Themes for Change:
A Look at
Systemic Restructuring Experiences

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Holistic, integrated restructuring efforts tend to be based on central themes. General features such as teacher collaboration and mastery learning have emerged in the process. The authors highlight five outstanding examples of schools throughout the country where unifying themes have helped restructure in meaningful ways and discuss general trends in restructuring.

Restructuring schools, an idea that gained educators' attention in the mid-eighties and called for fundamental changes in our educational system, is now becoming reality in schools across the country. At some of these schools, restructuring has been undertaken individually, while at others, efforts have involved the aid of supporting networks. Whichever way, the challenge has been to reassess and redesign the way we think of and do schooling. This article summarizes a project to identify and analyze as many of those schools nationwide as possible.

The School Improvement Resources Inquiry USA Project (SIRIUS-A Project) was funded by the Indiana Department of Education and involved analyzing sixty-two restructuring experiences across the country. The study was launched to identify schools that are restructuring, the kinds of structural changes being implemented, and the kinds of change processes being used to plan and implement restructuring. This article does not address the change processes.

Background of the Study
A case-study approach was used to characterize the uniqueness of each school's restructuring effort and contextual conditions. This approach also facilitated free access to information in order to compile a holistic description of each school and describe the restructuring effort in school participants' own words.

Because a goal of the study was to identify and survey all schools in the country that had undergone recent re-

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structuring, the study utilized a sampling strategy which included all cases that met established criteria.\textsuperscript{1}

For the SIRIUS-A Project, schools that met the criteria for restructuring were those that not only planned but initiated \textit{systemic} restructuring. Systemic refers to interrelated rather than piecemeal changes; a change in one part of the school requires changes in other parts. These changes build to a holistic, integrated restructuring effort. Schools described simply as having undergone "restructuring" were not included.

A systemic restructuring effort that focuses on "time, talent, and technology," for example, would affect daily instructional periods and yearly grade levels (time); the roles of teachers, administrators, assistants, and students (talent); and facilities, equipment, and instructional resources (technology).\textsuperscript{2}

The principal at Linda Vista Elementary School in San Diego, one of the participating schools in the study, offered an apt definition of systemic restructuring: School restructuring appears to be most successful if it is a pervasive, systemic change—it affects each student in the school and it does not attack only one aspect of the school program.

**Process of the Study**

The study began with a concerted search for schools nationwide that were involved in restructuring. Criteria for systemic restructuring were established, and relevant organizations were contacted. Major sources of contacts included state departments of education, the Coalition of Essential Schools, the National Education Association's Mastery in Learning Network, and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory's Accelerated Schools Action Project. Names of schools also were acquired from the media, current educational publications, and referrals from schools participating in the study. The search resulted in an initial data base of 531 schools.

Each of the schools was contacted and invited to answer an open-ended questionnaire or send information describing its restructuring efforts or both. Of 531 schools, 137 (26 percent) responded by November 1990. Information from the 137 schools was then analyzed to identify examples of systemic restructuring. Those schools that met the systemic restructuring criteria comprised a final sample of sixty-two schools, forming the basis for the findings reported here.

**Systemic As Well As Thematic**

While analyzing the sixty-two schools, it became striking how the systemic descriptions often included an underlying theme explicitly relating the changes. In fact, it appeared that the more a school's changes built upon a theme, the more extensively systemic the restructuring effort seemed to be. The schools with strong themes reported changes that appeared more and more interrelated than the changes reported by schools without strong themes.

Thus, perhaps the most significant finding from the SIRIUS-A study is that some schools seemed to base their restructuring on a connected, underlying theme, which appeared to result in more systemic changes.

**Theme-Based Restructured Schools**

The following descriptions of restructuring experiences focus on systemic and theme-based elements. The descriptions presented here are not comprehensive; space does not allow for a discussion of all the schools' implementations.

\textbf{The Saturn School of Tomorrow} in St. Paul, Minnesota, based its design on two major themes: (1) "high-tech, high-teach, and high-touch" and (2) "mastery learning." The school serves grades four through seven. An example of a school that explicitly implements its themes, Saturn reported that its students spend one-third of their time with technology, one-third with teachers, and one-third with other students on cooperative learning projects.

The "high-tech" component includes a computer-based integrated learning system and extensive video-based instruction, especially in reading, writing, and math. The school also uses the computer-based Discourse System for group-based instruction.\textsuperscript{3}

"High-teach" entails commitment to the belief that students, parents, educators, and the community are all instructional resources who can ensure the success of each student. "High-teach" is realized through on-site learning at the St. Paul Public Library, the YMCA, and the science and art museums, through parental involvement, and through a differentiated staff that is not based on grade or classroom level.

