



INTERVIEW

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While in New York City for DMC's 2011 Superintendents' Strategy Summit, a meeting with good friend Joel Klein led Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (North Carolina) Superintendent Peter Gorman down a different path. After a career in public education, Dr. Peter Gorman has joined News Corporation (News Corp.) as a senior vice president in the Education Division, where he is focusing on the use and application of technology in schools. Prior to joining News Corp., Gorman had served as superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), the nation's 18th largest school district, for five years. Shortly after Dr. Gorman's departure, CMS was awarded the 2011 Broad Prize for Urban Education. Gorman, a longtime member of the DMC, is credited with increasing student academic achievement and helping to close the racial and economic achievement gap. Under his leadership, the district implemented a number of human capital and strategic planning initiatives, and received acclaim for integrating data into district decision-making.

At News Corp., Gorman joins Joel Klein, former New York City schools chancellor, who heads up News Corp.'s Education Division. Created about a year and a half ago, the Education Division holds a 90% stake in Wireless Generation, an education-technology provider. News Corp. is the world's second-largest media conglomerate (FY2011 revenue of \$33.4 billion), with operations in cable network programming (e.g., National Geographic Channel, Fox News), film entertainment (e.g., Twentieth Century Fox—producer of *Avatar*), television, direct broadcast satellite television, and publishing (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal*, Harper Collins, *The New York Post*).

Gorman began his career in public education as an elementary school teacher in Florida in the late 1980s, and held a variety of school and district leadership roles there until he became superintendent of Tustin Unified School District (California) in 2001. In 2006, he left Tustin to assume the superintendency of CMS. Gorman graduated from Michigan State University, and earned his master's and doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Central Florida. He holds an M.B.A. from Rollins College, attended the New Superintendents Institute at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and was a 2004 Broad Urban Superintendents Academy Fellow.

In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim, Gorman reflects on his success at CMS, talks about his transition to the private sector, and shares his vision for the future of education and the role of technology in that transformation. ▶

Congratulations. As soon as you left, Charlotte-Mecklenburg won the Broad Prize for Urban Education.

That was the power of my leaving—the moment I was gone, it got better! To be serious, I was thrilled for the district and for the students. The Broad Prize brought \$550,000 in scholarships, which is pretty phenomenal. The year before, we qualified for about \$250,000 in scholarships from the Broad Foundation.

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Yes, you were one of the finalists.

Yes, Charlotte was a finalist for the Broad Prize in 2010. I’m proud. We have a really good group in Charlotte. Our success was not about one person or one idea; it was about everyone working together.

You had several initiatives during your time there—integrating data into practice, strategically aligning staff, articulating a theory of action and putting it into practice. Tell us about those initiatives and what you thought were the most important aspects of getting CMS to where it is today.

The most important factor in our success was the people—a great group of people. We had a strong teaching corps and a fantastic group of principals. We had a lot of change in the principal corps. There were 175 principal appointments or reassignments

during my time as superintendent. No one fires their way to greatness. We created a pipeline for the development of principals. The principalship has changed over time, and for some principals, it is a different job from the one they were hired for. It’s much harder to be a teacher right now, and it’s much harder to be a principal now. We had to prepare people for these new roles. Folks at the district office were excellent; we really had an all-star cast. Having great people in the principalship and skilled teachers on the ground helped to push reform ahead. I don’t think that gets noticed enough. People notice particular initiatives, but without these people, it just wouldn’t have happened.

How did you align everyone? What was your theory of action, and how did you implement it?

We agreed early on about our theory of action: if we are going to improve, if we are going to increase academic achievement for our students, if we are going to raise the bar for all kids, close achievement gaps, and increase the graduation rate, then we have to make sure that (1) every school has a great leader; (2) every classroom has a great teacher; (3) data and accountability systems are in place to improve instruction; and (4) we differentiate resources to meet students’ needs because one size doesn’t fit all. Looking back, I would have added using technology to support instruction. I am devoting my career to that now.

