



POLICY BRIEF

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Systemic Change for Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AECT advocates that school districts engage in a process of transforming themselves from standardized, time-based, teaching-centered instruction to customized, attainment-based, learning-centered instruction. This transformation should utilize technology extensively throughout school operations, particularly in instructional settings.

INTRODUCTION

Districts and stakeholders are familiar with the *piecemeal changes*, often legislated, that can be characterized by two or three word slogans: class size, standardized testing, setting standards, professional development, mobile devices, and others. Few instances of *systemic change* can be found. Systemic change requires a major redesign of the core processes of schooling to meet the demands of tomorrow. Throughout history, all kinds of organizations have undergone periods of systemic change – usually in response to big changes in their environment – followed by periods of piecemeal change. We cannot and should not expect a system designed for the Industrial Age to serve the needs of Information-Age communities, whose educational needs are dramatically different. In short, we need a systemic transformation of educational organizations.

DISCUSSION

Parents and teachers alike recognize that students learn at different rates and have different learning needs. Yet our educational systems teach a fixed amount of content in a fixed amount of time. By holding time constant for all students, we force achievement to vary. Students who learn slower than the pace of a course accumulate deficits in their skills and understandings that make it even harder for

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them to learn subsequent material. This system dooms them to failure and being left behind. Also, students who learn faster than the pace of a course get bored and are held back from reaching their potential.

CONCLUSION

A new paradigm. The alternative to holding time constant is to hold achievement constant at a mastery level and allow every student enough time to reach mastery. This learning-focused paradigm of education would allow all students to reach their potential by providing customized learning experiences, founded in authentic projects supported by just-in-time instruction when appropriate. This requires a complete change in the roles of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and technology. Such fundamental changes require a systemic view of change (“systemic” in a broader sense than just system-wide), such as that proposed by Peter Senge to create learning organizations—change that recognizes the powerful interrelationships and dynamic complexities that underlie our public education systems.

The roles of students must change from passive, teacher-directed learners to active, self-directed learners. The roles of teachers much change from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side,” which includes teacher as designer of student work, facilitator of student work, and mentor of students. The teacher must also be a learner—about, with, from, and for students. Parents must become partners in learning for their children. And technology must change from a tool primarily for teachers to one primarily for students. It must facilitate planning for student learning, instruction for student learning, assessment for and of student learning, and recordkeeping for student learning. Student progress based on learning requires a change in the paradigm of assessment from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced, with a similar change in the recordkeeping system. Changed educational needs in society require big changes in curriculum, as well.

A paradigm-change process. The change process for public schools should be systemic in that a fundamental change occurs from an industrial-age system that is standardized, time-based, teacher-centered, and managed in a top-down bureaucratic manner to an information-age system that is customized, attainment-based, learner-centered, and managed by teams in which all stakeholder groups have a voice. The change process could take a charter school as the “unit of change,” or it could take the entire school district as the “unit of change,” encompassing all levels from the individual student and teacher, to the classroom, the building, and the district administration and governance systems. Although the change process should be facilitated by someone experienced in systemic change, it should be “owned” by all the stakeholders. This is a step beyond participation by all stakeholders.

Different paradigms of education represent different mental models about education, and those mental models are founded in different sets of beliefs or values about education. Therefore, the process of systemic transformation must focus on helping all stakeholders to evolve and deepen their understanding of education in general, the teaching-learning process in particular, and the ways their community’s educational needs have been changing as it has evolved from the industrial age to the information age. This process must result in the development of a new set of shared values or beliefs

about education. The process cannot be mandated top-down. Furthermore, the process must pursue the design of an ideal educational system, to transcend industrial-age mindsets about education. The process must be iterative and evaluative. Finally, the process must occur within a culture of developmental or transformational leadership that empowers all stakeholders to be leaders.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational practitioners should work to convince policymakers and other stakeholders to initiate a systemic change process in their school districts. They should also participate actively in the initiated process and encourage all stakeholders to participate. District policymakers and union leaders should initiate a systemic change process in their school district and hire an experienced outside facilitator as a guide. State and federal policymakers should provide funding initiatives and policies to support local systemic change processes. Those initiatives should make expertise as well as dollars available and should provide significant support for about three to five years. Finally, researchers should conduct action research to advance our knowledge about the systemic change process.

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