C H A P T E R   O N E

Stories of School Transformation

W hy do some schools transform? Why do some schools sustain their transformation? Why do some schools know their purpose and direction? Why do some schools succeed with all students? Why do some schools have staff that learn and implement new practices? Why do some schools have actively involved parents and community members?

This book uses the dominant perspective of *structural dynamics* (Fritz, 1999) to answer these complex questions and "demystify" the transformation process. We begin by introducing you to three stories about schools that transformed. All three stories represent the work of principals who, using instinct, intuition, or talent, understood and applied the natural laws and principles of structural dynamics on a level of: They were not explicit about why they did what they did, but they all had a feel for the structures that were needed to transform their schools. Our purpose in this book is to make visible what they did in terms of structural dynamics so that you can learn and strategically apply the structural principles in order to create the type of schools you want.

We selected these three stories for several reasons. The stories illustrate the principles of structural dynamics at work. The stories take place in very different contexts, communities, and school

levels. Finally, the focus of the work in these schools is very important. These schools are dealing with issues related to equity, social justice, and the learning of all students. They are examining and defining the school's purpose and fundamental principles. These people are serious about what they do and are bold in their expectations and standards.

We refer to the stories throughout the book to highlight various structural laws and principles. The names of the schools and principals have been changed, but the events and stories are all true. We know you will relate to many of the situations in these stories and hope you learn new ways to think about what is happening and to implement new responses within the perspective of structural dynamics. Each of the stories is organized into three sections: Context, Key Concepts and Actions, and Motivation for Change.

TRANSFORMING COUNTRY ELEMENTARY

Context

Country Elementary School is a public K–6 school of 350 students located in a rural county in a midwestern state. It is an old farming community where everyone appears to be related to everyone else. However, over the past 10 years, the school district has become home to a growing number of low-income and transient families with no roots in the community. By 2003–2004, approximately 50% of the school's students came from low-income families.

This student population began to attract the attention of the new principal and school faculty in 1993–1994. The 1994–1995 district data reflected the following:

- Country Elementary historically performed at the state average in language and math, but by 1995 failed to meet the state average.
- Student attendance was below the state average of 95%.
- Parent complaints were in excess of 140 per year.
- Suspensions and expulsions were consistently at 30 or more per year.

- Special education referral rates and placements were growing to the current rate of about 60 students with identified disabilities—or about 24% of the student body.

These issues were beginning to create stress among the staff. Principal Joy explains her observations:

When you put these factors together, I started to see some very significant signs of stress. I could see and hear the staff turning staff meetings more into talk times to relieve the stress. It was so high that we would try to give it away any- where we could. And sometimes we were very successful. Sometimes we could talk each other into believing it was someone else's responsibility, someone else's problem. The talk was repeated many days so that then we could go home and sleep at night and come back and start all over again. But you know what? It didn't make it any better. You know, no matter how much we gave away we started each day with the same concerns.

Today, Country Elementary is assisting the other schools in the district to implement instructional practices based upon Schlechty's (2002) Working-on-the-Work (WOW) framework. His 12 design qualities are at the heart of the school instructional model that is now being shared across the elementary schools in the district with similar success. Country Elementary went from the middle of the pack of 1,113 elementary schools to 22nd in the state. Table 1.1 displays Country Elementary's achievement data from 1998 through 2004.

Key Concepts and Actions

Ten years ago, the faculty and staff were clearly feeling inef- fective in spite of working harder and longer each day getting more frustrated with themselves and the students. Instead of 10 photocopies in the morning and afternoon, the faculty prepared more direct instruction and doubled the seatwork to get the students to practice the skills they wanted the students to demon- strate. Doing more of the same was not working for them. They

Table 1.1   Country Elementary Enrollment and Student Achievement Compared to State Averages, 1998-2004

	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
Enrollment	318	339	312	323	321	348
Third Grade						
Passed, Free/ Reduced Lunch	No data available	No data available	No data available	No data available	82.0%	88.0%
Passed, Special Education	No data available	No data available	No data available	No data available	No data available	75.0%
Meeting the Standard	60.8%	76.6%	63.3%	62.7%	86.0%	83.7%
State Average	58.7%	60.7%	56.9%	57.6%	77.1%	64.1%
Sixth Grade						
Passed, Free/ Reduced Lunch	No data available	No data available	No data available	41.0%	67.0%	77.0%
Passed, Special Education	No data available	No data available	No data available	No data available	70.0%	56.0%
Meeting the Standard	51.4%	71.4%	62.2%	64.4%	77.1%	80.4%
State Average	51.2%	49.6%	47.9%	47.5%	60.1%	63.3%

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were coming to the conclusion that the lower-income students "just couldn't learn what we wanted them to learn. And their parents did not care one way or another." Principal Joy recalled the following at a staff meeting:

> We were talking and someone said, "You know our expecta-tions are just too high. We're making it so hard here, we need to lower our expectations and make it easier for success. So our students will do better—everyone will be happy and things won't be so difficult for us and them." And when we first heard that, everyone thought, "Gosh, you know that does sound good, that sounds so intriguing." We were just lis-tening, but we weren't processing and one of the teachers stood up and said, "You know, when you think it's time to lower the bar, that's really the time to raise it."

