Seven Keys
to
Education Reform

SchoolsRetooled™

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2. **Make teacher pensions portable.**

3. **Place teachers and administrators in shared incentive programs linked to student achievement in their schools.**

4. **End pedagogy wars.**

5. **Reinvent school leadership modeled on the general manager role and asset-based management. Balance administrative teams with instructional leaders and community liaisons.**

6. **Open up the dialogue in Special Education to include the children by grade four, and provide incentives for progress toward grade level proficiency.**

7. **Value people of all ages.**

No-Fault Education Reform

The public school system is full of people with good intentions doing wonderful work. Exemplary models for educating children are being developed across the country, and each has instructional leadership at its core. They depend on excellent teachers. So why did the seven keys to education reform neglect to mention the best teachers? The short answer is that plenty of people are addressing the issue already. The slightly longer version turns on the difference between building a better educator and building a better education system.

Education policy is about the entire system of public education. A sustainable system must be robust enough to serve its mission while being inclusive of the general population of students and teachers. It cannot break down in the absence of a hand-picked collection of education's finest.

Further, the current system did not break down because of its incumbents. It has collapsed under the weight of data limitations, institutional myopia, bureaucratization, and a mismatch between mission and incentives. It has become abundantly clear that a bad system can drive good people to do bad things. What we need is a good system that makes it easier for all people to do better things.

We have broken a promise to the children who entered kindergarten in 2001. Many of them are not going to be ready for college. We must renew that promise to future generations and set aside our differences. As long as we can opt out of accountability by blaming one another, the children will be left behind.

1. Build the data infrastructure for the next generation of education leadership, from formulas for government funding to data on student outcomes and teacher effectiveness.

Efficient funding of student achievement through effective instruction is the cornerstone of education policy. In order to be informed as we pursue this overarching goal, we need to develop a new data infrastructure for education finance, student outcomes, and teacher effectiveness.

Education Finance: Federal, State, and local agencies fund education and account for spending according to regulatory guidelines. Schools districts maintain their books to document conformity to regulations. Unfortunately, that is in direct conflict with their mission to deliver education services to students with the best possible outcomes for the lowest cost. Groups such as the Council of the Great City Schools have been wrestling with methodologies that tied spending to the students and their specific outcomes for the last decade. Barriers to such a process have been highlighted at the Fordham Institute's conference on rethinking school governance as well.

A strong remedy lies in two solutions: first, use of **weighted average student funding** that would identify the money that was to be spent and direct districts to send some large percentage (90-95%) of dollars directly to each school based on who attended it; and second, development of **school-based financial accounting standards** that would facilitate analysis of spending and outcomes. In the first action, funding would no longer begin at the district level, and then trickle down to students. Rather than fund bureaucracies, education agencies would empower schools to spend directly on education services to students. Financial accounting standards would enhance accessibility of data for informed decision-making as well as provide transparency for oversight in school governance.

There need not be any loss of aggregate data for regulatory purposes. Information technology is available with the ability to tag data such that regulatory accounting requirements could be satisfied while education managers gained the reports they needed for mission-driven microeconomic analysis.

Student Outcomes: Data on student outcomes must have more depth and be actionable. In order to be informative and instructive, data should include an **expanded snapshot of the whole child** at periodic intervals; **track longitudinal progress** for individual and cohort analysis; and be **accessible as timely feedback** for educators, students, and their guardians. The current state of the art seems to focus on test results and allowing all constituents to weigh in on possible explanations thereof. It remains guesswork, masquerading as data-driven leadership. In addition, systems for feedback are cumbersome and incompatible.

Children take tests to show what they have learned and how they analyze and solve problems. Children also demonstrate their habits of learning, their creativity and industriousness, and their civic-mindedness. All will contribute to a foundation for lifelong learning. Additional measures that document intellectual and psychosocial development track their successful growth toward adulthood as well as highlighting need for intervention. Snapshots must reflect the whole child at any given time.

School-level aggregation of data can be difficult for elementary schools, which comprise grade levels that are not uniform. Districts have explored variations in grades K-8 that are less operational with the addition of pre-kindergarten. Many schools use the middle school concept that separates children for grades 6-8. However, recent studies suggest that grade six transitions are the most disruptive to the children in terms

of outcomes. We recommend reorganization of elementary schools and, therefore data, into adjoining **PreK-3 and 4-8 subgroups**.

Clustering grades 4-8 would recognize the movement from basic skill building to applied learning that is most significant in grade four. In addition, it would shift the change in school to an age that is less complicated physically and emotionally. Children could solidify their identities based on emerging intellectual strengths prior to the onset of puberty. By grade six, their psychosocial development should occur in a safer and more familiar place.

