



**Schlechty
Center**

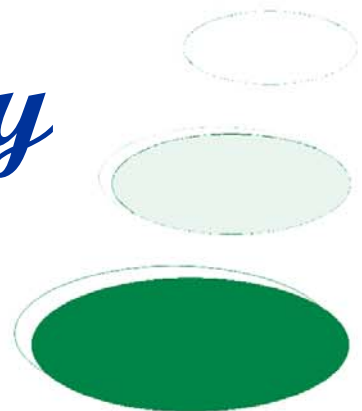
for leadership in school reform

950 Breckenridge Lane, Suite 200
Louisville, KY 40207
502.895.1942 Phone
502.895.7901 Fax
www.schlechtycenter.org

Fife Public Schools



*Changing the Quality of
Student Experiences:
The Fife Way*



Changing the Quality of Student Experiences: The Fife Way

In his 2006 opening remarks to all staff of the Fife, Washington, public schools, Superintendent Steve McCammon pointed out some of the accomplishments of the school district:

I believe that we have created the environment to take our district to unprecedented heights. We have a common purpose, gifted staff, a common language, time created for collaboration, teacher-driven staff development, more student performance data than we have ever had before, focused and aligned building plans, and steadfast school board and community support.

This list of accomplishments is the result of ten years of hard work and captures key ways the district, located outside Tacoma, Washington has changed. Furthermore, while celebratory in tone, the Superintendent's 2006 remarks were much more than a set of opening of school accolades meant to inspire the troops. His listing of district accomplishments was a part of the case he further built in his remarks—a case for continued hard work driven by a set of beliefs:

I believe that we have a very difficult task before us to ensure that all students meet the high standards that are set forth. I also firmly believe that if any district can accomplish this important task, none is better prepared for success than ours.

At this same opening convocation, Superintendent McCammon then looked out over the faculty and staff gathered and asked those who were new to the school district to stand. Next, he asked those who had been hired in the previous three years to stand. While these newer employees stood surrounded by their veteran colleagues, the superintendent publicly acknowledged that the veteran teachers in Fife had been invited, not required, over the past several years to commit to the district's new direction, one which makes student engagement central. Veteran staff members had been invited to

rethink their roles and their relationship to their students. The superintendent went on to address the newer teachers. “You were hired because you demonstrated to us a commitment to student engagement. Your commitment to our district efforts was a requirement of your hiring.” While the newest faculty and staff remained standing, the superintendent then asked, “Who will join us in this work?” Those who had been sitting created a surge of movement as they rose to join those already standing in symbolic response to their superintendent’s call for commitment.

The dogged commitment to organizational transformation grows out of Fife School District’s understanding that impressive accomplishments are not the end point in its work on behalf of children and young people in the communities of Fife, Milton, and Edgewood. Rather, the accomplishments make it possible for the district to press on and do what public school districts have not previously been designed to do—ensure high levels of learning for all students.

The Schlechty Center makes the case that if a school district sets out to transform itself, one way of charting its progress is by understanding interrelated system changes and accomplishments in four large categories: *changes in student experiences, changes in staff engagement with the district’s core business, changes in organizational structure, and changes in organizational culture.*

Recognizing that the success in Fife is not a common experience in the effort to improve school performance, and recognizing the desperate need for cases to illustrate how school and school districts might be transformed, the Schlechty Center decided to develop a case study to describe Fife's experiences. This case study is a summary of the Fife School District's accomplishments over the past decade. Seven of those years involved a relationship with the Schlechty Center. Information for this case study is drawn from shared work and ongoing conversations over the years with Fife superintendents, teachers, principals, board members, and other district leaders. Additionally, in 2007 information for this case study was formally gathered through a series of individual and group interviews, with all role groups reflecting on the district's work, the changes staff observed and been a part of, and the significance of the change efforts from their respective points of view.

The short story of Fife's work includes some answers to the kinds of questions leaders in public education frequently ask themselves and their colleagues: So what's different in the district and in our schools? How have several years of hard work, including the ebb and flow of energy devoted to innovation, paid off for the Fife Schools?

Student Experiences

In Fife, student experiences are carefully assessed and monitored in terms of student engagement and student learning. Increases in both student engagement and student learning have been documented. Additionally, ongoing assessment of student engagement and learning has caused redesign of school experiences for students.

Staff Engagement

The school district has established and subsequently deepened and sustained a clear sense of purpose, of its core business, and of key organizational values.

Throughout the organization, faculty and staff have increased their commitment to the district's purpose, core business and values.

Organizational Structure

The roles of student, teacher, principal, district office leader, and board member have dramatically changed to coincide with and support the district's purpose.

Organizational Culture

This organization which was once stigmatized by distrust and competing factions is now characterized as remarkably supportive, open, and distinguished by trusting relationships between and among staff, parents, and the larger community.

So how do readers here not only come to understand what happened in the Fife Schools, but also use that understanding to make purposeful changes in their own school districts? Using a systems analysis of what has happened over the last decade in Fife may provide educational colleagues from other districts insight into how leaders can refashion their organizations in order to change the quality of student experiences. The basic framework for this case study was developed by Phillip C. Schlechty in his book *Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation*. However, the Six Critical Systems will merely be the tool for analysis; the voices and experiences of the Fife practitioners will tell the story of their district's work and subsequent accomplishments.

