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**State Improvement Through Systems Change
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This paper was published as follows by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc. (NASDSE) and is reprinted with permission. This information may be particularly useful for planning preservice program improvements, for linking with systems change activities in public schools, and for preparing grant applications for these and other purposes.

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INTRODUCTION

With the passage of Public Law 105-17, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), a broader perspective on the context for special education and related services has emerged. From the inception of the federal mandate to provide a free and appropriate education to all handicapped students in 1975 (Public Law 94-142), a major thrust of educational programs for students with disabilities has been directed to the critical need for all learners to have access to public education. The initial concern in the law was to target first priority children (the unserved, or those who were not receiving an education) and second priority children (the underserved, or those who were receiving an education that did not match their individual needs and requirements). Over the past 23 years, significant strides have been made to address the basic questions of educational access and the right to an appropriate education as determined by educators, parents, and individuals with disabilities seeking to benefit from the procedural safeguards offered by federal law. Today the focus and intent of federal policy emphasizes results and accountability for learners with disabilities within the context of the larger system of public education that impacts all learners.

To address this crucial shift in policy intent, new language has emerged in regulation which calls for: "reforming and improving systems for providing educational, early intervention, and transitional services to improve results for students." Additional vocabulary in the law refers to systemic-change activities, which are necessary to implement state

program improvement plans for children with disabilities. The "second system" approaches (Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1990) which have defined a great deal of special education service delivery in the recent past have fostered a "separate but equal" program philosophy on behalf of students with disabilities. In response to the limitations of second system approaches, a systems-oriented philosophy has emerged which encourages the integration of special education innovations into the fabric of the operation of education programs and services from a big picture perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to orient the reader to the concept of systems change in order to better inform the efforts of state education agencies in the development of state improvement plans. To this end, the concept of systems change is defined including why it is important, what can go wrong in the process of pursuing systems change initiatives, and how the concept fits into the overall framework of IDEA. A collection of resources has been provided to assist state education agencies in developing long-range plans and strategies to influence effective systems change efforts within their respective states.

WHAT IS SYSTEMS CHANGE?

"Every system is designed to achieve the results it is getting" (Sparks, 1997). This statement may appear to defy conventional wisdom when considering the enormous gulf that often exists between intended state policy and the actual outcomes of educational systems as evidenced by the performance of children being educated. Virtually everyone is interested in promoting higher levels of educational attainment for all learners, but the means to achieve this end is not universally clear.

A major premise of change from a systems perspective is the interrelated nature of educational organizations and agencies which comprise the larger system of education and other human services. When the process, structure, or expectations are closely aligned, the potential for effecting fundamental change in the state system of education is dramatically increased. In simple terms, the goal of systems change efforts is to focus all elements of the educational system on the right things, concentrate resources on the attainment of these priorities, and enforce responsibility for these directions through appropriate governance and accountability procedures. As Holzman (1993) defines the construct of systems change, it has been applied to a number of targets. Among the targeted applications of change from a systemic perspective, the following are commonly described: (1) working with local school district and state education agency bureaucracies to effect change; (2) working with every school within a local or state school system; (3) working with every aspect of the school system; (4) working with schools and school systems systematically to insure continuity and understanding of the change; and, (5) working in strategic dimensions that encourage fundamental change in the teaching and learning dynamic for all students.

These efforts in and of themselves, however, do not guarantee successful change and improved systems. Fullan (1996a) identifies the two major barriers to systemic reform of education as being fragmentation and overload. Fragmentation refers to the propensity of individuals within any organization to draw different conclusions about the need for change and the subsequent actions that will promote the desired innovations within their own sphere of influence. Overload is all too common in the experience of educators who are bombarded with multiple and frequently conflicting calls to action that must be addressed simultaneously. A concrete example of this phenomenon is the universal demand for higher standards and levels of achievement for all learners, while at the same time being juxtaposed against the requirement to insure equity in the use of resources and personnel to address the unique needs

of disadvantaged learners within the system. Ysseldyke and Geenen (1996) highlight some of the challenges to integration of learners with disabilities into the school reform process such as: (1) insuring that all students are included in the call for improvement of the educational performance of American students; (2) supporting economic competitiveness in a global marketplace through higher levels of education among broader segments of the workforce; and, (3) assessing the degree to which all learners attain higher levels of performance through authentic indicators which reflect these high expectations.

WHY IS SYSTEMS CHANGE IMPORTANT?

