

School Improvement and Reform Platform

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The purpose of this paper is to clearly articulate my views on school improvement and reform. Specific areas of school improvement and reform will be examined; including, educational core values, aims of education, author's definition of school reform, goals of school reform efforts, and the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders within school reform efforts. While required readings and videos have influenced my beliefs; the opinions expressed herein are garnered from a variety of texts and experiences outside those required for this course.

According to my employer, Gwinnett County Public Schools, the district's core values are as follows: "Our core business is teaching and learning. All children can learn at or above grade level. All children should reach their learning potential. The school effect is important and has a profound impact on every child's life. A quality instructional program requires a rigorous curriculum, effective teaching, and ongoing assessment. All children should be taught in a safe and secure learning environment (G.C.P.S., 2011)." While I agree with the overarching core values listed above, I argue that character development is an often overlooked but a necessary component of quality instructional programs. My experience is that providing a safe and secure learning environment is obtainable if, and only if, students and parents share this value. Unfortunately, and due to a variety of reasons, many students arrive at school without an intrinsic ethical belief system or knowledge of how to appropriately interact with others. Given the above, my personal educational core value is to appropriately prepare students for their future lives at work, at home, and as a contributing member of society.

From my perspective, educational core values are intrinsically linked to the aims of education. As written, students must be prepared for life after public school. Many students will

choose to continue their education in college while many others will enter the workforce or military service. However, all students need the skills to appropriately interact and positively influence the lives of others.

School reform efforts encompass many components and I view some of these components with skepticism after reading *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner & Bruce, 1996). I am reminded of the many myths Berliner debunks in his book that are now being used in support of some current reform efforts. Given the above, my definition of school reform is continuous experimentation with public school policies, procedures, curriculum, and methods of instruction. These experiments are the result of laws enacted by politicians who act under the false premise that educators are the single cause of learning and development deficits or the single cause of observed success. Although I am skeptical of some reform efforts I do support others. Currently Duluth High School is a pilot school for the new Teacher Keys Evaluation System (TKES). I recently attended a training course required of administrators who are charged with implementing the new system. I learned that many of the details on how the new system will impact teachers remain unanswered. For example, teachers who teach courses that do not require end of course test will be evaluated differently from those teachers whose students do take end of course tests. When an administrator in our group asked personnel from the Georgia Department of Education how these evaluations would impact teacher pay - the response was "we don't know yet." Keep in mind the new evaluation system will be implemented statewide in August 2012. As indicated in our text (David & Cuban, 2010) "little historical or contemporary evidence exists that the basic assumption driving performance-based pay systems will hold up in practice." While I do not support performance based pay, I do support the goals and objectives of the TKES system overall. Data shows that 99.4% or 11,700 teachers employed by Gwinnett County

Public School in school 2008-2009 received an overall “satisfactory” evaluation while only approximately 70 teachers received “unsatisfactory” evaluations. Clearly, there needs to be a more accurate way to evaluate teacher performance than the current RBES/GTEP system. I personally think the TKES system will be superior to the current system; however, details of the new system should be made clear before being fully implemented. Moreover, “performance based pay” is based on the premise that some educators have been paid for less than stellar performance. Currently, teachers and administrators in Gwinnett County have not received a pay increase in three years; hence, pay for performance is a relative term and assumes that at least some high performing teachers will see a pay increase in the near future. To date, there has been no indication that any teachers will receive pay increases or step increases due to the continued economic crisis. To the contrary, Gwinnett County Schools have two furlough days built into the 2012-2013 academic calendar. In sum, TKES contains many needed improvements to the current evaluation system; however, in its current form, it appears to provide more punitive tools to rid schools of poor performing teachers than guarantees of reward for high performing teachers.

The ultimate goal of school reform should be to increase student achievement. However, measuring student achievement remains an area for debate. Currently, student achievement is only measured and determined by how well a student performs on a given standardized academic test. From my perspective, this approach is narrow and naive when compared to the overall growth potential of a student. This is an area where I think technology should be better utilized. Specifically, students could be evaluated at the beginning of the each school year on a variety of issues outside of academics, including ethics, citizenship, and social-emotional development and then re-evaluated at the end of the school year to measure how they have progressed. This measure could then be combined with academic data to create an overall “student growth”

composite score. Students who show deficits in social-emotional leaning could be scheduled for affective skills, leadership, or citizenship classes the following year. In sum, technology now provides the ability for educators to create an individualized education plan for every student. Specific student data can be used to target interventions in numerous academic and non-academic subject areas. If the ultimate goal is to prepare students for life outside of public school, then a better balance is needed between academics and social emotional development.

