A Model for the Nation? School Reform in Douglas County, Colorado

By William J. Bennett

September 2013

Contents

Introduction…….…3

The Three C's:

Communication…….…6

Collegiality……....7

Competition……...8

The Douglas County School District……...9

The Reform Movement……...11

The Elements of the Strategic Plan ……13

Choice Scholarship Program……....13

World Class Education……15

Teacher Evaluation and Market-based Pay……...17

Conclusion…….. 20

Bibliography Available Upon Request

Introduction

April 2013 marked the 30th anniversary of the seminal "A Nation At Risk" report by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report warned in apocalyptic language the dangerous consequences of the parlous state of American education for America's standing and role in the world.

Thirty years and billions, indeed trillions, of dollars later (the annual U.S. primary and secondary education budget is approximately $630 billion), the country is just now making substantial progress. We are finally reaching consensus that too many of our schools are failing; that, after parents, teachers are the all-important factor in a child's education (not class size, curriculum, technology, etc…); and that accountability throughout the system is essential.

As is often the case in American education, the impetus for change was failure. Reports like "A Nation at Risk" and documentaries like "Waiting for Superman" highlight the alarming condition of many American schools, too often, inner city or urban schools. It's no longer solely a conservative, right wing critique; many on both sides agree that America is falling behind the rest of the world when it comes to primary and secondary education.

In reaction, a modern education movement has emerged, among Democrats and Republicans alike, focused heavily on reviving our failing schools. This is the reform *du jour*, as evidenced by the fact that even Hollywood has entered the fray with education reform movies like *Won't Back Down*. Nevertheless, the pursuit of excellence has still been elusive in most cases.

This modern reform approach is entirely appropriate; after all, such failures should never be tolerated. However, sometimes when we place too much attention on what's wrong with our education system, we can take our eyes and attention off the valuable and noteworthy successes. Many districts have tried to succeed. It's just that most have failed and very few have actually succeeded at going from average or below average to great. Those few deserve our attention.

When I was Secretary of Education and heard the story of Jamie Escalante, the great calculus teacher at Garfield High School in Los Angeles who single handedly transformed the lives of underprivileged, inner city youths, I immediately visited him myself and brought him back to the White House. Here was a teacher who needed to be held up as an example for teachers, educators, and parents around the country.

Likewise, when a set of reformers come along with bold, ambitious and important reforms they deserve to be noticed, held up, and, if successful, replicated. To paraphrase philosopher Immanuel Kant, the actual proves the possible, and it is by their example that we promote positive change.

In that light, perhaps the most promising array of education reforms underway in America today are occurring in the Douglas County School District (DCSD) of Colorado.

Nestled between Denver and Colorado Springs in a vibrant, growing part of suburban and rural Colorado, Douglas County has already attracted national attention for its comprehensive program of school choice covering both private and charters schools – full choice, as we used to call it. But its full set of reforms runs far deeper than just school choice.

Douglas County is undergoing massive, game-changing reforms, from the aforementioned choice program to designing its own state-of-the-art twenty-first century standards and curriculum to constructing from the ground up a teacher evaluation and accountability system tied to market-based, merit pay.

Douglas County's reforms are large, ambitious, and almost all encompassing. It is a venture forward in education to uncharted waters. It's bold, courageous, and daring. In the coming years, Douglas County will discover much about the boundaries and possibilities of large scale, multifaceted education reform, as will the rest of us. It will be, and has already been, challenged on a variety of grounds – intellectual, political, administrative, and practical. It is a great and daring experiment and worth our attention.

However, over the past several decades this country has seen a lot of bold, ambitious, and promising reforms fizzle and die. What gives Douglas County its staying power?

Upon closer examination, including several of my own visits to the district and interviews with students, parents, teachers, administrators, the superintendent, and the board of education, I came across what I believe makes Douglas County truly unique.

I've dubbed them the three C's: communication, collegiality and competition. (When I was Secretary of Education for President Reagan, I described my reform agenda as the Three C's: content, character and choice.)

