference to the Working on the Work (WOW) Framework. What is the WOW Framework?***

**A.** The WOW framework identifies 10 qualities or characteristics of school work that have been found to be most closely associated with student engagement, meaning that the presence or absence of these qualities often affects the way students respond to the task they must do to complete the work. I call it a framework because, taken together, these 10 qualities provide a discipline that teachers can use to assist them in ensuring that the work they design for their students is designed in a way that is most likely to engage them.

***Q. In layman's terms, what does it mean to create engaging work and why is it so important?***

**A.** Higher order learning, the ability to create and evaluate for example, is demonstrably more likely to occur when students are engaged in their work rather than simply carrying out a task so they can gain access to an extrinsic reward or avoid some negative consequence. Writing a story, evaluating an argument or solving a real-life problem that requires mathematical reasoning involves much more complex mental operations than does developing a list, memorizing a definition, decoding words or adding a set of numbers. The fact is, however, that most of what we test for requires the exercise of less complex mental operations and seldom calls on students to evaluate or to create. It is, therefore, not necessary to engage students for them to learn most of the things that appear on standardized tests. All students have to do is to comply with the directives of the teacher, and usually external rewards and the threat of negative sanctions are enough to get the compliance needed.

Consequently we are currently set on a course that will result in students doing better on tests without learning the things they need to know to satisfy the conditions of 21st century democratic



societies, or satisfy those critics who want schools to help students develop what they call 21st century skills.

By the way, 21st century skills are amazingly similar to the kind of outcomes John Dewey had in mind when he wrote about the role of education in a democracy. The business community seems finally to be catching up with those educators who have long held that the purpose of school is more than the memorization of isolated facts and the mastery of low-level mental operations such as remembering, comparing, contrasting and so on. Nowadays business leaders, like educators, want students who are creative, students who can use what they learn to solve problems in non-school contexts, students who think critically and who can work productively in groups. The only way I know to satisfy both those who want students to learn more of what they need to learn and at the same time produce test scores that are acceptable to those who truly believe that improved test scores indicate improved learning [which may be true sometimes, but not always, and I suspect not even usually] is to concentrate attention on creating engaging work for students.

**Q. If you were a principal or superintendent, how would you initiate the WOW Framework in your school or school system?**

A. The first thing I would do is to become thoroughly familiar with the framework and the theories and assumptions upon which it is based. Next I would start a study group of willing teachers and provide those teachers with opportunities to attend WOW workshops, meet together to discuss what they have learned and work together to design work for students that takes the assumptions of the WOW framework into account. After I had established a knowledgeable cadre of teachers, I would invite them to develop an awareness workshop for their colleagues and use this workshop to invite other teachers to participate. Based on the response, I would begin to systematically develop building-level design teams where teachers would be encouraged to work with each other, and sometimes with school leadership, to create highly engaging units of work that focus attention on concepts that are especially difficult to teach and hard to learn.

**Q. What are critical steps that leadership should keep in mind when building the capacity to implement the WOW Framework?**

A. The successful implementation of the WOW framework requires that schools be transformed into learning organizations that can provide students with a platform from which to learn. Presently schools are organized as bureaucracies that provide teachers with a platform for instruction rather than providing students with a learning platform. Schools are designed to push information at students rather than encouraging students to pull information as they need it to accomplish some learning goal they care about.

Such a transformation is difficult and complex and requires leaders to have a deep understanding of social systems and the way social systems work. It requires leaders to have a disciplined approach to system design just as creating engaging work requires teachers to develop a disciplined approach to the design of work.

**Q. What is a design team? Who makes up a design team, and what are the roles of the design team?**

A. There are many kinds of design teams, so who makes up the design team and the roles depends on the function the team is to fulfill. At the Schlechty Center we are con-

cerned with designing work for students and designing systems that will support teachers as they design that work and support students as they pursue the work the teachers have designed. Work design teams are usually made up of teachers who accept a common goal, such as designing work that is intended to increase student engagement in tasks that will result in students learning more about subjects they find difficult to master and subjects and topics that teachers find difficult to teach. This work requires that all the participating teachers use a common discipline—in our case that discipline is the WOW framework—and requires that teachers learn to use each of the diverse backgrounds of team members to assist them in their design work. (Some of our high-school design teams sometimes include students in the design process.)

When it comes to designing systems, a different discipline is required, and mastery of this discipline, which can be summarized by the term “systems thinking,” is essential to participation on the team. Thinking about systems, at least as the Schlechty Center defines the task, requires one to understand six systems that have been identified as criti-



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cal to the operation of schools and other organizations, as well and to understand how these systems function in a learning organization as well as in a bureaucracy. It also requires team members to understand the concepts of capacity and capacity-building, and to develop skills in assessing the capacity of their schools and their school district to support the kind of innovations they want to install in their efforts to make student work more engaging.

**Q. You speak of teachers as being leaders and designers of student work. How is this different from a teacher being a provider of knowledge or the facilitator of knowledge?**

**A.** If schools are to be transformed into learning platforms and into the pull environments (as contrasted with push environments) that they must become, there must be a fundamental shift in the way teachers view themselves and their work. At present, teachers see themselves as instructors and believe that the way they instruct is a primary determinant of what students learn. Researchers and policy makers seem to believe this as well.

