



The Instructional Leadership Role of Superintendents in Instructionally Effective School Districts

Lars G. Bjork

Department of Educational Leadership Studies,
University of Kentucky, USA

ABSTRACT

Throughout the past four decades (1983-2024), the rise of a global economy and the changing nature of American society underscored the importance of educating all children. Successive waves of education reform in the United States of America (USA) launched a wide array of initiatives focused on improving student learning. These state and federal policy initiatives were accompanied by an historic shift in role expectations of school district superintendents. An examination of trend data reported in three successive nation-wide reports released by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) for the years 2000, 2010 and 2020 (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021) suggest that role expectations for district superintendents moved from away from an emphasis on management to a focus on instructional leadership. In addition, findings on superintendent instructional leadership practices in Instructionally Effective School Districts (IESD) reported by Bjork (1993, 2010, 2024) and Bjork & Browne-Ferrigno (2014) note that they effectively used their managerial position to support district-wide instructional improvement. They found that superintendents serving in IESD school districts used enacted their management responsibilities in areas that would indirectly influence the quality of learning and teaching including: (1) Staff selection and recruitment; (2) Principal supervision and evaluation; (3) Establishing clear instructional and curricular goals; (4) Monitoring learning and curricular improvement activities and, (5) Financial planning for instruction. These findings suggest that IESD superintendents' use their management prerogatives to enact their instructional leadership role and reframe school district leadership for deeper learning in next generation schools.

Keywords: Superintendent, Leadership, Roles, Reform, Instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Providing a brief overview of the public education system in the United States of America (USA) may facilitate understanding the context and changing role of school district superintendents during the educational reform movement (1983-2024). Unlike many European nations, the USA does not have a national education system under the direction of a ministry of education. The U.S. Constitution makes no mention of education, but the Tenth Amendment reserves to states all powers not specifically delegated to the federal government or prohibited to states by the Constitution. Because education is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, responsibility for public education is a state responsibility and is included in their respective constitutions. State legislatures formulate educational policies which are administered by state boards of education and their appointed commissioners. In addition, states have delegated to local, school district

boards of education the responsibility of conducting the practical, day-to-day operation of the districts. They appoint a school district superintendent to enact state and local education policies and manage district administrative affairs. There are fifty different state systems and many differences exist among local school systems within the same state. There are approximately 15,000 different local school districts-each has their own board, philosophy and goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical importance of understanding the nature of school district superintendents' instructional leadership role is examined in the context of the educational reform movement in the USA that underscored the importance of enhancing student learning. In the following section we review the relevant literature on how schooling is organized on a state rather than a national level, the structure of policy making and administration and, the several waves of education reform movement that influenced changes in superintendents' roles as well as data from nation-wide studies of the superintendent reported by the Association of School Administrators (AASA) for the years 2000, 2010, and 2020 (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021) as well as findings on superintendents serving in Instructionally Effective School Districts (IESD).

The Role of the Federal Government in Education

Although the provision of public education since the colonial period has been the responsibility of towns and cities, the General Welfare Clause of the U.S. Constitution gives Congress the ability to allocate funds to support the common good. The language is broad enough for the federal government to enact educational laws and allocate taxes to support the nation's schools in ways that support the general welfare of the nation. These federal funds however must be targeted to specific education needs (i.e. mathematics, reading, special education et al.) and are transferred to state governments that in turn, transfer funds to local school districts. The United States Department of Education administered by a secretary of education, provides oversight of federal education programs (i.e.) distribution of tax funds, collects data on the condition of education in the nation and supports long-term research on important issues facing schools.

The Role of the State Government in Education

Every state constitution provides for the support and maintenance of education. State constitutions and laws provide for the establishment of a uniform system of schools and specify how they are governed. In this regard, state legislatures make laws regarding education, determines school taxes and financial support to local districts. They set minimum standards for teacher and administrative licensure, salary schedules, determine the curriculum and special services (buses, books, and programs). The state school code is a compilation of laws that guide the operation of school districts and conduct of education in respective states. The typical education hierarchy includes a state school board that may be either elected or appointed by the governor. The state board of education hires a commissioner or secretary of education to oversee the state department of education. Education departments have separate departments and experts that are aligned with different aspects of education and provide oversight of local school operations. Schools are funded by local property taxes (60%), states allocations (33%) and the federal government (7%).

