

K-12 EDUCATION A PLAN FOR EXCELLENCE

By
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For the past 45 years, this Country has been engaged in one type of school reform program after another. During that time, we have seen spending increase at more than 10 times the rate of enrollment, staffing increase at four times that of enrollment and test scores remain largely unchanged. Today, public education is a \$600 billion enterprise with 6 million employees. It is the largest government employment program we have and it is still not working.

Since 1970, we have under-educated a large percentage of our young people. This has resulted in high drop out rates, inadequate preparation for either college or the work world and a decrease in the standard of living for millions of Americans. In 2013, sixty five percent of our high school graduates could not pass even one level of college readiness in reading, writing, math or science; minorities perform even worse. Failure to educate our children has yielded the highest incarceration rates in the developed world and the highest level of poverty in our history. In other words, the education strategy we have been following has been an unmitigated failure.

While this Country's education results have been stagnant, the rest of the developed world has passed us by. Today, America is 20th in high school graduation rates, 24th in college graduation rates and 27th in the graduation rate of scientists and engineers

In 1970, we were largely a domestic economy with a large manufacturing base. Today, we operate in a global economy and are non- competitive in the production of goods. Of Wal-Mart's 6000 suppliers, 5000 now reside in China.

As global competition increased and jobs became more complex, the need for an educated citizenry increased. Our schools did not adapt and, as a result, we have a large segment of our population that is unable to find work in the new economy even as thousands of jobs go unfilled for lack of skilled candidates.

Improving the effectiveness of our schools has never been more important, but throwing more money and more people at an obsolete system simply yields a more expensive obsolete system. What is needed is a new system of education, tailored to the individual needs of each student.

However, you cannot expect the people who now reside in and who grew up with the existing system to be the ones to change it. That is not possible any more than you would expect the management and employees of a failing business to be the ones to turn it around. What is needed is a new type of educator who has been carefully selected and appropriately trained to become the innovators of change.

Attracting such people is not possible in the present system. Today, education schools control the source of supply of human capital that is allowed to enter our schools. These institutions have had a monopoly for decades and have deteriorated into organizations that are both inefficient and ineffective. The source of this problem is certification laws. These laws are now keeping out the very people we need in our schools. "Certified is no longer a guarantee of qualified" and until it is, it has no value. Removing or dramatically modifying these laws will open up our schools to mathematicians, scientists, English majors, musicians, people skilled in another language, etc. Also, getting rid of certification laws will allow us to select and train a better population of leaders to lead both our schools and our districts. Individuals in these positions need to be carefully selected and appropriately trained---neither of which is occurring today.

Improving teaching and improving leadership are two fundamental requirements to begin the process of improving our schools. Eliminating certification laws is the first step to begin that process.

The other failure of our schools occurs at the governance level. Elected school boards, particularly in urban systems, are no longer up to the task of governing our schools. This is caused because we have made running for public office a very unattractive activity and, consequently, our brightest and most qualified citizens choose not to run. This is particularly true for school board races in urban centers. A lack of qualified candidates leaves a leadership vacuum that is now being filled with "social activists," single issue fanatics," and "union sympathizers"---hardly the type of people qualified to run multi-million and multi-billion dollar enterprises. Fixing the governance model, by either going to an appointed school board or eliminating the board completely, are necessary steps to correct the governance issue.

Each of these solutions could occur by simply changing state law. And none require additional funding. In fact, these solutions might save money as schools become more efficient and effective due to improved leadership and improved teaching; teacher turnover is reduced as working conditions and student performance improve and ineffective education schools close.

Improving the performance of our schools starts with improving the people in the system and to do that we must eliminate certification laws and modify the governance structure. With those two changes in place, high quality people will populate the system and they will then orchestrate the change the system so desperately needs.

The Discovery Institute is setting up a new American Center for Transforming Education. This Center will focus on the ideas expressed in the book, "Every School." The Center will focus on a select number of states that have both a Governor and a state legislature who have a commitment to create quality schools in their state.

The Discovery Institute has established a \$1.0 million funding budget (\$230,000 has already been raised) to support the initial staff and programs necessary to create this capability. Our goal will be to provide effective assistance to at least one state to become the Nation's leader in transforming our public education system.

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