Phillip Schlechty: A Framework for School Reform

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Abstract

Phillip Schlechty is one of the foremost modern leaders in school reform. He believes that in order for public schools to continue to serve our democratic society through the education of children they must change the way they do business. The purpose of this paper is to examine the framework Schlechty has constructed for educational leaders to use in implementing and maintaining changes that will improve the educational experiences of children.

Phillip Schlechty: A Framework for School Reform

Phillip Schlechty has built a career around the philosophy that public schools in the United States needed to make some basic changes in the way they operate in order to better serve students. As a former educator at the public school and collegiate levels, as an educational administrator, and as an advocate for school reform he has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving public schools. He is the founder and CEO of the Center for Leadership in School Reform an organization whose primary goal is restructuring the operating practices of schools. Schlechty has channeled his knowledge about the operational systems of schools and businesses into a theoretical framework for school reform.

Schlechty explains that while American society has strong opinions about the need for schools to change there have actually been very few significant changes in the way public schools conduct business. His explanation for this lies not within educators' inability to make changes, but in the idea that "they have changed so much and so often with so little effect that leaders seem baffled about what to do next" (Schlechty, 2001, p. 2). School districts are notorious for frequently introducing new programs for teachers to implement, often providing minimal support after the initial introduction. Frequently the programs are introduced without regard to making any changes in the operational systems or culture of the school so there are no provisions in place to support the programs. As a result these programs are often abandoned due to frustration or are replaced with other programs. Schlechty's theory of school reform centers on the notion that in order for schools to change the operating systems within the schools themselves must change. For these changes to occur there must be leaders in place who both understand the systems and have a precise plan for revising or replacing them.

Schools Today

While American society has changed dramatically during the last 50 years, schools have failed to keep up with it. Consequently barrages of complaints are directed at schools for not fulfilling their expressed goal of educating children. According to Schlechty (2001) school reform has historically been spurred by these complaints. While in the past complaints have primarily come from members of educational and professional communities, such as journalists and professors; today the criticisms are coming from all areas of society, including businesses, politicians and parents. Businesses complain that schools are not producing students with the academic and critical thinking skills they need to successfully function in the quickly changing world of business. Politicians complain about everything from school dropout rates to low student achievement. Parents complain about their children being adequately prepared for college. These complaints provide educators with due cause to review what goes on in schools and determine what changes are needed. In *Shaking Up the School House* (2001) Schlechty examines some of the areas in which society has changed and how these changes necessitate the need for schools to alter or in his words, shift, their frame of reference. These areas provide the basis for Schlechty's theory of school reform.

"Every child can learn at high levels" (Schlechty, 2001, p. 10) is a commonly held belief and expectation; however, until recently the expectation was that only a percentage of children would achieve academically at high levels. With this switch in ideology and expectations comes an increased pressure for schools to produce students with higher academic skills levels. Schools are not doing this because, according to Schlechty (2001), students are not being given work that they see as valuable. He maintains that teachers need to design work that "leads to academic skills in ways that are responsive to the motivational frameworks students bring to their tasks"

(Schlechty, 2001, p. 12). It is imperative for schools to figure out how to better engage students in learning. This is not an idea that is new to educational reform as John Dewey discussed it in his book *Experience and Education* which was first published in 1938. He wrote that students are not actively involved in the learning process in the traditional model of education. He went on to explain that by making a connection between students' experiences and their school work, students are more likely to become actively engaged in their work. The result of this is improved student learning. Schools must stop relying on the traditional models of teaching and move toward models that implore students to become actively engaged and invested in tasks which are designed to lead toward learning new knowledge.

Family and community structures within our society have also undergone distinct changes. There are wider ranges in the age and educational levels of parents today. There are a larger number of adults in communities who are not parents. Even our idea of community has changed. We identify not only with the community in which we live, but also with the community in which we work or a community based on our race or cultural identity. Finally, the two-parent family is no longer the typical family. Schlechty sees the changes in society as an impetus for schools to change the way they work. Schools used to focus on serving their community and they now need to expand their focus to serving multiple communities. Educators must look to meet the needs of students from diverse family structures, backgrounds and cultures. They must explore the resources of the businesses and people in their area and seek to get them to invest in the success of the schools.

