

System Failure

*Shaking up the bureaucracy is the first step to improving America's schools.
A response to Jason Kamras and Andrew Rotherham.*

Few professions in this country strike as deep a chord as teaching. Everyone has a warm memory that they can attribute to a teacher who made an impression on their youth. So it was no surprise that Jason Kamras and Andrew Rotherham held up the responsibility and credit for public education's future to the need to attract the right teachers with the right talents, pay them competitively, and equip them with the necessary tools to do their jobs ["America's Teaching Crisis," Issue #5]. Few people will argue with the importance of having the right people in the teaching profession. When they're successful, they're enormously successful. And when you've got a dud in the classroom, you have pretty much guaranteed that you will handicap about 30 kids for a year.

But Kamras and Rotherham miss a critical point in their argument, and that is

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the system in which teachers work. To use a business analogy, this would be akin to saying that regardless of the top management at a company and the systems and tools in place in that organization, the line workers are the determining factor in whether the company turns a profit. Are they important to the bottom line? Absolutely. But without the right systems—the leadership at the top and critical systems in place throughout the organization—success is, at best, left to chance. That’s why shareholders demand good governance and operational systems from public corporations. When it comes to American public education, every citizen is a shareholder in how successfully schools educate our children—and we must demand more in how our schools are governed and run.

Improving the quality of teaching, as Kamras and Rotherham argue, is important. But how do you ensure that you have the right teacher in the right classroom? How do you give them the tools—like curriculum, benchmark assessments, and pacing guides—that, across the board, will move an entire grade level, school, or school district in the same direction at the same time? How do you measure their success? These are the underlying problems facing American public education. The real issue in today’s public schools is the utter failure, at a systemic level, to create high-performing, well-functioning organizations, without which even the best teachers cannot do their best.

The largest urban school districts are the size of a Fortune 500 company. The New York City Department of Education has a bigger budget, more employees and more facilities than companies like Eastman Kodak, Sun Microsystems, or Continental Airlines. Unfortunately, mired in bureaucracy, many urban districts today have dysfunctional organizations that cannot perform even the most basic operations. Consider the Los Angeles Unified School District, which employs more than 77,000 people. When the district tried to implement a new \$86 million payroll system, a series of computer failures and insufficient staff training resulted in employees receiving paychecks that were either too large or too small—or not receiving them at all. The problems helped boost the cost to \$132 million. Or consider the St. Louis Public Schools, which mapped out its daily school-bus schedule on an archaic corkboard, outlining the routes with push pins and yarn. When a business consultant working with the district questioned the logic of the system, he uncovered a state-of-the-art computer program still shrink-wrapped and tucked in a storage closet. And each fall, districts across the country start the school year without a principal or enough teachers at every school, because their recruitment cycles start so late in the spring and summer that the best candidates already have accepted jobs elsewhere. Stories like these abound around the country. They are absurd. Yet

because the problems are deeply rooted in bureaucratic systems and a historic culture of low expectations, they're tough to fix.

That said, there are cases that show what can be achieved by even the largest bureaucracies through systematic structural changes. In addition to being the largest school system in the country, New York City's is also one of the most closely watched because of the dramatic reform that has taken place over the past five years. Buoyed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's successful bid for control of the city's schools, Chancellor Joel Klein—best known as the federal attorney who successfully prosecuted Microsoft—has displayed the bold leadership and entrepreneurship required to turn around such a large-scale, underperforming enterprise. Klein and Bloomberg ended the controversial practice of social promotion, moving children to the next grade even if they were not academically

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ready. They have implemented a new “Autonomy Zone,” in which principals who set high goals and meet them are given more freedom in exchange for greater accountability. And through successful negotiations, Klein and the teachers' union agreed to no longer allow teachers with “unsatisfactory”

ratings to transfer from one school to another.

