SCHOOL REFORM IN PERSPECTIVE

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I.

In 1982, education writers across the country were doing retrospective stories about the impact a 57 pound Soviet satellite had on the nation's schools. Ted Fiske of the *New York Times* called and asked if I thought we'd have another big educational reform movement like the one that followed Sputnik 25 years before. All too flippantly I replied, "No, not unless the Japanese put a Toyota into orbit."

What I'd overlooked, of course, was that Toyotas and Hondas were, in fact, orbiting our freeways here on earth. I'd failed to calculate how fears of a foreign military threat had been replaced by economic fears. I simply hadn't anticipated the electrifying impact a 65-page government report would have on education.

Having confessed my failure to get a clear fix on the future, let me try my luck at hindsight and reflect briefly on what's happened since 1983. Something worth noting is the fact that ten years after *A Nation at Risk*, school reform is still high on the national agenda—thanks, at least in part, to the vigorous support of corporate leaders.

Also, I find it quite remarkable that educational policy in this country has "gone national." For three hundred years, local school control was an almost sacred priority in the nation. And as recently as the 1970s, when I was U.S. Commissioner of Education, the words "national" and "education" simply could not be connected. In those days, if I'd have even whispered the words "national standards" I'd have been driven out of town.

Today, this country is more concerned about national outcomes than about local school control. We hear talk of national goals, national standards, national assessment, and according to Gallup surveys, most people in this country even support the idea of a national curriculum—a position that would have been unthinkable a few short years ago.

Looking back, I've also concluded that what we've had, during the past decade, is, not one, but three quite separate reform movements—each with its own definition of the problem, its own leadership and its own priorities.

II.

The first reform effort was an embodiment of the Nation at Risk report. Leaders of this movement accepted the Commission's conclusion that excellence could best be accomplished by strengthening the existing system and that leadership for such renewal could be found 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.

As it turned out, this formula matched precisely reform activities going on in North Carolina and 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, sparked reform initiatives in their own states—helping to create a crusade that yielded remarkable results.

- Since 1983, high school graduation standards have been raised in 42 of the 50 states, according to an Educational Testing Service study.

- 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 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 $20,000 annually to nearly $36,000 in 1992—a 22 percent increase above inflation.

In the late 1980s, this state-based push for educational renewal was dealt a severe blow by the recession—with school budgets being cut and tenured teachers losing their positions. But the larger point is that the first reform initiative was led by governors who shared the conviction that public education, with all its problems, still had the capacity and the will, to revitalize itself.

III.

Meanwhile, a second reform movement was emerging. This initiative accepted the National Commission's diagnosis of the problem but rejected its prescription for reform, which was considered to be both too timid and too trusting.

President Reagan signaled this alternative approach when he announced, just minutes after *A Nation at Risk* was released, "We'll continue to work in the months ahead for passage of tuition tax credits, educational savings accounts, voluntary school prayer, and abolishing the Department of Education"—a statement that bewildered the assembled crowd since the new report said nothing about these issues.

In a radio address a month before, President Reagan charged that the U.S. Department of Education had soured America's "love affair with education." Later, he accused the National Education Association of "brainwashing America's children." Clearly, the President had concluded that remedies for school renewal must be found outside the system, not within.

Former Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, looking back on this period, put it quite directly: "There was simply no commitment (during the Reagan period) to a federal leadership role to assist the states and their local school districts in carrying out the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk*."

At first, President Bush seemed to tilt toward the more traditional view of school reform. During the campaign he described himself as "the education President." After the election, Mr. Bush convened the nation's first Education Summit. Soon thereafter, in his second State of the Union message, the President announced six goals for all the nation's schools and quickly organized, with the help of Governors, the National Education Goals Panel to monitor progress toward their achievements.

As time went on, however, President Bush voiced increased skepticism about the capacity of schools to renew themselves. He described public education as a "failed system" and declared that, "for too long, we've shielded schools from competition and allowed our schools a damaging monopoly of power." School choice became, for the Bush administration, a central reform strategy and Education Secretary, Lauro Cavazos, made a strong pitch for "choice" in most of the speeches he delivered from 1989 to 1990.

This push for parental choice proved appealing to some governors and legislators, who were, by the end of the decade, running out of reform ideas—as well as money. In fact, during the past five years, 13 states have adopted some form of choice. They've been joined by several of the nation's largest cities. And the voucher issue, even now, is being battled out in Wisconsin, Maryland, and California.

