

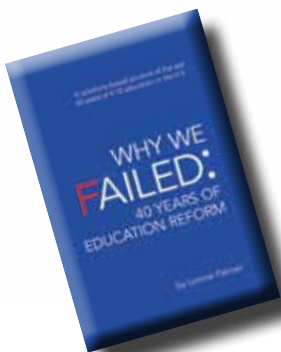


WHY WE FAILED:

An Interview with Lonnie Palmer

By Peter M. DeWitt, EdD

There are many pieces and parts to the education profession. Leadership, teaching, instructional strategies, relationships with families and students, as well as the political ramifications that seem to take place during every political cycle. As leaders move forward focusing on innovation and learning, there are other pieces that seem to weigh them down. When leaders look to the future they need to also learn from the past, but that's not a lesson that many will take advantage of in their career.



Where do leaders go for those lessons? To the leaders who came before them, of course. Leaders who have left the profession can help us see areas where schools need improvement. Sometimes those leaders have great insights that we can agree with wholeheartedly, and other times the suggestions may not be our first choice – yet all are worth reflection.

Former teacher and school leader Lonnie Palmer is trying to help educators not repeat the same sins of the past as he sees them. He wrote a new book, and the title is where many educators may have their first cringe-worthy moment. The book is entitled *Why We Failed: 40 Years of Educational Reform* (Guaranteed Press, 2016). Yes, the title may provide a shock to the system, but the pages inside cover a variety of issues, many of which we covered in an interview.

The most poignant part of the interview was in the explanation of why he chose to write the book:

“As I neared the end of my career, I realized the thing I enjoyed most about my work was mentoring aspiring leaders: teachers who were seen as leaders by their peers and who wanted to be assistant principals or principals, assistant principals who were working toward becoming principals and principals who wanted to become superintendents. I enjoyed answering their questions and posing thought provoking questions. I hoped I would help them see the big picture – how that seemingly simple problem they were struggling with fits into the context of a complicated school building culture and into their unique set of leadership opportunities. Writing this book gave me the opportunity to do that on a larger scale.”

Palmer went on to say, “I also didn’t want to see everything I learned disappear with me. As an educator and administrator who worked in urban, suburban, and rural school districts, I thought I had something valuable to share.”

It’s not new for those who work in education to have the word “failed”

enter into the rhetoric. And perhaps Palmer’s recent retirement provided him with the opportunity to be open and honest about topics that typically are hot button issues.

When asked whether the reasons for education’s supposed failures focus on student achievement or initiatives to modernize the education system, Palmer answered,

“Unfortunately it’s a little of both. We’ve tried repeatedly to improve student achievement and yet according to the Council on Foreign Relations the test scores have only grudgingly moved up a few points over the 40 plus years since my career began in 1970 (<http://bit.ly/1m4XAxI>). Meanwhile many other “wealthy” countries have demonstrated significant test score gains. As I write this we are ranked 41st in math and 24th in reading based on the international PISA tests. We’ve actually lost ground since the beginning of my career in helping our students compete in the global economy.” [*Actual PISA assessment ratings began in 2000.]

Palmer went on to say,

“By moving from first place in educational achievement in the 1970s to our present position we’ve gone backwards globally even though our students’ scores have gone up slightly. Also during the same time period the economic requirements of the global economy have placed ever higher expectations on young people. Many of our students have the required skills for success when they leave our schools today but an equal number don’t. There is no way to sugarcoat the fact that we’ve actually gone backwards globally. We need to do much better than we are doing with our students. Especially students living in poverty.”

PUSHING BACK AGAINST THE SYSTEM?

In the book, Palmer mentioned a few times that he had to “push back against the system,” because “the system” was a disservice to his students

as he saw it. Palmer explained,

“The system expects too little of students, teachers, principals, and superintendents, especially in schools with large numbers of students from poverty. During the 1980s and into the 1990s I was ahead of the state and federal government in doing all I could to raise a very low educational expectation bar. When I started as a high school principal in Averill Park, New York in 1980 our school was typical – 40 percent of the students took challenging Regents exams with a 90 percent passing rate on average and the other 60 percent floated through high school with minimal expectations. When I left Averill Park in 1993, 90 percent of the students took challenging Regents exams and the passing rate was still at 90 percent. While I pushed for more academic challenges for students I had school board members, teachers, students, superintendents, and parents pushing in the opposite direction. With the advent of Regents diplomas for all, the No Child Left Behind law, and now Common Core Standards, we are finally seeing some real academic expectations that will give children a better chance at life success. However, confidence in our ability to clear this higher achievement bar remains low.”

