FAST-TRACKING REFORM: A Plan To Overhaul Public Education

Mitch needs help. He’s 17, and his life has been a disaster until now. For two years he didn’t have a place to live. His mother is a crack addict. He’s done lots of things he’s not proud of. For a year, he was in jail for an uncontrollable temper. But now Mitch is ready to transform his life. He wants to get away from his old street friends. He knows that he needs an education, and wants to go to college. But the schools don’t want him. He’s too high-risk, and though he hasn’t gotten into trouble at school, the school authorities found it convenient to shuffle him off to the alternative school. That way he won’t bring down the test scores, which are the new preoccupation of American education.

Mitch is at least two years behind in school. Although he is very bright and a quick learner, the alternative school is overcrowded and understaffed. He’d like five courses, but they gave him only three, just enough to count him for state funding. His English class has 45 students, and the last session was canceled because the teacher was briefing a police officer about the assault he suffered at the hands of a student earlier in the day. Mitch’s algebra class has only eight students; most students in the alternative school aren’t ready for algebra. Mitch, however, has already passed algebra, but he’s repeating it because it’s the only math class available. His third class is a consumer-skills course. It won’t count for college, but it was available, and Mitch enrolled late.

Welcome to the underworld of education—the part we don’t like to think about or talk about.

Kids like Mitch need more resources and more help if they are to have any chance. To be fair to the school district, most of the kids at the alternative school aren’t ready for transformation, and the school has become callous and has effectively stopped trying to help them. The resources simply aren’t there. With the exception of the occasional teacher still consumed by the desire to help these forgotten kids, most of the staff has given up, too. Eventually all of us will pay the price in welfare, prisons and beefed-up law enforcement. More likely than not, we’ll blame the kids for not learning, and then we’ll blame the welfare mothers and the prison alumni for not making their lives work, even though they have few skills to work with.

To change situations like Mitch’s we need a whole new concept of educational leadership: young (and young in spirit), vigorous leaders who are encouraged to take risks and are given the resources and support to respond to new challenges as they emerge. One of the biggest problems in American education today is “safe” leadership. Educational leaders come from ranks of teachers schooled in obsolete teaching practices, conditioned by bureaucracy to “fit in,” and often indebted to the forces of nepotism, politics and political correctness. These leadership criteria are fatally flawed in times of rapid change.

**Dot-Com leadership**

The leadership pool of educators is already weaker than we would like—witness all the complaints about mediocre teaching. It is amazing that we have as many dedicated, effective leaders as we do, given the selection bias, lack of incentives and limited talent pool. The crisis in educational leadership has given rise to suggestions as wild as scrapping public education entirely, creating, perhaps, a free-market system built around private (even for-profit) schools. Home schooling is another desperate response for those fortunate few who can even consider it.

Public education can and must do better. Before we consider a “new school system,” let us find new leadership. First of all, we must encourage these leaders to take risks, because the largest risk of all is maintaining the status quo. Second, we should develop new participatory leadership patterns that involve teachers, students and parents, and seek active community support.

Current patterns of leadership have produced isolation and distrust among these groups.

Education needs “dot-com” leaders desperately. Dot-com leadership for education is the educational equivalent of the dot-com leadership in the business community, which has transformed not only commerce and industry, but the basic fabric of America. The stereotype is that they are young, and most of them are likely to be, but dot-com leadership is a state of mind, not an age. Nor is dot-com leadership tied to any particular training—even training in
technology, its progenitor. Dot-com leadership implies vision, risk-taking, caring, sharing and enormous energy. Our colleague, Patrick O’Shea, who finished his doctoral study at Old Dominion University and who helped us with research on this book, is an excellent example of an emerging dot-com leader in education.

Dot-com leadership can take shape with establishment of what we call the National Experimental School Administration, or NESA. An educational equivalent in certain respects to the space agency NASA, NESA would provide the United States with a laboratory in which to test and evaluate educational reforms, and act as a clearinghouse for knowledge about educational practice. NESA schools would become frontiers for educational change. It will be no easy task to open up the system. But it must begin somewhere; in this case, with a vision of change, a vision of new potentials, with mechanisms that allow local communities flexibility and the opportunity for adaptation.