Local School Districts

Local school districts are the basic administrative unit in the education hierarchy. It exists at the pleasure of the state, which has complete control of its boundaries, jurisdiction, funding, and powers of the board of education. It is the primary point of education access of citizens in education policy making. Policy making at the local level is constrained by the need to comply with the state constitution, state laws, rules and regulations as well as federal laws. Local school boards are elected and typically hold staggered terms to ensure continuity of decisions over time. They tend to have 5-9 citizens however cities may have larger boards composed of 12-15 members. Local school boards primary responsibility is legislative (i.e.) making policy and providing oversight of school district operations. One of their most important functions is to hire a school district superintendent to provide managerial oversight. Districts may be comprised of pre-schools, elementary schools (grades 1-5), middle schools (grades 6-9) and high schools (grades 10-12).

The School District Superintendent

Local school boards hire a district superintendent who serves as a chief executive officer (CEO) and manages its day-to-day affairs. They have a “central office” staff provides the expertise to manage its affairs and may varies in size in accordance with the size of the district. The central office staff provides oversight and support to local schools. Superintendents are hired on multiple year contracts (usually 3-years in length). Superintendents’ career usually lasts 16 years and may serve in 2-3 districts spending about 6 years in each. Superintendent duties include: (1) Advising the board of education on education and policy matters; (2) Making recommendations to the board regarding personnel hiring; (3) Ensuring compliance with directives of state and federal authorities; (4) Preparing district budgets for board review and adoption; (5) Leading long-range planning activities; (6) Providing oversight of instructional programs and student performance; (7) Determining the internal organizational structure of the district; and (8) Making recommendations regarding school building maintenance and new construction needs.

The School Principal

In most states, superintendents recommend individuals to be hired by the board of education. The school principal is responsible for the operation of the school however, it is common practice for principals to work closely some type of community group for improvement of the school (e.g.) a Parent Teacher Association (PTA), school-based management council (SBMC) or a site based decision-making council (SBDMC). During the education reform movement in the United States (1983-2024) the role of principals shifted from a management to an instructional leadership focus to ensure that all students learn. Characteristics of effective principals includes evidences leadership in providing clearly defined goals, curriculum and instruction, articulating high expectations for student achievement, monitoring students’ academic progress, professional development and teacher engagement in instructional improvement.

The Education Reform Movement in the United States of America

The report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) indicted schools for inadequately preparing children and jeopardizing the nation’s economy. It launched an educational reform movement in the United States that is unprecedented in its scale and duration (Björk, Browne Ferrigno & Kowalski, 2018; Björk, 2001). For over four decades education reform efforts have contributed to calls for accountability, improving learning and teaching as well as changing the nature of principal

and superintendent leadership (Björk, Kowalski & Young, 2005). Recent studies of educational reform in the USA suggest that while school districts were held to high accountability standards by their respective state governments, they decentralized school districts giving greater decision-making authority to principals and teachers. The devolution of decision making to the building level was accompanied by adoption of team leadership strategies and transformational leadership styles that increased teacher voice in classroom-focused change initiatives.

After the release of the *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), scholarly interest in district-level, systemic reform heightened and focused on the role of superintendents particularly regarding how they were launching and sustaining educational change initiatives (Brunner, Grogan, & Björk, 2002). Throughout the protracted era of education reform, media coverage created a perception that schools had failed in meeting their responsibility to the nation's children and the economy. Consequently, parents, policymakers, and citizens not only pressed for accountability but also called for substantive changes in the nature and direction of public education. Over the next several decades, educational reform reports were released in four consecutive waves. Although each wave had a unique focus, related themes gave them a sense of coherency (Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005). For example, the first wave (1983-1986) focused on improving student academic performance, school-level accountability, increasing high school graduation requirements, increasing the length of the school day and year, and increasing the rigor of teacher-licensure requirements.

