The Path of Change

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discuss how leadership, vision, and competition
will determine the future of education**

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN WEBER
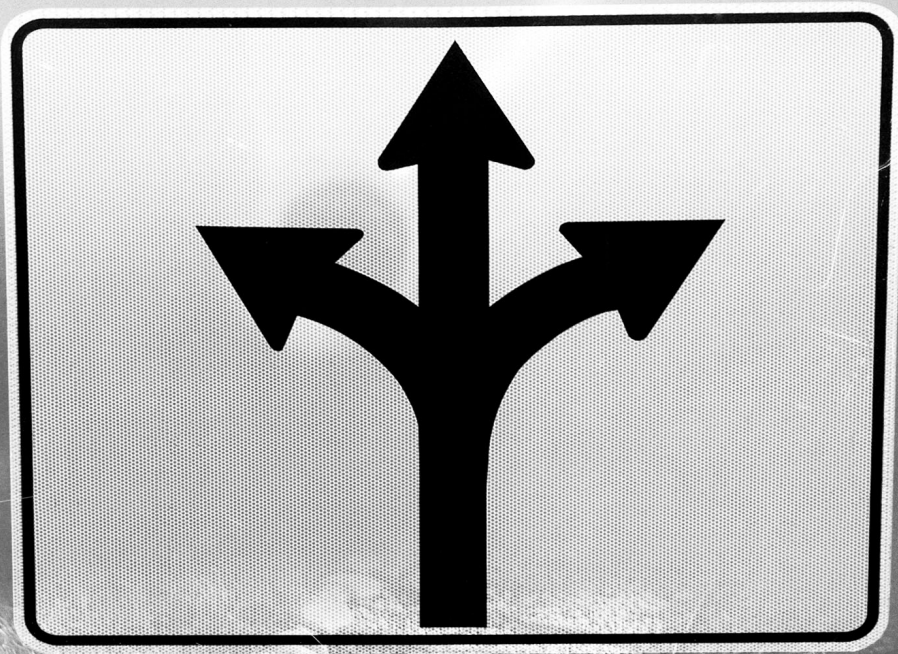
THE UNITED STATES faces both a crisis and an opportunity in its public education system. Years of education reform have largely neglected America's K-12 schools, and the result has been graduation rates that hover around 70 percent; they are closer to 55 percent for African Americans and Hispanics. Rarely has there been a more difficult time to lead public schools.

There are fundamental differences in the way members of these communities define values such as fairness, justice, and excellence, and how they reconcile the tensions between other values: equity vs. meritocracy, individualism vs. community, and autonomy vs. coherence. These divergences are manifest in debates over concrete choices such as tracking vs. mainstreaming, and arts and extracurricular activities vs. fundamental skills. Even at the community level, the size and diversity of large urban districts makes the hope of building an overarching consensus especially elusive. At the same time, the fiscal constraints affecting schools all over the country make the pluralism difficult to support.

How can we begin to build our collective vision for public education? Can classical private sector mechanisms – such as markets, choice, and competition – force change from outside of the system? How can vision be reconciled with the focus on testing? How, given the variety of stakeholders in education, should parents, teachers, and superintendents work together to achieve consensus? How much trust do we put in charismatic leaders of school reform? To attempt to answer these questions, the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* asked Jerry Porras and Tom Vander Ark to discuss these emerging issues. The discussion was moderated by Michael Krasny, host and senior editor of Forum on KQED, San Francisco's National Public Radio affiliate. It took place at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

Testing and Core Values

KRASNY: What is the importance of core values in schools? How does this mesh with the emphasis on standardized performance and testing?

VANDER ARK: There's a lot of business pressure right now to think about quarter-to-quarter earnings, and I think the current testing mania has created the same sort of short-term results focus. The new challenge in America is that the purpose of education in most of the 100,000 schools in the country has become raising test scores. We think that can be an important goal, but it can't be the purpose. Where testing replaces any sense of moral purpose for the enterprise, a school is not going to be a long-term success. We think in spite of this insistence on improving test scores, education leaders have to be really zealous about the culture.

KRASNY: We had a governor [Gray Davis] here in California who seemed to be quantifying progress almost entirely on test scores. I'm not sure whether that's going to continue, but what other things do you look for?

