THE DECATUR STORY:
Reinvention of a School Corporation
Mission and Values for Decatur's School Transformation

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

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 IU facilitators stipulated the importance of several *values about the change process*: (1) that IU's role was not to tell Decatur what changes to make, but to facilitate a process whereby the Decatur stakeholders collectively decide what changes to make, and (2) that the change process should explore the need for fundamental, systemic transformation (paradigm change), rather than automatically pursuing reforms (piecemeal changes). The facilitators explained what fundamental, systemic transformation is as follows.

We know that different students learn at different rates. Yet we teach a fixed amount of content in a fixed amount of time, which forces achievement to vary. This fixed-time paradigm, complete with its norm-referenced grading system, was designed for sorting students, which was appropriate for the industrial age, in which needed to separate managers from manual laborers, for we did not need to educate the latter to high levels. Now that knowledge work has replaced manual labor as the predominant form of work, we need an educational system that is designed for learning, not sorting. This means that, rather than holding time constant and thereby forcing achievement to vary (with children left behind), we must hold achievement constant at a proficiency level and allow each student as much time as he or she needs to reach proficiency. This dramatic change in the paradigm of education requires changes in the school culture, use of time, teacher role, student role, parent role, technology, assessment system, leadership style, and much more. We have not seen the likes of such a paradigm change since the

shift from the one-room school house to the factory model of schools at the dawn of the industrial age. And now the information age is ushering in a similarly dramatic change of paradigm in education.

Initial meetings between IU facilitators and Decatur leaders of all stakeholder groups revealed broad interest in exploring this kind of transformational change.

Mission and Values for Education

The first major task of the systemic transformation process was to create a district-wide framework of mission, vision, and ideal beliefs (or values) about education. This task was guided by the following *values about the change process*. First, the "Framework," as Decatur called it, must be a district-wide framework, to avoid the problem of one school becoming incompatible with the prevailing paradigm in the rest of the school district, in which case the broader system would relentlessly, if unconsciously, work to change it back to being compatible with it. Second, participants must think in the ideal, what Ackoff (19xx) calls idealized design, to help participants transcend their sorting-focused, factory-model mindsets or mental models about education. Paradigm change requires a change in individuals' worldviews, and thinking in the ideal is instrumental to helping participants evolve their thinking. Third, a large number of stakeholders must be involved in the developing the Framework so that enough mindsets will change and enough diverse ideas will be incorporated for the transformation to succeed. Not only must they be involved, but also they must develop a sense of ownership of the change process, as well as of the new paradigm that emerges from the process. The Framework of mission, vision, and ideal beliefs is the first "rough sketch" of that new paradigm, and it includes

determining the purpose of the new paradigm.

However, before this Framework could be developed, it was important to build an appropriate culture (or set of values) and understanding of the transformation process. This was done by forming a Core Team comprised of top leaders of the major stakeholder groups: the superintendent, a school board member, the president of the teachers' association, a building principal, and a PTA president. To this we should have added a highly respected non-teaching staff member. The Core Team adopted a set of process values as part of the new transformational culture: good communication is imperative, everyone is valuable, humility is important, and trust is essential. Other process values include: inclusiveness, empowerment, collaboration, consensus-building, disclosure, self-criticality, systemic thinking, mental models, idealized design, learning community, participatory leadership, and more.

When a strong enough transformational culture had been built, the Core Team expanded into a 25-member Leadership Team to create the district-wide Framework of Mission, Vision, and Ideal Beliefs. However, the Core Team took time to cultivate their culture in the Leadership Team, as well as to develop an understanding of paradigm change and why it is needed. Then they turned to developing the Framework, which is summarized in the box on the next page.

As the Decatur culture began to transform from an industrial-age model to an information-age model, many changes occurred, and learning became the new focus. These changes included the development of: (1) a collaborative relationship between the School Board and the Decatur Education Association, (2) the Challenger Learning Center, in which students work as teams in mission control and aboard a spacecraft as they test their decision-making skills and solve problems in this innovative, inquiry based, space-themed science and math simulation, (3) the Decatur Discovery Expeditionary Charter Academy, which is a 9-12 non-traditional charter high school organized by the MSD of Decatur Township, (4) support for $140,000,000 in school construction programs, (5) the reinvention of Decatur Central High School into five small learning communities, and (6) the reinvention of the school corporation with a new focus on learning.

Decatur's Journey toward Excellence is far from over, and the shape of the learning-focused paradigm of education is far from certain. However, what *is* certain is the crucial role that mission and values play in the Decatur transformation process. The process values have a powerful impact on the effectiveness of the transformation process, and the Framework of mission, vision, and ideal beliefs represent a steady compass for determining the purpose and guiding the nature of the changes we make as we design a truly learner-centered and learning-focused educational system to help every individual reach his or her potential.

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For more information about Decatur's systemic transformation effort, visit http://www.indiana.edu/~syschang/decatur/index.html.

Mission

Decatur Township Schools – Learning communities where all stakeholders are empowered to achieve excellence.

Vision

MSD of Decatur Township is an information-age school corporation committed to being learner centered. A focus on learning and continuous personal growth is promoted in a safe, respectful and caring environment characterized by high expectations. Learning Communities are the means to fostering collaboration and empowerment. Assessments, interventions and accommodations are used to meet the academic, social, emotional, physical, and developmental needs of all learners.

Ideal Beliefs

1. Learning. We believe a focus on learning must be part of the culture of our school community because learning is a community responsibility.

- Different learning and teaching styles will be used to cultivate the talents of each child.
- Varied interventions, strategies, and resources will provide students with multiple opportunities to meet their intellectual, emotional, social, behavioral, and physical needs.
- Teachers will be guides and facilitators to provide differentiated learning experiences and to empower students to take charge of their own learning.
- Students will be encouraged to pursue ambitious learning goals and assume responsibility for their own learning, and their progress will be monitored and supported.
- Throughout the learning process, each student with appropriate stakeholder support will persist until learning is achieved.
- Technology will be an integrated part of the learning process and will be accessible to every stakeholder.

2. Learning Environment. We believe the school must provide a welcoming, safe, productive, learner-centered environment for learning to occur. This nurturing climate will foster trust and high expectations. All stakeholders will be:

- treated with dignity and respect,
- viewed as individuals, and
- provided support for learning.

3. Assessment. We believe assessment must be used to guide the learning process to meet individual student needs rather than to compare students. Therefore, assessment must be used to:

- determine what learning has occurred,
- identify what interventions are needed,
- provide timely and continuous information to guide teaching and student learning,
- customize new learning based on students' prior knowledge and learning styles, and
- provide all stakeholders with feedback.

4. The Learning Community. We believe the relationship between the school and the larger community must be an interdependent one because students learn in both settings. Therefore,

- All stakeholders will be represented and empowered through a collaborative approach to decision making, to develop leadership and to secure sustained school improvement.
- All parents will work with teachers and students to foster learning.

5. Professional Development. We believe that professional development is important to provide all stakeholders with the skills to improve student learning. Professional development must be:

- sustained over a long period of time,
- relevant to stakeholder needs,
- focused on ways to serve student learning, and
- advanced through professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities are built around collaborative exchange in which educators direct their professional growth by working together, reflecting on their practice, exchanging ideas, and sharing strategies to improve student learning.