

Speech to Software and Information Industry Summit
By
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"What Really Impacts Our Nation's Urban Schools?"

Thank you for that nice introduction, Steve. It is nice to see so many friends here. And thank you for the invitation to address you. I do not accept many invitations to give speeches, but I thought this was an important one to do.

I'd like to take about 20 minutes or so this morning and frame some of the issues facing urban education today and talk about what impacts progress in our urban schools.

I'd also like to devote some time to describing what we need from you, but I hope you won't be disappointed when I don't have a lot of advice about how to boost your quarterly profits.

Finally, I would like to talk about what we need from the country.

I have also been given the task this morning of talking about the role of federal programs, innovation, and educational technology in the nation's large urban school districts. The challenges we face. The impact of key education policies and legislation. And the products we need.

It may have occurred to you that I won't be able to get around to much more than bits and pieces of each of these things in 20 minutes, but I will be happy to take your questions and comments after my initial remarks.

Let me begin with a bit of sports history. In 1962, as some of you might remember, after the New York Mets lost a record 120 games in the franchise's first year—Casey Stengel, the legendary manager, walked into the locker room and said, "Fellas, I don't want you boys to feel bad about this. It's been a team effort. No one or two of you guys could have done all this by yourselves."

Urban superintendents sometimes tell each other this story when they are about to be fired as a reminder that they didn't screw up the schools all by themselves.

I am repeating the story for you today to make the point that urban schools cannot succeed by themselves. And we will not fail by ourselves. It will be a team effort no matter which way we go. But to succeed, we will surely need your help.

I do not have to tell anyone in this room that urban public education is under more pressure to improve than any other institution—public or private—in the country.

We are being told to produce results or get out of the way. We are being told to improve or see the public go somewhere else. We are being told to be accountable for what we do or let some one else do it.

Some of the criticism is justified. Some of it is not. Either way, we are being challenged in the court of public opinion and by history to improve student achievement to levels that no nation has ever asked of its schools.

Many groups might have folded under the pressure, giving up in the face of mounting criticism. Instead, urban school systems across the country are rising to the occasion. We are improving instruction. We are strengthening our operations. And we are trying to re-engage our communities and boost their confidence in what we do.

The trend lines suggest that we are on the right track, even if our communities are not entirely satisfied with where we are or how fast we are moving.

Last month, we published the eighth edition of our “Beating the Odds” series. I suspect that many of you look at these data. The report presents an annual look at student achievement on state assessments, and does so city-by-city. It also breaks the scores down by race, language proficiency, and poverty status.

The report shows promising improvements in reading and math scores for students in our Great City Schools, particularly at the elementary school level.

The proportion of Great City School fourth-graders reading at or above proficiency levels has increased by 9 percentage points over the last five years; and the proportion doing math at the proficient level jumped by 14 percentage points over the same period.

These trend lines are corroborated by NAEP reading and math results on the Trial Urban District Assessment—something our organization initiated in the fall of 2000.

These NAEP data show that the nation’s large central city school districts boosted math performance at both the fourth and eighth grade levels by statistically significant margins over the last five years. And reading gains at the fourth grade level have been statistically significant, although educationally modest.

In other words, both NAEP and state data show that students in our urban school districts are improving—and improving at rates that outstrip gains nationally and in the individual states where the cities are located. We are surely moving in the right direction.

All in all, I would much rather have the country asking about whether we are improving fast enough than having it ask whether we are capable of improvement at all—as it once did.

Still, we know that we have a long way to go and that our gains represent the most tentative foothold on the rocky shoals of school reform. We are not Pollyannaish about our improvements. We know that we are behind. We know that our achievement gaps are wide, although if you look at the data carefully, you will see that our gaps are about the same as those seen nationwide—suggesting that we have a national issue here, not just an urban one.

People often ask me whether or not I am optimistic about urban education. I have to say that I am. And one of the chief reasons I'm hopeful about our prospects is not because we are getting gains but because we are figuring out why we are getting them and what it might take to accelerate them.

Several years ago, the Council released a groundbreaking report called *Foundations for Success*. The report compared the instructional practices of some of our fastest-improving urban districts with the instructional practices of some of our slowest.

It was one of the first real attempts by anyone to understand how reform is achieved at scale rather than in individual schools or pockets of schools. It began to show what really impacts urban schools.

