

Transforming Roles and Relationships: One District's Choice to Pursue Greatness

Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline. Jim Collins, 2005

Change in School District Culture

While teacher associations and other labor unions in school districts are too often cited as stumbling blocks to educational reform and, more often, accused of being at the root of education's problems, one school district in northeastern Ohio negotiated and settled three contracts in a short time and with unprecedented goodwill during the spring and early summer of 2005. Not only were the negotiations free of posturing and accusations, the discussions resulted in unprecedented opportunities for union and association members to assume leadership in creating a public school district focused on the needs and interests of children and responsive as well to the needs and interests of all employees.

The story of changing roles and relationships in the Orange Schools is demonstrated in the 2005 negotiations and resulting contracts, but the transformation itself has been taking place since 1997. Tom Bonda, current school board president, Cindy Eickhoff, school board member, and Cathy Keith, former school board member, all refer to the district change as an *evolution*. Bonda even says he recalls no single defining event marking changed relationships in the Orange Schools; rather, he refers to the change process as a long-term one with no sharp turns. Likewise, in keeping with the recollections of a multitude of Orange informants, the 2005 negotiations should be viewed within a multi-year context of organizational change undertaken by the Orange leadership. The spirit and style of the 2005 negotiations were possible because of a collaborative environment, changes in how district leaders and union leaders view themselves and one another, and a range of district efforts undertaken to change its culture since 1997. Today, the Orange Schools' values, its commitments to students and staff, its sense of purpose and focus, as well as the relationships between teachers and principals,

between students and the adults in the district, between staff and the school board, and between the superintendent and other leaders across the district are markedly different than what they were in 1997.

Dennis Hansen, the Orange Teachers Association (OTA) President, says that the Association used to think of itself as the “guardian of teachers’ rights” and “guardian of the contract.” In the 2005 contract negotiations, the OTA sought, in partnership with the school district, what the OTA leadership refers to as “what would be in the best interest of the school district.” Likewise, Jim Ventura, President of the Local Ohio Association of Public School Employees (OAPSE), describes the changed relationship between the school district and his union when he describes the membership’s current point of view: “Their service is valued; they want to make that service better for the children; they are not treated as servants.” Likewise, Marcy Fludine, President of the Clerical and Educational Support Services Association (CESSA) Local, explained to the district administrators during the negotiation process that her membership—teacher assistants, lunchroom managers and workers, and others—did not yet feel valued within the district. She reports being hopeful about the district’s current willingness to demonstrate its respect for all employees; since negotiations concluded, Fludine has formally been included in the major district leadership vehicle known as Key Leaders, a group convened by the superintendent regularly to think about the future of the school district. In November, Fludine was invited for the first time to accompany some of the other district Key Leaders to a conference in Boston. Phil Dickinson, Director of Business for the Orange Schools, described the changed atmosphere surrounding the 2005 negotiations:

I was used to coming out of negotiations and having to wear a bulletproof vest for about 6 months. We didn’t lose it this time. We didn’t get into conflicts. We didn’t take a step backwards. It’s really the leadership of the unions that have kept our work moving. It shows they are really key leaders.

So what has contributed to this school district’s internally-driven reform efforts? What made this school district choose to hold a mirror up to itself, to invest hours in organizational and

staff development, to put conflicts and shortcomings on the table in order to address them? How did a school district with high test scores, satisfied parents, and successful graduates arrive at making changes in the power relationships and the labor relations for all role groups?

The Role of Executive Leadership

To understand what contributed to changes in the school district's culture requires exploring the Orange Schools as Superintendent Daniel Lukich came to know the district in 1997. Lukich joined the district for some very specific reasons. As an experienced superintendent who had served previously in Ohio and more recently in Michigan, he was drawn to Orange because it was "someplace very good." Being that "someplace very good," however, was not all that Lukich sought. He sought a school district that had the potential—the readiness—to pursue deep, significant organizational change. In Michigan, Lukich had been exposed for the first time to the ideas of W. Edwards Deming, management thinker, writer, and innovator. Deming believed that:

... people should have joy in their work, that the system within which they work should be designed to make this possible ... that the system is management's responsibility www.deming.org

Lukich was drawn to Deming's emphasis on building systems that support and enhance quality.

