

Taking on



I didn't know what exit we were passing, but Christopher Cerf, the six-foot New Jersey commissioner of education, curled yogi-like in the back-seat of a small state-issued Chevy Impala, didn't seem to be paying attention to the 18-wheelers roaring by as we flew along the New Jersey Turnpike. "I've worked for a president, and I've worked for a mayor, and I've worked for a governor, and the mayor ran a city as big as most states," he was saying. "What draws me to this work is the same thing that draws me, I have to say, to wilderness canoeing. When you go to the head of a rapid and you're trying to go downstream—it's the rocks that make it fun."

This is a guy who has an astute appreciation for the challenges of education reform, and relishes them. In fact, the 57-year-old Cerf has been an avid wilderness camper since leading student canoeing expeditions near Hudson Bay in the 1970s. The tall, athletic, gray-suited father of three was appointed Chris Christie's education czar for New Jersey in January 2011 and now oversees the Garden State's 2,500 public schools, 1.4 million students, and 110,000 teachers in more than 600 school districts. New Jersey's is a complex and troubled public school system: although the state ranks in the top 5 on most nationally normed tests (NAEP, SAT, ACT), it has one of the worst achievement gaps in the country—50th out of 51 in 8th-grade reading, for example. The mandate from Christie was to close it. And Cerf, fresh from a stint as a deputy chancellor for Joel Klein in New York City, has a rather straightforward plan. As he says, "Rather than working to change the organization, you shut the old organization down and transfer relevant parts into the new organization that you're building and that's exactly what we're doing."

The Mission

The drive from Trenton to Newark was the third part of an interview that began in downtown Newark several days earlier,

New Jersey

A conversation with Chris Cerf By PETER MEYER

in a large, bare office that looks out over Jersey's troubled largest city. Cerf uses it as a transit station, a temporary office while on his way to or from meetings in the state's more populated eastern counties, his home in a northern suburb, or across the Hudson in New York City. I had caught up with him for part two of our interview in his official Trenton office, 50 miles to the south and west, where the state's education department is headquartered and where he has lively paintings drawn by schoolchildren on the walls.

A lawyer who has argued two cases before the Supreme Court and served as a White House counsel in Bill Clinton's first term, Cerf exhibits an appreciation of big ideas and broad trends as he explains the road forward. "I say straight out that there are many, many interests at work in public education," he explains. "There are the interests of children, of course, which everyone talks about. There are the interests of employees, who have a perfectly legitimate set of interests to guard against arbitrariness and get as much economic benefit out of their work as is possible. There are commercial interests, like vendors and publishers.... The 600 districts in New Jersey have their interests as well: in expanding their power, their authority, their institutional permanence.... But the great myth of public education is that the Venn diagram of those interests is perfectly intersecting. There are areas of substantial overlap, but many areas do not. I represent the interests of the children of New Jersey, pure and simple. When there is a conflict between interests, and you would be amazed at how many issues come my way where you actually have to make a call between one interest and the other, I'm with the children. And I make that clear."

Anyone who has dipped his or her toe in the waters of school reform knows the hazards, the rocks, of siding with the children. And Cerf did not live through the Klein years without suffering the slings and arrows of unions and their friends. "Cerf devised a cockamamie plan to reorganize the NYC school system," wrote Class Size Matters director Leonie Hamson in a lengthy *Huffington Post* attack not long after he took the reins in New Jersey. "Clearly, the man cannot be trusted; and Cerf's persistent proclivity towards prevarication, political smear campaigns and the privatization of public schools shows that he is not fit to run New Jersey's education system."

Cerf is neither rattled by such attacks—he certainly doesn't like them—nor defensive. "One thing you have to have in this

business is a very thick skin. But you also must be willing to be almost righteous in your pursuit of your objective." Cerf brings to the reform task a keen awareness of political necessities. "The second thing you need is a sense of what you are trying to accomplish. American public education has been extremely unclear about what success looks like, and I think that's one of the sources of confusion and division."

