

School Improvement Platform

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## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLATFORM

In a recent visit to his hometown of Pensacola, Florida, University of Alabama sophomore running back and Heisman Trophy candidate Trent Richardson visited a group of high school students to share his motivational message about hard work and perseverance. Richardson described his experiences as a child growing up in poverty with the associated pressures of drugs and peers. "I wasn't a bad person," he said. "I was hanging around bad people." (Vilona, 2011) Often we hear of stories of success in spite of extreme pressure and along with that is often the unwavering support of an adult figure, in this case, Richardson's mother. The sad and striking message of Richardson's is the opportunity lost by the educational system. Richardson's most vivid memories associated with school are of "the middle school teacher who was convinced he would amount to nothing. Said it to his face." (Vilona, 2011) Richardson is a success because of his athletic gifts, but he wouldn't have reached the public stage without a work ethic of his own, along with coachability, communication, and teamwork, all of which he could have easily displayed had his teachers respected his human potential.

### **Educational Core Values**

For educators and educational leaders, Trent Richardson's story should be cause for self-evaluation, not just of the particular teacher who pulled him down, but of the entire educational system that appears to do more harm than good to thousands of our students daily, whether they are special needs students who are bullied (Hairston, Keeler & Dress, 2011) or students whose dreams are shattered by emotional abuse or low expectations. How is it that in America, and many countries around the globe, schools hurt rather than help and students succeed in life in spite of, rather than because of, their schools and teachers?

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My educational core values come from a variety of personal and professional experiences in which I have seen and experienced the vast disparity in opportunity between students of varying social, economic and racial backgrounds and the impact that an educator might have on those students. It is my fundamental belief that our worldwide educational systems must center upon a respect for the worth of every student and their potential. My educational core values are:

1. I respect the human potential of every student.
2. Education is a community endeavor.
3. Ongoing collaboration and communication are essential for educational success.
4. We are all global citizens.

We don't have all the answers in tests or curriculum, but we can certainly go a long way by providing early identification of needs, embracing the full range of social, economic and physical issues that surround a child and his community, and empowering students, families and communities to be active participants in their education. Education is not just the responsibility of the school, its teachers and employees. Nor is it the sole responsibility of the family. Education is a community-wide undertaking that includes the interactions of students and adults across the world, and particularly involves a fundamental effort on the part of the neighborhood, city and state in which the student resides to support the journey of each and every young person from pre-kindergarten through high school and on to postgraduate education.

### **The Aim of Education**

From my perspective, the aim of education is empowerment. Education should foster relationships and global citizenship. It must provide basic skills and it also must promote innovation and creativity. It provides opportunity and the environment in which opportunity can

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lead to unlimited, student-created demonstrations of knowledge. Educational systems provide cheerleaders for students, families and teachers along the way, and resources and training for them as well. The systems provide means for documentation of knowledge paths and for sharing of tools and tips, and a means for collaboration so that nothing exists in isolation.

The aim of education is to connect a network of support services, teachers, counselors, nutritionists, coaches and nurses, to support young people from preschool to graduation. Through effective communication and collaboration between adults, students and their families are provided with the opportunity to equal education. Ultimately, they are empowered to global citizenship.

### **School Reform**

School reform is a comprehensive attempt to effect change in an educational system that includes the members of the schoolhouse, the surrounding community, and the families of students, and involves ongoing data collection and analysis of student performance and teacher effectiveness. School reform attempts to change the core framework of a school system so that adjustments occur in all aspects of a student's educational experience.

The goal of school reform is to foster large-scale change in support of student achievement. While many different recipes have been sampled for school reform, successful models demonstrate a democratic approach inclusive of all stakeholders, including community, students, teachers, staff and leadership. The goal of this large-scale change effort is accomplished when all parties adopt the plan, are accountable for their roles within the plan, and are humbled to adequately participate in ongoing evaluation and adjustments for student-focused adaptations.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

In school reform efforts, the role of the federal government is to provide venues for sharing and collaboration across the country, and opportunities for ready access to data and resources that can be shared. The federal government facilitates school reform efforts by enabling legislation and funding that identify measures of accountability and best practices. The federal government can also provide measures of supervision and evaluation that ensure standards of quality and support the common identification of benchmark measures of success as well as consequences for failure.

Without a doubt, the fundamental role of the federal government has been tied to funding, whether for research or for aid to schools and programs. Unfortunately, legislative efforts have frequently lumped educational programs with other appropriations and have been victimized by politics, poor research and powerful lobbying. It is critical for the U.S. Department of Education to identify its policies, streamline its programs, and publicize its platforms using research, collaboration and cooperative efforts in order to be a part of a successful reform effort.

