



# Conversations on Education Leadership

with Phillip Schlechty

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**Education Commission**  
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*Katy Anthes – What has been your role in developing educational leadership?*

**Philip Schlechty** – Over my 40-year career I have been a classroom teacher, a professor, department chairman (school administration), the developer of several leadership development academies and an author. The Schlechty Center develops seminars and workshops for teachers, principals, superintendents and school board members. We also have developed a comprehensive model for transforming schools and school districts from bureaucracies focused on compliance to learning organizations that are focused on engagement. We provide support to school leaders who are using this model in their efforts to improve their schools.

*KA – What changes have you seen over your career regarding how education leadership is viewed?*

**PS** – It is becoming increasingly clear that those who prepare educational leaders need to pay considerably more attention to what Pascale and Athos call the *soft S* side of things – style, staff, skill and superordinate goals – and give relatively less attention to the *hard S* side – strategy, systems and structure. Business schools seem to be catching on to this fact more rapidly than are schools of education.

*KA – In your view, why is education leadership so important?*

**PS** – To move school improvement forward it is essential that schools have the capacity to implement what Christensen calls *disruptive innovations*. To do this, schools must undergo systemic changes: changes in the induction system, the evaluation system, the directional system, the knowledge development system, the transmission system, the power and authority system and organizational boundaries. This requires a redefinition of both the structure and the *culture of schools*. Such changes cannot be introduced through the management of programs and projects; leadership must introduce them, sustain them and support them.

The reason school reform has failed for the past 75 years is that those charged with leading schools have been prepared to install *sustaining innovations* – that is, innovations that fit the system; but they have not been prepared to install *disruptive innovations* – innovations that require systemic change as a condition of their successful implementation. For example, the reason the curriculum reforms of the 1960s failed was that they required systemic changes for them to work effectively, yet school leaders tried to make them work while keeping the old system in place. I wrote a book about this in 1976, but few people read it.

In 1988 Phillip Schlechty launched the Center for Leadership as a means to provide high-quality and responsive support to those who are leading school reform efforts across the nation. Dr. Schlechty is the author of *Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation*, just published by Jossey-Bass Education Series. He serves on the ECS advisory board for the ECS and MetLife Foundation School and District Leadership Toolkit.

This interview, conducted in late 2005, is part of a series that will address different perspectives on education leadership while highlighting its growing importance in our schools and school systems. In August 2006, ECS will publish a leadership toolkit for state and district leaders who are seeking ideas to improve their state and districts leadership capacity. For additional resources or information on education leadership, visit the ECS Web site: [www.ecs.org/leadership](http://www.ecs.org/leadership) or contact, Katy Anthes, program director at [kanthes@ecs.org](mailto:kanthes@ecs.org) or Arika Long, policy analyst at [along@ecs.org](mailto:along@ecs.org).

**KA – What would be the most important shift in thinking or action regarding education leadership?**

**PS** – If schools are to be improved, leaders are going to have to understand that the present system was designed to produce compliance. Compliance is not as likely to produce high-level, profound learning as is *engagement*. If schools are to develop the kind of learning needed today, and to make sure that most students learn at high levels, not just minimum levels, they are going to need to be organized to focus on engagement rather than compliance. This will be a dramatic shift and will require substantially more from leaders than many now seem prepared to offer.

**KA – If you could see one change in your lifetime regarding education, what would it be?**

**PS** – Teachers would see themselves as designers of work for students and as leaders rather than as instructors or performers; they would view their students as volunteers rather than conscripts; and all the systems that comprise the school would be organized to support this view.

**KA – What is the link between teacher quality and leadership quality?**

**PS** – The link between teacher quality and leadership quality is found in the structure and culture that leaders encourage and support in the schools and districts they lead. It begins with the recruitment and induction system, moves through the knowledge development and transmission system, and is most clearly displayed in the evaluation and directional systems that determine how status is assigned and goals are set.

**KA – What is your favorite book or resource on this topic?**

**PS** – On the topic of teaching and teachers, my favorite books are Willard Waller's *The Sociology of Teaching*, and Dan Lortie's *School Teacher*. These are classics, and even if it makes me seem dated I continue to be inspired by them. These books more than most books on teaching and teachers clearly show how systems work and help one to understand why things happen as they do.

On the subject of leadership, Peter Drucker is my favorite author. Much that some of the more popular books on leadership contain was foreshadowed, if not clearly stated, by Drucker. I also get considerable inspiration from the sociological literature, especially some of the classical theorists – for example, Robert K. Merton and Emile Durkheim. I still read John Dewey from time to time. Just because it is old doesn't mean it is dated or wrong.

**KA – What should policymakers know about the importance of education leadership? How can they support education leaders?**

**PS** – Leadership is the key to school improvement, and policymakers should do all they can to encourage the right people to become school leaders and then support them after they make the choice to lead schools.

What does this mean? For one thing, it means that they should develop policies that liberate leaders rather than inhibiting them – policy should provide direction rather than mandates and goals. Any time policymakers at the state or national level develop policies that go below the district level – for example, to the schoolhouse or the classroom – they have exceeded their mandate. There is more wrong with national education policy than underfunding and one of the things that is wrong is that local leadership is being replaced by bureaucrats who have little real feel for the conditions of community life.

We are rapidly turning our schools into governmental agencies rather than community institutions, and part of the cause of this is the emergence of an interlocking directorate of policymakers who get together in foundations, think tanks, and other places far removed from schools. They gather and make decisions that ought to be made by superintendents, school boards, parents, principals, union leaders and sometimes state legislators.

**KA – What future global trends do you think will alter the U.S. public education system? How can we prepare our policy leaders and education leaders for this?**

**PS** – The exportation of routine intellectual work – see *The World is Flat* by Thomas Friedman – means that even relatively well-educated Americans are going to have to compete with cheap workers – cheap knowledge workers. It is no longer cheaper *unskilled* workers that make up the competition.

Once a product is commoditized, Americans cannot compete in its production without lowering our standard of living, even if the product is a knowledge product. The only way we can compete is by being a world leader in innovation and invention. This means that our education system must encourage inventiveness and creativity rather than the pursuit of the routine. A compliance-based system cannot encourage invention. That is one of the primary reasons why schools must be transformed from organizations that, for the most part, only produce student compliance to organizations that nurture commitment to intellectual pursuits and engagement in meaningful knowledge work.