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# Urban School Reform and the Strange Attractor of Low-Risk Relationships

*Brian R. Beabout*

## Abstract

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, school leaders in a newly decentralized school system reached out to external organizations for partnerships—a job that had previously resided in the central office. The necessity of these contacts and the quantity of newly independent schools make a unique context for studying how school leaders think and act in relation to external partnerships. Iterative interviews with 10 New Orleans public school principals reveal a range of external partnerships that can be classified into a three part taxonomy consisting of charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. A discussion of low-risk relationships and the importance of utilizing feedback relationships concludes the paper.

Key Words: urban schools, reform, systems theory, complexity theory, partnerships, external, change, community, relationships, improvement

## Introduction

A number of scholars have recognized the value of external partnerships to the process of educational change (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Fullan, 2000; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996). While the *school effectiveness* era of reform focused on the characteristics of high-functioning schools (Anderson, 2008; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993), scholarship has turned to a more *ecological* approach to school reform (Sirotnik, 2005) which combines the internal

characteristics of the school and a school's relationship to its environment to create a more holistic picture of schools and possibilities for change. Significant in this ecological approach to change are the relationships that schools create with external community partners.

Nationally, all schools have a myriad of connections to the outside environment ranging from vendors, to the district office, teachers' unions, parent groups, business partners, and athletic conferences. This paper does not argue that schools need to find *completely new* partnerships, rather that they must be *strategic* in the types of partnerships in which they engage. Having too many partnerships results in information overload, a lack of coherence (Fullan, 2001), or shallow implementation of multiple reforms—what Bryk and colleagues (1998) term “Christmas tree schools.” Instead of succumbing to information overload, schools must take in “just enough” (Doll, 2008) outside information that they remain open to change without losing their “unique personality” (Tye, 2000) or sense of being a somewhat unified entity. External relationships can be difficult to establish and maintain, but they have, in some forms, the potential to give schools the ideas, resources, and feedback that they need to be viable social institutions. Muncey and McQuillan (1996), while drawing conclusions from their five-year ethnographic study of several reforming schools, implore educators to:

seek informed and supportive outside perspectives while developing, implementing, and assessing any efforts at change...outsiders may be able to see, and to clarify for others, the multiple perspectives that are informing (and perhaps impeding) discussions about and efforts at reform. (p. 283)

While they refer here to their role as external researchers embedded in a study of school reform, it seems logical that external organizations, as well as external individuals, could provide a similar benefit to schools engaged in change. Troublingly, the results reported below show that while schools in this sample *are* establishing external relationships, they tend toward establishing low-risk relationships that are more likely to provide donations or technical support rather than support for the school improvement process. This analysis of the relationships schools enter into with external groups provides a basis for ongoing examination of how these relationships can best further the process of change.

## The Research Context

Between August 2005 and January 2010, the New Orleans Public School District has undergone perhaps more structural change than any other district

in the modern history of the United States. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Public Schools was a struggling urban district with 127 schools under the leadership of an elected school board. A handful of magnet schools served a small middle class and White student population, but the overwhelming majority of schools in the district were poor and African American. During the 2004-05 school year in New Orleans, 63% of the public schools were labeled *academically unacceptable* by the state due to low test scores and attendance rates (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). In terms of student achievement, pre-Katrina published results show that 55% of the city's 4th graders scored below a basic level in reading, and 59% of them scored below basic in math. For the high school students in the district, 59% scored below basic in language arts, while 61% were below basic in math (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006).

After the storm, President Bush offered \$21 million in federal aid to rebuild schools with the caveat that it could only be used for charter schools (Ritea, 2005). A number of schools quickly converted to charter status to get access to the rebuilding money. In November, the state legislature took over all public schools in the city that had performed poorly on achievement tests and placed them in a Recovery School District (RSD) which was to be run by the state and whose superintendent was to be appointed by the state's highest education official (Anderson, 2005). Almost four years later, this series of structural changes has left the district as the nation's most charter-intensive urban district. When students returned to school in Fall 2009, they had 54 charter schools to choose from, along with 38 non-charter schools operated by the RSD or the school board (New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools, 2009).

Despite these massive structural changes, the makeup of the student population and the challenges they face in receiving a quality education are familiar to those involved with the district before the storm. There has been no influx of middle class White students to the district as one official initially predicted (Inskeep, 2005). While the post-storm student population is 57% of the pre-Katrina figure, there is little debate that the city's public schools serve a population that is overwhelmingly poor and African American. Of students in the district (regardless of which type of public school), 83% qualify for free and reduced lunch, while 95% of the students are non-white (State of Public Education in New Orleans, 2008). This report also indicates the large number of students who are performing below grade level, struggling to get required special education services, and suffering from unaddressed storm-related mental trauma.

