Sailing over the Edge: Navigating the Uncharted Waters of a World Gone Flat

A Perspective from NCTE Past President Kylene Beers

The following is the text of Kylene Beers's presidential address, delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on November 22, 2009.

The history teacher stood beside me in the crowded hallway of a school built over fifty years ago. Eight hundred or so middle schoolers attended this school, one originally built as a high school and designed for closer to 600 students. All wearing red, white, or blue pullovers and blue or tan pants—or, for the girls, skirts if they chose—these students were mostly students of color and mostly from low-income housing projects. The building, once almost majestic with wide staircases, marble walls, polished floors, and classrooms with tall sparkling-clean windows that looked out to a neatly kept neighborhood, was now simply old, crowded, and tired. Those once-gleaming windows were covered with brown, pull-down shades, installed, perhaps, to block the view of a ten-foot cyclone fence that was topped with coiled barbed wire and encircled the school. "Why the barbed wire?" I asked the teacher as I held up a shade to look outside. "Well, remember the ancient maps of the world? Some, at the edge of uncharted waters, had drawings of dragons with the warning, 'Beyond here there be dragons.'" He paused, nodded toward the covered windows, and went on: "And out there, beyond here, there be dragons."

The title of this president's address, *Sailing over the Edge: Navigating the Uncharted Waters of a World Gone Flat,* calls to mind, for me, that most famous seaman, Christopher Columbus. Now, Columbus, of course, didn't actually sail over the edge of the earth. In fact, the well-recited tale that Columbus stood alone in his belief that the world was round while others thought it was flat is just, well, a well-recited tale. As many as 500 years before Columbus, the Greeks knew the world was a sphere, and in Columbus's day, many educated Europeans knew that as well. Columbus most certainly was among that group.

While some uninformed and uneducated seamen might have clung to the outdated myth of a flat world, what was probably truer is that most understood the world was a sphere and that traveling beyond the horizon did not mean plummeting into an abyss. Their concern was that beyond the horizon lay the unknown, and in the unknown, as the ancient maps warned, "there be dragons." It was fear of the unknown world, not of falling *off* the world, that kept ships hugging the coastline.

But not Columbus. Evidence shows that Columbus believed that Asia was wider than it is and the ocean not as broad as it is, and when confronted with charts or maps that suggested otherwise, he simply either discarded that information or changed the data (Meltzer, 1990, p. 57). Columbus was not fearful of the unknown. He may have been worried about the dragons and been apprehensive about what he might find on the far side of the globe, but he was determined to sail off, even into the frightening unknown, and probably took courage from the realization that he was taking something of the *known* with him. The waters into which he was sailing may have been uncharted, uncertain,

unknown, but sailing he did know. The basic principles would still hold true no matter how far into the western Atlantic he ventured. Wind would still drive the boat forward, the rudder would still turn the ship away from the rocks, and the anchor would still hold them fast when they reached shore again.

We as teachers may be venturing now into unknown waters—a world in which the tools of literacy are multiplying and evolving more rapidly than ever before, in which the social fabric is complicated by social networking tools, and in which our sources of information and *mis*information have exploded from three channels to 300. But we know that some principles will hold true even in these new oceans. We still want our students to learn to use language to make sense of their experience, we still hope that they will read to sharpen insight and deepen understanding, that they will write and speak ethically and honestly. Some fundamentals remain true. But there will be dragons. . . .

Here, there be dragons

Franklin was sitting quietly in the classroom of 33 ninth graders, at the back of the room, not moving. His long legs stretched out under his desk, and he sat comfortably, relaxed. His expression wasn't quite blank, but still, and it was hard to tell if he was actually listening. His eyes tracked the teacher, and he occasionally nodded, but I wasn't sure he was *listening*.

A few rows up, over toward the side of the room, Manuel was busy drumming an intricate rhythm on his desk with his two index fingers and whispering his drumming none too softly: BA ta da DA ta da BA ta ta DA . . . . The teacher's eventual reminder to, "Hold it back, Manuel," meant he paused, looked around, and then put his head down to sleep.