The need to improve the quality of student learning combined with a faculty belief system that could envision what that looks like was their next step. In Principal Joy's words again:

> We started to develop what I would say would be a very com-mon vision. We decided that we knew we couldn't hand pick our students and we didn't want to. We knew that we couldn't hand pick our parents and we didn't want to. But we knew the one thing that we could control would be the work that we gave to students. As we started reading and doing visita-tions and sharing, we also found out at the beginning that we didn't know how much we didn't know. And that was another big step forward for us in changing what happened, and when we finally knew that we had to change, we had that urgency, and with that urgency then we were ready to move on.

The faculty recognized that Principal Joy was not instituting a lot of changes when she arrived; however, she was observing the staff's frustration regarding the lack of student achievement. One of the early elementary teachers noted the following:

> [Principal] Joy kind of felt her way into it and let us become comfortable and let us help make a lot of the decisions and led

us towards change. She gave us the freedom not only to succeed but to fail also, and I think that's a strong concept because we learned so much from our failures.

Other teachers agreed:

We agree . . . what we always come back to is, it's okay to make a mistake. You know you do learn. . . . If you didn't learn anything from it and you didn't make any changes from your mistakes then that would be a problem.

Another teacher noted,

But also when we started making changes, she made us feel like we were part of that too, that we were part of the team that decided to make the changes . . . that she wasn't doing it all by herself and it was a team effort.

An upper elementary teacher continued, "I do know and I feel like what she was doing was building trust before anything was done to make changes."

The hallmark of this principal was building a risk-free environment that supported teachers who wanted to figure out a better way to improve their practices and impact student learning. The urgency to change was established in this dialogue with her staff. Creating a disposition about change was one of her early contributions to her school improvement effort.

Next, Principal Joy and the faculty studied and visited other schools and looked at three or four school reform models, including the Little Red Schoolhouse, Success for All, Accelerated Schools, and the 12 design qualities in Phil Schlechty's (2002) WOW framework. One of Schlechty's staff from the Center on Leadership in School Reform (CLSR) remarked about Country Elementary School, "The school faculty isn't walking into Chapter One of school reform."

Principal Joy indicated that the faculty had been soul searching for some time before they approached CLSR. She observed that the staff kept returning to the WOW framework. Finally, Principal Joy confronted the faculty and one teacher responded in the following way:

It makes sense—it's meat and potatoes. It fits our needs. We do not want a prescriptive program. We do not want someone coming in and giving us a checklist. We don't want them saying you have to buy this book. We don't want them to say we're going to come on site and evaluate you and this is how you're going to change. We are professionals and we want to have ownership for the framework and the work we need to do. We need a framework like WOW that will allow us to do the things that we need to do and it will also show us how to keep those design qualities and do it in a consistent disciplined way.

Principal Joy reflected on the rationale offered and indicated that, at first,

I wasn't too excited. Being a typical administrator with my neck on the line, I wanted the checklist. I wanted something that was concrete. I wanted it black and white. I wanted to know month to month where I was going to be, what I was going to be doing, who I'd be with—and that doesn't happen in this framework.

They worked pretty hard, and again and again they continued to support the WOW framework. However, Principal Joy was concerned that the little direction offered in the WOW framework would interfere with their advancement. She knew she needed a commitment from the faculty and staff, because this was not a district initiative; this was going to be a building-level initiative. In her own words, Principal Joy shares her concerns: "That's pretty high risk for a principal because, as most people know, if the building fails the principal fails, and that usually leads to a replacement. I had some concerns, some big concerns, and I told my teachers."

With the teachers' interest in WOW increasing and Principal Joy's sense of time running out, she created some minigrants for professional development. A consultant from CLSR provided an inservice on a bus as they traveled to a soccer game 60 miles away from the school. Everyone was treated to a great day of fun and laughter with their spouses. While the teachers deliberated with the CLSR consultant, they were waited on by students from the school.

After the trip, Principal Joy requested all of the teachers assess their level of commitment to the WOW framework. She explains the teachers' reaction:

> Eighty percent came back and said, "We understand this, we feel like we could do it, we're ready to commit." We had nothing in the negative range, but you know that was still a pretty big risk for a principal and I really wanted 100%. So I asked the teachers if I got a couple of floating subs and if I would arrange a day where every 45 minutes they could meet with a small group and one would be a facilitator. I would not be in the meetings. If they could get those final questions out that were keeping that 20% from really getting on board. And at the end of the day they came back and they said, "We're ready. We're ready to go."

Principal Joy and the team of teachers who asked to be in on the lead team (her trailblazers) secured a $50,000 grant from the state to work with CLSR. The school team people took off. They not only took off, but they became the advocates of the program. After school they would be talking to other teachers, using Dr. Schlechty's books (1997, 2002) to answer colleague questions, and sharing work samples and writing examples. "The first time you do it," they all said, "it's scary." They used their own work samples to help others generate ideas. Sometimes, they would just sit down with a teacher and say, "Let's just take one design quality and talk about it or write about it." They started backward mapping for some, but everyone was developing his or her own response at a different speed and in a different way—a way that was comfortable for him or her. Nothing was mandated: It wasn't as if on September 1 everyone had to show all the types of engagement with each design quality.

