

Preface

Collaborative Action for Children: The Urgency of Now

The first time it hit me was when I was acting as a judge in a city school system science fair. Armed with our clipboards, we judges dutifully made our way up and down long rows of little booths, each featuring eager students anxious to tell us about their projects. We listened closely, asked probing questions, and then carefully marked our scorecards, rating the substance of each project and the skills of the student presenter.

When I had finished a couple of hours of this demanding job, two students stuck out in my mind. The first, I'll call him James, came from one of the city's highest-achieving and most affluent schools. He did a project on neuroscience, literally on brain surgery. His project was festooned with scientific and medical artifacts. He had a model of a brain, surgical tools, complex illustrations, and colorful diagrams attractively arrayed on a pair of large folding panels. His knowledge was deep and impressive, well beyond what we'd expect of a fifth grader. In the course of our conversation, he revealed that his father was a physician in the neuroscience department at the medical school in town. His father had been eager and generous in helping him with his project.

A little farther down the same row was another talented student. Adrianna, a recent immigrant attending one of the city's poorest

schools, had done a project on photosynthesis. She was shy and spoke in halting English about how she had gone to the public library on her own, found some books on photosynthesis, copied some of the pages on the library's copier, and pasted them to the rumpled poster board she'd purchased at CVS. She was clearly bright, had loads of initiative, and was very enthusiastic about her topic, but her knowledge of photosynthesis appeared limited. She had received no parental assistance whatsoever in assembling her project.

At the end of the day, I was called upon to objectively rate these two students, and many others, on the quality of their projects and presentations. On the basis of the criteria on my judging score sheet, there was absolutely no question that James's project was superior and likely the winner, while Adrianna's was at or toward the bottom of the pack. But what was I really rating? Their own skill and knowledge or their parents' social and economic capital and ability to advance their children's academic careers? Here were two students only in fifth grade, and the advantages one enjoyed outside of school relative to the other appeared already to have determined their life prospects, regardless of anything that might happen in school.

In the future, James would benefit from extraordinary supports and opportunities at every stage of his education. He would enjoy stable, comfortable housing; comprehensive health care; excellent nutrition; safety; and security. In the 80 percent of his waking hours spent outside of school, James would be showered with stimulating, enriching opportunities ranging from afterschool programs to summer camps, tutoring, travel, access to learning technologies, SAT prep, specialized sports training, and much, much more. His life out of school would be a veritable buffet of enrichment intentionally designed by his parents to provide him with maximum advantage in the competition for elite college admission and high-paying, prestigious employment. Should he experience adversity along the way, his family would provide a network of connections and resources to aid him in overcoming his challenges. With such help, he would, in all probability, not only achieve at high levels in school and extracurricular activities but ultimately be very successful in college and his career.

By contrast, Adrianna, through no fault of her own, would very likely face a legion of obstacles to her success, obstacles common to children with her social-economic status. Her family could be forced to move regularly to find safe, affordable housing. She would likely be the victim of anti-immigrant and ethnic discrimination and would also be likely to experience a number of childhood traumas, including witnessing violence in her neighborhood. She would get her health care from the emergency room when she desperately needed it but wouldn't receive basics like dental care. Her diet would feature a lot of processed foods because her neighborhood is a food desert. The water she drinks may be unsafe, and the air she breathes polluted. Adrianna is every bit as capable in the abstract as James, but her circumstances conspire against her. She won't have much access to enrichment opportunities outside of school, in the afternoons, on weekends, and in the summer, because her mother has to work two jobs just to make ends meet. She will be obligated to miss school fairly often to take care of younger siblings because of the high cost of daycare. She'll have a nearly impossible time competing with the likes of James. In due course, she may get discouraged, drop out, and go to work in a low-paying job just so she can provide the family with some income. Through no fault of her own, or lack of talent or grit, Adrianna's college and career prospects are not bright.