State governments also provide support for federal initiatives by personalizing efforts that are unique to the students and communities within their geographic region. State governments must work in synchronization with the federal and state Departments of Education so that the legislative branch of the government and the executive of the states are not disrupting initiatives with unfunded mandates, additional or contradictory mandates, and politically-motivated endeavors that are not well-researched or student-focused. Most of these efforts cannot be stopped as they are a part of the democratic process. However, a state Department of Education can serve as an exemplary clearinghouse of resources and data collection so that reasonable

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decisions can be made using timely and accurate information focused on reform rather than status quo.

An example of such an effort is the Common Core Standards movement led by the Council of Chief State School Officers. This project utilizes private enterprise, data from businesses and higher education, and is supported but not mandated by the federal government. Thus, the effort has support from a wide range of individuals, experts and organizations, and is now being tied to federal funding efforts in a unique public/private/state/federal partnership. In addition, the Common Core movement, while not required, has enough support across the nation to demand attention and support from vendors, schools, colleges, funding sources, and governments and could inevitably lead to standardization across curriculum that benefits all students and teachers (CCSSO, 2011).

The role of the District is a critical one in a school reform effort. The District is by nature a political hotbed, with decision-making heavily influenced by voter opinion, taxpayer generosity, and local issues. In a reform effort, the District must develop a plan of communication, collaboration and data-driven decision making that allows for enough time to carry out the plan, enough funding to make the plan possible, and enough resources to ensure success. District reform efforts are not easy, as they often come with great expectations, union battles, and the need for extraordinary cooperation in the face of critical decision-making. Often leadership is needed from elected officials whose attentions are divided between the interests of the electorate and the welfare of the students.

The role of school leadership is also central to the effectiveness of school reform. The school leaders not only staff their schools with personalities capable of change, but also must

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support the staff through difficult times, particularly during times of evaluation and reflection.

The school leadership must be patient and carefully place all the resources necessary for effective change in their schoolhouses. They must have vision and the capacity for long-term planning, but they also must have the respect of the District to carry out their plans.

Administrators must be able to work with the community at large and command the respect necessary to carry out change.

Teachers certainly influence school reform as they are the critical means through which reformed education is delivered. Teachers require professional development and support in order to adequately plan, launch, and evaluate reform efforts. While it does appear that some traditional or veteran educators are not welcoming of reform efforts, their reaction may be heavily influenced by the way in which the administrators present the impending changes and the ways in which that change influences the teacher's lifestyle, habit patterns, and niche within the school building. A teacher resistant to change can destroy school reform efforts, but a teacher who embraces it and works collaboratively with others may also be the key to the success of the effort.

In a reform-minded classroom, the teacher is an active participant in the learning and leads students to and through the learning process. Authentic learning where the student is fully engaged in the experience of acquiring knowledge, rather than the passive recipient of broadcast messages from the teacher, presents an opportunity for teachers to fundamentally change the traditional educational system (Schlechy, 2002). Accountability and responsibility of teachers are critical components of school-wide reform.

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Students contribute to school reform as active participants who are responsible for their learning and for the behavior that promotes a school-wide learning environment. Reform models which engage students in planning and accountability efforts for school change empower young people to own their education. Not only are students learning content in core subjects, but they also learn about systems, processes, leadership and decision-making through the reform process. We empower them to develop metacognitive abilities so that they can define for themselves successful academic environments. When every student is treated with respect for their unique qualities, differences and needs, services can be streamlined and efficiencies identified so that all the resources of the school are fully utilized for the benefit of all.

Parents also play a critical role in school reform when they become active participants in the learning process. No matter the level of education of the parent, their potential to impact student behavior and academic performance mandates that they are welcomed, educated, involved and celebrated as powerful influences in the life of the student and the success of the school. Creative school leaders elect to involve parents and families in the life of the school as often as possible. Whether through regular phone calls, family events at the school site, or home visits, developing a relationship with a family yields powerful results for schools and students. Educating parents to be advocates for their children is essential for long-lasting reform.

Other stakeholders in school reform include businesses, political leaders, school staff, and neighbors. In a successful reform model, no one is left out of the process. While there are obvious financial reasons for communities to want an educated youth work force, there are also other ways that school success mandates stakeholder involvement. Safety and security, home values, moral and ethical leadership, and basic human decency all play into the level of involvement of the stakeholders in a school reform. The potential is unlimited when human



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resources are combined for the good of all. The process is not just one of give and take. Students can make a significant impact on communities through volunteer service and specialized programs. Collaboration and cooperation between all community members supports change that is long lasting and positive.

While there is not one perfect school reform model that works in all settings and with all age groups, a well-planned effort that clearly identifies the needs of the student audience and involves the community at large may not require a radical shift in curriculum content or resources. Reorganization can occur at a low cost or can be supplemented through a variety of creative funding sources. The potential is endless and certainly leaves this educator optimistic that we can move from being a hurtful educational system to one that celebrates the contributions of all and finds something positive in every young person.

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