

Winning the Race to the Top: What are the best reform strategies for K-12 education?

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I grew up in the Middle East. My parents invested heavily in our education, sending us to the best schools. They sent us to British and American Schools, because they believed that British and American schools were the best in the world. I came to the U.S. believing that all the schools in the U.S. were exactly like my high school in Amman, Jordan: academically rigorous, athletically competitive, and a true community whose doors never closed.

When I started working with youth in the U.S., I was shocked at the state of our public schools. In the students, the teachers, and the administrators, I saw a lack of discipline, a lack of actual teaching, a lack of accountability, and overall a lack of pride. There was no sense of teamwork, or goals that everyone aspired to.

It is a disgrace that we are number 48, and a kid from a low-income family living in China is getting a better public education than a kid in Clarkston, Georgia. In our state, your zip code determines whether you will go to college. We have kids who graduate from high school reading on a 3rd grade level. We have honor students who can't get above a 650 on the SAT. We have teachers who are passing the kids through, coaches using athletes who are failing their classes, and administrators who look the other way.

I have always believed that your team is as strong as your weakest player. Our school system is only as strong as our weakest schools. We need to take some drastic steps from the top down. We need schools that don't close their doors: schools with innovative, engaging, high-quality academic and athletic after-school and summer programming available to all, to provide the academic and social support that low-income kids need.

There are several educational reforms that have been implemented across the country that work; there is no need to reinvent the wheel. The time has come for us to stop talking and start taking action, starting with our weakest schools. We need to bring in the strongest principals and most dynamic

teachers. We need to create an atmosphere where learning is esteemed, and hold the kids accountable to high standards.

I would:

1. Fire all the superintendents and principals. They can reapply for their old jobs if they want them. If they have been working in the system more than 15 years, need not reapply.
2. Put teachers on a rotation, every 3 years every teacher moves to a different school in a different zip code.
3. Develop partnerships with community organizations that can supplement school activities in afterschool hours, weekends, and summer time.
4. Develop a system where students realize that going to school is a privilege. Kids who don't want to learn can be placed in an alternative track. Three strikes and you're out.
5. Set higher standards for graduation. Make sure that students have adequate reading and writing skills before graduation from high school.