

Community Engagement Using Future Search: A Systematic Evaluation of The Wisconsin Experience

Jeffrey Axelbank, PsyD
Consultant
Private Practice
Highland Park, NJ

Drew Howick, MA
Founder
Howick Associates
Waunakee, WI

Abstract

In the current era of conflict over school policies and contentious School Board meetings, community engagement has become both more critical and more difficult to accomplish effectively. By interviewing nineteen district superintendents in Wisconsin, this study systematically assesses how effective the Future Search process is at community engagement. The results strongly support the use of Future Search to positively and meaningfully engage school district communities. Nearly all subjects reported that the investment of time and money was well worth it; that there were many positive outcomes; that Future Search provided valuable input to strategic planning; that it was superior to other attempts at community engagement; and all said they would recommend Future Search to their peers.

Key Words

community engagement, future search, strategic planning, stakeholder involvement, collaboration, polarization, building trust, school board relations

It has become a bedrock principle in school administration that community engagement is desirable and even essential in improving our schools. In the current era of conflict over school policies and the resulting contentious school board meetings (see, for example, Robertson, 2021 and Carr & Waldron, 2023), community engagement has become both more critical and more difficult to accomplish effectively. The question about how to engage the community may be an obstacle to

superintendents and school districts taking the steps necessary to harness the power of such efforts. While community engagement may enjoy wide acclaim as an essential tool for school districts theoretically, superintendents may be ambivalent about undertaking it in practice. When asked how they feel when they think of community engagement, 65 leaders of State School Administrator Associations created the word cloud shown in Figure 1. (Howick, Axelbank, & Bales, 2023).



While “essential” and other positive words got the most mentions, other responses convey more ambivalence: obligated, divisive[ness], consuming, vulnerable, agitation, challenging, torn, volatile. It is clear from such reactions that these district leaders have mixed feelings about what might be involved with engaging their community. In addition, one can speculate that this doubt may be driven in part by lack of knowledge or experience as to how best to conduct community engagement.

Some authors have attempted to fill this knowledge gap. Hands (2023) and Chadwick

(2004) detail steps and methods that can be taken to effectively engage the community. Hands (2023) examines both macro and micro levels of interpersonal and systemic

relationships in the districts she studied to build a comprehensive model with recommendations. Chadwick’s “Practical Guide for Educators” (2004) surveys various techniques for engaging a community, and develops a generic four-stage process: frame the issue, identify constituent groups, understand constituent perspectives, and develop strategies to encourage constituent action. She describes possible ways to

implement these stages, providing a sort of menu of options. One of the options she outlines is Future Search, the method we investigate in this study.

There have been a number of studies of specific applications of Future Search in schools and other settings (see, for example, Bailey & Dupre, 1992; Warzynski, 2004; Whittaker & Hutchcraft, 2002; Polanyi, 2002; Oels, 2002; Dewey & Carter, 2003). Our search of the literature identified two attempts at systematically examining Future Search by investigating a large number of Future Search conferences. Olsen (2011) studied the impact on the development of leaders who had used Future Search by comparing 54 leaders who had used Future Search in their organizations to 82 leaders who had not. She found that “Leaders who have implemented a Future Search conference in their organization do display more transformational leadership behaviors than leaders who have not implemented Future Search methodology” (p. 85). While examining leadership correlates with Future Search is indeed important, it leaves open the question of the impact on the organization itself.

A comprehensive study of school systems that used the Future Search process is reported in Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson (2005). They provide detailed information on twelve school districts that used Future Search for community engagement and future planning. The districts studied run the gamut from small to large, rural to urban, with a variety of levels of diversity. Each example includes the goals, process, and results of the Future Search.

We embarked on this study to systematically assess how effective Future Search is in fulfilling the goals of the superintendents who decide to engage in the

process. We took advantage of an unusual situation in Wisconsin wherein a large number of school districts have utilized Future Search and therefore provides a ready sample. We decided to use the district superintendents as the study’s subjects since superintendents are the main decision-makers in a school district, and investigating these leaders’ experiences would help other superintendents decide whether Future Search was right for their district. We will first describe Future Search principles and process, outline our methodology, report our results, and then provide some discussion and recommendations.