Schlechty also explores society's perception of schools. He maintains that schools today are seen as government organizations, rather than community organizations. This view has been perpetuated by the court system, as well as Congress, mandating legal guidelines that impact all

levels of school operations. As government agencies are often viewed with skepticism and the target of criticism schools are now seen through similar veils. Rather than simply accepting what schools say or do, parents and community members now ask questions and are wary of what is going on.

Schlechty does not see this as a negative, but merely an important shift in thinking. He points out that the "mission of schools as promulgators of a common democratic culture" (Schlechty, 2001, p. 28) is a philosophy that should be modified to fit with the shifts in what society deems its common values. These values are still grounded in democratic ideals, but since quality and choice have become values central to our society, schools would be wise to take notice. Quality implies that schools are expected to provide students with higher levels of academic experiences. To meet this expectation of quality, schools must learn to customize learning to suit individual students' needs. If schools fail to do this and the parents' expectations for student learning are not met, they may choose another school for their children. Thus, the value of choice comes into play.

Parents' ability to make choices also means that public schools today have competition. With the encroachment of the use of school vouchers and a growing system of charter schools parents have more choices than in the past about where they send their children to school. The choice used to be either public school or private school and due to the expense of private schools that left many parents with no choice at all. Parents now expect their children to reach higher levels of academic proficiency. If they feel like their child's school is not meeting this expectation there are other options for them to consider. Public schools now have competition and this dictates that educators reflect on what they are doing and what changes need to be made in order to meet the needs and demands of parents and students (Schlechty, 2001).

A final area identified as significantly impacting school reform is technology. Schlechty (2001) states that organizations' ability to improve is correlated with their ability to use and keep up with technology. Public schools are behind in integrating technology into instructional practices and badly in need of catching up. Students are inundated and fascinated with technology. Technology plays a significant role in their lives and experiences. Schlechty believes that including technology in the learning environment is vital to not only captivating students' attention, but also in preparing them for interacting in society. He challenges educational leaders with finding ways to incorporate technology into students' learning.

A Model for Change

School systems today function under the pretense of compliance and attendance (Schlechty, 2005), students must attend school and they are expected do what they are told to do while they are there. Compliance and attendance do not produce learning. In an interview with the *Journal of Staff Development* (1998) Schlechty said, "attendance can be commanded, but their attention must be earned… compliance can be insisted on, but their commitment is under their control" (p. 2). Schools need to shift their focus away from compliance and attendance toward attention and commitment. Schlechty (2001) explains that learning is produced by attention and commitment to the process of working on a task or activity. Understanding the business of schools is a critical step in making this shift. He describes the business of schools as "the invention of tasks, activities, and assignments that the students find to be engaging and that bring them into profound interactions with content and processes they will need to have mastered to be judged to be well educated" (Schlechty, 2001, p. 54). Schools must offer students experiences and work that they find compelling and worth doing if they are to gain students' attention and commitment.

Schools should thus turn their focus to the quality and kind of work they are giving students. Schlechty explains that the work students should be given is what Peter Drucker (1974) called knowledge work. It entails students using ideas, theories, and information they already know to solve problems or create a product. This work actively engages students in the process of learning and will hence lead to the acquisition of knowledge. Schlechty (2001) says that this is the business of schools and leaders should embrace it if they are going to foster change and see improved student success.

Another important component of changing schools according to Schlechty is the process of exploring what leads to learning in the school environment. Since the business of schools is creating and providing work that will actively engage students and result in them acquiring specific knowledge, the desired or expected result is student learning. Therefore schools must examine the causes and measures of learning in order to fully understand how to design work that produces the desired results. Schlechty (2001) identifies curriculum alignment, student engagement, student persistence, and student satisfaction as the major causes of learning in schools.

Curriculum alignment is simply that what is being taught is what is intended that the student will learn. The content should be a reflection of the learning standards that have been set and that will likely be measured. Some educators fear this limits their ability to be creative in the classroom. Schlechty (2001), however, maintains that if teachers have an extensive knowledge of the curriculum they should be able to design activities that enable students to experience what he refers to as the texture and richness of the subject. In other words, activities will foster a connection to the student's own experience, evoke critical thinking skills and lead to an in depth

multi-perspective understanding of the subject. The outcome of this is learning at higher academic levels.

