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SCHARP: Opening the door to systems change

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VI

SCHARP: Opening the Door to Systems Change

The majority of policymakers, educators, and the public at large agree that public education needs reform. However, the nature and extent of changes are discussed and debated. Some promote the newest curricula, the latest teaching innovation, or the freshest administrative style (Sashkin & Egermeier, n.d.). Others regard these approaches as piecemeal solutions that "tinker at the edges" of the real problem (Reigeluth, in press). The real problem, they say, is an ailing education system requiring fundamental, systemic changes through basic restructuring (Corbett, 1990; O'Neil, 1993; Reigeluth, in press; Sashkin & Egermeier, n.d.). These two approaches bracket a solution continuum ranging from minor adjustments on one end to basic restructuring on the other. In this chapter, we explore the relationship of the SCHARP model to this continuum, whether SCHARP can support the processes necessary for fundamental change, or whether its potential contribution is nearer 'tinkering at the edges.'

Systems Change in Education

If there is a common thread among the various interpretations of systemic change, it is a belief that change in one component of a system affects everything else in that system--and that various pieces of the system must be better aligned toward achieving common ends. If some components of the education system are left untouched, 'the pieces that aren't changed drag schools back to the old system'. (O'Neil, 1993, p. 10)

O'Neil's statement on systemic¹ change introduces not only its major distinguishing characteristic, but also the very element that makes successful change of this type so difficult. In successful systems change, all aspects of the system must move forward (Anderson, 1993); change in one aspect of the system requires changes in other aspects (Banathy, as cited in Reigeluth, in press). To produce the reciprocity of relationships critical to successful systems change, everyone in a particular educational system--students, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and parents--must be involved in the change process, content with the changes made in their roles as a result of the process, and willing to engage in the professional development necessary to work effectively in their new roles within the system (Reigeluth, in press).

The common sense of shared ownership characteristic of systems change demands decentralization of traditional administrative structures. The locus of control shifts from

¹ As used in this chapter, the terms systems change and systemic change refer to the same concept. The terms are used interchangeably both to reflect their actual usage in the literature and to reflect the preference of the particular author being cited.

individuals external to the system (e.g., funders, curriculum experts, political leaders) to people residing and working within it (St. John, 1992). As decentralization occurs, people within the system gain the ability to make the staffing and resource allocation changes necessary to support and sustain the new system (Sashkin & Egermeier, n.d.).

Ultimately, if the principles of systems change are upheld and the basic restructuring that needs to occur is allowed to take place, the process is expected to result in an education system characterized by an appreciation of interconnectedness, an emphasis on shared decision making, and a focus on active learning (Anderson, 1993). Members of the system are motivated by shared self-interest. Dialogue and conversation hold sway over lecture and information giving. System members have the freedom to experiment (and to fail); self-sufficiency is fostered. The focus is on long term capacity building--both within the school and within the community. Rather than evaluating success by measuring the extent of deterministic impacts and outcomes, standards of success focus on quality of process and interactions (St. John, 1992).

The Challenges of Systems Change

As the previous discussion implies, systems change can represent change of such magnitude that, in effect, the previous system passes away and a new system emerges in its place. Vision is important in the presence of such immense transformation (Corbett, 1990; Smith & O'Day as cited in O'Neil, 1993); models are indispensable. So it's puzzling when efforts to locate examples of successful systems change efforts--including descriptions of the guiding vision and models used--bring one up empty handed. A brief search of the literature on systemic reform shows that there's a sizable gap existing between what's being said about systems change and what's being done to produce it. There are very few actual examples of sustained, systemic change within the nation's schools (Wagner, 1993) and no new model of systemic change exists that "has been field tested, debugged, and proven effective" (Reigeluth, in press). Even descriptions of the basic patterns underlying systemic change are hard to find (Anderson, 1993). What does this gap between theory and practice mean?

In all likelihood the gap indicates the demanding and uncertain nature of systemic restructuring. As mentioned previously, the reciprocal nature of systemic reform is particularly challenging in that it requires both initial buy-in from all members of the system and access, early on in the process, to the lion's share of resources necessary to support systemic change. Of the resources necessary, the most important is probably also the scarcest--time (Wagner, 1993).