Future Search

Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010) is a method of planning that aims to discover the common ground that exists in multiple stakeholders and then harnessing this to spur these stakeholders to take action to address needs they identify in their setting. Future Search is based on four principles (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010; p. 5):

1. Get the whole system in the room
2. View the whole system before planning
3. Focus on common ground and the future, not on conflicts and the past
4. Self-management and responsibility for action

Get the whole system in the room

When thinking about which stakeholders to include, Weisbord and Janoff (2010) coin an acronym: who A.R.E. I.N.? (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010; p. 48):

- A people with **A**uthority on the issue
- R people with **R**esources of money, time, energy
- E people with **E**xpertise on the issue
- I people with **I**nformation on the issue
- N people with **N**eed around the issue

The involvement of all stakeholders begins with the formation of a steering committee that plans the Future Search. This committee is made up of 10 -15 people and includes representatives of diverse stakeholders constituting a microcosm of the community. The superintendents interviewed for this research typically included these groups as stakeholders in their Future Search: students, parents, staff, teachers, School Board, local government leaders (e.g., mayor, council), residents with no children in the school, clergy, small business owners, large business leaders, childcare providers, and representatives from the local college or university.

Like Future Search, most methods of community engagement reach outside the

typical boundary of the school system to include community members who still have a stake in the schools. However, interaction *between* the stakeholder groups is a unique feature of Future Search, not present in other models.

View the whole system before planning

Typically, stakeholder groups are very knowledgeable about their part of the system, their “silos.” But when people only know their own part of the system, they are blind to causal relationships that are essential to the systemic ecology. The Indian parable of the six blind men and the elephant is a playful way to understand this problem (Figure 2) (illustration by Hans Møller, used with permission)

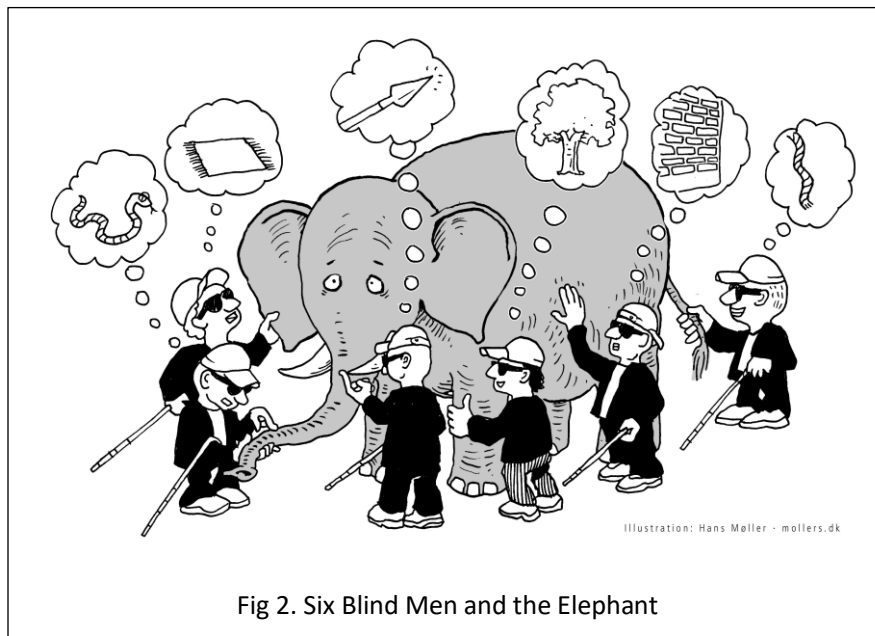


Fig 2. Six Blind Men and the Elephant

While each can describe a part of the animal, they don't understand the whole elephant or understand the interconnectedness of the parts of their system *until they start talking with one another.*

A frequent comment by the superintendents interviewed was that when stakeholders got together and talked with one another, their minds were opened to other perspectives and this greatly reduced

polarization in the district. In turn, this lowered the level of extremism and created opportunities to agree on common priorities.

Focus on common ground and the future, not on conflicts and the past

Future Search entails using past conflicts as *data*, not to be ignored, but also not to be worked on. By keeping the focus on the future that everyone desires, creativity is unleashed, positions are softened, and people find they have more in common than they realized.

