

Why I'm Optimistic About Public Education

by Tom Coyne

Many times in my life I've heard it said, "it's always darkest before the dawn." Nobody would deny that today many people see a dark future for public education. Test scores are flat, budget pressures are rapidly increasing, and polls repeatedly highlight people's growing frustration with the current system. However, I don't believe the outlook is as bleak as many people believe. In thirty years of doing turnarounds, I've learned to look for subtle cues that a successful change program is either possible or just getting underway. I use a five-part model to group these cues.

The first part is the need for change. Before an organization can turn around, a majority of its members need to intellectually understand and emotionally fear the consequences of not changing the status quo. I don't think you'll find many people in a public school system today that think the status quo is just fine. Whether based on state tests, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or the OECD's PISA tests, there is a growing and very visible body of evidence that America's students are falling behind their global peers in reading, writing, math and science. And among the public and in the business community, people are coming to understand that if we are to grow our way out of our current debt crisis, better performance by our public schools is critical. Closer to home, anyone who works in public education today knows that budgets are under acute pressure, with taxpayers unwilling to provide more funding in the absence of better results, even as health care, pension, and operating costs continue to rise. People in the private sector know what this means – once the stress passes a tipping point, people grudgingly confront the reality that tinkering around the edges will no longer suffice, and that the time has come to rethink the assumptions, processes, organization and assets that underlie the current business model. Today, our public school systems are reaching this point.

The second part of my model is a positive emotional desire for a shared vision of a more attractive future. If need is about "change from", this part of the model is about "change to." Unfortunately, even as the felt need for change has become more acute, most public school systems have thus far failed to develop a shared vision that a

majority of stakeholders wants to achieve. Some believe this vision should focus on gains in academic performance; for others, it should also include the development of athletic and artistic potential, and character more generally; and for still others it must avoid job losses and the preserve health and pension benefits. What most school systems have yet to go through is an exercise familiar to many who have experienced turnarounds in the private sector: the definition of a shared view of desired outcomes of education, their required timing, and how to measure them; agreement on the physical, financial, human, and technical resources that are available to achieve these outcomes; and finally a confrontation with the proverbial “blank sheet of paper” upon which a new business model must be designed that defines the ways the desired ends will be achieved with the available means. This has been the essence of strategy since the ancient Greeks first coined the term. While in most school districts stakeholders have yet to agree on a shared vision for the future, I’m quite sure this situation won’t last much longer. The pressures on the current model are building so quickly that I can’t see many more candidates running for school boards on a platform of “more of the same, but with higher taxes.” Parents, voters, and business leaders will demand a compelling new vision; if one cannot be produced via evolutionary means, then they will vote against further funding increases and force revolutionary change on the system, in the same way that investors’ refusal to provide further funding to a company’s often compels its sale or a restructuring via bankruptcy.

The third part of my change model focuses on what must be changed in order to move from the current situation to the desired future state. What is the detailed sequence of actions that must be taken to get from here to there? Again, one’s initial impression of progress to date in this area is usually negative. Reasonable people can quickly get into a heated discussion as to whether the best way to improve our schools (a phrase which is usually deliberately ambiguous) involves increased school choice, better use of data and technology, improved curriculum and assessment, performance based pay, better teacher selection and training, and a host of other ideas. Walking away from these discussions, many people shake their heads in frustrations, and tell others the outlook is bleak.

I don’t share that view. In fact, I view the profusion of ideas as a healthy sign that people still care enough about the future of our schools to think very seriously about how

to improve them. What has been missing so far is a better school district and school board process for systematically evaluating, prioritizing, and experimenting with different improvement initiatives that have been proposed. It is not that we lack examples of how to take these steps. There is a growing body of research that helps us to better understand the relative merits of different ideas, based on the results of experiments that different school systems have already conducted. There are also examples of school systems (e.g., the Province of Alberta in Canada) that have taken a very systematic, evidence-based approach to testing different pilot initiatives, and quickly scaling up those that have demonstrated impressive results.

Also missing has been a hard-nosed understanding that these experiments must be implemented within existing budgets – they are not add-ons that won't be undertaken in the absence of additional funding. For people who have experienced a turnaround or bankruptcy at a private sector company, this seems self-evident; in my experience, nothing raises voter anger as quickly and intensely as school employees who refuse to change unless additional funding is provided.

