School Redesign: Reform or Failure?

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ED 6017

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Do schools meet the needs of the students that come out of our current system? It has been a question in debate for a long time. As the pace of change in society accelerates, it is imperative to reexamine if we are meeting the needs of students of the 21st century and it has become increasingly clear we are not. Critics of the system write scathing accounts of how schooling is harming children and society by teaching conformity instead of the critical thinking skills they purport to teach. In response to the criticism, some schools in Canada have worked hard at reforms and have reexamined their basic practices, trying to bridge the gap between what 21st century learners need and what is being currently offered in schools. However, it is difficult to change an entire structure and so far these new initiatives have not gone far enough to shift the whole system. Some schools and school boards have been successful at changing practices and mindsets to meet the growing demand for 21st century skills. It remains to be seen whether one of these changes could be a ‘keystone’ habit (Duhigg, 2012) change that will create a shift towards a more responsive system.

The school system has been under fire for not meeting student needs.. John Taylor Gatto, a long time teacher turned education system critic, writes that schools teach “confusion”, “class position”, “indifference”, “emotional dependency” and “provisional self esteem” (2002, p. 3-9). Gatto’s biting indictment of the school system isn’t the first one. John Holt, a former school teacher and then advocate of homeschooling and unschooling wrote about the harm that schooling causes children (1967). Ivan Illich (1970) wrote about how we should be “Deschooling society” and advocated for parents to take their children out of schools where they were taught to conform and not to think. Seth Godin (2012) says that what schools are really doing is teaching kids to dislike learning and that “As soon as we associate reading a book with taking a test, we’ve missed the point.” (p. 14). Regardless of whether one thinks the whole structure is rotten, examinations of formal education have proven to be deeply unsettling. Some educators and policy makers have been trying to bridge the gap between what is needed for 21st century citizens and how schools meet those needs. It will be a difficult path to reform, but it is necessary to pursue transformation to meet the needs of the students who are currently coming out of the school system today.

Reform is necessary to meet the needs of students in the 21st century. However, large scale change is difficult to achieve and requires thoughtful processes to make sure that any helpful developments will actually stick. In Alberta, secondary schools are trying a project called “High school Redesign”. High schools are particularly difficult to change because of the interconnectedness of the system itself. (C21, 2015, p. 13). The goal of High school Redesign is to “change mindsets” in order for learning to be more student centered (Alberta Education, 2017). The program is designed to put the student at the center of the learning and create a space for her/him to grow organically as a learner. Some schools have created flex time during the day so that students can focus their time on the things they deem to be important. Peace River School Division (PRSD) in northern Alberta is one such school district that has attempted to apply flex time to the school schedule to “facilitate greater student engagement, achievement and provides our staff with opportunities to grow their practice, collaborate deeply and expand their horizons as educators” (PRSD, 2015).

This idea of redesigning high school by adding flex time likely does not go far enough in changing deep-seated practices that lead to insufficient engagement and motivation among high school students. It doesn’t change the fact that much of what we have chosen to teach in high schools are not connected to student’s real life experiences and are not connected to their needs in their future careers. However, adding a new concept like High school Redesign could, potentially, create new habits that could lead to a deeper change. The key to truly reforming schools are to create conditions that lead to change (C21, 2015, p13) and that’s the potential of High school Redesign.

To change how schools operate, leaders must take four important steps. First, they have to “create enabling conditions”(p. 13) and find ways to start “loosening policy” (p. 13). Then they must “learn what works” (p. 13) by having all stakeholders share their successes and failures to determine how to tweak the approach. The next step is to “scale out” by encouraging networking and sharing information (p. 13) and then “scale up” by spreading the innovation out to the rest of the organization (p. 13). The PRSD has completed these steps by starting off with pilot schools, getting school leaders to change their own mindsets enough so that they could go back and convince teachers to change their ideas about how school time should be managed. The pilot schools then began sharing information in monthly meet-ups with the school division leaders and the other schools involved with the change. At this point, the school division has “scaled out”(p. 13) to all the high schools who all are trying their own version of High school Redesign. They meet to share information, successes and failures and this is a necessary part of school reform (p. 13).

It has become obvious that we need to reform schools. Critics of schools have been good at pointing out the deficiencies in the system, especially for the 21st century learner. Reformationwill take a great deal of effort as school organizations have become entrenched in certain ways of doing things. It has proven difficult to change. Finding ways to innovate through rooted thought patterns and habits may be the key to inciting large scale change in the school system. Using new programs like High school Redesign may lead to people changing their mindset about how schools should work and what we expect from them. Programs like these, if successful, could lead to a whole new paradigm in schooling for the next generation so that their schooling can be relevant, helpful, and give them the skills they actually need for the time in which they live.

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