

# **THE BOLD PLAN**

## Improving Public Education and the Economy

As far back as 1995, the major obstacle to improving public education in Delaware was identified by the State Superintendent, a business consortium led by the DuPont Company, and the Brookings Institution as the public school system. That system is still in existence today and yet, as Albert Einstein once said, "Doing the same thing over and over expecting different results is the definition of insanity." Everyone who lives or works in Delaware is affected by the state's educational system. It makes no difference if your children attend a nonpublic school or if you have no children. Education is about much more than producing capable, productive kids. It is about economics. It's about retaining and attracting businesses, real estate values, population shifts, crime rates, quality workforce, etc.

In recent years much has been done in Delaware to improve public education. We have experienced Races, Visions, Committees, and Task Forces. The business community has been involved in much of it. The efforts have been very good but significant improvement has been elusive. NAEP (National Assessment for Educational Progress) recently reported that more than 60% of Delaware's high school graduates were below proficiency in reading (African-Americans 80%). Two-thirds of our eighth graders are functionally illiterate in math and reading, Delaware colleges reported that 53% of entering Delaware freshmen need remediation (73% of African-Americans and 69% of low-income).

In looking for an explanation for these results we can eliminate funding as a problem source. Census Bureau data shows that Delaware is in the top ten states for educational spending. In 2009 we were 6<sup>th</sup> at over \$14,000 per pupil. In 2017, 1/3 of the state's budget (\$1.4 billion) was spent on education.

Poor quality education has economic consequences. Using regression equations, Dr. John E. Stapleford, President of ECON FIRST, calculated that over 10 years (2006 to 2016) if Delaware's 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores were equal to surrounding states it would have resulted in an additional \$4.5 to \$7.8 billion of output and 12,300 to 20,850 more jobs.

Teaching is a profession but education is a business that supports teaching and whose primary customers are parents who hold schools accountable! In schools, teaching is similar to the legal and medical professions. Educational, legal, and medical services are provided by trained professionals but other services (scheduling, billing, records, etc.) are needed for support. So, while teaching is carried out by teachers and building administrators, other services are needed for the business aspects of education. The business people provide support but do not provide professional services. Steve Jobs once said, "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do." Who is hired to provide teaching services? If you were scheduled for a colonoscopy, would you want it performed by the doctor or the office receptionist? Operational decisions are best made by professionals at the local level.

The Bold Plan targets the systemic change that is necessary for Delaware's education/economic improvement efforts. That systemic change was first introduced by the Delaware Department of Education in 1995 with the support of the business community and the Governor's Office. In many ways it is similar to the nonpublic systems that have been successful in Delaware for over a hundred years. The change was piloted by the Charter School of Wilmington under the supervision of some of Delaware's largest companies (DuPont, Bell Atlantic now Verizon, Hercules now Ashland, Delmarva Power, Christiana Care, and Zeneca now AstraZeneca) and has proven to be nationally successful. U.S. News and World Report recently ranked CSW among the nation's top 100 public schools! An evaluation sponsored by the Delaware Department of Education and conducted by Dr. Gary Miron, Head of the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University, reported that students under the "Bold Plan" outperformed their counterparts at traditional public schools. The "Plan" was able to advance the learning of its students at a faster rate than similar students in traditional public schools. The original charter school was launched with only two directives: 1) "Just get the job done.", and 2) "Failure is not an option."

The vehicle for introducing the systemic change was charter schools. The Charter Law states that its purpose was to "...improve public education overall..." Charter schools were to be laboratories to try new things and then, change the traditional schools. Dr. Gary Miron was quoted in a Brookings Institution publication, as saying, "Charter schools weren't meant to duplicate the traditional public schools. They were to be a lever for change..." That change included how traditional schools operate. The Delaware Department of Education stated that the charter reform was based on local control and accountability.

But the change to the traditional schools never happened. There has been no sharing. The Wilmington Education Advisory Committee commented on the disconnect between charter schools and district schools. The original business, political, and education leaders of the systemic change are all gone. That resulted in the traditional system taking control of the systemic change agent – charter schools. Charter schools now mirror the traditional system. While the number of charter schools has been increasing, an article in the August 2015 issue of Delaware Today magazine pointed out that, "Charters proliferated in a way never intended or anticipated." Superintendent Ferguson said that having many charter schools would create excess capacity which would be inefficient and expensive.

