

Setting Constructive Rebellion in Motion

Amidst a pandemic and a social justice movement, school leaders have an opportunity to prepare for the aftermath of tumult

BY SUZETTE D. LOVELY

Throughout our lives, society pushes us to conform. Schools teach conformity starting in preschool, initially under the guise of safety. As students matriculate through the school system, they encounter a barrage of rules that implore them to do the right thing. Students are expected to listen quietly, raise their hand to be recognized, play nice, not talk back to the teacher, put their cell phones away and so on.

Character education and conscious discipline programs help children learn the conventions of appropriate public behavior. School rules exist as a means to protect young people from the damage that other young people might inflict.

However, by the time students enter adulthood, conformity is so ingrained they have no choice but to embrace it.

During the topsy-turvy times of COVID-19, superintendents have been forced to make bold moves. Taking pre-emptive measures takes courage. All summer long, we faced the uncertain prospects of when schools would reopen. Then we had to disappoint a nation of parents and children by announcing many schools would remain closed through fall or perhaps the entire first semester.

Education has entered an era of business as unusual. Yet with conformity and routines out the window, the time is ripe to break a few rules that long have needed to be broken.

Exposing Fault Lines

If we expect students to advance society and develop the mindset to solve local and global problems, our education system has to be less stifling. For example, the social justice movement sweeping the nation is forcing educators to take a hard look at how we treat students of color. School districts have joined corporations to issue public statements saying they support Black Lives Matter and will do more in the fight for racial equity in education.



Movements expose fault lines that existed well before the movement began. But when the protests stop, what will prevent us from settling back into our old ways? Historians point out that when people don't plan well for the aftermath of a tumultuous time, the aftermath tends not to be all that good. Whether Black Lives Matter will be a transformative moment for K-12 education depends on our ability as leaders to lay bare the vast inequities that continue to exist in our nation's schools.

Maintaining beliefs at odds with popular opinion is not enough to right a wrong. Martin Luther King Jr. pushed America down this path during the civil rights movement. Yet according to Jennie Ikuta, author of *Contesting Conformity: Democracy and the Paradox of Political Belonging*, King made clear there is no virtue in being a non-conformist simply to get attention and be different. Taking a stand against educational inequity must come without fear of standing alone.

How We Got Here

Organizations put tremendous pressure on their employees to conform, despite claims to the contrary. Workplace conformity takes on many forms. These include modeling the behavior of those in similar roles, preserving the status quo, acquiesc-

ing to group decisions and routinely agreeing with the opinions of higher-ups. Francesca Gino, author of "Let Your Workers Rebel" in *Harvard Business Review* (October 2016), says employees feel accepted and believe their views are more credible when these views are shared by others. Information is processed and internalized in a self-serving manner.

For educators, the predisposition to fit in starts early. New teachers are quickly indoctrinated into their building's culture by peers. Novices long to feel accepted and part of the team, making it difficult to resist social pressure or be on the wrong side of a disagreement.

As time passes, it's safer to allow the principal to resolve any major stand-offs than to openly confront a colleague or share an opposing point of view. Although conflict resolution training is a staple in schools, it's aimed at resolving conflicts among students rather than the adults who serve them. While many teachers rely on authoritarian methods to handle classroom conflicts — leading to a host of issues for students of color — they are conflict adverse when it comes to addressing tension with a colleague or parent.

As I reflect on my own journey in education, bringing conflicts to the surface was not something I relished. Like most, I was taught to be a

team player, go with the flow and not rock the boat. Rising through the ranks helped refine my conflict resolution skills. For example, during the decade I spent as deputy superintendent of human resources in two large California school districts, I became adept at using shuttle diplomacy to help mediate conflicts. When direct communication between a principal and his/her staff broke down, the union president and I would join forces to broker a cease-fire.

In the end, this strategy did not allow for the full airing of concerns nor did it encourage push-back against the conformity creep that permeates our system. What I failed to recognize was that by trying to keep disagreements at bay, the kind of employee engagement and deeper reflection the district claimed to be seeking became lost.

Strike a Balance

Not all forms of conformity are negative. Education codes and board policies help ensure laws are not broken and offer protections to students and employees. The principles of constructive conformity are also underpinned by district norms. But in order to evolve, schools have to strike a balance between conforming and nonconforming practices.



Suzette Lovely joined by Sean Covey, who contributed the foreword for her latest book, during AASA's 2020 National Conference on Education in San Diego, Calif.