Lukich also first heard educational thinker and writer Phillip Schlechty's ideas in Michigan in the early 1990s. He found that Schlechty's message about the urgent need to change schools through a systems approach resonated with his own feelings and beliefs as a school superintendent. Schlechty maintains:

I am persuaded, in fact, that only through revitalizing and redirecting the action of district-level operations can the kind of widespread and radical change that must occur become possible. Schlechty, 1997, p. 78

Lukich was interested in leading a district that was poised to reinvent itself and that would be willing to pursue a systems approach, rather than the piecemeal, programmatic approaches that litter the field of educational reform. Most importantly, Lukich sensed in the Orange school board

a willingness to pursue a course of change that would be long-lasting, would outlive specific leaders, and would demonstrate to other districts what could be done to make a good district a great one.

Although Lukich eventually opened the door to rigorous organizational self-examination and invited others throughout the organization to seek new ways for the district to create its future, that work did not begin simultaneously with his arrival. Making changes in district office leadership and addressing critically outdated facilities were first on his agenda. The personnel changes and the facilities improvement efforts provided, in his view, foundations for the organizational culture changes ahead.

Confronting the Brutal Facts

In his 2001 book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins presents a compelling analysis of what it takes for good companies to become great, including the willingness to “confront the brutal facts.” Collins suggests that when leadership makes it possible for people to hold a mirror up to the organization without fear and without potential reprisal, then such an organization stands a much better chance of achieving greatness.

*Yes, leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted. There’s a huge difference between the opportunity to “have your say” and the opportunity to be **heard**. The good-to-great leaders understood this distinction, creating a culture wherein people had a tremendous opportunity to be heard and, ultimately, for the truth to be heard.*
Collins, 2001, p. 74.

The Orange Schools, with an enrollment of 2,300 students, serves 8 municipalities: Hunting Valley, Orange Village, Pepper Pike, Woodmere, Moreland Hills, and portions of Bedford Heights, Solon, and Warrensville Heights. Although parts of its enrollment area reflect all the signs of suburban affluence—upscale businesses and restaurants and well-appointed homes—the district is growing in its diversity, both racial/ethnic and socioeconomic. Given its many indicators

of success, the district might have followed the all too common practice of public schools who feel they are victims of public opinion: *Let others throw stones at us and identify our shortcomings, but we will tout our strengths and good works, because no one else will.* The Orange Schools had and still have much to tout, including exceptional test scores, healthy parental and community support, college-bound graduates, and admirable staff. So why did they not simply stay the course, continue their good work, and bask in the satisfaction of being a high-performing school district?

Today, district leaders in all role groups would say that all was *not* well, despite the high test scores. In the view of many district leaders—particularly teacher association leaders, school board members, and the other unions’ leadership—there was much evidence in the late 1990s that the school district had no common direction, no clear, strong focus on students, and little trust in the relationships between and among teachers, district leaders, the school board, and the association and union leaders. If the district had not eventually confronted the massive distrust within the organization, lack of open communication between the board and the rest of the school district, and the stereotypical antagonistic posturing between the unions and the school administration, the cultural change so dramatically illustrated by the 2005 contract negotiations would never have happened. And the fact that in this era of external accountability when school districts can choose to merely comply with state and federal goals, the Orange Schools could have simply kept on “being good.”

Before the Orange staff could confront the brutal facts about its dysfunctional relationships, however, they had to experience a series of unsatisfactory efforts at collaborative work. Teachers, support staff, and district administration recall attempts by staff in 1998 to address two issues: mold problems at one of the school buildings, and, subsequently, plans for a new school. Gatherings to deal with those issues stand today as concrete examples of just how dysfunctional the school district was. Individuals and representatives of groups in the district were inexperienced at talking together constructively, let alone working together to solve problems. The OTA leadership remembers feeling as though they were being *blamed* for the mold problems, simply because

they had brought the issue to the table. Director of Business Services Phil Dickinson, newly hired into his position, found himself needing to tell teachers and others that he understood if they did not immediately trust him. He asked that they watch how he operated and, subsequently, judge him based on the extent to which he demonstrated his belief that those affected by a problem were in the best position to respond to the problem.