There were many pre-existing conflicts in the districts represented by our interview subjects. An example of such a schism involved long-time residents who were resistant to change and newcomers to the community who were eager to see progress and change. During the Future Search Conferences, these two camps found that they both had common interest in the quality education of the students.

And when they learned about challenges to maintaining or improving that quality, they were eager to come together and agreed on effective steps such as improving facilities. By focusing on this common desire, their conflicts faded into the background.

Self-management and responsibility for action

Most of the participant discussions in Future Search occur in groups of eight to twelve people. Each group is asked to select a facilitator, recorder and reporter, and these roles contributed to keeping each group moving and focused. Participants were asked to share these roles throughout the process and, in doing so, participants were responsible for completing each task in a timely manner. This process enabled the district leaders to fully participate in the discussions and empowered the participants to lead their discussions,

reinforcing the principle “do not do for others what they can do for themselves.”

If the four principles are followed carefully, the Future Search process results in a “common ground agenda” of usually 8-12 items to which everyone agrees (a unanimity model, not consensus or majority).

The participants also prioritized these, giving the superintendent and School Board clear direction for what the community wants them to do. Because the stakeholders create the common ground agenda and the priorities, the community has buy-in and strong commitment to implementing it.

Therefore, there is no need to “sell” these plans to stakeholder groups. The superintendents we interviewed commented that it became much easier to pass school funding referenda following the FS because they had a hand in creating the plan and were fully committed to seeing their plan implemented. In addition, when residents questioned why the district was taking some action, the superintendent could always answer, “we are doing this because the community told us they want it.” And this was a reliable way to minimize resistance and obstacles.

The format used most often in the twenty school districts represented in this study takes about 12 hours, typically in two consecutive evening sessions of four hours, followed by the next Saturday morning for the final four hours. The highly interactive and experiential conference is broken into four parts: review of the past, survey of current trends, envisioning a desired future, and discovering common ground. In the process of engaging in these activities, participants most often met in small groups made up of representatives of each stakeholder group.

Research Design and Methods

We contacted all twenty superintendents in Wisconsin who had used Future Search in their districts in the past eight years, asking them if they were willing to be interviewed for this project. The response rate was 100% and all the respondents indicated a willingness to be interviewed. An information sheet was emailed to the subjects, and they were asked to sign a form consenting to be interviewed and to

having their interview recorded and transcribed. Four interviewers were able to schedule nineteen interviews, yielding data on twenty Future Searches (one superintendent had done two Future Searches, one each in two different districts). The interviews took 40-80 minutes and were recorded and transcribed using an online transcription service. See Appendix A for the list of questions that were asked in the interviews.

Results

Basic characteristics of the districts and superintendents

Table 1 shows the basic and demographic characteristics of the districts represented in this study, as reported by the interviewed superintendents (Table 2). Twelve of the twenty districts were self-identified as rural in character, five as suburban, two described as a

combination of suburban and rural, and one classified as suburban and urban. To gauge the socioeconomic character of the districts, we asked what percentage of students qualified for reduced or free lunches. The range was 15% - 57%.

Table 1

Characteristics of the School Districts

District	No. of pupils	No. of buildings	Population-Community	Type of Community Served	% F&R Lunch	Racial/Ethnic Make-up	Political Make-up
1	450	2	1,500	Rural	57	95% White 5% Minority	Conservative
2	780	3	6,000	Rural	23	88% White 12% non-white	More Blue
3	840	2	2,500	Rural	30	96% White	80% Red 20% Blue
4	850	2	12,000	Suburban	<10	mostly White half Jewish	Liberal
5	915	4	4,500	Rural	50	22% Latino <5% Black	slightly more Blue

6	1,031	4	10,000	Rural	40	93% White 2% Black 5% others	Left-leaning
7	1100 ^c	2	8000 ^d	Rural	53	99% white Amish/Mennonite	Conservative
8	1150	2	4,500	Rural	35	95% White	Red
9	1,260	3	5,000	Rural	35	88% White next biggest group is Hispanic, and then Black	historically conservative, but new residents coming from Madison, so now purple
10	1500 ^e	4	4,500	Very Rural	50	70% white 25% Hispanic 5% other	Conservative
11	1,900	3	4,500	Rural	10	very white, growing latino	Red
12	2,200	4	13,000	Suburban/ Urban	30	70% white 10% African- American 20% other	Liberal, Democratic
13	2,300	4	25,000	Rural	15-20	mostly White	Red flavor
14	3,000	7	9,500	Suburban	50	98% white 1.5% Hispanic 0.5% Black	Red, Conservative
15	3,176	5	17,000	Suburban	37	80% White 7% Black 5% Hispanic 4% Asian 4% Indian 1% Pacific Islander 1% unclassified	60% Conservative 40% Progressive
16	4,000	6	30,000	Suburban	17	80% White 20% POC	Blue (by 2020 Election results)