Boston Public Schools is another success story. The oldest district in the nation recently overhauled its human resources department after decades of complaints about bureaucracy, non-responsiveness, and ineffective and time-consuming pen-and-paper application processes. The solution, implemented by Harvard MBA Michelle Boyers, is an online application and hiring system to reduce paperwork. The result is that more teachers are now applying to work in Boston. And more teachers are staying longer than a few years. Does that systemic reform benefit teachers? You bet.

Or consider Chicago Public Schools, another big-city district with an appetite for reform. When another newly hired Harvard MBA, Monica Santana Rosen, was stumped by her inability to get someone on the phone to answer questions about her medical benefits, she put her experience into action and established a better system: Employees now have an appointment when they come to the HR Employee Service Center. The department explains forms to groups of new employees, rather than one at a time. And an employee who calls to speak to a human resources representative is never on hold for more than 20 seconds.

These seem like simple, common-sense solutions. But they affect an entire district of teachers and, ultimately, the children they serve. A teacher who spends

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less time on bureaucratic paperwork has more time to spend in the classroom. These deeply rooted district systems were upended when fresh eyes saw the problem in a new light. And that's why my foundation—which recruited and placed both Boyers and Rosen in school districts through our residency program—has worked to bring about systemic reform of America's education system through improving the governance and management of our public schools.

Despite these successes, our country is in need of systemic reform in our public schools today more than ever before. It has been 24 years since the landmark study of American education, “A Nation at Risk,” and not much has changed. More than one million students drop out each year. Where do they go, and what do they do? Many turn to gangs or criminal activity. Thirty years ago, kids without a high school diploma were doomed to jobs in the mills or factories. Today, there are no mills or factory jobs; these kids are just doomed.

To give these children a future, we must give them a high-quality education. That's why we need reforms that go beyond teachers and the superficial qualities of the educational bureaucracy. The length of the school year and school day, for example, is woefully outdated. Rooted in the agrarian calendar year, when children were needed to work in the fields before and after school, our students attend only 180 school days a year, then take a gaping 10-week break from academics during the summer. When was the last time you saw a school-age child rushing home to pick a crop? Yet we are shortchanging our children when it comes to the hours they spend in the classroom, and we are at a competitive disadvantage as a nation. By the time students in other countries have graduated from high school, they have obtained the equivalent of one year more of education than their American counterparts. The average school year of nations participating in the Third International Math and Science Survey is 193 days. China provides 30 percent more education time than the United States, and Singapore has a policy to extend math classes by 30 percent for students who fall behind in basic skills by the end of the fifth grade.

There is also a wide disparity in our country in the skills and learning of African American and Hispanic children and their white counterparts, a gap that I consider to be the civil rights issue of our time. We should be outraged that a recent long-term-trends study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), showed that 17-year-old African American and Hispanic children read at the same level and perform the same math skills as 13-year-old white children.

And not only do we have achievement gaps that we need to overcome, but we also have a divide among states. Why should a high school student in Washington be required to take only two years of math to graduate, while students

in Ohio are required to take four years? We lack strong national standards that would adequately prepare students for college, careers, and life. A student in Maine should receive the same skills and knowledge as one in Montana or New Mexico. More than 60 percent of high school graduates who go on to college say they wish they had taken tougher classes in high school. Those who head straight for the workforce have even deeper regrets: Seventy-two percent wish they had taken tougher courses in high school. Half of them specifically regret not learning more math. The time has come for strong American standards. Already, leaders in 30 states have pledged to raise high school standards to a level that will make diplomas meaningful again. Nine states have banded together to create common standards for high school algebra. Common standards make common sense.

Systemic improvement of our education system has the potential to have a far greater impact than the ability of a single teacher in a single classroom. The work of teachers cannot be underrated; in fact, many of the points Kamras and Rotherham raised need to be part of a systemic reform. If our system of public education is to adequately prepare every student in this country for college, for work and life, we need to start with a system that works, including nationwide standards, a longer school day and school year, and leaders who can transform the governance and management of a school district. Once we do that, our students, and our country, will stand a chance at true success. **▀**