Teacher Effectiveness: Merit-based contracts for teachers cannot be drafted in the absence of data. Leaders must build a system around formal and informal evidence of **teacher practices** and **student outcomes** and validate the data before asking teachers to accept it as a basis for their employment and compensation. This is NOT a chicken and egg conundrum. Trust comes from knowing the people and the tool. It cannot be the basis for sign-off on a system to be designed later.

Children learn with outward results; however, they also internalize many things that will manifest themselves later. We will never know all that we have taught them, the good, the bad, or the rest. That is why we look at teacher effectiveness with an eye to process and outcomes. Accordingly, multiple measures are needed to assess teacher performance, including whole-student progress, instructional practices and collegiality, and feedback from students and their guardians.

2. Make teacher pensions portable.

Pension portability is essential to education reform. Currently, public school teachers give up mandatory payroll deductions to a pension system before they even have permanent jobs. The system collects contributions for a lifetime, but benefits are optimized only for those past age 55 with 30 years of service. Teachers who move about rarely accrue significant pension benefits, and teachers who are forced to leave a system often suffer serious financial penalties, even if vested.

Conversion to some form of **defined-contribution plan** offers a way out of the golden handcuffs of a closed retirement plan as well as equity for individuals leaving such a system voluntarily or for reasons beyond their control. In addition, it would be a constructive response to a looming financial crisis due to underfunding of pension plans. However, the transition would require **funding of the obligation to legacy plan beneficiaries**. In addition, the new arrangement would shift financial risk to the retirees and, necessarily, should require **extension of the Social Security safety net** to educators who have remained in antiquated opt-out systems.

The pension trap serves to limit mobility for teachers with a strong vested interest in a rigid retirement plan. Conversely, it is a barrier to retention of employees who cannot envision staying long enough to reap those same benefits. This combination of "lifers" and a revolving door of newcomers impedes the dissemination of best practices and technological innovation. Institutional myopia and group-think are frequent side effects. Further, employees may lose motivation if they are no longer energized by the work but cannot afford to leave. Termination of long-time employees can be unthinkable for many school leaders

who observe poor performance but cannot deliver a verdict that includes forfeiture of any part of retirement savings or income potential.

Systems for pensions and for tenure have been subjects of controversy in education policy. Both are terms of employment that must be negotiated contractually. However, the pension situation necessarily must be addressed at a higher policy level. Conversion to a new plan will eliminate the funding source for existing pension plan benefits. Education authorities will incur debt to meet these obligations, and government subsidies will be needed as an incentive for conversion.

The situation is complicated further by pre-existing underfunding of pension obligations. Essentially, employee contributions and retirement income tables were set in an era of greater market stability and returns on investments. These expectations have become unrealistic. Pension obligations are rapidly outgrowing funds in reserve. This is not the first time this has happened. In fact, government workers, including teachers, are among the last to remain in defined-benefit pension plans that offer guaranteed payments after a lifetime with the same employer. Most private sector defined-benefit pension plans were terminated during the economic turmoil of the 1970s or early 1980s, often with catastrophic results for beneficiaries.

Since that time, private sector retirement plans have evolved to allow workers mobility across organizational and geographic borders through defined-contribution retirement savings. Employers also have shifted responsibility for the risk/return profile of investment portfolios to employees. A typical pension planner focuses on contributions defined by the employee to be invested across a portfolio of options. In either case, most private and public employees are protected by the Social Security safety net in the event of financial disaster.

As underfunding of pension plans re-emerges as an issue, some plans have offered their employees the option of paying into the system at a higher rate and/or accepting lower payouts as a short-term solution. However, some combination of a bailout and/or conversion will be needed to protect government retirement plans eventually. As a further complication, government workers in states such as California, Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Texas have never been enrolled in Social Security, since these states held onto a defunct opt-out clause in the 1980s.

The very real threat to solvency of pension plans is converging with the intangibles for employees to create an opportunity to address several problems at once. Researchers Joshua Rauh of Northwestern University and Robert Novy-Marx of the University of Rochester have suggested offering **tax-free bonds for unfunded pension debt in exchange for conversion of new employees to 401(K) plans and enrollment in Social Security**. This plan or a similar alternative would offer permanent remedy while reducing the downside for all players.

3. Place teachers and administrators in shared incentive programs linked to student achievement in their school.

While awaiting the development of teacher effectiveness reports, school districts need not set aside all notions of merit-based compensation. Clear goals for student outcomes exist at the school level with

accountability at the administrative level only. Divisiveness between teachers and administrators has increased under this arrangement, obscuring awareness of their common mission.