Cindy Eickhoff suggests that it had definitely not been a school district practice to involve employees in such problem-solving processes:

If there was ever an example of communication not working, that would be it. We had people dealing with a problem they didn't understand. Getting the right people in the right chairs has been very important. Communication was totally broken.

Lukich remembers that such meetings involved much sparring between and among people who carried baggage that was often unrelated to the issue at hand. And OTA President Hansen suggests that hostility and frustration related to addressing the mold problems at the old elementary school became the problem that “broke the camel’s back.” Everyone recognized that they were tired of the dysfunction, of the way they had done things: “We wanted to do things differently, make things better.”

When in 1998 the community passed a bond issue that made it possible to build a new elementary school and redesign the existing middle school, an Education Specifications (Ed Specs) Group was formed to imagine possibilities for the new facilities. Phil Dickinson remembers the work of the group as a turning point: “... Ed Specs was an experience of trying to work together, a breakthrough experience to work with parents and varied municipalities. It became a source of hope.” He recalls the group thinking about science rooms, a multi-use building, and the layout of the elementary school. He also recalls how the group managed to work together, in stark contrast to how the district group confronting the mold problem had not worked effectively together. It should be noted, however, that some district leaders recall that those around the table of the Ed Specs Group were not yet a focused group, thinking and deliberating on behalf of the district’s

beliefs and direction. They spoke from their wants and needs as individuals, not as part of a school district. Looking back on the Ed Specs' work, district leaders today agree that it represented new possibilities for the future. Though the group lacked organizational direction and trust across role groups and buildings, its very existence paved the way for future work which would ultimately create district clarity about purpose and direction while establishing collaborative processes as part of what the district now refers to as "The Color of Orange."

Finally, Lukich cites the 2000 negotiations with the teacher association as a last dramatic example of hostile discussions, accusations, and mistrust that would conclude an era in which teachers and administrators viewed one another as natural antagonists and during which the school board and teachers operated at cross-purposes. Though the contract was settled, the school *district* had not yet "won" as a district; only the disparate groups—teachers, administrators, school board—could claim respective wins and losses in the usual war.

Pursuing Systemic Change: Becoming a Standard-Bearer School District

In the early days of the Lukich tenure, the school district made some preliminary connections with the work of the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform, based in Louisville, Kentucky. The Ohio Council of Academic Excellence had contracted with the Schlechty Center to do a series of workshops focused on what the Center proposes should be the core business of schools: providing all students with engaging work. Superintendent Lukich, the three principals, Director of Educational Programs Nancy Wingenbach, and several teachers attended workshops in Columbus, Ohio, where they first met Schlechty Center Senior Associate Judy Hummel and Schlechty Center President George Thompson. These district leaders were sufficiently impressed with the ideas presented in the workshops that they decided to invite Founder and CEO Phil Schlechty to come to the district to speak to the entire staff.

That particular early experience with the Schlechty Center is remembered by various staff members as a less than auspicious occasion. Teachers and principals recall a snowy professional

development day in 1999 when teachers were asked to report to school to hear a speaker, despite bad weather and cancellation of school for students. Not only were teachers resentful of being part of a command performance by some guru from Kentucky, but some of them felt uninformed as to why he was there or what his message might contribute to them or the district. Dave Tirpak, Brady Middle School teacher, recalls that all but a small group of the faculty resisted Schlechty's message about the importance of focusing on student engagement—and how such a focus would require significant school and district change. Tirpak remembers conversations with other teachers to the effect that the speaker must not have known anything about Orange. Support staff, who were also in attendance, had little idea of what value the speaker's ideas might have for them.