Each of those top priorities had subcategories. We stuck to our knitting and focused our efforts on doing each of those four areas well. For example, in support of teacher effectiveness, we determined that we had to have strong professional development and an excellent human resources structure that included identifying the type of teachers we wanted to hire, placing them, and onboarding them effectively. The school districts that really move the ball do small things well. And while those four items were our priorities, we did well in executing their much smaller components.

I have a friend in education who says that there's no single 100% solution, but 100 1% solutions.

I think that's great. I absolutely agree. There is still so much work left to be done in Charlotte. We raised the graduation rate by almost 10% in my time, which is pretty good movement, but it still means that almost a quarter of the kids don't graduate from high school. So, while we're pleased, we're not satisfied.

At DMC, we're thinking a lot about the power of motivation. About 90% of a district's dollars goes to people, and there's so much research showing that motivated teams and people produce better results.

Absolutely. As we considered the resources in our district, we concluded that our top resource was our people, followed by the time we have with students, and then money.

We've been distilling strategies on how to dramatically improve performance with the people you have. It gets to this age-old question of nature or nurture—you find talent, or do you develop it? You seem to have done both.

Some folks believe that you just move out the nonperformers, and others focus exclusively on improving existing staff. I believe both are critical. You've got to move out nonperformers and you've got to move in the best people, but you've also got to help everyone improve every day. That's what we tried to do in Charlotte.

One difficult part of that combination is that improving performance happens incrementally. You're talking about moving a C+ player to being a B- player, but every bit of that helps. You can't argue with improving performance. I think having better data and better information help you improve every day.

So, the good news is that you don't need more money to improve performance, but the bad news is that it's hard work. It's hard because it goes back to your point that it's all about all those small things you've got to do well.

Absolutely. One time I heard someone say we talk too much about change and not enough about improvement, which makes a lot of sense to me.

Let's shift gears here. This journal goes to 5,000 superintendents; I bet many of them are wondering if the grass is greener on the other side. So, is the grass greener?

It's a different shade of green. I loved working in Charlotte, and I love what I'm doing now. I had reached a point in Charlotte where being a school superintendent had started to impact me and my family physically, mentally, and emotionally, and I had to transition to something else. I was in New York a year ago January for the DMC Superintendents' Strategy Summit, and while in town, I had the opportunity to visit with Joel Klein, a good friend. We talked about his leaving the New York City Department of Education and joining News Corp., and he asked me if I had ever thought about doing something different with my career. That got me thinking.

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This new position is different, and it's hard in its own way. I went from having over 17,000 people report up through the chain to me in Charlotte to having no one report to me here. I am accountable for my actions alone, and I find that freeing. I enjoy the fact that I don't work for a board of education—I want to be clear, we had a great board in Charlotte—but working for nine people individually and as one body was hard. I struggled to meet the needs of each ▶

of those members. Now, I have one supervisor. I know what he expects, and I'm able to deliver the results he expects. I had also reached a point in my career where I was dying for anonymity.

And here we are giving you anonymity.

Yes, but this is totally different. In a poll in Charlotte, I was found to be one of the top five most recognized people. Now, when I'm walking to my office, I'm just another guy. My experiences were invaluable, but it was time for something different.

The way we instruct students and the way that learning takes place in schools doesn't match their lives and is not always the most effective process.

One of the things you were well known for while you were in Charlotte was defining success. Do you find, now that you're a part of corporate America, that there's a clear definition of success beyond making money?

Yes. My supervisor made that very clear. We discussed this when I interviewed for the job. It is important to me to know exactly how success is defined in my job, and I learned from the superintendency what questions to ask to define my success and what I'm accountable for. I ask, 'When I do my job well, how will I know it? What will I have produced? What does it look like?' So, I know exactly what it takes. I think you could come to this world and struggle to determine what exactly it is that you need to do. It was very clear to me to ask, 'What are the deliverables? What are the boundaries?' I like to get clarification on those things and understand the basic parameters, just like I did as a superintendent.

