

RESTRUCTURING K12 SCHOOLS SYSTEMICALLY: TOWARD A PROPOSAL FOR THE CALIFORNIA SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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ABSTRACT

The Education Committee in the California Senate is inviting ideas for legislation. This is an opportunity because public education in California is troubled. Bureaucracy has increased to hyperbureaucracy. Diverse stakeholder and policy-maker views overload schools and teachers with conflicting and ill-designed demands. California schools trail national averages in every objective measure of school quality due to “piecemeal” decision-making with unintended negative outcomes. The system as a whole has problems. “Systemic solutions” are needed, but their complexity, scope and cost hinder feasibility. This proposal offers a systemic solution that is neither costly or unmanageable. The cost and complexity of serving the entire system is managed by identifying and treating key leverage points. Namely, to improve California schools through legislation, we propose the following: [1] Enforce California Education Code #41400-41409 by removing loopholes and requiring compliance to return to and sustain the administer/teacher ratio; [2] Redefine the role of administrators to be supportive of teachers, rather than supervisory; [3] Reframe mandates, reforms, and programs in positive rather than negative terms. Such legislation is anticipated to create effective and systemic decision-making with many anticipated benefits. Cost of certificated non-teaching employee salaries could go down as much as 17%. The savings will allow an increase in teacher salaries. There will be more effective decisions made, as they will be made by those most expert and experienced in the specific people they serve and the subject matter and processes they manage. Well-designed policies and consequences make it easy for people do the right thing, which will be satisfying to all and improve morale system-wide. Shifting terms in problem-based mandates, reforms, and programs to ideal-based will result in more positive attitudes, more community spirit, and higher morale, as well as less unhappiness, less isolation, and less violence. Threats to the legislation’s success may be that systemic solutions are not yet mainstream and that administrators might feel diminished by the reduction in numbers and shifting their roles from supervising to supporting teachers.

Keywords: social systems, education, management, systemic solutions, systems theory

BACKGROUND

Our large modern social systems have great challenges. Decades ago, bureaucracy was a wonderful antidote to the problems of paternalism. But today bureaucracy has too frequently grown into hyperbureaucracy. But, what exactly is hyperbureaucracy? And how do we measure it? Bendix and Melman write

“for industrial organizations, a crude but serviceable index of the degree of bureaucratization is the ratio of administrative (salaried) to production (wage) employees.

Data compiled by Bendix from several sources show that for a number of Western countries the ratio of administrative to production workers in industry steadily increased from under 1:10 in 1900 to over 1:5 by 1950. And there is evidence that the rate of bureaucratic expansion may be an increasing” (Bendix and Melman in Scott, 1986, p. 25)

Hyperbureaucracy has been evident for decades in American public education. In Rogers’ study of a school district in New York (1989), there were seven hundred teachers assigned to the district office, a non-school site. Segure (1980) found a ratio of twenty-five-plus administrative to one hundred teaching personnel in spite of California’s maximum ratio law of eight to one hundred (California, 1978).

It is not only hyperbureaucracy that impacts the important institution of public education, where we prepare our future leaders. Diverse stakeholder and policy-maker views overload schools and teachers with conflicting and ill-designed demands. Evidence and illustrations come from Fullan, Silberman and Sarason, three educational scholars. Fullan’s description is compelling.

“One person claims that schools are being bombarded by change; another observes that there’s nothing new under the sun. a policymaker charges that teachers are resistant to change. A teacher complains and administrators introduce change for their own self-aggrandizement and that they neither know what is needed nor understand the classroom. A parent is bewildered by new practice and reading and by the relevance of education to future jobs. Some argue that restructuring schools is the only answer, while others decry that this, too, is just a pipe dream diverting our attention from the core curriculum changes that are desperately needed. One university professor is convinced that schools are only a reflection of society and cannot be expected to bring about change; another professor is equally convinced that schools would be alright if only superintendents and principals had more “vision” as educational leaders, and teachers were more motivated to learn new approaches to improving the curriculum. A governor works hard to get major new legislation passed to reform education. A principal thinks “this too shall pass.” Change agents at all levels wonder how to get more and more programs institutionalized while teachers think that it is these same promoters of change who should be institutionalized, not their programs. Students are too distracted by a host of other matters to pay much attention to all the uproar.” (Fullan, 1991, p. 3)

Silberman reviews the educational research in the 70’s and finds

“...The reason the reform movement failed was ‘the fact that it’s prime movers were distinguished university scholars’; ...what was assumed to be its greatest strength turned out to be its greatest weakness ... well-intentioned intelligent university authorities and ‘experts’ on education can be dead wrong. The reforms failed because of faulty and overly abstract theories not related or relatable to practice, limited or no contact with an understanding of the school.” (Silberman in Fullan, 1991, p. 22)

Sarason says it most simply in his book title, which is. ‘The Predictable Failure of School Reform.’

