

Failing schools in a failing system

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The ubiquity of failure

There seems to be a lot of failure about: failing schools, failing teachers, failing children. While this is professionally insulting, headline writers love it, politicians use it to shift responsibility and the recipients of the label often have little choice but to internalise the notion. Hunting the failing school has become an exciting and rewarding political pastime. When the quarry is identified it can be savaged and publicly humiliated. For example when a school in the UK had been identified by an official body as 'failing', a national newspaper ran the headline 'Is this the worst school in Britain?' (Brace 1994).

Failure in some form or another exists in all educational systems: a search for remedies is always necessary and complacency is never acceptable. Nevertheless, in many systems there is great pressure on teachers, available resources are decreasing and student motivation seems to be lessening in the face of decreasing job opportunities. It should come as no surprise if various parts of the system find it difficult to cope.

This chapter looks at the political and ideological contexts within which the ethos of failure has blossomed. It describes what happens to schools that are publicly labelled as failing and argues that the performance of schools (including those which are deemed to be 'failing') cannot be evaluated properly or fairly unless the different contexts in which these schools and their teachers have to work are taken into account. Those who identify 'failure' must depend on what information is available to describe school performance. The principle of 'freedom of information' can be an asset here but it can also be abused in ways that harm rather than help schools and the children who they serve. We therefore believe that it is crucial that such information be used responsibly and in this chapter propose a system and some guidelines for ensuring that the ideal of 'freedom of information' is not abused when information about schools is published.

The chapter is motivated largely by our experiences in England and Wales but given the preoccupation with 'failing' schools in Tennessee, Maryland, Kentucky and many other parts of the United States we believe it has important lessons for American educators as well.

Political background

In the last twenty years many educational systems have been exposed to considerable amounts of change. A key feature has been the frequent revisions of style of politicians (from confrontational to receptive) and 'u' turns in policy. Often these have led to low morale amongst teachers and administrators. In the UK a number of major initiatives have had a notable impact on all state schools. These include the delegation of functions to individual schools, a national curriculum, new vocational courses and qualifications, national testing, teacher appraisal (evaluation), publication of average achievement scores for schools in 'league tables', a semi-independent role for some schools under 'grant maintained' status

and a new external inspection system administered by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). In the US there have been moves towards detailed public accountability on the basis of test scores in states such as Tennessee, and there has also been a considerable debate about the consequences of introducing accountability through testing. This has ranged from a concern with the negative impact on curriculum and teaching (e.g. Smith and Rottenburg, 1991) to the way in which results at State level may have been manipulated for essentially political ends (e.g. Cannell, 1988). The 'market ideology' underpinning many changes has undoubtedly encouraged a climate in which competition has begun to dominate co-operation. Replacing a planned system with one where local market forces predominate makes it plausible to locate blame with individual schools. Markets operate through competition in which there are winners and losers. Designating schools as 'effective' or 'failing' is a natural consequence.

For the recipients of a failing label the results can be dramatic, even catastrophic. They may be taken under the direct control of the national education department, have their principals and many of the teachers fired; have powerful troubleshooters or externally appointed 'improvement' teams appointed with the task and powers to try and turn them around or indeed close them down as recently happened in the UK. They may simply drift out of business altogether as parents lose confidence and move their children elsewhere.

Publishing the average test scores of schools in the form of rankings or league tables has encouraged competition rather than collaboration and co-operation between schools and thereby undermines one of the prerequisites for school improvement - the opportunity and capacity of schools to learn from each other. Along with numerous other reform initiatives that have involved teachers learning, 'unlearning' and 'relearning' new curricula, new teaching strategies and new structures within a

very short period of time some of these changes have fostered a climate of fear and retribution. For many principals and teachers, the combined effect of the changes and related pressures has had a negative impact on their morale, resilience, and self-esteem.

The current discussion about failing schools also raises the question of whether this 'problem' has always existed on this scale and we have just chosen to overlook it or whether the number of schools that could be described in this way has increased only recently. No doubt such schools have always existed and we have neglected to deal with them adequately. Nevertheless an inevitable result of comparisons among schools, whether by publication of crude league tables or more sophisticated 'value added' ones as in Tennessee (Sanders and Horn, 1994) is that there will always be winners and losers. Once the losers are deemed to be 'failing' it is difficult to find ways to help them when the prevailing atmosphere is one of recrimination, and retribution. So the attribution of failure is important and we need to look more closely at what this attribution might mean.

