

**TRANSFORMING AMERICAN SCHOOLS:
CAN DELAWARE LEAD THE WAY?**

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin by thanking University of Delaware and the Rodel Foundation for the invitation to contribute to this outstanding conference. It's a great honour to be in this state which is influential far beyond its size.

In thinking about the remarks I want to make I have brought three distinct perspectives to bear. First, as an outsider with some knowledge of education systems around the world, I want to comment on how the school system in Delaware and the US looks against international benchmarks. Think of this as speaking from the head.

Second, as a battle-hardened veteran of the Blair government's controversial school reforms, I want to draw some lessons from that broadly successful but also messy, error-strewn experience, which took us from below average to above average but not yet world-class. These are thoughts, as the great Theodore Roosevelt put it, "from the man in the arena whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood" rather than from one of those critics who stand on the sidelines, "cold timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." Think of this as speaking from the gut.

Third, as a committed friend of this country who majored in American History at Oxford and who has been fascinated by trying to unravel its mysteries ever since, I want to comment on the struggle, over more than two centuries, to close the gap between the American Dream and the American reality. One of the virtues of a good friend should surely be that he or she can say what otherwise might go unsaid. Think of this as speaking from the heart.

I believe school reform in this country is at a critical juncture. In the next year or so it will be necessary to choose between two broad options: on the one hand, a retreat to the comfortable, introverted, input-focused, evidence-light approach that

characterised education reform in the last three decades of the 20th century, during which time Americans tried and failed to live up to the towering ambitions of the civil rights movement; on the other, an advance to the demanding, outward-looking, results-focused, evidence-informed approach towards which some promising progress has recently been made.

That choice will have to be made in Governors' mansions, State Capitols, City Halls and school boards across the country while at Federal level the reauthorisation of the No Child Left Behind Act – the most important piece of education legislation for many years and the most equitable legislation of the new century so far – will be the moment of truth. Here in Delaware the central issue will be the degree of commitment to the implementation of Vision 2015; this state has a great opportunity to lead the nation.

The decisive factors in the making of this choice will be the accumulating evidence of what works (and what doesn't) and the courage of those who lead public education and who shape opinion within the system and among businesses and communities. With Vision 2015 and the progress made since then, this state has made an impressive contribution– but, as you know better than I do, they are only a beginning. In the words of the great poet, two roads are diverging in a wood and the choice this state and this country make – you make – will make all the difference.

As you prepare to face that fateful choice, I want today to do three things – glance back at the past, assess the present and sketch the future.

SECTION 1: THE PAST

In 1955, the year General Motors achieved a US market share of 50 percent and two years before the launch of Sputnik undermined America's post-war confidence, the American high school reached its zenith – at least for white kids. A year earlier the Supreme Court had momentarily decided that the education those white kids received should ultimately be available to all, setting the terms of debate for the ensuing decades.

Up to that time – and indeed beyond – the US had a huge comparative advantage over all other countries in the provision of universal, general education as Claudia Goldin and Larry Katz have recently demonstrated. “During the first three quarters of the [20th] century educational attainment rose rapidly”, they argue.

This was largely due to the existence of universally available high school education but also to the growing availability of college. Because good schooling brings very long-run benefits, America's educational leadership over the rest of the world brought substantial relative gains in economic growth right through to the end of the 20th century. Even now the US leads the world in the college graduate share of those aged 55 to 64 years.

But in the last quarter of the 20th century, educational attainment stagnated in this country. Countries which educationally-speaking had been trailing in America's wake for most of the 20th century, began to catch up. As Goldin and Katz explain:

"The slowdown in the educational attainment of young Americans at the end of the twentieth century is especially striking when compared with the acceleration of schooling among many nations in Europe and parts of Asia, where educational change has been exceedingly rapid."