Student engagement is another factor in learning. Schlechty explains that learning is an active process and part of that activity is engagement. Students who are highly engaged in an activity are focused on and invested in what they are doing. It is done with the idea that the activity holds purpose or value and that they have a vested interest in discovering the outcome. He maintains that teachers need to design work that will actively engage students and that they will deem as valuable. He identifies various levels of engagement and suggests that teachers evaluate the quality of the work they give by assessing the students' levels of engagement. Students who are authentically engaged are focused on work that is purposeful and compelling. These students work diligently on an assignment and are driven by the anticipation of its outcome. In classrooms where students are actively engaged in work there are fewer instances of students being disruptive or unproductive. When work does not pique students' interest or they see no purpose or value in it, they are more likely to be distracted or refuse to participate in the activity. The outcome of these situations will not result in the desired level of learning. This goes back to the point that if the desired outcome of school is student learning, then schools must address the factors that produce learning. The level of involvement students' maintain while working on activities directly impacts what they learn.

Student persistence and satisfaction are the final factors of student learning Schlechty addresses in relation to school improvement. Persistence simply implies that students stick with a task or assignment until it is completed. Students who are actively engaged in interesting and quality work persist out of the desire to see the results which is how learning takes place. Students who complete a task just because it is what they were told to do are exhibiting

compliance, but are less likely to learn. Satisfaction is the feeling of success or pride that comes as a result of persevering through an activity to its completion and discovering the applications of its outcome. According to Schlechty, teachers would benefit from closely examining these factors of learning and how they relate to their students and the work they create for them. They should then apply what they learn to developing new activities and work for their students.

Schlechty uses business practices and systems as a point of reference for his framework of school reform. He has taken ideas from business authors such as Peter Senge, Peter Drucker and Philip Crosby and incorporated them into his theoretical framework. Schlechty (2001) maintains that "learning is to schools as profit is to business" (p. 87). In order for a business to be successful they must make a profit, so for schools to be successful the must produce learning and in order to meet the current demands of society they must produce learning at higher levels than in the past. He uses the analogy of students as the customers of the schools and the experiences they have, or work they produce, or their learning as the product. With this in mind he developed a framework for improving the quality of student work and learning. This framework is intended to bring about the changes that he deems necessary to improve the business of public schools.

Working on the Work (Schlechty, 2002)

Schlechty (2002) explains that Working on the Work or WOW is not a program that schools can implement with the intention of changing the organizational structure or functioning of their school. It is however a practical approach to analyzing the work that students are given based on what research has shown will provide the best learning experiences for students. He explains that this work, or knowledge work, is simply "using ideas, concepts, problem-solving skills, analytical skills and applying facts to some end" (Schlechty, 1998, p. 1). As the quality of

work given to students improves there will be an improvement in student learning. This idea

should not be new to educators as it was discussed by John Dewey in 1938. He wrote,

"everything depends on the quality of the experience…" (p.16). Providing experiences that are

rich in texture and depth and foster students' interest will ultimately be reflected in the academic

achievement levels of students. The WOW approach can also be utilized by teachers and

administrators as a format for discussing instructional practices and evaluating their

effectiveness.

The Working of the Work framework redefines the role of teachers from one of a

presenter of information to that of a leader and inventor of work. Schlechty (2002) writes, "the

primary function of a leader is to inspire others to do things they might otherwise not do" (p.

XX). Teachers are challenged with getting students to work on things that they may not initially

be interested in. This shift in the role of the teacher may be difficult as it directly changes how

teachers function within a classroom. Teachers and what they are doing are no longer the center

of attention. The focus of the classroom shifts to what the students are doing. In their role as

educational leaders teachers are responsible for finding ways to engage students and guide them

into unfamiliar areas of knowledge. This is accomplished by teachers designing work and

activities that students find fascinating and of value. Additionally, it entails teachers guiding

students through the learning process rather than feeding them information in the traditional

manner of lectures and worksheets. To accomplish this teachers must have an in depth

understanding and knowledge of their content area and they must be open to looking at that

content from different points of view. They must also know something about their students'

experiences, interests, and knowledge base. Finally, they need to understand what motivates their

students. These things provide the ground work for creating interesting and engaging assignments and activities that will lead to learning the intended knowledge.

