

**How the Start-up Mentality Failed Kids in San Francisco:
Analysis of a Real-World Improvement Initiative**

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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Introduction

Daniel Duane's (2018) *Wired* article, assigned in this course as "How the Startup Mentality Failed Kids in San Francisco," documents how Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School (WLBMS), built with exceptional resources to give students in San Francisco's Bayview neighborhood an equitable, high-quality STEM education, fell far short of that vision: Its opening was chaotic, its leadership unstable, and 3 years later its enrollment and achievement remained low. The problem warrants analysis because its costs fell on the students the district most wanted to serve, because it consumed substantial public and philanthropic investment, and because districts elsewhere continue to launch similar technology-centered schools. This paper analyzes the project as an improvement initiative so that the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and districts considering similar projects can understand its current state, the causes of its difficulties, and the implications for future work. After describing the school's origins, the paper examines performance gaps, system structure, root causes, organizational dynamics, and stakeholders' thinking habits; synthesizes these findings; and closes with implications and three lessons for any organization. Case-specific evidence comes exclusively from Duane's article and describes the situation at the time of publication in mid-2018; external literature supplies the frameworks used to interpret that evidence.

WLBMS replaced Willie L. Brown Jr. College Preparatory Academy, one of the district's early-2000s "Dream Schools," which opened in 2004 in the Bayview, where 20% of residents live below the federal poverty level, and by 2010 enrolled only 160 students for 500 seats (Duane, 2018, paras. 3, 11, 13). After it was decided that the school could succeed only with a new building, a replacement was funded through a 2011 voter-approved bond, supplemented by philanthropic gifts and a \$500,000 in-kind personalized learning platform from Summit Public

Schools; the district also hoped the school would help reverse a four-decade enrollment decline of nearly 40% (Duane, 2018, paras. 4, 14–16). The result was a \$54 million STEM campus, the most expensive new public school in city history, with robotics and digital media labs, one-to-one technology, a “design thinking” curriculum built on 80-minute periods, and an on-site wellness center (Duane, 2018, para. 3). To ensure diversity, the district gave admission preference to four Bayview elementary schools and offered families citywide a “golden ticket” toward their first-choice high school, and the school opened in August 2015 (Duane, 2018, paras. 5, 7).

What’s Going on Here?

Within weeks of opening, the school’s reality diverged sharply from its vision. This section explains why, moving from what fell short (the performance gap analysis) to how the system produced it (the systems and root cause analyses) and why the organization did not correct course (the organizational and thinking-habits analyses), descending from events to underlying structures and mental models (Kim, 1996). Four assumptions apply. Disputed figures are used as reported, with the dispute noted; anonymous teacher and parent accounts are treated as credible where district records corroborate them, as with the unfinished campus, although they may not represent every stakeholder’s experience (Duane, 2018, para. 19); declining test scores are assumed, as the author suggests, to have depressed enrollment (Duane, 2018, para. 47); and causal links the article implies but does not state are labeled as inferences.

Performance Gap Analysis

A performance gap is the distance between vision and current reality. Senge (2006) described it as the source of creative tension, which energizes change only when leaders hold to the vision instead of lowering it. The Gap Analysis Worksheet documents five gaps, three of

