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However, the great irony is we have just experienced first-hand perhaps the most profound change in education in American history: the rapid appearance of what we call a culture of high-stakes testing. In terms of relationships, one seeks allies and change champions from senior leaders, uses policies and legislation to enforce new behaviors, develops rewards and enticements to achieve buy-in, punishes those who don't buy in and develops a communication strategy to create good press.

Despite the claims of a popular slogan, the world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who share a common cause and vision of what's possible. This is good news for those of us who want to change public education. We don't need to convince large numbers of individuals to change. Rather, we need to connect with kindred spirits.

But making connections isn't the whole story. Networks need to evolve into intentional working relationships where new knowledge, practices, courage and commitment can develop. From these relationships, emergence becomes possible.

Emergence is the process by which all large-scale change happens on this planet. As separate, local efforts connect and strengthen their interactions and interdependencies, a system of influence develops - a powerful cultural shift that influences behaviors and defines accepted practices.

A Failed Attempt

For decades, educators, theorists and citizens have struggled with the question of how to change public education to serve the needs of our society. Think about how many different reform efforts you've seen in your career. Yet how many of them achieved the intended results? By now, most educational leaders are frustrated and exhausted, fearing they'll never find the means to ensure success for all students.

However, the great irony is we have just experienced first-hand perhaps the most profound change in education in American history: the rapid appearance of what we call a culture of high-stakes testing. Can you even remember what you were doing before No Child Left Behind?

There is no question that No Child Left Behind has brought about unprecedented changes not only in public schools but also in society. Its demands have transformed teacher preparation programs, curriculum design, textbooks, parent expectations and relationships with schools and student expectations about learning. Its rankings of schools even affect real-estate values. Without argument, NCLB has been a powerful force for change in 21st-century America.

But has it accomplished its intent? The official legislation for NCLB states it would "close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility and choice so that no child is left behind." The goal of NCLB, then, was to create a culture of achievement for all by focusing on freedom, choice, reliability of methods and better results.

NCLB relied on traditional change theory to achieve these goals. This change theory involves creating a vision, developing a strategy, writing a policy, designing an implementation plan, structuring a timeline of activities and desired outcomes, designing assessment and evaluation tools, then parceling out the work. The theory assumes large-scale change requires large-scale efforts, carefully managed and controlled through every stage.

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This process should sound familiar because it has been and remains the primary way we effect change in all types of organizations, including education. Veteran educator [Stephanie Pace Marshall](#), who runs the Illinois Math and Science Academy, describes this as "the old story" in her book *The Power to Transform*.

If this approach to change were going to work, it would have done so by now. Yet most would agree it has failed in its attempt to create a culture of achievement for all. Instead, what has emerged is a culture of high-stakes testing that actually subverts achievement and learning. NCLB also has had a wearying and demoralizing effect on educators. Australian teachers visiting U.S. classrooms described teachers as "panicked." One teacher renamed NCLB "No Teacher Left Standing."

How could this have happened? How could such profound changes create results opposite to what was intended? To answer this question, we need to shift our lens and notice how change really happens on this planet.

The Perfect Storm

Large-scale changes that have great impact do not originate in plans or strategies from on high. Instead, they begin as small, local actions. If they remain separate and apart, they have no influence beyond their locale. However, if they connect, exchanging information and learning from each other, their separate efforts converge and can suddenly emerge as change powerful enough to influence a large system.

This sudden appearance is known as an emergent phenomenon. Three things are guaranteed with an emergent phenomenon: its power and influence far exceed the sum of its parts. It displays skills and capacities that were not present in the local efforts. And its appearance always surprises us.

A simple way to understand emergence is to look at the phenomenon of the "Perfect Storm." Meteorologists never can predict the sudden appearance of these super-powerful storms. Their power is a result of a number of discrete and often invisible factors converging in perfect synchrony. If any one of the elements were not present at that very moment, the storm could not emerge. It is the simultaneity of their convergence that creates their power.

NCLB activated unseen dynamics in the atmosphere of America to create education's Perfect Storm. Many local changes that had little significance in isolation converged with other changes to create a force no one can ignore. No one could possibly have predicted what emerged: educators hanging on to

life rafts, struggling to maintain a focus on achievement, learning, the whole student, the arts and so forth, as they react to the gale force demands of high-stakes tests.

What were the invisible and discrete forces that converged to create this culture of high-stakes testing? While we describe them here separately, it is how they interacted and converged, their dynamic interplay, that gave rise to this Perfect Storm called NCLB. Here are just a few:

- * Overwhelming diversity of needs, cultures and problems in the classroom;
- * **A loss of confidence in public education and its professionals;**
- * Realization that America is falling behind other nations in the global economy;
- * Students failing to achieve;
- * Employers complaining that graduates lack basic skills;
- * **Hegemony of the corporate model: command and control leadership; focus on results; motivation through fear and rewards; only numbers count;**
- * Increasing reliance on testing to sort students;
- * A culture that has difficulty with ambiguity and diversity; and
- * A culture that wants easy answers, quick fixes and silver bullets.

