

# Roundtable News

## What Works?

*What Have We Learned from Practice and Research about Improving Schools?*



*Gloria Davis (center) moderates panel made up of (l to r) Andrew Kelly, North Beach Schools, WA; Kathleen Smith, Brockton, MA; Talisa Dixon, University Heights, OH; and Gillian Williams, The Rensselaerville Institute*

The news business is an essential part of a democratic society. Still, it operates in odd ways. Bad news sells. Catastrophe makes the front page. Good news, on the other hand, gets relegated to the inside pages, just a “human interest” story.

As distinguished *Atlantic* journalist James Fallows and his wife Deborah have documented in their book *Our Towns* (2018), despite headlines over the last 30 years about the decline of the United States, the country is being reshaped town by town, civically and economically, out of sight of the national media.

The same phenomenon is visible in schools. That’s what venture capitalist

Ted Dintersmith found when he visited schools in every state in a single year. Educators in ordinary settings were doing extraordinary things. Richard Long of the Learning First Alliance and Emma Garcia from the Brookings Institution report something similar: Educators know what they are doing, reported Long, while Garcia pointed to the significance of state-by-state achievement differences to demonstrate how to improve schools.

Most of all it can be found district-by-district, many of them busy getting on with the business of school improvement. This was highlighted by a panel of local educators (above) and

conversations in the halls and around the coffee urn.

We still have a long way to go. But schools won’t be turned around by orders from on high, or mandates or threats. They’ll be turned around from the ground up by educators dedicated to what they are doing with the support they need to get the job done.

It’s these developments that the Roundtable explored during its Fall meeting in Washington, D.C., as it looked into research and practice around school improvement.

## WHAT SCHOOL COULD BE

Students at MIT and other prestigious schools have been “cheated,” observed Ted Dintersmith, author of *What School Could Be*, after showing a brief clip demonstrating that graduates of the engineering school could not light a bulb when given a bulb, a battery, and wire. Competitive and motivated? Yes. Good at passing tests? Of course. But they hadn’t learned any real engineering or science, he said. They hadn’t been prepared for the real world or the nation’s public life.

Studies show, in fact, he said, that today’s students can’t distinguish between the truth or falsehood of what they see on the internet.

Our schools and colleges and universities, he argued, are good at cramming “stuff” into students’ brains for short term memory. “But when an expensive private school retested students at the end of the summer, the average grade went from a B+ in the Spring to an F. These students aren’t mastering the material.”

Dintersmith drew a comparison of the old school model and a new vision of schooling, a vision he said, that he found all over the United States after visiting at least one school in every state within a single school year. All told he was in some 200 schools.

In place of an industrial, centralized, data-driven model that micromanaged classrooms and focused on content and low-level skills, he said, we need innovative and purpose-driven schools in which teachers and students are trusted and encouraged to create and develop essential skills.

The schools that truly impressed this former venture capitalist as he criss-crossed the United States, were primarily public schools. He met with thousands of



*Ted Dintersmith*

teachers, students, parents, administrators, and stakeholders. He found ordinary educators doing extraordinary things. Of 35 outstanding schools, 32 were public. “It’s a myth,” he said “that public schools can’t innovate.” Whether teacher-led, principal-led, or superintendent-led, someone “had the backs of these schools” and they were driven by belief, not mandates or management.

The problem with the “achievement gap,” he said, is just that: First is the gap; second is achievement. The real gap, he argued, is the gap in expenditures on students from wealthy families and those who need the most. (See figure, p.4.) The achievement gap? “How many kids get up in the morning excited about test-prep?”

“If the best we can do for kids is to prepare them to try to compete with Artificial Intelligence, they are at risk — and our democracy is at risk.”

Schools that work, he noted, really know what they want in their graduates: citizenship, empathy, and kindness. “Those three elements are part and parcel of the soul of the school.”

What’s better preparation for life, he asked, memorizing vocabulary and solving polynomial equations or working on real problems? National and state leaders need to stop telling educators what to do. They need to encourage educators. Support them. And then get out of the way.

### In This Issue:

What School Could Be	2
We Know What We’re Doing	3
Lessons from the States	3
Turning Schools Around	4
Transforming Large Organizations	6
Superintendents Speak	7
Here and There	8
2019 Plans	8

## WE KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING

Rich Long of the Learning First Alliance brought a research lens to bear on the set of issues outlined by Dintersmith. LFA is a coalition of major school associations trying to bring representatives of 10 million teachers, administrators, board members, parents, and researchers together to come to agreement on how to move forward with school improvement. In 2018, LFA published a compendium, *The Elements of Success*, that summarized decades of research on what works in schools.