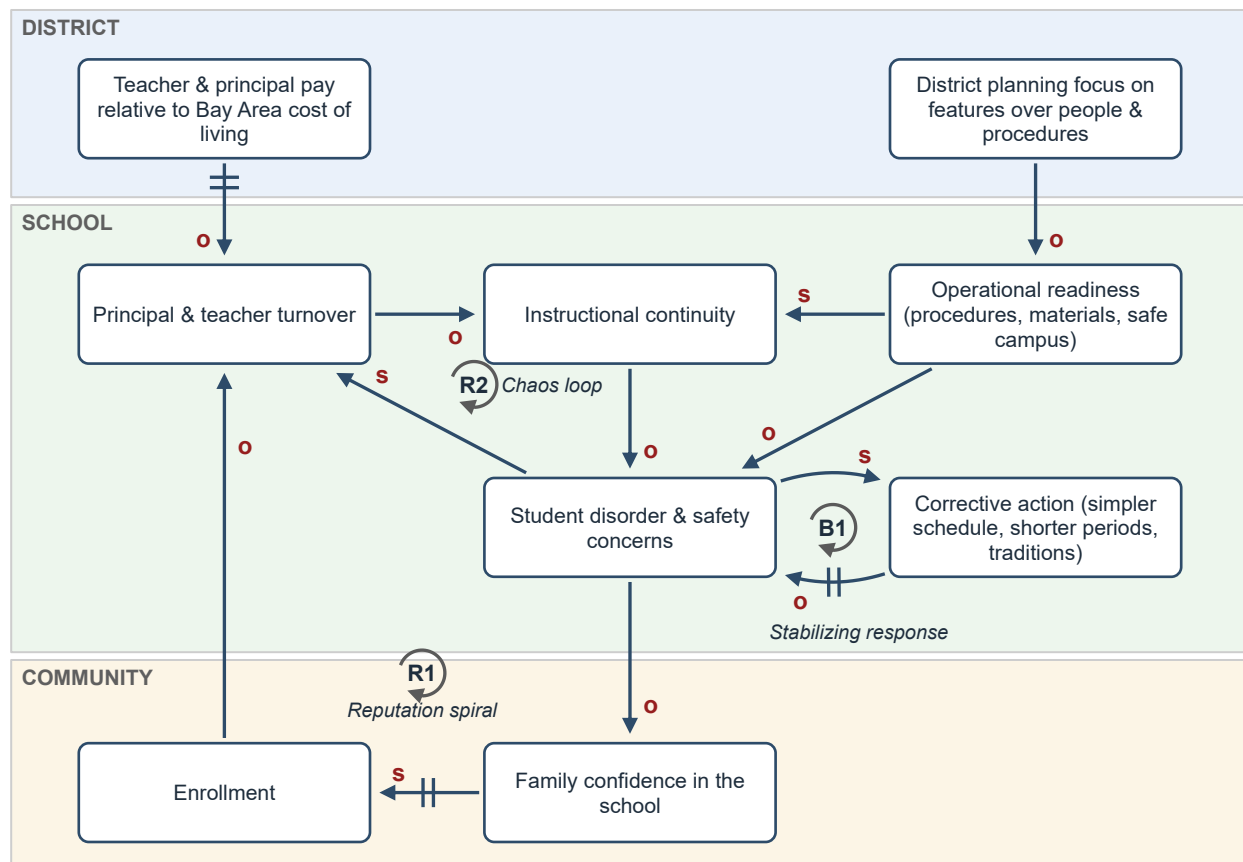
which emerged at launch. Operationally, the school opened amid active construction, with textbooks in boxes, laptops and lab equipment missing, and no attendance or discipline procedures; only 16% of staff described the campus as safe (Duane, 2018, paras. 7, 18–19). In leadership, the first principal left after a month. A third principal was in place by mid-October and a fourth within 2 years, and six other faculty members reportedly resigned in the first months, a figure the district disputes (Duane, 2018, paras. 7, 45). Instructionally, the district ended the school’s use of the Summit platform early in the first year over student data privacy, leaving teachers with long class periods and no curriculum tools (Duane, 2018, para. 23). Two outcome gaps persisted in 2018. Only 21% of students tested at or above grade level in English and about 10% in mathematics, both lower than the year before (Duane, 2018, para. 47). Enrollment remained low: The school filled just 70 of 100 sixth-grade seats in 2016, and although its incoming class grew to 111 and first-choice rankings had begun to rise, its 382 students left it about half full (Duane, 2018, paras. 8, 47–48).

Systems Analysis

Seen as events, the WLBMS story is a string of crises; seen as patterns, it repeats a familiar history. Brown 1.0 had also failed to attract students, and SFUSD had the highest teacher resignation rate of 10 California districts studied, with 664 vacancies entering the 2016–2017 school year (Duane, 2018, paras. 13, 30). Beneath those patterns lay structures that made some actions easy and others hard. Voters readily approved construction bonds, whereas raising salaries required union negotiations and new taxes, and some teachers’ monthly pay roughly equaled the city’s average one-bedroom rent of about \$3,400 (Duane, 2018, paras. 15, 29). Beneath the structures lay a mental model: The district’s planning notes described solar panels,

flat-screen televisions, and gardens but no effort to retain teachers or principals (Duane, 2018, para. 28), implying that an outstanding building would produce an outstanding school.