17	4,000	6	22,500	Suburban/ Rural	21	85% White 6% Latino 5% two or more races	Conservative
18	4,500	6	40,000	Suburban	20	90% white 10% Black 5% Asian 5% Hispanic	Politically Conservative but socially progressive
19	5,200	9	30,000	Rural	37	94% White then 2 or more races then Hispanic	Purple
20	9,064	11	74,849	Rural and Suburban	35	Mostly white	Marquette - Blue Surrounding - Red

Note. All information provided here is based on the information each superintendent provided in their interview.

^a Red is assumed to mean conservative/right, blue is assumed to mean liberal/left, purple is assumed to mean roughly evenly split between red and blue.

^b 1 village, 3 townships. ^c 20% are transient each year. ^d Including prisoners, estimated 5000 not including prisoners.

^e Very transient population, e.g., 100 students would leave in October and 100 new ones would arrive in April.

^f Includes 3 tiny villages.

^g This is the only Future Search that was in Michigan. The superintendent was responsible for an unusual area covering 9000 square miles and includes 13 public Local Education Agencies (LEA), one large district accounting for 3000 students, 1 public school academy, 1 private school, 16 towns/villages, 24 Townships, including one district with only 36 students.

Table 2

District	No. of Years as Superintendent	No. of Years in This District	District	No. of Years as Superintendent	No. of Years in This District
1	12	12	11	15	8
2	6	6	12	13	6
3	3	3	13	5	3
4	4	4	14	6	6
5	18	6	15	6	6
6	4	4	16	?	6
7	6	6	17	1	1
8	10	6	18	5	1
9	7	7	19	9	5
10	17	17	20	Four so far	3

Table 3

Year and Attendance at Future Search

District Year the Future Search was held
No. attendees

1	2017	150	11	2015	125
2	2018	92	12	2017	120
3	2021	70-80	13	2017	over 100
4	2021	105-125	14	2016	90
5	2021	over 80	15	2023	100
6	2022	80	16	2018	100
7	2019	90-100	17	2023	225
8	2019	115	18	2023	145 evenings, 125 Saturday
9	2016	120	19	2017	104
10	2016	100	20	2021	75

Note. All data shown is based on information each superintendent provided in their interview.

All these districts would be considered small to medium size, with a little over half (eleven) of them serving cities and towns with under 10,000 residents, and the largest has a population of nearly 75,000. All but three of the districts encompass multiple towns, with one of them serving a very large geographic area made up of 54 different governing entities (towns, villages, townships). These districts all serve overwhelmingly white populations—nearly all of them were at least 80% white, with only two having about 70% white residents.

Decision to conduct a future search

Fifteen of the superintendents learned about Future Search through programs of the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA). Nine of them specifically cited the WASDA training for new superintendents, and four more said that they learned about Future Search at WASDA

conferences. Some had previous experience with Future Search or the Future Search facilitator (second author D.H.). The idea to use a Future Search process in their districts originated with sixteen of the superintendents, while three district School Boards initiated the idea, and one inherited the idea from a predecessor who had started the process.

The rationale for future search

All the superintendents were interested in engaging the community served by their districts, to align their efforts with the values and desires of the residents, and this was the primary reason for using FS. In particular, they expressed a desire to hear from a wide array of voices in their communities. This comment is representative of this goal:

We need to get the right people here at the table and really go through what does the community expect from us ... And so [we were] really trying to gain clarity there and get everybody at the table in a respectful and controlled way.

