REVISITING THE AGENDA ON REFORMING AMERICAN URBAN SCHOOLS: A DISTANT ODD REALITY OF LAKE WOBEGON SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Abstract: *An ever growing thirst for a framework that supports a flexible environment in which the schools an school districts are protected within a zone that recognizes school reform is everyone's business. Moreover, the teacher's role as a leader in her classroom and among her peers must become a part of the search for a culture of success. This article offers a reformist perspective to the school reform efforts where alternative models to address the expectations of Title I must be considered. Borrowing from Garrison Keillor satire of the possibility of a successful school district author offers a discussion on school reform efforts components and concludes with the observation that school districts with a profile of Lake Wobegon do not exit. To that end, the more appropriate approach to school reform is a discovery of a common standard and is precisely promulgated through federal and state policies that buy into a the place of recognizing and rewarding success.*

Although Garrison Keillor eventually revealed that his boyhood town is actually Freeport, Minnesota, his original model community of Lake Wobegon is yet to be found supposedly because the "incompetence" of surveyors who mapped out the state of Minnesota in the 19th century was mostly due to the public schools they attended. The last century has seen education and its systems being hailed both as a panacea for all social ills (Dewey, 1916; Perkinson, 1995), and vehemently criticized as a purveyor of social inequality (Freire, 1970; Goldin, 1990; Kozol, 1991; and Freire & Freire, 1994).

Proponents of the panacea idealism believe that all kinds of social problems linked to a lack of quality education would decline instantly including: the instance of crime, murder, drug dealing and addiction; the occurrence of unwanted teenage pregnancies; and the money needed for welfare, food stamps, and subsidized housing. Economists tend to measure the benefit produced by education by calculating a rate of return. As the education level in the United States would rise, so would the entrepreneurship and creativity of its population, the development of jobs, and the quality of life for everyone. Although education cannot be a panacea for all social ills, it can be an instrument of positive change to make social justice more the norm than an idealized idiosyncrasy (Klein, 2007).

Notwithstanding, far too often, education is considered a *public good,* and that this implies a particular role for all stakeholders. Economists define public good as satisfying up to three conditions: (1) non-excludability, (2) indivisibility, (3) non-rivalry. Non-excludability means that non-payers cannot be excluded from the benefits of the good or service. Indivisibility can be illustrated by the example of a bridge over a river, which can be used by anyone without extra costs being incurred. Non-rivalry is virtually the same, except that it is the benefits available to every member of the public that are not reduced, rather than the amount of the

good.

Durkheim (1897/1951) concluded that education can be reformed only if society itself is reformed. He argued that education "is only the image and reflection of society. But if real change, in the form of policy, is going to come to the way we educate our children, hard evidence will need to take the place of idealistic fervor. In recent years, schools and school systems across the nation have been affixed a variety of alarming labels, among them is a range of descriptors ranging from "chronically low performing, (Mazzeo & Berman, 2003)," "failing schools" (Murphy & Meyers, 2007), "struggling schools," (Stephens, 2010) or "troubled schools," (Levine, 1996). While it is understandable that our public schools are viewed from this point of view – a machine which can be fixed or repaired with the right set of tools – it is ironic that those who claim that schools, in general, must move into the 21st Century are using 19th and 20th century models to bring about change.

Barack Obama called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) "one of the emptiest slogans in the history of American politics" (Glod, 2007). President Obama, certainly, joined a cascading chorus of those who may have originally detested most aspects of NCLB and still desired reform while touting the need to retain the law's demand for accountability and closing the ever-widening student achievement gap. By the time he gets a new version of the law through Congress, his own campaign theme—*change you can believe in*—may be a contender for the same title. School reform represents a deep change in education, not simply alterations in the forms and structures of schooling, but fundamental reconfiguration at every level of the educational enterprise. School reform is not just about schools. It is also about students and teachers, and how education leaders at all levels—state, district, school, and classroom—work together to help students succeed. It an enterprise that need clearly defined and new strategies that will require significant support from all stakeholders from all levels while strengthening the act of communicating proactively with families and other community members will go a long way toward mitigating the failing of the school.

A NEW PARADIGM SHIFT

Educators confront a paradigm shift in teaching and learning which is driven by the increasing anomalies of the current educational system. One of the most powerful recent voices to critique the current system and the associated reform attempts Diane Ravitch (2010) in her notable text: *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.* Ravitch illustrates her discontent by offering a number of case studies. Of particular interest is the adaptation of two separate, yet identical business models by two large school district. One is New York City schools under Mayor Bloomberg's handpicked czar, Stephen Klein, and the other is the San Diego School District under, Alan Bersin. Both superintendents are attorneys who have served as federal prosecutors. In a provocative, painstakingly detailed descriptions, Ravitch use these two examples of school systems brandished as examples of the miracles of business model leadership. Interestingly, both districts present major questions about tactics which raise test scores by getting rid of historically low scoring student groups, privatization of schools and expenditures of major sums of money for questionable results. Ravitch notes a number of alarming tendencies: in both cases, teachers were rarely consulted

but rather were commanded from the top down by non-educator administrators demanding absolute obedience; teacher morale plummets in both cases as teachers transferred, retired early or simply quit; initial gains in tests scores quickly become illusory as student demographics become factored into analysis.