Figure 1 maps these dynamics across the district, school, and community levels. In the chaos loop (R2), turnover reduced instructional continuity and increased disorder, which drove more staff away; students arrived excited, one teacher recalled, until they “realized the school was a sham,” and then “the bad behavior started” (Duane, 2018, para. 24). In the reputation spiral (R1), disorder eroded family confidence and enrollment, which, by inference, further destabilized staffing, producing what the author called “an enrollment death spiral” (Duane, 2018, para. 8). Corrective action by later principals forms a balancing loop (B1) that reduces disorder only after a delay. Delays run throughout the system: Raising pay requires union and ballot processes that were still underway in 2018 (Duane, 2018, para. 15), family confidence reaches enrollment only through the annual lottery, and culture, as the fourth principal said 3 years in, still had to be built (Duane, 2018, para. 46). Stroh (2015, Chapter 12) observed that funders and grantees alike set unrealistic goals, funders to see quick results and grantees to impress funders; with delays this long, such goals could not be met.

Figure 1*Causal Loop Diagram of the Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School System*

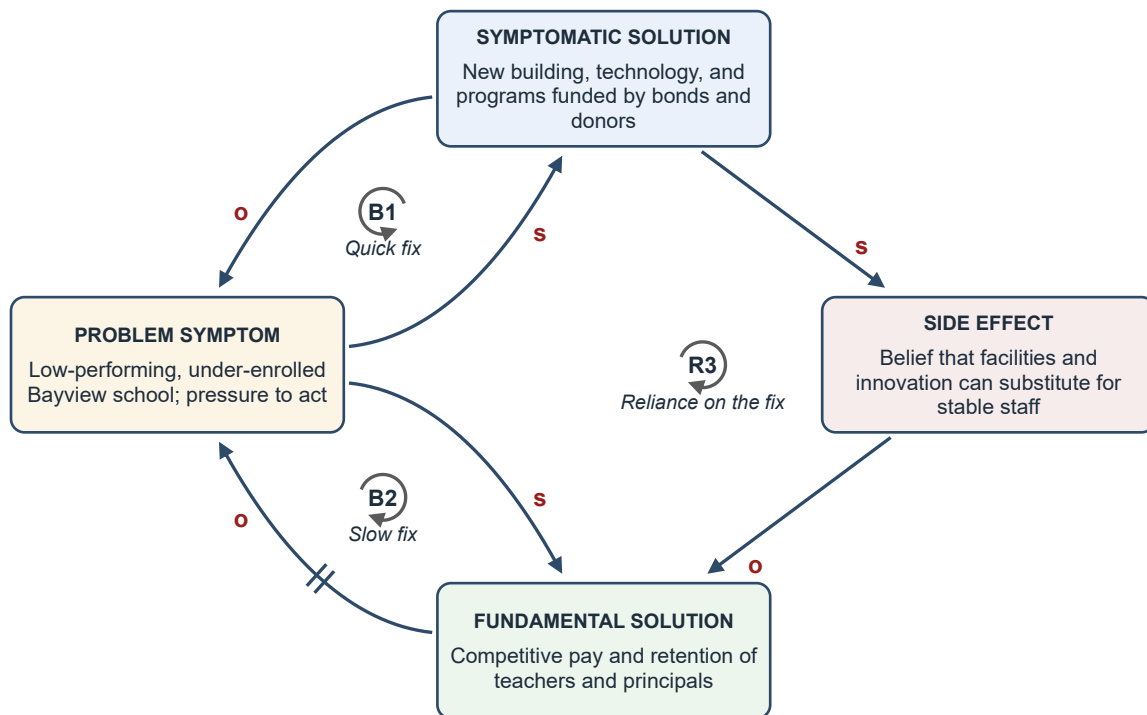
Note. Arrows show causal influence. An *s* indicates that two variables move in the same direction; an *o* indicates that they move in opposite directions. Double hash marks (//) indicate significant delays. R = reinforcing loop; B = balancing loop. The link from enrollment to turnover is inferred. Based on Duane (2018).