Fife District Profile and Brief History of Its Change Efforts

In the late 1990s, then Superintendent Bob Corley recognized that the Fife School District had some indication that it was doing a good job, but those indicators were not sufficient evidence to warrant his satisfaction that the school district could continue doing

what it had traditionally done. School board members recognized that a bitter 1995 teacher strike had left scars on the school district and the community—scars that could not be addressed in any typical way. At an AASA Conference in 2000, Corley heard Phillip Schlechty make a presentation regarding systemic reform and Corley became interested in the Schlechty Center’s work with systems processes. Corley soon headed to the Schlechty Center’s headquarters in Kentucky with his two assistant superintendents, McCammon (now superintendent in Fife) and Marti Harruff (now superintendent in Montesano, Wash.). After extended conversations during which leaders at the Schlechty Center learned much more about the Fife Schools, Fife leaders began thinking that the work of a new Schlechty Center initiative, the Standard-Bearer School District Network, might be just the type of atypical approach to change that Fife needed.

What struck the Fife leaders was the emphasis of working on *systems*, rather than fixing the *people*. They knew that the Fife Schools hired strong teachers and staff, had a supportive community, and students who performed pretty well. The Fife leaders also recognized that the change efforts required to move such a school district into the future would have to be comprehensive and get at the bedrock of the organization. So the three Fife leaders, with their knowledge of the district context and their early understanding of Schlechty Center work with systems change, was granted board approval to join the Standard-Bearer School District Network in 2000. The network at that time was comprised of 20 school districts committed to assessing and developing their capacity to support change using the framework of 10 District Standards that had been developed by Phil Schlechty and the Schlechty Center staff.

Fife's early work as part of the Standard-Bearer Network involved groups of teachers, principals, district leaders, and board members assessing district capacity rather than performance. Those involved became zealous leaders who understood that capacity would give their district readiness to respond to an ever-changing environment and to consider new possibilities without judging or blaming individual staff members.

Simultaneously with the ongoing capacity assessments, teachers and principals were sharing their new learning about student engagement and coming to understand that teachers could purposefully design schoolwork that is more likely to be engaging to students. Teacher leaders began to talk the language of engagement and the 10 Design Qualities, suggested by the Schlechty Center's *Theory of Engagement* as central to school improvement in considering the work provided to students. Fife provided opportunities for staff from across the district to learn about this new work through national conferences, through district-sponsored experiences, and, to a lesser extent, through school-based activities.

In 2001, at the end of the initial year of Fife's new effort, Corley left Fife to take a Florida superintendency. The Standard-Bearer work continued under the leadership of the new superintendent, Steve McCammon. Many in the district point to this continuity of direction early in the change process as a defining event in Fife's later accomplishments. Corley investigated and initiated the systems change effort and McCammon, now as superintendent, pursued ever-deepening, imaginative strategies to bring the changes to fruition.

After the first three years in the Standard-Bearer Network, Fife continued as an affiliate member utilizing Schlechty Center conferences for ongoing district capacity

development. The Working on the Work conference, the Principals Academy, and the Key Leaders conference became the primary means for Fife Schools to stay abreast of the Schlechty Center's latest ideas and tools, to support and develop new staff members, and, increasingly, to provide development for school board members. From 2002 to 2007, the Schlechty Center utilized selected Fife staff as Fellows (practitioners who work alongside Schlechty Center senior associates for specific purposes) at conferences, and even as leaders of development work in neighboring districts. The superintendent served as an adjunct Schlechty Center associate for the last five years, because the Schlechty Center valued his talents and commitment to transformation, and the Fife school board recognized the cutting-edge resources such experiences made available to their school district.

**Six Critical Systems:
The Framework for a Systems Analysis**

The successful employment of disruptive innovations requires dramatic alteration in both the structure and the culture of a school or school system. Most important, such innovations require changes in the ways vital functions are carried out: the way new members are recruited and inducted, the way knowledge is transmitted, the way power and authority are distributed, the way people and programs are evaluated, the way directions and goals are set, and the way boundaries that determine who is inside and who is outside the school are defined. Understanding these six critical systems is key to dramatically changing the way schools do their business. (Schlechty, 2005)

The Schlechty Center assumes that public schools do not currently have the capacity to make student engagement central. Therefore, schools currently have limited potential to make sure that students will learn those things that schools, parents and community members want all children to learn to be considered well educated. As Fife realized as part of their change efforts, if schools are to increase their capacity to change

the quality of student experiences, the school district will be required to transform itself. The Schlechty Center argues that this means transforming from bureaucracies that produce compliance to learning organizations that nurture engagement for students and for the adults in the school district.

So what must school districts do to transform themselves? The Schlechty Center recommends that school leaders should pursue organizational transformation by working on the six Critical Systems which Schlechty explicates in his 2005 book. These systems regulate behavior in schools, both those schools that are bureaucracies and those that are learning organizations. In order to realize the kind of transformation that districts such as Fife desire, school leaders must refashion both the nature and the substance of each of the six Critical Systems, as well as change the order of emphasis from the order given these systems in a bureaucracy. An explanation of the focus of each system is briefly described as follows:

- **The Directional System:** The systems through which goals are set, priorities are determined, and when things go awry corrective actions are initiated.
- **The Knowledge Development and Transmission System:** The formal and informal systems of education, training, and socialization through which organizational members are brought to know and understand what they need to know and understand to uphold organizational norms and to function effectively in the organization.
- **The Recruitment and Induction System:** The systems through which new members are identified and attracted to the organization and brought to understand and embrace the norms and values they must understand and embrace

to be full members of the organization. They are also the systems through which current members are brought to understand and embrace the norms and values of an organization undergoing important change.

- **The Boundary System:** The systems that define who and what are inside the organization, and are therefore subject to the control of the organization, and who and what are outside the organization, and are therefore beyond the reach of the systems that make up the organization.
- **The Evaluation system:** The systems through which measures of merit and worth are assigned, status is determined, honor is bestowed, and the method and timing of negative sanctions are set.
- **The Power and Authority System:** The systems that legitimize the use of sanctions, define the proper exercise of power, and determine status relationships.