What is clear is that these two children of comparable aptitude and cultural endowments will be profoundly advantaged or disadvantaged by their life's circumstances, by the existence of poverty and discrimination. Their odds of being successful are widely different, and on average, schooling is simply too weak an intervention to overcome these odds. We've always had inequality in America. There is evidence that these problems are worsening and urgently need interrogation and remedy. Nonetheless, Americans, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, have long sustained a belief that our country is a meritocracy, an equal opportunity society. And what makes it a society where anyone's talent and effort can propel them to the top? Our public education system. The school system is supposed to lift everyone up to a "level playing field," give everyone a fair chance to

succeed in spite of pervasive inequality. Horace Mann, the founder of modern public education, said it best and first: “[E]ducation above all else is the great balance wheel of society.” But more than a century and a half from Mann’s time, the balance wheel effect hasn’t materialized. School systems have tried their best to perform the balance wheel function but with limited success, even when they strive to provide equal treatment for all students—which is rare because, unfortunately, much of our school history has been characterized by unequal, unfair treatment of the most disadvantaged students, compounding the adverse circumstances of their lives and making it impossible for all but a relative few to defy the odds.

This book addresses the question of what we do if the whole premise of public schools as the great equalizer is flawed. The data indicate that this is exactly the case. Despite individual examples to the contrary, the institution of public K–12 schooling, which occupies only 20 percent of a student’s waking hours between ages five and eighteen, is, on average, not nearly a strong enough treatment to create an equal opportunity society. If we accept this as true (and if you doubt it, look at the persistent, strong correlation between educational opportunity, achievement, and attainment with socioeconomic status), what do we do?¹ Americans have been struggling with this question since the authors of the “Nation at Risk” report sounded a clarion call that our public education system was, in 1983, woefully outdated, outmoded, and uncompetitive. The report’s rhetoric was powerful and urgent: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” and “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a *rising tide of mediocrity*.” The authors of this report and many others at that time called for a transformation in US schooling. We might well do the same again today, because we are still a nation at risk.

A few years after the jarring “Nation at Risk” report, the nation’s governors and business leaders met at President George H. W. Bush’s Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, and pledged to do whatever was needed to fix the schools so that they might deliver

on Mann's ideal. They did so because they saw our system of schooling as a human capital development system, but one that was badly flawed, incapable of preparing this nation's youth, and thus our society and economy, to compete effectively in the twenty-first century.

In response to "Nation at Risk" and other calls for change, "fix the schools" became the mantra. The theory of action was, and in many quarters continues to be, that US schools were failing to achieve Mann's ideal simply because they were inefficient and ineffective. The belief in the myth that schooling can yield a meritocracy in spite of pervasive inequality was durable. Proponents of various ideological stripes insisted that the schools were subpar for a variety of different reasons. One school of thought was that schools were intentionally designed to reproduce the existing social order. Failure was deliberately built into the model. More mainstream critics believed that schools simply weren't managed well, were too unionized, while still others pointed to educators being not sufficiently savvy about teaching and learning, while still others blamed poor performance on inadequate school funding. If we could fix these problems, school optimization advocates (and full disclosure, I was certainly one) argued, we would transform the schools to the point where they would become the instruments of equity that Mann had envisioned. Schools would finally become the great equalizers.

States, starting with Kentucky, launched the now nearly three-decades-old era of standards-based reform, a massive initiative, backed by business leaders, governors, the federal government, major philanthropies, state governments, and ultimately, local school systems. The origin of this movement was an economic imperative—build a human capital system to drive the growth of a twenty-first-century, high-skills, high-knowledge economy. In a felicitous coincidence, the interests of big business converged with the interests of equity advocates. There was widespread embrace of the belief that the nation needed a system to educate all (and "all means all," as Kentucky reformers asserted) children to high levels of skill and knowledge so that they could successfully participate in a twenty-first-economy that was rapidly shedding its low-skill, low-knowledge jobs.

This was a radical reform, a dramatic revision in policy makers' expectations for US public education. A system that heretofore had only educated a few elite students to top levels was now being charged with and held accountable for educating all children to top, world-class levels. The school reform movement was powerful and sweeping, ultimately embracing all the states and becoming the official policy of the United States government. It was incredibly ambitious. It had widespread support. It was a movement driven by competitive economic pressure and ideals of excellence and equity, coupled with a yearning for continuous improvement. The strategies employed such as standards, assessments, accountability, data use, focus on teaching, choice, and turning around chronically underperforming schools were all commonsense approaches utilized in various other sectors. In the end, however, these strategies proved necessary but not sufficient to achieve the goals of education reform.