As this long-struggling public school system re-creates itself in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a number of non-profit and for-profit organizations have

entered the educational arena in the city (Beabout, 2008). Offering everything from facilities management to special education services to professional development, these organizations have moved into the void created by the collapse of the mammoth central office operations of the pre-Katrina district. This inquiry examines the new relationships between New Orleans public schools and their external partners in search of lessons that other schools can use to efficiently leverage such community partnerships for school improvement.

## Conceptual Framework

This inquiry applies social systems theory and complexity theory to the relationships that schools in post-Katrina New Orleans have forged with external organizations. All social systems are *open* systems in that they are not machine-like constructions that operate unchangingly based upon preset rules (Banathy, 1996). Open systems operate on systemic feedback which gives information to the system from its environment. Negative (or regulatory) feedback works like a thermostat by sensing current conditions and suggesting changes to keep the system on its present course. Positive (or amplifying) feedback assesses whether the course which the system is on is a good or not. Positive feedback can offer suggested changes in system behavior to avoid declining performance. This study assumes that external partnerships have the potential to provide both regulatory and amplifying feedback to schools. As sources of this important information, external organizations can potentially have vital roles in educational improvement. But the process is not so simple. Schools are challenged to attend to the multiple, conflicting elements in the cacophony of feedback and interpret these messages collaboratively to guide practice (Riley, 2004). Access to this feedback is an integral part of the educational change puzzle.

Complexity theory is a relative of systems theory that deals with highly complex systems in which straightforward cause-effect relationships are rarely observable (Boisot & Child, 1999; Reigeluth, 2004). These systems *do* remain intact, however, and adapt to changing internal and external conditions. The behavior of complex systems is often an *emergent* phenomenon that results from innumerable low-level interactions that give shape to overall system behavior (Morrison, 2002; Reigeluth, 2006). Essential to applying complexity theory to the case of New Orleans is an understanding that complex systems operate with autonomy and survive only if they are capable of learning (McQuillan, 2008). If understood as a complex system, the post-Katrina New Orleans schools are now dependent on the millions of decisions made in radically decentralized schools. In this framework, bureaucratic control is no longer understood to be desirable or even possible (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994).

System improvement then lies not in crafting better policies, but in building capacity at school sites (Bryk et al., 1998). Building this local capacity requires that schools not only reach out into their environments to seek resources and information, but also that they have some basis on which to separate out useful potential relationships from those that would be resource sinks. This article offers some guidance for educational leaders.

## Literature on Schools and External Relationships

Scholarship related to school–community partnerships describes both the challenges and benefits inherent in this process. While much of this literature surrounds the important relationships between parents and schools (Epstein, 2001; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005), I will focus here on the group-to-group relationships instead of the group-to-individual relationships often involved when individual parents interact with the school. I make this choice on an assumption that these group-to-group relationships are more likely to sustain school improvement. Thus, I will deal here with the role of parent groups (PTO, PTA, etc.) but not the interaction of schools with individual parents.

In the arena of educational change, relationships with external organizations have been used by schools to buffer the change process from the constantly changing social and political environment. Corcoran and Lawrence (2003) describe a K-12–corporate partnership that worked to improve science teaching. The authors were positive about the role of the external organization that sponsored the program, noting that:

Reform support organizations can help school districts stay focused. They can legitimate strategies and policies, build public support, and buy the time to make them work...Intermediaries often are able to shape the stakeholders' definition of the "problem" and build a more stable reform agenda. Unlike schools and districts, they are not subject to direct political authority and are more focused in their aims. (p. 34)

Notice here that while the external partnership is serving as a source of new information (new teaching techniques and content knowledge), there is also an element of buffering as this relationship provides continuity and political support. Bodilly, Chun, Ikemoto, and Stockly (2004) identify negative consequences to schools of the opposite case: when too many uncoordinated reforms are allowed to work at cross-purposes. While there is some reason to be wary of excessive business influence on our public schools (Apple, 2001; Cuban, 2004), schools and their leaders should be able to weigh the benefits and risks of such a relationship.

In a unique organizational partnership, Lane (2003) describes the influences that change-oriented student teachers had on their mentor teachers while student teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The external supports these student teachers received from the university (emotional support, critical dialogue in courses, etc.) are shown to have been important parts of their ability to act as change agents in their placement schools.

