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# From Checker's Desk

*Chester E. Finn Jr.*

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*Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.*

## ***Reforming Education: The Hard Part Lies Ahead***

As 2003 opens, hollow public treasuries will make it tougher than ever to revitalize American K-12 education—not because more money will improve our schools but because the most painful parts of the reform process lie ahead and, without dollars to cushion the discomfort, politicians will be loath to ask people to endure it.

The education renewal efforts of the past decade were easy compared with the miseries of the next few years. We've passed the laws, designed the necessary changes and put measuring sticks in place, but by and large we haven't yet caused many people or institutions to alter their ways.

That's why, as we approach the twentieth anniversary of A Nation at Risk, America's overall education performance remains woeful. Test scores are mostly flat. Graduation rates are actually sagging. Racial gaps are still wide. "Failing school" lists contain

thousands of entries. Dozens of countries outstrip us on international gauges of student achievement, and some now also boast higher college-going rates.

We surely haven't been idle or chintzy. We've spent billions on reforms of every sort. We've shrunk classes, hired more teachers, installed computers, built new schools, stiffened graduation requirements, added kindergartens, replaced textbooks, devised tests, written manifestos, conducted studies, held summits, set standards, created charter schools, experimented with vouchers, outsourced school management, "in-serviced" teachers, hired nontraditional superintendents, and on and on. Dozens of governors have pledged to turn around their states' education systems. George W. Bush persuaded Congress to enact the boldest federal education law in history. Business leaders beyond counting have signed up for commissions, task forces, and roundtables, all pledged to fix the schools.

Some progress can be glimpsed. A few states, such as Texas and North Carolina, can display slowly rising scores, as can a handful of local school systems (e.g. Charlotte, Houston, Chicago.) There are promising signs in Massachusetts. Where gains are being made, the formula seems to include strong, sustained political leadership over many years with a regime of tests that carry palpable consequences for children and schools alike.

But even these “poster states” and districts have yet to turn any big corners. Most of their gains amount to modest upticks in basic skills among low-income youngsters—much needed, yes, but far from an education renaissance. Nobody would claim that all—even most—of the kids in those jurisdictions are learning what they should. And the policy changes that they’ve made require constant vigilance against relentless attacks from testing opponents, educators who feel that results-based accountability cramps their style, middle-class parents convinced that their kids are getting short-changed, civil rights groups alleging that “high stakes” tests discourage minority youngsters, and state and local officials asserting that Uncle Sam must pay for any changes he seeks.

Reforming education is like stretching a Godzilla-size rubber band. If you don’t keep tugging hard, it reverts to its former shape. The crusading governor leaves office or the dynamic superintendent gets fired. The elastic snaps back. Few changes remain. This has partly to do with public education’s

feisty and obdurate interest groups. (Note that teacher unions are relatively weak in Texas and North Carolina, both right-to-work states.) It has partly to do with the education profession’s view that children are more like wild flowers to be left to blossom than rose bushes in need of cultivation. And it has much to do with parents, who generally believe that someone else’s little darling must study harder and somebody else’s school needs to be transformed.

For a nation that has long placed education reform atop its list of urgent priorities, it’s striking how superficial most of the reforming has been so far. Yes, nearly every state has written academic standards and installed a testing program. But most states find it exceedingly difficult to enforce their standards by holding back the children who don’t meet them, denying diplomas to those who fail the exit tests, riding schools of ineffective teachers, firing inept principals, and closing bad schools.

Washington has now inserted itself big time into standards-based reform with the mammoth No Child Left Behind Act—its first anniversary was the occasion of much White House hoopla in January—that sets myriad rules and timelines for test-giving, progress-measuring and intervening. But even as we observe hundreds of conscientious educators and local officials gearing up to give NCLB implementation their very best shot we see too many states and districts balking at—or simply ignoring—some of its

key provisions, protesting its rigid schedules, even softening their previous achievement standards to boost the odds that more kids will attain them.

This past autumn's sorry experience with making districts provide educational alternatives for youngsters stuck in failing schools hints at the trouble ahead. Certainly the vexed history of federal education interventions says Uncle Sam will find it hard to effect changes in places that don't want to change. (NCLB will likely be a valuable boost for those that do want to change and some that are wavering.) Washington has remarkably little clout. It doesn't contribute much of the money—and is reluctant to withhold even those small sums. Beyond jawboning and sun lighting, there's not a lot the feds can do if Vermont, Kansas or Louisiana (or St. Louis, Birmingham or Cleveland) doesn't behave as it's supposed to or goes through the motions but fails to deliver the desired results.

