



VIEWPOINT

THE NEXT CHAPTER OF EDUCATION REFORM: BUILDING A NEW HUMAN CAPITAL ENGINE

Paul Reville

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

The Harvard Graduate School of Education and mayors of six U.S. cities are collaborating to build a better system of education for the 21st century.

Education reform, which has been vigorously promoted by business and government leaders over the last quarter century, has yielded some progress for America's students, but has failed to achieve the central goals of American public education: excellence and equity. Despite numerous initiatives and deep investments, we face a situation in which a vast number of graduates from U.S. high schools are ready for neither college nor careers. In U.S. education, we still have an "iron-law" correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement and attainment. This situation poses a real threat not only to our economy but to our democracy and our way of life. How did this happen? What did we reformers get wrong?

Was It the Goal?

Maybe we were just too naive and idealistic in thinking we could educate everyone to proficiency. We pledged to build a system that would educate all students—and all means all; no exceptions—to high levels of proficiency that would enable them to get and hold 21st-century, high-skills, high-knowledge jobs, to be informed citizens and potential leaders in a complex democracy, to head up families, if they so chose, and to become lifelong learners.

The goal of "all means all" is as relevant and even more urgent today as it was in the early 1990s, when governors and business leaders worried about the disappearance, through automation and offshoring, of low-skill, low-knowledge jobs. Many of those jobs have, in fact, disappeared, and now mid-skill jobs are at risk. What we actually have now is a felicitous dovetailing of our moral obligations and our economic imperatives. We have always had a responsibility, if seldom enacted, to do for each succeeding generation what has been done for us in terms of education and opportunity. We now have a twofold economic imperative: to prepare a high-skill, high-knowledge, 21st-century workforce to power future economic growth for our country while preventing the accelerated growth of an expensive and disruptive underclass of people unable to participate in the economy. Conclusion? The problem was not the goal, which now more than ever is right and urgent.

Was It the Strategies?

Reformers have made deep and expensive reforms over the past 25 years. States have installed standards, put in place assessment and accountability systems, introduced school choice into a formerly monopolistic system, and focused in a variety of ways on improving the quality of teaching and utilizing data to guide educational improvement. Extraordinary efforts have been made to turn around underperforming schools.

The evidence suggests that in many places, these strategies made a measurable difference. However, they were nowhere near strong enough to close persistent achievement gaps and get all students ready for success. They did not go deep enough. They were not broad enough. So the strategies are somewhat to blame: they were insufficient to achieve the ambitious reform goals.

Was It the System?

Almost all our reforms assumed that the existing mainstream delivery system of education, the “factory model” devised early in the 20th century, would continue to be the modus operandi for education. Reformers would improve and update the delivery system, but its central features—hours, chronological age structure, geographical locations, and classroom organization—would stay the same. We would optimize the old system rather than replace it.

This system was built to mass-produce education, to socialize a growing population of immigrants and country people pouring into America’s rapidly industrializing cities. The factory model was popular at the time and was a logical choice to address the major challenge of quickly preparing an orderly workforce for a burgeoning low-skill, low-knowledge economy which required lots of routine work. With modifications like middle schools and kindergartens, the model served the nation well until the last quarter of the 20th century, when other countries caught up in educating their students to high levels, international competition and low wages pulled jobs out of the United States, and automation eliminated lots of the routine work.

In 1983 Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education issued *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which called for changes. Government and business leaders sought a much stronger human-resource development system, which would feature a dramatically reformed education system at its center. This system would have to educate all students to levels previously reserved for the elite few, but the underlying assumption, seldom discussed, was still that the existing delivery system could do the job that the new policies demanded: educating all students to the high end of the achievement distribution.

This policy demand was unprecedented. The system had been built to deliver a normal, bell curve distribution of student achievement over a low center. Now, policymakers, by fiat more than a systematic effort at building capacity, were making revolutionary demands on the old system. They were asking a human-capital development engine designed to go 30 miles an hour to jump up to 21st-century speeds of over 100 miles an hour, but the old engine, even with a few reforms, was not up to that task. Some of its weaknesses included a one-size-fits-all assumption about students and learning, not enough time in the classroom (20 percent of students’ waking hours), and a callous underestimation of the impact of poverty on children’s chances for learning and success.

The system is definitely the problem. We need a new engine. Our current system is simply not strong enough to do the job. If we are to realize our urgently important goals of excellence and equity while building on the reform work to date, we need a vision for a reengineered, higher-capacity education and child development system, one that will be as robust in its operation as we are ambitious in our education goals.

The Education Redesign Lab and the By All Means Initiative

The Harvard Graduate School of Education has established the Education Redesign Lab (ERL) to spur development of this vision and this new engine. Through advocacy, fieldwork, research, and net-

work building, ERL seeks to directly address the most conspicuous failure of education reform—failure to educate variously disadvantaged students to high levels of proficiency. ERL asks, if we want to build a system that will guarantee that children growing up in deep poverty will enjoy the same opportunities and chances for success as their affluent peers, what should that system look like? What should be the key features of this new engine?

In conjunction with a set of visionary mayors and superintendents, ERL has launched an effort, called By All Means, to build six laboratories committed to exploring this question in cities across the country. In Oakland, CA; Louisville, KY; Providence, RI; and Salem, Somerville, and Newton, MA, mayors have convened children’s cabinets committed to doing interagency work over several years to build new systems of support and opportunity for disadvantaged youth.

In particular, these leaders will work on customizing education from early childhood through college graduation to meet the in-school and out-of-school needs of every child, assuring success at each stage of the educational journey. They will work at braiding health care, including mental health, and other social-service systems with education systems so as to mitigate those impediments. Finally, each city will develop systems of out-of-school learning and enrichment to give disadvantaged youngsters the benefit of the types of opportunity that are routinely available to privileged youth. Out-of-school learning opportunities are currently a huge contributor to student achievement or the lack thereof, but schools have little or no control over children’s access to out-of-school learning opportunities.

ERL will assist in implementation of the programs these city labs develop and will closely monitor success with an eye to documenting bright spots of effective practice as well the practical, political, financial, and cultural barriers that seem to inhibit progress. In so doing, we hope to accelerate the creation of dramatically improved systems that will provide all children—and we genuinely mean all—with access to the opportunities, support, and education that routinely assure the success of impressive numbers of affluent youth.

We hope this work will build momentum for creating the kind of education system the 21st century demands. The U.S. student population has recently become more than 50 percent low-income and “majority-minority,” that is, a majority of students are of color. Historically, our education system has served both these groups poorly. Now we cannot afford to fail them. No challenge is more urgent for our society to address. We will need leaders from government and business to embrace this challenge and, through their leadership, carve a pathway to a new era. If we fail to meet this challenge, our economy, democracy, and way of life are at risk.

Paul Reville is the Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he founded and leads the Education Redesign Lab. He is a former Massachusetts secretary of education. Contact him at paul_reville@gse.harvard.edu.

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