The deepest structure is Senge's (2006) shifting-the-burden archetype, shown in Figure 2. Pressure to fix a failing school could be relieved quickly with a symptomatic solution: buildings, technology, and programs that bonds and donors readily fund, or slowly with the fundamental solution: competitive pay and retaining strong teachers and principals. Each quick fix eased pressure while reinforcing the belief that facilities could substitute for stable staff, further sidelining the fundamental solution. Summarizing Stanford economist Eric Hanushek, the author

observed that officials unable to solve deep problems such as low salaries “do what they can and hope for the best” (Duane, 2018, para. 39). Much philanthropy followed the same pattern (Duane, 2018, para. 41), although with exceptions: Salesforce founder Marc Benioff gave \$250,000 to support a parcel tax to raise teacher pay (Duane, 2018, para. 40), and one foundation noted that “no one funder can take on the entire entity” (Duane, 2018, para. 43). Even after the crisis, the author estimated, the district was paying the fourth principal about \$29,000 less than the first (Duane, 2018, para. 49).

Figure 2

Shifting-the-Burden Structure at Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School



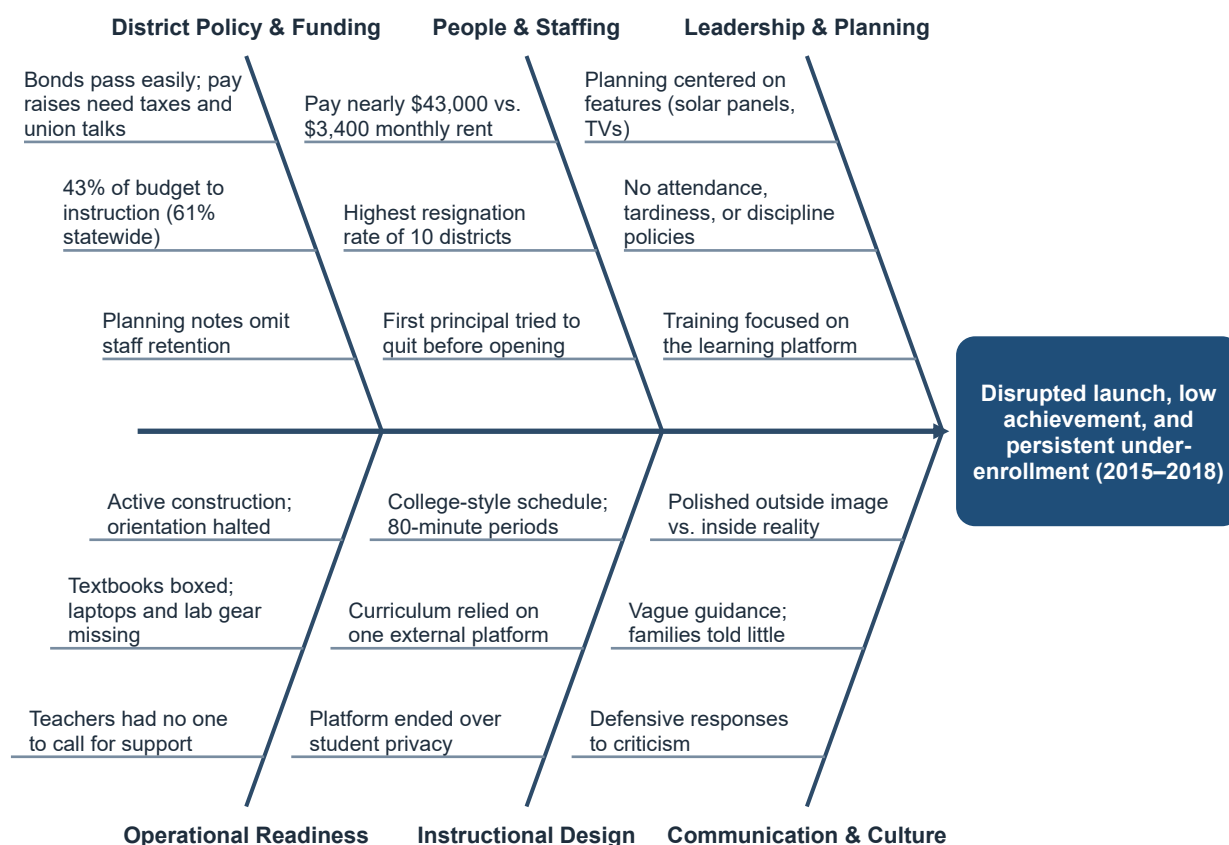
Note. B1 and B2 are balancing loops; R3 is a reinforcing side-effect loop. The symptomatic solution acts quickly, whereas the fundamental solution acts only after a delay (//). Archetype adapted from Senge (2006); content based on Duane (2018).

