

# Future Search in School District Change Connection, Community and Results

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*Future Search in School District Change* is an edited book of 16 case studies demonstrating the use of Future Search methodologies to create significant change in school systems facing complex external and internal pressures. The case studies demonstrate the power of widespread community involvement in developing consensus and support for educational goals and strategic plans.

The Future Search concept was developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff. Its roots can be traced back to the group dynamics research of Kurt Lewin and Ronald Lippitt in the United States and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in England. Its key principles are: involving diverse stakeholders who have the authority and expertise to act; exploring the whole system rather than its parts; developing a shared vision and common ground in the search for mutually supported plans; and creating a sense of group responsibility for action. The book contains only a very brief historical perspective and the reader wishing a more complete explication of the research and values underlying Future Search will need to consult Weisbord's book *Discovering Common Ground*.

Future Searches occur in a conference format generally scheduled over four half days. Typically, 60 to 70 people attend, though many more can be accommodated in parallel or sequential conferences. The agenda consists of five explorations: the past, noting personal, local and global perspectives on time lines; the present, mapping external trends and sharing stories; the future, developing scenarios for creative enactment; common ground, identifying and confirming shared visions of the future; and action plans that will bring the common ground themes into being.

These 16 case studies are organized thematically in five parts. Part One outlines the demographic diversity of the school districts discussed and then presents two contrasting cases from Lawrence, Kansas and Toronto, Ontario. Part Two, the studies in Leadership Perspectives and Tools, describes how three superintendents used Future Search for strategic planning and to build leadership capacity within their districts. Part Three, Growing Community Partnerships, provides four examples of how the community involvement in Future Search can lead to strong and sustainable partnerships between school systems and parents, citizens and outside agencies. The theme of Part Four is Including Student Voice. The cases in this section outline the importance of involving students in both the planning and execution of Future Search conferences and the positive outcomes for school and district culture. Part Five, Beyond the District, offers four examples of school districts participating as stakeholders in other organizations' Future Searches; it includes ideas for conducting the process in challenging times of budgetary shortfalls.

The editors close the book with an epilogue summariz-

ing the results one can expect from Future Search, how the process models effective teaching and learning, the costs involved, the importance of follow-up and some caveats. They also direct the reader to additional print and on-line resources.

Early in the text the editors have included a table organizing the cases according to a number of additional common themes. This is useful as it enables the reader to peruse chapters of particular personal or organizational interest. Most readers will not likely read all the cases, as there is considerable redundancy given the use of Future Search as the change process in each case study and the extensive detail in most chapters. Three of the case studies are Canadian, involving large urban school districts. They will be of particular interest to jurisdictions undergoing mandated amalgamation.

The editors identify school administrators, school boards, parents, teachers and government officials as the audience for this book, and the writing is suitable for this diverse group. It is clearly not a theoretical text designed for academic use although the issues presented in the case studies would lend themselves to analysis from a variety of perspectives. As well, this book is not a "how-to" manual. Those readers wishing to conduct their own Future Search would need to pursue training through the Future Search Network or engage trained facilitators.

Overall, *Future Search in School District Change* provides a rich and interesting array of case studies describing how school districts facing significant challenges have worked with their communities to develop strategic and coherent plans for the future. It makes a strong argument for the importance of including all stakeholders in district change initiatives. |

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