Communication

Douglas County has taken on a gargantuan task. They are trying to do everything at once: full scale choice, system accountability, and innovative instructional methods and assessments. And yet, throughout my meetings and interactions in the district, it didn't feel like an imposition on the district, parents, or teachers, but rather a cooperatively developed and well thought out plan, developing from the community rather than being imposed on it.

The key to this is communication. The superintendent and district leaders are candid, open, and inclusive. The superintendent's sessions with teachers and administrators have an "ask whatever, say whatever" policy. The district's communications outreach to parents is extraordinary, including email conversations, newsletters, one-on-one meetings, radio show appearances, and frequent telephone town halls. "The magic elixir is parental involvement," said one member of Superintendent Fagen's advisory group.

From the outset of their reform agenda, the board, superintendent and district leaders have taken careful steps to openly communicate their ambitions and to involve teachers, parents and students in the entire process. I heard no complaints of back-room deals or secret negotiations. Those who disagree, and some do, can do so openly and without fear of retribution. I have visited hundreds of schools over the years and the level of openness and engagement from all parties within the district is unique and impressive.

Collegiality

Complimenting this communication is a remarkable amount of collegiality, or comity, on each side. Through my various meetings, it is clear that Superintendent Fagen and the board have carefully thought through what they are doing and made their reform agenda less of a mandate from on high and more of a grassroots conversation. The degree of collegiality among teachers, administrators, the board and the superintendent is highly impressive.

Granted, there is a vocal opposition in Douglas County made up of parents, teachers, politicians, and community activists, particularly when it comes to school choice. They can be loud and in some cases vitriolic. However, the board, Superintendent Fagen, and the other district leaders continue to operate in good faith, not trying to silence their opposition, but rather trying to engage them. Their goal is not to crush their opponents or undermine their standing in the district but to involve them in the conversation as the reform agenda moves forward. They may not agree, but they have a voice and that voice is respected.

One parent described the ethos of the school/parent/teacher environment to me as "good energy." "It's very clear that we are a partner with the parents," explained one teacher to me. "Every teacher is so willing to go that extra mile." And parents and students know that.

Competition

Historically speaking, education reform has been known to move at a glacial pace, and even more slowly in districts that already boast average or above average performance. Compared to Colorado and the rest of the nation, Douglas County performs above average. One would not typically expect a district of its quality to undergo such massive reforms. And yet, the school board and superintendent have a palpable desire to transform Douglas County from good to great. Their goal is to make Douglas County an elite, 21st century school district that is competitive not only with the best districts in the country, but also internationally. Too often complacency can be the norm in American education, not so in Douglas County.

This competitiveness permeates the entire system. Through its full choice program, Douglas County believes that competition within the district between private and public schools as well as homeschoolers will encourage improvement as schools face the possibility of losing students to better performing schools in the district. With its market-based pay system, DCSD hopes to attract the best teachers in the country through a competitive system that rewards high value teachers in short supply, while weeding out poor performing teachers.

As we delve into the details of Douglas County's reform agenda, you will notice these three C's – communication, collegiality, and competition – are the bulwark of Douglas County's success to date. What Douglas County is undertaking is remarkable in size and scope, but it might all be for naught without these three essential linchpins.

The Douglas County School District

Spanning approximately 850 square miles, Douglas County rests between Colorado's two largest cities, Denver and Colorado Springs. The district is a magnet for highly educated workers seeking to live within commuting distance to Colorado's main jobs hubs along the I-25 corridor. With a median household income right around $100,000, the district is one of the nation's most affluent. While the national unemployment rate lingers around seven or eight percent, the unemployment rate in Douglas County was 5.4% as of April 2013. Of all Douglas County students, only 11% are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Thirteen percent are Hispanic and 1.7 percent African-American.

The district is lopsidedly Republican. Forty-six percent of registered voters are Republican compared to nineteen percent Democrat.

Douglas County is Colorado's third largest district, enrolling 65,000 students spread throughout 80 schools, including eleven charter schools enrolling approximately 6,000 students. The district is also friendly to homeschoolers, with about 1,400 total active students, including about 500 of those who participate in online or school programs.

The district is one of the better performing districts in Colorado. In 2009, before many of Douglas County's groundbreaking reforms took place, the district's graduation rate was 81.9 percent, students took a combined 5,561 AP tests, and averaged a 21.5 on the ACT.