Superintendent Lukich could have decided then and there, given the initial teacher response, to forget about student engagement and the accompanying system changes required by focusing on engagement. Fortunately for the district, he did not. Instead he took another approach. He invited teachers, principals, and district office staff to think together about what it would take for the district to be open enough to hear and consider Schlechty's message. From the group's wisdom emerged the understanding that the OTA could be instrumental in leading the initiative; over the next two years all exploration of work with the Schlechty Center was undertaken by cross-role groups led by the superintendent but always including the formal leadership of the OTA. Over time this collaborative approach would grow into the Key Leaders group, including the involvement of the two other unions' leadership, school board members, the principals, and district office leaders. The superintendent now relies on this group to think together with him about district strategy. Recalling how the superintendent would invite various district leaders to consider new approaches and new ideas, Brady Middle School Principal Steve Hegner says:

Dan invited a group of us to go to that first conference ... and asked us what we thought. And he's done that with other initiatives, topics, and speakers. It wasn't like "this is what we're going to do." He wanted to know what we thought this would mean for Orange.

Several such experiences blossomed into what staff throughout the district recognize and value: a culture of collaboration.

In 2001, the school district entered into a formal partnership with the Schlechty Center to pursue its reform work as a member of a network of like-minded districts from across the country convened by the Schlechty Center, the Standard-Bearer School District Network. Member districts used the Schlechty Center's District Standards both to assess strengths and to guide developmental work. Because these district standards are designed to measure organizational capacity, rather than individual performance, they provided an appropriate vehicle around which former district antagonists might rally.

Expanding Collaborative Efforts

The assessment of capacity required Orange staff to ask themselves hard questions about evidence of commitment to a central focus on students and student engagement, by looking at school district policies, procedures, programs, and practices. The assessment became for the Orange Schools a powerful way to confront the brutal facts about district incapacity to pursue a new vision of schooling. As recalled by various staff members, the assessment process became a hallmark of new collaborative work.

One of the first district assessment teams illuminated the school district's lack of articulated beliefs and shared vision for a desired future—and its reliance on bureaucratic management structures and processes.

One strategy for fostering coordination of effort requires a system of rationalized rules and procedures combined with a formal set of rewards and sanctions that support compliance with expectations. A second strategy for fostering coordinated effort requires the development of shared beliefs, commitments, and values that have become sufficiently internalized by group members that they are routinely applied to almost all decisions, combined with heavy reliance on informal control and self-control as the primary mechanisms for enforcement. Schlechty, 2005, p. 157

At that time, the three contracts in the Orange Schools provided coordination by rationalized rules and procedures: contract provisions spelled out who did what for how long, and under what circumstances.

Jim Ventura describes the nature of the former bureaucratic relationships:

In the self-evaluation process I realized that the only place that Orange had any structure to our organization was in the labor contracts themselves. Besides the big issues of economics and health care, there were all the rules of daily operations of the school system. Because of the legal strength of a negotiated agreement in Ohio these rules of operations superceded the law as well as any school board policy. This caused a lot of conflict between administration, management, and labor. When management wanted to operate in what they believed was an efficient manner, the contract almost all the time dictated different terms and conditions. These terms and conditions were usually frozen in place for three to four years.

Details of expectations, rewards, and punishments were spelled out with bureaucratic precision, along with detailed descriptions of procedures to be followed to obtain redress if either party—administration or employee—fell down in the expectations. The 2005 contracts still include some of the typical language spelling out rules, roles, and relationships, but the contracts also include atypical provisions leaving some of the daily operations and processes “open-ended,” so that the membership might participate on committees and work groups to actually determine the rules and procedures.

The work today of the Orange Schools is coordinated less by regulation and bureaucratic procedures than by widespread collaboration and commitment to an organizational direction. So how did the Orange Schools use their district assessment to develop beliefs and articulate vision? Although not a teacher, Jim Ventura served on both the assessment team and the development team that subsequently created district beliefs for review and adoption. Ventura notes: “After the first self-evaluation process the teacher union leadership quickly started to develop new beliefs and core values. I was part of some of this work.” Furthermore, he credits his experience in the assessment and development process with giving him a range of ideas that he uses today in his work with his membership. Former school board member Cathy Keith remembers this process, specifically, as fundamental to making the school district the kind of place it is today. Nancy Wingenbach characterizes what happened relative to clarifying values and beliefs as a “...central focus on kids. If we keep that focus, we can do just about anything.”