The CLSR consultant noted,

> It's a highly inclusive place, and everybody was always invited. The information, the concepts, the CLSR processes and protocols and practices were always laid out to everyone. But it was clear that different folks were going to need different levels of help and that was okay.

Principal Joy supported those who wanted to move forward and continued to invite others to become involved. She also found

it necessary to confront some of the teachers who refused to get involved and gave them a timeline to demonstrate their participation. She learned while working with the CLSR about trailblazers, saboteurs, and a whole gamut in between. She really took a good look at her trailblazers and tried, as much as she could, not only to encourage, to cheerlead for them, but also to find ways to support them. If they were really stepping up to do something, to try something that hadn't been done before, she would find a resource they needed, even if there was not a budget for that resource. She became very creative with grants, working with businesses and eliciting parent support and support from the parent-teacher organization (PTO). Principal Joy tried to make the work environment as safe as possible for the teachers who were willing to express their support for the new ideas. She talked to the teachers frequently about risk taking and helped them understand how important it is to learn from one's own mistakes.

On the other end, the saboteurs were the ones that kept her awake at night. As a self-described reflective learner, Principal Joy learned not to react immediately to a negative situation. She learned to look at a problem situation, reflect on it, and then come back with a strategy. She kept saboteurs and their issues always job centered. She tried never to make the issue personal for herself or a staff member. She kept returning to the main questions: Are students learning what we want them to know and do? Is the work we are expecting students to do engaging? Does it motivate them to learn in ways they need to learn? In Principal Joy's words,

> We were able to work through some difficult times with some individuals. Some individuals had to be changed around. Some things had to change. I know it's a tough call. I had to make those hard calls, and sometimes that just has to happen. I think that by doing that, it not only helped me to keep my focus, it helped everyone else to keep their focus, too. Because they knew then that the bottom line is we had to keep the main thing the main thing.

During this time of the searching and discussing of the adoption of the CLSR framework, Principal Joy catalogued the staff beliefs and values that she saw driving their approaches to the changes. Again and again, working in a collaborative, collegial manner in the spring of her fifth year and after the start of WOW planning

and implementation work, she started capturing those ideas. She was looking for a means to bind the faculty together through a set of working principles to guide their work, and as she did so she kept coming back to 10 ideas. When they came back that fall, she presented the list of these 10 ideas to the faculty in a random order. Principal Joy characterizes the faculty's reaction to the 10 ideas in the following way:

> It [the list] is my interpretation of what you have been telling me is important. They had a comfort level with them, and I said, "Well, you know this is high risk" again. "Let's do it this way." We took our teacher handbooks and we kept all the old guidelines, but we added the 10 givens for that year and we tried to work with both. At the end of the year, I knew that they were ready to let the old guidelines go. After that, everyone had a pretty high comfort level, so together we took out the old guidelines and we threw them away. And so now when we look at the 10 givens, we say, "This is the way we do business."

Clearly, another of Principal Joy's major priorities was to start early on to collect data on the many sources of issues and activities going on in the school. She asked herself, "What else could I look at besides just state test scores? What did I need to see?" She started tracking parent complaints, retentions, and suspensions, and at about this time Country Elementary started to see things happen. Once the implementation of the WOW work started, the staff noticed a drop in complaints and an increase in parent involvement and volunteer time. They also noticed a change in attendance at events such as back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences. They were running close to 100% attendance at the conferences and, if for some reason a parent couldn't attend, the staff contacted the parents and attempted to rearrange the meeting time and communicated their continuing interest in meeting.

The CLSR representative notes that the staff of Country Elementary has

> paid very, very serious attention to a whole host of common and uncommon ways of measuring success and success with

youngsters, with community engagement, and so they have been a lesson for everyone and they share it widely about what should we be collecting here in the way of real artifacts and measures of what's going on. Staff engagement, student engagement, and the whole idea of having the data—the evidence pervades their teacher talk all the time. It is literally embedded in all their school improvement plans. The school has had an influence [both] inside the district [and] well beyond the district. It's a place that shares everything. The level of collegial work here is extraordinary and it's resulted in a great deal of success for other places.

The final major initiative of Country Elementary's administration and faculty was to find ways of gaining parental commitment to the parents' role in their child's education. Principal Joy and the staff knew they needed to raise the expectations of the family as well as of the students, especially for students from low-income families. The teachers needed parent support to make school important and to help in the reform itself by providing their time to volunteer in classrooms to support student learning. Faculty also knew that to be a state Four Star School with high-achieving students, student attendance was critical. Finally, the staff knew they had to bridge the gap between social classes in the school.

Initially, parent complaints were high and parent participation was limited. However, Principal Joy and her staff did not remain resigned to the common perception that these parents, like their children, had low expectations for learning and that school was a holding place until adolescence and a job after high school. When Principal Joy first arrived, parent complaints and student discipline were consuming her time. She looked to the faculty and asked, "Why?" So they started to look at their parent communication and interaction patterns. They went to parents and asked, "When and where can we meet and talk with you?" The parents responded and said, "At the Wal-Mart." It was a neutral place, where the power of the professional was reduced and the parents were not put in the position of feeling inadequate for not supporting their child's teacher and the school's work.

