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COMMENTARY

Challenging Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of the Profession: Applying *Breakthrough Thinking* in Teacher Preparation Programs

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Abstract

Prior to beginning college, preservice teachers have spent thousands of hours immersed in the culture of the K–12 classroom. To prepare preservice teachers for the legal and moral expectations that all students will be educated to high levels, teacher preparation programs must reconsider their practices in order to break assumptions that have been ingrained in preservice teachers through personal experience, replacing them with highly toned teaching skills and parallel professional dispositions.

This article compares and contrasts the elements of Fullan's "breakthrough teaching" (Fullan, 2006) with the principles of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium standards (INTASC) and practices commonly found in teacher education programs. Created nearly 15 years before Fullan defined "breakthrough teaching," the INTASC principles that dominate teacher education program design are relevant in today's accountability era only if used to reconfigure the delivery of teacher education activities. The article concludes with recommendations for ways that teacher education programs can align their efforts with the accountability expectations of K–12 teaching.

Introduction

As students spend thousands of hours in K–12 classrooms learning the content of their schools' curricula, they are also learning the culture of the educational setting. Consequently, when they enter teacher preparation programs at the collegiate level, they carry with them many preconceived notions about the ideas, behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that form the core of teachers' practices. The imprint of the years spent in K–12 schools as students surfaces in preservice teachers in two familiar ways. First, only in education do people see themselves as experts on education even before having any

formal training. Second, because personal experience is such a powerful mentor, many students model their teaching after the practices of the teachers they observed while they were K–12 students. The existence of these ideas in the minds of preservice teachers poses a significant challenge to university teacher education faculty who are expected to produce a new generation of educators that will be able to prepare K–12 students for the future rather than for a past that no longer exists. Therefore, it becomes the requirement of preservice education programs to break assumptions that have been ingrained in the thought patterns of preservice teachers through personal experience, replacing them with highly toned teaching skills and parallel professional dispositions.

While most of today's young adults were taught in classrooms that were under the effect of accountability measures, most teachers in those classrooms began their careers in an era when teachers were allowed, for the most part, to define their own curricula and choose their own instructional practices. In addition, most of today's preservice teachers graduated from high school before or just after the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and clearly before the full impact of that legislation was felt. As a result, soon-to-be teachers have, at best, a limited understanding of the expectations for teachers in today's high pressure, test-driven classrooms.

The Need for *Breakthrough Thinking*

Dweck (2006) identifies two opposing mindsets about how people learn. The “*growth mindset* is based on the belief that one's basic qualities are things that can be cultivated through effort. Although people may differ in every which way — in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments — everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (p. 7). [italics in original] This model involves a passion for learning that leads one to ask, “Why waste time proving over and over again how great you are when you could be getting better? ... This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging moments in their lives” (p. 7). People who adopt this orientation exhibit the will, desire, effort, and perseverance that allow them to move aggressively into new, uncharted territory.

Other people utilize a *fixed mindset* when approaching life's challenges. In a fixed mindset, there exists “...an urgency to prove yourself over and over again. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character — well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them” (Dweck, 2006, p. 6). [italics in original] Moving toward new, uncharted territory is avoided due to one's satisfaction with current conditions and the risk of failure that is always possible when new experiences are encountered.

While Dweck (2006) focuses on the psychology of individuals, mindsets also affect the thought processes of institutions. For example, two similar businesses take divergent

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paths at a critical point in time. One firm accepts the challenges and risks involved in change, reorganizes itself, and moves toward new endeavors, thus practicing the growth mindset. The other company retains familiar practices, secure (or perhaps simply hopeful) that past successes will continue despite changes in the business environment. That company assumes a fixed mindset about its purpose and capability.

It can be argued that few organizations have been locked into the fixed mindset for more years than have educational institutions. Teaching practices, the school year, administrative structures, curricula, and even the physical look of many classrooms and buildings are but a few examples of the educational establishment's adherence to tradition. It is no wonder, then, that numerous educational reform movements have come and gone with little long-term, systemic change resulting from their implementation.

