

INTRODUCTION

I have toiled in the vineyards of public education since the late sixties. There is an old joke that says if you remember the sixties you weren't there. Well I was there and I do remember. I also remember the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, and the beginning of the new millennium. Much has changed over that time but much hasn't. And I have learned a lot. One thing I have learned is that Pogo, the cartoon character, was right when he observed that "we are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities." American educators are confronted on all sides by challenges and challengers. But we also have the opportunity to overcome these challenge and to make the world anew through our work

One of my great blessings is that for 14 years as executive director of the American Association of School Administrators I had the opportunity to reflect on all this and to use the bully pulpit of a national position to comment on the good, the bad, and the ugly of the state of education. I have often thought that the schools of America are so much better than the critics think they are, and not as good as those of us who work in them would like to think they are. I have railed against the unwarranted criticism leveled at schools and the expectation that when any problem faces our society, the schools are supposed to handle it. I have also worried that too often our schools aren't reaching the children most in need of a good education and that we slide along offering an education that neither challenges nor uplifts our students.

I have focused much of my observation on the leadership of our schools because that has been my life's work and it is what my "day job" has been. And over the last six years I have watched educators struggle with policy that purports to raise the bar for schools while it lowers the boom on them. I have watched with sadness dedicated professionals struggle to do what is right and what is expected and to try to sort those sometimes competing expectations out. I have

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said adieu to too many who have left the field of battle prematurely out of frustration and despair.

I have often said I believe in the American dream because I have lived it. And I got to live it because of the public schools of this country. American public education has been the cornerstone of our democracy and without it, there is no American public. So I have fought against those who would destroy it by design or disregard. One of the things that has changed since I began my career back in the sixties is that many of the idealists of that period have become the cynics of today so that public education today must not only worry about its enemies—it must worry about its friends who have given up on the possibilities and who fail to understand what is at stake.

The idealism of the sixties was about equality and opportunity. That is still the challenge but it is so much more subtle now. Then, it was overcoming Jim Crow laws and overt racism. Today, the racism is dressed in prettier clothes and the laws that purport to help the poor and minority unconsciously maim them by narrowing possibilities through the results of a cheap assessment system built on bubbled-in answers and bubble-headed ideas of how to make education better.

Meanwhile, the “flattened earth” and the challenge of global competition, the widening gulf between those who have and those who don’t, the explosion of information that comes at learners with the speed of light, and the need to sort the wheat of wisdom from the chaff of misinformation has made the educational process so much more complex than it once was in those good old smoke-filled days of the sixties.

And school leaders have had to confront these challenges without adequate support or resources. They have been asked to make bricks without straw as they work in an environment that requires results without resources and solutions without support.

So I have tried to offer guidance and reinforcement through the insights I have gathered from all around me. Those who know me well know I am nothing if not eclectic in my thinking and my sources of insight. In the last few years I have written and spoken more and more from a spiritual perspective because I truly believe the work of education is “soul work” because it touches the deepest parts of who we are. We must be attuned to the fact the work we do comes from the soul and through the heart. Our work is not mechanical—it is organic and it is truly a mission. We are called to do what we do and

we must be in touch with that calling to be effective. So sometimes I tend to focus on the affect as much as the effect of our work.

This book is a collection of these observations from the last few years. In many ways it represents a culmination of the work I decided to do back in those kaleidoscopic and tie-dyed sixties. My hair isn't as long as it was then, and it certainly isn't as dark, but I would like to think that as my hair has lightened, my understanding of our work, its challenges, and its opportunities has become more enlightened.

This book is divided into four sections. The first focuses on what I call the "building blocks of leadership." These are certainly not totally inclusive but offer a wide range of views on what it means to be a leader and how one might approach this work. Some of my views are probably held by a minority of one and might be seen as eccentric. I hope you will also find them provocative.

The second section focuses on the job I know best in education—that of superintendent. For over 30 years I have either been a superintendent or have headed the national organization that supports their work. So you must forgive me if I have built up a few opinions over that time. One is that we must stop viewing the job as being a "superintendent of schools" and begin seeing it as a superintendent of learning and education. It is not about the place; it is about the processes and relationships that take place in that place we call school.

The third section offers some of my views of how we might face the challenges of transforming education with a different approach. I have a pretty simple idea for transforming schools—we must make them places kids want to be. That must come from creating a learning situation that is engaging and meaningful—and maybe just a bit joyful. I think for America to survive in the global environment it has to get back to what it has always done best—promoting creative thinkers who challenge the status quo and conventional thinking. That would be a good start at transforming our schools.

The last section I am calling "Lessons From the Road." My work has been the work of a warrior—but often it has been as a "road warrior." I have lost and worn out more suitcases than most people have seen, stayed in more hotels than a traveling salesman, and logged more flight miles than most pilots. But what I have tried to do is extract meaning from these sometimes seemingly meaningless experiences. Since I express myself most vividly through metaphor and story, this road warrior part of my life has

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served as a rich resource and fodder for my views on education and leadership.

I can honestly say that the writing I did to create this book has been a labor of love. It comes to you from the warmth of my heart and the depths of my soul. I love the work I have been privileged to do and those I have been blessed to stand side to side with over these last four decades. Yes, we *are* surrounded by insurmountable opportunities, but when I get discouraged I go back to the words of William Faulkner as he accepted the Nobel Prize for literature. He said that he believed that mankind would not only survive but prevail. I believe in no less for the educators who care so much about their work and their children.