



Making Student Achievement the North Star of Our Education System

Michael T. Hartney

In a recent white paper on school governance, I concluded that public education often fails to incentivize adults to make student achievement the North Star of their work.¹ Schools and systems are rarely held accountable for student learning outcomes, either by voters or in their employment contracts.² Many K-12 leaders even acknowledge that student academic achievement is not their sole or top priority.³ Recent research by Ohio State University professor Vladimir Kogan demonstrates what many have long intuited: when adults are “distracted” by nonacademic issues, student learning suffers.⁴

Since the pandemic, this problem has metastasized. As former education secretary Arne Duncan explains, “[Education] reform has taken a backseat in the COVID era, and now, we’re just trying to catch up.”⁵ In this essay, I consider what a K-12 system that wholeheartedly commits itself to making student achievement its central mission would look like. More specifically, this brief concept paper draws on examples outside of public education, and even beyond the K-12 sector itself, to envision what it would look like for system and school leaders to adopt an unrelenting focus on student academic outcomes.

GOVERNANCE IS NOT MANAGEMENT

Public schools cannot make student outcomes their North Star when school boards encroach on management. As business icon Kenneth N. Dayton famously argued: “Governance is governance, management is management, and every organization must clearly distinguish between them if it wants . . . to achieve the institution’s mission.”⁶ In public education, the mission *should* be simple: to maximize student learning. Too often, however, boards wade into stakeholder politics by bypassing or blaming their superintendent when that superintendent makes unpopular decisions that are necessary to improve student learning. The contentious issues of closing low-performing schools or removing ineffective educators are a

case in point. In portfolio districts such as New Orleans, for example, the governance model succeeded there by empowering management to make critical decisions regarding school reauthorizations and/or renewals without board members' meddling. But over time, even there, political pressure has slowly led lawmakers to reempower school board members to overturn these decisions.⁷

"Establishing a clear and focused mission, and using it as the discipline to decide what to do and what not to do, is the most important function of governance," explain Ray Fisman and colleagues.⁸ Applying this logic to public education, school boards would resist undercutting their superintendents' autonomy to lead, simply to appease stakeholders. As governance coach and former school board member A. J. Crabill observes, boards are routinely pressured by constituents who plead with them to intervene over matters that are "transactional and episodic," but as governing entities, boards are supposed to "render owner service and support whereas the superintendent is supposed to focus on customer service issues."⁹ In other words, boards should empower superintendents to make these decisions and resist the temptation to deviate from the district's core mission. With mission-driven governance, Fisman and his coauthors explain, "every decision an organization makes should be completely aligned with its mission—what we call True North—and no decision should be made that deviates from this direction."¹⁰ While he concedes that this is a high bar, it is necessary because "activities that deviate from True North also tend to create their own *special interest* constituencies whose goals are [not] aligned . . . with the mission of the organization."¹¹ Most seasoned school reformers will recognize these troubling dynamics. Stakeholder politics rears its ugly head when weak-willed boards cower to the political demands of adult stakeholders. Having a clearly articulated mission grounded in student achievement and then respecting the line between governance and management would go a long way toward creating the macro-level conditions for districts to truly prioritize student learning.

LESSON ON LEADERSHIP AND CONTINUITY

Michelle Rhee. Joel Klein. Geoffrey Canada. Eva Moskowitz. Jaime Escalante. Education reformers have long been enamored with dynamic leaders and educators who do extraordinary things. An entire era of reform was anchored by a documentary titled *Waiting for "Superman."* But public education cannot wait for a handful of extraordinary individuals to single-handedly compel schools to adopt an unrelenting focus on student achievement. Nor would such an approach work in the long run.

Decades of research in leadership outside of education show that individual leaders are *not* the sine qua non that sustains high levels of organizational performance.¹² Indeed, the external constraints that surround teams, firms, and schools are far more impactful than generational leaders with dynamic personalities. Although an important recent study by economist Sam Stemper finds that superintendent quality does boost student achievement, the sizes of the effect are, on average, relatively modest.¹³ Notably, environmental constraints shape the impact of leader quality on school performance. Specifically, Stemper observes that

“top management matters most in districts where managerial flexibility is ex-ante largest: smaller districts and districts with weaker teachers unions.”¹⁴

None of this is to say that school systems should shy away from choosing dynamic leaders. But often, the most important thing that leaders can do is to use flexibility that exists but is not used because of customary practices or political pushback. For example, in an early study of collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) in big-city school districts in the 2000s, Frederick Hess and Coby Loup found that there is often more flexibility in CBAs than is commonly thought, but that few leaders take advantage of this flexibility to push the envelope on behalf of kids.¹⁵ As Loup told *Education Week*: “There seems to be a lot more latitude for the managerial side of school leadership than previously thought. . . . There should be some fairly thick-skinned, hard-knuckled principals out there willing to grab that authority and try some experiments.”¹⁶ Student-focused leadership that moves the needle for kids doesn’t seem to require the big-ticket items like huge spending increases, either. For example, Stemper’s superintendent analysis found that “effective superintendents do not change levels of district spending or staffing but instead make changes in school operations, increasing teacher turnover and reducing teacher absences.”¹⁷ In other words, these leaders focus on the human capital that supports teaching and learning.

