Ten Schools and School Districts to Get Excited About

by D. Douglas Doblar

It's been suggested, only half in jest, that someone time-traveling to the present from one hundred years back would feel most at home in a classroom. It's fun to chuckle at this cliché from time to time, but just think about how true it really is. To make it more powerful, try turning it around and imagining your current self warped back a century into the heart of industrial America.

The first thing you would be likely to notice is that everything is done in a sort of bulky, standardized way. People dress the same. Men wear relatively similar suits, coats, and hats, and women wear plain dresses. Travel is also standardized. Trains take big groups of people and products to a few select destinations "in bulk." (In a few years personal automobiles will become popular, but most of them will be black Ford Model T's.) In personal life, if you are a man, you go to a factory job where you and countless other men perform "bulk" tasks over and over again. If you are a woman, you tend to your standardized house and to your children during the day. If you are a child, you have a factory-working father and a stay-at-home mother who are married and for whom this is their only marriage. You and your parents consume mass media, mass production, and mass marketing.

And as a child, you find your school perfectly suited for this life. As a student, you are fully standardized, learning the same things, in the same ways and at the same pace as all the other students in your school. As an organization, your school is structured much like the factory at which your father works: your teacher (i.e., supervisor) tells you exactly what to do, your assistant principal does likewise with your teacher, and your principal does likewise with your assistant principal. Everything is designed around three goals:

1. Ensuring that all students reach a minimum level of reading, writing, and numeracy skills

2. Sorting the future managers from the future laborers
3. Preparing you to follow orders and perform tedious tasks without complaining

Returning to the comfort of the present, life is hard to recognize. In today's world, "the customer is king," meaning that everything is customized. We choose just the right car, clothes, cell-phone plan, cable-TV package, kitchen decor, health-insurance plan, investment options, college to attend, and so on. No more bulk, mass, or standardization. Everything is customized to suit our wants and needs. . . .

Except school. By and large, school still reflects the standardized "factory model" that suited life one hundred years ago. Students still learn largely the same things, in the same way, and at the same pace as the other students in the school district. The bureaucratic setup is still in place. Teachers still "transmit" knowledge to students, despite unparalleled access to information thanks to digital technology. School assignments still consist mostly of tedious, repetitious tasks that sort those who can and will tolerate them from those who cannot or will not. Students leave this place thoroughly prepared to enter a world that existed one hundred years ago.

Calls for schools to *improve* are everywhere, but recently calls for schools to *transform* have proliferated, based on the idea that schools are not simply underperforming but outdated if not obsolete. Most prominently, scholars and authors such as Phillip Schlechty, Peter Senge, and Francis Duffy have targeted school and school system leaders with books calling for whole-system or systemic change to make schools compatible with other information-age social systems.[1]

Charles Reigeluth offers one "vision" of what such schools might look like.[2] A few of the prominent features he suggests, based on comparable changes in other social systems, include:

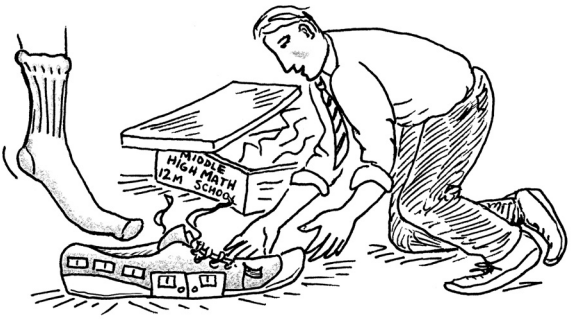
- *Teachers who operate as guides and facilitators of learning rather than sources of learning.* Under such an organization, learning would become resource based, project based, and student or group based, rather than teacher and class based. Colloquially worded, he refers to transforming teachers from "sages on the stage" to "guides on the side," allowing students to take greater charge of their own learning.
- *Personal learning plans and contracts for each student, negotiated by the student, the teacher, and parents.* Such contracts would reflect standards-based goals similar for all students as well as goals of interest to the particular student.