As for the order of emphasis, in a learning organization leaders understand the primacy of the Directional, Knowledge Development and Transmission, and Recruitment and Induction Systems. Furthermore, in a learning organization, the Directional System is given more attention and emphasis than any other system and is not only fully developed, clear and coherent, but it becomes the system which shapes and determines emphasis of all the other systems.

So in addition to substantive changes required for each system, organizational transformation would result in a changed order of emphasis, meaning the weight of leaders' time and attention might be reflected in the order below.

- Directional System
- Knowledge Development and Transmission System
- Recruitment and Induction

- Boundary System
- Evaluation System
- Power and Authority System

This is in contrast to bureaucracies, which put much more emphasis on Boundary, Evaluation, and Power and Authority Systems.

In an attempt to chronicle major changes and accomplishments of the Fife Schools, attention will be given to analysis of how the Fife School District refashioned these six Critical Systems and how they changed the relative emphasis between and among these systems thereby creating the capacity to change the quality of student experiences.

Directional System

Pointing Our Boats in the Same Direction

The systems through which goals are set, priorities are determined, and when things go awry corrective actions are initiated. (Schlechy, 2005)

Dramatic change in the quality of student experiences grows out of the fact that the Fife School District is now crystal clear about its direction. In that same 2006 all-staff presentation, the superintendent articulated the district's core business—that is, what the district spends most of its intellectual and fiscal resources pursuing. He said:

What is our core business (or common result)? To produce work that engages students—work that is so compelling that students persist when they experience difficulties. Work that is so challenging that students have a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction when they successfully complete it.

His laser-like clarity leaves no room for doubt that this district knows what it is about.

McCammon's other remarks that day included chronicling his beliefs:

- I believe that in Fife School District we have the finest collection of educators in the state, and that the administration and support staff around them are second to none.

- I believe that we have a very difficult task before us to ensure that all students meet the high standards that are set forth. I also firmly believe that if any district can accomplish this important task, none is better prepared for success than ours.
- I really do believe that teachers are designers and leaders and that we should not work on the teachers or the students, instead we should work on improving the work that we design for students to complete. This should be done both individually and, whenever possible, collaboratively around our lesson design.
- I believe that there is very real power in collaboration. While we cannot collaborate around every problem and lesson, we are better as a whole when we take advantage of our collective talent. The talent and experience is abundant in this district and we have the common language and trust in place to make it happen.
- I truly believe that as a district our focus is precisely where it should be and that is on the student work. If we are truly focusing on aligning what we teach and creating more engaging lessons, the test scores will take care of themselves and will be but one important indicator of our success with every student.
- I have grown to deeply believe that effort affects learning outcomes at least as much as does intellectual ability and that it is our utmost responsibility to engage all of our students in the work. This is the most difficult task in our business, but also the most important one.
- I believe that it is nothing more than common sense that if we are reflective in our teaching and embed more Design Qualities in our lessons, then more students will become engaged and therefore more learning will take place.

In conversations with principals, teachers, central office leaders and board members, the district's focus on engagement, on providing meaningful, engaging work that increases the likelihood that students will learn required content and skills, is a part of everyone's conversation. A veteran principal contrasted her earlier years as a principal with her current experiences in Fife. "The direction is set by the superintendent." She explains that there is no question in her mind what the district focus is, and she is given a

range of support in order to maintain her focus. A middle school dean says, “Our boats are all pointed in the same direction, but we have autonomy to do it in the way we want. There is no Big Brother. The superintendent may bring us in and ask us what we need.”

So how do teachers see the district’s direction? A high school teacher who is also the Fife Education Association president expresses his observations about the district’s journey to establish a direction:

Probably, the biggest moment was—I can’t put a date on it—was when somewhere along the line the critical mass realized that what we’re talking about is the engagement of students. We’re talking about students and what they’re getting out of this. It’s not just about what you are teaching. Because the way we are teaching changed rather dramatically over a period of years. The focus now is really about are the kids learning this or not. I use to be a great teacher, but now it’s all about the kids being good learners.

A Fife third grade teacher describes how the vision for her own classroom grows out of the district core business:

The shift for me is that I hope my room is getting better and better, and it is not all about me and what I want but about the students, their wants and motives. Then, the classroom evolves out of that. Rather than, “Okay, this is it. You will fit into the hole I designed.” Now I recognize that I have squares or triangles or rectangles and how am I going to create the holes that each will fit in.

Another veteran elementary teacher says, “I’m constantly looking at projects, ways, and work that I engage them in and can get concepts across without having to use dry materials that aren’t interesting to kids.” Another teacher provides some historical contrast and notes that for a long time the district had a goal which was to teach children and make them learners. However, she added, “I don’t think we had any vision of where or how we should do that. You’d come to work and do the job. You’d pull the ditto out that you’d been using for 10 years and you’d do it again.” Fife teachers resoundingly describe a different world of school today than the one this last teacher describes.

Central office leaders echo that same kind of understanding. One speaks from the basis of more than 26 years in the district. When asked about the “essence” of the Fife School District she says, “It’s pretty basic, pretty easy, because we’ve learned it so well. It’s student engagement. As an employee, it’s not about me. It’s the end result of how students come out of their learning experience.”

The school board is a vital part of articulating, celebrating and sustaining the main focus of the school district. For example, a seventeen-year veteran school board member explains what he has always hoped will happen as the result of the district’s efforts to transform itself. “Our goal is that when your kids come home, they want to tell you what they did in school. They’ll want your opinion to learn more about what they’re doing. They want to be working on it.” And then that board member goes on to tell a story about a recent board meeting where elementary students were demonstrating bridge-building in science. One student’s father stood up and testified that this assignment was the first time his daughter came home and actually expressed interest in learning more about some content, because she was excited about building bridges. In fact, the father described to the board how she wanted to go on the Internet with her father’s help to get more information. The veteran school board member proclaims that youngster’s experience and her father’s joy as great indicators of realizing for that youngster the district’s vision—creating excitement and student desire for learning.

