
MEMORANDUM

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To: Dr. Richard Machesky, Superintendent of Schools
From: Grayson W. McKinney
Date: December 2nd, 2014
Re: Rethinking the ABCs of Education, One “Letter” at a Time

Dear Dr. Machesky,

I hope this memo finds you well. We have only had a few opportunities to meet in person, such as at last year’s outstanding teacher of the year ceremony, and briefly in my classroom this year at Costello, but I would like to start off by saying what a breath of fresh air you have brought to the leadership of our school district. I have appreciated your visibility in our schools, and the transparency with which you share your district-wide efforts through your weekly OneTroy Friday updates. It was nice to see you at the opening ceremonies of our school year at Athens, as well as in your appearance at our first staff meeting. As Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal (2013) state it in their book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*,

“We need versatile and flexible leaders who are artists as well as analysts, who can reframe experience to discover new issues and possibilities. We need managers who love their work, their organizations, and the people whose lives they affect.” (p. viii)

You seem to be truly taking the reigns in stride, and I look forward to the many years of working with you in the future.

I am writing to you today in order to share with you an issue that has been on my radar for a couple of years now, and one towards which I

feel more and more educators are beginning to lean: the issue of discontinuing the archaic system of grading children's performance in school on a letter-scale grading scale. From the discussions I've been a part of over the last three years, I believe that many teachers in Troy, especially at the elementary level, seem open to the idea of moving beyond the subjective, punitive grading system that we use today. They understand that if you give a student an C, it appears she's learned nothing. Yet give her an A, and then what has she truly learned? Something? It's my opinion that letter grades are subjective marks that are only used to tell how good a child is at "doing school", not on what they have come to master and understand. I believe it's the responsibility of the twenty-first century teacher to change the old paradigm and move towards a more informative, less punitive system for discussing the learning of all children.

Used as they currently are, letter grades in education disconnect young people from their natural talents. Sir Ken Robinson puts it perfectly in his 2012 TED Talk, "Human resources are like natural resources; they're often buried deep. You have to go looking for them, they're not just lying around on the surface. You have to create the circumstances where they show themselves," (Robinson, 2012). Letter grades, and the approach to education that utilizes them, can inadvertently crush the creativity and joy from learning for young people. Learning activities can become all about the grade in the mind of the student and teacher, rather than showing deep and meaningful understanding and inspiring curiosity and inquiry. Even very young students can sense this shift. It is my opinion that Troy School District should move as far away and as quickly as possible from the practice of giving students letter grades on report cards, tests, quizzes, and all other learning activities. Instead, we should lead the schools of Oakland County and Michigan towards a system of standards-based grading, and replace letters with narratives about students strengths and true passions even if these talents and passions do not fit into the conventional boxes of "reading" or "math".

Elementary schools are often forced to follow suit with what secondary schools are doing, much to the detriment of our young learners. Ken Robinson (2010) once referred to a well-meaning policy statement that said 'College begins in Kindergarten'. "No it doesn't," he said. "Kindergarten begins in Kindergarten." Treating nine-year-olds like they are half of an eighteen-year-old doesn't make sense. Is a 4th-grader half way to college? Judging them as if they are and assigning them a letter grade doesn't feed their spirit, it doesn't feed their energy or their passion for learning. It gives them a label to adopt and assume as an identity. We teachers, without intention, become the ones responsible for allowing them to label themselves as a "C student", or someone who's "not good at math".

Our educational system is built on the idea of academic ability, with the most useful subjects for work in the industrial workforce at the top: math and language arts. Kids are automatically taught to stay away from things at school on the grounds that you would never get a job doing that, especially in schools that are forced to do away with the arts programming. How many children have been told that they'll grow up to be a starving artist if they pursue an artistic career? Pablo Picasso is credited for saying, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." According to Robinson (2006), the consequence of our academia-centered view of talent is that "many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they're not, because the thing they were good at at school wasn't valued, or was actually stigmatized." We can't afford to continue in this way. We need to treat students' creativity and spirit as important as we treat the ability of learning to read. Letter grades achieve the opposite effect.

