Leading for Change

Five ‘Habits of Mind’ That Count

By Tony Wagner

There are many things we do right as educators—most notably, working hard to make a difference in the lives of children, despite ever-escalating challenges. I’m beginning to see, however, that we educators are handicapped when it comes to leading efforts to improve teaching and learning. People in a host of other professions—business, law, medicine, engineering, architecture—have been trained to analyze and solve problems as a matter of everyday practice. We have not.

In all the professions listed above, and in many others as well, individuals or, more frequently, teams are given real-life problems in their field to study in graduate schools or continuing education programs, most often through a methodology called the case method. They are asked to analyze the issues and then make recommendations for strategies that might solve the problem or produce change. While the case-method pedagogy sometimes is the game of “guess what’s on the teacher’s mind,” with practice and coaching from professors, graduate students learn what kinds of data are most important to attend to in their analyses, as well as the questions to ask that might yield a deeper understanding of the problem. Once out on the job, these professionals are called upon to use their analytic skills on a daily basis and are rewarded as they become more skillful problem-solvers.

None of this is routine in the education profession. In our graduate schools, we still teach aspiring principals and superintendents much more about management than about how to make change. The case-study method or other similar approaches are very rare in most graduate programs. As a result, most graduates of even better schools of education lack both exposure to and practice in the analytic skills that are the foundation for effective problem-solving.

Nor are most educators asked to use these skills on the job. At the Change Leadership Group, which I co-direct at Harvard University, we have identified three culturally embedded traits that thwart educators’ opportunities to regularly practice problem-solving skills:

- **Reaction.** We educators are expected to be responsive to a cornucopia of urgent needs and demands every day. We can’t say no, and everything is a priority. Most of us haven’t developed the discipline of reflection as a way to remain focused on the truly important vs. the merely urgent, and we’ve inclined to think that because we’re busy we must be making progress toward our goals.

- **Compliance.** The education culture has tended to reward compliance to authority at all levels over active questioning or genuine discussion of issues. Compliance is usually how so-called “change” is implemented in our profession. The board or superintendent or principal hours about some new program and adopts it. Rarely is there any problem analysis or discussion of how and why this particular strategy may be better than another, or how its success will be evaluated. The result is that the “reform du jour” is half-heartedly implemented until some new leader or “better” reform comes along.

- **Isolation.** Educators work alone more than any other professionals in modern America. Most professions have come to recognize the value of teamwork as a better way to understand and solve “problems of practice.” Groups are far more likely to come to a deeper understanding, and to better solutions, than are individuals working alone, no matter how talented.

Fortunately, there appears to be new interest in forms of collaboration among educators. “Critical friends’ groups” and “professional learning communities” are increasingly popular. And my group, for one, sees great potential in what we call “leadership practice communities” as a way to develop education leaders’ problem-solving skills. (See Education Week, Commentary, Oct. 27, 2004.) For these forms of collaboration to be effective as tools for change, however, individuals and groups need to cultivate new habits of mind that will help them overcome their lack of preparation and practice in this work.

Deborah Meier and her faculty at New York City’s Central Park East Secondary School developed what they called the “Five Habits of Mind” as a structure for “teaching students to use their minds well.” (See Ms. Meier’s 1996 book, The Power of Their Ideas.) To them, and others in the Coalition of Essential Schools who adopted those habits of mind, the goal was to get students in the habit of routinely asking essential questions in their discussions and written work, questions such as these: What is the evidence for this, and how credible is it? Whose point of view is being represented here, and what are other points of view on this topic or issue? There are many others.

Lacking a comparable adult discipline of questioning, many problem-solving discussions among educators rarely reveal anything new in terms of a deeper understanding or alternative solutions. Most of the questions educators ask each other in such settings are “safe” ones. Many fall into the category of clarifying questions or “warm” feedback.

So what are some questions change leaders might learn to wrestle with? What might be the equivalent of “Five Habits of Mind for Change Leadership” we could work on together?

In our work, my colleagues and I have identified a sequence of questions that, if pursued rigorously and courageously, can lead to a deeper understanding of what are the truly important questions that need to be examined carefully within the organization. We call these Five Habits of ‘Mind That Contribute to an Educator’s Great Potential’ in School Improvement.

