

Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation

Book Review by Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

Peggy Silva reviews *Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation* by Phillip Schlechty.

Schlechty pulls no punches in declaring his purpose for writing. He states that he wrote “to help leaders design school systems that invite inventions, as opposed to systems that mandate implementation of programs that will serve only to shore up for a brief time a system of schooling that must either be changed in fundamental ways or die.” He organizes his thinking around structures he defines as social systems: recruitment; knowledge transmission; power and authority; evaluation; directional systems; boundary systems.

We are used to examining a school’s organization and the impact on student and teacher behavior. Schlechty turns that perspective around to wonder how the structure and the culture affect learning. Each chapter addresses a single structure and creates a strong argument for the need for transformation. He borrows C.M. Christensen’s ideas of disruptive innovations as imperatives for schools, if they want to move from “compliance to engagement.” He expresses his frustration with structures that accept oxymorons in design—although he defends studying as a legitimate school activity, he states that as much studying goes on in a school restroom as exists in a study hall.

Schlechty argues that disruptive innovations require “supportive structural and cultural changes,” and that new ideas never receive their due because of the penchant for “insisting that only programs based on convincing data are worthy of support.”

The author’s arguments will find strong support from his readers. The strength of this text, however, lies in the series of key questions at the end of every chapter, questions that could be used to examine and redesign existing social systems. In his chapter on knowledge transmission systems, Schlechty states the importance of discussion about norms within specific contexts.

When arguments are developed, how are they

grounded, and do people agree on this grounding? For example, when a person advances an argument is it justified by research, by moral tradition, or by conventional ways of doing things? Which of these knowledge bases are viewed by others in the school as valid grounds, and which of these knowledge bases are rejected by others?

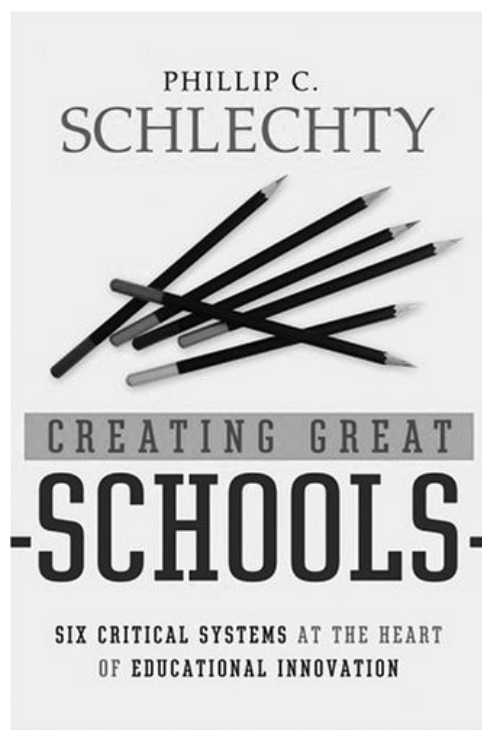
In his exploration of power and authority systems, Schlechty asks:

Which persons or offices have control over the resources that provide the bases of power (for example, who can hire and fire, bestow status, or confirm reputations), and how diffused or centralized is this control?

He further asks whether rewards are linked to maintenance of the current system, as opposed to rewards available to support the change effort. In discussing boundary issues within school structures, he asks questions about accountability norms and mechanisms to protect those who work in school from “dysfunctional conflicts with...outside groups.”

Although Schlechty does not explicitly address issues of race, class, or gender, the tenets of equity are embedded in each one of the series of questions asked at the end of every chapter.

School communities involved in studying their system prior to suggesting transformative changes will find this text a valuable tool. School leaders exploring the effectiveness of existing social structures will find essential perspectives in the questions the author poses. Consulting agencies will find guiding questions to push organizations’ thinking. As the author states in his introduction, “Those who lead systemic change need to be armed with every bit of insight available.” Schlechty offers a framework for questioning existing structures and the reason to embrace disruptive innovation. ■



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