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I was asked to talk about education reform, which I love talking about, but I will talk about it in the context of an advocacy for broad reform being essential for communities, states, or provinces, and certainly for countries, to succeed. I learned through trial and error how to advance a reform agenda against opposition, and the process may have relevance in other jurisdictions where there is such a vested interest in the status quo.

It seems to me that we are living in a world where people are holding on to what they think is more valuable than what could be, and they use their energy to defeat any better idea, because they are fearful of the kind of change that it might bring. And so, the realization of clear ideas requires certain skills that weren't needed in the past, at least in the United States.

In 1984, the Florida education commissioner complained that the pace of reform was overwhelming the system. He said we needed more time to chew what we had already bitten off. Fourteen years after that statement when I became governor, Florida was still chewing. We were at the bottom of the barrel in academic rankings; we were dead-last in graduation rate; and our reading and math scores were at the bottom 3 in almost every indicator. On the NAEP test, which is our nation's report card test, we were 29th or 30th out of the 31 or 32 states that administered the test.

When I became governor, we abandoned delay as a strategy. We embraced what I would call the full-steam-ahead model that made adults really uncomfortable. But in a few short years, Florida became a national leader and made huge advancements on many of the indicators that are out there.

So how did we do it?

The first thing was, as a candidate I said I was going to do it. I said exactly what I wanted to do, with enough detail that people knew I wasn't kidding, and interestingly as the challenger, those ideas became the basis of the whole campaign. The incumbent lieutenant governor was my opponent, and he had no new ideas, or at least he didn't express them. His focus was on opposing my ideas and that's the perfect place to be. If you want to make big changes in political life, advance that cause, and defend it with passion and conviction and persuade people, and then if you get elected you actually have the chance to do it.

A lot of times in public life, people say "I'm with you after the election, but I don't want to mess up the election. I'm going to win, and then I'll have a chance to pursue whatever the idea is." But by the time they get into office, they have often compromised themselves to do the tepid things, rather than the bigger things.

So my first advice to anybody who is seeking bigger policy objectives is - Be big, be bold, take the risk while you campaign, so that the campaign is about those ideas.

The second thing I did was put myself outside my own comfort zone, which is something that is not done much in public life. We live in these protected bubbles, where we can tweet amongst ourselves, and interact amongst ourselves, and we can only talk with people who agree completely with what we think, and we are never challenged. So I decided to go outside my own comfort zone, because campaigning can be pretty boring if you are not out there learning, just doing fundraisers. At least that was my attitude.

So I decided I was going to visit 100 schools. Now remember, I was already known: this was my second run, and I had horns on my head for the people who were inside the establishment of the public education system. It was kind of weird for me to go around and visit schools, but I loved it so much that I decided to go to 200 schools after the first 100, and in the end I went to 250 schools in less than a year.

I visited schools that were fantastic, I visited schools that were failing. I talked to teachers who hated my guts. I talked to teachers that secretly said "Go for it, man. I think you are on the right path." I saw students who were struggling. I saw a junior in high school who was taking for the fifth time, the last time he could take this test, an 8th-grade aptitude test to graduate from high school. And the question he was struggling with when I looked over his shoulder was "A baseball game starts at 1:00 and ends at 3:30, how long is the game?" That's the level of aptitude, the level that expectations were in Florida, and here's a kid who went all the way through 11th grade and was struggling with that question. I wonder what his life looks like now. Do you think that he is going to have a life of purpose and meaning, with systems that were dumbed-down and where the focus was making sure that the adults were doing quite well, but not the kids?

They typically sent me to the AP classes, the Advanced Placement classes with all bright kids. In one school, I don't remember which school it was, there was a little pocket where excellence took place, with great teachers, and the kids were learning Advanced Placement literature. And next door there was a gigantic fight in the classroom that they couldn't hide from me. So I walked into that classroom, and literally there was a brawl going on, which was typical in a school that had no expectations and no discipline and no focus on student learning.

I learned a lot, and it allowed me to make my case perhaps with more substance and with a personal face, a personal context on it. So I got elected, and to the surprise of a lot of people who don't believe politicians will do what they said they were going to do, I did it.

The legislature passed the 'A-Plus' plan, and we graded schools 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', and 'F', half on learning gains, and half on proficiency. Schools that were graded 'A' or showed improvement were given $100 per student, direct, totally unregulated. They could have bought plane tickets to Rio de Janeiro if they wanted to, I guess. However 85% of that money, $140M per year, went to bonuses for teachers - the largest merit-based teacher program in the country.

