

Student Centered Schools Future-Ready Students

The Moral Imperative: From Vision to Action



Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute

March 2014



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Introduction

MISSION: School Transformation has galvanized the public schools of the state like nothing before it. Eight years in the making, this movement to transform the Texas public education system has become a force all its own, energizing superintendents and education and community leaders across the state.

Like any truly difficult task, MISSION: School Transformation's year-by-year success will require sustained hard work and dedication from everyone involved. Crucial to that success will be TASA's ability to develop and support a cadre of courageous, visionary superintendents willing to expand their leadership beyond the local level and propel this mission forward in the coming years.

TASA's Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute was designed to create and sustain such a cadre. It built capacity within a group of exceptional leaders to understand, design, and initiate innovative systemic changes—locally and statewide—within the frameworks of both the Public Education Visioning Institute and the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium.

TASA's Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute included 38 superintendents and senior-level district administrators in the early stages of their careers. Institute participants gained enhanced capabilities to lead in times of change, increased their capacity to transform the system, developed a sustained collaborative network among their institute peers, and realized clarity of vision as they focused on creating models of future-ready schools throughout the state. In the spirit of student-centered learning, the design of the institute was modeled after elements of project-based learning, action research, the flipped classroom, and design thinking. Sessions were customized dynamically in response to participants as they discovered new insights that shaped and enriched the institute.

Based on their experience in the institute, participants chose to create projects in the form of 21st Century tools. Teams of participants initiated the design of five tools to be used across the state to further advance MISSION: School Transformation, including an info-graphic, video, slide presentation, mobile app, and report. The title of this report captures the desire of the institute participants to help launch the vision from the Public Education Visioning Institute into action.

The Moral Imperative: From Vision to Action is intended to serve as a vehicle for moving forward the tenets of *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*. This document provides a background of both the Public Education Visioning Institute and the Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute, and suggests a theoretical framework for answering the questions: Why Transformation? and How to Transform? By challenging readers to embrace the moral imperative inherent in MISSION: School Transformation, this document will help move the vision into action and, ultimately, reality.

The Moral Imperative: From Vision to Action

If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow.
John Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 1915

Whether spoken or written, the word “freedom” fosters an undeniable sense of pride, patriotism, and a belief in democracy. In America, freedoms have been debated and protested for centuries, placing value on this simple term. Not all freedoms have been fully achieved, however, establishing a moral imperative to continue the debate.

Education is an American freedom established for all and an unarguable core value of our democracy. The debate, however, lies among several questions. Does educational freedom stop at the right to attend school? Or, does it extend to the learner in the classroom? Freedom of the learner was a concept introduced by John Dewey (1938) stating learning increased when students were provided meaningful experiences. Unfortunately, little has changed since 1938. Students today continue to be denied the freedom to learn in meaningful and relevant ways due to bureaucratic structures that bind our educational system.

Fortunately, there is hope. A new vision has been initiated for transforming public education in Texas and this paper serves as a call for educators, parents, and advocates to join together in making this vision a reality.

Background

In 2006, a group of educational leaders joined together as the Public Education Visioning Institute to answer the call and create a new vision for public education in Texas. The institute participants published a report in 2008 titled, *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*. Their work has enlightened and inspired many throughout the state to think differently about teaching and learning.

Their vision established a focus on the learner and a framework for transforming education. The *New Vision* called for schools to shift from bureaucracies to learning organizations, with six articles outlining the principles and premises. The articles challenged educators to engage the digital generation and recognize how technology has changed the learning needs of students. They called for the design of learning standards to accompany the digital age and allow students to not be simply consumers but creators of knowledge. The articles affirmed the value of assessment and accountability, while calling for the elimination of high-stakes testing and requesting the design of meaningful measures for student learning. And finally, they called for the removal of bureaucratic barriers through the creation of policies that balance state and local control of schools.

With the publication of this framework, hope was ignited and efforts to transform public education initiated. The authors of *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* identified a goal for that document to “serve as a stimulus for conversations.” It has created conversations among educators, legislators, and communities throughout our state and beyond, generating the purpose for continuation of the work.

In 2012, the Texas Association of School Administrators created the Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute (FRSLI) with 38 district leaders throughout the state of Texas. This group

shares in the vision of the founding group and has boldly engaged in the journey toward school transformation. The initial work of the FRSLI started with a recommitment to the principles of the visioning document along with the establishment of shared beliefs. These shared beliefs, along with the work of pioneering leaders, have set the purpose for transformation and have empowered the institute participants with a determination to move from vision to action.