Finally, in the late 1980s, President Bush created the American Schools Development Corporation to help design new schools for a new century. In the private sector, innovations such as Chris Whittle's Edison project, fitted philosophically into the "break the mold" strategy Bush proposed.

What we've had then, since 1983, are two competing visions of school renewal—one approach, working within the education establishment, sought to achieve change by tightening standards and providing more support. A second approach challenged the existing system, proposing more options based on a competitive, market driven model. In my opinion, the confusion and conflicts created by these differing views of school reform cannot be overstated.

IV.

Finally, a third reform movement—actually a whole set of initiatives bundled into one—was being led by individual educators and social activists who, for the most part, accepted the more conservative vision of school renewal—even though their proposed remedies differed widely. Looking back, I've identified at least seven separate initiatives within this independent movement.

First, we've had a group of teacher renewal reformers, who've insisted that excellence in teaching is the key to school improvement. John Goodlad, for years, has been a vigorous advocate of this essential theme. In The Carnegie Foundation report, *High School*, we called for more dignity and more status for teachers, while two reports in the mid 80's—one by the Carnegie Forum and the other by the Holmes Group—gave priority to teachers, while the newly established National Board for Professional Teaching Standards worked to establish a nationwide credentialing system.

A second group might be appropriately described as student-centered reformers, those who have insisted that effective student learning is the central issue and that bureaucracy, centralization, and standardized testing are barriers to renewal. Ted Sizer, an advocate of this position has, with his Coalition of Essential Schools, focused on creative classrooms, more flexible curricula, teacher autonomy, and less rigid class grouping.

Third, we've had a handful of curriculum reformers. E.D. Hirsch in his book, *Cultural Literacy*, powerfully pressed the point that the lack of a core of common learning explains, in large measure, the failure of our schools. Diane Ravitch has also written thoughtfully about the need for more curriculum coherence. Bill Bennett's

books, *James Madison High School* and *First Lessons*, set forth, with great precision, what all students should be learning.

Fourth, during the past decade, a small, but growing band of school equity reformers, led by Jonathan Kozol, focused on school finance, describing the outrageous funding gap between privileged and poor districts. Meanwhile, school aid formulas in more than a dozen states were declared unconstitutional by the courts. And, even now, the issue of public school funding is being judicially debated in about 30 states.

Fifth, a group of school restructuring reformers have called for a more flexible, more decentralized governance for the nation's schools. Al Shanker repeatedly has urged schools to shift from the old industrial model—with its fifty minute periods—to a more flexible scheduling design. Meanwhile, Dave Hornbeck and others helped restructure Kentucky's education system by moving decision making to the local level and holding schools accountable for outcomes, not procedures.

Sixth, a group best described, perhaps, as the social crisis reformers concluded that schools cannot be renewed in isolation. We simply must look at the needs of high-risk families—and most especially at children. In response, Jim Comer's network of schools bring comprehensive services to young students. Our own Carnegie report, *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation*, called for a national strategy to assure that all children are well prepared for school.

Most recently we've had the national assessment reformers. Chester Finn, a vigorous advocate of this position, has argued persuasively 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 have been working on new evaluation tools, while the National Academy of Sciences, and other professional associations, contracted with the federal government to develop discipline-based standards.

In summary, the school reform movement of the 1980s was actually three quite separate initiatives—state-based, Washington led, and independent efforts. Taken together, they offered up a rich menu of renewal strategies. However, these efforts have been disconnected and, looking back, I'm convinced the reform movement would have been far more productive if we would have had a forum where various leaders could regularly meet together, sharing insights.

V.

In the end, however, what really matters are not the proposals or experimental projects, but the actual learning that's occurred. Just what evidence is there that the academic performance of students has improved since 1983?

Last week, a national study of student performance in mathematics showed gains in half the states. In reporting this story, one headline read: "Students in Many States Raise Math Scores Steeply." Another read, "Small Improvement Seen in U.S. Students Math Ability." Both were right, of course. Gains were made. But the problem is that we have no agreed upon "Dow Jones average" to monitor the overall health of education. As a result some analysts view the glass as half empty—others as half full.