Behind him sat Theresa. She hunched over her desk, a strand of black hair in her mouth, working feverishly to copy down every word the teacher said. She interrupted him often—"Mister, mister, wait, did you say we got to know all the quotes in the story for the test? What quotes? Did you say what quotes it was that we got to know?" "Theresa," the teacher would patiently respond each time, "look up here. I'm putting all the important points on the board. Look up." And for a moment, she would raise her head, look at all that was written on the board, but then, with eyes even wider, she would hunch closer to her desktop. She would return to writing whatever she heard next and

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then would interrupt again, "Mister, mister, did you say how many it was going to be?"

The principal stood beside me and whispered, "Seen enough? Ready to go?"

I wasn't, but he was, so we left the classroom and walked out into the hallway.

He began talking as soon as the classroom door was firmly closed. "So, there they were. The three students who kept us from reaching AYP. They are the ones who did it. So very close. I can't believe we came so close." Then he paused. "Can you fix them?" he finally asked.

"Fix them?" I said, just mulling over his choice of words.

"Yeah. Just fix them," he said walking back toward his office.

And *here*, there be dragons

The school hallways were wide and airy, the floors were waxed and gleaming, and the walls were lined with trophy cases that highlighted the many areas of student accomplishment—debate, drama and art, band and orchestra, math, science, Latin, football and tennis and basketball and track. The spacious cafeteria was filled with round tables, and students looked out the back wall of glass to a wide lawn of green grass and tall oak trees that gave way to the athletic practice fields. The library hosted thousands of volumes of books, at least a dozen couches, several dozen new computers, and a comparable number of big tables where work could be spread out comfortably within yet another wall of glass through which students could see yet another acre of manicured lawn. From the science hall came the pungent odor of alcohol from labs that many doctors would envy. The noise from the language hall was loud and confusing as students sat on area rugs in small groups practicing the foreign languages taught in that school: Mandarin, French, German, Latin, Spanish, and Japanese.

The fine arts hallway revealed art rooms with high, high ceilings to accommodate tall windows that let in an abundance of natural light; music rooms that were lined with soundproofed practice rooms; photography studios with dark rooms, and theater classrooms with black box stages. The mathematics hall had blackboards in the hallway where students grouped in small clusters to work challenge problems, and in the English/language arts hall, between classroom doors, there were comfortable chairs and rockers with small end tables that held lamps and

stacks of books and magazines where students sat and read or held book discussions.

It was a beautiful school. Two things struck me as I walked into classrooms and listened to conversations. First, it was obvious how much the school valued collaboration. Students helped one another, questioned one another, listened to one another, quizzed one another, and at times enjoyed debate with one another. They sat together at tables in classrooms, faced each other rather than a black-board, and when confused about something were as likely to seek a classmate as the teacher. Second, it was exciting to see how connected to the world students were through technology. In a health classroom, students were on Skype with students in another health class from a school across town. They were planning a two-part article that would appear in both school newspapers about teen smoking. In an American government classroom, students were putting finishing touches on a survey to adults about the Electoral College. They planned on posting the URL to their online survey on their teacher's Twitter account and were hoping for a national response. In a language arts classroom, groups of students were reviewing Web-based articles for research papers and annotating those articles on their class Delicious account. In a math class, students were making podcasts of what had happened that day so that absent students or per-haps parents could hear—literally—the day's lesson while another group updated the class wiki, providing examples of problems worked during that period.

The principal nodded when I commented on the use of collaboration and technology in the school as we walked out of that math classroom. He headed to the room across the hall saying, "Well, if you like technology, come look at this," and he opened the classroom door. As I walked in be-hind him, I expected to find—I didn't know, supercomput-ers? Table top touch screens?—but no, I had walked into a classroom that, though filled with technology, most assur-edly was not preparing students for success in the global economy of the 21st century.