In my home state, Massachusetts, I was lucky enough to be able to play a role in this movement, first as head of a local education fund, then as cofounder of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (where I had a role in creating the historic Education Reform Act of 1993), then as a member of the state board of education (on two separate occasions for two different governors from different political parties), next as chairman of the state board of education, and finally as secretary of education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In all of these roles and others, I had an impact on the policy and practice of reform in a state that became known for the strength of its school reform work.

Massachusetts enacted education reform more effectively than most other places, and the results showed and were celebrated far and wide. I was proud of our carefully crafted reforms. As a reform leader, I celebrated our comparative success, not only in leading the nation but in arriving at or near the top of the world on some achievement measures. However, I was painfully aware that while we celebrated literally decades of first-place National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) finishes, we have some of the widest achievement gaps in the nation. All of our high rankings are based on achievement scores,

calculated by averaging, thereby concealing the fact that we still have hundreds of thousands of youth being under- or mis-educated, totally unprepared for success. Our gaps between various subgroups were and continue to be larger than comparable gaps in most other states. And we had set out to achieve “all means all”! By this standard, I realized, we’d have to view our education reform efforts as a failure. And the results, nationally, were no better.

In fact, nationally, the results were even worse. After a quarter century of education reform, we, as a nation, have merely made modest progress in raising student achievement, closing gaps, and preparing our young people for success. We have come nowhere close to putting all of our children on an equal footing or preparing all of them to participate effectively in today’s economy. We have left millions of children behind because we have not provided anywhere near all of them with the skills, knowledge, and disposition to be successful as workers in a twenty-first-century, high-skills, high-knowledge economy, as citizens in a complex democracy, family heads, and lifelong learners.

When education reform was all said and done, we still had a nearly iron-law correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement and attainment.

Where did we go wrong?

We tinkered with schooling but made no changes to the basic design and fundamental premises behind our school system. We tinkered with the legacy school system, accepting its factory-model structure and norms, its one-size-fits-all pedagogy, its peculiarly outdated calendar and schedule, its monopolistic bureaucracy, and its avoidance of attention to the impact of poverty, racism, and the myriad factors affecting if and how children show up at school. What David Tyack and Larry Cuban called the “grammar of schooling” remained intact and ultimately proved, even in the face of massive and expensive reform efforts, to be unequal to the challenges of the twenty-first-century.² We had set massively ambitious policy goals of educating all children to internationally benchmarked standards of skill and knowledge, and yet we had failed to change the fundamental system of schooling that had been designed for another purpose in another era.

I used to begin my Education Reform class at Harvard with an unvarnished look at the underlying theory of action behind the school reform movement. I'd start with a profile of two students: one, my youngest daughter, and the other a hypothetical classmate of hers from the same urban public school system. I'd paint a picture of inequality similar to the one illustrated by the lives of James and Adrianna. The inequalities afflicting the Adriannas of this world begin early, go deep, and persist. In class, I'd describe how my daughter, Addy, started kindergarten with two parents, having heard millions more words than many of her classmates, having been read to in English nightly, having already traveled all over the world, having had quality day care, great nutrition, and total stability and safety, while her classmate Marcus had none of that and quite likely many traumatic events with which to cope. The school system was supposed to erase these differences in advantage and disadvantage, but it was failing to do that because it was never designed for that purpose. School reform would have to fix the system to achieve the recently recognized imperative to educate all students to the level heretofore reserved for the elite few. That was a tall order.

Despite the fact that Marcus has the same aptitude as Addy and his parents have high aspirations for him, the probability that he will enjoy academic and career success and a middle-class life are far below those of Addy. He may well overcome these odds, but the data suggest he has a very steep hill to climb.

I knew this from my own experience as a child of privilege. I came from a comfortable, not wealthy, upper-middle-class family. Through the accident of birth, I inherited access to the opportunities and supports that have enabled me to be relatively successful. When, in college, I came to the realization that I'd landed on third base not because I'd hit a triple but because I'd been lucky, I dedicated my career to equity and education.