What we found was that our faster-improving urban districts were often marked by—

- A strong political consensus among city leaders for reform that was acted on jointly by superintendents, school board members, and staff—and sustained over a reasonably long period.
- Credible, concrete, and measurable goal-setting at both the district and school levels that translated the political consensus into attainable targets.
- Strong accountability for results, starting with the superintendent and working down through the central office staff to at least the principal level.
- A common curriculum that was tied to high standards and rigorously applied at the classroom level.
- A cohesive professional development strategy tied directly to the implementation of the state's standards and the district's curriculum.
- A mechanism for monitoring the implementation of reforms at the school and classroom levels rather than assuming that they were trickling down from the central office.
- Assessments designed to catch kids before the end of the school year when it was too late, and data systems supple enough to allow school officials to decide where and how to intervene when schools and students were slipping behind.

- A defined strategy for focusing on the district’s lowest-performing schools and students.
- Finally, a clear and rational sequencing of reforms from the elementary level through the secondary.

There is a lot of detail underneath each of these themes, and none of them are particularly mystifying at this point—although they were just a few years ago. Many school districts have some of these markers—or at least say they do.

What was different in these faster-improving school districts was how seamlessly they integrated the reforms.

The faster-improving urban school districts built their reform agendas explicitly around student achievement; sustained that agenda over time; were systemic in the implementation of their reforms; consistent in their application; and relentless in their focus and evaluation.

Slower moving districts—by contrast—often were characterized by the opposite. Little political consensus for reform. Vague—rather than clear—goals. No accountability. Incoherent curriculum and professional development. Ineffective program implementation. Little classroom monitoring. Poor data systems. And weak interventions.

These slower-moving districts had instructional strategies that were less cohesive, more program-oriented, less data-driven, and less focused.

We have spent a great deal of time since we did that original study—Foundations for Success—working in our districts and schools with our Strategic Support Teams on the details underlying these broad themes. We have learned a great deal through that process.

We have learned that you couldn’t pick and choose among these reforms. You couldn’t separate one from the other. You had to do them all at once and you had to lock them together systemically in ways that fundamentally changed how a district operated. We have learned that—

- You couldn’t delegate your most important instructional and curriculum decisions to your schools and expect to get improvements across the board.
- We learned that you couldn’t hit your districtwide targets by having everybody aiming in different directions.
- We learned that innovation wasn’t always as important as implementation, but that both were often driven by capacity.

- And we learned that you couldn't buy reform off the shelf. There is no program or package these districts can buy from you or any grant they could receive that would improve instruction all by itself.

Now, there are still lots of things about what really impacts urban school improvement that we don't know.

- We don't know much about the relative importance of each reform component. We also don't know much about the role of technology in supporting or driving these broad strategies.
- We don't know whether it is the commonality of the curriculum—or its nature or its implementation—that really makes the difference—although all this matters to some extent.
- We also aren't clear about what it takes to sustain our gains.
- And we are not sure what the best strategies are for improving achievement at the secondary level.

Finally, there is a new theory of action emerging from cities like New York, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Baltimore. We don't know yet whether this new approach will trump the managed instructional approach I have just described.

In these cases, the districts are moving away from a more uniform and standardized curriculum and returning to a site-based approach—but they are pairing it with a new and more data-driven accountability system at the school and districts levels. Here the role of technology in managing the data systems that accountability depends on is obvious.

But the jury is still out on this new theory of action. It is not clear whether this new approach produces gains that are faster or slower than what we see with other strategies.

Ultimately, I suspect that what we are looking at is not a choice between two competing theories of action so much as we are looking at new ways to sequence those theories as capacity improves and achievement increases over time.

I'd be happy to talk more about this later if anyone is interested. But our vision of reform and improvement in urban education involves us continuously learning about what drives progress; thinking critically about the elements of that progress; and providing direct technical assistance to our membership on what it needs to get better performance based on that analysis.

As an organization, we work very hard on each of these components and are trying not just to represent our members like most associations do, but to improve them.

Now, what does all this have to do with federal legislation and educational technology—the other things that you have asked me to talk about.

Actually, I think some of the issues I've raised have a great deal to do with how we think about reauthorizing *No Child Left Behind*.

If accountability trumps everything else, then maybe Congress should stop trying to tell everyone what to do—and simply hold everybody responsible for the results they get.

