



Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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Foreword

Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

By Bob Wehling

I've often wondered what would happen if, all in the same day, our country had a major earthquake, a tsunami, one or two hurricanes, a couple of tornadoes and a plane crash with a total of 100,000 or more kids killed, seriously injured, or rendered homeless. Without a doubt, there would be a national call to action with thousands of volunteers and unprecedented charitable donations to support the cause. Considering this scenario, I'm left asking myself why we don't get a fraction of that response to the situation of ten times that number of kids who fall through the cracks of our education system and are doomed to lives of minimum wage jobs, welfare, and/or prison every single year. How is it that we are compelled to action by unforeseen tragic events while simultaneously immune to the everyday occurrences which continue to produce lives without opportunity or hope?

Acknowledging Reality

Over 48 million students are currently being served by American school boards, administrators and teachers throughout our country's 16,000 school districts. In over 90,000 American public elementary and secondary schools, educators are working hard to do what's best for all children.¹ However, despite significant progress in public education in the United States, we remain far behind where we need to be. And the pace of progress is extremely uneven across the country. I believe we've proven that simply admonishing schools to do better and writing legislation that demands more accountability is not the answer. While it has certainly helped to have more data and accountability, we still have millions of kids not achieving to the level that they need to be.

The fact is that every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. 16,000 districts each doing their own thing; thousands of school levies failing in some districts and passing in others; uneven standards across our 50 states for both teachers and students; appalling levels of teacher turnover; insufficient attention to school readiness and other similar issues...until we adequately address these intertwining factors, we are doomed to continue generating over 1,000,000 dropouts per year and an equal number of high school graduates who are insufficiently prepared to succeed in higher education or in the adult workforce.

I've had the pleasure of working with thousands of school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers over the last forty years. The vast majority of these people are truly dedicated and working as hard as possible to help students succeed. The fact that these people are not collectively producing better results is, in my opinion, not their fault. They are doing everything they can as members of a dysfunctional and ill-equipped system. The unfortunate reality is that our current educational system does not effectively educate all children – especially children who are physically, mentally, emotionally, or socially unable or unwilling to learn. For many children, it is difficult to care when there is no light at the end of the tunnel to motivate them to learn or encourage them to keep trying to catch up once they've already fallen behind. What must we do to create a system that motivates all children to hunger to learn and then to give them all outstanding educational opportunities?

Asking the Right Questions

Simply stated, we need fundamental changes to our educational system to create the level of results which will enable all students to compete with their peers, nationally and internationally, as workers and as productive, educated citizens. To get at some of the systemic changes I believe are imperative, let me start with these questions:

- Why should a fourth grade teacher in Seattle have different training, standards and licensing requirements than a fourth grade teacher in Dallas or New York?
- Why should a family that must relocate from Maine to Louisiana find their children subjected to materially different standards, expectations, curricula options and assessments? After all, we are the most mobile society in the history of the world.
- Why should we accept the fact that most high school graduates in our urban cities and rural areas have been exposed to fewer educational options and opportunities than our students in affluent suburbs?
- Why should school administrators have to spend their time on tax levies and bond issues, rather than on instructional leadership and education excellence?² Why should teachers and students see vital programs cut because their community is poor or fails to support public education? Isn't there a more efficient and dependable funding system which adequately provides for excellent education opportunities for all students regardless of where they live?
- Why are we satisfied with a system that currently provides a 1-in-14 chance of the typical child having a "consistently rich, supportive elementary school experience"² when we know that early educational experiences are an important predictor of later success?
- Why are we willing to accept that the cumulative effect of over a million dropouts each year translates into a population where over 10 percent of all American kids ages 16-24 are high school dropouts,³ especially when we consider that dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested at least once in their lifetimes?⁴ I'd really like someone to tell me why we aren't morally outraged by this situation!
- Why do most Americans seem to believe that our good jobs are going overseas simply so that corporations can save money? Why don't they understand that many of these jobs are leaving to go where there is a well-educated workforce, with a very strong work ethic and a commitment to further learning? Why don't people seem to understand that this situation is very likely to get worse rather than better and will continue to deprive our children and grandchildren of well paid, career ladder jobs with adequate wages and benefits?

Using Our Resources

As in business, to hope for better results without changing the system is simply wishful thinking. I believe a U.S. public education system would produce materially better results by standardizing those elements necessary to ensure that every child has a high quality teacher and an equal opportunity for a great education. These universal elements would

include standards at each grade level and for graduation, curricula frameworks in key subject areas, one national assessment system, and technology to meet the needs of all students. Each of these elements would be the same regardless of geography and regardless of the wealth and education level of a child's parents and community. The new system would be completely aligned and therefore be easily understood by teachers, parents, students, and the general public.

