How to Create Schools That Thrive in Chaotic Times

Educational leaders seeking to improve schools can find valuable advice in Tom Peters' acclaimed volume for business managers.

Educators today face a world turned upside down by economic, social, scientific, technological, and political changes. Vast amounts of new knowledge are created every day, changing and expanding the knowledge base. Current educational systems, in a word, are outmoded, requiring shifts in attitudes and perceptions, along with practical changes, that will help students meet the challenges of the 21st century. In light of this, schools and school systems face a related challenge: to be flexible enough to redefine their goals and operating procedures so as to help students deal with a world in great flux.

Destined to be a classic in the business management field, Thriving on Chaos: A Revolutionary Agenda for Today’s Manager by Tom Peters (Alfred E. Knopf, 1987) has momentous theoretical and practical implications for educators as well. It is "must" reading for anyone concerned about the ability of schools to meet the curricular and instructional needs of students, as well as the educational needs of modern American society. It is one of those rare books that can help educational leaders create organizations that will excel in these revolutionary and chaotic times.

Peters begins by discussing the declining economic situation in the United States—competition from abroad, a tendency towards mergers and "giantism," declining productivity, minimalization of labor's role in organizations. His organizational solutions to these challenges are also prescriptions for schools as they reorganize for survival. According to Peters, organizations most likely to meet these serious challenges:

• have few layers of organizational structure;
• contain small autonomous units, with few central staff as "second guessers" to the decisions these units make;
• devote constant attention to quality and service;
• are responsive to the customer;
• create changes and innovations at a fast pace;
• are "people centered," using staff to add value to their product.

In the remainder of the book, Peters elaborates on these characteristics and offers specific suggestions for creating organizations for excellence. The book’s five sections—customer responsiveness, fast-paced innovation, flexibility by empowering people, leadership and change, and building new systems—taken together, have important, even urgent implications for school leaders as they design ways to improve the quality of school programs.

For example, in the section on customer responsiveness, Peters argues that leaders must promote an organizational passion for quality and must have a system in place to ensure quality. Organizations that do this spend a great deal of time listening—truly listening—to their customers and then use those ideas to improve their products. He stresses that high quality is defined primarily by the customer, citing numerous examples of companies that too often dismissed the critical comments of their customers. Should schools spend substantial time and energy listening to students, parents, and the community, as well as other educators, in their search to provide high quality education? Should the perceptions, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions of parents and students be a major factor in defining schools of high quality? Yes, of course!

Peters also stresses that the measurement of quality should continuously be conducted by the natural
work group, team, or department involved in making the product. When "front line" people evaluate product quality, the data are immediately provided to the group most likely to improve the product, rather than filtered to them through an accounting department or an audit or inspector brigade far removed from the product—whose data might not be accurate, pertinent, or useful. One might argue from Peters' message that statewide evaluations and competency tests should give way to the collection and analysis of data by small groups of teachers, who would then diagnose students' needs and determine the content of programs.

Peters also suggests the need for small continuous improvements fostered mostly by the workers themselves, not large-scale changes brought in from outside the organization. He cites abundant examples of organizations that routinely implement thousands of suggestions each year and, in fact, actively encourage them. If teachers and students regularly made suggestions on how to improve the quality of the educational program and if their suggestions were implemented quickly and efficiently, imagine what school districts might be like.

Another set of prescriptions focuses on innovations, which Peters says occur through small experimental programs, numerous pilots, the continuous "swiping" of creative ideas from others, and from champions of new ideas within the organization. He devotes an entire section to the support of "fast failures"—small, risk-free pilots with people constantly learning from the ones that fail. Based on his prescriptions, schools with small teams of teachers working together could design experimental programs; find examples of new programs in other schools to pilot, adapt, and modify to suit local needs; and learn from each other and from "failures." If these policies were the norm in education, imagine what kinds of schools we would have.

All five prescriptive areas are richly detailed and described through quotes, stories, case studies, and practical suggestions. For example, Peters illustrates the need to celebrate the successes of people in the organization and details ways to do it. He focuses on ways for leaders to create inspiring visions and to be visible managers. In a section on measuring what's important, he brilliantly analyzes ways to measure the "intangible" factors of success—service, listening, innovation, responsiveness, support of failures—which educators can use to brainstorm and create new measures of educational success. Almost every page has an idea or a kernel of an idea with significant implications for schools. Few books have the potential to foster major changes in thinking and acting that can have long-term beneficial effects for schools and school systems. This book is one of them. *Thriving on Chaos* can help lead us, and help us lead others, to thriving, innovative, and productive school systems.

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What Educators Can Learn from Chris Zajac:
Observations on *Among Schoolchildren*

Tracy Kidder's keen eye provides a discerning look into the real world of a 5th grade classroom.

Mrs. Zajac means business, Robert. The sooner you realize she never said everybody in the room has to do the work except for Robert, the sooner you will get along with her. And ... Clarence. Mrs. Zajac knows you didn't try. You don't hand in junk to Mrs. Zajac. She's been teaching an awful lot of years. She didn't fall off the turnip cart yesterday. She told you she was an old-lady teacher.

So begins Tracy Kidder's latest bestseller, *Among Schoolchildren*, an engaging account of the day-by-day experiences of one teacher and one group of 5th grade children in a deteriorating neighborhood in a rust-belt community. The experiences observed and recorded, while warm and involving, are not unlike the experiences of thousands of teachers in hundreds of schools every day. This, as much as anything else, accounts for the book's wide popularity. In it, the typical, the everyday, the mundane are elevated to heroic dimensions. A common experience, turned on its end...