After a few attempts at finding new ways of involving parents, the staff of Country Elementary latched on to an idea of a back-to-school night where the faculty performed a skit making fun of

themselves and the norms of school. Principal Joy then took over and talked to the parents alone while the faculty and students prepared a treat for the parents on the school grounds. She asked the parents to commit to just two things: to get their children to school each and every day and to review their homework. She encouraged the parents not to *do* the homework, but just to *review* it. She also invited the parents to come to school any time they wanted to see what was going on with their children. Following are the words of one of the school's parent volunteers, who spells out the change in attitude and the nature of the invitation the school offers parents:

> A parent is a child's first teacher. And when we bring our kids to here, we don't relinquish that role. We become part of a team and there's a real team feeling and that increases the comfort level. We'll hear teachers say, "What can we do to help your child? You know, a parent knows a child better then anybody else can know that child—how can we help?" When you have that level of communication, you get a much higher comfort level.
>
> I was encouraged to become a substitute because I worked well with students and there was a need in the school. We know the kids, the rules, and they aren't as disruptive. A lot of our children, especially children with learning disabilities, are negatively affected when there's disruption or change in the routine, and having somebody that they see almost every day, you know, makes that transition very easy for them.

Motivation for Change

The motivation to change Country Elementary into a school for all students can be traced back to Principal Joy's own child and her frustration with teachers who told her that her son could not learn because of dyslexia. She knew as a parent and educator that her son was bright and outgoing. She knew he was competent to learn and caring of others. She knew he needed alternative pathways to the usual visual and paper-and-pencil approaches to learning to read. She believed that the school needed to be ready to teach all students—not just those who

come ready to learn what the teacher has decided is important and then in the manner that works for only about 60% of the student population.

Simply put, Principal Joy argued that each student had to be successful each day and that the faculty's job was to figure out how to achieve this. She would provide the time and resources for them to learn how, but they had to decide how to change their instruction to reach all the students of Country Elementary. She was committed to results, becoming the leading data collector and school data scribe, recording both quantitative and qualitative measures of student performance, parent involvement, and professional development of staff.

Principal Joy's other driving urge was for each parent to have high expectations for his or her child. Again, from her own personal experience as a parent and special educator, she knew that school people often made parents feel worse about their child's performance. Many parents of Country Elementary refused to enter the school because of their fear of ridicule and embarrassment. In Principal Joy's word's again,

> At parent-teacher conference time, I got to the point that some families had just refused to come. So, I just asked them why. One family, which had a number of children in this school, told me—they said, "You know we did not finish school and, when we went to school, school was not a good place for us to be. Now you want us to come back so you can tell us how we've also now failed as a parent." And I said that's not what we're going to do here. But, you know what? They didn't have enough trust to come and try it.

Now, the school attendance—at 98.5%—is above the state average of 95.5%, parents are attending almost 100% of their parent conferences, and there have been fewer than 20 parent complaints per year for the last three years.

The final urge that drove Principal Joy was a desire to lead her faculty to become their own best resources to one another. She wanted to see her teachers as risk takers and inventors of an enriching curriculum and engaging instruction. She supported teachers in scheduling an hour of collaboration time for grade levels and special educators four days each week.

TRANSFORMING BRIGHT LAKE SCHOOL

Context

In 1992, Bright Lake was a school of 650 students, Grades 1–8, organized into 10 multiage teams. It grew to 1,000 by 1997 and so a second K–4 school was opened. The original Bright Lake School remained a K–8 school with about 600 students in this growing suburban district located in New England. The Bright Lake community is filled with high-tech companies, light industry, big box stores, and a supportive professional class of employees. The school has primarily middle-class parents and is above average in academic achievement. All but one of the 50 students with individual educational plans (IEPs) were placed and served within the school environment.

When its new principal, Dr. Terry, arrived in 1992, she found a school board committed to multiage structures, teacher empowerment, and technology integration. The school board was student centered and committed to teaching an enriched curriculum that integrated technology into the classroom. The board empowered a team of four middle school teachers to design their image of "a new Mercury team" to push the "leading edge" toward technology integration and student-centered learning. The team of teachers was given the opportunity to re-create themselves in all ways based upon their beliefs about how a school should be.

These four pioneers, along with the supportive school board, launched a yearlong planning effort that resulted in an open-design learning environment attached to the old traditional school structure and culture. Two other Grade 1–4 houses were also a part of the redesigned space. While the rest of the school had fairly traditional box-like classroom spaces, the culture in the elementary school was not necessarily so traditional. The multiage and individualization traditions of the English primary school had strong and deep roots within the elementary grades. However, the "upper houses" (Grades 5–8) tended to look like young junior high schools, like so many other middle schools of that day and age.

The school board also appointed a full-time technology thinker and planner who worked with staff to design teacher

and student tools to enhance their mutual and independent work and integration of technology. All teacher teams were organized into multiage "houses" made up of 4 teachers and 80–100 students spanning four grade levels. Dr. Terry inherited 8 houses with their teacher teams, some fully committed to the emergent ideas of student centeredness and technology integration, and a significant portion of traditional middle school teachers operating in a traditional school culture. They all were in teams, but many of the teachers in the upper houses behaved as soloists or worked in dyads within their groups of four without having bought into the school board's vision.

