

System Design Conference ¹

Overview

Following closely on the completion of the district's Community Engagement Conference, the System Design Conference provides educators within the school district with a structured large-group event that will result in new mission and vision statements for the district and a strategic framework to guide the transformation of their district. This event is scheduled to happen at the beginning of *Phase 2—Envision*.

Background

The 3-day System Design Conference is an advanced form of strategic planning for an entire school system. It helps educators and support staff within the district to create an idealized vision for the future of their school system, as well as, helping them to devise a set of parameters to guide their district transformation journey. While this conference is primarily for people working in the district, the Leadership Team may decide to invite a few key community members to participate.

One of the core principles for designing this conference is that the whole-system must be in one room. Having the whole-system in the room means inviting at least one person from every unit, department, program, and school in the district to participate in the conference.

The Focus of the System Design Conference

The focus of this 3-day conference is on 1) creating an idealized vision for the future of the school system; and 2) creating a broad strategic framework for guiding the district's transformation journey.

Results That Can Be Expected From a System Design Conference

More than thirty-five years of experience with and research on Search Conferencing, which is the model for System Design Conferences, suggests the following results from a successful System Design Conference:

- Creative and achievable strategies for transforming the school district;
- Collaborative and participative approaches to transforming a school system,
- Consensus on transformation goals and the desired outcomes of transformational change;
- Shared values for transformational change;

¹ (Designed using principles of Search Conferencing. Alternatively, change leaders may decide to use the principles of FutureSearch. Either set of principles will work.)

- Commitment to strategies that are formulated for transforming the entire school system's relationships with its external environment (Path 1 changes), transforming its core and supporting and work processes (Path 2 changes), and transforming its internal social infrastructure (Path 3 changes);
- Specific action plans for implementing proposals to transform the school district;
- The integration of differences among participants; and,
- The completion of strategic planning tasks in two or three days (and sometimes evenings) that would take months if done by outside experts.

Guiding Principles for System Design Conferences

Principle #1: Focus On Shared Learning, Not Teaching. A System Design Conference is not like a “typical” conference or training session. There are no presenters, lectures, speeches, keynote addresses, or training sessions. A facilitator guides the conference by encouraging both active and responsible participation.

Principle #2: Conflict and Differences are Acknowledged, but not “Worked.” The System Design Conference stimulates very active dialogue about the future of a school system. Conflicts, differences, and disagreements are inevitable. However, through the process of making conflicts intellectually clear, rather than emotionally draining, individual differences among participants lead to stronger conference outcomes. More than thirty-five years of experience shows that Search Conferences that include people with the **widest range of firmly held beliefs** often produce the most constructive results. This learning also applies to System Design Conferences.

Principle #3: Support Equal Status. In the System Design Conference process, no one person is more important than another. There are no experts. Everyone contributes. The inclusive process of selecting System Design Conference participants encourages the participation of people who are knowledgeable about the topic of the conference, influential with their peers, and committed to implementing conference results.

Principle #4: Emphasize Personal Commitment and Ownership. A System Design Conference produces goals and action plans that participants are personally eager to implement. No one makes plans for other people to implement. This personal ownership and commitment to action creates plans that actually get implemented, rather than ignored.

Principle #5: Focus On Creating, “Solutioning” and Puzzle-Solving--Not Problem-Solving. Desirable solutions are approached as complex, interlocking puzzle pieces that require examination of many data and the relationships among the data. The System Design Conference focuses on creating a desirable vision of the future with no intention to resolve conflicts or solve problems at this point in the transformation journey.

Disagreements and conflicts are acknowledged and then System Design Conference participants move on to creating workable ideas for change.

Principle #6: Develop Shared Meaning. Another emphasis of the System Design Conference is on creating meaningful dialogue among people who care deeply about their system but who would otherwise not have structured time to explore their beliefs and take action on their areas of agreement.

The Structure of a System Design Conference

The following structure is used to design a three-day System Design Conference. The results of each activity flow into subsequent tasks, thus creating a natural progression of goal setting and action planning activities.

Activity 1: Analysis of Our External Environment

During this activity, participants explore the characteristics of the Industrial-Age paradigm that has guided how school districts deliver education services to children and compare that paradigm to one that is required for success in the Information-Age—a teaching and learning paradigm that provides customized, personalized education to students. Specific dialogue topics are:

- What’s happening in society that requires us to transform the way we related to our external environment, transform our teaching and learning processes, transform our support work processes, and transform our internal social infrastructure?
- What’s happening in our immediate community that requires us to engage in transformational change?

Activity 2: Analysis of Our “System”

During this activity, participants discuss the school district within the “context” of its community. Specific dialogue topics include:

- Our school system’s history--where we came from, its greatest successes, past efforts at school improvement (based on principles of Appreciative Inquiry).
- Our current school system--what do we keep, what do we drop, what are the characteristics of “Our Most Desirable School System.”
 - The nature of our relationships with the external environment (Path 1 changes)
 - The nature of our desired teaching and learning processes and the nature of our support work processes (Path 2 changes)

- The nature of our internal social infrastructure, which includes a discussion of the following topics (Path 3 changes):
 - Does our organization culture support the kinds of transformational changes we would like to make?
 - Does the organization design of our school district support effective teaching and learning, collaboration, and participation in decision making?
 - Do our job descriptions, operational policies, and administrative procedures support the kinds of transformational changes we want to make?
 - What new job skills will be required by our faculty and staff to function effectively in a transformed school system?

Activity 3: Planning

This activity focuses on plans to continue the district's transformation journey. Specific topics include:

- What constrains our ability to create our “Most Desirable” and “Achievable” school system?
- What should our strategic goals be?
- What action plans do we need to develop?
- How do we organize the district into clusters for the purpose of facilitating the transformational change process?

The results of the System Design Conference are recorded on flip chart paper and transferred to a computer and printed-out for all participants. Skilled typists should be available throughout the conference to record notes and transcribe the results directly to laptop computers. The new mission, vision, and strategic framework developed during the System Design Conference are used by the academic clusters, central administration cluster, and support work cluster during *Phase 2: Envision* in the SST Protocol.