"We don't have a satisfactory language to define educational issues," observed Long. Although PDK has shown for years that people think highly of the education they see locally, they don't like what they hear about schools nationally. One problem is that "Our schools are afraid to talk about the innovations they are implementing effectively." Such efforts swim upstream against the flood of national school criticism.

The *Elements of Success* demonstrates that "We know what works," insisted Long. "There's a consensus on this. It's not a mystery. You as local leaders can use this to argue that we know what we're doing. We know what needs to be done in broad terms. Educators need to

figure out how to get it done locally." The keys to success involve six elements, he said:

- Focus on the total child
- Commit to equity and access
- Engage families and communities
- Distribute leadership
- Build a strong teaching force and staff
- Create a relationship-oriented school climate

*Richard Long*



"We also found general agreement that the 'solution' in school improvement isn't the same for every school," he observed. The best schools are those in which educators, parents, and communities have developed local programs to meet their specific goals and concrete challenges.

For educators who have been around the track, he acknowledged, there is (to p. 5)

## LESSONS FROM THE STATES

In 2015, Martin Carnoy, Emma García, and Katiana Khavenson produced a report for the Economic Policy Institute (*Bringing it Back Home*) arguing that although international comparisons have come to dominate how politicians and pundits judge American schools, the relevance of these comparisons is questionable. After all, most foreign nations manage a unitary national system. In the United States, by contrast, students attend schools in 51 separate education systems, run not by 400 Maryland Avenue but by individual states.

They argued persuasively that instead of running off to Finland and Singapore to identify the magic sauce that led to school success, educators would be better served by trying to understand why Massachusetts and Utah produced such sterling results on NAEP. After all, whatever the differences between New England, the Plains States, the rural South, and the Midwest or West, each of these states operates within a distinctive American culture, not the culture of Asia or Scandinavia. And, they pointed out, there is no "evidence

that students in Asian countries score higher on international tests mainly because of better schools rather than large investments made by families on academic activities outside school" (to p. 5)

*Emma Garcia*



## ROUNDTABLE'S FUTURE

With its first decade behind it, the Roundtable has developed, with the help of Artemis Connection, a strategic plan to take it to the next level by doubling membership in the next five years. Part of the effort involves a new members-only "app" to keep Roundtable superintendents connected between meetings, a remarkable intranet developed *gratis* for the Roundtable by LumApps.





## TURNING SCHOOLS AROUND



**Above:** Talisa Dixon & Gillian Williams

**Below:** Andrew Kelly & Kathleen Smith

Moving from policy and theory at 30,000 feet to ground level provided members with new insights as Gloria Davis, former Decatur superintendent, moderated a conversation with Andrew Kelly (North Beach, WA), Kathleen Smith (Brockton, MA), Talisa Dixon (Cleveland Heights-University Heights, OH), and Gillian Williams (The Rensselaerville Institute, NY).

Kelly revealed that his foundation lesson in educational administration was taught to him in fourth grade by Mrs. Gilmore, who took a special interest in him: successful teaching depends on relationships. “Schools,” he said, “are either getting better or getting worse. I believe in the teeter-totter philosophy – you never see a teeter-totter in perfect balance.

Leaders have a responsibility to pay attention to what’s happening.”

To Kelly, school progress rests on a **three-legged stool**: the ethos of adults in the system (what are they committed to?); alignment of school structures with that ethos; and strategies to measure and hold people accountable, while monitoring and praising improvement.

