



The Little School System That Could

Transforming a City School District

Daniel L. Duke

MANASSAS
PARK
HIGH
SCHOOL

COUGAR
PRIDE

The Little School System That Could

SUNY series, Educational Leadership

Daniel L. Duke, editor

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Transforming a City School District

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Dedication

Dedicated to Tom DeBolt and Frank Jones, for their vision and persistence in the service of Manassas Park's young people, and to Bruce McDade, for making his advisor proud.

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Contents

List of Tables	ix
Preface	xi
Timeline	00
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Understanding Systemic Change	2
Doing Organizational History	4
Why Is the Manassas Park Story Important?	6
Organization of the Book	7
Chapter 2 The Birth of a School System	9
A New City and a New School System	10
A Plethora of Postpartum Problems	13
Schooling in an Unsupportive Environment	23
Cause for Hope	27
Chapter 3 An Improbable Choice for an Impossible Job	31
The Cards DeBolt Was Dealt	33
Delivering on the Promise	39
Envisioning the New High School	43
From Brainstorming to Bricks	48
Raising Achievement in an Era of Accountability	51
Chapter 4 Excellence Begins Early	55
Where Will It Be and Can We Afford It?	56
Planning the New Elementary School	59
What About Learning?	66
Chapter 5 A Foundation for Sustained Success	73
It Takes More Than a Leader to Make a Leadership Team	74
Charting a Course to Significance	81
The Final Ingredient for Success	92

Chapter 6	A Maturing Culture of High Achievement	99
	Multiple Indications of Success	100
	Features of Manassas Park's New Organizational Culture	107
Chapter 7	A Future Full of Questions	115
	How Will Manassas Park Cope with Changing Demographics?	116
	Will Local Revenue for Education Continue to Be Adequate?	119
	How Long Will the Political Alliance Hold?	121
	Will Student Achievement Continue to Improve?	123
	What Will Happen When Tom DeBolt Leaves?	125
Chapter 8	Understanding the Process of School System Transformation	127
	The Power of Politics	129
	The Impact of Re-culturing	131
	The Necessity of Structure	133
	The Potential of People	137
	A Systematic Approach to Systemic Change	140
Chapter 9	The Significance of Manassas Park's Transformation	143
	Lesson 1: School Systems Can Be Turned Around	144
	Lesson 2: A Change Process Characterized by Accelerating Incrementalism	146
	Lesson 3: School System Change Benefits from Local Adaptation	149
	Lesson 4: Size Probably Matters	150
	Lesson 5: Don't Underestimate the Importance of Improved Facilities	151
	Lesson 6: The Necessity of Broad-based Community Support	152
	Lesson 7: Transformation Starts at the Top	153
	Lesson 8: Transforming a School System Can Transform a Community	156
	Notes	159
	References	161
	Index	167

Tables

3.1	Percentile Scores for the 1995–1996 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Grades 4 and 8	35
3.2	Grade 11: Test of Achievement and Proficiency, 1995–1996	36
3.3	Graduation Data, 1995–1996	37
6.1	Standards of Learning Test Pass Rates, Grades 3, 5, and 8, 1998 and 2005	106
6.2	Standards of Learning End-of-Course Test Pass Rates, 1998 and 2005	106

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Preface

What does it take to turn around a low-performing school system? That is the central question addressed in this organizational history of a small city school system in northern Virginia. It is also a question on the minds of politicians, policy makers, and educational leaders. The landmark No Child Left Behind Act and various state and local accountability initiatives have fostered an environment in which the continued operation of low-performing schools no longer is acceptable. Low-performing schools frequently are found in low-performing school systems. Manassas Park City Schools was such a system. From its creation in 1976 until 1995, the fledgling school system struggled with a variety of problems ranging from inadequate resources to deplorable facilities. Mismanagement, incompetence, and personnel turnover were common. These and other factors contributed to low staff morale and subpar student achievement.

Things began to change in 1995 when the Manassas Park School Board hired a new superintendent. How Tom DeBolt and his allies transformed the school system is a story to hearten even the most skeptical observer of public education. While the account of what happened in Manassas Park is most directly applicable to other small city school systems, it contains lessons for all school systems facing the challenges of low performance, underfunding, political turmoil, and a culture of low expectations and defeatism.

