

THE ART OF SYSTEMIC PLANNING

The Purpose

The purpose of systemic planning processes is to develop a model to move a district from its current state to one that better meets the needs of students in this 21st century.

The Rationale for Systemic Planning

Systemic planning techniques have long been used in the corporate world to help clarify the future direction of an organization. Adapted to an educational environment, it allows the design of a vision for the future of teaching and learning and to create a plan for the actions necessary to accomplish that vision. Systemic planning creates ways to help a district identify priorities and shape its own future. It is used to better anticipate long term opportunities and develop plans, programs and processes to make that future a reality. It provides coherent and defensible criteria for making decisions about how to educate all students of all ages.

In 1991, a rationale for systemic planning for the West Des Moines Community School District was presented.

“Many challenges and a variety of issues face our schools today. We know that in the not too distant future our students will be living in a different world than many of us have known.

“We are and will continue to be a global society. This changing world environment impacts us culturally, economically, and politically. We are and will continue to be a knowledge-based society. This changing environment impacts those who prepare the worker of tomorrow with different skills than those of the past.

“We cannot ignore these changes around us and must remain proactive and plan for the future.

“Schools today are examining a myriad of issues including learning readiness, national goals, America 2000, expanded early childhood programs, dropout prevention, at-risk students, outcomes based competencies, improved science and math education, parenting education, restructuring, transformation, cultural diversity, extended learning time, year round schools, technology, choice, and leadership. Obviously, no school system or organization can effectively deal with that many issues at one time.

“How will we in the West Des Moines Community School District plan so we proactively approach the many issues facing us?”

“Our district already has in place many mechanisms for planning. The annual planning process involves staff, parents, students and community members in identifying strategic issues from which the Board of Education sets district wide goals. In addition, plans have been written which provide direction for the district in curriculum, technology, facilities, finance, human resources and Community Education.

“However, with all of the challenges facing education today, it is imperative that we take a systematic or holistic look at what this district needs to do to remain effective in the 21st Century.”

Challenges to Systemic Planning

Systemic planning is one process which can lead to meaningful school change. Among the many challenges accompanying this kind of process are the following:

- There are numerous small reforms in the district, but it is difficult to see how they fit together.
- It easier to adopt short term, surface changes than it is to implement and sustain deep, substantive ones.

- Continuously sharing evolving information with all stakeholders in the district is difficult
- Leadership skills are required for everyone, not just administrators.
- Time is the biggest single barrier to implementing meaningful change.

District Beliefs on Systemic Planning

Understanding these challenges, the Systemic Planning Steering Committee developed several underlying beliefs which were instrumental in the process of change.

- The primary focus must be on meeting and addressing the needs of children.
- Broad involvement builds understanding and ownership and increases effectiveness.
- Learning about the whole, not just the parts, is important.
- Process must give support to all stakeholders — visible, tangible, omnipresent support.
- The Systemic Planning Committee should model a learning organization.
- This is an educative process; people must realize, then subsequently acknowledge, society's responsibility to reinvent education in order to ensure the success of our children in the information age.
- It is OK to continually reflect and challenge our assumptions.
- We need to have high expectations and believe improvement is possible in all aspects of the system.
- The learning system is impacted by both internal and external influences.
- Systemic planning is an ongoing process that will not end.
- This process is lifelong learning.
- We the district, have a strong basis from which to begin.

These beliefs and others guided the process during research, discussion, creation, and writing of the Task Force reports. The report is called *Building a Learning Community for the 21st Century*.

Building a Learning Community for the 21st Century

Excellence in education is not an end goal, but a journey. To continue this journey, the West Des Moines Community School District must dedicate itself to becoming a true learning community. A learning community is more than schools. It is more than classrooms, textbooks, and basic skills instruction. It is an organized commitment to inquiry, self-reflection, and service.

The traditional education paradigm places students as consumers of knowledge and teachers as disseminators of knowledge. The use of the terms learner/educator is intended to expand this traditional perspective to allow all members of our learning community to fluctuate between the roles of educator and learner, based upon their needs and circumstances. Whether it be the superintendent, members of the Board of Education, other central office administrators, principals, teachers, parents, community/business leaders, support staff members or students, each member of our community will be challenged with opportunities to educate. The boundaries implicit in role designations, will not limit us in serving as resources for one another or in continually expanding our own lifelong learning.

The Guiding Principles are the core beliefs of the district on its journey to excellence. These beliefs should drive decision making and should be evident in all the district's planning. The effects of the Guiding Principles are illustrated through the scenarios. The scenarios show the Guiding Principles at work. The success criteria are assistive in integrating the Guiding Principles and provide a framework for implementation.

Through the systemic planning process, five Guiding Principles have been developed for the West Des Moines Community School District. Success criteria were developed for each of these *Guiding Principles*.

Guiding Principle: Continuous Improvement

Quality is a design consideration in all decision making. Ongoing feedback provides students, staff, and community with vital information. Students, staff and parents are accountable for student learning, and the district continuously develops more ways to measure and assess the quality of its educational programming.