For the purpose of this memo, I have chosen Bolman's and Deal's "four frames" to structure my suggestions by tapping into an established system of terminology and analytical tools. This has been a very helpful book I've come across in my Educational Leadership coursework in the Ed Specialist program at Oakland University. In their writing, they suggest that is of utmost importance for leaders of organizations of all types to look at problems and their potential solutions through four distinct frames, or viewpoints, much as we teach our students to do when tackling their own problems. Looking at things from a different angle can often present an entirely new perspective and help the problem solver to avoid potential pitfalls and problems when looking for the best path forward. The four frames through which we can look at the issue of grading include the structural frame, the human resources frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame.

I hope that my suggestions are taken in the spirit they are meant, and seen as an effort to move our district forward into the position of forward thinking and leadership in Oakland County and the State of Michigan, as it has always been and should remain.

The Structural Frame

A "frame" is a coherent set of ideas or beliefs, forming a lens that enables you to see and understand more clearly what goes on from day to day in what is fundamentally a very complex organization. The structural frame is the oldest and most popular way of thinking about an organization, and usually is arranged in a top-down manner, hierarchical and rules-oriented. However, with the dramatic changes in technology and thinking, old organizational structures are becoming obsolete. Consider the example of BMW, the luxury

car company whose success formula, according to Edmondson (2006), relies on flexibility, participation, and quality:

“Just about everyone working for the Bavarian automaker - from the factory floor to the design studios to the marketing department - is encouraged to speak out. Ideas bubble up freely, and there is never a penalty for proposing a new way of doing things, no matter how outlandish,” (as cited in Bolman and Deal, 2013, p. 49).

You can see why this idea would appeal to those teacher leaders in your schools, who can see a need for continuous improvement and change, even if it means replacing one of academia’s oldest traditions in the form of using letter grades.

Looking at this issue from Bolman and Deal’s structural frame, I would form a team of elementary teachers to meet regularly, beginning at least one year out, to plan the transition from the use of letter grades to standards-based grading. It would be of utmost importance for this team of teachers to focus on how the summative letter grade system would be phased out, starting at the elementary level, and replaced with more formative assessments and authentic discussions about student progress. It would take buy-in from all administrators, and at least 80% of all teachers involved in grading to make an effective transition to a new system. According to Bolman and Deal, the structural frame acknowledges that putting the right people in the right roles can help to “strengthen common goals while accommodating individual differences” (2013, p. 45).

As you are aware, the mission of Troy School District is to ensure learning for all members of the school community. Our organization solely exists to ensure quality education for all students, and I believe this can be achieved more effectively through careful planning by a core team of invested individuals, who see the value in moving towards a more progressive system of evaluating student learning. It will be important to give this project enough forethought and planning that from a structural viewpoint, enough coordination and control can be implemented to ensure that diverse viewpoints of all stakeholders are able to mesh to form a common vision in moving forward.

The Human Resources Frame

The human resources approach to management emphasizes dealing with issues by changing people, sometimes through rotation, promotion, or dismissal, but in this case, through training and professional development. As you are well aware, Troy School District is composed of a team of highly motivated individuals who constantly strive to give their

best to our most-deserving students. They are highly skilled, experienced, and most importantly, have the students' best interests at heart. In bringing about a revolutionary change to the way things are done, however, professional development and training would most certainly be a necessary step. It would be important that the main idea as to why the change is coming to pass could be shared and understood and embodied by all school personnel. In this way, we would be changing people in terms expanding their thinking and opening their eyes to a new way of doing things.

An old formula (Maier, 1955) tells us that $\text{Performance} = \text{Ability} \times \text{Motivation}$. We know Troy teachers have the ability, but it would be essential to truly make them understand the reasons behind the change to grading policy, not to simply accept that another new initiative was rolling out from the top down. If they were to come to truly understand and accept the motivation, you could count on their dedicated performance in implementation. This understanding that we would look for only comes with exposure to the concepts through well orchestrated professional development. In more recent research on the model of motivation at work, Pink (2011) claims that there are three drives behind a person's motivation: autonomy (people want to have control), mastery (people want to get better at what they do), and purpose (people want to be a part of something bigger than themselves) (as cited in Bolman and Deal, 2013). If you take this into consideration, you'll see why it is important to truly help teachers to see the "why" and "how" of what we're doing in order to make the biggest impact with students.

