



SYSTEM CHANGE CAN TAKE EDUCATION GOALS FROM **FANTASY** *to* **REALITY**

BY JAN O'NEILL

As Congress considers reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), schools again stand at the center of the accountability movement. Most states have spent significant time, energy, and resources to develop accountability systems that explicitly define what students are expected to learn at each grade level and how this learning will be measured. Educators

are working hard on the challenge of helping all kids learn, but a recent study comparing test results from 12 states with National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results calls into question not only the rate of progress in closing the achievement gap, but whether states are lowering the bar for passing state tests. In some states, the disparity between state and NAEP results actually *widened* from 2002 to 2006 (Olson, 2007).

How is it that everyone is working so hard and yet such little progress has

been made? The answer may lie in the fact that many districts have been relying on relatively superficial fixes for the achievement problem, unaware or unwilling to make the deeper levels of improvement needed. Consider three levels of improvement: 1) fix the problem, 2) fix the process, or 3) fix the system.

Given the NCLB pressure for quick results, few would blame administrators for trying to fix the problem as quickly as possible, and those first-level fixes are certainly the

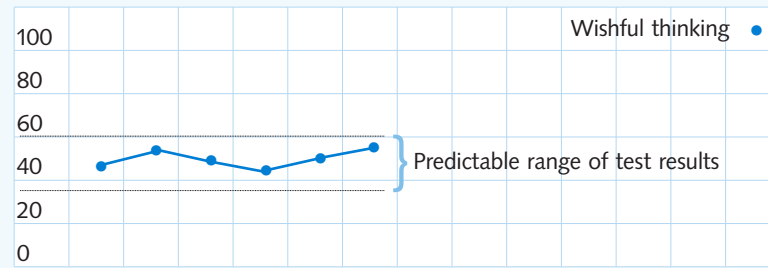
easiest. Districts spend significant resources on initiatives and programs to fix the problem without including processes and systems to support them. The late W. Edwards Deming admonished, “A goal without a method is wishful thinking.” In the U.S., we tend to fall in love with quick fixes, dynamic gurus, and “innovations” — not methods and processes. Assessment for learning, professional learning communities (PLCs), differentiated instruction, SMART goals, and response to intervention are well-researched and worthy approaches, but if the expectation is that conferences, workshop days, or instructional coaches are going to embed these practices in teachers’ work so that they make a significant difference in student learning, then we’re living in a world of wishful thinking. None of these approaches, without clearly articulated and specific underlying school and instructional improvement processes, constitute a method for improvement.

The second-level solution, fixing the process, requires having a process in the first place. Few of us have been trained to think in terms of process; rather, we tend to think about activities, resources, and strategies when we consider improvement. A process comprises a series of distinct steps, each one leading to the next. A district strategic plan, a school improvement plan, and a PLC team are not improvement processes. They may be artifacts of improvement processes, but they aren’t the processes themselves. The complaint that plans and teams aren’t closing the gap fast enough is indicative of a lack of process. What is the process by which the district improvement plan is developed, executed, and monitored?

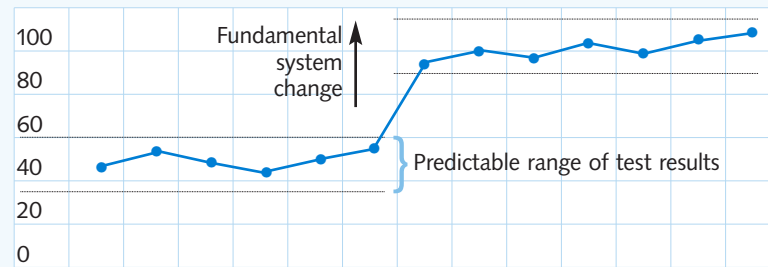
JAN O’NEILL is co-founder and president of QLD (Quality Leadership by Design), an educational consulting company specializing in school and systems improvement. She can be reached at joneill@QLDLearning.com.

How system change can raise the sights

WISHFUL THINKING: The idea that test results will reach 100% is a hope.



SYSTEM CHANGE: A fundamental change in the system can drive results.



What is the school improvement process that schools use to develop, implement, and monitor school effectiveness? What is the process teams of teachers use to improve their instruction? If district leaders can articulate step-by-step processes — not programs and initiatives — then they are at least halfway to a system of improvement that can guarantee better results each year.

The third option, fixing the system, is the type of deep-level change needed if districts are going to move from wishful thinking to realizing the long-term vision of all students being proficient by 2014.