Determining the quality of the work that students are given is a vital part of the teachers' role as an educational leader. WOW is designed to be used as a tool for assessing that quality. Schlechty (2001) developed specific standards by which the quality of work can be measured. Through a process of applying each of the standards to student work he maintains that teachers can readily determine if the work is knowledge work and if it is in fact producing the desired level of student learning.

The Working on the Work model can effectively be used on a school-wide basis. In order to do this the school must first adopt a united vision. This vision provides a lens through which the school can develop common goals and implement the changes needed to meet those goals. While schools' visions may vary, in following the WOW framework each school would adhere to the standards created by Schlechty (2002). Schools would engage in professional conversations about school practices and instruction. Students would be actively engaged in quality work the majority of time. Clear expectations and standards for student learning would be in place and students would achieve at high academic levels. Materials and technology would be used in ways that help connect learning to students' interests and experiences. The school would be a safe and nurturing learning environment that invited acceptance and respect for all. Students would be provided opportunities to work with others and make choices about their work. Finally, student work would have purpose and meaning.

School Leadership and Change

Making changes within schools is dependent on a "leader or leadership group that acts as a change agent" (Schlechty, 2001, p. 40) and having a system in place to support the change.

Schools are well versed in making changes, but not in maintaining them. The leadership role of school administrators is vital to changing the way schools do business. In the past business leaders have focused primarily on change that involves growth or efficiency where as today leaders are dealing with systemic changes. This is also true in education. Schools typically make changes by introducing new procedures or programs. However, Schlechty (2002) explains that when the change that is introduced requires for a "fundamental reorientation to the environment or to customers and clients" (p. 163) it becomes a structural and cultural change rather than simply a change in a program. These types of changes or shifts in frameworks are what are needed to improve the way public schools conduct their business. School administrators therefore need specific skills to lead their schools through the process of change.

In leading schools through a change it is essential for administrators to not only be clear in their beliefs and vision, but also to be able to articulate them. Additionally, they must be knowledgeable about the system or school they intend to change and have clear expectations about how the changes will take place, what difficulties or resistance they may encounter, and what the outcome of the changes will look like. Leaders must persuade the school and the community to support their vision. Schlechty (2001) states that in order to accomplish this. a leader must instill a feeling of urgency and need in the invested parties. They must get teachers, as well as parents, to believe that change is necessary and guide them into looking forward to the outcomes. Finally, they must ensure that there is adequate training, resources, and technology available to support the changes.

Administrators cannot manage changes in the way schools do business without the support of other leaders in the school. Schlechty (2006) wrote that schools must shift from being bureaucracies to being learning organizations. This means moving from a system driven by

leaders who conduct evaluations that are used to maintain control to one where leaders use evaluations to discuss data and progress toward common goals, such as improved student achievement. It means leaving behind a system where rewards are given for compliance to one where acquiring new knowledge and implementing new ideas are rewarded. School leaders will need to invest in shared leadership to assist them in changing their school into a learning organization. This involves sharing the responsibility for decision-making and accountability with a group or team of leaders. This group of people must function as a team working together to create, implement, and maintain a plan that supports a vision of change. In addition, they are charged with recruiting new staff and introducing them to the beliefs and practices of the school. Finally, the leadership team must continue to work together to ensure the organization of the school remains in alignment with its vision.

The school leader or administrator's character also plays a part in his or her ability to guide the school through the process of change. Integrity is a critical component of a successful leader's character. Others must believe in the honesty and commitment of the school administrator before they will support him in his endeavors. Leaders also must have a clear idea of who they are and what they believe in. They must know how to keep their own egos in check and remained focused on their vision for the school. Finally, leaders should convey the ability to persevere through difficult situations. Change is not easy and numerous difficulties will be encountered throughout the process. Teachers, staff, parents, and students will look to the administrator to provide them with encouragement and reassurance throughout the process of change.

