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A Blueprint for Managing a New Era in Education

New Jersey’s K-12 School System Post-School Choice

A Blueprint to Managing a New Era of Education

Overview

The Absence of Vision

The world in which we live has changed dramatically over the past two decades, driven by the twin forces of technology and globalization. These forces have changed the society and the job market in which our students will find themselves, but our school system remains relatively unchanged. Why? Is it because our elected representatives and appointed officials have carefully studied the future needs of society and determined that system-wide reform was not necessary, or because change does not come easily to such a complex and long standing societal institution populated with strong and unyielding vested interests?

The inescapable conclusion is that not only is there no vision for the future of education, but there does not even exist a process suitable for developing such a vision for system-wide change. This project will provide a forum that is responsive to this need.

The Policymaking Process

Educational policymaking should be guided by scholarship and best practices, informed by the experiences of practitioners and the needs of the schools, and reflective of the political reality in which schools exists. Unfortunately, the reality of educational policymaking over the past years is far different with a sizeable disconnect among policymakers, practitioners, scholars and the public. Dialogue in a setting conducive to
informed deliberation is non-existent. Forums developed by one group or another often are hijacked by advocacy groups, lobbyists or the media. Vested interests come to the table intent on preserving current salary, benefits and work rules. The result is that differences of opinion among stakeholders are not bridged but become wider and fueled by greater animosity.

The Common Sense Institute of New Jersey (CSI-NJ), in partnership with the School of Education at Monmouth University, is seeking to change the current policymaking dynamic by creating an informal “safe” space for policymakers, practitioners and scholars to exchange views, identify problems and brainstorm strategies.

The timing for such an initiative is excellent. The State is poised to expand educational opportunities through avenues such as charter schools, private school scholarships and inter-district public school choice. Technology is creating additional educational opportunities such as virtual schools and online courses.

The proposed forum will discuss the creation of a vision to advance a new system-wide educational delivery system incorporating leading-edge methods, tools and techniques along with new curricula aimed at truly engaging and energizing today’s students and providers, in order to prepare them with the necessary skills to be successful in the 21st century global economy and achieve greater measurable outcomes overall.

The forum, co-hosted by the School of Education at Monmouth University and the Common Sense Institute of New Jersey, will focus on how this statewide system of education should be structured, funded, monitored and evaluated to improve and enhance student learning.

The sponsors invited academics from the region, New Jersey policymakers from the Legislature, Governor’s Office and Department of Education, superintendents as well as
advocates and institutes to discuss their perspectives on the future of K-12 education in New Jersey. The educational leaders were brought together for two days of self-directed dialogue over a four-week period during the fall of 2010.

Our System of Education

_The Legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools...._  
– New Jersey Constitution, Article VIII, Section IV

Although the Legislature has complied with the Constitutional directive by establishing such a public school system, this “system” has been implemented in such a way that most students can only attend their neighborhood schools resulting in an educational system with few educational options, especially for children in failing schools. In addition, these neighborhood schools have been primarily funded through local property taxes.

The advent of an expanded inter-district public school choice program, an increased number of charter school applications and legislative and gubernatorial support for a private school choice proposal will change the educational landscape of the State. Greater educational options may benefit students and parents, but will also challenge an already disparate system. This movement toward greater educational opportunity is being accelerated by changes to the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which provides additional educational options for children in failing schools.

What will our statewide “system” of education look like after the rapid expansion of school choice and how will it be planned, structured, funded, monitored and evaluated.
The Problem

Efforts to expand the number and type of educational providers have been approached in a piecemeal fashion often on a pilot basis without any real conversation about how these changes, if widespread and statewide, will create a new “system” of education.

A “system” by definition is based on related parts that are organized into a complex whole and therefore requires predetermined structure, organization and relationships.

The problem is that the vision for this new “system” of education has either not been articulated or has not been created.

Let’s look at an example. District A and District B are neighbors. District B has a number of charter schools, early childhood providers and the county vocational school. District A has an approved Inter-district Choice Program and successful private schools. Both receive most of their budget through state aid and have failing schools in years 7 and 8 of improvement status under the ESEA. Where can students in these districts attend school and who pays? How do they share governance, costs and responsibilities?