This relative slide in the educational performance of the US, has had, and will continue to have, economic consequences. Since "A greater level of education results in higher labour productivity [and]...tends to foster a higher rate of aggregate growth" relative weakness in education puts at risk long-term growth rates. The recent work of Eric Hanushek and others reinforces the case by demonstrating the strong, positive correlation between the performance of countries in PISA and TIMSS and their rates of economic growth. Having looked at the international comparisons in science and maths over the past forty years they conclude: "higher levels of cognitive skill appear to play a major role in explaining differences in economic growth." They show that the US has fallen relatively in these international comparisons and is now at best average.

Some suggest, given strong economic growth in the US over the last two decades, that this doesn't matter or, as Gerald Bracey has argued, "Our schools are better than the critics claim." This is a dangerously complacent line to take – the time lag in the relationship between schooling and economic growth is long. Look at the data of Andreas Schleicher of the OECD-PISA. In the 1960s the US led the world in high school qualifications and Korea was 27th. Now Korea leads the world and the US is 13th and falling. As recently as 1995 the US was second in the world on college-level graduation rates; just a decade later it has slipped to 14th, slightly below the OECD average.

This slippage is not the result of a lack of investment which remains relatively high in the US. Rather it reflects – to use hard economic terms – a lack of productivity. The point is reinforced by the fact that in international comparisons

of younger children the US does relatively well which, given the country's wealth, is what you would expect. The problem is that, as they get older, children make less progress each year than children in the best performing countries. Here we're not just talking about poor kids in poor neighbourhoods; we're talking about most kids in most neighbourhoods. This challenge is acute in Delaware which has historically been funded above average among US states while performing slightly below average.

Moreover, there is no comfort in the belief that future economic success depends not so much on the overall levels of cognitive skill in the population but rather on ensuring that at least a few brilliant rocket scientists come through. Hanushek et al show convincingly that in the 21st century having "a substantial cadre of high performers" and "near universal basic skills" are both essential. In short, the choice is a false one and the debate a distraction.

Summarising then, long-term, the future success of the American economy will depend on significantly improving the US school (and college) system with all the urgency that can be mustered. Indeed, because of the inevitable time-lag, even with the most rapid imaginable education reform, it will be some years before the impact is felt on economic growth. No wonder business leaders often play a leading role in driving school reform in Delaware and many other states; they see the hard edge of these issues. It is one thing in the global economy to offshore unskilled jobs because labour is cheaper elsewhere; quite another to offshore highly-skilled jobs simply because the qualified workforce can't be found – but too often this has become the reality.

Equally importantly, though, school reform in this country has never been just a question of economics, important though that is. From the beginning of the Republic, education was seen as fundamental to building democracy and extending freedom. Jefferson was giving expression to a universal belief when he said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was and never will be." This idealism was one of the reasons why the US made much earlier and more rapid progress towards universal public education than many countries in Europe. The state of New York for example, established universal public education in 1812, not matched even remotely in England until 1870. In fact in 1812 the British were more pre-occupied with shelling the White House! The roots of the comparative advantage Goldin and Katz identified in the 20th century lie deep in the previous century.

From the 1950s onwards the realisation of this ideal, an ideal which underpinned the American Dream, became central to the burgeoning civil rights movement, at first in the Deep South where grotesque educational inequality was placed firmly on the agenda by the Brown versus the Board of Education decision and later in the northern cities as the hopes of the diaspora all too often turned to despair.

There were, of course, many strands to the civil rights movement, all wonderfully woven together in Taylor Branch's monumental trilogy *America in the King Years*. Two things in his account are both striking and relevant to our agenda today. One is that the movement in the 1960s, while symbolised by great set piece speeches or new legislation, was in practice the accumulation of numberless acts of often unrewarded, unnoticed heroism, which, like ripples on an ocean, combined to become an irresistible tide. You see equivalent inspiring acts of educational heroism in schools and communities across this country now; they too need to become an ocean tide.

The second is that the leaders of the civil rights movement believed firmly that once equal access to school and college had been achieved, equal success would follow. Listen to King speaking to African American school students in Cleveland in 1964; "doors of opportunity are opening now that were not opened to your mothers and fathers. The great challenge facing you is to be ready to enter those doors." If they are ready, he implies, access will be enough.

