

Reforming the Education Conversation

Lisa J. Nutter 04 April 2011

Introduction

There are many voices, many opinions, many ideas, and in fact, there have been many attempts at improving education for young people. Both the discussion and ability to reach agreement about scalable solutions have been difficult. One of the reasons it has been so difficult for adults, while good intentioned, to come together and get on the same page about the direction we should be taking is that the conversation has been so ideologically divisive. Another is that people are looking for big transformational ideas (perhaps overlooking smaller ideas that can leverage big change), and many of these big ideas are focused on structure rather than content. A third reason is that we have not focused on how to have more constructive dialog about a comprehensive strategy; thus how we engage in and conduct the conversation about education reform itself is in need of reform.

Setting the Table for a Constructive Conversation

As we enter another virtuous cycle where we publicly debate how to reform education, let's first take stock of

what we're presently doing to improve student outcomes in Philadelphia:

- We have more school choice than any other school district in the state, and we rank third behind Detroit and Los Angeles in terms of number of students in charter schools, at about 40,000.
- The School District of Philadelphia has used increased state investments in public education in a variety of targeted ways, including expanding and changing the scope of summer school, reducing class size in grades K to 3, enhancing literacy programs, improving the student-to-counselor ratio, increasing school-based social services, improving parent engagement and increasing services for English language learners. The School District has documented gains in Pennsylvania System of School Assessment scores and graduation rates, which have improved along with these increased and targeted investments.
- The lowest-performing public schools are being restructured or are being targeted for restructuring; many restructured schools are being turned into charter schools and are now being led by organizations with experience turning around troubled schools and producing positive student outcomes.
- Performance-based contracts have been negotiated with the teachers' union, setting the stage for greater

accountability and improved staffing decisions aligned around the needs of students.

- We have a network of nonprofit youth development organizations and school operators that have been nurtured over the past several years and have increased the capacity of our community to serve youth through innovative educational and youth development programming.
-
- These are all key pieces that can provide some leverage for broader systemic change as we enter another cycle of increased debate and discussion about what a system that produces high-quality education should look like. Thus far, as in the past, much of the conversation around education reform has been about *this* idea or *that* idea being *the* answer, when we all know that there isn't just one answer. We also know that one idea does not make a strategy.
- This time, we have an opportunity to emerge from our own camps and join together in a conversation about what works, what doesn't and why. We have an opportunity to lift up and address some fundamental problems that exist across the education "ecosystem"—problems that exist regardless of the structure (e.g., reformed traditional public schools, charters or vouchers) by which we attempt to facilitate change. The departure points and questions that could set the table for a better, more productive

conversation might look something like this:

- **Departure point 1: Scaling up effective practices—we don't do a good job of scaling up evidence-based and promising practices.** Why is that? And what do we do about it?
- **Departure point 2: Preparing our adults—we don't do a good job of preparing adults to teach and support young people.** What should we be doing differently, and what systemic solutions are at our fingertips? How do we create a talent pipeline for all of the educational options that we are trying to create?
- **Departure point 3: Holding the solutions accountable—our education ecosystem is heavy on rhetoric and light on accountability.** Whatever the strategy and intervention, how do we ensure that families, employers and higher education institutions have an ability to hold the solutions accountable and distinguish educational quality?

The overarching question here is “how do we *significantly* increase the supply of quality education and do so *at a pace that kids and families deserve?*” The suggested departure points should help us get to viable, systemic and sustainable solutions. Together, the responses to these questions should also lead us to an actionable, focused strategy that we can share as a community blueprint for change.

So, there is a lot to talk about. More importantly, there is a

lot to do, starting with building a strategy.

Many Ideas, One Strategy

E Pluribus Unum: Many Ideas, One Strategy

Building a sustainable education reform strategy will require us to understand the strategic value and limits of each of our reform ideas. We need to better understand what has and hasn't worked and why, addressing issues such as which interventions have worked for specific populations, what types of school choices we are missing in our current landscape, and what types of schools are showing progress and why.

For example, many of the ideas proposed for Philadelphia's schools are focused on the structure by which education gets delivered, whether the structure is turning around underperforming public schools, promoting charter schools or using vouchers as a way to improve choices for families. How do we hear each other and understand the value that these ideas bring? Since each of these ideas has strategic merit, how do we create a sustainable structure that supports all of the ideas as a cohesive strategy? What would these approaches need in the way of financial resources, human resources and a sustainable infrastructure in order to work together as a set, not just co-existing, but instead working in concert?

To be successful, this unified, coherent and deliberate strategy should be measured based on its ability to increase the supply of quality education, implying that more young people are getting a better education. The strategy must be one that we are willing to invest in for the long run, yet have clear short-term and intermediate goals. And at a minimum, it would need these three things:

- **Research and learning:** A disciplined and structured way to research, evaluate, codify and share effective practices and models in order to ensure continuous learning.
- **Adult preparation:** A rigorous and systematic process to prepare our adults (i.e., parents/guardians, teachers, administrators and youth development practitioners) to deliver and support effective practices and models.
- **Accountability and transparency:** An objective set of measures by which we hold our solutions and those delivering the solutions accountable and a way to share results with stakeholders, parents and students.