We created a voucher for schools where kids in failing schools - schools that were graded 'F' for two years - could go to a public or private option of their choice. We expanded testing through each grade, grades 3 through 10, so we could measure learning gains rather than having the gaps. We needed to know if the kids who were behind were catching up.

We increased the high-school graduation requirement from the pathetic 8th-grade level to a slightly-less-pathetic - in my mind the best we could get - 10th-grade level test. We created a very extensive

database so there could be no excuses that people didn't know how it's working. We can literally track, in Florida, 4-year-olds through post-graduate work and whether they got a job. We can tie that to teacher performance, we can tie that to who their teachers were, and what schools of education those teachers went to. So there is rich, robust data that researchers can look at, to help all of us be assured that there is more learning.

There was a lot of opposition, the teacher's unions hated this, and district bureaucracies. Frankly in the public setting, management benefits from the collective bargaining process as much as labour does. Think about it. If you are negotiating basically with yourself in the mirror, for economic benefits that are appropriated by any legislative body, there's never a loser. Everybody benefits from the increase in pay, the teaching benefits, or the health care benefits.

They didn't like our plan either. Change didn't come easy, because empires don't go easily into the night. In the United States, 13,174 government-run, heavily-unionized, politicized public-sector school districts is not the governance model for 2013. So in Florida we had a big fight on our hands.

But we had a business community that was supportive because they saw the dismal results, and they wanted more qualified people to go to college and be career-ready. We had support from the legislature, because I made this the basis of the campaign and I was a rookie governor. They didn't want me to fail. And so the energy allowed us to pass this. With a big fight, we got it passed, and we implemented it, and thank God we saw great increases in test scores that allowed us then to take the next iteration.

The next lesson, I would say, is if you have an idea and you have the chance to pass it through the legislature, then you have to faithfully execute, and that gives you the opportunity to continue to push the ball forward. Success is never final; reform is never complete. There should be a command focus on constantly-challenging systems, so that they work better on behalf of the people that they are trying to serve.

My belief is that comprehensive reform isn't the way to go. We're not sending our kids to Hogwarts with Harry Potter. This isn't the kind of system that we have in the United States, or for that matter, in Canada. So I have six suggestions, a cocktail of reforms if you will, that can bring about more student learning for more students than what the status quo does.

The first is **early literacy**. I know that you are focused on this here in this province and in Canada, and I support that. Not early baby-sitting, but literacy-based learning. There should be a focus on dealing with the gaps as quickly as possible, because family life, at least in the United States, is dramatically different from one family to another. The children of a mom and dad in an affluent circumstance have heard literally millions more words than children who are part of a single-parent family living in poverty. It is imperative for us if we want to see the demands on society and on government diminish, for us to intervene until committed family life, wholesome loving family life is restored. As a guiding principle, I'm not smart enough to figure out how to do that. But I do know that early literacy works, and in Florida we changed the system.

For the life of me, I do not know how the logic of promoting illiterate 3rd-graders into 4th grade is a good idea. It's based on this notion of self-esteem. But the simple fact is that if you're a 4th grader who can't read, then you are going to be a 5th grader who can't read. And a 6th grader who can't read. And eventually you are going to be old enough to drop out. We should worry more about whether the child can read, rather than whether or not he or she feels good. That is what we have to do.

So we implemented a pre-K program where there was support for literacy, and we assessed all 4-year-olds going into kindergarten. And we can go back and determine whether it's the home-school environment, or the religious pre-K part of it, or the traditional pre-K part of it, or Head Start, or any different variation of early literacy environments. We can determine which ones preschool programs work and which ones don't.

We also do this so that kindergarten and first-grade teachers can intervene early enough, to make sure that the gaps close. We put reading coaches in every elementary and middle school to teach teachers how to teach reading, because schools of education don't.

And in 2001, we **eliminated social promotion** for 3rd graders. All 3rd graders in Florida, with some exemptions, if they are functionally illiterate do not go to 4th grade. Trust me, this was a big deal. The year before, thirty-two percent of all kids were determined to be functionally-illiterate. So we decided to put a hard edge, a hard-edged gate to say that is not acceptable in the State of Florida. And the simple fact was, in 4th grade you start reading to learn, before that you are learning how to read. We cut the functional literacy rate in half in the first year. And after that we saw a continuing reduction. And so the gaps that existed in many states have narrowed appreciably because of this focus on early childhood literacy.