If I were asked in summer 2008 what should be the role of the federal government in education, my response would be one word – minimal. This view was of course based on the assumption that housing prices and tax revenues would remain stable. In fall 2011 my opinion has changed. I simply don't think public schools can continue to exist (in current form) without an increase in federal government intervention to include funding, nationwide curriculum standards, and teacher compensation. If the public only values schools for their ability to provide academic instruction, then technology can provide this service more efficiently and for far less money. If the public values schools for the stability they provide society, then maintaining this stability will ultimately require increasing the level of involvement by the federal government.

Ideally, state governments should provide funding, however, as indicated above, the housing collapse and associated economic crisis has lead states to scramble for ideas to cut costs. Regarding standards and assessments, my view is that standards and assessments should likewise be developed at the national level and based on world standards; thus, removing this responsibility from state government. If educational leaders aspire to world class results, then they must we be willing to adopt some practices that heretofore have been considered unacceptable. For example, Chinese students are segregated by ability and willingness to work. Those who don't meet the standard are relegated to a salt mine or some other type of manual

labor for the betterment of society. In contrast, the United States has adopted a policy that everybody is a winner and everybody is going to college. We no longer offer a technical prep diploma track which, in my opinion, has done more damage to the graduation and dropout rates than any mitigating school reform effort can overcome. In our school, the development of the 9th grade academy began two years ago under the premise that having the academy would decrease the dropout rate and thus improve the graduation rate. As of September, 2011, Duluth failed to obtain the 85% graduation rate mandated by NCLB. After recalculations and “hunting down” students who left Duluth for discipline or financial reasons, Duluth met AYP in November 2011. Next year the goal is an almost unobtainable 90%. Obviously, creating the 9th grade academy has had little if any positive impact on the goals it was created to obtain; nevertheless, it is better to be perceived as “doing something” rather than nothing. So, in like step we have implemented a 7 period bell schedule and hour long lunches where students are scheduled to receive extra help in areas where they are struggling. The reality is that many students don’t attend the help sessions and spend their hour lunch socializing with friends. The same is true for the Gateway test intervention classes. As indicated in a previous post, technology may provide solutions for individualized remediation and credit recovery. As I previously wrote regarding the potential advance of analytics, I visualize a student sitting at a cubicle in front of a computer while instruction is provided based on strengths and weaknesses. While the “real time” data would be beneficial to a human instructor in very small classes – I’m not sure this level of individualized instruction is feasible in a conventional classroom. At the present time, I think learning analytics would best be utilized as a tutoring tool or for credit recovery. Gwinnett County schools currently use a learning analytic tool called “Elements” – while the information in elements is extremely useful, many teachers complain they spend too much time “chasing data” instead of

teaching the subject. My experience with Elements leads me to conclude that Learning Analytics has great potential in a virtual environment but will require countless hours of staff development before teachers will be able to fully exploit its potential. In contrast, if master teacher videos were available on a variety of topics, then a human teacher would not necessarily be required to interpret the data from Elements or to teach remedial material.

Now with a multitude of changes/reforms taking place simultaneously, how does anyone accurately measure the impact of any one of the variables? For me, the answer is no one can. What you can do is refer to these programs when the area superintendent asks “what are you doing to bridge the achievement gap within our subgroups?” In short, and to answer the question for this course, what measures are being used to evaluate the effectiveness of school improvement initiatives? - Only subjective measures discussed during the yearly evaluation with the area superintendent. Other stakeholders, such as P.T.S.A., principal’s advisory board, student government, Juntos club, meet on a regular basis to inform and give opinions to the principal; however, once again, perception rules reality as it is better to meet and not accept any proposals than not to meet and risk being viewed as dictatorial.

Given all the above, I don’t think schools need radical reform unless the changes can be measured one step at a time. I do; however, think schools need significant technological upgrades and modifications that can keep pace with a dynamic world. Schools will and should become smaller to accommodate non-conventional students who would like a “hybrid” school whereby they can receive instruction mostly on-line but also have opportunities to interact with staff and students when needed. Trade schools should reemerge for students who can’t afford or lack the desire to attend traditional colleges. Current schools should be reconfigured for trade education academies, college prep education academies, and fine arts education academies. The

associated curriculum should be relevant and rigorous to the extent that additional training would be truly optional.

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