

# Why One-Size Does Not Fit All: Strategic Spending and Collaboration for College and Career Readiness

*Dr. Jerry D. Weast*

Former Superintendent of Montgomery County, Maryland Public Schools  
Jane Kubasik, Chair of the Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education (MCBRE)

## A Return on Our Education Investment

Each year, the United States invests about \$500 billion of public funds—and \$4 billion in philanthropic funding—into its public K-12 education system. Primarily, that annual investment supports over three million teachers to spend an average 180 instructional days working with nearly 50 million students.

Unfortunately, according to the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, the United States may not be spending its dollars and time as effectively as more successful nations spending less. Despite spending more money on education than almost every other country in the study, the United States remained just average in reading and science, and lagged in mathematics on the global scale.

At the same time, calls for even more funding—to support decreased class sizes, increased technology, and teacher performance pay—dominate the airwaves. Before increasing its financial investment in public education, the United States must evaluate how strategically current dollars are spent.

## Collaborating Towards a Common Goal

Uneven or poor student performance is not the *problem*, but rather the *result* of multiple root causes. Unfortunately, most of the existing proposed solutions promote parochial agendas. Educators advocate for money or assert

that kids can't learn. Business leaders criticize the lack of a skilled labor pool. Policy makers brand educators as those who won't do as they are told. Students shun coursework they deem unrelated to their futures.

Effective collaborations occur when people and groups both inside and outside of the formal channels are inspired toward a common goal—neutrally defining a problem and building solutions collaboratively. Therefore, the nation must stop personalizing the problems and solutions to education through the lens of government, business, labor or student perspectives. The nation cannot merely legislate, regulate, mandate or even spend its way out of performance disparities—but instead should collaborate toward an effective solution.

None of the successful countries in the PISA study rely on constituency-driven solutions like performance pay, charter schools or vouchers for success. Rather, the highest performing nations support uniform, high-quality standards, linked to key gateway assessments—the “north star” from which all else aligns. Strategies that guide toward a “north star” destination effectively align policy, differentiate resources and build capacity of the system to position for student success. With education budgets contracting and unlikely to recover, strategically repurposing and prioritizing current spending should be the United States' top priority.

The country has just begun to clarify its “north star.” Studies show that graduating

students from high school must mean more than granting paper diplomas. While citizens expect schools to sustain the country's economic engine, more importantly, they want graduates who can fully participate in civic life. A critical component of education must focus on preparing students for that active engagement in society. A recent study from American College Testing (ACT) affirms college and career readiness goals serve these shared values well—providing graduates a gateway to the future and helping the United States stay globally competitive. Graduating students both prepared and inspired to thrive in college and careers creates shared value for all stakeholders of the education system and provides a shared goal to work toward.

In order to chart a path forward, the country must understand its baseline. Any mapping program requires a *starting* point—not just the final destination—to strategize the best path toward success.

### **Shifting Our Focus: From a Geographic Lens to College-Readiness Metrics**

While education spending is important, the highest performing nations prioritize spending differently. For example, the United States is the only industrialized nation spending the most money on its most advantaged students. Even more troubling, a 2011 study identifies the *impact* of poverty (rather than the prevalence) as greater on students in the United States than in a majority of tested nations.

Historically, the country has sorted its more than 14,000 school districts into urban, suburban or rural caches and focused policy, research and programmatic interventions to address what is wrong in urban districts. While this particular geographic designation once served as a reasonable proxy for the location of the nation's poorest and most underperforming students, new immigration patterns indicate a *reverse* migration is underway—and that the suburban systems are at highest risk for decline.

The current strategy is not only expensive,

it's not working. Without a shift in strategy, the nation is sure to see nearly all of its schools—urban, suburban and rural—follow the urban pattern. Rather than continuing to view districts through this outdated geographic lens, a new focus on performance on the college and career-ready trajectory could provide a better snapshot of where school systems across the nation stand in preparing students for future success.

### **Performance Benchmarking**

A recent McKinsey & Company study established a Universal Scale that evaluated a variety of international benchmarks to classify school systems within a bell curve—poor, fair, good, great or excellent. Further, the study emphasized that strategic interventions for successful growth should be applied differently within these five categories of performance. Therefore, a school system needs to know where it is today in order to set goals and strategize improvement.

An early challenge to creating and embracing a version of a universal scale is identifying the measure. Currently, the United States does not have a uniformly administered assessment of college and career readiness. A solution is to consider some of the measures students, families and colleges *already* support. The existing college readiness Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Advanced Placement (AP), and ACT exams are not only taken by millions of students each year but also serve as a proxy for career readiness—with these college and career ready standards recently benchmarked to the PISA standards.

