Transforming Public Education: A Regional Call to Action

Executive Summary



Education at the Crossroads

Public education in Wisconsin is at a crossroads. The current educational system is expensive to sustain given the financial crisis and changing economic structure in the state. Yet the need to prepare students to be competitive workers and responsible citizens is greater than ever. It will require innovation and systemic transformation to ensure the success of all students. To this end, the CESA #1 superintendents participated in a regional learning community initiative in the fall of 2009 to examine the current state of education and develop a vision for what schools need to be.

The Challenge

The superintendents recognize that preparing students for yesterday's or even today's economy and society is not good enough. We must look forward and transform our educational system to prepare students for a different and rapidly changing world. This challenge is greater and more complex than at any time in history, and we face great risk if we are unable to meet this challenge. It is urgent and unavoidable. Failure to respond not only places public education at risk, it places the health and well being of our society in jeopardy. We must focus on the learning needs of students and what will ensure their life and work success in the future.

Schools were designed to accomplish a mission different from what they are charged to accomplish today. Many argue that there is not enough funding available to adequately support the school systems as they are currently designed and functioning. In fact, substantial new funds need to be infused into the current system just to maintain stability. As a result, it is unlikely that increased funding will generate any significant innovation or improvement.

A highly educated work force is essential to the overall future and economic vitality of the State of Wisconsin. This key resource to fuel our economic engine requires a high level of commitment and ongoing financial investment.

Roles and Purposes of Public Education

A review of the historical and current role of schools in society reveals that schools play at least four identifiable roles: **educational, custodial, community building/enrichment and economic**. Looking to the future, these roles must be examined in light of necessity, affordability and relationship to priority expectations. It may be that the focus of schools must shift to better align with the highest priorities of our communities and greatest benefits to society.

To prepare students to be ethical, engaged citizens, Wisconsin communities and schools must give them meaningful ways to practice autonomy in an environment that values the development of the whole child and nurtures an appreciation for the global nature of issues and challenges. The learning environment must also offer a comprehensive curriculum that supports the development of creative, adaptable, curious, self-motivated critical thinkers with a sense of responsibility for themselves, their families, their community, and their nation.

Our vision for teaching and learning in the future is a collaborative product of research and practice that identifies distinct elements connected to the enduring purposes of public education.

Enduring Core Purposes of Public Education

- Develop the whole child academically, intellectually, socially and physically
- Nurture ethical citizens and leaders who contribute to and thrive in a global society
- Promote cultural literacy
- Foster creative, collaborative, adaptable, curious, self-motivated critical thinkers
- Develop skills to enable economic self-sufficiency
- Instill the democratic values, principles and beliefs on which our society rests

Promising Practices

Simply changing schools will not be enough to build the capacity and create the learning outcomes demanded by the 21st century. Nothing short of transformation will be enough to meet the challenges ahead. We know that high-quality instruction and rich, deep learning will continue to remain at the core of high-performing educational environments. Transforming today's schools holds the potential to increase their efficiency and sustainability, and to meet the educational needs of the next generation of American learners.

We know that the single greatest factor affecting student learning is the quality of the teacher. The relationship teachers develop with their students serve as the foundation for learning, and the instruction and assessment practices utilized by teachers are keys to student success. To promote high academic standards, teachers need to create supportive but rigorous learning environments and develop positive, influential relationships with students.

In addition, meaningful, active engagement is a critical element in student learning. Students work harder and learn more when learning activities are personally and culturally relevant. In today's and tomorrow's high-performance classroom, students must be able to work collaboratively and develop teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills. The curriculum must be connected to students' interests, experiences and talents within a real-world context.

