Change from Without: Lessons from Other Countries, Systems, and Sectors

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Change Alternatives

When Galileo first constructed a telescope and saw that Venus transited around the Sun and not vice versa, and it was concluded that this must also be true of the third planet from the Sun – the Earth – Europeans had to confront the idea that everything did not revolve around them.

Teachers can also only really learn once they get outside their own classrooms and connect with other teachers: when they can see beyond the immediate world that surrounds them. This is one of the essential principles behind professional learning communities. Likewise, schools can only really learn when they connect with other schools – including ones outside their own immediate districts. And the same is true of countries.

In the early twentieth century, educational ideas used to spread around the world freely and in many directions. This is when learning theory was inspired and influenced by European psychologists and philosophers like Piaget, Froebel, Montessori, Pestalozzi, and Vygotsky. Now, ideas circulate more among the globally dominant Anglo-American group of nations and then outwards to other countries through international lending and donor organizations such as the World Bank. Whereas the ideas that circulated almost a century ago were largely pedagogical and psychological ones that involved professional educators, today's globally circulating ideas in education are institutional and systemic and are more confined to politicians, bureaucrats, and their advisors – they are ideas about how to change education on a large scale across entire systems and countries in relation to particular visions of economic reform.

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The Anglo-Saxon Obsession

In one sense, these developments are a good thing. Especially in America, for too long, educational reform strategies had been circulated incestuously within districts, states, and the country at large. The source of inspiration might shift – from New York City to Cincinnati and Chicago and then to Boston or Denver – but ideas moved around mainly internally – recycling ideological obsessions with tested achievement targets, accountability requirements, greater independence for charters and pilots, and performance-related pay for teachers. All these have been locked within an economic ideology of market competition, measurement-driven performance, granular analysis of data on quality, and the exercise of accountability in relation to standards, targets and outcomes.

The ironic effect of contemporary international interest in large-scale reform, though, is that it has exposed how the countries and systems that have actually been most successful educationally and economically are the ones that provide greater flexibility and innovation in teaching and learning, that invest greater trust in their highly qualified teachers, that value curriculum breadth, and that do not try to orchestrate everything tightly from the top (Wei et al., 2009; McKinsey, 2007).

Most market-driven and individualistically oriented countries in the Anglo-American group of nations suffer from wide achievement gaps between children from poor and rich families respectively, rank poorly in early child-care provisions (except for New Zealand), score particularly badly in child well-being (the UK and U.S. ranking last or next to last out of 21 developed countries) (UNICEF, 2007), and register much higher rates of stress and mental illness, especially among the young, compared to more mainland European-style systems and economies (James, 2008)

By comparison, high-performing Singapore emphasizes "Teach Less, Learn More" and mandates 10% "white space" for teachers to bring individual initiative and creativity into their teaching. Finland – the world leader on results in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests of sophisticated, applied knowledge in mathematics, science, and literacy, as well as on international ratings of economic competitiveness – avoids national standardized tests altogether and reaches high levels of achievement by attracting highly qualified teachers with supportive working conditions, strong degrees of professional trust, and an inspiring mission of inclusion and creativity (Hargreaves, Halasz, & Pont, 2008). The Canadian province of Alberta, which tucks in just behind Finland in international PISA rankings, has secured its success, in part, by partnering with the teachers' union to develop a 9-year initiative in school-developed innovation (the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement) that involves 90% of the province's schools.

Among a number of emerging reviews of international practice (e.g. McKinsey, 2007), a state-of-the-art review for the U.S. National Staff Development Council of teacher education and professional development practices in the highest-performing countries reveals that high performance is associated with highly qualified teachers being accorded wide professional flexibility for curriculum and pedagogical decisions within broad boundaries (rather than prescribed and standardized

requirements) in countries and systems where teachers are well supported in their schools and accorded considerable public and political respect (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

What can be learned from international comparative examples such as these, and just as importantly, how can this learning be organized most effectively? What can we take from other effective systems, and how can we learn from the best of them?