Parent groups can also serve as important change partners. Arriaza (2004) notes “that school reform initiatives have higher chances of becoming institutionalized when the community actively participates as an empowered change agent” (p. 10) His study traces one example of a community exerting tremendous force on schooling practices. This group was not invited by the school to form a relationship, in fact they began as an activist group of parents petitioning against the schools, but they were nonetheless able to create lasting changes in how the school educated English language learners. After some tension, two-way lines of communication between the parents and the schools were created and led to a healthier system. Notice, of course, that there is also a heightened state of uncertainty in this case. Changes in the economic, social, or political landscape put pressure on schools that might not be comfortable. Reaching out into the environment presents danger. Schools will inevitably be working with groups (parents, businesses, universities, funding agencies, etc.) with divergent views of what education can, and should, be (Fullan, 2000). This case exemplifies the messiness inherent in school change from a post-Newtonian, complexity perspective. In lieu of planning and compliance monitoring, this school took in data from the external environment, and while there was a period of uneasiness and resistance, initial tension gave way to collaboration and co-evolution in which both the school and the parent group were changed from the interactions centered around the education of students.

Another mode of collaboration between schools and external organizations are the myriad of connections between reform organizations (Accelerated Schools, High Schools that Work, Schlechty Center, Coalition of Essential Schools, etc.) and the schools they serve. While the schools in the present study were all in some form of post-Katrina *start-up* or *rebuilding* mode, and none had fully operational school reform partnerships, this literature is included here as an important extant source of information about schools and their external relationships.

One salient characteristic of this reform organization research is that external partnerships that explicitly seek to change teaching practice are likely to be supported by some members of the school staff and resisted by others. Muncey and McQuillan’s (1996) study of the Coalition of Essential Schools paints a

clear picture of the tensions that emerge when institutional relationships intersect with the micropolitics of the school site and the individual history of a specific school. The result can be organization-to-organization relationships that appear healthy but in which individual educators hold a range of opinions and commitment levels. When it comes to changing teaching practice, it is this *individual* level of commitment that is most important, as teachers wield considerable freedom in most classrooms. Similarly, Blase and Blase (2001) found that even in schools with exceptional administrative support for teacher empowerment and despite specific engagement activities to enable this transformation, teacher leadership participation was a highly individual process that required support, guidance, and patience on the part of school leaders. This gap between the individual and the group remains a central challenge for schools in maximizing the benefits of external relationships. This tension is well-treated by Olson (2003) who identifies this “chasm between what the society through its institutions defines and what teachers and children make of it in their subjective and intersubjective mental lives” (p. 4). Accordingly, the present study makes no assumptions that principals’ descriptions of external partnerships imply a school staff unified in supported of a given relationship. Nonetheless, the perceptions of school leaders in the decentralized post-Katrina context are significant in that these were the people seeking out new relationships and actively framing them for the schools.

This brief review of literature centered on schools’ external partnerships in contexts of change identifies theoretical and empirical support for schools to forge long-term relationships with external partners as part of their overall change strategy. Among the benefits cited are: accessing community feedback, being buffered from political forces, gaining access to new information, and discovering broader bases of community engagement with schooling. Challenges to this approach, however, include inviting too much conflicting information to the school, the varied ability of schools to manage these relationships, and the individual-group tensions that persist when organizations agree to come together. All of the empirical work cited above, however, is situated in pre-existing schools operating in a range of conditions we might call “normal” in contrast to the rapidly changing educational context of post-Katrina New Orleans. The rapid decentralization of the district affords a unique opportunity to examine how individual school leaders prioritize and engage in these relationships without the intervening influences of central office directives and relatively stable institutional history. This study examines the external partnerships of eight schools as they created (or in some cases re-created) their identity as organizations within the broader societal context.



## Methods

As part of a larger study examining the lived experiences of New Orleans principals during 2006-2007, the results reported here emerged from the constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of transcripts from 29 interviews with 10 principals or school CEOs. Interviews took place between March of 2007 and September of 2007 and lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to over 2 hours. One principal was interviewed twice, all others were interviewed three times.

Because a related study had revealed something of a hierarchy of public schools in the new system (Beabout et al., 2007) an effort was made to include principals from a diversity of public schools in the district. This study includes three principals from RSD schools, six principals from state/district charter schools, and one principal from an RSD charter school. Because two participating schools had co-principals that both agreed to participate in the study, there were a total of eight unique schools involved. Of these, two were high schools, one was a middle school (5-8), and five schools had a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade configuration.