Dr. Terry describes what it was like when she first arrived on the job:

> The district's philosophy and vision was being implemented by the Mercury Team [during its second year in the new build-ing addition]. The feeling was, first of all, that we have the vision of what it's supposed to look like, but we don't have the road map. We don't know exactly what the practices need to be and, perhaps most importantly, we don't know how to get there. We don't know what all the essential elements look like in practice; we could describe them in visionary ways and guiding-our-practices sorts of ways, but not in ways that we could say, "Here are the forms. Here's what it looks like. Here's what you do on Monday morning, and here's what you do on Tuesday."

The school's achievement profile is displayed in Tables 1.2–1.5.

Table 1.2   Bright Lake 2003 Achievement Data in English Language Arts, Grade 8—Percentage of Students Achieving at the Standard or Better

	Bright Lake	*District*	*State*
Reading for Understanding	73%	74%	62%
Reading Interpretation	48%	53%	36%
Writing Effectiveness	79%	79%	66%
Writing Conventions	68%	69%	52%

Table 1.3   Bright Lake 1999–2003 Achievement Data in English Language Arts, Grade 8—Percentage of Students Achieving at the Standard or Better

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Reading for Understanding	80%	62%	67%	68%	73%
Reading Interpretation	62%	29%	48%	42%	48%
Writing Effectiveness	77%	66%	75%	69%	79%
Writing Conventions	69%	67%	64%	55%	68%

Table 1.4   Bright Lake 2003 Achievement Data in Mathematics, Grade 8—Percentage of Students Achieving at the Standard or Better

	Bright Lake	District	State
Skills	74%	79%	67%
Concepts	55%	60%	40%
Problem Solving	63%	64%	48%

Table 1.5   Bright Lake 1998–2003 Achievement Data in Mathematics, Grade 8—Percentage of Students Achieving at the Standard or Better

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Skills	64%	78%	71%	76%	82%	74%
Concepts	60%	49%	48%	46%	60%	55%
Problem Solving	36%	59%	54%	53%	62%	63%

Key Concepts and Actions

When Dr. Terry arrived, parents were concerned about the changes and did not understand what the teams were trying to correct. Dr. Terry decided not to force other teams to follow suit before the teachers had the necessary capacity. Instead of trying to spread the change further, as the board expected, she tried to slow things down, to focus on creating a professional learning community throughout the school, and to raise teacher and community understanding about the core values and guiding principles of the school. The staff were concerned about the expectations of both the school board and principal to implement this model.

One thing Dr. Terry felt it was important to do in her first year was to reexamine student-centered teaching and learning. She formed a Program Council, a governing body made up of representatives of all teams and all parts of the school, and spent most of her first year examining every word in the draft vision/mission statement. The Program Council reexamined this statement, wordsmithed it, argued about it, hassled it, and worked it through time after time until the entire thing was rewritten. Interestingly enough, not much of its real substance was changed. The original vision was pretty appropriate, and the Program Council was now in full support of the values and principles.

Dr. Terry was not surprised that the statement wasn't changed much, because it matched the picture that she had in her head before she ever found Bright Lake. There was a sense of rightness about it and the teachers also had the sense of rightness; it's just that they hadn't had any opportunity to dig in deeply and develop the common understanding they now had. Having developed a shared vision among themselves and with the school board, Dr. Terry and the staff shared it with various community groups, including the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and at community forums.

After the first year, as the community controversy heated up, Dr. Terry realized that she needed a structure to organize and facilitate the community dialogue. She created the Families-as-Partners Council, a representative group of parents drawn from each of the houses that met once a month to consider the same issues of vision and direction as did the Program Council, but specifically from the community and parent perspective. The community conversations continued, along with the Program Council conversations, over the course of several years. The two councils met independently, with the principal as the glue binding the two together, systematically creating a coherent learning community committed to building practices that supported the vision and guiding principles of the school.

During the second year, the Mercury Team was running as fast as it could to continue to draw the road map and develop the infrastructure needed to implement a learner-centered, technology-enhanced model of teaching and learning. Instilling parent or consumer confidence became paramount. In year two, Dr. Terry invited two researchers to evaluate the work of the Mercury

Team. During the qualitative study, the parents identified a number of challenges. First, parents found the individualized planning formats to be long, confusing, complex, and filled with detail. They could not tell what was going on with their child's performance as the team moved from letter grades to extensive narratives. The parents wanted letter grades as a way to compare their children's performance with children from other schools. Dr. Terry recognized that parents needed to be involved in developing a progress-reporting system that provided them with the information they wanted about their children. Second, parents complained about the appearance of chaos when they observed in the Mercury Team's house. The team then developed new traffic patterns using their movable walls and storage cubbies in order to give the students clear physical boundaries to help them determine where they should be at any given time.

Then, Dr. Terry commissioned another survey of parents and learned that parents wanted more communication links to the classroom. The team responded with a concept of a Thursday Folder, which included outlines of units under study and examples of students' work and other exhibits. Parents were asked to review the folder Friday through Sunday and to return it to a team member Monday morning. Teachers then reviewed the parent comments, made any adjustments related to parent or student reflections on the previous week's work, and planned with the student for the coming week in individual weekly conferences.

