

**The Future of Public Education:
A Free Appropriate Public Education for All Students**

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT 3
 AUTHOR’S NOTE4
INTRODUCTION 7
“FREE” CHALLENGE – BONDING 9
 POSSIBLE SOLUTION - CHANGE IN FUNDING SOURCE, LESS RELIANCE ON BRICK AND MORTAR.....10
“APPROPRIATE” CHALLENGE - 21ST CENTURY JOB SKILLS 12
 POSSIBLE SOLUTION - CURRICULUM CHANGES.....14
“APPROPRIATE” CHALLENGE - MENTAL HEALTH 19
 POSSIBLE SOLUTION - INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.....20
“APPROPRIATE” CHALLENGE - ACHIEVEMENT/OPPORTUNITY/LEARNING GAP 25
 POSSIBLE SOLUTION – INTEGRATION29
”PUBLIC” CHALLENGE - CHARTER SCHOOLS..... 33
 POSSIBLE SOLUTION - ENERGY SAVINGS AND MAGNET SCHOOLS.....39
CONCLUSION..... 43
WORKS CITED 47

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges facing the public school system as it attempts to live up to the promise to provide a “free appropriate public education” to all of its students. The funding mechanism for public schools, with its reliance on community funding, lends itself to inequities. The lack of an effective response to the rising challenge of mental health issues, the unwillingness to respond to the changing skill demands of the workforce by revising curriculum and the ineffectiveness of efforts to close the achievement gap have all led the public to question whether or not they are receiving an “appropriate” education. The response increasingly has been to look for a better educational alternative elsewhere, in charter schools. The effect of charter schools overall has been to weaken public schools’ abilities to provide a quality education for each and every student. An analysis of each of these challenges and possible responses will provide a possible road map for traditional public education to do a better job of living up to its mandate, to “promote the general welfare”.

Keywords: Bonding, Mental health, 21st century skills, Achievement gap, Charter schools

Author's Note

The sections I chose to research and write about in this paper have deep roots for me as a student and as a professional. My ideas that form the sections of the paper (relationship between bonding and school finance, marketable skills, mental health support in schools, opportunity gaps in education and alternative learning settings) have developed over a much longer time frame than the time it took to actually write it.

As a teacher who sits on the superintendent's advisory council, I have been privy to conversations about all of these topics. I have questioned and debated these ideas in school board meetings as well as during after hour conversations with coworkers. As a professional and on behalf of all of my students - past current, and future - I feel a strong sense of urgency to ensure the mission of public education is sustained

Personally, public education was my gateway to the purposeful life I have had the good fortune of living. Beyond having some very basic essentials that my parents could provide (and for which I am grateful), there weren't many outside factors driving me to set, manage and realize goals. I did fine as a student, quite well actually. But the purpose of education was somehow lost on me. I didn't see anything I was doing as part of a larger plan. My free, public, appropriate education wasn't viewed as a pathway to my future benefit. Yet, that's exactly what happened. I scored well enough on the PSAT to be recognized as a National Merit Scholar Semifinalist. Consequently, I fell onto the radar of the college admissions cyclone and with the help of some teachers, counselors and other mentors, I began to imagine a future for myself beyond what my parents could provide. In this way, public education was a gateway for advancement for

me and for that reason alone I feel it is worth fortifying. The wider we can make that gateway - or the more gateways we can provide - the better off (I think) society can be. As Paul Wellstone, former Senator, former teacher and fellow Minnesotan once said “We all do better when we all do better”.

In short, because of the circumstances of my upbringing, the public school system and the education it provided me were crucial to my “success” in adult life. Traditional public schools have the ability to bootstrap their students to be able to achieve the “American Dream.” As such, they are an important asset to the welfare of our nation, and must be protected and preserved. The way to do this is to continue to ensure the public school system does a high quality job of educating their students to prepare them to be successful adults.

I also want to point out that I looked at educational issues and possible reforms as largely experienced by urban or first tier suburban communities. While these issues are likely faced by rural communities, those contexts are different and so different challenges and responses are also likely. I know this work could be complemented by a similar paper about the unique and nuanced issues facing rural schools and possibilities for reform there. This paper is a beginning point of the conversation about how to improve traditional public schools and is by no means exhaustive.

And finally, the bulk of this paper was written before Covid-19 quarantines forced education to adapt and respond. It remains to be seen what lessons will be learned from this upending of traditional educational structures. One need only look at the market disruptions caused by now ubiquitous services that are their industries largest

(Uber taxi service and AirBnB vacation rentals and accommodations) to see that technology and innovation can rapidly turn staid models on their heads.

Introduction

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires school districts to provide a “free appropriate public education” (FAPE) to each qualified person with a disability. This framework will guide an analysis for how to improve public education. Keeping public education “free” is challenged by funding mechanisms currently in place. Many students are not receiving “appropriate” education because of the lack of applicable 21st century skills, the increasing challenge of student’s mental health concerns, and the gap between education opportunities provided to children of color in comparison to their white counterparts. The “public” part of education is challenged by the nonstop growth of charter schools which threaten to strip resources from traditional public schools.

Even before recent challenges with “Distance Learning”, the lack of flexibility and responsiveness of our free public education has led to decreasing satisfaction with the job educators do, and an increase of others who are willing to step into the gap like charter schools. Our traditional public schools must innovate if they hope to continue to be servants of our Constitution and “promote the general welfare” of our public.

As early as the Revolutionary War, leaders in the United States recognized the need for free public education. Thomas Jefferson advocated for increased educational opportunities for all, at a time when education was mainly available to privileged elite or to those with the capacity to effectively home school. As the Industrial Revolution began, business leaders recognized the need to have a trained, educated workforce and so, by 1918, every state had free compulsory education. A quality education for all supported the great belief about America, that anyone can work hard here and be successful. A goal of public education, since its beginning, is to be responsive to the

needs of the public. Sometimes, it has led the way, such as when in Little Rock schools were forced to desegregate. At other times, public education has missed the mark as shown by persistent disparities in funding and test scores that fall along racial and economic lines. It is important to the health of our nation to keep a robust, free, fair, flexible and responsive public school system.