Along with the quality of the teacher, there are a number of other characteristics and components of transformational learning environments that current research appears to support. Following are several examples of how school and educational practices can and need to be transformed to take advantage of what we know about quality learning and technology and other innovations that hold promise to improve our work:

Typical Current Practices	Examples of Transformative Practices
Age-based cohorts	Learning/progress-based grouping
Classrooms with randomly assigned age mates	Small, collaborative, flexible learning groups
Standardized solutions	Customized learning plans and processes
Indirect measures of learning	Direct measures of learning
Inefficient, partially productive systems	Focused, aligned, efficient learning organizations
Largely face-to-face teacher-directed instruction	Electronic, digitally-blended instructional approaches
Patchwork of standards and parameters driving educational organization and processes	Coherent, flexible, research-based, innovation-focused, teaching and learning processes
Largely print-based instructional materials and textbooks	Electronic/digital, highly customizable textbooks and on-line instructional and learning resources
Highly structured, traditional staffing models	Student-centered, relational staffing, featuring professional partnerships with experts, certified staff, community resource people, and mentors
Technology-assisted teaching and learning	Technology integrated and delivered learning options
Educational progress measured by seat time and credits	Progress toward graduation measured by authentic learning, using direct measures
Traditional annual school calendar and schedule	Instruction and learning delivered anytime, anywhere, 24/7 when students are ready to learn
Learning almost exclusively based in schools	Learning occurring where students are, with schools as the base from which students and teachers work

Our Recommendations



With this context in mind, school superintendents in Southeastern Wisconsin believe that there is no choice but to innovate and transform today's schools if we are to meet the expectations society holds for the education of Wisconsin youth. In light of this reality, we present the following policy recommendations:

- ***Develop*** or adopt learning standards for the State of Wisconsin that are future-focused, rigorous, comprehensive and reflect the needs of next generation learners
- ***Develop*** a comprehensive state assessment system that, to the extent practical, directly measures accepted next generation skills and competencies
- ***Ensure*** that the voices and engagement of teachers, students and parents are part of the transformation process
- ***Establish*** Innovation Zones throughout the state to encourage and support innovation by offering opportunities to implement what is known from current and emerging research to significantly improve education, support accelerated learning, and develop models that can be tested and documented for replication, growth to scale over time, and long-term sustainability
- ***Provide*** flexibility and targeted incentives to school districts within the Innovation Zones to design and implement transformative teaching and learning approaches:
    - Permit individual learning plans to serve as alternatives to state graduation credit/course requirements
    - Provide proficiency-based diploma options
    - Allow competency-based graduation requirements as an alternative to traditional credit requirements
    - Provide incentives for flexible learning environments that combine blended experiences (e.g. classroom face-to-face and e-learning)
    - Provide flexibility for school districts to modify and move beyond current requirements governing days, hours and minutes of instruction to allow learning to be a 24/7 activity
    - Provide flexibility in educator certification requirements
    - Establish a clearinghouse of information regarding student performance outcomes, organizational structures, and business plans of transformative schools and make them accessible to the public

- ***Support*** the expansion of transformative practices by:
    - Allowing full funding for public school choice students (Open Enrollment) accepted in Innovation Zone schools
    - Creating legislation to allow districts to build comprehensive, flexible compensation plans for staff that align with state-of-the-art, research-based, and proven models
    - Requiring Wisconsin educator preparation institutions to provide training in next generation learning, including effective strategies and interventions to meet the needs of all learners
    - Requiring educator preparation institutions to have a scholar/practitioner in residence to promote collaboration and communication with K-12 educational institutions in support of educator training and best practices
    - Creating more and better bridges from secondary to post-secondary education for students who accelerate their learning and graduate from high school early. Examples might include expanded internships and apprenticeships, varied early entrance options to technical and community colleges, and increased flexibility for early high school graduates to participate in four-year college programs without adding to the financial burden of K-12 institutions
    - Evaluating current rules and regulations governing the operation of schools relative to their usefulness in light of the unique and changing needs of learners, communities and our society

We are convinced that by transforming today's schools we can increase their efficiency by reducing the need for remediation of content and skills, increasing graduation rates and, in some cases, reducing ongoing costs for personnel and other learning support elements. These recommendations will enable us to prepare our next generations to meet the challenges and expectations presented to them by a rapidly changing society and at the same time to ensure that school systems are more financially sustainable in the future. We believe this is a vision worth supporting and funding.