The next major action step during this period of scaling up was to respond to the state's new standards. Dr. Terry was a leading contributor to the state framework and brought her expertise to the staff at Bright Lake. She saw the standards as a friend and an opportunity for school teams to focus their instruction and classroom assessment clearly in a common direction without sacrificing their commitment to student-centeredness. She also used the standards and the corresponding focus on assessment as a way to bring a degree of accountability to bear on her expectation that each team would build their capacity to eventually undertake the essential practices embodied in the vision and principles. She knew the data required by the state standards would demonstrate to teachers and community members that the new teaching practices were having a positive impact on student performance. This would bring credibility to those new practices that parents and the community were so nervous about.

Two continuing issues confronted Dr. Terry and the Program Council. One was supporting new teams with professional development resources (i.e., time and funds) to help them get on board with the student-centered vision and to begin instituting new teaching practices. The second issue was the scale-up rate. The board and superintendent had taken the position that every team had to begin to look just like Mercury Team at a rate of at least one team per year. This fueled the opposition's fear and put extra pressure on Mercury Team, which was still on a very steep learning curve, ironing out their newly created practices and procedures. With the Program Council, Dr. Terry instituted "a school of choice" plan, in which each house would write its own program description, describing the core values and education strategy or process, and then parents would be able to select the house they wanted their child to attend. This eventually led to an action-planning process, which served the school well on a number of fronts.

Finally, a major task for Dr. Terry was to implement her focus on assessment and an action-planning process driven by each team. Each team was asked to analyze data on their own students' performance and to design annual improvement plans, looking hard at their instructional strategies and processes. This assessment strategy, along with the school-of-choice policy, ultimately became the means for Dr. Terry to protect the pioneers on the Mercury Team. The data did show, in time, that the Mercury Team strategies were producing high student performance, a fact that effectively reduced the community and teacher resistance and paved the way for phasing out the more teacher-centered, separate curriculum and instructional processes employed by the more traditional teams. This action-planning process also began the internal accountability processes for *all* teams. Accountability began with expecting each team to describe their approach, instructional strategies, and curricular topics and structure. Over time, it evolved into a structured action-planning process in which every team was expected to show specific instructional approaches and improvements in student performance.

The ongoing building of assessment tools to measure student learning also measured the intellectual and affective skills embedded in the state standards. Dr. Terry inquired regularly about student performance and student performance measures. Her lasting contribution to the school as a whole was to help staff build action plans based on data. Their action plans were built

upon state assessments, such as the New Standards Reference Exams, state Writing and Math Portfolios, and norm-referenced tests. The school's test scores continued to soar as staff made adjustments annually based upon student performance data.

As test scores continued to improve, teachers were concerned about their failure to assess what mattered most to them—the love of learning. The tests, however challenging, failed to capture the generative nature of their work, their student-centeredness, their commitment to a lifelong love of learning and to developing a sense of responsibility and ownership in their students. Dr. Terry explains, "The only way we're going to get [students] turned on is to invite them, to cause them to become engaged, and so we just continue to expose them to as much as we can."

Toward this end, the last tool she developed with the staff in her last year was a student investment rubric to measure student engagement. Her Program Council worked for the better part of a year, examining the state standards, reviewing model assessment tools focusing on engagement, responsibility, communicating, and persistence. Together, they used their own experience, their commitment to measure what mattered most to them (not just state academic assessments), and national models to build an assessment system to use across the system on a quarterly basis to assess students' "investment" in their own learning.

Motivation for Change

Clearly, the dynamic urge of Bright Lake School was embedded in its developing vision and its culture of technology-enhanced learner-centeredness: student voices, values, and personal visions leading to higher levels of student engagement and responsibility for their own learning. A parent once remarked, "My child has more self-confidence than I do. She is encouraged to do anything, be anything, she wants here."

Dr. Terry's urge was to see that student learning was tied to the standards, yet powerfully connected to students' interests and personal context. The guiding principle was for all students to learn what we want them to learn in ways that had deep meaning for them and really mattered to them. In addition, the battle cry was to "making learning the constant and time the variable." Also central to the Bright Lake vision was to see students gain increased

self-confidence in and responsibility for their own learning. Dr. Terry explains,

> We don't give up on any kids. When you try to think about what kids don't make it, I guess I'd have to say no kids don't make it here. In the almost six years that I've been here, there have only been two students that we've had to finally set up an alternative placement for, and that was because of excessive violence to themselves and others. I guess that is about the only kind of child that I can imagine not making it here: It is one who would present a danger to himself or to others. We don't fail kids. We don't tell them they're not making it. They don't walk out of here thinking, "I was a dummy," or "I didn't make it," or "I have an F average."

Dr. Terry wanted to take learner-centered concepts to scale. To demonstrate the principles of learner-centeredness within standards-based reform is not only possible, but those principles are the primary vehicle for all students to delve deeply into higher-order thinking and learning. Clearly, Bright Lake transformed itself from a more traditional middle school to a distinct set of families of teachers, students, and parents that embraced a shared purpose and set of principles to guide their continuous learning. Bright Lake eventually got to scale because faculty, student, and parent engagement reached new levels of respect and came to trust in a model of learning that encouraged individual and group learning that set no ceiling. They truly unleashed the power of students to explore and discover what mattered most to them.