VANDER ARK: I don't want to suggest that it's not important to create both a set of goals and performance metrics. There's no question that any productive organization is clear about its mission, and works hard to translate it into a set of performance indicators and put feedback loops in place. Creating goals, performance indicators, and feedback mechanisms, and pushing like hell – when I was a superintendent, I

JERRY PORRAS *is professor emeritus of organizational behavior and change at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. His research focuses on characteristics of visionary companies. Co-author of the book "Built to Last," Porras' work stresses the importance of an organization's sense of the meaning and significance of what it does and what it stands for – over and above simply generating profits. Even in the business sector, he argues, this differentiates highly successful firms from those that are average or even above average.*

TOM VANDER ARK, *as executive director of education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is responsible for the development and administration of its education grant programs and scholarship programs. Before joining the foundation, Vander Ark served as public school superintendent for Federal Way, Wash., one of that state's larger districts. Among the first superintendents recruited from the private sector to lead a public school district, Vander Ark previously ran a consulting practice for Cap Gemini. He also serves on the boards of the Washington Early Learning Foundation, Partnership for Learning, and Communities in Schools.*

thought that was sufficient. What I've learned since then is that there are many other things you have to do. For young people, you have to translate a set of expectations into tangible products that they own and understand the relevance of, so they have to understand what good work looks like. When you help young people understand what quality work looks like and why it's important to them, to their lives, to their future, then magic happens. That's part of the translation that I think education leaders have to do, making an abstract set of standards real in the lives of young people. You then have to do the same thing around culture, around values, because if you write down this set of values, then you have to make them real in the way that you behave day to day, the way you treat each other.

KRASNY: That realness and immediacy, I imagine, translates into the business sector as well. You have to make things tangible.

PORRAS: Yes, you do. And I think I'd like to really pick up on this theme of a big goal, increased test scores, and what the purpose is.

KRASNY: It's kind of like profits in the business world. You can look at profits and you can't necessarily judge how the morale is in the company or how people are dedicated to being creative or innovative. You've got a very easy kind of a yardstick.

PORRAS: Exactly right. If you don't know what the purpose of the organization is, you can set goals that don't build anything, don't create something fantastic over time. If you don't know what your purpose is, then you can set all these goals – whatever seems to be attractive, supported politically, can be sold to other people – but if you look at a long time period, this school or organization will just wander around. A purpose is like a star out in the distance; you never get to it, but it keeps guiding you over time. Having a clear sense of what that is is not an easy thing to get at, because it forces people to really explore the fundamental contributions that they personally are trying to make as part of an organization. You have to understand that about yourself, and then you need to understand what the organization is doing.

KRASNY: That's why I was suggesting that a lot of it seems to boil down to what can be quantified. In this state, you're funded if your test scores reach a certain level, and you're not if they don't.

Porras (left), Krasny (center), and Vander Ark at the Stanford forum in October.

VANDER ARK: When a superintendent goes out and says, "We want to raise test scores," that's good and it's interesting. If, however, you can connect with the community by saying, "It's our goal to make sure that every kid leaves our system with great life options in continuing their learning, in work, and as engaged citizens," that's a higher purpose. Now, one of the frustrating things for us is that there are no metrics around kids ready for college, work, and citizenship, so we do need to invent some of those metrics. We think the national graduation rate is about 70 percent, but we've been lying to each other for decades about the real number. The real number of kids that leave high school ready for college is about a third, about 32 percent. You can cut both of those numbers almost in half if you're talking about low-income kids of color. As we think about our work over the next generation, we hope to help lift the national graduation rate from 70 percent to 80 percent and make sure that *all* of those kids are ready for college, work, and citizenship. To me, that's a goal worthy of getting out of bed in the morning for.

what I call the strategic values that people have versus the core values. If you really can get at core values, I don't think that there will be too much disagreement in a particular community about what they might be. There's a lot of disagreement about the strategic values, however. What are strategic values? They're the values that people want to use and follow to implement a particular strategy in trying to make the school successful in a particular environment. You have certain environmental conditions, and you say, "How are we going to be successful?" Well, you adopt a particular strategy and after that come a set of values. A strategy is driven by a goal, so what's the big goal that you want to achieve? If you disagree about the big goal, then you can't agree about the strategies and you can't agree about values; it's a chain. You have to start somewhere, and I think the place to start is an agreement about what the larger goal is. What are you trying to achieve as a larger effort? To me, that larger goal really does need to be connected to the purpose of the school.

> " **The new challenge in America is that the purpose of education in most of the 100,000 schools in the country has become raising test scores. We think that can be an important goal, but it can't be the purpose.** "

Consensus and Conflict

KRASNY: How do you create a consensus about what is important in schools? Some people are looking for critical learning techniques, and what others are looking for is nuts and bolts. You'll say that you're looking for inclusiveness, but they're looking for exactly the opposite. People are always searching for some kind of consensus and it's difficult. It's elusive and vexing.

PORRAS: I think one of the reasons, and I like to put it in this framework of values, is that there's a difference in

KRASNY: So, one set of parents say they want character building, and another set of parents say they want college prep.