Our public education has missed the mark in some important ways recently, leaving other entities tasked with filling the gap. Public education struggles to keep up with teaching the skills that are necessary in today's changing work landscape, attending to growing mental health needs of students and closing the gap between students of color and white students in terms of achievement, opportunity and learning. Charter schools, community non-profits, public library programming and individual families strive to make up for the losses in order to prepare young people to lead independent and fulfilled lives. Public education needs to change to address these inadequacies, or face becoming irrelevant.

“FREE” Challenge – Bonding

Public schools are generally built and funded through the mechanism of bonding. A school district goes to the voters and asks for money to make improvements, build new schools and pay for technological advances. Therefore, communities that support bond referendums, in general, place a higher value on education, are wealthier (or both), and end up obtaining higher quality education for their students. Typically how bonds work is that the money for the school district is borrowed, and the taxpayers of the district pay it back through property taxes. Because school districts do not always sustain student populations, school facilities are requested, built, enhanced, and then vacated based on boom and bust cycles that follow population bubbles. When learning space is limited, expensive temporary portable classrooms can be used. If districts overbuild, wasteful school closings and resulting teacher layoffs result. With such a strict connection between the number of students and classrooms needed, schools are beholden to the voters to meet the needs of the students. While this seems only right, what if the voters refuse?

Consider the story of Williston, South Dakota. Last May voters again rejected a referendum to fund the schools. The bond was to build a high school and two elementary schools. “Since the district was formed in 1950, voters have never OK’d a school bond” (Kelly, 2019, p. 5). The next option for this district is to consider dissolving the school district. The students have been bused to another district’s senior high which is running out of space. The high school students of Williston face the very real threat of no school to attend a few years in the future.

Crestwood School District in Dearborn Heights, MI faced a similar challenge. The past five ballots have all been voted down by a large margin. In 2007, more than 70 percent voted “no” on three separate proposals. “‘We haven’t had a bond in the Crestwood School District since 1967,’ Knezek stated on his Facebook profile. ‘Other school districts in our area have received hundreds of millions of dollars in bond support over the last 10 years alone. It was past time that we made this investment’” (Khalifeh, 2016, p. 6). The referendum in Dearborn Heights ultimately passed on a 51% to 49% vote. Without the passage of these bonds, and with little flexibility to respond to population and technology changes, school districts have little ability to respond to challenges.

Funding has a direct effect on educational outcomes. The Learning Policy Institute found that a 21.7% increase in per-pupil funding was large enough to eliminate the gap in education attainment between poor and wealthy students. Additionally, “increasing per-pupil spending by 10% in all 12 school-age years increases probability of high school graduation by 7 percentage points for all students, and by roughly 10 percentage points for non-poor children” (Barrett, 2018, p. 10). Clearly, throwing money at the problem works. In spite of this, in 2015, twenty-nine states provided less school funding than in 2008.

Possible Solution - Change in funding source, less reliance on brick and mortar

A more equitable distribution of resources would do much to alleviate these educational disparities. A model where the federal government provides more money to each student (currently 8.3% of per pupil cost) would go a long way to evening out funding and consequently results. With over 83% of funding for students reliant upon

their local communities, too much educational attainment is reliant upon the whims and abilities of local taxpayers (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Schools should look to expand online learning so that students can learn from a common space or learn from home. Being able to weather population changes will allow districts to spend fewer resources adapting to boom and bust population cycles. With the lessons learned from “Distance Learning,” a more flexible model for blending online and in-person instruction can be created, thereby lessening physical demands of housing students and hopefully easing the need to respond to population changes so directly.

“APPROPRIATE” Challenge - 21st Century Job Skills

With the onset of the Digital Age, the landscape for employment has changed radically. Both employers and employees have noticed a gap in skills needed to be successful (Goldstein, ‘It Just isn’t Working’: PISA Test Scores Cast Doubt on U.S. Education Efforts, 2019). Our education model, which has been developed for the industrial revolution, has not adapted well to the changing digital landscape. Consequently, public schools have increasingly come under scrutiny for not doing a good enough job of educating our students for the modern workforce.

Students themselves feel the lack of quality education. The performance of students on standardized tests has flat-lined since 2000. Students were asked about how to improve education. One of the common themes was to *prepare students for real life*. A common refrain expressed by students, “It feels like once we’ve graduated high school, we’ll be sent out into the world clueless and unprepared” (The Learning Network, 2019, p. 15). A recent survey found that only 60% of high school students felt they have the skills required by the workplace and only 42% of adults felt that high school students are “career ready” (Scheidegger, 2019). It is only natural for students to wonder whether or not they are being well served by their traditional public education.

Employers are also critical of the education being supplied by our schools as it relates to workforce readiness. In a 2016 survey by the world’s leading provider of on-demand compensation data and software, only half of employers felt that recent college graduates were ready to enter the workforce, feeling that crucial skills are lacking or absent (PayScale Inc., 2016). The National Association of Colleges and Employers found that only 42% of employers thought that recent graduates had the Oral and

Written Communication skills and the Professionalism and Work Ethic needed to be successful in the workplace (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Not only the students, but the employers themselves are feeling like the educational system is not doing an adequate job.

Although employers value all skill sets, there is a greater demand for socio-emotional and higher-order cognitive skills than for basic cognitive or technical skills. ... Employers perceive that the greatest skills gaps are in socio-emotional and technical skills. These findings suggest the need to re-conceptualize education and training systems. (Cunningham & Villaseñor, 2016, p. 1)

Simply put, the skills employees need are not being taught by our traditional public schools.

New core work skills in 21st century economies are required.

Skills development is essential for increasing the productivity and sustainability of enterprises and improving working conditions and the employability of workers. ... young women and men need the technical skills to perform specific tasks as well as core work skills: learning to learn, communication, problem-solving and teamwork. (Brewer, 2013, p. 6)

Clearly, soft skills are becoming more important than work skills in today's emerging economies.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines employability skills as

... the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labor market at different periods of the life cycle. (Brewer, 2013, p. 6)

Peart states (2019) such soft skills as "Learnability, Resilience, Agility, Collaboration, Verbal Communication, Written Communication, Empathy, Creativity, Problem-Solving, Leadership, Negotiation and Technology" are required in today's work force. Similarly, "Learning skills, innovative skills, creativity, critical thinking, project-based learning,

internship, student-driven research projects, problem solving, communication skills and teamwork have become most important than any other skills being acquired in the previous century” (Gore, 2013, p. 7).