Time for teachers and students to get to know one another. Time for parents and community members to become involved in children's learning. Time for leaders at all levels to reflect and plan collaboratively. Time--perhaps five years--to rethink the purposes of education, reinvent teaching and learning, and create new school cultures. (p. 28)

Practically speaking, most districts simply don't have this amount of time. Neither do they have the other resources, nor the broad-based support necessary to make the huge commitment systemic reform requires.

Even if these basic prerequisites are met and systemic reform is initiated, in the absence of a proven model, there is no guarantee that the newly restructured system will be more capable of meeting the challenges facing it than the system it replaces. This brings the process full circle as without a model in which members of the system can place their confidence, it becomes impossible to obtain their support. Without their support adequate resources, including time, won't be made available. The circle is not only completed, it proves to be a vicious one, preventing the process from ever getting off the ground.

The goal here is not to list the many factors involved in creating the gap between the theory and practice of systems change in education. Rather, it is to illustrate, through use of a few key examples, the daunting nature of the systems change process. Once this is understood, the gap between theory and practice can be appreciated. It is also much easier to understand why the majority of attempts to address the crises in public education continue to make adjustments within the present system. Until proven models and successful examples of sustained systemic reform provide education leaders with evidence that it offers the solution to the crises they are facing, they will have no reason to call for, or support, systems change. Indeed, given its inherent demands, education leaders will have every reason to continue making changes within the confines of the present system--for while piecemeal solutions and tinkering at the edges of the problem may be ineffective, they are familiar and safe.

So where does this leave us? Does it all boil down to a forced choice between fundamental restructuring and superficial, piecemeal, tinkering, or are other options available?

This leaves open the possibility that viable solutions to the crises in public education need not necessarily fall only at the systems change end of the continuum. It also leaves open for consideration the possibility that a model located somewhere between the extremes may serve as a precursor to systems change, setting in motion the chain of events necessary for fundamental reform to follow. We believe this is indeed possible and that it is possible with SCHARP. In the next two sections we explore three ways in which SCHARP can serve as a precursor to systems change and we provide actual examples of systems-style change that occurred during the course of the project.

The SCHARP Model and Systems Change

There are at least three ways in which SCHARP may open the door to systems change. First, the entire SCHARP effort is organized around comprehensive school health, a concept that is arguably broad enough and worthy enough to provide the vision necessary to guide systemic reform. In addition to the vision of providing for students' general health and well-being that comprehensive school health provides, field tested and proven

models for the actual development of comprehensive school health programs are available to assist districts in taking the steps necessary to move toward their vision. If a school district committed to this vision decided subsequently that it wanted to go beyond the goals of comprehensive school health in its restructuring efforts, the models available could be adapted to provide an adequate point of departure for even broader change.

Second, as its title signifies, SCHARP was developed specifically to explore the efficacy of the school-community partnership. One of the basic challenges that must be addressed in efforts involving systemic change is building and sustaining the broad base of community commitment and involvement necessary to support the change process (Sashkin & Egermeier, n.d.). Increasing numbers of people are beginning to appreciate the interconnections between school failure, underachievement, and related health and social problems. As awareness increases that these problems create "serious repercussions not only for children and their families, but for their communities and ultimately for the nation's economic and social systems as well" (Lavin, Shapiro, & Weill, 1992, p. 213), development of a program devoted to protecting and improving the health and well-being of students (and ultimately the communities in which they live) will be a goal around which increasing numbers of teachers, parents, and communities can rally. SCHARP's focus on comprehensive school health can provide an excellent avenue through which community commitment can be built and sustained.

The third way in which SCHARP may open the door to systems change is through its design, which teamed rural education practitioners with university faculty members in their states. This pairing created a system of school-university connections in five states that encouraged university faculty to work hand-in-hand with rural practitioners to develop programs to address the particular health concerns of their school districts. Faculty helped link practitioners in isolated districts with services and resources and provided them with the background necessary to develop school/community connections and to serve as advocates for health. Practitioners provided faculty with a wide array of opportunities to apply their health education expertise to meet the needs of a particular rural district. In forging these links, the SCHARP model has encouraged different interest groups within the education system to work together to bring about change and has demonstrated the power of involving all interested members of the system in the change process. Additionally, SCHARP has succeeded in establishing a network of connections that can be added to and used in future restructuring efforts.

Opening the Door to Systems Change: Examples

As the discussion of SCHARP's connection to systems change has been largely theoretical thus far, and as practical examples of the change brought about in participating rural districts probably provides the best evidence that SCHARP has opened the door for system change, this chapter closes with project examples of change and comments from the rural practitioners and faculty members who worked to bring the change about. To maintain continuity with the previous section, these examples have been grouped to

provide illustrations of the three ways in which SCHARP may open the door to systems change.