The use of iterative interviews (Seidman, 1998) allowed for a relationship between the interviewer and the participants. The three-interview format suggested by Van Manen (1997) was utilized for this phenomenological inquiry. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed manually by the author. These transcripts were coded with low level codes, and each instance of a low level code was imported into a "memo" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where it could be compared with other instances of that code and where initial reflections were recorded. In time, these memos grew and were combined into the findings sections that make up this report.

## Findings

Principals in the post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools spoke at length about a variety of new relationships with the external environment. This abundance of relationships was partly due to the lack of a centralized bureaucracy which, for better or worse, had a large influence over most schools before the storm. The explosion of charter schools and the state takeover left the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) with direct control of only five schools, down from over 100 (New Orleans Parents' Guide, 2009; Ritea, 2006). This created a relationship vacuum in which charter schools, and to a lesser degree, the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) schools and the five remaining Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools, had to find supports for things

ranging from extracurricular activities to payroll processing, curriculum, and personnel. While forming relationships with outside organizations is a central facet of school improvement under a complex systems paradigm (Fullan, 2001; Morrison, 2002), some principals had more experience with this than others. The principals in this study formed connections with external organizations that can be classified as charitable relationships, technical support relationships, and feedback relationships. An examination of these varied experiences with external organizations follows.

### Charitable Relationships

In the aftermath of Katrina, charitable private donations poured into the region, making up for the relative lack of federal and state emergency preparedness (Buras, 2007). Nationally, donations to the American Red Cross increased 129% in the year after the storm (Annual Report, 2006). Schools received much of this attention, with some groups and individuals sending resources from a distance and others making the trip to New Orleans to literally lend a hand in reconstruction. One charter school principal tells the story of being adopted by a middle school in suburban Chicago:

They found us on the Internet and they adopted us... She contacted [us] last year and we have this ongoing, *to this day*, relationship with them. She got her friend to spend their entire spring break at our [school] teaching art classes... her sister sent this like \$1500 donation, for faculty—you know, to treat them for something... at the end of the school year I took the money, and I treated everybody to Ralph's on the Park, which is one of the [upscale] Brennan's restaurants.

This charitable relationship was formed out of the blue, the result of a blind Internet search in Chicago, and the charter school has received financial support from the relationship. The art classes mentioned above would be classified as a technical support aspect of this relationship because they helped further the school's educational offerings for children. This points to the multidimensional nature of external relationships, which complicates the process of categorization. It seems reasonable for various aspects of a single organization–organization relationship to be classified independently. For a more pure example, another charter principal explained the financial and public relations support her school received from the Green Cross, an international environmental group:

On October 5<sup>th</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev is coming to visit our school. He is in the Green Cross, and he works with Global Green, and we... are going to receive a grant to be a green seed school, and the Global Green people

have been checking out schools. Right now they're just going to replace our windows and make them more energy-efficient. But that's nothing to sniff at. So we'll take that...it's going to be...on CNN. We are going to get a lot of press.

Schools also received resources from individuals throughout the country, from foundations, from educational publishers, and from the more traditional grant-based programs that had previously been centered at the district level. These gifts were appreciated both for their impact on school operations as well as symbols of support from the outside world that were significant to principals when Katrina began to leave the national headlines and the challenges schools faced seemed overwhelming:

One of the things that surprised me from the beginning, and continues to surprise me, is the generosity of people all around this country who have never seen us...they've never met us—not from here. So many people willing to help—and that's a wonderful feeling.

These charitable relationships that blossomed in the post-Katrina period were mostly one-way relationships, characterized by the transfer of resources from one party to another. While these relationships were certainly emotion-laden, these were not relationships of relative equals, they were not predicated on long-term interaction, often lacked more than superficial trust, and they did not focus on school improvement. While the process of rebuilding after the flood certainly required (and still requires) injections of outside resources, it is clear that these are not the type of relationships that lead to feedback or learning, nor do they seem to approach the description of *networks* and *collaboration* that Hopkins (2007) cites as a useful lever for sustainable reform. These are impoverished external relationships, and while they may have helped increase staff satisfaction or allowed the school to purchase additional educational resources, they did little to enhance the long-term health of the school.

### **Technical Support Relationships**

Principals also described forming relationships with groups that could support the school's functioning in terms of curriculum, counseling services, extracurricular activities, and support for students with special needs. These groups provided more than just resources; they provided people and expertise which added to the educational offerings of the school. One RSD principal referred to a partnership with New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) and looked forward to the building of that relationship:

I think that they are going to place—on this campus next year...an administrative intern...I think they are going to put eight interns in eight

schools, and I think one might be placed at this site. In which case, that would be a big help to try to get some more creative things going.