Themes that emerged during the second wave of education reform (1985-1989) included implementation of standards-based tests, focusing on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills, technological literacy, and collaborative (team) learning. An important and pervasive theme in Second Wave reports recognized demographic trends and acknowledged that race and poverty had a profound impact on student learning outcomes. The third wave of education reform reports (1989-2003) criticized recommendations of reports previously released as being narrowly prescriptive, solution driven and focused on organizational and professional issues related to decision-making rather than on teaching and student learning outcomes.

The fourth wave of education reform (2004-2024) echoed previous recommendations (Ravitch, 2010). Policy analysts, professors and practitioners took exception to the *No Child Left Behind* (2002) legislation that placed undo emphasis on top-down and coercive mandates. These provisions reflected the persistent and regressive theme of accountability in using prescribed measures of student academic progress and endorsed the notion of top-down authority in schools and districts. These reports and subsequent legislation embodied a view of leadership and change that contradicted research findings that suggest that collaboration among stakeholder groups (teachers, parents, professors, and policy makers) facilitated the change process. Although passage of *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) remedied many onerous regulatory provisions of the *No Child Left Behind* (2002), superintendents took the lead in beginning to decentralize their districts (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Potterton, 2019). They accomplished this by taking action in five key areas including: (1) Asserting the need for administrative coherency; (2) Building capacity of principals and teachers as leaders of building-level reform initiatives (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno & Kowalski, 2018); (3) Convening

district-level leadership teams to align infrastructure, improve operational efficiency and re-center work on student learning (Anderson & Young, 2018); (4) Modeling administrative teamwork for central office staff, principals and teachers who were assuming greater responsibility for change and, (5) Using data on demographic shifts in the population and student performance to change the curriculum and teaching to better serve all students (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Potterton, 2019). Taken together, these decentralization efforts not only underscored the importance of teamwork but also redefined the roles of teachers, principals and superintendents as interrelated parts of district learning organizations (Collinson & Cook, 2007). Analysis of superintendents' decentralization efforts suggests that they used their position and authority to structure and restructure school districts (Bruner, Grogan & Bjork, 2002). Scholars also suggest that the roles of superintendents changed over time to reflect the changing reality of work, shifting expectations and increasing responsibilities for leading school reform initiatives.

It is evident that during the reform era (1983-2024) the links between the nation's economy, society, and schools were irrefutable, and education reform was viewed not as a singular event but as a continuous change process. In this regard, education reform was viewed as a way for the nation to adjust to a wide range of global economic, political, social, and technological changes. Responses to these global shifts have contributed not only to redefining the nature and scope of learning and teaching but also altered the nature of superintendents' work. Rather than superintendents continuing to serve as top-down managers, they expanded the scope of their work by: (a) interpreting social and economic forces on schools, (b) reconfiguring organizational structures, (c) engaging local community members, (d) facilitating instructional improvement, (e) building capacity of their professional staffs to work as teams, and (f) institutionalizing organizational learning as a long-term survival mechanism (Browne-Ferrigno & Björk, 2018). Taken together, global shifts had a profound impact on heightening the importance of superintendents in accomplishing successful systemic reform.

SUPERINTENDENT ROLE CHARACTERIZATIONS

During the last several decades (1983-2024) growth of the global economy launched a wide array of economic, social, and political changes in the United States of America (USA). As policymakers aligned student academic performance with long-term, national economic survival the scope of educational reform altered the nature of learning and teaching shifting it away from simply ensuring students were literate and numerate to preparing the next generation of workers and advancing equity. Consequently, state and national education policy initiatives focused on challenging issues of increasing student learning as measured by standardized test scores. During the last several years, education leaders and policy makers have examined the long-term impact of changing the nature and direction of learning and teaching. The notion of next generation schools and deeper learning (content knowledge, application and problem solving), technology and the compelling need to ensure equity have underscored the importance changing the nature and direction of schools. These shifts in the expected outcomes of student learning accentuate the importance of structurally supporting the development of school principals and teachers who are regarded as the engines of education reform.

