

# Tom Donahoe – Finding the Way: Structure, Time and Culture in Schools

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**A think-piece for school leaders, edited with the author's permission.**

I am familiar with the characteristics of effective schools as identified by research. I have seen the lists of desired states. But I have not read about, heard, or seen how a school takes on these features and, in so doing, differs significantly from the traditional school in the way that it functions – in the way it's organized, in the way it structures time, in the roles and interrelationships of its staff.

What has been missing, I think, is an adequate consideration of this crucial relationship in schools between structure, time and culture, and the most likely result in change efforts of not addressing this is what Yevgeny Yevtushenko calls 'fatal half-measures'. As long as the responses to school change only bend, rather than break, the traditional model, any changes brought about in a school are living on borrowed time. It will be easier to go back than to go forward.

When I began studying school improvement my attention was attracted by the way schools were formally organized. However, gradually I also found that time and culture also had significant roles to play, hence the title of this piece.

## **Organizational conditions**

In terms of school organization, there are no infrastructures designed to encourage or support either communication among teachers to improve their teaching or collaboration in attacking school-wide problems. So teachers, like their students, to a large extent carry on side-by-side but essentially separate activities. The way an organization is configured affects the behaviour of those in it. The traditional school organization minimizes collective, collegial behaviour on the part of teachers.

Schools think that they make structural changes. When we talk about new models of governance, school-based management, or shared decision-making approaches, we think we are talking about structural change. However, those new elements of school management tend to be applied on to the traditional school organization, not woven into its organizational fabric.

From my studies I came to form a number of conclusions about school restructuring efforts. The first was that the process needed to be undertaken as a formal reorganization of the school. It won't work if staff members perceive it as an informal or ad hoc arrangement for the purposes of carrying out a project. The idea that the school is undertaking a formal, comprehensive reorganization – that this is not just one project among many – needs continuous reinforcement.

The second conclusion was that there was a deeper reason for the reorganization to be formal and comprehensive: if it is not, then the school will remain vulnerable to changes in leadership and staff and changes will not be sustained.

The third conclusion, which grew out of the second, is that schools are too dependent on

their principals. The plain fact is that there simply aren't enough great principals to go round. Thus a critical objective of school restructuring has to be the development of a school organization that can generate good school performance when the principal is not a highly effective leader or that can sustain good performance when an effective leader leaves. That having been said, it also became clear to me that the leadership skills of the principal are critical, at least in the early years, to the success of an effort to create a formal environment of shared influence. Schools are trapped by a leadership dilemma: they require skilled, effective principals in order to outgrow their utter dependency on those principals.

That observation led to a fourth conclusion. In order for schools to outgrow their dependency on the principal, every member of the administrative staff, teaching staff and governance group – as well as some parents – must have an active role in the formal organization.

The fifth conclusion was that schools need an external change agent to help them through the challenges and traumas of change. We know how hard, painful, fragile and prolonged change is for collections of people within an organization, and a change agent eases the journey and can keep the process from cracking and crumbling. Without external change support, only schools with an exceptional staff or exceptional leadership, or both, will achieve meaningful change.

### **The structure of time**

This is the paradox: even if we could buy time for school staff, they have no space to install it.

One reason is the tension between management responsibilities and the core teaching mission. This makes no sense. The traditional school organizes the school day so that teaching itself, including the preparation and paperwork, both administrative and academic, is a full-time job. On top of that a significant number of staff also have management responsibilities. Sub-optimizing both can't solve the tension between teaching and school leadership roles.

A second tension is that, like a factory, but unlike most organizations, a school doesn't have much flexibility for restructuring into the schedule the kind of time that teachers need to make schools a collegial effort. I am certain that the most radical and politically difficult element of school restructuring is what needs to be done with the use of time so that teachers can expand their role together. No matter how unthinkable radical change in the school day may be, the school simply cannot continue to function traditionally, with a compressed academic day during which each teacher sticks to his or her own teaching room(s) and duties. This factory model has never been in the best interests of teaching and learning and it just won't do now. We have come to believe that all children can learn effectively and should stay in school to do so. We have to have time together to problem-solve that aspiration, these desired changes in student learning.

### **Culture**

The education system is a series of closed containers – classrooms, schools, central office fiefdoms – all surrounded by competing special interests. Change requires a dynamic, open, self-examining, interactive system.

These qualities describe a culture more than a structure. But the creation and life of a

desired culture depend on a compatible supporting structure. Schools need to change their organizational structure in order to change their culture – and we need to have regard for the culture that will be needed to implement the desired changes in student learning.

Currently we have made an enormous investment in maintaining a bureaucracy whose directions teachers can simply ignore behind the closed doors of their classrooms. It is obvious, therefore, that the kind of culture and supporting structure schools now need reduces both top-down direction and classroom autonomy.

What is needed is shared influence settings in which teachers have less autonomy because the pressure to do things differently comes from a source that they need to respond to – their peers (and the students). The loss of individual autonomy is offset by the collective ability to do things on behalf of student learning that the teacher was never able to achieve in isolation.

There simply isn't any other organized human activity, either in metaphor or in reality, that is anything like the collective effort of a community to impart learning and character and culture to children, to enable them to become active, productive citizens. We need to set aside concepts like the 'marketplace' and questions like 'Who is the customer?' because all of them, drawn from other kinds of organized activity, narrow our ability to envision the uniqueness of schools and the shared influence culture they need.

### **Finding the time**

It would be obvious to any naïve researcher studying the school system that the redesign of time use is essential. A basic requirement for all schools is that the full staff should meet regularly, for example three full days before the start of the year, regular days or half days throughout the year and two full days at the end of the year. Time has to be found during the year. Schools can budget time just as they budget money and target it towards what is a priority. Time is a priority.

This time can be found. Because teachers make the calendar, teachers can also change the calendar. And just as new things can be included, so can redundant or unwanted things be taken out.

Beyond that, schools also need a new mind-set about time to avoid wasting it. Collective time needs to be viewed as a valuable, scarce but manageable commodity that is rigorously allocated to key aspects of the ongoing learning and development agenda. Just as the state requires a certain number of days and minutes for student learning, the school should find a way to formalize a certain amount of collective staff time. Until that happens, collective time is ad hoc, vulnerable to a range of pressures and most likely viewed as an add-on rather than as an integrated part of the learning mission of the school.

### **Conclusion**

The reform of structure, time and culture does not ensure improvement; it is, though, a necessary prerequisite for making it possible, for creating the capacity to move to another level. In this sense the term 'restructuring' means something literal: the formal rearrangement of the use of time in school to allow teachers and leaders to create and sustain the kind of collaborative and interactive culture and enabling structural conditions they need to transform student learning.