To clarify a district focus, various role groups from across the district revised existing beliefs and gave voice to a new set of beliefs and a sense of the district’s future. What beliefs and vision emerged from this process, and how do they now reframe district work and relationships?

Beliefs

We believe that, in order to meet the needs of all students:

- *The core business of the Orange Schools is to make learning valuable, satisfying and challenging for all students.*
- *All students will learn when engaged in and enthusiastic about their work.*
- *The learning environment must be positive, supportive, nurturing and safe.*
- *All students need adult advocates.*
- *All individuals must have a commitment to quality in the services they provide to students and to each other.*
- *Collaboration among the school district, home and community is vital to the success of all students.*

Vision

Orange Schools will set the standard as an academically excellent educational environment where our students and community come to be authentically engaged in their work.

Beliefs Drive Collaborative Action

Once created and published, such statements sometimes become perfunctory prefaces to district documents that gather dust on office shelves. To the contrary, evidence suggests that the Orange statements became living beliefs propelling action, specifically a series of organizational development efforts over the next several years. Highlights from some of these organizational development efforts include the following:

- Teacher Academies—development opportunities designed by and for teachers, led by Orange teacher leaders;
- Teacher Appraisal Groups (TAG)—a process designed over the course of two

years by Orange teachers and administrators as an alternative teacher appraisal process;

- Goals Process—a means to encourage teachers to develop professional career and teaching practice goals that are based on the Standard-Bearer Design Qualities during each stage of their careers. (This process provides opportunities for intellectual discussion, inquiry learning and research about an area of interest and need identified by teachers.)
- Recruitment and Induction process—a system designed by teachers and administrators to ensure staff commitment to district values and direction;
- Learning Communities—efforts within each building to address specific needs of students;
- Interest-Based Bargaining—an approach used for the 2005 negotiations.

Each of these processes, structures, or subsystems is illustrative of district design work based on beliefs and fashioned collaboratively by district staff.

The intentional design of collaborative groups in the school district plays an important role in the cultural shift. Dan Hanstein, Orange High School principal, Steve Hegner, Brady Middle School principal, and Mark Haag, Moreland Hills Elementary principal, are members of the Key Leaders group. While Hanstein has been working with staff in his school about changing how time is used for students and staff during the school day, he has also served on district teams refining how results are defined and identified for the district as a whole. Hegner and Haag were key members of teams that redesigned the district's Evaluation System and that created a Recruitment and Induction System—at the same time that they each led work in their buildings to create processes for teachers to focus on engagement and to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. In the Orange Schools, principals who serve both a school and the district as a whole will be key contributors to the district's future.

By intentionally redefining the roles of all staff, Orange has established new and productive relationships between and among people, thus making it possible to have a collaborative culture that puts students and the work provided them at the center of the organization. As Nancy Wingenbach puts it:

As we work to continuously improve our capacity to promote student learning, there has been a shift in focus. Previously, we paid attention to “teaching,” and now, as a result of our understanding of our “real work,” our attention is on “learning.” A significant aspect of that shift is the need to assess student progress, build in interventions, and actively design instructional strategies and lessons that engage our students in learning.

The district leadership has marshaled the energy and imagination of a host of its employees, without restricting anyone because of role group, to take on the demanding and sometimes painful work of self-examination and, subsequently, the design work of creating new processes, structures, and subsystems.

Teacher Collaboration

This story of cultural change would not be complete without highlighting what the leadership of the two non-teacher unions have to say about the role of teacher leadership in contributing to the changes they have seen between their unions and the district. Both OAPSE and CESSA leaders believe that the teachers led the way for them and their organizations to become full members in the school district. Dennis Hansen identifies the Teacher Academies begun in 2001–02 as a benchmark for changes in teacher and administrator relationships. The Academies made it possible for teachers to have new professional experiences working with one another—and to lead the design of that work.

... it is becoming clear that the way an organization deals with change is determined in large part by the systems devised to support the creation, importation, and diffusion of knowledge within the organization, as well as by the way knowledge is shared between the organization and the larger environment. Schlechty, 2005, p. 88

Lukich understood that if student engagement were to become the centerpiece of district work, more than a handful of district employees would need to know what student engagement could mean for the district. Nancy Wingenbach assumed lead responsibility for rethinking how teachers might learn about student engagement—and how that knowledge might enhance their work.