These issues are the foundation. There are even more to consider, but at the very least these are the types of systemic issues that must be addressed and supported over the long haul. If we advance another conversation about education reform and our various ideas without seriously considering and solving these fundamental

issues, we will end up with an incomplete strategy and fail to make large-scale progress at a pace that families and students deserve. In addition, we each have a role to play in the solutions as practitioners, as parents, as employers and as leaders. Similarly, we each have a responsibility to offer the best research-based solutions that we have the capacity to deliver.

Taking the Next Step

Taking the Next Step

So, where do we start? Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves, "What's the what?" Out of all the instructional models and approaches, what do we want to invest in as the approaches that will transform classroom practice *and* transform education? In some ways, this is a more important question than the question we've been obsessed with, which is "What's the structure?" Real choice means that we have more variation in high-quality instructional models from which parents and students can choose, depending on their interests and learning styles.

A conversation reframed with research and learning, adult preparation, and accountability and transparency will help lead us to a consensus on a direction for education reform and guide us in a conversation that leads to action.

The *research and learning* will help us look at effective school models both here in our own community and

outside our community and give us the information we need to replicate these models to scale. Research will also help us, as a community, to identify the types of things we want to invest in and can provide us with the tools we need to agree on them and invest in them. Without doing the research, the audit, the sharing of solutions, we cannot get to scale. The career academy model created more than 40 years ago by Philadelphia Academies, Inc., has been replicated in schools across the country because there was a structure in place at a national level to share best practices and to teach others how to develop and implement them. California, Florida and Texas are among the states that have effectively replicated the model because they identified the model as the solution, resourced it and, in the case of California, created intermediaries to get it done.

A focus on adult preparation will ensure that systems are in place to teach practitioners and volunteers to take the solution or solutions we identify and implement them on a scale that can serve the largest number of young people. Technology can be a tool here to help accelerate and facilitate adoption and is something we are beginning to utilize at Philadelphia Academies, Inc., to enable us to better support teachers as well as volunteers and to get the career academy model to scale.

Accountability and transparency will task each of us with the obligation of determining what we can do within on our own organizations to support the solution, guide us in

evaluating our success, and ultimately aid us in communicating the results with stakeholders, parents and students.

Finally, with these three foundation pieces in place, we need to bring people together in the same space to collaborate and interact with one another around concepts, ideas and the solutions. The best example we have of cross-systems collaboration to date in the city is the Philadelphia Council for College and Career Success. By using a set of citywide goals established by the Mayor, the Council first organized people around the question "What's the what?" articulating the sheer size of the problem, and then identifying a set of concrete strategies that address these goals. Articulating the goals provided an anchor to organize the Council's work, and the strategies that have been developed direct and align the youth workforce resources in the city around a common vision: All Philadelphia youth are prepared for educational and economic success.

There are 50 contributors to this special issue dedicated to education reform. Each has ideas. Sharing them here is an excellent start to getting the conversation going. There are several nonprofit organizations in Philadelphia dedicated to improving educational opportunities for Philadelphia youth—still more ideas. Students, parents, teachers, administrators and industry leaders all have something to offer around the subject of improving education, and thereby something to offer toward

improving life and economic outcomes for our youth.

Each spring, Philadelphia Academies, Inc., hosts the All-Academies Student Speech Competition with ninth- and tenth-graders from across our 10 Academies programs participating in researching, writing about and ultimately speaking on a debate-worthy topic. The program culminates in a sharing of the students' work in front of an audience of peers, parents, teachers, administrators and business leaders. All involved come away from the experience enlightened, invigorated and better educated.

Indeed, having a conversation about a debate-worthy topic can enlighten, invigorate and better educate all of us. As an immediate next step, I suggest that an organization that focuses on cross-sector solutions (perhaps the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal*) convene these discussions, which might actually lead to community consensus. Like the Philadelphia Academies' students who come together each year to research their timely topics and speak out about their ideas, we, too, should get together and start talking (and listening) across our various camps. Our timely topic for constructive debate and consideration is education reform, and the stakes couldn't be higher.

Lisa Nutter is President of Philadelphia Academies, Inc., a nonprofit youth development organization that works in Philadelphia's public high schools to provide career-based learning, college readiness supports

and positive adult networks, motivating young people to graduate and preparing them for the 21st-century economy. Her professional background spans education, community organizing/development, human services and arts/culture. Ms. Nutter holds a Psychology BS from Pennsylvania State University and a City Planning MA from the University of Pennsylvania, and is an Emerging Leaders Program fellow with the Centre for Leadership and Public Values (University of Cape Town, Duke University). She is actively engaged locally and nationally in social change and youth development, and serves on Boards including the Women's Community Revitalization Project, Big Picture Philadelphia, United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and ArtReach.