The Bold change is visible in the original draft of charter regulations prepared in October 1995 by Mike Ferguson, then State Superintendent of Public Schools and co-author of the Charter School Law. That draft stated, "Reliance on bureaucratic decisions would be a thing of the past." "...empower local communities to try new, unique solutions to problems that are facing their own schools..." "Parents and teachers are less restricted by decisions made at a district or state level." "...empower local communities further with additional decision-making authority." "...try new approaches to learning without bureaucratic restrictions." Superintendent Ferguson informed the founding president of the first charter school that, except for federal laws and laws involving health and safety, he was free to do whatever he thought was appropriate as long as he was willing to accept responsibility for the outcomes. The Bold Plan of autonomy and accountability was emerging.

More recently the "Bold" concept surfaced at the 2014 April Education Event sponsored by the Rodel Foundation. At that gathering Andreas Scheleicher, a member of Rodel's International Advisory Group, presented data showing that a school's performance would be improved by giving the school greater autonomy coupled with involving teachers in the decision-making process (distributive leadership).

The original Memorandum of Understanding offered to the Wilmington priority schools (lowest performing) is another example of the “Bold” concept. That document would have given the priority schools authority over employment decisions, developing and implementing their own budgets, deciding curriculum and instructional practices, school calendar, scheduling, and they would have autonomy from any district requirements not mandated by state or federal law. An interesting question could be, if the drafters of the MOU believed that greater autonomy and accountability would improve student performance in the low performing priority schools, why wouldn’t it be given to all public schools?

This “Bold Plan” of autonomy and accountability leads to local control of schools. That means our public schools will be customized and not standardized. One size does not fit all therefore, we can focus on meeting the unique needs of the individual communities being served. The Brookings Institution pointed out that decision-making authority must be transferred from school boards and bureaucracies and placed in the school buildings run by CEOs, Chief Education Officers, formally known as principals.

While some principals are “ready to go” most will require a transition that will take place over time as cadres of building principals are prepared and mentored to assume their new roles as CEOs. As individual schools wait for the conversion they will operate as they currently do. This will permit the transition to be as seamless as possible and provide for controlled growth. CEOs will be responsible for operational issues – hiring, budget preparation, financial expenditures, curriculum, continuous improvement, etc. – with the assistance of teachers. Boards and district officials will approve initial budgets, major capital projects, and will collaborate with CEOs to formulate goals. They will review appeals of CEOs’ decisions, evaluate the performance of schools and CEOs, facilitate meetings of CEOs for the purpose of sharing ideas and experiences, and provide operational support in areas such as finance, legal, personnel, planning, marketing, etc. when requested by the CEOs.

The success of this systemic change is achieved through Autonomy and Accountability. It would be implemented over a period of 3 to 5 years to provide time for current and aspiring principals to qualify as CEOs possibly through an MBA program in Education Administration or professional development courses in finance/accounting, marketing/ communications, planning, personnel management etc. and to reduce the number, personnel, and responsibilities of school districts. Services and personnel at the state education department would be reduced as well. Funding formulas should be reviewed and, possibly, include poverty as a special need.

Using BOLD, the CEOs will establish a culture of success which will permeate the entire operation of the school (policies, practices, demeanor, expectations, curriculum, teachers, parents, students, etc.) and everything and everyone will align with it. This is the same concept as self-fulfilling prophecy, positive attitude, or mental imaging. The Charter School of Wilmington and the Newark Charter School attribute much of their success to the development of a positive culture. In a 2012 speech delivered at the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce dinner, Marvin N. “Skip” Schoenhals, chair of Vision 2015 and WSFS Bank, credited the improvement at WSFS over a fifteen-year period to a change in the bank’s culture. He said public education had to do the same thing.

Adoption of the BOLD PLAN suggests other changes. If schools are making operational decisions, do we need the expense and service duplication of 19 school districts? Wouldn’t 5 districts be more efficient

and economical (1 in Kent, 1 in Sussex, 1 in Wilmington, 1 for the balance of NCC, and 1 for Vo-Tech schools)? Shouldn't the size of the state education department be substantially reduced? With parity established among schools wouldn't it be time for expanded parental choice? As George Bernard Shaw once stated," Progress, without change, is impossible!"

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