Fife staff seems to understand clearly the direction of the district and how that direction is used as a reference point for all district work. They know the answers to key questions that are part of the Directional System: Who are our customers? What is our business? What is our product? The school district is at a point in its transformation

where students are understood to be the primary customers; designing engaging work focused on the right content is the district's business; and the satisfying, challenging schoolwork that holds promise for each child is the product of the school district's core business. Ten years ago, Fife had no such clarity, and therefore lacked the capacity to lead its staff, parents and community in a common direction.

Knowledge Development and Transmission System ***Building Trust***

The formal and informal systems of education, training, and socialization through which organizational members are brought to know and understand what they need to know and understand to uphold organizational norms and to function effectively in the organization. (Schlechty, 2005)

Even though leaders may be clear about a school district's direction, without a well-designed Knowledge Development and Transmission System, that direction may remain the well-kept secret of a few leaders or, regrettably, a promising kernel of organizational purpose without substance. Over the last several years, the Fife School District has developed powerful systems of transmitting the social norms that shape behavior throughout the district. As it refashioned its Knowledge Development and Transmission System, the staff gained new-found respect and trust in one another.

While opportunities for staff development were once much more random and, according to all role groups, unfocused or individually focused, rather than being focused on school and district goals and direction, today the Fife system for developing, importing, evaluating and transmitting knowledge could accurately be called *tightly* focused and adaptable to new circumstances and information.

When the district began its efforts to focus on student engagement and the district changes necessary to support the work, the superintendent and his two assistant superintendents assumed key roles in learning about the nature of the work and then involving principals and teacher leaders in deepening the foundational understanding necessary for district transformation. A school board member says:

We had three people at the top committed to the process, doing a lot of work with the process, and it was at that time an educational process. They didn't really force anyone to do it; we started to learn the language. You've got to know what you're talking about so you can talk to each other.

The district provided all role groups opportunities to attend national Schlechty Center conferences, to participate in assessing district capacity, and for some to become part of an early District Development Team which identified, coordinated and led the district's ongoing change efforts. In the first few years of the district's Standard-Bearer efforts, principals and teachers customized activities and processes that would be invitational and yet offer people ways to learn about engagement, about district standards, and about efforts the district was making to build its capacity to change. So while top district leaders were immersing themselves in understanding the district standards for transformation and the nature of student engagement, other staff members were invited—not coerced—to participate. As a junior high teacher puts it, "It's been the softest hammer imaginable."

Sometimes the learning experiences were orchestrated by district leaders. For example, teachers and principals recalled 2001, the first year of McCammon's superintendency, when the superintendent modeled and led a structured process for looking at student work in order to inquire about student engagement and the design of the work provided them. He would visit individual schools and lead or participate in the

Descriptive Review process, helping to establish a focus on students and the work provided them. During the 2001–02 school year, a districtwide staff development day involved all teachers participating in the Descriptive Review process with the superintendent in the middle of that work.

A 5th grade teacher remembers those early learning activities. “It was a huge experience, teachers listening to each other. For a new teacher, it was huge to sit down with experienced teachers—some of 20 years or more—and they were actually listening to suggestions from other people.” As Fife embarked on some dramatically different ways for adults to learn together, they were experiencing some of what adults should typically experience in a learning organization. A learning organization assumes that adults can create new knowledge together given a discipline—a coherent set of ideas and accompanying processes—by which to create that new knowledge. Of course, new knowledge may also be imported from others outside the school district, and Fife continued its efforts to learn from other school districts in the Standard-Bearer School District Network.

Each year since 2000, Fife has sent teachers, principals, and district leaders to the Working on the Work conference. Fife teachers or district leaders were often asked to be co-presenters or facilitators at those conferences, working and learning with teachers and others from across the country. As a result of such cross-district collaboration, the Orange Schools, outside of Cleveland, Ohio, had at least two occasions to visit in Fife and for teachers and district leaders from each district to share good ideas which demonstrated serious changes underway. One example of an idea imported from the Orange Schools is the early WOW Academies at Fife—specific opportunities for teachers

to work together to design work that might increase engagement. The district carved out the time and supportive resources for teachers to attend the Academy during the school day and, much as Orange did, teacher needs and interests figured prominently in the choices of what the work under design might focus on.

Over time, the WOW Academy has evolved into a sophisticated hybrid of what it once was. During the 2006–07 school year the district introduced to teams of teachers the Coaching for Design process led by an experienced, well-prepared Fife teacher leader. Throughout the year 79 teachers participated in three sessions of the WOW Academy which now incorporates Coaching for Design. Today, participation in the district WOW Academies is competitive; teams of teachers submit proposals about what they want to design and why it will be high-leverage for their students. Although not all proposals are funded for participation in the district WOW Academy, schools have discretionary money at the campus level to support teachers in similar design work, so if teachers are not invited to the district Academy, they still get support on their campuses for original design work. Teachers and principals talk with great excitement and appreciation of this latest iteration of the WOW Academy, calling it a real breakthrough in the school district's efforts to provide engaging work for students. Enhanced by electronic sharing made possible by a district-designed portal, following the two-day Academy teachers' collaborative creativity has been elevated to new levels of effectiveness, according to Fife staff. An experienced elementary teacher says:

A defining event for me was I just went to my first WOW Academy. We came out with a three-week unit, with engaging activities with my grade level. And I just can't believe we were given that time—two days to work with our group. And to get to these activities I can use tomorrow. And it's on the portal, so anyone can use it, too. Giving us this gift of time, I think staff really appreciates that.