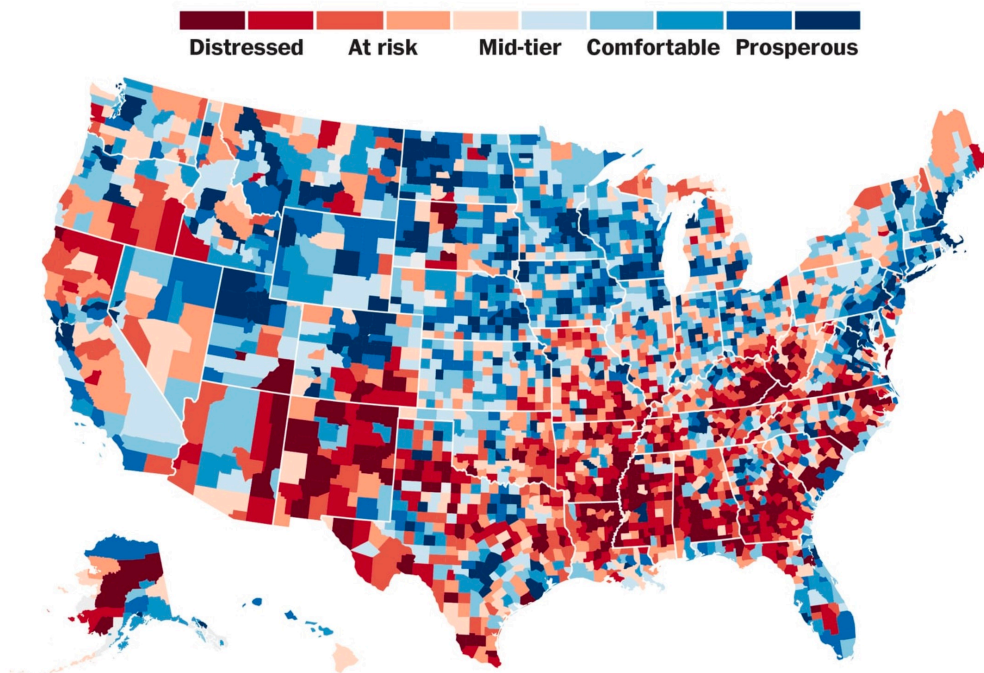
Kathleen Smith has spent her career in Brockton, which she described as a working class town. She began as a special education teacher and brings the philosophy that every child has unique needs to her desk every day. One result has been a dramatic turnaround in Brockton High, a large school made up predominantly of children of color (75%), with half the students economically disadvantaged and more than 20% speaking a language other than English at home.

Brockton’s turnaround is the *(to 6)*

## ECONOMIC DISTRESS IN THE UNITED STATES BY COUNTY

## Prosperity and distress

2017 Distressed Communities Index scores





## WE KNOW WHAT WE ARE DOING (CONT'D)

little that is new here. But three factors argue for building on these six elements: First, there is consensus among leading educators that these are the keys to creating schools that perform at high levels. Second, each of the six in isolation has only limited power; interactions among the elements are key. Third, these six elements receive at best lip service from national pundits and critics. At worst, they are ignored or trampled on in the push to “fix schools” and raise achievement. Educational leaders have a responsibility to push back, said Long.

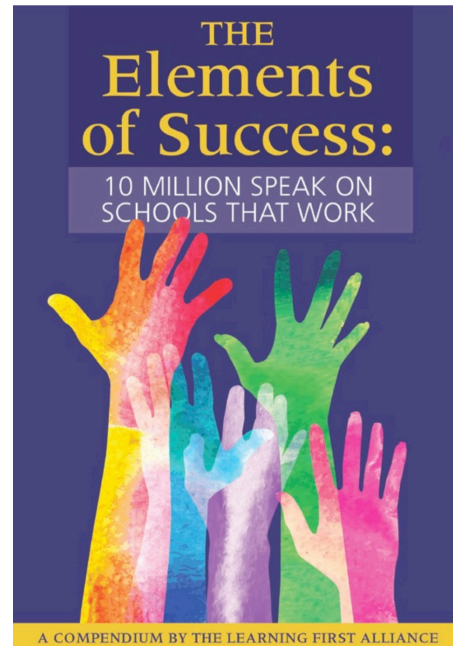
One way to start is to begin telling a more positive story. Insist that we actually know what we are doing. Then structure your local program in recognition that one size does not fit all because every community is unique. Develop an active partnership with business. Above all: share your success stories and help people get to YES by starting with what everyone in the community shares in common.

## LESSONS FROM THE STATES (CONT'D)

Garcia presented the study’s findings. She pointed out that lessons from other nations are often not valid or applicable to U.S. education, given structural and cultural differences. Moreover, even though international assessments often show U.S. students are performing *on average* below students in other countries, “this does not mean that many U.S. students are not making greater academic progress than students in many high-achieving countries.” She cited results for students in Massachusetts and Connecticut outperforming students in Finland and Korea on PISA’s reading examination.

More granular examinations also bear this out. Garcia argued that low-SES American students have made larger gains over time on international assessments than low-SES students in higher scoring nations. Meanwhile, high-SES students in many states (Connecticut, Minnesota, and Massachusetts, among others) perform at least as well in mathematics as students in Finland.

The EPI researchers adjusted NAEP scores by removing the portion of performance that could be attributed to students’ and school SES composition so as to leave behind an “adjusted score” that defines a “state effect.” That is to say, remove contributions from students’ SES, ethnic composition, school composition, and teacher resources. What is left is the state effect – something in the state’s



school system is contributing to improved achievement. Taking out these variables reduced the variation in students’ average performance from a 34-point spread across states to a 23-point spread.

