

The Educator, examined: An Interview with Phillip Schlechty

We must constantly study ourselves, our work, our institutions

By Dennis Sparks

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(Editor's Note: Phillip Schlechty is president and CEO of the Center for Leadership in School Reform, Louisville, Ky. A more complete bio follows at the end of the interview.)

JSD: In your new book, *Inventing Better Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Reform*, you write, "What is needed is a fundamental re-examination of the assumptions upon which our system of schooling is based and a willingness to modify those assumptions in ways that take into account the emerging realities of the 21st century."

In the book, you challenge the reader's assumptions about the teacher's role, the leadership practices of principals and superintendents, and the psychological orientation of schools. Let's begin by talking about teachers, who you advocate should be viewed as leaders of knowledge workers and inventors rather than as performers.

Schlechty: It's commonplace to think of the teacher as a performer or a service delivery professional. We even have teacher performance appraisal systems. Such systems assume the most important things that occur in the classroom are those things the teacher does.

The teacher's performance is important, but student performance is more important. Rather than performing for the students, the job of the teacher is to get the student to perform. Teachers are leaders. They perform in order to get others to perform. They are not actors who perform in order to be appreciated.

Similarly, teachers are not service delivery professionals in the sense that doctors and lawyers are service delivery professionals. Teachers do need clinical skills. They do need to know how to "diagnose." But the reason they diagnose is so they have a clearer notion of what they need to encourage students to do rather than knowing what they as teachers need to do to or for students.

All of this proceeds from the observation that what teachers are trying to do is engage students in working on knowledge, rather than having students passively absorb knowledge. The idea that learning is an active process, requiring one to use knowledge toward some end rather than simply absorb knowledge, is certainly not a new one. Therefore, the idea that students might best be viewed as knowledge workers is not new either. Knowledge work is nothing more or less than using ideas, concepts, problem-solving skills, analytic skills, and applying facts to achieve some end. Those who engage in this type work are knowledge workers.

Historically, knowledge work has been the work of intellectual elites such as teachers, physicians, journalists, priests, the executive classes, ministers, and lawyers. Nowadays, nearly everyone must learn to work on and with knowledge. As Peter Drucker says, this is going to be "the knowledge work century."

Because students' intellectual activity should be the focus of the school, teachers need to become skilled in inventing work that will engage students. Put simply, students do not learn from work they do not do.

We must remember, however, that engagement is not all there is to it. Good school work is engaging school work, but not all engaging school work is good school work. Good school work is sufficiently compelling that students persist with it when they have difficulty, and they find satisfaction in it when it is done. Moreover, the effort expended results in students' learning those things their parents, the larger community, and the society at large believe should be learned.

Perhaps the most important understanding here is that students are volunteers, whether we want them to be or not. Their attendance can be commanded, but their attention must be earned. Their compliance can be insisted on, but their commitment is under their own control.

I would argue, by the way, that we already have evidence that when teachers act on the assumption that students are volunteers, they find themselves liberated in ways they might not before have thought possible. We can learn a great deal from watching teachers in summer school and in after-school programs where teachers know they must earn the students' attention rather than assume that attention is owed. I have seen teachers who are prone to confuse rigor with rigor mortis during the regular school day become creative and imaginative in an after-school or summer school program, precisely because they came to view the student in these programs as volunteers, and they came to view themselves as leaders and inventors. This is what we need all day, every day in every classroom.

Teachers as inventors

JSD: How should staff development prepare teachers to be inventors and leaders of knowledge workers?

Schlechty: Organizing staff development around improving the quality of work we give students rather than improving the teacher's performance in the classroom changes the whole dynamic. When the focus is on improving the experiences of students, staff development then takes on a very different character. It is an ongoing invention rather than a canned program, and it is collaborative because teachers and principals need to consider together how they can improve the quality of the work they give students and what the teachers and principals need to learn in order to do that.