This example of the WOW Academy in its initial iteration and the most recent version illustrates well how adept Fife is at continuing to import new learning from outside the district and then enhancing and recreating their internal processes, incorporating that new learning. In creating processes for developing, importing and transmitting knowledge, Fife recognizes that it has built a foundation which provides readiness for new work like the Coaching for Design. A high school teacher says, “The Coaching for Design was for us the right time and the right place. We had the foundation, so it is even more powerful because of that.” A teacher at Columbia Junior High talks of the way that foundation was built. “It was a skillful, slow building process. ... the WOW Academy as it is now, that couldn’t have been in Year One. That would have blown people out of the water.” In the fall of 2006, a group of teachers, principals, and district leaders went to a Working on the Work Conference specifically to learn more about Coaching for Design. One teacher in that group commented repeatedly throughout the interview about the importance of having foundational work in place so that powerful subsequent processes—such as Coaching for Design—have a real chance of taking hold and making a difference. The foundational work she described included processes for widespread understanding of engagement, of understanding and embracing the role of teachers in designing that work, and of the role of principals and district leaders in creating opportunities for teachers to design the work.

Six years ago in contract negotiations, the district and the Fife Education Association mutually agreed on six days which would become professional development half days to focus on engagement and district change. For a school district that experienced in 1995 what was at the time the longest teacher strike in the history of

Washington public education, the collaboration resulting in that contract provision represents huge changes in shared understanding, commitments and new relationships. In recent years, negotiation sessions have averaged no more than three meetings in order to reach consensus on teacher contracts. In earlier times, the negotiation process had been slow and somewhat contentious

The way the Knowledge Development and Transmission System was changed over time involved care for and understanding of the needs and interests of teachers. For example, a junior high teacher explains from his point of view the district's early steps:

One of the first steps was opening up the door to classrooms and not making such a secret what went on in there. That was a key with convincing people that what you do behind your doors is a good thing and you should let other people see it. Every single teacher has this terrible fear that if you open the door people will find out that you don't know what you are doing. You'll be exposed as the fraud you are, sent off in shame.

The volunteerism involved in the early sharing of work and collaborative design work kept fear out of the process. A 27-year veteran elementary teacher explains what has changed for her:

I thought in my last few years of teaching I was just going to coast. I thought I'd just basically be able to skate during the last 10 years or so. ...Now, the notion of collaboration is what really excites us. It's just rejuvenating. It's making my job fun again.

This teacher knows well that the district did not always value and support teacher collaboration:

Everything we did was in isolation. Every teacher, almost every teacher, did things in their own rooms in their own way. There was no collaboration. If you had a problem, you stayed in your bunker and figured it out yourself. When you think about where we were pre-2000, a bitter, bitter, strike, it's really amazing where we are now.

Another elementary teacher also remembers his earlier years in Fife: “Collaboration was, ‘I’m running a set of copies, do you want me to run you a set?’”

From the point of view of the school board, members see how collaboration now flourishes. The most veteran board member, who first served on the board in 1990 and is still serving in 2007, believes the district’s biggest problem in the 1990’s was trust. He believes that developing trust, beginning with Corley’s leadership and then continuing and deepening now during McCammon’s tenure is the “start of our whole story.” This school board member recalls how Corley made the financial statements transparent and invited anyone to come and talk with him. Over time, the district found a framework by which to rethink itself and continued to build the trust needed for ongoing growth and development.

This board member also recalls how surprised he was in his earlier years on the board to discover that in this small district, individual schools did not work together. The way schools work has changed so that now when they share their current work and their future plans with board members, individual school efforts are parallel with one another. Today, principals gather at their annual retreat and use data and the district direction to think through the next steps for the upcoming year. Subsequently the vast majority of the district’s staff development dollars and ultimate support flow through school plans that are created among Learning Improvement Teams. The plans are approved and subsequent support provided, as long as they are in line with the district’s vision of focusing on student engagement.

Another school board member who has served less than five years describes how trust operates between the Fife board and the school district staff:

That trust is a huge thing. And it's not blind trust. I've been married for 30 some years and if I tell my wife that I'm going to do this, this, and this . . . sure she trusts me, but that doesn't mean she doesn't ask questions, the kind of dialogue of questions we've talked about. Tell me why this is important to you and we're going to spend the money on this. Sure she trusts me. She still asks the questions. And I do as well. Let's make sure we're on the same ground.

This board member's example demonstrates some key variables related to the Knowledge Development and Transmission System. First, in a learning organization, conversation, dialogue, and discussion are the primary means for developing and transmitting information. Second, the nature of that conversation is determined, among other things, by the respect and value people hold for one another, rather than rigid reference to positions. Finally, when the board member talks about "making sure we're on the same ground," he is actually referring to clarity about the Directional System. Discussions and decisions should constantly be referencing the Directional System in a learning organization.

The veteran board member relayed a 2003 incident involving the school district's attempt to be innovative in working with the Fife Education Association. During McCammon's second full year as superintendent, teachers throughout the state were called to go to Olympia and picket on behalf of budget changes. The superintendent, with full support of the board and in collaboration with the teacher association, proposed an innovative approach intended to be a win-win for the district and the Fife Education Association. They offered to use district school buses to transport citizens from the community who would go to Olympia and picket on behalf of teachers. Not only would the community add a powerful dimension to the statewide demonstration, but this plan would permit teachers and kids to stay in school. As the plans unfolded, regulations would not permit the schools to use the district buses for private citizens to travel to

Olympia. Therefore, the district did have to shut the schools down, and, as it happened, citizens still accompanied teachers in picketing Olympia. The board member comments on this jettisoned innovation: “I think it showed our teachers, too, that you can go out and try something new and different, and if it doesn’t work out it’s no big deal. We’ll work around it and figure out something.” Another board member heartily agreed, commenting, “What it showed is that we were all willing to work together. It didn’t turn out exactly how anyone had thought was the best, but we came up with the best possible solution.”

