

Transcript

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Creating Successful Schools

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Angus McBeath was Superintendent of Schools in Edmonton, Alberta, until October 2005. He is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Atlantic Institute of Market Studies in Halifax. We are indebted to AIMS for making Mr. McBeath available to us.

Introduction

I would like to start tonight by suggesting that we pay homage to teachers and the work they do to transform the lives of children. Recall for a moment teachers who saw something in you that perhaps no one else did, and how that helped change your life. Teaching is the most important paid work in society. If we do not regard it that way, we will be lost as a people.

Just as Dolly Parton was once reported to have said, “There’s no such thing as natural beauty,” so there is no such thing as a system of public education that works naturally for the best. Operating school systems is hard, important work—work that baffles most of us, perhaps because we do not know how to drive reform.

School districts rarely want to be truly reformed because the ruling class of any system never wants to reform anything that reduces its power and authority, although they say they do. Teachers’ unions have only one job, and it is not to look after the public education system—it is to look after teachers. However, the public education system is not the property of the teachers’ unions—it is up to management to provide leadership and make the system work. There is no magic to reforming public education. I do not offer instant solutions or a substitute for hard work and perseverance, but I can give you some lessons. Improving public education belongs neither to the right nor to the left. It belongs to all of us, regardless of political stripe. It is hard work and it takes a long time. You have to be more thoughtful than the most hidebound opponent of reform. You have to engage others in the process and bring them along, and it is work worth doing.

A generation ago, Edmonton’s education system was as conventional as anywhere in North America. Before the 1970s, nobody wanted to do anything except wring their hands

“The dreams of parents and children can only be realized by effort, theirs and ours, and by a system that challenges and stretches and tests the minds of our children. We owe these children, our children, such an effort and such a system.”

—Tom Finneran

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and surrender to the usual Canadian excuse that there is little that can be done about public sector organizations.

Edmonton's Path to Excellence

Choice. What we did starting in 1973 was very simple. We introduced “market forces” by allowing every child in the system to choose between schools. That immediately ruffled the ruling class in our school district. They said that it would be too difficult, that some schools might be forced to close, that it would be inconvenient for the planners, and, above all, that it would take control away from the central bureaucracy and give it to parents.

Now, in 2006, we issue a passport every spring to each student in Edmonton, and they and their parents shop for a school. More than 50 percent of our students do not go to their home school. Parents no longer consider “choice” something special: if you tried to take it away from them, however, there would be a revolution. Some schools do close, and they should. We closed four in June of 2005. In a way, schools close themselves. Our parents close the schools by taking children elsewhere. The process is highly regulated by the Department of Education. When a school gets too small, it is no longer viable financially, and the students start to lose something in their education. Then, because we subsidize city transportation to ensure that low-income parents have equal choice, even more parents take their children and go elsewhere.

Parents have four choices for publicly funded education in our city of just over a million people. They can go to the public school district where I work. They can go to a second public system. They can go to publicly funded charter schools, and they can also choose to send their children to publicly subsidized private schools. Despite those subsidies, we have, perhaps, only five or six chartered and/or private schools in the city, because the private schools keep asking to join us because we compete effectively in meeting parental expectations.

In Edmonton, the wealthy send their children to public schools. I worry about any public education system where the wealthy do not want to send their kids. I do not blame parents with means for leaving the public system and going to private schools, but where does the efficacy for public education go when that happens? And why should you have to pay twice for the same thing?

If the private schools are thriving, it is because the public education system is floundering. If the pool of students for private schools dries up, it is because the public education system is doing its work well. By giving the par-

ents of children a choice of where to send their children to school, by putting them in the driver's seat, we have unleashed forces that have compelled both public and private schools to be more innovative and customer focused.

