SOME YEARS AGO, MY WIFE AND I MADE THE MISTAKE OF PLANTING A PRIVET HEDGE AROUND THE PERIMETER OF OUR YARD. 

Early on, it was beautiful, but as time went by, it became more and more unruly. The final blow was the invasion of a noxious vine that overwhelmed the hedge. 

In desperation, we took implements of destruction to the hedge and laid it to waste. We then had to contend with a mountain of debris. After previous trimmings, we had rented a five-horsepower chipper, but this job was simply too big.

We rented an industrial strength chipper that I towed home behind the pickup. After much maneuvering, I got the chipper to the back of our lot and aimed at the fence. What a spectacle it was when we turned it on! Chippers of this size have a very large and heavy flywheel that allows the machine to crunch branches up to six inches in diameter. It takes the machine awhile to get up to speed, and when it is finally running at chipping speed, it emits a wail so loud that the all the neighbors came out to see what was going on. We spent the next several hours feeding this beast until the mountain was reduced to a molehill or so.

The most curious thing happened when I turned it off. It kept running! As an old physical science teacher, I immediately recognized that this was our friend inertia. A Newtonian concept, inertia is a result of the laws of motion — the tendency of a mass that is put into motion to remain so unless acted upon by some external force.

We have spent a lot of time over the last 30 years exploring ways to change and improve the performance of our schools. Most of us over the years have been involved in several attempts. It is often a frustrating experience. We all work very hard to make the research-based changes that we hope will lead to increased student achievement.

But when we step back and look over the trail of our 35-year career, we can see only the spottiest remnants of those well-intentioned attempts. Why would this be? We are dedicated, intelligent, well-read, and optimistic. Why can’t we bring about significant, long-term change to our public schools?

I think the biggest impediment to this type of change is the inertia of our existing system. We are trying to change the current practice of educators, but in doing so, we must overcome practices that have been in place for quite some time. Some aspects of this system have a history that can be traced back for millennia.

My sense is this system is much like a massive flywheel that keeps turning long after its usefulness has passed. You only have to visit your local school to observe this inertia at work. You can see and hear the echoes of generation after generation of educators. It is evident in the structure of the day, the school, the classroom. You see it in the neat rows of individual desks. You hear it when the bell or the electronic tone sounds to signal the end of one time interval and the beginning of the next. You see it in the interactions of students and teachers, whether it is the reading circle in the elementary school or the history teacher holding forth in the high school. It is in the conversations of people who believe that anyone with a small amount of training can teach. It is in the voices of parents who know what school is supposed to be like. Remember, “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” It reverberates everywhere in our profession. And it will take a force of some magnitude to slow and change this inertia.

Fortunately, signs of a countervailing force are becoming evident. In my last principal assignment, I was continuously struck by the level of educational professionalism exhibited by the recent graduates of teacher preparation institutes. There is growing support for standards-based, research-supported professional development. Many sources are reporting that investing in the improvement of teachers’ knowledge base is one of the best uses of the limited financial resources available to schools and districts. Michael Fullan has written about an approaching paradigm change in our profession. He sees increasing professionalism among teachers and administrators in the schools and districts that he has studied. I think this growth of professionalism in the way we talk about and approach our work as educators could be what finally overcomes the inertia of the past and allows us to bring our public school system into the 21st century.