ISSUE AND OPPORTUNITY

Public education in California is no exception. The Los Angeles Times reported discouraging findings in research by the Rand Corporation (Helfand, 2005). California schools trail national averages in every objective measure of school quality due to “piecemeal” decision-making with unintended negative outcomes. The system as a whole has problems and “systemic solutions” are needed. Stephen Carroll, a Rand senior economist warns against inaction, but offers no solution. The complexity, scope and cost of systemic solutions hinder feasibility (Helfand, 2005).

This paper is inspired by a three-pronged opportunity that exists today for California Schools. First, the need for systemic solutions is established by the Rand research referred to earlier. Second, in spite of apparent cost and complexity, there are systemic solutions that are cost-effective and achievable. Third, the Education Committee in the California Senate is inviting ideas for legislation.

Banathy reduces some of the obscurity and complexity of systemic solutions, writing that.

“Systemic Change is based on a systems view of an organization, and it is guided by the principle that any change in a part of the system affects the whole system, and change in the whole affects all of its parts. Second, the system is more than the sum of its parts, more by the interaction among the parts and the emergent effects produced by the interaction. Third, change occurs by purposeful design. Fourth, a systemic change—even the smallest one—is contemplated in view of the relationship between the system and its environment.

“Piecemeal Change allows tinkering with or changing parts in an effort to improve the system. Change is not “mapped” into the whole system. Changing parts happens without consideration of the effect on the relationships that operate among parts and between the system and its environment. On account of the “non-systemic” nature of piecemeal change, change is usually short-lived because it was not accomplished with the involvement of other parts and lacks their cooperation.” (Banathy, 1991, p. 149)

RESOLUTION

This proposal offers a systemic solution that is neither costly or unmanageable. The cost and complexity of serving the entire system is managed by identifying and treating key leverage points. Meadows explains leverage points as “places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.” (Meadows, 1999)

This legislation will improve California schools through establishing effective and systemic decision-making by:

- 1) Enforcing ratios of administrative to teaching personnel set by §41400 -41409;
- 2) Redefining the role of school administration as supportive rather than supervisory; and
- 3) Reframing decisions, programs, and reforms in positive rather than negative terms.

Changes are recommended at three leverage points (LP). This three-part proposal is elaborated next.

Leverage Point #1: Enforce California Education Code #41400-41409 by removing loopholes and assuring compliance to return to and sustain the administrator/teacher ratio.

Problem at LP #1

Bureaucracy or hyperbureaucracy in the modern world has grown in California public education. Administrators and non-teaching certified personnel numbers have greatly increased, (Segure, 1980; Gabriele, 2014). In California, this problem is addressed in California Education Code §41400 - §41409, which states:

“It is the intent and purpose of the Legislature to improve public education in California by maximizing the allocation of existing resources, to discourage the growth of bureaucracy in the public schools, and to emphasize the importance and significance of the classroom teacher.”

However, the aim of the code is not realized because of loopholes and ineffective remedies. The excess administrators and administrator meetings result in decisions affecting classrooms that are made by non-teaching administrators instead of teaching teachers. There are more people between the principal and the teachers, giving the actual teaching staff less time and ability to communicate their classroom needs and to effectively teach our children. Lack of say affects teacher morale. Moreover, the increased numbers of administrators is costly. Gabriele gives an interesting example of the negative effects of too many administrators

Solution at LP #1

Modify §41400 to §41409 to return administrator/teacher ratios to code with an effective remedy. Suggested steps are:

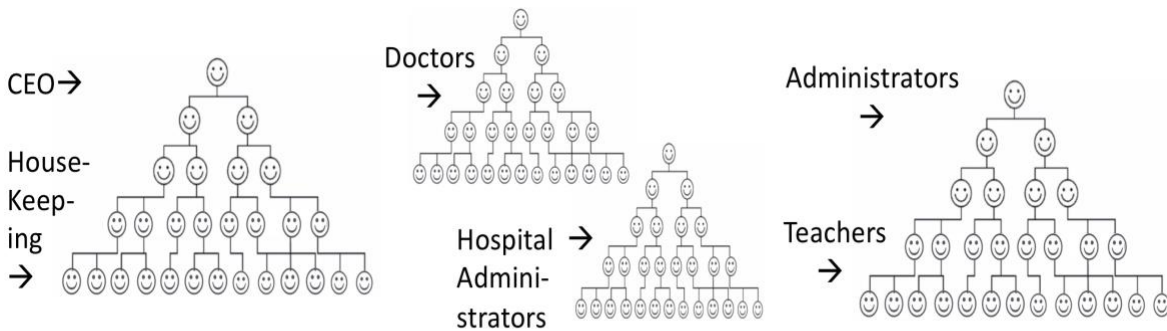
- 1) Remove loopholes which allow schools to count non-teaching certified staff as “teachers.” For example: §41401 counts “pupil services employees,” certificated staff that teach no classes, as “teachers”;
- 2) Require districts to return to the ratio in Education Code §41402 by attrition and by design;
- 3) Confirm the ratio of non-teaching certified staff to teachers in a district by automatic monitoring of certified employee payroll stubs containing key data
 - a) actual classroom teaching assignments and
 - b) workplace site: that is, whether the employee is located at a school or non-school/district office;
- 4) Provide consequences for lack of compliance that are effective, that is, fines taken from administrator salaries, rather than the general fund.

Note: Each district is to propose the specifics of their implementation plan and timeline.

Leverage Point #2: Revise administrator roles as support, rather than supervision

Problem at LP #2

California school-site administrators are also overloaded with excess responsibility. This is evident in the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders or CPSEL (See link in references), Administrators are expected to provide both supervision and support. The formal organization chart of certified school personal is supervisory, that is, one upside down tree, resembling hotel organization, unintentionally treating teachers as employees with little special training or education, like blue-collar workers or housekeeping staff. The organization chart of teaching and administration should be two upside down trees, resembling hospital organization, where hospital administrators are to manage the hospital, not to supervise the medical expertise of doctors. We need our students to have teachers with the best education and prestige, like doctors. (See Figure 1).



A. Hotel Organization B. Hospital Organization. C. US K12 School Organization

Figure 1. Illustrating hotel, hospital, and school organization as upside down trees

Finally, the one tree organization chart of schools was a piecemeal evolution in American public education, not carefully or systemically designed. The word “principal” in the US used to mean “principal teacher” before the split between administrators and teachers. This split occurred when child labor laws brought legions of children into public schools. Today, principals, like other school administrators, have teaching certificates, but have no teaching assignments. In the United Kingdom, K12 schools are headed by head teachers (teaching teachers). In Japan, school administrators are classified personnel, with no teaching credentials (cf. the illustration of hospital organization in Figure 1).

Solution at LP #2

Redefine the role of administrators to be supportive of teachers, rather than supervisory.

- 1) Redefine administration systemwide, as support staff rather than as supervisory staff: State supports districts; districts support schools; and school-site administrators support classroom teachers. This is a better match with the idea that teachers are to provide materials and activities, and then support students in their learning and development.
- 2) Revise CPSEL “STANDARD 2: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP” to “LEADERSHIP OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEM.”
- 3) INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP belongs in teams: The K5 principal with the elected grade level chairs; and the Grade 6-12 principal with the elected department chairs;
- 4) Principals and administrators are to be elected or hired by each school’s teachers, rather than appointed by the district. This will align the school administration role to its most important

systemic function: “morphostasis,” creating and maintaining stability in school structures and processes in order to support the classroom function “morphogenesis,” fostering student learning, growth, differentiation, and transcendence. (Buckley in Scott, 1986, Gabriele 2014)

Discussion.

Walter Buckley, an American sociologist and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, provides additional insight into the behavior of a school or social system. He was among the first to apply concepts from general systems theory in his field. Buckley categorized system functions into two types: morphostasis and morphogenesis (Buckley in Scott, 1986, p. 83). Morphostatic systems are characterized as clockwork and self-adjusting, like circulation, digestion, and respiration in a human being. Complex systems (organisms and groups) rely on morphostatic systems to facilitate the higher-level functions of morphogenesis, such as growth, differentiation, learning, and transcendence.

According to Buckley, all subsystem functions of complex systems can be grouped around these two purposes: morphogenesis (e.g., growth, learning, differentiation) and morphostasis (i.e., maintenance). Applying Buckley’s two functions to educational systems is clarifying. First, old paradigm supervisory leadership is seen as outdated and micromanaging. Second, in new paradigm servant leadership, the pendulum has swung too far. A better way to conceive of optimal administrative functions is that they are neither supervisory, nor servant. They are “support” functions.

