

## **The Network Schools Model**

*The best way to change the existing reality is to create a new reality  
that makes the old one obsolete ... Buckminster Fuller*

Structural change in the “existing reality” of public education is long overdue. We are currently operating schools using a model devised in the 1920s, engineered in the 1950s, and standardized as part of the accountability movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The reopening of schools in response to the pandemic presents an opportunity to consider a new way to organize schools, a “new reality” I call the “Network School Model”.

The organizational structure of schools, modeled after the factories and mills that served as the backbone of local economies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, provided the most cost-effective means of sorting students. It used standardized tests to sort students for group instruction at the elementary level and sort students into two groups at the secondary level: those who would qualify for higher education and those who would enter the workforce. In our current global information economy where the mission of public education is to provide all students with the skills, motivation, and self-discipline needed to become lifelong learners, this organizational structure no longer makes sense. Vermont’s Act 77 provides the tools to offer every child the time and customized instruction required for them to: learn-how-to-learn; become flexible, creative, and adaptable thinkers; and develop the insight and character needed for full participation in our capitalist democracy. Now might be an opportune time to organize schools in a way that will fully realize the promise of that legislation.

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The optimal way to teach someone is by tutoring. Tutors fully engage students by matching their instruction to each student’s ability level, their unique interests, and their unique way of learning. The notion of providing a tutor for each student was inconceivable before students had access to the vast array of free online video instruction that emerged in the past decade and before the widespread use of video-conferencing. With the availability of these resources, it is possible to develop and implement a student-centered and student-driven model for schooling; a model based on the assumption that each child is naturally curious and capable of attaining the skills needed to become a self-disciplined learner; a model that builds on the personalized learning plans, flexible pathways, and proficiency based assessment initiatives launched in Vermont.

In the Network School Model, existing school buildings become Network Education Centers (NEC) that provide coordinated support services for each child. The [community schools](#) model developed by the Institute for Educational Leadership provides a framework for NECs:

*A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends.*

*Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities. Partners work to achieve these results: Children are ready to enter school; students attend school consistently; students are actively involved in learning and their community; families are increasingly involved with their children's education; schools are engaged with families and communities; students succeed academically; students are healthy - physically, socially, and emotionally; students live and learn in a safe, supportive, and stable environment, and communities are desirable places to live.*

*Most people think of schools today as serving a single purpose: a binary, analog-system of delivery - teachers teach and students learn. Community schools are more akin to smart phones. Schools and communities connect, collaborate, and create. Children and families have an array of supports from community partners right at their school. Communities and schools leverage their shared physical and human assets to help kids succeed.*

In addition to fulfilling the objectives described above, the NEC would also serve as the yearlong and before-and-after school child-care facility for the community and serve as the technology resource center for those students or community members who do not as yet have ready access to the internet. Each town would define the scope of services provided in their NEC, thereby ensuring the continuation of local control in the provision of schooling and in the services needed for children to succeed academically. Ideally, the towns would identify ways publicly funded organizations could collaborate to provide support for students.

The NEC would be especially helpful in supporting students from economically disadvantaged homes. The social services in place today to support these students are [uncoordinated, sometimes duplicative, and, therefore, more costly](#). This lack of interagency coordination and agency-school coordination works against the ambitious expectations the public has of its schools. When teachers coordinate their efforts with those of the social service providers serving children, they can gain a better understanding of the life circumstances of their students.

The Network School Model envisions two tiers of schools and a third tier of optional programming for students over 16:

*TIER ONE schools, serving children from Kindergarten through early adolescence (i.e. 12-14 years of age)* provide individualized skill instruction (i.e. reading; writing; mathematics; science and social studies; etc.) and provide small group instruction in oral communication, social skills, the development of collaborative projects. Instruction would be teacher directed for the younger children but over time would be a hybrid of small group instruction and computer assisted instruction (CAI). Tier One schools would coordinate the wraparound services needed for special education and Section 504 students. Classes in Tier One schools would be limited to groups of no more than 12 children per teacher and would focus on developing the skills students need to succeed at the next level: the ability to craft a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP), to design independent studies that incorporate on-line learning, and to succeed in an environment where independent work is demanded. Advancement from Tier One to Tier Two will be based on a wholistic analysis by a team consisting of teachers drawn from both Tier One and Tier Two schools, the student, and his or her parents. The team will review the student's PLP, academic preparation, and readiness for the transition to the independent work expected at the Tier Two school.

*TIER TWO schools, serving early adolescents (i.e. 12-14 years of age) through to pre-adulthood (i.e. 16-18 years old)* provide support for students to successfully meet the goals set forth in their PLP. This will be accomplished through the completion of self-designed independent study courses, online courses, traditional direct classroom instruction offered two to three times per week, and weekly seminars. The on-line curriculum and traditional classroom instruction will focus primarily on meeting the school's proficiency-based graduation requirements. The seminar sessions will be led by a teacher who serves as an advisor to each student in the group. The teacher/advisor will facilitate the reflection and revision of each student's PLP. The teacher/advisor, parent, and heads of the Tier Two school and Tier Three program determine if a student who wishes to pursue Tier Three programming is capable of doing so. If not, the student will be encouraged to modify their PLP to qualify for the programming.

TIER THREE programming (OPTIONAL), serving students over the age of 16, is designed to provide a means of fully realizing the potential of Flexible Pathways. Students in this Tier would be supported in the design of a High School Completion Program (HSCP) or Work Based Learning program. Students enrolled in Tier Three programming will work under the guidance of an advisor who can help prepare them for enrollment in a traditional college and/or link them with various trade unions, employers, and vocational and proprietary schools that offer licensure needed to qualify them for work in a particular field.

### **Urgency for Change**

The Network School model is evolving in the workplace, in for-profit and non-profit organizations, and [among home school parents](#). Job-site training is largely web-based; recertification webinars are replacing in-person on-site seminars in professional organizations including public schools; and on-line “meetings” are replacing large group meetings in many organizations. Most graduate schools offer asynchronous online courses to supplement the traditional courses offered on campus, courses that enroll scores of classroom teachers seeking professional advancement as well as adults seeking further training. Home school parents are using inexpensive online lessons to engage their children and help them fulfill the minimal State standards in place. Those parents are also arranging ad hoc opportunities for their children to connect with their peers to work and play together, and taking advantage of programs offered by museums, public libraries, theaters and music centers.

Given the pervasiveness of online learning, the damage done to public schools due to budget constraints over the past decade, and the limited revenues on the horizon, it is easy to envision a future where the number of homeschoolers and privatized charter schools grow while public school enrollments decline. The need for a transformation has never been more urgent or more clear. The Network School model with its emphasis on community schools that offer wraparound services and child care, its emphasis on the role of teachers to connect with individual students and parents, its capitalizing on proficiency based assessments and personalization, and its integration of CAI offers a change to the existing reality that could make the old one obsolete. I believe the Network School model warrants consideration as the way forward.