

Innovations in Education: It Starts with a Conversation

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This edition of PSIJ—**It Starts with a Conversation**—introduces readers to alternative and innovative strategies for educational reform and extends the conversation to all who care about our children and their education. Well aware of the politics in education, we aim to bridge the current knowledge gap, with the hope and expectation that such a bridge will unite all interested parties for collective impact.

The scale and complexity of the U.S. public education system has thwarted attempted reforms for decades. . . . [T]he country now ranks 18th among the top 24 industrialized nations, with more than 1 million secondary school students dropping out every year. The heroic efforts of countless teachers, administrators, and nonprofits, together with billions of dollars in charitable contributions, may have led to important improvements in individual schools and classrooms, yet system-wide progress has seemed virtually unobtainable (Kania and Kramer 2011).

Said in another way, the politics of special interests in the education section—no doubt well-intended—often gets in the way of progress and results in fear of change.

According to Pennsylvania System of School Assessment results, Philadelphia children perform poorly in comparison to their peers across the state. Despite recent gains in student achievement for Philadelphia's children, only 54 percent and 57 percent of students served by the School District of Philadelphia and public charter schools, respectively, read and perform math at grade level.

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The articles are written by local and national educational experts, operators, advocates and consumers. They offer an understanding of the complexities of education reform and paint a potential roadmap toward creating disruption in the education system to achieve collective impact.

Collective impact is the simple idea that all forces (organizations and individuals) unite their agendas and resources toward holding each other accountable to one common goal. A collective impact does not mean that everyone loses, but existing education organizations and leaders may have to give up some control, and create win-win situations for all parties.

It Starts with a Conversation presents a futuristic vision of the potential of our education system and how it might be accomplished.

- Imagine that unions, in addition to ensuring that teachers and administrators receive their due diligence, helped those who should *not* be teachers or administrators to transition out of education into another field.
- Imagine that *all* of our educational universities prepared our teachers to not only discuss and argue pedagogy but also to teach with the skills and competencies needed to ensure that our students can compete in a global economy.
- Imagine that *all* school operators and districts, in addition to educating our children, welcomed the talents and energy of the rest of us to help and be part of the solution.
- Imagine that *all* of us actually believed in the capabilities of students and parents without economic means to make the best decisions for their children about their education.
- Imagine that *all* children attended school in a safe and friendly environment and could focus on learning.

None of us, individually, has the solution to creating the best learning institutions. However, collectively we can guide reform through some simple truths, however politically challenging they may be, and innovations:

1. A simple change is to create an environment where risks are encouraged and accountability lines (student performance) are clear. We need to let those who can teach, teach and those who can lead, lead, and we all need to feel comfortable taking risks, without the worry of losing our jobs, to educate our children. Accountability needs to revolve around student performance.
2. Let parents, who care most about their children, make the educational decisions on behalf of their children. Parents without economic means will improve our educational system simply through their selection of quality schools. The right legislation, if written correctly, takes the authority away from school administrators and policymakers who most often do not have their own students in public education and gives it to parents of children in public education to demand better educational options.
3. Stop trying to coerce school operators and districts through shame and embarrassment, but rather become part of the solution by creating learning communities in which gradual improvements can be noted and continued. Stop trying to coerce universities to change their practices, but rather have school operators rank the best universities by quality teachers—student selection will follow.
4. Stop focusing education reform decisions around money and politics, but rather focus them on accountability and results for children.

5. Acknowledge that not all kids learn alike. Our educational system for the most part teaches to the common denominator. However, by doing so, we fail kids with special needs and basic learning abilities who, in alternative environments that focus on how they learn, would thrive.

This edition of *PSIJ* is about educating the American people so that they can become part of the solution through their voices and actions. Too many of us feel that our advice or offerings of help fall on deaf ears.

We offer articles from more than 50 educational leaders and experts. We begin with a 20-year history of educational reform nationally and in Philadelphia and discuss how groups across sectors can identify a shared agenda and mobilize the human and financial resources required to forward that agenda. We hear from the new and emerging generation that is flooding the system with talent and creating teacher and leadership accountability. We read about schools that are leading the field through innovations such as shifting instruction to a knowledge economy and that have set new standards for transparency, accountability and integrity. We hear the voices of parents who are demanding choice, and through that choice are demanding quality education, safety and engagement. We hear from professional development educational agencies and operators who are doing a better job of preparing our teachers and leaders to teach and lead than some of our universities. We hear about

educational quality measure standards that are alternatives to test scores. We hear about creating connections and links between our K–12 and higher education institutions and the real world economy.

After reading *It Starts with a Conversation*, you should be able to:

- Articulate the history of education reform in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia.
- Articulate what is working and what should change in current education legislation.
- Understand how alternative models of education (accelerated schools, cyber charter schools, vocational models, etc.) are providing new models for consideration.
- Understand why economic support in the form of choice (i.e., scholarships, vouchers) and school transparency and public accountability are part of the reform solution.
- Understand how higher education institutions can better prepare teachers and principals for better educational outcomes.
- Articulate how specialized schools meet the needs of specialized populations and achieve academic excellence.
- Understand alternative higher education models that tackle the question of affordability and accessibility.
- Understand that education excellence is not just about money, but also the application of financial

resources.

- Understand how both the lack and surplus of school facilities can be coordinated across school systems.
- Articulate how supporting organizations such as The Free Library and Summer Search and foundations and corporations can partner to be part of the solution.
- Understand how the health and wellness needs of students are critical to academic success.

Many people view education as the number one civil rights issue of our time. Some education advocates spend much of their time critiquing our educational leaders, under the assumption that public pressure will force education reform. Other advocates and system reformists have articulated an understanding of the entrenchment of schools and school systems, but have not articulated concrete solutions/suggestions on where or how to create education reform. Yet as you will read, solutions are all around; we need to embrace them, step beyond our political comfort zone and take action. The future of our region and country depends on it, and we depend on you to get engaged. Be inspired to take action and push for systems reform!

We hope that this edition will serve as a rich resource for not only educational operators, advocates and education consumers, but for everyone in the region, providing an understanding of the complexities of education reform and a potential roadmap that will advance the education

reform agenda toward collective impact and a brighter future for all of us.

References

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