Cerf lists some of the prevailing notions about the purpose of an education: "to facilitate the melting pot, advance democratic values, educate the masters of the universe and their heirs to continue to run the world, and to have everybody else get enough of an education so they could go on to some kind of trade—and so on." And to explain his own motivating principle, he cites the much-maligned No Child Left Behind Act. "One of the extraordinary powers of No Child Left Behind," he says, "is that it attempted to articulate a vision that this is about every child getting a sufficient education." That is his goal in the Garden State.

Up for the Challenge

If there is a model for the perfect modern education-reform leader, Christopher Cerf surely qualifies as that person. After a career that includes stints teaching high school history, vetting nominees for President Clinton's first presidential administration, running a couple of businesses (Edison Schools and Sangari Global Education), and helping Joel Klein reinvent New York City's education system, he is arguably one of the most seasoned education-reform leaders in the land. Smart, tough, tenacious, and impassioned, Cerf seems to be enjoying himself. "It's a job I didn't need," he says. "It's a job I can't afford. I'm at a certain point in life where having the title is not particularly meaningful to me."

Cerf spent his early years in Washington, D.C., where his father, with a Yale Ph.D. in political science, worked for a foreign policy organization used by Congress before joining the Kennedy administration as a deputy assistant secretary of commerce for international relations. His mother became a homemaker to raise Chris and his two brothers.

"My father, who has been gone now since 1974," says Cerf, "was a child of the Depression, grew up in a very lower-middle-class environment in Chicago and Milwaukee, like so many people of that generation." He was the first of his family to go

to college, which was cut short by World War II, where he served as a Navy pilot. After the war, he worked as a secretary for the newly organized Central Intelligence Agency, in Germany, where he met his future wife, a translator for the agency. Both were 22. “This was right after the war,” says Cerf. “At the time, the late 1940s, the CIA was more like the Peace Corps. What do you do when you come out of college and need a job? You get an entry-level job with the government and you see foreign countries, which my father described as about as glamorous as counting freight cars.” Cerf’s mother had already had something of a glamorous life; at least she had “a really extraordinary father,” recalls Cerf of his grandfather. William McGovern was, by training, an anthropologist, by avocation an explorer and adventurer. “He was allegedly one of the very first non-Asians to go to Lhasa,” Cerf recounts. “He was lost in the Amazon for a year. He spoke seven languages. He ran naval intelligence for FDR during World War II. He was a Buddhist monk for part of his life. He was a very quirky guy, lived out of a suitcase growing up.”

After Kennedy was killed, Cerf’s dad took a job running a Boston foundation, and for middle and high school the young Cerf attended “a funky little private school called the Commonwealth School. It was extremely diverse, not only racially but also socially.” It was at Commonwealth that Cerf fell in love with history and the big ideas that have energized it, and decided to be a teacher. He sailed through Amherst, then headed to Cincinnati Day School, where he taught AP U.S. history and government, modern European history, and one middle section (“to keep me humble,” he says). Nurturing his other passion, and taking a page from his grandfather’s playbook, Cerf led trips to remote regions of northern Canada. “Two of us would take a group of 10 or 14 kids and literally not see another human being for 40, 45 days. This is some of the most empty terrain left on the planet, with wolves and caribou and moose. It’s a very influential part of who I am today.” And Cerf certainly recognizes the similarities between white-water canoeing and education reform. “If it was a straight shoot, it wouldn’t be very interesting,” he says, “so the ability to advance a policy agenda in an environment that is entirely set up to thwart it is a real art form. It involves interpersonal engagements. It involves political judgments. It involves designing policies and selling policies and dealing with interest-group politics,



Commissioner Cerf speaks with his deputy, Andrew Smarick, and assistant deputy, Barbara Gantwerk.

dealing with people who are on your side but who may have a political focus that can get in the way of a policy objective.”

A Seasoned Leader

What got Cerf to the top of Christie’s education commissioner wish list was a remarkable record of top-drawer political, legal, and educational experience. He had given up his high school teaching career when his new wife decided to pursue a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Rutgers. “Well, I guess we’re married,” Cerf recalls telling his wife. “If you’re moving, I’m moving, too.” Cerf applied to a number of “Ivy” history programs and law schools and eventually chose Columbia’s law school. Several years later he had earned the prestigious job of editor in chief of the school’s law review. “That opened up lots of horizons for me,” says Cerf.

