



FOREWORD

by Walter Isaacson

Those of us who have unruly kids or who care about the challenges of education can take heart from the tale of Albert Einstein: as a young child, he was no Einstein. He was slow in learning how to talk, so slow that he was dubbed “the dopey one.” He also had a rebellious attitude toward authority, which led one schoolmaster to send him packing and another to amuse history by declaring that he would never amount to much. These traits made Einstein the patron saint of distracted school kids everywhere. But they also helped to make him the most creative scientific genius of modern times (or so he later surmised).

His slow verbal development led to his lifelong habit of thinking in pictures rather than just in words. He loved to perform what he called “visual thought experiments” – what you and I might call daydreaming, but he’s Einstein, so he gets to call them thought experiments. These daydreams, he later said, spurred his creativity and led him to imagine new ways of doing things. As for his willingness to challenge authority, that quality led him to question received wisdom with a spirit that the more obedient acolytes in the academy never contemplated. “Long live impudence!” he exulted as a young man. “It is my guardian angel in this world.”

A new generation of educational innovators seems to have inherited Einstein’s spirit. Impatient, creative, imaginative, attentive to results and unencumbered by tradition, this loose alliance of can-do organizations is one of the most important forces today improving education for America’s neediest children. And behind them at each step has been NewSchools Venture Fund.

A generation ago, this nation set out to boost the numbers of young people earning a strong education, amid warnings that we were falling behind in international competitions of military prowess, economic might, and aerospace brilliance. Yet we flagged in our effort to change the basic facts of the battle: school systems that left behind many kids from disadvantaged backgrounds; a deep mismatch between where the best teachers were needed and where they actually ended up.

Today’s generation of education entrepreneurs has begun to change those basic facts of schooling for low-income kids. Courageous visionaries have built networks of schools – Aspire Public Schools, KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, Mastery Charter Schools, YES Prep Public Schools, and many others – that defy neighborhood expectations. Teach For America, whose national board I’m proud to chair, has taken the old equation about teachers and flipped it on its head. In a country where the best-educated and most skilled teachers teach the most affluent kids, thousands of Ivy League graduates now compete for spots in inner-city classrooms. Paying no heed to those who claim that broken communities and families are too much to overcome, these bold young entrepreneurs

already have sent thousands of bright kids from tough neighborhoods on to college. And in a closing of the circle that gladdens my heart, alumni are now returning, college degrees in hand, to the schools that changed their lives – to teach the next generation.

What these young revolutionaries have done, though, is bigger than just starting good schools, or training good teachers and principals and sending them to where they're needed. They have changed what people think is possible. They have turned inner-city teaching into the coolest possible career choice, even – especially – for bright young adults previously headed into law or investment banking. They have created schools for low-income kids where success is the norm, not the exception – which helps to make teaching a more welcoming profession. They have shown all of America that while it may not be easy work, it can be done.

The central square for this revolution – the birthplace of its ideas, the meeting place for its generals – has been NewSchools Venture Fund. From the days when Aspire Public Schools and KIPP were just a couple of schools, and no one had heard of a charter management organization, NewSchools has helped to guide change that has benefited hundreds of thousands of children. We have only begun to reap the benefits of this entrepreneurial work. It will be exciting to see what this energy will produce in the next 10 years.

The work has not always been easy. Too often, an entrenched system has spent more time explaining what's not allowed and what can't be done. Fortunately, this new generation of entrepreneurs has paid no attention. One hears a bit of Einstein in the words of Michelle Rhee, a Teach For America alumna who started The New Teacher Project and went on to become Chancellor of the Washington DC schools. Explaining the philosophy that has delivered a lifesaving shock to the heart of the Washington, D.C. school system, she said: "I am somebody who is focused on the end result that I think needs to happen. So if the rule's standing in the way of that, I will question those rules. I will bend those rules."

Long live impudence!

