The End of the Education Debate

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

The education-reform debate as we have known it for a generation is creaking to a halt. No new way of thinking has emerged to displace those that have preoccupied reformers for a quarter-century—but the defining ideas of our current wave of reform (standards, testing, and choice), and the conceptual framework built around them, are clearly outliving their usefulness.

The problem is not that these ideas are misguided. Rather, they are just not powerful enough to force the rusty infrastructure of American primary and secondary education to undergo meaningful change. They have failed at bringing about the reformers’ most important goal: dramatically improved student achievement.

The next wave of education policy will therefore need to direct itself toward even more fundamental questions, challenging long-held assumptions about how education is managed, funded, designed, and overseen. The exact shape of this next generation of education policy is still far from clear—but it is not too soon to think about how we have arrived at this point, and to draw lessons from what has and has not worked.

An Era of Reform

Contentious as our education debate has seemed, it has actually been defined by fairly broad agreement about the problems to be solved. That rough consensus—and the flurry of policy proposals that emerged from it—can trace their roots to A Nation at Risk, the 1983 report of the Reagan administration’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. Charged with assessing the performance of American

Chester E. Finn, Jr., is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and a senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution. He is the author, most recently, of Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut.
schools, particularly with an eye to international competitiveness, the commission found grave, systemic problems. “The educational foundations of our society,” the commissioners declared, “are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.”

Much of the problem, they concluded, stemmed from America’s disregard for measurable educational outcomes. And though the teachers’ unions and other staunch defenders of the status quo have resisted it, most reformers (on both the left and the right) have since come to accept the idea that academic performance—as measured by achievement tests, completion rates, and international comparisons, rather than by spending, intentions, or equity of access—should be the principal benchmark for assessing the success or failure of American schools.

In this view, the overriding mission of reform is to boost academic achievement in primary and secondary schools. Two further goals are related but subordinate: to narrow the learning gaps between haves and have-nots, and to help disadvantaged children escape dreadful inner-city schools through the creation of better alternatives. This three-pronged mission has given most education change agents their purpose for 25 years.

This is not to say, of course, that there is any unanimity about the best means of achieving these goals. Some reformers (especially but not exclusively on the right) have focused on the need for alternative schools to break the stranglehold of the education establishment. Their emphasis on competition has fostered the booming marketplace of school choice. It has yielded thousands of charter schools (and a growing battalion of for-profit and non-profit charter-management organizations), vouchers in a few places, tax credits in a few others, and scads of additional options—from home schooling and virtual schooling to magnet schools, statewide public-school choice, and International Baccalaureate programs.

Other reformers (more often found on the left and in the center) have focused on the need to improve the existing public-school system through testing. This emphasis has yielded statewide academic standards and evaluation methods, as well as considerable federal aid and pressure. The expanded federal role has been most evident in a thoroughly revamped National Assessment of Educational Progress (1988); the Clinton administration’s Goals 2000 Act (1994); the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act (2001); and, most recently, the “Race to the Top” component of the 2009 economic stimulus act, which will award competitive grants
These results-oriented reforms have been accompanied by much ancillary activity. They have yielded, for instance, vastly improved collection of achievement data, report cards on school performance, new ways of thinking about financing education, innovative organizations such as the New Schools Venture Fund and Teach for America, unconventional leadership in schools and districts, and a plethora of alternative pathways into the classroom that allow would-be teachers and administrators to avoid the traditional college-of-education miasma.

Yet even as these divergent emphases and priorities have defined the contours of the education-reform debate, its core has, by and large, consisted of widely shared aims. And certain elements of that reform consensus, and the changes it spawned, have anchored their place in the American educational mainstream. The central goal of boosting achievement, for example, is now well established—superimposed atop yesterday’s preoccupations with equity, disabled youngsters, and progressive pedagogies. We now judge schools first and foremost in terms of pupil achievement. We expect far greater transparency about student, school, district, and state performance, and we want that transparency to extend to pupil sub-groups, not just overall averages. We no longer take for granted that kids will attend the district-operated public schools in their neighborhoods, and that the only exceptions might be wealthy families and Roman Catholics. We no longer assume that superintendents must be career-long education professionals, or that school governance belongs exclusively to elected local boards. We no longer even assume that face-to-face contact with a teacher inside a building called a “school” is the only possible circumstance in which instruction and learning can fruitfully occur.