The fact is, however, that most students do not learn from what the teacher does, they learn from what they (the students) do. The teacher, therefore, is a leader rather than an instructor. The job of the leader is to ensure that followers do the right things and that they have the skills needed to do those things right.

More than that the teacher must become a thoughtful designer of the most important thing schools want students to do, that is to do school work that results in their mastering complex intellectual tasks and materials, and retaining what they have mastered long after the learning event occurs.

If they are successful leaders and designers, teachers will find that there are many sources of instruction in addition to themselves, and in this digital age the variety of these other sources and the quality of these other sources will often exceed the quality of instruction an individual teacher, no matter how talented, can provide. Increasingly the skill of the teacher will be measured not by their prowess as an instructor, but as a designer of work that is so engaging the students seek out instruction wherever it can be found. And, this means that teach-

ers must become knowledgeable guides to instruction, rather than simply being primarily instructors.


**Q. Reference is often made to the need and urgency for change, why is the need and urgency so important?**

**A.** The most important changes that are occurring around us are changes in the way people access and exchange information. There has always been more to schooling than the distribution of knowledge, but the digital world is making schools, as distributors of knowledge, obsolete. Schools must now do what many educators have wanted to do for a long time, but could not because the knowledge distribution function so overwhelmed them. Unfortunately, because knowledge distribution has so long dominated the attention of teachers, many still believe that knowledge distribution is the purpose of schools—as do some business leaders. Indeed, Lou Gerstner, the former CEO of IBM, who is quite influential in setting the school reform agenda and who recently advocated in the *Wall Street Journal* for the abolition of local school districts in favor of 50 state-run districts, has also argued that all schooling is about is the distribution of knowledge. Such bureaucratic rational system thinking abounds among policy makers.

What such thinking overlooks is the fact that schools are about the education of the young, not simply the training of the young. This means that schools should be about ensuring that the young have access to the knowledge they need to make sense out of their world so they can develop their unique set of talents in ways that are satisfying to them and beneficial to others. The schools should also ensure that students know enough about the academic disciplines to distinguish sense from nonsense; and there is certainly enough nonsense involved in our thinking about schools to occupy every citizen's attention for a long time.


If schools cannot change to meet this challenge, other institutions will arise to replace them. These institutions are, in fact, already coming into existence, sometimes in the form of home school networks and sometimes as freestanding educational collaborative arrangements among parents and private providers.

My greatest fear is that if educators do not soon come to understand the urgency for dramatic change (as contrasted with the tinkering that is now going on in the name of reform), what will be left after the



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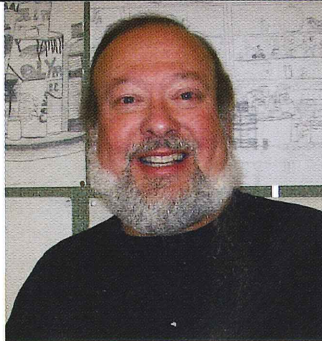
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reformers have finished with our schools will be highly bureaucratic organizations run by state education agencies where the children of the poor will come to learn how to write brief descriptive paragraphs about poems written by others, and to learn how to do low-level arithmetic, while most children will be in new educational environments that exploit new technologies and are organized more like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and 4H— places where students will be encouraged to write poems and imagine themselves riding with Albert Einstein alongside a beam of light while their less fortunate peers anxiously face one more test to prove that they have learned at least a little something.

**Q. What three major changes do you think must be made in public education for it to survive?**

**A.** Schools must be returned to local communities and the communities must develop clear standards regarding what they want students to know and be able to do as a result of their school experience. The role of the state would be to ensure that local communities develop such standards and

that once they are developed, that they are enforced. The state would also ensure that local community standards ensure fairness and justice for all children, not just for the children of the elite and powerful.

Discussions about learning standards should become the center of community conversations and school boards should facilitate these conversations much like some churches encourage members to open their homes to small groups of friends and neighbors for the purpose of Bible study or planning to do good works in the community.

We should commit to using the schools as community building organizations and seek ways for schools to support the community rather than concentrating on ways to ensure that the community supports the schools.

**Q. Do you think public education will survive this century if change does not occur?**

**A.** The answer to your question is a flat “no.” The only way public schools will survive is by developing enough leaders who have the courage to organize their local communities behind the idea that the community, rather than the state or federal government,

is the proper center for school standards and developing in those communities a clear commitment to supporting and enforcing the standards that are developed.

Put differently, we cannot save our schools without building strong communities bound by a set of common beliefs about the purpose of public education. Community building and school transformation go hand in hand, and we cannot save our schools unless we save our communities as well. Taking the schools away from communities, as much federal policy is now doing, is heading in precisely the wrong direction. We need local control of schools, but we also need communities that have enough sense of the common values to control the impulse to use the schools to promote special interests.

Public education should serve the common good and it is in the quest for a definition of this good that the debate over standards has the most promise. Unfortunately, that debate is being taken away from communities and turned over to experts in state and federal bureaucracies. What we need are schools organized in ways that put the joy back into teaching and that do not confuse rigor with rigor mortis. ■



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