

TEST GOOD IDEAS TO CHECK FOR UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES

We are on the Yangtze, one of the last ships to move through China's Three Gorges Dam Project before its completion. This dam, 1.2 miles across and 600 feet high, will create a reservoir 360 miles long and raise the water level by 175 meters. It already has flooded 113 cities, 140 towns, 1,352 villages, 657 factories, and 1,300 archeological sites. The great dam, built on a seismic fault, is causing 1.3 million people to relocate. In addition, critics contend it will dump so much silt into the reservoir that in a few years, the dam will lose the capacity to control floods.

Our nation's No Child Left Behind Act is similarly producing unintended negative consequences. Linda Hammond-Darling (2004) writes that despite the noble intentions of NCLB and positive results it has produced, this 600-page law has affected schools and students in destructive ways never anticipated. Within a few years, most public schools may be labeled as failing despite high performance and improved achievement. The culprit: unrealistic test score targets. To date, more than 20 states and a number of districts have formally protested provisions of the law, citing among other things the likelihood that it will increase the dropout and pushout rate for students of color.

Dams alter ecosystems just as school initiatives alter the landscape of teaching and learning. NCLB is an enormous initiative, but even small events cause major disturbances in complex systems. When considering local initiatives, district and school personnel must examine these efforts for congruence with sound principles of professional development, organizational development, and effects on student learning. If such principles are absent, educators must

ROBERT J. GARMSTON is director of the Center for Adaptive Schools and a professor emeritus at California State University, Sacramento School of Education. You can contact him at 2825 Yardley Place, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762-3560, (916) 933-2727, fax (916) 933-2756, e-mail: FABob@aol.com.

tweak the program to include them.

A principal in Sunnyvale, Calif., for example, arranged a breakfast meeting at his school in which teachers reported to the board and central office about a new program. He did this because he knew that top-level support was essential to program success. In South Dakota, a principal refused grant money that would have negatively impacted instructional practices and stressed the system into more initiatives than could reasonably be addressed at one time.

Groups can, to some degree, anticipate unintended consequences of good ideas and alter their work to minimize the negative and maximize the positive. Consider conducting environmental impact studies in three arenas. (See box below.)

Understand systems. Individual teacher contributions are not the wellspring of successful schools. The source of improvement is

always the system. Teachers working together on common goals, aligned instructional practices, and an unwavering focus on student learning together create schools where students succeed. Learning groups must explore possible consequences of instructional decisions. The Futures Wheel (see illustration on the next page) is an excellent tool for this exploration.

For example, do 6th-grade teachers talk with 3rd-, 4th-, and 5th-grade teachers about 6th-grade math performance? If not, how can you make such discussions happen?

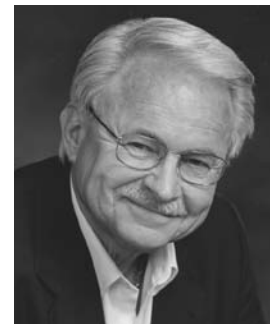
Check how clear teachers are about the expectations at each grade level and how consistent curricular premises and instructional practices are across grades and departments. Schools that have cross-grade-level meetings to address articulation concerns are aligning content and pedagogy.

Study the *whole* system. Intensive skills work in mathematics at the primary grades does not necessarily produce students competent in 4th-grade mathematics. Because conceptual understandings are essential to the increasingly abstract nature of middle grades math, primary programs

Tests for environmental impact

To what degree will this initiative:

- Contribute to understanding and decisions based on a **system's** impact on student learning?
- Engage faculty **inquiry** regarding relationships among instructional practices and student work?
- Increase teachers' **repertoire** of tools for group data analysis, planning, and problem solving?



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about the challenges of creating effective groups. His columns can be found at www.nsd.org/library/authors/garmston.cfm

must be rich in verbalized experiences. Teachers must agree on the content.

Ask:

- What is the system in which this work lives?
- Who is involved in acting on the initiative?
- Who might be affected?
- Does the system know it is a system?

Engage faculty in inquiry about instructional practices and student work. Groups that “engage in structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions that investigate the relationships between instructional practices and student work” are groups in which student learning continuously improves (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).

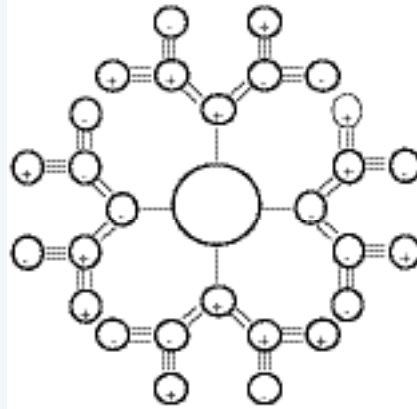
Investigate is the key word. To what degree are teachers involved in reflective dialogue about performance indicators? More than simply looking at student data, do groups inquire into causes and possible responses? Are administrators creating time, space, focus, and professional development opportunities to enable teachers to do this work?

Inquiry is more than a set of skills; it is an attitude, disposition, and a way of being.