Standards-based reform is not the only kind that hasn't yet borne much fruit. There's also the education marketplace with its boldly different theory of change: competition and choice, via charter schools, outsourced management, home-schooling, vouchers, and a dozen other ways of putting the consumer in charge of key decisions and making schools vie for pupils and revenues. It's a swell theory and it got a needed boost in June when the Supreme Court OK'd Cleveland's voucher program. But here, too, the hard parts still lie ahead. The United

States now boasts nearly 3,000 charter schools but too many are doing a punk job of educating children and more than a few face acute management, governance, and fiscal problems. Such faltering, in turn, emboldens enemies of choice to crack down on the charters' freedoms, curb their numbers, and generally allow the rubber band to snap back. Hence realizing the promise of charter schools may turn out to be as hard as remaking the public school "system."

Private management firms are also having a rough go of it. School systems keep changing their minds about "outsourcing," they insist on contractual conditions that block vital changes in the schools they do entrust to private managers (e.g. no replacing of teachers), and the firms themselves display mixed academic results even as their reddish balance sheets spook investors. This, too, is an idea with immense potential but one that is far from having proven itself.

What about vouchers, then? The evidence suggests that helping disadvantaged black children switch from bad public schools to decent private schools yields a rise in their achievement. But it doesn't seem to do much for poor white and Latino youngsters. In any case, there aren't enough private schools to go around and it's uneconomic to build more unless the vouchers are amply funded. Education's private sector has not shown a lot of entrepreneurial energy, either. Moreover, if one thinks the politics of other school reforms are daunting, gaze upon

the voucher battlefield. The unions and their allies will fight this one to the death—and few political leaders have the guts to defy them.

Results-based accountability and school choice aren't the only education reforms that stick in establishment craws. Try paying teachers according to the subjects they teach or their effectiveness in the classroom. Try bringing into that classroom instructors who didn't pass through colleges of education. (That's why most states' "alternate certification" schemes are tiny—and the ed schools are doing their utmost to seize control of them, too.) Try introducing modern technology (e.g. distance-learning and "virtual education") instead of spending the money on salaries. Try lengthening the school year or day. Watch the rubber band snap back.

Though it seemed hard at the time, what we've done so far under the reform banner was a cakewalk compared with the next steps. We've made many moves that allow for change to occur, yet naught will come of this until millions of individuals actually alter their behavior, until thousands of institutions amend their ingrained practices, until the alternatives win the freedom to be truly different—and those in charge pay as much attention to their effectiveness as to their existence.

What's a governor to do? Faced with ballooning health care costs, shrinking budgets, and escalating college tuitions, what chance is there to pay for the summer schools that might

get more kids up to speed, for bonuses for great teachers, or for technical assistance for charter schools? The logical way to fund such improvements is to close bad schools, put those that remain onto year-round schedules, lay off bad teachers, and make the sports program pay for itself. But who needs such misery?

What's a president to do? In recent days, newspapers have printed innumerable lists of urgent issues awaiting the 108th Congress but I've yet to see any that mention education. You won't lose money betting that enforcement of No Child Left Behind in reluctant states and clueless districts will be the job of the Education Department while celebrations of NCLB's success will continue to be held at the White House. As for other initiatives, instead of pricey and contentious moves to reshape special education, build merit and accountability into college student aid, press for full-bore voucher demonstrations, or assault the teacher unions, the President's team is apt to focus on appealing, low-cost, low-conflict initiatives such as better teaching of math and civics. We need those, too, of course. But they won't transform our schools.

There's simply not much payoff in a democracy from hassling people to do things they don't want to do and defying powerful interest groups on behalf of nebulous future gains. Particularly as election campaigns rev up and candidates and political parties vie for the "education reformer" crown, don't expect public officials and wannabees to inflict more pain on parents, stu-

dents, or teachers, especially when the budget won't allow them to offset the discomfort with new education goodies. Hence as the school-reform lifting gets heavier, we may not see much leadership coming from the usual places. Tax cuts and prescription drugs are so much more appealing.

Welcome to education reform circa 2003.

—January 9, 2003

## ***On Outrage and Double Standards***

Many have remarked upon the double standard that operates in American education when judging the regular school system versus proposed reforms in it. The school establishment insists that would-be reformers prove in advance that their change will work perfectly with no adverse side effects, while the regular school system gets away, seemingly forever, with working badly and producing much collateral damage. Reform ideas are thus held to a lofty standard, the unchanging system to a far lower one. (Indeed, a strength of the No Child Left Behind Act is its requirement that all schools make their results public and face the accountability music.)

