

Preparing for the Unpredictable with a Negative Imagination

Ken Mitchell, EdD
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On Friday April 5th, I was meeting with a group of superintendents that included a few who were in their first year. Before the meeting began, I asked the neophytes how things were going with their upcoming school budget and board elections.

A couple responded, 7 K L Q J V D U H J U H D W
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superintendent overhearing them, raised an
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V R P H W K L Q J D U R X Q G W K H F R U Q H U ' \$ S S U R [L P D W H O \
an hour into the meeting, our building began to
shake. Within seconds the phones of the 30
superintendents in the room began buzzing.

The meeting abruptly ended as all headed back to their districts. A 4.8 magnitude earthquake had just rattled the northeast corner of New York State.

With all their experience and state-of-the-art equipment, seismologists are still unable to predict when an earthquake will occur. They know the causes. They have data on seismic gaps and patterns. They monitor shifting of

tectonic plates in vulnerable regions, but the science of prediction, especially in the short term, remains immature.

Unless one is a fortune teller, making accurate predictions, whatever the context, is a delicate science of balancing data, experience, and imagination. With all of these at their disposal, even the best experts fail to accurately and consistently predict such events as pandemics, stock market crashes, or terrorist acts.

Yet, there is an expectation that leaders should have known. Crisis is often followed by criticism that a system's leaders failed to anticipate the event, no matter the level of probability. In response, leaders often react with studies and plans to mitigate, even low probability events, especially those with high impact consequences.

Most school districts have safety plans for a variety of potential and improbable events, including earthquakes. Yet given the array of possibilities, it is unrealistic to presume that leadership can predict when such

