BUILDING A 21ST CENTURY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN YOUR COMMUNITY

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE OF LEARNING
What is the problem we are solving?

We believe the industrial age model of education needs to be transformed from the inside out. The dropout crisis, America’s drop in international rankings, the widening achievement gap and a disengaged, under-challenged youth are calling upon this nation not to reform its educational system, but to transform it. Too many current reform efforts concentrate on improving the performance of an obsolete model – a model that was conceived and implemented in the 19th century.

If we were to build a 21st century education system from scratch, we would establish immersive learning environments calibrated to each child’s individual learning needs, we would leverage technology, we would recognize and develop each student’s strengths and envision learning on a larger scale. We would help children learn, not just facts and figures, but also the importance of context, decision-making, critical thinking, collaboration, and what it means to be a global citizen in our hyper connected world.

Our mission at the Institute for the Future of Learning is to partner with superintendents who hold a 21st century vision for their district and who are committed to its implementation.

Transforming the outdated, obsolete practices of a complex system is a herculean task and no man or woman can do it alone. It takes time, resources and dedicated work over a three to five year period to
have this level of impact. We believe the potential of our nation’s children, and by default that of our
country, will not be realized until our public education system makes the fundamental shift from a factory
based ‘batch processing’ model to a 21st century model in service of the unique strengths, and learning
needs of each and every student.

What is the purpose of our work?

Transformative change requires much heavy lifting on behalf of the leader and his or her organization. Our
research tells us that a superintendent has limited time and resources and finds him or herself pulled in many
different directions and responding to the demands of many stakeholder groups. Transformative change is
demanding, and a superintendent dedicated to building a 21st century learning environment must ‘play on
two playing fields’ at once:

“It’s the hardest work I’ve ever undertaken in my career. We’re trying to effect change at scale, and we have
to ‘play on two playing fields’ at once. We’re still being judged by the criteria for ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’
and state accountability standards, while we are holding ourselves accountable to a much higher standard. We
have to succeed at both. It’s hard, but it’s the right work to be doing.”

- Dr Jim Merrill, Superintendent Virginia Beach Public Schools, excerpted from ‘The Global Achievement Gap’

Our goal at the Institute is to partner with superintendents and to help them envision, get buy-in for, and
implement, transformative change district-wide. We will work hand-in-hand with the superintendent and the
local community to transform school practices so that children graduate with the skills and knowledge, which
will enable them to thrive in the 21st century.

How do we do it?

We will do this by providing practical hands-on support and expertise, using a whole systems approach
grounded in three core activities:

• Collaborative Dialogue, Strategic Planning, and Formal Action Plan
• Transformative Assessment and Data Informed Decision Making
• School and Community Partnership

Ideally, we build a three to five year relationship with the district – supporting student learning, building
teacher capacity to meet the needs of students, developing tools for school and district leadership, and
improving the larger community’s support for learning.

We propose a flexible ‘phased’ model where a district can decide how much support is needed for the
work. An example of what these phases might look like, and how each stage might be evaluated, is outlined
below:

PHASE 1 – Laying the Foundation

This phase focuses on creating an action plan that identifies the vision and desired outcomes for all of the
stakeholders in the school’s community. It also nurtures a commitment to sustainable school change through
school culture and competencies. This is a year of building relationships, listening, leading with inquiry,
looking at data, taking inventory, and developing the partnership that will focus the next several years with
a formal action plan.
Over a 6 to 18 month timeframe (depending on the size of the district), we partner with superintendents

- Engaging the local community and key stakeholders in creating a vision and multi-year action plan for the district.
- Organizing and reviewing data on student performance, school processes, demographics, and perceptions creating a virtual data room.
- Using an established inventory or survey to assess school culture and climate.
- Determining the data that will be collected and used to evaluate and assess the action plan.

PHASE 2 – Moving Forward

This phase is driven by the action plan and has the Institute interacting and moving forward with each group of the stakeholders. It is a year of changing past practice, transforming assessment, communicating with stakeholders and exploring the impact of change within the schools and districts.

Phase Two is driven by the action plan, activities include:

- Offering differentiated professional learning opportunities that include job-embedded activities and action research that use data to build capacity – all linked directly to student outcomes.
- Creating a formal communication process using on-line resources, newsletters, and reports for all stakeholders.
- Incorporating technologies to provide on-line, blended, and global learning experiences.
- Evaluating the progress of the action plan and reporting to the stakeholders.

PHASE 3 – Sustaining Progress

Phase Three and beyond focuses on continuing the activities of Phase Two and at the same time building the capacity for teacher and school leaders to lead the initiative into the future. This is also a time to formally assess the longitudinal data collected over the past few years and revisit the district’s action plan for the following year.

Sample Phase Three activities include:

- Using differentiated professional development tools to assess progress and competencies.
- Designing a process to sustain relevant learning opportunities using selected leaders.
- Formally evaluating and sharing progress and data collected as part of the plan.
- Revisiting the action plan and updating the plan for future.
How will we know if we are successful?

Our ultimate goal at the Institute is to partner with a district to lay the foundation for transformative work and to partner in its implementation. We will know we are successful if the following is in place as a result of this partnership:

- A well-articulated and shared vision for the district
- An engaged network of community stakeholders sharing mental models and learning together
- A guiding coalition to shepherd the change
- Alignment of resources (money, people, time) with vision
- Meaningful formative and summative assessment for students, teachers and principals
- Professional Development aligned to student learning and outcomes
- Teachers are truly engaged in a learning community - through action research and best practice
- A data informed decision making process is used by teachers, principals and the superintendent

Closing Thoughts

At its core, the US public education faces a systems challenge. While charismatic leaders and teachers with exceptional drive and capabilities can impact the learning of a discrete number of students over the short term, there is a fundamental, systems level need to build and lead sustainable change for the long term. Change which transforms the factory model of education to a 21st century learning environment with school and community collaboration focused on individualized learning preparing our children for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. This is the work of the IFL.

Notes:
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