The reality of the current accountability movement demands that schools move boldly into new, uncharted territory if they are to fulfill legal mandates while accomplishing the new imperative to educate all young people so that they have both the knowledge and skills needed to sustain a strong social structure. Thus, it is especially crucial that teachers entering the profession understand the growth mindset required to improve the nation's system of public education. But how are they to do this when the teacher education programs that train them and the schools that employ them remain trapped by the fixed mindset? The answer, it may be argued, is that both teacher-training institutions and K–12 school systems must adopt *Breakthrough Thinking*, a radical new perspective about the intellectual process (Fullan, Hill, and Crévola, 2006). This paper will examine breakthrough thinking and then apply its principles to affect the mindsets of teacher preparation programs.

About *Breakthrough Thinking*

Elmore (2006) states that “My work has led me to an increasing appreciation of the power and resilience of the default culture of public schools — the deeply routed beliefs, structures, artifacts, and symbols of an increasingly dysfunctional and obsolete set of institutions” (p. xi). Elmore (2004) adds that “...they [the schools] lack the means to influence instructional practice in classrooms in ways that result in student learning,” (p. 234) arguing further that improvement efforts have failed to generate desired results because they are “often not explicitly connected to fundamental changes in the way knowledge is constructed, nor to the division of responsibility between teachers and student [or] the way students and teachers interact with each other around knowledge” (p. 10). While NCLB stresses accountability for schools and districts more than for individual teachers, Elmore posits that schools will not achieve required improvements in student achievement until teachers continually provide all students with personally meaningful experiences that are anchored in sound educational practice. Doing so

will require schools and teachers to move their work from general practice to highly specialized instruction.

In short, to reach the student achievement goals established by federal and state accountability systems, teachers must understand the achievement level of each student and then stretch the student to learn more through educational practices that are anchored in research while being personally meaningful to the student. This new expectation requires different capabilities than those that traditionally have been found in teacher preparation programs and in professional development activities for practicing teachers. To overcome this disconnect, Fullan et al. (2006) contend that educators must adapt their thinking to accept and implement what they call breakthrough thinking.

Fullan et al. (2006) hold that despite significant efforts to implement research-based educational strategies, schools are not experiencing the substantive increases in student achievement that were envisioned with the passage of NCLB because the various improvement strategies being used are applied to existing practices and static paradigms. As a result, they hold that the creation of new paradigms of interaction between teachers and students must occur because “The old mission was about providing access for all to basic education and access for a relatively small elite to university education.... The new mission ... is to get all students to meet high standards of education and to provide them with a lifelong education that does not have the built-in obsolescence of so much old-style curriculum but that equips them to be lifelong learners” (p. 1).

Breakthrough thinking involves more than implementing reform practices based on prescriptive mandates in which teachers follow rigid guidelines that define what they are to teach and how they are to teach (Fullan et al., 2006). While initially promising, such an approach often leads to short-term gains that plateau after relatively short periods of time (Elmore, 2004), resulting in “...useful startup results [that are] ultimately on the wrong track” (Fullan et al., p. 9) because such an approach leads to the use of tightly controlled direct instructional models that deskill teachers. For this reason, “These programs do not believe in the power of teachers as learners or of students as thinkers and problem solvers. As such, they cannot achieve long-term breakthrough results” (Fullan et al., p. 11).

Breakthrough thinking is “...a system based on focused instruction — [that] matches the short-term effects of direct instruction while building the conditions for longer-term effects that will be shown to be far more enduring than those of direct instruction” (Fullan et al., 2006, p. 12). The key to this approach rests on the moral purpose of education (Fullan et al., 2006) and repositions the roles of students and teachers. Moral purpose is defined as “education for all that raises the bar while it closes the gap” (Fullan et al., 2006, p. 16), a goal that is accomplished by enacting three interrelated “P’s” simultaneously. These three “P’s” represent *personalization*, an educational process that

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puts the learner at the center of everything that occurs in the classroom (Leadbeater, 2002, p.1); *precision*, instruction that focuses specifically on each individual's learning needs (Fullan et al., 2006); and *professional learning*, growth that is ongoing and focused for every teacher (Fullan et al., 2006).