First, through the use of comprehensive school health, SCHARP provided practitioners with a sense of direction, or vision, offering them a model to develop an integrated plan for change and the tools needed to organize for it. As one practitioner stated when asked about the lasting effects of SCHARP, "Mainly it is a greater understanding of the importance of health as a precondition to success in any line of endeavor. In my classroom we really do have health education running across the curriculum." Most districts involved in SCHARP adopted and implemented a health curriculum based on the principles of comprehensive school health (Savard, 1994). In one district, the administrative team agreed to give priority to comprehensive school health for the following year's funding. In another, a community nursing clinic was organized in association with the regional public health service. Open twice a month, the clinic provides comprehensive health services, consultation, and education to people of all ages.

SCHARP encouraged the development of school-community ties on both a formal (the summer academy) and informal (conversations between faculty and practitioners) basis. One of the summer academy's central goals was to increase participants' awareness of the reciprocal relationship between school and community. During the academy, case examples illustrating ways in which schools and communities worked together to forge new ties and to create innovative school-based services that better suited community needs were shared. Discussions, role playing, and skill building activities on related topics including leadership, coalition building, and conflict management were also covered. Practitioners left the academy ready to address one of the central challenges in systemic change: building and sustaining a broad base of community support. During their year of implementation they gained practical insight into the importance of a strong community support base.

Many had never attempted to work closely with parents or community members and were surprised at what a powerful resource this support base proved to be. Time and time again they commented on the importance of establishing strong school/community ties. The following comments on the topic, taken from SCHARP Project evaluations (see Savard, 1994), illustrate how impressed the practitioners were.

It is really important to get the school administration and the community involved ... School board support is very important--they really want to know what's going on.

This is really the first time that I have ever had parents seriously involved. It works.

Many of the problems faced by university faculty communicating to rural students in the SCHARP program would be eliminated through use of

electronic mail and networking. My advice is to get to know the community before you start and involve them all the way--start to finish.

The main thing is that you have to know the people and get the right ones involved at the right time doing things they like and can be successful doing.

Do what we did! Bring all the staff, community members, and students together and develop a comprehensive health curriculum and service program. It works.

One district succeeded in developing a community action team that was so effective in its work townspeople began turning to it for assistance on other concerns. As the practitioner in this district commented, "The townspeople are seeking the aid of the community action team and seem to recognize us as a group that represents their needs." Developed as part of the SCHARP Project, these school-community linkages lay the foundation for the broad based community support so vital to systemic reform.

While perhaps less impressive in their overall impact than the previous two components, practitioner-faculty teams also proved to be an helpful resource. In particular, the teams helped address the sense of isolation that is so widespread among rural practitioners. Faculty were available to practitioners when they ran out of ideas or grew discouraged. Consultations between faculty and practitioners during these times gave practitioners the support they needed to continue on with their efforts. As one practitioner commented, "I am much more aware of resources that are available to rural communities and that we are not as isolated as we might think." This comment also refers to a second challenge faced by the practitioners--lack of resources.

Faculty encouraged practitioners to be as creative and innovative as possible when developing resource lists. A comment from one faculty member illustrates both the challenge of securing adequate resources and the creative thinking that took place around this issue:

The rural practitioner is being faced with more and more "urban" type problems as more poor people move to rural areas because they cannot survive in the cities Rural areas don't have the resources to deal with these problems. We are trying to get schools to team up with other agencies to coordinate services. The rural school is a natural center for coordination--but resources are lacking.

Summary

While the SCHARP model is not a systems change model it can, as this chapter has tried to show, open the way to systems change. Organized around comprehensive school

health, SCHARP offers a worthy vision and a well tested model for making that vision a reality. With a design that emphasizes school-community ties and practitioner-faculty pairings, SCHARP creates a broad base of support for changing norms.

Educational leaders in favor of systems change tend to overlook the possibility that moderate approaches, those located on the solution continuum between the extremes of fundamental restructuring and piecemeal tinkering, may help pave the way for subsequent fundamental reform. In an imperfect world, one that challenges the all-or-none integrity of systems theory with the practical constraints posed by cost, time, and support, the SCHARP model offers a proven, workable alternative and a possible first step in the larger restructuring process.