

Financing Systemic Transformational Change— Where Can You Find the Money? ¹

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[Author's note: this article was written using a Comprehensive School Reform model that was part of the New American Schools effort to improve schooling. We didn't use this model because we are advocating it; instead, we used it because there are financial data available about the cost of implementing that model. We used those cost data to create an example of how you can estimate the cost of whole-system transformation. So, please do not focus on the specific model we used. Instead, focus on the general principles we used for estimating the costs of systemic transformational change.]

The Transformation Challenge

Whole-system transformation within the context of the *FutureMinds: Transforming American School Systems* initiative means whole-school district. In the United States, a school district is one of the few organizations—perhaps the only one—that is actually referred to as a system (as in “school system”). We believe that whole-system transformation is the reform methodology of choice for improving the quality of teaching and learning throughout an school district because we know that changing pieces of a system (as in school-based reform) cannot and never will improve an entire school system.

Merreyln Emery (in Emery & Purser, 1996) gives us a strategy for defining the system to be improved. She says that you draw a circle around all of the buildings, programs, people, and so forth, that must collaborate to deliver a product or service to customers. Everything inside that circle is the system to be improved. Everything outside the circle is that system's external environment. For a school district, everything inside the circle includes individual school buildings, academic programs, support services, the central administration, and so on. Elements outside the circle include the district's community, its state department of education, the U.S. Department of Education, its state government, its geographic region, the U.S. society, and the world society.

¹ This article was originally published as a chapter in Duffy, F.M. (2003). *Courage, passion and vision: Leading systemic school improvement*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. The chapter was co-authored by Jason Cascarino (a consultant formerly associated with New American Schools) and Chris Henson (Assistant Superintendent, Business and Facility Services for the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools where he oversees the district's \$542 million operating budget.)

When planning to transform an entire school system change leaders need to identify a starting point. That starting point must have enough strength and resilience to resist efforts of unchanged parts of the school system to force it to revert to its pre-change status. We believe that individual schools are not strong and resilient enough to countervail this significant pressure. Instead, we recommend that the starting point for systemic transformational change should be a cluster of schools that collaborate to educate students and that cluster must contain the entire instructional program of the district; for example, if the instructional program in a school district is preK-12th grade, then the academic cluster chosen to start the district's transformation journey must have schools that represent that instructional program. A single high school and all the middle and elementary schools that feed into it would be an example of an academic cluster that satisfies this criterion.

The reason it is important for the starting academic cluster to contain a district's entire instructional program is because of a systems design principle simply called "upstream errors flow downstream" (Pasmore, 1988). In a work process, mistakes or errors early on, if not detected and corrected, will flow downstream and cause significant problems later on. We see this in school systems when students have two weak teachers in a row. Those students continue to learn, but they never catch up to their peers who had more effective teachers. We also see this in school systems where children fail to master reading and math before leaving the elementary grades. Those children continue to struggle with reading and math for the rest of their academic career in a school system. Upstream errors always flow downstream, so when change leaders are seeking to improve their school systems they need to examine and improve their entire instructional program as an intact program. This way they can see where errors are being made and then take steps to eliminate or ameliorate those errors. The only feasible way to do this is to engage an intact academic cluster of schools that represent the entire instructional program.

In a school district with multiple academic clusters, change leaders should not start the transformation journey with the highest performing cluster nor the lowest performing cluster. If the highest performing cluster in a district begins the transformation journey, then its success will be attributed to it having the most resources, the smartest kids, the best teachers, and so on. If the lowest performing cluster starts the transformation, it will likely not have the capacity to succeed with transformation activities and its failure to transform will demoralize the rest of the system and reduce the capacity of the district to move forward with systemic transformational change. Instead, an academic cluster that is an average performer should be selected as the starting point for the transformation. The average performing cluster will have the capacity to begin the transformation and that capacity will be enhanced as they move forward along the transformation paths.