1. **Clarifying questions.** These are “what, why, and how” questions that help us to focus our thinking around a topic or issue. There are many others.

2. **Understanding questions.** These are “why, how, and what” questions that help us to focus on the real issues and to better understand or alternative solutions. Most of the questions educators ask each other in such settings are “safe” ones. Many fall into the category of clarifying questions or “warm” feedback.

3. **Generating ideas.** These are “what, why, and how” questions that help us to focus on the real issues and to better understand or alternative solutions. Most of the questions educators ask each other in such settings are “safe” ones. Many fall into the category of clarifying questions or “warm” feedback.

4. **Creating ideas.** These are “what, why, and how” questions that help us to focus on the real issues and to better understand or alternative solutions. Most of the questions educators ask each other in such settings are “safe” ones. Many fall into the category of clarifying questions or “warm” feedback.

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As we learn to work with these questions, we are learning to think as a community, to focus our thinking on the most important issues of the day, and to generate new ideas that are shared with others.

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finance reforms based on our evidenced-based model, sought our help to develop indicators to help them understand how they were using the education dollar. Our findings were somewhat discouraging.

When school districts receive revenues through a block grant, local education systems often do not use the funds to implement school-based instructional-improvement strategies that work. They rarely employ school-based instructional coaches—the resources that is key to making professional development work. Nor do they use the funds for certified tutors to help struggling students, the most effective early-intervention program.

Instead, they use resources to expand the number of elective classes, primarily in middle and high schools (and at a time when student performance in core subjects such as mathematics and reading is at risk). Writing is both the highest policy goal and the focus of most state testing). They also hire large numbers of instructional aides, even though the same results are often achieved with fewer aides, at one-quarter the cost.

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the challenges we face as well as more effective strategies for dealing with them:

• What is the problem we are trying to solve, or the obstacle we are trying to overcome, and what does it have to do with improving teaching and learning?

• What are our strategies for solving this problem, and how and why do we think implementation of these strategies will cause the change that's needed—what's our "theory of action?"

• Who (teachers, parents, students, community) needs to understand what, in order to "own" the problem and support the strategies we're implementing?

• Who is accountable for what for implementation of this strategy to be successful, and what do they need to be effective:

• What evidence (observable changes in short-term outcomes or behaviors) will we track that we will tell us whether our strategies are working?

A huge problem is that reform-oriented strategies do not solve the problem. Reform-oriented strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning are usually short-term and do not solve the problem.

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Simply finding enough money to adequately fund a state's schools does not solve the school finance problem. An equally difficult challenge is structuring a finance system to support evidence-based resource-allocation strategies.

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Nearly 40 students in each of five classes and featured a broad spectrum of attitudes, backgrounds, and math skills. I welcomed the ethnic diversity. Both my regular and honors-level algebra classes were diverse in terms of African American, Hispanic, and white students, along with recent immigrants from Russia, Asia, and Central America. This was one of the reasons I was interested in which the school was founded. But oddities seemed to be an inadvertent goal.

The school created race-based clubs—Young Black Scholars, Young Hispanic Scholars, Young Asian Scholars. Each encouraged excellence by ethnicity and sponsored special school events. There was nothing comparable for white students. The well-funded program required teachers to refer students for evaluation. We were advised not to send too many white students, lest the racial balance could be achieved.

The school provided academically enriched classes, but not all students were able to enroll. For some bright and personable minority students, acting out in class was a strategy to get themselves into "regular" classes, while "acting white" by cooperating with teachers was not. One parent whom I phoned to discuss his son's antics said, "Listen, lady, the boy's hormones are raging, and there's nothing I can do." When I urged students to take college-prep courses seriously, the principal responded that they would get into college because they were black. Others asked why I cared what they did.

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District and Meredith v.

NCLB Fairness: Miller's Comments Are Welcome

To the Editor:

U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the chairman of the House education committee, has joined the growing list of politicians who have come forward to demand that the No Child Left Behind Act ("Miller's Outlines Proposed Changes for NCLB", www.edweek.org, July 30, 2007). One of Mr Miller's key arguments is that the accountability required under NCLB comes at the cost of fairness. While schools get credit for meeting the test score goals, they get little or no credit for progress students make over time. Mr. Miller's bill calls for a shift from the current "pass-fail" system of comparing cohorts from subsequent