

THE DECATUR STORY: Reinvention of a School Corporation Collaboration: Developing Partners in Education

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This is the third in a series of articles to be published in 2007 that addresses reinvention of the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township.

As described in the two previous issues of this journal, in February 2001 Indiana University's School of Education offered to facilitate fundamental school transformation in the Indianapolis Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township. The first article indicated that school transformation differs from school reform in that it entails changing the paradigm of education from the factory model of schools, which uses fixed time and standardization to focus on sorting students, to an information-age model of schools, which uses flexible time and customization to focus on successful learning for all students. This kind of change requires collaboration of many kinds.

One kind of collaboration is **partnership**, which tends to be a longer-term and more formal kind of collaboration. The most important partnership in Decatur's transformation effort, called the Journey Toward Excellence, is the one with **Indiana University's School of Education**, for the provision of an outside (neutral) facilitator experienced in systemic change. The journey to paradigm change is a treacherous one, and stakeholders in a school district typically have a long history of disagreements, factions, animosities, rivalries, and such. Therefore, it was important to have a facilitator who was viewed as neutral and impartial by all stakeholder groups in Decatur. Furthermore, it was important for that person to be experienced in the transformation process, to help avoid the landmines scattered along the route to paradigm change, and for that person to be available to facilitate all meetings in the school district until an internal capacity could be developed to assume increasing amounts of that role.

Other partnerships that have proven valuable in Decatur's Journey Toward Excellence include ones with The Mind Trust, CELL, and the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. **The Mind Trust** is an entrepreneurship partnership

with the Mayor of Indianapolis dedicated to making Indianapolis the nation's foremost destination for transformative leaders, organizations and ideas in public education. **CELL** (Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning) is located at the University of Indianapolis and serves as a leading convener, catalyst and collaborator for dynamic, innovative education change. **The Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce** has established a Common Goals effort, which is a partnership with all Marion County school corporations to improve graduation rates.

However, the most important kind of collaboration in Decatur's paradigm change effort is collaboration among stakeholders *within* the Decatur school system and community. In the remainder of this article, we address why this kind of collaboration is so important, with whom it needs to be done, how it is being done, and what it is being accomplished through it.

Why Collaboration Is so Important.

One important benefit of collaboration in the transformation process is the broad range of **ideas** and perspectives that are seriously considered for the new paradigm. Paradigm change is a process of invention, and it needs to take into account the diverse needs and preferences of *all* stakeholders if it is to truly succeed. Without broad stakeholder input, there will be little commitment to the new paradigm and probably considerable resistance.

A second important benefit of collaboration is **culture change**. There are two aspects of culture change. First is the culture related to the change process. The typical school culture of mistrust among stakeholder groups, top-down decision making (see our article in the previous issue of this journal), bandwagon reform, and uniformity for changes in all schools is counterproductive for paradigm change. For Decatur's Journey Toward Excellence to

succeed, we first needed to foster a change in the culture of the school district and community to one of openness and trust among stakeholder groups, a consensus-building view of decision making and leadership, a devaluing of importing ready-made solutions (which inevitably are piecemeal reforms), and a valuing of different changes in different schools.

The second aspect is the culture related to the new paradigm of education. The culture needs to change from teacher isolation to teacher collaboration, from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, from the same instruction for all students to customized instruction for the needs and motivations of each student, from student compliance to student engagement (Schlechty, 2005). These are fundamental changes in the two aspects of culture in a school system, and they can only occur through collaboration.

A third important benefit of collaboration is changes in **mental models**. This is closely related to culture change: mental model change is individual change, whereas culture change is collective change. They must both change simultaneously and in the same directions, for they strongly influence each other. But change in mental models requires unlearning, as well as learning. This also occurs most effectively through collaboration. In university talk, they say that meaning is “socially constructed.” It was primarily through dialogue about important issues that members of Decatur’s Leadership Team changed their mental models and the culture of the team, and these changes have spread well beyond the team.

A fourth important benefit of collaboration is that it has built **commitment** and reduced resistance among the participants in Decatur’s Journey Toward Excellence.

Collaboration with Whom?

