

## **Facilitating Systemic Change in an Urban School District: The First Six Months**

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In an effort to improve public education, several researchers have developed design theories for systemic change in education (see e.g., Banathy, 1991; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1998; Reigeluth & Garfinkle, 1994). According to Reigeluth (1999), “Design theories are intended to provide direct guidance to practitioners about what methods to use to attain different goals...” (p. 8). Following the release of A Nation at Risk (1983), researchers such as those cited above have been developing design theories to help our society transform its public educational systems. Many of these theories have not provided practitioners with the level of guidance and support needed to sustain a long-term systemic change effort. Additionally, many of these theories have focused on the individual school as the unit of change, as opposed to focusing on the district and community levels. The most detailed design theory for district-wide systemic change that we have found to date is the “Guidance System for Transforming Education” (Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr & Nelson, 1996; 1998; in final preparation).

### **The Guidance System for Transforming Education**

The Guidance System for Transforming Education (GSTE) is a design theory for facilitating systemic change. It is comprised of “discrete events,” which are a chronological series of activities for engaging in systemic change, and “continuous events,” which are activities that must be addressed continuously throughout much or all of the change process (Jenlink et al., 1998). The discrete events fall into five phases:

- I. Assess Readiness and Negotiate an Agreement
- II. Prepare Core Team for change process

- III. Prepare Expanded Teams for the Process
- IV. Engage in Design of a New Educational System
- V. Implement and Evolve the New System

The continuous events address 19 concerns, such as building trust, sustaining motivation for change, and evaluating and improving the change process. The GSTE was developed from several real-world systemic change efforts, but has not been tested since its development.

In November 2000, the two of us set out on a journey to test and improve the GSTE by using it to facilitate a change effort in a small, predominantly urban, school district. The district is comprised of one high school, one middle school, four elementary schools and one early childhood center. What follows is a brief account of our experiences through the first six discrete events, which fall into phases I and II of the guidance system, along with the initial results that have emerged from our engagements with the stakeholders in the school district.

### **Phase I – Assess Readiness and Establish Relationship**

#### Event 1 – Assess and Enhance Facilitator Readiness

Prior to engaging a school district in a long-term change effort, we needed to assess our readiness and capabilities as process facilitators. As co-facilitators we bring various experiences to the table, and are able to exchange ideas and support one another throughout the process. We share common values and beliefs about education. We have a need to help improve and transform urban public school systems, where our children are most at risk of failure. Here is a sample of the experiences that not only have strengthened our relationship as co-facilitators, but also have enhanced our readiness and capabilities to engage a school district in a systemic change effort.

- *Experience Working in a School System.* Having been teachers, we both have first hand knowledge and experience in understanding the dynamics of a classroom and school system. This experience has lead us to pursue an area of research and development needed to help improve and transform our public educational system. The teaching experience has provided us with the credibility needed to work with the stakeholders of the district.
- *Experience in Other Change Efforts.* Combined we have experienced and facilitated six school change efforts.
- *Reading on “Systems Design of Education.”* We have kept current with the critical readings in the field of Educational Systems Design.
- *University-based Support Team.* A university-based support team has provided the facilitators with a safe zone to discuss ideas and plan upcoming events in the process. Establishing a university-based support team not only provides support to us as facilitators throughout the systemic change process, but also allows the faculty and graduate-student members of that team to learn about the systemic change process by vicariously experiencing it through the facilitators; and it encourages critical inquiry on the process of facilitating systemic change in school districts.

As co-facilitators we have made a commitment to continually assess ourselves throughout this long-term change effort with the Decatur school district.

Event 2 – Establish Relationship with a School District

We began our journey by publicizing our interest in facilitating a fundamental change effort that would focus heavily on professional development and involve all stakeholder groups.

Four superintendents contacted us to express interest. We conducted phone conversations with all four superintendents to explain what our interests and motivations were and to learn about them, their motivations for change, their understanding of the need for systemic thinking, and several other conditions in their districts that we felt were important to the success of a systemic change effort. Table 1 shows the protocol that was used flexibly during the four interviews. Based on these phone interviews, we selected the district that we believed was the most ready for systemic change, and we made an initial visit to the district to get to know the key players better. This event was conducted simultaneously with Event 3.

