The rhetoric surrounding the need for educational reform in American is numbing. Over the past several years educators and politicians alike point to the failings of an education paradigm that attempts to be all things to all people as the nation speeds into the 21st century. This system is simply not attainable. It is an understanding of this paradigm that contributes to one’s ability to define what an educated person is, and what kind of Americans our educational system should aim to produce. This translates into an articulate vision and understanding of what education should be. To this end, what must be in place to ensure that this nation is properly preparing students for their collective and individual futures and not based on our past? Through the dismissal of dogmatic elements of pedantic standardized curricula and the adoption of more individualized approaches fit to each student’s interests, a stake can be claimed that provides an improved educational soil for the nation based on philosophical and social relevancy.

20th century American education developed and, in fact, was defined based on the needs of an agro-industrial society. The educational system was cultivated to support a working class America in which all citizens could become productive, skilled laborers at its outset. A noble enterprise, indeed, but during the latter half of the century a shift began. Post-war America witnessed an increasing percentage of citizens desiring access to higher education for the purposes of advancing America’s position as global superpower while, at the same time, improving the role that the individual could best play in society. In fact, the essential question being asked among secondary school students was not whether they would attend college and university but which one.
This fundamental shift in expectations exceeded the pace of change. While the past half-century has witnessed growing expectations for the youth of America, educational reform has not met this call to arms, so to speak. Change agents have not penetrated and moved the boulder of education reform in the nation. Rather, a staggering amount of funds have been directed at the problem of how to better prepare our students for a changing world without nearly enough thought as to how this money should be best spent. Instead of addressing and enacting effective educational reform, the country has earmarked funds for those who might not be able to attain the new American dream of a college degree without federal, state and local assistance. The underprivileged and under-addressed, for instance, have gained a disproportional amount of attention and funding to raise the quality of their educational program to enhance their chances of obtaining a college degree if they so choose to take this path. As a result, other students have been hampered by a system attempting to equalize the playing field through disproportionate spending. This works against basic principles of competition that are interwoven into the American human fabric and, frankly, inescapable.

In order to best prepare students for an unimaginable future that requires the American educational system to prepare our children for jobs that do not even exist yet, it requires championing educational reform grounded in the spirit of entrepreneurialism, creativity and imagination through the lens of pluralism and heterogeneity. With the arrival of the 21st century comes the realization that we have a populous primarily rooted in service industries and entrepreneurial enterprises, not agro-industrial pursuits. Pat Bassett (2012), the outgoing President of NAIS, recently identified six key elements to fulfilling 21st century expectations for high quality schooling that he suggests all schools and school leaders consider: character, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and cosmopolitanism. All worthy,
bedrock principles, these elements require a new approach to teaching and learning that are based in a celebratory, Jeffersonian approach calling for the equality of opportunity for academic advancement in our country.

American education would be best served by focusing on the individual student and his/her unique talents. Through differentiated instruction educators should aid students in understanding how and what they best learn, based on their innate intelligences, and leveraging their asymmetrical strengths in both the classroom and greater society. In essence, teachers in American schools need to teach the way in which students learn. Embracing Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, we better understand that all people have unique gifts, talents and/or skills that need to be understood, nurtured, leveraged and celebrated. As stated in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Gardner concludes,

> Ultimately, the educational plans that are pursued need to be orchestrated across various interest groups of the society so that they can, taken together, help the society to achieve its larger goals. Individual profiles must be considered in the light of goals pursued by the wider society; and sometimes, in fact, individuals with gifts in certain directions must nonetheless be guided along other, less favored paths, simply because the needs of the culture are particularly urgent in that realm at that time. The synthetic ability entailed in this form of decision making involves its own blend of intelligences—if not a special form of intelligence. It is important that a society find some way of training, and then using, those abilities that permit a vision of a large and complex whole. (Gardner, 1983, p. 392)

So what should an educated person be? An educated person must be an individual with intimate knowledge of his or her own strengths and intelligences capable of becoming a self-defined productive member of our American democratic society, a nation based on individual rights and pursuits. Not all students can or should attend four-year colleges and universities; the
melting pot concept cannot truly sustain itself. There is a *best* next step in the life journey for all adolescents as they complete their formal education and pursue their passions, embrace their talents and exercise their rights to become what they were designed to be regardless of their societal conditions.

