



Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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Together We Can

Bob Wehling

Let me begin by stating how grateful I am to all of the wonderful people who have herein contributed their thoughts on truly improving education opportunities for all children in the United States. I wanted to get all of these different perspectives because of my deep belief that we need a many faceted total system improvement or change, not just another piecemeal effort.

Accordingly, each participant was asked to address what we must do as a nation to ensure that every American child has equal access to a high-quality, world-class educational opportunity. Participants were chosen from across numerous fields and varied areas of expertise in order to present a comprehensive and varied collection of personal and professional visions for the 21st century American public school system.

The end result is a diverse set of possible solutions that we hope will serve to inform, educate, and motivate readers. For example, we were provided with successful templates for sustainable educational improvements through Ackerman's experience as Superintendent of San Francisco Unified School District and Sexton & Adams' chapter which detailed the impressive work of the Prichard Committee. We have been motivated to reconsider our roles, from Futrell's challenge to each of us to take responsibility for transforming our educational system to Hornbeck's identification of political will as the important missing ingredient in sustainable improvements and urgent call for us to find common ground. Jim Kelly reminded us of the importance of fresh thinking, boldness, and risk-taking in order to move us forward. Howey & Zimpher reinforced the notion of mutual mission and shared accountability while calling for deep structural changes to our current P-16 system. Both Tom Carroll and Barb Kelley focused on teaching in the 21st century and the important role of teacher quality. Kelley led us through the intertwined components of teacher recruitment, preparation, induction, retention, and distribution, while Carroll called for an entirely new school staffing model and detailed what teachers would need to be successful in this new system. Siegel laid out her personal vision for American public education as one in which every child has the opportunity to become an active, successful lifelong learner for the 21st century. Palacios described what an experienced early childhood educator sees as the necessary foci of public education as detailed through her own experience and practical examples, just as both Dick Riley's chapter and Jim Hunt's chapter relied on their first hand experiences in national political arenas. Both Riley and Hunt call for shifting education to a national priority and developing a new national consensus as the mechanisms for creating a stronger and more dynamic American education system. Both Ravitch and I detailed the necessity of a national curriculum as the only realistic solution to the myriad of problems that currently face our country's schools, while Linda Darling-Hammond urges us to consider an entirely new paradigm for national education policy. Similarly, Schneider and Zigler called for a national system of training for educational leaders in our schools, while Wise's chapter focused on the importance of national teaching standards. Rust used his experience as a leader in American business to discuss the connection between education and economy while iden-

tifying education as the number one economic problem facing our country. Seidel also discussed the importance of education and the economy as he called for improvements to our information and accountability systems as the necessary drivers of education reform. Finally, Wick's chapter focused us on the future forces that will soon impact the educational landscape and challenged us to consider new models for education, teaching, learning, and policymaking.

We must, as our authors have said, build stronger grass-root groups in every city and town supporting quality education for all. We must strengthen the relationship between every university and its surrounding K-12 systems. We must continue to improve teacher education, training, mentoring, support, compensation, and on-going professional development. We must cease hoping that 50 states and 16,000 school districts will all wake up one morning and agree to put in place and sustain a world class education opportunity for each child. With the help of experts in each field we must move toward national standards, a national curricula framework, a national assessment system, and a base level national funding system passed through the states to local communities which provides for a great, world class education opportunity for all children.

Our vision for a high-quality, world-class system of American public education:

- All children, from day one of kindergarten would be encouraged to develop a love of learning. They would clearly understand what was expected of them and would look at the teacher as a trusted counselor, friend and coach to help them achieve. They would track their progress and would ask for, and receive, help as needed. Expectations would be high; time on task would be significant; but learning would be fun and school would be a great place to be.
- All teachers would be National Board certified or clearly on a path toward certification. They would be deeply and continuously trained in the subjects they were to teach, and would have the talent and techniques to deal effectively with all children and to meet their individual needs. All teachers would feel fully supported by both other teachers and all administrators. All of the teachers in a building would feel a collective responsibility for the success of all students and would help each other as needed. Highly connected learning communities are the way of the future.
- You would sense, as soon as you entered the school, an atmosphere conducive to learning. Students would proudly wear school uniforms; they would be respectful of others and they would be constantly curious and engaged. Smiles would abound.
- Textbooks, software, and ancillary materials would go into all key subjects in depth, fostering critical thinking and questioning; focusing on concepts and the "why" and "how" of things rather than just "what" and "where".
- Parents and teachers would communicate regularly and families would often be in the schools as volunteers, aides, or just observers.
- All students would be allowed to move as rapidly as their intellect and effort would enable them. Diagnostic testing and subsequent individual learning plans would ensure that all students were constantly growing, challenged, and excited by new opportunities.

- By middle school at the latest, all students would be aware of the importance for college education and would be exposed to neighboring campuses and faculty. College faculty would be a routine presence in the K-12 environment.
- Technology would be omnipresent, facilitating learning and offering students the opportunity to go beyond what might be available in the local school. Technology will rapidly drive major changes in how we teach and learn. It is already happening. Technology won't wait for governments and school boards to make changes.
- The community would continuously celebrate the accomplishments of teachers and students, as well as the entire school. Business and community resources would be available to supplement the education opportunities for all students.
- Testing would not be an issue, but simply a snapshot in time. You would never hear "I have to teach to the test", but rather "I teach to the standard." "In fact, my students and I welcome tests to help us understand where we are and what we need to do."
- Teachers and administrators meet and share constantly in a mutually supportive environment. Principals are seen as helpful and knowledgeable educational leaders.
- Achievements in academics, athletics, and other extra curricular activities are routinely celebrated by a supportive community.

To accomplish all of this, we need to, once again, make education a top national priority. Some may say that this is already the case, but I believe the evidence suggests otherwise. In many cases and for good reasons we are preoccupied with terrorism, war, immigration, health care, social security, Medicare and Medicaid, criminal justice, the environment and other issues. All are important, but nothing is more important than our future and our future depends on the education and well being of our children.

Each of us must work with our elected officials and those running for office at all levels of government to put a world class education opportunity for all children high on their agenda. We must also remind our local media to keep the pressure on, report progress or lack of it, and hold us collectively accountable for the opportunities we provide for our children and for future generations.

Together, we can do it. Let's get started.

Bob Wehling