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From the Principal's Desk

Barriers to Change and Innovation: A School System's Seven Learning Disabilities



Dr. Gail Kist-Kline
Principal, Springdale
Elementary School,
Liberty Township,
Ohio

Throughout the year, From the Principal's Desk features interviews with elementary and secondary school principals on a variety of topics of interest to teachers, administrators, and other school leaders.

This month we are very pleased to present an interview with Dr. Gail Kist-Kline, principal of the Springdale Elementary School located in Liberty Township, Ohio. During her 15+ years as an educator, Dr. Kist-Kline has served as a teacher, principal, and college instructor. Her experiences as an educator have propelled her to a wide range of school settings including rural, inner city, and inner suburban schools. Her current K-6 principalship position services about 515 students of diverse racial and economic backgrounds. In this interview, Dr. Kist-Kline identifies seven organizational "learning disabilities" school systems may encounter as barriers to change and innovation.

MCTN: You've talked about the seven "learning disabilities" that many schools have. How do you define a learning disability as it relates to a school or a school system?

KIST-KLINE: Just as a student can have a barrier to learning, school situations may experience barriers to change. Even though schools should be in the business of constantly evolving and changing to improve, there may be blocks that get in the way and prevent change from occurring. So these obstacles then can be likened to learning disabilities in that they prevent schools from moving forward, and those are the obstacles that keep us as educators from being innovative in education. Organizational learning occurs when members of the school feel a need to grow and make a commitment to both individual and collective learning.

MCTN: Let's talk, then, about these seven organizational disabilities a school may be experiencing.

KIST-KLINE: The titles for these disabilities come from Peter M. Senge's work on learning organizations. What I've done is to apply the disabilities to a school setting, so the titles are similar to those he developed, but the descriptions are different in that they fit school situations. The first one is called "I Am My Position". When we hear, for instance, a teacher say, "I teach fourth grade," or "I wish they'd just let me teach," that might be a signal to us that this person is suffering from this learning disability. They can describe their daily tasks very well, and do their immediate job very well, but they feel little control for anything outside their immediate area. That's a problem for us in moving forward because this staff member doesn't have a sense of responsibility for collective resolve in the school situation. If school personnel focus only on their own specific area, subject or grade level, they contribute less to the whole organization.

MCTN: Do you think the problem is real or just a perceptual problem on the teacher's part?

KIST-KLINE: I think some of it is perceptual in that they don't perceive the need to be involved in other areas, but some of the problem is reality. We structure school settings so that we don't have a lot of opportunities for collaboration built into a school day. We may have a few quick meetings, but the majority of the teacher's day is spent inside his or her classroom. This promotes an individualized or isolated approach and doesn't allow for extending beyond one's own subject or grade. The teacher becomes an expert in his or her area, but has less knowledge about the whole school and doesn't envision it as a system. Working in isolation creates an incomplete picture of the school and limits the possibility for a coherent plan of change.

MCTN: You label another disability "The Enemy Is Out There." Tell us about that disability.

KIST-KLINE: This is one where we place blame, as well as control, with others and we look to them as being the powerful ones who are making decisions for us. Statements like: "If only we could pass the levy, we could do all these great things, " or " If only parents would get more involved in their child's education," indicate that we are placing blame or control with someone else. Instead we need to analyze our own performance and say, "Okay, here's what we can do for these issues," and "Let's see what we can do to address those things that seem outside our control."

MCTN: Do these "others" that the teachers and administrators blame come from outside the system or from within the system?

KIST-KLINE: Both. For example, when a teacher says, "Well, if only my principal would do this or that," the teacher is a person in the system blaming another in the system. Whereas a principal might say, "If only the community or family would work with us." So, the enemy can be within our school or outside our school system. But it's that external locus of control-when we give control to someone else rather than internalize it-that's a learning disability because it keeps us from analyzing and then formulating creative solutions to our own areas.

MCTN: How do you effectively involve working parents? Do you hold meetings in the evening?

KIST-KLINE: Before school starts we have our back-to-school meetings at grade level. There we discuss expectations; we give them the school schedule; we talk about special activities and programs. We also have a parent group consisting of 15 representatives elected by the parents. They meet monthly. We also have our parent-faculty council. They meet regularly and discuss school reports and other things. They also help do the fund-raising. I would say 90 percent of the parents get involved, and they just don't serve milk and cookies, they play a very active role. For example, if we need a little sprucing up -- a little wallpaper here; a little sponge paint there -- I put a notice in the school newsletter which the students here publish, and which goes home once monthly. I ask the parent-faculty council for some money to do the sprucing up, and then I ask for people to come in and help us do it. So we already have a committee ready to do that.

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some of our school issues.
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MCTN: You've often said that the third learning disability, which you call "The Illusion of Taking Charge," is a tough one to understand. Why is that?

