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The Education of Eric Oddleifson

For the past 20 years I have been as impassioned an advocate for arts education as anyone. Three years ago, as I was realizing I was getting nowhere with my arguments, I received an encouraging call from Chris Coxon, at the time Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning for the Boston Public Schools. He said, “Eric I have this wonderful lady in my office that wants to turn her elementary school into an arts based school. Why don’t you put together a plan for how to do it, with a budget, and tell me - who will pay?”

For the better part of a summer I labored on that plan for Principal Lourdes Santiago, to include four arts teachers for the 500 kids at the Sumner school, an increase of two, and suggested that it was the responsibility of BPS to pay for them (instead of private capital).

Miracle of miracles, Chris agreed, and actually found the money, from Title 1 funds.

The miracle lasted for one year. The positions were eliminated the next year as Title 1 funds for Boston tanked.

Why So Difficult?

I asked myself – why was it so difficult to get just two more arts teachers for one school – not to mention the real need for Boston, which I had calculated at \$36 million, up from the \$12 million actually being invested in arts education? For a district that had a \$680 million budget at the time (it since has climbed to \$840 million, while the student population has declined by 5,000), 5 percent of that budget didn’t seem like much of a stretch, given the compelling arguments that I and many others had been making.

A Huge Mistake

I soon learned that I had made a huge mistake in assuming that the superintendent operated much as a CEO of a business enterprise, with authority over the budget, and able to make strategic funding decisions.

It turns out that superintendents everywhere, not just in Boston, have very little authority over anything – strategy, personnel, rewards, performance, or money. Virtually every dollar comes with strings attached. Almost all money must be spent in a proscribed manner, regardless of the real needs of the district, school, or student, precluding any opportunity for innovation. She cannot easily direct dollars to where they are needed.

Marguerite Roza, co-author of *Facing the Future – Financing Productive Schools*, observed (at a Brookings Institute presentation):

Due to the mandates of multiple funding sources, there are major problems with education finance.

It's haphazard and contradictory and centered around politics, not centered around students. What drives money is the politics, not the students. It's opaque and under-examined- not transparent. We're not using financial indicators on the things that really matter. It's over specified and inefficient. Too many layers in the system are saying how the money should be used, and the result is inefficiency.

In a Commentary in Education Week in January of this year Roza, and her colleague Paul Hill, continue:

Money is used so loosely in public education – in ways that few understand and that lack plausible connections to student learning – that no-one can say how much money, if used optimally, would be enough.

Accounting systems make it impossible to track how much is spent on a particular child or school, and hide the cost of programs and teacher contracts. Districts can't choose the most cost-effective programs because they lack evidence on costs and results. The system does not support experimentation.

We do know that schools with greater spending flexibility – in foreign countries and here, at home, in the private and charter sectors – spend more on teaching and less on support services and specialists than do U.S. public schools.

It is clear from this that the system is virtually unmanageable and needs to be completely redesigned.

Marc Tucker, President of the National Center on Education and the Economy, was addressing systemic inefficiencies around the time I was struggling with the needs of the Sumner school. His message in *Tough Choices or Tough Times* was blunt—“We do not need new programs. The one need that is indispensable is a new system. The problem is not with our educators. It is with the system in which they work.”

Tucker, and the Commissioners, called for radical decentralization of school districts, through contract schools – autonomously managed schools reporting to school boards.

Predictably, some in the education establishment took exception. Diane Ravitch wrote a stinging commentary, calling it pie-in-the sky theorizing, which if enacted would dismantle American public education, with most of the report's prescriptions not only radical but dubious.

Others, more recently, indicate such radical decentralization can't be achieved anyway, because teachers have no interest in running schools and that principals simply do not have the experience or talent to do so.

But, the tide is turning. Massachusetts, along with five other states, has now signed on to the report's recommendations as has the National Education Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers.

In Massachusetts, the report's recommendations potentially can soon be implemented through the Education Reform Act of 2009, approved by one chamber of the legislature. It provides the implementing mechanism for the Commission's contract school recommendations by providing for Innovation Schools – autonomous, yet in-district schools, the operations of which are overseen by local school boards.

Our research suggests that such decentralized schools can be hugely cost effective. By managing funds strategically at the individual school level we can double school performance in the next seven to 10 years with the money we already have in the system, and a teacher's total student load at the high- and middle-school levels can be reduced to 80, from levels 50-100 percent higher – the norm in many schools now.