There are even studies about the disagreement regarding the skills necessary to succeed in today’s workplace. One group of researchers believed complex and collaborative problem solving and learning through digital networks were most important, while another thought cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills were the most important (Rong, Golubovich, & Robbins, 2015).

What all of the articles, studies and journals, (and many more) agree on, is that the needs of the workforce have shifted and changed, and that education has not adequately responded.

Possible Solution - Curriculum changes

The problem of an ever-changing workforce and inadequate education system begs the question of how best to respond to the change.

Curriculum standards are the place to start, and while none of the business people I spoke with proposes having separate courses in innovation, problem solving, and the like, all believe that these skills could be expressly taught through project-based learning, where students learn subject matter, then apply that learning directly to a real-world problem. (Fletcher, 2007, p. 26)

An example was given for a social studies lesson.

Rather than teach a series of facts, we should approach the subject in a problem-based way, he says. For example: Divide students into teams, give each team a GPS and specifications for a city park, then ask the students to pick the best site to place the park as well as articulate the rationale for their decision. Students can thereby use technology to gather data, analyze and synthesize the data, and make suggestions based on facts--just as you and I do in our jobs every day. (Fletcher, 2007, p. 27)

There have been some innovators in education who are attempting to address how best to engage students and prepare them to lead lives of purpose and meaning. Many schools, charters and traditional, have attempted to respond to the needs of 21st Century workers with varying degrees of success. One of the most successful attempts has been to focus on Project-Based Learning (PBL). Thomas writes that "...students and teachers both believe that PBL is beneficial and effective as an instructional method" (p. 34). There were other beneficial consequences of project-based learning, such as enhanced professionalism and collaboration on the part of teachers and increased attendance, self-reliance, and improved attitudes towards learning on the part of students. In addition, PBL is at least equal or better than other methods of instruction for producing gains in academic achievement and developing lower level cognitive skills.

Project-Based Learning shows other positive results (Chiang & Lee, 2016). In addition to facilitating problem solving ability amongst Taiwanese vocational education students, PBL seems to motivate those students to learn. Similar to the U.S., vocational education in Taiwan often attracts students who are underperforming in traditional college preparatory tracks. Within the U.S., student populations often attracted to vocational education are the same students who are disproportionately failing in traditional schools. Presumably PBL could be a lifeline for these U.S. students if not the broader student population.

Indeed, Project-based Learning has been a catalyst for reform in schools. "PBL and high school reform are most likely mutually reinforcing, with PBL helping to engage

students in the community and to personalize their learning, and an emphasis on these reforms potentially leading teachers to try more PBL” (Ravitz, 2008, p. 12).

Project-based Learning, paired with professional development of teachers, was shown to have a significant effect on teaching 21st century skills. “Similar patterns were seen for all four core academic subjects, with statistically significant differences in math.” This is important because it shows that PBL can be successful in almost any school setting or magnet school, regardless of the specific academic focus. Also noteworthy, the impact of teaching of these skills was the least significant for students whose teachers’ perceptions of their abilities put them into the ‘average’ range. “Concerning the equitable distribution of reform practices, teaching of 21st century skills was evenly distributed regardless of teachers’ ratings of student academic performance in their target class” (Ravitz et al., 2012, p. 6). While typical curriculum is aimed at the largest group of students, in the middle academically, PBL seems poised to reach those students on the edges.

As a result of PBL, students showed significant differences as compared to the control group in the areas of academic achievement as well as attitude toward learning the subject. Students were more positive about their learning. PBL “has also more positive effects on students’ academic risk taking, problem solving and creative thinking skills” (Bas, 2011, p. 10).

While PBL has been shown to be successful in teaching 21st century skills, limitations have been noted (Ravitz, 2008). Project-based Learning works best when paired with professional development and training for the teachers, an expenditure of time and money. Also, PBL works better in spaces that have been uniquely constructed

to facilitate such learning, rather than converting traditional classrooms to PBL sites. It makes sense then that PBL is used most often in schools that have undergone major facility changes.

To a lesser degree, school systems are using other means to teach 21st century skills. Schools can focus on embedding 21st century skills within content without wholesale changes to curriculum by teaching flexibility and adaptability. This can be done by utilizing a reinforcing feedback loop “so as to improve productivity through finding new and better ways of completing the task as indicated by the feedback” (Kivunja, 2015, p. 4). This is also paired with a balancing feedback loop to learn to “so as to improve productivity through finding new and better ways of completing the task as indicated by the feedback” (Kivunja, 2015, p. 4). This is a cyclical loop where for example, a student continues to get responses to aid in improvement, such as edits to a paper, that they then implement during the reinforcing feedback loop, only to get more in-depth edits during another balancing feedback loop.

Creativity is another 21st century skill that can be embedded into traditional content. Creativity can be used to “Create new and worthwhile ideas (both incremental and radical concepts), Develop, implement and communicate new ideas to others effectively, Demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work and understand the real-world limits to adopting new ideas”, and “Act on creative ideas to make a tangible and useful contribution to the field in which the innovation will occur” (Piirto, 2011, p. 1). By being mindful of including creativity, teachers can modify existing content to include 21st century skills.

Kivunga believes we need to move from our current pedagogy “Vygotskyian Social Constructivism” to teaching “Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Siemens’ Digital Connectivism”.

“It is ... a professional imperative for us to change the pedagogical paradigm: to help prepare our graduating students to meet the complex challenges they will face in their real-world lives after school, college or university.” (Kivunja, 2014, p. 90)

The need to make public education more meaningful and to teach the 21st century skills that are in demand has been demonstrated. There are many ways to achieve this, either by restructuring our educational system in whole or by working within existing frameworks. To remain relevant, public education must adapt.

“APPROPRIATE” Challenge - Mental Health

The percentage of children diagnosed with mental health needs has been rising and creating a great challenge for our schools (Association for Children's Mental Health, 2020). This is partially due to the lessening of the stigma regarding mental health, partially due to mental health workers doing a better job of diagnosing mental health needs, and also partially due to an increase in students who have mental health issues. While the genesis of the rise of students with mental health needs can be debated, what is not greatly disputed is the fact that this increase has added another burden to an already taxed public school system.

Many of our students face challenges in school beyond academics. 1 in 5 children and youth have a diagnosable emotional, behavioral or mental health disorder and 1 in 10 young people have a mental health challenge that is severe enough to impair how they function at home, school or in the community (Association for Children's Mental Health, 2020). “Of children and adolescents 6–17 years old who were defined as needing mental health services, nearly 80% did not receive mental health care” (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002, p. 1548). There is an unmet need that is affecting our students' ability to learn.