Palmer continues offering some pretty controversial viewpoints, some that many readers will take issue with, including the SAANYS organization and myself, the interviewer:

“Other ways the system resisted necessary change include: overly protective tenure laws and rules that have kept ineffective performers in their jobs well past any reasonable expiration date; school boards that move outside their legal decision-making boundaries to sabotage necessary change; poorly designed teacher and principal evaluation systems that provide little chance of improving professional performance despite huge time investments by

all involved; arcane and onerous special education rules that waste critical funding while producing minimal academic achievement improvement; and politically motivated school funding structures that are very responsive to unions and politicians and very unresponsive to the needs of our students with the greatest achievement problems.”

One of the chapters in the book is titled, “Politicians Need Not Apply” and focuses on school leadership. The chapter provides interesting insights from someone who has spent many years in leadership positions. Palmer explains the chapter,

“Too many educators who move up the ladder from teacher to principal to superintendent are excellent at interviewing for the next position but lack the critical skills and values required to be successful in the position they are interviewing for. They are politicians rather than CEOs. In this chapter I tried to be very concrete about the critical leadership skills and values successful educational leaders must have and to show what happens to a school district when the superintendent is missing some, or in too many cases all, of those key skills and values. The entire school district can easily go off the rails. People who occupy leadership positions in education have to consider what they plan to accomplish when they arrive in that next leadership position and how they will achieve those goals in a way that maximizes the talents of those they will be working with.”

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS

Throughout the book, Palmer wrote about the need for more authentic assessments, and how leaders and teachers need to understand their importance. Palmer said,

“One of the characteristics of all effective learning experiences in our lives – including those learning experiences that occur outside the classroom – is that

they are memorable. Many teachers do their best to make classroom instruction memorable. But if teachers limit themselves to traditional lectures and bubble sheet test prep activities as their entire instructional tactical arsenal, their efforts will be forgotten.

There are many ways to create memorability: authentic assessments with an audience, academic contests, experimental activities, school/workplace collaborations, etc. Effective learning and teaching requires a combination of those strategies.”

“When I worked as an assistant superintendent in New Rochelle City School District outside of New York City, the New York State Education Department was run by two commissioners with somewhat different mindsets regarding student testing and evaluation. Tom Sobol brought in some very interesting ideas that included the possibility that authentic assessments of students’ academic work should somehow be integrated into the testing and evaluation process leading to high school graduation.”

According to Palmer, “Sobol’s successor, Richard Mills, started his tenure as a commissioner supportive of authentic assessments. However, Commissioner Mills also oversaw the implementation of new Regents exam graduation standards. The new exams meant a significant increase in the academic skills required for a high school diploma. With the new reportedly harder tests being phased in, Commissioner Mills came under pressure to eliminate the possibility of any type of waivers from any portion of the traditional standardized testing.”

When asked for examples of authentic assessments Palmer explained,



“I worked with a large team of teachers, department chairpeople, and principals at New Rochelle and applied for and received approval for 13 waivers to integrate a variety of authentic assessments into the state required student testing and assessment system for the New Rochelle City School District. One of the most successful authentic assessments was a project at Isaac Young Middle School where eighth grade accelerated Regents Biology students completed research projects with doctors who worked at the Sound Shore Medical Center in New Rochelle.”

Palmer provided further depth to the authentic assessment example:

“Isaac Young was the city’s most diverse middle school. Students substituted an authentic assessment research project in place of 12 multiple choice questions. The switch amounted to 20 out of the total of 100 points on the traditional bubble sheet Biology Regents exams. Each student had a doctor-mentor and the project included lab work, data collection and analysis, a written paper with conclusions, and a public oral presentation (sometimes in both English and Spanish).

The rubrics used to evaluate student work were elaborate and time consuming to implement. The effort by the teachers and the principal was enormous. The oral presentations showed off these wonderfully diverse students dressed in white lab coats with ties and business attire and their

computer PowerPoints. The applause and beaming students and parents at the end of these presentations brought back the goosebumps and memories of successful student authentic assessment performances I had seen throughout my career.”

HOW SHOULD EDUCATION CHANGE?

In the end, Palmer covered many topics in the 400-plus page book. Some of the examples and criticisms he provides will not sit well with educators, while others may be in alignment with some of the thoughts educators have but are hesitant to say. Regardless, *Why We Failed* is an interesting read. Not just because of what Palmer writes about, but because of

what it represents. His perspective is different, and we can learn something from it if we choose to open it up. However, we seem to be lacking the need to listen to or read someone else’s opinion which may be different from ours. In Palmer’s case, it begins with the title of the book.

If we stop reading something because of the title of the book, we lose out on some interesting insights we would gain by giving it a read. Palmer had a very long and interesting career as a teacher and school leader. That experience, like the experience we are all establishing in our own lives, should not be swept aside but rather shared and reflected on.

LONNIE PALMER has been a science and math teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent of schools in urban, suburban, and rural schools. He is the author of *Why We Failed: 40 Years of Educational Reform* (Guaranteed Press, 2016). ©2017 Lonnie Palmer

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