

Chapter 1

Introduction

Don't tell Tom DeBolt, the superintendent of Manassas Park City Schools in northern Virginia, that his school system cannot be world class. Don't point out that his working-class community has a modest tax base and a growing population of recent immigrants, many of whom speak little or no English. Don't argue that Manassas Park cannot possibly compete for talented teachers with its more prestigious and affluent neighbors. Don't try to persuade him that the most many of his students can hope for is to graduate from high school and find a blue collar job with decent wages. Tom DeBolt's ambitions would shame an alchemist, but in the case of Manassas Park, they are coming true!

DeBolt is a self-professed visionary and optimist, and the story of Manassas Park's transformation from a perennially low-performing school system with disreputable facilities and dispirited educators to a model small city school system with fully accredited schools, championship teams, acclaimed extracurricular programs, and award-winning school buildings is, first and foremost, a story of inspired and inspiring leadership. But it is much more. It is a saga of local politics, of a community rallying to support its beleaguered schools, and of the wonders that can be wrought through teamwork. What took place in Manassas Park between 1995 and 2005 was not just dramatic improvement in student performance on standardized tests, but the rebirth of an entire school system.

What does it take to transform a low-performing school system into a successful and respected enterprise? This question serves as the focus for *The Little School System That Could*. Like the tiny steam engine in the classic children's book, the Manassas Park City Schools (MPCS) demonstrated the power of positive thinking as it changed from a

struggling school division to a symbol of educational improvement and a source of community pride. Created in the immediate aftermath of Manassas Park's establishment, in 1975, as Virginia's newest city, MPCs languished for two decades in the shadow of outstanding neighboring school systems in Fairfax County, Prince William County, Loudoun County, and Manassas City. Then in 1995, the Manassas Park School Board hired a new superintendent, Dr. Tom DeBolt. He inherited a collection of ramshackle schools, a budget that had not kept pace with enrollment growth or inflation, and a track record of academic and administrative problems. A decade later, every Manassas Park school had achieved state accreditation under the provisions of Virginia's tough educational accountability program, the school system had won architectural awards for its innovative school designs, Manassas Park teams had garnered league and even state championships, and salaries for teachers and school administrators had grown to be competitive with Manassas Park's far more affluent neighbors.

Manassas Park's ten-year journey from educational backwater to beachfront, however, was not an uninterrupted string of giant steps forward. As travels go, the path covered by the school system was less like the flight of an arrow than the meanderings of a moth. Despite periodic setbacks, though, DeBolt and his colleagues stayed the course, eventually overcoming obstacles, silencing critics, and achieving success.

How this study was conducted and the conceptual framework that guided it will be discussed in the next section. Covering these matters up front will allow the chronicle of Manassas Park's turnaround to be presented without interruption as a continuous narrative. Following a description of the study's methodology, several reasons why this study's findings are important will be noted. The introduction concludes with an overview of the remainder of the book.

UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Historians of education have characterized the process of school reform as a matter of persistent "tinkering" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Examples of dramatic transformation are rare. While such an assessment is reasonable, it should not obscure the fact that systemic change, such as what took place in Manassas Park, does occur. The more that can be learned about the nature of such sweeping change, the better educators will be able to address the needs of low-achieving school systems. Understanding the

complexities of systemic change, however, is no simple matter. Many researchers feel most comfortable when they gaze through a microscope, not a wide-angle lens. Microscopes permit researchers to isolate particular features and study them in detail. Systemic change, however, defies such an approach. Multiple lenses, each oriented to a different aspect of change, are required to grasp the process in all of its complexity.

In order to investigate the transformation of MPCS, four lenses, or conceptual frames, were employed. These frames were developed and described by Bolman and Deal in their classic treatise on the study of organizations, *Reframing Organizations* (1997). Each frame embodies a set of assumptions regarding how organizations operate and adjust to their circumstances. These assumptions serve to focus attention on particular aspects of an organization and the role they play in supporting or inhibiting change.

One frame concerns the structural dimension of organizations. This perspective assumes that organizations such as school systems exist to accomplish a particular mission and that they need to develop a structure to achieve that mission with a reasonable degree of success or else they are unlikely to survive. Elements of an organization's "structure" include its goals, policies, quality control mechanisms, decision-making processes, roles, and organizational units. By examining the Manassas Park City Schools through the structural lens, it will be possible to determine the extent to which the school system's transformation involved changes in priorities, policies, programs, and processes.