Wingenbach began work with the Schlechty Center’s Judy Hummel to consider a new approach to teacher learning. They sought to design a vehicle for teacher learning that would reflect a specific moral norm—that teachers, like students, should be treated as volunteers in learning processes; that their needs and interests should be taken into account. Wingenbach and Hummel sought to create experiences for teachers that would be invitational and that would capture their attention and commitment.

Historically Orange had provided its teachers staff development experiences focused on classroom management, differentiated instruction, and other such topics, but the sessions were typically focused on teacher performance rather than on student needs and interests. Dave Tirpak, who has been a building representative for the OTA throughout the change process, says, “We didn’t really focus on the students. We took them for granted. They did well. Now we focus on students and on their engagement.” Wingenbach was determined to make what would become the Teacher Academies intellectually stimulating and professionally meaningful and useful, so that they would result in growing interest and commitment to student engagement throughout the district. The Academies would be a departure from conventional professional development experiences:

The fact remains, however, that in spite of serious efforts at improvement, staff development and continuing education offered by schools and in the context of schools is even now too often pallid and intellectually vacuous. Rather than being viewed by teachers as a learning opportunity to be embraced, staff development is a requirement to be endured. Schlechty, 2005, p. 98

Initially, Hummel and Wingenbach designed a two-day experience for teachers which would give them an introduction to the Schlechty Center’s Working on the Work framework,

which focuses on student engagement and design qualities that teachers might use to increase engagement. As part of the two-day experience, teachers worked together to create lessons or units that they could take back to their classrooms and use. They also had an opportunity to use a structured process to look at student work, draw inferences about student engagement, and analyze the work provided to students for evidence of qualities that were likely to engage them. The Teacher Academies became a vehicle for stimulating, productive collaborative work by teachers.

At the conclusion of the first two-day Academy, Wingenbach did something very simple and straightforward that was to become very significant: She asked the first group if they thought other teachers should have a similar opportunity to learn together and design work together. They clearly recommended that the district should provide other teachers such an opportunity, and so the district scheduled additional sessions. The simple practice of seeking teachers' ideas and recommendations demonstrated what would become common practice. Teachers would come to feel respected and valued; the former era associated with cantankerous discussions about a moldy building and hostile contract negotiations was passing. Dave Tirpak comments as well that, whereas teachers had previously been highly competitive with one another, trying to outdo one another in terms of making a "classroom splash," they now talk with pride about their role in facilitating an Academy, or about the work they designed as a part of an Academy.

Steve Hegner recalls a proposal drafted by a Brady Middle School teacher leader after the early Teacher Academies. The proposal outlined what would become Brady's Teacher Lead Team, a vehicle for teachers to work with the principal in leading building initiatives. After word spread to the elementary and high schools, each level created their distinct version of this vehicle, which has become a way for teachers to identify issues unique to the building and address them collaboratively with the principals. Hegner attributes the creation and evolution of the Teacher Lead Team to the common ground teachers found as a part of the Teacher Academies.

Unfreezing the System: Redesigning Power and Authority Relationships

Those in roles of authority in learning organizations rely much less on the power which comes from their positions than on human relationships and influence guided by an organization's values. What Wingenbach initiated from an administrative position became, eventually, the property of the teachers themselves. Not so long ago, power and authority relationships in Orange inhibited the school district from making students its focus; the system was frozen into separate role groups, each with disparate interests: school board, superintendent and district office, principals, teachers, and support staff. Cheryl McDonald, OTA Secretary, identifies the way the Teacher Academies utilized teacher leaders to facilitate sessions as a critical shift in the way the district did business: "It was so powerful to have our own teachers leading the Academies." When teachers facilitate sessions or lead other teachers there is a much stronger possibility of influence on teaching and learning than if strangers or supervisors act as experts.