Listen to President Johnson promising "every child a place to sit and a teacher to learn from" – he makes the same assumption that access would be enough. While some civil rights leaders expected it to take decades to make up the ground – Bob Moses estimated it would take "fifty years to work this through" – all expected that the ground would be made up in time. In relation to education, those expectations have not been realised.

Dig deeper than the headlines and the evidence is compelling. Not only does the US perform somewhat below OECD averages in the recent PISA, it also suffers from a very high socio-economic impact on student performance. Delaware is no exception to this rule. In other words, rather than overcoming the social differences children bring with them when they start school, the US system – like ours in the UK – tends to reinforce them. As Goldin and Katz have argued, "The slowdown in the growth of educational attainment...is the single most important factor increasing wage differentials since 1980 and is a major contributor to increased family inequality."

Those who led the civil rights movement, whether in Congress, churches or communities, must surely be devastated by the actual outcomes 40 or 50 years later. We know now that access to school is not enough. It is success in school that matters. We know that, at the heart of education reform, at the heart of success not just access, is the quality of what happens in classrooms – the skills and knowledge, the expectations and ambitions, the consistency and dedication which teachers bring to the task of enabling students, whatever their background, to achieve the standards necessary for life, work and citizenship in the 21st century. Though no-one believes it would be enough on its own, achieving the ambitions for 2014 set by NCLB would be a great start for this country. Advancing the Vision 2015 agenda here could be this state's contribution. This far-from-easy task has become, I would venture to suggest, the emerging frontier in the drive to realise civil rights in this country.

History suggests, therefore, that right now there is a great challenge facing America. Both future economic success and the wider aspirations at the heart of the very idea of America depend on vastly improving the outcomes of public education. The great threat to the country's future is that for a range of reasons it might fail to rise to this challenge. Then, for many, the American Dream will never be more than a dream. The great opportunity is that a combination of business and civil rights leaders and bipartisan political leadership, could become unstoppable. Right now, here in Delaware as well as across the country, the issue hangs in the balance.

SECTION 2: THE PRESENT

Let me start by assessing the negative side of the ledger – my fears. One worry I have is the sheer difficulty of getting things done in this country compared to many other countries, including my own. Of course, successful large scale change is never easy but in the Blair era, when the government had a large majority in Parliament and significant popular support, rapid progress was possible – as of course were rapid blunders! Partly in conscious reaction to that very British constitution, your Founding Fathers separated powers between three branches and two levels; a similar dispersion of power is usually found at state level. Add to that a culture which is historically suspicious of the very concept of government – as if George III is lurking behind every filing cabinet – and the challenge becomes much greater than in most European or Asian countries.

Then recognise the power and organisation of those who defend the status quo, face up to the legacy of failed attempts to bring about bold reform and the result is

a widespread sense of defeat in people's heads before they even begin. Across the country people sigh, along with the Russian Prime Minister in the 1990s who said, on leaving office, "We tried to do better but everything turned out as usual."

Moreover, these organisational and cultural barriers within the system are compounded by the worrying lack of anxiety among the American people about public education. It seems that the public is resigned to the state of their public schools rather than satisfied or delighted with them. *Education Next's* Fall issue (2008) finds that if parents could issue letter grades to the system, as schools do to students, just 20 per cent would give an A or B. People are significantly more satisfied with their police forces and post offices. Even so, there is little recognition that unless public education significantly improves in the near future, there is a disaster in the making. Education systems don't fail with the suddenness of a natural disaster but the consequences can be just as devastating. In a moment of despair, James Baldwin once observed that civilisations are destroyed not by wickedness but by spinelessness.

How many Americans see education as the top priority in facing up to the country's economic challenges? If public education really is the frontier of the civil rights movement, where are the modern equivalents of the Freedom Rides and the Freedom Summer? Where is the clamour? How is it that a leading elected official in another state could say to me recently that if one youth was beaten by the police there were mass protests but if thousands of youths were failed by the schools no one lifted a finger? Delaware, by taking a lead, may be ahead of the other states but – if I understand what people here are telling me – there are no grounds for complacency.