Admiration for nonconformity is a business strategy embraced by many successful corporations. Startups hold up their willingness to buck convention as a badge of honor. In 2012, Apple's slogan "Think Different" paid homage to the crazy ones (Albert Einstein), the misfits (Bob Dylan), the troublemakers (Martin Luther King Jr.) and the square pegs in a round hole (Richard Branson). While the commercial suggested there was a social cost to being a rebel, it created an ideal that resonates with the American psyche.

Sadly, organizations — both public and private — often sabotage their own best intentions by espousing out-of-the-box thinking on one hand while establishing in-the-box practices on the other. Blending conformity with nonconformity takes yin and yang. We don't want a lack of conformity to give employees the impression they're free agents. Conversely, rigid structures limit a team's ability to come up with new ideas or find better solutions to problems.

Slashing Red Tape

In schools, we do a lot of talking but what are we actually saying? When superintendents allow team members to be candid, people become more committed to the work. After all, non-conformists aren't anarchists or malcontents. Instead, they are practical change agents who want to cut through red tape to bring better practices to bear. As system leaders, we can draw upon five strategies to set constructive rebellion in motion.

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Recognizing Constructive Acts of Rebels

Being dubbed a rebel conjures up a host of images — most of them negative. Yet to strengthen K-12 education's place in the world, constructive rebellion must be part of the equation. School leaders fixated on designing efficient processes and getting employees to go with the flow should rethink the merits of this approach.

No matter how turbulent the road ahead may be, there is a right way and wrong way to push back. For example, teachers have a long list of standards to

cover as students learn from home. Yet virtual learning plans require a high level of self-direction.

Simplicity is key. Is your distance learning program giving teachers the chance to explore, deviate and be creative? Now that we're a few months into the school year, ensure teachers are breaking the rules that should be broken. You'll recognize the difference through people's actions.

Constructive vs. Destructive Rebellion

Constructive Rebels	Destructive Rebels
Create	Complain
Ask questions	Make assertions
Display optimism	Display pessimism
Generate energy	Zap energy
Pinpoint causes	Point fingers
Focus on the mission	Focus on self
Attract	Alienate
Show passion	Show anger

SOURCE: *Ready for Anything* by Suzette Lovely

► **Define what needs to be done rather than how or who should do it.**

In partnership with the board of education, the job of the superintendent is to establish the direction for the district. However, once goals and priorities have been set, principals and teachers should decide how to get there and what resources they'll need to arrive successfully.

► **Ask questions of activism.**

Rather than take someone's word that a practice is best for everyone, ask for proof. Have people show or explain why their way is better than another way. Leaders who regularly ask "why?" or "how do you know?" push people beyond their comfort zone and give employees a reason to stay engaged.

► **Insist employees develop solutions.**

If low test scores are a problem, ask principals to share their fix-it plan. If poorly maintained facilities are an issue, invite maintenance staff to present their ideas to improve building conditions. When the leader turns team members loose to identify and remedy problems, staff is more inclined to own the results.

► **Become a champion of collective creativity.**

To foster collective creativity, people have to tell you what's wrong with things. At Pixar, screenplay writers, directors and mid-level production folks have "brain trust" meetings to assess movies as they are being made. To root out mediocrity, members of the brain trust list all the things they think "stink" about the movie in production. After the meeting, it's up to the director to figure out how to address the candid feedback. By giving the brain trust no power to mandate solutions, candor goes up and self-preservation goes down.

► **Make sure your audio matches your video.**

There's nothing worse than watching a video where a person's mouth is out of sync with the audio. Similarly, nothing hurts a superintendent's credibility more than saying one thing and doing another. Don't facilitate a *First, Break All the Rules* book study with the management team in the fall, only to forget the book ever existed by spring. It's hard for words to carry any weight when actions don't match.

One Bite at a Time

In the words of the late congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis, people should never be afraid to make some noise and get into good trouble. Seeking out courageous dissenters and allowing teams to pursue necessary trouble will



During her time as superintendent, Suzette Lovely (right) invited a high school senior to address elementary educators to promote out-of-the-box ideas in their vision setting.

liberate your employees to tackle old problems in new ways.

In the ever-changing narrative of schooling, superintendents are being called upon to do things that aren't particularly comfortable or popular. Setting constructive rebellion in motion will force your organization to emerge stronger and better on the other side of the pandemic. To build momentum, try to eat the conformity elephant one bite at a time. Small measures can produce big changes. ■

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