School systems must better meet the needs of all students. And they can. But to succeed, we can’t just do more of the same.

We need to transform.
The American dream is under duress as the income gap widens, and upward mobility is more limited than at any time in recent history. Despite a steady increase in per-pupil spending on public schooling over the last decades, not enough students graduate with proficiency in reading and math. And despite some recent progress, students living in poverty and students of color still lag far behind white students with more means.1

Thankfully, not all schools are failing. There are many exemplary schools, including urban schools, that are succeeding despite high poverty rates, and there are growing numbers of district leaders taking courageous steps toward real and lasting improvement. Yet, to achieve our ambitious performance goals for all students, a school-by-school approach alone is not the answer. We need to raise our sights and reorganize the entire educational structure in which our schools function.

New Structure for New Goals

Unlike most industries where resource use and organization have changed dramatically over the past few decades, the fundamental school structures and spending patterns in education have remained largely unchanged. And they were established to deliver on completely different goals than those we are trying to achieve today:

Changing Education Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEN</th>
<th>NOW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide access to subject matter</td>
<td>Ensure student learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare and sort students for a range of jobs requiring different levels of knowledge and expertise</td>
<td>Ensure all students are prepared for college and career</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare students for predictable jobs</td>
<td>Build skills to participate in information age and engage in lifelong learning for rapidly changing world</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The organizational practices and structures that grew out of these historical objectives largely dictate how schools look today:

- Teachers in isolated classrooms, paid based on number of years worked and courses taken, with few options to leverage and grow expertise without leaving teaching for administration.
- Content delivered in person by teachers to the students in their classroom.
- Age-graded, subject-specific classes that vary little in size by subject, grade, or student need.
- School days organized into short, rigid time blocks for 6.5 hours a day, 180 days a year.
- Students who fall behind get pulled out of mainstream classes for extra help.

These legacy structures are reinforced by local and state funding systems, staffing practices, union contracts, and even state laws stipulating everything from class size to teacher salary. This inhibits movement toward new ways of organizing education to align with today’s goals and realities.

What are today’s realities? Research shows that students begin at different points and learn at different rates. It also shows that high-performing schools rely on teams of teachers with the combined expertise to use data to continually improve their practice and to adjust their lessons and student grouping to meet individual needs. And research also shows that the students who are farthest behind need more instructional time, more focused attention, highly effective teachers, and more support to catch up.

At the same time, the world of work has changed. Because career opportunities for women have exploded, school systems can no longer rely on women to fill their teaching ranks in jobs with sometimes low salaries that don’t reward excellence and results. Professionals expect flexibility with hours and part-time options at different times over their career.

These realities mean that we can’t achieve our vision of proficiency for all students unless we “fix” our schools and systems. And there is no shortage of opinions on how to do this:

- Eliminate teacher tenure
- Pay teachers for performance
- Extend the school year and increase instructional time
- Spend more on various programs

The list goes on and on. But while each idea for fixing education may have merit, they all share a critical flaw: They take a one-dimensional view of the problem. They focus on the need for change in a specific area, ignoring the larger picture of how all the pieces work together to achieve overarching objectives.
Three E’s of Educational Progress

Tinkering won’t do. To achieve the aggressive goals we’ve set for public education, we need to transform our fundamental educational structures. We need to adopt an integrated systems-level approach to accomplish the three E’s of American education:

**Excellence for All**

We need an approach that acknowledges that different students succeed in different ways. While some students thrive in a school with a traditional schedule, others—often poor students and English language learners—may need an extended day, small-group instruction, access to social and health services, or all three. For students who fail to thrive in one situation, we need the flexibility to provide effective alternative settings free from the stigma of pullouts. We need structures that allow for sharing of innovative practices. We need the ability to assign talented staff to schools and students with the greatest needs, while providing all educators with growth opportunities. Most importantly, we need to promote a collective vision of excellence that drives support from the entire community—a community that shares the goal of creating an educated citizenry with 21st-century skills.