Change Travel

Reform is like ripe fruit. It does not usually travel well. In a classic set of studies, Mary K. Stein and her colleagues (Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2004) have examined the destinations and destinies of successful reforms originally designed for New York District 2 in the 1990s. With a tight and detailed design focused on specified literacy instruction, learner-centered leadership, intensive coaching, and a relentless preoccupation with results, a successful reform in New York District 2 was transposed, along with some of its architects and implementers, to the city of San Diego. After some initial increase in measured attainment, the attempt to impose an instant solution on San Diego that had been developed over many years in New York was then declared a failure. The researchers identified many reasons for this, including:

- Military-based and larger San Diego was more conservative yet had less local capacity than smaller District 2 within high-capacity, chutzpah-like New York.
- San Diego's reforms were imposed in 2 years, whereas New York's had been developed over a decade.
- Large and complex secondary schools were included in the San Diego reform, unlike District 2.
- As San Diego's reform mill became increasingly grueling, resentment grew against the interlopers responsible for its implementation.
- Understandings of literacy and instruction that had taken a decade to develop in District 2 were interpreted more superficially in the fast-track reform environment of San Diego.

Stein and colleagues go on to document that a little less was lost in translation with a further attempt at implementation in Philadelphia as implementers tried to be more sensitive to differences of context.

Attempts to transplant reform designs from one country to another in wholesale fashion suffer from the same historic fallacies as the efforts to copy or replicate innovative, lighthouse, or model schools. Attempts to transplant the innovative designs that are evident in many model schools often stumble because implementation timelines are shorter, leaders are less charismatic or exceptional, staff are "captives" of a preceding culture rather than drawn to the school by its mission or being handpicked by the principal, resources are scarcer, and – in consequence – understanding of and

capacity to enact the complex principles and practices that make up the model school are weak (Fink, 1999).

A second fallacy in trying to spread school-level reform is that if whole systems cannot be copied, at least particular elements can. This leads to a search for silver bullets of educational change – easily separated practices or elements that appear to work well in a group of pilot or outlier schools and that seem to be worth mandating for or spreading to the rest. Technology is a common temptation. Small schools are another – ignoring the fact that a badly led or dysfunctional small community, or one that perpetuates poor teaching and learning practices, can be more claustrophobic and stressful for staff and students alike than a larger, more anonymous institution that at least has some variety within it (McQuillan & Englert, 2001).

This fallacy and failing also occurs at the international level of policy borrowing and policy transfer. For example, from the complexity of high-performing Finland, policy-makers might be and have been drawn to the fact that all Finnish teachers have masters' degrees and then embark on certifying all their own teachers to Masters level (McKinsey, 2007). But just as when college-educated teachers were upgraded in many countries in the 1970s to acquire bachelor of education degrees on often indifferent, part-time courses, the acquisition of an additional masters-level qualification in other countries can lose the rigor that first defined it and connected it to its already highly qualified applicants in the case of Finland. It can become a merely symbolic process of certification, rather a substantive process of quality improvement.

In educational reform, Sarason (1990) pointed out everything is connected to everything else. You cannot change one thing without changing the rest. Cherry-picking particular policies like small schools or masters' degrees fails to grasp how they are interconnected with a whole array of other elements. But as we have seen, trying to transpose an entire system can be culturally inflexible and ineffective too. Despite these documented difficulties, whole reform designs or isolated elements of them are often exported impulsively from one country to others. The reasons are usually ones of ideological compatibility with favored agendas of market competition and political control over the education agenda, and cultural affinity among the English-speaking nations, along with the physical travel of a very small number of international consultants or policy pollinators among and beyond them. One key instance concerns the transposition of national policy strategies from England to other English-speaking countries. These policy strategies center on setting imposed targets in tested literacy and numeracy at different age points along with curricular and training emphases in these core subjects. Strangely, England ranks relatively poorly on international tests in literacy. The record of its literacy strategy has been labeled as unsuccessful, contrived, or stuck even by its proponents (e.g. Barber, 2007); parents are increasingly opposed to the testing of younger children (Honore, 2008); and the scope of standardized testing is already being severely scaled back (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Yet, the country's emphasis on standardized testing and governmentally imposed system-wide targets has been eagerly adopted by both Ontario and Australia, even though they already rank among the world's leaders in literacy attainment (Levin, 2008). These ready-made solutions seem to be going in

search of problems that do not exist or making up ones that aren't there, rather than local problems giving rise to their own solutions.

Change Lessons

This does not mean that we cannot or should not learn from other contexts. But we should do so intelligently in relation to clear principles and multiple examples, sensitively in relation to differences in context, and interactively through dialogue among educators at all levels within and across the respective systems rather than confining discussions and decisions to only the most senior leaders in the system. Let's look at three examples by way of illustration.