While NLNS was certainly focused on long-term impacts on the schools in which it works (Hess & Kelly, 2005), it was by no means clear that this principal viewed this relationship in the same way. This RSD principal described this organizational relationship quite positively, but framed it in terms of what the school would get out of it, not on the dialogue or mutual benefit that would result. The extra staff member was described as a good way to enable the school to achieve the principal's goal of instituting more "creative things" at the school, but there seemed to be no scrutiny of pre-existing agendas. Given what appeared to be a relationship that meant one thing to NLNS and entirely another to the school, I categorized this relationship in the way it was described by my participant.

Two of the eight schools in the study (both charters) were in negotiations with both the New Orleans Public Library and the New Orleans Recreation Department to create new libraries and recreation centers within or close to the schools. One of the schools had even loftier goals in terms of shared services:

Well I have four...buildings...that I don't want to use as classrooms. They are portables...I want to put a mental health unit in one of them, and the medical doctor in another one, social worker in another one, and a dentist in another one. That's what I envision for the community... then we still have the fitness center right across from the area. Then the public library...

This type of community-based schooling was much more challenging pre-Katrina because principals had to navigate the public school bureaucracy to get permission for all of these relationships. Principals interested in this type of school are having a much easier time moving forward under the new, flatter system. While only the library and recreation center relationships were active at the time of data collection, this example ably demonstrates the difference between charitable relationships and technical support relationships. The library, the recreation department, and the medical professionals on the school's wish list are not merely writing checks or donating classroom supplies, they are engaging in a long-term relationship with the school to provide specific professional services that the school feels will enhance what it offers its students. Most of these are not services the school could provide with its own budget and/or staff. But nonetheless, these relationships, precisely because they do not focus on the core instructional mission of the school, are unlikely to lead to reflection on the part of the administration and teachers on how they approach teaching and learning within the classroom context. If we accept changed teaching

and learning practice as the gold standard of educational reform (Elmore & Burney, 1997), then these relationships may not have the legs to carry school reform forward.

Some of these technical support relationships were not contractually based, like the above, but were much more serendipitous—as one RSD principal explained:

I saw this in the newspaper. [hands me a clipping advertising psychological services offered by Tulane University] So, I called Tulane. And I said, “I wanna support this, I want it for our kids. So, can I send this information out to all our children and encourage them to take advantage of it?” “Oh, absolutely” [they said], and they gave me little brochures.

It does appear that creating external relationships is indeed easier with a flat organizational structure, especially in the post-Katrina context where both schools and community organizations were actively scanning the new environment for partners. But forming new bonds is still not a trivial undertaking. Principals in New Orleans now have to reach out into the world a bit more than they did under the old administration, and this takes time and effort away from working with teachers and tending to classroom instruction. One charter principal described setting up for a one-day NASA demonstration that his school was calling “Space Day:”

The day they brought it, I had to hire a security guard...the night before...everybody was there, I was there until 12:30 that night...I was parked in the back of the school, somebody stole my front tire...I had to get a ride home.

This story is emblematic of the very real transaction cost of establishing external relationships. Even the most beneficial external relationship carries with it a trade-off or opportunity cost, and this transaction cannot always be properly evaluated at the outset. What can be assessed, however, is whether or not the partnership is likely to be instructionally focused or not. While the aforementioned technical support relationships certainly contributed to the broad goals of the school, it was clear in each case, once again, that instructional practice was not the central focus.

### **Low-Risk Relationships**

I argue that charitable relationships and technical support relationships can be classified as *low-risk* relationships in that they have little to do with core operating procedures related to teaching and learning. Even the savviest donors or temporary social workers are not in a strong position to truly influence how professional educators go about their work, especially if this

goal of instructional change is not established at the outset of the relationship. This finding supports the conclusions of extant research that finds that school–business partnerships, as one example of an external relationship, generally have little to do with school improvement (Hoff, 2002; Toubat, 1994). In Hoff’s study, 327 surveys were returned by Atlanta-area businesses which were actively engaged in a partnership with a local school. Only 4%, however, indicated that coordinating school improvement was “very much” part of their role. Of course, low-risk relationships should not be understood as inherently harmful to a school; many of the examples above indicate that schools stood to benefit immensely from what these relationships could offer them: from staff development money, to extra personnel, to special learning opportunities for students. In fact, it might be argued that urban schools could *barely function* without the aid they get from external partners on a range of social, educational, and fiscal fronts. But what is important about low-risk relationships is that they have little chance of engaging the educators at the school in an honest and critical examination of teaching and learning processes. They “help out” instead of “dig in” and prepare for sustained improvement.