These are profound changes that have gained real traction in America’s psyche, laws, and classrooms. They have done much good, and we should strengthen and build on them. But the reform consensus that produced these valuable developments now seems to be fraying at the edges, if not actually unraveling.

THE DEMISE OF CONSENSUS

Perhaps the most visible example of this deterioration is the widespread anger among both education professionals and policymakers over the design and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. No sane
observer expects to see the kind of “universal proficiency” that this statute demands by 2014. Nobody thinks it makes sense to brand tens of thousands of schools as failures when many of them are successfully educating nearly all their pupils. Few believe it smart to set a single proficiency bar and focus only on students just below it, at the expense of both those far below and those already above. On the left, many insist that NCLB is “underfunded,” while on the right many bridle at its heavy-handedness and its seeming inability to foster more choices among schools.

Yet much of this backlash appears to be a kind of projection: NCLB stands in for the broader education-reform consensus, which increasingly finds itself lacking in advocates and defenders. The bipartisan agreement woven together in 2001 by President Bush and members of Congress from both parties (including, notably, the late Senator Edward Kennedy) has long since fallen apart; what remains of its approach is now thoroughly unpopular with the education establishment. The National Education Association, though a long-time Democratic sidecar, recently issued a 26-page single-spaced denunciation of Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s Race to the Top funding criteria—alleging that they place far too much emphasis on charter schools and insult teachers by suggesting that their performance should be gauged by their pupils’ achievement. The NEA, like many other education organizations and interest groups, wants Washington to revert to its earlier role as funder rather than reformer of American schools.

NCLB is now conventionally described as a “tainted brand,” and there is even some loose talk of “repealing” it. The latter reveals a failure to understand that this law is just part of a far broader approach to federal education policy—merely the most recent reauthorization of President Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act—and therefore remains the principal vehicle for channeling federal aid into K-12 education. The real argument surrounding NCLB is not about whether those longstanding funding channels should be preserved; of course they will be. The debate is about what strings should be tied to those federal dollars, and toward which reforms the funding should be aimed.

That question is increasingly at the center of a heated dispute—one that boils down to whether Uncle Sam’s proper role in K-12 education is to provide resources, demand changes, or simply get out of the way.
of states, districts, and parents. This divide is unlikely to be bridged any
time soon, particularly as two of the four leading congressional players
in this realm—Democratic senator Tom Harkin of Iowa and Republi-
can congressman John Kline of Minnesota, the chairman and ranking
member of the Senate and House education committees—have made
clear their dislike of NCLB and all that it stands for. (Harkin wants more
money, while Kline mistrusts federal activism.)

As No Child Left Behind inflames passions among professional edu-
cation reformers, it also highlights a broader backlash against testing
across much of the American middle class. It’s not that parents and voters
have turned against the principle of using of standardized tests to moni-
tor school and student performance: National surveys continue to show
2-to-1 support for the practice. The problem stems from parents’ concern
that their own children might be denied promotion or graduation based
on a test score; from voters’ confusion when their own upscale suburban
schools are deemed to be failing by state or federal accountability systems
even though most of the graduates do just fine; and from frustration
when parents—often prompted by teachers—conclude that the basic-
skills testing regime yields too much “drill and kill,” too little flexibility,
and insufficient attention to art, music, and other creative disciplines.

Such objections go to the heart of standards-based reform. Even as
Americans grow accustomed to judging schools by their results—and
even as they recognize that testing is the simplest, cheapest, most objec-
tive way of gauging and reporting those results—many still lament the
effects of testing on curriculum and instruction. They worry that the
testing regime erodes teacher professionalism and motivation, stunts
the individuality of some children while unfairly penalizing others,
and dumbs everyone down to elementary reading and math skills while
neglecting gifted students who already possess these skills. In a speech
last November, President Obama himself railed against making students
“fill out a bubble” and “master the basics,” urging that we instead assess
kids’ capacities in areas like “teamwork” and “entrepreneurship.” (Never
mind that such assessments are notoriously subjective and unreliable.)