He spent his first summer in law school at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund doing civil rights litigation. He worked his second summer at a large Wall Street law firm, “and it took me about five minutes to realize that that was not a path that I had any interest in pursuing,” he says. But he didn’t have to make that choice right away because he was offered a clerkship with J. Skelly Wright, the judge who had overseen the post-*Brown* era school integration in New Orleans and Washington, D.C. The following year he was asked to be a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. He then took a job working for a very small D.C. law firm called Onek, Klein & Farr, a fortuitous choice since this was the firm of Joel Klein, an accomplished litigator and budding antitrust lawyer who, years later, would bring Cerf to New York City to help rebuild the nation’s largest school system.

In fact, Cerf found his own way to education reform. After arguing his cases before the Supreme Court (one win, one

interview

CHRISTOPHER CERF MEYER

loss), he joined Bill Clinton's campaign team, then went to work in the White House counsel's office. "It is an extraordinary experience to drive your car into the West Wing parking lot every day, work in the White House, have meetings with the president and with all the people who are in the newspapers every day," he says. He left just before the end of Clinton's first term, wooed away by a brash former magazine publisher (he rescued *Esquire* magazine in the 1980s) and entrepreneur to help start an education company. Cerf ran Edison Schools for six years, shepherding Chris Whittle's revolutionary idea into more than 150 schools in dozens of cities across the country.

"Not to rise up in defense of an organization which I haven't been with in five years," says Cerf, "but Edison absolutely succeeded. It was the point of the spear in the school reform movement. We had very, very high standards and we were on the leading edge of data-driven decision making.... And if you cut through the blather on the achievement record of Edison Schools, you'll find that it was materially higher than other comparable schools in their districts, including in Philadelphia." And it was with Edison that Cerf learned "the power of politics to thwart the effort. I'm not just talking about the unions, but there is a tremendous and deep resistance—here we are in the center of capitalism, right—there is a very deep resistance to the private sector that's embedded in the culture of public schools."

A Bold Vision

Cerf was to see that deep resistance up close and personal when he came to New York City as Joel Klein's chief transformation officer. He and Klein had a similar view of the world, which Cerf explains this way: "We need to be brutally honest about the depth of the issues that are confronting us. That we live in a nation where equality of opportunity is what differentiates us from all that came before." He sees education reform in broad nation-making, moral terms. "The great vision of the American experiment is that you could transcend your birth circumstances to become someone different from your parents, and public education is meant to be the catalytic agent of that central ideal." But that ideal, says Cerf, "is a great big lie if you are born into economic disadvantage.... It is deeply distressing to me, as it is and was to Joel, that we tolerate this. At a fundamental moral level it's just deeply wrong, and we need to shout from every mountaintop the wrongness of that."

Translating that moral challenge to real reform, on the ground, is what has

eluded so many education-reform efforts. "Government is organized to block change rather than advance it," says Cerf. "At every level, someone can sweep into a meeting and put a wrench in the spokes." Thus he is spending time establishing the process by which he will dismantle, then rebuild, New Jersey's education system. He has been "incredibly explicit," he says, about "the definition of success for us, [which] is that we dramatically increase the number of children, regardless of birth circumstances, who graduate from high school ready for college and career." He has set out four pillars on which to build the new system: accountability, talent, high academic standards, and innovation. Cerf threw out the organizational chart at headquarters, which employs only about 800 staff, shut down some offices completely, and, in keeping with his new pillars, created jobs for a chief talent officer, a chief accountability officer, a chief academic officer, and a chief innovation officer. His team is poring over the 2,000 pages of education regulation that Cerf believes thwarts change. He is building regional achievement centers across the state and moving a lot of people out of a "central function" to work with schools and superintendents "to build out" the capacity of the four pillars at the school level.

It is a bold vision for New Jersey schools. But Cerf seems to be the right person to run the reform rapids and bring the state's low-achieving schools to safer waters. Stay tuned.

Peter Meyer, former news editor at Life Magazine, is currently senior policy fellow with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and contributing editor at Education Next.



"They say we're not placing enough emphasis on diversity."