As Gardner posits in recognizing the underlying tension,

> First of all, there must be a general strategic decision: does one play from strength, does one bolster weakness, or does one attempt to work along both tracks at the same time? Naturally this decision must be made in terms of the resources available, as well as of the overall goals of both the society and the individuals most directly involved. (Gardner, 1983, p. 388)

It is necessary for American education to return to an equal opportunity approach calling on universal fair and equal distribution of expenditures for all students in the public system. For those students willing to engage in competitive pursuits in the race to the top, they will be rewarded with an increasing number of educational opportunities and, ultimately, advancement in society. Core socio-philosophical elements of the current century were born in models of late-20th century capitalism and competitive advancement, and it is now the responsibility of our education system to prepare our students for the global, pragmatic life beyond formal schooling. It is irresponsible to *not* prepare our students to compete and succeed in an emerging, unimaginined world, no matter what their ultimate role and fate.

To do this, education reform in this country must undergo what creativity expert and author Sir Kenneth Robinson (2006) describes as not an educational *evolution* but an educational *revolution*:

> Every education system in the world is being reformed at the moment, and it’s not enough. Reform is no use anymore because that’s simply improving a broken model. What we need…is not
evolution but a revolution in education… this has to be transformed into something else. (Robinson, 2006, 04:52)

Robinson posits that a swift, radical re-imagination of what schools are, and what they could be, is necessary to cultivate creativity, acknowledge and celebrate multiple types of intelligence, and get the best out of people. He believes that the current public education system is educating students out of their creativity and, in fact, creativity must be viewed as equally important in education as literacy. Robinson asserts that many people go through their entire lives having no real sense of what their talents may be, or if they have any to speak of. These talents, however, must be harnessed in order to aid in assisting every single person in realizing and, perhaps, achieving their potential in the modern world.

As such, relevancy of and interest in content to the student supersedes the rote transmittal of accumulated knowledge and skills as perhaps the primary revolutionary focus beyond the current, slow pace of change hampering education reform in America. While there may be some baseline information and skills that children should be exposed to and master in the early, formative years (such as reading, writing and arithmetic, for example), schools and educators have the awesome responsibility of creating teaching-learning environments that engage each and every student in fundamentally interested ways. As John Dewey (1916) states in Democracy and Education, "if knowledge comes from the impressions made upon us by natural objects, it is impossible to procure knowledge without the use of objects which impress the mind" (Dewey, 1916, pp. 217-218). Nearly a century later, the aforementioned principle still rings true. Effective learning must be relevant and impressive to each individual student.

Returning to Dr. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, students are gifted in different directions, asymmetrically excellent, and in possession of minds that need to be fed in such an engaged manner that relevancy is front and center to the learning process. If students can
make personal and profound connections to the curricula developed in consultation with their interests, there is a much greater chance that they will flourish in the learning process and, thus, society. Creativity, imagination and entrepreneurialism will become hallmarks of this educational paradigm; a necessary approach to education as we speed into the 21st century, an unimaginable future for us all.

With that said, the role of foundational, standardized curricular cornerstones established during the early years of schooling has both place and purpose. Acquiring basic human skills as tools for higher order thinking and learning through Bloom’s (1956) Taxonomy are necessary and needed. Once a common, primary knowledge has been captured, students will be more inclined to connect with society through inquiry and innovative thought. To determine when and how this shift takes place is a conundrum of sorts, for each learner reaches developmental milestones at different times. For now, may it be understood that as students move through their primary schooling years they will engage in less standardized content and skill-building and more relevancy-based curricula. A mindful balance in the delivery of curricula must be maintained in such a way that students are allowed to explore and make connections within a greater set of boundaries as younger learners. As socio-educational development continues, students must be given the latitude to better define and understand on their own (thesis), shift an understanding (antithesis), and then create new understanding (synthesis) based on prior collaborative knowledge. Rooted in German philosopher Georg Hegel’s (1821) dialectical materialism, John Dewey (1916) believes that cycling through the constructivist process of human understanding is a key ingredient to the educated mind and person. There is great merit in this assertion.
Professor Eleanor Duckworth (1987) of the Harvard Graduate School of Education echoes similar constructivist sentiments through her life’s study of Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget’s work. In “The Having of Wonderful Ideas”, Duckworth connects the need for constructivist learning to the role of teachers in the educational process. She states,