Many students are challenged with the social contracts that go along with learning in a school. 7.4% of children between the ages of 3 and 17 have a diagnosed behavior problem. 7.1% of students in that same age range have diagnosed anxiety. 1 in 3 of students with each of these diagnoses also have the other diagnosis. More troubling is that these conditions are increasing. Students who have been diagnosed

with anxiety increased from 5.5% in 2007 to 6.4% in 2011-2012 (Ghandour, et al., 2019).

“Nationally, only 40 percent of students with emotional, behavioral and mental health disorders graduate from high school, compared to the national average of 76 percent” (Association for Children's Mental Health, 2020, p. 5). With the increase of diagnosis it can only be assumed that even greater numbers of students are being academically disenfranchised.

Teachers are feeling the challenge of from students' unmet needs. Increasingly, teachers are including mental health support in negotiations in their new contracts.

The Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) has made mental health its primary issue at the bargaining table this year, and offered a contract proposal that calls for every St. Paul public school serving K-12 students to be staffed by a mental-health team with licensed staff in these positions: psychologist, counselor, social worker, and nurse, as well as behavioral-support specialists or equivalent education support professionals. (Flannery, 2019, p. 4)

These same educators recently went on strike for these demands.

Teachers in Oakland, Chicago and Los Angeles also went on strike – their demands included mental health support for students (Goldstein, It's More Than Pay: Striking Teachers Demand Counselors and Nurses, 2019). The fact that teachers have made support for student mental health an integral part of their negotiations, alongside demands for better pay and more competitive benefits, speaks to teachers' strong perspectives on the negative impacts on student learning stemming from poor mental health.

Possible Solution - Increased mental health services

Since the 1990s, there have been different methods to address the mental health challenges facing our current school system. School Based Health Centers (SBHC)

and Expanded School Mental Health (ESMH) are two of many attempts. Results have been mixed for many reasons, (program design, fidelity, resources), but as time has gone on, adherence to best practices has produced verifiable improvements in behavioral and academic measures for students with mental health challenges (Weist, et al., 2000).

These efforts are distinguished from the past is the emphasis on a well-rounded approach to solving health issues; an approach involving family, county services as well as outside medical providers. Many believe this multifaceted approach yield more positive results. According to the conclusion of a review of literature on SBHCs,

Exposure to chronic childhood trauma negatively impacts school achievement when mediated by mental health disorders. Disparities are common in pediatric mental health care in the United States. SBHC mental health services have showed evidence of their ability to reduce, though not eradicate, mental health care disparities. The same review showed that SBHC programs have decreased truancy and drop-out rates. This has resulted in modest academic gains. (Larson, Chapman, Spetz, & Brindis, 2017, p. 684)

ESMH programs had a significant reduction in suspensions for the group receiving ESMH services vs. an increase in suspensions for students not receiving services. There was also a decrease in teacher ratings for Total Difficulties and Emotional Problems for the students receiving ESMH services (Ballard, Sander, & Klimes-Dougan, 2014).

A comprehensive study of ESMH programs in elementary schools found a small to medium effect on decreasing mental health problems. Mental health programs integrated into student's academic instruction showed the strongest effects. Interestingly "services that were curriculum-driven and not integrated into existing academic material showed small effects" compared to larger effects for services

integrated into academic material (Sanchez, et al., 2018, p. 163). This study supported the idea that classroom teachers can be effective in helping reduce mental health programs (with proper training and support) in addition to school health professionals.

A review of 88 randomized control trials of found “mental health treatments can succeed in improving both mental health symptoms and educational performance (Becker et al., 2013, p. 1).

A study on the effects of the Minneapolis School Districts ESMH program found that it reduced mental health symptoms and moderately increased academic achievement. Importantly, the study found that it was effective in helping low-income and underserved populations. There was also a positive effect on suspension rates (Everts, 2011).

Internationally, there is support for the effectiveness of additional mental health services provided in school. A comprehensive study in Chile found that there was a statistically significant relationship between the number of workshops attended and improvements in behaviors and academics. It showed “empirical evidence that a large-scale mental health intervention early in schooling is significantly associated with improved behavioral and academic outcomes.” (Guzmán, et al., 2015).

The Affordable Care Act (ACA), with its provision for reimbursing school districts for health services provided to students, has made it easier to support student’s mental health needs. New York received over \$100 million in Medicaid reimbursement and the ACA authorized an additional \$200 million to support Medicaid-eligible children and families by identifying new clinic sites and expanding existing services (Vaillancourt & Kelly, 2014).

The connection between unmet mental health needs and school struggles is well-supported. Research has shown that programs placed within schools that also involve families, community agencies and personal physicians have been very effective in decreasing mental health challenges and somewhat effective in increasing academic goals. Best practices for these services include proper training and funding, as well as implementation beyond the trained service providers (school counselors and social workers). An “all hands on deck” approach has shown the greatest results.

The effects of teaching mental health literacy showed significant improvements in the knowledge of mental health and illnesses as well as the intention to seek help and to provide peers with help for mental health problems (Ojio, et al., 2015). Teachers who are well-trained to manage behavior and provide emotional support have also showed positive effects in environments where significant numbers of students are experiencing mental health challenges (Sawka, McCurdy, & Mannella, 2002). Specialized behavioral and mental health programs for youth in the justice system have showed significant positive results in lowering drop-out rates and increasing school completion (Cuellar & Dhaval, 2016). Educational outcomes improved for even the highest risk students.

Support for student mental health yields multiple results. Doing so improves academic and behavior issues, while also improving student’s overall quality of life. This is especially important because most severe mental illnesses occur before the age of 25. For all students, an understanding of their own mental health, especially as it corresponds to emotional intelligence, is crucial. The role of emotional intelligence (EI) in particular cannot be overstated. EI influences 58% of success across every type of

job (TalentSmart, 2020). Supporting students' mental health and making efforts to increase their EI improves their well-being and regarding both health and career.

Overall, healthier students are more successful students. In the past, perhaps because of the stigma attached to mental health, the focus has been on physical health. The lack of emphasis on mental health has left many students out of a positive, productive educational experience. Now, with increasing mental needs, as well as increased mental health awareness and diagnosis, it is more important than ever for mental health to be fully included in the prescription for a better educational system. To not address these issues would be negligent in terms of educators' duty to the public.