Transforming a whole system also requires creating and sustaining improvements along three change paths: Path 1—transform the system’s relationship with its external environment; Path 2—transform the system’s core (teaching and learning) and supporting work (central administration, cafeteria services, transportation services, and so on) processes; and Path 3—Transform the system’s internal social infrastructure (organization culture, policies and procedures, the reward system, job descriptions, and so on).

Clearly, these challenges will demand human, technical and financial resources; especially financial resources because those will be used to acquire the human and technical resources. So, how can a school system find the money it needs to pay for whole-system transformation? The answers are found below.

Estimating the Cost of Whole-System Change

Unlike traditional reform efforts, whole-system change cannot be sustained solely through small increases in operating budgets. Because systemic reform touches all aspects of a school district’s core operations, it imposes significant resource requirements and demands a rethinking of the way current resources are allocated, as well as some creative thinking about how to use “extra” money that will be needed to jump start systemic reform.

Financing whole-system change will also require the continuation of both school- based budgeting that is coordinated and aligned with centralized budgeting processes. Financing whole-district transformation is not an “either centralized or school-based” endeavor. It requires a “both centralized and school-based budgeting” approach.

Because there seems to be a scarce amount of literature on financing whole-system change, innovative, ground-level tactics, methods, and sources are needed to help educators find the resources they need to transform their school systems into high performing organizations of learners. This article offers some insights about how to do this.

To imagine what the cost of whole-system transformation might be, we first look at the resources needed to support comprehensive school reform in individual school buildings within districts. Then, using that per building cost data, we scale-up the cost estimates to determine a hypothetical ballpark figure for supporting whole-district transformation. We then offer some ideas about how to pay for all this.

Our whole-system transformation cost calculations were done in three steps.

Step 1: Calculate the Cost of Comprehensive School Reform in Single Schools

The RAND Corporation in its ongoing evaluation of the New American Schools comprehensive school reform models provides information on the availability and adequacy of resources to pay for comprehensive reform at the building level. This information is provided in a report authored by Brent Keltner (1998). Keltner's findings are from the 1996-1997 academic year and they were derived from a sample of 58 schools using six of the eight New American Schools designs. Keltner identified resource requirements for comprehensive reform in those 58 schools using four different resource categories: teacher-time, personnel, design services, and materials and conferences. A summary of his findings follows. Later in the article, we scale-up those cost data to project the cost of creating whole-district transformation.

Teacher-time. Educators need time to learn new curricula, teaching practices, and management techniques, and they need time to collaborate (Purnell & Hill, 1992). The RAND evaluation team collected information at each of the 58 schools in its sample about the amount of teacher-time required to implement the various reform models. They counted the total number of hours teachers spent in common planning time, teacher teams, and management teams, and the total number of days teachers spent in on- and off-site design training.

Personnel. All of the comprehensive school reform models supported by New American Schools require specialized school personnel to support the designs. Many comprehensive reform designs use on-site resource experts, such as site facilitators, curriculum coordinators, and technology coordinators. Other comprehensive designs use experts that work directly with students or families, and include reading tutors, instructional assistants, and family outreach personnel. The RAND evaluation team collected data on the total number of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions dedicated to comprehensive reform for each of these categories of personnel.

Design services. Other resources needed for comprehensive school reform are design teams that collaborate with school-based educators to implement the selected reform models. Members of these design teams are experts with the reform model being implemented. For each school in the RAND study, information on the costs associated with these design teams was also collected. These costs included consulting fees and travel expenses.

Materials and conferences. Schools implementing comprehensive school reform models also need materials to support implementation. Most comprehensive designs also require teacher participation in design conferences and visits to other schools outside their district that have successfully implemented the same reform models. To gather data on the costs of materials, the RAND evaluation team collected information on the costs of teacher books, student notebooks, entrance fees, and bus rental fees for students on field trips. Conference costs included the costs of airplane trips, hotel nights, and teacher per diems. Once the RAND team collected sufficient data to calculate the cost of comprehensive reform, they calculated the total dollar cost for comprehensive reform in each of the 58 schools in their study.