In fact, McPherson illuminates a higher principle here, He claims that “neither the few destructive laggards nor the handful of brilliant performers” are the key to organization health. Instead, he urges attention to the “care, feeding, and unshackling of the average man” (Peters and Waterman, 1982, p. xxii).

- 5) Revise elements and indicators in CPSEL STANDARD 1: DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A SHARED VISION to goals of morphostasis (maintenance), and fostering meeting basic needs, survival, safety, and belonging.

Discussion.

Maslow explains that the behavior of human beings is generally predictable as acting to meet their own individual goals and needs: from lower or most basic to higher, the needs are: *survival, safety, belonging, achievement, self-actualization, and transcendence* (Maslow in Valle and Halling, 1989). Bolman and Deal explain that “the better a lower need is satisfied, the more an individual is likely to focus on higher needs” (Bolman and Deal, 1990, p. 70).

It is proposed here that systemic revision would add more value to the CPSEL Standard One by focusing the goals, elements and indicators on morphostasis and basic needs—survival, safety and belonging, (in educational terms -- psychological safety, inclusion and appreciation of diversity). Creating and maintaining these conditions would then allow optimal morphogenesis, learning, growth, differentiation, among staff and students.

Concluding links.

Thus, the best use of systemic and coherent “administration” is to:

- To provide key policy and procedures, carefully adapted to be feasible, appropriate and valuable for the users, at the beginning of the school year, typically June through August, so teachers can plan their classes and support staff can set up their support policies and procedures, structures and routines. This is the supervisory role.
- To provide support during the school year. In this way, teachers can implement their plan and adjust around students' needs, rather than having to adjust to outside disruptions. Most importantly, there will be as few interruptions as possible once classes are in session.
- These assumptions of supervision and support are true for all levels of educational system-- State to districts, district to schools, principal to teachers and support staff (administrators and classified). This approach would support teachers as they provide the conditions for optimal learning, growth, differentiation, and transcendence in their students.

Leverage Point #3: Reframe decisions, mandates, reforms, and programs in positive rather than negative terms.

Problem at LP #3

Decisions, programs, and reforms focused on (defined by) problems are ineffective and amplify the problem. For example, focusing on anti-bullying amplifies bullying; focusing on drug awareness increases drug use (Wolchover, 2002), and focusing on anti-racism increases racism.

Solution at LP #3

All decisions, programs, and reforms are to be framed positively in ideal-based terms. Research by Whitney (2010) and Norum (2001) prove the value of ideal-based campaigns over problem-based ones. Examples of reframing and proposals are:

- 1) Reframe “anti-bullying campaigns” to kindness campaign; Gabriele reports an experience:

Some twenty years ago, at the onset of school anti-bullying campaigns, I was very anxious about them. From experience with my students, I had learned that problem-based increase problems. Then, about ten years ago, a local school in the district that my grandson was attending “flipped” the campaign to positive. Instead of asking their students to report bullying. They asked them to report on the kind acts they observed in their classmates. I was so pleased. It was a wonderful adaptation. (Gabriele, 2021)

- 2) Rename drug awareness programs from D.A.R.E to Keeping it R.E.A.L (Nordrum), 2014. The acronym REAL stands for refuse, explain, avoid, leave; and
- 3) Rename anti-racism campaigns to inclusion and appreciating diversity, to helping children focus on including and appreciating each other's different backgrounds.

CONSEQUENCES

Such legislation is anticipated to create effective and systemic decision-making with many anticipated benefits. Cost of certificated non-teaching employee salaries could go down as much as 17%. The savings will allow an increase in teacher salaries. There will be more effective decisions made, as they will be made by those most expert and experienced in the specific people they serve and the subject matter and processes they manage. Well-designed policies and consequences make it easy for people do the right thing, which will be satisfying to all and improve morale system-wide. Shifting terms in problem-based mandates, reforms, and programs to ideal-based will result in more positive attitudes, more community spirit, and higher morale, as well as less unhappiness, less isolation, and less violence.

Threats to the legislation's success may be the difficulty of systemic solutions. Systemic solutions are still unconventional, not yet mainstream or well-understood in social systems theory, practice or policy, and in public education. Additionally, many administrators might applaud the shift; having learned from experience that their most important purpose is to protect their teachers from outside pressures. Others might feel unappreciated and diminished by the reduction in numbers, as well as the shifting of their roles from supervising to supporting teachers and schools.

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