**THE "high-touch" component is described as meeting students with sensitivity and concern on their level. A teaching team stays with a group of students throughout their third and fourth years at the school. All students are assigned to an advisory group.**

In addition, heavy emphasis is placed on letting students follow their interests and choose individual activities. Students also take heterogeneous grouped courses lasting eight weeks.

Many of the school’s activities are designed so that students learn by reaching mastery, rather than by earning grades or spending time in a subject area. Some of these activities include the following:

- The student, parents, and an advisor develop a personal growth plan in which they identify the student's interests, strengths, and needs. Goals and objectives are unique to each student, and students are actively involved in determining their own progress and making modifications to their goals and objectives.

- Mastery learning is monitored through a computer-based Integrated Learning System (ILS) and the personal growth plan process. The ILS has hundreds of lessons the students use to develop reading and math skills. Students work at their own level and pace, and the computer provides

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Thus, systemic restructuring is demonstrated at Saturn through various interrelationships permeating the entire school and presenting a holistic picture of a fundamentally transformed school.

Examples of implementations within teams include an individualized reading program with daily sustained silent reading for all students, flexible scheduling and multi-grade grouping in one team’s math program to meet varying student needs, and a homework monitoring program for at-risk students. The school also pursues a school-wide action plan, not only to address the needs of all students, but also to address certain goals needed by all teams “to provide for a cohesive forward movement.”

To sustain the multigrade organization of teams that is Skowhegan’s restructuring emphasis, teams maintain heterogeneous grouping within the classrooms. To address individual student needs at different grade levels, cooperative learning and differentiated instruction are used in the classrooms. Other key features conducive to a team approach are common team planning times, flexible scheduling, peer tutoring, and four para-educators who assist mainstreamed students in the classroom.

Narragansett School in Gorham, Maine, is an elementary school incorporating two major themes: making the school a center of inquiry and focusing on children’s development as learners.

Toward the first goal, Narragansett implemented activities such as developing and carrying out research projects. A teacher-leader position was established for each grade to facilitate communication and collegial decision making among teachers, and teacher assistants allow teachers more time for peer conferencing. Finally, the school added a teacher-scholar position to observe and facilitate teacher reflection processes.

Narragansett implemented several changes to focus on children’s development. Teacher teams stay with children from mixed grade levels for more than one year. Parents choose students’ placements with their teachers. There is differentiated staffing with teacher assistants, and parents volunteer in the classrooms, with
According to Moses, peak performance schools have a clear vision and purpose, seek to actualize human potential, and surpass expectations. Third, Mark Twain now utilizes differentiated staffing arranged in a professional hierarchy of a lead teacher, professional teachers, interns, undergraduate aides, and teacher's aides. The larger staff gives teachers more time to devote to curriculum planning and instructional needs, thus serving the growth needs of students. In addition, fifteen parents volunteer daily and over twenty additional parents volunteer regularly.

Bloomfield Hills Schools in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, is creating a model high school through extensive changes funded by RJR Nabisco. Major themes are (1) community involvement in designing education, (2) inquiry, (3) mastery learning, (4) integrated disciplines through encompassing themes (for example, "How have humans dealt with the question of whether to live in harmony with nature or completely dominate it?"); and (5) student responsibility and choice.

Students have the option of selecting what problems they will study, how to study them, how to use their time to study them, and how they will demonstrate mastery of core competencies after studying them. They decide how they will be assessed for the core competencies, who will assess them (i.e., who will serve on their student assessment panel), and such details as whether they will spend all or a part of their day at the model high school.

To create a school that accomplishes these ends, Bloomfield Hills Model High School has implemented major changes in the use of time, teachers' roles, and assessment. It has restructured time by offering two daily two-hour interdisciplinary instructional blocks, a daily twenty-five-minute student advisory program, and a two-hour period for students' independent projects (e.g., individual or group research or internship). The school day also provides one period for common team planning and one for individual planning for all teachers.

The model high school restructured teachers' roles in that they truly be-
come co-learners and facilitators with
the students. Because the teachers are
creating the new thematic curricula
based on community input and their
own and their students' explorations
of how disciplines interrelate, in ef-
fect they are investigating along with
the students. Teachers also collabo-
rate to create new curricula and to
help students undertake responsibil-
ity. Finally, they coach students on
mastery performances before student
evaluation panels. The teachers from
the model high school serve on these
panels, but as the students' advocates
rather than evaluators.

