The Stages of Systemic Change

by Beverly L. Anderson

By analyzing where they are an the continuum of educational change, stakeholders can see where they still may need to go.

At first I didn't see the magnitude of the change. I thought if we just did better what we had always done, we would be OK. Then I realized we had to do something totally different, but I didn't know what. Gradually we began trying some new approaches. One change led to another and another and another like dominos. I started to see what people meant by systemic change. A new energy and excitement surged among its as hope grew and the cloudy vision of what we wanted became clearer and clearer.
-Principal of a restructuring high school

Administrators across the United States are recognizing that the education system needs fundamental changes to keep pace with an increasingly complex global society. Yet, the deeper we get into the process of change, the more confused we can become. We need some sense of what to expect and what direction to take. Seeing the patterns of change can be difficult; stakeholders in a system tend to see change primarily from their own perspective. Often teachers may not understand what is seen by administrators and parents, nor do administrators or parents see change from a teacher's perspective, or from each other's.

To give stakeholders an aerial view of the shifts occurring in educational systems, the matrix "A Continuum of Systemic Change" defines six developmental stages and six key elements of change (see fig. 1). A composite of experiences in systemic change from across the United States and at all levels of education, the matrix provides stakeholders with a common vantage point for communicating and making decisions about change.

Stages of Systemic Change
Six stages of change characterize the shift from a traditional educational system to one that emphasizes interconnectedness, active learning, shared decision making and higher levels of achievement for all students. Although Figure 1 displays the six developmental stages as linear and distinct, change is unlikely to follow a linear path. An education system will seldom be clearly at one of these stages but will usually experience "Brownian motion," going back and forth from one stage to another on the path toward an ideal situation. The six stages are:

Maintenance of the Old System: Educators focus on maintaining the system as originally designed. They do not recognize that the system is fundamentally out of sync with the conditions of today's world. New knowledge about teaching, learning, and organizational structures has not been incorporated into the present structure.

Awareness: Multiple stakeholders become aware that the current system is not working, as well as it should, but they are unclear about what is needed instead.

Exploration: Educators and policymakers study and visit places that are trying new approaches. They try new ways of teaching and managing, generally in low-risk situations.

Transition: The scales tip toward the new system; a critical number of opinion leaders and groups commit themselves to the new system and take more risks to make changes in crucial places.

Emergence of New Infrastructure: Some elements of the system are operated in keeping with the desired new system. These new ways are generally accepted.

Predominance of the New System: The more powerful elements of the system operate as defined by the new system. Key leaders begin envision even better systems.

Key Elements to Change

As schools. districts. and states move through the six developmental stages. six elements of the education system seem to be particularly important. Monitoring these six elements can help us understand an education system's progress.

Vision: The vision that people have of an education system and what it should accomplish must change in order for the system to change. Through the stages of development, the number of people from different groups who agree on the shape and purpose of the new system increases.

Public and Political Support: As the vision develops and is translated into practice, the support of the public and of the political leadership at all levels of the system must grow. Such support involves a deepening understanding of the what and why of the changes needed. The inclusion of diverse populations appears to be critical in building support.

Networking: Building networks that study, pilot, and support the new vision of the education system is essential in establishing lasting systemic change. These networks typically do not rely on the existing bureaucratic structure. They frequently use computers, newsletters, conferences, and personal communications to link people of similar roles across existing organizational lines.

Teaching and Learning Changes: Teaching and learning based on the best available research on how people learn is at the core of the new system. Closely related is the perspective that all students need and can learn the higher-level skills of understanding, communication, problem solving. decision making, and teamwork. If changes do not occur in teaching and learning, all the other changes have little value.

Administrative Roles and Responsibilities: To achieve change in the classroom, administrative roles and responsibilities need to shift at the school, district, and state levels from a hierarchical structure of control to one of support and shared decision making.

Policy Alignment: State and local policy need to be aligned around the beliefs and practices of the new system, particularly in areas related to curriculum frameworks, instructional methods and materials, student assessment practices, resource allocation, and the inclusion of all types of students.

Making simultaneous changes in all six elements requires conscious planning. The process is akin to remodeling a building while people are still using it; redesign and reconfiguration need to be carefully staged to keep the building functional.

Using the Matrix
The matrix "A Continuum of Systemic Change" is proving particularly valuable in three ways. Educators are using it to:

1. *Develop a common language and conceptual picture of the processes and goals of change among diverse stakeholders.* Once stakeholders can see the issues and perspectives of the others. they are better positioned to take actions that will support and enhance others' specific situations. One of the nation's earliest and largest restructuring efforts, Re:Learning, used frameworks similar to this matrix to develop common understandings and to engage multiple stakeholders in discussions about the goals and strategies of systemic change.

2. *Develop a strategic plan for moving forward on systemic change.* Once systemic change is under way, people often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. A matrix such as this one can be used to specify what steps to take next.

For example, state mathematics and science curriculum directors used the matrix at a national conference to analyze their own state's progress on systemic change. Many found that they were moving along reasonably well with the vision, the policy realignment, and the shifts in administrative roles, but changes in classroom teaching were small, and public support was lagging. They realized these areas needed special attention if the full system was to change.

3. *Develop an ongoing assessment process to support and encourage deep, quality change.* The matrix can provide the basis for deciding the focus of an evaluation, the type of data to collect, and the modes of analysis and reporting. An organization funding changes in science instruction based its evaluation tool on the matrix. In another state, districts and communities used the matrix to evaluate their progress in redesigning arts education.

For systemic change to occur, all aspects of the system must move forward. A physician doesn't say, "Well, I guess I won't worry too much about that heart problem. The rest of the body seems fine." By adapting this matrix to their own systems, educators can help stakeholders rise above their singular viewpoints to a more comprehensive perspective of the changes occurring. By nurturing all aspects of the education system, we can bring about the systemic change that will transform education.

Beverly L. Anderson is Executive Director of InSites, 1877 Broadway, Suite 405, Boulder, CO 80302. She formerly directed the Re:Learning systemic change initiative at the Education Commission of the States.