

Choice Works: Educating our way to self-sufficiency

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Why improving education outcomes is important. What is at stake.

Countries like the United States and Canada have fueled the global economy for much of the last century but our dominance in the future is not guaranteed. The world we live in today is more interconnected, more interdependent and much more technologically advanced than the one we grew up in. Competition has gone global and knowledge is the hot commodity. Developing countries – like China and India – are gaining ground in the race for knowledge and challenging our long-term ability to attract the investment that creates jobs and wealth.

In short, we are in an educational arms race and we are at risk of falling behind other countries. North America is not producing enough engineers, innovators and knowledge based workers, largely because students are not learning the

skills in school to pursue these careers. Canada does better on the international tests but there should be no complacency since the stakes are so high.

This situation will not create a pipeline for prosperity. The countries which prepare their students to succeed in the increasingly competitive and dynamic world workplace will lead the world. The ones that don't will work for them. Unlike a conventional arms race, where there could be a winner and loser, in this race, the world wins if America and Canada are successful.

To put this in more practical terms, a high school dropout will earn \$17,000; a high school graduate will earn \$27,000 and a college graduate will earn \$53,000. With each passing year, the gap based on educational attainment grows.

So for a brief moment, let's get beyond the standard debate concerning education, which is an argument about whether our schools are good or bad or whether it is fair for school officials to be responsible for student learning given the fact that students arrive with different family backgrounds and different learning aptitudes. Let us assume that in order to create sustainable communities and competitive countries, our schools have to get better.

How should we do it?

I have five suggestions, implemented together, that will give the communities that embrace them a leg up.

They are higher and more rigorous standards of learning, robust accountability, a healthy injection of competition through school choice, rewarding teacher effectiveness and an embrace of technology.

Rigorous Academic Standards

Rigorous academic standards are the foundation of a quality education. Academic standards define *what* students are expected to learn in each grade.

My experience with developing standards is that educators focus on their niche and demand their inclusion. The resulting compromise has created a system of too many standards that are a mile wide and an inch deep; making it harder for teachers to effectively teach to all of them.

In the United States, the good news is that during the last two years, 48 states got together to develop a set of common core standards for language arts and math with the ultimate goal that if students

graduate from high school, they will be truly college and career-ready.

To achieve that important goal, standards must be rigorous and ambitious. Sadly, only about one-third of US students are college or career-ready when they graduate from high school. Less than half of the U.S. states require a math course beyond Algebra I. Just 14 states require Biology. Either States' don't require challenging courses or the content of these courses aren't rigorous enough. Rigorous standards assessed accurately will lay out that fact for all to see.

In addition to more rigour and higher, standards should be fewer and moms and dads need to understand them and fight for them when the efforts begin to dilute, abandon or diffuse, which always happens.

Standards are the important first step. Next must come assessments that accurately reflect how students are faring. Ideally, the assessments would be given intermittently during the school year to identify and reverse failure early. The final annual assessment should be given nearer the end of the year to accurately measure whether students achieved a year's worth of knowledge in a year's time.

Robust Accountability

Accountability matters in every aspect of life. Good parenting requires accountability. Successful businesses have strong accountability. Successful institutions of all stripes embrace accountability. Schools should be no exception.

In Florida, since 1999, we have graded schools A-F based 100 percent on student learning. Let me tell you, no one – and I mean no one – has to explain the

difference between an A school and an F school. New York City now has the same A-F letter scale. Just this year, Indiana and Arizona also adopted the policy.

When we first graded schools, we had more Ds and Fs than As and Bs. Today, the number of As and Bs has quadrupled and Ds and Fs have plummeted. And during the same timeframe, we have raised the bar multiple times.

When schools organized themselves around the singular goal of learning – which meant earning an A or improving a grade – students achievement went up. Under this system of accountability as measured by the NAEP or the Nation's Report Card, Florida's fourth graders went from 29th out of 31 states in reading to 6th best out of 50. Similar gains have been achieved in eighth grade.

And the greatest gains come from minority and poor students. Florida is one of just a handful of states to measurably narrow the achievement gap for minority and poor students. In fact, our Hispanic students perform as well or better than the average student in 31 states.

Florida's accountability system uses both a carrot and a stick. Our experience is that you need both.

Schools who earn an A or improve a letter grade earn \$75 per student to use how they want. More than one billion dollars have been awarded during the last decade and 85 percent of the money went to bonuses for teachers and staff.

As a stick, Florida offers an array of alternatives to traditional public schools. While some call this a consequence, most families consider choices an opportunity or even a lifeline to a better education and a better life.

The fact that there are consequences creates an environment where new strategies naturally are applied. Reading coaches in schools teaching all teachers how to teach reading is an example. Ending social promotion in the third grade so when students start to read to learn in fourth grade, more of them actually know how to read. More mentoring programs to assist teachers with the hardest to teach students. And on and on it goes because a good accountability system makes every child important for the school's success.

As you have learned through the good work of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, disclosing results identifies the great work being done with like-kind students and points out where improvement is necessary.

Simply put, there are no more excuses!

School Choice

In today's world, we have unprecedented choices in nearly every area of our lives – where we live, where we shop, what we drive. In every area except what could be the most important – that is in education.

Knowing what we know – that a quality education is the proven path to prosperity – how can we deny a child that lifeline to a better living and a more secure financial future? How can we doom a child to a school that we know will not prepare them for success in life?

