

SCHOOL REFORM IN PERSPECTIVE

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Thanks very much, I'm delighted to be with the education writers.

This morning I've been asked to comment on

- the school reform movement,**

and I'd like to begin with a small confession.

In 1982, education writers across the country

- **were doing retrospective stories**
- **about the impact a 57-pound satellite**
 - **had had on the nation's schools.**

Ted Fiske of *The New York Times* called and asked if I thought we'd have another big reform effort

- **like the one that followed Sputnik—25 years before.**

And I replied, all too flippantly I'm afraid,

- **"No, not unless the Japanese put a Toyota into orbit."**

What I'd overlooked, of course, was that Hondas and Toyotas were, in fact,

- **orbiting our freeways here on Earth.**

I'd failed to calculate how the

- **fears of a military threat in this country**
- **had been replaced by economic fears.**

And, I simply hadn't anticipated the electrifying impact

- **a 65-page government report would have on education,**

thanks to hyperbole like

- **"foreign powers,"**
- **and "ebbing tides."**

And the rest, of course,

- **is history!**

II. LOOK AHEAD

Having confessed, at the very outset,

- **my complete incapacity to predict the future,**
- **which is breaking all public speaking rules,**

I'd like to try my luck at "hindsight." And during the remaining moments reflect on just what

- **this decade-long school "reform movement" has been about.**

A former friend of mine recently described it as

- **3 great waves**
- **accompanied by high winds.**

But it's been, of course, much more than that. At least I'd like to think so.

And looking back, one of the things that strikes me most is that,

- **not only did a reform movement actually begin,**
- **but that ten years later education is still high on the national agenda.**

And that fact alone, in my opinion, is worth a headline.

Further, I'm impressed that corporate America

- **has become active partners in school renewal,**
- **which surely helps keep the movement going.**

It's also worth noting that the education issues being discussed have become

- **more, not less, sophisticated since 1983.**

And I find it especially remarkable that

- **during the past ten years**
- **education in this country, for the first time in our history,**
- **has "gone national."**

For more than 300 years local school control

- **was an almost sacred priority for America.**
- **Education has been grass roots.**

As recently as 1970, when I was U.S. Commissioner of Education,

- **the words "national" and "education"**
- **simply could not be connected.**

In those days if I'd even whispered the words

- **"national standards,"**
- **I'd have been driven out of town.**

But suddenly, all of the caution has disappeared,

- **with virtually no notice or debate.**

Today, we hear talk almost daily about

- **national goals,**
- **national standards,**
- **national assessment.**

And, according to George Gallup, more than half the people in this country

- **support a national curriculum,**

a position that would have been unthinkable just ten years ago.

I really do believe that when future historians review this period

- **they'll emphasize, above all else, that**
- **the decade of the 1980s was the time when Americans**
- **became more concerned about**
 - **national outcomes**
 - **than about local school concerns.**

III. REFORM MOVEMENTS

But all that I've said thus far is a kind of social backdrop!

Coming more directly to education, I've concluded that during the past decade we've had

- **not just one, but three quite separate reform efforts,**

each with its own definition of the problem,

- **its own leadership,**
- **and its own priorities.**

IV. STATE-BASED

The first reform effort of the 1980s

- **was really an embodiment of the *Nation at Risk* report.**

Leaders of this movement agreed fully with the National Commission that educators were in trouble

- **but that school renewal could be achieved**
- **within the educational establishment itself.**

What was called for, the commission said, was

- **more basic education,**
- **more homework,**
- **better teachers,**
- **and tighter graduation requirements,**
- **along with more support—**
 - **a familiar formula for renewal.**

As it turned out, this agenda matched precisely

- **reform activities going on in**
 - **North Carolina**
 - **and in Mississippi,**

where Governors Hunt and Winter had already made a clear connection

- **between economic development and education.**

Later, Dick Riley, Bill Clinton, Tom Kean, Lamar Alexander, and other energetic governors

- **helped spark a school reform crusade that**
- **has yielded, during the past decade, remarkable results.**

