



ARTICLE APPEARING IN NOVEMBER 2010 ISSUE OF ASBJ

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For far too long, school officials have let others frame the national conversation about public education. It's time for those closest to the action – school board members, superintendents and other educators – to lead the debate about school reform. Now is the time to marshal the facts, identify the response teams, and devise proactive strategies for seizing the reform agenda.

Public Education Faces Fall Tsunami

By Nora Carr

Public education faces a fall tsunami as well-funded groups – many with pro-charter reform agendas – issue scathing reports on America's failing schools, particularly those serving urban areas.

From the Fordham Institute's *America's Best (and Worst) Cities for School Reform: Attracting Entrepreneurs and Change Agents* to NBC's *Education Nation* and Davis Guggenheim's documentary film, *Waiting for Superman*, there's a clarion call for a shake-up in how public schools are run.

These exposes paint a searing portrait of children trapped in the nation's worst traditional public schools juxtaposed against the hope and high expectations of a handful of top charter schools.

While few would disagree with District of Columbia Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee when she says in *Superman* that these kids are "getting a crappy education," the

underlying charters are good, public schools are bad mantra is too simplistic.

Dramatic improvement in student learning is needed across-the-board in public schools today, not because most schools are inherently broken but because the demands of today's global economy are so much higher than what those schools were designed to deliver.

Incompetent educators, bloated bureaucracies, complacent school boards, and lazy, over-confident students don't characterize the nation's public schools any more than innovation and high achievement represent the outcomes of most charter schools.

In fact, only 17 percent of charter schools outperform traditional public schools, according to research by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education



Outcomes. Most (46 percent) perform about the same while 37 percent do worse.

These reports also ignore the fact that public schools, including those in urban centers, are improving. On international measures, U.S. students made significant gains in math and science between 1995 and 2007 in both fourth and eighth grades, while achievement gaps have narrowed.

According to the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education (CPE), "U.S. students have made greater achievement gains over the past 12 years" than "their high-performing Asian counterparts," although countries like Japan and Singapore still top international charts in math and science.

Using the bottom tier of traditional public schools to shape public opinion and a national reform agenda is disingenuous at best and dangerous at worst.

Understand the context

Led by an elite group that tends to equate innovation with charter schools and sees the traditional education establishment as the major impediment, the national agenda for education reform is coalescing around several core strategies.

Forged by non-profit organizations like Teach For America, The Broad Foundation, and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, these strategies seek to inject new – and often business or Ivy League-trained – leadership in public schools and classrooms.

The common ideas shared across the reform agenda include tying teacher pay to student achievement, recruiting better talent to lead and teach in struggling urban and rural areas, removing ineffective teachers and principals,

eliminating tenure, and using charters and other means to create more alternatives to traditional public schools.

Focused on the nation's chronic low-performers, it's hard to argue with this framework. In fact, most public school officials would agree that the achievement gap between children of color and children who live in poverty and their more affluent peers is America's most pressing civil rights issue.

Although clearly linked to poverty and other social challenges that educators can't control, the bottom line is this: America can't afford to have about one-third of its fourth graders reading below grade level or lagging behind many other industrialized nations in science and mathematics.

The U.S. already loses more than \$3.7 billion annually to remedial classes, services and lower wages and tax receipts when high school graduates aren't prepared for the rigors of college and don't complete a post-secondary degree according to the Alliance for Excellent Education.

America won't survive as a democracy, let alone remain economically competitive, if most of its citizens aren't educated enough to meet tough international standards. The days of educating only the elite well are over.

The young people struggling to learn today will comprise the majority of U.S. adults in the very near future. As a matter of self-interest as well as social justice, the nation can no longer afford to educate only the top 10 to 20 percent of students traditionally routed on the college preparatory track.

As U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in a 2009 profile in *U.S. News and World*



Report, "I think we are lying to children and families when we tell children that they are meeting standards and, in fact, they are woefully unprepared to be successful in high school and have almost no chance of going to a good university and being successful."

No one can – or should – make excuses for a school that fails to educate 70 percent or more of its students or doesn't demonstrate a year's worth of learning for most students, no matter what is happening – or not happening – at home or in the community. The traditional, one-size-fits-all model of public schooling continues to work well with some students and in areas when the student body is more homogeneous. When a school has more than 29 different subgroups and 15 native languages to contend with, something new is required. Many teachers who do well in suburban schools wouldn't last a week in urban environments.

Too many public schools still play the annual pass the lemons game as they shuffle weak teachers from one school to another or bury struggling principals in meaningless central office positions rather than work through the time-consuming process and legal hassles inherent in removing tenured teachers.

"The problem isn't that we don't know what to do to reform our schools. The research is very clear," says Anne Bryant, NSBA's executive director. "The problem is that we don't do what we know."

