TWENTY YEARS AGO A Nation at Risk set off alarms about the quality of America’s schools, and ever since our country has been caught up in a frenzy of education reform. But the frenzy hasn’t produced much. After untold billions of dollars and lofty reform packages too numerous to list, very little has been accomplished.

Why such disappointing results? Many factors are no doubt responsible, but much of the answer rests with the politics of education. The problem is that, with rare exceptions, reforms that make it through the political process tend to be those that are acceptable to established interests and that leave the fundamentals—and problems—of the current system intact. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

This status quo bias arises from three facts of political life. The first is that the teacher unions are far and away the most powerful actors in American education. Their tremendous financial resources allow them to influence campaigns at all levels of government, and their huge memberships—more than 3 million total, spread across virtually every electoral district in the country—enable them to turn out armies of activists in support of union-endorsed candidates. No other group can claim such an awesome capacity for in-the-trenches political action.

The second fact of life is that the teacher unions use their power to resist true reform. Their fundamental interests have to do with protecting and extending their collective bargaining arrangements, protecting members’ jobs, enhancing members’ pay and working conditions, defending members’ rights in the workplace, and increasing the demand for teachers. These interests need have nothing to do with what is best for children, schools, or the public interest. They are classic ...
vested interests—interests rooted in the existing structure of public education—and they are threatened by serious efforts to transform the system and to make it more productive.

The third fact of life is that American government is built around checks and balances that make new legislation difficult to pass and blocking it relatively easy. To be adopted, a reform must make it past subcommittees, full committees, and floor votes in two houses (not to mention filibusters, holds, and other obstacles), and the executive must sign it. This means that reformers must win political victories at each step to achieve their ends, while opponents need to succeed at only one step to block. By the design of our political system, then, the advantage always goes to interest groups that want to keep things the way they are. Which is precisely what the teacher unions want. These are the elements that, taken together, generate a politics of the status quo. The teacher unions are extraordinarily powerful, they have a strong self-interest in resisting change, and they operate within a political structure that magnifies their power by making it easy for them to block change. This is why true reforms are either defeated or eviscerated, and why the reforms we get don’t change things much.

Mainstream Reforms

In the wake of Risk, the driving force for change came from business groups and state governors. Business groups were deeply concerned about a faltering economy and the growing threat of international competition. They saw a mediocre education system as a big part of the problem—and they demanded action. Governors were the politicians who responded. They were held responsible, by both business and the public, for doing something to improve the schools, and their popularity and careers hung in the balance. Education reform became the politically smart thing to do.

But how to do it? Not experts themselves, governors and business leaders turned to experts within the education community, particularly academics from education schools—whose advice was predictably mainstream. The way to improve the schools, these experts argued, was to spend more money, raise teacher salaries, toughen graduation requirements, and strengthen teacher certification and training, among other things: reforms that could be pursued without changing the basic structure of the system. As a result, the tidal wave of reforms that swept across America involved almost nothing that was threatening to the teacher unions. Indeed, the unions had much to cheer about, because the reform movement gave them golden opportunities to press hard for what they wanted anyway—more spending—and to claim that they too were dedicated reformers.

With mainstream reforms doing little to change the system, real reformers generally agreed by the late 1980s that their efforts were not working. The notion spread that incremental changes were inadequate for dealing with the system’s deeper problems, that significant improvement called for a restructuring of the system itself.

This shift in perspective led to a surge of support for two major movements that soon took on lives of their own: the choice movement and the accountability movement. In other respects, however, the newfound concern for restructuring didn’t amount to much. Intellectually it served as little more than a big tent under which a hodgepodge of ideas—from decentralization to professional development to the teaching of higher-order thinking—could be packaged as exciting, break-the-mold reforms. Which they weren’t. There was no grand vision of how the system should be changed, no agreement whatsoever on what it might mean to restructure.

This tradition of reform-as-tinkering has been maintained to the present day, with all the familiar proposals—augmented by a new favorite, reductions in class size—continuing to occupy much of the reformist agenda. Why are the states investing so heavily in reforms that hold so little promise? The answer is that, despite their ineffectiveness, they are political winners. They are popular with the public; the
education school experts make “scientific” claims on their behalf; the business community tends to believe these claims; and the teacher unions either support them or find them innocuous—and so don’t exercise their blocking power. From a political standpoint, mainstream reforms are all pluses and no minuses.