“APPROPRIATE” Challenge - Achievement/Opportunity/Learning Gap

Perhaps no other marker of the failure of our public schools to do their intended job is as pronounced as the difference between educational outcomes referred to as the Achievement, Opportunity or Learning Gap. These three terms are related to each other, but slightly different in meaning.

Generally speaking, opportunity gap refers to inputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities—while achievement gap refers to outputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits. Learning gap refers to relative performance of individual students—i.e., the disparity between what a student has actually learned and what students are expected to learn at a particular age or grade level. (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013, p. 2)

While it can be said that the genesis of any three of these “gaps” involves intractable societal issues (e.g., institutional racism, generational poverty), that doesn’t preclude our educational system from giving each student a quality education. While the achievement gap is emphasized here, all three are closely related.

There are multiple, varied solutions for closing the achievement gap. If one were to believe that institutional racism is the primary catalyst for persistent gaps in achievement, efforts far beyond what educational systems are capable of putting forth are required. That being said, school and school districts can make strides in the direction of reducing racist beliefs and attitudes that contribute to student performance.

Within the locus of control for school districts is teacher training. Several programs have been developed to professionally develop teachers in ways that aim to lessen the achievement gap (Hirsch, 2005). *Strengthening Teaching* aims to close the achievement gap by providing extra training to improve teachers in districts that have a higher percentage of students affected by the achievement gap. *Courageous*

Conversations, encourage staff and students to engage in dialogue that can serve to change the culture and practices of teaching in order to close the achievement gap. A *Courageous Conversation* “offers a multicultural perspective and provides students with the skills for negotiating various cultures” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 41). With this system educators become students as well as teachers as the dialogue serves to open the discussion about race and racism and its effects in the classroom. *The Tripod Project* focuses on the quality of the relationship between the students and the teachers. It maintains that successful teacher-student relationships have three phases “First, affirmation of the student’s ability to complete the task; second, sincere offer of assistance and support; and third, visible pleasure by the teacher in the student’s success” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 42). This relationship focuses not on compliance but on cooperation between teacher and student. *Positive Deviance* proposes analyzing the people who are able to overcome the problem at hand to find results. A central tenet is that the solutions for a problem are to be found within the community that is affected. While this has not been tested in schools, it has had results in reducing malnutrition, illiteracy and HIV in prostitutes. Each of these may be effective – directly or indirectly – in reducing racist attitudes and beliefs in schools and classrooms therefore enabling teachers and students to reduce the achievement gap. Certainly, teacher training is an important place to start.

Larger curricular changes may also be instrumental in closing the achievement gap. Multicultural Education (ME) was particularly effective in curricular intervention in reducing prejudicial attitudes as compared with reinforcement. Districts changing their curriculum to be more reflective multiculturally was effective across all age levels,

particularly with older students. It also was more effective in urban than suburban districts, but still effective in both. Multicultural Education, by emphasizing the diversity in our society, improves students' attitudes toward race and identity. A direct correlation has been shown between students' respect for each other and academic achievement (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Multicultural education can be an effective tool for closing the achievement gap.

Research on the academic results of another curricular program *Tools of the Mind* has shown promising results for impacting students who are affected by the achievement gap due to poverty. *Tools of the Mind* is a curriculum designed to help with self-regulation. Research has shown that early childhood poverty leads to different brain structures and functions that can impact executive functioning. Implemented in kindergarten, the program "led to improvements in neuroendocrine and neurocognitive function as well as significant improvements in academic abilities" (Blair & Raver, 2014). Early programming in self-regulation and other related areas can help to level the playing field for students as they begin their academic careers.

Inequities in education present themselves in almost every measure of education, from standardized test scores to graduation rates. Gifted education is not immune from this. Making greater attempts to recruit gifted and talented students from diverse backgrounds can go a long way towards reducing the achievement gap. Research shows that the number of students who are both in the top quartile of their class as well as below the poverty line decreases dramatically as the students go through their academic career (Ford, 2011). These students are also twice as likely to drop out as compared to their higher income peers. These negative effects can be

counteracted by supporting and educating families as well as staff. Other productive efforts include increased identification of gifted learners who are negatively affected by the achievement gap, identifying them earlier, and giving them more support throughout their academic careers. Surely supporting students who have already shown academic prowess makes sense to raise the overall bar of students who are from lower socio-economic states and children of color.

Technology has also been thought to be a possible equalizer for students. Providing students with opportunities to learn independently by giving access to additional online resources can help reduce the achievement gap. After being given computers, students from low-income backgrounds enrolled at a community college performed better academically than peers who were not provided with computers (Fairlie, 2012). Doubtless a lack of access to technology could be a hindrance to academic success.

A voucher program in California provided technology funding for schools with at least 40% students receiving free and reduced lunch, resulting in positive effects on math and language arts scores on standardized tests. Among low socio-economic students there was “robust evidence that voucher spending significantly increased English test scores... by one-third to nearly one-half of a standard deviation” (Bass, 2018, p. 22). In a world more and more dependent upon technology, providing equal access can have an equalizing effect.

In education today, socio-economic status is the greatest predictor of success, alongside such factors as the level of education attained by parents, particularly mothers. However, high-achieving, high poverty schools, where the achievement gap is

being overcome, all have things in common. These include strong teacher professional development and family outreach services, so that the community can better understand the academic content to be able to help their students at home. A dedicated feedback loop to provide additional help to students not meeting standards was also common in successful school systems (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). Results to close the achievement gap can be found, but the solutions are complex and need to be supported by resources.

Possible Solution – Integration

Since *Brown v. Board of Education*, concerted efforts have been made to equalize the educational opportunities for students of color. The achievement gap has steadily fallen since 1954 although, at times more rapidly than others. A noticeable steep decline occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s, coinciding with a controversial policy known as “busing.”

Busing referred to the forced “desegregation” of schools by making students attend schools that were not in their neighborhood to make schools more diverse. By increasing diversity, the idea was that disparities between whites and students of color would be lessened. In 1971, the Supreme Court ruled that school districts must achieve racial balance, even if it meant redrawing boundaries and the use of busing as a tool to balance schools. This plan was controversial, and many believe contributed to whites leaving cities for the suburbs, known as “white flight”. Busing was fought in congress and in the courts. In the early 1990s, the Supreme Court ruled in three separate cases that judges could ease restrictions placed on school districts with respect to racially balancing students at schools. The Supreme Court ruling also coincided with a

lessening of the rate of decline for the achievement gap. In 2001, “No Child Left Behind” was passed, and in the early 2000s the achievement gap began to lower more significantly again.