KIST-KLINE: That's because it happens when we think we're taking a proactive approach, but we're really only reacting to a problem. So it's kind of an illusion. An example of this would be deciding that we are going to do something about improving state proficiency scores so we design an intervention program for students who aren't succeeding. We believe we are taking charge, but in actuality, we're reacting to the fact that the students aren't performing successfully. So it's better to think a step ahead and say, "Okay, what will we do if students don't succeed?" instead of waiting until students in fact aren't succeeding. Instead of waiting for someone else to impose a change on us, we would be better served by thinking creatively about a solution before the problem even exists.

MCTN: Isn't it true, though, that sometimes you can't anticipate a problem?

KIST-KLINE: Yes, I do think that because of some of these barriers, we struggle to find the time to address problems in advance since we spend much of our school day troubleshooting and responding to situations. However, there are lots of people in the field of education, business and in other areas who do project ahead and say, "You know, we need to make these changes now rather than wait for a problem to arise." Schools struggle with the time element just like everyone else, but it is possible to foresee the need to change and initiate that process. You can't prepare for every problem, but we should think generally about issues that face us.

MCTN: Would you agree that businesses, typically, tend to be better than schools at setting aside time to anticipate problems?

KIST-KLINE: Yes, and I think time is the critical factor. The issue of time leads us to the next disability, which is called "The Fixation on Events". We are so focused on what's happening right here and right now, and we get caught up in the daily events surrounding school operations that we really don't leave time or energy to analyze or create new solutions to some of our school issues. That's not a criticism; that's a reality. We don't set aside time that would allow us to think about problems that may be ahead. We certainly have the knowledge, power and the motivation, but we don't have the time built into the school day for that to occur. In addition, the way the school year is currently structured -- with nine months on and three months off -- leaves little creative energy during the school year when we most need it.

MCTN: Are you a proponent of changing the parameters of the school year?

KIST-KLINE: I am, actually. We've been adhering to this current school calendar for so long that we don't explore ways we could modify it. I think students, families and schools would benefit greatly if we would explore calendar options.

MCTN: The fifth disability is an interesting one. Tell us about it.

KIST-KLINE: It's called "The Parable of the Boiled Frog." It's based on a story: If you put a frog in a pot of boiling water, it would jump out because it would sense danger. But if you put that same frog into room-temperature water it would feel very comfortable and wouldn't try to move. If you gradually turned up the heat it really wouldn't sense danger until it was too late. The educational analogy there is that we have had some slow, gradual changes we didn't sense until it was too late to prevent problems. For instance, we have become a very mobile society and we didn't sense that change because it's been so slow and gradual. If it were an immediate change we would have noticed it right away and been able to

address it, but it's been so slow and gradual that we didn't begin to notice it until recently. So if you hear people saying in your community or in your school "Our students are doing just fine," or, "It was good enough for me, it's good enough for my child," they may be caught up in that boiled frog parable because they don't really sense that there's a need for improvement and that we need to be moving ahead with things. If the situation is not perceived as an immediate danger, it's not perceived as a threat to our educational system at that point.

MCTN: How does the fact that our society is more mobile fit into this example?

KIST-KLINE: Good question. Let me expand on that. We are used to students remaining in the same school system for much of their career. Our main elementary structure is such that students stay in the same school from K-6. When students move in the middle of the year, we don't have good systems in place to help them become familiar with the new school. The curriculum isn't the same as perhaps at their other school and now they're either ahead or behind and are playing a game of catch up. We haven't really adjusted for the fact that we've become a very mobile society and students enter and leave frequently in a school year. Twenty years ago, students typically stayed in the same school system together with the same class of students until they graduated. Today, students who stay in the same school their whole career are, in fact, the anomaly. So we just haven't adjusted to this gradual change.

MCTN: Let's move on to the sixth disability.

KIST-KLINE: The next disability is called "The Delusion of Learning from Experience." This comes about when we don't always see the immediate impact of our teaching because teaching happens over time. As a parent, someone might think, "I hope that my child has really learned this; the only time I'll really know if it worked is when he or she is out on his or her own and using those skills." Well, the same thing is true with an educational system. Often, we can't immediately determine

whether or not learning has taken place or a strategy has the impact we were hoping for. It's easier to learn from a direct experience than if our actions have consequences beyond our immediate horizon of learning. Then it's difficult to learn from experience. For example, when state legislators make a decision that impacts classroom teaching we can't immediately determine the impact of the decision. That's something I call a "distance decision". We would be better served if most decisions were made closest to those implementing those changes. For instance, if the classroom teacher was the one deciding on a change, he or she would learn immediately whether or not the change was effective or not. The teacher could then decide to reserve it, revamp it, or rethink it. The teacher gets feedback and adjusts accordingly. If that same decision is made at the state level, the state decision-makers do not get immediate feedback as to whether or not the decision was a good one.

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MCTN: So, when decisions are made from a distance, how is it determined whether or not a decision had a positive or negative impact or was successful or not, if not from experience?

KIST-KLINE: Well, it's not immediately apparent to us, and that's kind of an issue with teaching, as I said. But it's also that it's further down the line so it may take it a year or two or three to see that "Gosh, this really isn't having the effect we thought it would." For

instance, I'm not sure our state proficiency tests are having the effect that the legislature thought they might, and it's taken years to gather the data to determine the effect. Currently, most data utilized to determine the impact are only quantitative. We need to gather more qualitative data along with the quantitative to gain a more complete understanding of whether a decision has had a positive or negative impact.