Twenty-five students sat at 25 individual workstations, each working alone on a computer. Each student stared at a screen filled with text. Occasionally, a student would type something, and then the screen image would burst into bright fireworks or switch to a frown-y face that then faded away. A teacher walked around the room, occasion-ally reminding this student to keep all four legs of his chair on the floor or that student to be sure and save his work. One student leaned over to say something to the student next to him. As he did, he tapped on the computer's screen. The teacher reminded the student, "No talking." "I've got a

question," the student countered. "No talking," the teacher said again.

As I stared, the principal said, "Pretty impressive, isn't it?" "What is it?" I asked. "This is our intervention room for students who aren't on grade level and either have failed or might fail our state test," he explained. "What are they doing?" I asked, and he explained that they were each working on modules that were designed to quiz them repeatedly on specific questions that mimicked the types of questions they would see on the state test. "The best feature is that at the end of each quiz, students see im-mediately how they've done." Suddenly the frown-y faces or exploding fireworks made sense. I asked how long students had to do that before they went back to other classes, other classes where the experiences were rich and varied and were more about curiosity than correct-ness. "It depends. Many are here all day. The modules are incremental and students must pass each module at 90% accuracy before they move to the next, and they must end up on grade level before they can go do grade level work."

I looked around the room. Most of the students were male, and all but two were either African American or Hispanic students. "Wouldn't these students benefit from the same educational opportunities or experiences of the other students in this school?" I asked. He shrugged. "Those students are doing real high-order thinking ac-tivities because they've shown they can handle it. These students can't do the analysis and synthesis and evaluation required to do those activities, mostly because they can't read the material. Most of those other students are headed to college, and these students, well, we'll be happy if they graduate from high school. That would be a real accom-plishment for these kids. Before we set up this learning lab, these students would have just been mixed in with ev-eryone else; they were getting passing grades because of group work, though they were rarely pulling their weight in a group. In this learning lab, they work independently and therefore we see exactly what they are learning."

"But, they are only learning to pass a test . . ." I began, and a cloud crossed the principal's face. "Dr. Beers, for these students, a high school diploma will be an accom-plishment. We're helping them achieve that dream." And he opened the door and ushered me out. Before we left, I asked him what percent of his school was on free or re-duced lunch. He said only a small percentage, about 4%. "And would I be looking at many of those students who make up that 4%?" I asked. He nodded slowly and said, "I don't know each of these kids, but I would imagine all of them are our low SES kids. We don't have many students

of color, but the ones we do have all come from one or two apartment complexes that are government subsidized. These kids always bring down our scores."

As I looked around the classroom before he shut the door and then looked back across the hall, I was reminded of Margaret Riel and Hank Becker's 2000 report, "The Beliefs, Practices, and Computer Use of Teacher Leaders." Their most disconcerting findings revealed that teachers in low socioeconomic schools are much more likely to use computers for remediation and skill reinforcement than for gathering, analyzing, and sharing information. The reverse is true in schools of higher socioeconomic status. Though all of these students were in a high SES school, it was the poorer students who were segregated into a classroom in which they were being shown the least powerful ways to use technology because it was decided that a minimum expectation—learn to pass the test—was a high enough expectation for these kids. I worry that this digital divide reflects a belief that poorer students cannot handle or grasp higher-level thinking but must be drilled in basic skills. This mindset encourages unequal schooling of this nation's children, and sustains a segregation every bit as intolerable as segregation based on color. This segregation of intellectual rigor undermines the democracy of this country by quietly suggesting that some deserve better than others.

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And, most certainly, *here* there be dragons

In the December 12, 2005, online *Forbes* magazine, columnist Dan Seligman offered his view of the work being done by many to close the achievement gap. In his column "Gapology 101," Seligman suggested that then Teachers College President Arthur Levine's commitment to closing the achievement gap is a "fool's errand" because, in Seligman's words, "it is not possible to close the achievement gap."

