

“PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY”

Technology Leadership and Innovation for the New Economy at School District 129

Bruce Campbell

Nova Southeastern University

The Pathways to Prosperity initiative was launched in 2012 as the result of several years of research conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Harvard Graduate School of Education’s (2011) report challenged the United States’ education model, pointing to some of the merits of the European education paradigm, which has adopted a traditionally more flexible perspective. In the latter, college is not necessarily the “preferred” option for all high school graduates; preparation for middle skills jobs is seen as a viable alternative to 4-year degree programs. James Rydland, superintendent of schools, and Don Ringelestein, director of technology, from School District 129 in Illinois, are 2 key leaders heading up the Illinois Pathways to Prosperity initiative. They were interviewed to gain in-depth insight into this new initiative. Discussed were its main objectives; collaboration between industry partners, government, and local educators; anticipated results of the new initiative; getting educators to consider new educational paradigms, resulting in improved high school graduation; plus, trained workers to fill middle skills jobs that remain vacant in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Thought leadership involves establishing relationships and delivering value to respective stakeholders who are vested and committed to mutual success (Badings, 2009). As Badings noted, the action extends beyond the transactional relationship of selling a product or service, it involves establishing the organization represented as the expert in that field. West Aurora School District (SD 129) in Illinois has

two such thought leaders. SD 129 was designated as a partner school district in the United States to test research published by Harvard

United States Information

Population: 313.8 million
Urban population: 82%
Life expectancy: 78.5 years
Literacy rate: 99%
Internet users: < 245 million

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (2012).

• **Bruce Campbell**, Assistant Director, Student Educational Center—Palm Beach Gardens, Nova Southeastern University.
E-mail: bruccamp@nova.edu

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Graduate School of Education in 2011 entitled, "Pathways to Prosperity" (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). I interviewed James Rydland, superintendent of schools, and Don Ringelestein, director of technology for SD 129, for the purpose of better understanding the role of thought leaders in regard to instructional technology and distance education within the Pathways to Prosperity Network.

PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY

The Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) initiative was inspired by the results of research into the multipath model used in the kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) educational systems throughout Europe. This led the authors to gain understanding of these pathways to motivate high school students to graduate at a higher frequency than currently experienced in the United States (Symonds et al., 2011). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012), the United States is ranked 11 of 36 countries in high school graduation rates. The P2P initiative is designed to more effectively prepare students for employment in middle skills level jobs, where there is an increasing gap between job openings and skilled workers to fill those jobs. These are jobs that require individuals to have a high school diploma plus additional trade-specific knowledge, which is potentially acquired while in the final years of high school. The second part of the multipath model is the traditional preparation currently in use in K-12 education, referred to as college preparation; thus fulfilling the generally accepted "college for all" concept (Hoffman, 2011). Hoffman (vice president and senior advisor at Jobs for the Future), also notes that "career readiness, and 'career' has not gotten the attention it needs, especially given college costs and the demands of the 21st century economy" (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2012, para. 5).

At the official announcement ceremony of the Pathways to Prosperity Network, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan expressed his enthusiasm for the Harvard study and subsequent involvement in the P2P initiative, noting that the initiative took a bold new approach to career and technical education: "The goal of [career and technical education] 2.0 should be that students earn a postsecondary degree or an industry recognized certification and land a job that leads to a successful career" (American Youth Policy Forum, 2012). He also declared an urgent mandate for educators: "It is the responsibility of K-12 educators to prepare all students both for college and a career; this must be both/and; not either/or" (American Youth Policy Forum, 2012). Additionally, Secretary Duncan explained the urgency in that millions of jobs throughout the United States are vacant and could be filled if workers possessed the necessary requisites including high school diploma and trade specific skills training (American Youth Policy Forum, 2012). The P2P initiative was created with that in mind.

However, more than related to the education system alone, P2P's success will rely on profound and systemic involvement by thought leaders, stakeholders, partners, and advocates representing a broad range of actors. Actors include: traditional schools, employers, career support structures and information systems, intermediary organizations, and parents and community organizations.

