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U.S. Education: The Age of Wisdom and Foolishness

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Test score “plunges” are in the news, dampening schools’ traditional first day optimism just as they reopen after the summer break. Charles Dickens’ opening lines in a Tale of Two Cities seem an especially apt, if ahistorical, descriptor of the current state of education in the United States.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

To teachers, administrators and parents these may seem like the dark days on the eve of destruction of public education. Indeed, from draconian budget cuts to school closings, from competition for students from private fund-enhanced charter schools to maniacal focus on test scores, from flawed measures of teacher performance to attacks on teacher professionalism, public schooling as a collective good is under siege. These threats are especially ironic and unconscionable because we now know more about teaching, learning and effective change than ever before. So, it is the age of wisdom, light and hope because our knowledge grows and deepens. But it is also the age of foolishness, darkness and despair because ignorance and selfishness have prevailed over knowledge and evidence.

In each critical area for improvement foolishness threatens wisdom.

- 1) *Integration:* We live in an increasingly diverse society in which collaborative interaction across myriad differences will be an essential requirement for a healthy productive citizenship, employment and innovation. In addition, substantial evidence suggests that traditionally underperforming students are more successful in integrated rather than segregated schools, while not undermining the academic performance of their peers. However, as a nation we have abandoned integration as a goal in either housing or education. Schools systems that have courageously attempted to maintain integrated systems have gotten little material or moral support from political leaders. More troubling, political and financial support for charter schools has exacerbated rather than mediated racial and socioeconomic isolation.

- 2) *Expertise*: We know that teachers increase their expertise and remain in schools when they have structured opportunities to collaborate to learn from colleagues and experts and when principals support a collaborative learning culture. Teachers in the US have fewer and less sustained learning opportunities than in countries with higher performance gains on international tests. However, instead of promoting collaboration as an improvement lever, federal education policy and funding have prioritized competition among teachers based on performance incentives. Evaluation systems favored by reformers demand that principals rank teachers on a 1-to-4 scale, promoting judgment not growth and adversarial rather than supportive relationships.
- 3) *Motivation*: The preponderance of evidence and everyday experience suggest that intrinsic motivation, collaboration and collective responsibility are more effective drivers of improvement on complex tasks than extrinsic incentives, competition and individual rewards. By contrast, federal policy has prioritized competition between teachers for rewards, between schools for students and between parents for entrance into schools.
- 4) *Poverty*: We know that out-of-school factors explain far more of the variation on student achievement measures than individual teacher differences and that teacher effectiveness is mediated by factors related to school culture. However, with the exception of the underfunded Promise Neighborhoods program and yet-to-be funded expansion of pre-school, comparatively little attention has been given to the circumstances that mediate student readiness to learn and no major federal programs support improvement of school culture. Instead, the sole focus on measuring individual teacher effectiveness promotes the illusion that pressure, hiring and firing can be the major levers for improvement.
- 5) *Assessment*: Evidence mounts that teachers' expertise in error analysis, ability to accurately diagnose students' level and range of understanding and their repertoire of strategies to productively engage students in moving their own learning forward are powerful predictors of student learning. This evidence speaks to the importance of non-consequential, just-in-time, formative assessment of daily student work. In spite of this knowledge, increasing federal and state pressures for performance on end-of-the-year summative assessments distracts teachers and their students from the engagement in very strategies that will have impact on long-term learning.
- 6) *Emotion*: Honest examination of our own experiences and decades of human development and learning sciences research tell us that social and emotional wellbeing are foundational for academic learning. However, the tyranny of academic outcome measures in consequential judgments of teacher and school effectiveness diverts needed attention away from this critical contributor to students' learning and health. In addition, while research supports the importance of a growth mindset to the effort required to master challenging learning, the focus on winning, what has come to be seen as an "education game," suggests that failure or below average performance is a final condemnation rather than an opportunity to grow.
- 7) *Engagement*: Learning requires both cognitive and emotional engagement. Language and mathematical literacy skills are essential capacities. But skill acquisition is not what engages the hard work and imagination of young learners. Every teacher knows that, "You'll need this later on in life" and "It's going to be on the test" do not inspire a love of learning. Students' interests are diverse and it is these interests that spur them to want to read and use mathematics. It is therefore profoundly disturbing that the twin plagues of test score mania and budget cuts have decreased attention to the very things that can stimulate children to want to know: making sense of the natural and build worlds (science technology and engineering); investigating how people live in the world (history, social science and civics) and exploring the many ways in which people express their understanding of the world (the arts).
- 8) *Collaboration*: Finally, we know quite a bit about the differences between behavioral and structural changes stimulated by hierarchical compliance regimes and changes that are the

result of collaboration and altered belief systems. The former tend to be superficial and short lived, while the latter deep and sustained. Compliance tends to breed resentment and cover-up, while collaboration fosters trust, openness and deep personal investment.

In the current climate, acting on wisdom and hope rather than foolishness and despair takes courage. My hope is that as the school year begins teachers can summon the courage continue learning and to act on what they know about teaching and learning and that principals, superintendents, school boards and parents can work together to give teachers and their students the protected space to do so.

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