Lowering the achievement gap is difficult because often it runs against the policy wishes of our society in regard to education. It takes societal change to affect the achievement gap, and this change comes at a cost, either of school resources, of tax dollars, or the cost of societal fabric. The most common vocalized criticism of “busing” is that it destroyed the “neighborhood school”.

There is evidence that shows “busing” works. Not only did busing help students academically, but it also showed results beyond high school with reducing the likelihood of remaining in poverty. These effects also extended into a second generation. After desegregation efforts were stopped, from 1991 to 2010, dropout rates increased for students of color. College admittance rates for students of color dropped after stopping desegregation efforts (Barnum, 2019).

The effect of the end of busing in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District was to increase the achievement gap for minority students. Both white and black students did poorer on testing in schools with more minority students. The gap was lessened by overt efforts by the district to minimize the achievement gap in other ways, by allocating more resources to high minority schools. Another noticeable effect was an increase in crime rates for minority males after re-segregation. The effect of the end of busing was to increase the achievement gap, in spite of efforts to direct more resources to mitigate the issue (Billings, Denning, & Rockoff, 2012).

Louisville Kentucky also experienced success with busing and yet chose to end it. In a comparison between Louisville, which implemented desegregation efforts and Detroit, which won a Supreme Court battle to stop desegregation, the past 30 years have brought different effects. Louisville schools are much more integrated than Detroit schools, and their black males are twice as likely to be proficient in math and reading tests as those in Detroit. Still, opposition from parents which included suing the school district, has led to easing desegregation guidelines (Eligon, 2019).

Ultimately, the story of busing has a lot in common with other efforts to close the achievement gap. Because the achievement gap is a problem with societal causes, the ability to solve it lies within the society's interest in changing itself. Busing, while proven successful, remained unpopular with many people, not just whites. While no direct correlation can be proven, it is cited often as a cause of "white flight" from the cities to the suburbs in districts, although this flight was also found in cities that did not employ busing. Many people support closing the achievement gap as long as it does not disrupt their lives. Evidence shows that most desegregation programs have no negative effect on white students (Angrist & Lang, 2004).

Many successes in closing the achievement gap are not found in the schools, but in the communities. An interesting factor in closing the achievement gap seems to be centered on community involvement. One of the most significant variables in students of color who are closing the achievement gap was a personal religious faith. This makes sense considering that along with religious faith typically comes a supportive community that offers a sense of belonging; acceptance; encourages "high road" behavior; clear rules. While certainly public schools want to avoid proselytizing, it might

make sense to allow space for faith, while still respecting the separation of church and state (Jeynes, 2014). This also shows that perhaps part of the answer for reducing the achievement gap lies outside the walls of the schools. More outreach can possibly lead to greater results.

”PUBLIC” Challenge - Charter schools

There’s an old saying “Water will find its level.” While this has many applications in terms of education, it could be said “Communities will find ways to ensure an appropriate education is received”. Where traditional public schools have failed to meet the needs of students in regard to mental health, 21st century skills and closing the achievement gap, schools operating under a public charter have stepped in. Traditional public schools are facing increasing challenges from charter schools to serve their students.

A charter school is a public school that operates as a school of choice. Charter schools commit to obtaining specific educational objectives in return for a charter to operate a school. Charter schools are exempt from significant state or local regulations related to operation and management but otherwise adhere to regulations of public schools – for example, charter schools cannot charge tuition or be affiliated with a religious institution. (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020, p. 2)

Charter schools are able to be more flexible than public schools, adapting to changes in education, without some of the constraints of public schools such as *the mandate to educate every student of the community*, as well as concessions to trade unions. Because of this, charter schools have taken money from public schools that could have been used to support innovation and worker’s wages. Additionally, because charter schools can try to influence which students come to their schools, they often end up educating students who do not require as many resources to teach as public schools, thereby creating a more efficient model of education, albeit one that does not benefit all students uniformly. “We tell parents that the public schools provide the special education. We can’t be set up for everything.” said a principal of an Arizona charter (McKinney, 1996, p. 1).

By 2014, charter schools had grown by 70% in the past 5 years (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014). From the 2000-2001 school year to the 2016-2017 school year, the percentage of public schools that were operating under charters in the United States grew from 2% to 7%. From that school year to the next (2017-2018) there was a 5% increase in the amount of charter schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

In November 2017, EdChoice found that 16 percent of parents would like to send their child to a public charter school — which is up nine percentage points since 2013. Together, these two surveys indicate that the potential number of charter school students in the U.S. is between 8 and 8.5 million. In 2017-18, there are nearly 3.2 million charter school students. This means that the potential size of the charter school sector — based on current parent demand — is almost three times larger than today's actual enrollment. In order to satisfy this demand, the sector would need to open, and find suitable homes for, thousands of charter schools over the next 5 to 10 years. (David & Hesla, 2018, p. 2)

Clearly the demand for charter education is great. While this is the most recent data for charter school enrollment, the trend suggests charter school growth has continued over the past three years.

The cost of charter schools to public schools is great, both in terms of lost students and lost revenues. A study by Duke University on communities with a large growth of charter schools found that “as a result of charter school growth, the local districts had between \$300 and \$700 less to spend on each remaining student at district-operated schools” (Loewenberg, 2018, p. 8). Another study put the figure between \$700 and \$1500.

In addition to costs per student, districts lose money because they are not able to be flexible. A loss of only a small percentage of students per grade does not necessarily translate to less teachers, or less costs to maintain school buildings,

transportation, etc. For example, if an elementary school of 300 students lost 15 of them to a charter school, they would still have the same teacher cost and maintenance cost, but at a loss of 5% of their revenue. The school system effectively just has fewer dollars to pay for the same services. In addition, public school districts are often still responsible for transportation, coordinating special education services and other services for the charter schools (Education Commission of the States, 2018). Typically charter schools increase the number of schools that need to be supported in a community, raising the costs of upkeep as well (Bifulco & Reback, 2011, p. 3).