John F Kennedy first made his name in 1940, by publishing an essay about the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s and called it *Why England Slept*. I hope in ten year's time no-one looking back on this country's attempt to grapple with education reform will feel the need to write *Why America Slept*, still less *Why Delaware Slept*.

Fortunately, these anxieties are balanced by very real grounds for hope. To start with, wherever I go in America, I sense growing recognition among the country's leaders at local, state and national level that public education needs fixing. Furthermore, many of these leaders are ready to look abroad as well as at home for solutions. Delaware's excellent Vision 2015 Report and the coalition that supports it, is perfect illustration of my point.

Moreover, not the least consequence of the No Child Left Behind Act is much greater clarity in the data about the extent of the problem. Again, Delaware's analysis of its own challenge is exemplary. A much clearer diagnosis doesn't automatically lead to the cure but it is a major step forward.

In addition – again assisted by the data – we are increasingly well-informed about, to use Tony Blair's favourite phrase, what works. We have chains of schools such as KIPP, Aspire and Green Dot that demonstrably succeed where many in the past have failed. We have whole systems such as Boston, Chicago and New York City which are driving bold reform and delivering results. We have organisations such as Teach for America, the New Teacher Project and New Leaders for New Schools showing how apparently insurmountable human capital challenges can in fact be surmounted. We have not-for-profit organisations such as Education Trust and Achieve with deep expertise in crucial areas. We have foundations – Gates, Broad and Dell, for example – willing to take risks and invest substantially in bold alternatives to the inadequacies of the present. At state and local level there are businesses, community organisations and foundations acting with a similar sense of purpose, as this event itself demonstrates. Never before has there been so much insight into how to bring about successful change, nor such substantial capacity to deliver it. The question now here and across the country is whether political and educational leaders can seize that insight and capacity and bring irreversible progress.

There is a further point; the very international comparisons that make such depressing reading for the US (and challenge the UK too), also indicate a way forward. They demonstrate what can be done – with evident progress in less than a decade – with a combination of the right strategy and courageous, sustained leadership. Singapore's story over 40 years is truly inspirational. So, in an entirely different culture, is Finland's over 30 years. Poland made remarkable progress in the last decade. The reforms in Alberta and Ontario, just across the northern border, are working too. It can be done.

Which leads to my final ground for hope – the No Child Left Behind Act itself. Here was legislation which reached across political divides and set ambitious goals. It put no ceiling on educational performance but for the first time it fixed in legislation a high floor. It has put the achievement gap on the agenda from sea to shining sea. To set a date for delivery as soon as 2014 was aspirational certainly; some critics say it is unrealistic and the due date should be postponed, perhaps indefinitely. The same case is sometimes made here in relation to Vision 2015.

Others say, provide the pre-school and the capacity first and we'll come to the accountability later. Even if the American people would accept a "pay first and ask questions later" approach, these arguments fail to recognise the degree of urgency. Moreover, the fact that there are schools right now achieving those 2014 or 2015 goals surely suggests significant delay would be a mistake. In any case, from the perspective of the Freedom Summer of 1964, far from looking too soon, 2014 looks half century too late. As the then Vice-President said rejecting pleas for patience, on the 100th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, "It is empty to plead that the solution to the dilemmas of the present rests on the hands of a clock. The solution is in our hands."

Across the country, and in Delaware too, there are promising, albeit early, signs that progress is being made. Performance is improving – not enough but at least heading in the right direction. Achievement gaps are narrowing – not yet transformatively but increments are better than nothing. The current Governor and Secretary have much to be proud of as well as a challenge to face up to.

So for me NCLB and the action that states such as Delaware have taken in its aftermath, are sources of hope. The question to my mind is not "Should this progress be reversed or abandoned?" but "How can it be refined and followed through?" In my last section I want to turn to this.

SECTION 3: THE FUTURE

It is clear that for all its qualities, the policy agenda which developed in the wake of NCLB, does need refinement. A number of refinements in particular stand out from an international perspective.

