



# Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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## CHAPTER 16

## A Nation of Locksmiths: Transforming Our Education System to Guarantee All of America's Children a Quality Education

*Mary Hatwood Futrell*

*“Some see a door locked and walk away.*

*Others see the door locked and look for a key.*

*Still others see the door locked and make a key to open the door.”*

*(Unknown)*

When America decided more than 200 years ago to establish a public system of education, a critical part of that decision most likely focused on why we educate and how to educate citizens for a changing world. They knew then what we know now, that the primary focus of education is to prepare American citizens for their roles in a continuously evolving democratic, capitalistic society.

We have come a long way since the Northwest Ordinance Act in 1787 (Cremin, 1982), which authorized the creation of schools to serve the public good. Today, thanks to generations of actions at all levels of government, every American has access to education through our public school system. Indeed, our universal education system is one of the fundamental foundations of our democratic society and of our economic system and has played a major role in making it possible for all Americans to be part of our society.

But, does every American have access to a quality education, to an education that will prepare them for the global, knowledge-based society in which we are living today and which will continue to define who we are in the future? As a nation, we have struggled to fulfill our commitment to provide not only access to education, but access to equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. And, as a result, we have made considerable progress, as evidenced by America's leading role in our global society, especially within the world economy.

At the same time, we continue to face challenges, which I call “wicked problems,” such as, how do we close the achievement gap that persists within our increasingly diverse student population? Can the educative process provide a core curriculum without ignoring or diminishing the need for additional curricula that are responsive to the different learning styles, needs, and interests of students? How can we change schools and simultaneously improve the quality of education they provide? How can and will technology be used to rethink the paradigm that has defined the organizational and philosophical foundations of our education system for more than a century? Some will see these and other similar challenges as negatives. I view them as positives, as opportunities to work together to redesign our education system to educate more effectively the people of America.

We live in a changing world, a world in which well-educated citizens will be in greater demand at every level of society. In order to answer the questions above, we need to first ask one question in particular: “Why do we educate?” And, by educate, I do not mean simply teaching the basics. That is a critical component of the educative process, but for what purpose do we prepare our young people to be citizens, leaders, and workers? What do our citizens need to know to be viable players in this complex, multi-cultural, highly competitive global society? Thus, the question is not whether each one of us will be part of that debate, but rather, if we will be prepared to actively engage in it.

Yes, our students need to demonstrate better mastery of science, math, and technology, but that will not be sufficient. We need to expand not narrow our curriculum to ensure that all Americans have a better understanding of the world. Unfortunately, as we all well know, reports indicate that, because of the No Child Left Behind Act, many school districts are doing just that—dramatically narrowing their curriculum to teach to the adequate yearly progress requirements outlined in that legislation. In order to achieve the goal of enhancing understanding and appreciation of our global society, the curriculum should be enriched, not depleted.

Let me be more specific. We need, for example, to start in primary school, certainly no later than middle school, to teach our children to speak another language and to understand the geography and culture of other nations. We need to ensure that our children are equipped with the “tools” to be independent thinkers, as well as have the communicative, social, and work skills to be team players, whether here at home or abroad.

To achieve these goals, teachers must be key players in the entire decision-making change process, from the beginning to the end. Are educators—teachers, school counselors, administrators, and teacher educators—prepared and willing to assume the role of key players to help rethink the education paradigm, or are educators still being prepared for the industrial era that is long past? Is there support and political will to redesign and restructure the public education system? Are we willing to dismantle the top-down administrative structures and silos that currently define our education system?

The model of schools as cubicles—in which teachers teach their classes in isolation using the didactic method, or where subjects are taught as isolated disciplines—is no longer the most practical or effective way to teach and learn. Further, in too many classrooms, students are isolated as “independent” learners. Students today need to understand the interdisciplinary relationship between, for example, technology, English, history, and biology. To accomplish this, courses might be taught by teams of teachers using strategies like block scheduling or mediated learning that would allow more time for students to develop strong social and academic foundations and to learn how to learn together through more interactive, team-based opportunities. In such environments, students would discover how to do research, synthesize their findings, and effectively communicate the answers. Thus, they would have more opportunities to become self-motivated and inquisitive, to understand how different subjects interact, to become more confident leaders in their learning environment, and to become life-long learners.