It might be necessary, however, for Congress to define what accountability means when every state can define its own version of proficiency.

If accountability—on the other hand—needs to be paired with instructional strategies and the capacity to deliver them, then maybe Congress should devote more resources to enhancing capacity and conducting more research on what strategies work with which students.

If the sequencing of reforms means more than choosing between them, then maybe Congress should rethink NCLB's system of annually cascading sanctions.

I am puzzled by a lot when it comes to NCLB. But I am most troubled when Congress seems to legislate on the basis of some "reform theology" that asserts propositions about what really impacts schools whether or not these propositions meet the test of reality.

Someone is bound to remind me that the Council of the Great City Schools supported NCLB. We did—and we do.

When NCLB—the bill—was heading to the floors of both houses of Congress, we had a critical choice as an organization. We could support the bill because the public understood it to be about results and accountability for those results.

Or we could oppose it because we knew its internal operating gears were so badly calibrated that it would not work as advertised.

We chose to support NCLB because we thought it was important for the nation's urban public schools to be seen supporting better achievement and greater accountability for it. We deliberately chose the strategic over the tactical, the long-term over the short-run, and the high road over the low. And we would do it again if we had to for exactly the same reasons.

This is not to say that we don't see all the same problems that NCLB's toughest critics see. We do. The legislation has huge problems—problems that are producing serious unintended consequences.

It is my opinion—having gone through seven reauthorizations in my 31 years at the Council—that NCLB will need to move away from its compliance-oriented system of punishments and toward a more balanced set of incentives and sanctions if it is going to work right. That would probably mean less prescription and greater emphasis on instructional strategies, more carefully thought-out accountability, and more capacity-building.

It is also my opinion that the law needs to spend more time and attention to research on what works and what doesn't.

Many provisions in NCLB were drafted without any sense of what raises achievement or what the research says.

There is nothing in the provisions on highly qualified teachers, for instance, that has anything to do with quality teaching.

There is no connection in the law between supplemental services and how tutoring works most effectively.

There is no tie between the assessment provisions for English language learners and what the research says about how long it takes to learn a language.

And there is not really much relationship between how the federal government thinks of accountability and what the research says motivates human behavior.

In some ways, Washington has become an “evidence-free zone.” I would much rather the federal government spends some of its resources on good research than pretending that it already knows what works and then making everyone live by its suppositions.

There are a lot of things we just don't know.

We could use some help figuring out what makes an effective teacher effective, for instance. What distinguishes the good ones from the bad ones? How can we spot them beforehand? How do we make them all more effective after the five year slump?

We also need some help figuring out the best instructional strategies for English language learners. What are the best vocabulary and academic vocabulary techniques with this group? What do we do with over-age ELLS?

We need help figuring out the appropriate blend of structural and academic reforms in our high schools. How do we raise the rigor of our coursework without triggering more dropouts?

What do we do with our lowest performing schools? What are the most effective and sustainable restructuring strategies?

And how do we make technological innovation more effective?

If we had answers to these and other questions, it would help us immensely.

All of this brings me to you and what we need. I also suspect you need some things from us—and I would very much like to hear what those are.

If I were to give you my top ten list of things urban schools need from the educational technology industry, it would be these—(in no particular order)

- (1) We need tools to help us build academic vocabulary, understanding, problem-solving and comprehension skills in our students rather than programs that rely on repetition and practice.
- (2) We need programs to help us with our English language learners and students with disabilities. You might want to think about using speech recognition software to build products with these students in mind.
- (3) We also need more virtual programs that could allow students to simulate science experiments or other inquiry-based experiences.
- (4) We need tools and programs that allow more group-work and cooperative learning rather than so much solo activity.
- (5) We need you to be clear about what your programs can do and what they can't do.
- (6) We need you to tell us the degree of alignment between your products and the state standards. Not just where they are aligned but where they are not. Not just that they are topically aligned but at what depth of rigor.
- (7) We need you to stick with us through thick and thin. I know that urban schools are difficult to work with. They are difficult for us to work with. But companies that do well with us are the ones who are committed enough to our overall mission that they work through the headaches over a sustained period. Relationships mean everything here.
- (8) We need you to follow-up with us to see that your programs are being implemented correctly. We all know numerous examples when programs prove to be ineffective because we have implemented them poorly or when we use them as substitutes for good teaching. It would also be helpful if you just built in professional development into the price of your products, so we didn't have the option not to buy it.

