

The Superintendent

THOMAS P. MCGARRY

Hooked on Neatness

As we keep our classrooms quiet and orderly, so do we keep our school districts. Even change must be done neatly. The way we maintain neatness is through the seriatim implementation of predefined models—each of which is refined to an exquisite neatness—with implementation usually being additive. While the approach has the appearance of neatness, it lacks the impact of a carefully conceived methodology. Driven by neatness, and faced with new problems of incredible complexity, we destine ourselves once more to failure.

To create conditions for reform efforts to succeed, we need to discover how to develop an open process of problem solving that draws on the best each of us has to offer, that deals realistically with the data and problems that confront us, and that leads to solutions that work in the real world of today. There is no model, no ideal state, only a process. It seems to me that the process must have at least three aspects.

1. *The environment must be conducive to cooperation and real problem*

Driven by neatness, and faced with new problems of incredible complexity, we destine ourselves once more to failure.



Photograph by Betty Clanton

One fundamental condition for successful reform is cooperation among those participating in the process: the ability to sit down together and discuss problems and solutions in an atmosphere of camaraderie and trust.

solving. A broadly based group of problem solvers, representing all those groups with a vested interest in the outcome of the process, must strive to create an atmosphere that facilitates real data gathering and interpretation and leads to real-world problem solving. The environment must encourage open dialogue, sharing with peers in similar situations, realistic discussions within the team, the use of skilled facilitation to unblock communication, and the use of expert knowledge on current theory and practice of what works and what does not work.

2. *Those involved must be committed to one another and to finding real solutions.* There is no magic here. It is the same commitment that makes any personal or professional relationship work. But, as in these relationships, the commitment must be verbalized and must serve as a point of reference throughout the process of problem solving.

3. *The method must use a bootstrap*

approach. Such a methodology starts small and builds incrementally, with constant revision and redefinition, toward a solution. Specifically, the process must begin with agreement on basic premises, no matter how simple, and continue with the group's commitment to those premises. The commitment may even need to be written. Further, the process must lead the participants to identify the most pressing problems and to develop solutions together through application of the basic premises. Next, the premises must be open to revision and expansion in light of the new reality created. And, finally, the process must address new data and new problems through application of the revised basic premises. The process is "lean and mean," but it works well precisely because it reduces the essential elements to: people who trust one another, a compact of trust, and flexible, unflinching problem solving.

How easy it is to theorize, how much harder to make things work. I

believe, however, that the Longmeadow Public Schools have begun a process that will help us better serve our community. In October 1989, through the joint sponsorship of the Longmeadow School Committee and the Massachusetts Teachers' Association, a team of six of us attended a well-crafted problem-solving laboratory. The conference—jointly sponsored by the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, National Network for Educational Renewal, and American Association of School Administrators—was designed to assist school districts in improving the quality of their educational services. There, in an environment with all the elements proposed above, our school team—a school committee member, the superintendent (I), the MTA's regional

director, the local teachers' association president (a middle school teacher), an elementary school teacher, and the high school principal—discussed afresh all the internal and external problems that we face and forged a commitment to working together toward solutions. We left with a draft of principles that will govern our future dialogue, with enhanced trust of one another, and with a willingness to deal with the realities of our situation. Not with Pollyanna eyes, but with a nonideological view of our needs and our problems, we agreed to cooperate.

We have learned from the successes and failures of many others who are similarly engaged. What we have learned is distilled in three of the most essential principles to which we agreed.

- There is no recipe or model for

improving decision making in school or for restructuring. Longmeadow must create its own model.

- Communication in every direction is essential at every stage.

- Trust is essential, and we need time to develop it.

Again, there are no models, only a process, for change. Ultimately, we must abandon our obsession with neatness. If successful change occurs, it will not arrive all wrapped up in a tidy package but, rather, will be a result of our willingness to experiment, to conceive new visions. The process might even be a little messy, but the end result will be worth it.

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