- *We believe a quality education is critical to the existence and preservation of a healthy democratic society and vital to our state and nation.*
- *We believe education has value for all students and success cannot be measured by a singular assessment.*
- *We believe students come with a diverse set of talents that should be developed through personalized learning and individualization.*
- *We believe successful schools enhance learning and meet the needs of students through high expectations, engaging opportunities, and continual transformation.*
- *We believe parents and communities desire quality schools that provide what is best for their children and are willing to work collaboratively in this effort.*
- *We believe effective teachers make a profound difference for students and success is achieved through meaningful work and meaningful relationships.*
- *We believe education is at a crossroads and everyone has a responsibility in its transformation.*

Why Transformation?

Simon Sinek's (2013) theory of "the golden circle" teaches us that successful organizations start with a shared understanding of the purpose or beliefs behind the work, which he calls the "why." In education today, there are numerous debates surrounding how American education needs to be redefined with philosophical arguments ranging from school choice to standardization. Educational greats have provided us with journeys through educational history outlining the various influences that have hindered the success of public schools (Ravitch, 2010; Schlechty, 2009; Vollmer, 2010). The research and efforts of these visionaries and others have provided inspiration and hope. The debate continues, however, and creates further division without viable solutions, resulting in a stalemate of inaction. But on what exactly are we waiting? Are we waiting for transformation to be mandated? Communities to rise up in protest? A magic potion? Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) would define our knowledge without action as a knowing-doing gap. Whereas Sinek would be more inclined to say this indicates we have lost sight of "why" quality education is a democratic necessity. Most likely, it is a combination of both.

The "why" driving our efforts towards educational transformation is established in the aforementioned beliefs but is more simply defined in knowing that our world has changed and the future of our youth lies in the hands of educators, their parents, and communities. Students today consider the days before computers a nostalgic part of history and to these digital natives, technology is a valuable learning resource comparable to encyclopedias and textbooks of yesterday. Technology provides immediate digital access to information, experiences, and communication, creating an urgent need for education to align and to effectively prepare students for this global world. Although, many recognize that our world has changed and acknowledge the value of a quality education, resistance remains and waiting continues.

Common arguments are rooted in uncertainty about veering away from American values when, in reality, the paralysis to change is slowly weakening us as an educated society and world leader. If we fail to act and continue to wait, the most we can hope for is continuation of factory-model schools resulting in a workforce that is unprepared, unmotivated, or even worse, uneducated (Schlechty, 2011). This resistance and waiting continuously impedes the vision of providing meaningful and relevant experiences for today's learner. We must move beyond the debates and unite in a shared understanding that we must prepare our students for their future through the transformation of teaching and learning.

Some may be falsely inclined to think we are educators in overdrive or attempting to persuade others toward progressive ideals. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our passion and determination for educational transformation come from our unwillingness to continue to wait. We hear our students' call for freedom to learn in a more purposeful and meaningful way and choose to no longer turn a deaf ear to their voices and negative descriptors of their school experiences.

Glance into a majority of classrooms throughout our state today and you will find most still mirror those of "the good 'ole days." The teacher remains the controller of knowledge while students sit as silent consumers of their teacher's wisdom. Some classrooms have been equipped with more modern resources and there are isolated examples of student-centered classrooms. Organizational transformation of public schools in our state, however, is inconsistent at best and, more accurately, not found. As a result, students describe their educational experience as "boring" and "pointless" while others depict it more like a bridge they have to cross to enter the greener pastures of college or their careers. Opportunities such as lunch and extracurricular activities still remain the highlights, while engagement in academics remains dependent upon the teacher assignment.

This depiction of school from the voices of our students does not indicate a learning environment where creativity and innovation are fostered and future-ready students are developed. This environment depicts the stalemate created by bureaucratic barriers such as the narrow focus on standardized tests and accountability, broad curricular standards, inadequate funding, and policies limiting local control by communities.

Educators today are bound by standardized tests that fail to provide a valid measure of a child's true ability. For years, districts have highlighted their random rise in a data point, applauded the efforts of a few star teachers, and prayed for a good rating. All the while, knowing that a single test on a single day measuring every single student in a singular way tells us little about academic ability, teacher quality, or school success. In addition, high-stakes tests hinder the things that have made America strong and prosperous, such as cherishing individual talents, cultivating creativity, celebrating diversity, and inspiring curiosity (Zhao, 2009). Standardized testing and high-stakes accountability, however, are not the only impediments.