Root Cause Analysis

A single “five whys” chain would force this analysis down one causal pathway toward one root cause, discarding much of what a complex system can teach (Card, 2017). Instead, the fishbone diagram in Figure 3 sorts contributing causes into six categories drawn from the analyses above.

Figure 3

Fishbone Diagram of Root Causes at Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School



Note. Causes are drawn from Duane (2018). Categories above the spine reflect district- and leadership-level causes; categories below the spine reflect school-level conditions.

Separating where the problems appeared, such as turnover, construction, and missing materials, from why they occurred yields three root causes. First, the funding and planning

structure described in the systems analysis treated facilities as the solution. The district directed only 43% of its budget to teacher salaries and other instructional expenses, compared with 61% statewide; officials attributed part of that difference to San Francisco's combined city and county responsibilities and to smaller classes and schools that spread the budget across more staff, but central-office salaries were also among the state's highest (Duane, 2018, para. 31). Second, the school launched before its foundation existed: The opening date held despite the readiness and leadership gaps, and summer training addressed the learning platform rather than how to care for "11- and 12-year-old kids" (Duane, 2018, para. 18). Third, the instructional design depended on conditions the district did not control: a college-style schedule that overwhelmed students used to one or two teachers (Duane, 2018, para. 19) and a single external platform whose loss removed the model's core.

Organizational Analysis

Vision and Excluded Voices

The vision belonged to district leaders seeking a new building to answer an enrollment crisis and to technology philanthropists and partners whose gifts shaped the school's identity (Duane, 2018, paras. 4, 14, 16). In Senge's (2006) terms, it was announced rather than shared. Even the first principal tried to resign before the school opened, and a district official said his heart "seems not to have been in it" (Duane, 2018, para. 18). The reported accounts suggest that the people closest to the work had little voice. Teachers who asked for the missing procedures were told, "Positive, productive, and professional" (Duane, 2018, para. 18); a parent described teachers who "had nobody to call" (Duane, 2018, para. 21); and families received an orientation about "far-off stuff like the 3-D printer," cut short by the fire marshal, and later letters attributing the principal's departure to personal reasons (Duane, 2018, paras. 18, 20).

Espoused Theory and the Start-up Mental Model

Argyris and Schön (1974) distinguished the theories people espouse from the theories in use that govern their actions. WLBMS espoused equity through innovation, but its theory-in-use was a start-up mental model: Launch quickly with an imperfect product, iterate on feedback, and treat early failure as the price of innovation. The model was visible in the project's premise of emulating tech-driven private schools and courting their funders (Duane, 2018, para. 17), in district staff escorting a technology executive's wife through a building one teacher likened to a Ferrari with "no engine" (Duane, 2018, para. 22), and in the defense offered by Tony Payne, who had served as interim principal: "The startup metaphor is a really good one . . . where you have to iterate" (Duane, 2018, para. 36). The governing values in use appear to have been to open on schedule, impress funders, and protect the school's image.

Learning Loops and Defensive Routines

Argyris (1977) distinguished single-loop learning, which corrects errors within existing governing values, from double-loop learning, which questions those values. The district's responses were single-loop: It replaced principals and explained the first departure as personal. The third principal, Bill Kappenhagen, moved toward double-loop learning by simplifying the schedule, shortening periods, and telling parents, "We're going to do middle school well, then the rest will come" (Duane, 2018, para. 25), but the article offers little evidence that the district questioned its assumption that facilities could compensate for turnover. Instead, administrators called the disaster narrative "unfair and overblown," and Payne described violence—"a kid throwing a pen in a classroom, that's middle school"—and teacher losses as normal (Duane, 2018, paras. 33–35). His point that violence at predominantly African American schools is portrayed more harshly is legitimate, but using it to close inquiry is what Argyris (1986) called

skilled incompetence, in which managers “use practiced routine behavior (skill) to produce what they do not intend (incompetence)” (p. 74). For leaders of such a visible project, these routines guarded against the fear of public failure, kept problems undiscussable, and, in Senge’s (2006) terms, eroded goals rather than closed gaps.