Fullan et al. (2006) believe that educational breakthroughs require focused teaching, and that two key ingredients must exist if focused teaching is to occur. First, teachers must have a detailed map of the curricula for which they are responsible. This map must include "clear specifications of the learning objectives, associated standards and targets, and indicators of student progress" (p. 36). This information clarifies the knowledge that the student is expected to acquire and establishes the benchmarks against which student learning is measured. Second, teachers must possess a detailed knowledge of effective, explicit instructional strategies that will enable each student to master curricular content. In essence, until teachers across the profession are deeply knowledgeable of each student's progress in learning rigorous content and are able to engage students in learning experiences that instill this knowledge, the substantial gains in student achievement envisioned by NCLB will not be realized. Preparing preservice teachers for this level of explicit teaching is [or should be] the primary function of teacher education programs.

For the K–12 classroom teacher, the heart of breakthrough teaching rests with the "triple P core components" (Fullan, 2006, p. 15) of personalization, precision, and professional learning. New teachers must enter their classrooms well versed in each component because students are entitled to effective instruction every day and cannot wait for their teachers to become proficient. Society demands and the moral purpose of education requires that every teacher be technically and dispositionally prepared to deliver effective instruction to every student.

Personalization of student learning has three facets. First, teachers must have a deep understanding of the standards students are expected to learn, an understanding that enables each teacher to connect ideas across the standards and relate the concepts of the standards to each individual student. Second, personalization of student learning requires teachers to understand various types and purposes of assessments, their validity in measuring student understanding of required standards, and the role of assessment as an integral part of the overall instructional process. Finally, the personalization of student learning requires that each teacher possesses skills in data analysis including the application of the analysis to planning for the next steps of instruction. For the fullest benefit to occur, personalization is essential both within individual classrooms and as a collective school priority.

Precision in teaching is instruction that addresses the needs of each student as identified through assessment. Whether teaching new content or reteaching content that has not been mastered previously, breakthrough teachers understand how to teach

so that the brain will learn. Breakthrough teachers know the technical processes for effective instruction in a content area such as inquiry science and also know the technical processes for teaching reading and writing, the all-important tools of learning. Precision also includes knowing which instructional practices should be employed based on assessment data.

Professional learning builds a growth mindset for continuous improvement in teaching skill and classroom effectiveness. To sustain professional learning, teachers must conduct research, work in a professional learning community, and be able to transfer their “knowing” into effective “doing,” thus building personal accountability through documentation of their professional growth that aligns itself with changes in the profession in general.

To illustrate this concept, Fullan et al. (2006) use an example from the field of medicine. A patient presents a doctor with a variety of symptoms from which relief is sought. The physician must be well-versed regarding a vast array of symptoms in order to diagnose the problem. Once the illness or condition has been diagnosed, the physician follows a protocol of care that has been developed specifically for that illness or condition, a protocol that continues to be monitored for long-term effectiveness with large numbers of patients, and that can be upgraded as data warrant. In parallel fashion, teachers must also be deeply knowledgeable about the content of the curriculum and well-skilled in “diagnosing” the gap between the student’s knowledge or skill level and the standards of the curriculum. They must then use appropriate protocols to address each student’s learning needs in order to affect academic growth that will take the student to the intended level of achievement.

What, then, is required of preservice teacher preparation programs so that their graduates are ready and able to enter the classroom and to utilize breakthrough teaching strategies to achieve maximal learning for all students? What technical teaching skills must preservice teachers learn to be effective breakthrough teachers? What mindset must preservice teachers have to be effective breakthrough teachers? One answer may be found in the use of the INTASC standards, the foundation upon which contemporary preservice teacher education is based, and an additional answer may be found in the attitudes instilled in the attitudes of preservice teachers themselves. Through valid and meaningful utilization of the INTASC standards, teacher training programs can assist in creating new skills, new resources, and new motivations that teachers can employ as they seek to meet the moral imperative of educating each student to the highest level possible. In so doing, teacher training programs can be driving forces in building teacher capacity, one of the six secrets of change upon which true educational progress can be based (Fullan, 2008).

