

Systems Change at WestEd

Six Guiding Principles



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WestEd is committed to taking on the most pressing and enduring challenges in education, human development, and other social sectors. Addressing these deeply ingrained challenges requires a keen understanding of the systems within which they exist and how these systems are designed to produce and sustain the existing outcomes. To bring about equitable, lasting systems change that transforms opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for children, youth, families, and communities, WestEd is guided by the six principles outlined in this brief.

The brief begins by defining systems change and what it entails. It then describes a set of principles that guide systems-change work at WestEd—whether partnering with a client to facilitate incremental improvements within a particular system or collaborating across sectors to design and implement large-scale, cross-system change efforts that lead to sustained population-level results.

Defining Systems Change

A *system* is a set of interconnected parts serving a common purpose and functioning as a whole. *Systems change* occurs when the parts of a system and the relationships between them are intentionally changed to produce significantly different and improved conditions and results. Systems change is both a process and an

outcome. It can take place within and across sectors (e.g., health care, education) and institutions (e.g., school districts, state agencies).

To bring about systems change, we must apply systems thinking,¹ disciplined inquiry, and collective action. These activities lead to a deep understanding of the factors and interactions—policies, practices, resource flows, relationships,

¹ Systems thinking is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how different parts of a system relate to each other, how systems work and evolve over time, and what outcomes systems produce. With a systems perspective, individuals and organizations can better identify patterns, feedback loops, and leverage points for positive change (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, n.d.; Senge, 2006).

power dynamics, and mental models—within complex systems that promote or hinder desired experiences and outcomes (Kania et al., 2018). Ultimately, we use this understanding to generate solutions that lead to radically better results.

Guiding Principles

The following six principles guide how we approach systems change at WestEd, particularly in our work with systems that support children, youth, families, and communities:

1. Embrace system complexity.
2. Invest in leadership for systems change.
3. Partner with those who are closest to the challenge.
4. Attend to context.
5. Understand and address root causes through inquiry, iteration, and multifaceted solutions.
6. Prioritize alignment and coherence within and across sectors and institutions.

These six interrelated principles draw on scholarly articles on systems change, as well as the insights and experiences of WestEd staff supporting and facilitating systems change work. While the breadth and scope of projects at WestEd that focus on systems change vary depending on the unique needs and contexts of our clients and partners, all are informed by these common principles.



1. **Embrace system complexity.**

Systems change requires an understanding of complex systems, including the difference between simple, complicated, and complex problems:

- **Simple problems** are straightforward and have clear solutions. They often involve basic cause-and-effect relationships and can be easily understood.
- **Complicated problems** are more involved and may have multiple interconnected elements. They often require expertise or specialized knowledge to navigate.
- **Complex problems** are characterized by uncertainty, dynamic interactions, and unpredictability. They involve numerous interconnected factors and often lack clear cause-and-effect relationships.

Addressing these different types of problems requires navigating different types of change. *Technical change* involves solving problems using known methods and established practices. *Adaptive change* involves addressing challenges that require new ways of thinking, learning, behaving, and adapting to new and unfamiliar circumstances (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Systems change also requires understanding the conditions within a system that hold problems in place. Problems within a system are generated and reproduced by system conditions situated at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels (National Equity Project, n.d.-b). Systems are composed of *explicit conditions*—policies, practices, and resource flows—and *implicit*

conditions—relationships, power dynamics, and mental models (Kania et al., 2018). Attending to these different yet interconnected conditions is fundamental to transformational change.



2. **Invest in leadership for systems change.**

Leaders set the vision, model behavior, and make decisions about policies, practices, and resources that either support or inhibit systems change. Leaders also influence the interpersonal conditions that make change possible, including relational trust, power dynamics, safety, belonging, and inclusion. Because leaders play such a critical role, it is important to invest in developing their skills, knowledge, and dispositions for leading systems change. Effectively leading a systems change effort requires embracing complexity, including discerning between simple, complicated, and complex problems and navigating a great deal of uncertainty and iteration when moving toward a common goal (National Equity Project, n.d.-a; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Wheatley, 2006). Systems-change leadership involves a number of competencies, including applying systems thinking, focusing on listening and learning, facilitating collective sense-making, paying attention to context and relational dynamics, and having self-awareness (National Equity Project, n.d.-a).



3. **Partner with those who are closest to the challenge.**

Systems change efforts are more likely to be equitable and sustainable when they are carried out in partnership with those who are closest to

the system challenge being addressed, including those who are impacted by the system and those who operate within it. Individuals and communities closest to the system challenge often have firsthand experiences with its complexities, nuances, and day-to-day impact on their lives. This proximity creates opportunities for deeper understanding of the root causes, dynamics, and interconnections within a system, offering insights that may not be obvious to external observers. Effective participatory systems change efforts require facilitating transparent and accessible partnership strategies, building relational trust, noticing and navigating power dynamics, and shifting mental models toward valuing and learning from local knowledge and experience (Valdez et al., 2023).



4. **Attend to context.**

Systems change efforts must attend to the unique contexts in which the systems exist and operate with the understanding that no one place is the same. The priorities in one community are not necessarily the same priorities in another, nor should the change process itself be designed to be exactly the same (Valdez et al., 2023). Effective systems change efforts involve responding to the unique history; relationships; and political, economic, and geographic contexts of each system and the community it serves.



5. **Understand and address root causes through inquiry, iteration, and multifaceted solutions.**

Current problems and their root causes must be deeply understood before they can be solved. The first step in understanding a problem and the system producing it involves deep inquiry into what might be contributing to the problem. This sort of inquiry may include mapping a system or process, exploring existing data sources, or engaging in empathy work to build understanding of the experiences and motivations of those closest to the problem (Bryk et al., 2015). This inquiry may not always result in a definitive answer—while cause and effect may be more obvious for simple problems, a true root cause may remain unknown for complex problems (Ortiz Guzman, 2021). Once a problem is more fully understood, potential solutions for addressing the identified root causes can be prototyped, implemented, and iterated. Complex problems generally cannot be solved through ready-made solutions. Rather, they require complex problem-solving that includes learning, innovating, experimenting, and navigating ambiguity and uncertainty.



6. **Prioritize alignment and coherence within and across sectors and institutions.**

In the context of systems change, *alignment* occurs when all policies, practices, processes, resources, and roles in a system work together in similar or consistent ways. *Coherence* refers to integration and interconnection between the parts of one or multiple systems in a way that mutually reinforces shared understanding and overall progress toward a clear vision and set of goals. When systems change efforts are aligned and coherent within and across sectors and institutions, they are more likely to be relevant, effective, and sustainable (Walrond & Romer, 2021).

These six interrelated principles of systems change guide and anchor WestEd projects across a wide variety of systems and contexts, and they support WestEd's work in service of equitable, sustained, and significantly improved outcomes.

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