The state standards outlining curricular expectations lack specificity and relevance. If the goal of the state is for a student to be a "jack of all trades and a master of none," they have successfully reached their target. Broad curricular standards ensure instruction is focused on speed and quantity as opposed to mastery and depth of learning. The focus remains on rote memorization, short-term retention, and checking off standards that have been taught, not necessarily learned. As a result, more students are left behind, disengage, or simply drop out.

In the search for a solution, school districts receive endless recommendations, from decreasing class sizes to increasing resources. Each of these things, however, comes with a price and educational funding continues to be the target of reduction efforts, while legislative action has done little to address the inadequacies. Some might argue that school districts throughout Texas have spent more time in the courtroom than the classroom fighting for adequate funding. Unfortunately, this fight continues and funding remains a realistic barrier to transformational efforts, as do the policies that limit local flexibility.

Our country is founded on “the people” having a majority voice through the election process. In recent years, the voice of “the people” has been lost in policies that hinder a community from making local decisions in the best interests of their children. Policies range from minor issues, such as the school calendar, to those more significant, such as how success is measured. Each has plucked away the freedoms of local communities and silenced the voice of progress.

Standardized tests and accountability, broad curricular standards, inadequate funding, and policies limiting local control by communities are some of the realistic barriers paralyzing school districts across the state. We do not deny they pose challenges but believe we have a choice in whether or not they continue to prevent us from doing what we know to be right for students. We can no longer wait for these impediments to reach resolve. John Dewey is quoted as saying, “If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow.” Our opportunities, therefore, lie in overcoming these barriers that are robbing our students of their tomorrow. We must be empowered by our “why” and the voices of our students, and boldly leap each barrier towards transformation.

How to Transform?

The “why” or purpose for transformation has been clearly defined; however, the meaning of the term is vital in understanding the process itself. Transformation is best described metaphorically using the stages of a butterfly. When a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, it is transformed, leaving little evidence of its former structure. This “metamorphosis” is equivalent to educational transformation in that the organization must move into a stage of redesign and emerge as a learning organization (Schlechty, 2009). Transformation should not be misunderstood and narrowed to a simple change of practice. Transformation requires us “to do things [we] have never done before—not just get better at what [we] have always done” (Schlechty, 2009). Grounded in the research of many educational greats, a roadmap to transformation was designed through the visioning document and is in the process of continuous review. A “how” chart (opposite) has been provided as a morsel look at transformation; therefore, leaving us to simply be bold and act.

From a Caterpillar ...	To a Butterfly
Whole group instruction is the primary instructional delivery model. Every student is instructed the same way using a one-size-fits-all approach.	Instruction is personalized based on the individual interests, learning styles, and needs of each student through a variety of learning structures.
Classroom is exclusive to students who perform above or below the average. Those with learning differences are pushed out as a means for serving their needs.	Classroom is inclusive of all students and serves individual learning needs through personalization and differentiation.
Classroom is centered on the teacher as the distributor of knowledge while the students play the role of consumer with little choice in their learning.	Classroom is centered on the students who are empowered in their learning through choice, collaboration, and challenge while the teacher serves as facilitator.
Learning resources and products are limited to textbooks and worksheets focused on understanding and recall, and lack interest for students.	Learning resources and products are varied with a primary focus on application and replication of real-world situations. Work provided encourages critical and creative thinking and aligns with student interests.
Assessment of learning is done through a standardized exam providing lagging data of concepts mastered.	Assessment is for learning using multiple quality, valid measures to ensure concepts are mastered and applied.
The system is designed to produce students of a singular type like a factory produces a product.	The system is flexible, fluid, and ever-changing with a continuous search for improvement.
Learning environment is structured for control with students isolated in rows and the teacher directs from the front of the room.	Learning environment is designed to foster collaboration, investigation, and discovery. Students are allowed the freedom to work in an arrangement that best meets their learning needs.
The system clearly values compliance and obedience over learning. Strong focus on rules, discipline, and control.	The system values learning and creativity with compliance being a residual of engagement and shared expectations.
Technology is used primarily by the teacher as a substitution to former tools like the overhead, chalkboard, or encyclopedia. Instructional methods do not change.	Technology is utilized as a tool by students to enhance their learning through collaborating, informing, designing, organizing, creating, etc.
Organization is managed as a bureaucracy through policies and mandates that limit choice and flexibility.	Organization is a learning organization that is collaboratively guided by continuous improvement and shared values.

