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The Case for Developing Pre-K through 16+ Educational Systems

As I try to imagine life in the world of formal education after the pandemic (I am not ready to use the term “new normal”), I see, read and hear about some daunting realities. The experts say that high quality early education for young children will become harder to sustain due to the new and necessary regulations.

Most Pre-K schools operate on very tight budgets/margins and the required class sizes and staffing patterns will force many to close. Some have already announced closure. Those that hope to remain open will be forced to raise their fees and too many families will find that their choices are limited and unaffordable.

How many of the 40 million + applying for unemployment benefits will find new jobs? The cost of high-quality early education for their young children will likely take a back seat to rent, food, etc. Think about the impact of the increased number of young children having their formal educational opportunities unavailable until they reach the age of public kindergarten.

In K-12 education, there are reports daily about districts laying off teachers in large numbers because of budget constraints and future revenue challenges in most states and cities. These staff reductions are occurring at a time when more teachers will be needed to meet necessary new requirements for class sizes and social distancing. In addition, academic and co-curricular programs have been and will be cut. The most distressing reality to me is that one of the leading solutions being proposed is that students will only attend school for half-days or part of the week. I think we have already seen the challenges of online education for young children. I see no evidence that children need less formal instruction, structure and social engagement to be well prepared for life and future educational experiences.

Higher education is in the same turmoil. Many small colleges are on the brink of closing. Too many students and families are now or will in the future find college tuition beyond their means. And faculty are feeling more and more disenfranchised as they are given little voice in decisions about their teaching. Will faculty be willing to teach on campus due to health risks? Will faculty be willing to teach online with little guidance and flexibility? And what about research? International education? Co-curricular activities? Educational quality? You can add to this list.

There is no easy solution. I have written previously about the value of “mergers” in higher education. I would like to suggest a perspective that may be worth exploring by Pre-K through 12 and higher education leaders...together! Prior to moving to higher education (including service as a president at several colleges), I had a career in Pre-K through 12 education, including seven years as a

superintendent of a large and diverse district. During those years, I advocated (with limited success) that we consider and implement Pre-K through 16+ “systems.” This notion was embraced by many and discussion was enthusiastic. I must admit, however, that the implementation was slow. The impediments and challenges seemed too daunting to too many educational leaders. And, by and large, things were not in crisis. But I believe that now may be the time. The educational crisis is now both real and pervasive.

As a college provost and president, I was more successful in advancing this “systems” philosophy. The colleges at which I served joined together with school districts and city administrations in writing grants, sharing resources and prioritizing collaborations. We never reached full implementation, but we shared a vision, exercised cooperative leadership and moved forward if only incrementally.

However, I propose this idea now for a more important reason than just budgets, cutbacks and the pandemic. These issues are daunting, but the need for a Pre-K through 16+ systems approach has been necessary for decades. The facts about education in America were daunting before COVID-19 and will only get worse.

Here are some facts. In 2017-18, the overall high school graduation rate was 85% -- the highest since this data was first published by the National Center for Education Statistics. For Hispanics, the rate was 81%, for Blacks 79%. These rates are significantly lower in many urban and rural school districts.

The data for early childhood education is less clear. Some studies report that the overall rate of attendance by three and four-year-old children is 20%. Other reports conclude that this number might be as high as 40%. In other words, between 60-80% of young children in America do not attend educational programs until they begin kindergarten or first grade.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, just under 70% of high school graduates attended college. This number is lower for Blacks and Hispanics, and is actually decreasing over the past several years. When analyzed as the total number of Americans between the ages of 18-24, the NCES reports that only 41% of all young people were enrolled in undergraduate (2 year and 4 year), graduate, full and part time higher education in 2018.

My point is this. If education is the key to an improved future in terms of quality of life, employment, personal satisfaction, etc., this country is failing too many of its citizens. Working together (Pre-K through 12 and higher education), I believe that we cannot only provide quality educational experiences, but also contribute to addressing the serious issues of racism, inequality, inferior housing, under employment and more. I recall a speech by Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard, who said, “If you think the cost of education is high, think about

ignorance.” And Nelson Mandela may have said it best: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

This is why I believe in Pre-K through 16+ systems. We need to do a better job of creating a sense of understanding that education is not a collection of pieces, some optional. We need to do a better job of creating an understanding of the necessity of starting education early and continuing through college and beyond. We need to do a better job of demonstrating the value of education, and the cost of not attaining degrees. And we need to do a better job of demonstrating excellence AND efficiency.

Rhetoric will be important, but not sufficient. We will need to make all education affordable and attainable. We will need to make education at all levels the highest value for parents, students, community leaders, business leaders, as well as for teachers and administrators. We will need to speak with one voice in state capitals and in Washington...until our words are truly heard and rhetoric becomes reality. I think our best chance – our only chance – is to work together. Let education be seamless and natural.

I believe that collaborations in Pre-K through 16+ systems can have benefits for all. We need to be willing to share resources – space, faculty, administrators and leaders. These collaborations do not necessarily need to be formal beyond agreements and understandings between and among the parties. But they must be in one voice and with full engagement.

There are unlimited ways to start this. While it is easier for colleges with teacher education programs to collaborate at all levels of the educational system, it is indeed necessary for all colleges and school districts to participate. Systems can be multi-institutional and regional. We just need to share the concept and start to build the system...together!

There is no right first step. It will be important to establish an overarching board or advisory committee representing representatives from all constituencies. This will help with educating the community, modeling the vision and concept, assist collaborative planning, and insure inclusivity. It should be a working group that is willing and able to develop and implement strategies and plans.

The following are ideas that might be considered:

- Integration of high-quality developmentally appropriate Pre-K programs by bringing these programs into school buildings and/or onto college campuses

- Sharing of resources such as student aides and teachers from K-12 and higher education in preschools; providing teacher training, curriculum design, health services and parent education at all levels
- Developing community service programs on and off the campuses that address needs and facilitate dialogue and engagement
- Submitting grant requests to fund key programs and initiatives (private foundations respond well to collaborations like Pre-K through 16+)
- Encouraging and allowing qualified K-12 faculty to teach entry level college courses and qualified college faculty to teach certain high school classes (electives, innovative curriculum, team teaching)
- Sharing facilities and other resources when possible (labs, music rooms, art studios, athletic fields, etc.)
- Working together in the areas of assessment, curriculum development, administrative oversight (HR, athletics)
- Integrating and sharing instructional and administrative technology (hardware, software, training, support personnel)
- Acting as a team in the recruitment and retention of students
- Providing shared parent programs (degree programs, continuing education)
- Advocating in unison regarding the value of a college degree (and beyond)
- Demonstrating collaboration, economy, value
- Sponsoring social programs to build community within the system and between the system and the larger community

These suggestions are just the tip of the iceberg. Together...you will identify the best possibilities and the right first steps. Superintendents and presidents will need to take the lead. Board chairs will need to get involved. Teachers and administrators will need to own the plan. Parents and community leaders (including elected officials) will need to have their voices heard.

Aristotle wrote, “The fate of empires depends on the education of youth.” Now is the time to create a new model...and contribute to the future of our educational institutions and our communities. Is there a better reason?

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