

An Interview with Tony Wagner

The Lawrence Educator had the opportunity to sit down with Tony Wagner, Co-Director of the Change Leadership Group (CLG) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Tony consults widely to public and independent schools, districts, and foundations around the country and internationally, and he is a frequent keynote speaker and widely published author on education and society. Tony's latest book, The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—And What We Can Do About It, speaks to many of the same issues being faced in the Lawrence Public Schools.

LE: As we transform our schools, how must we also transform our definition of leadership

TW: The old days of compliance, command and control as a way of instituting change don't work. I'm not sure they ever worked. But, increasingly today, I think people need to own the problem that needs to be solved. They don't need to be told what to do or how to do it. So we can help teachers and teams really own the problem of improving student skills, and then turn them loose on finding some of the best ways to do that. As opposed to telling them "here's the problem and here's what you should do."

LE: Shouldn't students also be responsible for improving their education?

TW: Well, that's a great point. In fact, I've done focus groups with groups of kids and we videotaped them. Students in some of the schools that change the most quickly—two academies, for example—really understood that their school had a problem with dropouts and that something needed to be done. And they were very articulate about what they felt teachers and parents needed to do differently as a part of the problem. The students owned their share, but they made clear what that they thought that teachers and parents needed to do be more responsible as well.

LE: How did the videotaping play into them actually play in to their understanding as to what the broader school problems were?

TW: We videotaped them in part to show faculty and parents so that teachers can have a better understanding of the problem of why go to small schools. It's one thing to talk about drop out, but it's another thing to hear a student say, "no one cares about me here," "my classes are boring." It's very different. So, that was the main reason we did the focus group and videotaped them. But, the other value of it was so that students get to hear one another talk about these issues. Isolation is the enemy of improvement at every level. When you have groups of teachers working together, to talk about problems, same as when you have a group of kids talking about a problem. A shared understanding develops.

LE: In Lawrence we are mid-stream in our changes to move to a smaller, academy-based model, while also focusing on career-centric academic paths. Given the difficulty of such significant changes, how can we help the community understand the importance and urgency of making these fundamental changes?

What I'm understanding around this country—and this is what my new book is about—is that there is a core set of survival skills that all kids must master for college careers and citizenship. I call them the “Seven Survival Skills.” I see a lot of schools making AYP, but failing kids. The reason they are failing kids is, first of all, because although they may make AYP in tenth grade, the kids don't graduate. But more significantly, even if they are graduating the majority of their kids, they are not graduating them with the skills they need for college careers and citizenship. In part, the problem is that we're not testing the skills that matter most; and so we're not teaching those skills. In this country, what gets tested is only what gets taught. So, if you want these skills taught, they have to be tested. And if they're not being tested by the state, then they have to be tested by the district and by the schools. I'm deeply concerned that we're making AYP but failing our kids.

LE: So, how do you get people on board with such significant and difficult change?

TW: In my experience, the way to get community ownership of a new set of goals is to involve the community in adult conversations about how the world has changed, about the skills our kids need to succeed in today's world, and how different it is from what people needed 25 or so years ago... Teachers, parents, community members all need to talk about the ways in which the world has changed and what our young people need to today, and discuss how those needs are much different than in the past. And frankly, I don't think that change can be successful without creating that readiness for change. If there is pushback from the community and you're in the middle of the course of change, then maybe you do what's called a “mid-course correction.” You engage adults in a conversation about what's working and what's not working, and about what they do and don't understand about the change process.

If you want to make a structural change, if you want to make changes in pedagogy, it requires a fundamental understanding that in the 21st century, rigor is not mastering more academic content. In the 21st century, it's about having core competencies. And that's a very, very different orientation. For example, I used to be an English teacher. It's not about teaching the parts of speech. It's not about drilling kids on grammar and punctuation. It's about teaching them to write an effective essay. It begins with teaching them to reason, how analyze and how to think.

LE: With our nation's educational philosophy outdated and entrenched, how does the challenge of leadership for educators differ from the changes faced in the private sector, and what lessons can be learned?

In the private sector it's: “innovate or die.” Companies that are doing business the way they did it twenty years ago or are offering the same products and services as twenty years ago are history. They don't exist anymore. In order to stay alive, companies need to constantly improve their products, processes or services. They understand that to do that, they have to do research and development; they have to invest in people and invest in improvements. As educators, we don't do any of those things. We don't have an R&D capability; we don't have any pressure to innovate. Quite the contrary. In education,

we see tremendous resistance to innovation. We greet all innovation with extreme skepticism, to say the least. And, sometimes, that's well founded, because we in education are kind of fad-driven, and tend to seek the "silver bullet of the month." But the real issue is that we in education are isolated and insulated from this larger world of rapid change. That's why in this new book, I spent nearly two years interviewing executives about the skills that matter most, because I'm trying to open up the world of education to these fundamental changes that are taking place in the workplace today and the kinds of skills kids are going to need to succeed. Any job today that can be turned into a routine— white collar, blue collar, service... doesn't matter—is either going to be sent off-shore or automated. So the issue is: What skills are our kids going to need in order to keep a good job? And that's the kind of change that needs to drive innovation.

LE: You mentioned educators isolated; is that isolation from colleagues and peers or is that from the outside world that business world?