Recent weeks have brought to light another vivid example of double standards at play in U.S. education. I refer to the Washington Teachers Union scandal. It seems that the former leaders of the huge teachers union local in the nation's capital looted its treasury of some \$2 million over a seven-year period. Yet I don't hear the public-

school establishment demanding immediate corrective action in the specific case plus broad reforms designed to assure that nothing of the sort can ever happen again anywhere. No such demands are audible. Indeed, the silence on this front is deafening.

Now consider the response we always see when someone messes with the finances of, say, a charter school. This hasn't happened often but, when it has, outrage has rolled across the education landscape like a tsunami. We hear loud calls from teacher unions, school board associations, ed schools, etc. for urgent action to impose new rules and red tape on all charter schools, not just the malefactors. "If we don't rein in this entire category of activity," goes the cry, "great harm will be inflicted on America's children."

Why is the Washington Teachers Union case not similar? Yet in this instance there is no outrage. Sure, the FBI and U.S. Attorney are beavering away. Criminal indictments may follow. But where are the denunciations from America's leading public educators and their agents and political allies? Where is the cry for new protections to be imposed on all teachers and union locals? Why the silence?

You know why. The establishment protects its own. The last thing it wants is any basic rearranging of the ground rules. While it may not condone illegal behavior by individuals, it treats such things as regrettable aberrations in a basically sound set-up, not fundamental flaws in the arrangements themselves. When "outsiders" misbe-

have, however, the response is no mere wrist slap for the miscreants. It's a full-scale attack on the policy arrangements that let outsiders enter the arena in the first place. But not when the perps are union leaders!

So far as I can tell, the National Education Association—usually so trigger-happy—has been a silent bystander to this episode. So has nearly everyone else. The *Washington Post* reported: “Those who might have raised red flags did not speak out until the money had vanished: the WTU's parent, the American Federation of Teachers; the union's own three-member board of trustees; its twenty-one-member executive board; its membership; and U.S. Labor Department regulators.”

The AFT's internal controls and accountability systems turn out to be staggeringly weak—and yes, that would be the same national union that recently urged a moratorium on charter schools because they're insufficiently accountable and because those who monitor them are too lax. Talk about lax: The AFT ostensibly requires each of its locals to conduct a complete internal financial audit every two years, yet the Washington Teachers Union hadn't done one since 1995. Asked to comment, an AFT spokesman told reporters that the union “would consider tightening its oversight.”

To be sure, the national union tipped off the FBI in the first place and secretary-treasurer Edward McElroy claims to be “outraged” by “alleged abuses.” But imagine the AFT reaction

if, say, a charter school or a for-profit Education Management Organization—EMO—went seven years without an audit, even if there were no evidence of malfeasance. The unions would not settle for mere voicing of outrage. They would demand legislative and regulatory redress. They would probably insist that some governmental authority be placed in charge of the auditing function, required to conduct these audits on a regular cycle and obliged to make public their results.

What happened inside the Washington Teachers Union was no momentary lapse. “According to an FBI affidavit,” *Education Week* reports, “there is ‘probable cause’ to believe that the three officials embezzled money, committed tax, mail, and wire fraud, and laundered money” over a seven-year period, even as office phone bills and rent went unpaid. All this within shouting distance of AFT national headquarters.

A forthcoming book by Peter Brimelow estimates U.S. total annual teachers' union dues payments at a staggering \$1.25 billion. Yet I don't see anyone urging legislation to ensure that these huge sums are properly looked after, to safeguard teachers from the misdeeds of their leaders, or to require that the unions' books—and audit results—be exposed to the sunshine.

Meanwhile, the Washington Teachers Union has applied for a quarter-million dollar bank loan to replenish its coffers. The district's teachers will have to repay that loan—with interest. They

will repay it from dues withheld via payroll deduction—i.e. by the school system—using funds supplied by taxpayers.

Where is the outrage over this squalid episode? And over the double standards that apply in American public education and among those who purport to lead it?

—January 16, 2003

### ***Counting our blessings***

As readers may have noticed, these “desk” messages tend toward the crotchety and Cassandra-ish. That’s because we see plenty still not working well in U.S. education, too many dumb ideas, lots of would-be reforms that ran out of gas, and no shortage of would-be reformers who, when push comes to shove, will settle for being pushed by the system rather than shoving harder against it.