Moving from what the superintendent calls “random acts of staff development” to highly focused formal and informal processes for learning together, the members of the Fife school district utilize the many facets of their Knowledge Development and Transmission System to move the district toward realizing its vision for a desired future.

Recruitment and Induction System *Raising Staff Up in the Fife Way*

Recruitment has to do with those processes by which schools (or any other organizations) identify new members and gain from those who are identified an agreement to participate in the life of the school. Induction has to do with those processes employed in the effort to ensure that recruits are aware of and become committed to the norms that guide behavior in the school. Induction also has to do with the way existing members are retrained and resocialized when systems are undergoing changes that redefine rules, roles, and relationships and when changes modify the normative order in substantial ways. (Schlechty, 2005)

Fife principals’ comments exhibit a strong understanding of and commitment to providing new staff with quality experiences which will increase the possibility that they embrace the district’s norms. One Fife principal who was a teacher leader in the early days of district transformation work recognizes that induction has not always been

intentional in the school district. She describes the important role the superintendent plays today in articulating the district focus for new staff and in making time for extended conversations with new staff so that they hear directly from him what is most important in the school district. She also commented on how the district leaders' annual retreat is a means for ongoing induction for experienced building and district office leaders to hear from the superintendent about district direction and to focus on its primary business. This particular principal is acutely aware of the important role she must play in leading induction efforts at her school, because of the large number of teachers new to her school—thirty percent of her teaching staff was new to that building in 2006-07.

When new staff members are hired, they are expected to gain some understanding of student engagement and to have a desire to contribute to the district direction as it pursues becoming a learning organization. As the deputy superintendent says: "I think you want to work in Fife because you are given the freedom to do your job. And you are given the time and the incentives to collaborate with others to make sure the job is done and done right." Once new members are hired, the combined efforts at the district level and the school building continue the induction process and provide principals with the naïve and often most telling, insights of novices. A Fife principal recounts how new teachers in his building help his school recognize discrepancies between what his school and district want the focus to be and what may be pockets of the less fully committed. New teachers will ask questions and seek support based on the district's preachments, and he understands that their insights help him see what work still needs to be done.

Central office leaders hired in the last few years provide insight into the unique characteristics of the Fife Schools in contrast to other districts they each served. For

example, one explains that Fife's focused professional development is a major difference from other districts she knows. "I've never seen an emphasis at a superintendent level on professional development," she says. "I may have seen an emphasis at the level of curriculum director, but it comes and goes. It may come one year and go away. It's never stuck on for years." She also says that although she has been integrally involved in implementing other reform models elsewhere, she has not experienced anywhere else the sustained commitment that she sees in Fife. Both of these district office leaders admit that they may lack a sense of just how comprehensive the changes in Fife have been, because they have not been in the district throughout the whole process. However, their experiences in Fife give them ample information to understand how different it is from many other districts.

While Fife staff indicate that there is still work to be done on the Recruitment and Induction System, in recent years the district and to some extent individual schools have made important changes in how new staff "enters" the district. One experienced junior high school teacher believes new teachers are embracing the district's direction: "The young teachers, those who have been with us less than four years, they're on board and they're doing these things. It's kind of the Fife Way." Not all teachers interviewed agreed that new teachers were totally enthusiastic about a focus on student engagement and on teacher as designer and leader, but they had no doubt that new teachers are now provided ample opportunity to understand and embrace what the district cares about most. That same junior high school teacher describes the contrast between his own induction and the processes new teachers currently experience:

So we kind of raised each other (he and two other colleagues). So while that was good, it wasn't necessarily good for the district or the building. Now the whole

idea is that there is a consciousness of raising all the teachers in a similar way, helping people, consciously putting them in groups—that’s a big difference. I came into, “Here are the grammar books. See you in June.” Today, we work much harder to raise teachers up in a Fife Way.

So is the Fife Recruitment and Induction System everything it could be according to Fife leaders? It seems unlikely that it is. Is the Fife Recruitment and Induction System intentional? Absolutely. Does induction begin at the point of first contact with prospective employees? Are the processes involved in Recruitment and Induction shared between the central office and the school buildings? And, do district office, school, and teacher leaders all understand that a Recruitment and Induction System is about supporting new staff in becoming fully committed members of the learning organization? The answer to all these questions is a resounding yes.

Similarly, staff seems well aware that over the past several years the way district leaders successfully gained the commitment of veteran employees to its new direction was primarily through invitation and significant support. As one veteran high school teacher puts it, “He (the superintendent) has never promised anything and not delivered.”

Boundary System ***From Outsiders to Full Members***

The systems that define who and what are inside the organization, and are therefore subject to the control of the organization, and who and what are outside the organization, and are therefore beyond the reach of the systems that make up the organization. (Schlechty, 2005)

One of the strongest illustrations of Boundary System change in the Fife Schools is the way the *school board’s perception of its role* has changed. Frequently, in school districts driven by bureaucratic tendencies focused on power and control, the school board views itself as overseer and monitor. As such, school board members see themselves as operating outside the school district, looking in evaluatively at school

district operations. For Fife, this once was the role of the school board. The seventeen year veteran school board member provides a historical perspective about how the board's role has changed.

Pre-beginning of the journey, I saw [my role] as a caretaker, an overseer, a representative of the community. We were just there to bring problems to the administration. That was part of our role. Now, ... I see myself more as a consultant to them.

He goes on to describe how the board now sees itself as a partner in a dialogue focused on processes used, rather than on specific decisions made. "This has become a norm on our board—looking at the process."

Teachers talk about the board as partners in the change process. Teachers mention that board members go to conferences, regularly hear from teachers and students about schoolwork and, most recently, sit in on WOW Academies. When board members participate in learning alongside teachers and other district leaders, they are entering into a different role than that of executives exercising oversight. And as learners alongside district employees, they have crossed the boundary of the organization and are now insiders rather than outsiders looking at and judging the insiders.