For example, in *Inventing Better Schools*, I set forth 10 qualities or attributes to which teachers might attend if they were set on inventing work that is more engaging for students. (See page 42.) These qualities could serve as a framework for ongoing collegial discussions in schools

as well as for the design of new activities for students. These qualities might also serve as a curriculum framework for staff development. For example, there might be staff development activities in which teachers are provided opportunities to become aware of ways of linking classroom activity to products students value and care about, ways of breaking the linkage between failure and punishment, and ways of enriching content without introducing boredom.

Even now, the Center for Leadership in School Reform is working with school districts to design staff development programs like this, and the results so far are promising.

Developing school leaders

JSD: You argue in your book that principals and superintendents must function as leaders of leaders, and manage by results rather than by programs. "Values and vision rather than programs and rules will drive the system," you write. What are the implications of this for staff development for principals and superintendents?

Schlechty: First, we have to help school leaders understand the centrality of beliefs in the change process. For instance, take a commonly expressed belief like "all children can learn." That's an incomplete sentence; until we've said that all children can learn more than they're now learning, and that it's our obligation to ensure that they do so, we haven't said very much.

Leaders must have a few very simple beliefs, help others examine their beliefs, and then use those beliefs to evaluate action. Getting clear about beliefs is critical, but using them to direct action is also important. It's essential that we help principals and superintendents understand the power of beliefs, how they can communicate beliefs, and how they can get people to come to grips with what they believe about the nature of school and the capacity of students to learn.

When we manage by programs, we are more concerned about doing things right than doing the right thing. Too often, we ask whether we have implemented the program with fidelity rather than whether it has made a difference.

Assumptions about behavior

JSD: In your writing, you argue that systems are flawed, not the people in them. In *Inventing Better Schools* you write, "Systemic thinking requires us to accept that the way social systems are put together has independent effects on the way people behave, what they learn, and how they learn what they learn. . . . Americans generally prefer explanations of human behavior that give emphasis to the attributes of individuals as contrasted with the properties of social systems." To put it in my own words, you are saying that educators are steeped in psychological principles and the importance of individual attributes, but they are naive about the power of structural and cultural factors to affect behavior.

Schlechty: The first paper I presented in my professional career was on the psychological bias of American educators. Because of this bias, we assume that the behavior we see in schools is a result of some personality attribute. In reality, people are often acting in response to structural and cultural forces.

One such force is the assumptions we make about things. For instance, watch little children when they start playing school. They have internalized what the role of the teacher ought to be. One stands up and the others all sit down. That's not because it's natural for some people to stand up and others to sit down but because that's the way the system is put together. Other structural forces include the time scheduled and the way the classroom and its furniture are arranged so teachers are on the stage and students are in the audience. These sorts of things shape human behavior in ways that we do not realize.

Structural changes

JSD: You argue in *Inventing Better Schools* that we know much more about procedural and technological change than we do about structural change. What do we know about structural change in education?

Schlechty: Unfortunately, educational literature on this subject is not as rich as is the literature in business and management. Few provocative leadership studies focused on schools. Most leadership studies have focused on

business leaders, military leaders, and political leaders. Furthermore, when educational leadership has been studied, the studies have generally been associated with introducing new programs or procedures rather than with the difficult business of transforming cultures and redesigning systems.

It seems to me that educators — following the lead of persons like Terry Deal, Tom Sergiovanni, Michael Fullan, and a few others — need to study more systematically transformational leadership in education. In the meantime, I take most of my inspiration in such matters from the literature in business, biographies of great transformational leaders, and the reading of history, plays, and novels.

Building capacity for reform

JSD: You have expressed concern that school districts don't have the capacity to support classroom and school reform.

Schlechty: There are three big areas regarding district capacity. First, the district has to establish and maintain a clear focus on a preferred future. Second, the focus on the future has to be maintained once it is established. Consequently, the change has to be system-based rather than personality-based, which means that when a leader leaves, the direction isn't altered. Third, the district must have the capacity to behave strategically. That means not only doing new things, but deliberately stopping doing old things. One of the most difficult parts of the change process is stopping doing old things because the old things always have constituencies behind them whose interests are threatened.