A **whole-school incentive system** that pays teachers and administrators to work together to achieve a short list of goals for students is a strong first step toward a more advanced system of merit pay. This action creates a reward for desired outcomes while limiting the focus to collective accomplishments. It celebrates interdependence, collegiality, and a results orientation, all of which are crucial to long-term success.

Note: Much attention has been given to a whole-school incentive program in NYC that lasted roughly 18 months and was abandoned due to conflicting budget priorities. We have reviewed the project and methodologies and consider the results unreliable in the prediction of authentic behavioral change.

4. End pedagogy wars.

Dogma is the enemy of diverse learners. It is not news that children are smart and different. When lessons fit their styles, students internalize teaching methods and begin to activate strategies independently. Even the best techniques become stale over time as singular approaches to formal lessons. However, it is not that the strategy has become obsolete. Rather, it is the lack of creative alternatives being presented.

Since the introduction of the New Math in the 1960s, educators have been drawn to pedagogical fads. Staunch supporters of all-or-nothing swings in teaching methods have ruled content areas, and a throw-away culture has had its way with the tools of the trade. These single-minded approaches have always failed to meet the needs of a segment of the student population. Eventually they would get discarded – baby with the bath water. Given enough time, as any veteran teacher will assure you, each was resurrected, once its antithesis had been explored and unanimously dropped for its own shortcomings.

Debates over pedagogy have continued to treat many decisions as binary, and persuasive dialogue has quickly devolved into a classic Good-versus-Evil dichotomy. While this would seem to be wrong intuitively, research often has supported the conclusion that the most recently released version of teaching was better. What could be wrong with that?

The paradox of the short-term blip in achievement in response to any new strategy accounts for part of the problem. Essentially, students who were receptive to a particular strategy would experience diminishing returns; less receptive students would be neutral or worse. Over time, the strategy would grow stale, and any valid innovation would have a better chance of stimulating learning, especially if it hit the mark with children who were underserved by the previous technique. All the same, confetti would fly heralding the discovery of the new magic bullet for education's woes.

The greater flaw has been the limited bandwidth for **learning styles, processing speeds, and vehicle preferences**. Pedagogical swings or biases have prevented access to meaningful lessons for some of the students all of the time. A more robust model of student engagement and choice could **keep the whole menu of learning strategies in the mix** with less risk of overexposure. Versions of "broadband" learning have appealed to academics but found limited success in K-12 schools as early innovators struggled to implement them because of limitations of technology and traditional classroom management.

Today, the time is ripe to revisit the case for teaching every child by design. Technology has become ubiquitous with a wide variety of platforms and applications. Accountability for special populations has exposed shortcomings in inclusiveness of education systems. And scrutiny of teachers has led to a mixture of sharp criticism as well as heightened support for valiant efforts. A longer vision will allow us to exploit these challenges and opportunities for our own growth.

Truly student-centric education will rely upon further evolution of classroom resources and redefinition of the role of the teacher. The new classroom must be technology-rich and multi-purposed, or students must have access to alternatives in the form of dedicated activities rooms or virtual learning opportunities. Teachers will need to release control over instruction in favor of milieu design, coordination of the learning workshop, and guidance of student decision-making, as well as observation and feedback. Educators need not worry about discarding teaching methods. Let the children try them all to see what works. Best practices match strategies to learners; they should never limit the field.

Reinvention of the teacher is not a personal quality issue so much as an opportunity to diversify skills and take professional risks. Knowledge cannot be personified in a single teacher, nor can complex lesson plans be developed and applied in isolation. Collaboration and interdependence among educators will be crucial. Deep knowledge of content and pedagogy will remain essential; however, the ability to work in a team and foster self-advocacy in students will be equally important. Individual variations arising from professional experience, style preference, or demographic factors must be seen as sources of insight rather than divisiveness.

5. Reinvent school leadership modeled on the general manager role and asset-based management. Balance administrative teams with instructional leaders and community liaisons.

Structural change in education is driving the need for new leadership and vision within schools. Decentralization of resources and greater autonomy in decision-making have extended the headmaster's role beyond traditional instructional leadership. At the same time, instruction has moved beyond the school walls to involve community partners as well as remote virtual learning opportunities beyond the school leader's oversight. Further, diversity among students has heightened the importance of engaging with their cultures and families. The administrative model for the future will require general management at the top, assisted by instructional leadership and community liaisons. Excellence in schools will result from drawing the strengths from each discipline and allocating resources efficiently.