They found that the average resource-use for comprehensive reform across all 58 schools in their sample was \$162,000 per school in the first year of implementation. The average school in their sample had 40 teachers and 740 students. To support design implementation, this average school used 1.8 hours of planning time per teacher per week, 6.5 days of training per teacher per year, 1.7 FTE specialized school personnel, \$25,000 for design services, and \$12,000 for materials and conferences.

As a reminder, these costs were based on 1996-1997 data. Seventy-six percent of the resources used by the 58 schools in the RAND study were used to pay for a combination of teacher-time and for specialized school personnel required by each reform model. The average combined value for these two resources was \$125,000 (\$66,000 for teacher-time and \$59,000 for specialized personnel). Design team consulting services averaged \$25,000 per school, or about 16% of total costs. Materials and conferences averaged \$12,000 per school, or the remaining 8% of the total cost.

Looking at these costs, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that the total costs are the same as out-of-pocket costs for a school district. Keltner clearly states that the costs of comprehensive school reform in the 58 schools in the RAND study were not the same as out-of-pocket costs. The average school in the RAND study did not actually spend \$162,000 out-of-pocket to implement its comprehensive reform model. ***A significant portion of that \$162,000 was covered by reallocating funds within each school's operating budget.***

Step 2: Find Funds to Pay for Per Building Reform

The RAND evaluation team identified funding sources that schools can draw on to cover the costs of comprehensive reform. They collected data on two types of funding strategies: reallocating resources within current operating budgets and using funds outside existing budgets (or, extra money).

To examine the reallocation of current operating resources, the RAND team included funds from the school district's normal budget allocation to each school for personnel, materials, staff development, and discretionary budgets. One example of resource reallocation used by schools in the RAND study was the use of existing in-service days and money for substitute teachers to pay for teacher-time to participate in training. Another example of resource reallocation was the retooling of existing staff positions to support comprehensive school reform. A third example of resource reallocation was when school-level administrators used their discretionary funds to pay for travel, materials, and conferences to support the selected comprehensive reform model.

To examine the use of outside (extra) funds, the RAND team collected data on the use of federal Title I funds, district money beyond a school's normal budget allocation, grants from private foundations, and volunteer contributions (e.g., teachers volunteering their time instead of being paid for it and parents helping with the costs of student field trips). The RAND study tracked Title I funds separately because many of the schools in their sample did not meet the eligibility criteria to receive those dollars.

The sources of funding for the 58 schools in the RAND study were fascinating. About \$62,000 (or 38% of the \$162,000 average cost for comprehensive school reform) was covered through resource reallocation. The other \$100,000 came from sources outside a school's normal operating budget--\$53,000 from Title I, \$30,000 from district budgets, \$11,000 from outside grants, and \$6,000 from volunteer sources. ***In other words, each school in the study was able to find all the money needed to support comprehensive school reform at the building level.***

In summary, the RAND study drew the following conclusions from their assessment of the costs of comprehensive school reform in the 58 schools in their sample.

- Resource reallocation using current operating resources is absolutely essential for funding comprehensive reform. Nearly 40% of the funds for comprehensive reform at the schools in their sample came from reallocated resources.
- During the early stages of systemic transformation, and certainly for the first time a district engages in this kind of change, access to extra funds should allow most schools to supplement the resources found through the resource reallocation.
- Access to federal non-Title I funds (e.g., the Obey-Porter funds) is not sufficient for schools without Title I funds. The combination of \$50,000 in Obey-Porter funds and \$62,000 in internally reallocated resources would still leave most non-Title I schools considerably short of the money needed to implement comprehensive reform within

the schools in the RAND study. The needed funds, according to Keltner, would then need to come in the form of additional district funding, other outside sources, or both.

- District-level leadership is crucial in funding comprehensive reform. District-level leadership, according to the RAND study, helps prevent school-based practitioners from perceiving comprehensive reform as an add-on activity—something that is not part of a school district’s core operations.

