

*Why this could
be the* **Best
of Times
for
Education**

By Dr. C. Jackson Grayson, Jr.



IN THIS PAPER:

The opportunity that exists in what many see as education's "worst of times"

Four ways educators can set the path for positive transformation

Examples of pilot program success using process and performance management

Thomas Edison's laboratory was destroyed by fire in December 1914. The next morning, he looked at the ruins and said, "There is a great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew!" Three weeks later, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Edison delivered his first phonograph.

Education needs to do the same: Burn the mistakes and start anew. But many educators think we can't.

In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, there is the famous opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Many educators focus on "the worst of times," pointing to drastic budget cuts, layoffs, furloughs and travel restrictions, on top of decades of stagnant student achievement gains, deplorable dropout rates, and little progress in closing the achievement gap. They prefer to be reactive; hunker down; "cry wolf" for more stimulus funds, as Eric Hanashek said in a recent *Ed Week* commentary; and wait to see when the economy recovers.

I think this is a lose-lose strategy.

Now is "the best of times" to start anew, overcome past mistakes, and create a transformed educational system. Dramatic changes are often made possible by the worst of times, as we've seen with crises such as hurricanes, tsunamis and floods, all of which offer opportunity for transformation and a new future. People begin to realize that some of the things they thought were insoluble and inevitable – constraints impossible to change – suddenly became possible and transformable when they start anew, as did Edison.

Can that be done now in education? Yes. I have four recommendations that can set the path to transformation – starting now.

First, shift to process and performance management. Education, including schools, districts, states, foundations and the federal government, only focuses on *one* of these: performance management, or the outcomes. But, if your goal is to improve, you also need process management.

Why? Outcomes are produced by processes. Therefore, if you want to improve outcomes you must improve the processes that generate the outcomes. But you can't manage outcomes for improvement any more than you can manage test scores by just reporting the scores. You have to manage the processes to get improvement.

The problem – and it is a huge one – is that in working with more than 250 districts in the past five years, APQC has found that most educators don't know how to manage processes for improvement. They don't collect process data, don't map processes, don't measure processes, and don't compare processes.

If educators simply can't manage outcomes for improvement, and they don't know how to manage processes for improvement, no wonder the nation has had such little improvement in decades. Yet, there are hundreds of organizations in business, healthcare, government and the military that are using

both process and performance management. Education must do the same, or there will be little improvement – and certainly no transformative improvement.

Second, empower all employees. Shift from being primarily top-down organizations to ones that are both top-down and bottom-up.

Education inherited the Industrial Age model built on the belief the “top” should “think and plan,” and everyone lower in the hierarchy should “do.” Over the years, this approach has led to inefficiencies and millions of employees becoming disillusioned and feeling distrusted and not valued.

Empower *all* employees, whether they are teaching a class, being a principal, driving a bus, cleaning a toilet, or serving food. Give them training, time, resources, responsibility and performance measures. Not only will this prevent errors and save time and costs, it will serve customers better and provide professional dignity.

Third, place an equal focus on efficiency and effectiveness. For a transformation to succeed, it must have both.

It seems almost incredible that the word “efficiency” is almost nonexistent in education. I did a word search in the No Child Left Behind and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act regulations, and among the hundreds of thousands of words, found either zero or only two or three minor mentions of the word “efficiency,” and certainly no requirement for it.

Because of this, the United States has become one of the most expensive educational systems per child in the world. Funds and time are tied up in inefficient, non-value-added and wasteful activities. For transformation, efficiency and effectiveness must co-exist.

Fourth, reduce functional silos. Remember President Reagan’s words at the Berlin Wall in 1987: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

The “walls” in education are the vertical specialized functions in all of education, such as curriculum, instruction, transportation, procurement, human resources, information technology, food service, and others.

Business discovered more than 20 years ago that while some advantages stem from having specialized functions, these functional walls often become disconnected entities – silos, castles, chimneys – that breed turf wars, don’t work well together, create delays, waste funds and time in suboptimal results, and do not serve customers.