Finland

Finland receives a lot of international policy attention. It ranks number one on most PISA assessments, has the narrowest achievement gaps in the developed world, and is a world leader in corporate transparency and economic competitiveness. In 2007, I took a team there for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)to examine the relationship between leadership and school improvement (Hargreaves et al., 2008). Drawing on our evidence and on the growing body of other literature on the Finnish experience (Aho et al., 2006; Castells & Himanen, 2004; Grubb, 2007; Sahlberg, 2006), this is what we concluded.

After being one of the most backward economies in Europe in the 1950s and after an international banking crisis, the loss of its Russian market, and the escalation of unemployment rates to almost 19% in the early 1990s, Finland consciously connected economic transformation toward being a creative and flexible knowledge economy to the development of a significantly more decentralized education system. This effort has been coordinated at the highest political level where chief executive officers (CEOs) from leading companies like Nokia meet regularly with university presidents in a science and technological development committee chaired by the prime minister.

The coherence is not merely bureaucratic and governmental, but visionary and inspirational. Finns have a common vision that connects their creative high-tech future to their past as creative craftspeople. There are more composers and orchestral conductors per capita in Finland than in any other developed country, and all young people engage in creative and performing arts until the end of their secondary education.

This vision is shared at every level among Finns since teachers create their country's future as a creative and inclusive nation. Though teachers are paid only at the OECD average, teaching in Finland is highly competitive with only a one-in-ten chance of acceptance to teacher education programs in primary education. Retention is high among Finnish teachers because conditions are good and trust is high. All

Finnish teachers are awarded masters' degrees. Finns control quality at the most important point – the point of entry.

Within broad guidelines and with minimal steering by the state, highly qualified teachers create curricula together in each municipality for the children they know best. Curricula and pedagogy are not separate – they are in a common tradition of what continental Europeans call "didactics". The sense of delivering a curriculum devised by others from afar is utterly alien to Finnish educators. Finnish educators are grateful that they are not constantly bombarded by government initiatives, like the Anglo-Saxon nations.

In small classes rarely larger than 24 students, and with generous definitions of special educational needs, the push for quality is driven largely by quietly lifting all children up from the bottom, one at time, through knowing them well in small classes, having specialist support as needed, and not having to deal with excessive paperwork and endless external initiatives.

Principals work across schools, sharing resources where they are needed, and feeling responsible together for all the children and young people in their town and city, not acting competitively only for the children in their own school.

Assessment strategies are largely diagnostic forms of assessment-for-learning and internal to the school. External accountability is confidential and undertaken on a sample basis for monitoring purposes only, not as a census of everyone.

Principals are seen as being part of a "society of equals" in their schools, not as line-managers. They are often recruited from within their schools and they engage in considerable informally distributed leadership with their colleagues. Principals may not be recruited from outside education, and many principals teach for at least 2 h per week. Leaders teach and teachers lead. Teachers say that if the principal is indisposed or ineffective, they take over the school as it belongs to all of them.

Finland has a strong system of social support and investment funded by high taxes that characterizes much of continental Europe so that people have security of housing, of support for parental leave so families can care for young children, of early childhood education, and of care and livelihood in old age.

Some market-oriented advocates dismiss the high-performing Finnish example as simply too different (New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 2007). Or they highlight weaknesses such as Finland's impending generational crisis of leadership succession, as a way of occluding the strengths. Or they choose single items such as awarding teachers masters' degrees, that are applied and imposed in isolation and disembodied from the democratic and inclusive context of the rest of the system and society (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Or they overly celebrate how the system succeeds without Anglo-Saxon systems of standardized testing (Sahlberg, 2006).

And yet, the broad principles of developing an inspiring and inclusive mission that attracts into the profession high-caliber people capable of creating curriculum together for children they know well in smaller classes is much more readily transferable. So too is the importance of active trust among and for the teaching profession, and the synergy of educational and economic improvement with social and public investment more widely.

Without an inspiring and inclusive mission, high trust for professionals and strong social support throughout the society, other less successful measures such as market incentives have to be used to attract and retain highly qualified professionals. Without highly qualified professionals, teaching cannot be trusted so much, which increases the argument for external accountability, standardized curriculum, and government intervention. But these measures then destroy nations' capacities to be competitive and creative knowledge economies. Last, without small classes in which teachers know their children well, individual knowledge of children's needs has to be developed in other ways, through batteries of data on standardized tests.

