

Testimony before House Commerce, Labor and Economic Development
Tuesday January 29, 2013
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My Credentials

2010 Commission

Speaker of the House Doug Mays in 2005 asked me to serve on the 2010 Commission, which had been authorized by the legislature to make recommendations re efficiency and effectiveness in Kansas Education. I was the only CPA and independent businessman and served on the 2010 Commission for 5 years. For five years, I visited schools all over Kansas and listened to testimony from Superintendents, Principals, Teachers, KNEA, Boards and all kinds of interested parties in the education community. I faithfully wrote a minority report for five years to the legislature.

Work

I have been a CPA in Topeka since 1980 and have had my own accounting and management practice since 1987. I oversee 60 employees.

Education

In addition I was on the founding board of two successful private schools: Douglas County Christian School, now Veritas in Lawrence 1978, and Cair Paravel-Latin School in Topeka 1980. I know what it is like to run a school, hire teachers, let them go when necessary.

Classroom Experience

I was trained in the United State Army Special Forces to teach and train others in guerilla warfare and counter insurgency techniques. I have taught Ancient history, American History, Latin, Mathematics and English Grammar. I taught Freshman Latin at Kansas University for 2 years and I even taught Latin to a kindergartener named Caleb Stegall, who is now the chief counsel for our Governor Brownback.

Efficiency was the Goal of our Taskforce

The goal of our Task Force was to find ways to streamline the system and more of the money, time and effort into the classroom where the real work is done.

I am speaking as a member of the Task Force not for the Task Force.

As you probably know in our report to the legislature number 6 we recommended that you

Revise/narrow the Professional Negotiations Act to prevent it from hindering operational flexibility/resource assignment. This included tenure, salary schedule and mandatory negotiable items.

In order to run efficiently the principals, superintendants and boards must be looked to as the final authority in regards to teachers, with no intermediary. They must be freed from bureaucracy and interference to do the job and be held accountable accordingly.

Local Control and Unity of Command

Real local control should mean control at the local school building, district and board levels (i.e. the community). The most important activity requiring local control is not the purchasing of pencils or computers or sports programs but recruiting, hiring, training and firing teachers. To have any interference from an outside organization in this intimate and sacred relationship is to harm the students and the school and leave the taxpayer elected leadership unaccountable for their actions.

I believe that principal need to be trained and empowered to take real responsibility for their schools and be fully accountable for their results. This cannot happen in a bureaucracy. The administrative layers must be lean and trim, with clear lines of authority. A word from a principal should be the final word. If that principal is not doing the job then the superintendant must find one who will.

The most important act that a manager, principal or superintendant has to do is to evaluate, counsel and if necessary, let an employee go. It is difficult job in the best of circumstances. A poor teacher (incompetent, ignorant, arrogant, self willed, or poor attitude and character) will harm students and destroy morale or other teachers and prevent a culture of excellence. They may cause good teachers to leave. No principal can afford to have an incompetent teacher or a teacher with bad character in front of the students.

The greatest hindrance to local control, lean administration and unity of command appear to be the bureaucracy created by the vested interests (i.e. the teachers union)

The Professional Negotiation act creates an undue burden on the system

Unions are a created by previous legislatures. They will be allowed by this new legislature unless you remove this artificial burden. The teachers unions are not elected by the taxpayer nor responsible to the taxpayer but they are paid for by the taxpayer and yet they appear to be dictating policy to elected officials and those chosen by the elected officials to run our schools.

The KNEA is a State and National organization (hardly representing local control) not elected by the parents, students or taxpayers. They represent only one faction, whose sole focus appears to be: increasing their pay and benefits, decreasing their hours and responsibilities and maintaining job security. This appears to me to be undemocratic.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt told the head of the Federation of Federal Employees in 1937 that collective bargaining

"cannot be transplanted into the public service.

The very nature and purposes of government make it impossible for administrative officials to represent fully or to bind the employer" because "the employer is the whole people, who speak by means of laws."

FDR pointed out the obvious, that the government is sovereign. If an organization can compel the government to do something, then that organization will be the real sovereign.¹

Tenure

In 2002, with New York City's public schools clearly failing, the State Legislature of New York granted control of a new Department of Education to the new mayor, who had become a billionaire by building an immense media company, Bloomberg L.P., that is renowned for firing employees at will and not giving contracts even to senior executives. New York Mayor Bloomberg quickly hired Klein, who, as an Assistant Attorney General in the Clinton Administration, was the lead prosecutor in a major antitrust case against Microsoft. In Klein's view, tenure is "ridiculous."

"You cannot run a school system that way," he says. "The three principles that govern our system are lockstep compensation, seniority, and tenure. All three are not right for our children."²

Good teachers don't need tenure and bad teachers need it desperately. Principals must have complete authority in the classroom to be held responsible and to make sure students are not continually and repeatedly subjected to incompetent teachers or ones with attitudes that would harm the student.