Some of the districts were facing decisions on constructing new buildings or were anticipating the need to put a referendum in front of their community for funding. A number of the superintendents reported that previous referenda had failed, and they saw the FS as a way to help the community support the referendum and to help make decisions about how the funding would be used. For example:

We were actually going through a significant land purchase. A lot of the conversation was about, what's going to be built on the land? Should it be a high school? Should it be a middle school... And I felt like we were really missing the boat, that we shouldn't be talking about what goes on the land. We should first be talking about, who are we, as a district, who do we want to be.

A number of the superintendents had conducted or considered doing surveys and a few used focus groups or more informal ways to get input from the community. But the interviewees cited the limitations of such efforts, chiefly that they could not ensure that they were getting a representative sample of their community. Three said there had not been any previous efforts at community engagement.

Thoughts on return on investment

Funding for the Future Searches came from either general funds or professional development funds. Quite a few of the interviewees commented that they were at first concerned about the cost of hiring a consultant to facilitate the Future Search process. When asked about their thoughts on the return on this investment, they were unanimous in expressing that it was a good way to utilize funds. A number also mentioned the investment of time required, for example:

[It was an] investment ... in time. That became a pretty heavy focus of a number of my staff members, including myself, that had committed to planning and working on logistics. We invested a considerable amount of manpower beyond that... but I think it is a worthy investment when you consider ... that you had community members who were now informed and educated.

Outcomes of the future search

All the superintendents we interviewed went into the Future Search with clear ideas about the outcomes they were hoping for. These are representative of the desires of the group:

... build relationship with community, identify what students need in order to be successful, [create] opportunities that will meet the needs and aspirations of the community and district, etc.

The big thing was, one, to bring the community together... Secondly, to see where the board and the admin team's thoughts aligned with the community. And the third big outcome was to develop a strategic plan.

The interview subjects were asked to what degree Future Search accomplished their desired outcomes, and 100% of the responses were characterized by immediate and succinct expressions of satisfaction, for example: “Awesome.” “Nailed that.” “It was a work of art.” “Exceeded my expectations across the board.” Most of the respondents described ways that they were able to turn the priorities into achievable and measurable steps.

Unexpected outcomes

One of the common experiences of Future Search is that ideas emerge that could not be anticipated. This is due to getting people together who don't normally talk with one another, causing synergy—the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The superintendents we interviewed cited a number of surprising results.

I didn't know that the facilities issue was going to get the priority it did—it was the #1 priority. I also didn't expect the passion in the conversations—it was very real.

More emphasis on mental health - then they had some really good ideas on how we could even do it more. And even the kids had really great ideas.

I was surprised at how strong Social Emotional Learning came out from our community. Not just getting services in school, mental health providers within the school. They wanted something more. People wanted us to do more community partnerships, to use the brain power of the people in our community.

A number of superintendents described how important it was that students were included as participants. They felt that the community really listened to the voices of the students. And they expressed surprise at some of the students' suggestions and feedback:

Especially the high school kids: “yes, I got a great education there. But sometimes it's just really boring. You've got to do more to engage us.”

The students wanted less technology. They wanted more paper and pencil.

We solicited any negative or disappointing outcomes and twelve of the superintendents responded that there were no negative results. One superintendent expressed disappointment that more Hispanic families did not participate. A surprising result that one interviewee mentioned was that academics was not prioritized higher by his district's community.

Long-term Impact of the future search on the districts

All of our interview subjects reported profound positive impacts on their districts that they attributed directly to the Future Search process. These included improved alignment between district and community, and the district representing the values of the community, represented by these sample comments:

We actually came together - very much in alignment in regards to what we really want to have outcome for kids and what we want our District to look like, now and five years from now.

We had common values after the Future Search, and there was clarity in those values.

A number of the superintendents reported that, even though Future Search is not intended to be a conflict resolution process, it nonetheless led to healing fractures or divisions in their community.

You always have your naysayers. And we purposely tried to invite the worst naysayers, the people that are always complaining about what we did or how we did it. I think it did heal some of those.

We had our own community members who disagree with one another, who [were] still sitting at the same table and having a conversation expressing their opinion, but doing it in a respectful way.

One of the most striking impacts reported by our subjects was the way that Future Search facilitated the community being supportive of the school district. This was most vividly demonstrated by the ability to pass referenda, even when past efforts had failed. This is particularly noteworthy because passing a referendum is not a stated purpose of Future Search.