Tower Hamlets

If Finland seems too culturally homogeneous for other countries to be able to copy, let's turn to an interesting and more diverse outlier in England instead. After the collapse of London's docking industry in the 1970s, when supertankers and container ships could no longer navigate the tight bends of the River Thames, new waves of immigrants moved into the newly impoverished area of Tower Hamlets – many from rural areas of Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries. Despite the reconstruction of part of the Docklands into a fashionable global finance and media center of Canary Wharf, the white-collar workers who came and went on the new high-tech transit line were barely aware of the immigrant community in their midst whose people found little skilled employment in the office towers of glass and steel.

Tower Hamlets' Bengali community suffered from high unemployment rates and some of the greatest incidences of poverty in the country with more children on free school meals than almost anywhere else. Educators' aspirations for student achievement were startlingly low and in 1997, Tower Hamlets was proclaimed the country's worst-performing Local Education Authority, with the lowest-performing primary school in the nation.

Ten years later, the transformation of the schools in Tower Hamlets is dramatic. The schools perform around and above the national average. On standardized achievement tests, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination results, and rates of students going on to university, the borough ranks as the most improved local authority in Britain. It has significantly reduced achievement gaps in relation to children with special educational needs, those from cultural minorities, and those on free school meals. These gains have been achieved with largely the same population and are reflected in Figs. 1 and 2 in relationship to the more modest national gains posted in the same time period.

Figure 1 refers to the percentage of students gaining five or more passing scores at grade C and above in their crucial GCSE secondary school examinations. Grade C is typically the minimum required to move on to university-bound programs.

Figure 2 displays the percentage of students at key Stage 2 (age 11/the last year of primary school) who attain Level 4 proficiency in English literacy.

What explains this system-wide turnaround? In a large-scale research project co-directed with Alma Harris called *Performing Beyond Expectations*, I have studied

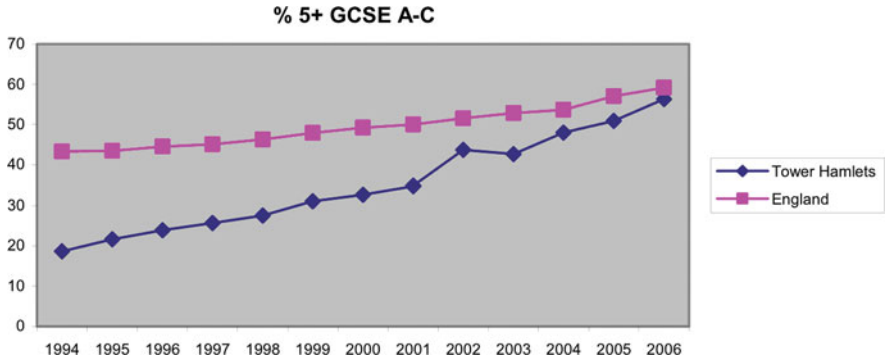

Fig. 1 Secondary school examination results in Tower Hamlets

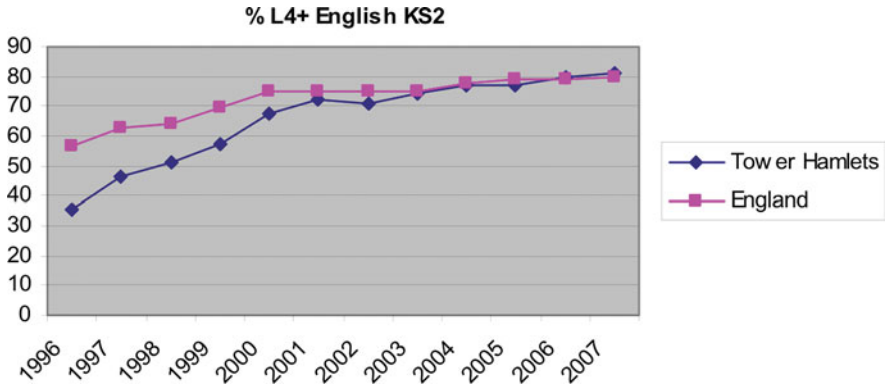

Fig. 2 Primary school literacy achievement in Tower Hamlets

the secrets of Tower Hamlet's success in association with my research colleague Alan Boyle (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). At the center of the story are the following components:

