

INSIGHT

FEATURED ARTICLES

Leadership Focus

Texas' Shanna Peeples Named 2015 National Teacher of the Year 10
 Amarillo ISD English teacher Shanna Peeples, Texas Teacher of the Year, has been honored as the 2015 National Teacher of the Year.

The 84th Legislative Session: An Insider's Look at What Passed and What Didn't 12
 TASA Governmental Relations staff provide the "Capitol insider" perspective.

The Impact of Impact Aid 15
by Susan Buckley and Randy Hendricks
 School districts serving military bases face unique challenges. The Impact Aid law provides them with financial assistance.

2015 Dr. John R. Hoyle Memorial Administrative Leadership Institute 18
 "Leadership for Today and Tomorrow" is the theme of this year's 24-hour conference.

The New Normal 19
by Dr. Marvin Fairman and Tim Jackson
 School leaders are constantly navigating the gap between the old status quo and the new normal. It's never been more crucial that leaders master the art and skill of adaptation.

Superintendent Ricardo López Leads Mission CISD on a Mission to Promote Reading 22
by John Micklos, Jr.
 Participating in Read to Them's Texas Reads One Book program kicked off Mission CISD's efforts to transform its community through literacy.

Proactively Addressing Social Media Use by Texas Educators 25
by Elisabeth M. Krimbill, David P. Thompson, and Stacey L. Edmonson
 In this fast-paced world, it is critical that school leaders clearly address with staff their expectations regarding social media and online communication.

TSPRA Voice

Using Your Unique Communication Tools 29
by Tommy Brown
 Educators have access to tools others don't, and they must use them to spread the word about the good things happening in their schools.

The New Normal

Dr. Marvin Fairman and Tim Jackson

When was the last time you bought a roll of film to put into a camera? I'll make it easier for you — when was the last time you took a picture with a camera that used film? It's very likely the most recent picture you took was with your phone. If I'm right about that, I'd be willing to wager you weren't struck with wonder over the revolutionary nature of using a phone as a camera.

Why? Because taking high-resolution pictures with our phones and saving them as pixels onto a hard drive is hardly revolutionary anymore. It's the new normal.

If someone had told you 20 or 30 years ago that most Americans would one day be walking around with high-resolution, film-less cameras in their possession at all times, you might have thought that a strange and fanciful prediction. If someone told you the same thing today, you might say he or she has a firm grasp of the obvious. That's how the new normal works — things that just years before seemed like the stuff of science fiction now go unnoticed and unquestioned all day long.

The process of getting from the old status quo to the new normal is called adaptation. The gap between the old status quo and the new normal is fraught with challenges and filled with opportunities. We're not talking about phones and cameras now. We're talking now about your school district and the new normal.

The Art of Adaptation

In recent years the new normal for many superintendents and central office staff across the nation is to do more with less as a result of state legislatures creating unfunded mandates, eroding state and local financial support, and eroding support for public officials in general. During this same time frame, class size has been increasing, performance standards have been on the rise, and the populations being served are becoming more diverse with more economically disadvantaged students.

Superintendents and other key central office leaders are constantly navigating the gap between the old status quo and the new normal. It's never been more crucial that leaders master the art and skill of adaptation.

Adaptation is one of the 10 (essential) Dimensions of Organizational Health. In the context of organizational health, we define adaptation as that ability to tolerate stress and maintain stability while coping with the demands of the environment. Healthy organizations adapt. Period. The unwillingness or inability to adapt is a key indicator of an unhealthy organization.

Doing more with less doesn't always translate into adaptation. Sometimes it translates into extinction. When organisms in the biological world fail to adapt, they cease to exist. When organizations in the institutional world fail to adapt, they cease to be effective. In the most extreme cases, organizations also become extinct. Leading up to that there is a long, sustained run of resisting change.

Here's the bottom line: You don't get to choose whether or not there will be change. However, you do get to choose how you handle it.

Choosing the path of Adaptation is about managing change that is thrust upon the organization, whether from economic, political, social, or other external sources. The healthiest expression of adaptation is when the organization transitions from a coping organization to a changing one and ultimately into a growing organization.

