
Preface

The Five Essentials to Organizational Excellence is the result of my experiences over twenty-six years as a public school superintendent. My journey as a superintendent can best be summed up as a continuous search for “a better way.” Accountability for improved student achievement has long been a national goal and served as the main criterion for the decisions I made and the recommendations I offered to school boards on a daily basis. I was on a constant search for a system, a program, an initiative, and a solution to the problems and challenges we faced regarding student achievement. As I look back, I realize that, like most people, I learned more from my failures than from my successes. It could be that what I learned from my failures *led* to my successes. In any event, what I now know is that organizational development in public schools is an emerging and continuous process. Furthermore, organizational development represents the cornerstone of increased learning potential for students in American classrooms today.

I learned quickly that my effectiveness as a school leader was greatly enhanced by collaboration with those around me. What began as improvement of my own collaborative skills grew to become the main focus of human resource development in the school districts I served. What began as confrontation and “we-they” attitudes between my administration and parents grew into a positive and productive engagement of parents and other community members.

More times than not, my search for “a better way” took me to unconventional sources. Applying private-sector practices to public schools was very successful for me, although it is not a widespread practice even today. Once I started down this road, I discovered and invented programs and systems to improve learning potential that would never have been experienced without the journey. Innovation in public schools is not encouraged by those still operating under traditional organizational management practices. As Margaret Wheatley so aptly points out in her book *Leadership and the New Science*, “I believe that we have only just begun the process of discovering and inventing the new organizational forms that will inhabit the twenty-first century. To be responsible inventors and discoverers, though, we need the courage to let go of the old world” (1994, p. 5). What category of

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organizations could and should better benefit from inventing new forms of organization than public schools whose business is teaching and learning?

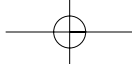
We are driven to discover and invent new organizational forms primarily because of the dramatic changes in our society—changes reflected in our public schools. Our organizational forms must be transformed in order to

1. Effectively meet the challenges of ever-increasing diversity in the student population as well as the workforce.
2. Capitalize on growing diversity in the population and the workforce as an ever-expanding source of capability and strength for the organization.

The responsibility for leadership has become too demanding for one person to shoulder. While there has been much written and debated about the leadership needed in organizations today, without question leadership is currently being redefined to tap into the new leadership potential of all the stakeholders of schools across our nation. In American public education, the redefinition of this leadership is most critical in the position of the school principal. School principals are in the position to most effectively facilitate much-needed collaborative leadership to the benefit of students across this nation.

When I began to commit to writing my thoughts regarding what was required to transform our public schools into learning organizations that so many people have dreamed about and have shared with me over the years, it occurred to me that, first and foremost, we had to ready ourselves for profound change. To do so requires an unprecedented change in how we think about organizing for learning and decision making regarding schools. As we think differently about school organizations, we must address the issue of leaving behind those organizational forms that either worked for a less complex time, or never worked but were sustained over time because of a pervasive “mindlessness” regarding meeting the changing needs of our stakeholders.

I have attempted to bring meaning to the integration of what I have determined are the Five Essentials of school transformation. Planning Strategically, Benchmarking for Excellence, Leading Collaboratively, Engaging the Public, and Governing by Standards constitute the building blocks of a new form of organizing for public schools. Each system or process, when implemented independently of the others, contributes to increased effectiveness of the organization in terms of student achievement. Because of the overlapping nature of the Five Essentials, when implemented as a whole, their contribution to organizational effectiveness is significantly greater.

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There is no question that it takes courage to cast off old ways that do not work and take that leap of faith required to invent and adopt new organizational forms. This book was written to make that leap as short and comfortable as possible for those courageous enough to let go of the old ways.