The Accountability Movement

The greatest achievement of Risk is not that it generated countless education reforms. Most of them have been a waste of time and money. Its greatest achievement is that it directed attention to the problems of public education, brought political power to bear on the side of reform, and gave impetus to the movements for accountability and choice—both of which, while fighting against long political odds, have the capacity to transform American education for the better.

As the 1980s drew to a close, what made accountability so attractive was that, unlike mainstream reforms, it offered a coherent way of thinking about the problems plaguing the system and a plan for righting them. Moreover, because it was a top-down approach—a demand for effective management that business leaders, governors, and the public could readily understand—it came across as a natural extension of mainstream reform efforts to make the existing system work better. It was a reform that everyone could agree was desirable.

Well, almost everyone. The teacher unions and their education allies had a very different view. For the goal of the movement was to hold them (or their members) accountable, and that was something the unions wanted to avoid. Historically, teachers and administrators have been granted substantial autonomy, and their pay and jobs have been almost totally secure, regardless of their performance. A very cushy arrangement. So why would they want to have specific goals thrust upon them, their performance evaluated in a serious manner, their pay linked to performance, and their jobs made less secure? They wouldn’t. In their view, the absence of accountability was a terrific deal, and they wanted to keep the deal they had.

With accountability so popular, however, the unions and their allies found themselves in a political bind. Full-fledged opposition would have put them on the wrong side and pegged them as self-interested defenders of the status quo. This being so, they opted for a more sophisticated course of action: to “support” accountability, participate in its design—and block any components they found threatening.

From the unions’ standpoint, most aspects of the typical accountability plan can be “supported” at little cost. After all, there is nothing about curriculum standards that is inherently threatening to union interests. The same can be said for tests of student achievement. True, standards that are truly rigorous can set teachers up for criticism (when students fail to meet them), and achievement tests can provide a devastatingly precise means of conveying the bad news. But this is why unions participate in the design process: to ensure that only “appropriate” standards and tests actually get adopted.

Standards and tests become truly threatening only when they are backed by formal consequences. The unions’ prime goal is to see that this doesn’t happen. Their highest priority is to ensure that there are no sanctions for poor performance, and above all that there is no weeding-out process by which the school system rids itself of mediocre or incompetent teachers. No one should ever lose a job. Other kinds of economic sanctions—pay cuts, school closings—are forbidden as well.

Another union bugaboo is pay for performance, which in a genuine system of accountability would typically be the key means of rewarding productive behavior, discouraging unproductive behavior, and introducing proper incentives. The unions insist that pay be determined by formal criteria—seniority, education—that are not measures (or causes) of how much students learn and that any teacher can satisfy. Bad teachers and good teachers get paid the same. No one has an economic incentive to perform.

When consequences are actually adopted (against their wishes), the unions do everything they can to ensure that they take the form of positive inducements—and thus more money in the hands of teachers and schools. There should be only winners. No losers. If performance is to be rewarded, the unions insist that the rewards go to whole schools rather than individual teachers—which dilutes the impact on teacher incentives, but induces less competition among union members. Even for low-performing schools, moreover, the unions insist that the consequences be positive: more money, more training, more programs—things that the unions would be pressuring for anyway and that do nothing to promote the right incentives.

Because of union power, then, the politics of education...
tends to produce accountability systems in which the requirements of effective management are thoroughly violated. The typical system includes no mechanisms to weed out poor teachers, no attempts to pay teachers based on their performance, no real sanctions for low performance, and no logical connection between rewards and incentives.

The truth is, today’s accountability systems are pale reflections of the real thing. They look like accountability systems. And they are called accountability systems. But they can’t do their jobs very well, because they literally aren’t designed to.

School Choice
School choice has provoked more political conflict than any other education reform because it is the most threatening to established interests, especially union interests. And the unions, by no coincidence, are vehement in their opposition.