Furthermore, two district decisions related to Teacher Academies reflect a change in power and authority relationships: not only were teachers asked to lead the sessions, but also participants were asked to volunteer. This *invitation* to learn together in the Teacher Academies continues as part of district practice today. The district created a context very different from the typical school bureaucracy, in which teachers are mandated to attend certain staff training sessions, begrudgingly put in their seat time, and leave with little or no change in their thinking—and little sense that the district respects them.

When Orange Key Leaders reflect on changes they believe are significant in the Orange Schools, Steve Hegner shares how the organization has opened the possibility for many to gain full membership and to assume leadership:

We used to have star teachers who had influence, were recognized, invited to conferences—and then there was everyone else. Since Standard-Bearer, anyone who works hard on behalf of the district can contribute. Participation is not based just on seniority and an inner circle. A call is put out and folks can choose to answer. I think of all the different teachers, including new ones, who have been to conferences. It's not a tenure thing. People are not "chosen." The extent of your involvement is up to you.

Bob Coyne, former OTA president, recalls how little respect administrators formerly showed him as a high school teacher. In fact, Coyne embraced a legacy of hardball union tactics learned from his police officer and union negotiator father, because he saw no other way to get the attention of the administration around important issues of teaching and learning. Coyne contrasts former days with his current relationship with Superintendent Lukich: “We went from slamming the door on each other to patting one another on the back.”

A turning point in Coyne’s thinking about what might be possible between administration, school boards, and association leadership occurred in the spring of 2002 at a Schlechty Center Key Leaders Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. First, Coyne recalls that he had never been invited to attend a conference before with district administrators and school board members. Furthermore, he had never experienced conversations—both those formally a part of the conference and informally as part of the natural flow of discussion when people travel together—in which the district leaders cared about his reactions and ideas. He was accustomed to presenting positions, concerns, and grievances on behalf of the OTA to the district, but he had no experience in pursuing genuine discussion as the group did in Baltimore. Furthermore, the keynote guest speaker, Adam Urbanski, President of the Rochester Teachers Association and Director of the national Teacher Union Reform Network, had a profound impact on Coyne and others. Urbanski provided Coyne with a picture of what is possible when district leaders—superintendent, school board, and teacher leaders—choose to work together on behalf of the school district. Coyne admits that such a vision was one that he had, up to that conference, held no hope of realizing. “I started to believe this might work. Board members were there with us. The conference agenda was designed to bring us together.”

Coyne also recalls the difficulties he faced when he returned to the school district. Teachers were not immediately ready to imagine different kinds of relationships among the district administration, the teacher association, and the school board. “I had to convince teachers that I wasn’t being bought. Some of my colleagues thought I had become ‘too soft.’” Although Coyne is

no longer an officer in the OTA, the current OTA leadership refer to Coyne's work as critical in refashioning relationships within the school district; others in the Orange Key Leaders group all mention Coyne as someone who not only carries much of the history of the school district's culture—past and present—but who also is a leader who helped cause the culture to change.

Former school board member Keith recalls that same Baltimore conference from a different perspective. She had not looked forward to traveling and participating with Bob Coyne, who has since become a trusted colleague. She viewed him in 2002 as simply an aggressive, hard-headed union leader. But over the course of the conference Keith gained new insights into Coyne as a teacher, a leader, and a human being:

Adam Urbanski talked about what unions could be. That began what we have become. We had defining discussions about what unions should look like. It was a great few days. Later, Bob Coyne stood up and spoke on behalf of what was possible and I never thought he would. We now have a better idea of what it can look like. We have a fragile structure that we have created.

Marilyn Mauck, former OTA president, characterizes OTA's earlier relationship with the school administration as a "long walk across Chagrin Boulevard," the road separating the school campuses from the administration building. In truth the physical distance is a short stroll, but in practice the distance was lengthened by a history of disputes, distrust of both parties, and destructive definitions of roles which separated individuals and kept them from working together. Mauck recalls that personal battles between the OTA and the Orange administration led to some initial changes, but that ultimately, the redefinition of roles and relationships has led to changes so significant that she has had to ask herself, "Could this be real?" In discussing the 2005 negotiations, Mauck observes that the district demonstrated real compassion for teachers and sought their perspective. Mauck goes on to say, "It's not personal anymore." Today, Mauck confidently predicts that any problem at the heart of the district—concerning students or learning—will be solved and will best be addressed by teachers working with district office leaders and the school board.