Step 3: Scale-Up Cost Projections to the Whole-District Level

Given the apparent lack of data on the costs of whole-system change, we use building-level cost data (from the RAND study and from Odden, 1998) as the basis for scaling-up our thinking about what whole-district change might cost. To help us do this, we use a hypothetical school district with three preK-12 clusters of schools with a total of 24 schools. We assume that our make-believe district wants to use one of the Comprehensive School Reform models—the ATLAS Communities model.

Odden (1998) calculates the costs of implementing comprehensive school improvement designs in individual school buildings. We used this per building cost calculation for this example. Later, to estimate the cost of whole-system change, we scale-up those costs to project the cost of whole-district change. According to Odden, all of the Comprehensive School Reform models have the following first-year costs associated with them (to use these numbers to project the cost of whole-system transformation, change leaders would need to adjust them for today’s dollars).

For planning purposes, we assume that reform model we selected for this example will cost-out at the maximum level. The ATLAS Communities model require \$150,000-\$250,000 per building to implement, plus \$32,000 for design team consulting services. Each school needs an additional 3.6 to 5.6 staff slots but these could be filled using existing district personnel. The maximum total cost per building to implement this design is \$282,000.

So, now we have the fist-year per building cost of implementing the ATLAS Communities model. Now, we need to scale-up those costs to see what they would be to transform all of the schools in the school system. The math is easy: \$282,000 x 24 school buildings = \$6,768,000.

Finally, whole-system redesign requires the transformation of a school district’s central administration office into a central service center. Let’s say that the first-year cost of this kind of transformation is \$250,000.

So, the total first-year cost for redesigning our entire theoretical school district is estimated as \$7,018,000. We round this number up to \$8,000,000 to give ourselves a bit of a financial cushion to cover unexpected costs. This \$8,000,000 represents the projected cost of the first year of whole-district transformation for this make believe district with three preK- 12 clusters with a total of 24 schools.

Odden and others suggest, however, that it can take up to four years to fully implement the NAS designs. So, now we need to multiply our first-year estimate of \$8 million by four to arrive at a four-year projected cost of \$32,000,000. We also know that these cost data are based on 1998 data, so we need to adjust those numbers upwards to today's dollars. We also want to have money available to cover unexpected "surprises" that might pop up during the four year redesign period. In addition, we want to have some money in reserve to seize unexpected opportunities for transformation that might emerge during the four-year implementation period. So, given these needs, we add a financial cushion of 25 percent to our projected bottom-line giving us a new 4-year grand total of \$40 million to pay for the total redesign of their entire school system. Stunning number, isn't it?

So, how will educators in our make-believe school system find the money to pay for their reform dreams?

Finding \$40 Million for Four Years of School District Transformation

If the educators in the above fictional school system asked us where to find the \$40 million, below is what we would say.

Use "Extra" Money to Kick-Start the Transformation Process

Getting a handle on education funding is extraordinarily challenging, largely because school revenue comes from combined local, state, federal, and private resources. The combination of these myriad funding streams differs, often widely, state by state, and community by community. For example, in FY2000 the state share for education funding in Nevada was about 30 percent compared to over 71 percent in New Mexico. The share of federal dollars in the same year varied from over 20 percent in the District of Columbia versus less than 4 percent in New Jersey (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). To complicate matters, education spending as a whole has not often been effectively tracked, a circumstance that "discourages accountability . . . since no one person holds responsibility for total spending..." (Rothstein & Miles, 1995). Thus, we have to make some

broad assumptions and calculations about funding system-wide transformation absent comprehensive cost data.

The default mental model for financing whole-system change is that the money needed is “extra” dollars and not part of a district’s core operational budget. As long as “extra” remains the prevailing mental model for funding whole-district transformation, these improvement efforts will be unsustainable. The reason for this conclusion is simple: there will never be enough extra money to pay for sustained whole-system transformation.