Virtually everyone has an opinion on why and how the system of public education in this country can be improved. The sheer volume of educational reform initiatives that have been launched over the course of the past fifteen years underscore this fact. Since 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education raised the potential link between the performance of our educational system and economic competitiveness, the concern for reform, restructuring, and improvement of the system of American education has been a prevailing theme within the literature on educational efficacy (Clinchy, 1996; Cook, 1992; Fullan, 1992; Slavin, 1996; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

Simultaneously Top Down and Bottom Up

The complexity of educational change begs for alternatives to the linear approaches to reform and restructuring that have proven to be ineffective in the recent past. Rather than focusing on the orchestration of a coherent educational system from a top-down orientation, effective systems change efforts must address a coherent picture of future success and improvement from the viewpoint of individual teachers and students. As Fullan (1996a) describes this dilemma: "what looks like clarity at the top may increase the clutter at the bottom." Within this framework, the key concern should be for how efforts are focused on the level of student/teacher interaction and improvement for all learners within the larger system and how these developments develop deep changes within this big system. The importance of systems change is reflected in the realization that subsets of the larger educational system, most notably special education, have identified priorities which are beyond their scope and influence. To achieve a vision of education which fully includes all learners, promotes higher levels of educational attainment for all learners, and provides successful transitions from school to work and/or post-secondary education for all learners relies on the commitment of all members of the educational community to embrace values, beliefs, and norms that support students with disabilities in the same manner as any other student within the system.

The importance of systems change is clearly spelled out by Peter Senge (1990) in terms of the necessity for individuals to engage in systems thinking that makes connections between themselves and their world. For special educators, an example of this principle is identifying how the actions of special educators create the problems being experienced in the larger picture of educational organizations and systems. Stated in another way, vision without systems thinking paints a lovely picture of the future without an in-depth understanding of what is required in order to get from here to there.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG IN PURSUIT OF SYSTEMS CHANGE?

Lack of Commitment

The complexities of systems change could easily lead to the conclusion that it is best left alone for fear of making the condition of education worse rather than better. Students of chaos theory such as Wheatley (1994) compare organizational life to what physicists describe as a field consisting of random particles. These fields, both positive and negative, form as particles that converge to create an unmistakable reality. The vision, spirit, and morale of an organization or system are a function of the particles that create fields consisting of evolving thoughts and conversations in a myriad of situations. Fullan (1996b) expands this concept through his view that: "you can't mandate what matters." In other words, mandated change can produce policies of minimal compliance. The most important expressions of systems change, such as the attitudes, skills, behaviors, and beliefs of individual educators, are found in their individual interpretations and commitments.

Misunderstanding Resistance

A common mistake in pursuit of significant change is to misunderstand the inevitable resistance to innovations and different ways of doing business. The metaphor of the long-distance runner is very instructive in this area. If you experience no pain; you typically make no gain in your endurance, competitiveness, and speed as a runner. For systems change to be successful, the most vocal critics of education must be acknowledged and represented in the process of identifying problems and barriers to improved educational practice along with their potential solutions. Concomitantly, the commitment to realistically assess the current problems and barriers to future success is frequently lacking. Fritz (1989) refers to the healthy concept of creative tension which is represented when realistically assessing the gap between current and desired realities. When this conceptualization becomes ineffective, the individual members of an educational system seek to maintain a sense of equilibrium which compensates and corrects for planned changes. Fritz refers to this development as an oscillating structure which seeks to maintain the status quo within the educational communities.

Action Versus Reflection

The compelling need to combine action and reflection results in a transformation of systems and the people who work in them (Friere, 1969). Unfortunately, most educational systems do not balance these two critical components in an effective manner. Virtually all members of educational organizations are busy with daily routines and actions that define their work. It is challenging to find the necessary time to reflect on the importance and impact of their work. In this scenario, tremendous levels of activity are represented without the opportunity to reflect systematically on educational practice. Conversely, consideration of significant changes in education that encourage substantial reflection on the part of educators are often divorced from commitment to act in different directions. This produces inertia for change which translates into a position where it is more important to talk about the problems than to do anything about them. Verbalism is alive and well when members of educational organizations and systems become adept at admiring the problems which prevent them from being successful.

Individual Versus Collective Focus

Fullan (1996b) identifies the necessary balance between individualism and collectivism in support of improved systems. Teachers and other educational service providers tend to operate in isolation. The individual experience of most educators is defined by what is done behind the closed classroom door. As a virtue, this individual autonomy is highly prized by most educators as an extension of who they are as unique professionals. While special education as a discipline has advanced the value of collaboration and cooperative goal structures to facilitate educational opportunities for students with disabilities, there is much work to be done to achieve a truly collaborative system. On the other side of this equation, organizations that have promoted the value of team structures in support of group effectiveness run the risk of developing a variation on "group think" which mediates against creativity and individual initiative. The needed balance between individualism and collectivism is often lacking within educational organizations which presents a significant challenge to systems change efforts.

Networking

Educational organizations frequently fail to connect in a meaningful way with the larger context of the communities that they serve. The focus on developing team approaches and collaborative structures typically evaporates outside the environment of the school building. While some success in this regard has been achieved in several communities through the impetus of school-to-work regional councils, the presence of effective school and community networks remains a major barrier to the support of systemic changes. Anderson (1993) recognizes the structural difficulties in building and maintaining the networks that are essential for systemic change. She advocates replacing the typical bureaucratic structures that define communication patterns with promising alternatives such as computers, newsletters, conferences, and personal communications to link role alike people across organizational boundaries.