On the down side, the composite ACT score is practically unchanged since 1983. That's true of the SAT's as well. And the National Assessment of Educational Progress, perhaps our best source, reports that students remain weak in writing, in reading comprehension, in science, and in civics.

On the bright side, we've had modest gains in math, and minority students have shown considerable progress in most subject areas, while still lagging behind their white counterparts.

But there's a deeper problem. To look only at overall school performance masks enormous discrepancies just below the surface. It's my own feeling that perhaps 15 to 20 percent of the nation's schools are doing very well. Consider, for example, that since 1982, nearly 2,000 public schools have received national recognition for excellence from the U.S. Department of Education.

At the same time, perhaps 30 to 40 percent of our schools range from good to mediocre—while at least a third or more are in desperately bad shape. These schools have, all too often, been bypassed by reformers—and yet it's here that the problem is most acute. The Carnegie report, *An Imperiled Generation*, declares, "The failure to educate adequately urban children is a shortcoming of such magnitude that many people have simply written off city schools. . . . We find it disgraceful that in the most affluent country in the world so many of our children are so poorly served."

VI.

Well, where does all of this leave us?

While we've had constructive action, and while some schools are succeeding and others hold their own, overall we've made only limited progress toward genuine reform. No one can conclude that the overall performance of public education in this country is adequate for the century ahead.

What's missing is a unifying vision of school renewal. In the decade of the 90s, we simply must find ways to set priorities and it's my own suggestion that we focus, with special urgency, on two of the nation's six education goals, both of which have wide support.

Specifically, let's embrace the first education goal and work aggressively to assure that all children come to school well prepared to learn. Excellence in education begins before school, even before birth itself, and yet, according to a Carnegie Foundation survey of kindergarten teachers, 35 percent of the nation's children came to school last year linguistically, physically, and socially ill-prepared. School readiness is an urgent mandate for the nation and if our youngest, most vulnerable children are neglected, excellence in education simply cannot be accomplished.

I also propose that special emphasis be given to the third education goal which calls for the assessment of students in basic subjects.

Critics worry, quite correctly I believe, that the national standards and assessment movement could impose rigid testing on all schools and suffocate reform. On the other hand, such an effort properly directed, could give the reform movement precisely the focus that's been lacking.

The national assessment effort could, for example, drive us back to the curriculum itself. It's one thing to talk about assessing students—but what precisely do we plan to measure? I urgently hope that we can move beyond the old Carnegie units and create, for the twenty-first century, a more coherent, more integrative course of study.

National assessment also should surely lead to the creation of a new generation of evaluation instruments that reflect more accurately the full range of human potential that Howard Gardner so vividly describes in his pathbreaking book, *Frames of Mind*.

Further, national assessment may force us to look more closely at teaching and at learning. After all, the goal of such evaluation should be to help all students succeed, not fail. This means having both achievement standards as well as delivery standards that hold schools accountable, not just students.

Finally, national assessment could even force us to examine school finance. After all, it's difficult to defend common outcomes if equality of resources is denied.

So, in an intriguing way, the national standards and assessment movement could, if well guided, serve as the fulcrum of reform by focusing the debate on issues at the very heart of education.

To give direction to this ambitious effort, I'd like to see a congressionally-chartered panel established, comprised of distinguished leaders from education, business, politics, parents, and students, too. In a 1989 speech at the Business Roundtable I suggested that since we have a Council of Economic Advisors, why not have a blue ribbon council to monitor the educational progress of the nation.

VII.

I'd like to end with one very personal observation. In Japan, where my granddaughter went to school, the term "sensei"—teacher—is a title of great honor. When all is said and done we simply must make teaching in this country an honorable profession—since it's in the classrooms of America where the battle for excellence, ultimately, will be won or lost.

A Nation at Risk contained this warning: "History is not kind to idlers." It's clear to me that time is running out and that, in the coming decade, our reform efforts simply must become more focused and more effective.

As a general rule I'm optimistic, especially before lunch, and without being too sentimental, it may be worth recalling that *A Nation at Risk*, with all of its headline-making hyperbole, ended on this optimistic note: "Despite the obstacle and difficulties, we are confident that we can meet our goal. We are the inheritors of a past that gives us every reason to believe that we will succeed."

I'd like to believe that before the next decade of reform has been completed this prediction, finally, will come true.