Eighty percent of DCSD students scored "proficient or advanced" in fourth grade reading on the state assessment and 77 percent of 8th graders performed likewise. By comparison, the state results were 65 percent and 64 percent, respectively. For math, 86 percent of DCSD fourth grade students scored proficient or advanced and 66 percent of eighth graders scored likewise. By comparison, the state results were 70 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

However, when you consider how few of Douglas County's students are in poverty (only 11 percent of students are Free and Reduced Lunch students), its performance results are closer to what one would expect of a district of its socioeconomic status, rather than a district of elite or extraordinary caliber. In fact, one education researcher makes the case that Douglas County, given its affluence, actually underperforms when compared to similarly situated districts[1]. This is noteworthy because one of the primary measurements of the success of Douglas County's reforms should be student achievement and readiness. And if that's the case, given its students' performance today, one would expect those students to be performing dramatically better in the future in order to prove the success of such a wide swath of reforms.

One area where Douglas County is exceptional is its per pupil funding. Even though Douglas County is an affluent district, its per pupil funding is remarkably modest. In 2012-13, per pupil spending in Douglas County was $6,218 (with all funding sources it was approximately $7,300). By comparison, Denver checked in at $6,868 (with all funding sources it was approximately $10,000). DCSD's total budget ran $383 million

[1] See: http://oomswithaview.org/2013/07/01/dougco-sound-and-fury-signifying-something/

for 62,000 students, while Denver's ran $525 million for 76,000 students. On average, the United States spent $10, 615 per student in 2010[2].

By implementing simple, market-based reforms, like appropriating funding to schools within the district on a carry-over basis rather than the typical "use it or lose it" policy, DCSD was actually able to cut spending between 2009 and 2012. This is quite a remarkable accomplishment to think about as we discuss its major reform agenda.

The Reform Movement

As one of Colorado's first districts with a charter school, Douglas County is no stranger to education reform. Though in the past much of the reform has been done quietly, incrementally, and with little attention. This time around the story is dramatically different.

Close observers of the district, like expert education researcher Rick Hess, say its current reform initiative began in 2008 after a school board funding initiative threatened to cut funding for some of the county's charter schools. Faced with the reality of losing charter schools, opponents in the community rallied in response. With four of seven spots on the school board up for grabs in the 2009 elections (enough to swing control of the board), the race became a watershed moment for the district. Voter turnout skyrocketed from 26,000 in 2007 to 44,000 in 2009 and, with the strong Republican advantage in the district, all four Republican-endorsed candidates won their seats, and by a large margin.

[2] See: http://schoolsofthought.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/21/which-places-spent-most-per-student-on-education/

One of their first matters of business was to hire a new superintendent who would embrace charter schools and their choice-focused agenda. The district chose Dr. Elizabeth Celania-Fagen. Prior to her becoming the superintendent of Douglas County, she was superintendent of Tucson Unified Schools. Only 35 years old at the time, Fagen was one of the nation's youngest superintendents of a large, urban school district. And prior to Tucson, she was assistant superintendent in Des Moines, Iowa.

In March 2010, the Douglas County board voted unanimously to appoint Fagen. Fagen was, and is, essential to the board's bold and ambitious reform agenda. She is highly talented, focused, determined, and well versed in the universe of education reform and its various factions. She knows what she's doing and what she's up against. By spring 2011, Fagen and the district put forth its strategic plan. With a focus on three pillars – Choice, World Class Education, and System Performance – the plan became the keystone of the district's top to bottom transformation.

In fall 2011, school board elections for the remaining three seats rolled around. Turnout increased even more, reaching 53,000 voters. The Republican-aligned candidates again won all the open seats. At that point, the board was now aligned unanimously (seven to zero) in favor of the reform movement.

The other vital narrative during this time was Douglas County's relationship with the Douglas County Federation of Teachers (DCFT), the district's teachers' labor union. Beginning in 2009, the district began to clash with the DCFT over the school choice program, which DCFT opposed. After two consecutive school board elections went against the DCFT and the district began outlining its ambitious reform agenda, in spite of the DCFT's opposition, tensions reached a breaking point.