- *Multi-age grouping based on developmental level rather than chronological age,* allowing a student to remain with one guide and community of learners for longer than a single year.
- *Thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and creativity integrated into an interdisciplinary curriculum.* Such new learning needs, reflected in the demands of information-age jobs, could be pursued in conjunction with more traditional standards in a less-fragmented curriculum.
- *New, more central, and comprehensive roles for technology in schools.*
- *Administrators moving from a commanding role to a supporting role.*

Gradually, schools and school systems are undertaking the challenges necessary to create schools that reflect these modern needs. The remainder of this article will profile ten such schools and school districts worth getting excited about now—in the information age. The examples were chosen based upon reports relating their adoption of some or all of Reigeluth's vision.

Garden City Community School—Garden City, Idaho

The Garden City Community School opened its doors to K–8 students in 2006, with plans to expand service to K–12 students in the future. The school's public Web site says its educational program was "designed from the ground up by a team of educators and parents to provide the greatest possible support for learning and development." The result is an exciting, learner-centered, public charter school in which students enjoy freedom and flexibility in contributing to the design of their own education, the responsibility to pursue their decisions, and partnerships with community organizations to maximize their ability to do so. Each student's educational experience is tailored to individual abilities, learning styles, interests, and state requirements, with input from students, teachers, and parents.



In addition to highly personalized education plans for each student, the Garden City Community School boasts several other information-age innovations. For one, the school's community partnerships benefit not only its students but their families as well. The school stays open for extended hours and provides extended services to community members of all ages. Another exciting feature is a continually accessible authentic-assessment system, whose work sampling and student portfolios offer an up-to-date "capability snapshot" of each student based on the school's integrated curriculum. Garden City Community School boasts multi-age classes and groupings and student-managed labs and studios as well.[3]

Chesapeake Public Charter School—Lexington Park, Maryland

One look at the very first statement in the Chesapeake Public Charter School's mission statement—"to offer each student a unique educational experience"—shows why it is a school worthy of excitement. A customized, relevant educational experience is the cornerstone of an information-age school, and Chesapeake claims to offer just that. Students, teachers, and parents collaborate to create personalized educational plans that accommodate student interests and needs, and the school day and school year are structured around maximizing "concentrated learning time" toward those personalized goals and toward schoolwide basics as well.

Chesapeake boasts a brain-based curriculum and inquiry-based instruction offering hands-on experiences, social interaction, and community integration to maximize all the benefits of learning time. Thematic units such as "The Environment and the Chesapeake Bay" and "Maryland: Past and Present" are cornerstones of the educational programming.

Chesapeake Public Charter School opened in August 2007 to K–8 students.[4]

New Technology High School—Napa, California

Since opening the doors of its first building in Napa in 1996, the New Technology High School has developed a model subsequently adopted in several school systems nationwide thanks to its overwhelming initial success. In fact, since the formation of the New Tech Foundation just eight years ago, thirty-four New Tech sites have opened in nine states.

The Napa campus remains New Technology High's most visible success story. Since 1996, 756 students have graduated from New Tech Napa and moved on to an impressive list of universities and

businesses in nearby Silicon Valley. The school was born out of frustration among local employers that the pool of potential employees capable of excelling in a technologically advanced marketplace was not keeping up with demand.

The result of that frustration is a school that has not simply *integrated* technology but has also tapped into its *transformative* potential. Students spend the majority of the school day working in teams that tackle high-tech, real-world projects and problems. One of their best-known projects is the facade of the school building itself, designed by a group of students as a course project. The new role that New Tech has given its students requires a new role for teachers as well. No longer "transmitters" of knowledge, teachers at New Tech High carefully monitor and guide the progress of each student rather than "teach" as normally thought. Teachers work in teams of two with fifty students per team, keeping the same students for two to four years in some cases.

After more than ten years such of success, an abundance of information about the New Tech High School model is publicly available. The Napa campus offers a comprehensive Web site—maintained by students—explaining the school's history, graduation requirements, and philosophy as well as presenting exemplary graduate portfolios.[5]

Halau Lokahi Public Charter School—Honolulu

The charter for the Halau Lokahi Public Charter School grew out of a declaration by the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations affirming the right of indigenous peoples worldwide to all levels and forms of education by culturally and traditionally accessible means. This group concluded that such an education is possible only when indigenous people themselves acquire both the control and the resources to develop culturally relevant curriculum and instructional practices. Throughout the Hawaiian islands, locally created and controlled educational models that reflect, respect, and embrace Hawaiian native values have been established by the New Century Public Charter School Alliance, formed in 2000.