In June 2014 a comprehensive study of Charter schools in Pennsylvania reported “the growing financial impact on local taxpayers of the increasing number of students attending charter schools and the current funding system that places the full responsibility for charter school costs on school districts is clear” (Schafft, 2014, p. ii). Funding for charter schools paid out of the district budget went from 2.1% to 5.3% (Schafft, 2014, p. 44). The report also found that while some charters were providing a better education when judged by standardized tests, most were not, particularly online schools.

Most troubling perhaps was the analysis of special education funding. The report on Pennsylvania Charter Schools found that in 2012-13 charter schools only used 43% of the money received for special education students on instruction and related expenditures for those students. In 2011-12 the percentage was only 45% (Schafft, 2014, p. 60). With so few dollars of the special education funding being spent on the services for the students, it begs the question of whether or not they are properly receiving the services called for in their Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.) and

where the excess money is going. An I.E.P. is a legal document that lays out the specific types of academic and behavioral support students will receive. If it is not followed, families of students can sue the district or charter school.

Oversight was supposed to be one of the hallmarks of the charter school movement. Faced with a traditional public school system with muddy levels of accountability, the clear option of having a failing schools charter revoked to ensure oversight gave many hopes. While there are many charter schools that are performing better than their public counterparts, others are grossly underperforming and the oversight mechanism, to pull their charter, is rarely enforced (Manno & Finn, 2015). There are many reasons for this such as the fact that 90% of the overseers of charters are the district within which they reside, which presents a management challenge to oversee an entity without the ability to control it. Another reason is the challenge of what to do with the students when a charter school closes. A sudden influx of a large group of students must be carefully planned for, as explained in the charter and bonding section. Also, charter schools have become a political actor with large lobbying groups.

Problems with charter schools in Detroit were reported by the New York Times. "By 2015, a federal review of a grant application for Michigan charter schools found an 'unreasonably high' number of charters among the worst performing 5 percent of public schools statewide" (Zernike, 2016, p. 5). Charter schools were opened to address the issue of how to increase academic performance. Detroit now has the second largest share of students in charters than any American city except New Orleans, which turned almost all its schools into charters after Hurricane Katrina. The hope was that this would result in raising the level of success in Detroit schools.

However, the result has been described as “a total and complete collapse of education in the city” (Zernike, 2016, p. 2). One of the greatest defenders of the charter school system has been Betsy Devos, now the Secretary of Education. When the Detroit public schools ran out of funding, Ms. Devos’ Great Lakes Education Project argued to “kill off” public schools. Instead, the schools were bailed out, at the cost of a commission that was supposed to help the public schools to be more successful. The Great Lakes Education Project argued against such a commission, saying that it would “would favor public schools over charters” (Zernike, 2016, p. 3). A positive effect of charter schools was the innovations they brought that were successfully copied by the traditional public schools. One high school based its program on charters in Chicago and New York and obtained positive results in the culture of the schools (less gang activity) and ACT scores. When traditional public schools are able to be flexible and adapt, they can improve education.

James Ryan, in the *Stanford Journal of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties*, makes the case that it is unrealistic for charters to compete with traditional public schools in the measure of test scores. The first reason is that inner city charter schools are disproportionately made up of factors typically correlated with lower school achievement (students of color are disproportionately located in the poorer area of larger cities.) Both factors contribute statistically to lower scores on standardized tests. The second reason is that charter schools are funded at a lower level typically than traditional public schools. Charter school funding ranges from a little less than half of what traditional public schools to a few places where funding is equal (Ryan, 2008). On average charter schools receive 27% less funding. The main reason for this is that charter

schools receive 76% less funding from their communities than traditional public schools (McBirney, 2018). The fact that inner city charter schools are underfunded may very well be another contributing factor to the lack of progress on closing the achievement gap.

The financial outlook of many charter schools is in doubt as well. In Arizona, 1 in 4 charter schools has significant red flags in the finances. Half of the schools with red flags might have to close within the year (Philip, 2018). One third of the charter schools that opened in the year 2000 were closed by the year 2010 (Education News, 2017). Over half of the states allow for-profit charters, which call into question the ability of those schools to ethically self-govern. The City of Palm Bay issued \$21 million dollars of bonds to Charter Schools USA in 2006. When the charter school walked away the public was left to repay the \$21 million in bonds (Cashing in on Kids, 2020). When these schools close, the burden is put back upon the traditional public schools.

James Forman refutes the common fear of “cream skimming” of public students to charter schools. He points out the prevalence of students of color and students of low income in charter schools. One can conclude that these students (who are typically not doing as well in our public schools) are going there in hope of a quality education, however, some research shows that they are less likely to receive one in a charter school, as measured by standardized tests (Forman, 2007).

It should come as a surprise to no one however that many charter schools have been incredibly successful. The reason? Autonomy, according to five highly successful charter schools. Every school leader identified autonomy as enhancing their ability to

achieve high levels of student performance (Ableidinger & Hassel, 2010). For public schools to compete, they have to work with greater flexibility and autonomy.

Turning back the challenge of charters will be difficult. For one, they are increasingly politically ingrained, with lobbyists and public support. Secondly, viable resources - mainly large enough tracts of land to support public schools - are difficult to find in densely populated areas. While charter schools have taken over public schools that have closed, it is difficult to see the reverse happening when charter school demand remains so high (even despite frequent lack of charter school oversight) (Baker, 2016).

Possible Solution - Energy Savings and Magnet Schools

Schools need to follow best practices of Charter schools and look at ways they can be more efficient and more flexible. One way to free up some operating capital would be to focus on energy savings. There appears potential for large economic gains for schools and districts that “go green.” In 2011 the EPA issued a guide for developing and implementing energy efficient programs in schools. Energy costs are the second largest expense for school districts after teacher salaries (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2011). This large expense is another reason school districts need to be less reliant upon brick and mortar institutions to remain flexible. Schools are able to lower the costs of energy greatly by making adjustments such as replacing inefficient systems, changing consumption, and going “green” by adding solar and wind power. For example, Cypress Fairbanks school district in Texas earned \$631,000 in incentives, and is projected to save over 7 million dollars over the next 7 years. Readington Township in New Jersey was able to use low or no-cost measures

to save \$93,350 in energy costs and reduce its electricity consumption by 13% and natural gas consumption by 3%. Westover School in Connecticut generates 23% of its electricity from solar panels on top of its three buildings. Schools are capable of being leaders in the field of energy savings (Strayer, 2014).