Test scores and the school dropout problem is not a phenomenon that can be fixed by a single initiative or change in policy. While most reform efforts have been designed around external change strategies, this investigation was driven from the *inside out* with the goal of revealing those factors students and their parents believed and value. By identifying certain cultural factors that are predisposed to a more successful learning environment, the value of various school improvement initiatives may be enhanced.

In *School Turnarounds: Actions and Results*, Brinson, Kowal, and Hassel (2008) have been emphatic onwhat actions ought to take place and what new leaders must do for school turnaround to occur. In contrast to Durkheim's (1897/1951) contention, most mainstream proposals for improving education in the United States assume that our society is fundamentally sound, but that for some reason, schools are failing. Different critics target different villains: poor quality teachers, pampered, disruptive or ill-prepared students, the culture of their families, unions, bureaucrats, university schools of education, tests that are too easy, or inadequate curriculum. Borman (2005) casts a comprehensive school reform in a more positive light, demonstrating that the effect of a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) on student learning has been greater than the effect of Title I. He goes on to say that where CSR fails it can only be attributed to the implementation process rather than the model itself. Instead of the seemingly piecemeal and uncoordinated categorical targeted approach to CSR, certainly, a long-term commitment to research-proven educational reform is needed to establish a strong marketplace of scientifcally based models capable of bringing comprehensive reform to the nation's schools. In recent years, attention increasingly has focused on a radically different approach to improving the quality and performance of schools – comprehensive school reform. Rather than layering one program on top of another, this approach focuses on redesigning and integrating all aspects of a school – parental education, teacher role, good teaching versas effective teaching, and the overall culture of success which includes school management, governance, and assessment.

PARENTAL EDUCATION

An important concept of school reform is the value of the human element. A reach to a lasting school reform requires the codification of the human element within the process and giving focus to the role of meaningful relationships, interactions, and the dynamics of all stakeholders. It requires a concerted effort and commitment to embracing the emotion, feelings, needs, and perceptions of teachers and leaders as well as their roles and beliefs and/or pedagogical assumptions. Moreover, it is only when the people in this process are considered first and their needs and wants met that educational reform has much chance for success. While the accumulation of research data is important and concerted conversations on student dropouts are essential, the instrumental design generally undertaken to study the public schools has not been found to produce any beneficial results. Teachers and students are not instruments to be

tinkered with, either from forces within or outside the schools.

Parental education, perhaps, is the single most important influence affecting English mastery and academic success among immigrant children, and therefore more must be done in this area, not just for the benefit of these students, but for the benefit of the nation as a whole. With the shift in demographics moving toward a larger minority population, underinvestment in education becomes more problematic. Henderson and Mapp (2002) conducted a thorough review of two decades of research on parent involvement, structuring their examination around three topics: studies on the impact of family and community involvement on student achievement; studies on effective strategies to connect schools, families, and community; and studies on parent and community organizing efforts to improve schools. There is substantial evidence that family engagement in children's learning is beneficial, but the evidence that school-based initiatives can influence family behaviors in ways that impact learning is limited to small-scale investigations of specific strategies that are productive for those families that most directly access them.

Lareau (2003) has argues that middle-class parents, without regard to race, use a strategy of "concerted cultivation" to raise their children. They devote almost every waking minute of the day to giving their kids educational experiences. The children are very heavily scheduled with organized after-school activities, to the point that they lead hectic lives with much rushed traveling and many overlapping or conflicting appointments. Even ordinary conversations are opportunities to develop kids' cognitive and language skills. Parents use persuasion (Epstein, 1995; Sanders, 1996, 1998))and negotiation (Fullan, M. 2001, 2007)to influence their children's behavior--a laborious and slow way to get them to comply, but one that constantly challenges them mentally. Kids talk as equals with adults, including teachers and physicians.

Perhaps out of frustration with the slow pace of change, today's advocates and policymakers--whether conservative, centrist, or moderately liberal--now use a fundamentally new strategy. Instead of tinkering with what goes on inside schools, they concentrate on changing the incentive structure.