Making that transition is often the difference between a district that thrives or struggles to survive. If we do not adapt and change effectively and take care of our “customers,” someone else will. Throughout Texas and the rest of the U.S., parents have more options ranging from charter and private schools to coordinating efforts of home-schooling parents.

The Levels of Adaptation

Adaptation is one of three dimensions of organizational health that consistently demonstrates a statistically significant relationship with student performance. (The other two dimensions that correlate directly with student performance are goal focus and cohesiveness.)

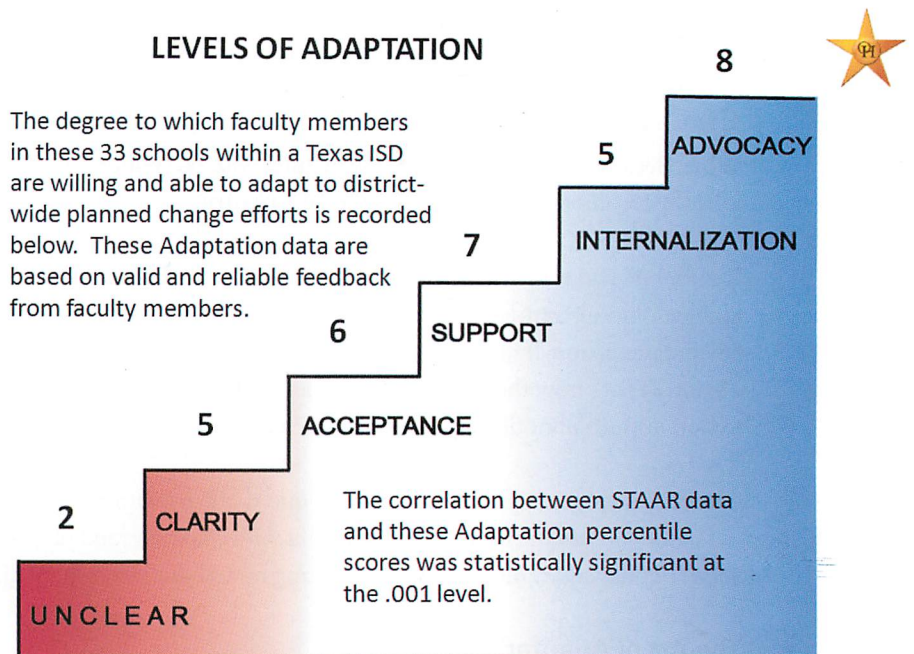
Experience and hard data tell us that the school’s ability to adapt in times of needed change has a direct impact on learning. That is reason enough for leaders to be proactive in sharpening their adaptation skills. It is also important that principals model healthy habits of adaptation for faculty and school populations — because teachers, students, and parents are coping with change as much as anyone in the district office.

Here’s the big challenge: Not all adaptation is created equal. If measured correctly, a school’s overall willingness and capacity to adapt and change can be accurately placed along a continuum from lack of clarity on the low end to advocacy on the high end. Because adaptation is so crucial to student performance and the overall health of a school, it is one of the first scores we examine closely when we get the data back from an annual assessment.

In the figure below, we have recorded the number of schools in a Texas school district that are functioning at each of the six levels of adaptation. Seven of these schools are in the “red zone” and are functioning below

the 33rd percentile, 13 are in the “white zone” and are able to function independently within their teams, and 13 schools are in the “blue zone” and are able to function interdependently.

Here is a snapshot of what each level tells us about the schools in that group:



- **UNCLEAR** – A majority of teachers are getting mixed messages from principals and central office personnel regarding these change efforts and are unclear about the expected changes so they are in a holding pattern.
- **CLARITY** – This typically means that principals are viewed as the message carriers. Principals are making it clear that these changes are coming from the district office and there’s no choice but to comply.
- **ACCEPTANCE** – These data clearly show that the principals have been able to convince a majority of the faculty to accept needed changes. They have a “want to” but may not know “how to” make the needed changes. Therefore, one can anticipate they will respond well to training and support.
- **SUPPORT** – These data clearly show principals have been able to work collaboratively with team leaders and have helped the faculty gain understanding and support for these change efforts. These faculty leaders will work with their team members to accomplish these efforts because they have ownership of these needed changes.
- **INTERNALIZATION** – At this level, the majority of teachers have internalized the need for these change efforts and will work with both horizontal and vertical teams to make them.
- **ADVOCACY** – At this level, team leaders and faculty members are willing to hold themselves and others accountable for results. Systems are in place so these teams can work interdependently.