And yet, I remain an optimist here too. As I said, there is already a rapidly growing body of research that supports the powerful impact some initiatives can have on different academic performance metrics. There is also a growing body of evidence (e.g., from the military) that supports the importance of developing character traits like resilience, grit, persistence, teamwork, and leadership through school activities like sports and the performing arts.

Finally, the introduction of the Common Core academic standards promises to have a very powerful (and probably very underestimated) impact on the future of our schools. Not only will the Common Core raise the performance standards we use when assessing academic performance, but, because of the scale of its adoption and its higher performance bar, it will also drive the development of much more standardized and content rich curriculum across the United States. As I saw when I lived in Alberta, a consistent, content rich curriculum is an underappreciated yet very powerful driver of education performance improvement, because it facilitates more parental involvement, the development of enrichment and assessment products for families, students, and businesses, and improves the perceived fairness of school staff performance evaluations. Looking to the future, a content rich curriculum available on a national

scale in the United States will also facilitate the development of much more advanced education technology products (e.g., immersive education simulations with integrated assessments, the results of which are instantly available to students, parents, and teachers – e.g., “Call of Duty: Math”). Perhaps more important, a content rich curriculum facilitates a move from the current system of “promotion/graduation based on seat time/course credits” to a new system (already familiar to the private sector) of promotion based on a student’s demonstrated competence on a novice to expert scale in different areas of study. Undoubtedly, this will change the role of a teacher to one that looks more like a classic tutor, or (to use a more familiar analogy) a sports coach (e.g., progression to the varsity team based on improvements in demonstrated competence, brought about by individual coaching and practice). In sum, I don’t doubt the means to achieve improved public school performance are available today, or that even more effective means will be available in the near future.

That said, the ability to use these tools – that is, to execute the sequence of actions needed to improve performance – may be beyond the skills set of some current staff. This is the fourth part of my model – knowing how to implement the required changes to the current business model, or, to put it differently, giving people the confidence and new tools they need. To some extent, it should be possible to train current staff to provide the missing skills (e.g., in the analysis of the terabytes of test performance data that is now available, and the identification and transfer of best practices). In other cases, more user-friendly technology (e.g., for data access and analysis) can help. And in other cases, the implementation of new approaches will likely unleash the talents of current staff that have either been held back or underappreciated up to now (e.g., the ability to leverage technology, and provide effective individual coaching). Again, I’m confident that most school systems have a core of the talent needed by the new system (both old and young) that will be unleashed when new initiatives are launched, who will deliver the early wins and infectious enthusiasm that are essential to successful turnarounds.

However, the blunt truth of the matter is that, as is true in the private sector, some people who thrived under the old system will not be a good fit when the business model changes. Most likely, they will not leave voluntarily. And as I’ve seen time and again in private sector turnarounds, they will stealthily try to block and sabotage change, and

poison the new business model, despite all the coaching and counseling you may give them. This brings me to the fifth, and probably most difficult element of my change model – successful change requires the will and power to remove these people from an organization. Again, in the case of our public schools, my confidence that this will be possible has increased in recent years, as legislatures and school boards have enacted more rigorous systems for school, principal and teacher evaluations, and fair processes for termination. To be sure, I think that many of these err on the side of giving far more than three strikes to some people who should be quickly removed from the game. Yet they are real steps in the right direction, and school employees will quickly learn that the failure to make use of them will result in funding cuts and the imposition of revolutionary change processes they hope to avoid because of their unpredictable consequences (e.g., to staffing, pensions, and healthcare benefits).

In sum, I'm optimistic about the future of public education in the United States, because the need for change is clear; we're close to agreement among key stakeholders about a desirable and shared future outcome we want to attain; the techniques and technologies are available (if not yet fully agreed upon) for getting to this future within existing budgets (provided we are willing to experiment with major changes to the traditional education model); we either have or can obtain the skills we need to implement our change plan; and we are putting in place processes to remove the most implacable opponents of change, provided we have the will to use them. It can, indeed, seem dark today when we talk about the state of our public schools. But dawn is on the horizon.

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