This situation is made more complicated by the need for educational reforms that can benefit all schools. These needed educational reforms include school funding reform, curriculum changes that address 21st Century skills, formative assessments, teacher evaluation and streamlined tenure, merit pay, technology and virtual schools, teacher and administrator preparation, mentoring and professional development, and data collection systems.

The question is are any or all of these strategies connected to a vision for a new “system” and to each other?
Goals for the Working Group

A vision of this new “system” should be established prior to the anticipated great expansion of educational opportunities and implementation of educational reform.

We need a road map regarding where we want to go as a state in terms of educational reform and how we will get there.

We are not working from a blank slate. The state has a longstanding “system” of education that must be changed deliberatively. As discussed above, a “system”, by definition, is based on related parts that are organized into a complex whole and therefore requires predetermined structure, organization and relationships. This project will establish the road map for New Jersey as it enters an era of enhanced educational options.

The dialogue and ideas generated by the working group will further this process.

The recommendations of the group will be transmitted to the Governor, Department of Education and Legislature. The conference proceedings will also be summarized and the report publicly disseminated.

*Forum Overview*

The first session began with welcoming remarks by the hosts Dr. Lynn Romeo, Dean, School of Education, Monmouth University and Jerry Cantrell, President, Common Sense Institute of New Jersey. The working group members were asked to introduce themselves and provide some perspective on his or her work in education. An introduction and overview of the goals of the working group were provided by David Hespe, former Commissioner of Education and Interim Superintendent, Willingboro School District. Hespe also led the group on a discussion of the current state of education in New Jersey to identify current issues for the group to discuss further in-
Forum attendees were invited to discuss their views on the issues. Topics of the open discussion focused on curriculum issues such as standardization and testing requirements as well as district management, length of school day and year, tools for teachers, classroom environment, teacher preparation and family involvement.

The working group members indicated that the goals of the sessions to create a forum suitable for dialogue and deliberation regarding controversial and complex educational issues were accomplished.

The second session of the working group provided an opportunity for forum members to make formal presentations of their work in this area to the entire group.

The presentations were to:

- have system-wide implications;
- be relevant to all members of the group;
- be connected to current educational challenges; and
- be impacted by the post-choice environment.

The presentations informed the group regarding such things as the role of private education providers in our educational system and methods for a critical analysis of school district productivity through a systems perspective focused on data analysis.

Group dialogue followed these presentations, connecting with the goals of the working group and intended to foster an exchange of information and ideas.
Key Findings of the Working Group

The following list summarizes the key ideas put forth by members of the working group:

- The role of school boards must be redefined.

- Online learning has proven to be an effective technique of educating students. As New Jersey’s charter school law undergoes greater changes, online-only schools must be included.

- Currently, only the Department of Education can authorize a charter school. This responsibility should be shifted to other institutions, such as state and private colleges in coordination with the Department of Education, allowing the Department to become an “authorizer of authorizers.”

- Current law effectively prohibits the conversion of private or religious schools to charter schools. The one-year “waiting period” for conversion must be revoked.

- New Jersey law regarding the conversion of a local public school to a charter school is also prohibitive in that it requires approval of a majority of the school’s teachers.

- Standardized testing has revealed that some students who pass advanced level courses have not yet mastered basic skills. This problem calls for greater standardization of curriculum across schools and grade level.

- New testing requirements and enhanced expectations of 11th and 12th grade students lack synergy with course requirements in earlier years.
Next Steps

The participants were pleased to have the opportunity to engage in informed discussions on issues central to the future of their work and committed to continue the dialogic process. The working group will reconvene at the beginning of the New Year to continue deliberations on the issues identified herein. In the intervening few months, the participants were asked to identify new ideas and strategies related to their specific area of practice or perspective. Some members of the group will also work with a researcher to collect and mine large amounts of data in search of patterns of teacher effectiveness. They were also asked to turnkey these discussions with others in their area or within their network to develop a more complete picture of the strengths, weaknesses and implications of these ideas and strategies for public education in New Jersey.