A Nation at Risk stunned the establishment and captivated the public when it was released 20 years ago. This was something that hadn't been seen before in American education—a startling indictment of a system that most regarded as sacrosanct. Condemning it was considered nearly blasphemous.

Nevertheless, Risk said, all was not lost. Its authors made a number of policy recommendations that they believed would improve American education before another generation fell victim to its empty promises. Now that everyone knew what the problem was, someone would surely get around to fixing it.

No one did.

To be sure, some progress has been made over the past two decades. For example, we have determined definitively—meaning with scientific research, not simply because someone said it in print—that there are some basic ingredients that are necessary for a good education. We know, for example, that teacher quality counts more than almost any other external factor, including class size or neighborhood attributes, in determining academic success. We know that phonics instruction produces the kind of real results that gimmicky “whole language” approaches can’t replicate. We know that competition—through vouchers, charter schools, and even simply a diverse array of school districts and private schools in a geographic area—creates an environment in which successful schools thrive.

Yet we risk another damning and depressing report 20 years from now if we simply assume that our advanced knowledge of what works can make it real for all of the nation’s children. Vast repositories of best practices and sage advice do no more to educate a child than a blueprint does to get a house built. Ideas need to be put into action, not just onto paper. Doing so is easier said than done, and, unfortunately, we don’t always make it easy on ourselves.
School Leadership

First of all, the nation suffers from a distinct confusion over who is in charge of what. We may know that learning depends on teachers’ solid understanding of their subjects, their clear appreciation of and enthusiasm for those subjects, and their willingness to tailor their instruction to the needs of each student. But that means little unless we also understand that the only people capable of ensuring quality instruction in a school are that school’s leaders. Governors, legislators, and even local school boards may all say they know “what works” in instruction, but they simply cannot create that quality with the stroke of a legislative pen, such as when they mandate phonics instruction.

They are also often unaware that the rules, policies, and laws that they have written or simply enforced may be direct impediments to creating an ideal classroom setting. Funding students based on where they reside, rather than where they attend school, for example, is a practice as old as the system itself, and just as outdated. That same finance system also mandates that districts receive their appropriation based on their enrollment at a single date during the year, funding schools for an entire year for a child who may have left his school the next day. Archaic funding policies like these do little to encourage innovation within the system.

Proactive teachers, principals, and administrators are both the gatekeepers and the keymasters of education reform. Any changes in the system must be carried out by educators working at the school level. Without great school and classroom leaders to make sure reforms are implemented, even the most ambitious and sweeping policy changes can sputter out by the time they hit your children’s classrooms.

In the world of schooling, the majority of highly successful turnaround cases seem to be those where an individual educator had not only the right idea about instruction, but also the tenacity to bend or break those rules that would have prevented meaningful changes at the school level. But it should no longer be the case that only the lucky students get to learn in schools where teachers have decided to work against standard expectations.

It is critical, then, that education reformers begin recruiting, grooming, and mentoring potential leaders not just for key policymaking positions in the hierarchy of education, but for positions in which they would lead, innovate, teach, and inspire. Those who matter most in the reform movement are those in the school. It’s time to start putting leaders in place in the classroom and at the school level first.

It won’t be easy. As the Koret Task Force’s report continually observes, the resistance to change within the system is not only intense, but also, in the majority of cases, overwhelming. Any effort to improve or change education is usually met with a backlash from unions and other organizations that sense that changes in the way the system works can often cut into their power base.

In 2000, for example, Arizona voters approved Proposition 301, an initiative meant to inject funding directly into classrooms, implement performance pay for teachers, encourage school-based management, and complete a statewide system for collecting and reporting data. Voters understood that passage of this proposition would mean more money in their classrooms, better pay for the teachers in their schools, more control at the local level, and more information for parents.

That didn’t sit well with the unions, however. After the proposition passed, state union representatives immediately lobbied the state attorney general to issue a “clarification” explaining that performance pay actually meant an across-the-board bonus for every teacher in a school or district, regardless of performance, and that funding classrooms directly actually meant passing the funding through the district first so the district, rather than the school, can make the major funding decisions. That was the end of direct classroom funding, and school-based management went with it—and that was essentially the end of the reforms of Proposition 301. Where the voters had seen an opportunity, the unions saw a threat. It’s likely to continue that way for quite some time.

It is reasonable to assume that the next generation of potential leaders will come from pipelines other than colleges of education—a virtual breeding ground for educational stagnation—such as alternative certification programs for teachers. The Koret report rightly endorses choice, but choice must apply to the adults, as well as the children, in the education system. Alternative certification programs like the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence—which provides teachers with a certification based on their mastery of subject area and excellence in classroom management—need to be endorsed by states as a viable route to ensuring excellence in the classroom. Teachers need to be recognized for their ability to teach, not for their ability to toe the party line in a teaching college. Only in this way can we hope to truly professionalize the teaching profession and pave the way for needed changes in tenure, performance-based pay, and other policies that contribute to the transparency in the system that Koret envisions.

Unintended Consequences

Shaming the education establishment into doing the right thing—as Risk attempted to do—only motivated educators to defend their turf and the status quo more creatively. As a result, reformers have let the establishment define the terms of the debate. Advocates for school choice suddenly become “anti-public school.” Those who want to professionalize teaching are labeled as unsympathetic to the “plight” of teachers. Those who push high academic standards for all students are scolded for supposedly forcing poor children to drop out of school.

Reform is presently being resisted in an act of self-preser-
BECAUSE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM COULD NOT BE SHAMED INTO MOVING 20 YEARS AGO, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS FINALLY TRIED TO MOVE THE SYSTEM ITSELF.