VANDER ARK: You can have a system of schools that has a set of higher-order goals and ways of ensuring that schools are meeting those goals. Then I think you can have a variety of different approaches, which I think most American communities need. I think urban areas, if they're serious about all kids, have to have a variety of approaches, and we've come to that conclusion in a variety of ways. One is that kids learn in different ways. They are motivated by different experiences and environments. Teenagers, in particular, are begin-

Porras: An educational purpose is like a star in the distance; you never get to it, but it guides you over time.

ning to have a sense of self, to understand what they get interested in, what gets them out of bed in the morning, and if we don't take advantage of that, we're just stupid. It's our sense that we should have a variety of options, some that are traditional, some that are thematic, and some that are highly individualized and supportive, but all of which have a common set of goals.

> **" The national graduation rate is about 70 percent, and we've been lying to each other for decades about the real number. The real number of kids that leave high school ready for college is about a third, about 32 percent. "**

KRASNY: And all of which can be tailored to different students?

VANDER ARK: Absolutely. Now, that's a very different landscape of choice than the one that we have today. We have a lot of choice in education today, but it's all the wrong kind. We assume that every kid within a boundary should go to the same high school, and build their own curriculum, choosing from 100 courses of varying degrees of difficulty with no adult guidance. We also assume that they have the knowledge, insight, and motivation to do that successfully toward a desired future state, and it's a disaster for 75 percent of our kids. Our sense is that instead of that notion of comprehen-

sive high school, there should be three or four types of choices, and that the least-advantaged kid in a community has access to the same kind of quality options that the most-advantaged young person in a community does.

Competition and Reform

KRASNY: What are the long-term implications – charter schools vs. comprehensive public schools, for instance – of competition?

VANDER ARK: I think it is a factor, not *the* factor. There are those that view choice primarily as a competition-driven market mechanism. Market mechanisms assume a level of efficiency that doesn't exist in education. It is far from an efficient market. I do think that schools need a level of urgency about serving all children well, and some understanding that parents and kids have other options is a healthy one.

KRASNY: Forgive me, but you know what happens: If a school is not succeeding and the parents can afford it, they put their kids in private schools. There is competition going on all the time, isn't there?

VANDER ARK: Most schools are shielded from that. A lot of the schools in California have more kids than they can serve, which I think leads people to be less urgent than they might otherwise be. That said, it is critical that schools are part of learning networks, that they have to be a member of a group of schools, whether it's in a district or across a group of like-minded schools, where they can struggle with the same issues with schools that are like them. That's an environment with a high level of cooperation and learning with some level of competition.

KRASNY: What do you think about competition between schools or between different kinds of schools?

PORRAS: Well, I think that there certainly are many pitfalls to implementing the sort of competition that goes on in the business world into an educational system. Competition would be wonderful if the public schools were as strong as the private schools and people would make choices based on factors other than "This is really a great school" or "This is really a crummy school." I think the challenge is how do we

get there. I'm a product of public schools, and I think the public school system is central to a free society, a strong America. We shouldn't abandon it. I think our challenge is how do we find ways to make the public schools as strong and as attractive and as significant as the string of private schools that people think that they want to send their kids to.

VANDER ARK: A quick addition to that is that the new accountability mechanisms at the federal level, "No Child Left Behind" and some of the proposed voucher programs, view choice as an exit strategy and that's all. The assumption is that low-income families have somewhere to go, and that's just not true. If their school's not working, it's not as if they have a good option down the street. I think those sorts of solutions come at the problem entirely wrong, and we should start with what kinds of schools do young people in our community need, and how do we make sure that every one of them has access to quality options.

Visionary Leadership: The Myth of Charisma

KRASNY: Do you have to have visionary people, or can you take a grassroots approach?

PORRAS: Well, I think being visionary is often attached to being charismatic and very seldom is the word visionary used without charismatic when it refers to leadership. My view is that that's really oversold. I think that charisma can go a long way toward creating a lot of excitement, a lot of hoopla, and maybe a lot of superficial change, but over the long term, it doesn't really last. What I think works better is leaders who really focus their attention and energies on building the capabilities of whatever organization they're leading. Build the capabilities of that organization, the people in it, and the way the structures are set up, and the processes and the system, and have those capabilities really do the work of the organization and create success in the organization. Don't let it be dependent on who the leader is. That way, you can pull the leader out and put another one in that shares the same focus, and the organization will keep chugging along.