What do we mean by 'failing'?

Any attempt to define 'failure' poses problems particularly when, as is the case in the UK, the terms 'failing' and 'ineffective' are often used interchangeably. For example, are all schools that are not 'effective' therefore 'ineffective' and/or 'failing'? Are there intermediate categories of schools not doing as well as they might but not (yet?) in a serious or even dire state? How should we describe schools that are effective in some areas but not others (Sammons et al., 1995a)?

Some commentators have tried to address this issue (see for example Stoll, 1995, Barber, 1995) by differentiating between 'struggling' and 'failing' schools. On one level, all schools that can be described as ineffective must be failing their students. On another level most schools will be 'failing' some of their students, some of the

time, in some respects. For example a school that is 'effective', for white middle class boys may not be so for black working class girls and issues of race, gender and social class are particularly pertinent.

In England and Wales, the body which administers the new inspection system (OFSTED), defines failing schools according to how far one or several of the following deficiencies are found:

- poor standards of pupil (student) achievement;
- poor quality of education provided;
- inefficiency in the running of the school;
- poor provision for pupils' (students') spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. (DFEE/Ofsted, 1995).

Within a market ideology of competition between schools, these attempts to define 'failing' locate blame within the school: they pay little attention to the surrounding context that may contribute to what is interpreted as 'failure'. To avoid making such assumptions we think the terms 'troubled' and 'troubling' schools are more neutral. 'Troubled' schools we argue, are those which are perceived to have serious problems. These schools are 'troubling' because of their effects on children, staff and others who are connected with them.

Characterising 'troubled' schools

'Troubled' schools are those which are viewed as causing concern, for example by centrally appointed bodies such as local commissions set up by the US state education departments. While such schools rightly give proper cause for concern it is debatable whether simply blaming, labeling and imposing draconian measures on them helps them improve (indeed by lowering morale such steps may have just

the opposite effect). If positive change is to be encouraged we need to find more constructive ways to work with these schools. One of us recently has worked with three such schools (Myers, 1996a). Two key insights have emerged from this work.

First, the current literature and collective wisdom on school effectiveness and school improvement seems to be of limited use to such schools. This is primarily because most of this research was based on schools that were already deemed effective (Reynolds 1995a, 1995b). Although characteristics prevalent in effective schools (eg Sammons et al., 1995b) may be of background interest to those working in troubled schools, simply being aware of what is missing is of limited practical help for those wanting to rectify their situation. Knowing, for example, that strong leadership is absent, does not provide clues on how to make it exist. In addition, it may be more than the absence of these positive characteristics that causes schools to experience problems. Troubled schools may be actively affected by 'antithetical' characteristics. For example, it is not just that there is no 'strong, purposeful, leadership', that contributes to a school's problems and pushes it into the troubled category but that the leadership is weak, fragmented and inconsistent (Myers, 1994). Unfortunately, there seems to be little research on the characteristics that prevail in troubled schools.

Secondly, every troubled school is different. The reasons they have got to a troubled state are varied. The ways they react to being in such a state are different. Consequently there is no magic solution to their difficulties. They need different types of support.

Elsewhere, one of us (Myers 1996b) has described three distinct categories of troubled schools.

'Striving' schools are those that are in trouble but are determined to change and improve. Although the principal and staff know there are serious problems to address they do not accept a simple definition of failure. In one principal's words:

Curiously, the blow dealt us by HMI (official inspectors) served to concentrate minds and energies on the task in hand. There was a great sense of injustice, of there being 'another agenda' and consequently a great determination to prove our accusers wrong. This engendered the staff cohesiveness so critical to success (Drake et al, 1996, p.103).

In this 'striving' school, the fact that the vast majority of the staff, united *with* the principal to demonstrate that the judgement was wrong proved to be very significant for the school's subsequent improvement. The principal exercised strong leadership to make changes and the staff *allowed* her to do so.

'Swaying' schools are ones where for a while it may be 'touch and go' whether the school will survive let alone improve in the face of their difficulties. In one school, within a two year period, there was considerable staff turnover including the principal and deputy principal. Two acting principals ran the school before a permanent appointment was eventually made. During this time the school experienced one trial and one real external inspection. Staff morale wavered. On occasions staff appeared energised and enthusiastic, but at other times they were demoralised and dejected. In the end 'under new management' the school started to improve.