What are some of the other skills that are similar to those of the superintendency? What translates from your former position to your role here?

One similarity is that while I don't supervise anyone here, I have to get work done by partnering with others. So, the ability to influence and to get feedback, thoughts, and ideas from others carries over. I continue to work with a lot of superintendents, and I ask them for their thoughts and ideas on the direction that education is going towards regarding technology. I communicate and build relationships. This is critical, whether you're a school superintendent or in the business world.

I think being a self-directed, organized individual contributed to my success as a superintendent, and contributes to what I do here. You've got to have some self-direction, know who you are, and know what your strengths and weaknesses are. When something is not an area of strength, you ask others for help and subcontract your weaknesses. I carried that over from being a superintendent.

Your responsibilities here include thinking more broadly about the role of technology in achieving greater educational outcomes. Tell us a little bit about what you are currently working on.

I don't think it is reasonable for us to expect teachers, school administrators, and staff to meet the needs of every child without utilizing technology in multiple ways to help them get the job done well. It can be something as simple as using technology to take school attendance—taking five minutes for attendance in each class loses hours of instruction over the course of the year. Technology can eliminate that waste of time. It can use analytics to help teachers determine which kids did well in which areas. Teachers can take that knowledge and apply it to customize and direct students' learning. Algorithms can help teachers customize instruction, remediation, or enrichment, as School of One has demonstrated. To expect students in a classroom with some kids who can read Tolstoy and others who read at the fourth grade level to get one kind of instruction from a teacher is unrealistic.



News Corp. Education Division Vice President Peter Gorman

The power of engaging curriculum that leverages technology can't be underestimated. We've got to modify and customize.

When you were at Charlotte-Mecklenburg, would you have considered yourself someone who was at the forefront of adopting technology?

I would say I was moderate at best.

What stopped you?

What stopped me was a false view that the budget could not accommodate additional investment in technology. In retrospect, I'm convinced that we could have redirected dollars towards technology. There are one-time funds that come up at the end of the year that I could have used differently. We could have tracked how people spend funds and looked for opportunities to use them differently. I've always been nervous about folks who spend 90% of their budget in the second half of the year, or 50% of the budget within the week that budgets

must be spent. We did make use of technology, but I believe we could have gone further. In retrospect, we could have done things with technology to adapt learning to better meet students' needs.

“When my daughter doesn't know the answer to a question at home or in her free time, she solves problems and accesses resources and information using technology. But, when she goes to school, she powers down. And that's a problem—she needs to power up for school.”

We've got to combine world-class analytics, best-in-class curricula, a device and delivery system that enables learning to occur 24/7, and effective teachers to customize education to meet the needs of kids. That's what I'm dedicating my life to now. ▷



News Corp.'s Education Division is focusing on the use of technology in schools.

What do you mean when you talk about delivery systems?

Is it a reasonable expectation to think that having one teacher in front of 30 students in every class is the best way? I'm convinced that we need a variety of configurations, something I am reminded of with my own child. She does well in English Language Arts, but she needs more support in Algebra 1. She gets the same amount of direct teacher interaction in both classes, but she could really use more individual time in Algebra 1 and more access to advanced work in ELA. Technology could help teachers customize learning and allow my daughter to get more one-on-one when she needs it. We are using structures that do not meet the needs of kids. My daughter constantly uses technology in the rest of her life. Her school is starting to give her that access, but it should be ubiquitous.

So, are you fundamentally redefining what a school or classroom looks like? People are pushing the edge of the envelope on this, for example, with the flipped classroom model.

We talk a lot about schools and how we have traditionally done education, but I think we need to talk about what learning consists of. The way we instruct students and the way that learning takes place in schools don't match their lives and is not

always the most effective process. When my daughter doesn't know the answer to a question at home or in her free time, she solves problems and accesses resources and information using technology. But, when she goes to school, she powers down. And that's a problem—she needs to power up for school, not power down.