Accountability and Communication

Accountability was diffuse. The principal answered for results but controlled neither construction, the platform contract, nor pay, while the district controlled those levers and described the problems as normal. Hanushek’s judgment that “the interest of the kids isn’t ahead of the interests of the institutions” (Duane, 2018, para. 38) and the author’s verdict that “the adults had failed to lead, and things fell apart” (Duane, 2018, para. 24) describe a system in which no one owned the whole. Communication flowed outward to donors and the public more readily than inward to teachers and families.

Habits of Mind, Heart, and Imagination

Capella University’s (n.d.) thinking habits clarify how the stakeholders reasoned: district leaders who designed the school, principals and teachers who ran it, families and students who experienced it, and funders who equipped it. Two habits were practiced. Kappenhagen’s redesign reflected continuous learning, specifically learning in failure, and courageous action in making an unpopular decision. James Robertson, a robotics teacher present from the start, practiced caring empathy: Realizing that parents could not see their children’s learning, he held a robotics night at which he “watched parents crying,” and his view that community “takes time to build” reflects connected seeing (Duane, 2018, para. 48). Two habits were absent or partial. Curiosity, particularly the avoidance of quick fixes that “ignore causal complexities” (Capella University, n.d., p. 3), was missing when Brown 1.0’s failure was answered with a building rather than an

inquiry into turnover. Payne's argument about racialized coverage showed complementary thinking only in part, because it did not integrate teachers' and families' experience; holding both truths at once, biased coverage and a failing school, would have opened inquiry rather than ended it.

Analysis

The five lenses converge on one explanation: The district built a facility and launched a program faster than it built the people, procedures, and shared commitment needed to run them, and then defended the launch instead of learning from it. Three themes capture the main causes, those that would most have improved the odds of realizing the vision had they been addressed, and show how leadership behaviors and mindsets shaped both performance and organizational learning.

The Visible Fix Displaced the Fundamental Solution

The gaps that persisted in leadership, achievement, and enrollment depended most on people. The systems analysis shows why people were neglected, the root cause analysis finds retention absent from planning, and Figure 2 shows how each visible fix deepened that neglect. This was the most consequential cause because, as Hanushek noted, the reform most reliably correlated with good student outcomes is the presence of good teachers and principals who stay (Duane, 2018, para. 29). Research confirms the stakes: Ronfeldt et al. (2013) found that teacher turnover lowers achievement in English language arts and mathematics, with the largest effects in schools serving more low-achieving and Black students, the students WLBMS was built to serve.

An Unready Launch Set the Spirals in Motion

Stroh (2015) placed foundation building, the development of common ground, relationships, and capacity, at the start of any change and warned that people expect more measurable progress in that phase than is realistic. WLBMS skipped the phase, and leadership behavior converted the omission into poor performance: A principal whose commitment was in doubt had not established basic procedures by opening day, the resulting disorder started the reinforcing loops in Figure 1, and the system's delays let a few months of chaos shape enrollment and reputation for years.

Defensive Leadership Blocked Organizational Learning

The organizational analysis explains why the system did not correct itself. An announced vision, an image-centered theory-in-use, and Model I defensive routines (Argyris, 1977) appear to have kept teachers' concerns and families' experiences from reaching decisions and confined the district to single-loop fixes. In the reported accounts, learning appears where people were close to the problem and willing to name it, as with Kappenhagen and Robertson, while curiosity is absent where the most consequential decisions were made. Without evidence that governing assumptions were ever surfaced, the system kept producing the results it was structured to produce.