School leaders who are to successfully implement changes within their schools must do a number of specific things. They must know the needs and expectations of the community they

serve and focus on how to meet them. They must examine the business of schools, which is to provide activities that are engaging and purposeful and result in student learning, and establish a plan for shifting the focus to better accomplish that business (Schlechty, 2001). School leaders must offer professional development that supports their plan for change by not only providing the information and skills necessary for implementing change, but also the theoretical framework of the change. This enables teachers to fully understand what they are being asked to do and gives them the guidance and support they will need to work on making the changes that are being set forth. If change is to be successful, leaders must create and follow a plan of action that lays out the details for all of these things prior to embarking on the change process.

Implications for Change

Phillip Schlechty offers a somewhat simplistic, yet complicated picture of school reform. Simplistic in that the basic premise and framework of his philosophy is laid out in very explicit and concrete actions. How difficult is it really to observe students in a classroom and determine if they are actively engaged in their work? How difficult is it to get to know your students, understand some of their life experiences and interests, and then bring these things into the work you create for them? The complicated or challenging part of Schlechty's framework for school reform is that it requires a complete shift in the culture and operations of schools. It requires moving away from the more traditional teaching model where the focus in the classroom is on what the teacher is doing, to a model in which the focus is on what the students are doing. It involves moving away from the teacher creating work based solely on the curriculum or content area and moving to the teacher considering students' diverse needs, interests, and experiences and then creating work that piques their curiosity and that they see as valuable. These changes

are complicated as they involve altering cultures and systems that have been in place for many years.

How does a school begin this process? Schlechty implores schools to carefully examine how they go about doing their business. Schools must first determine exactly what their business is. Is it meeting the mandated accountability standards? Is it producing students who are college or work force ready? Is it producing students who know how to use critical thinking skills? After answering that question schools must identify who their customers or consumers are. Are they the parents, the students, the community at large, or perhaps all of these? After determining what they are in business for and who their customers are, schools must specify what product they are producing and assess the quality of that product? Is their product meeting the expectations and demands of their consumers? Is it a top quality product? If not, schools must delve into what needs to be done to make improvements?

The business of schools. In working through Schlechty's framework for school reform schools first need to define what their business is. Public schools are in the business of educating young people or providing them with a pathway to acquiring knowledge. This ideal has been reflected throughout the history of education and school reform in the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann and John Dewey to name just a few. Schlechty (2001) elaborates on this saying that schools are in the business of providing students with experiences, activities, and assignments that have an intended outcome of the student acquiring a predetermined set of skills or knowledge base. This is a rather broad explanation and schools may want to explain the business of their school in terms of school-wide goals. Does the school have target goals tied into district or state or federal mandates for accountability? Does the school's mission statement

establish certain outcomes that the school expects to achieve? School-wide goals should be used to guide the operations of schools and to provide a gauge for measuring progress and success.

After setting the parameters for the business of the school, it is time to determine who the customers are. Schlechty sees students as the primary customers or consumers of schools. They are the ones who schools are in the business of directly providing services for. However, they are not the only customers that schools serve. Parents, communities and society at large might also be seen as customers as they have a vested interest in the business of schools. They provide financial support which is vital for schools to remain in business. They also either reap the benefits of schools' successes or suffer the costs of schools' shortcomings. Therefore, schools must consider satisfying the needs and expectations of the students, parents and communities.

In keeping with Schlechty's framework schools next need to examine the product they are producing. The product schools produce is student learning; there is no question that schools are producing learning. This is well documented by the federal and state mandated accountability systems. The real issue for schools to address and the central issue in Schlechty's framework for school reform is the quality of learning that is being produced. Are schools producing learning at levels that meet their customers' expectations? The expectations and demands for student achievement and learning are higher now than they have ever been. Schools are expected to produce students with high levels of academic proficiency. This expectation is not just for a select group of students. All students are expected to perform at higher academic levels. Is this really an unreasonable demand? We all want our children to achieve at the highest levels they are capable of and we expect schools to get them there. So to answer the original question, many schools would have to respond with no, they are not producing a high enough quality of student learning. The critical issue then becomes what schools can and are willing to do to improve the

quality of the product, or learning, that they are in the business of producing. Schlechty believes schools can improve learning by changing the quality and kind of work students are given.