While it is time to stop tinkering with elements of the system and change the system itself, I'm not calling for us to reinvent the wheel. Virtually all key elements of an improved system already exist. They are just waiting to be properly assembled. In every state, we have model programs and pilots. We have committed groups of teachers and administrators who know what to do. We simply need to take the best of all these models and join the elements into one cohesive and sustainable system for all children. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has clearly defined "accomplished teaching" in 27 fields across the K-12 system. These standards can and should be incorporated into the curriculum of every college of education. All certification and licensing programs should be modeled on these standards, recognizing that it will take new teachers at least five years of practical classroom experience to fully reach the standards. Moving toward a more uniform system of teacher education and training which incorporates rigorous high standards will produce a core of teachers who have the same degree of training one would expect of doctors, lawyers, pilots, engineers or practitioners of other professions. Clearly this is not the case today, despite substantial progress led by NBPTS, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and many others.

Similarly, we now know what world class standards should look like in virtually every subject area. Consider the work of Achieve, Inc. – a national organization composed of governors and business leaders and staffed by educational policy experts. This organization is able to review the standards of any state and compare them with others in each subject area. Right now, the decision to use this resource is completely voluntary, and states can choose whether or not to have their standards reviewed. Currently, less than half of the states are participants in Achieve's American Diploma Project (ADP)⁵ network, a project also sponsored by the Education Trust. We should insist that every state employ the services provided by organizations like Achieve, Inc. with the aim that all 50 states operate at the same high quality standard in all key subject areas.

Overall, we have abundant examples of proven principles and practices which can be seen across various parts of the U.S. Consider, for example, the work of the KIPP Academies, the Baldrige based schools, and numerous K-12 schools with close partnerships with one or more colleges or universities. Likewise, consider the impact of National Board Certification which has recognized and certified over 50,000 highly-qualified educators across the country, as well as organizations like the Sylvan Learning Centers that diagnose and support the needs of struggling students.

The truth of the matter is that we have numerous resources available to us. We know what we need to do; we just need to do it. We know how students learn and what schools must

do to support them from decades of research and practice. We know that when teachers and students truly understand the standards and expectations, and use data to track growth and performance that improvements almost always occur. We know that there is work to be done. The Pygmalion principle is alive and well. Children will generally live up to our expectations. But, our expectations are inconsistent state to state and community to community. In order to move forward, we must have the same high standards in place for all students. It is possible, as evidenced by numerous international examples.

Learning from Our International Peers

In order to provide accountability for high standards of teaching and learning, many countries around the world maintain a basic curricula framework which is tied directly to clear, high standards as well as a national assessment system. By measuring educational achievement in this way, all students and parents are subject to the same high expectations – and opportunities - whether they are in a country village, an urban center or a suburban area. Individual schools can and do supplement the national curricula with special offerings to meet the diverse needs of students in different regions.

There are many lessons to learn from our international peers if we are to create a truly world-class, globally-competitive education for all American students. In general, kids in other countries spend more time on education than we do here in the United States. Part of this is a belief in true “time on task” by both educators and parents. Further, Americans tend to think educational success is based on a combination of student intelligence and teacher quality. While both are undoubtedly a part of the equation, there is a fundamental belief in other countries that educational success is based on how hard you work, and there is general consensus that more effort means better results. Community and parental expectations are generally higher, and there is a greater stigma attached to lack of effort and performance at school. Similarly, I’ve seen a greater degree of school pride in the Asian and northern European schools that I’ve visited than I’ve seen here. Overseas, for example, it is most common to see students dressed in blazers that proudly identify their school name or logo and very uncommon to see litter, graffiti, or disorder on the school campuses. Overall, there seems to be a greater respect for the public school systems in the countries I’ve visited. While I acknowledge that there are no perfect school systems in other countries and that even widely celebrated examples in Asian countries also have their shortcomings, I believe there is a lot that can be learned from the value that the general public places on education in these countries. If nothing else, we must do something to move in this direction. What must we do to challenge current attitudes about public education in this country?

While challenging the general public’s opinions will undoubtedly take time and effort, there are other lessons from overseas that can be more easily implemented. There is a clear difference, for example, between textbooks and curricula frameworks in the U.S. versus other countries. In general, this can be described as breadth (U.S.) versus depth (international). While American textbooks are frequently longer and contain more chapters, many international textbooks focus more intently on fewer topics. In America, we also tend to emphasize facts and dates over broader concepts and stimulating questions, unlike other countries. Our American approaches to curriculum also make teachers’ jobs more difficult

with much less time for planning, observing, and collaborating with other educators than our international peers. Generally speaking, teachers in other countries are not isolated to the same degree that we often see in this country. Teacher collaboration in other countries also supports their more consistent and standardized national systems. Further, because there is a national assessment system in many of these countries, everyone in every city and village knows what to expect and how to prepare. Here in America, we already have a national test in place that could fill this need. Currently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test is used to provide subject-matter achievement results for groups and populations of students, but it could easily be expanded to provide scores for individual students, schools, or districts. A national system of public education, like the ones in place in widely-celebrated systems overseas, provides the most potential for sustainable, systemic change to American public education.