Factor in Local Education Spending

Federal dollars represent approximately 10 percent of all education spending. The remaining 90 percent flows from state, local, and private resources. Local resources come generally from property and other local taxes. Finding extra dollars here means raising taxes, the feasibility of which varies from community to community. There are also Local Education Funds (LEFs), which are private community organizations designed to pool resources together at the local level to distribute to schools. According to the Public Education Network, the national association of LEFs, there are 70 LEFs in the country that have for over twenty years contributed \$1.5 billion to public education. While certainly not insignificant, we think that LEF funding is not large enough on a yearly basis to warrant factoring in to our make-believe school district’s search for funds.

Factor in Private Sector Education Spending

The private sector participates considerably in education. In 1999, the largest 1000 private and corporate foundations in the U.S. contributed \$751.6 million to elementary and secondary education (The Foundation Center, 2001). These foundations represent roughly half of all foundation giving among the more than 14,000 private foundations in the U.S. That being the case, private foundation contributions to elementary and secondary education could conceivably be double that figure, or \$1.5 billion. Not all of this money is applicable, of course, because some of it goes to fund private schools, to finance land acquisition, for building maintenance and renovation, for scholarships, and so on.

Factor in State Education Spending

Can a district’s state bear the burden of “ponying up” the extra money needed to support whole-district change? Probably not. State funding for school districts, as was mentioned, varies greatly from state to state. It is assumed that nearly all state-level resources are directed

at funding existing operations, not invested in school district improvement. States do award competitive grants for new programs. For example, Massachusetts has a Bay State Readers program, which allots \$2.9 million per year for schools to hire a literacy coordinator and purchase professional development and other technical services in language arts. California has the Immediate Intervention Under-performing Schools Program (II/USP) that grants \$200 per pupil to schools needing improvement. A total of \$149 million was awarded in FY2001. These awards last a finite number of years, typically two or three. Presumably, new grant programs take their place thereafter. Most states have similar amounts of dollars set aside for new programs.

In general, however, the amount of “extra” state funding available to school districts is minimal. A survey of 10 states revealed that competitive state grants represented an average of 1.5 percent of total state allocations. In 2000, total state allocations for elementary and secondary public education added up to \$180.5 billion, 1.5 percent of which is \$2.7 billion. The eye-opening and disappointing conclusion from this analysis is that it seems that finding and getting “extra” money is an inadequate strategy for financing whole-system transformation. What else can our hypothetical school system do to come up with the dollars they need to transform their entire school system into a high performing organization of learners?

Use Dollars Already In District Budgets

Our figures are admittedly rather raw and warrant more systematic study by school finance experts. But, beyond the fact that they at least suggest that improving school systems cannot be permanently funded by “extra” resources, there are more critical reasons why it ought not be. We believe that school districts will need to find as many extra dollars as possible to launch for the first time their whole-district redesign efforts because their current operating budgets do not have a budget line for supporting whole-system change. However, we also believe that a whole-district transformation process (e.g., like the school system transformation protocol that is part of the **FutureMinds** initiative) needs to be embedded in a district’s core operations. To embed a whole-system transformation process into the core operations of a school district, dollars for district-wide transformation must become a permanent part of a district’s budget.

Even though extra dollars may be needed for a first cycle of whole-district transformation, school districts should not depend on those extra dollars to sustain whole-system transformation. Extra dollars, by their very nature, are unreliable. Schools and school systems have to apply for them and they may or may not be successful year after year in

getting that money, thus leaving a shortfall in funding in a given year when an application is rejected. ***And, when the money goes away, so does the change effort.***

Extra dollars are also tied to the various “waves” of education initiatives. The “new thing” in teaching and learning will get funded until the next “new thing” comes along. Instead of continuously improving by building on what works, school systems chasing extra dollars will toss out what works for whatever is new has new funding attached to it. Fundamentally, as long as a whole-district transformation process remains an add-on activity funded by extra dollars, it will never become a core operational function of a district. High performing school districts, we believe, will be those that not only improve once, but improve ceaselessly, thereby spiraling their districts continuously upward toward higher levels of performance. In these districts, improving will be “normal.” It will be part of their core operations, not a set of extra, added-on activities.

