

Progress Report on the Decatur Township Systemic Change Project

The purposes of this report are (1) to inform you about a systemic change effort that the School of Education is facilitating in the MSD Decatur Township of Indianapolis, and (2) to invite your involvement.

As a systemic, district-wide effort, it addresses all aspects of education, and it can benefit from the expertise of faculty in all programs in the School of Education. This provides an excellent venue for you to conduct research, provide service, and possibly even do some consulting. It also provides an opportunity for you to work with colleagues outside of your program area and to see how ideas on which you are working might fit within a broader change effort.

We need you, and Decatur needs you. Please let us know if you would like to talk about possibly being involved at some point.

What is this project all about?

The **purpose** of this project is to help the Decatur Township engage in a process for deciding what an ideal school system would be for their community, and to work on getting as close to that ideal as possible. We are not there to tell them what their schools should be like; we are there to help them see new possibilities and to decide for themselves what they want.

Some of the **values** that underlie the process we are facilitating are:

- As many stakeholders as possible should be involved.
- The stakeholders collectively should have ownership over both the change process and the changes that are decided upon.
- The change process should focus on student learning and development; all changes should be designed with that in mind.
- The change process is first and foremost a process of helping people to evolve and deepen their thinking about education—to help them evolve their mental models about education (Senge) and to thereby evolve the culture of their schools (Fullan).
- The process should encourage all participants to think in the ideal, then develop a strategic plan for evolving as close as possible to that ideal.

The **logic** of the change process, which has evolved through several change efforts, centers around the creation of a vision of Decatur's future educational system. If that vision is developed by, and owned by, a large number of stakeholders, the change process will be successful. The challenge is how to develop a shared vision. People's visions about education are based on their beliefs (or values, or philosophies, or ideals) about education. Thus, to arrive at a shared vision, they must first arrive at a set of common beliefs about education. As Senge and Fullan have indicated, mental models and culture are the foundation for any fundamental changes in education. Hence, much of the change process is

concerned with engaging stakeholders in dialogue with each other to understand why others believe what they do, and through that understanding to evolve their own beliefs, mental models, and school culture.

What has happened in the project so far?

Charles Reigeluth and Roberto Joseph have been working as facilitators with the Decatur Township for almost a year and half, meeting weekly with a "Core Team" of stakeholders to build a foundation for this kind of change process. The members of the Core Team include a school board member, a principal, a PTO leader, the president of the Decatur Education Association, and the superintendent. The Core Team will soon expand to include a much broader cross-section of all members of the community, and that expanded team will work with all stakeholders to design better learning experiences for all children.

As the first step to getting all stakeholders involved in this systemic change process, the Core Team held six widely publicized meetings to which all community members were invited. The purpose of those meetings, which took place between January 22 and February 7, was to start to identify the educational needs of the students and community and how they have changed over the past generation or two. In April and May the Core Team will hold 7 more community meetings to help stakeholders work on developing shared beliefs about education that will guide decisions on what changes (if any) should be made in their schools.

Where is the project going from here?

This summer the Core Team will expand into a 25-member "Decisioning Team," which will include key opinion leaders from all stakeholder groups. This will be the political force behind the change effort. Then in the fall the Decisioning Team will likely form several building-based design teams to develop different visions for their respective buildings (or for smaller schools-within-a-school in their buildings). These design teams will want much information about your latest thinking on how to better foster learning and human development. We expect them to want to try out different ideas, which offers an excellent opportunity for action research. Later, a district-wide design team will work on designing administrative and governance systems that will best support the school designs. Information about policy, leadership, and finance issues will be important. Finally, once the new designs have been created and approved, work will need to be done to develop and implement strategic plans for evolving as close as possible to those designs. Professional development, technology support, and much more will be needed at that time.

In addition to opportunities for you to do service and research in the Decatur schools, an advisory board will be formed to shepherd the entire change process.

Please let us know if you would like to talk more about any of these ways of becoming involved in this project. Decatur needs your help!

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