'Sliding' schools are those which seem to have become fixed in a seemingly never ending downward spiral. One troubled school that one of us worked with, was not able to find its way out of the spiral. In spite of the enormous amount of financial and human support it was receiving from various quarters it actually deteriorated.

Like the 'swaying' school, this school had also experienced considerable staff turnover including most of the senior management team. A number of initiatives were mounted to 'improve' the school, for example, to counter high student disaffection and improve behavior but these were rarely carried through consistently because staff were constantly 'firefighting' in response to immediate problems. The cumulative effect of these problems was that the staff became increasingly cynical about whether proposed new initiatives would have any impact. Consequently they became less committed to these initiatives, thus lessening the likelihood of their success.

As each initiative failed to deliver an improvement in student behavior, it became more difficult for the staff *and* the students to believe that *anything* could work. In addition there were serious relationship problems within the senior management team - a lack of agreed and shared goals and dysfunctional transactions amongst them. Dysfunctional relations were also apparent among other staff. A significant number (some of them influential members of the staff group) had worked in the school for a long time and suffered what Rosenholtz (1989) calls the 'paralysis of spirit'. Some were cynical and resistant to any suggested change, often using the assumed teacher union position as a reason why change could not occur. (The teacher union position adopted at school level was not always supported by officials at national level.) There was active conflict between one of the major teacher union groups and the management.

Another group of teachers, mainly recent appointments, consisted of young, energetic, enthusiastic but not very experienced, staff. They found it a challenge to maintain their enthusiasm in the face of their more cynical colleagues and to cope with inconsistent leadership and support. For some of these teachers, the only alternative to becoming acclimatized to the negative culture was to leave. Many

staff had low expectations of students. Among the students there was a culture of ambivalence and even opposition to learning. This disaffection resulted in some appalling behavior, dissatisfaction and lack of confidence among parents and a poor reputation in the area, low morale amongst staff and students and poor student outcomes. In short this school was sliding on a steepening downward spiral.

These particular schools were all deemed to be 'failing' by the official government inspection body in England and Wales (OFSTED), yet they were all very different from each other. They illustrate the complexity of the issue. Together they show that simple labels such as 'failing' are highly imprecise descriptors and supply a very poor basis for further action.

In addition to the need for an accurate description of 'troubled' schools, the wider context in which such schools exist is important for a comprehensive understanding. For example, most schools currently identified by inspectors as 'failing' serve deprived and disadvantaged students, and this results partly from a failure to contextualize judgements properly. This is not, of course, to argue for complacency or low expectations in disadvantaged environments. Naming schools as 'failing', however, often has the effect of lowering morale and obscuring positive aspects. Public humiliation is not the best way to improve matters. Likewise, labelling schools as 'successful' can be equally problematic. It can lead to complacency. It can also lead to inordinate pressure to ensure that each year's examination and test results are an improvement on those of the previous year, without any reference to the talents and abilities of the students in each cohort. It also, of course, begs the question of how 'successful' is defined.

Agreeing and achieving performance targets may at least help define and indicate improvement but, needless to say, setting achievable, realistic and worthwhile

targets is far from simple. All targets must relate to the individual circumstances and contexts of the school.

Placing schools in context

There are two general ways in which the performances of schools can be conceptualised. One, which might be termed the absolute definition, is that which occurs when specific, well defined targets are not achieved. For example, a school could set itself the target of achieving an average class size of 30 or less over a year and a relatively straightforward computation could be carried out to decide whether it had succeeded or failed. This is like using simple performance indicators such as average examination results or attendance rates. A school can be deemed to fall short if it is seen to be below a given threshold. That threshold, of course, will have elements both of arbitrariness and judgement in its choice. So called 'absolute' criteria will necessarily be chosen partly on the basis of existing variations among schools. For example, it would be rare for a definition to be chosen so that no school fell into the category, and likewise it would be rather pointless to choose a threshold that nobody could reach.