None of these changes, beliefs or dynamics by themselves is sufficient to create the level of systemwide change we have just experienced in education. NCLB provoked these and made them visible. They converged in unanticipated ways to bring forth this culture of high-stakes testing - a culture that dominates and influences everything we do in education. This is the nature of emergent phenomena.

This culture is an emergent phenomenon, a system of influence. In organizations and societies, a system of influence determines accepted practices and patterns of behavior; it sets the criteria for what's important and what's not. A system of influence, like a culture, sets the values, norms, expectations, beliefs and assumptions. It determines where resources go, what practices are used, which behaviors are rewarded. Over time, those who fail to conform to these requirements are labeled as deviant and pushed to the fringes.

To understand how these powerful, determining systems of influence arise, we must look into the dynamics of emergence. Once we understand these dynamics, we can work with emergence to create a new system of influence that better serves our intentions.

Local Experiments

Although we might consider this culture of high-stakes testing as permanent and immovable, it can be changed but not by looking for fixes or applying our old theory of change. We can never "fix" an

emergent phenomenon. Even if we could change each discrete element, we could never replicate how they converged.

So how do we create a society where no child is left behind? How do we create schools where teachers can focus on learning and where all children can achieve? A simple change theory embedded within the dynamics of emergence provides hope, opportunity and a clear map of what we need to do as leaders.

Although emergence is a description of large-scale change, it doesn't start big. Large-scale change emerges from connections among local efforts, from the exchanges of learning and the forging of relationships. Therefore, we can begin to create systemwide change by working locally.

At the start, these small efforts seem impotent, puny in the face of the dominating culture. And yes, by themselves they are insufficient. But these initial local experiments teach us how to make the future come alive in the present and activate supportive beliefs that have been suppressed by the current culture. For example, if you design a program that produces high achievement among economically poor students, you activate the support of those in the community who still believe in the American ideal of opportunity for all. Many such supportive dynamics and beliefs are invisible now, but they appear as we do our work.

The work of educational leaders is to encourage local experiments, to watch for and nourish supportive beliefs and dynamics and to encourage faculty and staff to connect with all the kindred spirits now working in isolation. This is how we work with emergence to create the future we desire. And this is where communities of practice come in.

Communities of Practice

Emergence has a life cycle. With each stage, connections become stronger and interactions more numerous and diverse. It begins with networking - connecting people who are often so busily engaged in their own efforts they have no idea what's happening outside their building or school district. Often simply discovering you're not alone offers a huge morale boost.

Yet networking is only the beginning. People recognize they can benefit more by working together. Relationships shift from casual exchanges to a commitment to work together. Personal needs expand to include a desire to support others and improve professional practices.

Although these connections can manifest in many ways, one example in both the corporate and education worlds is communities of practice. The Ball Foundation in Chicago defines the communities of practice they fund as "a group of practitioners dedicated to learning with and from one another in pursuit of promising instructional, organizational and leadership practices that support increased student achievement."

Communities of practice have become common in schools and districts and within educational foundations (see related story, page 38). Formed within buildings, districts or across states, these communities of practice connect teachers, administrators and professionals who are advancing their

field of practice or solving specific problems. Topics can range from improving the reading skills of 3rd graders in one school to developing new models for teacher preparation nationwide.

These bodies play a pivotal role in creating the conditions for a new system of influence to emerge. **The theory of change through emergence that we describe here only happens through a strengthening of connections and a linking together of disparate efforts. Communities of practice provide a powerful means to do this.**

Through many years of organizational work, we have learned that, for any problem, the solutions we need are already here. **If you want to solve a problem, look inside the organization or system and you'll find someone who's already worked out a solution or created the needed process. Communities of practice are just that - the solution we need, already here. What's lacking is the realization they are a major means to create the changes we yearn for.**

Our old theories of change didn't allow us to appreciate the power of such communities. We believed that large-scale changes require large-scale efforts. With that lens, we scarcely notice communities of practice. They're too small, too localized. But with emergence, it's not critical mass we have to achieve, it's critical connections. Anything that strengthens connections is important. Communities of practice aren't the only means to do this, but they are a tried-and-tested process for developing connections, promoting learning and evolving practices that work. And they are already here.

A New Beginning

What if we, as educational leaders, could understand that communities of practice are a powerful route to large-scale change? We would no longer view them as a fad or an interesting diversion from traditional processes. Instead we would invest in them more seriously. If they weren't working well, we wouldn't dismiss them, abandon them or stop funding them. Instead we would make it a priority to figure out how to make them successful. We would invest whatever it took in time and resources to ensure their viability and vitality.