In 2012, the collective bargaining agreement between DCSD and DCFT was due for renewal. After a series of falling outs, chronicled in much more detail by Rick Hess in his comprehensive paper on DCSD titled, “The Most Interesting District in America? Douglas County's Pursuit of Suburban Reform,” the collective bargaining agreement between DCFT and DCSD expired in July 2012. The district is now in the unique situation where its reform agenda can proceed full speed ahead virtually unfettered by opposition. The current district leaders have unanimous control of the board and the teachers’ union is no longer organized nor engaged in opposition.

The Elements of the Strategic Plan

Choice Scholarship Program

The first element of Douglas County’s Strategic Plan is the highly controversial Choice Scholarship Program (CSP). The board first approved it in March 2011. The program mandates that eligible students can receive three-fourths of district per pupil funding, which amounted up to $4,575, towards tuition at 30 partner schools. The program began with openings for 500 students and 497 applied.

Almost immediately, the program was challenged in court. At first, a local judge deemed it unconstitutional and issued an immediate injunction to stop the program. The board appealed the decision to the appellate court, which overturned the injunction and reinstituted the program. As expected, the decision was appealed to the Colorado Supreme Court, which is expected to decide the case in 2014 in what could be a monumental decision for school choice supporters.

While highly controversial on a national stage, judging from conversations on the ground with parents, teachers, and district leaders, the choice program appeared to be among the least controversial of the many reform changes.

I spoke with one mother whose daughter with special needs was currently enrolled in the choice program. With her learning disability, she struggled in elementary school learning math in a traditional classroom setting. The choice program gave her the opportunity to enroll in an online math program with eDCSD (an online school in Douglas County) and learn at her own pace.

Today, she is in middle school and enrolled in the traditional math class. In fact, she leaped ahead of her fellow classmates and is actually taking Algebra I in 6th grade. The Choice Scholarship Program gave her the flexibility to stay in a rural school her parents liked but with the added online resources for specialized learning her school didn't offer.

District leaders say the choice program is also essential for cutting costs. They explain that it allows students enrolled in one school to take classes their school might not offer at other schools in the district.

If it is ultimately upheld in the courts, the Choice Scholarship Program will be a landmark in education reform. The battle over choice is typically waged in struggling school districts (often the inner cities) where students desperately need to escape failing schools. Rarely is it pushed in districts as successful as DCSD and with as many resources as DCSD. But because Fagen and the school board believe so strongly in choice at all levels and for all students – public, private, and home schooled, DCSD is responsible for one of the most ambitious full choice programs in the country.

World Class Education

The second element of the DCSD strategic plan is what they call World Class Education. While the term "world class" is thrown around a lot in education, DCSD is bent on customizing its own 21st century curriculum and standards that will elevate DCSD to level of international leaders like Singapore and Finland. In fact, DCSD has already proven it is willing to blaze its own trail here. While much of the nation is engaged in a heated debate over the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the Douglas County school board rejected the Common Core in a unanimous resolution in July 2013.

In its place, the district's leadership has constructed their own curriculum from the ground up, called the Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (GVC). In their resolution rejecting the Common Core, they said that the GVC is "more rigorous, more thorough, and more directly tailored to the needs of Douglas County students" than the Common Core national standards. They also added, "The District's leadership team has reviewed the Common Core Standards, and determined that they do not meet the expectations the District has for all our students."

Enlisting the involvement of over a hundred DCSDS teachers, Superintendent Fagen took on the gargantuan task on piecing together the district's own custom standards, borrowing some from the Colorado Academic Standards as well as the Common Core. DCSD's new custom standards draw heavily from the constructivist school of education policy, designed by thinkers like Tony Wagner of Harvard. Constructivism accentuates student experience, interaction, and creativity over the

memorization and mastery of knowledge. It is typically thought of as the counterpoint to E.D. Hirsch's critical work on core knowledge, the theory that students learn best by reading in depth, learning, and memorizing actual content.

What is notable about this is that constructivism is typically associated with liberal education reformers seeking to move away from more conservative policies of rote learning and memorization. One would not expect a dyed-in-the-wool Republican district to embrace constructivism, and frankly, it caught me off guard as well. I have long been an advocate of Hirsch's core knowledge and have had doubts about the effectiveness of constructivism.

