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Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

Is it realistic for schools to remove failure as an option?

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What if failure really were not an option?

Geoffrey Canada is adamant in his answer: People would succeed. They wouldn't give up, they would work harder, and, when it comes to schools, they wouldn't keep doing the same unsuccessful things over and over.

"When it's clear that failure won't be tolerated or accepted, you know what happens? People stop failing," Canada told more than 500 people Friday at the Hyatt Regency Milwaukee. He was the keynote speaker at a national conference of the Alliance for Children and Families, a Milwaukee-based organization for human services organizations.

Canada is the founder and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, a birth-through-college set of programs focused on getting children in a 97-block area of New York's Harlem to earn college diplomas. He has become a national celebrity as a crusader for such efforts. He is featured in the new, controversial movie, "Waiting for 'Superman.'"&ensp"

Canada said things Friday that would leave people from most anywhere on the political spectrum saying, no way, can't be done, he's crazy. Teachers, major politicians, rich people, low-income people - he said things all would dislike.

But at the core of what he said was a belief that if failure is an option for you, you're not on his team.

Focusing on schools, he said if you're a professional in other fields and you've had nine unsuccessful months in a row, you work evenings, you work weekends, you search for new answers until you succeed. "You've got a mission, you've got to do your mission," he said.

In schools, he said, after those nine bad months, you take three months off and come back in the fall to do it again. "What kind of business model is this?" he asked.

He said the unspoken but conventional deal that school systems give teachers is, "We're not going to pay

you a lot of money, but you get a lot of time off." He added, "That is not a good deal for our children."

Canada firmly favors firing teachers who aren't succeeding. If you're a lousy teacher, "you should go into a different business - bake cookies, I don't care," he said. If you fire the people who are not succeeding, you're left with the people who are, he said.

Nationwide, "we've got a total (school) system of people who aren't accountable," he said.

Canada said that in his schools, the goal is for every child to graduate from college. There is no Plan B, he said, because once you create a Plan B, you stop working with a lot of kids on Plan A. And a college degree is a prerequisite to succeeding in today's world, he said. (His own schools have not begun to graduate seniors yet - 11th grade is the highest level as they grow year by year. But, he said, 650 children who have gone through other Children's Zone programs are in college now.)

Is it realistic?

Canada espouses high-expectations thinking taken to its highest level.

Does it work? Well, of course not entirely. The [New York Times ran a story](#) Oct. 12 detailing the struggles of two charter schools that are part of the Harlem Children's Zone, including how hard it has been to get more children to proficiency levels in core subjects.

To tell a teacher to achieve across-the-board success with all students - or else - is offensive to many excellent teachers and as silly as making it a national law that all children will be proficient (oh, that's right, we did that in 2002 and the deadline is only four years away).

Yet there is something to what Canada says. The schools in Milwaukee that are most in line with what he advocates really are different from your general run of struggling public schools. The energy and dedication put into the pursuit of getting the students to succeed is at the core of the difference.

Maybe the people running and teaching in the large number of schools in Milwaukee with weak results should rest less easily, should be pushing harder to find better ways to do things, and should expect more of themselves. There are efforts under way to overhaul some of those schools, but I'm quite sure they are not as ambitious as Canada would want.

Maybe political and private-sector leaders need to think more about what kind of safety net kids really would benefit from, the kinds of programs that would bring benefits later, like being employable and staying out of prison.

Personally, I think failure is an option to this degree: It's unrealistic to think every child is going to succeed, given existing realities. A ninth-grader told me recently that he intends to go to a major college outside Wisconsin. But it was clear that he doesn't read very well. Frankly, he's not going to make it to a top college.

But what if his second-grade teacher had said, I'm not letting this child go forward before he is up to grade level in reading? What if he had the kind of preschool experiences that put him in good shape to learn when he reached kindergarten?

Think outside the box, don't give up on kids, and give kids optimism, Canada said.

Sounds good to me. And if doing those things and pushing to the limit don't bring total success, they might bring improvement. Maybe I'm not thinking big enough, but the needle on so many gauges of success for Milwaukee's children points so low that I'd be happy to see it move a bunch of notches upward, even if it didn't reach the top. Maybe more of Canada's attitude would help that happen.

Oh, one more thing. Money. Canada's advice: Come up with big plans first, then worry about money. "We've got plenty of money in America to provide for all of the needs of our children," he said.

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