Ask:

- Do leaders publicly model inquiry?
- Might they be encouraged to do so?
- Are groups clear about the purposes of dialogue? (To understand, not to decide.)
- Can members grasp the big picture or essential question while examining details?
- How prevalent is the practice of “seek first to understand, then to be understood”?
- What knowledge/skills do members possess about asking open-ended, value-free questions that probe deeply into assumptions and thinking?
- How might professional development be organized to develop some of this knowledge into application?
- What provisions are there for time to talk and space in which to talk?

Increase teachers' repertoire of tools for data analysis, group planning, and problem solving. Publicity about false reasons for school failure plagues reform efforts — falsities such as that teachers don't work hard enough. In reality, the problem behind low-performing schools is poor decisions about what improvement to work on (Elmore, 2003). Teachers work hard. But to work



THE FUTURES WHEEL can show positive and negative ripple effects. Write the name of an event or program in the center. Work outward, describing negative and positive effects in the circles with the pluses and minuses. A full-size template is available with the PDF version of this column in the members-only area of the NSDC web site at www.nsd.org/members/

hard at the right work requires being data literate. Collective tools and group capacity for analyzing data, planning, and solving problems are necessary. Data about student learning means more than having information about performance; also necessary are program data, community data, and demographic data.

Data-wise groups look collectively at information displays without prematurely interpreting and drawing conclusions from the information. They describe details, nuances, and patterns until the patterns emerge for all — the data-shy and data-competent group members. Data-wise groups generate multiple theories of causality and maintain a state of

constructive curiosity about both causes and theories of action.

The first idea for a solution is rarely the best — or even right. Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman told me about a district in Winnipeg (Manitoba, Canada) which discovered that special education transient students were not improving satisfactorily. Digging deeper into causal factors, the issue of teacher-student relationships emerged. Knowing these students would come and go, teachers were unconsciously hesitating to invest themselves in deeper commitments to these youngsters. If students stayed with teachers for longer periods of time, they reasoned, richer relationships and learning could result. The group thought outside the box. Members gathered data about the patterns of student movement within the district. They developed a monitoring system for apartment vacancies in which a family could get a new apartment with the first month's rent free as long as the family agreed to stay a full year. This was good for the apartment owners (less transience and revenue loss), good for the parents (a month's free rent and a stable environment), and good for the students (teachers knew they were in the system to stay — at least for a year). Learning improved.

THE FUTURES WHEEL

Any event can have both positive and negative ripple effects. As we have seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, carefully constructed evacuation plans can produce unexpected results. Had a Futures Wheel been used for planning, those without cars might have escaped earlier,

Continued on p. 57

- Humility; (“Hold your clarity as if it were an accident.” — *Castenada*)
- Courage to take risks.

SUMMARY

The team is the window on the soul of the school. To know how poised a school is to help students make gains, sit in on a grade-level or subject-specific team meeting. Are teachers spending time on items related to academic focus? Does their talk reflect real belief in the students and shared responsibility? Can they engage one another in honest, nondefensive dialogue? If the answer is yes, then “Katie, bar the door!” This school is going somewhere!

REFERENCES

DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & DuFour, R. (Eds.). (2005). *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Services.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Services.

DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Services.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Jentz, B. (2005). *Talk sense*. Newton, MA: Leadership and Learning.

Newmann, F.M. & Wehlage, G.G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzer, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York:

McGraw-Hill.

Reeves, D.B. (2002). *The leader's guide to standards: A blueprint for educational equity and excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rosenberg, M.B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life (2nd ed.)*. Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press.

Saphier, J.D. & Gower, R. (1997). *The skillful teacher: Building your teaching skills*. Acton, MA: Research for Better Teaching.

Schlechty, P.C. (2000). *Shaking up the schoolhouse: How to support and sustain educational innovation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schmoker, M. (1999). *Results: The key to continuous improvement (2nd ed.)*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin Books. ■

group wise / ROBERT J. GARMSTON

Continued from p. 66

people may not have run out of gas during traffic jams along the escape route, and materials for survival might have been delivered in a more timely manner.

Here is how to use a Futures Wheel (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) for an environmental impact study.

1. Write the name of the event or program in the center of the wheel.
2. Work outward to the first layer of circles. Describe two negatives and two positives, making the ideas as divergent as possible.
3. Proceed to the second layer. For each negative and each positive, write a positive and negative effect.
4. Proceed to the next level. Surprises often occur here. A faculty in Idaho reached this layer in studying the adop-

tion of a new reading program and realized they were stuck, unable to identify another set of positives and negatives. They reasoned that if they didn't know, perhaps students would. They asked students for their perceptions and came to new understandings about how they could make this program valuable to students.

Keep in mind that the Futures Wheel is not a predictor of events. Rather, it reveals possible consequences that can be taken into account when planning a program. Educators need not live passively at the end of a pipeline of change. They can test changes for congruence with best practices, and if found wanting, modify how new initiatives are implemented.

REFERENCES

Elmore, R. (2003). *Knowing the right*

thing to do: School improvement and performance-based accountability. Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices.