However, when I visited the district and questioned Fagen and teachers about the constructivist curriculum, they pushed back on the notion that they were rejecting content knowledge. Rather, they emphasized they were pursuing a balance of constructivism and content that teaches higher order thinking and creativity about content. When I said, "You start to learn how to learn by learning something," they responded that they were "learning how to learn by learning something and then doing more with that."

"Content is a vehicle for skill development, but unto itself is not enough," Fagen told me. Students in the 21st century must be able to do more than be able to memorize, she added. They must be collaborative, creative thinkers. DCSD is "not looking for a free for all, but looking for free form," she explained.

One of the district's world civilization teachers explained to me that she pushes students to learn content first and then takes the knowledge one step further by asking students to apply it to contemporary situations. For example, after studying the elements

that led to the fall of Rome she had her students then compare and contrast that to a failing community in today's world like Detroit.

I admit that I have a healthy dose of skepticism when it comes to the constructivist approach. However, in a unique district like Douglas County, where many students already read above grade level and have the various benefits of affluence, a constructivist approach may just work. That remains to be seen. If students already have the content under their feet, I feel more confident about it and about their innovation. Work and experimentation and assessment needs to be done though. This is a big challenge. If anyone is up to it, Douglas County is.

Teacher Evaluation and Market-based Pay

After designing its own custom-built curriculum, DCSD set out to build a corresponding set of teacher evaluations that would be coordinated with the new curriculum. What Fagen and the district produced, again with the help of groups of teachers and administrators, became the Continuous Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness (CITE) program.

CITE is based upon five main rubrics: Outcomes, Assessment, Instruction, Culture and Climate, and Professionalism. Each of these criteria has four measurements: highly effective, effective, partially effective, and ineffective.

The results of Douglas County's CITE evaluations can count for no more than fifty percent of a teacher's overall evaluation, per requirements of Colorado state law. The remaining fifty percent are students' results on student growth.

Douglas County's goal for CITE was to construct teacher assessments that disaggregate the relevant data in a more nuanced, detailed, and probative way. For example, in some previous assessments the same evaluation rubrics were used to measure a gym teacher's performance as a physics teacher's. With Douglas County's CITE program, each has its own rubric.

On its face, CITE seemed innovative enough to solve many of the common problems with clunky, one-size-fits-all teacher evaluations. However, it quickly became controversial when the district decided to tie the results of the CITE evaluations to its new market-based, merit pay system.

As if their flood of other groundbreaking reforms weren't enough, DCSD set out to construct one of the most cutting-edge, inventive market-based salary systems.

Free from the restraints of a collective bargaining agreement with the teachers' union, DCSD sought to move teaching away from the traditional "step and lane" pay scales once and for all. Rather than base salaries predominantly on experience and qualifications, the district fashioned a salary system on the basis of supply and demand and free market forces.

In their search to bring the most talented teachers in the country to Douglas County, Fagen and the district leaders realized that they needed to be able to free up resources in order to pay exceptional teachers more. Like any other free market corporation, Douglas County needed to be able to pay their employees on the basis of talent and demand. Teachers in short supply and high demand, like exceptional high school physics teachers, deserved higher salaries than teachers that were in oversupply, like middle school gym teachers.

Once the teachers are hired, bonuses and raises are based on their performance on the CITE evaluations. For example, teachers rated “highly effective” would be rewarded with a higher percentage raise. Amongst all of Douglas County’s various ambitious reforms, this seemed to be the most contentious issue among teachers.

In my conversations with dozens of teachers, they all agreed in principle that they should be evaluated. However, there was no consensus on what should make up the evaluation metrics and they were certainly not satisfied with the CITE program.

One teacher described the CITE evaluations as “very ambiguous” and explained that it was left to administrators to evaluate how well a teacher performs various tasks, even though the administrator wasn’t always present.

One social studies teacher in particular, a 19-year teaching veteran, was moved almost to the point of tears as she discussed the struggle over the evaluation process. She stated she supported Fagen and the board’s reforms, but “the way things were done last year, in my opinion, was way too fast.” She thought the evaluations were unfair and she almost quit teaching altogether. However, she did add that she looks forward to next year and trying to work the arbitrariness out of the system.