His reasoning was that those who struggle in school are from families of low socioeconomic status, and "the poor and disadvantaged have less cognitive ability than those from higher-status families." With a generous response, I'd suggest that Seligman is trying hard to reduce a complex situation to a simple scenario: it's just too bad if you're poor. However, I fear my responses to his comments are less generous. I suggest that Seligman's comments at best

represent an inability to understand the depth and complexity surrounding underachievement, a lack of awareness of the potential that sits, locked and silent, in too many of our underachieving students, and a discounting of the commitment of many adults—teachers, parents, child-advocates, policymakers, administrators, and even college presidents—to unlocking that potential; at worst, his comments reveal an unfounded prejudice.

While there is a correlation between socioeconomic status and performance on an IQ exam, that correlation is more accurately related to opportunity than innate ability and should not be seen as the justification for shrugging shoulders and giving up. Because the correlation is not about innate ability, it requires, of course, that we provide teachers with strategies that represent best practices, encourage principals to redesign schools into more effective learning communities equipped with proper learning materials, show parents how to partner with their children's learning, push schools to provide safe learning environments, and educate the public about what literacy learning ought to look like for *all* children. What's missing from that list—what is too-often missing— is our responsibility, along with our state and national leaders, to look at the ongoing poverty crisis in this country. Seligman's reminder of that correlation cannot be an excuse to do less in schools; instead, it is better seen as the call to action in the fight against poverty.

And though I am hesitant to say it, perhaps Seligman has a point: Improving schools and improving teaching without improving the financial lives of children is perhaps like giving the thirsty a bigger cup that, though filled with cool water, is riddled with small holes. Closing the achievement gap does require that we do more than better equip schools and teachers. Closing the achievement gap means we must not only ask hard questions but demand a change in current practices: Why in the richest nation in the world do over 20% of our children either go hungry each day or wonder where they will sleep each night? Why must we ever ask if the federal budget will cut free breakfasts and lunches for children at schools? Why isn't excellent childcare available to every child, not as a privilege, but as a fulfilled expectation? Why does the US rate highest in per capita income and also highest in child poverty rates when compared with the other 19 rich and industrialized countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and

Development, 2008)? Until we have national leaders who are willing to address these issues as they consider new standards for college readiness, we will not only leave children behind, but we will have left them there homeless and hungry.

I am reminded of Barbara Ehrenreich's general session at the 2008 NCTE Annual Convention. This author of the best-selling book *Nickel and Dimed* (2008) told a packed ballroom that the problem with poverty is a lack of money. Those in the room began to laugh—*of course* the problem with poverty is a lack of money—and then all grew silent as they considered her statement. Ehrenreich talked about the year she lived only on her income from minimum-wage jobs, a year that was the basis for her book. She explained that because she made so little money, everything went for survival—food, rent, car repairs—and nothing could be saved so she could afford to rent a better apartment, afford to take a class that might allow her to have a better job, afford to move into a better area of town where wages or tips might be higher so she could save more. The problem wasn't that she wasn't working hard; the problem wasn't that she lacked high expectations or standards for what she wanted to achieve. The problem wasn't that she wasn't bright or willing or motivated. The problem with poverty was she had no money, and without money, she was stuck.

We face a moment now in education where in spite of new efforts, we may discover a decade from now that we're still stuck, still wondering how to close the academic achievement gap. The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association have recently taken what some would say is another step in the direction of closing the gap by creating a common core of state standards. Regardless of where you fall on the continuum of support for this particular set of standards, I would suggest that these standards—any standards—will fail to achieve the goal of preparing all students for college or the workforce if we fail to end child poverty.