Because students demonstrate mas-
tery of learning through performances
instead of through traditional grading
procedures, the school established
an administrative liaison counselor
position to help coordinate students'
courses and transcripts with the other
district high schools and colleges.

**Implications of Thematic Restructuring**

Of the sixty-two schools that met
the criteria of systemic restructuring,
these are five examples that go one
step further by basing their restruc-
turing on one or more major integrat-
ing themes. In all sixty-two schools,
the structural changes are systemic,
but the changes in the schools with in-
tegrating themes appear deeper and
more interrelated. Schools with inte-
grating themes also present a more
complete picture in the information
they provided for the survey, com-
pared to less theme-based schools.

**General Trends in Restructuring**

A second indication from the sur-
vey is that a few general features are
emerging as central to restructuring
efforts across the country. Universal
features of restructuring were not
found; rather some general emphases
seem to be surging. Hence, the term
"central features" is used.

In presenting these central features,
should be noted that not all schools
emphasize any of them in their re-
structuring efforts. In fact, some of
the schools focusing heavily on over-
all themes appear not to stress any of
these features inasmuch as their over-
all theme is more idiosyncratic. Other
schools use one or more of these cen-
tral features, but only on a superficial
basis. They might implement a fea-
ture as one of their changes, but not as
one of their central restructuring
emphases.

The central features are restructuring
emphases occurring fairly fre-
quently in our nationwide sample.
They are not based on a tally of all the
schools that are implementing that
feature, for example, all the schools
using team teaching. Rather, they are
based on a count of the schools whose
primary restructuring focus appears
to be on that feature, for example,
team teaching.

**Teacher Collaboration.** The most
frequent central feature emerging
from the study was teacher collabora-
tion. In addition, two large subcate-
gories of teacher collaboration
emerged: (1) site-based management
and (2) team teaching.

**Site-based Management.** The schools
in the study emphasizing teacher
collaboration through site-based
management used terms such as
"shared decision making," "partici-
patory management," and "shared
leadership" in describing their prac-
tices. Although some schools are
restructuring by facilitating collabora-
tion among teachers, most are em-
phasizing collaboration among all
groups, including the community,
parents, and administrators. Some
include students and staff. Many
mechanisms and structures for deci-
sion making and determining gov-
ernance responsibilities were reported
by the schools. In a unique example at
Sweeney Elementary School in Santa
Fe, New Mexico, a team comprised of
a teacher-facilitator, three teacher-co-
ordinators, a secretary, and two par-
ents replaces the principal. The facili-
tating teacher is on leave of absence
and is responsible for the school's
day-to-day management. For their
peer evaluations, each teacher is ob-
served by two other teachers and the
facilitator.

**Team Teaching.** Many types of team
teaching were reported by schools:
interdisciplinary team teaching,
schools-within-a-school, teacher
teams that stay with multi-age groups
for more than a year, teaching teams
for at-risk students, and teaming of
regular and special teachers. In some
schools, facilitating teacher collabora-
tion was found to be the major
purpose of using interdisciplinary
team teaching, rather than attempt-
ing to integrate the disciplines.

**Heterogeneous Grouping.** Hetero-
genous grouping of students is an-
other central feature of restructuring
efforts among schools in the SIRIUS-
A study. For some schools, particu-
larly middle and high schools, non-
ability grouping, which eliminates
tracking, is a major emphasis. Multi-
age grouping is a common restruc-
turing feature for elementary schools.

**Continuous Progress.** Students
progressing at their own learning or
developmental pace also seems to be
a central feature in restructuring ef-
forts. This is implemented by a vari-
ety of structures, such as no grade
levels in the entire school, continuous
progress within two or three grade
levels, and continuous progress
within one grade or classroom.

**Integrating Disciplines/Learning.**
This central feature includes interdis-
ciplinary team teaching where the
emphasis is on providing an inte-
grated, holistic view of the curricu-
lum for students. Some schools have
emphasized specific integrated learn-
ing theories. Guggenheim Element-
ary School in Chicago, for example,
emphasizes learning that integrates the arts, kinesthetic activities, social and personal learning skills, and memory enhancement processes in the curriculum.

School as a Center of Inquiry. Examples of inquiry themes reported by schools were: “developing a culture of learning and professionalism for educators,” “creating an ongoing critical dialogue about all aspects of the school,” “the process of learning,” “a community of learners,” “a community of learners and leaders,” and “thinking.”