The final outcome was a referendum ... And then we passed the referendum during the pandemic. In sixty years, they had not passed anything that would progress the buildings or the district for kids and they're learning.

The previous administration said we will never ever go for an increase to the Special Education millage [a type of property tax]. And that was a value that came out of our Future Search. On May 2, we passed a \$100 million millage over the next 20 years, money that will all go to the Special Education costs in our 13 local districts.

Two hallmarks of Future Search, “getting the whole system in the room” and helping stakeholders to come to a shared understanding of their system leads to elements of the community learning about each other. This was seen as a very valuable impact of Future Search for our interviewees.

I think baked within the process was that kind of learning about each other. ... And as you have people in-person around the table talking to each other, I think that certainly builds empathy.

You have a lot of diversity within that room. - age, culturally, ethnically, professionally. A lot of different types of folks in a room. And it does allow for kind of hearing, exchange of thought and perspectives that maybe align or don't align with yours. So, I think that's certainly a good outcome there, that it introduces people to others in your community.

Given the inevitable turnover of district and school leadership personnel, and Board members, sustainability of goals and continuity across changing leadership would be very important for the stability of a district's schools. Future Search aids in this continuity, providing a stable set of goals and priorities, set by the community and independent of whomever is on the Board or in the superintendent's chair.

A product of getting diverse stakeholders together is that people talk with those whom they would not otherwise interact. Such new contact often leads to innovative and unexpected results. The experience of these superintendents confirms this impact of the Future Search process, particularly as evidenced by new partnerships and programs. Some examples were a new learning center in auto-mechanics and diesel engines, expanded relations with the Chamber of Commerce leading to youth apprenticeships, a partnership with an Audubon Nature Center, and business partners for a technology education center.

Future Search helped in developing a strategic plan

Nearly all the superintendents that we interviewed saw the Future Search as integral to their efforts to develop a strategic plan for their districts. Most often the priorities that emerged from the Future Search became the basis for the specific action steps incorporated in the subsequent strategic plan. Superintendents found this enormously helpful to them, especially knowing that the community would now be supporting the actions needed, including funding and volunteers.

The impact of the future search on the superintendents and their job

All the superintendents interviewed for this study noted the impact of doing the Future Search on them personally and professionally. Most said that it made their job easier in some ways, but also harder in other ways. The Future Search made the path to implementing new programs and policies smoother because the community identified those priorities and therefore supported actions to bring them to fruition. But because of the transparency and accountability inherent in the Future Search process, many of the superintendents felt pressure to bring results. Despite this pressure, which may have made their job more rigorous, they welcomed the stimulation and energy it imparted to them.

In addition, some commented about the time and work required both before and after the FS as another aspect that may have made their job more challenging.

One subject noted the profound impact that the FS had on his feeling about his job: "I remember driving home after that last afternoon and talking to my wife. And I said, this is why I wanted to become a superintendent."

Bottom line: Would the superintendents do another future search and would they recommend it to colleagues?

The superintendents we interviewed were unanimous in saying that they would recommend the Future Search process to their peers. The comments were characterized by enthusiastic endorsement, such as, "On a scale of one to ten, I'd give it a ten." The experience garnered from doing the Future Search led all these superintendents to say that they would do it again. Most said that after about five years the priorities need to be refreshed, and so that would be an appropriate time frame to consider conducting another one.

They also learned important lessons from their experience that would ensure success.

Find the right people for your design team. Get the influential people in your community involved.

Don't be afraid of the dissenting voices. It's important that you have the dissenting voices around the table.

Make sure you're setting aside enough time to get the work done. I think that it was a lot more of a marathon for prep than what I was expecting.

You got to trust the process. And whatever your community comes up with, that's the right answer.

Despite their enthusiastic recommendations, the superintendents offered some caveats. There has to be willingness on the part of the district administration team and School Board to act on the priorities that emerged from the Future Search. There also has to be a commitment to invest the time required – there is no shortcut possible in that regard. And if the superintendent is hesitant about being fully engaged with the process it would not work well.

Discussion and Recommendations

The experiences of these superintendents from Wisconsin school districts strongly suggest that Future Search is a powerful process for engaging the community to set the direction of the district, consistent with the values of the people living there.

