



AFTERWORD

by Kim Smith, Co-Founder, NewSchools Venture Fund

Our goal is a simple one: to give every child in this country a fair start toward “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Over the ten years since we created NewSchools, I have learned that everyone supports this goal – left, right, and center. They support it because of their deepest moral values or because it is in our collective economic self-interest, or both.

So why, more than 50 years after Brown vs. Board of Education, are we still so far from our goal?

Mostly because a crisis of leadership. Not a shortage of leaders. Plenty of leaders have made important incremental progress. But powerful orthodoxies and deep institutional inertia have combined to create a crisis of creativity in our leadership. Max DePree writes: “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.” For too long, most of our educational leaders have failed to define a bold new reality, instead working inside the debilitating historical norms and inertial forces that surround them. They have failed to be servants to the right constituency – serving the adults in their employ instead of the neediest of children.

For the past decade I have had the privilege of supporting the small but growing community of inspiring entrepreneurial leaders described in this report. What makes these leaders so important? They are optimistic and bold. They have a sense of urgency and refuse to accept no for an answer. But they are not just rebels. Their bold ambitions for our kids combine with their deep pragmatism to drive them beyond the old ways of working. They are bipartisan, and their work bridges the public, private and nonprofit sectors. They are not intimidated by traditional monopolies or oligopolies.

Why should we be hopeful about reaching our goal?

Consider for a moment the lesson of Jean Monnet, who in 1950 – when all of Europe feared another World War was inevitable – conceived of a bold new solution: a European Union. Rejecting the conventional wisdom that France and Germany would always be at odds, Monnet set out to prove that his novel idea was possible. He wrote in his journal:

The course of events must be altered. To do this, men’s attitudes must be changed. Words are not enough. Only immediate action on an essential point can change the present static situation. This action must be radical, real, immediate, and dramatic; it must change things and make a reality of the hopes which people are on the point of giving up ... We must change the context by transforming the basic facts.

Monnet observed: “nothing is possible without men, nothing is lasting without institutions.” And so he set out to create new and lasting institutions that overcame Europeans’ belief that peace was impossible, thereby laying the groundwork for the European Union. Education entrepreneurs, like Monnet, have been creating bold new solutions in order to “transform the basic facts,” and prove what’s possible.

Certainly, we need more of these ambitious entrepreneurs – not just to build great schools for our neediest students, but also to develop revolutionary new ways to recruit and prepare teachers and leaders; and to support their work with dramatically better tools and data. These advances are essential to the massive gains we know education must make.

In taking on this challenge, we should take note of Dr. King’s reminder that “human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men.” We must ask ourselves: what can we do to support these tireless and courageous change agents? The answer lies in wise social capital and policy choices.

Education entrepreneurs need growth capital so their organizations can reach a size commensurate with the problems they are tackling. They need funding that supports the leadership and infrastructure required to accomplish their bold goals, and investments that move beyond traditional philanthropic norms toward a cross-sector approach that will bridge social purpose companies, nonprofits, and hybrid solutions.

Smart new public policies and investments are also essential. They will drive dramatic improvements in teacher recruitment, development, and retention, and will help build better student assessments, allowing us to measure the complex skills students need today. Likewise, better facilities financing and growth capital will increase the supply of strong public charter schools.

For our own part, we promise to redouble our efforts as a focused, specialized intermediary whose sole purpose is to support these amazing entrepreneurs, because we believe that without their success, we will never reach our goal.