A board member describes the role he now plays in assisting parents and other community members to understand role changes. He talks about explaining what board members do and don't do, encouraging conversations between disgruntled parents and school staff. He goes on to say, "...we are becoming community leaders. Our board is not made up of people who are out there as public speakers. We're plain folk types. That's the way we deal . . . on a one-to-one level." He goes on to explain that in order for board members to have useful one-on-one conversations they must really understand the district's change efforts. For example, board members have had opportunities to attend WOW Academies, to hear about teachers' collaborative efforts, and to learn about

student perceptions of their work. Such experiences give board members the understanding they need to talk to their neighbors and the larger community on behalf of the district's work.

The current school board president who came on the board five years ago when changes were well underway recalls that the relationship between the school district and the community seemed quite healthy and constructive at that time. However, he, too, originally thought he would be serving the district by providing oversight of the operations of the schools—not because they were going in a bad direction but because that had been the board's role. He describes what his role is today:

I realize we play a much larger role as a support to the beliefs of the superintendent, central staff and teachers . . . to what their vision is. We should play more of a support role. And, obviously, you can't support something you don't believe in, so we've gone through processes to gain knowledge.

He describes the important work of the board in enlisting the community to join in leadership with the school district. This board member's commitment to the community and to the school district, which he says is the heart of the community, has not changed. What has changed dramatically over the past five years, as he describes it, is how he views the way he can contribute as a board member. For his work today as a part of the board he must view himself as an insider, a full member of the school district.

A second major indicator of Boundary System changes in the Fife Schools relates to the *nature of student membership in the organization*. Frequently, school districts treat students as problems to be fixed; raw material to be acted upon. In listening to Fife teachers and other district leaders, it becomes clear that students are seen as customers and potential partners in learning, which indicates a pretty rare point of view in public education. However, teachers did not automatically embrace this view of students. A

teacher of 27 years remembers her own reaction when it was first suggested that teachers think about their students as customers. She recalls thinking, “I’m in charge here. Now wait a minute.” Today her view is totally different:

I teach kindergarten. It’s hard to explain, but I never even thought that they’d have an opinion about the teaching. They’re only five. But they do. They have an opinion about what’s going on in the classroom. And then if you open that up to them, then they even have more. I have never enjoyed teaching so much. I loved teaching before, but now I really love it because the kids are so wonderful. They’re really involved.

Another elementary teacher contends that in thinking back to the year 2000, it was very rare in Fife to find anyone who asked their students about the work provided them. She suggests that now it is hard to find a building where questions about the quality of the work provided them are not asked of students. Evidence of listening to students is found throughout Fife’s schools; the district has created a special vehicle for sharing teacher and student work known as *Walls that Teach*. Each building displays student work accompanied by a teacher-provided explanation of the learning focus of that work, some of the thinking involved in the teacher design of the work (often this includes the Design Qualities used and the reasons for those specific Design Qualities), and student remarks indicating what they thought about the work. The superintendent explains that originally *Walls that Teach* was meant as a way of drawing parents into the district’s efforts. He concludes, however, that this public sharing of work has actually fueled teacher collaboration. To an outside observer, *Walls that Teach* presents clear evidence that student voice lives in the schools of Fife.

Within the Fife School District, school board members see themselves as genuine members of the organization and students are also viewed as such. Unlike highly bureaucratic school districts where maintaining boundaries between the district

employees and all others saps the time and attention of the superintendent and other leaders, Fife has exerted serious effort to focus less on who is not a member and more on redefining the nature of membership—specifically for the school board and students—in keeping with its core values, its primary business, and its vision of a desired future.

Evaluation System

Invitation to Growth and Reflection

The systems through which measures of merit and worth are assigned, status is determined, honor is bestowed, and the method and timing of negative sanctions are set. (Schlechty, 2005)

Starting with the superintendent, there is an understanding in the Fife Schools that enlisting staff involvement and commitment in the change effort could never be mandated. Both the superintendent who initiated the work and the current superintendent understood well that what the district wants is *staff engagement*, thus the district puts a great deal of effort into creating inviting experiences for volunteers. Concurrently, district leaders understand that the Evaluation System is not the means by which the district achieves change in attitude, practice, and commitment.

For several years, teachers in the district have had the option of participating in either a conventional personnel evaluation process with the principal sitting in the back of the room noting the teacher performance, or instead participating in the *formative evaluation*, which was always more reflective and teacher-driven. In another instance of district creativity, several years ago Fife revised the formative process, embedding Standard-Bearer language, the Classroom Standards, and the concept of the teacher as leader and designer. Teachers still may choose between the two options—they can pursue a conventional evaluation or the latest iteration of the formative process—and the

choices they are making indicate their growing commitment. The superintendent says, “The neat thing is that without us pushing it, more and more teachers say every year that they’d rather use the reflective piece which includes the Classroom Standards to identify a couple of things they need to work on. That’s a celebration.” First, the way that the district revised its reflective process, as well as the numbers of teachers choosing that process, clearly illustrate what it means to have an organization use its Directional System to make changes in the Evaluation System. Regrettably, too often districts embark on change efforts with leaders attempting to use the Evaluation System as a “big stick” to get staff to go along with a new direction. Such efforts tend to result in compliance at best and may result in rebellion and sabotage of district change efforts.

Additionally, when school board members say they may initiate dialogue about why some action or decision is recommended, they are talking about opening dialogue about whether or not the recommendations are congruent with the values of the district, and how any action taken will support those values. And each time substantive discussion occurs about what the district values, the Directional System is accessed and strengthened, and potential actions are evaluated in light of the district’s purpose and beliefs.

