Adequacy, Equity, And Accountability

Modernizing a System Of Public Education Designed For the 20th Century

By Ted Hershberg, Ian Rosenblum, & Virginia Adams Simon

It is time to transform our system of public education. The current system, unchanged in fundamental respects for a century, was designed to accomplish three essential tasks: to provide universal basic literacy; to socialize a diverse population to the demands of a factory system; and, through IQ-type tests and the bell-shaped curve, to identify and sort out the top fifth of students who would go on to college. The rest easily found jobs in a manufacturing economy that required little in the way of high skills or invested education, but paid middle-class-sustaining wages. By succeeding as well at these tasks, our schools were a key element in America's emergence as an industrial superpower.

As the global economy underwent dramatic change in the last quarter-century, schools adopted numerous reforms to increase student achievement. Although the schools did not worsen during these years, results are still disappointing. Recent scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, indicate that only between 24 percent and 31 percent of our students perform at "proficient" or higher levels in reading.
We must invest more, but we must not do so without also changing the rules that govern schools.

Mathematics and Science Study repeatedly show that American students rank near the top among developed nations in the 4th grade, but fall into the bottom 10 percent by the 12th grade. Results from the New Standards Reference Exams, demanding tests that measure higher-order-thinking skills, demonstrate that large majorities of students, even in affluent suburban districts, are not being taught problem-solving skills. This is corroborated by a recent recommendation of the National Research Council that credit no longer be given for Advanced Placement scores below the highest level of 5, because students taught largely through a memorization paradigm are unable to reason mathematically and scientifically when they get to college.

When confronted with such evidence, many educators are quick to respond that since the American economy is the envy of the world, our schools must be doing lots of things right. Test scores, the argument goes, are not aligned with predictors of success in later life, so we can ignore the exam results, confident that somehow our students leave school with what it takes to succeed.

Unfortunately, shifting the terms of the argument from test scores to the economy doesn’t work, because it confuses the strong performance of the economy in the aggregate with the far more comforting experience of individual American families. In the last 50 years, virtually all income gains have gone to the top fifth. A panel of prominent economists convened in the mid-1990s by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York attributed fully half of the striking growth in income inequality to “new technologies that favor the better educated.”

With the 21st-century economy requiring that students graduate able to use technology, solve problems, and learn on their own throughout their lives, presidents, governors, and corporate leaders have called on schools to accomplish a task far more demanding than ever before: Educate all the children—not merely the top one-fifth—and educate them to unprecedentedly high levels.

The evidence makes clear that the current structure of public education—designed for a different purpose and a different century—cannot help all students become effective citizens or productive workers in the new economy.

What to do? The left calls for more money. The right calls for competition. But neither has alone proven effective. In the last three decades, we have significantly increased real-per-pupil spending, doubled the number of teachers with master’s degrees, and decreased the student-to-faculty ratio by 22 percent without any appreciable rise in student achievement. Choice and vouchers show mixed and at best marginal results.

Our solution is a major overhaul of the organization and incentives of K-12 education through a strategy of investment with accountability. We must invest more in our educators and our schools, but we must do so without also changing the rules that govern them. Operation Public Education, a foundation- and business-funded initiative at the University of Pennsylvania, proposes that every state develop an approach to public education that addresses three inseparable pieces of the school reform puzzle: adequate adequacy, equity, and accountability.

The fight to increase funding for schools should begin with a largely unanswered question: “How much does it cost to provide every child with a quality education?” This target is known as the adequacy level. Illinois, Maryland, and Massanbarretta have answered the adequacy question through a “foundation” budget process—by starting with a blank slate and adding all the costs that go into education. The power of this approach is that it shifts the debate from arguments over providing more or fewer resources to questions of what spending is most likely to be effective and why.

The next challenge is to create a formula that fairly divides the funding burden between the state and local communities, a concept known as equity. Many states rely too heavily on local property taxes to fund their schools. In 1950, this system made sense because Americans lived in communities that were heterogeneous by income. But 50 years of suburbanization has produced economically segregated school districts. As a result, a large majority of children today live in communities where local real estate taxes, even with current state subsidies, cannot support a quality education.

To achieve equity, states must bear the primary responsibility for school funding and use a distribution formula weighted toward the special needs of low-income communities.

We hope that the teachers, other education professionals, and the general public will take an interest in this and other proposals. We invite you to join us in preparing a framework that will make education reform feasible. And we hope that the General Assembly will keep an open mind to the possibilities for change in education, for the sake of all Wisconsin’s students. Under these assumptions, the model presented in this article can be adapted to any state’s needs.

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Some say that we divide classrooms, schools, and districts into three categories: those whose students are making one year’s worth of academic progress in a given school year, those who are stretching their students beyond the progress that we would expect, and those whose students are losing ground.

Half of a teacher’s evaluation would be based on value-added, using three-year running averages so that no one was penalized for an aberrant year. The other half would rely on high-quality observation protocols developed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, covering planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional development.