**Equity**

We need structures designed to deliver educational quality across the board. It is not enough to have a few successful schools scattered through a city—especially when the students who suffer the most are already the most marginalized. There are natural geographic boundaries in communities, but those boundaries should not be barriers to high-quality schools and programs. Districts must reorganize to ensure all schools get the funding and the quality of staff they need to meet their students’ needs—this will likely mean shifting people and resources toward lower-income students and the schools that serve them—and that all students, regardless of race or income level, have access to high-quality schools. A commitment to educate all children well is both philosophical and pragmatic. Americans believe in and support the opportunity for everyone to be educated—and expect an equitable return on their investment.

**Efficiency**

We need to structure educational organizations to make the most of taxpayer investments. This means finding innovative approaches—including in some cases outsourcing or privatizing—to achieve high quality and economies of scale, particularly in operations and school support.
One Vision, Seven Integrated Strategies

In our work with urban districts, we have developed a vision for restructuring public education for today’s goals and realities. This vision is built around the seven transformational strategies for creating system-level conditions and organizing resources—people, time, and money—to support the creation of high-performing schools at scale. These strategies should not be viewed as best practices or as success factors that can be implemented independent of each other. Instead, they should be seen as an integrated set of seven areas for transforming education to meet our new goals for learning.

1. Define rigorous college and career-ready standards for learning and align curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Many states have now adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a variation on CCSS or independent, more rigorous standards. Such standards will require significant shifts in instructional practice at all levels. These common sets of standards across districts and states enable teachers, schools, districts, and states to share best practices and set benchmarks. Aligned instructional materials, high-quality professional development, and effective assessments (both standardized and teacher-developed), are critical for teachers and school leaders to continuously adjust instruction and to ensure that students learn the material. It makes no sense for individual teachers or schools to recreate scope and sequence and develop instructional materials and formative assessment tools completely on their own without leveraging these efforts across systems and states.

“Evidence is mounting that teachers who team with other effective teachers get better results than those who don’t or can’t.”

2. Restructure the teaching job.

Study after study shows teaching effectiveness is the single most important in-school predictor of student achievement. And the evidence is mounting that teachers who team with other effective teachers get better results than those who don’t or can’t.

This virtuous cycle begins with attracting high-potential teachers to consider the teaching profession. Then, school systems need to attract top candidates, develop them throughout their careers, and reward them for success. To do this, they must restructure the teaching job to emphasize teacher teams, differentiated roles, and more flexible, doable job definitions and schedules. A more effective system will include new ways to attract and hire top talent, support and develop individuals throughout their careers, retain effective teachers, and evaluate effectiveness. Districts must identify struggling teachers and provide sustained support to help those with potential to become better educators—and remove those who don’t. They need ways to reward teachers who excel in the classroom and/or who take on challenging assignments or leadership responsibilities. And they need to provide the best teachers with opportunities for advancement that do not require them to leave the classroom full time and forever.
3. Match teachers and time to students through Strategic School Designs.

Information-age teaching jobs will require new ways of organizing schools that enable teacher collaboration and leverage teaching expertise cost-effectively. This means each school must have a coherent instructional model and must then organize to support this vision in three important ways. We call this Strategic School Design:

- **Excellent teaching for all students:** Organize teachers and teams to maximize student learning and continuously grow talent.
- **Personalized learning and support:** Match grouping, learning time, technology, and program to students’ individual needs.
- **Cost effectiveness through creative solutions:** Organize jobs, partnerships, and technology to maximize resources that support teaching and learning.

Though each school may put these principles into action differently based on its instructional model and the needs of its students and teachers, the traditional concept of one teacher/one class/one course is no longer valid. Students spend time with different teachers or other adults with specific skills, grouped with different students, for varying lengths of time, studying different subjects or skills, depending on what their learning needs are on that day, or during that week or month. Some students may master what is now considered a yearlong course (or a year’s worth of material) in four or five months; others may need longer than a year. They may spend part of the day in online learning environments with 50 other students and part of the day in small instructional groups of four to six. Students who struggle receive additional support and attention right away and as much as possible in the general education environment.

School systems have an important role to play to help accelerate or scale these kinds of high-potential school models. By providing innovative prototypes for staffing, scheduling, and professional development—based on both public and charter school successes—school systems can keep each school from organizing completely from scratch and experiencing the inevitable failures that come with trial and error. Different prototypes can serve different numbers and combinations of students with specialized learning needs (such as special education students or English language learners). In addition, school systems will need to remove barriers to the flexible scheduling and grouping of teachers and students required for new school designs.