Unfortunately, as most students or individual districts must pay for these exams, the pool of test takers is limited to those with the financial means. The emerging Common Core in the United States will be a good catalyst toward a unified approach and language around academic subjects and will likely support higher quality curriculum. College readiness assessments can likewise ground our dialogue with a

clear consensus about where we are beginning and how we measure progress.

### **Aligning Resources to Objectives**

Like the systems across all five performance bands studied in the McKinsey report, policy and related resources from federal, state or local funds could be aligned to strategies that uniquely support *striving for improvement* for those schools in the lower performance bands and strategies that uniquely support *sustaining results* for those in the top performance bands. This tiered approach saves money and time by prioritizing what works at that particular stage of growth rather than uniformly mandating and funding what is counterproductive at later stages.

Further, this tiered approach to policy and strategy can create “networks” of schools sharing best practices and solving similar challenges—wherever they are located. For example, districts dealing with the integration issues of reverse migrations can foster collaboration about effective strategies to extend their record of academic success to all students, rather than experience declining performance across the board.

### **Employee Engagement—The Most Underused Resource in Education**

While it’s tempting to focus only on the rational elements of a well-crafted plan, the leader of any organization will affirm it is not the plan that does the work, but the people. Additionally, no plan is accomplished by attacking the competencies or the intentions of the people doing the work. Full-scale success can only occur in a culture of the best people doing their best work.

Policy, research and governance have successfully created the national mandate, but in the process have marginalized the single most important resource for achieving it: the educators who do the work. It is both of these elements working together—the integrated *structure* of mission, means and measures and the

evolution of employee *culture*—that bring the vision to life. In fact, employee engagement—from leaders, teachers or service personnel—is likely the greatest untapped resource in the education landscape.

In order to stimulate engagement in students, leaders must also create and support a similar engagement among our educators. System-wide goals must be translated into intuitively actionable roles and responsibilities for each employee. Getting from “what do we do” to “what am I responsible for,” specifically identifies how each position within the system connects to goals for student achievement.

Kindergarten teachers ensure students have sufficient early literacy skills for later college and career success. Bus drivers are responsible for students arriving at school both safely and on time. Cafeteria workers serve nutritious meals on schedule so students have time to eat before returning to class. When culture evolves to this level, spending is seen through a different lens. Rather than protect a favored staff member or pet program, the culture will begin to eliminate what isn’t supporting shared goals for the students.

### **Building a Culture of Respect**

Culture doesn’t just happen. It is created through a set of shared experiences and beliefs. To change a culture you have to change the beliefs, and to change the beliefs you have to change the experiences. Education culture has been the scourge of public debate for years. Language such as “reform,” and “takeover,” and disparaging and often one-sided stories and movies lead to feelings of fear and persecution, creating defensiveness in school systems rather than openness and flexibility. Politics, whether local or national, usher new changes every few years with promises of money for trying new programs and ideas. Vocal constituencies, often with competing interests, insist on reactions to their many demands. What results is a “gotcha” culture rewarded for *activity* rather than *productivity*. Unlike education, no other industries

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undertake transformation efforts by disparaging their workforce publically or by depriving them of the key resources to do their jobs.

Just as with student performance, there is a comparable trajectory for workforce culture. Embraced by the private sector for years, employee engagement measures are well researched and offer statistically significant contributions to success. Attention to psychological well-being moves individuals and organizational culture from a “What do I get?” mindset to “What do I give?” “Do I belong?” and “How can we grow?”

Why does this matter? Engaged employees are more productive and working for more than their paycheck—they are psychologically committed to the work. Alternatively, actively disengaged employees are described as physically present, but psychologically detached—and their displeasure can be contagious to colleagues. Policy, funding and strategy decisions should focus on building a culture of engagement to get the best return on education investment dollars and improve the overall school system. Engaged employees working in an environment with like-minded colleagues who feel their work is valued will, like the McKinsey research suggests, naturally attract the best candidates, demand professional growth and cultivate peer-led learning and innovation. More importantly, employees who are valued and trusted team members and regularly included in key decisions are more likely to make sacrifices and more willing to identify and support budget contractions. Being part of the process builds commitment, a far better outcome than compliance.

### **An American Success Story**

While international success stories are important, there are some American successes, too—those “great” or “excellent” systems that have not only adopted a single college-ready goal, but have also built a strong and integrated structure around that mission and created an engaged culture of employees who can deliver

promised results in record numbers.