Another segment of our education paradigm that needs to be addressed if we are to improve education is the leadership structure. Are school leaders prepared to share leadership responsibilities? Are teachers still regarded as very tall children? Are schools and school districts willing to empower teachers (one of their greatest resources) to be part of the team to identify challenges that need to be addressed, and to implement strategies to improve schools and, thus, the education of our children? In other words, are members of the teaching profession, policymakers, and the public willing and ready to take the necessary actions to redefine that structure to more effectively educate our children for the challenges of the knowledge-based globalized society in which we live? Is it within our reach to challenge our children to achieve today's promises and those of the future? Is that possible in the way our society, especially our schools, is structured?

This conversation could not be timelier. This year, nationwide K-12 enrollments reached a historic high of 55,000,000 students and are projected to reach 57 million by 2010. The same is true of higher education enrollment, which is expected to grow by three million students—from 15 to 18 million—by 2015, at the undergraduate level alone (Institute for Higher Education Policy, April 2006). Of those three million students, 80 percent most likely will come from racial and language minority groups. Will those students, in particular those from minority or poor backgrounds, be able to afford a postsecondary education at a two or four-year institution? Will they be prepared to master the curriculum? This challenge is reinforced by the fact that today, over 80 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require at least some postsecondary education. With these figures in mind, as the United States becomes increasingly diverse, can we afford not to educate all Americans and educate them better than any previous generation?

Whether we are preparing policymakers or policemen, corporate leaders or salesmen, astronauts or artists, counselors or chefs, educators or engineers, a quality education for all is the key to ensuring that the United States will continue to be a primary leader in our globalized world. We, therefore, need to transform our education system—prekindergarten through graduate school—in order to guarantee that every American has access to quality education and to ensure that they are prepared to be life-long learners. Our ability and determination to fulfill that transformation needs to become a national priority. The education citizens receive today should enhance their quality of life, help them adapt in a constantly changing society, and help define what type of society we want and will become.

Let me assure you that the issue of education is not simply an American debate—it is a global debate and a top priority around the world. As Thomas Friedman, author of the book, *The World is Flat* (2005), said, “The more I cover foreign affairs, the more I wish I had studied education in college, because the more I travel, the more I find that the most heated debates revolve around education.” The strongest nations will be those that invest in education to build on the interrelationship between human potential and the political, economical, and social viability of their people. They will be those nations which examine their people and their society and determine what knowledge and skills are necessary for them to survive and grow, and contribute to a better quality of life.

At times like these, educators at all levels bear a particular responsibility to help others respond to the mosaic of changes and challenges impacting our society. To successfully

address any of these issues requires commitment and courage on the part of each of us. It is our professional responsibility to help redesign our system of education and to work together to ensure that it effectively fulfills its purpose of teaching the children of America so that they understand the value of education and are prepared to be educated throughout their lives.

The challenges before us—institutional, professional, and personal—are not new. They did not recently bubble to the top of the pot. Whether it be a once in a lifetime catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina or the steady influx of immigrants into our society, we have been through these natural and cultural changes before. As tumultuous as they may be, they help reiterate the defining characteristics of America, past, present, and future. On the international level, globalization is a reflection of the continuous evolution of who we are as a people, as a society, as a world. Again, the challenges we face are not unique to any one particular part of our country or the world. Nevertheless, they impact each of us and all of us.

Yet, we should not need a disaster or demographic revolution to understand the need to transform our education system to continually expand access to and enhance the quality of schooling. Education is not stagnant. Education is vibrant; it is constantly evolving. On the one hand, it must be protected, but it also must be cultivated to meet the changing social, economic, and political needs of our society. And, that requires hard work from all of us.

As I have stated throughout this paper, how well we sustain the viability of our nation will be a reflection of how well we understand the role of education in positioning the United States to be a key player in our modern global village. For almost three decades, we have had national conversations about reforming our education system. While those conversations have been ongoing, and heated, they have been fragmented and have not brought about the necessary transformative results.

At the same time, we recognize that much of what we have accomplished as a nation has occurred because education is, and continues to be, a major foundation of our democracy and, in particular, our economy. Educating people has enabled us to address successfully the myriad challenges that changed us from an agrarian to an industrial, and now, to a knowledge-based society. And, as we accept and adjust to this transformation, key players need to work together to not simply rebuild the same system or correct deficiencies. We need to work together to truly transform our schools to educate more effectively all of the nation's citizens, particularly our children, for they are the future of America.

