

How Many Decades Before 'Reform' Becomes 'Status Quo'?

By Kevin G. Welner

Pause for a moment and warily inhale the decaying fragrance of well-aged change.



The nation's established school reformers have been on the ascendency for decades, and the so-called "change" they offer is simply more of the same. Consider this brief recap of school reform over the past three decades, focused in particular on privatization and choice, as well as standards-based testing and accountability.

Reform in the 1980s: "A Nation at Risk"; site-based management; basic-skills testing; graduation exams; and the beginning of standards-based reforms.

Reform in the 1990s: Alternative teacher certification and, relatedly, programs such as Teach For America; federal promotion of standards-based reform; state-level development and expansion of standards-based, high-stakes student testing; development and expansion of charter school policies; and the first appearance of education management organizations, or EMOs, and tax-credit vouchers.

Reform in the 2000s: The No Child Left Behind Act; expansion of charter school reforms; teacher incentive-pay policies; and the expansion of privatization, or "neo-vouchers," EMOs, and charter management organizations, or CMOs.

Reform in 2011: Race to the Top; intensified policies on charter school expansion, teacher incentive pay, and high-stakes testing; growth of tax-credit-voucher and conventional voucher policies; the growth of CMOs and reliance on them for school turnarounds; and further privatization, particularly through online education.

Our nation's current school reform agenda dates back to a time when U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was an underclassman at Harvard, a time of "Billie Jean" and "Flashdance." This hoary education "change" agenda that began with the wake-up call in the report "A Nation at Risk" has survived the passing decades, blossomed as No Child Left Behind, and re-emerged in the Obama administration's Race to the Top. Such reforms, advanced as offering an exciting, untraveled pathway, are more accurately described as driving along the same old road, just with our foot pressing down harder on the pedal.

Yet, like Dorian Gray or Bart Simpson, this batch of established education reforms never seems to age. They retain their allure as resplendent new changes while the rest of the world moves forward. For this reason alone, one has to grudgingly admire the reformers' impressive rhetorical feat of claiming the mantle of change while calling for little more than intensified versions of the same ineffective policies of their reformer parents and grandparents.

When approaches have been tried unsuccessfully over a couple of decades with less-than-stellar outcomes, we might expect the next policy, or at the very least the next "change," to lean in a new direction. But the seemingly permanent wave of test-based accountability, privatization, and choice has managed to soar past its silver anniversary almost entirely unscathed by the depredations of time and evidence.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education presented "A Nation at

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Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” to U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell on April 26, 1983, with a set of recommendations that might be considered somewhat progressive by today’s standards. The report stated that the federal role in education should be to protect civil rights and support students and teachers “with a minimum of administrative burden and intrusiveness.” Yet the report’s framing of education as a utilitarian good directly linked to economic and national security situates it nicely as the birthplace of today’s reform agenda. The recommendations included strengthening high school graduation requirements, adopting more rigorous and measurable standards, and systemically administering standardized achievement tests “as part of a nationwide (but not federal) system of state and local standardized tests.” (“**Educational System Placing Nation 'At Risk'**,” April 27, 1983.)

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At about the same time, in Texas and other states, the basic-skills testing of the late 1970s and early 1980s was morphing into statewide assessment systems with testing in multiple grades. Then, in September 1989, an education summit in Charlottesville, Va., brought together President George H.W. Bush and the nation’s governors, led by Bill Clinton of Arkansas, and laid the framework for a set of national goals, including this one:

“By the year 2000, American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.”

This and the other goals became the foundation for President Clinton’s “Goals 2000” legislation in 1994. The No Child Left Behind Act signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002 followed suit, but added the heavy hand of escalating sanctions.

Running along a parallel track, states began adopting charter school legislation, starting with Minnesota (1991) and California (1992). Also, in the 1990s, the nation’s first education management organizations began running schools for public school districts as private contractors. The ensuing years have seen a rapid expansion of charter schools, EMOs, and, more recently, nonprofit CMOs, such as Uncommon Schools and the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, as well as privatization of other school services such as food services, supplemental education services, and online education. Even teacher employment has moved from a professional model to a market model, with lowered barriers to entry and exit, perhaps best exemplified by Teach For America, which was launched in 1990. The creation and remarkable growth of “neo-vouchers,” a type of private school tuition-vouchering system based on tax credits, is a bit more recent—starting in Arizona in 1997—but also now constitutes a fixture of the transformed landscape.

When Secretary Duncan says, “We all have to work together and challenge the status quo” and “Just investing in the status quo isn’t going to get us where we need to go,” to which status quo is he referring? The differences between his “Race to the Top” and Mr. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind,” as the opening decade-by-decade list illustrates, often take the form of an escalation of the same basic approaches, not a directional shift. The nation’s current policy is to intensify ineffective and costly reform strategies of the past.

This trend cannot and must not last. At some point, hopefully before this school reform agenda becomes eligible to join AARP, we can expect that people will start noticing that the emperor’s clothes are threadbare and outdated. More importantly, we can expect the nation’s leaders to

demand high-quality research evidence about the effects of these policies before blindly supporting any continuation of them. And we should also expect more than a few snickers the next time a self-styled reformer condemns the "status quo" and then demands a reinforcement of familiar policies we've been pursuing for the entire lifetimes of almost half of the American population.

Until then, we will apprehensively await the next reform policymaker's fevered announcement of the next groundbreaking, yet eerily familiar, policy that attaches A-to-F grades to schools; or lifts caps on the number of charter schools; or looks to private-sector business ideas and infuses our schools with competition; or evaluates districts, schools, teachers, or students based on standardized tests.

Or, perhaps sometime in the near future, we will hear state and national leaders offer sensible and well-grounded proposals that build the capacity of schools to offer an engaging and challenging curriculum, with well-supported students and teachers, safe and well-resourced schools and neighborhoods, high-quality teacher preparation and induction, early-childhood education and early interventions in reading and math, racially and socioeconomically integrated schools and classrooms, and wrap-around services to cultivate healthy and prepared students.

Pause for a moment and savor the faint aroma of true reform.

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