

Transforming What's Possible in Public Education



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For decades, we Americans have deluded ourselves that we are doing a good job of teaching our children.

The education establishment has spun out the narrative that our best schools are just fine, our worst schools are intractable problems with no solutions, and accountability is unnecessary — and the public has believed it. We've accepted mediocre results and decided they're good enough. We've settled.

But the truth is, very few of our students are actually getting a high-quality education. The system might work for affluent families in particular suburbs, but the majority of our kids are being left behind. Just half of white students nationwide are proficient in reading and math. By what standard is that okay? For African-American kids, the proficiency rates are just a fraction of those dismal results.

Americans can do better than this. The future of our children and of our country's economic competitiveness depends on a radical reimagining of how we educate our children. It demands recognizing the potential in every child and committing ourselves to giving all children the knowledge and skills necessary to reach that potential. It requires breaking through the political hurdles that put the interests of adults ahead of the interests of kids.

And it necessitates a dramatic change in the mindset that closes off possibility through low expectations — particularly for children of color living in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

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Of course, it's much harder to teach kids who come from poverty, who don't have books and other resources to prepare them for school. But that means adults must work harder — and not give up on kids.

The traditional approach in urban districts with large populations of needy families is to make excuses for low student achievement because the students are poor, while blaming parents for their children's academic failures. But when parents have other school options, they take them. They know what's best for their children, and they choose it.

That's why the school choice movement has surged so far, so fast. In just the last few decades, alternatives to traditional district schools have cropped up all over the country, disrupting the status quo and bringing educational excellence to communities long ignored.

As one example, the charter school sector has grown more than fourfold since 1999, with 6,500 public charter schools educating 2.5 million students in 2014. In some of those schools, low-income black and Latino children are outperforming peers from the most affluent school districts and suburbs. With clear standards and excellent teaching, children written off by the traditional public schools are thriving.

The challenge now is to figure out how to deliver that caliber of education on a much larger scale. It has been parents, not bureaucratic monopolies, that have led the charge for innovation and creativity, that have broken down traditional geographic and academic boundaries, and that have bolstered student achievement by demanding that their children's interests come first.

That's why I believe the possibility for the greatest systemic change lies with alternatives to traditional public schools, whether it is school voucher programs, parochial schools or public charter schools. In less than 25 years, the school choice movement has caused a revolution in our education system, fostering innovation and creativity, and making it possible for all children to succeed.

Imagine what we could do in the next 25 years, in the next 50 years. We can give all families a variety of schools to choose from, each with high academic standards and a rigorous curriculum, creating opportunity where now there is none, and raising the bar in communities that are only beginning to discover that they don't have to settle for good enough.

4x

Charter school sector has grown since 1999

2.5

Million students educated in 6,500 charter schools in 2014