ILLINOIS PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY AND THE WEST AURORA SCHOOL DISTRICT (SD 129)

The Illinois P2P initiative was launched as part of the Pathways to Prosperity Network, which is

a collaboration between the Pathways to Prosperity Project at [Harvard Graduate School of Education], Jobs for the Future, and six states focused on ensuring that many

more young people complete high school, attain a postsecondary credential with currency in the labor market, and launch into a career while leaving open the prospect of further education. (Harvard, 2012, para. 2)

Members of the P2P Network recognize the importance of the new Common Core State Standards as an important movement toward "a more uniform national academic currency" (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2012, para. 5). (The Common Core State Standards define the level of knowledge and skills that students should possess from their K-12 education. Achievement of these standards ensures that students are prepared for college and training programs to join the workforce. Forty-five states, including the six-state initiative, accepted these standards. More on standards can be accessed at <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>.) The six states that are part of the P2P Network are Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The uniqueness of the P2P initiative is that it allows feedback to the P2P Network, to test in practice the ideas posed by Symonds et al. (2011), prior to launching the initiative nationally.

SD 129 was selected as an initial launch site for Illinois Pathways to Prosperity. SD 129 has approximately 12,375 students, including 3,440 high school students. The high school graduation rate, according to the school district, is 71.3%, or just below the national average of 75.5% (SD 129, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). One of the significant features of SD 129 is its demographic diversity. The school district reports that "the student population is 49% Hispanic, 32% Non-Hispanic Caucasian, 15% African American, 3% Asian, .05% Native American, and 3% Multiracial" (School District 129, 2012, District Profile, para. 1). This poses a unique set of challenges considering the most recent statistics reveal that Hispanic students have the highest dropout rate (15.1%) nationally, while the combined dropout rate of all other student

populations have a combined average of 7.4% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Organizations from the private sector, government, K-12, higher education, and other entities are working together as one cohesive unit in this unique initiative. The goal is to prepare students for industry occupations that typically require a minimum of a high school diploma plus specific skill training that may not require a college degree. These are jobs open due to a technology or training gap in the current labor force. Additionally, the initiative does not ignore those occupations requiring a college degree along with specific skill sets, but has job readiness for high school graduates as the primary focus (Ringelestein, 2012; Rydland, 2012). It is the common goal of all entities involved to provide multiple paths to job readiness, or completion of a "college degree of value" in today's difficult job market.

BIG SOLUTIONS START SMALL

Breaking down the multiple issues of low high school graduation rates, high unemployment rates, and lack of technical skills to fill available jobs; thought leaders Rydland and Ringelestein worked with community leaders to discover the relationship between the problems in order to create a bridge resulting in a concept that could be adopted across school districts nationwide, if successful. Both agreed that the current situation in Aurora is a common issue in school districts and communities throughout the United States. Indeed, the P2P initiative has not been "tailored" to SD 129; Instead, SD 129's overarching attributes (e.g., student population of 12,375 located in historically a manufacturing-based economy) made it an attractive location as a P2P site, as its experiences would allow for replication in other parts of the United States (SD 129, 2012).

RETHINKING INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY-BASED SOLUTIONS

In 2011, all computer technology was replaced in the school district, which included installing a wireless network in all 17 buildings of SD 129 (Ringelestein, 2012). This was a major undertaking, which required mobilization of multiple stakeholders in the district. Through the leadership of Rydland and the innovative efforts of Ringelestein, this was accomplished efficiently and cost-effectively. According to Ringelestein, there were two other things leadership had to accomplish. This first item was to “enable and foster creativity among the teaching staff” stating that “many good ideas, in fact, most of them come from the field and we have to foster an environment for that to happen.” The second item was the necessity of providing best practices examples. Ringelestein invited teachers to accompany him to other districts “to show them what is happening in other places so we can take best practices and not reinvent the wheel.” He stated that it helps by showing teachers working examples from other districts. From a futurist point of view Ringelestein added: “Then, once adopted, we want to integrate them district-wide so that it is consistent with all the teaching environments” (Ringelestein, 2012).