Both low-achieving and high-achieving states made gains, she stressed, with the ten highest-gaining states producing gains three times as large as the ten lowest-gaining states. The research indicated that in addition to the effects of individual and school-based SES characteristics, there is an additional “poverty” effect at the state level. States with more poverty are likely to have lower achievement, whatever the racial and ethnic makeup of the state’s students.

State comparisons are intriguing. Neighboring Massachusetts and Connecticut, for example, started out at about the same point on NAEP 8th grade mathematics scores in 1992, but the Bay State began outpacing its neighbor consistently in 2003,

While the analysis did not draw direct lessons for school improvement, it did argue that a good starting point for such lessons can be gained if policymakers and researchers examine states with high student performance on NAEP or substantial performance gains, combined with *qualitative research* to improve insights into how these results were achieved.

## TURNING SCHOOLS AROUND (CONT'D)

stuff of lore. District and school teams committed to a **schoolwide literacy initiative** in which students in every class were expected to read, write, and reason. The effort pulled the school from the bottom of state rankings of urban high schools to near the top. But it wasn't working for some 400 students with disabilities and their IEPs.

The district set out on a three-part strategy: break with traditional approaches by moving away from pull-out or unsupported inclusion models to co-locate special education teachers in full inclusion classrooms; help students reach their potential by providing life skills for all Brockton students with significant cognitive challenges; and preparing each student for self-sufficiency by starting from a realistic base and giving up on no one.

When Talisa Dixon arrived at Cleveland Heights-University Heights, she realized there were **no students of color in AP courses**. No one used the term "tracking" of course, but that's what "performance based placement" meant. Dixon set out to change this mindset by embedding opportunity and equity goals in the district's strategic plan, adding an equity policy that ensured the board was responsible for the goal, and putting equity training for

teachers into the union contract. "We didn't want to hear what we were hearing: 'What happens to our [white] kids if we adopt these equity goals?'"

We also argued, said Dixon, that the heavy lifting around equity can't only be the school system's responsibility. She led an effort that successfully added equity training for city officials and employees. The point, she said, is that you need "systems that outlive the superintendent. When you have it written and down in policy, you can leave a legacy behind you."

Gillian Williams, had earlier led a session on **school turnarounds** with her colleague Mildred Toliver. In that session, they argued that data is abused – it's too complex, badly timed, and collected for someone else. Effective turnarounds have to be locally owned and based on expertise mostly put together from within the school, while outsiders are used sparingly and time-bound. It's important, they added, to toss out the "heroes and villains" narrative.

Williams said it is essential to move from accountability, compliance, monitoring and evaluating, to performance, responsibility, helping, and verifying. Most of us understand effective help,

they said, as being empowering and affirmative. "If that's how we define help," said Toliver, "it's how we need to approach people in our schools – positively, not punitively."

Williams told a great story. In her first school, a gruff lunch server barked at the kids daily, demanding to know which sandwich they wanted. Williams asked her to focus on reading. She did. Every day she barked at them about reading! A lot of the students credited the "lunch lady" with keeping them on task as their reading scores improved.

The education discussion is the most negative discussion we have in this nation, said Williams. "A principal told me, it's not that we don't have hope. Or teachers have hope. It's that we don't think we will ever be credited with success." Ouch!



*Toliver (l) & Williams*

## TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN LARGE ORGANIZATIONS

Alonzo Crim, a legendary superintendent in Atlanta in the 1980s, used to tell audiences that the Atlanta school system was the largest employer in the city with a budget approaching \$1 billion and that it served more meals than all the restaurants in the city, transported more people on a daily basis than the city bus service, and offered more classes to more students than all the universities in the state. Simply as a management exercise, overseeing a large urban district (or a small rural one) requires leaders to put on many different hats, as educators, community leaders, politicians, and managers.

Charles Wright, Jr., managing director of Wright

Associates in Seattle, has extensive experience working with school districts (Duval County, FL; Seattle, WA; and Denver, CO), as well as with foundations (Cleveland, Ford, and Gates) and the private sector. He led a discussion on how to lead transformative change so that it serves all students. He emphasized three critical elements:

- Process improvement – principally Lean Management that eliminates waste and maps process & information flow
- Project management – that applies knowledge and skills to project activities from (to p 7).



## TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN LARGE ORGANIZATIONS (CONT'D)

conception and launch through project completion.

- Balanced scorecard – a strategic planning and management system that communicates what you are trying to accomplish, aligns day-to-day work with strategy, prioritizes projects and products, and measures and monitors progress toward strategic targets.