We need to acknowledge the fact that whether we like it or not, our students are not achieving as well academically as they should and that there are glaring academic disparities among students in schools all across this country. Unfortunately, for example, the fragmentation that defines too many curricula in our schools is not assuring all students that educational foundation or equality of educational opportunity. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that changes throughout our society—economic, social, and political—are placing greater demands on our schools and the teaching profession.

So, what would I do to improve the quality of education in America? First and foremost, I would encourage America to reaffirm its commitment to ensuring that every citizen has the knowledge, skills, and experiences to improve their quality of life, fulfill their responsibilities as citizens, and enhance our national development. To respond to this pledge, we should start, I believe, by addressing five key areas:

### **1. Focus more on student learning**

Provide every child access to free, quality preschool starting at age three. Programs should be designed to help prepare children developmentally and socially for formal schooling.

Fulfill the pledge that every child will attend a school that is well-equipped, safe, and staffed with highly qualified teachers. Each child should be taught a well-defined, rigorous curriculum with the focus on student learning.

Encourage students to assume more responsibility for their learning. Support students' efforts to be more avid learners.

Support students needing extra assistance through tutoring and mentoring programs.

Increase parental involvement. Programs especially designed for parents who need help with their child's schooling should be provided.

### **2. Strengthen and enrich the curriculum**

Implement a core curriculum, especially through 8th grade. Ensure that the educational foundation of all students, whether they end up pursuing an academic, general, or vocational track, will be predicated upon a solid academic core. Students as a result will be equipped with a greater capability to successfully function in our knowledge-based, multi-cultural, multilingual global society. Core subjects should include mathematics, science, English/language arts, history, the arts, and technology, and should be heavily supplemented by world geography, world history, and foreign languages.

Ensure that all course content is rigorous, coherent, and clearly sequenced from one grade level to the next.

Align curricula and assessment standards. Ensure that educators (especially teachers and school administrators), students, and parents are fully aware of and understand what the standards are, how they will be applied, and the consequences of failing to meet them. Schools and school districts need to align curricula, content, and instructional and assessment standards so that all children are assured the educational foundation they need to demonstrate not only mastery of the subjects they are taught, but how to use what they have learned to further educate themselves. Require that teachers and administrators know how to disaggregate the data in order to improve the curriculum, teaching and learning.

### **3. Honor and fulfill the promise that every child will be taught by a “highly qualified teacher.”**

Recruit and place only highly qualified, certified, professionally-prepared teachers in classrooms. Stop by-passing the certification process and placing non-certified teachers in our schools. Require every teacher to be professionally prepared to teach and able to demonstrate successfully mastery of content, as well as a repertoire of pedagogical skills and dispositional values.

Require all new teachers to complete a two-year induction program before they are issued certification.

Place more National Board certified teachers and other exemplary teachers in low performing schools. This recommendation is particularly critical in light of the fact that research shows that poor and minority students are far more likely to be assigned teachers who have not been professionally prepared to teach, are teaching out of their content area, and/or have not demonstrated that they are exemplary teachers.

Recruit high-performing administrators to provide instructional leadership and who understand how to help teachers address their instructional needs. These administrators should also require preparedness and efficacy of the teachers in their schools. Equally as important, administrators must share the responsibility for the improvement of teaching and learning in the school. In other words, administrators must be managers and disciplinarians, but they must also be instructional as well as distributive leaders who share leadership responsibilities with their faculty.

Increase professional development opportunities for all teachers and administrators, with a special focus on concerns that they have identified within their schools that are impeding efforts to improve student learning. Teachers should be involved in identifying areas that need to be addressed, but also involved in defining and sustaining professional development programs to address those needs. Such programs should be resourced to be ongoing and should be designed to help educators address problems within their schools and master new curricula and instructional strategies.

### **4. Transform schools, colleges, and departments of education (SCDEs) to better prepare teachers and educational leaders for 21st century schools.**

Align the work of SCDEs more closely with state and national standards to ensure that pre- and in-service preparation programs reflect the demands of our society and the changing dynamics in our schools.

SCDEs and local school districts should form learning communities designed collaboratively to enhance the continuous professional growth of all educators—P-20—and to ensure that their faculty are well-versed and well-prepared to help transform schooling and, thus, education.

Ensure that SCDEs are themselves transformative and have the capacity to prepare K-12 educators to help redefine and teach in 21st century schools, using distance and mediated learning technologies and other innovative new methods of educating students for the information society in which they live.