Following some ideas set forth in *Inventing Better Schools*, CLSR is now working with the North Central Association, the Southern

Association of Colleges and Schools, and 15 very diverse school districts to develop a system for assessing district-level capacity to support building-level reform, and to create strategies for enhancing those capacities where they are found lacking. For example, school districts cannot maintain direction unless they are more effective than most are at using measures of results as a source of direction. The ability to use results is a critical capacity in schools. Assessing the presence or absence of the capacity to manage by results is essential as is developing strategies to improve this capacity where it is lacking.

Central office role

JSD: What's the district's role in staff development?

Schlechty: The primary role of district level leaders, including staff development specialists, is to create system capacity and to help others gain access to that capacity. For example, central office personnel need to help building-level personnel become skilled in collecting and analyzing data and using data to inform action. It's not the job of central office to direct action; it's the job of central office to ensure that action has direction.

Second, in providing direction, central office plays a key role in articulating, communicating, and sustaining the beliefs and vision toward which action is expected to be oriented. The idea of each building having its own vision is wrongheaded if we want schools to serve total communities rather than isolated sets of parents and students. There should be a district-level vision, and each building, through its particular mission or missions, should reflect a version of that vision. The job of central office is to foster the communication and dialogue that cause building-level personnel to evaluate their assumed missions and actions in terms of the district's vision and beliefs.

Even more important, district-level personnel should seek opportunities to be invited to work on building-level teams. Also, pushing the bottom into the top by inviting some representative principals to be on the superintendent's cabinet, for example, is one way of flattening an organization. Another way is by driving the top into the bottom by creating conditions in which central office personnel view themselves as resources to buildings, and the building-level personnel see them as resources as well.

Preparing to lead

JSD: In *Inventing Better Schools* you write, "Educators must prepare themselves to totally reinvent the American system of education." How do we prepare ourselves to do that?

Schlechty: Reading books and engaging in careful and thoughtful conversations with others who are reading them remains the best way to come to grips with the past and to anticipate the future. Too few educators take the time to read — and many say they do not have the time to read. We have a saying at CLSR: "If you do not have the time to read, you will not have time to lead." I have yet to run across a strong leader in business or in education who is a nonreader.

In addition to reading and reflecting, educators must learn to be action-oriented. They must renounce the statement "Yes, but," and enthusiastically embrace the query, "What if?" Inventions are based on research, and best practice is certainly a part of invention. However, real inventions go beyond research and require imagination. Even best practice is not good enough. We need educators who are comfortable in working on the cutting edge of ignorance as well as those who work on the cutting edge of knowledge. We must envision education systems unlike any that have existed before and busy ourselves with the task of creating them.

If we fail, the education of our youth will increasingly be in the hands of sources and forces totally outside the ken and control of the family, the local community, or even the state, for increasingly the de facto educative agencies are those agencies such as national electronic media that take for granted that students are customers whose attention must be earned and whose commitment must be deserved rather than commanded. When families and communities lose control of the education of the youth, they have lost control of the future, and with this loss of control comes, almost certainly, the demise of democracy and the rise of a totalitarian system of information control. School reform is a civic matter as well as a matter of economic concern.

Bio of PHILLIP SCHLECHTY

Job: President and CEO of the Center for Leadership in School Reform, Louisville, Ky.

The non-profit center's goal is to build district capacity to support building-level changes. The center helps district assess where they stand relative to a set of 10 standards developed by the center. Then the center customizes a program to deliver the training and development that can drive improvement in the district.

Education: B.S., M.A., both with majors in social studies, education, history and political science and a Ph.D in the sociology of education, all from Ohio State University.

Professional history: Schlechty taught in public schools, colleges and universities, with his most lengthy tenure at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he was professor of education, department chair, and associate dean.