Culture and Structure

Fundamental changes are required in the way schools, universities, community based agencies, advocacy organizations, and parents work together in order to form substantial and systems-focused partnerships. The prevailing culture of most schools, universities, and other professional bureaucracies is oriented in a direction that looks inward and seeks to maintain the differences that make that organization unique. For example, the differences in organizational culture between schools and university teacher preparation programs is vast on the dimensions of reward structures, philosophical orientations, work schedules, and other structural factors (Rude, 1998).

The issues of organizational differences have been well documented by Fullan (1994) in his call to address issues of restructuring, reculturing, and retiming. *Restructuring* requires changes in the basic role definition of professional educators. *Reculturing* moves the focus of educators from traditional teacher-oriented roles to becoming members of learning organizations that are focused on the specific functions that improve the learning and performance of all learners. *Retiming* refers to fundamental shifts in the time and other means available to educators to prepare for the new roles and responsibilities emanating from changed systems. Without consideration of these critical factors, the phenomena of organizational insanity continues to thrive where the best intentioned individuals continue to do the same things and expect different results.

WHERE SYSTEMS CHANGE IS FOUND IN IDEA '97

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as amended by Public Law 105-17 provides significantly higher levels of expectations for improving the condition and results for all learners, including those with disabilities. Building on the previous requirements for Comprehensive Systems of Personnel Development, which has enjoyed a degree of success in selected states, the new law introduces the concept of State Program Improvement Grants for Children with Disabilities in section 1451. The most notable provisions of IDEA '97 are found in section 1451(a) (2), which calls for States to address the need to improve educational and transitional services and results for children with disabilities through the facilitation of: ". . . lasting systemic change that is of benefit to all students, including children with disabilities." Further, in section 1451(a)(5), there is an acknowledgment that: "Research, demonstration, and practice over the past 20 years in special education and related disciplines have built a foundation of knowledge on which State and local systemic-change activities can now be based." The required components of effective educational systems must include the following components: (a) high academic standards and clear performance goals; (b) a system that fully addresses the needs of all students; (c) clearly defined results that children with disabilities are expected to achieve; (d) inter-agency service integration and coordination; (e) assistance and support for transitions; (f) comprehensive programs of professional development; (g) dissemination of successful teaching practices and models; (h) creation of school-based disciplinary strategies; (i) placement-neutral funding formulas and cost-effective strategies; and, (j) involvement of individuals with disabilities and parents of students with disabilities in planning, implementing, and evaluating systemic-change activities and educational reforms.

The opportunity to participate in the State Program Improvement Grant initiative is permissive, and may extend from one to five years in duration. The requirement for state education agencies to maintain their Comprehensive System of Personnel Development remains in force for states that do not pursue the State Program Improvement Grant opportunities as indicated in section 1412(a)(14). The level of collaboration specified in the eligibility guidelines for the grant program clearly support the legislative intent to develop an integrated and comprehensive system for planned change with individual states.

SUMMARY

The current focus on systemic change represents a tremendous opportunity to increase the level of learning for all students, including those with disabilities. Systems change is an inclusive effort to align the process, structure, and expectations for the educational system in order to reform and improve the essential components of educational, early intervention, and transitional services for all learners. A related requirement is to concentrate available resources on the priorities that are identified through the systems change efforts. The identification of system priorities is of critical importance, since an absence of such recognition leads to the conclusion that everything is a priority. When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

A number of potential pitfalls that are encountered in the process of effecting systems change have been identified along with potential strategies that contribute to successful efforts. Some typical barriers that are encountered in this arena include: the potential for fragmentation and overload; simplifying the effort as either top-down or bottom-up (it requires both); a lack of commitment; misunderstanding resistance; the false dichotomy between action and reflection; lack of collaborative networks; lack of attention to the different cultures and structures of organizations; and providing insufficient time and/or resources to

effect systems change. The expectations for integrated systems which align the past successes of educational, early intervention, and transitional services for all learners, including those with disabilities, is explicitly stated in the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as outlined in Public Law 105-17. The new law represents a tremendous opportunity to impact the larger system of education and provide systemic expectations for all learners to learn and perform at higher standards.

"May you live in a time of change" is an ancient Chinese curse that points out the double meaning of change in their culture, which represents the possibility of either disaster or opportunity. Michael Fullan speaks of "change forces" in his well known book about probing the depths of educational reform. To paraphrase a theme from a popular science fiction movie that was produced nearly thirty years ago, and to lend encouragement to the leaders of statewide systems change efforts: "May the force be with you" in your pursuit of educational excellence.

RECOMMENDED READING

This paper has summarized a sample of the extensive literature on the topic of systems change. Additional resources which readers may wish to pursue to expand their knowledge of systems change include the following:

Fullan, M. (1994). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Quinn, R. E. (1996). *Deep change: Discovering the leader within*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

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Wheatley, M. J. (1994). *Leadership and the new science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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