What the research says about reform

Despite the heated national rhetoric on turning around low-performing schools, the basic formula remains the same. Effective schools require experienced and committed teachers, strong school leadership, an engaging curriculum that emphasizes math

and literacy skills, a safe and supportive climate, and involved parents.

Strong local leadership by schools boards and superintendents is critical to student improvement, and ultimately, student success.

Effective school boards share a set of common traits, according to CPE research, including high expectations, clear goals, and a laser-like focus on policies that will drive student achievement and instructional improvement.

As stewards of the public's trust, local boards govern best when they collaborate with parents, educators, and community members to analyze data, make decisions, and monitor progress. Local boards also contribute more to student learning when they use policies and budgets to align district-wide systems to meet children's needs, even if that means allocating more resources to struggling schools or using incentives to attract better teaching talent for certain subject areas.

A trusting relationship and a sharing a common vision with superintendents also increase board effectiveness and student outcomes. Sustainable improvement in teaching and learning takes time, and requires an ongoing investment in professional development and stable leadership.

If school districts are going to avoid the obsession with short-term gains that nearly bankrupted the economy, they have to have to figure out how to work better with the employees they have and focus on improving instruction as well as test scores.



While mass teacher firings snag headlines, such efforts don't represent sustainable change. Worse, the current rank and yank approach espoused by many today ignores decades of research about school reform, organizational development and human motivation.

Research indicates that the working conditions of public school employees reflect their students' learning conditions. And, as student needs escalate, so does the skill level required of teachers and principals. Schools, especially those in urban areas, are starting to crack under the pressure.

And, while many pundits are quick to encourage schools to adopt business strategies, research by Stanford University's Jeffrey Pfeffer and other business scholars have found that tampering with pay systems, cutting labor costs, and rewarding individual rather than team performance hurt productivity.

Daniel Pink extends this concept even further in his 2009 book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. He identifies seven "deadly flaws" that an extrinsic, "carrots and sticks" orientation has on individuals, groups and organizations, including: "extinguishing intrinsic motivation; diminishing performance; crushing creativity; crowding out good behavior; encouraging cheating, shortcuts, and unethical behavior; becoming addictive; and, fostering short-term thinking."

Clearly, the gap between research and practice in business is as wide as it is in education. No wonder school boards and superintendents place more faith in professional development than in removing

principals or reforming compensation to tie what educators earn to what students learn.

They recognize there simply aren't enough superstars in education or enough dollars to buy their way to greatness. As leaders of a \$600 billion enterprise serving 52 million children, school boards and superintendents have to leverage their people to create organizations where high achievement for all students is the norm.

Reclaiming the reform agenda

If public school advocates want a say in how state and federal funding are being used to shape the reform agenda, they need to speak up and act fast. Research shows that people tend to filter out information that doesn't align with their belief systems and adopted frames on issues. Once public opinion gels, it's very difficult to change.

Journalism's basic credo is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Not surprisingly, then, the news media and the public are typically suspicious of people and entities they perceive as powerful. As leaders of large organizations, school board members and superintendents are already at a disadvantage in comparison to activist groups.

Blaming educators, unions, and recalcitrant school boards for poor student performance may not accurately portray what research says about effective schools, but it sells. It also fits the human need to assign responsibility for any perceived failure.

A media favorite, the hero-villain frame in which the inspiring reformer is pitted against grossly incompetent and negligent educators representing the status quo is particularly

pernicious – especially when the heroes all hail from charter or independent schools.

The “nation’s failing public schools” catch phrase has been repeated so often and given so much prominence by politicians, the press, and other thought leaders, the fact that public schools have made dramatic improvements during the past 20 years has largely been ignored.

Yet research by Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup consistently shows that the vast majority of parents are happy with their public schools, with 77 percent in 2010 giving the schools their oldest child attends either an “A” or a “B” grade.

These marks fall precipitously when the general public is asked to rate America’s schools, however. While 49 percent give their community’s public schools an “A” or “B” grade, only 18 percent rank the nation’s public schools as high. Clearly, the constant media drumbeat of widespread school failure is having an effect.

The PDK-Gallup poll also shows a dramatic decline in support for local control of public schools since 1980, when 68 percent of Americans said school boards should bear the greatest responsibility for determining what

is taught in schools. In 2010, this dropped to 28 percent – the same percentage favoring federal control of education. The perception that states should control public schools, a weak 15 percent in 1980 soared to 43 percent in 2010.

“There has been a remarkable change in public attitudes that should be troubling to all school board advocates,” says Lance Melton, executive director of the Montana School Boards Association. “If you look at what has happened even from 2007 to this year, the reduced support for the role of school boards in this important area is potentially the most significant development in this year’s poll results.”

With parents and the public leery of state tests as the sole measure of student achievement, local school officials still have an opportunity to set the agenda for school reform in their communities as well as nationally. But they have to speak up, engage others in the debate, and learn more about what really drives student gains in learning.

Getting results – and telling people about it – remains the best and most ethical way to influence public opinion about their public schools.