I am not suggesting that children of poverty cannot succeed. No. I see students who live in abject poverty make great strides in schools every day. And I see great teachers who make a tremendous difference in these students' academic lives. But I have to wonder what would happen if, in addition to demanding that schools close the academic achievement gap, the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind required that local and state leaders close the poverty gap that exists in their communities, along with the health care gap, the housing gap, the technology gap, the access-to-college gap, and the many gaps that exist between low- and higher-income schools. What would happen if the

reauthorization legislation required that business owners completely close the wage-earning gap between races and genders, that social institutions close the preschool-years preparation gap as well as the nutrition gap between low-income and middle- to high-income pregnant women, and that we all had to examine and eliminate our own gaps of expectation for success among and between races and genders? Close those gaps, fix those problems, address those inequalities, and then, *then* talk to me about closing the academic achievement gap. In part, students remain stuck because the academic achievement gap does not exist in isolation. It is nursed and nurtured in the arms of poverty. Until we recognize this, we will have failed our children.

And, one last dragon

I knelt down next to Ben, a tenth grader, and asked what questions he had about the book he was reading—*Among the Hidden* (Haddix, 1998)—now that he was four or five chapters into it. "What questions?" he asked. "You didn't say nothing about answering questions." "No, no, I meant what kinds of things are you wondering about? This is an interesting book, the way Luke must stay hidden and how the government has decided how many children people can have. What kinds of questions would you want to ask Luke if he were here or his parents or perhaps even the author?" Ben looked around the room and turned back a few pages, slowly. He finally said, "You didn't say nothing about questions. What do you want me to answer and I'll answer." I tried again, "Ben, I want you to ask the questions. I want you to tell me what you're wondering about." Silence and then a smile, "Like 'What was the main character's name?' That's always on tests."

I try to envision Ben in a few years, out of school, trying to find his way in this new world, a world that Thomas Friedman (2006) has described as *flat*. In this flat world, Friedman suggests that *how* we teach will be more important than *how much*. This is a world that, though defined by technology, is struggling with some of the most basic of survival skills as a result of an exploding world population—from 3 billion in 1960 to nearly 7 billion in 2008—diminishing natural resources and escalating poverty (World Bank, 2008).

In *this* flat world, Karl Fisch (2006) explains that "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist . . . using technologies that haven't yet been invented . . . in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet."[1] We are preparing them for life in what Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* (2005), has called the conceptual age, while they still attend schools that "operate on an

agrarian calendar (summers off to allow students to work in the fields), an industrial time clock (fifty-minute classroom periods marked by bells), and a list of curriculum subjects invented in the Middle Ages (language, math, science, and the arts)" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 12).

We say to each other, perhaps loudly and adamantly, that times they sure are a'changin', but I'm not sure we stop and ask ourselves "what do those changes compel me to do?" One change we all see has to do with automation. Automation has shifted many jobs from human to the machine or computer. You now go to the grocery store and scan your own items at checkout. You probably went online and made your own airline reservations. Many of you will do your holiday shopping surfing the Web instead of fighting the mall. And each of those shifts certainly means, yes, that one type of job was lost; but it also means another was gained.

The person who once scanned your groceries for you has lost a job; but, if she has or can acquire the expert knowledge and personality to sell the grocery store chain the scanner that replaced her and teach the store manager how to set it up and make sure it isn't skimming the take for its own electronic pocket, then she'll have a new job with the company that manufactures the scanner. If she can explain the product in a compelling way, identify when her potential customer is listening and when he is drifting, if she has enough expert knowledge about the product so that she can answer any question, then she'll get the new job in the sales force or, with another type of expert knowledge, she might be the person who designs the scanner. She still has a job, and a better one.

If you were the airline agent who sat at the end of a phone line and typed into a computer someone's point of departure and destination and then read off the options of times and fares, you probably lost your job when the proper software converged with Internet access and home computers. However, if you had the expertise to write the program that allows each of us, on our own time, to make our own reservation, or if you were hired to fix the bugs that would obviously arise, or if you could answer the questions for people who experienced glitches in the process, then you'd still have a job. Automation does not simply mean losing jobs; it means losing jobs that are based on a rules-based logic: if the passenger wants to fly to Philadelphia, enter that code; if another city, enter another code.