To give students the skills they need, educators must master a problem-solving pedagogy within a standards-driven curriculum. Teachers need to understand that all children are capable of achieving at high levels, and must therefore be able to differentiate their instruction based on students’ learning needs and develop teaching strategies through data-driven decision-making. New investment must underwrite the cost of this training.

We also call for a new category of teacher coaches, whose responsibility would be to work with their colleagues to improve their craft. Coaches, mentors, and members of technical-assistance teams to help struggling schools would be drawn from the top ranks of the career ladder and would help new teachers and low-performing teachers undergoing remediation.
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Mathematics and Science Study repeatedly show that American students rank near the top among developed nations in the 4th and 8th grades. Since fewer than 30 percent of Americans live in large cities, these data make clear that poor achievement is not a case of the urban tail wagging the school dog. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that students in smaller schools have consistently outscored their colleagues in larger schools. The problem is that many students in large schools are not performing at grade level.

In our system, individual educators would be held accountable for student-learning results. To do this fairly requires an alternative to absolute test scores, which are highly correlated with family income. Instead, we need a way to separate, as of the difference between the actual and the expected, the mix of students entering on, above, or below grade level does not matter; as a result, value-added creates a level playing field.

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Our solution is a major overhaul of the organization and incentives of K-12 education through a strategy of investment with accountability. We must invest more in our educators and our schools, but we must not do so without also changing the rules that govern them. Operation Public Education, a foundation- and business-funded initiative at the University of Pennsylvania, proposes that every state develop an approach to public education that addresses three inseparable pieces of the school reform puzzle: adequate, equity, and accountability.

The fight to increase funding for schools should begin with a largely unanswered question: "How much does it cost to provide every child with a quality education?" This target is known as the adequacy level. Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusettes have answered the adequacy question through a "foundation budget" process—by starting with a blank slate and adding up all the costs that go into education. The power of this approach is that it shifts the debate from arguments over providing more or fewer resources to questions of what spending is most likely to be effective and why.

The next challenge is to create a formula that fairly divides the funding burden between the state and local communities, a concept known as equity. Many states rely too heavily on local property taxes to fund their schools. In 1950, this system made sense because Americans lived in communities that were homogeneous by income. But 50 years of suburbanization has produced economically segregated school districts. As a result, a large majority of children today live in communities where local real estate taxes, even with current state subsidies, cannot support a quality education.

To achieve equity, states must bear the primary responsibility for school funding and use a distribution formula weighted toward the special needs of low-income communities.

Our model includes state aid to local schools that is linked to student need, flexibility, and performance. Adequate funding is necessary, but it is far from sufficient. We will not see significant increases in student achievement unless we also change the way the schools operate. Those changes can be thought of as accountability, and must include new systems of assessment, evaluation, compensation, and professional development.

The federal "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 marks a turning point in American education because it demands school-level accountability for whether all students are learning. We know that the real difference is made at the classroom level, so we go a step further and call for accountability for individual educators and for students themselves.

To hold students accountable, we would adopt North Carolina's approach and require students to achieve gateway standards at the 4th, 8th, and 10th grades. But without significant changes in the quality of classroom instruction, there is no reason to believe that students will meet the higher standards now required of them.

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The model lets us divide classrooms, schools, and districts into three categories: those whose students are making one year's worth of academic progress in a given school year; those who are stretching their students beyond the progress that we would expect, and those whose students are falling behind.

Half of a teacher's evaluation would be based on value-added, using three-year running averages so that no one was penalized for an aberrant year. The other half would rely on high-quality observation protocols developed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, covering planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Administrators would be evaluated similarly: half on their schools' value-added results and federal No Child Left Behind Act goals, and half on a nationally recognized system that measured their instructional and community leadership.

This 50-50 split for teachers and administrators reflects a central principle of accountability: Educators should be evaluated based on their own knowledge and skills and on the learning gains of their students.

Since evaluations would be based in part on test results, the quality of the assessment instrument is vitally important. If the tests are aligned with high state standards, measure higher-order thinking skills, and appear annually in fresh and non-redundant forms, we can avoid becoming mired in old arguments about "teaching to the test." Indeed, the only way students would do well is if educators taught the entire curriculum and stressed the problem-solving skills that the tests would measure.

In place of the traditional salary schedule, we propose a career ladder that teachers and administrators would ascend based on their evaluations. Such a system is dramatically different from merit pay: It does not pit teachers against one another and does not pay bonuses for high student test scores. Yet it succeeds in correcting two major flaws of the current system: It aligns the incentives so that educators are recognized and rewarded with higher salaries for demonstrating consistent, high-quality instruction, rather than for hours toward an advanced degree, and it would mandate remediation for teachers who received an unsatisfactory value-added assessment or ASCC rating.

Changes in assessment, evaluation, and compensation, while crucial, will not alone succeed in helping the nation's students. Our system therefore would place significant emphasis on continuous professional development and school capacity-building.

To give students the skills they need, educators must master a problem-solving pedagogy within a standards-driven curriculum. Teachers need to understand that all children are capable of achieving at high levels, and must therefore be able to differentiate their instruction based on students' learning needs and develop teaching strategies through data-driven decision-making. New investment must underwrite the cost of this training.

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