Another overlooked element of the leadership puzzle is planning for continuity of the core mission—learning. We’ve long known that too many districts jump from reform fad to reform fad, inducing the “spinning wheels” phenomenon in many urban districts.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the lessons of effective portfolio district reform is the ability of boards and system leaders to quietly plan for succession that exhibits fidelity to the reform mission. In reflecting on the successes and shortcomings of the portfolio model reforms that swept across myriad urban districts in the 2010s, Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim note the imperative of lining up leader succession plans: “Reform leaders . . . need their own succession strategies. In the portfolio strategy cities that made the most progress, the original leaders left after some time but were succeeded by others who understood the initiative and continued moving it along.”¹⁹

LESSON FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE SCHOOLS

Portfolio districts aren’t the only systems to focus less on celebrity reformers and more on quiet, sustained leadership in the support of academic coherence. The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools offer an excellent example on this front.

DoDEA enrolls nearly seventy thousand students across 160 schools all over the world—from Germany to Japan to North Carolina. As Brown University political scientist Kenneth Wong notes, this comes with serious challenges: “Geographically dispersed campuses—across nations, cultures, and time zones—are vulnerable to organizational fragmentation and disjointedness in policy implementation.”²⁰ Yet under the steady ten-year leadership tenure of DoDEA’s superintendent equivalent, Tom Brady, the system went all in on common and coherent academic standards, which, according to Wong (and National Assessment of Educational

Progress [NAEP] data showing no pandemic learning loss), led to “increased coherence in [DoDEA’s] academic standards and a long-term investment in improving instruction.”²¹

An internal review commissioned by DoDEA found that before these organizational reforms, like a dysfunctional school board or a fragmented state education agency, “headquarters was overly involved in day-to-day operations, at the expense of focusing on policy and standards. DoDEA’s academic standards, curriculum, and assessment were weakly aligned both across and within regions, professional development opportunities were lacking, and there was limited organizational accountability and collective ownership.”²² If this sounds a lot like an earlier theme (governance is governance and management is management), anyone who thought so would be correct.

In response, Wong tells how Brady restructured the entire system, making it more coherent, while at the same time putting an unrelenting focus on more-aligned instruction: adopting so-named College and Career Ready Standards, with an early focus on math instruction. What does this all add up to? *Academic coherence*. In a report on Brady’s accomplishments before stepping down earlier this year, we learn a remarkable fact: “An email that [Brady] received from a [DoDEA] teacher in Bavaria underscores [something] Brady said he’s been striving for since 2016, when DoDEA began a phased, yearslong approach to implementing new standards. The teacher said one of her students ‘just came in from Okinawa, and I want to let you know that we’re within two pages of the science notebook’ from the previous school.”²³ In other words, a student moving from Japan to Germany is more likely to have an easier academic transition in DoDEA than one moving from Chicago to Milwaukee. Traditional public K-12 schools can and should do better on this score.

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

There are also lessons from the pandemic that abound concerning what it means to make student achievement a school system’s North Star. For example, researchers at the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford found that the charter sector often displayed more dynamism and a willingness to prioritize academics during its transition to remote education at the outset of the pandemic.²⁴ Since the CREDO study, surveys by the RAND research organization have shown that charter management organization (CMO) leaders were more willing to adapt in ways that prioritized core academic subjects and student performance. In my own analysis of the RAND survey data, for example, I found that CMOs were four times as likely to eliminate noncore courses to focus on core academic subjects such as math and English language arts (ELA). They were also three times more likely to report adding instructional minutes in these vital subjects.²⁵ Indeed, these same RAND surveys showed that CMOs were more likely to shorten the school day, but they were laser-like in their focus on student academic outcomes in core subjects. When we think about learning loss and efforts at learning recovery, this willingness to put an intensive focus on student outcomes on core subjects recalls an old adage attributed to Peter Drucker: “What gets measured, gets managed.”²⁶

If public school systems are to prioritize achievement, they cannot simply be compliance oriented when it comes to testing and accountability; they must embrace student academic outcomes, making them central to their messaging and self-evaluation. This happens all too rarely. Especially in recent years and in the aftermath of the pandemic, we've seen establishment leaders and traditional systems downplay achievement outcomes and standardized testing. As Richard Elmore noted in an old *Harvard Business Review* essay from the mid aughts: "The public education sector has long had a culture that values effort more than results."²⁷