First, much depends on the quality of the assessments being used. Where poor tests are used, the information they provide will be misleading with potentially dire consequences for the students themselves when they leave school and meet the real world coming the other way. One option for solving this problem was advocated recently by the New York Times, and would involve asking NAEP to create a rigorous test to be given free to states – with those that choose not to use it being publicly identified and therefore asked to explain themselves. Whether this is the best solution I'm not sure but the direction is certainly right.

Second, the introduction of growth models has brought welcome refinement to the accountability requirements and it makes sense to build on this development, as you are doing currently here in Delaware. Growth models are helpful as a measure of progress and explanation of the scale of the challenge; they are

dangerous when they become a justification for poor performance or lower expectations. Our experience in England suggests growth or value-added models should be combined with a continuing focus on the absolute outcomes which are all that matter to students when they leave school. They need to be part of a refined, modern, student-based data system which puts the evidence at the fingertips of every professional at every level. Your emphasis on the Vision Network, and data-driven decision-making, is the kind of thing I have in mind.

Third, districts and states need to develop the capacity to act decisively in response to the data. They need to be able to recognise and reward those who succeed, especially those who succeed in challenging circumstances; they also need to intervene effectively where progress is not what it needs to be. In England, not without difficulty and controversy, we did develop this latter capacity. Under pressure from us in central government our equivalent of school districts did learn how to intervene effectively in failing schools. They did not apply pre-packaged interventions in mechanical sequence; instead they diagnosed the problem in each school and tailored the solution accordingly, answering the only question that matters in these circumstances – “what do we need to do to get these kids a good education as fast as possible?”

Sometimes it meant closure of the school and dispersal of the students to other schools; sometimes it required the introduction of new providers and sometimes the replacement of a principal. Our “districts” varied in their technical capacity to do this; they also varied in the degree of political will they brought to it. It is always tempting in these difficult circumstances to give the benefit of the doubt – but doing so, in my experience, is almost always a mistake. After all it raises the question, “How come you were so doubtful?” Meanwhile at central government level we intervened in districts which lacked the capacity to drive school improvement. We did so successfully in almost 10 per cent of the total, which, among other things, incentivised the rest. I was intrigued by the proposal in Vision 2015 for an Office of Innovation. Perhaps this could become the vehicle for working with high performing schools to identify best practices and equally for developing creative solutions for the problems of under-performance in the state. Either way, the moral case for action is overwhelming.

This raises my fourth point: successful education reform is as much about means as it is about ends. Getting the policy right is difficult to be sure; but it is relatively easy compared to making it happen, consistently and effectively so that the benefits are felt in every classroom. Policy failure is as often a failure of implementation as it is of concept. Systems need to develop both the technical

capacity and the necessary mindset to deliver results. This is what in the Blair administration we self-mockingly called “deliverology”, but, when we applied it systematically, it worked. You will need a Delaware equivalent if the ambitions of Vision 2015 are to be realised. As one of our more hapless kings – Charles I – once observed (shortly before they cut off his head), “There is more to the doing than bidding it be done.”

Fifth, there is much more to do to ensure there is a highly effective (more important than highly qualified) teacher in every classroom and a highly effective principal in every school. It is especially important to ensure that the schools facing the toughest challenges have access as soon as possible to the most talented teachers and leaders. Doing so requires root-and-branch reform of inherited, traditional, bureaucratic systems of recruiting and training teachers and leaders, of paying and rewarding them and of shaping their incentives, both short-term and long-term, including pension arrangements. There needs to be a constant focus on developing talent and building capacity. At the moment all around America I see fine examples of what is required – Teach for America, the National Institute for School Leadership, KIPP’s leadership development programmes and New York City’s Leadership Academy, for example – but at the moment these remain exceptions to the rule, not the rule itself.

In relation to human capital there is a more profound, underlying question. As McKinsey’s Report *How the World’s Best Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* makes clear, the world’s best systems are recruiting teachers who have both the right personal qualities and come from the top third of the graduate distribution; in the US most teachers are from the bottom third. Without improving their underlying capacity to attract talented people, education systems will struggle to compete in future. This challenge is likely to be particularly acute in a place like Wilmington where so many of the Fortune 500 companies are incorporated.

