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FIRST PERSON

Are our schools learning organizations?

by [Mark Sass](#) on April 25, 2014

WHAT IS FIRST PERSON?

In the First Person section, we feature informed perspectives from readers who have firsthand experience with the school system. View submission guidelines [here](#) and contact our community editor to submit a piece.

Is your school a learning organization? What a silly question, we're a school for crying out loud. We teach, our students learn, hence we are a learning organization. But students are not the only agents of learning in schools. We forget that teachers need to grow and learn as well, just as it is in any profession.

This might explain why schools and teachers are constantly inundated with initiatives from outside of their school organization. Most of the initiatives confronting schools, like Common Core Academic Standards, Standards-Based Grading, and Professional Learning Communities

are well-researched and grounded in strong theory. Yet, for the most part, these initiatives came from outside of the school, with little if any support from educators. Why? It's because most schools are not learning organizations.

In the 1990's [Peter Senge](#) wrote [The Fifth Discipline](#), in which he argued that organizations are continually faced with shifting technology, customer preferences, and intensifying competition. To combat this shifting scenario, organizations need more than a clear vision and strong leadership. They need to be a learning organization. Learning organizations garnered much attention within the private sector, but not as much within the public school arena. If schools were set up as true learning organizations we would have employees (educators) who were skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge. Knowledge that would transform our schools into true learning organizations and promote high academic achievement.

In their article "[Is Yours a Learning Organization](#)" (Harvard Business Review), authors Gravin, Edmondson, and Gino, offer up a quick assessment tool to see where your company (school) stands as an organization that "fosters knowledge sharing, idea development, learning from mistakes, and holistic thinking." They also offer three building blocks to a learning organization: 1) A supportive learning environment, 2) concrete learning processes and practices, and 3) leadership that reinforce learning. While the tool was set up for businesses all you need to do to apply it to schools is replace unit (as in a company unit) with school, and manager with principal.

Psychological safety, appreciation of differences, openness to new ideas and time for reflection make up the **first building block**. We need our schools to be safe places for teachers to engage in collaborative thinking that allows for constructive conflict. Schools where the culture demands tight compliance to edicts from on high, without debate, are not safe. When people are overstressed and do not have the time to reflect they become "less able to diagnose problems and learn from their experiences. Supportive learning environments allow time for a pause in the action and encourage thoughtful review of the [school's] processes." When is the last time you saw a teacher with the opportunity, during the school year, to do this?

Building block two focusses on the processes by which organizations generate, collect, interpret, and disseminate information. For educators this entails the social science practice of action research. It promotes experimentation to develop new strategies, time to gather data and analyze the results, as well as opportunities to educate and train their colleagues. For educators time is the key resource necessary to complete this work. Collaboration among educators takes dedicated time away from the act of teaching and funnels it into strategic time spent working with colleagues. We already know that the top international schools' teachers spend less time "on stage" with students, about 30% less, than do American teachers. If this was taking place in our schools we would see a shift from top-down, fix-it, and one-size-fits-all professional development to a more growth-driven, inquiry-based, collaborative,

and tailor-made type of professional development.

The third building block advocated by the authors, focusses on building leadership that reinforces learning. Principals, who invite input from others, recognize their own limitations with regards to knowledge, information, and expertise, who provide time, resources, and venues for identifying problems and recognizing challenges encourage teachers to learn. Teachers in this environment feel empowered to offer new ideas and options. This type of learning environment requires a leader who is comfortable and even encourages professional discourse that is not seen in most schools today.

We know that teachers enter the profession needing time and space to learn. Regardless of what teacher preparation program a teacher comes from, there is no way for that new teacher to have the necessary skills to be successful on day one. We also know that the practice of teaching is not a fixed skill. Teaching, like all professions, relies on a workforce that is adept at making the necessary changes to fit a changing society and its students. In other words, we need a teaching profession that learns as it engages in its daily practice, a profession that demands precision in what it does, while at the same time looking for new ways to innovate and respond to a shifting and changing student body. It is time for us to look at schools as places of learning for students and educators.



Mark Sass

Mark Sass is an educator in the Adams 12 School District where he has a hybrid teacher role. He teaches part-time at Legacy High School and then works at the District as a facilitator of standards based grading. Mark has been teaching for 18 years. He is currently a National Teacher Fellow for the Hope Street Group and is an Aspen Institute Teacher Leader Fellow. Mark lives in Denver with his wife and two children who attend Denver Public Schools.

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Jeff Buck · 15 days ago

You make an interesting point Van. I would expand it to say that complex systems in general will attempt to "replicate and protect what they do, [and] insulate themselves from change ..." I've come to appreciate the observation that the individual people working in a system have far less impact (especially lasting impact) on outcomes than the structure of the system itself. As they say, the system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.

Since it has often been observed that the school system we have was patterned after the best thinking of the Industrial Age, it seems like we'd have about as much luck trying to tune up a vintage muscle car (good old Detroit Iron) to get us to Mars. Unfortunately, the vehicle and the task just do not match.

As far as true innovation goes, when we were writing the Innovation Proposal for DGS, we were directed to describe only "proven innovations". In other words, actual innovation, which by definition is unproven, does not seem to be what actually on anyone's mind.

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Van Schoales · 18 days ago

Nice piece Mark, I would say that too many schools and districts are not designed to be learning organizations. It would require the adults to set aside a significant amount of time and energy or at least some to look at what is working and not in their schools or districts. It would also require them to devote resources to understanding how others are doing better and then apply those lessons with ongoing evaluation to their own situations while also allowing for true innovation in the way some tech companies do. Schools and districts are designed for the most part to replicate and protect what they do, insulate themselves from change which sometimes is a good thing. Until we make some fundamental structural and cultural changes in typical school districts, I have little hope that much will change.

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