The jobs that won't be automated are ones that require . . .

- the ability to recognize, synthesize, and evaluate complex and emerging patterns and draw generalizations from those patterns;

- the ability to make on-the-spot predictions based on observed patterns;

- the ability to use the context of the situation for decisions; and,

- the ability to be flexible, adaptable, reactive, reflective, and speculative.

The overarching characteristic is that these jobs are *creative*. They require abstract problem solving and mental flexibility. They are not routine, not repetitive, and not procedural. These characteristics are not nurtured by worksheets in which students are directed to underline the subject once, the verb twice, and put parentheses around prepositional phrases. Nor are they encouraged by ten-item multiple-choice tests over books read.

A 2006 report titled "Are They Really Ready to Work?" asked 400 employers from across the US to rank order the following skills from most important to least important. These skills were among the top ones identified as most important for all three groups of new entrants to the work force—high school graduates, two-year college or technical school graduates, and four-year college graduates.

- Professionalism/Work Ethic

- Teamwork/Collaboration

- Oral Communications

- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

All the skills labeled as "basic" (reading and writing) scored lower than these skills, which are called applied. We're still busy giving students lists of quotes and asking them to identify who said what when our students might be better served if we instead asked them, based on what they know about a character from the things he has said and done, how he might act in this situation or that. We're teaching students to look first to the end of a text to study the questions so they will know what to think about as they read when we *should* be teaching them to read a text and formulate their own questions. We still teach from textbooks that not only boldface the difficult words in a text, but teach those words up front, though no one ever picks up *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times*, or a novel by John Grisham or T. A. Barron and finds that someone has helpfully identified the important or difficult words and put them in boldface font with a definition in the margin at point of use. We claim to do that as a method of support, but when was the last time we thought to ask students to look at a chapter or a paragraph and identify the difficult words that they most needed to know for the text to make sense—and then asked them *why*. Too many times when I

ask students that question, the answer is, "We usually use books that tell us what we need to know." These students will work in a world where no one understands what it is they will need to know—we must help them develop the mental agility and the cognitive confidence to ask their own questions. We must examine our practices and ask if it is any wonder that some students leave schools lacking the initiative, the flexibility, the *adaptability* that is required in this new flat world.

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In *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times,* Trilling and Fadel (2009) explain that the jobs of this century ask workers to do something far different than what they've previously been asked to do. By 1980, there was a decline in the need to be able to do routine manual labor (that's been shipped to China, India, and Brazil, where manual labor is much cheaper) and routine cognitive labor (that's been handed over to computers and machines). By 1985, we see that complex communication skills—which include creating and critiquing multimedia texts as well as working collaboratively with diverse groups of people and using language ethically and responsibly—and expert thinking were becoming very important.

What was happening during this time is that as computers took over routine cognitive work and workforces in other countries took over routine manual labor, the many mid-level jobs—jobs requiring some education but not a lot, some expertise but not a lot—disappeared. More people were now fighting for jobs that either required expert knowledge or required little knowledge but paid little. We must understand that as we sail these uncharted waters, we won't go backwards. Automation won't go away; labor costs in India will not become higher than labor costs in the US.

One way we rebuild a strong economy is to educate students so that they are able to do this creative—*innovative*—work. We have a long way to go to get there. At one point, not too many decades ago, we tested those things we had taught. But now, fearful and hugging the coast of AYP, far too often we only teach those things we will test. We currently have assessments that anchor us in the last half of the 20th century. These high-stakes assessments come with too many penalties, are focused on discreet skills, often lead to admonitions to just "fix" the kids who are "hurting the scores," and rarely lead to a passion for *learning*. We have embraced practices that encourage students—*children*—to believe that the reason to read about

Charlotte and Wilbur, the reason to walk over that bridge into Terabithia, the reason to watch the life of a boy who began as a kite runner, or to stand next to Cassie Logan or Kenny Watson or Scout or Romeo and Juliet is to be able to answer a ten-item multiple-choice test on a computer; we have suggested to them that good writing has six traits.