Superintendents, emphasized Wright, need to be the “catalysts and champions” of these approaches.

What is needed, he said, is a customer-focused mindset that builds trust with families and colleagues, and makes a difference for students, teachers, staff, and families.



*Charles Wright, Jr.*



**Left & Above**

*Superintendents Discuss Presentations*

## SUPERINTENDENTS SPEAK



*George Russell*

Oregon State Education Board member George Russell, one of the founders of the Roundtable as superintendent in Eugene Oregon, led attendees through a discussion of what they had heard. Highlights:

**What Brought You Here?**

1. A network that is safe and creative and aims to address challenges.
2. Embracing innovative ways to change culture
3. Bringing research and practice together
4. Seeing the possibilities

**Connect Dintersmith, Long & Garcia?**

1. World is changing; how do we change?

2. Take control of the conversation about what needs to happen in schools.
3. Take control of our data and understand difference between quantitative & qualitative research
4. Understand inter-state differences. Research at state level resonated strongly
5. Collaborate with community stakeholders

**Lessons You Can Take Home?**

1. Turnarounds need to be locally led and supported
2. Business models have been inappropriately applied to schools
3. We need to get smart about proper use of data and how it is abused
4. Action takes place at the principal level
5. Everyone can contribute, including the lunch lady!
6. Interpersonal not structural change is key
7. We can't import something wholesale that's successful elsewhere
8. Will people change if they don't believe in change?

**Designated Naysayer**

Russell introduced a new feature. He asked for a “designated naysayer” — someone willing to push back against what they'd heard. Here it is: “Dintersmith said he'd never seen a teacher reading a newspaper. We see such teachers. That's a destructive thing to say.”

### Partners

We want to acknowledge the support of our work by Artemis Connection, Atlantic Research Partners, Encyclopedia Britannica, FourPoint Partners, GuideK12, Hanover Research, LumApps, the National Institute for School Leadership, No Bully, and Right at School.

Artemis provides strategic consulting. Atlantic Research offers professional development for administrators. Encyclopedia Britannica is the authoritative English-language reference tool. FourPoint offers strategic guidance to schools. Guide K12 provides geovisual analytics for districts. LumApps creates “smart” intranets. Hanover offers data-based assistance to schools. NISL supports school principals. NoBully targets aggressive behaviors. And Right at School provides before and after school enrichment.

**We are grateful for this support!**

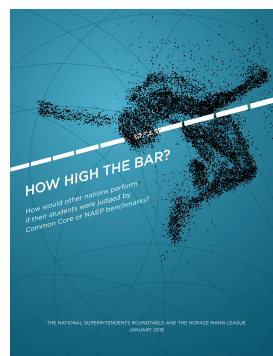
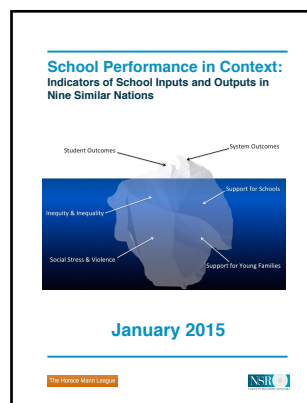
### PARTNERS



### Addressing Critics

Our planning process revealed members' hopes for help dealing with criticisms of public schools. We're working on it! Meanwhile, look at Section VIII of *The Superintendent's Fieldbook* and at the Roundtable's *School Performance in Context* (aka *The Iceberg Effect*) and *How High the Bar?*, each of which addresses the conventional wisdom of school failure. The *Fieldbook* is available from Corwin Press and the reports are available at no cost from NSR's website:

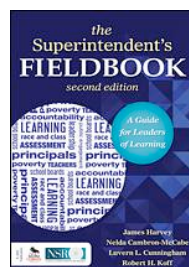
([www.superintendentsforum.org](http://www.superintendentsforum.org))



### Superintendent's Fieldbook

Available from Corwin Press at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yccxf54et>



### 2019 Plans

We have exciting things planned for 2019. Look for additional information as plans are finalized.

### Study Mission to Germany & Czech Republic to Examine Career & Technical Education

May 3 - 13

Details Forthcoming

### Leading Amidst Criticism

Philadelphia

July 19-21

Amidst scorching criticism from business and political leaders, how do we lead? What turns public perceptions around?

### Education and Creativity

Los Angeles

October 4-6

In an environment emphasizing test scores, how do we nurture all children's creative instincts?

### FEATURING

SIR KENNETH ROBINSON:

One of the world's most influential voices in education, his 2006 TED Talk, with 56 million views, is the most watched in TED's history.



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