Another example is where different targets may be set for each school, but so as to be realistic, these targets are set in the knowledge of what it is thought any institution is capable of achieving. Thus, for a school which already has an average class size of 30.5 a target of 30 may seem realistic whereas for one with an average size of 37 such a target may not. As soon as we begin to try to understand how targets are set and standards for failure come to be defined we see that there really can be no absolute universally applicable targets. To set a target which has a *useful* function requires, among other things, an understanding of where a school already is and how easily it can move to another state. In other words we must contextualize our target setting. This need to contextualize has become relatively well understood

in the last few years. When looking at student achievement at the end of a phase of schooling, the most important method for doing so is now recognized to consist of 'value added' analysis, whereby the achievements of the same students when they enter school are taken into account. In addition, such factors as income and social background of students' parents are often used. 'Value-added' systems have begun to be adapted in several places, for example, Tennessee and recently received official support from the UK government (DFEE, 1995).

While the principle of contextualizing educational achievement is now generally recognized among policy makers, it has not been extended widely into debates about school failure. Clearly, in some situations inspection systems require collecting absolute data. For example, acceptable student behavior is necessary to enable teaching and learning to take place. Given that all students are entitled to a high quality education, allowances cannot be made for disruptive behavior that prevents this whatever the situation. Nevertheless, inspectors, and others who judge schools like the media, also need to recognize that it is much easier to achieve acceptable behavior in some circumstances than in others. This kind of recognition needs to inform all judgements of 'blame'. Thus, by contextualizing behavior it should be possible to measure progress more effectively and to recognize good practice when it occurs, especially under difficult circumstances. An external inspection and suggested action plan, linked to appropriate resources and support is likely to evince a more favourable reaction than one that is made in a climate of blame and recrimination.

A second way in which 'context' affects how we view school performance is in terms of the *purpose* of any judgement that is made. The perceived purpose of any system of judgment alters, how the system operates. It may cause those with a stake in not being labelled as 'failing' to distort their behavior so as to avoid negative

judgements. These distortions may be detrimental to the students. For example, in England and Wales where schools' examination results have been published nationally, in rankings or league tables, some schools have responded by concentrating their efforts on those students they believe may improve their average examination results, while giving less attention to the rest. Schools in these circumstances have been known to collude with absenteeism and even to find ways of removing low attaining students from their roll. In any high stakes system, it is almost inevitable that this kind of 'gaming' or 'playing the system' will take place.

Another concern is that attempts to judge which schools are 'failing' often pay little heed to the practical consequences of such judgements. One consequence of being labelled as 'failing' is that students may suffer a fall in morale, the school may lose support in the community and there may be an overall net loss. Merely designating a school as 'failing' does not automatically lead to remedial action, additional resources or some overall net gain. The movement to provide educational indicators which apparently demonstrate school 'failure', is partly motivated by a belief that there is virtue in the mere fact of publishing comparative information - regardless of its soundness or substance.

Ranking schools

Any public ranking of institutions identifies winners and losers. Those at the bottom invariably attract attention as low achievers or 'failures'. Whether the ranking is made in terms of crude, uncontextualized outcomes or with reference to some contextualization as with 'value added' test scores, there is always a great deal of imprecision in any judgements. There are several reasons for this.

First, the findings are always about a group of students who have completed the program being analysed and so it is a previous state of the school that is being

judged. The current state may be different. Thus, for example, test scores for 16 year old high school students are based on a cohort who will have started at the school several years previously and any inferences may well not apply to succeeding cohorts.

Secondly, the statistical procedure whereby 'adjustments' are made for background factors and prior attainment will only produce estimates within a margin of error so that a great deal of uncertainty about the exact position of any school will remain. In addition there may well be factors such as household income, which influence student achievement. Failure to include these may distort comparisons (Goldstein and Spiegelhalter 1996).

Public league tables are, of course, entirely relative. It is perfectly possible that, in some sense, all the schools could be performing satisfactorily, given the various conditions under which they are operating. Yet by ranking them, those at the lower end may not be able to escape the 'failure' label. This relativism is often obscured by the language we use. In league tables of academic achievement, especially adjusted ones, schools often attract descriptions of 'effective' or 'ineffective' with no further qualification. One of the undesirable side effects of some 'school effectiveness' research arises from the use of such terms in quite unjustified ways.