TRANSFORMING CITY HIGH

Context

City High is part of a major metropolitan center in the Midwest. The high school student population consists of 3,100 students, which is large even by urban-suburban standards. It is well-balanced in terms of its diversity: 59% Caucasian and 41% minority (36% African American, 4% Latino, 1% Asian). The free- and reduced-lunch population is 30% across all groups. The

district will be a minority-majority district by the end of this decade.

In the past five years, the high school completed a major renovation to upgrade its classroom environments and integrate technology into the curriculum of the school. It has enjoyed a stable and supportive administration at both the district and school levels, including its counseling staff, for a number of years. In the county, City High students are achieving at the highest level as compared to all its urban and suburban neighbors. It attained this ranking over the past two years. City High has traditionally been among the top performing school for three decades as measured by SAT scores, community surveys, state assessments, and state overall rankings for each subgroup of its population. Each student subgroup in the school is at the highest level of achievement in the state (see Table 1.6).

In 1998, a tipping point occurred. According to Gladwell (2000),

A tipping point is really the power of context. What really matters are little things. If you want to change beliefs and behavior of your staff, you need to create community around them, where these beliefs could be practical, expressed, and nurtured. (p. 173)

Principal John describes what occurred at City High in the following statement:

I think the one event that crystallized the philosophy for us was when a few years ago one of our performing groups went downtown to put on a holiday show and the parents and the relatives were all there to watch and there were some students who were missing from the group: Students with disabilities who were being included in this program were left behind. I think what really struck us was that this is not the kind of access that we want for all kids at our school. So that was part of the event that really caught our attention and made us go back and look at what we were doing and how we were doing it and what was motivating our actions.

The outcome was the promotion of the universal access policy.

Table 1.6   State Assessment for City High by Subgroup, 1998-2003

	1989–1999	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2002–2003 State Average
African American						
Language Arts	51%	51%	52%	50%	61%	38%
Math	26%	37%	43%	43%	56%	35%
Special Education						
Language Arts	31%	36%	24%	29%	25%	18%/28%
Math	27%	31%	28%	41%	33%	18%/35%
Free/Reduced Lunch						
Language Arts	—	—	—	42%	56%	48%
Math	—	—	—	48%	56%	47%
General Population						
Language Arts	76%	77%	76%	75%	84%	68%
Math	60%	68%	71%	74%	80%	68%

In addition to this change for students with disabilities, the district hired a new African American superintendent who had been the City High principal prior to Principal John. He and Principal John continued to examine the performance data for students in different racial and ethnic minority groups as compared to their Caucasian peers, and they concluded that the achievement gap at City High needed to receive the same attention they placed on any individual not achieving as expected. They fed back the data to the staff and asked them to start to experiment with alternatives for raising student achievement.

For the past five years, City High has been outperforming its neighbors in diverse urban communities. Principal John and his staff of 215 professionals, 43 instructional assistants, and 120 community volunteers credit their renewed commitment to expecting all students to perform at high levels in part to the creation of a Learning Center. The center, by accessing all the resources of the school's classrooms, provides a place where any student can receive tutorial help, practice test taking, and make up missed assignments. The school also created service-learning opportunities and student study groups. The faculty's persistent commitment to creating accessible curricula, providing differentiated instruction, using criterion-referenced examinations, and writing rubrics across the disciplines have been the keys to their success. The district is the only one in the county accepting tuition students from neighboring districts. Over 100 students per year choose to come to City High from outside the district, generating over $400,000 in tuition payments.

Key Concepts and Actions

The tipping point sparked by the choir snafu led Principal John to gather together all administrative and counseling staff to review what happened. The staff called the parents, and together they laid out their concept of universal access. Principal John explains this process:

> We stepped back and looked at whether it was the classroom or vocational education, work experience for students, extracurricular activities—whatever. We stepped back and said, "Now, how does any student access those opportunities?"

We wanted to have the same pathways, the same processes, and the same procedures applicable to all kids in our school. And so that's how we got started and that's how we sort of do, disseminate, and permeate that philosophy throughout our staff and our community.

When Principal John and his staff first looked at how they were educating all students to high levels, the academic arena and success in the classroom came to the top of their list of areas that needed to be addressed. They felt they needed one process and one procedure by which all kids could gain tutoring help and classroom support, regardless of what label they had or didn't have after their name or whether they were in advanced placement courses or remedial courses: The labels should, they believed, make no difference. They wanted a situation in which all students could receive the support services they needed to be successful. They started with a regular education arena in which they had various resource centers for special education, which was a real duplication of effort. Principal John suggested the following:

Let's put them [the resources] all together and let them work together on behalf of all kids, all the teachers teaching all kids. So that one room does not have a label on it that says, "Smart kids only," "Stupid kids only," "Left-handed kids only." It just says "Kids." And so all kids access that room.

