



One Vision, Seven Strategies

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Behind *One Vision, Seven Strategies*

This publication summarizes the vision and urgency for transforming education systems now. The vision has evolved from Education Resource Strategies (ERS) work with urban districts around the country. ERS is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping urban school systems organize talent, time and money to create great schools at scale. *One Vision, Seven Strategies* is a call to action, launching our new campaign, *School System 20/20*.

School Systems 20/20 presents our seven strategies for transforming education systems so that all students succeed. The campaign provides a vision and tools to help get there. Join our efforts to transform systems so every school can be a great school.

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One Vision, Seven Strategies: School Systems for the Information Age

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The “American Dream” is under duress as the economy slows, incomes stagnate, and upward mobility is more limited than at any time in recent history. Despite a steady increase in per-pupil spending on public schooling over the last decades, not enough students graduate with proficiency in reading and math. And despite some progress over the past decade, students living in poverty and who are African American or Hispanic, still lag far behind white students with more means.¹

Yet not all schools are failing. There are many exemplary schools including urban schools that are succeeding despite high poverty rates, and growing numbers of district leaders taking courageous steps toward real and lasting improvement. To achieve our ambitious performance goals for all students, school-level change alone is not the answer. We need to raise our sights and reorganize the entire educational structure in which our schools function.

New Structure for New Goals

Unlike most industries where resource use and organization have changed dramatically over the past few decades, the fundamental school structures and patterns of spending in education have remained largely unchanged. Yet they were established to deliver on completely different goals than those we are trying to achieve today:

THEN	NOW
Provide access to subject matter	Ensure student learning
Prepare and sort students for range of jobs requiring different levels of knowledge and expertise	Ensure ALL students are prepared for college and career
Prepare students for predictable jobs	Build skills to participate in information age and engage in life-long learning for rapidly changing world

The organizational practices and structures that grew out of these historical objectives largely dictate how schools look today:

- Teachers in isolated classrooms, paid based on number of years and courses taken, with few options to leverage and grow expertise without leaving the classroom.
- Age-graded, subject-specific classes that vary little in size by subject, grade or student need.
- School days organized into short, rigid time blocks for 6.5 hours a day, 180 days a year.
- Students who fall behind get pulled out of mainstream classes for extra help.

These legacy structures are reinforced by local and state funding systems, staffing practices, union contracts, and even state laws stipulating everything from class size to teacher salary. This inhibits movement toward new ways of organizing education to align with today’s goals and realities.

What are those realities? Research shows that students begin at different points and learn at

different rates. It also shows that high-performing schools rely on teams of teachers with the combined expertise to use data to continually improve their practice and to adjust their lessons and student grouping to meet individual needs. Just as you can't fit a square peg into a round hole, we won't achieve our vision of proficiency for all students in a system that was built to deliver *access* for all, but *mastery* for only some.

So how do we bridge the gap between access and mastery? There is no shortage of opinions on this subject. "Eliminate teacher tenure." "Pay teachers for performance." "Extend the school year and increase instructional time." "Spend more on [fill in the blank] programs." The list goes on and on.

But while each idea for "fixing" education may have merit, they all share a critical flaw: They take a one-dimensional view of the problem. They focus on the need for change in a specific area, ignoring the larger picture of how all the pieces work together to achieve overarching objectives.

Three E's of Educational Progress

Tinkering won't do. To achieve the aggressive goals we've set for public education, we need to reorganize our fundamental educational structures. We need to adopt an integrated "systems level" approach to accomplish the three E's of American education:

Excellence for All

We need an approach that acknowledges that different students succeed in different ways. While some students thrive in a school with a traditional schedule, others may need an extended day or access to social and health services. For students who fail to thrive in one situation, we need the flexibility to provide effective alternative settings free from the stigma of "pull outs." We need structures that allow for sharing of innovative practices. We need the ability to assign talented staff to schools with the

greatest needs, while providing all employees with growth opportunities. Most importantly, we need to promote a collective vision of excellence that drives support from the entire community—a community that shares the goal of creating an educated citizenry with 21st century skills.