There is no reason to expect an end to standards-based performance-
monitoring and evaluation. It is clear, however, that testing—particularly
the high-stakes use of test results to reward or penalize students and
teachers—has few friends outside the ranks of professional education
reformers.
For similar reasons, the idea of national educational standards—the natural companion to national testing—also finds itself under suspicion. It is true that a system of uniform academic expectations and assessments would rectify some shortcomings of state-specific standards (chiefly the dizzying discrepancies among them, and the resulting confusion regarding which schools and students are failing or succeeding). In fact, a recent federal study found that states’ “passing scores” have been drifting downward under pressure from NCLB—since each state can set its own standards for “passing,” and each has an incentive to lower the standard so that it “passes” as many schools as possible. And a recent Fordham Institute study concluded that whether a given school gets a passing grade under NCLB depends far less on the performance of its pupils than on the state in which it is located.

But while national standards could help fix the problem—and two groups are earnestly engaged in developing prototypes—they represent a controversial venture into uncharted territory, and it is far from clear that many states will take the plunge. National standards also risk unleashing negative forces in American education—including further curricular narrowing, harmful effects on states that got standards right in the first place, and the possible rekindling of culture wars over what knowledge and which skills matter most (and who gets to decide). Similar endeavors in the 1990s (President George H. W. Bush’s support for private groups working to set standards in particular subjects, and President Bill Clinton’s effort to launch “voluntary national testing”) went badly awry, and poisoned many people’s views of national standards and tests. As a consequence—and despite painstaking efforts by today’s architects of “common core” standards—there is not yet a firm consensus for moving in this direction. Nor is there any durable structural arrangement that could make national standards viable over the long term, since almost nobody wants the federal government itself to run this enterprise.

If standards and testing formed one arm of yesterday’s education-reform consensus, a push for new alternatives to traditional schools formed the other. But the reform ideas generally labeled “school choice” have lost some credibility, owing to the mediocrity of the actual schools they have produced. Far too many of these institutions deliver weak academic results or fall victim to organizational, political, and financial woes and shenanigans. Advocates of such alternatives have learned, to our sorrow, that while putting a “charter” sign on a schoolhouse door certainly
indicates potential, it is no guarantee of quality—or even of a genuinely different approach to education. Many of the people starting and running charter schools—most of them earnest and well meaning—either don’t really know what they’re doing or lack the capacity to do it well.

Moreover, not all charters are created equal. The quality of the schools fluctuates widely by state. (Our ability even to evaluate charters varies greatly, too, depending on who performs the evaluations, what methods they use, and which schools they examine.) A few jurisdictions—Massachusetts, New York, Illinois—are sparing in their distribution of charter contracts and, for the most part, check carefully to determine whether organizations that get the green light have what it takes to succeed. As a result, these states have relatively few charter schools, but their performance is impressive. Meanwhile, states like Arizona, Ohio, Texas, and California confer charters on nearly everyone who applies; as a consequence, they now have many charter schools but also wide discrepancies in charter quality and performance (tending, however, toward the mediocre). So even as Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby reports solid gains by charter pupils in New York City, Ohio’s school-rating system for academic year 2008-9 showed that just 16% of Buckeye charter pupils were in schools rated “excellent” or “effective,” while 55% of them attended schools on “academic watch” or in “academic emergency.” And Texas is home to some of America’s strongest charters—Houston is ground zero for KIPP and the “YES Prep” network—but also dozens of the weakest.

To be sure, one can make a powerful case that, in many places, these new schools have not been given a fair chance to succeed. Policymakers have kept them over-regulated, lacking in facilities, sorely under-funded, and subject to far too many bureaucratic hassles. It is unclear if the choice movement is failing to produce superior results primarily because of its own deficiencies or because of ideologically driven obstruction; likely the cause is some mix of the two. Still, the resulting mediocrity—regardless of whose fault it is—only aids foes of charters and choice who argue that this approach must be contained (if not repealed). And while regulatory burdens and short rations—more easily justified with every report of the schools’ lackluster performance—are unlikely to roll back charters entirely, they can still do serious harm.

Recent years have also brought a principled critique by influential scholars—E. D. Hirsch, Grover Whitehurst, and Diane Ravitch come immediately to mind—of both standards-based reform and school choice,
on the grounds that these changes neglect crucial issues of curriculum and instruction (and so neglect what actually goes on in classrooms between teachers and students). These education experts have forsaken the reform consensus; they now argue instead for an improved version of the “one best system” of American public schools— which harks back to the Horace Mann-era conviction that a single, uniform public-education system, run by professional educators, is the surest path to both literacy and civic unity. Such critics have been increasingly successful in persuading other reformers and policymakers of their concerns.

