

The Power of Navigating by a North Star

October 4, 2018

I recently [blogged](#) about the importance of asking the right question in education -- are our schools improving at a pace that will allow every child in every Atlanta community to receive a high-quality education within the next generation?

While we are not yet on pace to create educational equity in Atlanta, we have reason to believe that by expanding upon what is working and changing course when things are not progressing, especially in long-struggling, underserved parts of the city, we can move in that direction.

The journey toward equity is hard and requires incredibly high levels of persistence and planning. Historically successfully overcoming enduring social problems has happened through having a shared “North Star” direction and strategy. The importance of a North Star – a plan to see change through to the end – cannot be overstated.

Why is a North Star so important? First, transformative change takes time. Some research suggests it takes a decade or more to create meaningful, systemic change, requiring “patience, persistence, and years of grindingly slow trench work.”^[1] The work of social change requires “patiently building movement institutions, cultivating leadership, organizing campaigns and leveraging power to secure small gains.” As authors Mark and Paul Engler note, “If you want to see your efforts produce results, it helps to have a long-term commitment.”^[2]

Given this research about how long it takes for systemic change to occur, it is clear that this work often stretches beyond the tenure of current leaders. Real transformative change can only happen when we commit to a plan with a North Star, that empowers a broad group of stakeholders including parents, community members, civic leaders, educators, business leaders, and philanthropists, representing many vantage points, to take up the mantle for sustainable school improvement. Strong, inspired leadership is crucial, but we also must ensure that these efforts are broader than any one leader or board’s agenda.

Second, a North Star plan helps give us the fortitude to navigate through difficult times. The evolution of our public school system into one with excellent schools for every child in every community will take courage to tackle the tough moments. This resolve is born through recognizing the long-term trajectory over near-term obstacles.

Finally, a plan that is developed authentically with the community is not only the most effective way to cultivate and sustain engagement from leaders of all backgrounds, it is a moral imperative. Changes that are made without broad stakeholder support— in education or any other area of policy— have the potential to alienate communities, educators, and schools. By contrast, the process of engaging collectively to shape a plan will ensure a seat at the table for all the diverse stakeholders who care about the future of Atlanta’s schools.

Thanks to the last APS board and the leadership of Dr. Carstarphen, Atlanta has made tremendous progress in steadying the ship following a debilitating scandal that broke community trust. That stability has been bolstered by points of real progress that include a more dynamic approach to innovation and governance and a focus on turning around persistently underperforming schools. It’s time now to chart a course for the next ten years that reflects what

we know and believe to be true for Atlanta and ensures that we are on track to realize our collective vision that all Atlanta students have the opportunity to receive a high-quality education within the next generation.

As partners and funders, we at redefinED atlanta are prepared to support our superintendent and school board in this journey and are proud to be backing the development of an authentic, community-informed, long-term plan for APS, intended to live far beyond the current board or superintendent's leadership. As a former teacher and school leader, I look forward to working alongside my colleagues in the education, business, and philanthropic communities, as well as with neighborhood groups, APS families, and other engaged stakeholders, to chart a course for the future of all of our communities' children.

^[1] *Stanford's Social Innovation Review*, ["CHANGE Takes Time"](#), Serra Sippel

^[2] *Waging Nonviolence*, ["Can Frances Fox Piven's theory of disruptive power create the Next Occupy?"](#), Mark Engler and Paul Engler

redefinED atlanta was founded in 2016 with the vision to transform Atlanta into a place where every student in every community receives a high-quality education. We are working to empower communities throughout Atlanta, strengthen school-level talent for Atlanta Public Schools, and increase the number of high-quality schools. Through advocating for school improvement, redefinED is creating spaces for connection and collaboration among non-profit, government, and philanthropic leaders helping to support citywide transformation.