As a parallel comparison, Little (1990) explains in her study of teachers’ professional relationships that many things that we might *call* collaboration (telling stories, gathering resources, asking for help) actually do not involve any interrogation of teaching practice at all. At the individual level, these activities represent low-risk relationships that help a teacher towards predetermined needs, but do not call into question the overarching goals of the teacher. At the school level, this interrogation is precisely what is needed if our underperforming schools are to seriously begin the process of sustainable change (Davies, 2007; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006).

Low-risk relationships are unlikely to upset the current mindset or the current trajectory of poorly performing schools. While such relationships were often viewed positively by the principals in New Orleans, they are not likely to help the schools move towards sustainable improvement. At best, these relationships might provide information or other resources for progress toward pre-defined goals—Argyris and Schon’s (1978) single loop learning—but they are unlikely to give information about the appropriateness of these goals in the school’s ecological context (double loop learning). Feedback relationships are much more likely to do this. The benefits and challenges of feedback relationships are discussed next.

### Feedback Relationships

Several principals in this study described external relationships that provided more than goods, services, or expertise. Instead, these relationships offered

feedback on the progress of the school and engaged holistically with the school over multiple dimensions, including teaching and learning processes. What is needed for sustained improvement are external relationships that foster the trust and professional collaboration which are requisite to improving classroom teaching, too often deemed a private affair in many American schools (Cuban, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Tye, 2000). I will refer to these types of relationships as *feedback relationships*, due to the potential they have to disrupt the status quo with regard to teaching practice. I view the idea of disruption *positively*, as a means to scrutinize and improve current practice which can become routine and implicit (Morrison, 2002; Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 2000; Senge, 2000). Hearing principals' perspectives on their feedback relationships is helpful to understanding the differences between feedback relationships and low-risk relationships.

As one example of a feedback relationship, one charter school principal explains the "first-year visitation" process that his school experienced:

they send a first-year inspection team, which is another school leader... and someone from their instructional support team. [They] come in for two full days and assess everything that they can in two full days.... Getting to sit down, talk with another school leader and say, what about this? And this? And this?... then getting to get all of those things out and then getting to hear from... other folks... having them help me see the forest through the trees, and that—and while we had some things we could work on and tighten up in different regards, that what we're creating was—was pretty solid for our kids.

This principal experienced some nervousness relating to this "evaluation" of his school, but in the end, relished the opportunity to have a respected group of educators look at his school with fresh eyes. His use of the phrase "get all of those things out" evokes images of a socially safe space reminiscent of a counseling session or a supportive interpersonal relationship. This principal implies that school-related stressors were often *held in* and not shared with other staff. This repression is consistent with notions of charismatic leadership (House, 1976) or coercive leadership (Goleman, 2000) in which differences between leaders and followers are emphasized. This is difficult to reconcile with leadership under a complexity paradigm (Morrison, 2002; Wheatley, 1999) in which dialogue and shared decision making result in leadership that is shared and distributed throughout the organization. External feedback relationships provide a space for sharing challenges given appropriate levels of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and shared purpose. As indicated above, they may also be useful in minimizing our historical reliance on charismatic or coercive leadership as a primary vehicle for improvement.

Another example of a formalized feedback relationship was the connection of one of the charter schools with a local university. The school, chartered only after the storm, reserved two spots on its board for university faculty, and set up a formal partnership shortly after the storm. But the principal, still scrambling to reopen a storm-displaced school, reported some initial apprehensions about making this connection:

I needed expertise in...accounting, I needed expertise in human resources, and I needed a legal person. I turn around and...the chancellor is standin' right behind me....He said, "I can help you do all of that. [our university] is there for you...let's open this school." And I thought to myself, this is great, but I was scared because [they] run two other schools very much in depth...to the point where the teachers have like 8½ hour school days, they are involved in all this professional development, and I knew that the problem [with us] wasn't with teachers, it was just because of the district and the facility issue....So I said, ya know, lets explore our options and see what kind of relationship we can have....I didn't want them running us.