In England, to address the massive teacher shortage we faced a decade or more ago, we completely overhauled our teacher training – making it more classroom-based, more accessible to people in mid-career who wanted to switch into teaching, better aligned with the school reform agenda and much better quality assured. We offered students incentives to go into teacher education programmes and varied those incentives according to the degree of shortage in particular subjects. Inspired by David Puttnam, the film producer, we introduced the National Teacher Awards, covered annually on prime-time television. Once the product had improved we promoted it vigorously through advertising with the slogan, *Those Who Can, Teach*. The result has been several years of sustained

improvement in the numbers and quality of recruits into teaching, assisted by our own version of TFA called Teach First. We increased teachers' pay too but evidence from around the world shows that increasing pay on its own brings poor returns.

For the US the question of where in the long-run it will find sufficient teachers of real quality, especially in science and maths, remains unanswered. I came across a medium-sized state with great universities – I won't name it – that produced just one new physics teacher last year. Just one. Increasing the supply of talent into teaching will require in addition to major changes in policy, a change in the way teachers are perceived. TFA and similar programmes are beginning to bring that about – but only beginning. Delaware's size and scale would mean that programmes such as TFA or NLNS could make a disproportionately beneficial impact, quite rapidly. All the evidence suggests that relying on traditional approaches to human capital will not be sufficient for a state such as this. If the economic times are likely to be more challenging in the next few years than they have been until recently, both the need and the opportunity are all the greater.

Changing a culture also requires leadership from those in government, business and the not-for-profit sectors. The chances of success would be greatly enhanced if teacher leaders too became advocates of reform. In the early 1990s when I worked for a teacher union in England, I suggested turning the traditional case for investment in teachers on its head. Instead of continuing to argue that if the government increased our pay we might consider improving the system, I suggested we should embrace accountability, improve the system and then tell the public, "Look, now you can see a system worth investing in."

Accepting this case at the time required too great a leap of faith. However, history is instructive. In spite of teacher opposition, accountability was imposed, schools did improve and, as a result, the biggest ever increases in investment in education, including in teachers' pay and professional development, did follow. Blair called it "Investment for Reform". While teachers did not always enjoy the journey they arrived at a much better, if more challenging, destination. Given the wide range of opportunities available, talented people won't flock into a profession with lockstep conditions and a beleaguered image. Nor will sceptical citizens continue to invest precious tax dollars in a system that doesn't seem to be working. Citizens the world over, like good businesses, prefer to invest in success. The challenge is to turn a downward spiral into an upward one; to build an ambitious future rather than rely on the modest mediocrity of recent decades.

This raises my sixth point; the extent and distribution of funding for public schools. International benchmarks suggest that America's overall expenditure on schools is above the average but, compared to other countries, two questions of distribution stand out. The first is that, even after funding equity suits, often more money per student is spent in wealthier areas than poorer ones. It is easy to see how this came about; but to an outside observer in the early 21st century, this disparity makes no sense at all. If all young people are to reach high standards, as NCLB envisages, then the system has to provide greater support to those with furthest to go. A child age four of "professional" parents will have heard 45 million words; a child age four of "welfare" parents just 13 million words. Overcoming such a massive language deficit is possible but not if the school system merely reinforces the advantages of the already advantaged. The inescapable practical implication is that, over time, states will have to play a larger role in raising and distributing funds for public education. Delaware, where the state already raises 63 per cent of the tax dollars for education, has a great opportunity to lead the country on this issue.

US funding distribution is also skewed in another way which receives less comment. A much lower proportion of it actually reaches the classroom than in the best performing systems; much more of it is tied up in administration. Of course, good administration matters but every dollar spent on unnecessary administration is a dollar that could have assisted that welfare child reach for the stars.