As leaders seeking to refocus schools on achievement and learning, we must identify a new role for ourselves weaving a stronger, more diverse web, making and strengthening connections. In this new role, we have many things to do:

- * Focus institutional resources in support of those efforts that develop more connections;
- * **Bring staff together more frequently to think together and to discern what they're learning;**
- * **Seek difference - both people and ideas that offer new perspectives;**
- * **Keep expanding the web, including new and different people in all activities;**
- * Support more local efforts and innovations, then insist staff and faculty take them out into the world and connect with others; and
- * Offer financial support for practitioner gatherings that provide opportunities for real exchanges.

We also need to focus on how we could activate or strengthen dynamics that presently are invisible in this high-stakes testing culture. These include people's natural desire to work in the community; our human need to seek supportive relationships; and the fact learning is social and flourishes in relationship. And we could activate ideals that live deep in the American psyche - that all children deserve education; that education is the route out of poverty; that we want fairness, justice and equality; and that America is the land of opportunity where all can succeed if they try.

If, as leaders, we do our work at innovating at the local level, if we work hard to strengthen connections, and if we embody these societal ideals in our own work, then we will be doing all we can to work toward the emergence of a new system of influence that makes it possible to fulfill these desires and ideals.

If we can look thoughtfully at how we got into this testing culture no one wanted, we will understand how change really happens on this beautiful planet. Then a new map will reveal itself that displays how we can work with emergence to create an educational system that truly leaves no child behind.

Learning Leadership Army Style

In 1993-94, I spent enough time with the Army to appreciate how much it focused on learning. As one colonel said, "We figured out that it's better to learn than be dead."

But until recently, learning occurred within a culture of command and control, in carefully structured and formal processes. According to a January 2005 article by Dan Baum in the New Yorker, officer training had become so bureaucratic that it was encouraging "reactive instead of pro-active thought, compliance instead of creativity and adherence instead of audacity."

Then came Iraq, where the enemy is constantly changing tactics and developing new methods for killing our soldiers. In this volatile environment, traditional processes for capturing lessons learned are too slow. Soldiers need instant knowledge about what just happened to a fellow soldier in Faluja or Baghdad.

Because soldiers are in constant electronic communication, they are able to create virtual communities of practice. Soldiers can share knowledge instantly, in the midst of battle even, rather than waiting for information from the chain of command. As a result, many tactics and responses now come not from Army doctrine but from immediate firsthand experiences.

The pre-eminent virtual community of practice is CompanyCommand.com, launched in 2000 by Nate Alien and Tony Burgess, company commanders based in Hawaii who spent evenings on the porch sharing stories and lessons learned. Realizing the value of these conversations, they set up an informal website to extend these to other company commanders.

By 2004, membership exceeded 10,000 and the Army, assessing the value of this community of practice, brought the site in-house. The Army chose to support the site rather than to shut it down, even though it meant relinquishing control and ignoring training protocol. Today, CompanyCommand is in widespread use and has spawned additional sites focused on specific weaponry or personnel needs.

In Iraq, the capacity for generating realtime, collective intelligence is essential for survival. It also has changed the nature of learning and battle tactics in a large hierarchical system. CompanyCommand is a brilliant example of how a conversation begun on a porch catalyzed connections and demonstrated real results that emerged as a system of influence focused on learning rather than command and control. Educators, take hope.

Communities of Practice in Schools

The IDEA Partnership reports that at least 33 states now participate in Communities of Practice at some level, including K-12 education.

In 2004, Myron Rogers and Joann Ricci of The Ball Foundation worked with Chula Vista Elementary School District in California to form a community of practice focused on independent reading as a component of a comprehensive literacy program. Chula Vista is the largest K-6 elementary district in California with more than 23,000 students.

The district's community of practice provides school staff with an opportunity to share instructional practices, solve problems, create new knowledge and innovate around learning and teaching.

The community started with six schools (out of 39) and increased to 10 schools within the first year. Teachers and administrators come together to share best practices, reflect on their purpose and continue their work toward promoting independent reading as a component of the literacy program. They also attend national meetings and visit other schools to broaden their experiences.

Among school leaders, communities of practice are more difficult to organize, but they have been used in several places, including West Clermont, Ohio, San Diego, and in several Washington state school districts. Both Ohio and Washington have had groups of principals regularly view videos of teaching and then discuss what is effective instruction. San Diego uses school walk-throughs followed by in-depth conversation for the same purpose.

These resources provide more details about the use of communities of practice in K-12 education:

* The Ball Foundation (www.ballfoundation.org) funds communities of practice at the local level and its website carries a detailed description of Chula Vista, Calif, Elementary School District's community of practice.

* The IDEA Partnership has devoted a section of its website (www.ideapartnership.org) to strategies for applying communities of practice to work with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

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