Equity

We need structures designed to deliver educational quality across the board. It is not enough to have a few successful schools scattered through a city. There are natural geographic boundaries in communities, but those boundaries should not be barriers to high-quality schools and programs. A commitment to educate all children well is both philosophical and pragmatic. Americans believe in and support the opportunity for everyone to be educated—and to expect an equitable return on their investment.

Efficiency

We need to structure educational organizations to make the most of taxpayer investments. This means finding innovative ways to organize talent, time, and technology and to achieve greater economies of scale in operations and school support.

One Vision, Seven Integrated Strategies²

In our work with urban districts, we have developed a multi-dimensional vision for restructuring public education for today's goals and realities. This vision is built around seven transformational strategies for organizing resources—people, time, and money—to support the creation of high-performing schools at scale.

These strategies should not be viewed as "best practices" or "success factors" that can be implemented independent of each other. Instead, they should be seen as an integrated set of seven strategies for transforming education to meet our new goals for learning.

1. Define information-age standards for learning and align curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Too many states and districts have goals for learning that do not include the content knowledge, critical thinking skills, creativity and collaboration that 21st century jobs will require. The Common Core Standards, now adopted by 45 states and 3 territories, are an important first step. Such standards provide the foundation for organizing instructional materials and strategies to accomplish them. Common sets of standards enable teachers within schools, schools within districts, and districts across states to share best practices and set benchmarks. Effective assessments, both standardized and teacher-developed are critical for teachers and school leaders to continuously adjust instruction and to ensure that students learn the material. It makes no sense for individual schools to be recreating scope and sequence and developing formative assessment tools completely on their own without leveraging these efforts across systems and states.

2. Restructure the teaching job.

Teaching effectiveness is the single most important in-school predictor of student achievement. Having a high performing teacher for four years in a row can close the achievement gap.³ And, the evidence is mounting that teachers who team with other effective teachers get better results than those who don't or can't.⁴ This virtuous cycle begins with attracting high potential teachers to consider the teaching profession. Then, school systems need to attract top candidates, develop them throughout their careers, and reward them for success. To do this, they must restructure the teaching job to emphasize teacher teams, differentiated roles, and more flexible job definitions and schedules. A more effective system will include new ways to attract and hire top talent, support and develop individuals

throughout their careers, retain effective teachers and evaluate effectiveness. Districts must identify struggling teachers and provide sustained support to help those with potential to become better educators—and remove those who don't. They need ways to reward teachers who excel in the classroom and/or who take on challenging assignments or leadership responsibilities. And they need to provide the best teachers with opportunities for advancement that do not require them to leave the classroom full-time and forever.

3. Match teachers and time to students through strategic school designs.

Information age teaching jobs will require new ways of organizing schools that enable teacher collaboration and leverage teaching expertise cost-effectively. This means each school must have a coherent instructional model, and then organize to support this vision in four important ways:⁵

- **Teaching effectiveness:** Build teaching teams that maximize combined expertise and have time for collaboration and access to expert support.
- **Instructional time:** Vary time based on subject and student priorities to ensure student learning and engagement.
- **Individual attention:** Create targeted individual attention for students by providing and continuously adapting schedules, groupings and delivery models in response to student needs and create personal relationships between students and teachers.
- **Special populations:** Implement cost-effective strategies for students with special learning needs that integrate with general education and emphasize ongoing assessment and response.

Though schools will find many ways to organize against the principles above, the traditional concept of “one teacher/one class/one course” is no longer valid. Students spend time with

different teachers or other adults with specific skills, grouped with different students, for varying lengths of time, studying different subjects or skills, depending on what their learning needs are on that day, or during that week or month. Some students may master what is now considered a year-long “course” (or a year’s worth of material) in four or five months; others may need longer than a year. They may spend part of the day in online learning environments with 50 other students, and part of the day in small instructional groups of four to six. Students who struggle receive additional support and attention right away, and as much as possible in the general education environment.

There is no reason to invent these new ways of organizing and to experience the inevitable failures that come with trial and error. School systems have an important role to play to help accelerate or “scale” high-potential models by developing innovative templates for staffing, scheduling, and professional development to serve different numbers and combinations of students with specialized learning needs (such as special education or English Language Learners). New school designs will also require removing barriers to flexible scheduling and grouping of teachers and students.

