

Creating schools that learn

Pages 271-272, Schools That Learn, Peter Senge

Joan has been teaching first grade for twenty-five years. She is known in her small district as a dedicated and effective educator. One day a neighbor pulls her aside to ask about the school. "I just don't think teachers are very motivated," says the neighbor. I've tried to meet with them to find ways to help my kids be more enthusiastic about school, but the meetings never seem to go anywhere. Some of them act like they are in foxholes, afraid to come out; some of them seem to think our girls' problems are our fault, and they have no responsibility to help us fix them. And I don't know what to do next."

Years before, Joan's own children had had similar problems in high school. I don't think it's the teachers," she says. She tells her neighbor about a project she had initiated several years back with two other teachers, to redesign the math curriculum. Merely by telling the story, Joan relives some of the excitement she had felt. Her eyes light up, her hands play a lively duet in the air as she talks. She tells her neighbor that the principal was very supportive and had a few ideas of his own. Then he said they needed to get permission from the superintendent.

Joan's shoulders suddenly slump and her eyes grow opaque. "All the superintendent could talk about," she says, "were the reasons it could not be done. He said he'd been through it all before. First, the state wouldn't allow it. The school board wouldn't approve. And the parents would protest. Sure he cared about the education of the children in the district. But all he could focus on were the 'why not's.' And without his support, our plan was dead." Neither Joan nor her partners have ever tried to innovate anything beyond their classroom doors since then.

Joan and the superintendent have never talked directly about this. And the superintendent has long forgotten conversation; he's had so many like it. He genuinely wants the district to improve, and he recognizes that it must change. But he sees himself as continually struggling with the worst tendencies of his partners. The state regulators can be inflexible; the school board tends to micromanage; some parents are intransigent, the teacher's union leaders are often suspicious, and the union itself has voted down innovative measures in the past. In his mind, his job represents a continual battle on many different fronts, with himself as the only person who sees the needs of the district as a whole. Sometimes he wishes he would get more support, but he never expects it and never asks for it, because there's no reason in his mind to think that anyone would give it to him.

The school board members, meanwhile, feel a great deal of pressure from the community; they perceive the people of the area as unwilling to spend any more in taxes for their schools. The union leaders, the principals, the staff, the local community members, the teachers at all levels, and the students themselves all have their own story to tell. Their perspectives couldn't be more different, but they all have two things in common. First, they all have the same goal: a school system that works more effectively and more compassionately, a system that doesn't let students like Joan's neighbor's daughters slip through the cracks this way. Second, they all feel utterly alone. Even when they compare notes, as Joan and her neighbor did, they do not imagine acting together.