Challenging Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of the Profession

University teacher education faculty members must challenge two fixed mindsets found in preservice teachers. To overcome the first mindset, the intellectual mindset, preservice teachers must understand that their deeply ingrained expectations about working in K–12 classrooms are obsolete in today's accountability-driven, sanction-based educational environment. Similarly, to overcome the emotional mindset, the second fixed notion that preservice teachers bring to the profession, such individuals must detach themselves from the classroom culture that attracted them to teaching in the first place, a culture that is personally attractive since they likely achieved a considerable amount of personal success as K–12 students themselves. Furthermore, the change in the mindset of preservice teachers from a widely held understanding of how classrooms have operated in the past to the acceptance of a new mindset in which change and uncertainty are endemic and in which standards, accountability, and the inclusion of all students must be implemented by university faculty members, most of whom have not experienced the current K–12 accountability environment first-hand as either students or teachers. Last, and perhaps most importantly, all this must be accomplished within the context of a separate set of accountability standards that have been imposed on teacher education programs.

Teacher preparation programs rely on the INTASC principles for beginning teacher licensing, assessment, and development. Each of these principles is explicated through various descriptions of the knowledge, dispositions, and performances that define it. Thus, the INTASC principles provide a comprehensive overview of the minimal requirements found in a licensed teacher and are designed to be expandable so that even well-seasoned teachers can use them as the basis for professional growth. The teaching profession is well-served by this work, relying upon these standards to focus the direction of teacher preparation programs as well as changes in the practice used by in-service teachers so that student achievement will increase on a broad scale.

Developed almost a decade before the implementation of NCLB, the INTASC principles were established when the concept of standards-based education was relatively new. Now, more than six years into implementation of NCLB and its emphasis on federally mandated levels of accountability, efforts to increase student achievement continue to fall short of what was expected despite the use of INTASC to prepare new teachers and to aid in ongoing professional growth of practicing educators. As a result, *the shift of classroom emphasis from the delivery of instruction to the impact of instruction* necessitates that the use of the INTASC standards needs to be viewed in light of the requirements for breakthrough teaching.

Fullan et al. (2006) state that “the only way classroom instruction can become all the things we want it to be is through attention to design and the creation of expert instruction systems” with “competent teachers who make the key instructional decisions in their classrooms” (p. 39). University faculty must see the INTASC principles as tools

to help preservice teachers develop a foundation for breakthrough teaching, including a deep, detailed understanding of the curriculum to be taught and a well-equipped toolbox that provides them means for implementing explicit teaching strategies and classroom methods. This may mean relinquishing familiar course activities and replacing them with more appropriate training experiences, thus mirroring the experiences of experienced (and, in many cases, highly competent) K–12 teachers who have moved away from teaching practices they have found pleasing over the years in order to integrate the extensive academic standards that are now required parts of their curricula into their classroom practice.

The adoption of three practices, each currently being used by many K–12 educators to increase the achievement of their students, could increase the effectiveness of teacher education programs as they seek to prepare highly skilled classroom teachers. First, the INTASC standards need to be “unpacked” in order to define and implement a clear, specific understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of each standard in light of NCLB expectations. “Unpacking” requires that those responsible for the teaching of the INTASC standards work together to reach a common understanding of what is meant by each component of each standard. The understanding of each standard is enhanced through conversations that focus on the roles played by both the classroom teacher and the K–12 student when a classroom teacher is meeting the standard. In this context, a deep understanding of each standard is evident when faculty members can give specific detailed examples of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes demonstrated under that particular standard.

It is essential that such dialogue between teacher education faculty working in a given program occur frequently and regularly so that a common vision of effective teaching as defined by INTASC may be developed. Given the relative infrequency of such widespread collaboration among teacher education faculty, however, such dialogue is not a part of the regular component of most teacher education practice. Thus, the time and effort required to unpack the INTASC standards would significantly change the typical work pattern of schools of education. However, it is essential that this process be undertaken if meaningful change is to occur.

Second, for preservice teachers to become breakthrough teachers, teacher education programs must be designed to develop exemplary knowledge, skills, and dispositions in preservice teachers. This design must involve “mapping” so that an accurate assessment of what portion of each standard is introduced, developed, or mastered in each course of the preservice program may be determined. In this context, it must be understood that mapping is much more than designating which standard is addressed by a course activity; rather, maps of a given teacher education curriculum identify clearly *when* and *how* components of the INTASC standards are taught, practiced, and measured throughout an entire program.