As in the case of a parent group organizing to improve the education of students discussed earlier (Arriaza, 2004), there was some initial apprehension about this external relationship. Therefore, this partnership engaged in lots of technical activities (collaboratively establishing financial procedures and composing legal documents) during the first year, and slowly more feedback-focused activities were undertaken:

I've requested a middle school institute for my middle school teachers, and they're putting that together for me. They've put together a gifted cohort...they're starting in April. Intersession, they're taking an online "Introduction to Gifted" course.

With the university faculty members on the charter school board, a number of teachers engaged in custom tailored graduate coursework, and with a large number of the university's student teachers interning in the charter school, it is hard to imagine the university not having a compelling stake in this school's success. This shared sense of responsibility between organizations is a hallmark of a feedback relationship. Not incidentally, it has also been noted that teachers' shared responsibility for student success is an important characteristic of individual schools who successfully navigate the change process (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Feedback relationships can also take the form of school-to-school partnerships, which is where Hopkins (2007) centers his discussion of networks and collaboration as drivers of school change in a post-policy context. One RSD



high school principal discussed his commitment to Washington Elementary (Note: pseudonym), his feeder elementary school:

we doin'a lot of programs with Washington across the street. I have a creative writing program here...and we send kids...across the street once a week to work with the English classes to help them develop learning how to write...I'm not gonna do anything here without including Washington because that's my kids. And I gotta grow a better product so I can take the whole further.

Apparent here, once again, is the shared responsibility that can come from a feedback relationship. In fact, shared responsibility and feedback relationships may be somewhat synonymous. It is difficult to imagine one without the other. The above example is included to draw attention to the fact that school-to-school partnerships include some special advantages that make them particularly good candidates. First, both partners are well-versed in the complexities of the teaching/learning process and the challenges of improving instruction in an entire building. The natural desire to hide weaknesses might be minimized, and trust maximized, when both parties face the same complex instructional challenges. Second, if similarly situated schools (in terms of student population, teacher population, accountability challenges, etc.) are paired, then there is more likely to be a trusting relationship than in cases when the partners have very different social standing. A corporation or a high performing school that partners with a struggling school will have to prove that it does not buy into the stereotype of the hopeless urban school in order for the relationship to thrive. Third, when schools partner with other schools, the vast majority of adults in the partnership are classroom teachers. These are people with the classroom experience and teaching expertise which are prerequisites to engaging in productive dialogue about teaching and learning.

In sum, feedback relationships have three salient characteristics: (1) the two parties trust each other, (2) there is sustained interaction, and (3) improving teaching practice is one of the activities undertaken. External relationships that do not meet all three characteristics might be beneficial or even essential, but they are unlikely to help the school to improve sustainably over time.

## Discussion

Under a complexity paradigm, organizations take feedback from the environment in order to gauge expectations and adjust operations accordingly. This can result in negative feedback which provides information about progress towards existing goals, or positive feedback, which gives information about the

appropriateness of those very goals (Hutchins, 1996; Senge, 1990). Without both types of feedback, schools might cheerily check off items on their to-do lists, without realizing that important items are not even being considered.

Given the importance of feedback relationships to a healthy system, the relative lack of them presented here is a bit troubling. Every principal that participated in this study had multiple examples of low-risk relationships, but the majority of principals did not cite an example of a feedback relationship. As relationships go, low-risk relationships are more of the passionate one-night-stand variety as opposed to the productive give and take of a long-term relationship. Low-risk relationships offer short-term gains, with little effort upfront on the part of the school. A school gets a new athletic field or a new science lab by jumping through some bureaucratic hurdles or writing a compelling grant application. These are positive developments, and school leaders should certainly be encouraged to pursue these leads when they are aligned with school needs and goals.

When I was a classroom teacher in New Orleans, I recall fondly the day that our school's new computer lab equipment, purchased with money from the estate of an external donor, was delivered. I stayed at school late into the evening for weeks to get the computers and desks set up so that students could come to the lab. I wrote grants to improve our software selection and to staff the lab in the evenings so students would not have to wait in line to use computers at the public library. My motivation and commitment to the school increased tremendously because of the low-risk relationships my principal had formed with the donor's family. Clearly, our students benefitted from this low-risk relationship, and all schools should pursue them. But I also asked myself a critical question: "What was the value of my increased commitment when my pedagogical skills were both weak and unexamined?" Our school still suffered from pockets of poor teaching, and we needed to focus our energies on improving student learning. This low-risk relationship could not do that, but a teaching/learning focused feedback relationship might have.