- The *visionary leadership* of a new director (superintendent) who was a self-confessed workaholic and who believed that "poverty is not an excuse for poor outcomes," that aspirations should be extremely high, that efforts to meet these aspirations should be relentless, and that everyone should work on this together;
- The *successful succession* of this first driving leader by a more developmentally inclined, yet equally persistent one, with just a short period of instability in between where the results took a slight dip;
- The ability to attract *high-quality teachers who stay* with the borough, after a period of weeding out overseas teachers who were drawn more to enjoying a brief life excursion in London than a long-term professional commitment to the schools;

- A commitment developed with the schools' leaders to set and reach ambitious *shared targets* for improvement in "a culture of target setting" so that "everybody owns them";
- A shared philosophy that *it is better to have ambitious targets and just miss them than have more modest targets and meet them*;
- *Mutual trust and strong respect* where "lots of our schools work very closely together and with the local authority" and where inspectors' reports refer to the "enthusiasm and high level of morale among the workforce";
- *Knowledge of and presence in the schools* which provides support, builds trust, and grounds intervention in consistent and direct personal knowledge and communication more than in the numerical data that eventually appear on spreadsheets;
- A commitment to *cross-school collaboration,* so that when one secondary school went into "Special Measures" (similar to "corrective action" in the United States) after taking in Somali students from refugee families in a neighboring authority, all the other secondary schools rallied round to help;
- A *resilient but not reckless* approach to external government pressure and policy – accepting the importance of testing and targets, but deciding to set their own targets and resisting the politically motivated pressure to build new (and partly privately funded) high-school academies since the authority already had high-trust relationships with its schools that now performed very well;
- *Positive business partnerships* with corporations in Canary Wharf that model a new form of "corporate educational responsibility" with schools; and
- *Strengthening of community relations and engagement*. Tower Hamlets schools affect the communities that affect them. They have done this by working with faith-based organizations and forming agreements with imams from this largely Muslim community to counter the effects of children taking extended absence from schools to attend and then stay on after family events such as funerals in Bangladesh. This includes announcements at school and at prayer in the mosque that extended absences will be treated as truancy because the educational achievement of the young people and the development of the community's future capacity matter that much. Tower Hamlets has also developed some of its schools into community centers that keep a school open from 8:00 am until 10:00 pm – providing resources and recreation for both students and the community's adults. Last, the employment of large numbers of classroom assistants and other staff from the community to support teachers builds strong relationships and trust between professionals and community members and enables and encourages some of these community members to go on to become professionally trained teachers themselves.

Educators in Tower Hamlets possess a robust and resilient sense of purpose; enjoy successful and sustainable system leadership that stays close to and is undertaken with schools; commit to professionally shared targets rather than politically arbitrary ones; establish an ethic of schools helping schools and the strong

supporting the weak; and commit to a kind of community development that penetrates all aspects of a cohesive and coherent change process, while still respecting and even enhancing the special expertise of educators in boosting achievement. One of Tower Hamlet's visionary leaders sums it up well: It's "not just about the data. It's actually knowing the school, knowing the community, knowing about history, knowing about the staff—all of that."

Performing Beyond Expectations

The study of Tower Hamlets is part of a larger investigation into unexpectedly high performance in other sectors and its implications for educational improvement. One of these sectors is sport.

Sport has started to undergo a revolution in evidence-based improvement. In *Moneyball*, Lewis (2004) describes how the Oakland Athletics baseball team of the 1990s managed to outperform most competitors, even after its financial backers had pulled out, by paying relentless attention to the statistic that best predicts season-long high performance: on-base percentage (the percentage of times a player can reach first base from the plate where he bats). "The most important, isolated offensive statistic is the on-base percentage," Lewis notes (p. 58). So the Oakland Athletics set about recruiting players who had a high on-base percentage and batters were urged to attend to it – to do anything it took to get on base, even drawing a "walk" or being hit by a pitch.

Systematically attending to this single statistic throughout the club's selection, organization, and playing strategies got it into the play-offs season after season, despite falling levels of investment. Before, coaches had recruited players who reminded them of themselves – big guys who could hit a ball hard. Now, the Oakland Athletics had some of the most peculiarly built players in baseball, but what they could all do was get on base consistently!

The parallel in football is Prozone: a computer program that can track players' performance throughout a game – monitoring and measuring energy levels, areas of the pitch covered, and number of successful and unsuccessful passes made – backwards, forwards, and sideways.