Thanks to state leadership, high school graduation standards in this country

- **have been raised in 42 of the 50 states.**

Forty-seven states have introduced new student testing programs,

- **and 39 have some form of teacher evaluation.**

About three-fourths of the nation's high schools have, since 1983, adopted

- **stricter attendance standards.**
- **27 percent now assign more homework,**
- **and 40 percent have lengthened the school day.**

Since 1983. the number of high schools with

- **no pass-no play policies has more than doubled,**
- **to nearly 70 percent.**

And during the past decade, average teacher salaries have gone up

- **from about \$22,000 annually to nearly \$36,000 now—**
- **a 33 percent increase above inflation!**

It's true that in the late 1980s, this "state-based" push for school renewal

- **was dealt a severe blow by the recession.**

But the larger point is that the first education reform effort of the past decade was led by governors,

- **who shared the conviction of the National Commission**
- **that public education—with all its problems—**
- **still had the capacity and the will to revitalize itself.**

V. GOVERNMENT-LED

Meanwhile, a second reform movement was beginning to emerge.

This initiative accepted the National Commission's description of the problem

- **but rejected its prescription for reform,**

which was judged to be

- **both too timid**
- **and too trusting.**

President Ronald Reagan signaled this alternative approach to school reform when he declared

- **just minutes after *A Nation at Risk* was publicly released:**

"We'll continue to work, in the months ahead, for passage of

- **tax credits,**
- **educational savings accounts,**
- **voluntary school prayer,**
- **and abolishing the Department of Education"—**

a statement that completely bewildered the assembled crowd,

- **since the new report said nothing about these issues.**

In a radio address just one month before, President Reagan also charged that

- **the Department of Education**
- **had soured America's love affair with education.**

And later he accused the National Education Association

- **of brainwashing America's children.**

Clearly, the president had concluded that school remedies must be found

- **outside the system, not within it.**

Indeed, former secretary Ted Bell, in commenting on this period, put it quite directly. "There was simply no commitment during the Reagan period," Bell said,

- **"to a federal leadership role to assist the states and schools**
- **in carrying out the recommendations of**
 - ***A Nation at Risk.*"**

VI. BUSH

At first, President George Bush seemed to tilt toward the "more traditional view" of school reform.

During the campaign, he called himself

- **the Education President.**

And soon after the election Mr. Bush convened the first education summit. In his second state of the union message, the president announced

- **six goals for all the nation's schools,**

and then with the help of leading governors,

- **he organized a National Goals Panel to monitor results.**

But then, as time went on, President Bush seemed to grow increasingly skeptical about

- **the capacity of the nation's schools to renew themselves.**

He frequently referred to public education

- **as a "failed system."**

And declared that for far too long we've shielded public school from competition

- **and allowed them a "damaging monopoly of power."**

In the later years, "school choice" became—for the Bush administration—

- **a central strategy for reform,**

and during the past 5 years some form of choice has, in fact,

- **been adopted by 13 states.**

And it's even now being debated

- **in Wisconsin,**
- **in Maryland,**
- **and in California.**

Near the end of his administration, President Bush created

- **the American School's Development Corporation**
- **to design new schools for a new century.**

Meanwhile, in the private sector, innovations such as Chris Whittle's

- **"Edison Project" fitted into this**
- **"break the mold" strategy proposed by Bush.**

SUMMARY—TWO MOVEMENTS

What we have had then since 1983 are

- **two competing visions of school renewal.**

One approach, working within the system, sought to achieve change

- **by tightening standards**
- **and providing more support.**

A second approach challenged the existing system

- **by proposing a competitive model of reform.**

VIII. INDIVIDUALS

But, in addition to these two approaches, a third reform movement—

- **actually a whole "cluster" of initiatives bundled into one—**
- **was quietly carrying on its work.**

This movement was being led by educators and social activists who, for the most part,

- **accepted the "more conservative" vision of school renewal,**
- **but differed considerably in their priorities for reform.**

And, looking back, I've identified at least seven separate initiatives

- **within this independent movement.**

TEACHERS

First, during the past decade, we've had a group of teacher excellence reformers, who've insisted that