Walter Isaacson is the President and CEO of the Aspen Institute. He has been the Chairman and CEO of CNN and the editor of Time Magazine. He serves on the board of a number of national nonprofits, including as Chairman of the Board of Teach for America.



INTRODUCTION

by Ted Mitchell, CEO and President, NewSchools Venture Fund

We have so little time.

It's this simple fact that awakens America's visionary education entrepreneurs early in the morning, and keeps them up far too late at night. They see the faces and know the names of the children we could lose, and they know we cannot afford to wait. They feel a sense of impatience that Martin Luther King Jr., and more recently Barack Obama, called "the fierce urgency of now." With the conviction of moral clarity, these bold entrepreneurs know that we must act—that we must do whatever it takes to make sure that every child in America has the opportunity for a real education. And they understand that it is already much later than most people think.

We, as a country, are beginning to wake up. In the same way that we have awakened to rising oceans and climbing temperatures, we are awakening to an educational outlook for low-income children that we cannot afford, economically or morally. Our outrage is building over a situation where we have forfeited our position as a world leader in college graduation rates, and where our kids rank behind those in the Czech Republic and Latvia on tests. When half the children growing up in our largest cities face a global marketplace for jobs without even a high school diploma, it strikes at our conscience.

Thanks in part to the work of education entrepreneurs, we have come to understand the crisis we face, and we have begun to grasp that it threatens us not only economically, but morally as well. It's not just that we are hobbled in the race to financial recovery—it's that we won't live up to our own beliefs and ideals. Horace Mann, the great architect of schooling in America, taught that we must build strong public schools because a good education is a right, and a tool to promote equality. And he warned of the consequences of failure: "Jails and prisons are the complement of schools; so many less as you have of the latter, so many more must you have of the former."

As you will read in these pages, Kim Smith, John Doerr and Brook Byers were awake to that knowledge when they set out to build an organization that would embody the fierce urgency of now. Their idea was to find people who shared their impatience, their willingness to break rules, to do whatever it took to provide children with real educational opportunity. NewSchools Venture Fund has identified some of the most visionary and hard-working innovators in education today, and has guided them as they built and grew organizations founded on the same ideals. As you will read, they have taken on some of the toughest challenges in the field—preparing outstanding teachers for the toughest classrooms; establishing systems of excellent inner-city schools; developing the technology tools and platforms that can accelerate achievement—with remarkable success. They are on the front edge of desperately needed innovation, and the lives of hundreds of thousands of children are better because of their work.

In the dozen years since its founding, NewSchools has moved from a couple of desks in Silicon Valley to a national force, uniquely positioned to seek out and support the most promising innovation work in public education. And in those years, education entrepreneurs have moved from isolated success to become a movement and, increasingly, a household concept. Public discussion of their work is common, and policymakers are coming to see them as the leading agents of positive change in public education. This revolution is no longer on the fringes.

These signal successes have energized the work of NewSchools, redoubling our enthusiasm to seek out the innovations that will speed the closing of the achievement gap. The goal that these entrepreneurs have set before themselves—not simply to improve schools, but to erase the gap separating the education of low income kids from that of their more wealthy peers—has not been fully achieved. Despite undeniable progress and the remarkable benefits that it has brought, there is much more to do. We need more good schools in our toughest neighborhoods. We need to do more to fix schools that are broken, to put great teachers in front of the kids who need them most, to find smarter ways to measure kids' learning, to equip teachers and principals with the skills they need.

What is heartening is that new entrepreneurs continue to come to the fore, bringing new ideas for how to make better schools for our children. What these past dozen years have proven is that we can help them turn their plans and ideas into organizations that change the lives of children. More than a decade after our founding, the most crucial work for NewSchools remains ahead, as we look “around the corner” to find the most capable teams and best ideas and guide them to success.

What we know is that we must get this right, and we don't have a minute to waste. As Dr. King reminded us, “There is such a thing as being too late.”