Public accountability and the fetish of information

In many industrialized societies there is a strong popular belief that the publication of information about the functioning of public bodies is an overwhelming social good. In societies like the US, this belief may also be enshrined in legislation about public disclosure. In the context of school 'failure' or 'success' the role of published information about performance is crucial. It provides data to make judgements or,

in market terms, it introduces a common currency by which the 'worth' of institutions can be measured.

As a reaction to unreasonable secrecy the belief in open access to information seems wholly healthy and undoubtedly has led to many benefits. Yet public disclosure of information cannot be upheld as an absolute principle. This is recognized by governments, for example, when they reserve the right to withhold information they deem to threaten national 'security'. Likewise, if publication of information is likely to harm individuals unfairly, or to mislead, then there is a case for refusing to publish it. It is our contention that some published performance indicators which make statements about schools or other institutions fall into this category. Their capacity to reflect reality accurately may be extremely limited and their publication may cause inappropriate inferences to be drawn about institutions.

In such circumstances, we would argue, information should not be made available publicly: or it should have warnings attached about the dangers of interpretation so that nobody would wish to take it seriously. This warning would be more than that which appears on tobacco advertisements. It would involve a proper explanation of why the information is suspect and a reassurance that those who publish the information fully accept its limitations.

This position on published information causes us to be critical about educational performance indicators and their use. Much of the information that is published under this rubric is produced simply because the data happen to be available (Bottani, 1994). Some of it, such as the achievement scores produced by the international studies of Maths and Science (Rotberg, 1990), have been used, one may even say usurped, by governments and international agencies such as OECD, in order to rank countries in a supposed order of merit. Even where caveats are

entered in official reports, these are of little avail since it is the very fact of publishing them at all which inflicts the damage.

A key factor in this activity is the lack of any possibility of an appeal to a set of publication standards. Just as educational test constructors have ethical guidelines and in most societies there are codes governing the publication of pornographic or derogatory items, so we believe there should be a code for the publication of comparative information about institutions. We believe it is time to start a public discussion to see if some consensus can be reached about what a suitable code might contain and whether and how it might be enforced. Moreover, it is also worth pointing out that without adequate regulation, the poor and misleading quality of some of the information will eventually become apparent and widespread public distrust will then set in. This would then undermine the whole enterprise, so that it is in the interests of those who would seek to promote the publication of information to consider carefully the provision of proper guidelines.

We want to start this debate by offering some guidelines. We have considered the various users of such kinds of information. For example, policy makers are interested in broad questions of efficiency whereas parents and students tend to be more concerned with local details relevant to their particular needs. For all users, however, there should be a shared interest in accuracy and general quality and it is these factors which motivate the following suggestions.

Ethical guidelines for performance indicators

1. The principle of unwarranted harm

As with many ethical codes, the fundamental guiding principle is that publication, or communication by other means, should cause no unwarranted harm to those who

are identified. We use the term unwarranted because there will be some legitimate circumstances when it is in the public interest for genuinely poor performance to be made known. This leads immediately to the next principle

2. The principle of the right to information

If acceptably accurate and unbiased information is available about the performance of public institutions there should be a presumption that this will be made public. This principle may be modified by the operation of principle number 1.

These two principles require some elaboration to be applied in practice. The remaining principles can be viewed as offering guidance on the application of these two.

3. The principle of contextualization

All performance indicators should endeavour to provide information which will allow the institutions involved to be judged in a fair manner. Indicators which are known to be affected largely by factors extrinsic to the institutions should not be used. No indicator should be published without a careful description of how it has been contextualized and how further contextualization could be achieved. This information should be presented prominently and in a manner which allows it readily to be understood.

4. The principle of uncertainty estimation

All performance indicators should be accompanied by estimates of statistical uncertainty. These should reflect sampling variability, and where possible the uncertainty introduced by choice of measurement, statistical technique etc. The

presentation of uncertainty intervals or ranges should be as prominent as the presentation of the indicator values themselves.

5. The principle of multiple indicators

Where possible, multiple indicators relevant to each institution should be presented, rather than a single indicator or a summary over several. This should be done so that no single indicator appears more prominently than another.

6. The principle of institutional response

Any institution for which there is a set of indicators should have the opportunity to make representations regarding the accuracy of the information presented. To facilitate this the agency compiling the indicators should make available all its data, suitably anonymised, for verification and reanalysis by the institution or its appointed persons and the data for an institution should be available to that institution for checking.