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The mapping process requires teacher education faculty to look at each of the courses provided in the program and to sequence educational experiences so that all standards are learned and reinforced through a spiral curriculum that continues until each preservice teacher gains mastery proficiency of that standard. In a typical teacher education program, however, courses and learning activities are only loosely sequenced. Thus, while all the INTASC standards may be covered, no formative or summative means of assessing how effectively those standards have been inculcated into the preservice teachers' practices may be identified. The implementation of a detailed mapping process that clearly identifies intended instruction and the curriculum that executes that instruction would maximize course impact while modeling the organization of instruction expected of K–12 classroom teachers.

To improve the preparation of preservice teachers, courses need to be devoted to the specific functions of teaching and must spiral through repeated learning experiences that teach the breakthrough components of personalization and precision. Undergraduate course work should include intensive study of academic content so that the preservice teacher is a knowledge content matter expert rather than someone with a broad but shallow understanding of that content. In addition, intensive content study should relate content areas to one another so that teachers are able to integrate content from multiple areas accurately and thoroughly.

Effective personalization in teaching requires a deep understanding of various ways that student knowledge and performance relative to the content standards may be assessed accurately. Preservice teacher training should include courses devoted to understanding student assessment so that even a beginning teacher can determine the progress being made by each student. Such training should include the study of various forms of summative and formative assessment, assessment construction, and the interpretation of results. Because skills in assessment begin with theory but are developed through authentic interaction with students and practicing teachers, teacher preparation courses should be reorganized to correspond closely to pedagogical requirements for teachers while giving preservice teachers much-needed experiences in implementing various forms of assessment.

Preservice programs that teach these standards individually are not preparing preservice teachers to move to breakthrough teaching. Certainly, the concepts of each standard can be introduced individually to ensure a basic level of student understanding, *but practicing of the principles must occur as part of an integrated whole if preservice teachers are to be able to use them as a seamless system.* This is true because, while successful teaching requires skills such as those listed, breakthrough teaching requires the presence of even higher levels of such capabilities if one is to consider teaching in light of the axiom that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Thus, for significant impact to occur, the INTASC standards must be embedded in course activities in ways that ensure that teachers have a deep and

thorough knowledge of curricular content and detailed knowledge of ways to best teach and assess those learning objectives in the regular classroom.

Third, monitoring preservice teachers' proficiency must be enhanced systematically to ensure that a deep knowledge of content and demonstrated proficiency in conveying that content to K–12 students may be established. According to National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requirements, teacher education programs must show how the INTASC principles are correlated to course activities to ensure that all such principles are covered sufficiently within the program. For significant impact to occur, however, more than a paper trail must exist. INTASC principles must be embedded in course activities in ways that ensure that both content and instructional proficiency are attained. Opportunities to implement and evaluate both proficiencies must occur in both university and K–12 situations so that professors, practicing K–12 teachers, and preservice teachers can assess the effectiveness of what occurs. Through this process, preservice teachers can formulate their personal beliefs while developing their capabilities as classroom educators. As such, the development and utilization of model classrooms and laboratory schools should become a systemic part of teacher education programs, thus allowing highly intentional, sequenced experiences to be created cooperatively between university and K–12 faculty. In this approach, preservice field experiences in K–12 classrooms could be transformed from their typical observational focus to experiences that highlight intensive skill development within the overall mapping of the teacher education program.

Summary

Changes in the expectations imposed on K–12 schools logically require change in the programs that prepare teachers to work effectively in those schools, but there is little evidence to suggest that the requirements for accrediting schools of education reflect the required changes for teachers entering the K–12 classroom environment. Even less evidence exists to indicate that the instruction of preservice teachers reflects what is required to ensure that all children are equipped with the knowledge and skills to work in a radically different world than the one in which their teachers were raised. As a result, teacher education programs must begin to make needed changes in the use of the INTASC standards, with specific attention being given to three principle aspects that INTASC identifies as being part of the requisite background of newly trained K–12 teachers. These three designations (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) should thus serve to guide a process for reorganizing teacher education programs.