Based on why collaboration is important, it can be seen that it should be done with **all stakeholder groups**, and with as many stakeholders as possible within each group. The more people collaborating, the more ideas that are contributed, the broader the changes in culture that occur, the more mental models that change, and the more commitment there is to the new paradigm. This includes all community stakeholders, as well as all stakeholders within the school system.

But don’t stop there! It is also important to collaborate with “**enablers**,” primarily foundations and other agencies that can provide

external resources to support the transformation process. It is important to collaborate with the school system’s “**supersystems**,” such as the Indiana Department of Education and the mayor’s office, to listen to their input and increase their support for the effort (or at least prevent resistance to the effort). And it is important to collaborate with **other systems** with which the schools interact, to receive input and ensure alignment of expectations, such as postsecondary education institutions’ expectations for certain kinds of information for admissions purposes.

How to Collaborate

In Decatur we began the collaboration process with a **Core Team** comprised of the superintendent, a board member, the president of the teachers’ association, an opinion-leader among the principals, and a PTO leader (and to which we should have added a non-teaching staff member). This team was a learning community that read about and discussed paradigm change in education.

After this team developed a strong culture and capacity for paradigm change, it expanded into the **Leadership Team** of about 30 opinion leaders from all the stakeholder groups in the school system and community. The Core Team led the Leadership Team through a similar culture- and capacity-building process with the purpose of creating a district-wide framework of ideal beliefs about education. We are now in the process of creating one or more **design teams** in each school building. Members of the high school’s design team have collaborated to design six “academies” that will be opening in August 2007. Other design teams will be formed this fall. It is also likely that these design teams will have something akin to “pyramid groups” to extend the breadth of collaboration to all interested stakeholders.

The most important principles (among many) that govern collaboration on these teams include: (1) all members are equals and are empowered to pursue what they collectively think is best, (2) all decisions are made through a consensus-building process rather than a “majority rule” process, (3) complete openness or “disclosure” of any reservations about an emerging consensus are practiced to build trust, and (4) learning is paramount (which builds the capacity for paradigm change).

What this Collaboration Is Accomplishing

Foremost among the accomplishments of

this collaborative paradigm change process are **changes in mental models** among the participants and **changes in the culture** of the school district, including a change in the paradigm of leadership (see our article in the previous issue of this journal). In terms of tangible accomplishments, the Leadership Team, with broad participation from all stakeholder groups in school and community forums, developed a district-wide Framework of **Shared Vision, Mission, and Ideal Beliefs**, which represents the foundation for the new paradigm of education in Decatur. Another tangible accomplishment is the adoption of a set of **shared values to guide the change process** (as opposed to beliefs that guide the new paradigm). These include such values as students' interests come first, stakeholder ownership of the change process, consensus-building approach to decision making, disclosure and trust building, systemic thinking, and much more.

Even more tangible are the designs for the **six academies** for the high school, which will be implemented in August 2007. You can find more information about these academies at <http://www.msddecatur.k12.in.us/HS/smallschool.html>. Finally, the most tangible accomplishment of collaboration in Decatur is the \$85 million **building program** that was approved without dissent. The plans were developed by a committee comprised of all stakeholder groups, and they worked tirelessly to reach consensus on a very large plan for such a small school district. The design of the project reflects the transformation from a traditional comprehensive high school to a design that reflects the idea of small learning communities. The collaboration of all stakeholders allowed consensus on this planning to occur so that student learning is the driving force behind the design.

Conclusion

Collaboration is not easy. It requires effective facilitation or it can end up creating divisiveness rather than consensus. And collaboration is not quick. It requires freeing up a lot of people's time for dialogue. But it is essential for paradigm change. There is no other way to help stakeholders change the culture of the school district and change their own mental models. There is no other way to deeply consider a broad range of ideas and perspectives for the new paradigm. And there is no other way to build the breadth and depth of

commitment required for paradigm change in education.

Decatur has not found this an easy road to travel. But we are convinced that through collaboration, Decatur stakeholders can transform the paradigm of education from the time-based, sorting-focused, standardized, factory model of schools to an attainment-based, learning-focused, customized model of schools that will provide a quantum improvement in helping all children to reach their potential.

Reference

Schlechty, P.C. (2005). *Creating great schools: Six critical systems at the heart of educational innovation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.