



Education Redesign: Building a New Model

Section 3: Analyzing Failure

Video 2: Problems with the Old Engine

PAUL REVILLE: So I'm going to ask the question here. What's the problem with the old engine? What are its weaknesses and shortcomings? Now, I've talked in general about the system design being a problem. But I want to drill down a little deeper on that.

We've said it's a factory model. And factory models clearly have their limitations. And we want to figure out what is it about that factory model that's problematic in the world of education.

Well, first of all, I would argue the "one size fits all" presumption of this system. In a factory, you like to take in material. You like to have quality control to make sure that the material coming into the factory is uniform. And then you give a uniform high-quality process that then goes through the factory, and then you can insist on a uniform, high-quality outcome or output from the factory.

But we know-- and again, looking back to the early literacy slide-- that our children come in at very different levels to the system, with very different assets, advantages, and disadvantages in their lives outside of school. And yet, we have a system that treats them as though they're all the same. And that just isn't working.

So we need to differentiate. We need a system that's going to meet each and every child where he or she is and give them what they need in order to be successful. We need to recognize those fundamental differences that children bring in.

So we have some students have seen or heard 30 million, 50 million words less than others when they first enter kindergarten. They're going to need more time and more literacy exposure in order to catch up. If some of our students come in in middle school from a third-world country not speaking any English and basically behind even in their own language in core subjects, we're going to need to differentiate and give them what they need to catch up in core subjects and to learn English, so that they can be proficient and compete with US students who are in the school system and have been for their entire lives.

So differentiating is important. Another factor that we're going to have to come to grips with-- and this is a tough one in our society-- because again, there's not a lot of appetite for expanding school time and expanding the school year. But we're asking schools in our society to do more than we've ever asked them to do before.

First and foremost, we're asking them to achieve world class standards. We're benchmarking our standards against the best in the world, and we're asking our schools to get not just a few students, but to get all of our students to levels-- again, heretofore reserved for the elite few-- and it's taking them much longer to do that. So one of the phenomenon, not surprising that we have in our American schools these days is the narrowing of the curriculum.

We've asked them and we're enforcing it through our accountability system to achieve world-class standards in English, math, and science, and they're finding,

understandably, that it takes much more of the school day to get all students to that high level than it would have taken just to get a few students to that high level. And since we haven't, as we should have done, expanded the school day to allow for the time necessary to achieve this much higher goal, we've had to steal the time from other subjects.

So subjects like history and civics, and the arts, and foreign languages, and physical education-- critically important subjects-- have suffered. The curriculum has narrowed. And that's not what we want for our children.

At the same time, as we need to be attending to those non-measured subjects, there are a whole bunch of other subjects that various kinds of experts are strongly advising us to pay attention to. The latest is social and emotional learning. People are identifying that the most successful people in our society are not only high academic achievers, but they have high levels of qualities like executive function or resilience or interpersonal skills, the capacity to collaborate work with others.

And we need to spend more time in schools attending to those aspects that prepare them to be successful. In other words, as I think we all know sort of intuitively, that success isn't just a function of how much you know, but it's what you can do with what you know-- having personality and the disposition and the resilience and the persistence to achieve that, and figuring out how schools can contribute to that. In addition, we have others that argue we have a whole suite of 21st-century skills-- collaboration, high levels of communication, international awareness, creativity, capacity to do high level problem-solving that we should be paying attention to.

And then at the same time, we have this exaggerated pension in our society to assign everything to the schools that families and communities are unable to do themselves, particularly given that the role of families and the role of communities has changed so dramatically in recent years. So whether it's nutrition, or driver education, or sex education, or violence reduction, or treating outstanding medical problems like obesity, everybody thinks nothing of lumping those into the school curriculum in some way, and saying in addition to everything else we're asking you to do, would you do this too, please?

And while that's understandable, and would be ideal if schools could take care of all that, we haven't fundamentally changed that basic early 20th century structure which gives us only 20% of the waking hours of students while they're in those ages, kindergarten through grade 12, in school. And it just isn't enough time to get those jobs done. So we're making choices and we're narrowing the curriculum and we're not doing everything we can to prepare them.

Some students are lucky enough to have families and communities and other supports outside of school that give them some of those other skills and knowledge and disposition that enable them to be successful. And others don't come by that naturally, and that's part of the problem. Another problem that we've had with our system and with our notions of reform after the past 20 years is that we've underestimated the power and impact and influence of poverty.

We get scared to talk about this issue because some people will accuse us of making excuses or saying that demography is destiny, but really what we're doing and what we should be doing as policymakers is doing the same thing that we ask our teachers to

do. Look at the data on your performance. So when we as policymakers look at the data on our performance, we see we implemented a variety of policy strategies with the goal in mind of improving student performance and preparing all of our students in our society to be successful. And while we've seen some modest improvements, in general, we have not achieved that goal.

So the question is, what is it, for example, that has enabled this iron law correlation between poverty and educational achievement and attainment to stay in place despite our best informed strategies and intentions? And we need to have a closer look at that. And in my view, we've underestimated the impact of poverty and other disadvantages.