



Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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Published by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

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CHAPTER 13

Charting a New Course in American Education

Richard Riley

As the Congress takes up the challenge of reforming the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, it might be useful to step back from the contentious debate in Washington and think about the larger framework that defines the future of American education.

Consider this question. Why, after more than 20-plus years of reform, are we still running in place and not making the hoped-for progress in terms of improving student achievement? Experts offer a variety of reasons – lack of funding; the tyranny of low expectations; the continuing disconnect between K-12 and higher education; racial, economic and class disparities; and, from the conservative perspective, a hidebound public education system.

There may be some truth in each of these suggested reasons but, to my way of thinking, they miss the mark. I believe we are where we are because the majority of Americans still see the education of our children as just a family and local matter rather than a national priority. In poll after poll, the majority of Americans are satisfied with their local schools, but they view less favorably the quality of education on a nationwide basis. Education and business leaders, however, see clearly the growing economic competition from the rest of the world and realize that we are in the midst of a knowledge economy that absolutely requires an educated workforce.

In a very real way, we have not been able to connect the dots that link improving our education system to the vital, long-term interests of this nation. In part, this is the result of our individualistic ethos and the localism that has dominated American education for the last century. While other countries have well-established national education systems that are adapting more quickly to globalization, the United States still has a very decentralized and fragmented education system that increasingly is unable to respond to the changing dynamics of the integrated global economy in which we now live.

As a result, many of the important trends that define what I call our nation's Gross Intellectual Product (GIP) are headed in the wrong direction. Data from TIMSS tell us pretty clearly that we are losing ground to our foreign counterparts. Even though America's students start school on an equal footing with students from other developed nations, by the time they reach high school, one-third of our students – 1.1 million a year or, put another way, 6,000 students per day – have dropped out. And in many low-income schools, the graduation rate is less than fifty percent. These attrition rates continue in higher education, as well.

All of these facts and more are well known to the education community. But our national dilemma, at the moment, is that we continue to search for a new 21st Century model of education that works for the American people while, at the same time, responds more quickly to emerging global dynamics – some hybrid combination of family, local, state and national responsibility that creates the right working balance. And then we need a national thrust to carry this idea forward – much like *A Nation at Risk* did in the 1980s.

Advocates of national standards – and I am one of them – recognize that the Bush Administration's implementation of an uneven NCLB has engendered a great deal of hostility to the federal role in education. (When I say that I support national standards – not federal standards – I mean the establishment of state standards that are aligned and consistent with each other. You cannot have real accountability with uneven measures of achievement.)

Many states, led by Republican and Democratic governors alike, are in near revolt against Washington's insistence that theirs is the only way to implement NCLB. The unfolding student loan scandal and the discovery of cronyism in a federal reading grant program have served to weaken the position of those arguing for a stronger federal role in public education.

For their part, more than a few states have become adept at gaming NCLB by setting teacher quality and academic standards so low that they have little connection to the economic challenges their students will face as adults. The growing disparity between some state reading and math scores and NAEP scores is just another indicator that real progress is not being made.

Many states have worked hard to overcome the discrimination and racial disparity that have haunted public education in America for well over a century. However, we need to recognize that how we finance public education and commit other resources at the state level continues, all too often, to fall into enduring patterns of inequality.

Scholars from across the state of California recently wrote a comprehensive report, entitled *Getting Down to the Facts*, that describes the state system of finance and governance as “broken” and suggests that no amount of tinkering around the edges will solve the problem. The report goes on to note that the lack of alignment between the state's accountability system and its method for financing public education makes it impossible to bring about substantial public education reform.

Progress also is hindered at the local level by disputes over governance. Urban mayors increasingly are demanding the authority to improve their schools, putting them into direct conflict with local boards of education. To their credit, these mayors recognize the direct link between educational success and the economic vitality of their cities.

This governance problem is very deep and not easily fixed. What are we to do?

A first step might be to look back at what progress we have made, at least on the national level. A good place to start is the 1989 Education Summit convened by President George H. W. Bush and the 50 state governors, then led by Governor Bill Clinton.

Agreements were reached at this Summit on some very significant ideas – to set national education goals; to align federal programs with state education reform efforts; to encourage the Congress to provide the Secretary of Education with waiver authority; and to create a National Education Goals Panel to issue annual reports on the progress of the nation and states toward meeting the agreed-upon goals.

I do not think many people, at that time, grasped the significance of the roadmap that was laid out at the Summit. It was the first time that education had been made a national

priority, not just a priority for each of the 50 states. At this Summit, specific education goals were set to be reached by the nation by the year 2000. Although we did not reach the goals by that time, this exercise taught us a valuable lesson about how hard it is to achieve education reform at the national level.

In agreeing to this new national focus, the governors also insisted that the states remain the senior partner in K-12 education reform and that the federal government play a supportive role in state-led education reform efforts. The Summit also added a spark to the standards movement. It became clear immediately to then-sitting governors and to the members of the new Goals Panel that it was hard to reach for the national goals without a set of standards for core academic subjects. It was (and is) impossible to have real accountability without having something to measure.

