Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste

By Eli Broad

For one difficult year, I was an assistant professor at the Detroit Institute of Technology. It was a year after I graduated from Michigan State University and started my accounting practice. I taught all the night courses that no one else wanted, like drugstore accounting. I scoured lesson plans, textbooks, and teachers' guides and tried to keep my students' attention. A lot of them were older than I was, worked two jobs, or had just come back from fighting in Korea. It was incredibly challenging work that left me with a lifelong respect for teachers.

Now, nearly 60 years later, that early experience has become all the more important because of my passionate involvement in philanthropic work to improve America's public schools.

I am old enough to remember when America's K-12 public schools were the best in the world. I am a proud graduate of them, and I credit much of my success to what I learned in Detroit public schools and at Michigan State. When I was in high school, not long after World War II, the United States had the top graduation rate. Since then, we have dropped behind 20 other industrialized nations. In less time than you just spent reading the last paragraph, another American student has dropped out of school.

American students today rank 31st in the world in mathematics and 23rd in science. If the academic rankings of our most precious resource—our young people—reflected the rankings of our Olympic athletes, it would be a source of major national embarrassment.

The most shameful part of the picture—the one I consider the civil rights issue of our time—is the dramatically lower graduation rates for poor and minority students. These students are far less likely to have access to the best teachers.

By any measure, America's schools are in the grip of a profound crisis.

Frankly, I'm not sure how far I would get if I attended public school today.

It's not just that public schools aren't producing the results we want—it's that we're not giving them what they need to help students achieve at high levels. K-12 education in the United States is deeply
antiquated. Most schools still have a three-month summer vacation, a practice that dates back to our agrarian past, when most Americans lived on farms and children were required to help tend and harvest crops. Most classrooms are still physically set up the way they were then, with a teacher facing rows of students. Children of many different backgrounds and learning styles are expected to learn the same lesson taught in the same way. School district policies and practices have not kept pace with student and teacher needs.

Although classrooms have stayed largely the same on the inside, the world around them has changed radically. The sheer pace of economic and societal forces as a result of the digital revolution far exceeds the capacity of our schools, as they are currently structured, to keep up. Technological advances have personalized every arena of our lives, but very little has been done to harness the same power to personalize learning for students with different needs.

Classrooms in China, India, Japan, and South Korea, meanwhile, have advanced by leaps and bounds. They have elevated the teaching profession, insisted on longer school days and years, promoted education as a key value, created national ministries empowered to set priorities and standards, and built school cultures designed to help teachers uphold these high standards. They do all of this with far less money than the United States spends on education. In the past few decades, American taxpayer spending in real dollars has more than doubled, with no associated increase in student achievement. Efforts to spend more money may be well intentioned, but money alone won’t fix our schools.

The American middle class, once bolstered by well-paying jobs in the manufacturing and construction sectors that didn’t require a higher education, now runs on service- and technology-sector jobs that require a significantly greater level of educational attainment. But too few young people are making it to college. Even when they do, the monumental cost of higher education and the lack of sound K-12 preparation make the university track not just difficult, but also, in the eyes of an increasing number, undesirable. Without a solid education, these young people face higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and crime. Lifetime income, taxes, productivity, and health indicators all decline.

These are the kinds of problems—lack of opportunity now and cynicism about the future—that contribute toward frustrations behind movements like Occupy Wall Street. The protesters are right. We must do better.
Many talented and intelligent men and women have attempted to reform education, and many have quit the effort because of the enormity of the problem, the lack of progress, and the system's resistance to change. I never shy from an unreasonable goal. And as President Barack Obama's former chief of staff and now-Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel once smartly told The New York Times, "Rule One: Never allow a crisis to go to waste. They are opportunities to do big things."

That's a good rule for everyone to keep in mind, no matter the type of crisis you find yourself confronting. When external forces are changing your world, think about what you can do to move with them, rather than reflexively hunkering down and refusing to change. Use crises as chances to rethink everything, question your assumptions, and start afresh. That's what we're trying to do in public education.

Entrenched bureaucracies, policies, and practices are no longer set up in a way that helps teachers and students progress. Taxpayer resources often don't make it to the classroom. Teachers are left to fend for themselves without adequate real-time information about how well their students are learning, access to best practices, or time to collaborate. Because teachers' pay and expectations are, in most cases, low, many talented Americans are dissuaded from entering the profession at all.

How did public school districts get here? I suspect the reason is because too few dared to ask the right "Why not?" question: Why not redesign these districts? It's a simple matter of reframing basic assumptions. Data show that the greatest positive outcomes for students happen when entire school systems are either redesigned or started anew.

The problem is immense. The solution must be big enough to match it. But there is good news. It is possible to challenge the status quo while honoring good teachers and defending public education. It is possible to encourage innovative, creative, and new solutions to tackle the challenges facing our public schools. And it is possible to provide all of our children with equal access to a free, quality public education, not just those lucky enough to live in an area with a great school, like I did 70 years ago.

Eli Broad is the founder of two Fortune 500 companies, KB Home and SunAmerica. With his wife, Edythe, he has founded The Broad Foundations to advance entrepreneurship for the public good in education, science, and the arts. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation funds systemwide public school programs and policies. This Commentary was adapted for Education Week from Mr. Broad's just-published book, The Art of Being Unreasonable (Wiley).