

Epilogue: Engaging the System by Changing Conversations in School Districts

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If we keep doing what we've always done, we'll always get what we've already got.

—Anonymous

FUTURE SEARCH: THE NEXT GENERATION IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

Future search represents an opportunity to “walk the talk” of effective teaching and learning. Every day, educators are working to apply the next generation of what is known about this. Teachers are going beyond rote memorization and engaging students in higher-level thinking and knowledge construction. They are emphasizing self-management of learning where students work independently to meet standards rather than fostering dependency on authority for the right answer. The work of cooperative learning is also evolving as students refine their capabilities as team players and contributors to the learning of others. Building administrators and teachers are working to apply these principles to themselves and their students as they aspire to create learning communities in their schools by actively engaging in meaningful dialogue, sharing what works, and discovering possibilities for the future. This modeling at the school level impacts what happens at the classroom level. What does this have to do with future search?

Future search models these principles of effective teaching and learning on a system level. It goes well beyond members of the system providing input. It is a real-time experience for the educational community in sharing information, analyzing what it means, and drawing conclusions. People have their perspectives broadened by interacting with others with different views. Mapping the larger environment in all of its glorious complexity helps to heighten the collective confusion that can lead to new possibilities. Future search offers your community a real-time experience of working in groups, engaging in dialogue, discovering common ground, and crafting a vision for the future.

As leaders of change in a classroom, a school, or a district, you pay attention to the process as well as the results. Yes, you want the results of higher test scores as a measure of student achievement. *And*, you want the critical by-products of efficacy, stronger relationships, and a sense of community because these are at the heart of sustainability and making other things possible over time. They are also at the heart of our humanity. Future search offers a method that seamlessly combines a focus on process and results.

Additionally, the principles and practices of future search address some of the limitations of previous planning models, particularly those involving outside stakeholders. Future search addresses administrators' fear of opening up “their” systems by clearly delineating the boundaries and responsibilities of all stakeholders. Community stakeholders play a vital role in shaping and implementing the future direction of the district. However, they do not write action plans for other groups, nor do they tell them what to do. As described in many of the cases in this book, new relationships are developed and nurtured in this process as information and expectations

are openly shared. The trust that's developed as people work together and appreciate their similarities and differences is the basis for positive change.

In previous planning models, plans were very detailed, leaving little room for input and creativity by those who would actually be implementing the action. This level of detail made adapting to rapidly changing external realities much more challenging. People in the district saw implementing the action plans as separate from their day-to-day planning and action, contributing to overload and fragmentation. In contrast, the outcomes of the future searches in this book provided both stability and focus. The level of detail did not restrict further development of new ideas or cause burn out.

RESULTS YOU CAN EXPECT FROM A FUTURE SEARCH

From the 16 case studies in this book and from other work with which we have been involved and are familiar, we know that school districts face many of the same issues. A review of the cases in this book highlights the following shared themes:

- Meeting the needs of all children—leaving no child behind.
- Student-centered curriculum—whole child through whole curriculum.
- Abundant resources—locating additional funding.
- Expansion and integration of technology.
- High-quality staff—“leaderful” organization.
- Safe schools.
- Schools as centers or hubs—partnering with community services.
- Readiness to learn—access to early childhood education.

The uniqueness in each case also demonstrates the flexibility of future search to address specific and emergent issues. We never know what solutions and actions future search will create. We do know that by the end of the future search conference, participants will have: a shared understanding of the school district's past and present; a shared vision of the district's future; initial individual, group, and stakeholder commitments to action; and the voice of all other points of view in everyone's head. In sharing information from all perspectives, everyone gains a new understanding of their interrelatedness and realizes that they are all in the “same boat” and can move forward only when they are all “rowing together in the same direction.” They will have been immersed inside the whole system and will find it difficult to “unlearn” its importance.

COSTS

Costs are always a concern in the tight budgets of school systems. The costs of future search include facilities, food, supplies, printing, mailing, facilitator fees, and expenses. Administrators have found different ways to fund their future search and planning efforts. Some have used monies in their existing budgets that have been allotted for strategic planning, especially when state departments of education have mandated such efforts. Some have requested monies in their upcoming budgets. Some have looked to local, state, and national grantors for funding. Some have partnered

with their communities for in-kind and donated services, such as space, food, and preparation, printing, and administrative assistance.

Administrators must consider not only the costs involved in sponsoring a future search but also the costs involved in *not* sponsoring one. The value of getting the community's support for school system improvement is immeasurable. The progress recounted in our 16 chapters far exceeds the initial costs of the future searches. Administrators must ask themselves how much the future is worth to them and then creatively find ways to fund their efforts. As one administrator explained, he was convinced when he examined the potential "return on expectations." His goals justified the costs and he found a way to pay for them.

ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

Many of the authors in this book are school district administrators who relate their successes and challenges in using future search for districtwide change. Their stories highlight their direct experiences. Leaders and participants do not need to become proficient in our methodology to be able to plan with it. Future search is based on the assumption that we do not need to teach people anything for them to be able to participate. They need only to show up and use the skills, experience, and motivation they already have. For some, participating in a future search before leading one has helped to reassure them that it works. For others, taking the three-day training workshop in managing a future search reinforced this assumption. Many simply engaged in the process and trusted that it was just what they needed to do.

We have found that school leaders embrace future search principles because they are congruent with their leadership philosophies and styles. The principles of "bringing the whole system in the room, exploring the whole elephant before seeking to fix any part, keeping common ground and future focus front and center, and encouraging self-management and responsibility for action" make sense to them. Leaders who have been willing to adopt these principles have made significant system breakthroughs. No personality changes are required. No additional training is required.

A word of caution: Future search does not make up for weak leadership and should not be used by leaders afraid of losing control or by those who believe that solutions must come from outside experts.

SUPPORT, FOLLOW-UP, AND SUSTAINABILITY AFTER A FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE

Sustaining the momentum and implementing action after the future search conference is critical. We know that even without support, action happens. We also know that with intentional support, the likelihood of sustained action is much greater. We highly recommend that while planning the future search, there be a thoughtful effort for follow-up—one that models the planning and the future search conference. Supporting follow-up meetings and creating structures to help turn plans into action go a long way to sustaining the momentum for change initiated in the conference. The following methods have been used to sustain the implementation effort:

- Incorporating results into a district's regular operational planning process.

- Including goals from the future search conference in budget processes.
- Creating a steering group composed of the chairpersons of all the action groups.
- Connecting goals and results to other initiatives.
- Sponsoring additional future searches.
- Further developing action plans and implementation strategies.
- Informing the community about progress, highlighting synergy, discovering where further collaboration is needed and which emerging areas need to be addressed because of unanticipated changes in the environment. This can occur at regular district meetings, at regular review meetings, at a one-day follow-up meeting nine months to a year after the future search conference, in newsletters, on listservs, and in local newspapers.

Frequently new relationships formed during the future search can result in actions that are not declared as part of the action plans. These actions are aligned with the common ground and initiated to achieve shared goals. Coordinating actions and communication among the diverse stakeholder groups improves the impact of the action.

The future search conference is not a substitute for rational planning processes—it is an umbrella for building commitment and a forum for working through the dynamic issues that are barriers to action. Strategic directions set in the conference are almost always reduced or combined afterwards as well as sequenced and prioritized. The conference is only the beginning of action.

REPLICABILITY OF FUTURE SEARCH

This book is the result of a call for stories to Future Search Network members about future searches in school districts. We are aware of well over 100 future searches in the education sector, many of which can be found at the Future Search Network web page (<http://futuresearch.net/method/applications/index.cfm>).

Future search is a flexible “tool” based on a set of principles and activities. These 16 diverse case studies illustrate many uses of future search in education. In some cases it was used for visioning and determining strategic futures; in other cases it was used to address critical issues, such as racism and health.

Future search has also been used at the building level within a school district; teachers have applied the principles to classrooms. It has been used for implementing school safety plans and for facilities planning. As illustrated in one case, the principles were applied to scheduling decisions, in another to launching a new program in biotechnology. Future search can be an effective tool for curriculum development, particularly across the pre-K–12 or pre-K–16 continuum. It can be used for complex issues that involve “cross-boundary” or cross-stakeholder work where it is important for people to be on the same page to move forward. The possibilities are plentiful!

As successful as future search can be, there are certain conditions under which we would not recommend its use. We would not run a future search if:

- The leader is the only one who has energy and commitment.
- Leadership is not committed to using the results.
- There is a predetermined answer (e.g., set of goals) and leadership is

hoping the conference participants come up with the same ones.

- There are no compelling reasons for bringing people together to discover common ground and take action other than a state mandate.

NEXT STEPS

If you are intrigued with the possibility of future search for your system, we would like to suggest some of the following steps:

- Contact any of our authors (see contact information sheet).
- Check the Future Search Network web page: www.futuresearch.net.
- Become a member of the Future Search Network, with access to the *Future Search Newsletter*, the listserv, and the conference database.
- Read books about future search.

CLOSING THOUGHT

In *Change Forces: The Sequel* (1999), Michael Fullan eloquently describes how easy it is for educators to experience overload and fragmentation. And it is also possible for them to experience energy, commitment, and coherence! Educational leaders want others deeply and constructively engaged in helping the next generation to have the best education possible. Leaders can encourage the kind of engagement that leads to ownership and action by shifting the conversation from “What’s wrong?” to “What’s possible?” and from “Who do we blame?” to “How can we partner together to create a better future?” These ideas are simple but not easy. Future search, by its structure and principles, can help. As demonstrated by the cases in this book, future searches are rich, informing learning opportunities that energize and renew a school district and its community.