Upgrading the system was only part of the strategy. The second part was to facilitate ongoing training to make it possible for teachers to use the technology. The new technology made it possible for students from SD 129 to participate in a global student initiative of the United Nations. They worked collaboratively with students in China, Israel, Finland, and Thailand on issues of a global nature. Ringelestein explained, “This allows students early in educational life, to understand we live in a global community and not just local. They begin to understand that we can work together globally on issues that face humanity and not just Aurora or Beijing.” Ringelestein also stated that innovative use of technology allows their advanced students to study unique languages such as Mandarin Chinese in a blended

format. Through online distance studies 10 students were able to move beyond the traditional foreign language options of French, German, and Spanish where it would otherwise be cost prohibitive for such a unique language to be taught in the public school system.

Ringelestein noted that technology is useful at the other end of the spectrum, too. Online learning systems can provide valuable support for students requiring remediation and credit repair opportunities. Furthermore, such online tools can be used with homebound students, so that they can maintain an active cyber presence in their classes while connecting from a remote site (such as a home or a hospital bed).

As technology permeates the learning landscape ever more deeply, we can expect its impact to become increasingly systemic. One of the challenges education has historically faced is the artificial division between the secondary and postsecondary education systems. Ringelestein observed that SD 129 strives to use online technology to connect students with universities that offer content for dual admissions; thus, enabling students to do dual credit work as online offerings through colleges, universities or massive open online courses [MOOCs]) “so that high school graduates can come out with their first year of college satisfied too” (Ringelestein, 2012). In other words, thought leadership of this kind ensures that students at both ends of the spectrum are assisted in high school graduation.

FROM SEPARATE SILOS TO UNIFIED THINKING

Rydland recognized that contributions in time, effort, and money were necessary from multiple entities in order to solve the problem of low graduation rates, lack of technology training, and soaring unemployment rates among workers unprepared for the technical aspects of traditional middle skills occupations. His efforts were spent in getting the community together at the front end of the P2P initiative and to get buy-in early in the process. In Rydland’s

words, "The secretary of education visited Aurora, and he was amazed to discover that all the various entities were assembled in the same room willing to work together in collaboration for a unified cause. We have a mayor that is committed, the business community is committed, we are a model of what it takes to get this initiative working" (Rydland, 2012).

The results of this action were that SD 129 was permitted to (connect to the city's new fiber optic network recently installed around West Aurora, borrow database storage from several of the large businesses in the community, and receive donations of very expensive equipment unique to manufacturers in the area. This collaboration allowed students Internet connectivity for access to the many programs necessary for innovative learning; for training on technical equipment to prepare students for jobs after high school graduation; and employers who have a vested interest in hiring students trained on the equipment provided. The results of this community involvement is expected to positively impact high school graduation rates and reduce unemployment rates based on the model recommended in the Harvard study (Ringelestein, 2012; Rydland, 2012; Symonds et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

The focus of this article has been on the kind of "thought leadership" which is applied to complex problems related to the need to prepare students for middle skills jobs in a rapidly changing economy; developing the competencies requisite for "hard to fill" middle skills jobs, addressing low high school graduation rates, and balancing "career readiness" with "college readiness." Concepts such as *value-driven results*, *college degrees of value*, *simple solutions to complex problems*, and, *consensus building environments*, were used by Rydland and Ringelestein during the interviews concerning thought leadership. The overall conclusion resulting from the interviews is that the notion of "thought leadership" involves vision-

ary thinking, willingness to listen to credible ideas, and the ability to unify teams from various industries in attaining viable solutions to chronic problems. As Rydland noted, "It has to be a team effort ... and not just a matter of lip service, but real concrete involvement.... It has to be future focused" (Rydland, 2012).

Acknowledgment: This article is a synthesis of interviews concerning key roles and attributes necessary for thought leaders to enlist, engage, and motivate stakeholders in the P2P initiative. Each interview was conducted using Skype and digitally recorded (with permission) using Callgraph. Audio recordings of both interviews can be accessed on District 129 TV Community page, at <http://tv.sd129.org/category.asp?categoryId=16&dateRange=>

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