It is important for us as teachers to attempt that insider’s view because it is critical to be able to make connections between children’s meaning and our own… the importance of teachers’ capacity to appreciate what a given experience means to another person… An important part of a teacher’s work is to make connections with other people’s ways of giving meaning to the same experience… to have them learn something together and pay careful attention to their own and each other’s responses… As teachers, we need to respect the meaning our students are giving to the events that we share. In the interest of making connections between their understanding and ours, we must adopt an insider’s view; seek to understand their sense as well as help them understand ours. (Duckworth, 1987, pp. 99, 105, 112)

Duckworth’s belief that the core of the teaching-learning relationship matters cannot be overemphasized. As she aptly articulates, “Learning in school need not, and should not, be different from children’s natural forms of learning about the world. We need only broaden and deepen their scope by opening up parts of the world that children may not, on their own, have thought of thinking about” (Duckworth, 1987, p. 49).

As noted in a previous unpublished, collaborative paper by Conrad et al. (2012), To that end, a school’s ability to maximize the potential of students by both finding thoughtful ways to develop a level of knowledge already proven to support order and progress in society, along with ensuring opportunities to explore some concepts more deeply despite the script, is what equates to good schooling. (Conrad, Harris, Hoffman, Raser & Rhodes, 2012, p. 4)
Thinking about this in terms of change and relevancy, it is an important growth consideration in a student’s life. It is necessary to understand and accept that students learn, grow, develop at different rates and require various balances in their educational programs. While there may be a greater need for younger students to be exposed to more foundational elements in their early schooling, as they age relevancy becomes a greater consideration to them. Students take that foundation laid before them and begin to make greater sense of it as it works for them. Students begin to construct knowledge in a completely individualized manner based on what they know and how they learn, which is unique and differentiated from other students. So, in essence, the change process is necessary and based on individual constructivism and relevancy.

So then what is holding up the school change process? As Robert Evans (1996), organizational psychologist and director of the Human Relations Service, articulates,

[T]he futility of school change is legendary. Perhaps no American institution has been reformed more often, with less apparent effect, than the school. Critiques of current performance, calls for radical reform, and ambitious initiatives for change have been chronic, cyclical—and, it seems, ephemeral. Innovative ideas and promising projects have repeatedly failed to move beyond ardent advocacy and local promise to full, broad adoption. The structure of schooling and the practice of teaching have remained remarkably stable. (Evans, 1996, p. xi)

Taking a moment to look beyond the traditional public school realm, many independent, parochial and charter school leaders are afforded attractive flexibility in re-imagining the shape and scope of teaching and learning within their schools. Supportive community constituents, such as an attuned and involved board of trustees, a confident parent body, and a progressive faculty ready to adopt and adapt new approaches to teaching and learning that are truly student-centered, are the ingredients to a successful endorsement of school leadership in becoming a true institutional change agent spirited by one’s core socio-philosophical thinking. Today, this is not
just a possibility but a necessity. To place a provisional stake in the ground and commit to
uniting a community of learners for the common good of best preparing students for their future,
not from our rusting past, is a moral imperative for all school leaders today. The proverbial
question then remains, how do we best do this?

“Here is a simple recipe for leading change. First, pour a truckload of evidence into an
ungreased container. Stir in a crock full of inspirational rhetoric. Add two heaping portions of
administrative imperatives. Finally, dump into the mix precisely one ton of fear. Bring to a boil”
(Reeves, 2009, p. 1). As author and researcher Douglas Reeves (2009) quips at the beginning of
Leading Change in Your School, if this were an effective recipe, then change leadership really
would not be a very difficult proposition.

If we have learned anything over the past several decades of
research in change leadership, it is that evidence, commands, and
fears are insufficient to create change at either the individual or the
organizational level. Sustainable change requires a reorientation of
priorities and values so that the comfort and convenience of the
individual is no longer the measure by which the legitimacy of
change is considered. Rather, we respond to a vision of change that
is so compelling and whose benefits for others are so
overwhelming that we see students and colleagues not as cogs in
the machine but as stars in a galaxy that outshines our fears and
dwarfs our apprehensions. (Reeves, 2009, p. 5)

In this galaxy of American education, schools and the many people associated with them
must place the individual student first. By truly centering the needs of our students and nation in
our acknowledgement of a rapidly changing 21st century world, the citizenry can and should
commit to revolutionary approaches in national education reform. With this commitment comes
the pledge to position the next and future generations of American students to discover and
leverage their own talents in a globalized society, one that will hopefully be led by the ingenuity,
creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of the American mind nurtured in classrooms all across this
great land.
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