In the course of a group interview with Fife principals, it was noted that throughout their responses to a series of reasonably open-ended questions about the district, they never once brought up the issue of state-required testing. On the one hand, this seemed particularly interesting, because many districts maintain that the current test-frenzied environment serves as a deterrent to change efforts. Additionally, since Fife’s test scores have always been reasonably good, and have in the last several years shown

marked gains, the principals might have used this opportunity to tout those gains. When it was noted that they had been energetically talking about their work without once mentioning testing, they readily explained its absence thus far in the conversation. They described testing as some of the information they draw on to pursue what is truly important in the district—designing engaging work for students. Clearly they were not mouthing platitudes when they gave their explanation. One principal explained it well when he said, “We have a framework to respond to learning needs based on the test information.” While many who work outside school districts today might maintain that tests are one source of information about learning, far too few public educators today say those words and mean them.

One of the three elementary principals went on to explain that the design of work is based in part on test results, but also based on classroom assessment and assessment of engagement. The high school principal underscored that the classroom standards are tools to gain more information that should inform teachers’ design work. He notes that more teachers than ever are kid-focused not test-focused. He describes the ways the high school has gone about making assessing student engagement a regular part of the way the high school faculty works. “We pay attention to student voice.”

In an interview with the superintendent he says:

The biggest conversation we’re having now at retreat is that we have to be very clear about what the data say and where we need to go. I’m certainly not just talking about the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning). We talk about what teachers are seeing in classrooms; what we see as weaknesses in the curriculum; where our kids tell us they’re not engaged. I tell our staff continually that if our students are struggling with certain concepts then we are morally and professionally obligated to do one of two things: if the curriculum is not aligned then we must align it, and if we determine that it is aligned and our students are still struggling with a concept then we must redesign the work to make it more engaging and meaningful for our learners.

The principals' comments about how student experiences are evaluated (made in an interview without the superintendent present) coincide with the superintendent's point of view. As with the personnel appraisal dimension of the Evaluation System, the critical functions of determining approach, allocating resources, or discontinuing efforts which are also a part of the Evaluation System are driven by what the district consistently says is at the heart of the school district's work.

Power and Authority System
Using Influence and Providing Support

The systems that legitimize the use of sanctions, define the proper exercise of power, and determine status relationships (Schlechty, 2005)

In the Fife Schools, examples of how the Power and Authority System now operates, as well as some insight into how it has changed over the last decade, arise primarily through discussion and description of roles and relationships. District office leaders provide ample discussion of how Fife is different from other districts, and possibly what accounts at least in part for its success in transforming itself. One leader suggests that there is less kingdom-building in Fife than in most other school districts. She describes kingdom-building as grabbing and hoarding resources, competing with other leaders, and, through such actions, effectively bringing to a halt much good work. She describes McCammon as a superintendent who is intolerant of kingdom-building. Another district office leader describes her role: "I remove barriers so others can concentrate on student engagement." Relationships in Fife are expected to be constructive and to support the primary work.

The three elementary principals agree that their healthy relationship as colleagues continues to deepen. During the 2006–07 school year they initiated a development activity that involved having their staffs come together to learn more about one of their schools, to view the *Walls that Teach* in one of the buildings, and to have cross-school faculty conversations. This was a first in that it was principal-initiated, cross-school development work. In general, principals talk about one another's schools and one another's faculty and staff as sources for learning rather as competitors. Principals were especially pleased that some of the team proposals for the WOW Academies involved cross-school teams. Another district leader also pointed out how special education teachers, who did not always see themselves as fully integrated into the change efforts, were part of these cross-school teams.

In the first few years of Fife's transformation work, the district office convened a District Development Team led by district office staff, and this group generated most of the change efforts. Today, as is evident in his 2006 opening convocation, the superintendent exercises his moral authority, sets the course and celebrates progress along the journey, while expecting principals with teams in their schools to determine the specific routes to pursue the direction. Buildings have development funds to be used in support of their work. For the first time, during the 2007–08 school year the district will provide a Working on the Work Coordinator to serve all buildings, especially in the design of student work and in the coaching process related to work design. That person brings expertise and experience in Coaching for Design and will assist school staff in bringing more of the design work to the building level. The superintendent views his role

and the role of other district leaders as doing whatever is necessary and possible to assist principals in leading their buildings.

Teachers are very much aware of how the role of principal has changed. One experienced secondary teacher says of his principal: “He’s a welcome presence in the classroom, and I solicit his advice. I do that with the assistant principal and the counselor as well. I think there’s a change in their attitudes about their job. We’re doing it together.” Teachers talk about the mutual respect between teachers and principals, which is vastly different from the status-laden roles of many school districts where teachers claim principals don’t understand or appreciate their work. An elementary teacher captures the nature of that change when she says, “Now it feels like there’s a team. When I first came it was *us/them*. Now it feels more like *we*. People still have distinct roles, but it feels more like a team.”

If an organization has no clarity about beliefs to guide it or about a preferred future toward which everyone should work, then individuals who control budgets or who are perceived to have greater importance can unfortunately wield their influence based on the size of their budgets or the specifics of their position. In an organization that has established clarity about beliefs and overarching purpose, status and influence stem from how one contributes to the organization’s purpose whether that someone happens to be a relatively novice teacher or a veteran principal. The Power and Authority System in Fife operates well guided by the district compass, its Directional System.

It should come as no surprise to public educators that the kind of customized systems change that Fife made does not come quickly or easily. In fact, the superintendent identifies Year Three as a crucial year; he says that it took until Year

Three to establish well—with increased trust and clarity of purpose—the district’s core business, the business of providing all students engaging work. As one of the secondary teachers says about current practice in Fife: “Instead of just throwing information out to kids and hoping some of it will land on them, now you’re watching what they’re doing and seeing if they are engaged. We’re going to do better; we’ll try something different.” And for the Fife Schools and, specifically, for the children they serve, that has made all the difference.