Conveying the Findings to Stakeholders

How these findings are shared will determine whether they produce learning or defensiveness, so each audience should meet them as structure rather than blame (Goodman, 1997). District leaders and the board need the worksheet's documented gaps paired with Figures 1 and 2, which locate causes in structures rather than individuals and so make them discussable (Argyris, 1986). Teachers and principals should test the analysis in facilitated sessions using the

ladder of inference and the two-column technique (Coghlan, 2019). Families need a plain-language account of what went wrong, what the district is learning, and how progress on safety, staffing, and achievement reflects their lost confidence; funders need Figure 2 to see why investment in people must match investment in facilities.

Implications for Practice

How People Interact and Communicate

Future projects should build a shared vision with the people who will carry it out (Senge, 2006). That requires collaborative teamwork, specifically collaborative dialogue grounded in trust and mutuality, and caring empathy that treats teachers' and families' perspectives as legitimate data (Capella University, n.d.). The principal should be hired early and engaged in the design, and wavering commitment should be resolved rather than overridden. Communication must flow inward as readily as outward, with leaders practicing conversational reflection, first believing and then doubting, when concerns arise.

Systems Perspectives and Analysis

Before approving a project, leaders should practice connected seeing (Capella University, n.d.) by mapping the system it depends on, from events through structures to mental models (Kim, 1996). Such a map would have directed resources to the high-leverage fundamental solution in Figure 2 and revealed that the reinforcing loops in Figure 1 amplify whatever direction they start in, so stabilizing staff and routines must precede scaling innovation. Planners should budget for delays with realistic goals and early indicators of foundation building, such as retention, perceived safety, and family confidence, rather than expecting quick test-score gains (Stroh, 2015). Curiosity's hunger for evidence would test critical dependencies, such as a single

platform with unresolved privacy terms, and readiness should become a gate that no opening date can override.

Accountability

One leader should own the launch, with authority across construction, staffing, partnerships, and instruction, while principals own culture and instruction. In systems terms, accountability is a balancing feedback loop: Indicators that flag drift in readiness, safety, or staffing trigger correction before reinforcing spirals take hold, and after-action reviews ask what happened, why, and what should change. That loop works only under what Argyris (1977) called Model II leadership, grounded in valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment, and supported by collaborative responsibility and the courage to accept responsibility rather than defend decisions (Capella University, n.d.). Accountability also means each party owning its share of the outcome. District leaders put the opening date and image ahead of readiness. The first principal stayed in a role he did not embrace, funders paid mostly for visible features, partners supplied tools without the conditions to use them, and voters rewarded construction over pay. Each should reverse course: leaders by protecting readiness and inviting dissent, principals by voicing reservations and advocating for staff, funders by investing in people, and partners by resolving issues such as data privacy before launch.

Was the Start-up Mentality the Cause?

I agree with the author only in part. The start-up mental model legitimized opening an unready school and provided the language to defend it, but it was not the root cause. The deeper causes were a structure that funded buildings over people, chronic turnover, and defensive routines predating any start-up rhetoric; Brown 1.0, launched in 2004, also failed (Duane, 2018, para. 13). Nor did WLBMS practice what makes iteration work: small pilots, rapid user

feedback, and leaders who bear the cost of failure. As the author notes, start-ups are backed by investors who accept the risk, whereas WLBMS “was started by government employees with little personal stake in the outcome” (Duane, 2018, para. 37), so the risk fell on 11- and 12-year-olds. The problem was not a lack of start-up thinking, but a superficial imitation of it.

Conclusion

Three lessons from WLBMS apply to my own organization and to any organization launching an ambitious initiative. Prioritize investment in root-cause solutions, rather than merely funding surface-level fixes. Outcomes depend most on the people who stay, and no facility compensates for constant turnover, so every initiative should name the fundamental problem it leaves untouched and ask whether it can succeed without solving it. Second, build the foundation before launch and plan for delays. Readiness, relationships, procedures, and shared commitment are the first phase of change, and treating readiness as a gate protects the people who would otherwise pay for an unready launch.

Third, make it safe to learn. A shared vision, candid communication, and leaders who treat problems as information make double-loop learning possible, allowing an organization to correct course before small failures become spirals. The district’s task is to begin its next project where WLBMS, through its later principals, teachers, and families, is only now arriving.

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