A school system is unlikely to be transformed by restructuring alone. Bolman and Deal's second "lens," the human resource frame, focuses on the people who staff the organization. The key assumption supporting this perspective is that organizational success depends on the extent to which employees find their work meaningful and satisfying. People in organizations, in other words, have needs that go beyond earning a salary. When they are treated well and valued for their contributions, the likelihood of achieving the organization's mission is greatly increased. To understand what happened in Manassas Park City Schools, therefore, it is also necessary to consider working conditions, opportunities for collaboration and professional growth, salary enhancement, and other matters of importance to school system employees.

All organizations exist within a greater context. A school system, for example, is located in a community, a state, and a nation. Each of these contexts makes certain demands on the school system and harbors

certain expectations for its performance. In order to survive, organizations must find ways to adapt to these contexts. According to Bolman and Deal, such adaptation typically involves a political component. Key assumptions supporting the political frame are that organizations depend on resources and resources are almost always limited. Conflict can occur when organizations compete to acquire the resources necessary to achieve their mission. Political activity is the consequence of efforts by organizations to deal with conflict over scarce resources. Since it is unlikely that a school system such as Manassas Park can be transformed without additional resources, it is important to learn about the school system's efforts to mobilize support for change and the resources needed to achieve it.

The fourth of Bolman and Deal's frames is the most abstract. The symbolic frame focuses on the symbols that embody and represent an organization's culture. It is assumed that much of what goes on in organizations is important because of the meaning or significance people attach to it. Sometimes organizations are unable to accomplish all that they set out to do, but what they *try* to do and how they go about it can symbolize cherished beliefs and values. Organizational change cannot be fully understood without investigating the symbolism and meaning associated with it. In this study of Manassas Park's transformation, attention is devoted to assessing changes in organizational culture over the decade from 1995 to 2005 and what these changes have meant to the school system and the community.

By combining the four frames and studying the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic dimensions of organizational change, it is possible to gain a reasonably comprehensive understanding of what was involved in the transformation of the Manassas Park City Schools. How the study actually was conducted is discussed in the next section.

DOING ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

Historians of organizations prefer to begin with information about which they can be reasonably certain. The sorry state of Manassas Park's school facilities, educational finances, and academic performance in 1995 is a matter of record. Equally indisputable are the conditions and accomplishments of the school system in 2005. These factual "book-ends" give rise to a question: What happened in Manassas Park between 1995 and 2005 that might account for such dramatic change?

The first step in answering this question involves a careful inventory of all the ways the school system in 2005 differed from the school system ten years earlier. Organizational historians tend to assume that dramatic improvements in school facilities, educational finances, and academic performance are unlikely without other, less obvious changes. Identifying these “changes behind the changes” provides the foundation for subsequent efforts to explain *how* the school system’s transformation was accomplished.

In order to get at this deeper level of change, interviews were conducted with a variety of individuals who were associated with Manassas Park City Schools over the years from 1995 to 2005. They included the superintendent, a school board chair, central office personnel, school administrators, city officials, and consulting architects. Each interview entailed questions regarding changes in the school system, including changes in organizational structure, operations, funding, personnel, and programs. In addition to these relatively straightforward changes, individuals also were asked to comment on more subjective aspects of transformation, including changes in organizational culture and school–community relations. Besides interviews, school board minutes, newspaper articles, school improvement plans, accreditation reports, financial records, documents produced by the central office, and an excellent dissertation on the early history of the school system were reviewed. In addition, school system planning sessions, administrative retreats, and school design workshops over the years from 1999 to 2005 were monitored by the author.

Identifying the variety of changes that took place in MPCS between 1995 and 2005 presented one kind of challenge. A second, and more difficult, task involved accounting for these changes. In order to determine *how* changes were accomplished, the organizational historian must reconstruct events as they actually occurred, which is not necessarily how people remember them occurring. Primary source materials such as minutes and memos can be helpful, but they do not always include a full account of what actually took place. Individuals in key positions were asked to provide narratives, or what Deborah Stone (1989) refers to as “causal stories,” of how particular changes were achieved and for what reasons. To get as accurate a reconstruction of events as possible, it may be necessary to compare accounts from various sources, a process sometimes referred to as triangulation. In most cases, a reasonable level of agreement across informants and documents

can be achieved, but in a few instances all that can be reported is that there is conflicting information about what actually took place.