Call to Action

The founding participants in the Visioning Institute provided school districts with a framework for transformation and challenged educators to open the dialogue about a new vision for public education. Our discussions have taken us on a journey, and efforts have been made to initiate change in educational practice; however, there remains little evidence of true transformation. Talk, therefore, can no longer be the substitute for action (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). Educators must embrace why change is necessary and push through the barriers that hinder us from action. We must collaboratively overcome our challenges, listen to the voices of our students, and transform in a way that allows for meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Our actions must include the following:

- We must continue the conversation and share the voice of our students.
- We must take responsibility and lead differently for transformation to become a reality.
- We must act on our beliefs and not simply leave them as words spoken.
- We must stand for the ideas of transformation.
- We must drive the work forward with grace and ferocity.
- We must be courageous and transform.

Educational transformation is a vision capable of becoming reality. That reality, however, is dependent on our next steps. Will we continue to wait or will we embrace the moral imperative of providing students with a meaningful education? Schlechty says, “If we are to provide every child with the best education possible, we need schools that give a central place to creativity and imagination and enforce standards of excellence” (2011). We cannot deny our moral imperative. We must take the vision to action by transforming and allowing students to have the educational freedom foundational to our democracy.

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About the Institute

Beginning in Fall 2012, TASA launched the Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute. Founded on the work of the Public Education Visioning Institute that produced *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*, the Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute was designed to develop and support a cadre of courageous, visionary superintendents and senior-level district administrators willing to expand their leadership beyond the local level and propel MISSION: School Transformation forward in the coming years. The institute built capacity within a group of exceptional leaders to understand, design, and initiate innovative systemic changes locally and statewide within the frameworks of both the Public Education Visioning Institute and the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium.

Interested individuals were asked to complete our online application, describing past and/or current experience with school transformation, future work around the visioning principles, why they were interested in participating in the institute, and experiences and talents that make them preferable candidates. Applicants were also asked to provide two professional references. From the submitted applications, a total of 38 Future-Ready Superintendents were selected to complete the institute.

Shannon Buerk, Chief Learning Officer of Engage Learning Organization, facilitated the institute.

The Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Institute participants met five times from November 2012 to September 2013, meeting in various locations around Texas. Session topics included:

What Is “Future-Ready?”

November 8–9, 2012 – Dallas, TX

- Beliefs, Norm, Tools
- Visioning Work: History and Resources
- Self-Analysis and Analysis of Current Context
- Out of Our Minds
- Flight of the Creative Class
- The Necessary Revolution
- Action Imperative: Challenge / Be a Student

How Can We Accomplish the Mission?

January 10–11, 2013 – San Antonio, TX

- Challenge: Create a “Day in the Life”
- Digital Learning = Student-Directed Learning
- Assessment and Accountability
- Learning Systems / Organizations
- Design Thinking Questions for Research
- Make an Action Plan for Field Research
- Homework: Midwinter Sessions / Chat & Student Panel / Schedule

How Can We Prototype the Change?

April 11–12, 2013 – Corpus Christi, TX

- Design Thinking
- Share Field Research
- Brainstorm Solutions
- The Elegant Solution
- Create a Prototype
- Action Plan
- Homework: Implement and Document Results

How Do We Make the Switch?

June 25–26, 2013 – Austin, TX

- Share Results from Action Research
- Partnerships and Community Engagement
- Navigating the Political System
- Communication
- SWITCH Action Plan

How Might We Scale the Change?

September 12–13, 2013 – Austin, TX

- Leading Locally
- Leading Beyond the LEA
- Sustaining the Collaboration

#txfutureready

Are you preparing them to be ready?

Teacher,

I am growing really fast and have dreams for my future, but I need your help. I need you to understand, engage, and teach me in a way that allows me to

- problem solve so I will think for myself
- collaborate so I will work well with others
- create so I will be able to contribute to my everchanging world
- question so I will never stop learning
- explore so I will discover from my experiences
- use new technologies so I will stay connected with my world.
- choose meaningful content so I will be engaged, not just getting ready for a test

My future depends on you!

Your Student
#txfutureready



Problem Solve



Collaborate



Create



Question



Explore



Technology



College Ready



Career Ready

Prepare me to be future ready.

Join the conversation and follow us on:



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Future Ready

We're Ready.

Engage students with 21st Century teaching and learning.



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