VANDER ARK: Let me give a quick
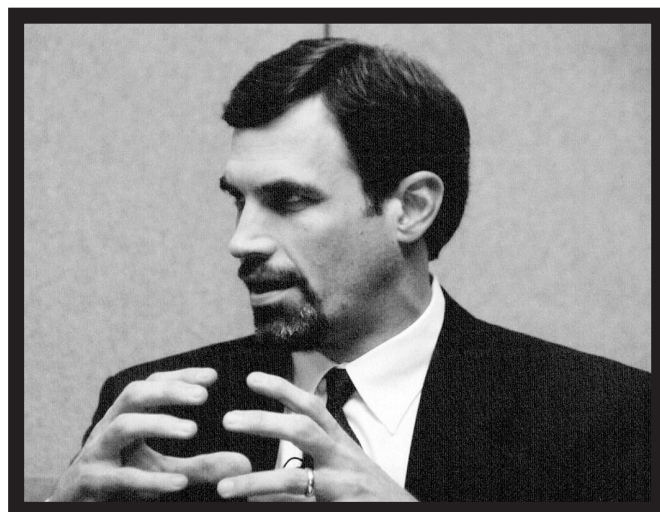
Vander Ark: Schools need a level of urgency about serving all children well.

public school example of what Jerry just mentioned. I think everybody's going to hear more about Milwaukee public schools in the future, because it is a fascinating leadership case study. The city had an extremely charismatic leader who grew frustrated and left. Rather than hurrying out and doing what Seattle and Portland and many other districts have done, trying to find the white knight superintendent, the chamber of commerce built a partnership with the school board, the union, the university, a technical college, and a private industry council, essentially saying, "These are our schools. We're going to build a plan and a set of goals." The board then hired a middle school principal to execute that plan. I don't know of any other urban district in the country that could have hired one of their own middle school principals, but they only did it because the community owned the plan, and I think that's a great example of what Jerry was describing.

PORRAS: I think that's true. Going out and getting the white knight and expecting him to come in and solve all the problems sometimes works, but only for the short term. In the longer term, that doesn't seem to work. In the companies that we studied, they very often promoted from within to the top level, seldom going outside for a CEO. Why? Because the people from within really know what the organization is about, not only what it does and the way it's structured, but they also know the organization from the perspective of what's important there. What is the purpose that they're serving? What are the values that really are guiding them? When you get up to the top knowing that, when a decision comes up in a crisis, it's made based on the principles that are consistent with the orga-

Built to Last

- Visionary companies are more successful in the long run
- Leaders built vision and "architected" organizations allowing for change while holding to the core vision
- Leaders tend not to be charismatic
- Four components of vision –
  - Core values
  - Purpose
  - Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAG)
  - Tangible image

"Built to Last," by Jerry Porras and Jim Collins

> **"Charisma can go a long way toward creating a lot of hoopla, and maybe a lot of superficial change, but over the long term, it doesn't really last. Don't let the organization be dependent on the charisma of the leader."**

nization, not the principles that may just be a part of the CEO. Over time, what this does is build up and reinforce these notions and makes the cultures, which are a product of these notions, stronger and more able to withstand all sorts of difficulties.

KRASNY: Including, I would imagine, the difficulty of the fact that statistically we have superintendents changing an average of about every four years.

VANDER ARK: That's correct. And school board members just as frequently.

KRASNY: Building to last, to use the title of your book, has to really come from the essence, the basement of the organization.

PORRAS: I think it's possible to get something started in four years, but it then needs to be carried on by someone from inside, typically, because an outsider won't know it, they'll have their own agenda. It takes courage to appoint someone from the inside.

KRASNY: Can you be a visionary leader of a cause rather than of an organization?

PORRAS: I think the answer is yes, because think of many people who've led causes, you could call them visionary types of people. A cause is not like a formal organization. I would consider it an informal organization: A lot of people and different subgroups coming together around a set of basic beliefs, an important goal, or sense of something that they're trying to accomplish. One of the things that I think can happen in a cause situation, in terms of leadership, is that the leaders are able to help permeate and promote the values and make them clear. It's the values and it's a set of assumptions about where they're headed, what the purpose is, and what the goal is that glues this cause together, and it doesn't move like a regular, formal organization. In a lot of ways, I

think having a vision is more important for a cause than it is for an organization, because in an organization, you've got the structure to coordinate people's behavior and guide them in the same direction. In a cause, you don't have that, but if you have a powerful vision – purpose, core values, and an audacious goal – if you have those three things, you can glue all the parts of this amorphous set of individuals together and have them move in a much more coordinated way. It never looks like a formal organization, but I think it can be very useful for a cause.

VANDER ARK: I would agree with that comment. I want to go a slightly different direction, because while we've downplayed this idea of the white knight, the so-called visionary leader, I don't want to confuse that with the notion that organizations must be learning organizations. That's especially true for school districts. Now, that may mean that they don't have the charismatic sort of leader, but you do need a team of people that are thinking really hard about the issues, and I find few of those in my experience. Sacramento is one of my favorite examples. When I go to Sacramento, they've read all the books that I've read, and they've visited all the places that I've visited. It's a place that is really thinking hard about these issues. I think you do have to have a learning culture that's working really hard on the key issues, and I think that's different than dismissing this notion of a charismatic leader. Would you agree with that?

PORRAS: That's right. Leadership in that case is really embedded in a whole lot of people and not embedded in one individual who's the rock star. □

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