One strategy that can be helpful to organizational historians trying to cover changes over a number of years is the critical incident approach. This method assumes that there are simply too many events in the life of any relatively complex organization to permit complete coverage. Such an account, even if possible, would make for very dull reading. Organizational historians consequently rely on the selection of *critical incidents* in order to craft a narrative.¹ Critical incidents represent potential turning points in the development of an organization, points at which the organization might have moved in different directions. Critical incidents frequently involve debates over mission and goals, the search for resources, changes in leadership, and failure to accomplish desired objectives. While the four frames discussed earlier are helpful in detecting *what* changed in Manassas Park, investigating critical incidents offers insights into *why* and *how* these changes were accomplished.

Interviews, board minutes, and newspaper articles were used to compile a chronology of events in Manassas Park City Schools between 1995 and 2005. Using this chronology as a starting point, selected informants were asked to pinpoint events that they felt were critical in the transformation of the school system. Those events about which there was general agreement then were chosen as critical incidents and further inquiry was directed at determining the circumstances surrounding them.

WHY IS THE MANASSAS PARK STORY IMPORTANT?

Talk of improving public education evokes various images. Three such images are windmills, wishing wells, and wings. Those who see windmills when they look at low-performing school systems are fatalists. Windmills suggest a quixotic undertaking, admirable in intent but unlikely to succeed. Attempts at fixing school systems, for others, are more like tossing money in a wishing well. They *hope* something good will result, but they really don't expect much. Still others look at troubled school systems and see sets of wings to help young people escape the gravitational pull of poverty, crime, and low expectations. These individuals believe that, with the right educational design and the proper thrust, liftoff can be achieved. Such beliefs now reflect the

thinking of Manassas Park educators and community leaders. But this was not always the case.

In recent years, researchers have devoted considerable attention to studying what it takes to turn around low-performing schools. Less is known, however, about the transformation of entire school systems. As the school system goes, so goes the school. It is unlikely, in other words, that school improvement can be sustained as long as the systems in which they exist remain dysfunctional. The Manassas Park story provides an account of nothing less than *school system turnaround*. Manassas Park may not be New York City or Los Angeles, but it faces many of the same challenges confronting larger cities. Besides, the United States is full of small cities like Manassas Park, often located in the shadow of great cities, that struggle to cope with a limited tax base, increasing diversity, and demands for greater educational accountability. The 2002 Census revealed that Manassas Park was one of 1,436 small cities with populations between 10,000 and 24,999 (2002 Census of Governments, 2002). The fact that Manassas Park has been able successfully to address many issues common to most city school systems offers hope to all who are committed to giving every urban child a reasonable chance of succeeding in life.

The Manassas Park story is especially instructive because it is not a fluke or some overnight miracle that is unlikely to be replicable. As the rest of this book reveals, the transformation of MPCS came about because of exceptional leadership, patience coupled with persistence, careful planning, caring and commitment on the part of educators and community leaders, and a willingness on the part of educational leaders to work within the local political arena on behalf of students.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 describes the circumstances surrounding the creation of the city of Manassas Park and its school system. The chapter goes on to detail the struggles of the school system during its first two decades to secure adequate resources and provide a decent education to the youth of Manassas Park. Chapter 3 begins in 1995 with the hiring of Tom DeBolt, Manassas Park's seventh superintendent in twenty years. The conditions DeBolt faced are detailed along with his initial efforts to forge political alliances and ensure the construction of a new high

school. The challenges surrounding the building of a new elementary school close on the heels of opening the new high school are discussed in chapter 4. The next chapter examines three keys to sustaining success in the improving school system—building a leadership team, developing a long-range plan, and negotiating a revenue sharing agreement with the city council. Chapter 6 focuses on the maturation of a new organizational culture in Manassas Park City Schools, a culture characterized by high expectations and professional confidence. Chapter 7 examines some of the questions that occupied Manassas Park educators as the first decade of Tom DeBolt’s leadership drew to a close.

The last two chapters place the organizational history of MPCPS in perspective. Chapter 8 returns to Bolman and Deal’s four “frames” to see how each was important to understanding the school system’s transformation. The final chapter discusses some of the “lessons” of this transformation for educators in low-performing school systems and students of organizational change.