This change may not be easy. There has been a long tradition of management of educators by educators, and the industry has resisted outside intervention. Indeed, a prerequisite for participation in school leadership has been adoption of the world view of insiders. However, schools of education have begun to enter joint ventures in school administration with business schools at leading universities. There is a real opportunity for schools of management to challenge the status quo as equal partners in a new school leadership model. Improvement should be realized in the areas of more sophisticated staff management, stream-lined administrative systems, and goal-oriented design of educational operations.

Asset-based management combines an understanding of the value inherent in the people, materials, and capital invested in the educational effort with the intent to build on the strengths of each. Authority comes with accountability at the top, and there is no place for excuses or blame. School leaders must have a clear

vision for the future and the autonomy to allocate resources strategically. Goals for the future cannot be limited to correction of deficits; rather, they must reflect high expectations and creative ways to expand resources. For example, students with limited English proficiency should not be instructed simply to speak English more fluently. Instead, their native language should be used to deepen their understanding of language arts standards and ease the transition to English-language content.

6. Open up the dialogue in Special Education to include the children by grade four, and provide incentives for progress toward grade level proficiency.

The two most important issues within Special Education are **early diagnosis and intervention** and **acceleration of progress toward grade level proficiency**. The combination of student outcomes data, longitudinal progress reports, and differentiated learning strategies addressed earlier on behalf of all students will benefit the children with disabilities as well. In addition, efforts are in place to expedite access to services for developmental issues in early elementary school. However, many students with moderate learning disabilities begin to manifest serious issues around grade four as they make the transition from basic concepts to applied learning. By this time, they may be performing significantly below their peers.

With accurate diagnoses and appropriate interventions, most students can make accelerated progress toward grade-level proficiency. This requires a higher level of collaboration between educators, beginning with the headmaster, and individual children, involving them in their education plans and drawing on their insight and motivation to help them overcome obstacles and resolve some issues earlier. In addition, engaging children in very private exchanges safely preserves confidentiality while lifting the shroud of secrecy that has left many children unnecessarily sensitive and confused about the learning style issues that have the grown-ups so worried. Absent such involvement, younger students with disabilities tend to attend meetings only after they manifest behavioral issues.

Existing regulatory policy requires periodic snapshots of a student's abilities and progress toward goals. What is missing from this series of pictures is tracking of comparative data over time. A child with a disability who is not making suitable progress in school qualifies for services; however, the effectiveness of those services in bringing the child closer to grade level proficiency also should be evaluated and met with corrective measures as needed. Too many children continue to lose ground academically even as they receive a high level of service that should be enabling them to overcome obstacles and compensate for their disabilities.

Beyond service delivery, the students themselves need more empowerment in understanding their growth potential and managing their progress toward goals. Currently, we begin to train children to be their own advocates in the management of their learning disabilities as part of transition planning for the end of high school. Children would benefit from involvement in the process earlier, especially in grades 4-8. These are crucial years for actively engaging students as they begin to establish their identities as capable, lifelong learners and develop compensatory strategies for their disabilities. Absent this involvement, many students with Special Needs enter high school demonstrating a mixture of dependency on adults and avoidance of academic challenge.

Armed with data and partnership with the students, special educators will be better equipped to facilitate mastery of math and literacy basics within their students by the end of middle school. This is an absolute necessity for closing the achievement gap. High school must be a time of growth in academic sophistication and analytical capability. A loose patchwork of supports exists for young adults with serious residual issues. However, for the vast majority of students with moderate disabilities, services end with graduation.

The National Center for Special Education Research recently reported results of a longitudinal study of students with special needs after high school. The students lagged their peers without disabilities on a number of academic and career measures. Essentially, failure to close the achievement gap by the end of high school was allowing it to widen for life. Extending remedial support beyond high school is looking backward with regret. Today's twenty-something young adults with disabilities may deserve support in light of our failures, but this is not the stuff of progressive policy. These young adults would have been far better served through intensive development of compensatory abilities at an earlier age.

7. Value people of all ages.

Older teachers have become the acceptable scapegoats in education. Casual negative references to employees of middle age have become part of the landscape, along with a bias toward youth in career advancement of teachers and school leaders. Ageism overlooks the value added by age and experience, deprives younger staff of natural mentors, and eliminates institutional memory. It offers no end game for employees. Being young at heart has no value – one simply must not get old. The legal precedent against age discrimination is clear-cut; however, the path to a culture that values people of all ages bears delineation.

The problem has its roots in a naïve leadership model that is skewed toward the highest and lowest performers and relies too heavily on role models as a motivational technique. School leaders have been shown to have a high degree of accuracy in assessment of their highest and lowest performing employees. However, they have difficulty differentiating the quality of the efforts for the 90% of employees in the middle. This may account for a preoccupation with exemplars and unsatisfactory performers. The large majority of veteran employees have been encouraged to emulate a series of role models, most of whom were younger and less experienced. The result has often been divisive, with resentment prevailing over imitative behavior.