High-stakes tests and packaged learning have created a generation of students who equate learning with finishing, and achievement with a decent grade. My message to policymakers has been and will remain simple and direct: *Testing* does not improve learning; better teaching does.

Now, to sail beyond the dragons

Of course, education is not just about preparation for a job. It never has been and never should be. Being able to work in society is certainly an important part of education, but education is also about being able to fulfill civic responsibilities, about finding and developing one's own personal talents, about the transmission of shared values and traditions. It's hard, however, to set aside schooling's important function of preparing students for work in society when joblessness in the US is at a near all-time high and economic security, for so many, is at an all-time low. As Kaestle (1988) explains in "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," perhaps what we're experiencing now is a "tighter fit between schooling and one's occupational fate" (p. 115).

With that "tighter fit," our first reaction might be to say "let's just focus on the basics—hug the coastline of 'This worked for me' and hope that's good enough." But what's needed now is the courage to sail over the edge. We will make some mistakes—intrepid explorers always do. But I fear we're barely willing to move out of the harbor, we're letting our journey be blocked by the smallest of dragons—Twitter and Kindle, Facebook and YouTube. Don't be distracted by those. Our most threatening dragons are the educational policies and classroom practices that reduce our understanding of what it means to live a literate life to a score on a bubbled-in exam.

We have got a lot to fix in education as we sail past those dragons. Not too long ago, we had a Secretary of Education who wrote that Ford's assembly line factory model is the right one for our schools. I am ashamed of such a statement. Schools aren't about the mass production of the exact same product. Some of our students will emerge

as writers, others as mathematicians, and others as artists or scientists or athletes or mechanics or homemakers or orators or . . . well, the list is as divergent as our students. Additionally, in public schools—and this is what I like the most about public schools—everyone is welcome. Unlike assembly lines that discard materials that can't guarantee a predetermined uniform result, public schools don't discard any child. Children can come hungry or filthy; they can speak English or Spanish or Vietnamese or Hmong; they can be athletic or clumsy, artistic or musical; they can be black or white, Latino or Asian; they can be gay or straight, rich or poor, Muslim or Jewish or Christian or Hindu or atheist. They can know a lot or a little. They can arrive late or on time. In public schools, teachers take students as they are, respect all as they are, and promise to teach all, as they are. It might be the plaque on the Statue of Liberty that says, "Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . .," but it's public schools that live that message daily.

Somewhere along the way, we've forgotten that we do live that message daily; perhaps we've lost some of the courage we need to believe that message. But to sail over the edge, we must remember that the best teachers are thoughtful, creative, independent thinkers—not passive, restrained script-followers; the best teachers teach from a cornucopia of pedagogy, choosing the right instructional strategy for each student; the best teachers value the probing question from the curious—even angry—student far more than the right answer from the passive one. The best teachers demand that each child receive the best education, and the best teachers have never needed a mandate demanding we leave no child behind. The best teachers, like good leaders, have the courage to overcome obstacles, the courage to sail into the unknown, even though, here, there be dragons.

Note

1. Many sources attribute this quote to Richard Riley, the Secretary of Education under President Clinton, because it appears in Karl Fisch's *Did You Know* video. Because of the wording on a previous slide in that clip, most viewers have presumed Riley also said this. However, in a personal Skype chat conversation with Karl Fisch (November 30, 2009), he confirmed that he does not have a source for Riley saying this. He can confirm that Riley made the statement he used in the previous slide and believes people have just assumed that Riley then made this statement as well. However, Karl says "Did You Know" was created several years ago and perhaps his memory is incorrect. I'm going to attribute this statement to Karl—it sounds like the smart thinking I expect of him; however, if someone has a direct source that shows when and where Riley did say this (or if someone else said it), let me know and I'll correct this.

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