

Value-added remodelling

America's schools are getting their biggest overhaul in living memory



Counting their Mandarin blessings

"This business", says John Demby, the principal (headmaster) of Sussex Tech, a high school in Delaware, "has changed dramatically in a very short period." This year, like all principals in the state, he is evaluating teachers under a new system for the first time. The state is also adopting a new curriculum for English and maths, the "common core". That will require changes to the state's regular computerised tests for students, themselves only three years old. On top of all that, Sussex Tech is launching a scheme to allow students to start accumulating college credits while still in high school. And it is overhauling the vocational training it offers in order to serve local businesses better and to provide students with more useful qualifications.

It is not just Sussex Tech; all Delaware's schools are undergoing a similar upheaval, thanks to a series of reforms championed by Jack Markell, Delaware's governor. He has made education reform a centrepiece of his tenure because he sees it as critical to the state's competitiveness. (It is the states that regulate education in America, although the federal government often tries to bribe them to adopt its pet policies.)

Mr Markell is especially proud of the 100 children at the McIlvaine Early Childhood Centre, a kindergarten in the hamlet of Magnolia, who are being taught exclusively in Mandarin for half of each day. Beneath gaudy paper dragons the five-year-olds adopt poses that mimic the Chinese characters for the numbers one to ten. Barely three months into the school year all of them were able to count to 100 in both English and Chinese, way ahead of curriculum requirements, says the principal.

Mr Markell plans to expand immersion classes like these from 340 to 1,000 students next year and hopes to reach 10,000 in a decade. But he is also enthusiastic about more workaday schemes, including one which aims to increase the quality of pre-schools that take in poor children on state subsidies, so that they will be up to speed when they start school.

On your marks

Since he took office in 2009, Mr Markell has campaigned to overhaul most aspects of education in the state, paying particular attention to raising standards for both children and teachers, especially in the worst schools. Those also happen to be the main targets of Mr Obama's

biggest initiative in education, Race to the Top (RTT), which awards grants on a competitive basis to states and school districts that present the best plans for such improvements. Delaware was the first state, along with Tennessee, to win a Race to the Top grant, in 2010.

Nineteen states have now received RTT grants, and all but four have applied for them. Along the way they have undertaken, among other things, to conduct more rigorous evaluations of both students and teachers, to make better use of the resulting data and to foster charter schools, meaning state-funded schools that operate independently of local school districts. The federal government is also encouraging the adoption of the common core, developed by a group of state governments to deal with inconsistencies and lax standards in their individual curriculums.

All this comes on the heels of the previous federal education reform, No Child Left Behind, which required schools to show big improvements in students' test scores. In fact the targets were so demanding that 34 states have had to ask the Obama administration to waive them. It has done so, but only on condition that they follow RTT-like policies.

The result has been a dramatic acceleration of reforms in America's public schools, at least on paper. All but five of the 50 states have adopted the common core. All but eight now allow charter schools (see chart 4). Thanks to No Child Left Behind, they all now track and publish the performance of individual schools and intervene at the feeblest ones. Most states also have some sort of evaluation system for teachers.

Many states have gone beyond the changes demanded by the federal government. Seventeen now offer vouchers for use in private schools to some students or give tax breaks to people who donate to scholarship funds. Thirty-eight are experimenting with new pay structures for teachers or principals, often with a performance-related element. Thirty-seven had applied for RTT-like grants to boost attendance at and quality of pre-schools, even before Mr Obama announced a push to improve and expand early-childhood education last month. From nurseries to technical colleges, in short, America is subjecting its schools to a vigorous shake-up.

How effective all these changes will be is not yet clear. In Delaware Mr Markell points to last year's double-digit increases in the proportion of students rated "proficient" in reading and maths in statewide tests. But only nationwide tests, due to be conducted later this year, will provide a comparative measure of the state's progress.

The proof of the pudding

Equally, it is far too early to tell whether all the tumult in education policy will lift America up in the international rankings. But its supposedly dire performance in these comparative tests needs qualifying anyway. The results of the two most widely cited ones, PISA and TIMSS, are inconsistent. TIMSS, which is put together by an international consortium of research institutes, puts America in or near the top ten in maths and science, with Russia among the countries that consistently beats it. PISA, compiled by the OECD, puts America much lower down but still well ahead of Russia. Neither has been around for very long (12 years for PISA, 18 for TIMSS), and although America has never been rated especially highly, by and large its scores are improving. Moreover, certain states, most notably Massachusetts, perform far better than the national average.

Most academic research suggests that the education reforms of recent years have produced only small, if any, improvements in students' test scores. So far the effects of introducing charter schools, vouchers and tougher standards for schools, teachers and students have been underwhelming, says Bill Evers, a former assistant secretary of education. It does not help that teachers' unions dislike charter schools and vouchers and are suspicious of RTT's enthusiasm for "value-added modelling", which involves predicting a student's future test scores from his past results and then measuring a teacher's effectiveness by the divergence between prediction and actual performance. Naturally enough, teachers are all the more reluctant if their pay is to be tied to the assessments.

Such misgivings can be alleviated, however. Delaware has painstakingly developed teacher-evaluation systems for everything from art to repairing cars, and spent most of its RTT grant on training teachers to cope with all the upheaval. Mr Demby, the Sussex Tech principal, has been provided with no fewer than three different coaches: to teach him how to conduct the new evaluations, to use a new data system tracking student achievement and (no wonder) to manage his time efficiently. Mr Markell, in his "State of the state" address this year, proposed raising teachers' starting salaries and paying bonuses to "teacher leaders". The federal Department of Education gave Delaware's RTT application extra marks because it had the support of the local teachers' unions.