In addition to supporting new models for school organization, most school systems need to take a critical look at their programs and portfolios of schools and how these align with student needs. Being strategic about the array of schools and programs can significantly reduce costs while enhancing program effectiveness.

4. Build and reward school and district leader capacity.

Moving to a model that fosters each principal’s capacity to initiate, lead, and maintain instructional improvements requires that districts set

a context for school leader success. They must clearly define what effective leaders need to know and be able to do. These standards of excellence will help them to hire the right leaders and place them in situations where they can be successful. They will also allow districts to measure the performance of school leaders and to hold them accountable, while providing the right career support. Being deliberate about consistent, district-wide leadership development will also ensure a ready pool of high-potential leaders to draw on as opportunities arise.

5. Revise funding systems.

To ensure that all schools reach high standards, school systems must ensure that the level and type of resources match the needs of students. Despite the best intentions, current resource allocation practices result in wide funding variances across schools, even adjusting for differences in student needs, and they do not do a good job of matching resources—not just funding level, but also staff skills and capacity, and student and teacher time—to student needs and schools’ instructional models. Most systems will need to adjust the way they allocate resources to schools, giving the most support to schools and students with greatest need, and give resources to schools in ways that best support their school designs. Many systems may also need to adjust their school portfolio to ensure that the mix of school grade levels, sizes and programs are appropriate to meet student needs cost-effectively.

6. Redesign central system offices.

System operations must be reorganized to move from Industrial Age control models designed to ensure compliance, to systems that use data and technology to empower local school leaders and teachers, customize service to schools, and improve efficiency. Centralized systems should be used to assess and provide what each school

needs. New systems of accountability should empower and expand upon the success of high-performing schools while providing support to underperforming schools *before* they fail students. School districts need an explicit strategy for turning around very low-performing schools that is integrated with the overall reform plan, and operations must be redesigned and streamlined to reflect this new service and support function.

7. Leverage partnerships with families, communities, and outside experts.

Shifting from traditional models in which needy students are often separated from the general education classroom to more integrated and cost-effective models of serving students will require districts to partner in new ways with families, communities, and outside expert providers. School systems should partner with other social service providers and combine resources to ensure integrated delivery and a “whole child” focus. In addition, most communities have myriad other resources—community colleges, local businesses and artists, youth service organizations—that would benefit from strong schools and may be able to cost-effectively augment or expand support in relevant areas. In some instances, community partnerships can even provide creative and cost-effective instruction to supplement instruction

provided by classroom teachers. Finally, numerous suppliers are organizing to provide online and other instructional offerings that expand curricular offerings and provide additional options for matching students with instructors at lower cost and sometimes higher quality.

Making these changes will not be easy. Each is a significant undertaking, yet all are necessary to build the educational systems we need. Implementing them means dismantling structures, processes, policies, and regulations that have, in many cases, existed for decades. It means changing the way teachers, school, and district leaders think about and do their jobs. It means changing the way we all think of a “class” or even a “school.” It will be messy, politically charged, and emotionally difficult. But continued failure to provide our nation’s children with the education they need and deserve is not an option.

Current energy around real reform combined with extreme budget pressure is creating momentum toward tackling longstanding barriers to innovation and improvement. But attacking the problem school by school is not enough. And even the boldest changes implemented in isolation will not achieve the change we need. We need to take a multi-dimensional approach and fundamentally reorganize education to meet our goals of excellence, equity, and efficiency for all students. The time is now.

END NOTES

- 1 A. Vanneman, L. Hamilton, J. Baldwin Anderson, and T. Rahman, “Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress,” (2009). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
F. C. Hemphill, and A. Vanneman, “Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress,” (2011). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- 2 For more on these strategies see ERS publication, *Seven Strategies for District Transformation*.
- 3 Eric A. Hanushek, John F. Kain, Daniel M. O’Brien, Steven G. Rivkin, “The Market for Teacher Quality,” (2005). National Bureau of Economic Research. Massachusetts.
- 4 Carrie Leanna “The Missing Link in School Reform,” (2011). Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- 5 Karen Hawley Miles and Stephen Frank, *The Strategic School: Making the Most of People, Time and Money*, (California: Corwin Press, 2008).

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