In addition to supporting new models for school organization, most school systems need to take a critical look at their programs and portfolios of schools and how these align with student needs. Being strategic about the array of schools and programs can significantly reduce costs while enhancing program effectiveness.
4. Build and reward school and district leadership capacity.

Building and running dynamic schools that are responsive to student needs will also require new models of school leadership. Districts must define what success means for each school and then ensure that leaders have the flexibility and the support to achieve that success. This will include more distributed leadership models where principals work closely with teachers, other leaders within the building, and—where appropriate—central office support staff to initiate, lead, and maintain instructional improvements. Clearer standards of excellence combined with increased flexibility and support will help districts to hire the right leaders and place them in situations where they can be successful. They will also allow districts to measure the performance of school leaders and provide opportunities for further career growth and impact. Being deliberate about consistent, districtwide leadership development will also ensure a ready pool of high-potential leaders to draw on as opportunities arise.

5. Revise funding systems.

For all schools to reach high standards, school systems must ensure that the level and type of resources match the needs of students. Despite the best intentions, current resource allocation practices result in wide funding variances across schools, even adjusting for differences in student needs, and they do not do a good job of matching resources—not just funding level, but also staff skills and capacity, and student and teacher time—to student needs and schools’ instructional models. Most systems will need to adjust the way they allocate resources to schools, giving the most support to schools and students with greatest need, and giving resources to schools in ways that best support their school designs. Many systems may also need to adjust their school portfolio to ensure that the mix of school grade levels, sizes, and programs are appropriate to meet student needs equitably and cost effectively.
6. Redesign central system offices.

Central offices must be reorganized to move from Industrial Age control models designed to ensure compliance to systems that use data and technology to empower local school leaders and teachers, customize service to schools, and improve efficiency. Centralized systems should be used to assess and provide what each school needs. New systems of accountability should empower and expand upon the success of high-performing schools while providing support to underperforming schools before they fail students. School districts need an explicit strategy for turning around very low-performing schools that is integrated with the overall reform plan, and operations must be redesigned and streamlined to reflect this new service and support function.

7. Leverage partnerships with families, communities, and outside experts.

Shifting from traditional models in which needy students are often separated from the general education classroom to more integrated and cost-effective models of serving students will require districts to partner in new ways with families, communities, and outside expert providers. School systems should partner with other social service providers and combine resources to ensure integrated delivery and a whole child focus. In addition, most communities have myriad other resources—community colleges, local businesses and artists, youth service organizations—that would benefit from strong schools and may be able to cost-effectively augment or expand support in relevant areas. In some instances, community partnerships can provide creative and cost-effective instruction to supplement instruction provided by classroom teachers. Finally, numerous suppliers are organizing to provide online and other instructional offerings that expand curricular offerings and provide additional options for matching students with instructors at lower cost and sometimes higher quality.

Making these changes will not be easy. Each is a significant undertaking, yet all are necessary to build the educational systems we need. Implementing them means dismantling structures, processes, policies, and regulations that have, in many cases, existed for decades. It means changing the way teachers and school and district leaders think about and do their jobs. It means changing the way we all think of a class or even a school. It will be messy, politically charged, and emotionally difficult. But continued failure to provide so many of our nation’s children with the education they need and deserve is not an option.

Current energy around real reform combined with continued budget pressure is creating momentum toward tackling long-standing barriers to innovation and improvement. But attacking the problem school by school is not enough. And even the boldest changes implemented in isolation will not achieve the change we need to yield success for every student—especially those who are already behind. We need to take a systemwide approach and fundamentally reorganize education to meet our goals of excellence, equity, and efficiency for all students. The time is now.
Endnotes


2. For more on these strategies see ERS’ publication, Seven Strategies for District Transformation.


Acknowledgments

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School System 20/20 is a vision for school system success, a diagnostic assessment, and a review process that allows districts to measure and monitor their structure and policy, as well as their resource use—including people, time, and money—to support excellent instruction.

Standards and Instruction
Rigorous, college-and-career-ready standards, and curricula to achieve them.

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Partnering to create innovative and cost-effective ways to serve students better.

Teaching
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A reimagined school day with new schedules and dynamic groupings.

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