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Urgency and Complacency in Public Schooling

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By Cheryl S. Williams, Executive Director of the [Learning First Alliance](#) (LFA)

In a recent discussion with the board members and elected leaders of the Learning First Alliance (LFA), U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said he views complacency as the biggest challenge facing public education in our country today. The Secretary had given opening remarks detailing the initiatives he has led at the Department of Education, and this assertion came in a questions/answers session that followed which I was fortunate to facilitate, in response to a question posed by a school board member who also serves as President of the National School Boards Association (NSBA).

I've had some time to ponder the Secretary's assertion of complacency — he maintains we should all have a sense of urgency around the challenges we face as a nation in preparing all our students to succeed in a world of work that requires higher skill levels than many of our students currently gain in their public school experience and that too few of those students continue to post-secondary study where the required skills will be learned. While no one, and certainly not I, can disagree that jobs for highly skilled workers, particularly in the "STEM" field (science, technology, engineering, and math) are going unfilled because the skilled workforce is insufficient (the data is there), I can take exception to the accusation of complacency on the part of public education leaders.

The education leaders I work with at the Learning First Alliance have spent their professional lives meeting challenges at the local, state, and national level to bring the best possible education to the students they serve. The system(s) public educators work in are funded largely by local tax dollars

and governed by local community members, many of whom are not professional educators. Successful school districts sit in communities that value education, fund schools well, and work collaboratively with district leadership, lay governance, and teacher organizations to focus efforts to provide rigorous school experiences for the students they serve.

I was reminded of the energy, commitment, and innovative practice at the district level at a U.S. Department of Education conference last week in Cincinnati, Ohio, entitled ***Collaborating to Transform the Teaching Profession***. I think a more accurate conference title would have been *Collaborating to Transform the Education Experience*, but I can't quibble with the wealth of good stories presented on the value of collaboration to address challenges in local districts.

Two sessions I attended were especially illustrative of the lack of complacency on the part of education leaders working in urban school districts with enormous challenges. The Syracuse City School District has a relatively new superintendent and school board president and a thoughtful union leader who has been in the district for more than 20 years. The district has a partnership with the Say Yes to Education Foundation, a Teacher Incentive Fund grant, and a Transformation Initiative that includes curriculum development; emphasis on the importance of instruction; new teacher and principal evaluation systems; creation of an innovation zone for highly impacted schools; development of a five year strategic plan; and a new compensation system for teachers and principals. The goal is to build the capacity for leadership throughout the district so all staff are problem-solving in ways that help students succeed. There is nothing complacent about the work going forward in Syracuse.

The second story I heard involved ***Cincinnati Community Learning Centers*** that are "putting the public back in public education." The goal is to make all 57 public schools in Cincinnati into Community Learning Centers, and the district is well on its way to reaching that goal. Each Community Learning Center School has the support of a Site Resource Coordinator who collaborates with health, legal, afterschool and other services that provide wraparound services for the students and families served by that school. The schools become "neighborhood hubs that provide academic and enrichment support to students, families, and communities beyond the traditional school day." There is absolutely nothing complacent about the community leaders and educators in Cincinnati, Ohio, as they galvanize their communities to meet the complex needs of the students they serve.

The U.S. Department of Education and Secretary Duncan are to be commended for bringing a nationwide group of innovative leaders in public schooling to the conference in Cincinnati last week. And, at the same time, we all need to be mindful of the words we choose when describing the immensely complicated and important work we're all involved with in meeting the requirements for increased rigor and achievement for our students to be successful. Complacency applied to educators is simply the wrong word. We all feel the urgency of educating our young people; it just takes time to do it right in the democratic, locally governed system we call public school. And it takes the commitment, empathy, and collaborative support of all of us to put what is urgent into practice in a way that benefits our students and ourselves.

Views expressed in this post are strictly those of the author and do not reflect the endorsement of the Learning First Alliance or any of its members.