The charter school movement in the United States provided a natural vehicle for such models, and the Halau Lokahi Public Charter School in Honolulu is the leading example of the movement's possibilities. Halau Lokahi is a project- and culture-based bilingual charter school organized around student-centered, self-directed inquiry. Classes are multi-age, utilizing the *ohana* method of classroom management, whereby students operate primarily in groups of five or

fewer. The *ohana* are responsible for managing their own behavior, projects, and working relationships under the guidance of a teacher.

The strong focus on cultural immersion is reflected in Halau Lokahi's commitment to service learning. Students there "learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs," and in the process they directly learn and participate in the Hawaiian culture. Through this unique structure, students are able to meet the local desire that student learning reflect an understanding of their native culture in addition to the state of Hawaii's academic standards.[6]

Great Expectations School—Grand Marais, Minnesota

Great Expectations School is a K–8 school organized on "the environment as an integrating concept." Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW), the school's sponsor, offers students valuable opportunities for hands-on, interdisciplinary learning experiences related to the school's theme. This integrating concept, however, should not be misconstrued to limit the word "environment" to its conventional use. Great Expectations seeks to take advantage of all the school's surroundings—including the ACNW—as a framework in which students can organize and construct their experiences. This philosophy helps break down the typical "barriers" that segment curricula into discrete subjects.

As with most schools profiled here, Great Expectations allows students to progress based on achievement rather than time. Project-based curricula and a continuous, authentic-assessment system allow students to drive their own education through in-depth study of real-world topics. Assessment is frequent and formative, seeking evidence of both *what* has been learned and *how* it has been learned. All this takes place within the context of a multi-age classroom in which students are not separated by age, ability, or progress.[7]

Cyber High School—based in Fresno, California

Cyber High is a comprehensive, electronic-oriented high school available to any California high school student with access to the Internet. It is a self-paced, fee-based institution designed to meet the needs of a wide range of "alternative" high school students. Any student can receive Carnegie units certified by the state of California through Cyber High, but its students typically have nontraditional needs, such as

- Acceleration
- NCLB "credit recovery"

- Home schooling
- Daytime jobs
- Unstable residency
- Dropout status
- "Aged-out" status

Students at Cyber High participate in a combination of computer-based objective assessments offering instantaneous feedback to support self-paced curricula and research- and project-based assessments scored by teachers. The innovative design allows students to complete California graduation requirements (interest-based courses are not available) when and where they are able and as quickly or slowly as they require.[8]

Charles Dickens School—Vancouver, British Columbia

Like many of the schools already profiled, Charles Dickens School exhibits many characteristics of Reigeluth's vision for an information-age school. After being granted alternative status by the Canadian government, the school first revamped its assessment methods, allowing other innovations to follow. The new assessment system is "oriented toward continuous progress," reported by narrative rather than letter grades or numerical scores. Parents receive anecdotal reports of students' overall performance, along with their self-evaluations. "Both parents and teachers have noticed that in such a climate of openness and respect, children evaluate themselves with great honesty and perception—and are often less generous in their assessments than are their teachers," according to a prominent education journal. The assessment system has met with high praise from parents, who find the narrative reports far more useful than traditional report cards.