Alarming, though, even after significant pandemic learning loss, we see the same attitude in much of public education today. In the country's fourth-largest public school system (Chicago Public Schools), for example, the mayor there recently stated, "I personally don't give a lot of attention to grades. . . . My responsibility is not merely to just grade the system but to fund the system. That's how I am ultimately going to grade whether our public school system is working—based upon the investments we make."²⁸

Here, outstanding CMOs can offer traditional districts a lesson on what it means to prioritize academic outcomes over other concerns. The best CMOs foster a culture of high expectations and relentlessly focus on quality instruction. These attributes—not school "wraparound services" or ancillary investments—are what have enabled these charter schools in New York and Boston to transform the lives of children. Unfortunately, today, the drive for spending resources on building "community schools" to address non-academic concerns has proliferated.

Yet the lesson from decades of research in the charter sector appears to be lost in this effort to move away from high expectations and a narrow focus on student academic outcomes. As economists Roland Fryer and Will Dobbie found in their study of Harlem Success Academy charter schools, it was not wraparound services that moved the needle with these disadvantaged kids; it was access to these academics-first charter schools themselves.²⁹ In Boston, for example, a charter sector that is well known for beating the odds and changing life outcomes for kids, qualitative research has concluded that these "beat the odds" dynamics are fostered by a trio of "high expectations for student outcome as measured by college completion; safe and orderly learning environment; and an all-school adherence to leadership's vision in the context of the school's mission."³⁰ Unfortunately, today, even some in the charter sector appear to have been seduced into downplaying the emphasis on "no excuses" academic approaches that led to their ascendance.³¹

Relatedly, schools need to explain why academic metrics matter to families in a way that they can understand and in ways that matter to them. Even if the traditional sector cannot perfectly emulate the "no excuses" sector, they can learn from prior efforts in portfolio districts that have sought to explain to families why these learning metrics matter, in ways that are understandable and aligned with the future of their children. Hill and Jochim explain it thus:

In New York City district officials under the leadership of Shael Polakow-Suransky . . . gave parents evidence about how test scores in third grade correlated with high school

course taking and graduation, and how many students were at risk of not finishing high school. In Spring Branch Texas Independent School District (SISD), superintendent Duncan Klussman [used] data to show students were struggling to achieve success after high school and that more needed to be done to address persistent achievement gaps between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers.³²

The simple point to be made is that system and building leaders cannot shy away from disappointing outcomes. Instead, they need to build political support (especially from parents) by helping them understand why poor scores matter and how improvement in these metrics can change the trajectory of their kids' life outcomes.

There are also important lessons to be learned from how Catholic and other modestly funded religious schools operated during the pandemic. These schools were not resource advantaged. Many were in buildings that were much older than those of their public school peers. Nonetheless, because student academic learning was their core mission, Catholic leaders made it a nonnegotiable to offer in-person learning to all students when school resumed in the fall of 2020. Public school leaders even acknowledge that Catholic success was not primarily about resource advantages. In an original survey of school board members fielded in 2023, I found that nine out of ten board members agreed that funding and facilities were *not* what enabled Catholic schools to bring kids back for in-person education that mitigated learning loss.³³ Instead, board members agreed that these schools were more likely to prioritize responsiveness to families and to keep bureaucratic red tape to a minimum. My own qualitative research dovetails with this finding. In a series of interviews with private religious school leaders in New York City, my research assistant heard time and again how remote learning wouldn't suffice because it wasn't possible to carry out the mission required of "Catholic education" behind a computer screen. In one memorable example, a school leader at a K-8 parish school in the city explained that her team "knocked down walls" to make in-person learning happen so that they could live up to their mission of prioritizing the needs of their students:

I walked in and I said [to our head priest], we have to get all of our kids [back to school] because they cannot stay in isolation. [Remote learning] wasn't a substitute for in person, for the social, for the emotional, for the academic, for the spiritual. So [leadership] made the decision that we were going to open up. We were going to do whatever to try and get as many students as possible back into the building. . . . I went to the building in July . . . and we surveyed the building, and we literally knocked down walls to create space.³⁴

The "no excuses" charter sector offers a related lesson about how maintaining fidelity to a student achievement-focused mission can sometimes require *doing less* overall. Rice University Business School professor Vikas Mittal made this observation to Rick Hess in his book *Cage-Busting Leadership*:

With charter schools like YES and KIPP, it's not just about an information dump. Their parents have a much better sense of what it is that the school stands for. . . . Businesses know [what they stand for] and everything is designed to accomplish that objective. KIPP

and YES’s positioning is designed around getting students to college—that means they don’t do other things. They don’t promise the best football team. The district schools try to be everything to everybody; in the process, they’re nothing to anyone.³⁵