MCTN: We have one more disability left to explore.

KIST-KLINE: Yes, and this is called "The Myth of the Administrative Team". This is when we expect administrators to sort out complex problems that are facing the school system. And why it's called a myth is because oftentimes instead of examining our problems or raising difficult questions, we let them remain unspoken. We don't give educators a raise for saying, "Hey, here's how we are being unsuccessful." We reward people for solving urgent issues, not for pointing out our flaws.

MCTN: Or for having success right out of the box.

KIST-KLINE: That's exactly right. We want that immediate success and immediate results that may fade because we haven't fully explored best practices. We need to continuously question how we could improve in a specific area. Competitive enterprises often ask, "Can we do better? Even though we're doing very well, what can we do better?"

MCTN: But, unlike schools, competitive enterprises very often have a monetary bottom line to help measure success.

KIST-KLINE: That's true, and obviously that is not our charge or the mission for our schools, and so it is a very different system for us. I'm not in favor of the competitive model for schooling, but I think we all need to be able to move forward and continuously improve.

MCTN: Who is primarily responsible for recognizing if a school or system is struggling with one or more of these disabilities?

KIST-KLINE: I think all of the stakeholders are responsible. The principal as instructional leader is the primary person given the charge of discovering those issues, but principals need assistance. They only have one piece of the puzzle and other folks have the rest of pieces. Each building should adopt a team approach so varying views are generated and shared. One way to accomplish this is to design committees that have representatives from each area of the school such as the custodian, teacher, psychologist, and cafeteria worker. That way, everyone can contribute a piece to the puzzle. The secretary views a problem through a different lens than does the second-grade teacher. Which one is better? Neither one, perhaps, because they both shed new light on the same issue.

MCTN: You spoke of intervention strategies that may assist someone in moving beyond the barriers formed by the school's learning disabilities; can you give us some examples of these intervention strategies and how they might be enacted so as to help the school move forward in positive ways?

KIST-KLINE: Sure, and I think some of those I alluded to a little bit but not in any depth. One I just mentioned is having one or more building-wide interdisciplinary committees so that you can keep on top of various issues and not be blind-sided or caught by the Parable of the Boiled Frog. In order to build in opportunities for interaction and collaboration, we need to set aside regular blocks of time-even if it's one day a week for two hours-for staff members to collaborate so they can each get beyond that notion of "I teach fourth grade," or "I am my position." If we're interacting with various areas and various people from those areas, we start to get a bigger picture.

I also think that we need to critically examine our practices in order to look ahead. It's important, for example, to avoid being blinded by success, to avoid saying, "We're doing great; we don't need to take a look at what we could be

doing better." We oftentimes just don't want to touch it because think: "Why fix it if it isn't broken?" Well, it's not that we're saying it's broken, but are saying we can do it better. So avoid being blinded by success. Probably the intervention strategy with the most impact is structuring situations to provide a more complete picture of the school system, throughout the school day and the school year.

MCTN: So an important factor is to have ongoing, regular connection with this school change process in terms of meetings and that those meetings should happen frequently throughout the school year.

KIST-KLINE: Absolutely. Self-examination has to be continuous and it has to be something that involves all the stakeholders relying on qualitative and quantitative data with opportunity for discussion. To meet for half an hour or an hour every other week is far more effective than to schedule a one-day meeting at the end of the school year. School change is on-going, even when you meet with a measure of success it's still important to keep evaluating and improving. Once a month collect data on whatever you've recently implemented so you can say, "Okay, here's the information we have. Do we need to make some adjustments?" And also to take the view that this is not a perfect process; we don't reach a level of perfection and then we're done. It's the continuous process, not just the end product that we're looking to improve. So we constantly revise and implement to keep growing and improving.

MCTN: What kind of methods do you use to evaluate the various strategies' effectiveness? For example, do you use anecdotal notes, rubrics or testing?

KIST-KLINE: I think all of those suggestions are important. I'm a very big proponent of using both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative information could include anecdotal notes, focus groups where you listen to a group of parents, teachers and students as well as survey information. But also then the quantitative data, such as test scores and use of rubrics, can help measure and set your standards. I think multiple measures are important

to get a more complete picture and not just have a truncated view of what is meant when a program or approach is deemed effective.

MCTN: If educational professionals want to learn more about school disabilities, what do you recommend?

KIST-KLINE: Peter Senge has written several books on the learning organization. One is *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Another is *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*. His most recent, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, is one that also would be useful.

MCTN: And how about your own work?

KIST-KLINE: I have two pieces published in journals. One, which is on the topic of creating a caring environment and how we might do that in a school situation, appeared in the July 1998 issue of *The Journal for a Just and Caring Education*. The essential point of that article explores how to create a caring school environment for students. And another article that relates to earlier points on external locus of control appears in the journal called *Health Values* in October 1989 and is titled *Health Locus of Control*.

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