

What does it mean to “redesign the educational model”?

BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front): Begin with a “clean sheet of paper” and develop a model of school of education that achieves a set of desired outcomes for its students. Rather than begin with the current model and adapt it, set aside everything about the current model and design as if the current model never existed (a significant challenge, of course, but ultimately what will lead to the best design).

Lipstick on a pig. That phrase gained prominence during the 2008 presidential election and is an apt analogy for nearly every educational “redesign”, “reinvention”, or “revolution” over the past few decades. Despite desperate calls for true education reinvention at least since the Nation at Risk Report in 1983 and the SCANS Report in 1991, every attempt has been some adaptation of the school model begun in 1894 (Yep, over 125 years ago).

So, what does it mean to actually redesign our school model? The answer to that question is actually very simple and exactly what you would expect. It means to begin with a “clean sheet of paper” and develop a model of school or education that achieves a set of desired outcomes for its students. That is essentially what occurred late in the 19th Century leading to the school model we are using today. To better understand what we need to do today, let’s look at what was done in 1894.

Leaders in government and education wanted a means for educating every child in America to a certain level in order to meet the emerging demands of the workforce. Their first step was to determine the desired outcomes. Toward that end, in 1893 the Committee of Ten was formed to determine what instruction every child should receive. With their conclusions in hand, a school model was developed based on the efficiency of the industrial age.

In order for every child to receive all the instruction recommended by the Committee of Ten, the model would have to be efficient. That meant breaking down the content into discreet subjects and spreading it over 12 years of school, with each teacher responsible for only select subjects and topics. With little to no available research on learning and brain development, this approach seemed reasonable.

It must be noted that the Committee of Ten did not endorse this approach. They actually stated that instruction should be integrated, that all teachers should be responsible for students learning all subjects, and that students needed to *practically* demonstrate their understanding of concepts and knowledge (as opposed to using standardized, multiple-choice type exams). However, doing this at that time for every child would not be practical or affordable, so these three critical insights were set aside.

Therefore, the education model that was implemented in the late 19th Century was the best that could be expected at the time and was still quite progressive in that its intent was that every child would receive the same education, regardless of who they were, where they lived, or their expected future plans. Of course, the level of equality in delivering that education was far from what was intended and, more importantly, equal does not mean equitable. However, that model met its intended outcomes pretty well for the next few decades.

Jump ahead one hundred plus years and it is easy to see the shortcomings of the model. We have reams of research on brain development and learning showing that the lost insights from the Committee of Ten were exceptionally important. In addition, since 1894 we have piled on expectations for outcomes while shedding very few. What we have not done is revisit the initial primary outcome on which the model was based—that every child needs to receive the same instruction over the course of their 12 years of school (now 13+ with kindergarten, 4K, and preschool).

What we all know today—and the Committee of Ten understood at least to a degree—is that instruction does not equal learning. Consequently, a primary outcome of delivering instruction is not appropriate if what we really want is for students to learn. Rather, student learning must be a primary outcome.

Redesigning the education model, therefore, requires first identifying the desired outcomes of those students who move through the model. And, in many ways, this has been done over and over including through the aforementioned Nation at Risk and SCANS reports and thousands of other similar efforts. What no one has done is to then begin with a clean sheet of paper. They always begin with the current model. That is what this process will specifically avoid.

This redesign process begins by taking the desired outcomes and working backwards to determine what activities would lead to achievement of those desired outcomes. In doing this, the designers must take into account all the factors and influences that will affect the outcomes. With a clean sheet of paper, these factors and influences include research into learning and brain development, the readiness of the students, and all the distractions and challenges the students will face as they move through the model. Equally important is acknowledging that student readiness, distractions, and challenges are unique for every child.

It is easy to see why designing can be a challenge even with the clean sheet of paper. However, every past attempt at doing this has added one other 600-pound gorilla that had to be considered—the current model of education. Everyone begins from there; they try to “design” based on research, student readiness, and distractions and challenges, but they add the burden of still needing to deliver the existing curriculum. In addition, in most cases, the “designers” try to fit the existing calendar, schedule, and infrastructure.

It’s easy to see why we never achieve the outcomes we’re striving for and why the cost keeps going up. We are constantly adapting and retrofitting meaning we cannot come close to leveraging the experience, research, and technology we have available. Imagine if Elon Musk was told his Tesla cars had to be built on the Ford Model T platform in the original Model T factory. That’s what we’ve been trying to do with education for decades.

That is why school redesign must begin with a truly clean sheet of paper. Don’t carry over anything from the current model. Lessons learned from the current model can inform the design, and some aspects of the current model may find their way into the redesign, but don’t carry anything over to begin with.

With that in mind, before adding any elements to the redesign, the desired outcomes must be identified. These, too, must begin with a clean sheet of paper. Further, the outcomes to be identified must be for the students, not for anything else (i.e. delivering curriculum). That doesn’t mean there won’t be periphery outcomes identified as important, but those must be supplemental to the design rather than driving the design.

None of this is really complex, but neither is it easy, because we all carry the 600-pound gorilla of the current model into the process. It will take time and collaboration to get that monkey off our backs, but it is not only possible, it’s essential if we want a school model that will truly allow *every* child to unleash their real potential.