Studies of education reform initiatives in the USA not only examined pedagogical shifts but also studied the concurrent devolution of responsibility for decision making to school principals and

classroom teachers. The unprecedented focus on improving learning and teaching also had an impact on heightening the importance of the instructional leadership role of school district superintendents. Research findings suggest that decentralization initiatives altered traditional management structures of schools and districts and reconfigured relationships among superintendents, middle management staff, principals, and teachers. It shifted emphasis away from hierarchical management authority towards enacting dimensions of transformational leadership particularly building-level, team leadership.

An important dimension of scholarly work during this reform era examined the increase in importance of the instructional leadership role of superintendents. This discussion will be framed by a concise review of the literature on education reform, role characterizations of school district superintendents, transformational leadership and attributes of superintendents serving in Instructionally Effective School Districts (IESD). Superintendent instructional leadership practices in IESD reported by AASA for the years 2000, 2010 and 2020 (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021) that their continuous involvement and use of their managerial position created the circumstances for district-wide instructional improvement as measured by standardized tests. Several practices associated with instructional improvement included: (1) Staff selection and recruitment; (2) Principal supervision and evaluation; (3) Establishing clear instructional and curricular goals; (4) Monitoring learning and curricular improvement activities and, (5) Financial planning for instruction. These findings suggest that superintendents' may use their management prerogatives as leverage to enact their instructional leadership role. Although understanding superintendents emerging instructional leadership role in IESD contexts is based on students' performance on standardized tests scores, it provides insight into their role as institutional actors in improving achievement and advancing equity.

The complexity of leading large-scale, district education reform initiatives require superintendents to have a wide range of knowledge and skills that scholars have described as five role characterizations. These roles have been validated historically (Brunner, Grogan & Björk (2002) and although some of these roles may increase or decline in importance, all remain relevant to contemporary practice (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Potterton, 2019). These role conceptualizations provide a framework for understanding the complexity of the position and help to define knowledge and skills linked to effective leadership. Superintendent five role characterizations include serving as: Educator; Manager; Democratic Leader; Social Scientist and, Communicator.

Superintendent as Educator

Since the 1850s, the primary emphasis of superintendents' work was overseeing district academic programs and ensuring that states' mandated curriculum was implemented, and teachers received adequate supervision. In sum, the earliest superintendents were essentially master teachers (Callahan, 1962). However, they were viewed as more than administrative functionaries during the latter part of the 19th century. During this era, they were regarded as intellectuals in their local communities and used their privileged status to deflect political intrusion into district affairs. Although their role as educational leader was displaced by more demanding managerial roles, it reemerged in the education reform era (1983-2024) as a primary role expectation by school boards (Kowalski et al., 2011). During this era, superintendents enacted their role as an instructional leader by using their administrative

prerogatives to support teaching and learning. Scholars found that superintendents serving in Instructionally Effective School Districts (IESD) are characterized as being actively engaged in instructional improvement efforts. In addition, they used administrative levers at their disposal to indirectly influence the behavior of principals and teachers who had a more direct impact on curriculum, instruction, and student academic performance. Their instructional leadership levers included: 1) Participating in staff recruitment and selection; 2) Establishing clear expectations for principal performance and evaluations; 3) Articulating instructional and curricular goals; 4) Monitoring curricular improvement and student learning outcomes and, 5) Engaging in financial planning for instruction. When superintendents reframed routine management activities, they became powerful levers for increasing the instructional effectiveness and added a new dimension to their work as transformational leaders (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno & Kowalski, 2018).

Superintendent as Manager

During the late 19th and early 20th century, the impact of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization increased the size of school districts (1880s-1920s) and contributed to adaption of business-oriented ideas about how school districts should be managed. The influence of big business contributed to a shift in the nature and direction of superintendents' work (Kowalski, 1999). Adoption of corporate perspectives influenced how business-dominated school boards perceived their roles and transformed superintendents' role from serving as an education leader to that of a chief executive officer (CEO). Their administrative responsibilities included budgeting, administration, personnel, and facility management (Kowalski et al., 2011) and remained the focus of their work until the educational reform movement prioritized improving student learning outcomes (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno & Potterton, 2019).