Decentralizing Control of Funding. After a successful pilot involving seven schools started in 1976, in 1979, the district removed 80 cents on the dollar from central office and distributed it directly to the schools, shifting money and authority from the bureaucrats at the district office to the individual schools. The decisions about how best to spend the money were shifted. After a three-year pilot, and over the resistance of those in the system with money and power, who did not always believe that the schools and staff had the competence to make these decisions, we extended this policy to all the schools in the district. Core goals and parameters—and how to measure them—would be centrally determined. The individual schools, however, would have the authority and resources to decide how best to operate the schools.

In 1996, we increased that 80 percent to 92 percent, leaving only 8 cents on the dollar in the hands of the central office, after you removed some dollars for central governance and several areas of central operations. We had found that as long as the central office owned everything—the rules, the formulas, the money—the schools would turn to the parents and say, “Don't hold us accountable; we don't control anything.” However, once the money was in their hands, they had to begin to behave differently.

For example, in the 1980s, we hired an expert to come and tell us how to save on our energy and utility costs. Many efforts were made to convince schools to change their behavior. However, in 1986, we offered the school principals a deal: “We are tired of nagging you to save money on utilities; we will just give you any savings on your utilities expenses. Anything you save you can keep for your schools.” They saved a great deal of money in the first year. The school board, of course, wanted that money back, and we had to convince them that if they took the money, they would never see another nickel of savings.

It is like if you live in an apartment building with a thousand apartments, and you get a letter from the management saying, “If you people conserve energy, we will lower your rent.” So you turn down the temperature, shut the lights off, stop opening the refrigerator so much. However, all your neighbors are still keeping the lights burning and windows open, and your rent stays the same. It will not be long before you give up. That is, until you

move from your apartment to a house in which you are solely responsible for your utility usage.

I remember a confrontation I had with the painting supervisor when I was a beginning principal. He showed up and said, “Seventeen years is up, and it now your turn to have your school painted.” I thanked him, but mentioned that he need not repaint some of the rarely used rooms, which could go without for several more years. He replied that if we did not want the whole school painted, then he would go on to the next school, and return in another seventeen years. I was to take it or leave it.

Today, after decentralization, the process runs much differently. I would submit an order to have the school painted. The lowest bidder would win the contract, provided it met specifications. The paint foreman would come to my school to make an appointment. Then, he would request permission to submit a bid. He would arrange to do it outside of school hours, and paint only the rooms I want painted. He would insist that it not interrupt instruction. Then, he would ask if there was anything else he could do for us. The evils of market forces.

Measuring Achievement. Schools tend to like local control more when there is less accountability. So that is one of the pillars that you must establish—no free money, no free authority. I like and trust my broker, but I still want a

monthly statement, and from my principals and teachers I want measures of student achievement and other important results.

Our plan to measure achievement met some resistance. Some teachers came in and said that it was wrong and that it would damage children. I asked them to bring the damaged children to my office. I had a few damaged adults I wanted them to meet. There is no viable adult life without completing high school in our country, only unemployment and poverty.

If you read the book, *The World Is Flat*, you know we are under threat. This is not the future; this is right now. You cannot maintain a civil society without a well-educated citizenry. A democracy cannot flourish when half the population does not vote, does not know the issues, does not know who represents them, and does not feel a stake in society’s future. All of this depends on the healthy functioning of the schools.

When we moved most of the money out from the central office to the schools, much of our staff went through Kubler-Ross’s stages of death, dying and grieving. We actually had a few central office staff on the payroll that did no work that schools wanted. Now that schools determine the quantity and the quality of service, if they do not find it inside the system, they go to the private sec-

INTRODUCTION/THOMAS M. FINNERAN

I’d like to thank Pioneer Institute for their assistance, their encouragement, their information, their nurturing over the many, many years that I had in the political arena. The Institute has been consistent, credible, and inspirational in their focus on markets. And I say this as a Democrat, life long, born, baptized and will probably die that way.

Of course, whenever I said this in a Democratic legislature, they accused me of being treacherous or politically traitorous.

