THOUGHT LEADER

Phillip C. Schlechty

Move staff development into the digital world

The way public school educators respond to emerging information technologies will be the defining event for public education over the next decade. I have little doubt of this. I do worry, however, whether public schools have the capacity to take advantage of the revolution going on around them — a revolution that is affecting not only the way students learn, but also the way our society thinks about information and about learning.

The reason I worry is that most public schools are organized along bureaucratic lines, and bureaucracies are much better at suppressing revolutions than taking advantage of them. If schools are to develop the capacity to respond to this revolution, they must first be transformed into learning organizations. Encouraging and supporting this transformation should be the central concern of every staff developer in every school and district in the U.S.

Such a transformation requires much more than installing learning communities within existing bureaucratic structures. Among other things, it requires that:

• **Students must be viewed as volunteers rather than as conscripts, subordinates, products, or even clients to be served.** In the past, ensuring that students attended to the task assigned was all that was expected of the teacher. Ensuring that these tasks were engaging was optional. This is no longer the case. Students and parents are now in a position to demand engaging learning tasks, and if schools do not provide them, parents and students have other sources to which they can turn, as any visit to Toys "R" Us will clearly demonstrate.

• **Teachers must be challenged to change their image of themselves and their role.** Traditionally, instruction has dominated teachers' attention. In the very near future, instructional planning and delivery are almost certain to move from the domain of classroom teachers to the domain of those who understand the ins and outs of the instructional uses of technology and gaming. The job of the teacher will become one of designing work for students that will lead students *to want and need to be instructed.* Teachers will be mature guides to a variety of sources of instruction. They will focus their interaction with students on leading, coaching, and supporting students in the completion of the educational tasks. In short, teachers must cease seeing themselves as planners and instructors and must come to see themselves as designers of intellectually engaging work for students and as leaders of students conducting that work.

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• **Finally, all educators must become much more attuned to the way information technologies can be used to increase student engagement — and to promoting vital face-to-face human interactions around significant content.** They must understand that the digital world is reality for most children. Electronic information technology is more than a new way to do the schoolwork that has always been done. These new technologies make it possible to do entirely new forms of schoolwork, and students will increasingly demand such work be provided to them.

If public schools are not transformed, the education of most children will likely be provided by the private sector, but education may not be in private schools as we now know them. Private schools, too, must be transformed if they are to respond to the information revolution, and they are no better positioned than are public schools to undergo the needed transformation. Staff developers in private schools face the same chal-

lenges as staff developers in public schools.

The most likely result of the failure to transform schools, whether public or private, will be that children like those who now perform relatively well in schools *will not be in school at all.* Parents will seek private entrepreneurs who are skilled in network building (electronic and otherwise) and who have a clear understanding of the ways information technology, especially gaming, distance learning, and the Internet, can be used to instruct the young and to instruct parents, paid tutors, and other paid or volunteer community members who assume leadership roles relative to the education of the young. Supported by existing and emerging information technologies, students will be educated in loose networks and coalitions of youngsters, supported by parents, paid tutors, and community volunteers, rather like an educational Boy Scout or Girl Scout troop.

The vague outlines of such a development can already be seen in some emerging home-school networks and in some virtual schools. All it would take to broaden this trend would be for legislators to provide vouchers to parents that could pay for hardware, software, or tutors, rather than vouchers for tuition to a school, private or public.

Glimmers of this can be seen even now in organizations that are being set up to capture some of the tutoring money being made available by NCLB and in some of the efforts of high-technology businesses and nonprofit corporations to respond to educational needs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In order to bring about such a transformation in schools, the func-

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FROM THE FIELD
Carolyn McKanders
Use a holistic approach

"I HOPE AND BELIEVE that professional development will become more holistic, impacting teachers and other adults who work in schools mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It's a matter of helping them connect to their own passions, life's purpose, and unique gifts — what I call navigating their own internal terrain. Once that happens, they are much more likely to be able to effectively collaborate with each other in order to improve teaching and learning. That's because people who understand themselves, who are emotionally balanced, and who are spiritually grounded can much more easily access their own resourcefulness and the resourcefulness of others. They're not as likely to become threatened by, say, diversity, or become defensive when someone disagrees with them. They're better able to handle the tension that's naturally created by collaboration.

"Professional developers need to own this kind of holistic approach and structure the professional development environment so that it provides opportunities not just for the important work of collaboration, but also for reflection, meditation, and even physical exercise. It's a wise investment in human resources that, in the end, will improve teaching and learning."

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tion of staff development will need to be transformed. Staff developers who have specialized in helping teachers master the art of instruction will need to become highly skilled in helping teachers design learning activities for students. *Staff developers will need to help teachers learn how to help students learn in the context of a different world* — a world in which nearly everyone can be an instructor and in which most instruction will be delivered electronically and will be processed through disciplined dialogue in small groups and seminars.

If schools cannot be transformed into learning organizations, the future of staff development in public schools and in most private schools may not be a happy one, at least for those staff developers who think of themselves as imaginative and creative. Rather than serving as leaders who inspire teachers to discover the greatness within themselves, staff developers will find themselves providing basic training for poorly qualified teachers in such things as direct instruction, behavior management, and the techniques appropriate to preparing students for tests. Should this happen, public schools in the U.S. will become what too many are even now becoming: bureaucratically organized, state-run agencies in which training, rather than education, is the central concern. Our children, our teachers, and our democratic society deserve much better than that. ■