An English Premiership football club we have been studying employs a single Prozone analyst. Many Premiership clubs have entire Prozone analysis teams while at the other end of the scale, one low-ranking second division team's Prozone analyst fell off the floodlights in a rainstorm while recording the game with his camera! The Premiership Prozone analyst we interviewed, who made the program the subject of his master's degree, described how multiple cameras are typically positioned around the ground to track players during each game. Individual player patterns and profiles are subsequently compiled from the accumulated data. The key question, though, is how are the data used to improve performance?

In the extreme case, our interviewee described how some managers had tried installing electronic chips in their players' boots to measure the number of steps they took per game as an indicator of energy expenditure. Some managers then set

"step" targets to increase the energy that players used. However, players got around this by taking extra little steps off-field when they were retrieving the ball and the camera couldn't follow them. The same kind of cheating occurs in education when targets for increased test scores are imposed on teachers who take their own extra little steps such as teaching to the test in order to produce the necessary numbers.

By comparison, the Premiership Club Prozone director invites players in to discuss their data. At first, only a trickle of players come to see him, but as players' subsequent performance improves, their peers take notice and are very soon following their team-members' footsteps to join this intelligent community of soccer learners who analyze data to improve performance together. Whether they concern individual student achievement, or comparative international performance, the most productive uses of data in education similarly occur not by imposing unwanted targets that lead to unnecessary expenditures of energy on superfluous extra steps, but by building intelligent communities of professionals and policy-makers who look at data together in shared commitments to improvement.

Conclusion

All policies start somewhere but most of them travel poorly. The past is a foreign country and too much nostalgia or amnesia about it impairs the intelligent immigration of its policy strategies into the present. This is the danger when presidents, prime ministers, and premiers try to replicate what worked for them as students in the past across entire policy systems in the present. Other countries and other sectors that seem to show exemplary success can equally be sources of disappointment if their strategies are adopted inflexibly and simplistically because of cultural familiarity or political plausibility.

Policy principles are much more transposable and transportable if they are interpreted intelligently within communities of practice among and between those who are their bearers and recipients. Indeed, it is these communities of practice and the ways they engage with past policies and comparative policies elsewhere in order to make committed and sincere efforts to improve together that will prove to be the ultimate test bed of effective as well as sustainable policy development and implementation. Seeds travel better than ripened fruit and so does the germination and cross-pollination of policy change.

In a high-performing country, a remarkably successful district, and a sports club that performs far beyond expectations, we have begun to discern what some of these common principles of high performance can be, including in contexts of low resources and even outright adversity.

What they point to is not what has characterized many Anglo-American reform strategies over the past 2 decades – bureaucratic standardization that stunts creativity, cutthroat competition that widens achievement gaps and pits the strong against the weak, obsessions with the independent authority of objective data and autocratically imposed targets that make everyone expend fruitless energy on taking unnecessary extra steps to create the appearance of improvement, and the reduction

of leaders who develop their community′s purposes to managers who merely implement the purposes of others and who are turned over with increasing frequency or ferocity if they fail to deliver.

Instead, what we have encountered is the importance of inspiring missions that connect the future to the past and draw the best people to the organization; leaders who know their people and how to get them to work well together in interchangeable roles and positions and who are able to stay long enough to see their work through; cultures of trust, cooperation, creativity, and responsibility; intelligent use of data that serves as a conscience that checks people and not as an all-powerful force that drives them; and commitment to the cause of community development, even among competitors who are galvanized by a common cause that transcends their differences and rivalries.

As we strive to extricate ourselves from the worst economic catastrophe for 70 years, it is time to move beyond the failed solutions of the last 2 decades, to abandon the ingrained ideologies of bureaucratic prescription and market competition, to resist the temptations to inflict our own educational biographies and the opportunities they gave us on a present population whose success may require different solutions, and to avoid transplanting simple solutions from plausible models of success elsewhere. Our task instead is to work together in relation to an inspiring purpose that can lift us all and commit us to helping each other, and to learn from the common principles that underpin inspirational success, far beyond expectations, in systems and sectors beyond and beside us.

In the Renaissance, it was the telescope that got us to see beyond ourselves. In the twenty-first century, it's more of a metaphorical Global Positioning System (GPS) that will help us locate and navigate inspiring sectors and systems, and that will help us learn how to extricate ourselves from the economic calamity that has befallen us. In the end, this will be achieved by no more slick solutions for achieving success in low-tax systems, but by truly investing in the quality, creativity, and community of the only sustainable resource we can ultimately rely on – the future generations of our people and those teachers who we call and depend on to educate them.

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