- During a leave of absence to serve as special assistant to the superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, he took the lead in creating the Metrolina Teacher Education Consortium and in early implementation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Teacher Career Development Program.

- In 1984, he moved to Louisville as the founding executive director of the Gheens Professional Development Academy, one of the first school district-based leadership development organizations in the United States.

- He founded the Center for Leadership in School Reform in 1988. He left Gheens in 1990 to devote full time to the center.

Schlechty has written several books, including *Inventing Better Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Reform* and *Schools for the 21st Century: Leadership Imperatives for Educational Reform*. Another book, *Leading Change in Schools*, is in progress.

To continue the conversation with Schlechty, write him at the Center for Leadership in School Reform, 950 Breckenridge Lane, Suite 200, Louisville, KY 40207, phone (502) 895-1942 or fax (502) 895-7901.

To learn more about the center and its work, visit its web site at www.clsr.org.

10 critical qualities of student work

- 1 - Product focus. Work that engages students almost always focuses on a product or performance of significance to students.
- 2 - Clear and compelling standards. Students prefer knowing exactly what is expected of them, and how those expectations relate to something they care about. Standards are only relevant when those to whom they apply care about them.
- 3 - Protection from adverse consequences for initial failures. Students are more engaged when they can try tasks without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or implications that they're inadequate. (Unfortunately, current school structures and grading practices often make this difficult to achieve.)
- 4 - Affirmation of the significance of the performance. Students are more highly motivated when their parents, teachers, fellow students and other "significant others" make it known that they think the student's work is important. Portfolio assessments, which collect student work for scrutiny by people other than the teacher, can play a significant role in making student work "more visible."
- 5 - Affiliation. Students are more likely to be engaged by work that permits, encourages, and supports opportunities for them to work interdependently with others. Those who advocate cooperative learning understand this well, and also recognize the critical difference between students working together and students working independently on a common task, which may look like group work but isn't.
- 6 - Novelty and variety. Students are more likely to engage in the work asked of them if they are continually exposed to new and different ways of doing things. The introduction of computers in writing classes, for example, might motivate students who otherwise would not write. New technology and techniques, however, shouldn't be used to create new ways to do the same old work. New forms of work and new products to produce are equally important.
- 7 - Choice. When students have some degree of control over what they are doing, they are more likely to feel committed to doing it. This doesn't mean students should dictate school curriculum, however. Schools must distinguish between giving students choices in what they do and letting them choose what they will learn.
- 8 - Authenticity. This term is bandied about quite a bit by educators, so much so that the power of the concept is sometimes lost. Clearly, however, when students are given tasks that are meaningless, contrived, and inconsequential, they are less likely to take them seriously and be engaged by them. But if the task carries real consequences, it's likely that engagement will increase. What teacher, for example, hasn't noticed that students prepare more diligently for a performance they know their parents will attend? Likewise, students who produce a documentary video on the Civil War are likely to be engaged in a more authentic learning experience than those who listen to a series of lectures on the war, with the sole goal of passing a test.
- 9 - Organization of knowledge. Students are more likely to be engaged when information and knowledge are arranged in clear, accessible ways, and in ways that let students use the knowledge and information to address tasks that are important to them. This doesn't mean that all content must be inherently interesting or relevant to students: They will learn many important things in school that they may not care about at the time. Content should be organized so access to the material is clear and relatively easy, and the students' work has enough attractive qualities to keep them engaged.
- 10 - Content and substance. Learning to read and to write complete sentences, for example, is not the same as learning to write persuasively and to read critically, thoughtfully, and well. Educators should commit themselves to inventing work that engages all students and helps them attain rich and profound knowledge. If such profound mastery is limited to students who are more socially or economically advantaged — or otherwise already capable of high-quality intellectual work without as much teacher effort — then the dream of democracy cannot truly be realized.

– Phillip Schlechty

About the Author

Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council.