You're describing learning in more immediate terms, as using different ways of accessing information. Is that the reason News Corp. is interested in education?

Our CEO Rupert Murdoch truly believes that we can change the outlook for millions of kids in this world by giving them a higher-quality education using technology and best in-class curricula, and by doing things to help teachers, like using analytics.

News Corp. also believes it already has experience in engagement and has content that could be helpful. Wireless Generation is part of our family. They know how to use analytics to inform learning.

News Corp. has no legacy education business. There's something neat about starting with that kind of *tabula rasa*. We have a blank slate. We can imagine education's future with total freedom, and that's what we'll do.

It certainly sounds like your perspective has really changed from sitting on this side of the fence.

Several years ago my daughter and I were watching *Little House on the Prairie*, and she said, 'Dad, that was just like my day at school today.' I thought, 'Wow, my daughter described her day in school to be just like in the image from 140 years ago. Is that good or bad?' And, I thought, parts of that are good: a great teacher having an impact on the lives of students—that transcends generations. But, on the other hand, education has been untouched by technology that has improved so many other areas of our lives. I thought, 'Wow, we've got to do this a little bit differently.' Two plus two is still four, but how do we use what we've learned over time to present information differently, and to customize it for students?

Do you have a point of view about what kind of changes will happen?

I think we are going to see it in a couple of areas. How we define access to teachers is going to change: I think it is going to become more 24/7. For example, when I look at some of the sites for tutoring programs, there is 24/7 access to help students sort through problems and issues. I think a teacher-student relationship will continue to exist, but I think we will see change after traditional school hours.

Also, does it have to take ten months for every student to absorb every subject? If I can get biology in eight months, can I move on to chemistry? What about the kid that needs eleven months to get bio? We are giving everyone ten months. How can we customize that?

Not to over-generalize, but do you think the large urban districts, where oftentimes the achievement gap is the largest, is where this is going to happen first? Or do you think this will happen in the smaller suburban districts first?

I think it will happen first in areas with great leadership. It's all about leadership and being willing to tackle these issues. I think that we're going to see a group of evangelists for improving education for kids in urban districts. I don't want to cite names, but we all know there are some folks out there that are doing world-class work. I think it will happen in first-ring schools around urban cores. I think it will happen in suburban areas. We need to make sure this happens for rural schools. I was in a meeting one time in D.C. and a staff member from Al Franken's office was there, and she kept asking about the impact on rural education. She said that for every student in St. Paul, there are two others living two hours off the grid. So we've got to make sure everyone has that access.

Sure. There are still several million people on dial-up.

Absolutely. We have to think about our environment and how it impacts our perspective,

particularly with education, where people are inclined to draw from their own experiences. Living in New York, I have found that you can quickly become New York-centric. I work to remind people that not everyone has the same access that we do.

“There are certain things which are tried and true over time—a great teacher engaging kids is what makes it really happen. Technology doesn't replace teachers; technology helps great teachers be even better.”

In closing, any advice or thoughts to share with our readers?

Yes, thanks for that opportunity. What we're really trying to do at News Corp. is to reimagine today's educational system, and make it more connected, adaptable, and successful. We want to do this with three reasons in mind: current outcomes are unacceptable, incremental change will deliver only incremental results, and technology has huge potential, but is underdeployed.

While winning the Broad Prize was an honor, it also made me realize how much work is still left to be done. Enjoy it for a day, then get back to work. To be successful, you've got to constantly be learning and improving. Looking back now, I could have done some things differently with technology that would have improved opportunities and access for all kids, and that would have increased learning and achievement. There are certain things which are tried and true over time—a great teacher engaging kids is what makes it really happen. Technology doesn't replace teachers; technology helps great teachers be even better.



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