The topic of education has always been central to the efforts and the research of the Pioneer Institute. For those of us who have either labored in the public arena or have children—and I happen to have done both—it is one of the most fascinating, frustrating and crucial tasks and responsibilities that any of us have.

For public officials, except for national security and national defense, there is no more important role or task than the transmission of knowledge. I dare say that every person in this room has been blessed to have that teacher or that professor, who had a crucial moment in our lives. It might have been second grade, the second year of college, or as you were going for advanced degree, when a teacher or a professor who lit a spark that began the flame leading you in a particular direction.

Reverend McDonnell opened tonight’s proceedings with an appropriate prayer reminding us of the gift, as well as the legacy, of life and of children. And I suspect in large measure that is what brings us here tonight to hear Angus McBeath. Let me point out to people, for those who might need a reminder, that these achievements in the public education system of Canada occur in a nation that is either legendary or notorious, you can choose the word, for being heavily unionized. People in Massachusetts understand the difficulty of that political slog and battle against entrenched public bureaucracies, and sometimes, unfortunately, education unions who do not always seem to focus on the outcomes that we dream of for our children.

tor. If they do not believe a product or service once provided is of value, they ask for a refund.

After the initial resistance, people now believe that this is how you do your work. Expect resistance, at least initially, to everything: measuring performance, setting standards and targets, expecting money to be spent wisely. Resistance will usually be in the name of the children. If you want to know who is telling stories, listen for the telltale line, “It is bad for kids.” What they really mean is it is bad for us adults, that is, bad for the ruling class. You have to learn to speak the code in public education, or at least to understand the code.

We have found that measuring results has improved the prospects for students at both ends of the social and economic scale. For example, in one of our most low income schools in Edmonton, 100 percent of the sixth-grade class passed the Language Arts Achievement Test a couple of years ago. Most of the students at this school are growing up in public housing. Half the population is of Aboriginal ancestry. One hundred percent of the kids are successful because every teacher is trained and all of the teachers use best literacy practices every day, in every room, with every student. The principal and assistant principal are in classrooms all day long. You are not even allowed to use the four-letter word “poor.” And when you walk in the building, you do not know it is a low-income school.

My answer may seem Pollyanna-ish, but we cannot allow children’s circumstances to dictate the work of the professional. People have made a whole career of saying, “The poor children, the poor souls.” I have heard more crying that purports to support children but is in the interests of adults. It is simply unacceptable talk. The children come to school: we teach them, test them, and make them do their homework and assignments. If you do not come to school, we will come after you. If you do not do your work, we will come after you.

*People have made a whole career of saying,
“The poor children, the poor souls.”*

The same approach applies to talented and gifted students. Our achievement tests have both a ‘Standard of Excellence’ mark and an ‘Acceptable Standard’ mark. Last week, I was in an affluent junior high school and said to the principal, “It is very interesting that 92 percent of your

students successfully passed three out of four tests, but that only 82 percent passed the science test. Why?” He blamed the teachers, saying that they had little interest in professional development. In fact, he was the problem. He was intimidated by his teachers and was very reluctant to ensure his teachers accessed the necessary professional development to improve their teaching practice.

The next day I sent him a two-page e-mail that said, “I want to know tomorrow what professional development your teachers will be enrolled in, or what knowledge and skills they will acquire this year. I want a report about the professional development work every month.” I wanted the results to go up at least 10 percent. He is to report back to me every month, and I will send somebody out to his school to follow up until that happens.

You have to have very high standards for the poor, and for your best performing schools. Rather than falling into the trap of improving just the weak schools or focusing on the best students, every student and every school can improve their performance. Every teacher and principal can improve performance.

Teacher and Principal Training. Let me voice something that you are not supposed to say aloud. People faithfully go to university and college to become teachers, and colleges and universities try very hard to prepare them. Nevertheless, most teachers start out not knowing how to teach. A great deal of teacher professional development is not worth very much. Nobody stops doing it because it does not work. It is just a ritual that people walk through. We spend a fortune in education for practices that do not work, based on a culture of tradition and entitlement.