It is my opinion that schools ought to have a mix of external relationships from all three of these broad categories. All have their benefits. But what seems essential is that schools, particularly those with a history of poor performance, have at least one feedback relationship that *will* support educators in the process of improving practice. The schools in this study, a mix of historically low and high performing schools, tended to have low-risk relationships, but not have feedback relationships. Under a framework of complexity theory, it seems reasonable to call this tendency the strange attractor of *low-risk relationships*. Strange attractors are ideas or cultural beliefs that often implicitly guide the functioning of a school system. Reigeluth (2004) identifies empowerment/

ownership, customization/differentiation, and shared decision making as examples of strange attractors that operate in public schools. If urban schools are to co-evolve with their environments and engage in meaningful reform, then they will need to fight against this strange attractor of low-risk relationships.

It is easy to understand this tendency of school leaders to interface with other organizations with notions of *their school* and *their plans* held rigidly in place. Much of our popular culture involves heroes, individuals who accomplish incredible feats in spite of significant odds. But fostering hero-worship in our schools will only extend the troubled history of school reform that has defined the last 50 years of American education (Oakes & Lipton, 2002; Ravitch, 2000; Sarason, 1990). Schooling is too complex an enterprise to be sustained by the perspective of one individual, regardless of their talents. Only with collaboration can significant improvement begin.

Schools that resist feedback relationships are seeking affirmation, maybe some handouts, but not critique. On the other hand, a school that overcomes the strange attractor of low-risk relationships is one that invites critique, has communication with a variety of stakeholder and professional groups, and can judiciously select external partners that offer necessary supports.

Fullan (2000) discusses the “inside-out” portion of educational reform in which schools reach out to their environments for information that can help them improve. Sometimes this learning requires questioning ingrained practices and carries with it the risk of upsetting the status quo. This learning process is not straightforward or clear at the outset, but school leaders should recognize:

Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one. (Fullan, 2000, p. 583)

I would add that the principals, situated at the boundary of the school and its environment, are the best-suited individuals to undertake this type of sense-making work. But a principals' primary responsibility is for what happens *inside* the school. That is, these probes into the external environment are primarily a means towards the goal of improving teaching and learning within classrooms. A school leader has to weigh the costs of engaging in external relationships to ensure that they do not pull more resources away from instructional improvement than is necessary. Good indicators of potential partners might be: possession of useful pedagogical or content knowledge, a basic understanding of the challenges faced by the school, belief that all students can learn at high levels, and/or lived experience with the organizational change process.

## Conclusion

Schools in the U.S. face an external environment changing in ways that would have been difficult to predict a generation ago: the rise of standards-based reform, the charter school movement, huge influxes of English language learners, and accountability for all groups of students. Hargreaves (2008) boldly points to the coming end of the standards movement, but nobody told Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Public schools have been somewhat immune to these changes as they still represent a subsidized monopoly that controls over 90% of the K-12 education marketplace. A vital component of sustained school improvement is the ability of schools to reach out into their external environment for new ideas, information, and resources. Feedback relationships may be an important source of these. They can result in large changes to the operation of the school, resulting in short-term disruptions that give way to long-term success. In fact, entering only into low-risk partnerships is certainly the riskier approach if sustainable long-term change is the goal. Seeking out feedback relationships based on trust and a commitment to improving teaching and learning appears to be a prudent investment for schools. This is especially important in those schools (urban, high poverty) that feel threatened by the current policy environment which can lead to rigid, reactive teaching practice that focuses on short-term gains rather than creating sustainable improvement (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). This is not to say that external partnerships should be the only, or even the primary, resource schools utilize for improvement. Others have shown the importance of leadership (Sammons, 1999) and professional learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) to sustaining reforms. But there is some evidence here that schools who engage thoughtfully in productive partnerships are asking the right questions and strengthening their offerings to students. Future research in this vein should qualitatively document the functioning of various feedback relationships, via case studies perhaps, and identify strengths and challenges to guide schools in the formation of such relationships.

With all of this talk about internal and external, it makes sense to close with a thought about how we think about the boundaries of school systems. Traditionally, we might think of teachers, students, and administrators as internal components with parents, elected officials, and the business community as external components. Feedback relationships force us to think about boundaries in a much more tentative fashion. When organizations that physically exist outside of schools become trusted partners in the improvement of teaching and learning, it seems sensible that we ought to redraw the boundaries delimiting who is *in* and who is *out*. A benefit of this more inclusive view is that the

problems of schools become the problems of everyone. To tackle the complex challenges faced by schools, particularly those serving high-poverty populations, there is a dual responsibility for schools to reach out to external partners and for external partners to reach out to schools. This type of collaboration among equal partners may be just the relationship our schools need to sustain improvement.

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