Leaders have been frustrated when their use of exemplars has failed to motivate the rest of the team. A common response has been anger and accusatory behavior toward seemingly uncooperative older employees. A system of tenure combined with a pension trap may engender stagnation on the job for some; yet an army of dedicated teachers, who seem to have aged out of role model candidacy, continue to devote their lives to the education of children. Such intrinsic motivation and individual leadership calls for an incentive system that fits that style. An institution that rewards youth deprives mature teachers of social acceptance even as it attempts to use peer pressure to motivate them. It is the wrong tool for the job.

Evolution toward a more successful program should reflect a **broader set of incentives** and more frequent **individualized self-assessment, goal-setting, and review**. Teacher assessment should begin with a **level**

playing field with **multiple measures of success**. Care should be taken to avoid a simple ranking system, which would push the staff deeper into the existing toxic culture.

Results in turnaround schools have suggested that teacher performance has improved with the simple addition of annual evaluations. With an enhanced leadership model, staff managers will be better equipped to value their diversity and offer opportunities for growth and incentives for strong performance over the course of every career. Likewise, attending to the whole staff on an equal basis will engender the trust that will be a prerequisite to future collaboration.

A cautionary note: While ageism has become an institutionalized vice in education, there is evidence of a more recent increase in ethnocentrism and marginalizing of others in our society. With rising economic inequity and the general dearth of new opportunities, people are protecting their turf in uncharacteristic ways. Vulnerable student subgroups once protected politically are being treated to resentment as we threaten to return to a zero-sum society. Those who set policy must be more vigilant than ever of discrimination of any kind.

Education Reform in Action

Education reform necessarily arises from the combined actions of Federal, state, and local education authorities. Some suggested policy implications are outlined below.

At the state and Federal levels…

- Set weighted-average financial formulas that fund each child based on his or her educational profile within the school, including eligible grant funding. Suggest maximum allowable distribution to district overhead.
- Establish school-based financial accounting standards that match funding to students.
- Organize data around children at grade levels PreK-3, 4-8, and 9-12.
- Aggregate longitudinal student progress reports for each grade level cohort.
    - Macro data on demographics, attendance, periodic formal assessment of competencies, and outcomes at the end of each school level (i.e., grades 3, 8, 12)
    - School-level data on informal assessments, developmental benchmarks
    - Tagged subgroup data for analysis as necessary
- Maintain education labor force statistics on employment, turnover, and credentials.
- Offer subsidies for school districts that convert to defined-contribution pension plans and ensure access to Social Security.
- Develop educator resources on a broad spectrum of pedagogical methods and blended learning.
- Expand licensure options to include general management training for school leaders.
- Recommend annual evaluations for all education employees.
- Design tracking mechanism for longitudinal progress for students with Special Needs.
- Recommend student participation in Individual Education Plan development as of grades four.

Within a school district…

- Reorganize district leadership around the needs of autonomous schools.
- Implement new financial accounting system.
- Develop school leadership teams consisting of a general manager, instructional leaders, and a community liaison. Supplement in-house training with external higher education partners.
- Organize neighborhood schools for students enrolled in grades PreK-3 and 4-8.
- Facilitate data collection to measure whole-student performance (e.g., longitudinal progress toward grade level proficiency, psychosocial benchmarks, and personalized learning objectives) and multiple measures for teacher evaluations.
- Develop challenging goals with each school for student achievement, and offer whole-school incentive plans for results.
- Negotiate new teacher contracts with annual goal-setting and performance review and option for pension plan portability and enrollment in Social Security as needed.
- Routinize school leader involvement with Students with Special Needs and longitudinal progress.
- Train school leaders and staff in new systems of evaluations and incentive pay, anti-discrimination policy, and a wider bandwidth of pedagogical practices.

About SchoolsRetooled[TM]

SchoolsRetooled[TM] focuses on PreK-12 education reform, school/district turnaround, strategic planning, and alternative program design. Kathleen Wright offers advice from her collective experience as a nurse, business manager, urban educator, and policy analyst. Her point of view calls for an end to the blame game while seeking accurate diagnoses and real solutions to the need for excellence and equity in the education of everyone's children. Kathleen is a believer in greatness in urban youth, miracles in Special Education, and mobility in education careers.

Kathleen is a graduate of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and the School of Nursing at the University of Virginia. She received her teacher training through the Massachusetts Institute for New Teachers. She is certified as a High School Principal as well as a Teacher of Mathematics and Special Education.

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