<p>Table 1. Protocol for interviewing superintendents</p> <p>Explain what we are interested in doing and why, long-term relationship/effort</p> <p>Ask why they are interested in change</p> <p>Ask why they are interested in our working with them</p> <p>Ask if they are interested in a district-wide effort</p> <p>Ask for information about the district, what change efforts are going on there, who’s involved</p> <p>Ask what leadership style the superintendent uses</p> <p>Ask who are the major stakeholder groups and what role they should play</p> <p>Ask what vision s/he has for the district, if any</p> <p>Ask what conflicts and difficulties they are facing</p> <p>Ask what are the major interests and activities of the major stakeholder groups</p> <p>Ask about relationships that exist among the major stakeholder groups, levels of trust</p> <p>Ask how much professional development is going on and what kind</p> <p>Ask what questions s/he has about us</p> <p>Explain a bit about our values and approach</p>
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Event 3 – Assess District’s Readiness for Change and Negotiate a Formal Agreement

We met with each stakeholder group (parents, school board, building principals,

teacher association officers, superintendent and central administrative staff) separately to explain our interests, motives, and view of change, and to assess their interest in and readiness for change and for neutral outside facilitators. Table 2 shows the protocol that was used during these meetings.

Table 2. Protocol for focus group meetings with stakeholders

Introductions

Why we are here

- Help communities interested in serious change – are looking at 4 communities
- Find out if you are interested in such change and in us as facilitators
- Explain the kind of help we provide
  - Facilitate, not lead
  - All stakeholders must have ownership, must want our help
  - We must be impartial – no pay from district office
  - Trust, confidentiality

Is there a need for improvement in your schools?

- What are you most dissatisfied with?
- What changes would you like to see? (Are they small or large?)

What should a good change process be like?

- Their thoughts
- Our view

What past and current change efforts?

- What did you think about each?

Who are the important stakeholder groups?

- Who are their leaders?
- How well do they get along with each other?

Do you want us to help you with change?

We explained that we viewed our role as helping them to decide what their schools should be like, not to tell them what changes to make. They seemed both surprised and pleased with this. We also described in general terms the change process that we have found helpful in the past. The most important part of that process is to involve all stakeholders in generating a shared vision of their classrooms, schools, and district. But for this to be possible, they must all first evolve and deepen their thinking about

education to arrive at a set of common beliefs and values as a foundation upon which to build their shared vision.

Here are the major issues that emerged from the focus-group interviews:

- 1) There is a lack of trust among some of the stakeholder groups, and this must be addressed before any other change work can begin.
- 2) Each stakeholder group sees different changes needed in their school system
  - a. Parents are interested in the safety of their children, and the socialization of their children to becoming productive citizens of their community. Surprisingly, they are not as concerned with their children's grades and test scores.
  - b. The school board is concerned with teacher accountability and standardized test scores.
  - c. The building principals would like to see the district come to consensus on getting rid of processes in their district that do not work well, and are hungry for a vision.
  - d. Teacher Association leadership would like to have a voice in the decisions that are made. They feel they have been kept out of the loop.
  - e. The superintendent and central administrative staff feel that the school board needs to trust them more and that a common vision and mission for the district need to be developed. The district currently has no shared vision.
- 3) All stakeholder groups feel that change is needed, that the general process we had outlined made a lot of sense, and that they would like us to serve as neutral process facilitators for their change effort.

Deviating from the GSTE, we decided that a formal agreement to embark on this change journey should be endorsed broadly by as many stakeholders as possible. Thus, we decided to form the Core Team (Event 4) first, have them draft an agreement among all

stakeholders, and then broaden the process to get input from the school board and all other stakeholders. The school board has already given its input and approval, and public meetings will be held this fall at all school buildings and some community locations, followed by a large public ceremony at which hundreds of people will sign the agreement. This delay in creating a formal agreement was possible because we had decided that, to maintain neutrality as facilitators, we should not be paid by the administration; but instead would work together to get outside grant funding for our involvement.

## **Phase II: Prepare Core Team**

### Event 4 – Form the Core Team

We then asked each of the stakeholder groups to choose one person from their group to serve on a Core Team that would initiate the change effort. The Core Team consists of the following individuals:

- PTA/O president (parent)
- Superintendent
- Board member
- Building principal
- Teacher association president

During the six months since February, we have been meeting with the Core Team a bit more often than once every two weeks for 2 hours per meeting. This Core Team is far too small to make any decisions about change. Rather, the purpose of this team is to create a culture and capacity for systemic change that will then be expanded into design and political support teams. The Core Team's role is primarily one of setting the stage for broad stakeholder involvement and ownership in the change process. The first task of this team was to prepare a draft of an agreement among all stakeholders to undertake this effort.