*7. The principle of the responsibilities of agencies publishing information

Any agency involved in publicly providing performance indicators should assume responsibility for disseminating material about its procedures and their justifications. It should also publish the technical procedures used for data collection and analysis.

Enforcement

The process of devising such guidelines would, we hope, create sufficient awareness of a common interest in following them. It may be necessary, however, to establish some form of regulation and a 'court of appeal' in order to ensure that the issues were well understood. One suggestion is that professional associations such

as the American Education Research Association (AERA) and the British Education Research Association (BERA) might take on this regulatory role.

Shifting the blame

We have argued that behind the publication of league tables and the labelling of schools as 'failures' lies an unspoken assumption about the locality of blame - that it resides in and with the school. Ironically, however, contextualizing performance, by using adjusted league tables of test scores for example, may actually strengthen such an assumption by encouraging the view that *all* other factors have been accounted for, and that any residual variation must have its origins in the schools. We have already discussed the inherent imprecision of all performance measures and the provisional nature of any conclusions. We have also argued that blaming schools is one consequence of the 'marketisation' of education. Nevertheless, if it is accepted that responsibility needs to be located somewhere, there remains the issue of where.

Suppose that in technical terms we could find an acceptable adjustment procedure, eliminate most of the uncertainty attached to the indicator, disregard the historical nature of the information and rely solidly upon our technical judgements of school differences. Who is to blame then?

If a school or teacher is performing poorly a first priority is to discover the reason why. In some cases personal factors such as acute illness may be involved. In other cases, however, we may need to look outside individual schools or groups of schools into the wider society. Education is not a one way affair. It is not simply the case that an education system delivers graduates into society, having educated them to fill different roles. Nor is it the case that the performance of people in the workplace or society at large can be causally related directly to their education.

to attribute, say, the poor economic performance of a country to the organization or performance of its education system is to make a logical and empirical blunder. It is just as easy to argue the reverse, namely that the poor economic performance of a nation has a direct effect on its education system: in terms of motivation, resource provision or some other feedback mechanism (see Raffe and Willms, 1991). Certainly it is not legitimate to argue, that league tables of international educational performance reflect the quality of national education systems. The attribution of cause and effect is fraught with difficulty in these circumstances, and the mere repetition of one interpretation does not strengthen its plausibility. The fact that so many policy makers of most political persuasions appear to believe that a large number of the ills of society can be blamed on the education system does not make that proposition correspond more closely to the truth.

In view of this the notion of context needs to be extended to include the general political and social context within which schools operate. For example, in a political system where the structure and content of education is subject to rapid, and perhaps poorly co-ordinated change, such as happened in England and Wales in the early 1990s, and has occurred in a number of American states, we should expect disruption, low morale and a consequent effect on 'standards'. In such circumstances, it is inappropriate to blame the schools. Likewise, in an economy where there is increasing unemployment and low employment expectations among young people, any effect on educational performance cannot necessarily be laid at the door of schools.

Conclusion

There are three main problems with attributing blame to schools that are troubled. First it may not be justified. We have illustrated the complexity of the issues and how difficult it is to disentangle precisely what is going on. It is rarely one person

or one event that has caused the problem. It is more likely to be a series of unlucky and unhappy circumstances. Second, whatever is going on inside the school is often compounded by circumstances beyond the control of the school, for example, the level of support and resourcing, turnover of key personnel, local and national legislation, or the social deprivation of students and their families. Third and perhaps most important, we have argued that attributing blame does not help the situation get better. In fact by lowering morale and thereby encouraging staff and students to leave a 'sinking ship' it may have the opposite effect.

Having said this, until a significant number of those involved with 'troubled' schools (staff, students, parents, governors, school district personnel, politicians) accept the need for change and assume responsibility, there is little chance of improvement. But it must be remembered that these problems do not exist in isolation: they are linked to the wider society and need to be seen within that framework. There is an old African saying 'It takes a village to educate a child'. The education community should take heed of this expression and find ways of working together to encourage and support those involved with troubled schools, rather than continually criticising and discouraging them. The first step must be to acknowledge that: schools that find themselves in this situation are there for a variety of reasons; there are no packaged remedies; diagnosis and support has to be individually based and adequately resourced; and finally that change takes time. There are no magic answers and no quick fixes.

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