Abstract of Successful Grant Proposal

Recent research has demonstrated that administrative leadership plays a critical role in student achievement (Walters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Unfortunately, administrators face many barriers in their quest to "manage less and lead more". Some of those barriers can be overcome simply by motivated and capable administrators. It is increasingly clear, however, that organizational conditions can wear down good intentions and that a systemic approach to school governance is needed to remove barriers and create conditions that foster administrative leadership for school improvement.

Clear Creek Amana (CCA) and Mount Vernon (MV) Community School Districts are located on the southwest and northeast edges of the "I-380 Corridor", one of the fastest growing and economically healthy regions of the state. These two districts have much in common. They are of similar size, have relatively new superintendents and have experienced significant changes over the past decade as Iowa City/Coralville and Cedar Rapids, respectively, have expanded. Population in both districts has increased and new housing developments have sprung up in Tiffin and Mount Vernon, altering what once had been viewed as rural localities. These demographic changes, coupled with the districts' commitment to excellence in teaching and learning, have made this the ideal time for CCA and MV to examine school governance issues.

CCA and MV, in collaboration with Grant Wood AEA, local and regional business leaders, school board members, community patrons and nationally recognized consultants in school restructuring, are submitting this proposal to identify those barriers, and to plan changes in school governance to create systems that will enable principals to become school improvement leaders. The collaborators will employ an "Interactive Systems Design" process, developed by Ackoff and Gharajedaghi for helping organizations restructure/ fundamentally change their operations. With the help of business leaders and consultants, CCA and MV will:

1. analyze current governance structures within each district;
2. create school-community consensus as to an "ideal" structure within which their schools should operate;
3. identify barriers to achieving the ideal and triaging those barriers according to those that could be overcome: a) immediately, b) following additional district planning, or c) with modification of state/national policies and/or legislation;
4. develop solutions for changes that could be made by districts and recommendations for state policy/legislative changes;
5. implement solutions, assess their impact and improve upon the solutions through successive approximations; and
6. develop and disseminate project findings to assist the Iowa Department of Education and other districts in creating systems that allow administrators to focus on effective leadership.

Strategies are Identified According to the Barriers that May Exist to Restructuring

Any planning process attempting to tackle a complex structure like a school system should hold the potential to produce an order-of-magnitude change in the present state- a

ten times improvement in the system. Interactive design is founded upon the work of systems scientists Jamshid Gharajedaghi and Dr. Russell Ackoff who have successfully created a methodology for creating and sustaining change in socio-cultural organizations. The implementation of a design is neither a revolutionary change nor an evolutionary change but a meaningful combination of both.

Interactive Systems Design consists of two general elements: 1) creating a design of a desirable present state and; 2) constructing ways of approximating the design over time. It is an iterative or cyclic process allowing participants to create their own future by constantly closing the gap between what currently is and what is desired. Such a planning process is the most relevant and appropriate process for dealing with the contextual complexities of working with and improving social systems, which we refer to as "socio-cultural" systems.

To think about a school district, or anything else for that matter, requires an image or concept of it: a model. When thinking about something as complex and dynamic as a school system, we tend to use a similar, simple, and more familiar model to explain it. When thinking of a school system, we tend to think of it mechanically where everything is controlled and managed so that each "part" does its job to ensure a finished product. Some think of schools as organisms, where the leaders are the "brains" who make the decisions after receiving feedback and ideas from the teachers "the parts." But in a world of accelerating change, uncertainty and complexity, it is becoming clear that these old models are not helping to solve our current problems. Schools must consider new models of thinking and designing their systems – one that takes into account the freedom of choice that everyone in the system has both in the quality of work they choose to do and the ends they are working to attain for themselves and others. Machine and organism-like thinking can't deal with the complex reality of working with an organization made up of people who can make such choices. (Gharajedaghi and Ackoff, 2004).
Schools need to stop and consider their current efforts at "reform" and "change" to understand that even if each part of the system (e.g. the elementary, the middle school, the high school, transportation, central office, etc.) functions independently as efficiently as possible, the system as a whole will not perform as effectively as possible. (Think, for a moment, about the United States' latest effort to assemble its Olympic basketball team. The best individual players in the world resulted in a team that barely made it into the medal round and finished a disappointing 3rd.)