### Event 5 – Norm the Core Team

In June 2001, we took the Core Team on a 2-day retreat. The agenda for the retreat is

shown in Table 3. This was a time for the Core Team to begin to focus on group dynamics, collaboration, giving and receiving constructive criticism, managing conflict, and understanding the overall change process, consensus and responsibility of the team. In one activity, we asked the Core Team to think of a "Big Question" that they wanted answered concerning the overall change process. Their major question was, "Will the school board continue to support the change effort?" Of course, neither the Core Team nor we could answer the question. Together the Core Team made a commitment to educate the school board and the community in every step of their change process. The Core Team left the retreat with a sense of cohesiveness and excitement. They understood what their role was as a Core Team, and felt ready to engage in a systemic change effort. A culture of trust and collaboration has been developing well.

### Event 6 – Understanding the Overall Change Process

Understanding the overall change process is a new event that we felt needed to be added to the design theory. We provided the Core Team and the school board with copies of the Jenlink et al. (1998) article so that they would begin to gain an understanding of the change process that we were using with them. We emphasized the importance of using the GSTE as a guide for planning their journey, and that they could make changes to this guide at any time. Even though the design theory is catered to the facilitator, we feel it is important to begin training the Core Team to be facilitators of their process.

### Event 7 – Train the Core Team in Systems Design

The process requires the Core Team to gain a thorough understanding of the fundamental concepts of systems thinking and design. Together with the Core Team we selected critical readings in systems theory and design that were appropriate for all members of

the team (see e.g., Banathy, 1996; Senge, 1990; Senge 2000). We developed key questions to

Reflect individually on major take-aways, share with group, discuss next steps

Table 3. Agenda for Core Team retreat

**Day 1**

10:00 – 10:30 Introductions and orientation for the retreat:  
Ice-breaker activity, review of agenda  
10:30 – 10:45 The Core Team: Who are we?  
Roles and responsibilities of each of us, strengths and weaknesses of the team  
10:45 – 11:00 Ground rules  
Establish ground rules for meetings and other interactions and behaviors  
11:00 – 11:45 Trust building  
Rope activity and debrief  
11:45 – 12:30 Collaboration  
Dialogue on what, why, who, how, problems, benefits, dialogue  
12:30 – 1:30 Lunch together  
1:30 – 2:30 Understanding the overall change process  
Dialogue on the article on the GSTE  
2:30 – 3:00 Collective reflection  
Big Question Activity  
3:00 – 3:30 Break and reflection time  
3:30 – 4:30 Constructive criticism  
Role play activity and debrief/discussion  
4:30 – 5:30 Managing conflict  
Dialogue on negative and positive conflict  
6:00 – 7:30 Dinner together  
7:30 – 9:30 Passionate conversation  
Watch *Mindwalk* video

**Day 2**

8:00 – 9:00 Breakfast together  
9:00 – 9:30 Reflections on Day 1  
9:30 – 10:00 Making connections  
Dialogue on the *Mindwalk* video  
10:00 – 10:30 Break  
10:30 – 11:30 Building consensus  
Dialogue on what, how, why, who, when  
11:30 – 12:00 Values of the change process  
Review the GSTE’s values and revise for our change effort  
12:00 – 1:00 Lunch together  
1:00 – 2:30 Values of the change process  
Continue to review the GSTE’s values and revise for our change effort  
2:30 – 3:00 Reflection on the retreat and next steps

guide the Core Team through each of the readings. We came together as a team to discuss the readings, and tried to clear up any misunderstandings. Throughout the entire change process we will need to continue to train the stakeholders of the district in systems thinking and design.

**Future Events**

In the next few months we expect to learn more about the following in our research:

- 1) How to build trust effectively.
- 2) How to assess and enhance the district’s readiness for systemic change.
- 3) How to assess and build the district’s capacity for systemic change.

**Conclusion**

Through use of the GSTE (Jenlink et al., 1998), we have found two major changes beneficial in this case study. First, it is helpful to form the Core Team before negotiating and signing a formal agreement with all stakeholders. In cases where the facilitators need a formal agreement in order to pay for their time in the early stages of the change process, it might be useful to view that as a separate contract negotiated as a part of Event 3, but then have the Core Team develop a draft of a separate agreement among all stakeholders. Second, we found that helping the Core Team to understand the change process was so important that it warrants an entire event of its own. In addition to these two major changes, we found many useful refinements and elaborations for the guidelines that comprise the events we have used to date. While this case study is helping us to learn much more about the systemic change process, we have been pleased with how well the process has gone to date and have found the guidance system to be invaluable in attaining the current progress.

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