While I believe a truly national system is the answer, I want to be totally clear that I am not advocating a government system which is heavily influenced by political considerations. Rather, I envision a system in which our best educators are commissioned to develop and enact national standards (not voluntary); a national curricula framework for at least the most important core subjects; a national assessment system which is fully aligned with the standards and curricula; modern technology to help meet the differing needs and interests of students; a compensation system which rewards excellence and which will help attract our best students into teaching; a national framework for teacher training, licensure certification, and professional development; and a funding system which ensures that all of this is accessible to all students. What is holding us back from creating a new system which works for all teachers and students?

Challenging Old Ideas

Perhaps we are held back by our connection to old ideas that no longer serve the diverse needs of America's students. Although it won't be easy, we must be willing to shed these outdated beliefs to make way for innovative new approaches. Some of the resistance comes from the fact that many of my suggestions fly in the face of our historic belief in local control. However, while I once fought for local control as a school board member and president, I'm now convinced it is the foundation of an uneven system which does not offer all children a world-class education opportunity. Only by moving from local control to local support can we begin to make widespread progress toward educational equity. So what's the role for states and local districts in the system I envision? At the state level, I think the principal role will be supporting local districts, sharing new learning and best practices, and serving as an efficient communication link between the national leaders/experts and the local districts. The local district's role will be providing support for teachers, implementing ways to make courses most relevant to the needs of local students, overseeing close supportive relationships between local universities and K-12 schools, fielding athletic and extra curricular activities, and finally, finding ways for the unique needs of individual students to be met by innovative solutions such as distance learning, tutoring, and/or other learning opportunities inside and outside of the school.

Similarly, we must re-frame the way we think about our American system of public education. We need to stop compartmentalizing our schools by grade level and geography and start thinking in terms of a Pre-K through graduate school system that is as seamless as possible. All teachers, at all levels, should feel a responsibility for all students and a responsibility to support one another. We must also become less reactive and more proactive when it comes to student achievement by shifting the focus to diagnostic testing that will benefit both the teacher and the student. Overall, we must once again make education our top priority! Today, in our Post-9/11 world, education often follows war, terrorism, energy prices, immigration, health care, and other economic and political issues on the list of America's concerns. While there are numerous obstacles to overcome, we must not let this prevent us from facing the challenge.

Facing Funding

While we certainly face ideological struggles related to school system redesign, we face financial barriers as well. Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles blocking the road to sustainable educational improvement is school funding. This road is littered with failed approaches that continue to benefit some students over others. We must design and implement a materially-different funding system for public education if we are to provide all of our children with reasonably equal basic educational opportunities. Today, the well-being of a school and the options available for students depend on the financial prosperity of the community, the education status of its population, and the percent of homes with children or relatives in the school system. Clearly, this system has inherent flaws that contribute greatly to the ongoing problem of educational inequality. The most egregious problem with the current system is that the children in the system are powerless and totally at the mercy of school levies whose success or failure is based largely on the votes of only 20 percent of the population who have children or grandchildren in the schools.

I believe it is unarguable that the way we fund schools is a significant part of the problem. Depending on roughly 20% of the voters in each of 16,000+ school districts to tax themselves to provide quality education for all students is a root cause of the unevenness we see all over the country. The fact that most levies and bond issues fail simply widens the gap between students lucky enough to live in affluent, well educated communities and those who live in poorer areas with lower education and more people on fixed or non-existent income who cannot support any taxation.

This situation which goes on every day all over the U.S., and which I am convinced most people understand and many accept or ignore, causes a number of closely related problems. It forces school boards to cut all but required courses and often to curtail professional development as well as technology upgrades and basic maintenance. It forces many superintendents and principals to focus on budgets and on the next levy rather than providing educational leadership and teacher support. Districts are forced to curtail school buses, extracurricular activities, and other "luxuries" such as mentoring and tutoring for students who fall behind. We continue this unfair and inadequate system of funding in the name of "local control." This may have been okay 50 or 60 years ago when students who did not have great education opportunities and who did not achieve academic success could still find meaningful employment with salary and benefits sufficient to support a family. But those days are long gone.

I believe we will be unable to compete effectively in the 21st century until we change “local control” to “local support” and create a combination of federal and state funding which will give each student genuine access to the very best education we know how to provide. In my view, this means restoring education as our clear number one national priority and raising education as a percent of the federal budget from 6-7% today to 20%+. The same priority and funding emphasis should occur at the state level. Local districts should get out of the school tax business and focus instead on mentoring, tutoring, coaching, helping in the schools and supporting principals, teachers, and individual students.

