

Making Change Casting Off “Yesterday’s Logic” to Transform Schooling

by Laurie Posner

While it is no longer so much in fashion to agonize about the death of one or another cultural institution (grammar!, romance!, rock-and-roll!), this did not stop Boston Globe writer Derrick Jackson from asserting that we are now witnessing “the death of public education” (2010).

Noting how many U.S. cities are facing major school closings and massive budget cuts, Jackson goes on to describe how the country chronically under-invests in education and underpays teachers, while blaming poor outcomes on student poverty and diversity. “In monetary terms,” Jackson writes, “we have given up on millions of children” (2010).

Funding education at insufficient or inequitable levels – and blaming poverty or diversity for poor outcomes – evokes what management consultant Peter Drucker (1980) called “yesterday’s logic.” As Drucker said, “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

Remaining trapped in yesterday’s logic comes at a perilous cost. Already each year, the United States loses an estimated 1.3 million high school youth to attrition. And while only recently the United States led the world in the number of young adults with college degrees, it has now slipped to 12th among 36 developed nations. Severe inequities persist, “Students from the highest income families are almost eight times as likely as those from the lowest income families to earn a bachelor’s degree by age 24” (Lewin, 2010).

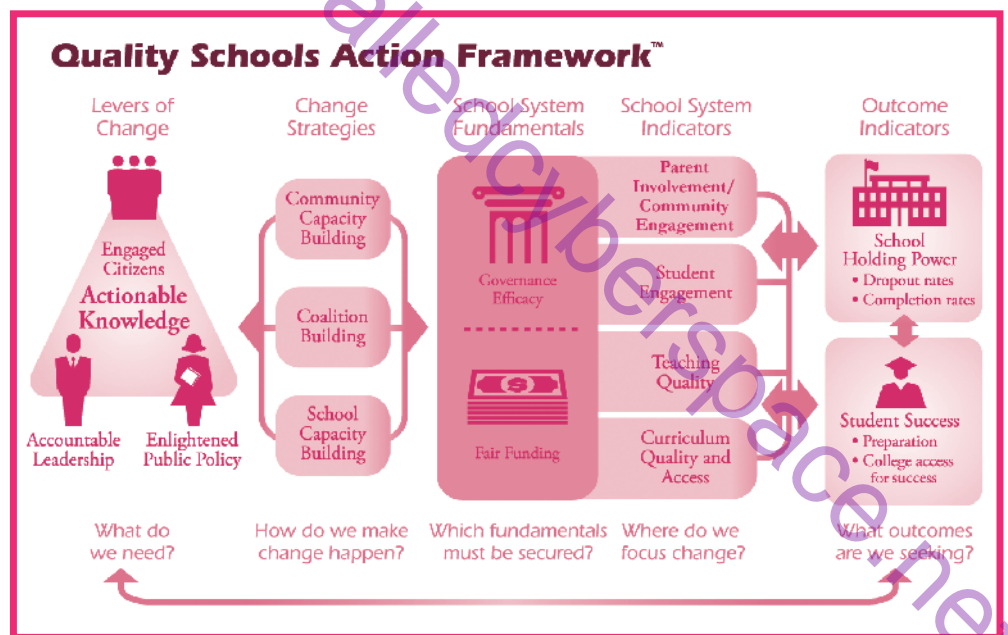
What can be done to reject yesterday’s logic and transform teaching and learning? Research and practical experience point to the need to take up three inter-related strategies: (1) community capacity building; (2) coalition building; and (3) school capacity building. Each strategy is an integral part of IDRA’s action model for transforming public education, the Quality Schools Action Framework (Robledo Montecel, 2005).

Community Capacity Building

Community capacity building as a term and an approach is often associated with community development and the power of social networks (“social capital”). As a concept, social capital has been around since at least the early 1900s, when L.J. Hanifan promoted its value in supporting rural schools. Hanifan (1916) wrote: “If [an individual] may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital... which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the

substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community” (see also Putnam, 2000).

As Hanifan implies, social capital and community capacity grow where there is a sense of neighborhood. In strengthening education, the best efforts build on these connections and expand knowledge and leadership to take up shared concerns. As a recent national study finds, well organized communities can serve not only to influence education policy and practice but also to “disrupt the priorities, assumptions and practices that have sanctioned poor



school performance for so long” (Mediratta, et al., 2009).