In so doing, the districts could then rely on their community's support, something that was not always available in the past. This facilitated the creation of actionable strategic plans and eased the passage of referendums. New partnerships and programs were created that had not been considered or possible before. While these results are clear in this sample, some limitations of this study need to be noted: 1) a limited sample, 2) the absence of a control group, 3) and the anecdotal, as contrasted with measurable, nature of the data. These limitations point to promising directions for future research.

Looking at the school districts in this sample raises the question of whether the results could be generalizable to settings with different characteristics. Would Future Search

be as effective in an urban school district serving a larger and more diverse community? Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson's (2005) comprehensive study of twelve cases of Future Search in school districts includes examples in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Minneapolis.

The range of district size in their survey, from 3,870 students to approximately 300,000 students, covers situations far larger than the districts in our sample. In fact, there are only five districts in our sample larger than the smallest one in their study. The results described by Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson are similar to what our subjects described.

Therefore, we believe that our results are likely to be generalizable to larger, and urban, school districts. Any time a study lacks a control group, caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions of causality. A comparison to a control group would be extremely valuable, and we recommend such a project for future research.

An examination of changes in student test scores, graduation rate, faculty turnover,

parent satisfaction, or other measures of school performance would help assess the impact of Future Search. A future study using such measures, and comparing districts that use Future Search with those that don't would be a powerful way to assess the efficacy of Future Search.

Given that our data provides convincing evidence for its effectiveness, given that Future Search has been used for over forty years, and given that there has already been a book written about its application to school districts (Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson's, 2005), why has its application not been more widespread?

In Wisconsin the New Superintendents Academy program has been instrumental in sparking interest in Future Search. But such exposure has not been apparent in other states. In addition, we asked our subjects whether they had any exposure to techniques of community engagement during their academic training.

Only one of the nineteen superintendents we interviewed reported having any significant training in community engagement. One described guest speakers who emphasized its importance. Others said that they sought extra training in strategic planning.

The overwhelming sense from these interviews was that the training they received did not adequately prepare them to engage their communities, a critically important component of the superintendent's role. A final recommendation that emerges from our study is

for graduate programs in Educational Leadership to include specific training in effective techniques of community engagement such as Future Search.

Conclusions

The results of our systematic study of Future Search as a tool of community engagement for school districts, as reported by the superintendents in those districts, are unambiguously positive. The superintendents report that conducting the Future Search led to overwhelmingly positive results, beyond their expectations.

They report significant increase in community support for the schools, which often resulted in the passing of funding referenda. The districts were able to create new partnerships with other community organizations.

Divisions in the districts' communities were healed. The Future Search led to clear priorities that became the basis for strategic plans that had the full support of the community, easing implementation of these priorities. Developing these community-determined long-term priorities eased the transition to new leadership.

In sum, the superintendents we interviewed felt that the Future Search achieved the goals they had for the process, and unanimously recommended Future Search, and would do it again.

Author Biographies

Jeffrey Axelbank is a licensed psychologist in New Jersey consulting to organizations on such issues as community engagement, strategic planning involving all stakeholders, conflict resolution, developing high-performing teams, and family business issues. He also supervises doctoral students at Rutgers University. E-mail: jeff@jeffreyaxelbankpsyd.com

Drew Howick has an extensive background in designing and facilitating planning sessions, helping organizations implement strategic changes and coaching leaders. In the last twenty years he has partnered with over fifty school districts who have successfully sponsored a Future Search community conversation. E-mail: drew@howickassociates.com