In England we required by law our "districts" to devolve the vast bulk of the funding for schools to the schools themselves. Each school now has a three year delegated budget, based on a published formula. This direction was set by the Thatcher government and continued by all its successors. In effect the burden of proof was reversed – a pound (or dollar) should be spent at the level of the school unless there is a convincing case for spending it elsewhere. Any government in England that sought to return to the old opaque system would have a riot on its hands. The commission on Leadership for Educational Achievement in Delaware, I understand, is giving attention to these funding issues and will report this autumn. That will be another great opportunity for this state to lead the way.

Along with the money, schools need to be given responsibility for how it is spent. The PISA evidence shows that increased management autonomy at school level is associated with better results but this lesson remains to be learnt in many parts of this country. Recently, in a northern US city, I came across a good school principal setting out to turn around a failing school. She had all the right ideas but had no

control over which teachers were employed at her school. She even needed permission from a teacher to visit a classroom. What chance did she have? The contrast with the nearby charter school, in similar social circumstances, was dramatic. Accountability and autonomy need to go together. The question for the US is not just how many charter schools it wants but how soon all schools can have charter-like autonomy. Similarly, all schools that spend public dollars – charter or otherwise – should be held to account in the same way and, if necessary, intervention should follow. Children are children regardless of the status of the school they attend.

This leads to my seventh and final point. The PISA evidence indicates strongly that there are benefits in holding schools to account through standards-based external assessments. In the global economy the question of national standards inescapably arises. The emerging bipartisan alliance in favour of common or national – as distinct from federal – standards suggests growing recognition that the US needs them to be fewer, clearer and higher. Moreover, *Education Next's* recent poll showed almost 70 per cent support in the population for national standards – and over half of all public school teachers agreed.

The truth is that across the world standards in maths, science and English will inevitably be set by global benchmarks in a globalized economy. Quite simply, to succeed countries will need world-class standards; algebra and geometry don't change at the Rio Grande or the 49th Parallel – or at the borders with Maryland and Pennsylvania for that matter.

From this perspective the question of national standards is straightforward; they will arrive anyway eventually. The only questions are whether they do so by accident or design; haphazardly or systematically; sooner or later. As they used to say in the civil rights decade, 'If not now, when?'

CONCLUSION

The choice facing the US is, as I began by saying, a stark one. It will shape America's capacity to succeed over the decades ahead in the profoundly challenging global economy; it will shape too whether the American Dream in a stunningly diverse America, is genuinely open to every citizen. The aspirations unlocked in the dawn of the civil rights movement have only partially been fulfilled. The school system has improved in many ways since that time but surely no citizen of Delaware, indeed no American, can be satisfied by the outcomes. There is no ceiling on what individual Americans can achieve but, though

enshrined in legislation, the high floor, on which economic success and social justice depend, has yet to be built. For those committed to a vibrant, successful America where the American Dream and the American reality more closely coincide, there can surely be, in Martin Luther King's phrase of old, "neither rest, nor tranquillity." It will be a long, hard road in Delaware, as elsewhere. Many of you – in the arena now – know this only too well. More and more people are watching education reform in the US, and hoping.

Counting on this country's success in this endeavour are not just children and families across this great country, not just the future of the American economy, not just the idea of the American Dream, but all of us around the world. In the 20th century a strong, generous, outward-looking America was a decisive factor in enabling humanity to rise and meet the challenges it faced. As Goldin and Katz have demonstrated, public education was central to making that possible. How much more important for everyone then is US education in the 21st century when the world is so much more complicated and the clock is ticking?

At the bottom of the staircase in No.10, just outside the Prime Minister's office, there is an exceptional photograph of Winston Churchill. Facing the camera, he glowers with such defiance that, even at that uncertain hour, war-time defeat must have seemed inconceivable to the onlooker. In fact, I'm told the real cause of his mighty frown is that the photographer had forced him to put down his cigar! Be that as it may, the time has surely come to heed his famous words, "America always does the right thing but only after it has exhausted all the alternatives." In education reform those alternatives have indeed been exhausted. It is time for America to do the right thing. I look forward to seeing Delaware lead the way.

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