

## DEAN'S MESSAGE

Nowhere in the world of education is the debate louder or more heated than on the subject of school reform. Given the range of perspectives, the dedication to agendas, and the high volume of voices in the room, is it possible to find any agreement on the question of how to reform the nation's schools? What areas of common ground could they find that might provide some footing to help them push education toward true change? Lehigh College of Education faculty and other educational leaders share ideas—and perhaps a few modest proposals—on where we might find some research-supported points of consensus amid the long-running clamor over school reform.

Regards,  
Gary M. Sasso, Ph.D.  
Dean and Professor



## SCHOOL REFORM

### 1. COLLABORATE CREATIVELY

Alexander Wiseman, associate professor of comparative and international education at Lehigh, sees benefit in breaking down the walls between classes—figuratively speaking, of course. “We’re great at separating and siloing. We teach kids that life consists of different areas of knowledge, and that you can specialize in one without really having to know anything about another. But life is full of both. You don’t have the choice of being good at math or being good at English. You’re going to have to use both of those in some capacity. If you are bad at one and good at the other, they’re both going to suffer.” More collaboration up and down the line can invigorate school staff, foster the spread of effective practices, and help students join together disparate skills so they can better wield them in the real world.

### 2. CULTIVATE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A wealth of research over the past decade or so shows that the most important school factor in student achievement is the teacher in the classroom, says Tony Flach, national practice director at the Leadership and Learning Center, an international organization dedicated to improving student achievement and educational equity. And the second largest variable is the school’s leadership. When describing the qualities of effective leaders, he refers to *Leaders Make It Happen!* by McNulty and Besser (Advanced Learning Press, 2011). “They describe several actions of principals that I see time and time again in site work and visits: These principals set goals and clearly articulate expectations for student performance; they’re creating a vision of student success; and they’re making it clear to their staff members that failure not only is not an option, it’s just flat not acceptable.”

### 3. MAKE ROOM FOR REFORM FROM THE BOTTOM UP

The public tends to regard the educational system as if looking at it through a smudged pair of bifocals. Up close, the view looks pretty good. But the big picture at a distance is a less pleasing sight. An annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public’s attitudes toward public schools highlight this disparity. In the 2013 poll, 53 percent of respondents gave the public schools in their community an A or B, compared to just 15 percent who gave the schools a D or Fail. But for the nation’s public schools as a whole, just 18 percent gave an A or B rating, while 25 percent gave a D or Fail. These proportions were similar in the 1993 survey. The closer they get to the schools—they’ve been in them, they know some of the teachers—they see the context that they’re working in, and they tend to be more positive. With the system we’re in, making reforms at the school level first, or having them driven by the school context, is probably a much better way to go than a top-down approach to reform.

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## 4. PAY HEED TO THE WORLD AROUND THE SCHOOLS

The character of each nation seeps into the doors of its schools. For example, a Lehigh researcher has studied Saudi Arabia's educational system (one of the lowest-performing in the world). Factors affecting its system include overlaps between religion, politics, and society; total gender segregation in schools; and a struggle over how to serve both its native residents and the children of workers imported from other countries. South Africa, meanwhile, faces lingering racial and economic divisions after apartheid, with unequal access to quality schools for poor blacks versus well-to-do whites. In both cases, the context of education is the foundation for everything that does (or does not) happen in schools. Then there's the much-hyped educational system in Finland. While the nation may have worthwhile approaches to share in terms of creating effective schools, it also has a much smaller—and more homogenous—student population to steer compared to the United States. It also has a much smaller proportion of children living in poverty. Research repeatedly shows that schooling can only be as great as the community context allows. As a result, school reform must address the burdens that many students carry into class along with their backpacks: absent parenting and lack of encouragement at home; stress from living in unsafe neighborhoods; hunger; and the various pressures to drop out of school.

## NOTEWORTHY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

by the numbers

42<sup>ND</sup>

U.S. News and World Report  
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2<sup>ND</sup>

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