Look at the example of soon-to-be-former Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, whose biggest job was to be the Pentagon's representative to the White House and to Congress, as well as to bring White House-set policy to the Pentagon. Hagel didn't really succeed at either, being viewed skeptically in the Pentagon as an ineffective representative and a manager who failed to advocate on behalf of the military. The New York Times (2014) writes, "Hagel has often had problems articulating his thoughts - or administration policy - in an effective manner." Perhaps if President Obama had taken the time to make sure that all of his cabinet members were on board and doing their jobs of being more vocal on behalf of their constituents in policy meetings, Chuck could have acted like a team player and been more effective at his job. Motivated employees are worth their weight in gold.

The Political Frame

It would be foolhardy to plunge into a minefield, such as replacing letter grades in school, without knowing where the explosives are buried, yet it happens all the time. Bolman and Deal point out that managers often launch new initiatives "with little or no effort to scout

and master the political turf.” (2013, p. 211). When taking the political frame into consideration, it’s always a good idea to take some steps in order to play politician without setting off a firestorm. First, in addition to structurally setting up a focus group of teachers to meet and plan a transition, it’s also important to set up channels of less formal brainstorming and communication. In this way, discussions can be had without as much risk if things go south. As a major fan of the Netflix show, *House of Cards*, I learned the meaning of the term “back channeling” and have seen some pretty dramatic examples of how this type of communication can be very effective in implementing change.

Another suggestion we can take from Bolman and Deal is to take steps to identify principal agents of political influence and anticipate the counterproductive steps that others will take in slowing the progress of the initiative. By assessing who might be the strongest party in resisting, it gives you a chance to develop links with your potential opponents to facilitate more communication, education, or negotiation. As they say in the political arena, keep your friends close and your “enemies” closer. Success requires the cooperation of many, and change cannot be forced unilaterally.

If I had to guess, I would venture to say that the biggest opponents to a change such as moving away from letter grades would be the parents of our students. Parents grew up with letter grades themselves, so it is easy for them to relate to and understand the traditional marks their students receive on a quarterly statement. Politically, it would be wise to form a focus group of parents to take their initial impressions of what moving to a more student-centered system would entail, and how their children would benefit. To get them to understand that we believe traditional report cards are highly ineffective in communicating to parents where their children are in learning would be the essential first step. If we can communicate more about student learning more routinely to parents, they might begin to see the need for the designation of a letter grade on a report card diminishing. Snapshots into the classroom on a more regular basis would afford a window into student learning that a mere letter could never achieve.

The Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame sees life as allegory, and organizations through the lens of what is expressed more than what is produced. The story of an organization can be told through a tapestry woven together that could include “myths, heroes and heroins, rituals, ceremonies, and stories to help people find their purpose and passion.” (Bolman and Deal, 2013, p. 248). When facing the uncertainty and ambiguity of change, people look to symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope and faith.

If we were to take on the initiative of moving to standards-based grading, it would be important to boil it down to what do parents really want and need to know about a child's progress in school? Symbolically, I believe it would be important to give parents a window into the classroom, more than an A (or F) on a report card could ever do. This symbolic gesture could be done through a video documentary, much as you and your team did at the beginning of the OneTroy initiative, showing how life would be with a new system of evaluation, and highlighting the philosophical differences between the old and the new. A pilot classroom could show different strategies of involving families. It could give the example of how sometimes, it's a picture from a student's reader's notebook, or visible thinking routines with a line or two of feedback from the teacher; or, more impactful, it could be a video of the student participating in class. These examples of real-time insight into students' learning, enabling parents to ask pertinent questions about their day in school, and about how she can help continue the learning at home. I truly believe that Troy families would jump at the chance to receive detailed feedback, communication Instead of numbers or letters.

Conclusion

Some still believe that grades are the only way to evaluate learning, possibly because they haven't been exposed to ongoing formative assessment strategies and self-evaluation over summative testing and grades. Grades are a measuring tool, but not a very good one. Learning should be shared, discussed and evaluated openly with all involved stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators. It is my strong opinion that grades should be replaced by meaningful narrative feedback, which helps students understand what learning outcomes have or have not been mastered. Feedback also encourages learning, while grades only stifle it. These discussions should be accompanied by objective feedback that guides students to other possibilities and to reflection and self-evaluation. It's time for grades to be eliminated, and I hope you may come to agree. With guidance from Terrence Deal Lee Bolman's four frames, I think we could make the transition a highly successful one. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Educationally Yours,

Grayson W. McKinney

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