- **good teachers**
- **and excellence in teaching**
- **are the keys to school renewal.**

John Goodlad has, for years, been a vigorous proponent of this position. Our 1983 Carnegie report, *High School*,

- **called for more teacher status and better training.**

**Two other reports in the mid-80s—one by the Carnegie Forum,
the other by the Holmes Group—**

- **also give priority to teachers.**

**And the newly established National Board for Professional
Teaching Standards**

- **promotes a nationwide credentialing system for top
teachers.**

STUDENTS

A second group of reform leaders might be appropriately described as

- **student-centered reformers.**

These people focused on the

- **dynamics of the classroom,**
- **and viewed bureaucracy and centralization as**
 - **barriers to renewal.**

Ted Sizer, a vigorous advocate of this position, has worked with his Coalition for Essential Schools to promote

- **creative classrooms,**
- **more flexible curricula,**
- **teacher autonomy,**
- **and less rigid student grouping.**

CURRICULUM

Third, we've had a handful of curriculum reformers.

E. D. Hirsh, in his book *Cultural Literacy*,

- **powerfully pressed the point that curriculum confusion**
- **largely explains the failure of our schools.**

Diane Ravitch has also written thoughtfully about the need

- **for more curriculum coherence.**

And Bill Bennett's *James Madison High School and First Lessons* define with great precision

- **what all students should be learning.**

EQUITY

Fourth, during the past decade, a small but growing band of school equity reformers,

- **led by Jonathan Kozol,**
- **focused on school finance and decried the outrageous funding gap**
 - **between privileged and disadvantaged districts.**

Meanwhile, school aid formulas in more than a dozen states

- **were declared unconstitutional by the courts.**

And even now school funding is being judicially debated

- **in about 30 states.**

GOVERNMENT

Fifth, we've also had the school restructuring reformers who've called for

- **more flexible,**
- **decentralized**

school governance.

Al Shanker repeatedly has urged schools to shift from the old industrial model,

- **with its 50 minute periods**
- **to a more flexible design.**

Meanwhile, Dave Hornbeck and others helped overhaul Kentucky's education system,

- **developing accountability standards**
- **and moving decision making to the local level.**

SOCIAL CRISIS

Sixth, a group best described perhaps as the social crisis reformers insisted that schools

- **cannot be renewed in isolation.**

We simply must, they said, meet all the needs of at-risk children.

In response, James Comer's schools offer comprehensive services

- **to both children and their families.**

And our own Carnegie Foundation report, *Ready to Learn*, provides a national strategy

- **to assure that all children are well prepared for school.**

ASSESSMENT

Finally, we've had the national assessment reformers.

Chester Finn, a vigorous advocate of this position, argues convincingly that

- students should be required to pass national examinations in basic subjects,
 - with high, uniform standards.

Meanwhile, experts such as Lauren Resnick and Marc Tucker are working on new evaluation tools, while the National Academy of Sciences

- and other professional associations
- have contracted with the federal government to develop
 - "discipline-based" standards.

In summary, then, the school reform movement of the 80s has actually been three separate initiatives:

- **state-based,**
- **Washington-led,**
- **and a cluster of independent efforts,**

which incidentally are not quite as distinctly separated from each other as I've just suggested.

VIII. STUDENT LEARNING

But all that I've talked about thus far has to do with process.

In the end what really matters is the learning that's occurred,

- **and here the evidence is both**
 - **sketchy,**
 - **and largely disappointing.**

Just last week a national study of student performance in mathematics

- **showed gains in half the states.**

But I found it fascinating that in reporting on this story, one headline in a major paper read:

- **"Students in many states raise math scores steeply."**

Another read:

- **"Small improvement seen in U.S. students' math ability."**

Both headlines were correct, of course. Gains were made, but limited.