The model of continuous progress is implemented using small, multi-age groupings in which students remain with the same teacher for two to three years, fostering long-term relationships. Learning is activity-based, open-ended, thematic, and cooperative within this structure. Teachers report considerable autonomy in making decisions about the learning process, with school administration focused more on support than management. The school's carefully articulated, universally supported mission and vision leave decisions in teachers' hands. The policy of "do it first and beg forgiveness later" has served the school well: few complaints are received, due to high levels of parental satisfaction and student achievement.[9]

Decatur Central High School—Indianapolis

Decatur Central High School—the only high school in its system—reopened with a new design in fall 2007. It represents the first redesigned school in a systemwide, systemic reinvention effort. The new design converted Decatur Central from a traditional comprehensive high school to a base for five small, student-centered learning communities each serving between 300 and 350 students. Teachers within these communities act as family advocates for fifteen to twenty family-school partnerships. Each learning community offers a relevant, rigorous curriculum, but the choice of communities significantly de-standardizes the experience, allowing each student to choose the community best suited to his or her needs and interests. The five small learning communities are:

- The Choice Academy, which organizes its curriculum around service, policy, culture, and legal issues as well as communication studies and current events
- Imagine, Create, Express (ICE), an arts-based community valuing "creative expression and performance"
- The New Tech Academy (see the "New Technology High School" entry above)
- Evolving Dynamic Global Excellence (EDGE), offering a theme of innovation and impact, both past and present
- Quest and Inquiry Academy, which provides significant practical career experience to each student

In addition to the five learning communities, Decatur Central houses the Learning Institute, which offers campuswide courses such as choir, writing, and Advanced Placement to students in all the small communities. Students also have access to the Decatur Discovery Academy, an off-campus learning community offering a personal learning environment; an inquiry approach to learning; service learning; and college courses.[10]

Minneapolis Public High Schools—Minneapolis

The reinvention of the Minneapolis Public High Schools is similar in nature and in philosophy to that of Decatur Central High School, but on a considerably larger scale. The Minneapolis School System began its own small learning-community organization in 2002 with a systemwide offering of themed and traditional communities to which students may apply city-wide. These six urban high schools each house three to five small learning communities, and students are no longer required to attend a neighborhood school; each student can choose from a range of communities that meet his

or her interests and needs. Teachers, students, parents, and community members design students' learning experiences based on their community selections. The following small learning communities are offered throughout the city:

- Humanities and Communication
- Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurship
- Cosmetology
- Center for Accelerated Learning
- Commercial and Fine Arts Program
- Open Campus (three)
- Engineering
- International Baccalaureate
- Biological Sciences and Technologies
- Arts and Media
- Computers, Construction, Engineering, and Information Technology
- Cars, Collision, and Construction
- Health and Medical
- Liberal Arts

The Minneapolis School System reports considerable investment in professional development to support educators' new roles within the new design, especially in sharing the leadership needed to sustain it.[11]

Chugach School District—Alaska

As a result of successful systemic reinvention, the Chugach School District in rural, south-central Alaska has received considerable praise and recognition as one of the most creative and visionary districts in the United States. The district serves 214 students, from pre-school to age twenty-one, spread over 22,000 square miles of the state. Upon realizing that geographic and cultural circumstances rendered the traditional schooling model unworkable for district students, Chugach-area schools redesigned themselves as models of student-centered education in the mid-1990s. Now every child in the district has a personal learning plan consisting of both academic and personal goals and a student learning profile outlining his or her current function levels, learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses in each academic and personal discipline. Instruction is delivered any time of the day in the workplace, the home, the community, or one of the region's four school buildings. Furthermore, the system has received a waiver to employ its performance-based assessment system in ten content areas instead of the traditional Carnegie units.

Table 1: Features of an Information Age School

School or School System	Teachers as Facilitators?	Personal Learning Plans?	Multi-age Groupings?	Interdisciplinary Curriculum?	Technology Utilized?	Administrative Support Rather than Command?
Garden City School (Idaho)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
Chesapeake Charter School (Md.)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
New Tech High (Calif.)	Yes	Choice, but not custom	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	Unknown
Halau Lokahi (Hawaii)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
Great Expectations (Minn.)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
Cyber High (Calif.)	Yes	Choice, but not custom	Yes	No	Yes	Unknown
Charles Dickens (B.C.)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Yes
Decatur Central High (Ind.)	Somewhat	Choice, but not custom	Yes	Yes	Varies by community	Unknown
Minneapolis High Schools (Minn.)	Somewhat	Choice, but not custom	Yes	Yes	Varies by community	Unknown
Chugach Schools (Alaska)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Chugach schools have received considerable press for their reinvention and resulting success. At the district Web site, readers can access information about both the reinvention process and the resulting schools.[12] Examples of the district assessment system and student work are available for students of certain schools as well. Though the reinvention of the district dates to 1997, Chugach has continued to attract media attention, most recently in *New Horizons, TechTrends,* and *Edutopia*.[13]