Vicki Phillips of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a charity that spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year trying to improve education in America, points out that the broad principles of reform are now largely accepted. The drive for more rigorous and consistent teacher evaluation has come from a Democratic administration, despite the party's ties with the trade unions. The unions themselves generally do not dispute the need for higher standards and greater accountability, but quibble with the speed and detail of the measures.

A similar consensus has emerged on the reforms to improve vocational training. In spite of the high unemployment rate, many businesses complain that they cannot find enough qualified candidates to fill their vacancies. A survey conducted last year by McKinsey, a consultancy, found that 87% of educational institutions thought they had prepared their students well for employment, but only 49% of employers agreed that their new employees had the training they needed. A similar survey of American manufacturing firms in 2011 by Deloitte, another consultancy, found that 67% had trouble finding the right people, and that 5% of their jobs remained unfilled for lack of suitable applicants. BCG, yet another consultancy, downplays the current "skills gap" but nonetheless estimates that by 2020 America will be short of some 875,000 machinists, welders, industrial mechanics and the like.

Mr Obama pledged, as part of his re-election campaign, to put an extra 2m people through community colleges, which offer two-year associate's degrees and technical qualifications rather than bachelor's degrees, which typically take four years. To make sure they learn the right skills, he has advocated close partnerships between these colleges and local businesses and suggested steering more money to colleges or teachers whose students find work. Last year he included a request for \$8 billion to pay for all this in his proposed budget, but Congress demurred. Even without its help, however, community colleges around the country are embarking on these sorts of reforms. Last year 24 states adopted laws intended to increase access to technical education or align it better to the needs of local businesses.

Cheryl Hyman, the boss of Chicago's network of community colleges, is only too aware of the pitfalls of poor training. In the 1980s she spent three months studying for an IT qualification that cost her \$3,500 in tuition fees and turned out to be useless. To ensure that none of the 120,000 students in Chicago's city colleges suffers a similar fate, she is working with Mr Emanuel, the mayor, on a programme called College to Careers.

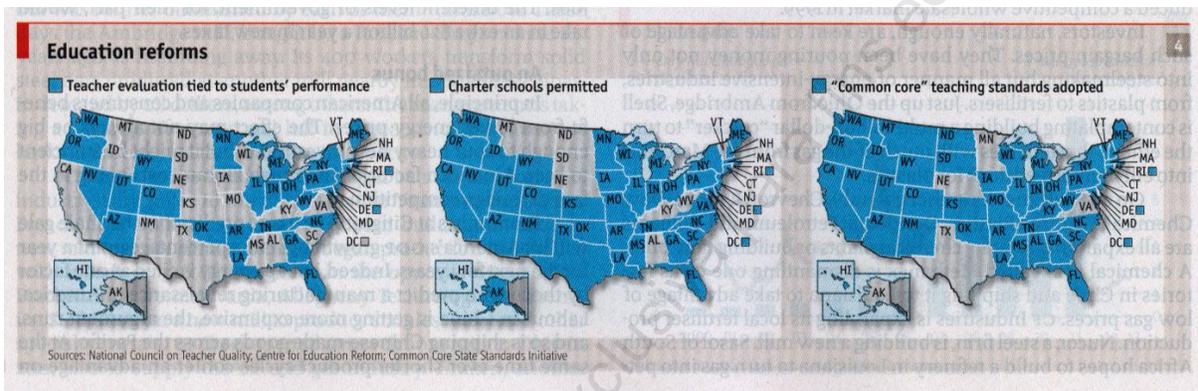
First, the city consulted local companies and economists to find out what qualifications were in demand now or would be in the future. It then enlisted businesses—84 so far—both to help shape the curriculum in those fields and to give students opportunities for work experience. This arrangement is good for both parties, says Larry Goodman, the CEO of Rush University Medical Centre, a local hospital. Employers can be sure of a steady stream of qualified job candidates and can see them at work before making any hiring decisions. Students, for their part, gain practical experience and can be sure that they are learning marketable skills.

Ms Hyman is also trying to make sure that the training the city colleges offer is "stackable", allowing students to gain qualifications without wasting time and money going over the same ground twice. For example, local universities have agreed that they will accept a sequence of increasingly advanced nursing certificates earned at the college to replace the first two years of a four-year nursing degree.

Pile them high, get them cheap

All this allows students to rack up qualifications faster and more cheaply. That, in turn, makes them less likely to drop out and helps them pay for further studies. Many places, including Chicago and Delaware, are encouraging (and paying for) dual enrolment in high school and community colleges or universities, in order to shift more people into this virtual cycle earlier in life. Kansas is going even further, paying a “bounty” to high schools for each student who earns a technical qualification.

At Sussex Tech students will soon be able to earn enough credits for half a bachelor’s degree from a local university, at no extra cost, saving them tens of thousands of dollars in tuition fees. As it is, they can get a certification in dental radiology as juniors, for example, and then qualify as dental assistants as seniors—and this is just one of 15 technical subjects in which the schools offers qualifications. In a mock dentist’s practice a mop-haired teenager leans over a classmate’s open jaw, muttering something about “adjusting the rheostat”. A poster behind him gives details of orthodontists’ pay scales. Mr Demby looks on with pride. “As schools,” he says, “we have to create a smarter product to be competitive.”



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