But you already know all that. So let’s—just this once—look on the bright side. Especially at this time of year, it’s appropriate to reflect on America’s education blessings. Let us celebrate some of them. My list has ten entrants. You may have more.

First, everybody who wants it can get as much schooling as they can handle in the United States at no cost through twelfth grade and bargain prices thereafter. The barriers have fallen. Race, handicap, language, poverty, even immigrant status doesn’t bar anyone from school or college. Though sometimes stuffy about what comprises public education, America is earnest indeed about the education of the public.

Second, you can always come back for more. The United States has the

world’s most forgiving education system, ready and willing to furnish second and third chances, to embrace former dropouts, to tailor programs at odd hours and off-beat places for adults who didn’t get as much the first time around as they now need. Though you may have to knock on a different door when you return, a door is always ready to open. You can move in and out of the supply side, too, teaching for a while before or after you do something else, embarking on a school principal’s career after completing one in business or the military. That’s not true in other lands where the merry-go-round only stops once for you.

Third, the postsecondary system is willing to fix what went awry in K-12. While many U.S. colleges should be better than they are, and while doing it this way is costly and inefficient, the fact is that you can, if you need to, get a decent secondary education in college, a decent college education in graduate school, a useful skill (or life enhancement) in community college, and the best tertiary education in the world from our top research universities.

Fourth, having fifty states is a good thing. Despite people who insist that our reforms would get farther if we had a single national system like England or Japan, the fact is that what Justice Louis Brandeis termed our “laboratories of democracy” enable us to try a lot of different approaches and accommodate differing priorities. That states watch—and envy—each other keeps the process open, competitive, and dynamic.

Fifth, we’re beginning to understand what really works and why.

Though much snake oil still gets peddled and “education science” remains underdeveloped, some of its branches are flourishing. Primary reading is the best-known example, but not the only one. Cognitive psychology and neuropsychology are shedding serious light on how people learn, and this holds great promise for how they are taught. So does the push for more randomized field-study types of education experimentation.

Sixth, we're willing to innovate. American ingenuity brought us community colleges and now it has brought us charter schools of every sort. It brought “Direct Instruction,” “Core Knowledge,” and “High Schools That Work.” It brought alternative certification and virtual education. Though faddism is an ever-present risk, the fact is that we're better off being willing to try new things and—eventually—to take a hard look to determine whether they really deliver the goods.

Seventh, private enterprise and philanthropy are bringing powerful innovations to education and, despite grouching about the profit motive, they've been allowed to. Technology is the most obvious domain—and will likely turn out to be a powerful driver of tomorrow's education gains—but we also have privately managed (outsourced) public schools, small schools a la Gates, new math and science programs, KIPP academies, GreatSchools.net, Standard & Poors' “school evaluation service,” and much more. And that's not even counting the thousands of business and civic leaders who have thrown themselves

into the reform enterprise, often functioning as virtual surrogates for education's ill-organized “consumers.”

Eighth, American education is blessed with thousands of outstanding, dedicated educators. Sure, we wish we had many more of them, but let's acknowledge the teachers and principals (and school board members, guidance counselors, HeadStart workers and bus drivers) who do a terrific job of positively shaping the lives of other people's children, all this for modest wages and without a lot of thanks or praise.

Ninth, for at least two decades now, the American public has kept education reform at or near the top of its urgent domestic priorities. For a country with a famously short attention span, that's a mighty long run for an issue as challenging (and sometimes as boring!) as this one. Sure, parents could do a better job of making their OWN kids straighten up and fly right. (Too often, it's the other person's child who is thought to need more homework.) But the durability and zealotry of the public's commitment to better education are much of what keeps the reform effort moving and the politicians engaged.

Finally and most important, living in a free society means that government is the people's servant, not their master, and that public education, in the end, means whatever the public wants it to. You need not send your children to a government-run school, a secular school, or a religious school. It's up to you. (Indeed, you can educate them at home if you wish.) You can

vote for, or against, a bond issue for school construction or a voucher referendum or a gubernatorial (or school board) candidate who promises to raise standards or improve discipline. You can be a critic without fear of retribution (except from cranky politicians, thin-skinned White House aides, and the crackpots on the profession's fringe). You can supplement your child's education with books, software, dancing school, and summer programs. You can, to be sure, do more of these

things if you are wealthy than if you are poor, but an outpouring of philanthropy and an ever more flexible set of public policies mean that such opportunities are (slowly) reaching more poor families, too. Not so many years ago, the question was whether low-income kids would have any education choices. Today the argument is over how many.

—December 30, 2002 ■