References

- Bailey, D. & Dupre, S. (1992). The Future Search Conference as a vehicle for educational change: A Shared vision for Will Rogers Middle School, Sacramento, California. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 28(4), 510-519.
- Carr, N. & Waldron, L. (2023). How school board meetings became flashpoints for anger and chaos across the country. *Pro Publica*, July 19, 2023. <https://projects.propublica.org/school-board-meetings-flashpoints-for-anger-chaos>
- Chadwick, K.G. (2004). *Improving schools through community engagement: A Practical guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Dewey, J. D. & Carter, T. J. (2003). Exploring the future of HRD: The First Future Search Conference for a profession. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 5(3), 245-256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422303254627>
- Hands, C.M. (2023). *Pathways to community engagement in education: Collaboration in diverse, urban neighbourhoods*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-33001-8>
- Howick, D., Axelbank, J. & Bales, J. (2023). Meaningful community engagement: Bringing together the whole system. *American Association of School Administrators State Leadership Conference*. San Diego, CA.
- Hurworth, R. (2007). The use of (future) search conferences as a qualitative improvement tool - Three Australian examples. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 7(2), pp. 52-62. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0702052>
- Oels, A. (2002). Investigating the emotional roller-coaster ride: a case study-based assessment of the Future Search Conference design. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 19, 347-355.
- Olsen, B.C. (2011). *Transformational Leadership Behaviors Among Future Search Leaders*. (Publication No. 3466612) (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University) ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Polanyi, M. (2002). Communicative action in practice: Future Search and the pursuit of an open, critical and non-coercive large-group process. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 19, 357-366.
- Robertson, C. (2021). While politics consume school board meetings, a very different crisis festers. *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/us/central-bucks-school-board-politics-pennsylvania.html?smid=url-share>
- Schweitz, R., Martens, K., and Aronson, N. (Eds.) (2005). *Future search in school district change: Connection, community, and results*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education.

- Warzynski, C.C. (2004). Future-Search conferences at Cornell University. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 123, 105-112.
- Weisbord, M., and Janoff, S. (2010). *Future search: Getting the Whole System in the Room for Vision, Commitment, and Action*. (3rd edition). San Francisco: Berret-Kohler Publishers, Inc.
- Whittaker, J. & Hutchcraft, I. (2002). The Role of Future Search in rural regeneration: Process, context, and practice. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 19, 339-345.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

I. Basic Info

A. What is the size of your district?

1. # pupils
2. # of towns or municipalities that your district serves
3. # buildings
4. Population of community you serve

B. How would you describe the character of your district?

1. Urban/Suburban/Rural?
2. Social economic status? What percent qualify for free/reduced rate lunches?
3. Racial/Ethnic Demographics?
4. Political breakdown?
5. Are there any significant or defining fractures/divisions in the community?
6. What are the conflictual issues in your community?

C. How long have you been a superintendent? How long in this district?

D. When did you do a FS? How many FS's have you done?

II. Decision to do Future Search

- A. How were you introduced to FS, where did you hear about it?
- B. Whose idea was it to do a Future Search– you, the School Board, both?
- C. How would you describe the state of community-school district engagement before you did a Future Search?
- D. What was the rationale for doing FS, what was your thought process about why do it?
- E. If this was your idea, how did you navigate getting the School Board on board?
- F. What were your anxieties, concerns, worries, hesitations going into it?
- G. How did you think about the necessary investment of money and time? What was your thoughts about the return on investment?
- H. Where did the funding come from to do this – what line in the budget? Other funding source?
- I. What other visioning or community engagement processes did you consider (e.g., survey, focus groups)? What other visioning processes have you done?

III. The Future Search

- A. What was the schedule? (how many days, which days and what hours)
- B. Who were the stakeholders – what were the stakeholder groups that were invited?
- C. How many people attended?

IV. Future Search Outcomes

- A. What were the desired outcomes that you had for the FS?
- B. How well did Future Search produce the outcomes you desired and expected?
- C. Were there any unexpected outcomes, positive or negative?
- D. What was the impact/outcome/effectiveness of the FS along these variables?
 - 1. Alignment between district and community
 - 2. District reflecting the values of the community
 - 3. Healing fractures/divisions in the community
 - 4. Getting the community behind the school
 - 5. Engaging the community
 - 6. Bringing the community together, elements of the community learning about each other
 - 7. Sustainability/continuity across changing leadership
 - 8. Innovative/unexpected results
 - 9. Helpful input to creating a strategic plan
- E. What did you learn about the values of the community?

V. Long Term Outcomes

- A. What happened next after the FS?
- B. To what degree are you still engaged in the process started at the FS?
- C. To what degree are community fractures healed?
- D. How would you assess the impact of the FS on you?
- E. In what ways did the Future Search make the job of superintendent easier or more difficult?

- F. Do you plan to do another FS? Do them regularly?
- G. What advice would you give a superintendent wanting to do some community engagement?
- H. What kind of training did you get in community engagement?
- I. How strongly would you recommend Future Search?
- J. What advice would you give to a superintendent considering Future Search?