

Education Redesign: Building a New Model

Section 3: Analyzing Failure

Video 1: Why We Failed

PAUL REVILLE: So the question is, why did we fail? We had good intentions. We set high standards. In many of our states-- I'm proud to say in Massachusetts-- we made substantial investments. We worked hard to get the results. But we got something wrong, because we're far from having achieved all means all right now. So I raise the question, was it the wrong goal? Were we simply too ambitious? Should we not be trying to get all students to a level where they can be successful in college and career? I would, as I'm sure most of you would, argue definitively that this was the right goal. It was absolutely the right goal, but somehow we were unable to attain it.

So did we choose the wrong strategies? Well I'm not so sure that's the right argument either. I think we've got a lot of strategies right. Particularly those strategies that focused on work within schools. We focus, for example, more than we ever had on teaching and learning. And that critical equation that goes on, that transaction that goes on between teacher and student and curriculum. We've made huge efforts to improve the quality of teaching. To give teachers more data to improve the quality of their instruction. To be more selective in terms of people entering the teaching profession. To provide higher quality mentoring and induction and professional development, and high quality evaluation for teachers. So all of that is good work and important work, but I would argue it doesn't go far enough.

So the next question I'd raise is, was it the wrong delivery system? In other words, the very system of public education. The system of schooling that we have described in the United States and use since the early 20th century. A system that was designed, incidentally, for a very different purpose. At the dawn of the 20th century, when we had large numbers of immigrants coming into the country. We had large numbers of folks moving from the countryside into the cities. We had a burgeoning industrial economy, and the factory model was the model of the day. And we built schools that look like factories, because we needed to batch process, mass produce education. And get everybody ready as quickly as possible to be American citizens. And to be workers in a low skill, low knowledge economy, that really demanded from most people only routine kind of work.

We created a system that delivered a bell curve distribution of educational achievement over a fairly low center. And that system served us pretty well, arguably, for the first three quarters of the 20th century. At that time, when we hit the last quarter of the 20th century, we began to realize-- and I say we people like governors, heads of businesses, a lot of educators-- that the system of education that we had-- the system that, for example, consumed only 20% of children's waking hours between kindergarten and grade 12-- was not delivering the kind of success that we needed in order to be internationally competitive.

The jobs that we have been preparing people for-- low skill, low knowledge, routine kinds of jobs-- were rapidly disappearing from the American economy. You could no longer drop out of school and get a job and enjoy middle class earnings that would enable you to support a family in our society. We began to realize in reports like the Nation at Risk report we're a clarion call for this. It said America's got to build a human

resource development system, an education and child development system, that does for the vast majority of students what we've heretofore been able to do only for an elite few. Because foreign competition, international competition, and automation is eliminating the low skill, low knowledge jobs. Nobody's going to pay Americans at the very high levels that we're accustomed to receive to do jobs that people elsewhere will do for a far lower price, or we can develop a machine to do them.

So we began to become aware that our old Model T version of an education system simply wasn't powerful enough to do the job that we needed done for the 21st century. Even for the late 20th century. That was an engine that was built to go 30, 40 miles an hour. And as we look to the future, that high skill high knowledge kind of economy, we were looking at the situation where we would need an engine that would go 100, 120 miles an hour. And we tried to make the old engine work. We strapped it with standards. We put it under a great deal of pressure. We stuck a carburetor of school choice onto it, hoping that would make the difference.

We did notice some performance improvements. Just as earlier in the 20th century, when we'd added kindergarten or added middle schools. We had made some difference in the performance of schools. But overall, it wasn't close to delivering on all means all. And despite our best intentions, we have come a long way. But we have a long, long way to go.