

Large-scale Education Reform: Role of Change Partners, Specifically Sponsors and Advocates

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INTRODUCTION

“Start with the children . . . they are the present and future and serve as our guiding star for society’s purpose, value, and quality of life.”
Start With the Children (2000)

Throughout the ages, men and women have struggled with educating their young in the most effective and efficient ways possible. They have learned the value of education is not a unique interest of a family, community, state, or nation. Education is now embraced by a global society and serves as the equalizer for the betterment of all.

To meet this responsibility, it becomes society’s challenge and opportunity to identify, design and develop interventions that provide quality education. Therefore in the realm of this proposition, the goal of this paper is to focus on large-scale initiatives designed to address the following three questions: 1) How does society deliver a quality education to all? 2) How are infrastructures, the organizational system and subsystems, significant to a successful change initiative? 3) How do individual roles and responsibilities within the infrastructure affect the outcomes?

ROLES OF SPONSORS AND ADVOCATES

For the sake of this paper, definitions of sponsors (initiating and sustaining) and advocates are based on the work of change management/leadership expert Daryl Conner and findings he presented in *Managing at the Speed of Change (1992)* and *Leading at the Edge of Chaos (1998)*.

A sponsor is defined as an individual or group who has the authority to legitimize and power to enforce the intervention (e.g., the Florida State legislature). Sponsorship takes far more than ideas and rhetoric; it requires the ability and willingness to apply the meaningful rewards and pressure that produce desired results. Major change will not occur unless appropriate sponsors demonstrate sufficient commitment. There are two kinds of sponsors, initial and sustaining. An initial sponsor is defined as an individual or group who has the power to break from the status quo and sanction a significant change. An initial sponsor is usually higher in the hierarchy than those who must perform the duties of sustaining sponsors (Conner, 1992).

A sustaining sponsor is defined as one who supports and follows through with the sponsor commitment and allocation of resources for his/her arena of influence. A sustaining sponsor has enough proximity to local targets, those individuals or groups who must actually change, to maintain focus and motivation on the change goals (e.g., Florida State Department of Education or Florida School Year 2000 (SY2000) operational test site school superintendents). Sustaining sponsors minimize logistic, economic, or political gaps that exist between layers of the organization (education system) and produce the

appropriate structure of rewards and punishments that promote achievement (Conner, 1992).

An advocate is defined as an individual or group who wants to achieve a change but lacks the power to sanction it. However, advocates are influential and valued for the advice and recommendations given to the sponsor and others (e.g., SY2000 Public School Council or Policy Advisory Council). Successful advocates spend time with sponsors engaged in problem solving and persuasion/communication) and pain management (e.g., dealing with resistance, barriers, and constraints). They help the sponsor realize the importance of the desired change (Conner, 1992).

To understand the role and influence of sponsors and advocates, the following assumption must be carefully thought through: There is a tendency for those involved or affected in a change initiative to overestimate the short-term effects of change and underestimate the long-term effects. The short-term effects are the results of incremental inputs and processes. Change transforms into long-term effects when people are results-driven and have been given purpose and value as to why the change is required. Initial and sustained sponsorship are key to making this type of transformation/change possible (Conner, 1992; Reigeluth & Garfinkle, 1994).

Many reform interventions have been short-lived due to such things as: the lack of clear purpose or value; organizational alignment of inputs/resources (e.g., internal and external); processes (e.g., strategies and methods); and outputs (e.g., measurable results) and fully committed and sustained sponsorship (Branson, 1998; Kaufman, Herman, & Watters, 1996; Conner, 1992, 1998). This type of change process critically depends on successful planning, implementation, and evaluation and research-based by applying the information and experience of the following data sources: General systems theory, Diffusion of innovation theory, Instructional systems design principles and concepts, Change management/creation principles, and Education reform initiatives/interventions.

Based on his "upper-limit hypothesis" (Branson, 1987, 1998), an example of a large-scale intervention was the Florida SY2000 Initiative, a noble attempt to change how education was being delivered and applied in the state of Florida. Implementing SY2000 was a major change that required knowledge, skills, and resources required for moving from where the state of education was to where it should be. It was a major transition and transformation for people and processes. The greatest challenge was to sustain the change for the long journey, making a difference in the lives of tomorrow's child. Leading change and diffusion of innovation experts highlight the critical roles of leadership and sponsorship for the successful implementation and maintenance of major change or reform efforts (Conner, 1992, 1998; Ely, 1990; Rogers, 1995; and Waterman, 1990). It is for this reason that sponsors and advocates are selected as the individuals by which this author placed her focus.

WHAT DRIVES EDUCATION REFORM EFFORTS?

"In times of change, the learner will inherit the earth while the learned are beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists."

Eric Hoffer

The following scenarios illustrate a rationale for having effective schools that focus on the value that learners add to themselves, their families, their communities and society as a whole. Based on outcomes of these scenarios, the forces behind these change efforts become clearer.

Imagine a doctor entering the operating room and not being familiar with the patient's history, current condition, or required treatment; or a gourmet chef preparing a banquet without having the ingredients to create his world-renowned entree. Imagine an auto mechanic who doesn't have the proper tools to get a vehicle to meet safety standards; or the baseball player without the skill set to be on the team and perform as a contributing member.

As an analogy, now conceive such individuals as products of our education system. An education system that starts long before and long after any formal training, a learning system that is life-long and prepares its members to be self-sufficient, self-reliant contributing citizens of a democratic society. According to Kaufman, Herman, & Watters (1996) these scenarios are headed for dismal outcomes because someone didn't 1) identify the desired learning outcomes, 2) determine what methods and strategies are required to reach accomplishment, or 3) set the criteria to measure whether desired outcomes were achieved as the end result.

These scenarios illustrate a call to educators to not only address knowledge and skill attainment, but to include the skills required for life-long learning. As educators, we have a responsibility to apply the processes (e.g., plan, analysis, design, development, delivery, and evaluation) required for the diffusion of education. Successful outcomes of such diffusion increase the probability of learners becoming self-reliant, self-sufficient contributing citizens.

How then are infrastructures, the organizational system and subsystems, significant to a successful change initiative, diffusion of education? The infrastructure of SY2000 was *The Florida Learning Support Systems (SY2000 Model)*. The model was envisioned as a way to enable all Florida students, even the disadvantaged, to excel in school. Its goal was to support high student scholastic performance, contribute to Florida's communities, and better prepare graduates for complex jobs in workplaces that are increasingly demanding, technologically sophisticated, and global. The model was designed to meet the needs of its stakeholders: student, family, community, business and industry, and state and local agencies.

The SY2000 mission was to create a technology-supported education system for increasing the quality and productivity of public school students in Florida. The system included electronic networks, tools, and processes that would enable Florida schools to achieve the Blueprint 2000 goals and district goals in School Improvement Plans. Blueprint 2000 articulated the goals and standards of Florida's School Improvement and Accountability legislation.

The vision was for each student to acquire the foundational skills and competencies needed to succeed in adult life in an Information Age. SY2000 design principles were derived from research in a variety of fields such as teaching, learning, motivation, psychology, instructional design, engineering, business, management, financial management, communications, and electronics. The total schooling process was guided by a quality system linked to international quality standards.

Accomplishment of 21st century educational reform embedded in constant change in technology advances, information explosion, and rapid knowledge acquisition demanding a learner-centered environment may very well depend on the words spoken by futurist Alvin Toffler, (Retrieved February 8, 2001 on the World Wide Web: <http://www.gunnar.cc/quotes/text.html>). "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

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