Superintendent as Democratic Leader

States have the responsibility for the provision of education and although state legislatures give oversight authority to state boards of education, local school boards effectively govern school districts. School boards hire superintendents to implement state and local education policy. Local school boards and superintendents are subject to a wide array of local, state, and national political influence. In this regard, the nature of superintendents' work as a manager not only involves oversight of a large corporate-like education enterprise but must contend with a wide array of interest groups and coalitions that want to influence educational issues. In this regard, the superintendents' role as democratic leader is viewed as being political. Although the notion of politics was soundly rejected by educators during previous decades (Björk & Lindle, 2001), declining public support and unfunded education reform mandates necessitated their increasing their advocacy role in support of sound education policies and adequate funding for public schools. These circumstances compelled superintendents to become political strategists and skilled at diplomatically galvanizing support for education among policymakers, employees, and citizens (Howlett, 1993). The issue facing school district superintendents is not whether they should be political but rather how they effectively enact that role on behalf of children (Björk & Gurley, 2005).

Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist

The notion that the school district superintendent is an applied social scientist was defined by the emergence of an information society during the 1950s. It contributed to greater transparency in all organizations but most importantly shed light on the nations' changing

social context and the failure of schools to serve the nation's economically disadvantaged and racial minority students (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). During the education reform movement, superintendents used the tools available to social scientists to better understand the relationship between society and schooling to help create a more equitable and just society. During recent decades, school district superintendents have become acutely aware of important challenges facing schools that are grounded in changing demographics, poverty, racism, drugs, and violence (Kochan, Jackson, & Duke, 1999).

Superintendent as Communicator

The role of the school district superintendent as a communicator is essential to their effectively carrying out all of their roles and responsibilities. The emergence of the educational reform movement in the USA (1983-2024) redefined superintendents' communication patterns moving it away from a top down, corporate model to a highly nuanced, interactive, two-way processes essential to professional teamwork. In the context of educational reform, the impact of technology, teamwork, voice, and collaboration changed historic communication patterns (Chance & Björk, 2004). Superintendents recognized that these factors increased interdependency and influenced the way people learn and behave (Schlechty, 1997). They contributed towards more horizontal internal communication patterns compatible with teamwork but also used social media platforms to inform parents and the public about school district events.

RESEARCH METHODS

Three nation-wide studies (2000, 2010, 2020) conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021) provide trend data on the changing nature of superintendent's roles during the educational reform movement in the United States of America (1983-2024). Decennial studies of the superintendence have been reported by AASA and its antecedents since 1928 and constitute the most definitive body of work in the field. The three most recent studies roughly correspond to the education reform era in the USA. These studies sampled a population of 12,600 school district superintendents. Participants included: 2000 (2,262); 2010 (1,867) and 2020 (1,218). All three studies used a mixed methods data collection approach and focused on identifying their characteristics, roles, and responsibilities. Data suggest that superintendents' instructional leadership role increased in importance (2000: 40.2%; 2010: 26%; 2020: 58%) in relation to their traditional managerial role (2000: 36.2%; 2010: [Ranked 2nd]; 2020: 47%) that help understand the relationship between national education reform initiatives and role change. Furthermore, the nature of superintendents managerial and educator (instructional leadership) roles is explicated by ISED scholars who have identified practices that offer insight into how they enact their instructional leadership role.

Superintendents as Institutional Actors in Educational Reform

Recent moves towards school district decentralization and relational leadership (i.e.) working with and through others to improve student learning outcomes is important shift in the nature and direction of superintendents' work. For example, Burns (1978) notes that corporate-oriented, top-down managers view workers as needing close supervision, focus on efficiency and centralize the coordination of work. However, Bass (1985) and Rost (1991) view leadership as working with and through others in accomplishing *shared goals* (Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005). Rost (1991) made an important contribution to leadership literature in