NESA experimental school districts would be formed within current district jurisdictions. An experimental school district in Anytown, USA, would be just a single high school and its feeder schools, which would be exempted from local and state regulations.

There are about 50 million children in America’s public school system, K–12. One percent would be about 500,000. Assuming NESA school districts would consist of high school feeders that averaged about 5,000 youngsters, we recommend creating 100 NESA school districts with at least one experimental school district in each state.

Experimental districts would be established in localities that request to be part of the project. This would mean that no community would be required to be part of the NESA network. If you force people to take part, they will complain about everything that goes wrong. However, when participation is voluntary, it’s easier to get everyone to work together to fix the things that go wrong. Let’s not fool ourselves into thinking that nothing will go wrong. Inevitably problems will occur, even severe problems. These problems are all part of the recognized risk of any real experimental efforts. The important thing that must happen for this system to be successful is that when a problem does occur, everyone will pull together to solve it, rather than attacking the program or its participants.

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A Clearinghouse For Knowledge

NESA districts would develop relationships with local and national universities and with the regional educational laboratories. Both the U.S. Department of Education and state departments of education would contribute to the experimental agenda. Some experimental agendas would be defined within the districts themselves.

America needs an impartial source of information about education, where the merits of all points of view are reasonably represented. NESA would serve as a clearinghouse for our knowledge about educational practice. NESA schools would become frontiers for educational change. The challenge is to establish NESA with impartial credibility and without a vast educational bureaucracy. We can never be sure that NESA could prove immune from the factionalism that plagues education today, but as Americans, we all win if we can build the common will to succeed.

To finance a hundred NESA schools, with the national coordination to support them, we propose an initial budget of about $4 billion a year (of the $5 billion total NESA budget) to fund national, regional and local experimental programs, and to provide technology and other special equipment. That figure sounds large, but it is well within our resources as a nation, a modest investment to transform our educational system to meet 21st century needs, an issue of national security.

This would provide a budget of about $30 million per NESA school. About half of that would be administered at a local level, in direct support for each school. The other half would fund developmental costs for curricula and for curriculum materials (including computer software), the development of new equipment and technologies, and support for national research and evaluation costs.

We suggest an experimental operating budget of $3,000 per student annually to begin. This would provide funds for a substantial program of experimentation. With NESA districts averaging about 5,000 students each, an annual operating budget (staff and facility) of about $15 million per district would be appropriate at the beginning. As we go along, we will undoubtedly identify new experimental

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requirements and thus we might expect the budget for experimentation to grow to equal the average current per-pupil expenditure: an estimated $25 million per year per NESA district.

As NESA schools begin to produce results, we will become more enthusiastic about increasing their resources. Among the first priorities is to create a research facility for each local NESA school district. We estimate that about $2 million per district would be required to build this facility. With a 20-year commitment, facilities would be built with bonds and amortized over the 20-year life of the project. Some projects might require modification of the basic school facilities as well, and funding should be available for this purpose as needed.

There is general agreement that we need a strong technology initiative in our schools. We suggest that $1 billion per year be invested in the 100 NESA districts for technology program development. That breaks down to another $10 million per district per year. About half of this would be spent nationally for development.

A $5 billion per year investment in 100 NESA schools may seem like a large amount, but take into account that the total investment in public K–12 education per year is about $200 billion (47 percent of which comes from local property taxes, 47 percent from the state, and about 6 percent from the federal government). With those numbers in mind, it becomes easier to envision an investment of about 2.5 percent of the total being put toward the development of a NESA school network.

Education has to be thought of as a part of the larger society, which is rapidly changing, requiring ever-increasing investment in research and development. There is general agreement about the need, but little confidence about the educational system’s ability to deliver. A well-funded NESA will provide no guarantees, and NESA could fail; but more likely, with constant redefinition for at least two decades, NESA has an excellent chance for success. The alternative we face is immobilization, further decay, and despair about the ultimate success of our nation’s schools.

This article is adapted from the book *American Schools: The 100 Billion Dollar Challenge*, by Dwight Allen, an Old Dominion professor of education, and William H. Cosby Jr., one of America’s most popular authors and actors.