And we did many more things. Apart from the grade 3 hard-edge and no social promotion, we put mentors in every school. I created a big hairy audacious goal - a BHAG - of 200,000 mentors in our elementary schools, focused on early constructing readers, and it ended up that we had 206,000 mentors working - from the private sector, from charity groups, from everybody involved in this. It made a huge difference in improving the results. So 10 years back, to put it in perspective, in the 4th grade report card, the NAEP, Florida went from 39th out of 41 to 6th out of 50 in 10 years' time.

The third suggestion is that **school choice** needs to be at the core of any kind of transformed education system. We have the most diverse student population in history, not dissimilar to what exists in Canada, and the system itself hasn't changed even though the diversity of the student population has changed dramatically.

It defies common sense, it seems to me, to corral children into an early-20th-century model, and expect them to thrive. It makes even less sense when their neighbourhood schools have a long track record of failure. Bureaucracies are not designed to innovate. They certainly don't like competition, they hate accountability, and what they do like is - no surprise - secure jobs.

And so I personally believe that our systems need to change, and the way you make those systems change is to empower parents to have more choices for their children, so that all schools improve. Florida began that journey in 1999 and we have never stopped. We have the most ambitious school choice programs, public and private. We have the largest number of kids that go to the Florida virtual schools - half a million courses given last year. The largest corporate tax credit scholarship program, the only state-wide voucher program for children with learning disabilities, the second-largest number of students attending independent public schools or charter schools. And the simple fact is, all the schools get better when you give people choices, because if there is a choice then everybody improves.

This is not just based on my passionate beliefs, this is based on research that we have in Florida that has been studied by researchers from Harvard, Stanford, and many other places. It seems to me that it is irrefutable, that we've seen this improvement in the wake of all this incredible school choice, and that has to be at the heart of what we're doing.

As a corollary to that, I would suggest, is that digital learning is the new school choice element that could be a catalytic converter for sustained education improvement. Today in Florida, when kids come home from school, they come home and drop their backpacks laden with 25 to 50 pounds of books, those poor little kids are walking around with neck injuries already at the age of 10, and then they pick up their iPads or some other device, tap on an app, and off they go into the digital world. It's kind of like Bam-Bam from the Flintstones turning into Elroy Jetson.

That's what we have today. There is this aversion to digital learning because the kids are challenging a system that wants to have an early-20th-century model and drive education by governance. But the simple fact is, high-quality digital content, brought into the classroom, offers huge potential to customize the learning experience of students. With digital education, kids can learn any time, anywhere. You can reverse the learning experience where homework is done in the classroom, or classwork is done at home, where students are held accountable for the learning, where teachers become managers of the learning experience and can customize it to create the best possible outcomes for students.

And you can move to a competency-based system. Imagine a system where kids of the same age go through the education experience, where one of them may be 2 or 3 grade levels ahead of the one that's struggling, but the one who is struggling is not being pushed along without mastering the material. For those kids, the learning gaps eventually become overwhelming and the kids drop out.

That's the system that exists in our universities now, increasingly, and it should be the system in the United States, In Florida we've begun to deal with it by tearing down these protectionist walls that make it impossible for digital learning to exist. I would encourage that to be part of any broad-based reform.

The fourth suggestion is that **accountability** matters. It matters in our lives, it matters in our businesses, and it matters for children. There should be a consequence that's different for a system when there are massive learning gains, then when there are no gains at all. There should be a different consequence. The systems should have to change if they are not yielding rising student achievement. And in Florida we did something, as I said, pretty radical. We graded schools based on student learning, and we rated schools in a way that no one could mistake. It wasn't complex, there were no fuzzy descriptions here - 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D' and 'F'. Everybody understood that an 'A' school was better than an 'F' school and it was based on student learning.

And the simple fact was that, even inside systems that didn't want to change, no one wanted to be associated with an 'F' school, or even a 'D' school. Everybody began to organize their systems or their strategies to ensure that there were enough learning gains so that the school grade could rise. It sounds simple, but I promise you it was the catalytic converter in our case, and now an increasing number of places, New York City and 15 other states, are doing this to put pressure on the system so that there is more continuous improvement.

Let me give you an example. In 2005, we started to include students with learning disabilities in our grading system. No matter how severe children's learning disabilities are, you can measure performance from a baseline to how they are progressing. Ever since Florida included children with learning disabilities in its grading system, we've led the nation in the NAEP scores for children with disabilities.

Accountability truly matters. We can excuse away why some kids can learn and some kids can't, and we can blame societal problems all day long. There's a legitimate case to be made in that regard, but if you start with the premise that God has given each child the ability to learn, then the accountability system

ought to be there to back that up. I honestly believe that. I believe that every child can learn, and it's up to the adults, inside and outside the system, to change when it's appropriate to make it better. And accountability is a key element of that.