But it took me decades of work in the field to understand, viscerally and not just intellectually, that fixing a deeply flawed school system requires not only attacking the most obvious markers of racism, inequitable funding, and segregation, not only strengthening the

transactions, called teaching and learning, that transpire between teachers, curricula, and students but dismantling the basic, factory architecture of our one-size-fits-all school system that was designed to, at best, provide the same treatment to everybody and thereby reproduce the existing social order.

As I returned to Harvard after my tenure as secretary, with equal measures of pride and disappointment in Massachusetts' educational performance, I realized all too well that our reforms of schooling had been necessary but not sufficient to fundamentally change student outcomes. I had a strong conviction that schools alone, as currently constituted, could not achieve the policy goal of "all means all." I was convinced that we needed to re-envision our education system and conceive of a broader child development and education system that would genuinely be designed to achieve the purpose of preparing all students for success. We could no longer tinker with our early-twentieth-century Model T, our factory-based system of schooling, because its design was based on the early-twentieth-century need to prepare only the small number of students, roughly 10 percent, to do the high-knowledge jobs, leaving 90 percent ready for routine factory work.

I realized that if we were to deliver on the rhetorical promise of all means all, we would have to redesign our entire approach to preparing young people to become adults. While we knew what wasn't working and for whom in our current system, we were still unclear on what would work more effectively. How would we redesign education systems to achieve our ambitious policy goals calling for a high standard of achievement for all? What would be the design principles? What would the architecture look like? I was convinced that we needed an education redesign lab to lead a process to answer these and other questions, to change the national conversation on education to something broader and bolder. The experience of that lab forms the basis for the work described in this book.

At the heart of our work would be a challenge to the underlying design principle of our current system: that fairness is achieved by giving everyone the same treatment. While that sounds logical, equity (fairness) and equality (the same for everyone) are not always

identical. An equitable system would give everyone what they need to achieve a uniformly high standard of achievement. If everyone gets what they need, then all children, and all means all, have a genuine opportunity to achieve success. Children's needs differ, so not everyone will receive the same curriculum, instruction, services, and supports from school. Their educational programs will need to vary to reflect their particular needs.

Imagine a child arriving in the United States from Syria. Her father had been a doctor, but the ongoing violence had cost his job and interrupted her education. Just getting to the United States has taken great resilience, but she's placed in a grade commensurate with her age despite speaking no English and missing foundational subjects. She will have a very different set of needs than her classmate, a privileged child of affluent parents who has enjoyed a lifetime of advantages that allow him to easily move forward in the dominant culture. Our school system should prepare both of these children for success, but that can't happen if we treat them both the same. We wouldn't do that in a hospital: give everyone, irrespective of their ailment, the same treatment because we thought that was fair or because it was just easier for us as adults to do the same thing for everyone. No. We'd diagnose each incoming patient and then prescribe what would be needed to get that patient to the standard of health. So, in schooling, we should meet children where they are and give them what they need to be successful. To be explicit, the girl from Syria will need different forms of instruction and more instructional time to meet her learning goals. We need to create an education system that can be responsive and customized to meet individual needs like hers.

Of course, this is much easier said than done. Building systems of opportunity and support to meet children where they are and give them what they need is indeed a monumental challenge, and the school reform movement was unable to do that. We have yet to see any community build, at scale, a cradle-to-career, longitudinal, education and child development pipeline that ensures the success of all children. The core of that pipeline needs to be an integrated, formal education system that includes preschool, kindergarten, through grade 12 and

postsecondary education, leading to a job. Wrapped around that pipeline needs to be a rich insulating fabric of opportunities and supports, comparable to those enjoyed by affluent families. Such resources, supports, and opportunities must be available to all children because they matter in preparing young people to be successful. For those who don't have access to such services and opportunities via the accident of birth, we must create public systems that provide comparable services, thus leveling the playing field with respect to opportunity to succeed.

This twenty-first-century design work, building a child development and education system that meets the needs of individuals and society, is, I am convinced, the most important work of our times. This book aims to present some mechanisms and tools for doing this complex work collaboratively, in ways that work for all concerned. In the end, this is how we will get to a prosperous future and the ideal of "all means all."

—*Paul Reville*