EMBRACING SECTOR AGNOSTICISM

Finally, policymakers and system leaders can demonstrate a true commitment to making student achievement their North Star by embracing sector agnosticism in education delivery. This shift in mind-set would require political authorities (judges or elected officials) along with system and school leaders (superintendents and educators) to jettison the narrow existing definition of “public education” that had too often focused on adult concerns with procedural rules and oversight mechanisms and move to an expansive one that cares solely about providing effective teaching and learning opportunities for kids.³⁶

While the portfolio model and the charter/CMO sector are best known for advancing this approach, other examples abound. In Colorado Springs, Colorado, Ascend College Prep partnered with faculty at the nearby Air Force Academy to educate high school juniors and seniors, providing a low-cost way for these students to get college credit while learning from talented university faculty. The school’s ability to evolve from a microschool to an actual public high school of choice was facilitated by an old (but little-known) law allowing multiple school districts to incorporate Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). Though BOCES themselves are not unique to Colorado, until recently an unpublicized provision in the law (dating to the 1960s) allowed Colorado BOCES such as Education reEnvisioned (ERBOCES), the sponsor of Ascend, to establish schools with no geographic boundaries. However, when a traditional public district (Colorado Springs School District 11) objected to ERBOCES establishing a school within District 11’s geographic boundaries, the state supreme court intervened and ended this potentially promising authorizing practice.³⁷ While the ruling is a clear setback for advocates of sector agnosticism, one of the attorneys who has helped ERBOCES along the way remains undeterred, telling me this through personal communication:

The value of our model is that we have no built-in constituency and we have to acquire customers. No child is stuck in our system or trapped in our schools. While our board and leadership are talented and ideologically aligned, the framework itself is an intrinsic motivator. If we don’t create and operate winsome programs, we have no student body. At ERBOCES, we serve a multitude of different demographics and are ok with experimentation and even some failures. We are content to have a school or program stretch and try something completely new and this is how reform and improvement can be realized in a very material way.³⁸

National Parents Union president Keri Rodrigues makes a compelling case for sector agnosticism in her own right:

Parents don’t care about governance models. We are here for outcomes. And the outcome we are looking for is economic mobility for our children. We don’t care if you call it

a district school, a charter school, or Mickey Mouse Clubhouse. When the kids leave, we want to know that they are adequately prepared to access the jobs in the economy of the future, because we want our kids to have an easier life than we did.³⁹

Most of the insights and examples offered in this essay would require changes in governance at the state or district level. Moreover, even if states granted additional statutory flexibility in, say, promoting sector agnosticism, political pushback would surely ensue. What can be done to head off these problems?

First, policymakers could improve on existing strategies around governance reform (e.g., state takeover) to ensure greater community (especially parent) stakeholder involvement in turn-around efforts that involve closures or staff changes. Sketching what that looks like is beyond the scope of this short essay, but some promising ideas around the use of performance contracts overseen by community stakeholders can be found in the report of the Hoover Institution's Education Futures Council, *Ours to Solve, Once—and for All*.

Second, and more immediately, reformers would do well to draw on the lessons of portfolio model veterans Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim. In their latest book, *Making Politics Work*, the duo caution that

all reform initiatives . . . face a fundamental challenge: benefits take a long time to realize and are often too small initially to support favorable coalition building. . . . [Even so,] leaders can [better] leverage politics to their advantage by carefully managing the allocation of benefits and burdens, avoiding implementation mistakes that unnecessarily generate harm, building new institutions that can defend reform progress, and communicating evidence about reform effectiveness to counter misinformation.⁴⁰

Finally, state policymakers must boldly take ownership over the right of children to receive a high-quality education when local districts refuse to prioritize student learning in key decisions. For example, just as state governments routinely use their authority to push back on NIMBYism in zoning and land-use debates to require more and more affordable housing supply, state leaders should similarly use their legal authority to ensure that districts prioritize student achievement when making difficult rightsizing or building closure decisions.⁴¹ There is a clear opportunity here to put students first given the current climate of pandemic disenrollment paired with longer-term, demographic-induced enrollment losses, especially in big-city districts. While the devil is surely in the details and states lack the knowledge and capacity to themselves designate specific buildings for closure, neither should localities be left to their own devices to make these decisions without demonstrating how they are being made with student learning as the key criterion. The bottom line: as districts around the country grapple with rightsizing, states must ensure that districts demonstrate that these decisions are based on student academic learning rather than the sort of adult political considerations that too often drive them.⁴²

NOTES

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Henderson Lewis, and Avis Williams. In Denver Michael Bennet picked his own successor, Tom Boasberg. In New York City, Joel Klein's initial succession strategy (to Cathie Black) failed quickly, but then Dennis Walcott, a close associate of Klein and Mayor Bloomberg, became chancellor. The portfolio strategy has stalled in Denver and New York due to changes in city elections, not because the reform strategy failed to renew its leadership."

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