Personal Student Development. This feature has become an important aspect of restructuring middle schools. The middle school concept strives to meet the developmental needs of adolescents and restructures many aspects of the school to meet those needs: time, grouping of students (usually in schools-within-a-school with teacher teams), and the role of teachers.

A major component of these and other schools that focus on personal development is the advisor/adviser program in which students meet with small advisory groups as a regular part of the school day or week. In addition to helping meet students’ personal and academic needs, some schools have adopted a theme of helping students develop social and group decision-making skills during these sessions.

Mastery Learning. In several schools with strong themes or theme combinations, mastery learning is one of the major elements and seems to help contribute to the extensiveness of the schools’ restructuring. The mastery theme seems most often to be combined with other emphases, although it is a sole emphasis for a few schools.

Mastery learning alone appears to be the central restructuring feature in South Tama County Community School District in Tama, Iowa, and Natchez-Adams School District in Natchez, Mississippi. South Tama, whose theme is “outcome-based education,” gives only the grades of A or B for demonstrating mastery or I for incomplete. At Natchez-Adams, where the emphasis is on mastery by objectives, all students test for mastery before moving to the next level.

Building a Democratic School Community. Examples of such themes were “student participation and governance in a just community,” “a partnership approach to governance structure between students, parents, and community,” and “partnership among children, parents, staff, and community.”

A related concept, building a community in the school, is articulated by utilizing the outside community. The Saturn School of Tomorrow, mentioned earlier, is one example. Another is the School Without Walls in Rochester, New York, a high school where all students spend part of their day in the community in an internship with a community mentor.

Linking Schools, Homes, and Community Agencies. Emphasizing the social needs of the family also seems to be emerging as a central feature of restructuring efforts. Garfield Elementary School in Olympia, Washington, for example, offers family support through the community mental health agency, home visits, transportation, parent classes, and medical, food bank, clothing, housing, and employment referral services. The school devotes one day per month for staff members to confer with professionals from a project coordinating council that plans and implements interventions. The staff also confers with students and parents on that day.

Another school, John Glenn Middle School in Bedford, Massachusetts, uses a case study review team of police, social workers, and juvenile probation workers to share information on problematic student and family cases.

Systemic Restructuring Vs. Past Reforms

Much time, effort, and money has been spent on piecemeal reforms the past twenty-five years, yet the quality...
of education is generally perceived to have declined significantly over that time. Society is changing in ways that make our educational system obsolete and, therefore, ineffective in meeting the needs of children and society. As we progress into the information age, it seems likely that this trend will not only continue, but accelerate. Does restructuring represent a different enough approach from reforming to reverse this trend? The SIRIUS-A Project is helping answer that question by identifying some important differences between restructuring and past reform efforts.

First, true restructuring involves systemic change in a school, including district-level administration. Most past reforms have been piecemeal. They changed only one or a few aspects of a school without taking a holistic view of how the changes would affect other aspects. Systems experts have found that the parts of a social system evolve to fit with each other. When attempts are made to change one part of a system, other parts often work to change it back to what it once was. This explains why most educational reforms that thrived when external money flowed have disappeared as the external money stopped. And similarly, it indicates that for any fundamental change to be successful, other parts of the system must change in turn to fit with and support it. Consciously taking a systemic approach and making systemic changes appear to offer a much greater chance of significant and lasting improvement in education.

Second, the schools reporting the most extensive and fundamental changes have based their structural changes on underlying integrating themes. It would appear that the themes help to unite the changes being implemented throughout the various parts of the school by giving more meaning and direction to those participating in the restructuring effort. This seems likely to contribute to more cohesive and enduring change.

Third, in most of the schools, the people involved in planning their school’s changes chose their themes based on the needs and values of their community: students, staff, parents, teachers, and other community members. This required open conversations, negotiations, and real commitments from stakeholders in the school. Few past reforms have been so widespread in involving members of a school community. Such involvement is likely to contribute to more lasting and permanent change because the participants are designing the changes themselves, based on a theme that has meaning to them and gives them ownership in the changes.

These three characteristics unique to restructuring—systemic, thematic, and community based—distinguish restructuring from past reform movements. Systemic means the change will be pervasive and holistic, thematic means it will have meaning, and community based means those who are affected by it have bought into it.

With systemic, fundamental change that is meaningful and that the school community itself has worked to create, restructuring appears to hold great promise for more lasting change that can result in a quantum improvement in meeting the needs of students and society in the twenty-first century—a radically different, post-industrial, information age.

3. The Discourse System is produced by Cybernetic Communications Systems, Inc., Israel.
6. This information emerged from an analysis of the change-process data, which are not reported here. EH