The second-to-last suggestion is that **teachers** matter a lot. A child in a classroom with a great teacher will get a year-and-a-half worth of learning in a year's time. Sadly, a teacher in a classroom adjacent to that great teacher will on average deliver about a half-year worth of learning in a year's time. So in one year's time - by lottery in effect – one kid can be two years behind another kid who is in a high-achieving classroom. To me, it is unconscionable that we allow that to happen. Many places don't even know when it happens, because they don't have the ability or they don't have the care to measure that. But even in the places where they do measure it, it happens many times and there is no consequence for that tragedy to unfold. And, if it happens in two years, that exact same result, those gaps become so big that it's very hard to imagine how a kid can recover.

We pay the teachers the same in those adjacent classrooms. If there were lay-offs, and the ineffective teacher had been hired a day earlier, in most states and I'm guessing here in Ontario, the great teacher would be sent packing. If the great teacher got frustrated and quit, which sadly happens way too often in many places in the United States, little if any effort would be made to keep him or her.

Now this may be a union-friendly model, it sure as heck is, but it's certainly not a child-friendly model. I'm sure here in Ontario, you are much more enlightened in this regard, and you are focused on children, not like in the United States where children are there kind of as pawns. I'm sure, given how enlightened this city is, that's the case.

My personal belief is that great teachers need to be recognized, and they need to be rewarded. And that will happen if we move to a pay system where student learning is at the core of it. We'll never get 100% on it, but there should be some objective evaluation of teacher performance based on student learning. In Florida, we've eliminated tenure for all new teachers, and you can lose tenure if you are an ineffective over a period of time. That system will yield a far better result of bringing high-calibre teachers, people into the teaching profession that will yield rising student achievement over the long haul.

And finally, what we suggest to you is that **standards** matter a lot. If you have high standards, a lot of kids will figure out a way to achieve them. If you have high standards, believe it or not, those same kids are likely to get close or achieve them. That's how it works in our families, right? That's how it works at TD, right? That's how it works every place I know. High expectations are the key to success. If you dumb down expectations, you can feel good about the results you have, but you are not going to get the results over the long haul that will create the kind of society, the kind of communities that we want. Learned people, living lives of purpose and meaning should be the objective of every community in great societies. But low expectations make that harder and harder.

In Florida, we're well along in that process. But nationally we've just started this process, and we're in a massive fight right now, strange as it might be, over whether or not the United States is going to support something called 'Common Core State Standards'. Now here are the facts, Common Core State Standards were voluntarily created by 45 states, not by the federal government. They are for language arts and math, they are higher, they are fewer, they require critical thinking skills, and at the end of the process, if you match the standards in 12th grade, you are college- or career-ready.

Today in the United States, 25% of the kids are college- or career-ready. Twenty-five percent! We spend more per student than any country in the world, including Canada, other than Luxemburg, I apologize to

the Luxemburgites. Yet we have a result where 25% of our kids are college- or career-ready measured by the ACT test. That only 25% of kids pass that test is a tragedy of epic proportions for the long-term future of our country.

And so we need to have higher expectations, and then be honest with the fact that we're not delivering great economic or great education success. My personal belief is that this is a fight worth having, and so I'm one of the few conservatives fighting the fight, against an avalanche of concern - legitimately so - about federal government encroachment into education in the United States.

But I cannot defend the dumbed-down standards that exist in Florida or any other place. I'd rather be part of the process to tell people to take their medicine, and recognize that we have failed, and that we need to renew ourselves with a dramatically different, transformed education system.

Let me close with this. There was a lovely paediatric surgeon in Orlando named Dr. Ronald David. After he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he spent his last years in the operating room restoring the most fragile of lives. When asked why he was so passionate about his job, he had this simple response: I like the duration of the cure. Saving a young life is a lifetime of living. That should be the cause for those who believe in systemic education reform, here or any place in the world for that matter.

We ignore education at our peril. The simple fact is if we get this right, we will have a lifetime of cure. It's true that young people dream huge dreams, but they also need the tools to be capable of pursuing those dreams. And maybe their dreams will change, but the capacity to be able to pursue them is what we need. And too many people have big dreams, but they have no clue about how to achieve them because our systems have not been designed for success, they've been designed, basically, to defend mediocrity and failure. I hope that you focus on the duration of the cure, and if you do so, my guess is that Ontario and Canada will continue to be a place of great envy, and hopefully you will allow the state of Florida to be an unofficial province.

Thank you very much.