

The Ghost of the World Yet to Come
Three-Quarters of the Story

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While visiting India in early November, President Obama conceded that the election back in the states “requires me to make some midcourse corrections and adjustments.” Good leaders know when it is time to adjust. They see opportunity in the face of the most challenging and troubling times. And they develop a plan to take advantage of the opportunity.

Governor Christie did just that. At a town hall meeting in Clinton, New Jersey, Christie declared that 2011 will be the year of education reform in New Jersey. There is no doubt that components of his plan for reform will continue to be debated, but Governor Christie just might be onto something. Could it be that the Governor’s focus on education simply reflects a commendable and opportune plan in the face of challenging and troubling times?

I hope the answer is a resounding “yes.” However, my concern is that the opportunity will be lost if the current narrative persists. The narrative is being crafted around the Governor’s slugfest with the NJEA and old reform mantras. Imagine the potential for a new narrative crafted around a future sound-bite in which the Governor states: *Education is not separate from the economy. To the contrary, education drives it.*

Drivers (Educators) Wanted.

Wow, what a different starting place! The sound-bite would affirm that the challenges facing us are more encompassing than educator contracts. Our country and our state are in a mess and education is the only pathway to cleaning it up. If, in fact, the day of reckoning has arrived, as Governor Christie revealed this past weekend on 60 Minutes, educators must lead the way or we are all doomed.

Maybe our country and state have gone awry and maybe educators must accept a larger piece of the blame than previously suggested. But, if so, the blame has little – if anything – to do with salaries or benefits. Let’s dig deeper.

For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development unveiled deeper reasons than salaries and benefits when it released the results of the 2009 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment.) Out of the sixty-five participating countries, the United States came in 23rd in Science, 17th in Reading, and 31st in Math. President Obama did not appear to be concerned with salaries and benefits when he proclaimed in a speech in North

Carolina, “Fifty years later, our generation’s Sputnik moment is back.” Trust me, this statement is much more than a sound-bite.

In a November 4th speech, Education Secretary Arne Duncan highlighted our country’s drop out data. Secretary Duncan stated, “One-quarter of U.S. high school students drop out or fail to graduate on time. Almost one million students leave our schools for the streets each year.” Paying educators more or less will not be the solutions for these numbers. The solutions are somewhere much deeper and it is time that we decide to get serious about being serious. Educators must decide to lead the way.

An optimist could quickly point out that three-quarters of U.S. high school students remain in school or graduate on time. Perhaps that was good enough for the *Ghost of World Past*. However, this “success rate” does not appear to be standing the test of the *Ghost of World Present*. And “three-quarters” will certainly not be adequate for confronting the *Ghost of the World Yet to Come*. In his November 23rd *New York Times* editorial, U.S.G. and P.T.A., Thomas Friedman wrote, “And as education systems of China, India, Singapore, Poland, and Vietnam continue to improve, and more of their cream rises to the top and more of their young people apply to Ivy League schools, it is only going to get more competitive for American men and women at every school.”

Let’s continue to go deeper. Let’s place our three-quarters (or one-quarter) into context. The United States, with 312 million people, ranks 3rd in the world in total population. India is 2nd with 1.18 billion people. China is first with 1.31 billion people. By population alone, the top three-quarters in these countries will outnumber our three-quarters (by a lot.)

If not by mere numbers, how will our cream of the crop compete with the global cream of the crop?

According to the Carnegie International Study, China will become the world’s largest economy in 2032 and will grow to be 20% larger than the United States by 2050. In addition, the study stated that Brazil, China, India, Russia, and Mexico will comprise nearly 60% of G20 economic growth over the next forty years. Salaries? Benefits? Tenure? Public, Charter, or Private Schools? Evaluation models? Do any of the debates really matter?

Of course they do and we need to start somewhere. But the starting point is the exact point worth questioning. A new starting point would begin a new narrative. We cannot solve everything overnight and must set priorities. Where should we expend our limited energy, time, and resources? Educators must lead the way.

Let us consider what some people would believe to be the best case scenario for the current narrative: salaries and benefits are capped, tenure reform finds common ground, additional students transfer from public schools to charter schools, and new accountability/evaluative

instruments are implemented. Do we really believe we will then find our country (and state) prepared to confront the *Ghost of the World Yet to Come*?

Our leaders need to recognize that now is the time to adjust. They must engage their drivers if we want to have a chance to reach our destination. Educators, likewise, need to recognize that now is the time to adjust. Educators need to be leaders. As we prepare to ring in 2011, educators would be well advised to set some resolutions worth sticking to. Resolutions come and go usually with the third week of January but we cannot afford to break them this year. Our commitment is overdue.

Two authors package a convenient set of resolutions for educators.

Tony Wagner, author of [The Global Achievement Gap](#), argues that educators must ensure our students have seven survival skills for success in a knowledge economy: critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination.

Yong Zhao, author of [Catching Up or Leading The Way](#), outlines five core assumptions for the future:

1. We must cultivate skills and knowledge that are not available at a cheaper price in other countries or that cannot be rendered useless by machines.
2. Creativity, interpreted as both ability and passion to make new things and adapt to new situations is essential.
3. New skills and knowledge are needed for living in the global world and the virtual world.
4. Cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical thinking are more important than memorization.
5. Emotional intelligence – the ability and capacity to understand and manage emotions of self and others – is important.

Think about the students in your care while you consider Wagner's skills or Zhao's assumptions. What are our chances? If only three-quarters of your students are in good shape, our country (and state) are doomed.

We cannot afford one-quarter of our most precious resource to be anything less than high-achieving...to be spectacular.

Wagner and Zhao do not spend too much time on contracts, tenure, where a student is educated, or evaluation models. Does anyone hear any of their inspiring ideals or resolutions in the current narrative?

These authors are not the only two forward-thinking authors. Their *resolutions* do not offer a complete set for all the challenges that face us, but we need to start somewhere.

We must decide where to start.

The *Ghost of the World Yet to Come* awaits.

Educators must lead the way.