Recording a decade's worth of organizational change requires a good deal of assistance. Forty-five people contributed their insights and information to this study. They included local leaders, members of the staff of Manassas Park City Schools, consultants, and architects. I would like to express my appreciation to all of these individuals, especially Tom DeBolt, Frank Jones, Bruce McDade, Pam Blake, Lois Steele, Ritchie Carroll, Gail Pope, Virginia Bowerman, Pat Miller, Bill Bradley,

and Bob Moje. Melissa Levy, a research assistant with the Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia, was very helpful in collecting archival information. Patsy Craig deserves enormous credit for preparing the manuscript. Thanks also to Lisa Chenel for supporting this project from the beginning and to the two reviewers of the book. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the generous financial support of the Microsoft Corporation. Microsoft has taken an active interest in programs designed to promote school and school system turnarounds, including the University of Virginia's unique Partnership for Leaders in Education, a joint venture of the Curry School of Education and the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration.

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Charlottesville, Virginia

Timeline of Important Events in the History of Manassas Park City Schools

- 1975 Manassas Park becomes an independent city.
- 1976 Manassas Park City Schools is created. Robert Strickland is chosen as the first superintendent.
- 1979 Strickland resigns. Robert Lewis becomes superintendent. Enrollment drops to 1,747 students.
- 1981 Lewis resigns.
- 1982 Gary Smith becomes superintendent.
- 1985 Smith resigns. Jimmy Stuart becomes superintendent.
- 1989 Stuart resigns. James Moyers becomes superintendent.
- 1991 Moyers resigns. David Martin becomes superintendent.
- 1995 Martin resigns. Tom DeBolt becomes superintendent. Plans for a new high school are presented to the school board. Enrollment drops to 1,561 students.
- 1996 DeBolt becomes active in local Republican Party.
- 1998 Virginia launches educational accountability initiative, including statewide standardized testing.

- 1999 The new Manassas Park High School opens. DeBolt begins campaign for a new elementary school.
- 2000 DeBolt conducts first retreat for his leadership team.
- 2001 Cougar Elementary School opens. School board approves a six-year long-range plan for the school system.
- 2004 City council adopts a revenue sharing agreement with Manassas Park City Schools. Three out of four Manassas Park schools achieve Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act. Leadership team develops new vision and mission statement.
- 2006 Renovated Manassas Park Middle School opens. School board and city council reach agreement on where to locate new elementary school.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Don't tell Tom DeBolt, the superintendent of Manassas Park City Schools in northern Virginia, that his school system cannot be world class. Don't point out that his working-class community has a modest tax base and a growing population of recent immigrants, many of whom speak little or no English. Don't argue that Manassas Park cannot possibly compete for talented teachers with its more prestigious and affluent neighbors. Don't try to persuade him that the most many of his students can hope for is to graduate from high school and find a blue collar job with decent wages. Tom DeBolt's ambitions would shame an alchemist, but in the case of Manassas Park, they are coming true!

DeBolt is a self-professed visionary and optimist, and the story of Manassas Park's transformation from a perennially low-performing school system with disreputable facilities and dispirited educators to a model small city school system with fully accredited schools, championship teams, acclaimed extracurricular programs, and award-winning school buildings is, first and foremost, a story of inspired and inspiring leadership. But it is much more. It is a saga of local politics, of a community rallying to support its beleaguered schools, and of the wonders that can be wrought through teamwork. What took place in Manassas Park between 1995 and 2005 was not just dramatic improvement in student performance on standardized tests, but the rebirth of an entire school system.

What does it take to transform a low-performing school system into a successful and respected enterprise? This question serves as the focus for *The Little School System That Could*. Like the tiny steam engine in the classic children's book, the Manassas Park City Schools (MPCS) demonstrated the power of positive thinking as it changed from a

struggling school division to a symbol of educational improvement and a source of community pride. Created in the immediate aftermath of Manassas Park's establishment, in 1975, as Virginia's newest city, MPCs languished for two decades in the shadow of outstanding neighboring school systems in Fairfax County, Prince William County, Loudoun County, and Manassas City. Then in 1995, the Manassas Park School Board hired a new superintendent, Dr. Tom DeBolt. He inherited a collection of ramshackle schools, a budget that had not kept pace with enrollment growth or inflation, and a track record of academic and administrative problems. A decade later, every Manassas Park school had achieved state accreditation under the provisions of Virginia's tough educational accountability program, the school system had won architectural awards for its innovative school designs, Manassas Park teams had garnered league and even state championships, and salaries for teachers and school administrators had grown to be competitive with Manassas Park's far more affluent neighbors.