Blue Ribbon testimony about teachers and unions

Four principals from the blue ribbon schools in Kansas shared the keys to their success with the 2010 commission. Encourage poor performers to move on. This was the toughest yet one of the most important principles they all shared. The principal from the school district at Ft. Riley said she cannot afford to have a poor teacher. The marginal

¹ Paul Moreno: How Public Unions Became So Powerful Wall Street Journal 9/12/12

² The Rubber Room New Yorker Magazine August 31, 2009

students lose 55% of the motivation and skills with one bad teacher and if there are two years in a row, it may be unrecoverable. They have to fight the unions to do this but they said you can't build the team you need if everyone is not performing up to standards.

Although the principals did not say this, the real key to the success of the best schools is the admin or dean. They must be kind but tough.

Enthusiasm exuded from every pore of these four. They were filled with praise for their teachers and staff. They loved the students and did not want to lose one student due their inabilities. Every child can learn was their motto and they were willing to make sure it happened.

The most amazing side light was that not one of them mentioned they needed more money. These were folks who were willing to make a success of their school no matter what they were given.

Dr. Deb Gustafson, principal of Ware Elementary School, said their classes averaged 23:1 student teacher ratio. Her average teacher stays about two years. Their parents are lower income enlisted personnel and highly transient. Therefore they have a very short time with the students and teachers and must make every minute count. They have developed a program for training new teachers and they keep promoting development in their weekly meetings. You can see not only enthusiasm in this woman but a firm resolve to train the good teachers and encourage the poor ones to move on. She referred to this process as counseling them out of the school.

There is another retired principal on the 2010 commission Barbara Mackey from Wichita. I saw her head nodding about this issue so I asked her about her experience. She said that this was the most difficult part of her job and she fought the teacher's union (KNEA) all the time, but just couldn't allow a poor teacher to ruin marginal students. The good student will survive no matter what, but it is the marginal or at risk students that need that extra spark that only an enthusiastic teacher can give. The unions push hard for tenure and they make it very difficult for a poor teacher to lose their job. You must be very tenacious to move the poor ones out of the system for they will infect and drag down the other teachers, destroy morale and team playing in addition to hurting students.

Measuring and Holding people accountable

Organization theorist Mason Haire said, "What gets measured gets done." He argued that the simple act of putting a measure on something is tantamount to getting it done. It focuses management's attention on that area.

Our favorite story of simple systems, peer pressure, and easy measurement was related to persistent and pernicious, absenteeism problem at one of the AT & Ts Western Electric plants. Management tried everything; the level of absenteeism wouldn't go down. Finally they put up a huge, visible board with everybody's name on it and posted a gold star next to each name when people came to work. Absenteeism dropped dramatically--almost overnight.³

Bill Gates: My Plan to Fix The World's Biggest Problems⁴

We can learn a lot about improving the 21st-century world from an icon of the industrial era: the steam engine.

Harnessing steam power required many innovations, as William Rosen chronicles in the book "The Most Powerful Idea in the World." Among the most important were a new way to measure the energy output of engines and a micrometer dubbed the "Lord Chancellor" that could gauge tiny distances.

Such measuring tools, Mr. Rosen writes, allowed inventors to see if their incremental design changes led to the improvements—such as higher power and less coal consumption—needed to build better engines. There's a larger lesson here: Without feedback from precise measurement, Mr. Rosen writes, invention is "doomed to be rare and erratic." With it, invention becomes "commonplace."

In the past year, I have been struck by how important measurement is to improving the human condition. You can achieve incredible progress if you set a clear goal and find a measure that will drive progress toward that goal—in a feedback loop similar to the one Mr. Rosen describes.

Another place where measurement is starting to lead to vast improvements is in education.

In October, Melinda and I sat among two dozen 12th-graders at Eagle Valley High School near Vail, Colo. Mary Ann Stavney, a language-arts teacher, was leading a lesson on how to write narrative nonfiction pieces. She engaged her students, walking among them and eliciting great participation. We could see why Mary Ann is a master teacher, a distinction given to the school's best teachers and an important component of a teacher-evaluation system in Eagle County.

Ms. Stavney's work as a master teacher is informed by a three-year project our foundation funded to better understand how to build an evaluation and feedback system for educators. Drawing input from 3,000 classroom teachers, the project highlighted several measures that schools should use to assess teacher performance, including test data, student surveys and assessments by trained evaluators. Over the course of a

³ In Search of Excellence Tom Peters page 268

⁴ Wall Street Journal Jan 25, 2013

school year, each of Eagle County's 470 teachers is evaluated three times and is observed in class at least nine times by master teachers, their principal and peers called mentor teachers.

The Eagle County evaluations are used to give a teacher not only a score but also specific feedback on areas to improve and ways to build on their strengths. In addition to one-on-one coaching, mentors and masters lead weekly group meetings in which teachers collaborate to spread their skills. Teachers are eligible for annual salary increases and bonuses based on the classroom observations and student achievement.

The program faces challenges from tightening budgets, but Eagle County so far has been able to keep its evaluation and support system intact—likely one reason why student test scores have improved in Eagle County over the past five years.

I think the most critical change we can make in U.S. K–12 education, with America lagging countries in Asia and Northern Europe when it comes to turning out top students, is to create teacher-feedback systems that are properly funded, high quality and trusted by teachers.