- (9) We need you to resist customizing or tailoring programs for us when a subsequent upgrade to that technology will require that it be customized as well.
- (10) We need help with our assessment and data systems. These are areas of huge and very public risk for us. Many of our benchmark assessments have no predictive validity and weren't designed to provide it—but we need it. In addition, many of our dashboard systems lack any grounding in good research and little rationale for why one set of data are any better than any other set. Finally, we need better longitudinal and tracking software that flags students who are falling behind, have attendance problems, or are about to dropout.

I'll throw in a bonus item as well—

- (11) We need you not to sell us stuff when we want to use it for an age group or a purpose for which it was not designed—even when we beg to buy it.

In other words, we need products that help us at both the strategic and systems level and products that help us at the tactical and classroom level.

When all is said and done, however, I suspect your biggest impact is at the systems level where it is devoted to data systems, but I may be wrong. Regardless, I suspect that the ultimate success will have more to do with us than.

I would like to start wrapping this up with a few words about what we need from the nation, for it's not always clear to me that the country really wants us to succeed.

Today, some 54 years after the Brown decision, more than two-thirds of the nation's urban students attend a school whose expenditure per pupil is below statewide averages.

Our urban school districts are being asked to overcome the many challenges we face on a playing field that is distinctly uneven.

This playing field, of course, is defined around ideas about who is valuable in this society and who is not. Who we have high hopes for and for whom we have no hopes at all. Who we have high standards for and for whom we hold no great expectations.

A typical child in suburban Philadelphia, for instance, will have \$50,000 more invested in his or her education between the time that child is born and the time that child graduates from high school than the average child in the Philadelphia Public Schools.

That difference is equivalent to four extra years of schooling for the suburban student.

A nation as tolerant as America is of such inequities shouldn't be surprised that we have achievement gaps or high dropout rates.

Now, there is often someone around who says that there is no relationship between money and results in education. . . . Frankly, I don't have much patience with that argument. We all know that when it comes to education—and just about everything else—money matters.

If money didn't matter, we wouldn't have so many politicians running around trying to raise it; so many companies trying to make it; or so many lobbyists trying to steal it.

We are the richest and most powerful nation on the face of the Earth and we act as if we are flat broke when the subject turns to urban children, to children of color.

There was a time when America had the will to put its money where its mouth is. In 1947, at the urging of Secretary of State George Marshall, Congress approved \$13 billion—more than \$100 billion in today's terms—to rebuild the cities in 15 European countries.

But we didn't stop there when the program ended in 1951. We followed that \$100 billion investment with literally trillions of dollars to protect our initial down payment and to fight and win the Cold War.

It was worth it. The investment paid huge dividends. Europe got stronger and so did we. But the effort came at a price to America in that we delayed doing for our own cities and schools what we had done for Europe's.

The irony now is that we compare the academic performance of our own children unfavorably with children in nearly every European country that we helped.

We ought to be able to do for the kids and schools in Atlanta what we did in 1947 for Alsace; for Baltimore what we did for Berlin; for Cleveland what we did for Cologne; for Detroit what we did for Dunkirk.

Surely, we ought to be able to do for our children in Thurgood Marshall's name what we did for Europe's children in George Marshall's name over 60 years ago.

Surely, we ought to be able to do a Thurgood Marshall plan for America's urban schoolchildren.

In one of his spot-on opinions, Thurgood Marshall once wrote, "The only way to get equality is for two people to get the same thing at the same time at the same place."

Well, what holds for people holds for schools and kids. But, I would go Marshall one better in asserting that our kids often deserve more just to level the playing field, for

our job is not simply to reflect and perpetuate the nation's inequities. Our job is to overcome these inequities, and our kids often need more resources to get that job done.

The great civil rights battles that Marshall waged were not fought over access to mediocrity; they were fought over access to excellence. And resources matter in this fight.

Now, when I started my remarks, I told you the story about Casey Stengel and the 1962 Mets. As some of you might remember, those same Mets went on to win the 1969 World Series.

Urban schools are not in first place right now, but one day soon—with your collaboration and support—we will be champions too.

No goal could be more important. No endeavor could be more critical. And no job could be more worth doing.

I know that you think so too.

Thank you.