Almost all of the other sectors have now moved or are moving to a mixture of both functional and cross-functional processes that save time and money while serving customers better. If education is to transform, it needs to do the same.

These four recommendations constitute the basic platform for transformation of any organization. Think of it as a sort of slab. On top of the slab, there need to be data systems, measurement, benchmarking, analysis, sharing, transfer, training, coaching, implementation and change management to build the transformation in individual entities, using improvement tools such as Six Sigma, lean, supply chain, "Plan-Do-Study-Act," balanced scorecard, quality tools and more.

Can these four platforms really be the slab that starts the transformation process? Absolutely. I don't blame you if you are skeptical, but here are two reasons I know it will work.

1) I have spent the last 33 years working as head of a nonprofit organization called APQC (American Productivity & Quality Center), whose sole purpose is to help all sectors improve and transform. We've worked with business, healthcare, government, the military, and for the last 10 years, in public K-12 and higher education. I have created or observed these four powerful methodologies at work in successful transformations in all the other sectors. I have also shown it can be done in education.

2) I created a year-long demonstration project in 2009 called "The North Star Project" to demonstrate these methods can also work in K-12 education. I enlisted 11 school districts from around the nation – districts with enrollment ranging from 9,900 (Jenks, Okla.) to 320,000 (Clark County, Nev.). These North Star districts achieved transformative gains in instruction and operations, saved a total of \$17.5 million, and released more than 39,000 hours for instruction. We have testimonials from all 11 superintendents.

These four recommendations – the slab of transformation – are deceptively simple in concept, yet difficult in implementation, because they involve change. But they are transformative and extremely rich in results.

If more districts in this nation were to follow these recommendations, we wouldn't have to burn the buildings down to "start anew." K-12 will again be the world-class leader in education. If we act now, it will truly be "the best of times" – and as Dickens went on to say "not the winter of despair, but the age of wisdom."

About the Author

Dr. C. Jackson Grayson, Jr. is Founder, Chairman and CEO, APQC.

Dr. Grayson has a BBA from Tulane University, an MBA from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and a doctorate in business from the Harvard Business School. His academic career has included professorships at Harvard, Stanford, Tulane and SMU, and he has taught in business schools in France and Switzerland. He has also been a Dean of two business schools—at Tulane University and at SMU where he became known for instituting innovations in business and education.

Dr. Grayson was selected in 1971 to be Chairman of the Price Commission under President Nixon, and it was there that he discovered how little American corporations knew about productivity and quality. So, when he left government, he founded the nonprofit APQC (American Productivity & Quality Center) in 1975, and has used process and performance management to help organizations improve their efficiency and effectiveness. In 1990, *Business Week* said of Grayson, "Few, if any, individual Americans have done more during the last 20 years to shape the country's economic future for the better."

During the past 32 years, APQC has worked primarily with business, healthcare, government, and the military. In 2007, APQC started a pilot demonstration project with several leading districts as part of its North Star Plan to help transform the U.S. public education system.

Grayson is a CPA and has been on the board of directors of large corporations. Grayson's career however, is not confined to business. He believes in variety, constant learning, experimentation, and fun. His career has included being a newspaper reporter in New Orleans, a special agent of the FBI, a manager of a cotton farm in Louisiana, a member of an export/import firm, and an owner of race horses. Grayson recently went sky-diving.

About APQC

The American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) is the leading resource for performance analytics, best practices and process improvement worldwide. Our research studies, benchmarking databases and renowned Knowledge Base provide managers with intelligence that they can use to transform their organizations for better results. A member-based nonprofit founded in 1977, APQC currently serves over 750 of the *Fortune* Global 1000 companies as well as hundreds of health care, government and nonprofit organizations.

For the past 10 years, APQC has worked with over 250 school districts to help them improve efficiency and effectiveness. APQC's North Star plan is aimed to transform the U.S. education system using the proven methodology of process and performance management.

Learn more at www.apqceducation.org/north-star.html or call our Education Team at 800-776-9676.