



Stanford eCorner

The State of Education Reform

Wendy Kopp, *Teach for America*

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Teach For America CEO and Founder Wendy Kopp is amazed at where educational reform is today, compared to where it once was in America. As an example, in the past, it would have been challenging to find evidence showing that schools can overcome the socio-economic disadvantages of their students, says Kopp. She states that evidence now shows this to be possible, and while questions of how to scale successful models persist, Kopp believes there are reasons to be optimistic about making fundamental changes to the education system.



Transcript

When I think about where we are today in this education reform effort, we're at a place I never would have predicted we could be at, five years ago, ten years ago, and twenty years ago. When I got into this in the US, the prevailing notion fueled by all the research was that kids raised in socio-economic background on average determined their educational prospects. We did not have evidence that schools could overcome the effects of socio-economic background. And if we had gone and looked hard, I think it would have been hard to find even a handful of schools that were showing that actually it is possible. I'm not sure we could have found one but let's just say we even could have found one or two, people would have chalked this up to charismatic school leaders and would have presumed that if they left the whole thing would fall apart. Now, past forward to today we have undisputable evidence in hundreds of classrooms but also in hundreds of whole schools that it is completely possible to provide kids facing all the extra challenges of poverty with an education that is transformational, meaning not just have a few kids beat the odds which through our country's history we know it's always possible but to put whole buildings full of kids who, based on their socio-economic background, would be predicted to have a 50 percent chance of graduating from high school and would be predicted to have about an eighth-grade skill level if they did on a trajectory that leads some to graduate from college at much the same phase as kids in more privileged communities. This is pretty radical progress. Now, we still have massive challenges ahead like if you look at the aggregate data, despite all the proof points, despite seen now. Wow, we know it's possible. We even know how to replicate success.

There's still a massive question about how do we do that at the scale of the magnitude of the problem. If you look at the aggregate data, we still have not moved the needle against the achievement gap in any really at all but certainly not in a meaningful way. And so, we've got a very real question on our hands about how do we scale this level of success. Even to that question there, if you look at what's been happening in the last five years, five years ago we had convened a big summit of the thought leaders in education, in philanthropy, and what not in policy and it said, "Let's put on a piece of paper, the cities in our country where we really have no hope at all for the public school system." Who would have a big debate? I don't know who would abound on the list but certainly New Orleans would have been right up there. And so, would Washington DC and those are two of probably the two fastest improving urban school systems in the country right now. So you know not that the verdict is out in terms of we know that they've done what they need to do forevermore. I mean the problems are still immense in these two places but there's reason for optimism that we can effect dramatic positive change at the system level.