Before we discuss the actual framework for change, we should pause to address the reasons why it is important for schools to change. In business terms, in order to be successful you must produce a quality product that the consumer is willing to invest in. Public schools no longer have a monopoly in the business of education. With mandates for charter schools and school vouchers being discussed and implemented at all levels of government, public schools can no longer operate under the assumption that they have the educational market cornered. There is now competition in the education business. In the past school reform has not produced wide spread changes in the way schools operate. Perhaps, like with any business, since there was no feeling of urgency or need to change and there was no sense of competition, there was really no incentive to change. Today public schools are faced with meeting higher expectations of student learning from the state and federal governments, as well as from the parents and communities. They are also faced with a new type of competition with charter schools and school vouchers looming on the horizon. It would stand to reason then that public schools should now feel pressured to make some changes and improve the quality of student learning.

Changing the work. Changing the work as stated earlier sounds like a simple task, however it entails a complicated process. Now that schools have identified the need for change they are, hopefully ready to begin the process of change. Ideally this involves the participation of the entire school starting with the school administrators. Schlechty challenges administrators to closely examine the culture and systems that are prevalent in their schools. He then asks that they develop a vision for changing the way their school conducts its business in order to meet the goals or expectations of the school. What will the outcome of this vision look like and how will

they go about making the vision a reality? This may entail improving on the systems that are already in place or implementing entirely new systems. While this is an ominous task it is one that is essential to the process of school reform and rests in the ability of the school leaders to explore new ways of doing the business of schools. Not only will administrators have to explore new ways of doing business, if they are to be successful they will have to develop plans to promote, sell, implement, and maintain their proposed changes.

Although the primary responsibility for evoking systemic change in schools lies with the administrators, they are not the only ones involved in the process of school reform, or in Schlechty's (2001) words, working on the work. Schlechty's model also has implications for teachers. Individual teachers or groups of teachers can initiate change by starting to change the way they go about conducting their business in schools. In other words, teachers can start by making changes in their classroom instructional strategies. Needless to say, the improvement will be far greater if the entire school is involved in the changes, however history shows us that sometimes the act of one person or a small group of people is what sets an entire movement into action; therefore, individual teachers or groups of teachers should not be discouraged if their administrator or entire school is not committed to the process. They are after all responsible for the kind of experiences students have in their classrooms and should take ownership in ensuring student academic improvement and success. Their success in improving student learning might even become the catalyst for school-wide change.

Teachers must examine and perhaps change their ideas of teaching. The role of the teacher in Schlechty's (2001) framework is that of a leader and an inventor. Teachers are responsible for inventing student work and guiding students through the process of completing the work, thus conducting the business of schools. Improving the quality of work that teachers

give to students will result in students being more engaged and invested in the learning process. This naturally leads to students achieving at higher levels of proficiency. Schlechty's (2002) Working on the Work framework can be used as tool for teachers to assess the quality of work they give and the level of student engagement in the classroom. Using what they learn teachers can begin to make changes in the kind of work they create.

The scope of change. Schlechty challenges and implores schools to take on the mission of changing the way they operate. He believes that unless public schools begin to make changes they may fail to survive. Change in public schools is likely to happen very slowly as schools are anchored in traditional ways of operating and have resisted making any type of major changes for many years. This is not to say that it cannot or will not happen. The process of school reform will take place if schools are committed to improving the business of student learning. In the past the incentive for schools to change has not been as intense as it is today, therefore there is an increased level of interest and investment in the need to change. Change may take place one classroom at a time, or one school at a time, or even one district at a time, but it must take place if public schools are going to continue to meet the needs and expectations of American society. While there might not be a consensus on the philosophy or framework for school reform there is a growing consensus on the need for school reform. Hopefully that acknowledgement will spur educational leaders into taking action and making changes in their schools.

Conclusion

Phillip Schlechty has spent much of his career as an advocate for school reform. He developed a philosophy and framework for change based on the premise that in order for schools to improve student learning they must change they way they work. He used the metaphor of the school as a business to explain his philosophy. The business of schools is the production of

student learning. He maintains that the quality of student learning that schools are currently

producing is not adequate to meet the needs and demands of today's society, thus the necessity

of school reform. In Schlechty's framework for school change he specifically looks at the quality

and type of work students are given and believes that by changing or improving the work there

will be an improvement in the quality of student learning. He does not depict the process of

change as being an easy one, but one that is necessary and attainable through the diligence of

educators taking steps to implement changes in the way schools operate.

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