



**A BRIDGE TOO FAR
RIGHT IDEA-WRONG TIME
FOR
CUOMO'S "REIMAGINING" COMMENTS**

For rural school districts experiencing chronic underfunding, lack of internet access and a host of other significant challenges, the governor's suggestion that we address educational issues identified by the pandemic might have been welcomed news. Might have that is, had he not taken the concept to the Nth degree right out of the "gate".



Imagine this: The pandemic passes and the country has been forced to recognize that rural schools faced greater challenges than their urban and suburban counterparts in providing instruction remotely. Lack of funding kept them from providing devices to students and the widespread lack of broadband access created chaos for families with more than one student and perhaps parents working from home as well.

There is no question that as educators and educational leaders, you have risen to the challenge, doing amazing work with amazing devotion to your students. You pivoted on a dime and proved yourselves to be the rock of your communities once again. What should have happened was we'd weather the storm, get through this and learn lessons at the local, state and national levels. New policies and funding would address deficiencies in our current methods of delivery. State aid reductions would at least be offset by new flexibility in how we provide instruction. The legislative and regulatory "Great Wall of China" created by New York State to prevent digital instruction from encroaching on traditional instruction (and the number of teachers employed) would finally be understood as a severe impediment to providing rural students what they need to compete. The combination of having succeeded in establishing both the need and the viability of remote learning, along with a fiscal crisis might finally result in the teachable moment for policy makers. Ideas long ago proved effective in other states (like regional high schools and personalized, digital programs) would finally get a full and fair airing.

The **right idea** would have been to thank teachers and school leaders for the extraordinary work they're doing. Having already telegraphed the daunting prospect of draconian cuts in aid and the challenge of opening school next fall under a brand new logistical construct, the **right idea** would have been to express gratitude and then inspire the educational community to undertake this new challenge with the same fervor and creativity you're presently showing the world. The **right idea** would have been to convene educational leaders around the challenges identified and often overcome in this crisis and focus resources and policies on supporting changes to the way we deliver instruction and services. That way, we'd be address



longstanding inequities and prepare ourselves for whatever comes at us next. Quietly assess and incorporate new thinking and new practices into formerly intractable political and social obstacles to student success. As the governor says, use this moment in history where people are willing (because of the crisis) to alter the status quo. But then he went a bridge too far.

The governor announced that since educators had shown the world that they were capable of teaching remotely, the school building was now essentially irrelevant. Personal attention was now somehow superfluous to the mission and the public's receptivity to change in a crisis should be used to "reimagine education". The example he used was having a single teacher instruct students in several locations (in essence, the digital learning model of the 1990s.) He invoked the name of Bill Gates and Melinda Gates and their foundation as working with the state to do the reimagining. This immediately raised the neck hair on folks who were concerned about the Gates' other ideas for public education; student testing used for teacher evaluation, student data warehousing, Common Core, etc.

What made the idea particularly stressful was the fact that not only did it come in the midst of the educational community's herculean efforts to overcome this crisis, it came on the heels of regular reminders that unless the federal government comes to the rescue (an increasingly political, rather than humanitarian discussion) the state is ready to cut 20% of state aid to education. No discussion of raising additional revenue, no suggestion that we use short term borrowing to bridge the gap, no other considerations whatever; just the absence of federal stimulus equals cuts to education.

Look. We understand that education and healthcare are the two large sources of discretionary spending for the state and we are smart enough to understand this isn't the time to cut healthcare. But New York State (which because of high taxes, debt and red tape always seems to exit recessions more slowly than its sister states) must learn from the recent Great Recession. You don't simply cut and expect business as usual. The governor has apparently put two and two together and decided that cuts and a crisis equals a new and cheaper form of public education through digital technology. To that, we say a resounding "no"! That's not what it's for! That comes at too high a price to children and ultimately the state's future!

By jumping ahead without any discussion with the educational community, the governor has taken his moment in history and needlessly created a battleground over what should have been a universally accepted "given." Of course we need to get broadband to all students. Of course we need to eliminate the inequity in funding our schools. Of course we need to expand course offerings and personalize learning to the actual needs of each student. **Of course.** Why then are we going to fight for every inch of ground to make it happen? Because the governor went a bridge too far, using Gates as an emotional trigger and attaching a reimagined educational system to the looming crisis of state aid cuts. Wasn't opening schools next fall under a completely new dynamic enough of a "reimagining" for now? Wasn't the physical and emotional stress of converting your entire instructional program for all grades and providing it in a totally new fashion enough for now? Wasn't adding meal delivery and childcare on a moment's notice enough for now?

Apparently not. Instead of a newly invigorated profession energized on the heels of having

done the impossible, we have an angry, rejected and fearful system ready to do battle for survival. Sad, because the easiest way to accomplish what the governor hopefully intends would have been to simply thank everyone for a job well done and work together to accomplish what everyone acknowledges needs to be done. Giving credit where it's due, (writ large) the governor has done a phenomenal job of leading us through this crisis. Day after day he's done the right thing for the right reasons. Effective and empathetic. Well done, indeed. But this? This was a bridge too far; overly enthusiastic to build from the "morass", he's out over his skis.

Sure we'll listen to what Bill and Melinda have to say. But better than permanently distancing educators from the children they teach would be government's receptivity to proven ideas, programs and approaches that we already know are desperately and immediately needed. This crisis has provided the ability to innovate, to be freed of state and federal testing and the time schools and students spend to prepare for them. Never again are we likely to have permission to create and educate without interference. Both schools and government should maximize this moment and use it wisely.

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