Manassas Park's ten-year journey from educational backwater to beachfront, however, was not an uninterrupted string of giant steps forward. As travels go, the path covered by the school system was less like the flight of an arrow than the meanderings of a moth. Despite periodic setbacks, though, DeBolt and his colleagues stayed the course, eventually overcoming obstacles, silencing critics, and achieving success.

How this study was conducted and the conceptual framework that guided it will be discussed in the next section. Covering these matters up front will allow the chronicle of Manassas Park's turnaround to be presented without interruption as a continuous narrative. Following a description of the study's methodology, several reasons why this study's findings are important will be noted. The introduction concludes with an overview of the remainder of the book.

UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Historians of education have characterized the process of school reform as a matter of persistent "tinkering" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Examples of dramatic transformation are rare. While such an assessment is reasonable, it should not obscure the fact that systemic change, such as what took place in Manassas Park, does occur. The more that can be learned about the nature of such sweeping change, the better educators will be able to address the needs of low-achieving school systems. Understanding the

complexities of systemic change, however, is no simple matter. Many researchers feel most comfortable when they gaze through a microscope, not a wide-angle lens. Microscopes permit researchers to isolate particular features and study them in detail. Systemic change, however, defies such an approach. Multiple lenses, each oriented to a different aspect of change, are required to grasp the process in all of its complexity.

In order to investigate the transformation of MPCS, four lenses, or conceptual frames, were employed. These frames were developed and described by Bolman and Deal in their classic treatise on the study of organizations, *Reframing Organizations* (1997). Each frame embodies a set of assumptions regarding how organizations operate and adjust to their circumstances. These assumptions serve to focus attention on particular aspects of an organization and the role they play in supporting or inhibiting change.

One frame concerns the structural dimension of organizations. This perspective assumes that organizations such as school systems exist to accomplish a particular mission and that they need to develop a structure to achieve that mission with a reasonable degree of success or else they are unlikely to survive. Elements of an organization's "structure" include its goals, policies, quality control mechanisms, decision-making processes, roles, and organizational units. By examining the Manassas Park City Schools through the structural lens, it will be possible to determine the extent to which the school system's transformation involved changes in priorities, policies, programs, and processes.

A school system is unlikely to be transformed by restructuring alone. Bolman and Deal's second "lens," the human resource frame, focuses on the people who staff the organization. The key assumption supporting this perspective is that organizational success depends on the extent to which employees find their work meaningful and satisfying. People in organizations, in other words, have needs that go beyond earning a salary. When they are treated well and valued for their contributions, the likelihood of achieving the organization's mission is greatly increased. To understand what happened in Manassas Park City Schools, therefore, it is also necessary to consider working conditions, opportunities for collaboration and professional growth, salary enhancement, and other matters of importance to school system employees.

All organizations exist within a greater context. A school system, for example, is located in a community, a state, and a nation. Each of these contexts makes certain demands on the school system and harbors

certain expectations for its performance. In order to survive, organizations must find ways to adapt to these contexts. According to Bolman and Deal, such adaptation typically involves a political component. Key assumptions supporting the political frame are that organizations depend on resources and resources are almost always limited. Conflict can occur when organizations compete to acquire the resources necessary to achieve their mission. Political activity is the consequence of efforts by organizations to deal with conflict over scarce resources. Since it is unlikely that a school system such as Manassas Park can be transformed without additional resources, it is important to learn about the school system's efforts to mobilize support for change and the resources needed to achieve it.

The fourth of Bolman and Deal's frames is the most abstract. The symbolic frame focuses on the symbols that embody and represent an organization's culture. It is assumed that much of what goes on in organizations is important because of the meaning or significance people attach to it. Sometimes organizations are unable to accomplish all that they set out to do, but what they *try* to do and how they go about it can symbolize cherished beliefs and values. Organizational change cannot be fully understood without investigating the symbolism and meaning associated with it. In this study of Manassas Park's transformation, attention is devoted to assessing changes in organizational culture over the decade from 1995 to 2005 and what these changes have meant to the school system and the community.

By combining the four frames and studying the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic dimensions of organizational change, it is possible to gain a reasonably comprehensive understanding of what was involved in the transformation of the Manassas Park City Schools. How the study actually was conducted is discussed in the next section.

DOING ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

Historians of organizations prefer to begin with information about which they can be reasonably certain. The sorry state of Manassas Park's school facilities, educational finances, and academic performance in 1995 is a matter of record. Equally indisputable are the conditions and accomplishments of the school system in 2005. These factual "book-ends" give rise to a question: What happened in Manassas Park between 1995 and 2005 that might account for such dramatic change?