While increasing energy savings is an important focus that can yield measurable results and lower school districts' bottom lines, it does not lessen the threat that Charter Schools pose for public institutions. Charter Schools are increasing in popularity. They are making a concerted effort to close the achievement gap and are obtaining similar to equal results with less resources. Charter schools are able to be more responsive to student's needs and avoid the bureaucracy and demands of labor unions. To keep pace traditional public schools must look at ways to be able to give the public what they want and need out of their education.

As noted, Charter school enrollment has grown 571% from the year 2000 to 2017. The 2017, NAEP report shows little to no difference in measurable outcomes between charter schools and public schools. Parent satisfaction is higher with "choice" schools, whether that be private, charter or choice within the public school system. Without a major effort on the part of public schools to do a better job of satisfying the needs and desires of the families of students, they will continue to lose resources (Phenicie, 2019).

Magnet schools are a possible response to the demand of the public for more "choice" in schools. Magnet schools that are placed and operate within public school districts often focus on a particular skill set or area of interest, such as math and science, the arts, or nature. By having students and families be involved with choice for

their students, families can feel that the districts are working harder to meet their educational needs.

Magnet Schools are more effective than traditional public and private schools in achievement in the four common subjects of Math, Language Arts, Science and Social Studies, often because of their specialized emphases (Gamoran, 1996). Some suggest that perhaps Magnets support stronger social connections between and amongst teachers and students or perhaps school districts provide more resources to magnet schools (Barrington, 2019).

Further, magnet schools tend to draw students district-wide and so are able to support a more diverse student body. Limits to teacher seniority practices may also free up Magnet schools' selection processes, yielding a more diverse, interested and qualified teacher workforce. This "choice" workforce enables the Magnet schools to be more responsive and flexible to student needs (Walden University, 2020).

Magnets also typically have higher community and parent involvement as well as more innovative curriculum (Gamoran, 1996). They allow school districts to innovate without breaking the model of the public school system, and allow districts to compete on a more even playing field with charter schools.

A major challenge for magnet, or "choice" schools within a public school district is transportation. In many districts, public schools are required to bus students to magnets if the magnet school is within district. If every student has choice, there would be logistical and resource challenges to meet those needs. Many districts offset this choice by making it the parent's responsibility to transport their children to a within-district, choice magnet school (Barrington, 2019).

There are no excuses for public schools failing to meet the demands of the public they serve. Many people rightly see a free, high quality, public education as the pathway to success in adult life. Like all institutions that serve needs, public schools must meet that demand or step aside for others to do so.

CONCLUSION

Free, appropriate public education is an integral part of the promise of our Constitution to “promote the general welfare” of the nation. Our public education system, by failing to be flexible and responsive, has missed the mark in several ways. It must change to be able to fulfill the promise to students.

The general public bears responsibility to improve public education. To keep education funding more equitable and less reliant upon the whims of bonding and local population swings, the states and the Federal Government must bear more of the burden than the 8.3% they pay now. For their part, local school districts and the communities they support must be more flexible in the use of their geographical space so that they are not continuously in a boom-and-bust cycle due to population shifts.

The world is changing more rapidly than it ever has before, and education must change to continue to be relevant. It must alter its curriculum to include emphasis on “soft skills” such as negotiation, creativity and critical thinking, to name a few. If unable or unwilling to make large-scale changes to curriculum, it needs to embed soft skills into its pedagogy to better prepare students for the workforce in the 21st century. Project-based learning has been shown to be an ideal format for teaching these skills.

Mental health challenges amongst school-age populations have increased and are disruptive to education. Studies have shown that increased mental health services yield positive results in behavior management, graduation rates, and to a lesser extent, academics. The most successful of these programs involve community services and medical providers. School Based Health Services (SBHS) and Expanded Mental Health

Services (EMHS) have both demonstrated an ability to enable students to perform better in academic settings.

The gap between the education of students of color and white students has demonstrated the failings of our public school system. Since *Brown vs. Board of Education* that gap has been decreasing, but not fast enough or far enough. There still remains a large difference between the education provided to students measured by the color of their skin and their socio-economic status. While the causal factors of this gap are mainly outside of the schools, that does not excuse their inability to close that gap. In fact, in recent years the rate of decline has lessened. To eliminate that gap, communities and districts must prioritize equity in education. They must reach out to communities to become more involved. Districts must train their staff to be mindful of culturally relevant pedagogies and best practices that have shown to decrease the achievement gap. Finally, they must allow students to be able to choose the school they would like to attend and to integrate their communities so that schools do not fall into “have” and “have-not” categories.

Because of public education's failings to address these issues, charter schools have become increasingly popular. They have directly attempted to address many of these failings with mixed, but overall positive results. Charters have been shown to be more flexible and responsive to students' needs. Without the challenges of district-wide policies and unions, they are able to use their staff more efficiently. Charters have also been shown to produce similar or better outcomes with less money than public schools. Overall, they have shown at least similar results when measured by many of the standard markers such as standardized testing. However, many charters have failed to

meet thresholds specified in their charters and despite falling short, have avoided having their charters revoked. Because charters have taken incremental support from school systems, the districts have difficulty adjusting resources so that often they are trying to do the same job with less resources. In this way, charters have been shown to be a drain of resources on public schools. There are standing questions about how well charter schools are utilizing special education money and if it is properly being spent on the students who need it. Public schools must learn from best practices of charter schools. Districts must consider how they can provide “choice” in their public schools. One way that has proven effective is the use of “magnet” schools. Charter schools popularity continues to grow, and if public schools do not adapt to stem the tide they will continue to lose students and funding. In short, in the face of increased competition, public schools and districts must work even harder to meet the demands of the public they serve.

The promise of a free public education that can improve a life – or the lives of many - is a central part of the promise of the American dream. The ability to use that education to work hard and attain success is part of many of the great stories of this nation. However, in many ways the promise of a “free appropriate public education” that was guaranteed for students with disabilities, has not been fulfilled for all students. With the incredible challenges that already face public schools (and that are only increased with just-in-time “distance learning” demands) schools must adapt and respond to the needs of the public. If they do not, they will continue to lose students who pursue their needs elsewhere. Now more than ever, our most staid institutions are facing unprecedented volatility. As the world adjusts to new challenges and

uncertainties, public education will need to innovate and accommodate, or face its own very uncertain future.

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