TEACHER ROLE

Recognizing the importance of teachers in driving the school change process is critical to the success of any change initiative; especially reducing high school dropouts. Researchers reveal that significant educational change requires modification in the school's culture (Gordon Cawelti and Nancy Protheroe, 2007), including its pedagogical beliefs, values, and norms (Datnow, A. & Stringfield, S., 2000; Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). Greene (1993a; 1993b;1993c), believes that, to create democratic classrooms, teachers must learn to listen to student voices. Listening allows teachers to discover what students are thinking, what concerns them, and what has meaning to them. When teachers learn to listen, it is possible for teachers and students to collectively search for historical, literary, and artistic metaphors that make knowledge of the world accessible to us. Cross-industry research argues that when an organization desires large-scale reform in a dynamic topic, it needs to "[create] partnerships of engagement that mobilize the entire system" (Fullan, 2007, p. 228). A school is both an organized system and a community of people. A *school community* consists of the people intimately attached to that school—

teachers, students, parents of students, administrators, support staff, and volunteers.

President Obama and Duncan, his Secretary of Education regularly frame their education reforms as "the civil rights issue for the 21st century." Yet it's stunning that the first African American president has increased federal education spending by over $100 billion dollars without directing a dime to promote integrated public education.

The quality of schooling (education that the state provides) should be equal, or should actually be better for less advantaged kids. Quality does not mean effectiveness at raising test scores--it means what is actually good. That may include intrinsically valuable experiences, such as making and appreciating art. But quality probably includes effective practices that raise scores on meaningful, well-designed tests. Communities educate children, not just schools; and it is a false hope that we can achieve dramatically better results by tinkering with the structure of schools: their governance, funding, incentives, and regulations. It is imperative that a change in paradigm requires a recognition that students do not merely passively receive or copy input from teachers, but instead actively mediate it by trying to make sense of it and to relate it to what they already know (or think they know) about the topic.

The push for national standards is another part of the administration's reform blueprint. For Duncan, the basic problem in NCLB is not the misuse and overuse of standardized testing; it's that the individual state tests don't provide a common measure, and instead encourage states to game the system by juggling proficiency levels. Longstanding opposition to national standards and tests forced NCLB to rely on separate state tests that allow such maneuvering.

GOOD TEACHING VIS-À-VIS EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Research indicates that effective teaching is the most important school factor in a child's education. The persistent focus of the National Board is, certainly, far reaching in its efforts on the teacher and teacher effectiveness, believing that strengthening teaching was the most effective action the nation could take as it worked to improve student learning. Over the past several years, many school improvement proposals, both public and private, have diminished the role of the classroom teacher. Generally portrayed as *doers and not thinkers*, teachers too often have ironically been held responsible for a system that has shown a basic disinterest in educating *all* children. Teachers know what they need: a collaborative and trusting school culture that is responsive in providing support systems aimed at increasing student learning.

But, because high-poverty schools are often challenging places to teach, they suffer disproportionately from small applicant pools and high teacher turnover—and, as a result, their teaching force often includes a disproportionate number of new and less-experienced teachers. In addition, when teachers have attempted to initiate change and challenge conventional thinking, they have felt constrained by externally imposed rules and regulations. Almost two an half decades ago, Philip Jackson (1986) argued that schools have followed a "mimetic tradition" and that this tradition is what the public believes schools are all about (p.117). This dominant tradition in American education values the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student through an imitative process. No wonder, when it comes to educational reform, most teachers and teacher advocates are a little skeptical.

So what steps can classroom teachers take to close the achievement gap and make our schools *dropout proof*? How do we move from theory to practice and develop innovative and concrete steps that teachers, administrators, students, and parents can unify around to reshape and reorganize their schools for all students? To answer these questions, new rules, regulations, or mandates are not, necessary. Rather, school improvement may be as simple as teachers and other school community stakeholders paying attention to what is working, or not working, in P-12 classroom and producing desired outcomes for students.

Regardless of the assessment instrument, teacher effectiveness is demonstrated when student learning improves (Darling-Hammond 2007; Gordon et al. 2006). Furthermore, there is consensus that learning in high school progresses toward the goal of graduation with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college, work, and as a citizen (Corbett and Huebner 2008). Therefore, the definition of teacher effectiveness must focus on growth in student learning that ensures students are successful after high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).

Effective teaching requires that the teacher has within his range of influence the primary objective of establishing a very specific pathway for the success of all students irrespective of social economic status and backgrounds. Perhaps, schools are over-organized to the point of dysfunction. Most education reformers agree that effective teaching is defined by improving student learning, but they disagree on how to measure teacher effectiveness and how to use those measurements to improve teaching. Good teaching is not necessary effective teaching. Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005), assert that good teaching (what teachers do) is not the same as successful teaching (teaching that produces student learning). They extend their description by stating:

> By good teaching, we mean that the content taught accords with disciplinary standards of adequacy and completeness, and that the methods employed are age appropriate, morally defensible, and undertaken with the intention of enhancing the learner's competence with respect to the content studied. . . By successful teaching, we mean that the learner actually acquires, to some reasonable and acceptable levels of proficiency, what the teacher is engaged in teaching. (p. 191).