Accountability, at least, leaves the traditional top-down system intact. But choice unleashes new forces that work from the bottom up to redistribute power, to give schools and teachers strong incentives to perform, and to hold them accountable—through consequences that are automatically invoked (the loss of kids and resources)—if they don’t do a good job. It also directly threatens the unions with a loss of members and resources, with far greater difficulties in organizing new schools, and with losses in power, control, and perquisites.

When it comes to vouchers, the strongest form of choice, the unions have drawn a line in the sand and used every ounce of their power to block. With great success. But while this has had a huge impact on the progress of education reform, the unions’ success has not been total. The chink in their armor is that the voucher movement has come to focus its attention on disadvantaged children, particularly in failing inner-city schools, and polls show that poor and minority families are now the most enthusiastic supporters of choice in the country. This has expanded both the constituency and the intellectual and moral arguments for vouchers, put the unions and their allies (including the Democrats) in the awkward position of opposing the poor in fierce political battles—and led to major voucher victories in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida (not to mention the Supreme Court). It has also led to the proliferation of privately funded voucher programs, which the unions have been powerless to stop, and which now enroll some 100,000 disadvantaged kids nationwide.

Choice advocates have also fought hard for two other kinds of market-based reforms: charters and privatization. From the unions’ standpoint, charters are hardly desirable. If seriously pursued, they create competition, allow teachers and students to move from unionized to nonunion public schools, and reduce union power and control. Still, because the money and the kids remain in the public sector, charters are not nearly the threat that vouchers are—and the unions have tried to salvage their public image, as well as give their Democratic allies much-needed wiggle room on the choice issue, by following a more accommodationist strategy.

But how to “support” charters without harming union interests? As with accountability, the unions have solved this problem through the politics of program design, using their power to insist on strict limits on the number of new charters, to require that charters be authorized by local school districts (which have incentives to say no), to require that charters be covered by union contracts, to subject them to as many rules and regulations as possible, and so on. While charters have become the consensus approach to school choice in American education, the fact is that today’s charter systems offer very little choice or competition—which is just the way the unions want it.

Privatization is another target of union power. For reformers, the idea is that school districts or chartering agencies should be able to contract with private firms to operate public schools—especially failing ones—in order to take advantage of the greater flexibility, expertise, efficiency, and inno-
The dire condition of disadvantaged kids in failing urban schools will prompt more and more liberals to embrace school choice, leaving the teacher unions to fight their battles alone.

The Future

So are the aspirations of Risk doomed to go unmet? The answer depends on whether the teacher unions can be dislodged as the supreme gatekeepers of education reform and their blocking power drastically reduced. Obviously, there can be nothing easy about this. The unions are already powerful, and they will use that power to try to defeat any attempt to take away their power.

Nonetheless, there is a power transition under way even now. It is almost imperceptible, but it is happening. The main sources are the very reforms that the unions have been fighting against for the past two decades: school choice and school accountability. These reforms have gained a foothold in American education despite union opposition, and, as they expand their turf in the years ahead, they will eat away at the foundations of union power.

This is especially true for school choice. Over the long haul, the dire condition of disadvantaged kids in failing urban schools will prompt more and more of today’s liberal opponents of choice—notably the civil-rights groups and many urban Democrats—to begin representing their own constituents on this issue, leaving the teacher unions to fight their battles alone. Thus isolated, the unions will lose more of their battles, and choice will continue to expand, if slowly and episodically. As it does, it will have an increasingly corrosive effect on union power. By allowing kids to leave regular public schools for alternatives and by forcing unionized schools to compete with nonunion schools, choice ensures that the unions will lose members and resources—and thus become smaller and less politically powerful. As this happens, they will be less able to defend the status quo against the relentless challenges of reformers, and there will be more and increasingly stronger reforms—which will undermine their power still further, thus accelerating reforms. And so it will go.

This process may take decades, and no system emerging from politics is likely to meet our highest expectations. But it stands to be a significant improvement over the system we have now, combining top-down accountability with the energizing, bottom-up forces of choice and competition to put a premium on performance and to drive out much of the complacency that has for so long been the norm in American education. This, I think, will be the true legacy of Risk. Not the tidal wave of mainstream reforms usually associated with it, but the far more important achievements of accountability and choice—in changing American education for the better, and in moving us beyond the politics of the status quo.

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