Their case is surely strengthened by the fact that, despite all the activity and energy surrounding education reform in recent decades, American test scores have remained essentially flat, graduation rates have remained essentially flat, and our international rankings have remained essentially flat. National Assessment (NAEP) scores have barely changed over the past 30 years. Recent years’ SAT scores have shown tiny gains in math, offset by declines in verbal performance. The two major international testing systems invariably find American students in the middle of the pack in math, science, and literacy, with scores generally lowest in the upper grades. Some upward bumps in the data do appear here and there, but there are just as many downward blips. In other words, 25 years of outcomes-minded reforms have yielded little (or nothing) by way of genuinely improved educational outcomes.

And while America has been treading water in terms of educational achievement, a number of European and Asian nations have strengthened their own performances. As recently as a decade ago, the U.S. could take some comfort from the fact that, while our test scores may have been so-so, our graduation, college-matriculation, and college-completion rates were the world’s highest. Today, however, half a dozen other developed countries surpass us.

It is hardly surprising that the apparent exhaustion of the education-reform consensus has been accompanied by exhaustion on the part of the American public (whose children have been caught in the middle of the debate), not to mention many policy elites and politicians. It is no coincidence that 2008 saw the first presidential election in two decades in which K-12 education reform did not loom large. In polls inquiring about public priorities, education has tended not to make the top-five list of concerns over the past few years; just a decade ago, it was routinely near the top. People seem weary of the topic, tired of unkept promises,
and fatigued by a seemingly endless parade of plans, schemes, initiatives, and pledges that always fail to solve the most basic problems. Savvy politicians have taken note, and avoid even talking about education. Better to focus on health care, the economy, Afghanistan, climate change, whatever. Education reform is yesterday’s topic.

These developments have created an opportunity for the defenders of the status quo in education. Large segments of the education system itself—the unions, the faculties of schools of education, school-board associations, and the like—never quite bought into the reform consensus, and continue to do their best to subvert it. They see both school choice and standards-based reforms as inimical to their interests, offensive to their philosophy of education, and insulting to their professionalism. So long as there was a reasonably robust bipartisan consensus backing serious education reform, they could not do much to halt its advance. But the public-school establishment is limitless in its capacity to exploit every fissure in the reform movement. Its goal, of course, is to re-empower itself, to expel from its temple the infidels that have invaded—all those unsanctified governors, legislators, mayors, business leaders, and policy wonks—and to restore something of the tranquility and hegemony it enjoyed before the early 1980s.

The exhaustion of the present wave of education reform thus creates a real danger. The gains made could well be lost, and the opportunity to build on what has worked and to find new avenues for meaningful change could easily be closed off. Reformers must therefore be aggressive in pursuing new means of improvement—but giving coherence and substance to a new approach will be no easy feat.

**BACK TO BASICS**

The erosion of the old consensus has not been followed by the emergence of any clear alternative. Some individual reformers and critics know what they want, of course, but no one way of thinking about education policy has taken hold. E. D. Hirsch, for example, wants a national K-8 curriculum aimed at forging culturally literate Americans. Charter critics want tighter regulation of all “schools of choice.” Some Republicans want greater freedom for states and parents; some Democrats want less. Secretary Duncan wants to transform the lowest-performing 5% of schools. A number of people obsessively want to promote “21st-century skills.” The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation wants more people to
go to college. McKinsey & Co. wants the United States to be more like Singapore. There is simply no unity—or even a broad coalition—built around a shared view of ends or means.

Instead, fault lines run in many directions. One such schism is plainly visible within the Democratic ranks. There, one finds “Democrats for Education Reform” on one side calling for more charter schools, merit pay, and results-based accountability for educators, and encounters teachers’ unions on the other side, defending the status quo. Also noteworthy is the near-simultaneous emergence on the center-left of two separate education-reform alliances: the Education Equality Project, which argues that the schools we have can produce stronger results, and the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, which contends that bigger societal changes must precede any major gains in school effectiveness. Duncan wants to be part of both, but has yet to show how he would pull off the straddle.

A schism can also be seen, albeit somewhat less vividly, among Republicans. Newt Gingrich, for example, aligns himself with New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein, African-American preacher Al Sharpton, and the “Education Equality” faction focused on narrowing achievement gaps. Meanwhile, South Carolina senator Jim DeMint, Michigan congressman Pete Hoekstra, and John Kline want the federal government to take a more hands-off approach. And governor-turned-education reformer Jeb Bush wants the entire country to emulate Florida’s model of charters, vouchers, standards, school-based accountability, better data, and a limited form of merit pay.