It is time to give parents a choice and a voice in where their children go to school, arming them with quality information and requiring their engagement.

Call it a scholarship, call it a grant, call it a voucher, call it whatever you want.

Florida provides the greatest array of choices to parents. Our pre-k program is the largest voucher program in the United States with over 140,000 four year olds going to private schools with public money. We have the largest corporate tax scholarship program, the largest number of students attending virtual schools, over a 137,000 students attending charter schools, the largest voucher program for students with disabilities and one of the largest dual enrollment programs in the country.

Research over the last decade has shown that Florida public schools have done better because of our array of school choice programs. Not surprisingly, competition improves all schools. In essence, school choice is like a catalytic converter accelerating the benefits of other education reform.

Along the way, some myths like school choice will only be taken advantage of by the wealthy; that public schools will be devastated financially; and that schools will be re-segregated have been shattered.

Teacher Effectiveness

Like you all, I believe all children can learn. Poverty, broken families, disabilities, and language barriers – all are challenges to learning. But all of these challenges can be overcome by effective teaching.

Research pioneered a decade ago found that students of the most effective teachers learn almost four times more than students of the least effective teachers and these effects can be seen for at least three years. Subsequent studies show that the impact of teacher effectiveness may persist even longer,

especially among young elementary students.

What makes an effective teacher?

First, great teachers have a bedrock belief that every student who walks into their classroom can learn. These teachers don't make excuses. Instead, they go to extraordinary lengths to overcome whatever obstacle stands in the way of their students' learning.

Second, great teachers create a safe and engaging environment for students to learn. That doesn't necessarily mean a neat and quiet classroom. Orderly chaos might be a better description! These teachers make school fun but meaningful.

Third, great teachers are both great learners and great leaders. A strong grasp of the subject matter and the ability to adapt instruction to meet the needs of each student makes these teachers – and their students – successful.

Finally, great teachers use data as a means to measure student learning and assess their own instruction. Great teachers focus on teaching the content in the standards.

To find and foster great teachers, we need to modernize the profession.

Teachers should be evaluated and compensated based on how much their students learn and teachers whose students learn more should earn more.

There should be differentiated pay to attract individuals from the private sector with the skills in high-demand subjects, such as math and science, those teaching positions should pay more.

Teaching in a high-poverty school is more challenging than teaching in an affluent

school. To attract great teachers to our toughest challenges, teachers who work in high-poverty schools should earn more. That's our best hope of closing the achievement gap.

Finally, in this competitive global economy, no one should have a lifetime guarantee of employment – and that includes teachers.

Technology

To really transform education, we need to embrace the fundamental concept that education should be custom-designed to maximize every child's God-given ability to learn.

How could we possibly do this for thousands or millions of students? We can do it, by harnessing technology to tailor lessons to each child's ability and learning style. This concept was only a dream a generation ago. Now it can be accomplished.

When you think about the possibilities, today's online courses are really just the beginning.

We have the ability to create the iTunes of the education world where teachers and students could access rich and rigorous content from different sources to create a learning experience that meets the individual needs of the students.

We know that students learn differently and at different paces. Yet, most schools teach students roughly the same.

If you walked into a classroom in Miami or I would venture to say, Halifax or Moncton, chances are it would look pretty much the same – students at desks with textbooks and pencils with a teacher in the front of the room. The only difference

might be that the chalkboard is now a whiteboard and a television or computer might sit in the corner of the room.

This is all the more extraordinary when compared to all of the changes that have occurred *outside* of school during the last 10, 20 or 30 years.

Imagine a repository of rich and rigorous content from multiple sources that could be accessed by teachers and students to build a personalized education plan. The potential for such a system is endless. Exercises and homework could be customized to a student's interests. Adaptive and customized learning already exists on a massive scale in the entertainment and job training fields. It should be expanded to our schools.

With a personalized education, more students would achieve.

Students would be able to learn at their own pace, spending more or less time on particular areas based on their ability. Likewise, once students mastered a skill, they could move on to the next challenge.

Transforming the "delivery system" would make some *existing* policies obsolete. In fact, some of the more contentious issues would become moot.

Class size would cease to be an issue. A student, armed with a computer, could learn from anywhere.

Learning at your own pace would end the need for social promotion. Students would move on when ready, not before.

More students could graduate high school with college credits and fewer students would be frustrated and feel compelled to drop out.

Providing the highest quality of instruction online could eliminate the disparity in instruction that currently exists in high-poverty or rural schools. Students would have access to the same curriculum and quality instruction that is available in the best schools.

Technology wouldn't replace the teacher but it would redefine their role. Lectures might be given online to thousands of students, while classroom teachers might become more like coaches or tutors available to provide one-on-one support, again based on whatever the student needed.

Funding could be based on completion or achievement, rather than attendance or seat-time. This expansion of virtual education would likely create the economies of scale to reduce costs, even as quality dramatically improves.

Conclusion

There are many who believe that the developed world is in decline.

The ageing of our populations, the entitlement time bomb that has not been dealt with, the emergence of new competitors without our legacy costs and the current economic downturn has created a cloud and more and more people wonder if will be able to compete.

We will be able to compete; we will be able to maintain and improve our standard of living; and we will not be in decline if we transform our education system. Advancing and implementing the blueprint advocated by the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies will help this region be sustainable over the long haul.

I hope you embrace it.



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