TW: Absolutely both. I'll begin with the thesis of a colleague of mine: "Isolation is the enemy of improvement and the enemy of innovation." Education is isolated as a profession from the larger world of changes that you see—fundamental changes in medicine, law, engineering, architecture, you name it. Profound changes. We in education, because we work alone all day, every day, and because we're not a part of this larger world of commerce, are really immune to those kinds of changes, and we don't see them clearly at all. We also, because of the tenure system, don't have an incentive to be learning new skills constantly. Where else in the world is there tenure? And thirdly, and maybe just as important in the change process, we're isolated from each other. Arguably, education is the most isolated profession in America. It is not an accident that it in virtually all other walks of work life, people work in teams. Even psychologists that work one-on-one have case study seminars where they present cases to one another on a very regular basis. Educators don't do anything like that. All day, every day. Much the same way we did fifty years ago.

LE: So, how do we overcome isolation and align our instructional practices with these essential skills?

TW: The first problem is to get clear about the skills that are most important and realize that those are the skills you have to test. And if the state isn't willing to do it, then do it at the district and take responsibility. Secondly, we're going to have to ensure that all teachers are working in teams, and that teams have responsibility for a group of kids over time. Much in the way that academies do when they're running effectively. But the responsibility in this case is not just to get good MCAS scores, but to teach all kids to think, to communicate, and to collaborate. The new three Cs: Critical thinking, Collaboration, Communication, really sum up the skills that people are going to need, because, as you may know, nearly half of the kids who pass the MCAS need remediation in college. And it's not content they're remediating, it's skills—writing skills, above all. Just because you pass the MCAS with a five paragraph essay doesn't mean you have adequate skills. Your first eight-page paper in college is going to kill you, because you've probably never written one before.

LE: Let's say I'm an educator—a teacher or a team leader or maybe even an administrator—who is in a district that is progressive and actually making these kinds of recommended changes. I'm probably already working in teams and I'm getting that necessary peer interaction. Is that enough or should I be searching outside the district for more information and skills development?

TW: No, because then the question becomes, how do you know how to improve. Here again I'll use another metaphor: I think teaching is arguably both a sport and a performing art. If you look at how people get better at sports or in the performing arts, their performances are being constantly videotaped and critiqued. And they're getting coaching.

I don't believe in professional development happening once or twice a year. What we all need to improve is effective coaches who really understand what is good instruction and who can help us continuously improve in the context of a team expectation in which we're all helping each other improve all the time. It's the only way we're going to be able to make a difference in kids' lives.

LE: What if I'm a teacher or educator in a district that has not yet embraced this approach, but I still want to improve my teaching skills as well as begin to focus on core competencies. As an individual teacher on my own, how can I do my best to move myself and my colleagues in the right direction?

TW: I faced that in a school, and I formed a little study group. We would meet once a month and we'd have a potluck dinner. We established a certain kind of report and a certain trust, and that evolved into us inviting each other into our classes, and offering or asking for feedback. I think that's one way. Another way is to get your video camera or borrow one from the media department, set it up in the back of the room, and record yourself. Then, watch it and see what you think. I think that videotaping is the best, most disruptive technology, is the most underutilized in terms of improving instructions.

LE: Educators talk about there being so little time to cover all of the material necessary just to pass the MCAS. Do teachers have enough time to teach the MCAS content as well as the core competency skills you're describing?

TW: Not in the old way of teaching. You can't "cover the universe." I profile three very successful schools in the last chapter of my new book. All three of them absolutely refuse to teach to the state test. They also do not offer advanced placement courses. Two of the three are predominantly minority. All three graduate virtually 100% of their kids. All three do at least as well as comparable schools on the state test, and all three have graduates who generally, significantly outperform their counterparts in college and beyond. What's the secret? They're teaching all kids to think and to write. Every day, in every class, in every content area. So, it turns out that if you really know how to think in the context of a discipline, you can answer the questions on the state test, even if you don't know the specific content. The questions typically have four choices, and one can almost always eliminate two, sometimes three of the answers even without knowing the content because you know how to reason; you know how to analyze the nature of the question, and because you've had enough depth of experience with content knowledge you will be able to figure it out. So what we see is that when schools successfully teach kids, all kids learn how to reason, how to analyze, how to weigh evidence; students do absolutely fine on the test.

LE: It seems as though many schools have relied on content standards as a crutch, and have the skills of reasoning and analyzation have atrophied as a result.

TW: I think it's worse than that. Content has become the name of the game. And that's a totally obsolete notion. Why? Because, number one: content changes constantly. Number two: content is growing exponentially. Number three: content can be accessed on every internet connected device. For

example, knowledge of the parts of speech has no relationship to effective writing. Now which is more important? Which are kids going to need more? Something like Google (to find content such as the parts of speech) and a heartbeat? Or a skill (sch as effective writing) that is essentially foundational for all learning and for work.

LE: You can't "Google" a skill.

TW: No, you cannot "Google" skills. But "Googling" effectively is a skill. And that's a skills that most kids don't have, because they never had to analyze the info they've gotten, have because they haven't' been taught.

LE: Who are some of the leaders that you admire most and have shaped your approach on leadership in education?

In terms of content, I've learned a great deal from the early members of the Coalition for Essential Schools: Ted Sizer, who founded the school, Deborah Meier, Larry Rosenstock and others. Some of whom have produced the most extraordinary schools in this country; really serving predominantly minority kids extremely effectively. Beyond that, I look to thought leaders. Certainly Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*, is one of the most important books written in the last decade. Daniel Pink's book, *A Whole New Mind*, is an incredibly important book. I think we have to look to these books to really understand, we as educators, how rapidly this world is changes, and how we're doing our students a serious disservice if we're not really clear on what they'll need to succeed in the future.

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