Harley-Davidson’s success story is illustrative of the power of embracing deep-level systems change. When the motorcycle manufacturer was on the verge of bankruptcy, then-CEO Rich Teerlink led his executive team through difficult but absolutely critical conversations about Harley’s identity, what was “good enough,” what they believed was possible and why, and what behaviors were getting in

the way of company success that they themselves would need to change as leaders. Teerlink’s book, *More Than a Motorcycle: The Leadership Journey at Harley-Davidson* (Harvard Business School Press, 2000), co-authored with the coach he hired to help him make these changes, describes in detail the company’s journey from near-bankruptcy to success. The book’s message is simple but profound: “People are an organization’s only sustainable competitive advantage.” Although Teerlink left the company years ago, today Harley is recognized as a world-class motorcycle company, and those who invested and stayed with the company, including employees, are reaping the rewards.

Harley-Davidson embraced deep-level systems change and the company turned around.

Teerlink and his team invested their time, energy, and resources in personally leading a successful cultural transformation. They established a clear vision and set of values that guided them away from quick fixes to

deeper, more lasting systemic changes. Employees no longer checked their brains at the door. Instead, they were called upon to set challenging goals and were given the tools, methods, and time for teaming they needed in order to take responsibility for the quality of the product. Harley's employees felt they shared accountability for their work and were proud of the improvements they made. Harley's leaders understood that there wasn't an inspection system in the world that could create quality through inspection. They had to rely on their people and on solid improvement processes.

In our educational systems, we, too, are tottering near bankruptcy. To take our students from where they are now to 100% proficiency by 2014 is impossible without a system in place to support this goal. 100% is a lofty goal, a goal worthy of commitment, and requires a fundamental change in how we think about our work. Consider a district that has been producing proficiency results ranging from 40% to 60%. The scores vary within a predictable range — we can predict that next year's results will fall somewhere within the range of 40% to 60%. The goal of 100% is well outside that range, representing a significant leap. Without a systems-level solution, including a clear methodology for improvement, 100% will remain a wishful thinking goal. (See chart on p. 49.)

To achieve 100%, or even to approach close to 100%, district leaders will need to get serious about leading a fundamental system change.

First, to get beyond wishful thinking, let's raise our sights. If meeting incremental Adequate Yearly Progress targets and achieving requirements on state tests are the goals, then we're not asking enough of our systems.

Complying with yearly AYP goals and state requirements doesn't require the deep level of improvement to our curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, and leadership systems that is needed to achieve 100%.

Accountability targets are necessary and important to monitor, but they aren't sufficient for real change to occur. If we focus only on meeting state requirements and AYP targets, we will continue to initiate programs that are first-level fixes, piling one more thing on teachers' plates. And, unfortunately, if we set and monitor compliance goals, we will get compliance behaviors. In the worst-case scenario, when compliance goals are supported by inspections of classrooms and schools, no matter how benevolent, the result can be fear of telling the truth (distortion of the data), apathy, cynicism, or even burnout.

On the other hand, if district leaders establish clear improvement methods, ensure that everyone is trained well in those methods, provide time and support for team improvement work, and create opportunities for public sharing of both progress and results, we won't need inspections and audits. In fact, there is no inspection as powerful as sharing with one's colleagues, through data, successes, and lessons learned. Most importantly, if leaders establish a culture of trust, teamwork, truth telling, and data-based decision making through their own personal leadership involvement, shared accountability — accountability without fear — can be the result.

Most, if not all, administrators and teachers are working as hard as they possibly can to improve student achievement. Programs, innovations, and initiatives are being installed one after another, often one on top of another. Still, these difficult questions persist:

- Can we *predict* that our results

will improve next year, and every year after that?

- Are teachers changing classroom practices fast enough to close the achievement gap, and are they challenging *all* students to higher levels of performance?
- Is the cost of closing the gap too high? Are we at risk of burning out our teachers and administrators?

There is a better way, but it requires leaders to stop, reflect, and ask themselves some tough questions, just as Harley's leaders did: Who are we as a district? What is good enough? Do we have a process in place that will assure improved student learning year after year? What are we, as district leaders, doing that gets in the way of improving results? What do we need to change?

If leaders are tired of wishful thinking and ready to roll up their sleeves for some hard but rewarding work, the good news is that educators as a whole deeply care about their mission. With training, ongoing support, and leaders who understand their charge, anything is possible. Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Give those committed people a method for improvement, and changing the educational world can move from a wish to reality.

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