During the Clinton years, we invested a great deal of effort in supporting the states in creating their own standards. As U.S. Secretary of Education for eight years, I also sought to position the federal government as the junior partner in this new relationship. Even then, the concerns of the states about the federal government's tendency to overreach were very real. It took months to persuade all 50 states to support the Goals 2000 legislation, which contained absolutely no federal mandates or regulations. It, along with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, did contain incentives for each state to develop challenging standards.

So you can imagine the surprise of many state leaders when the Bush Administration came forward with a compliance-driven federal approach in NCLB. Today, five years after the passage of NCLB, I suspect that more than a few governors and state legislatures rue the day that they agreed to a major role in education for the federal government.

Thus, we have a great need to find a new balance and a new working relationship between the federal government and the states. We must re-create a partnership that builds back the trust that has been damaged and develops a shared sense of priorities.

At a minimum, we need to recognize that the governance problem frames the NCLB reauthorization and use the ongoing NCLB debate to start developing a new national consensus on the importance of a high-quality education for all of our children. This consensus will not occur overnight. But I hope the issue will attract the interest of the various presidential candidates from both political parties.

I am encouraged that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation are committed to investing \$60 million in the Strong American Schools campaign, a project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, to put education reform on the national agenda. My friend, Roy Romer, a former Colorado Governor and, more recently, former Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent, is leading this effort.

As we work toward this national consensus, we must recognize that nothing is more critical than the high-quality teaching that occurs when well-prepared teachers work in schools organized for success – schools where effective teaching and learning grow out of a culture of collaboration and shared accountability for the achievement of every student. I wholeheartedly support the work being done in these areas by the National Commission

on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) and I am pleased to co-chair that organization with my good friend, Ted Sanders.

Regardless of whether NCLB is reauthorized this year, the next President of the United States must find a way to lift the public debate about education in such a way that the American people recognize that educational excellence is at the very foundation of our nation's security and long-term vital interests. America's moment as a world leader surely will pass if we continue to sputter along and allow our educational advantage to disappear.

At the same time, however, I believe that it would be a great mistake to insist on top-down reform, whether it is dictated by the federal government or well-meaning education reformers. This will do nothing to engender trust among our nation's governors and state and local education leaders.

It is clear to me that the Bush Administration overreached in implementing NCLB and mistakenly attempted to force improvement through a rigid, top-down federal regulatory approach that is more akin to the 1960s than the 21st Century. More preferable, in my view, is to provide federal incentives with state control and clear accountability.

At the same time, we cannot go back to the localism of the past that too often has perpetuated the class, racial and economic divisions that still define the American education experience for too many of our young people.

What, then, are we to do?

I believe that, at the national level, there is some merit to the idea of a "grand bargain" – a set of challenging national standards in core subjects that would include reading, math, science, history, social studies, music and the arts, civics and economics – in return for giving the various states greater flexibility and positive inducements to meet those standards. The standards may not be identical from state to state, but they should be consistent and aligned.

Some states will strive to meet those standards immediately, some states may try to game the system, as they do now, and some states may ignore national standards altogether and go their own way to try to improve student achievement. But over time, we will learn what works and what doesn't, and we will make adjustments. I can tell you from first-hand experience that there is a competitive streak in every governor of these United States and not one wants his or her state to be last in the national education standings. I also believe, though, that improvement and growth measurements should be included as important factors in determining those rankings.

In developing a new national consensus, I believe that we should build on the current efforts of various states that are coming together on their own to develop working partnerships.

Several projects provide models that can help move us to a new national consensus.

Achieve's American Diploma Project Network is a coalition of 29 states dedicated to aligning K–12 curriculum, standards, assessments and accountability policies. In another development, nine of those states have agreed to use one common, end-of-course Algebra II test beginning next year. In addition, ACT, the College Board and others are doing some innovative work to develop challenging core curriculum and assessments aligned to state standards.

We also must ensure that our teachers are well prepared to help students meet these curriculum standards. All of the standards and testing in the world will not help our children if we don't pay more attention to teaching quality. If the teacher is the most important factor in the education of our youth, as most of us believe, then the preparation of these teachers also must be held to a higher standard and be better aligned to the learning goals we set for our students. The work being done in this area by NCTAF in support of Teaching Academies that merge teacher preparation with practical clinical experience in urban classrooms is particularly promising. I am proud that the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, on whose board I serve, is actively supporting NCTAF's effort to expand our nation's pool of high-quality teachers, in addition to the Foundation's other important work to improve teaching and learning for all students through innovative school design.

We need many more projects like these that allow us to knit together at the state level P-16 education systems that are aligned and consistent and that prepare us to address the challenges of the 21st Century. The more interest we have in this uplifting research, the better our chance of reaching higher levels of achievement.

This process of building consensus through partnerships may seem less than orderly to some. However, I believe that building a national consensus without heavy, top-down compliance requirements – but with consistent alignments – will give us a much stronger and more dynamic American education system that will endure throughout the 21st Century.