Success Criteria

- Assessment provides continuous feedback through the learning process.
- Learners are involved in establishing goals and evaluating their progress toward these goals.
- There is a commitment to accountability -- not merely counting or measuring or assessing after the fact. Students, staff and parents are involved in a continuous dialogue about each individual's strengths, needs and development.
- Educators and learners improve in their function as researchers and are encouraged to act as risk-takers.
- Educators and learners move toward the goal of meaningful learning by utilizing both innovative and proven teaching and learning strategies.
- Long-term vitality and growth are ensured through shared responsibility in decision making and active participation in the change process.
- The district continuously reviews the use and application of resources, while systemically seeking out new resources.
- The district does not over emphasize the results or value of standardized tests.

Guiding Principle: Personalized Learning

Success Criteria

- The curriculum is meaningful and authentic with an emphasis on real life issues such as the world of work; families; the environment; and local, state, national and international issues.
- Educators and learners are actively involved in the development of their educational program.
- Students understand the purposes of their learning.
- Constructive teacher response to student work is essential in promoting quality student work.
- Technology which incorporates up-to-date information and allows students to explore areas of interest is a part of the curriculum.
- Students are engaged in making decisions about what and how they learn.
- The development of basic skills performance is implicit at all grade levels and in every discipline.
- Time for research and investigation of a student's own questions is an integral part of the curriculum.
- Educators and learners are committed to lifelong learning.
- Learners are assessed utilizing a variety of assessment tools.

Guiding Principle: Optimum Use of Human Resources

People contribute to the district by sharing their talents. Students, staff and community work with one another in the learning process. The district allocates its resources to provide the best opportunities for all learners.

Success Criteria

- Educators, families and the community assist students in developing the commitment and patience necessary to produce quality work.
- Learners serve not only as consumers of knowledge but as resources of knowledge. Educators continually model a commitment to lifelong learning.
- To meet the needs of all students, educators and learners work in partnership with parents, school support staff, community members, businesses, administrators, and teachers.
- Educators and learners communicate and share information freely and openly, developing close, trusting relationships.
- The district continuously expands its current definition of resources, in order to achieve and reward a high level of effectiveness.
- The district continuously assesses its needs and commits the resources necessary to meeting these priorities.
- Curriculum practices incorporate technology as a source of rich information and a vehicle for interactive learning.
- All students have the opportunity to be involved in experiences outside the school with adult mentors.

Guiding Principle: Integration

The coordination of resources, programs and services are interrelated. Subjects in the curriculum are integrated. Learning takes place in the classrooms with multi-age/multi-ability groups. Technology continues to be an important instructional tool. Involvement of all stakeholders in the development of curriculum is encouraged.

Success Criteria

- Educators and learners share a conviction learning is essential for personal growth and societal progress.
- Interdisciplinary units are developed at all levels to make connections between the disciplines in order for students to develop a more realistic view of the world.
- Collaboration between teachers across disciplines is expanded in the development and adoption of curriculum.
- The district examines alternatives to the traditional school day and delivery system in order to accommodate learning.
- Educators and learners articulate and maintain a shared philosophy about the educational process and its goals and outcomes.
- Learners grow and develop in multi-age, multi-ability groups.

Guiding Principle: Diversity

We value differences in others and find ways to share and appreciate those differences. Curricula and relationships reflect this belief. A wide variety of new and diverse resources are pursued. Seeking out many perspectives before decisions are made is important.

Scenario

Elementary students are discovering their connection to the world as they use the interactive fiber optics network to communicate with other young learners around the globe to author a book about the impact of family on their lives. Students in different geographical locations write various sections of the book, ranging from poetry to short stories.

Today, several West Des Moines third graders are exploring their family trees, looking for unusual characters to write about. One of the third graders is disabled, and she is assisted in her writing by a sixth grader, who asks probing questions to allow her to clarify her ideas and scribes as she dictates. Meanwhile another group uses the computerized information search system in the media center to study the cultures of their co-authors in others countries.

In a conference room at the high school, a committee made up of students, parents, teachers, and administrators meet to discuss significant revisions in the school's discipline policy. The School Review Board has noted an increase in problems related to the economic disparity of the district. Working with a sociology professor from the local university, the Board-appointed committee is striving to devise proactive solutions to the problems.

Success Criteria

- Curriculum practices are broad enough to accommodate the successful involvement of learners with diverse interests and abilities.
- Collaboration between general and specialized educators is expanded in order to meet the diverse needs of learners in heterogeneous classrooms to the maximum extent possible.
- Educators and learners work interdependently, valuing each other and the contribution each makes to learning.
- The curriculum promotes understanding of and sensitivity towards religious, racial, gender, cultural and other differences among people.
- Educators and learners share information freely, and value all perspectives in identifying and solving problems.
- Each district-wide curriculum committee includes representation from the community.
- Educators and learners take risks in a climate of trust conducive to personal growth and intellectual development.

Recommendations

As a result of extensive research, discussion and feedback from numerous stakeholders the following are recommended.

- Adopt systemic planning as an ongoing process to address the needs of learning now and into the future.

- Coordinate all current and future planning functions within the district and integrate the systemic planning process into all planning.
- Utilize the five Guiding Principles as the foundation for all future planning so the district will continue to improve and will meet the needs of all learners in the 21st Century.
- Develop an implementation design that defines how the Guiding Principles will be used in the normal conduct of business. The findings from the three task force reports should be used extensively in the development of these plans.