

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

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I have spent most of my adult life working with Communities In Schools, interacting with young people who are struggling in school. As a result, my thoughts on education reform come more from my heart than from policy development or research.

At the core of everything we do at Communities In Schools is a commitment to the importance of personal relationships...that every young person needs and deserves a one-on-one, caring relationship with an adult. It may, thus, seem ironic that the key strategy area outlined by Race to the Top that first caught my attention was the need for better data systems.

Someone, somewhere, keeps lists of the students who are in foster care, those young people who are coming out of the juvenile justice system, and the kids who are living in homeless shelters. We know these young people are very likely to drop out of school without extra supports; yet we still have difficulty identifying these students so they can be connected to services at their school. We cannot help these young people in special need if we cannot quickly identify them.

Building trusting relationships with young people takes time and persistence. Perhaps most frustrating for our staff people is trying to support the families who move frequently from school to school, or district to district. The young people in these families may not be on any agency's list, but their success in school is threatened with every transition. More sophisticated and accessible data systems would allow people in the schools to track students' particular needs and offer support in a more holistic way.

Second, as we design our education reforms, I hope we remember to listen to our young people and include them in the process of finding solutions. For three decades, I have had the opportunity to sit in sessions with students who are struggling in school and listened to their suggestions for how to improve their educational experience.

Always first on their list is getting rid of the teachers who “...are just collecting a paycheck” and finding more teachers who will demonstrate that they feel responsible for every student’s success.

Young people also tell me they are hungering for more opportunities to take responsibility for the quality of their school and to provide leadership in their communities. They want a consistent, *rationale* structure of rules and expectations. They like clean, well-equipped facilities with all the bells and whistles, but they would never trade a beautiful facility for a sense of belonging when they enter the building.

Last, I hope that the leaders who are shaping our reform strategies recognize the key roles of parents, businesses, civic groups, faith groups, public and private social service agencies and other nonprofits. I believe there still exists too much separation between schools and the rest of the community. Part of the responsibility for this divide belongs to the schools themselves...those schools who make parents feel unwelcome, who treat volunteers and outside agencies as hassles rather than supports...who want to dictate solutions to the rest of the community. An equal part, however, of the responsibility for this divide falls on the shoulders of the rest of the community...those people who have decided they can discard thousands of young people along the way because “they’re not *our* children.” Any truly effective education reform is going to require new ways of partnering that unify and integrate the resources available across many sectors of our community. The schools cannot do it by themselves.