Indeed, I am not sure it is possible to train teachers in colleges and universities to do the work that awaits them in classrooms. In any case, when they start teaching we put them in rooms, shut the doors, turn the key, and do not let them out for 30 years. Then we wonder why so many of them give up and fail to achieve great things with young people.

I am going to tell you a true story about me, and I am ashamed to tell it, but will do so anyway. When I finished my education degree, I was put into a room with children and told to teach them how to read, among other things. I did not know how to teach reading, for no one had taught me how to do so. Not that it mattered to anyone but the children, since I never told my principal and he was too busy with his other duties to find out.

After I got permanent status, I moved to the other end of the country and completed an advanced degree in

administration. Blaming myself for my inability to teach reading, I took another eight courses in how to teach reading, telling myself that now I would be able to do my job. However, I still could not do it. Not that it mattered to anyone but the children since nobody noticed it there either. I did not tell my principal, and he was too busy with his other duties to find out for himself. I think my story is true of many teachers: they cannot do the job for which they are being paid.

How should they? Law school graduates are not thrown abruptly into an office and given an appointment every fifteen minutes. Medical school graduates are not asked to do direct unsupervised surgical procedures without some kind of on-the-job preparation and rigorous supervision.

What is the solution? In Edmonton, we require each principal to spend up to half of the instructional day in classrooms. Again, I met resistance when we started doing that. I was asked by principals, how could they achieve such a target? Did I not know how busy they were doing the important work of business management, public relations, crowd control, and keeping parents away from the teachers and classrooms?

Principals, you see, do not always know themselves about how to improve the teaching of reading or math. Principals, largely, are engaging teachers who speak well, get promoted, and are asked to be in charge of a learning community. They do not always know how to do the work of improving teachers and they are given scant, if any, preparation on how to improve achievement results.

Principals have to put up with so many rules and regulations, so many masters and mistresses, that they rarely get around to doing the most crucial work of the school. So I had to say to them, "It is better to do the right work badly than the wrong work well. And it is okay not to know what to do. However, you are going to have to learn how to improve teaching by coaching teachers: mentoring them, coaching them, preparing them, ensuring that you know what training they need. You need to make sure they get the coaching and support they need, and hold them accountable for results. Because you have the money, and because you have the authority, there is no reason why you should not be able to improve the quality of instruction and achievement results."

We know from our own statistics that by the end of the third grade, who will probably not complete high school. Because many teachers do not know how to teach reading and writing well, they often fall for the most haphazard approaches and fads of the day. Yet, there is enough

knowledge in the research and in the literature to tell how to teach reading and writing properly. It takes three years in our system for a teacher to learn to teach reading and writing really well. We have been training our teachers and our principals for the last 55 months, 1,200 teachers a month, in how to improve the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics. This has been hard work for our staff. They ask, "When will all this training be over?" I tell them, "When you retire."

I have been in 7,500 classrooms myself in the last four years. I do not go to look at teachers; I go to look at principals. And I will tell you what I do, and why I do it. We have a volume of data collected on our students' achievement, because we test everybody in grades 1–9 in reading and writing, and every child is tested at grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 by the province. All of the data are public. Every school has achievement targets to meet. And there are consequences for not meeting them.

When I go to a school with my sheath of data and my questions about quality, I ask the principals to take me to their classrooms. We stand outside the door and I say, because I know that some of them do not want to be in classrooms, "Tell me what we are going to see in this room." We spend five minutes in the classroom and I ask the question, "What did we just see in this room? And what feedback are you going to give teachers based on what we have just seen?"

The principals are now spending time in the classrooms. I know that because I have been in 7,500 of them myself, and can tell by the reactions of the teachers and the children, and by whether the principals have learned to observe what is in front of their eyes. That is their job. They need to lead in achievement. They need to hold teachers accountable. And they need to support teachers for dear life, because the teachers' work is extremely difficult.