SCDEs should work closely with their counterparts in other professional schools, such as arts and sciences, law, business, medicine, and engineering in order to form professional learning communities that enhance the relevance of teaching and learning.

Urge colleges and universities to stop treating SCDEs like cash cows. Higher education institutions should invest in the educational quality of future students and the rest of America by investing in the quantity and quality of the preparation of future educators at all levels of the system. In other words, enhance the capacity of school districts to effectively staff their schools with well-prepared, well-trained professional educators by supporting the efforts of SCDEs to transform teacher education, counselor education, and educational leadership programs to more effectively prepare educational professionals.

**5. Maximize the capacity of schools to enable students to improve their education by providing an environment that supports and encourages high academic and behavioral standards and is collegial and innovative. To effectively implement the four foregoing recommendations, schools must have the physical and fiscal capacity to improve. Schools should:**

Implement smaller class sizes, especially at the elementary school level. Kindergarten-grade 3rd classes should have no more than 12 students, and grade 4th-6th classes should have no more than 15 students. At the secondary level, efforts should be made to ensure that class size will not exceed 20 students, especially in the core subjects. By keeping class size at these optimal levels, teachers will have more opportunities and time to address the learning needs of each student.

Establish a longer school year and/or extend the school day to increase instructional time. Educational demands have been steadily increasing without a simultaneous increase in instructional capacity. Refusal to address this issue is a strategy for failure. If instructional time is not increased, in-depth teaching and learning will not occur.

Guarantee that all schools are equipped to use technology to reinforce and advance educators' and students' ability to communicate effectively, engage in problem solving, better understand the subject area, analyze and interpret data, and so forth. Teachers and other school personnel, therefore, must have the expertise to use a variety of technologies in ways that will more effectively expand learning opportunities to educate our nation's children.

Ensure that schools have the capacity to encourage and implement interdisciplinary learning, team-based learning, block scheduling, and other innovative strategies. In other words, schools need to rethink the design of teaching and learning space to be more student-focused and effective.

These are five recommendations that will improve our public school system and, thus, the quality of the education our children receive. Yet, I am well aware that implementing these suggestions is easier said than done. Our system of education is multi-layered, extremely complex, and serves a huge segment of our society (55,000,000 K -12 children over a period of at least 12 years). Efforts to change the American education paradigm must reflect that complexity and that is what I have attempted to do with these five recommendations.

Our modern world is a different world, with different needs and demands. Our education system—P-20—must educate students to understand the rapidity, scope, and depth of the changes that are redefining the 21st century and the implications they will have for our future. And, when do we start? We start with building that foundation in preschool and nurturing it all the way through graduate school.

Implemented individually, the above recommendations will bring about incremental change in our schools. Collectively, they have the potential to transform our education system to enhance every child's schooling. These recommendations are not designed as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as a comprehensive set of reform proposals to be used based upon the particular needs identified within schools that want to transform themselves. They cannot be accomplished without adequate resources such as time, expertise, and funding, as well as a commitment from the full community to ensure their realization. They are based on an acceptance of a mutual desire and responsibility—at home, at school, and within the community—for assuring a stronger commitment to improve the quality of schooling and, thus, improve the quality of education each child receives. As Lawrence Cremin (1977) said many years ago, "Public schools democratize America by assuring every child the right to be educated." (p. 45). Even as schools all over the world adopt online and mediated learning strategies, the common denominator will always be the quality of education each child receives.

Many of our education institutions are in fact responding to societal change and understand that education is the key to maintaining America's position in the global community. But the response is not widespread. Are we prepared to change on a grand scale? Are we willing to transform our national education system? Our response must be, "Yes! We hear the call and understand the message." By working together, within our reach is the capacity and commitment to address successfully the challenges facing America's education system and the nation as a whole.

As I consider this issue, I am reminded of an anonymous quote I heard recently about a locked door: "Some see a door locked and walk away. Others see the door locked and look for a key. Still others see the door locked and make a key to open the door." As we begin this school year or the next, we may find the door to transforming our education system still "locked." We may not find a key right away. But, we must not walk away! We must work together to make a key to open the door to transform our education system and, thus, reach within and welcome the challenge of providing this generation of children and future generations the best education possible. So, let's make the key together and open the door to a quality education for all of America's children!

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