We know that the commitment levels of teachers in these 33 schools are being greatly impacted by their principals' leadership and specifically the principals' skills for helping teachers adapt and change to meet the new normal. Highly effective principals are proactive adapters and build a culture that supports proactive change. Some of their less productive counterparts are status quo, reluctant, or reactive adapters.

This kind of reliable feedback is invaluable to district leaders who want to capitalize on the skills of their most effective principals and help less effective principals step up their game. Having evidence where they are on the adaptation continuum is an important first step in increasing the leadership capacity of all principals.

With more than three decades of research data, we know that the quality of leadership provided by principals is the single most important factor in improving student performance. The degree to which principals understand and support district-wide change efforts will be transmitted to their faculties verbally and nonverbally. How principals transmit their messages will have a direct impact on their faculties' attitudes and receptivity to these changes and it will also impact the teaching and learning environment and student success.

We needn't be fearful or resistant to change, but we must not be careless about it either. By becoming better at adapting to new normals we find ways to make change productive rather than unnecessarily disruptive. Knowing where we stand in the midst of change is crucial — and it's why we champion the benefits of annual district-wide assessments.

The Climate of Change

Let's go back to the conversation about film in cameras for a moment to see what we can learn about the importance of assessing where things are and where they're headed. In 1992, Bill Gates slipped into the back of the room during Warren Buffet's annual gathering of elite investors and captains of industry. Buffet had invited Gates to join the group that weekend, but since he'd arrived late and slipped in the back, Gates' presence was unnoticed by everyone except Buffet, who stood at the front of the room facilitating the meeting.

At one point, Buffet suggested they go around the room and have each participant name a stock they were bullish on. Shortly someone asked, "What about Kodak?" Without hesitation, Gates said, "Kodak is dead."

Heads turned, eyebrows raised — some were amused, some were intrigued, some scoffed. Gates was still in his wunderkind years, and many of the older heads in the room were not conversant in the world of personal computers. Buffet enjoyed this kind of disruptive exchange so he asked Gates to elaborate. Gates went on to explain that the then-embryonic digital revolution guaranteed film's extinction. He went on to explain how changes in the very devices we use would disrupt traditional camera sales as well. Gates was emphatic in 1992 that Kodak was dominating a dying category — and they didn't even know it.

Gates was absolutely right that day about what would happen to Kodak as a company. But here's the thing: If you'd gone out that day in 1992 and dumped all your Kodak stock based on Gates' prediction,

you would have lost a lot of money. Kodak over performed for a few years before the bottom fell out and the company filed for bankruptcy.

The point is this: It's important to know where things are trending, but it is equally important to know where things stand currently. Sometimes we need to move quickly and sometimes we need to just need to monitor a situation so we'll know the right time to make a change. Assessments and feedback are crucial first steps in nurturing a habit of adaptation within a district.

Someday the current new normal you're dealing with will become the status quo — and then you might spot a "new" new normal on the horizon. That's the nature of our business. There will never be a time when it is not advantageous to strategically invest in the leadership development of principals, because they are in the pivotal position of inhibiting or facilitating change. In the current new normal it is not only advantageous to invest in leadership development, it is critical. Investing in your current leaders is the first and best way to do more with less. ■

Dr. Marvin Fairman is the president of Organizational Health: Diagnostic and Development Corp., and Tim Jackson is the executive director of Fried Green Media.

NOTE: The Bill Gates/Warren Buffet story is based on an account of the event found in "The Snowball: Warren Buffet and the Business of Life" by Alice Schroeder.



The banner features a watercolor-style illustration of a city skyline in shades of purple, blue, and yellow. The text "TASA/TASB 2015 austin Convention" is prominently displayed in the center. Below the illustration, the website "tasa.tasb.org" is listed. On the right side, an orange box contains the text: "Speakers who inspire. Learning that empowers. Conversations that engage."

TASA/TASB 2015 austin Convention

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