defining transformational leadership as, “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p.162). In this regard, superintendents viewed as being transformational leaders are focused on empowering others, enhancing commitment, and building a sense of community and ownership in the organization. In sum, superintendents acting as transformational leaders are actively engaged in education reform and employ diverse strategies to foster relationships and motivation, address individual needs, support professional growth, and encourage higher-order cognitive thinking (Bass, 1985). In addition, ISED literature suggests they may also use managerial prerogatives to recruit and select staff, evaluate principals and teachers to gauge their competency in accomplishing tasks and provide supportive professional development. Both relational leadership and managerial prerogatives contribute to accomplishing their overarching goal of improving student learning outcomes (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno & Kowalski, 2018). In sum, trend data reported by AASA for the years 2000, 2010 and 2020 (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021) on an increasing emphasis on superintendents’ instructional leadership role and findings from research on superintendents’ serving in instructionally effective school districts (IESD) suggest that superintendents may be viewed as transformational leaders not only with regard effectively using administrative levers at their disposal to increase the effectiveness principals and teachers but also in adopting relational leadership strategies characteristic of professional, knowledge-work organizations. Taken together, superintendents serving in IESD districts are adopting leadership strategies that enhance teachers’ knowledge and skills and indirectly improve students’ performance on standardized tests.

CONCLUSION

Superintendents’ role characterizations provide a useful framework for understanding the multi-dimensional aspects of their work. In many respects, school district superintendents are like executives of large complex organizations. Both sit at the apex of an organization’s hierarchy that tends to place a premium on centralization and transactional, top-down management to accomplish work. However, the education reform movement (1983-2024) altered this traditional pattern of school district-level administrative in rather significant ways. Superintendents serving in IESD districts recognized that their central office staff, principals and teachers were the engines of reform and re-conceptualized their role as instructional leaders. Research findings on Instructionally Effective School Districts (IESD) suggest that superintendents were both transformational leaders who worked with and through others, nurtured teamwork and collaboration as well as used their administrative prerogatives (i.e. organizational space) to formulate goals, set expectations and, build the capacity of the staff to enhance student learning outcomes (Browne-Ferrigno & Björk, 2018). Scholars note that organizational learning is a process that is directed towards building the capacity of its members to understand why change is needed, establish new organizational goals and performance expectations (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015). Superintendents who serve as transformational leaders’ value organizational learning and engage in the “deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims” (Collinson & Cook, 2007). In sum, they create shared meanings (Noam, Cook & Yanow, 1993) that contribute to re-culturing their school district organizations over time (Wenger (1998).

Several promising new lines of inquiry on superintendent role characterizations have been identified during the educational reform movement (1983-2024) that align with their responsibility to enhance student academic performance. First, superintendents' role as social scientist and using data to ensure that all children are educated may be central to ensuring continuation of a democratic society. It may also be instrumental in preparing them to participate in an increasingly global economy. Second, the education reform movement, the recent Covid-19 Pandemic, the post-Pandemic context and strident, partisan political conflict underscores the need for additional research on the superintendents' role of both communicator and democratic leader. Understanding effective modes of internal and external communication in crisis modes is central to their capacity to understand as well as represent the school district to multiple and diverse communities it serves. Third, although scholars have contributed to our understanding of instructionally effective school districts (ISED) the dynamics of changing organizational cultures and the social architecture of school districts are complex. Additional research focused on understanding how school district superintendents work with and through others to accomplish their work will make a significant contribution to the field (Browne-Ferrigno & Björk, 2018). Lastly, the challenge facing the field is to understand how the levers identified in IESD research reports may also be applicable to their enacting instructional leadership roles as school districts move towards placing greater emphasis on deeper learning (content knowledge, application and problem solving), technology and broadening equity. In these new learning contexts, the measures of student success will change and consequently identifying indicators of superintendents' instructional leadership roles may become problematic.

The education reform movement (1983-2024) challenged superintendents to meet the needs of a changing society and a global economy. Their role in educating the next generations of students remains an essential part of sustaining a democratic society, preserving the economic wellbeing of the nation and advancing equity. Although public schools have contributed to the nation's capacity to embrace a diverse society and participate in a technology-oriented, global economy remains a work in progress.

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