All teachers and support staff work on behalf of all students in the Learning Center. They used it as a model to spread teaching resources into the classroom. The special education resource teachers became co-teachers in the four academic and elective areas. The teachers have been able to model the Learning Center concept throughout the building. Principal John explains,

I think if you were to ask the teachers in the classroom what they have found since we instituted this, [they would say] that along with the high expectations that we have for our students in the classroom, we now have a way to provide the high levels of support that the students need to reach those expectations. And the teachers find that those students who routinely use the learning center come to

class better prepared, more informed, and able to contribute
to the class. That generates a lot of other positive things
that go on in the classroom when more students under-
stand what's going on and you can get into some discus-
sion. Now, there's no reason for anyone not to meet those
levels of expectations because we have the support in place
for all kids. And that's been a tremendous positive impact
on our classrooms.

At the same time that they created the Learning Center,
Principal John and the faculty began to focus their full attention
on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Program coherence
in this large comprehensive high school came mostly through a dis-
cipline- by-discipline study of state standards and their alignment
across the disciplines of the school. Principal John made it per-
fectly clear that his department chairs were personally to see that
the curriculum was aligned with state standards.

One excellent example of faculty collaboration across the cur-
riculum was the staff selection of writing as a means of creating a
focus on communication and language arts. They built a writing
rubric through their inservice work and expected all teachers—
not just the English teachers—to use it in their academic areas.
Next, they took on algebra, eliminating all math classes below
algebra. They provided students with a series of choices and asked
teachers to experiment with different ways to support all students
from double periods (sequenced together or separated each day) to
a greater use of manipulatives, more pacing, and more direct and
ongoing reinforcement of concepts to be learned.

Next, they built criterion-referenced assessments that all
teachers in a discipline used. They required essay exams in every
discipline and study groups for teachers and students to study test
data. In Principal John's words, "Tests are two-way instruments:
What did kids learn? And what did teachers learn about their
teaching? Exams are for both teachers and students. Each should
learn what happened and ask, 'Why?'"

Then, department chairpersons gathered staff and identified
two things they would do differently the next time they taught
that course. They surveyed staff and shared what worked for
them. Continuous attention to data, continuous attention to what

worked and what needed to be changed, and staff time to study and discuss findings were the heart and soul of their professional development activity—all focused on teaching and learning. The alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was funda-mental to their success and the principal and department chairs' highest priority in the school.

As the school's minority enrollment grew (the central office shares data monthly by subgroup with each school leader in the district), so did the achievement gap between White and Black students at City High, Principal John noted. He took the data to the staff two years ago and said, "It's unconscionable." He chal-lenged the staff to consider a way to get minority students to take accelerated and eventually junior and senior high advanced placement courses. He wanted to create honor students. He felt that minority students needed to see their peers taking the tough-est curriculum in the school and being successful in those courses.

So, last year, they selected a minority cohort of students—35 primarily African American boys and girls—and put them in selected homerooms with 10 teachers, providing the teachers with a common preparation period and lunchtime to collaborate and follow these students as a group across the curriculum. They also provided inservice sessions for the teachers examining belief systems, instructional strategies, and assessment literacy. The students were distributed in groups of five or six in selected classes and formed study groups to facilitate their success in a more challenging set of courses. In 2003–2004, Principal John selected 54 students and 10 new teachers to have the same experiences and deliberately included Latino students in this cohort. He intends to use this cohort format to scale up student learning and teacher instructional practices year by year. Table 1.7 highlights the success of the cohort in its first year as compared to the peer groups. He is also using a series of minority-oriented achievement grants to pay for students to take advance placement exams as often as they want.

City High has also built a ninth-grade orientation program called PantherQuest to introduce new students to the school. Upper-class students, under teacher supervision, run the program each July. Approximately two thirds of the incoming class partici-pated in learning the traditions and history of the schools, as well

Table 1.7   Cohort Achievement Comparison at City High School

	Number of Students	Average GPA	Average Credits
Minority Cohort	35	3.22	6.37
PantherQuest Cohort	481	3.06	6.20
School Total	3,014	2.80	5.83

as its expectations, programs of study, learning resources, and facilities.

Motivation for Change

There are a number of dynamic urges that motivated the spirit of the leadership and staff at City High. Principal John's concept of universal access and his commitment to high expectations for all students are the driving forces to providing equity and quality instruction and support for all students. Principal John calculated the shift in the minority enrollment to majority in the next decade and believed that the school needed to reacculturate the students, faculty, and parents to believe that all students can achieve to high level if they are properly prepared. This fact, coupled with the current poor performance of minority students historically in the county and his own school, has made increasing minority student performance both a personal and a school mission. Principal John continues, along with his superintendent, to challenge the faculty and students directly with the achievement gap between student groups.

This urge, along with his 31-year association with the school, motivates him to maintain the school's tradition of success in the eyes of the staff and community. He related that for three decades City High has been considered the best large high school in the county. He is committed to continuing this into the fourth decade, and the City High faculty is committed to continuing to achieve at high levels. According to Principal John, the vision stays alive through the faculty and the ongoing development of its new and existing staff. His professional development commitment and budget are the keys to his success.

SUMMARY

As you see, all three stories demonstrate different aspects of trans-
formational change. The purpose of the schools became more
explicit and their guiding principles fundamentally changed. We
use these stories throughout the remaining chapters to demon-
strate different principles of structural dynamics. The next two
chapters introduce you to this new way of thinking and acting.