Community capacity building also can overcome persistent barriers to family-school relationships, creating new forums for partnership and problem-solving. The United Way of San Antonio & Bexar County’s family-school-community partnership in Texas began just such an approach in 2006. Focusing on student outcomes at 10 schools, this initiative “shaped by and for parents” went on to create parent rooms at each campus, build parent-led networks from parent to parent home visits, achieve gains in student attendance and tutoring rates, decreased early dismissals, and fostered a dramatic increase in parental involvement (United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, 2010). Expanding on this approach, through the Eastside Promise Neighborhood project, the United Way and seven partners (Family Services; P16+ Council; the City of San Antonio; San Antonio Independent School District; San Antonio Housing Authority; City Year SA; and Community Information: NOW) are blending strategies that work to simultaneously strengthen schools and neighborhoods. As another example, PTA Comunitario in South Texas, a grassroots PTA founded by the community-based organization ARISE in partner-

ship with IDRA, is combining Latina leadership development with education advocacy. Through this PTA, family leaders are examining data on student achievement, attrition rates, and college readiness and hosting community-based meetings with school leaders to look together at how their schools are doing, focus on a shared vision for all children's success, and work out roles each can play to bring this to fruition. In this way, the strategy both banks on decades of research linking family engagement with better student and school outcomes (Henderson, et al., 2004) and promotes partnerships that respect family contributions and leadership.

Coalition Building

Traced to the French and Latin terms for “fellowship” and “the growing together of parts” (as in coalesce), coalition building describes the process of developing a partnership of organizations to advance a common purpose. Needed as they are, coalitions designed to improve education have not always lived up to their potential. Too often, they have failed to include grassroots organizations and parents of children in public schools (Mediratta, et al., 2009).

Against this backdrop, a case-study review of the development of the Educational Justice Collaborative provides important insights. The EJC is a coalition of more than two dozen organizations in California whose goal is to attain high quality education for all children. Formed around the class action suit, *Williams vs. State of California*, the EJC has brought together community organizers, educators, researchers, and policy and legal advocates to coordinate research and policy and build community capacity to promote systems change.

One of EJC's first actions, based on a review of statewide school outcome data, was to craft an Educational Bill of Rights. The bill highlights every student's right to an education under the California constitution and, within this framework, to high quality teachers, and to safe and supportive learning environments. Importantly, the bill also calls for reliable public information on school outcomes, and regular community forums with public officials, to build in accountability for resources and results. Since the Williams settlement, coalition members have turned their attention to realizing these rights through work on school funding equity, college readiness and the state's data system (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

School Capacity Building

School capacity building, the most familiar of the three change strategies, involves the process of assuring that schools have the vision, leadership, faculty, curricula and resources to engage all students in learning. It begins with the recognition that substantial changes require interacting strategies, ensuring: that teachers are valued, prepared and well-equipped; that curriculum is rigorous, challenging and exciting; that students' strengths are recognized and can flourish; and that families and community members are engaged as partners (Robledo Montecel, 2005). Rather than working apart from or at odds with the first two strategies, school capacity building depends on each for continuous self-renewal (Villarreal, 2006).

This holistic approach can be seen in work underway at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD in South Texas. Unlike traditional dropout recovery strategies, PSJA's College, Career & Technology Academy, carried out in partnership with South Texas College, is re-engaging students who have dropped out of school in new learning opportunities and a curriculum that prepares them for college. The results include increased graduation and college readiness rates. Further, to strengthen mathematics and science teaching and learning, PSJA is partnering with IDRA on professional development and strategies to strengthen community-school-family partnership.

If public education is not just to survive but to be transformed and thrive, turbulent times must not have us retrench and revert to the failed logic of the past. We need a new logic, built on knowledge and experience, bold commitment and respect. ❖

Bio: Laurie Posner is a senior education associate at the Intercultural Development Research Association, an independent, nonprofit organization in San Antonio, dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in public education for all children. This article first appeared in the IDRA Newsletter September, 2010. For full list of resources email la.voz@esperanzacenter.org.

... *Elva's Story*, cont'd from pg 2



At the Paseo por el Westside in May, Elva taught Ariana (left) and a friend to shoot marbles.

that ESPERANZA is us, the community that stands behind the women who became inspired enough, had will enough to seek a manifestation of what is just—and desire, stronger still, to return a sense of orgullo to the Barrios of San Antonio. To claim the right as women to speak for other women, for our children, our youth, our brethren, to speak for our right to the streets, to return a means for our voices to be heard. To this I have returned, a San Antonio full of ESPERANZA.

When I first walked through ESPERANZA's front doors it was to attend a Noche Azul concert. The first person that greeted me seemed so familiar to me. Turns out, I did not know her from anywhere in particular, but the familiarity struck me so deep that later that night words poured out of me. I felt compelled to record the experience. Under all circumstances the words remain inadequate for they do not fully translate the experience that is ESPERANZA for they do not capture the sense of belonging. These words are an attempt to describe this ancient connect we all feel when we see something good, something noble. This is what I see in the women who are ESPERANZA. To them I say:

*I know you longer than I know your name
I know you longer then this ancient game
Called living*

*Among the Living
I know you deeper then any dream
you dream*

*I know you holier than any holy thing
I know*

I know

*I know I know you deeper then anyone
I claim.*

Gracias por darne tanta esperanza!

Bio: Elva Pérez Treviño is an artist, writer, political activist and attorney born and raised in San Antonio's Westside.