The larger problem is we still don't have agreed-upon

- **benchmarks of excellence for education.**

And, as a result, some analysts

- **view the glass as half empty,**
- **others as half full.**

IX. HALF EMPTY

On the dark side, the composite ACT score is

- **practically "unchanged" since 1983,**
- **that's true for the SAT, as well.**

And the National Assessment for Educational Progress—perhaps our best source—reports that students remain weak

- **in writing,**
- **in science,**
- **in civics,**
- **and most especially in reading comprehension.**

On the bright side, we have had modest gains in math in recent years.

And it's also true that minority students have shown gains in basic skills,

- **while still lagging behind their white counterparts.**

Further, some insist that,

- **with the growing pathologies that surround the schools,**
- **they should be praised if they just hold their own.**

X. SUMMARY

But where then does all of this leave us?

What, in fact, has happened in the decade of the 80s?

As I see it, we have had a truly surprising, decade-long school reform campaign,

- **with lots of constructive action.**

During the past decade

- **academic standards have been raised.**
- **Minority students have made gains.**

And some schools across the country are genuinely outstanding,

- **with lots of innovations going on.**

But it's also my opinion that during the past decade

- **we've made only limited progress toward genuine reform.**

What's been missing—it seems to me—

- **is a unifying vision of school renewal.**

And during the decade of the 90s, I'd like to see us focus especially on

- **two of the six national education goals,**

both of which have widespread support.

READY TO LEARN

First, I'd like to see school readiness at the top of the national agenda, since it will be

- difficult, if not impossible, fully to compensate for**
- the deficiencies that influence children before school,**
- and even before birth itself.**

ASSESSMENT

I'd also like to see goal #3—student assessment—

- **continue as a high priority in the 90s.**

Frankly, I worry that national assessment, if poorly managed,

- **could kill creativity**
- **and suffocate reform.**

But I also believe that such an effort, if properly directed,

- **could serve as the one exciting fulcrum of reform,**
- **giving focus to the reform movement that thus far has been lacking.**

After all, national assessment inevitably will bring us back to the curriculum itself

- **by forcing us to consider just what it is**
 - **we want to measure.**

The national assessment efforts should also bring forth

- **a new generation of evaluation instruments,**

ones that reflect the full range of human potential that Howard Gardner

- **so vividly describes in his path-breaking book,**
- ***Frames of Mind.***

The assessment movement can also lead to better teaching and learning in the classroom,

- **as we hold schools accountable as well.**

And it's even possible that such an effort

- **will bring more equity in school funding,**

since it will be difficult to defend

- **common outcomes**
- **if equality of resources is lacking.**

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT COUNCIL

Again, national assessment could become the agent of excellence in reform.

To give direction to this ambitious effort, I'd like to see a

- congressionally chartered panel established**
- composed of leaders from**
 - education,**
 - and business,**
 - and politics,**
 - and involving parents and students, too.**

In a 1989 speech at the Business Roundtable, I suggested that,

- **since we have a Council of Economic Advisors**
 - **to measure our fiscal progress,**
- **why not have a blue-ribbon panel**
- **to monitor the educational progress of the nation?**

CONCLUSION

And now I'd like to end my remarks this morning with one very personal observation.

In Japan, where my granddaughter went to school, the term

- **"sensei"—teacher— is a title of great honor.**

And when all is said and done,

- **we simply must, in the coming decade,**
- **make teaching in this country a more honorable,**
- **more accountable, profession,**

since it is in the classroom

- **where the battle for excellence will be won or lost.**

Finally, it's also an opportunity to recall that the *Nation at Risk* report contained this sober warning:

- **"History is not kind to idlers."**

Frankly, it seems clear to me that time is running out on school reform, and that, in the coming decade,

- **our efforts simply must be**
 - **more focused,**
 - **and more effective.**

Generally, I'm optimistic, at least before lunch, and it may be worth recalling here at the end

- **that *A Nation at Risk*,**
- **with all of the alarming hyperbole,**
- **ended on this optimistic note:**

"Despite the obstacles and difficulties,

- **we are confident that we can meet our goal.**

We are the inheritors of a past," the Commission said,

- **"that gives us every reason to believe**
 - **that we will succeed."**

And I'd like to believe that before the next decade of school reform has been completed,

- **this hope-filled prediction, finally, will come true!**