This fragmentation suggests that simply making minor tweaks to longstanding reform concepts will not suffice—and that the time has come to question old assumptions. American education today is faced with the challenge of—and the opportunity for—a serious rethinking from the ground up. Its traditional structures and governance arrangements have more than proven their inadequacy, and the causes of these unacceptable deficiencies may simply lie too deep to be resolved by measures commonly thought of as “reform.” Indeed, it is the underlying weakness of those structural arrangements that has made education reform so difficult—like trying to place a new hybrid engine atop a buggy meant to be pulled by a horse.

This means not only fighting to loosen the stranglehold of the teachers’ unions, as many reformers have tried to do for years, but also rethinking some of the premises and timeworn organizational arrangements of
the American system of education. For instance, it seems increasingly clear that our revered system of “local control” by elected municipal school boards cannot cope with today’s realities of metropolitanization, mobility, and interest-group politics. And familiar modes of financing local schools based on dramatically varying property values and income levels yield results that are neither equitable nor efficient.

Meanwhile, the “one best system” of public education — for all its appeal to Hirsch, Ravitch, and others — fails to accommodate diverse cultural, economic, and familial demands. State-level standards, assessments, and accountability schemes are not up to the challenges facing a modern post-industrial nation in an age of globalized competition, yet we have no sure mechanism for pushing this responsibility to the national level.

Our traditional approaches to preparing, licensing, deploying, and compensating educators, too, are ill-suited to contemporary career paths, lifestyles, and management practices. Separating education from other human services and treating it as a quasi-independent domain within the public sector is costly, redundant, and irrational. Traditional means of delivering instruction fail to make good use of today’s technologies. And our “marble cake” policy structure of local, state, and national responsibility for schools has proven better at blocking needed change than advancing it.

One can fairly view No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top initiative as the latest and most forceful efforts to make the old structure work better — by creating in Washington incentives meant to prod state and local education systems to change specific practices and to deliver better and more uniform results. NCLB tightened the screws; wielding stimulus dollars, clear priorities, and new regulations, Duncan is tightening them further still. And the reaction is predictable. Indeed, the backlash to NCLB — and the conniving, finagling, pushing-back, and obsessing over Race to the Top dollars — is the old system’s desperate struggle to retain its prerogatives while stretching just enough to avoid forfeiting federal money.

But the old system is itself obsolete, and 40 years of sad experience show that further tugging and prodding from the banks of the Potomac is not going to modernize it. Any successful redesign will require a clear-eyed assessment of what has and has not worked in the effort to achieve the last generation’s reform goals, and must open itself to new aims. It will demand long, concerted effort by experts, civic and business leaders, educators, parents, and policymakers. And while it must be realistic
about politics and the difficulties of transition, any overhaul of American education must also be informed by an overarching vision of the kind of system it is after. That vision, more than the details of individual reform proposals, may be what is most sorely needed now.

**rethinking reform**

The next wave of education reform will require both the right and the left to let go of some long-held premises about education policy. Conservatives will need to see, for instance, that local control and funding are no panacea; that the difference between more private-school choice and more public-school flexibility, accountability, and variety is not as great as it might seem; and that national standards and tests — for all their flaws and risks — may be essential to meaningful improvement in student performance.

The left, meanwhile, will need to see that the dream of a single best public-school system, with the teaching profession largely held apart from the usual standards and practices of professional life, simply will not work in 21st-century America. On the contrary, the model of self-governing schools — whether private or public — with significant control over their own operations, staffing, curricula, and budgets is far more likely to serve the ends of performance-based reform.

A renewed commitment to those goals, rather than to the particular means pursued during the past several decades of reform efforts, may help both liberals and conservatives see their way to bold, constructive ideas for improving American schools — and toward alternatives to schools as we know them. It is too soon to say exactly what these proposals will involve, but it is increasingly clear that the existing channels of education reform can no longer lead to much progress.

It will not be easy for any of the players in the contemporary debate to admit that it is time to pursue a new approach. But only by returning to basics can we hope to achieve what must always remain the essential goals of education policy: to provide all children with the knowledge they must have to be informed American citizens, and to give them the skills they will need to compete in tomorrow’s global economy.