New York's experience has shown that a weighted-student formula, by which these schools can be funded, can actually increase individual school funding by 20 percent – enough to raise teachers' salaries and hire arts teachers as well

What Plays in New York Can Play Anywhere

William Ouchi, the strategist behind New York City's decentralization initiative, writes that “true decentralization is so difficult that there is no reason to attempt it, except that it's the only thing that works when a district is in a bad way”

New York is proving that it can be done. Those principals that were empowered in 2004-05 now control 85 percent of their total budget (schools are funded through a *Fair Student Funding* mechanism based on a weighted-student formula) with administrative ratios (nonteaching employees to all employees) as low as 4 percent, compared with 44 percent in some traditional schools.

We conclude that individual schools can be managed efficiently and effectively, providing a fair return on the taxpayers' dollar, if teachers and principals are empowered- given control over budgets, staffing, curriculum and schedule. A good example of how a school can be designed, or reconfigured, to make maximum use of time and people is the Brooklyn Generation public high school in New York, which opened in 2007. It operates at the same cost as other schools.

The A|L Inc Program

A teacher movement to accept full responsibility for schools is potentially the wave of change that could result in rapid scale-up of the best teaching, management and financial practices

Our program is designed to initiate such a movement, through district decentralization and school empowerment. Our systems approach includes:

- Developing a model weighted-student formula budget for municipal and school officials, as well as other stakeholders, to show how such a financial approach impacts individual schools.
- Helping school boards develop a *theory of action* in support of decentralization/school empowerment policies
- Helping teachers form union-compatible professional teaching partnerships to manage innovation schools under the new state law, and negotiate contracts with their school boards.
- Providing design and startup assistance (financial, organizational) as well as on-going financial and business management services to a select group of innovative, arts centered schools.

Our partners and collaborators in this effort include Walnut Hill School in Natick, Lesley University, Cambridge, The Center for Reform of School Systems, Houston, TX, Education|Evolving, St. Paul, MN, and the Conservatory Lab Charter School in Boston.

We believe mayors are our target audience, as they have budget responsibility for their cities, including education, and our program can significantly increase both efficiency and effectiveness in educational expenditures.

Our financing plan for this effort includes participation with the state of Massachusetts as it applies for ARRA funds, as well as a direct application by A|L to the Department of Education's *Investing In Innovation* fund.

What About The Arts?

Experiencing, and practicing, arts disciplines releases the human spirit. This is what we would wish for both teachers and students.

The arts are central to our thinking, not only for their intrinsic, academic value, but as the best way to instill a culture of professionalism in a school, built on proven teaching strategies for diverse learners. Katrin Robertson, a student of Elliot Eisner in his *Arts & Education program* at Stanford, and now teaching at the University of Michigan, suggests a Student's Bill of Rights:

- Every student has a right to be taught by a teacher who understands the diverse nature of language acquisition and who has been trained to teach in a cognitively diverse manner
- Every student has a right to be taught by a teacher who uses multiple strategies for teaching and assessing literacy
- Every student has a right to understand his unique strengths and weaknesses with regard to language acquisition, reading and written expression and knows what particular learning strategies work best for him so he can advocate for himself in the classroom
- Every student has the right to take the needed time to process language in a diverse manner before his language and comprehension skills are assessed.

- Every student has a right to represent his understanding of texts in a diverse manner and not be assessed strictly on the basis of high-stakes, standardized testing measures.

This is a description of professionalism of the highest order, and reflects the use of the arts as cognitive disciplines representing different forms of expression and communication.

10 Steps to World-Class Schools

In the Washington Post last May, Marc Tucker suggested 10 ways to transform our public schools. As a business entrepreneur who believes in the power of small, well organized groups with a focused vision and purpose, I see the most important to be:

Get outstanding students to go into teaching and treat them like professionals, not blue-collar workers in dead-end jobs. That means putting teachers in charge of their schools.

Teachers will accept responsibility for student outcomes, but only if they have control over the resources and decisions that affect learning.

This is what the A|L program is all about.

As Harold Ford, Louis Gerstner and Eli Broad observe in the Wall Street Journal of November 25, 2009;

For decades, adult interests have been at the forefront of public education. Reform has been derailed by adults who wanted to protect the status quo and enjoy lifelong benefits. This time, the focus will be on learning in the classroom.

States that have the track record and leadership in place to implement Mr. Obama's aggressive reform menu – of enforcing rigorous academic standards, creating data systems that track individual student performance, ensuring teacher quality and effectiveness, and turning around failing schools – deserve the funds to show that our public schools can lead the world

We have yet to prove, on a systemic basis, that we can dramatically improve America's public schools. Race to the Top is a chance to start small, hold states accountable, and expand proven reforms to the rest of the country.

Amen to that. With a systemic approach to the problem, A|L Inc. intends to be part of the solution.

Eric Oddleifson
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Also of interest to the reader will be the 2009 A|L Inc. piece – *Fundamentally Changing the Way We Organize & Manage Public Schools: A District Reform Approach.*