
Impressions of NASDC's Design Conference for Inventing a New Generation of American Schools

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The New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) was created recently by business leaders at President Bush's request to implement one of the four parts of his ambitious "America 2000" educational strategy.¹ The mission of NASDC is to jumpstart an effort to "reinvent American education by designing new schools for a new century."² It is an independent, non-profit organization that is expected to exist only for about five years to raise roughly \$200 million from the private sector to "underwrite the design of new high-performance educational environments."³

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The basic format of the Design Conference was for NASDC to distribute and describe the draft RFP and related information on Monday afternoon (Aug. 26) and to collect input about the RFP and overall activities of NASDC on Tuesday morning. Speakers on Monday were: Paul Hill of Rand, which provided assistance in preparing the RFP; David Kearns, Deputy Secretary of Education; Frank Blount, CEO of NASDC; and Thomas K. Glennan, Jr., of Rand.

Positive Impressions

The first strongly positive impression that struck me was that NASDC has a good understanding of the difference between piecemeal change and systemic change, the need for systemic change to solve our current crisis in education, and the kinds of prerequisites that exist for successful systemic change.

Upon numerous occasions, Frank Blount and the RFP itself both emphasized the importance of systemic change. Statements included: "This is a request for break-the-mold designs, not for fixing up the design already in place."⁴ And: "NASDC's interest lies not in incremental reform or cosmetic changes in existing school structures."⁵ Such a recognition of the need for systemic change has been difficult to find in the educational establishment—from the U.S. Department of Education, to state education agencies, and even to local education agencies (with a few exceptions)—and was therefore very refreshing to see here.

David Kearns argued that we need systemic change not just because our economic well-being is at stake, but because democracy itself is at stake. There was a clear recognition that the massive changes our society is undergoing as we evolve more deeply into the post-industrial information age make our current system of schooling obsolete; and (though not stated in these words) that trying to improve the current system to deal with its new environment would be about as productive as trying to modify an automobile to travel across large bodies of water.

Frank Blount and the RFP also clearly outlined the major prerequisites for "fundamental institutional change . . . ; Dissatisfaction with the status quo . . . A new shared vision. . . . The capacity for change. . . . Concrete practical first steps."⁶ Systems designers (see, for instance, Banathy, 1991⁷) would recognize these as important conditions for systemic change of human-activity systems in general and educational systems in particular.

The second most encouraging impression I had was about the wisdom of adopting a *three-phase process* for serving its mission. The first phase, from spring 1992 to spring 1993, will fund 20-30

teams to develop designs for new school systems. The second phase, from spring 1993 to spring 1995, will fund about half those teams to test and implement the most promising designs in school settings. The third phase, from spring 1995 to spring 1997, will fund technical assistance efforts to help communities across the nation adapt and implement new designs. This would include assisting the "one school per congressional district" that may be funded by the U.S. Department of Education in support of this quarter of the America 2000 strategy.

In my opinion, this three-phase process is far superior to the initial thought of funding only 5-7 teams for the entire effort. The new process should result in considerably better quality ideas about what school systems should be like for the information age, and further awards (for phases 2 and 3) can now be made on the basis of track record and plans, rather than on plans alone.

Other impressions that struck me favorably were:

- NASDC's emphasis on a *collaborative approach* to bringing about systemic change in education—an approach that involves all stakeholders in helping to decide what their schools of the future should be like.
- Their focus on *outputs* (results), meaning primarily that the new schools must demonstrably improve "student achievement of world-class standards."
- That the new schools must be "*economically feasible*"⁸ as well as highly effective.
- That the efforts it will fund are not R&D (Research and Development), but D&D (Design & Development). The focus is on system design and integration to create a superior system, rather than on research to create additional knowledge. Although new knowledge inevitably (eventually) impacts on practice, and creating a superior system inevitably generates new knowledge, the difference in orientation is important and much needed.
- That this is *not a model school program*, meaning that the focus is not on creating a particular school that works well, but on creating designs that are adaptable so that they can be used by *many* communities to create their own new schools.
- Addressing *all students*. Again, to have designs that can be used by many communities, it is important that the new designs be ones that are appropriate for all students, with particular attention to meeting the needs of at-risk students.
- *Not being too directive* about what "they" want the bidders to do. Some attendees

were concerned that NASDC was operating a "guessing game," where they were hiding what they "really" wanted from the bidders! I became convinced that they sincerely felt that they did not have the answers and that they wanted to give the bidders free reign to come up with creative new solutions to the problems we face in education. To the extent this is true, I very strongly applaud it.

- *Seeking input* on the RFP. Again, this seemed to me to be a sincere effort to do the best job they could in addressing what may well be the most important problem facing the United States today: our educational crisis.

Concerns

Given all these glowing impressions, what didn't I like about the RFP, the Design Conference, or NASDC itself? Surprisingly little! One concern was that they initially appeared to be tied to a traditional view of content and assessment. The close ties with the five national education goals placed a strong emphasis on demonstrated competency in English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. While I agree that all of these are important, there are other things I think are equally, if not more, important. Some of these were identified by the Labor Department's "Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills" (SCANS), including systems thinking, personal interaction skills, information-related skills, resource allocation, and use of technology.⁹ However, the conference presentations and what appeared to be more recent writings in the RFP both placed greater emphasis on a broader conception: attaining "world-class standards," and offering "a considered judgment of

the appropriateness or inappropriateness of existing or proposed standards and tests."¹⁰ Therefore, as the Conference progressed, I increasingly came to believe that here, too, NASDC wants to encourage creative new ideas.

Conclusion

I must say that I was pleasantly surprised at the quality of the NASDC operation and how "on target" the RFP was for addressing the urgent need to invent a new system of education to meet the needs of learners and society in the information age. I am now more optimistic about substantial improvements in the quality of education than I have ever been. □

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Education. *America 2000: An Education Strategy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1991.
2. NASDC. *Designs for a New Generation of American Schools: A Request for Proposals (Draft)*. Arlington, VA: New American Schools Development Corporation, 1991, p. 1.
3. *Ibid*, p. 1.
4. *Ibid*, p. 9.
5. *Ibid*, p. 2.
6. *Ibid*, p. 1.
7. Banathy, B.H. *Systems Design of Education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1991.
8. NASDC, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
9. Licitra, A. *Education Daily*, 1991, 24(74), pp. 1-2.
10. NASDC, *op. cit.*, p. 17.