One such system is Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools (MCPS). Montgomery County is the 16th-largest school district in the United States, and the largest in Maryland, neighboring Washington, D.C. Over time, this district transitioned from less than 20 percent to over 60 percent minority students. Its 145,000 students now represent a diversity of backgrounds (37.2% Caucasian, 23.4% African American, 23.4% Hispanic, and 15.7 Asian American). But this district’s performance soared rather than soured, as evident in these results:

- 90% of kindergartners enter first grade with essential early literacy skills
- 88% of third graders read proficiently
- 90% graduation rate (highest in the nation for large districts for 3 consecutive years)
- 66% Advanced Placement Exam participation rate, 71% scoring 3 or higher
- 1653 average combined SAT score, compared with the national average of 1509

MCPS was the first district in the nation to adopt a clear metric for how to measure success—80 percent of students would graduate college ready by 2014, as measured by college-ready SAT, ACT and AP scores. Rather than building “up”—as the old models of education were crafted—MCPS instead mapped college and career readiness objectives backwards to Pre-Kindergarten and was the first system to fully integrate all of the known best practices into one system, yielding nearly unparalleled success.

In 2011, the district was awarded the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. In 2010, it was recognized as a finalist for the Broad Prize in Urban Education. The MCPS journey and success story are the subject of numerous research studies, articles, Harvard Business School Case Studies and the book, *Leading for Equity* (Harvard Education Press). Several highlights of the MCPS story include:

- A vertically articulated PreK-12 curriculum and assessment model that incorporates a single college readiness goal, comparable to the emerging common core.
- A professional growth system (PGS) for all categories of employees—administrators, teachers and supporting service workers. The PGS includes a widely praised Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program that exits underperforming employees.
- The research-driven “Seven Keys to College Readiness,” compiled from National Student Clearinghouse data, represents a robust representation of key milestones met by successful college graduates from the system.
- Innovative practices emerging from the schools and other employee groups, including a new integrated K-5 curriculum (supported by a Department of Education *Investing in Innovation Fund* development grant) and Professional Learning Communities that disseminate best practices within schools and across the district.
- Teachers, administrators and service workers voluntarily gave up \$90 million in scheduled pay raises in a single year to preserve funding for programs that were making a difference in the lives of students in their care.

### **Beneficial Relationships Toward Success**

So what else contributed to this story of success? Leadership credits internal and external collaboration as a strategic imperative. Integrating the leadership of employee association groups into the decision making process fostered buy-in from the 22,000 person team tasked with the work. Leaders also maintained a fierce persistence in resolving conflicts between the college-ready goals and the various compliance functions with federal and state testing. These activities highlighted the disconnect between policies targeted for “striving” systems versus what was a good use of time and

money for this system focused on “sustaining” high performance.

New ways of working with the business community also emerged. Serving as trusted advisors, business professionals—mainly from large national and internationally acclaimed companies—began to see school challenges as common to those faced by their own organizations and were able to suggest multiple strategies and techniques for educators to consider. Broad topics such as mission definition, strategy and measurement systems ultimately drove the creation of quantified outcomes, such as the “Seven Keys to College Readiness” analytics, and improvements to the employee on-boarding process and overall engagement. Additionally, schools benefited from a variety of pro bono consulting projects from the businesses involved.

Combined with the district’s own efforts to repurpose spending, efficiencies and effectiveness gained from these efforts yielded millions of dollars of savings and substantial improvements in academic success. For partner organizations, understanding the impact of contributions, whether financial or expertise-based, fueled continued involvement and success.

### **Replicating and Scaling American Success**

Replication and scaling this story of success requires more than making information and research available, as most policy groups do. It requires more than making money tied to single, favored solutions available, like many foundations do. And more than sending classroom volunteers, supporting branded initiatives, sponsoring events—or criticizing educators to “be more like business”—like businesses often do. We have a path forward: One grounded not only in research about what works best on the world stage—but also from successful efforts such as the Montgomery County Public School system. Government has the power to strategically align policy. The education sector has the workforce drawn to the mission of student success. Business has an execution-oriented skill

set. Foundations and policy groups have the supplemental resources. Strategic policies and collaboration are absent on the national stage, but could effectively support three fundamental goals:

- Adoption of national college and career ready goals with funded, external measurements;
- Strategic differentiation of policy, funding and interventions for “striving” school

systems verses “sustaining” school systems; and

- Attention and sensitivity to the impact of policy and rhetoric on employee well-being and its role in student achievement.

The United States must make more strategic investments of education resources and promote increased collaboration to better prepare and inspire its students to thrive in college and careers.

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