



PRACTICAL STRATEGY LLC

education policy and management consulting

June 2006 Newsletter

Interesting Tidbits:

Two brains better than one: As reported on May 2 in the *Washington Post*, a new study demonstrates that in fact, groups outperform individuals on complex tasks. Reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the random assignment research from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign bolsters what many students of organizational performance have long believed - that effectively marshalling the talents and diverse perspectives of individuals together gets better results than top-down, unilateral problem-solving. Why is this important? Because it demonstrates, again, that when well managed and organized, with clear roles and responsibilities and effective communication, the ability to change and transform organizations can come from within. The role of leaders is to unleash that potential.

Really getting ideas to work:

Nary a day passes without a reference to Tom Friedman's *The World is Flat* or Jim Collins' *Good to Great*. Now Collins' has authored *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, a monograph that debunks the idea that non-profit organizations and government should just behave more like a business. Why? There are plenty of mediocre businesses too. The idea is to behave like a world-class organization. Collins has a number of thoughts about how the *Good to Great* framework applies across sectors. Most notable for me is the idea of discipline - that great organizations figure out how to execute their big ideas, and how to align their processes for results, and stick to it rather than jump from fad to fad. They don't just plan. They spend more time getting implementation right.

Cell phone withdrawal: Several weeks ago, my cell phone/PDA died. After initial panic about how to survive without email or phone access for even a few hours, much less two days, I was overtaken by a feeling of great calm and control. And, no balls got dropped, no crises went untended, no deadlines missed, no client's (or children's) needs ignored. My device was replaced, but I realized I needed to revisit how I use my gadgets - and return to time management practices where I control technology rather than let it control me. There are lots of good

What's New

Muller Named Senior Fellow at Institute for Educational Leadership: [See the press release](#). Keep reading for reflections and project updates.

Reflections

It's been a busy several months since our last update - so here are some of the highlights. Projects have involved working with Governors' staffs on college preparation and access, with districts on educational reform, and with non-profit leadership on business strategy, performance improvement and development.

We continue to partner with a great group of organizations - [Jobs for the Future \(JFF\)](#); Grace Sammon and [GMS Partners, Inc.](#); [Cross and Jofus, LLC](#); [Public Works, LLC](#); [Plexus Scientific, Inc.](#); and most recently, the [Institute for Educational Leadership](#). Consultants [Robin Chait](#), former teacher and US Department of education policy analyst, and [Alix Beatty](#), formerly a researcher at the National Academy of Sciences, have been instrumental in all of our work.

I've noted a big theme in our recent work related to the **PRACTICAL STRATEGY** idea. Basically, it's *systems thinking*, or managing the "white space". In our education work, we're seeing growing focus on alignment and K-16 (or P-20) efforts - looking across the requirements of high school, college, work and the economy to figure out how to break down traditional organizational silos. The challenges of the new, knowledge economy, shifting demographics and a host of other factors require that segments of the educational enterprise, which theoretically should act in concert but in practice do anything but, work effectively together - in the best interest of students. We're doing more work with clients figuring out how to improve that alignment and address different aspects of the P-20 issue. What do these forces mean for leadership, strategy, staffing, organizational development and performance?

Another angle on this is in organizational strategy and performance. In many organizations, the conundrum is often about translating vision to practice, and figuring out how to make people and processes coalesce to achieve common purpose. We're finding that lots of obstacles that organizations face in achieving their goals result from struggling with important areas of intersection -- hence the term "managing the white space." Imagine an organizational chart -- we know who is responsible for what happens inside a box. But what about all those things that happen between and among boxes? How do we handle those more effectively, whether between organizational units or across independent institutions?

Someone quipped to me recently that **PRACTICAL STRATEGY** is an oxymoron. My response - that's the ideal. not the reality. Our job is to help our clients make their

than let it control me. There are lots of good ways to do this, with surprising benefits, if you feel chained to your 'berry!

Overheard in an 8th grade

carpool: *Parent:* (Responding to honors student lament that his 89% average had momentarily dipped to 85%) Why are you so concerned with grades? This is not a message you are getting from us at home. *Student:* In our school, there is something called the federal No Child Left Behind Act. If our grades aren't good enough, our teachers will be replaced by someone from the federal government until we improve... This exchange is a great example of how important messages can get muddled. The comment came from a student in a selective magnet program in a school that has not come close to meeting AYP, where a large percentage of students are performing well below grade level. The comments about NCLB came from a highly respected teacher, translated through the ears of a well-intended middle schooler. The conversation then turned to the intent of NCLB and what strategies might help fellow students who are struggling academically. One simple lesson: building shared understanding and paying great attention to implementation really matters.

Good reads: I never know what to read next, so I asked my former college classmates, 25 years later, for some book recommendations of titles that had had a big impact on them. [See some of the suggestions.](#)

Consultants Needed!

The **PRACTICAL STRATEGY, LLC** team of consultants is growing. We're looking for help at all levels. Flexible hours, rates commensurate with experience. [Email](#) for more information!

response - that's the ideal, not the reality. Our job is to help our clients make their strategy work - in practice. If we can be of any assistance to you, your organization or a colleague, please let us know.

With best regards for a good summer,

Rob

Recent Projects:

Ohio Postsecondary Enrollment Options: With [Jobs for the Future](#), assessed dual/concurrent enrollment policy and practice in Ohio for the Governor's office and state Partnership for Continued Learning, and provided recommendations for strengthening this critical component of the state's high school improvement agenda.

Arizona Education and Workforce Alignment: With [Public Works, LLC](#), researched high school requirements in Arizona and alignment between secondary and postsecondary systems, reporting findings and conclusions to the [Governor's P-20 Council](#).

National High School Alliance: provided management and operations support during a period of staff transition, and continue to help coordinate the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded *National Network of Constituent Organizations*, a consortium of national education associations working to advance the National Governors' Association's Honor States Initiative.

Rogers Public Schools, Arkansas: With [Cross and Joffus LLC](#), conducted a technology management assessment, with recommendations for improving district practice, as part of a district-wide strategic planning process.

Sarasota County Public Schools, Florida: Work continues with five comprehensive high schools and a regional technical center restructuring in small learning communities, and aligning career and technical education programs with postsecondary education requirements and economic trends.

Corporation for National and Community Service: Supporting [Learn and Serve America](#), [AmeriCorps](#) and the [Corporation](#) overall with several projects to improve grants management practices, streamline communications and reduce burden.

KaBOOM!: Working with CEO and senior staff of the nationally recognized non-profit [KaBOOM!](#) to translate strategic plan vision to effective management practices, and supporting internal capacity development, performance measurement and recruiting.

Academy for Educational Development: For leadership of [AED's](#) US Education and Workforce Group and Centers, helping structure analysis of new markets and map to internal capacity, to help drive future business development and growth.