In reflecting on the way the school board works with the district, Tom Bonda says:

Now there's a sense that there's nothing we cannot fix by working together—this group of Key Leaders expects to find a solution for any problem or issue. We will ask—what's the best thing for this district, not about individuals or different groups.

Future Orientation

The processes, structures, and subsystems that Orange has built through collaborative effort indicate the likelihood that this school district is poised to address future challenges in healthy and creative ways. Key Leaders throughout the district are optimistic, though some express caution about being too congratulatory too soon, given their understanding of the complexity of social systems such as school districts. Cindy Eickhoff recognizes that ensuring that the district's culture runs deep is critical, ongoing work. She even says that there is a “fragile” quality to the changes the district has made. As she elaborates on the nature of such fragility, she discusses the importance of thinking about continuity of leadership, of ensuring that the next superintendent hired, the next director hired, and the next school board member elected will participate deeply in learning and understanding what the current Key Leaders believe, value, and have attempted to build into the organization. (Three of the school board's five members are new as of January, 2006, and Dr. Lukich is providing them an ongoing induction experience.) In looking toward the future of Orange Mark Haag recognizes both accomplishment and unfinished business:

Yes, a lot of progress has been made and we, over the last couple of years, recognized this, but there is a certain amount of “it's fragile” and there's still a challenge there. While we're celebrating and recognizing progress we've made, there's still work ahead of us to keep the momentum going.

Jim Ventura characterizes unfinished business from his vantage point as providing leadership development experiences for the middle management employees among the membership of OAPSE so that the “living contract” created through 2005 negotiations fulfills its promise to the membership. Dan Hansen talks of developing future leaders among Orange teachers, but he

also addresses the importance of the Orange Schools being a “Standard-Bearer” for other school districts. With more than a little of the idealism that marks a moral leader, Hansen talks about his responsibility to serve the district and his responsibility as part of the Orange leadership to provide a service to other districts with lessons about change and the value of undertaking this sometimes painful work.

The 2005 edition of *Pride*, a school district publication distributed throughout the community, gives some indication of what might be thought of as an organizational “disposition” to confront the brutal facts, a disposition which in this publication identifies some of the substance of future work. Lukich lists a series of questions that serve as recent challenges to this high-performing district:

- *How do we address the changing demographics of the district as reported by the most recent demographic studies?*
- *How do we support and improve achievement and learning for students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds?*
- *How can we meet the needs and improve our program for middle level students at all grade levels?*
- *How can we better support our teaching staff through Induction, Evaluation and Goals process to improve instruction?*
- *How do we create a professional learning community and provide a more flexible building schedule to create time for teacher collaboration?*
- *How do we more directly involve our support staff—OAPSE and CESSA employees—in their search to improve the quality of their work and profession?*
- *How can we support the change needed on a building-by-building basis to meet the needs of elementary, middle school, and high school staff and students?*

In this front page article, a superintendent could just as well have listed the awards and honors earned and kept the challenges out of the public eye. The fact that Lukich chose not to do so is indicative of an *organizational disposition* marked by candor, self-appraisal, and relentless pursuit of quality. Lukich recognizes that important future work of the Orange Schools will proceed on the collaborative relationships built and supported by the school district. Some of that future work will be characterized by increased attention to using data about students, and by district support

for learning communities of teachers in every school addressing the changing needs and interests of students.

This district might have basked in the bounty of its favorable circumstances. Rather, the Orange Schools consciously chose a different course marked sometimes by individual hardship and organizational complications. The Orange Schools today have a newly developed strength as an organization—vigorous relationships between administrators, teachers, various union leaders, and school board. Such a cultural shift happens by design, not by accident. It happened in Orange because the leadership was strategic in setting a course for systemic change; its teachers were invited to be partners in leading that change; all union leaders became organizational resources, rather than organizational deficits; and the school board embraced its role as one dimension of a leadership team, working in concert with other key leaders in the school system.