Rethink Staffing Patterns

District leadership should think comprehensively and creatively about all resources, including staff, time, and dollars. The largest single resource allocation in any organization, school systems included, is staffing. A critical part of a whole-district transformation process is to make sound judgments as to what the best staffing allocations are throughout the school system not only to maximize classroom instruction but also to create greater efficiencies in educating all students.

Reallocate Money Saved Through Retirements

Another way to recoup resources from staff positions is through the natural retirement process. As high paying, senior-level people retire and as those positions are filled with younger professionals at entry-level salaries, the differences in salaries can be redirected to support systemic transformation.

Rethink How Existing Dollars Are Used

Reallocating staffing resources is not easy. In many cases, non-regular classroom staffs are funded through federal and state categorical, formula-based programs like Title I. This money is traditionally and legally spent on specific activities; e.g., for additional staff support for disadvantaged and special needs students. However, in recent years, the federal government has granted more flexibility in how these funds can be used, including sanctioning the comingling of funds to finance more holistic transformation approaches. Schools with at least 50 percent of students designated in poverty can combine their Title I

allocation for each of those students into a single pool of resources to support improvements for a whole school. These so-called “school-wide” programs can further be combined with other funding streams so long as they are used to implement a comprehensive improvement plan, a plan that fulfills the overall “intents and purposes” of each of the funding programs (Cascarino, 2000).

Use Creative Financing Strategies

Change leaders in districts can also use some non-traditional strategies to reallocate money. One example of a creative strategy was applied in the Frederick County Public Schools in Maryland, led by their former superintendent, Dr. Jack Dale. That district saved \$500,000 by converting two parent conference ½ days into one full day. This kind of savings can be used to fund whole-district transformation.

Fundamental Principles for Funding Systemic School transformation

We realize that the estimated costs for creating and sustaining whole-system change discussed above are hypothetical. But, we did use real per building cost figures to make our estimates and extrapolations. We now want to uncover some important underlying principles that we think are important for financing whole-system change. Many of these principles are advocated by “real” school finance experts. The fundamental principles that we would like to uncover are:

- Think creatively about securing resources. Instead of saying “We can’t do this, because...” say, “We can do this. Let’s be creative in figuring out how?”;
- Develop a new mental model for financing school system transformation that helps you think outside the box for creating innovative solutions to your resource allocation challenges;
- Embed a whole-district transformation methodology and the resources to support it into the internal social infrastructure of your district;
- Fund systemic transformation as you would fund a core program or activity with real dollars that are a permanent part of your budget;
- Reallocate current operating money to support whole-system transformation;
- Over time, reduce “extra” resources for whole-district transformation to near zero while increasing internal resources to support systemic transformation and by creating a permanent line on your yearly operating budget;
- As needed, combine federal funds in innovative ways (see Cascarino, 2000, p. 1) to directly support district-wide transformation of the district’s relationship with

its external environment, in teaching and learning and support work, and in the internal social infrastructure of the district.;

- Focus your thinking on financing for adequacy rather than on financing for equity (see Clune, 1994a, 1994b);
- When seeking outside (extra) money, make sure that the requirements and goals of the funding agency do not conflict or constrain the vision and strategic direction of your redesign effort; and,
- Employ superior communication skills so all stakeholders recognize the true purpose of your budget reallocation strategy, how it will work, and what the benefits will be.

Onward Toward Whole-System Transformation

This article highlights the hypothetical costs of financing systemic school transformation and offers some ideas about how to pay for the cost of whole-system transformation. In presenting our ideas, we by no means want to suggest that less money needs to be invested in education from outside sources. What we are arguing for is to see school districts learning to use their current resources more effectively to better support continuous improvement. We are arguing in support of the position that educators should think more creatively and comprehensively about how to fund systemic transformation in the short term to jump-start the process and for the long term by making these transformation funds a permanent part of a district's core operations.

We believe that finding the extra money “out there” will surely help get a systemic transformation process moving, but it will never be enough to fund the effort completely, nor sustain it over time. ***On-going whole-system transformation ought to be a core function of a school system, funded by core resources that can be spent more wisely to transform entire school systems into high performing organizations of learners.***

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