While I believe a bipartisan national commission should be created to study and propose a new, more equitable and dependable system, I'd like to share the following funding possibility. One option which should be explored is to take all the monies currently being invested in public education by the federal government, by each state and by local counties and communities and convert that into a national education fund. That fund, administered by a bipartisan or apolitical group, would be dispersed evenly across the country on a per student basis. Future increases would come from a consumption-based national education tax sufficient to provide every child with quality education options and technology and to provide each teacher a level of income commensurate with training and student results. At the time the consumption-based tax is implemented, all current state and local property and income taxes supporting education would be eliminated, though each community would continue to be able to tax itself further for supplemental programs and activities.

Currently, we spend about \$540 billion each year on public education.⁶ If this total investment were to be increased by just 20 percent, we would have an additional \$100 billion to serve America's school children. While there are numerous possibilities for the allocation of these funds, I envision an increase in each of the approximately 3 million American teacher's annual salary by about \$20,000 each year. This would cost an additional \$60 billion a year, but would undoubtedly help to attract the best and brightest to the field of education. I propose that the other \$40 billion should be used to equip every school with distance learning capabilities and provide for at least two weeks of annual teacher training each year. These additional funds could come from a variety of sources, such as the national sales tax of approximately 10 percent proposed above, or additions to federal, state, or local education budgets. According to 2005 research by the National Center for Education Statistics, on average the federal government currently supplies only 8.5 percent of the funds to operate American public schools.

From my perspective, if we truly want our children and grandchildren to be productive and contributing citizens in a growing economy with meaningful and rewarding jobs, we need to increase our spending on education by \$100-150 billion per year as a country. Only an increase of this magnitude would enable us to: 1) make teaching a sufficiently well paid profession to attract our best and brightest students; 2) ensure that every child and every school has state of the art technology and software to meet the needs of all the students; 3) vastly improve the curricula and texts we use in order to have our students compete effectively with their peers around the world.

Our curricula needs to focus much more on concepts and to give students a depth of understanding in all key subjects rather than just an emphasis on raw facts, dates and numbers.

I believe the time is right to look at all aspects of our educational system versus those in other developed countries, including how we fund schools and reward teachers in order to provide the framework for a new system which will give all of our children and grandchildren the education they deserve and must have to compete in the 21st century. These are just a few of the myriad of possibilities to consider. Imagine how changes like these could equalize access to a high-quality, globally-competitive education for all students.

Shifting Our Focus

While I acknowledge that many of these suggested changes to the current system will be highly controversial, I challenge naysayers to shift their focus toward calculating the societal cost of maintaining the status quo. We simply cannot continue to provide disparate educational opportunities and expect equally-successful outcomes. We cannot continue to blame American job-loss on lower foreign wages, when it is also higher qualifications that attract U.S. companies to hire overseas. To win back these jobs, and keep many others, we need a better system of education that gives Americans a globally-competitive advantage. If we fail to move in new directions, I am convinced we will be convening meetings each year for the foreseeable future to commiserate about the results and to keep tinkering with a broken system, meanwhile continuing to lose a million or more kids each year through the cracks.

Looking Ahead

American public education stands at a critical juncture, teetering over the edge of our increasingly “flat” world. The way I see it, we are in public education today where we were in American politics before women and minorities all had the right to vote and fully participate in our society. If we are to move forward as a nation, we must come together to address the realities of the out-dated systems that continue to hold us back. Recognizing the unjust and uneven distribution of educational access and opportunity that exists in our public schools today is a bold, but necessary first step toward securing our society’s place in the future. We must work together to build a 21st century U.S. education system which takes everything we know about quality education and applies it to every school. It’s the only way to secure a future for each American child, and therefore the only way to secure a strong future for our country. As Mortimer Adler, a professor at the University of Chicago in the 1930’s reminds us, “The best education for some is the best education for all.”

Endnotes

1. For detailed information on American public elementary and secondary schools, see Hoffman, L., and Sable, J. (2006). *Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003–04* (NCES 2006-307). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
2. Toppo, G. (2007, April 2, 2007). Study: Teachers failing in class. *USA Today*, p. A7.
3. Kaufman, P., Alt, M.N., and Chapman, C.D. (2001). *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000* (NCES 2002-114). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
4. “*The Impact of Education on: Crime*,” Fact Sheet, Alliance for Excellent Education, November 2003
5. For an up-to-date look at participation in the American Diploma Project sponsored by Achieve, Inc. and Education Trust visit their website at www.achieve.org.
6. This number is based upon 2003 data from the U.S. Department of Education and speaks to the total annual investment of federal, state, and local funds in American public education.