Fenstermacher and his associate (2005), convincingly, believe that it must be conjoined with factors outside the classroom. Over the last few decades, Research (Shulman, 1987, 1991; Berliner, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 1992) has drawn attention to the complexity of what effective teachers know about what they teach and how they help students to learn. As a consequence of this research, standards are emerging as a sound basis for defining levels of expertise in teaching and assessing teacher performance. Current teacher accountability policies do not focus on teacher effectiveness.

A vast majority of teachers receive tenure pro forma after several years in the profession, without having to demonstrate tangibly that they have improved student achievement (Gordon et al. 2006). Federal law holds schools accountable for ensuring that teachers are highly qualified, but that provision focuses on teacher qualifications rather than actual impact on students in the classroom.

Teacher evaluation tools are often the only form of feedback given to teachers to improve practice. These instruments measure teacher practice and presumably reflect behavior that is supposed to represent good teacher practice. While most (Holtzapple, 2003; Milanowski, 2004; Kannapel and Clement, 2005; Gallagher, 2004; Heneman, Milanowski, Kimball, & Odden, 2006) would agree that teacher quality is the integral factor in student learning, teacher evaluation, the instrument through which the quality of a teacher is assessed, has not evolved enough in most cases to measure what is known to be effective teaching. The best way to improve teacher effectiveness is to provide teachers with support and guidance that are grounded in effectiveness—that is, which uses effectiveness data to enhance professional development and teacher education, strengthen evaluations and career development, and revamp accountability policies to reward and encourage student learning. To begin this process, the establishment of realistic benchmarks needs to be at the heart of the overall evaluation process which will encourage planning and teaching.

CULTURE OF SUCCESS

Most professional development programs in schools aim to improve individual teacher behavior, such as teaching methods, classroom management techniques, and new approaches to teaching specific content areas. The unfortunate result is that too often than not teachers grumble that traditional professional development is notorious for "sit and listen." It would not be far-fetched to conclude that teachers find professional development sessions as a good time to grade papers on the sly. Why? This type of professional development is not geared toward what teachers need to know to improve student learning or tailored to reform efforts under way in a school. Studies of individual teacher improvement efforts, however, consistently demonstrate that many teachers do not use these new approaches in their daily interactions with students (Bush, 1984; Hart; Sizer, 1992).

The culture of success (Hargreaves, 2003), defined by the beliefs and values of respect, encouragement, caring, support, and reciprocity between students and teachers, plays out in the lives of students learning, college and work readiness. Student voices are robust in operationalizing the essential cultural elements at all levels of these schools to produce the outcomes of personalization, racial cohesion, and access to learning opportunities. Help and trust are key factors for students (Beard & Brown, 2008). Hoy, Hoy, & Kurtz, 2008; Fahy, Wu, & Hoy, 2010). Both elements encourage vulnerability and risk taking. While students want help in school they also want to be trusted. Thus far, most of the policy debate on teacher effectiveness has focused on using test scores to implement merit pay or to fire teachers, but those strategies alone will not lift teacher performance on a large scale.

CONCLUSION: MAY BE LAKE WOBEGON DOESN'T EXIST AFTER ALL!

A failing school provides a hot bed for a complex pipeline to prison (Takona, 2010), and in inequity to social justice. There must be both a parental and community involvement to the success of the school and not the alternative regarding school choice; where the choice for the able family is ever relentless search for the "passing schools". Measurements by standardized testing and market-based approaches to school choice have been counterproductive in the

extreme. To this end, assessment by standardized testing had produced an illusion of progress, while in fact it had undermined the traditional strengths of the American educational system, a phenomenon not found Lake Wobegon where *all children are above average!*

So many schools, struggling to survive, divert hundreds of instructional hours each year from history, social studies, science, the arts and physical education, and redirect those hours to test preparation (Ravitch, 2010). Having innovative ideas and understanding the change process is not the same thing. Indeed, the case can be made that those firmly committed to their own ideas are not necessarily good change agents because being a change agent involves getting commitment from others who might not like one's ideas. Ravitch (2010) calls for a voluntary national curriculum, and believes that a consensus around better education is possible. Schools and school districts are thirsty for a framework that supports as flexible environment in which the schools in that protected zone is able to operate. Policies from the federal, state and districts must be stringent yet attractive to reward and support in order to provide a catalyst for change.

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