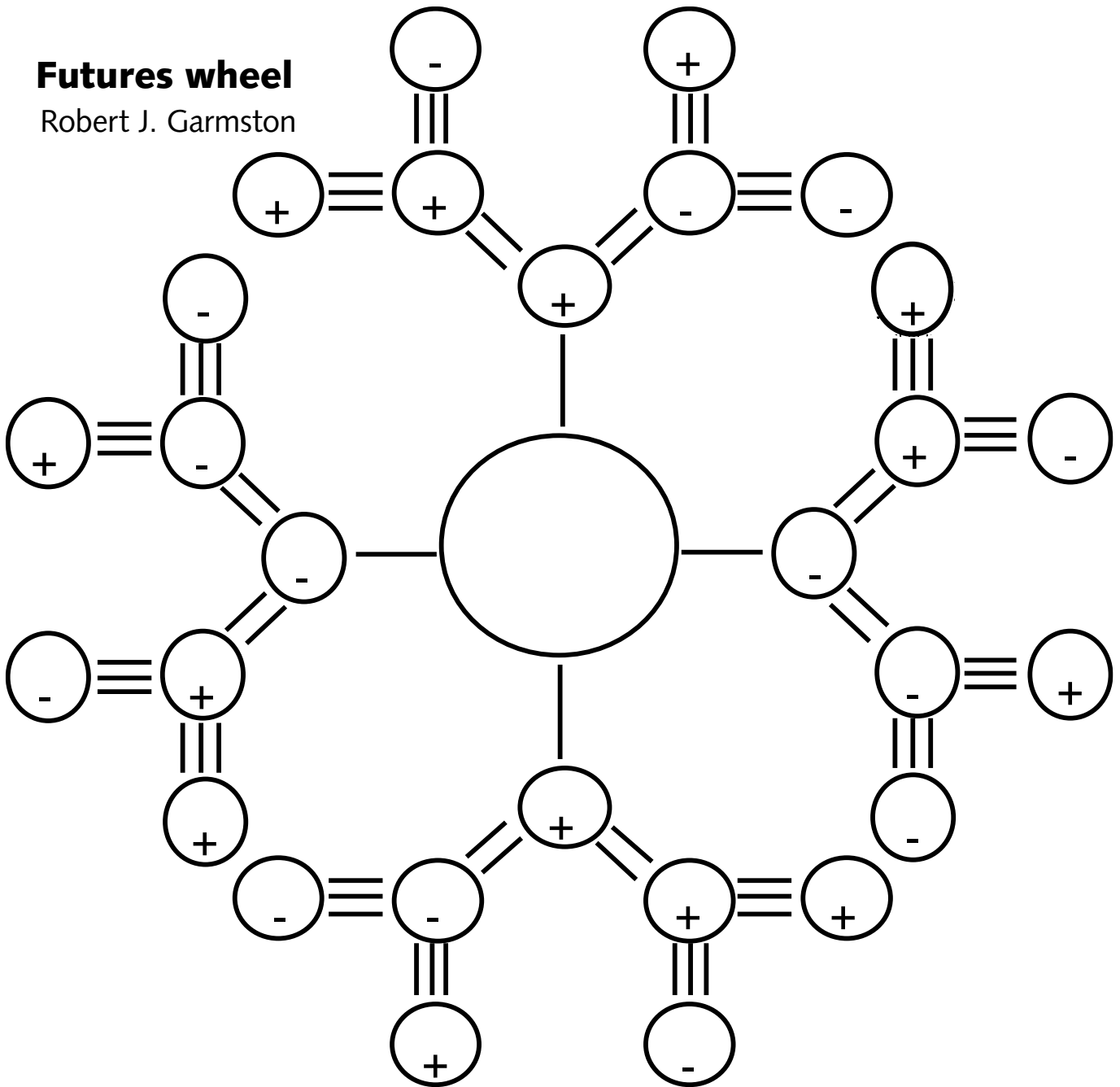
Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1999). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for collaborative groups*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.

Hammond-Darling, L. (2004). From “separate but equal” to “No Child Left Behind”: The collision of new standards and old inequalities. In D. Meier & G. Wood (Eds.), *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Supovitz, J. & Christman, J.B. (2003, November). *Developing communities of instructional practice: Lessons from Cincinnati and Philadelphia*. (CPRE Policy Briefs, RB-39). ■

Futures wheel

Robert J. Garmston



Here is how to use a Futures Wheel (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) for an environmental impact study.

1. Write the name of the event or program in the center of the wheel.
2. Work outward to the first layer of circles. Describe two negatives and two positives, making the ideas as divergent as possible.
3. Proceed to the second layer. For each negative and each positive, write a positive and negative effect.
4. Proceed to the next level. Surprises often occur here. A faculty in Idaho reached this layer in studying the adoption of a new reading program and realized they were stuck, unable to identify another set of positives and negatives. They reasoned that if they didn't know, perhaps students would. They asked students for their perceptions and came to new understandings about how they could make this program valuable to students.

Keep in mind that the Futures Wheel is not a predictor of events. Rather, it reveals possible consequence that can be taken into account when planning a program. Educators need not live passively at the end of a pipeline of change. They can test changes for congruence with best practices, and if found wanting, modify how new initiatives are implemented.