Conclusion

The ten schools and school districts described above each exhibit many of the information-age features one would expect to find based upon changes in society and in other social systems. Specifically, the features chosen for inclusion in this review were based upon the vision of an information-age school proposed by Reigeluth (1994). The following table summarizes those features:

These ten examples by no means constitute an exhaustive list of schools and school systems meriting excitement. As the table demonstrates, certain features received priority over others for inclusion: some level of personalized education or choice among curricula; a move away from single-age groupings; and more facilitative roles for teachers. Had transformative uses of technology or support-based administration been the primary criteria for inclusion, the list might have looked quite different.[14]

Notes and References

1. See Phillip Schlechty's *Schools for the 21st Century: Leadership Imperatives for Educational Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); *Inventing Better Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); and *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse: How to Support and Sustain Educational Innovation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). Three of Senge's works are Peter Senge, Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith, Janis Dutton, and Art Kleiner, *Schools That Learn* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency, 1994); and Peter Senge, C. Sharmer, J. Jaworski, and B. Flowers, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (New York: Currency, 2005). Francis Duffy has addressed these themes in *Moving Upward Together: Creating Strategic Alignment to Sustain Systemic School Improvement* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Education, 2004); *Power, Politics, and Ethics in School Districts: Dynamic Leadership for Systemic Change* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2005); and *Strategic Communication during Whole-System Change: Advice and Guidance for School District Leaders and PR Specialists* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006).

2. These features were taken from Charles Reigeluth, "The Imperative for Systemic Change," in *Systemic Change in Education,* ed. Charles Reigeluth and

Robert Garfinkle, 59–70 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1994).

3. See Eric Leins, "Community Garden," *Boise Weekly,* 10 May 2006, available at <http://www.boiseweekly.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A161657>. An extended supporting document is also available from the school's Web site, <http://www.gardencityschool.org>, or from the author by request, at <ddoblar@indiana.edu>. This document is entitled "Garden City School Curriculum Overview," dated 2007, from the Garden City School.

4. *Washington Post*, 10 May 2007, available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/05/09/AR2007050902521.html>. Further information about the school is available at <http://www.chesapeakepublicchargerschool.org>.

5. See <http://www.newtechhigh.org/Website2007/index.html>. The New Tech Foundation also offers a highly informative Web site (<http://www.newtechfoundation.org>). *Time* magazine featured the model in its December 18, 1996, issue. See "How to Bring Our Schools Out of the 20th Century," by Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe, available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1568480,00.html>.

6. For more on the Halau Lokahi Public Charter School, visit <http://www.halaulokahi.org>.

7. To read more about the Great Expectations School, visit <http://www.greatexpectationsschool.com>.

8. Read more about Cyber High at <http://www.cyberhigh.org>.

9. See S. Wasserman, "Dare to Be Different," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 2007): 384–391; and the school Web site, <http://dickens.vsb.bc.ca>.

10. More information is available from the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township Web site, available at <http://www.msddecatur.k12.in.us>.

11. More can be found on the system's Web site, available at <http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us>.

12. The district's Web site is available at <http://www.chugachschools.com>.

13. See Wendy Battino, "New Horizons for Learning," Chugach School District (2002). This article can be retrieved online at <http://www.newhorizons.org/trans/battino.htm>; Wendy Battino and Jo Clem, "Systemic Changes in the Chugach School District," *TechTrends* 50 (2): 51–52; and G. Reubenstein, "Northern Lights: These Schools Literally Leave No Child Behind," *Edutopia,* available at <http://www.edutopia.org/chugach-school-district-reform>.

14. Since the completion of this review, the author has continually received information about other schools and school systems that might merit consideration for a future edition of this paper. Such suggestions are welcome and encouraged, and may be sent to <ddoblar@indiana.edu>.

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