Knowledge, a deep knowledge of academic content, is critical if a teacher is to communicate academic standards effectively to students in the K–12 classroom. For example, it has long been assumed (tacitly if not explicitly) that elementary school teachers need only know a little more about subject matter content than their students, thus

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assuming that high school teachers will focus on the delivery of specific subject matter content. This stereotype is no longer viable if, indeed, it ever was true. All teachers must understand the primary drivers of their content areas, the abstract constructs and theories that build a given subject matter discipline and connect it to other disciplines. Students in every grade need detailed clarification of subject matter and content-driven academic challenges in order to enhance their learning. To be able to provide a rich, content-based program for each student, the fulcrum of NCLB, each preservice teacher must have a detailed, advanced mastery of that content. However, given the generally limited amount of course work that most preservice teachers complete and acknowledging that much of that content is studied at introductory levels (at least in programs that focus on the training of elementary school teachers), current university requirements do not lend themselves to preservice teachers acquiring the depth of understanding of content that is needed for breakthrough effectiveness. Clearly, practical and financial reasons make it unfeasible to add large numbers of content-specific courses to preservice teacher preparation programs. As a result, thought should be given to changing the manner in which preservice teachers acquire content discipline knowledge. The development and implementation of innovative programs, such as adding apprenticeships and other authentic learning experiences to preservice teacher education programs, should thus be considered.

Skills, precise and extensive teaching skills that must be ready for application from the first day that a new teacher greets his/her first class, must also be a central focus of teacher preparation programs. The definition of teaching that teacher education programs implement must delineate detailed steps for effective instruction including an understanding of and dexterity in using formative assessments to identify daily student progress toward intended curricular objectives because increasing student achievement occurs one student at a time. Teachers who are able to meet and exceed the demands of the new accountability era know daily where each student is in his/her acquisition of curricular knowledge, thus allowing teachers to implement the many varied teaching responses needed to teach students what is needed at a given time. Therefore, schools of education should consider repackaging their course work into extended times for observing and then practicing detailed components of instruction. In addition, sufficient time must be provided for multiple opportunities to practice new skills and to do so in authentic environments such as laboratory schools *so that the students in a new teacher's classroom are the beneficiaries of the teacher's expertise rather than the trial-and-error subjects of the teacher's training*. Throughout the entire process of teacher preparation, therefore, much emphasis should be placed on the importance of providing the right instructional response for each student precisely as the instructional process is designed.

Dispositions, the collective mindset that directs a person's approach to life, must be oriented to the moral purpose of teaching children so that all students can perform at high academic levels. It is easy and politically correct to espouse a personal belief that

all children can learn. However, in the quiet of their classrooms and the privacy of their kitchens, teachers across the country question whether or not all children can learn within the current educational environment. Questions arise about the amount of time needed to teach certain subjects, varying degrees of parental involvement, the extent of individualization, and society's commitment to education for all, each of which is a necessary component if the goal of high-level learning for all students is to be realized. Such issues continue to dominate the educational discourse and will not likely be resolved in the near future. Most college students enter a teacher education program because they liked school themselves and were successful during their K–12 years. They believe they can help others like school and experience a degree of success that will bolster self-esteem and prepare them to contribute to adult society. All this is admirable, of course, but the reality is that teachers need more than a commitment to their students and to learning. They must possess and implement the skill sets necessary to make student success a reality. For this reason, teacher preparation programs must develop new teachers who are able to meet the expectations for schools that exist in a modern, fast-paced, and constantly changing global society. Since the skills needed to meet such a demanding imperative must be redefined and expanded continually, a (perhaps the) central disposition that must be developed in preservice teachers is an attitude of continued professional learning.

In summary, the future of teacher education is a challenging one. Each day provides more insight about what is needed to educate all students. Educators at all levels are talking to one another about ways to improve and heighten the level of their work. The timing is right for schools across the nation, both K–12 and higher education, to break through old patterns in order to implement new ways of working so that all students, young and old, are better able to live their lives because of the education they have experienced.

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