Results. Teaching, like parenting, is about getting children to do what they would rather not do. Leading is also about overcoming resistance, in this case the resistance of adults. Principals should not fear resistance, but welcome it. Resistance is a good sign that you are engaged in something important, and overcoming it sharpens your skills and character. We need to coach principals. We need to train them and hold them accountable. And we need to take action if they do not achieve results.

We have in our system programs of choice. We have about 34 of them, spread throughout the city. Programs of choice range from a performing arts school to a school in which you would learn to be a cadet to a school in which

you would learn to play hockey. Or it might be a school in which you would learn a second language or second culture. Or it might be a Christian school, a Hebrew-language school, or an Arabic school. Or, it is a school that offers something that parents believe speaks to their children, and eliminates another reason to send children to private school.

Our introduction of choice provoked dire threats from one of our unions. I was told, for example, that I was on my way to jail when we were negotiating with the first private Christian school that asked to become part of the system. I was told that we were breaking down the barrier between church and state. Now, most of our private schools are Christian in character, and a couple of them have been with us since 1999. We have brought in thousands and thousands of young people from the private schools. We literally eliminated that part of the private sector. The teachers' union has gained a great many dues-paying members. However, if we were afraid of resistance we would have given up immediately.

In my view, the public does not care whether their schools are public or private, as long as the children get an education that prepares them for the future. We in the public schools often forget that there is no inherent right to public education. Our failures do nothing but send students to the private and charter school systems. So having independent charter and private schools keeps us on our toes and make us work harder.

We are still expanding our programs of choice. We are still open to suggestions. Almost every suggestion for programs of choice comes from parents. We just started a new program offering two Septembers ago: We have a large Indian-Canadian community and they wanted their children to learn English and at least one other language, in hope that that the one other language might reflect who they are as a people. In fact, we just introduced mandatory second language instruction for all children, over the resistance of many adults, who said that we could not find enough teachers and that it is too hard for the students.

We have also found ways to use choice to target problems, like how give an equal opportunity to girls pursue science careers. We have developed all-girl junior high schools, identified female teachers, and used professional development money to improve their skills. We still have more work to do, but the girls are starting to surpass the boys, which will give us a new problem to address.

We are not finished in Edmonton, for we are still not satisfied with our high school graduation rates. Because

reading and writing skills predict high school completion, we have a list in every school in our system of each student who is below grade level in reading and writing from grades 1–10. When I make a school visit, the first thing I say is, "Let's get out the list." You only have to do that once and the whole system has their list ready. Then I say, "I want to know where Bob is. You said Bob is below grade level in reading. I want to know where Bob is right now, in what room? What strategies are the teachers using? Where is that kid going to be in June?" I asked those questions in October, or whatever month I visit the school. Last year, 57 percent of the at-risk kids on the list went up one or more grade levels, because expectations matter. There is a face to these names. They are not just statistics, but real children. Even though we have 80,000 students, we can still monitor each of them, and the students know it and their teachers know it. It creates conversations between teachers and principals. It means that we set targets for each of these kids. It means a professional development plan that actually changes teacher performance and teacher work.

Conclusion

The alternative to doing the hard work is to maintain the status quo. However, if the status quo is not working, we should give parents their money back, instead of asking for more money for the same or less quality. It would be very simple to say that everything is the fault of the teachers' unions, and that would be very unfair. Let me make one request of each of you: call our school system tomorrow, and, if you are put on hold, you will hear information about our results, results that are good and those that we don't like.

In closing, I would note that our successes have been written up all over Canada, but not emulated. It is hard to pierce through the view that you cannot measure achievement, the fear of teachers' unions and vested interests, or the lack of urgency because our country is prosperous. But we are not as competitive as we need to be. And the young people of India and China will not feel sorry for us if we should become a second world nation. They will not say, "Oh, poor you. We have had it easy in India and China while you were having it tough."

If Canadians and Americans do not change until we have a full-blown crisis, then it will be too late.

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