In my meetings with teachers, Fagen was present and knew very well that many teachers objected to the current evaluations. The teachers, Fagen, and the administrators were open, candid, and honest with each other and know that there is more work to done on the CITE program.

In defense of Fagen and the district, there is no evidence yet that the supply, quality, or morale of teachers or interest in the district from quality teachers has suffered. As Rick Hess notes, in 2012, the first year with the new pay system, DCSD made 417 job

offers and only three candidates turned down the district based on salary. And district leaders say there has been an overall rise in the number of applicants in 2013.

Conclusion

These are the pillars of Douglas County's groundbreaking reforms: full and comprehensive school choice, a 21st century, advanced curriculum, and state-of-the-art teacher evaluations tied to a market-based, merit pay system. Altogether these reforms are bold, ambitious, and impressive.

Of course, this doesn't mean there aren't risks. Concerns about CITE still abound and not all teachers are in favor of it, but there will always be some measure of dissatisfaction in a system where some are rewarded and others are not and some are rewarded more than others. Real questions also remain about some of the new methods, testing, evaluations, etc… but Douglas County has shown a great grasp of the literature and familiarity with state of the art educational theory and practice. It has surveyed the state of the art research and seeks to combine much of it to daily, concrete application.

So far, it seems to be working. Test scores are improving. In 2012, three years into Fagen's term and a few years into the Strategic Plan, the graduation rate increased to 87.4 percent, the average ACT scored improved to 21.7, and students took a combined 7,820 AP tests. Eighty percent of students were proficient and advanced in 4th grade reading and 78 percent of 8th graders were. Eighty four percent of 4th graders were proficient or advanced in math and 68 percent of 8th graders were. By comparison the

Colorado state figures in reading and math were 67 percent for 4th and 8th grade and 72 percent and 52 percent, respectively.

Granted, test scores are not the only metric for student achievement and readiness. A number of these reforms can be justified on other grounds. For example, it is good public policy to have a responsible and comprehensive system of evaluation and accountability. It is good public policy to offer a full choice program. There are legitimate reasons in education policy, besides test scores, to support Douglas County's reforms.

Philosophically, what Douglas County is doing is vitally important. The district is testing the limits of education reform in America. Its full choice program may be the most comprehensive in the nation, and it is the first district to construct its own curriculum, evaluations, and market-based pay system. However, while I agree philosophically with what DCSD is doing, and although these public policy breakthroughs may be sufficient to justify its reform agenda, in the end the ultimate test should be student achievement and readiness.

Will this groundbreaking set of reforms dramatically improve such student achievement and readiness? The answer is not clear yet. The improvements to date are promising, but much remains to be seen. Given the socioeconomic status of DCSD students, if modest improvements in test scores are the extent of its success (and test scores are the primary indicator of student achievement and readiness), then the scores as they stand now may not be sufficient to validate the entire spectrum of reforms. To validate a reform agenda of this magnitude, student achievement should dramatically improve, arguably to the level of excellent or exceptional. It should be noted that this is

the district's goal as well – to make Douglas County one of the elite districts in the nation.

Certainly, it is still early and the district deserves more time. Some of the reforms, like the CITE program, are still being improved and refined. It may take years before the reforms fully manifest themselves and we can accurately judge the final results. Also, the district might respond that you cannot measure improvement on test scores alone, and I understand that. However, if not by test scores, then DCSD must show what metric it uses to evaluate improvement and how much its students have improved.

The burden of proof is high, but Douglas County is one of the few school systems I've ever seen that really wishes to go from good to great. And they have a very good shot at it. Remember, Douglas County encompasses 65,000 kids and 850 square miles, and yet its per pupil expenditures are extraordinarily modest and it doesn't pay its teachers lucrative salaries or have special privileges or endowments. The district may have some inherent advantages, but the linchpins to its success are not exclusive to the water or wallets of Douglas County. It's the three C's: communication, collegiality, and competition. It's something every school district can replicate: bold leadership with the goal of working and moving in unison to improve education for students, parents, teachers, and taxpayers.