

Settle for Better

How overpromising undercut the education reform movement, and what to do about it

WHEN I FIRST GOT INVOLVED in education reform back in 1993, a quote attributed to the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead had become a mantra at gatherings of those of us in “the movement”: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Everyone in the room would nod their heads in agreement and breathe in the heady inspiration that comes from being with like-minded people who share a belief in the righteousness of their cause and the inevitability of their success. For us “happy few” crusaders, history and justice were on our side.

Thirty years later, and after spending the last eight years in state bureaucracy as the Massachusetts secretary of education, I still believe in the ideas and aspirations behind the reform efforts of the 1990s and 2000s, but it’s now clear that our ambitions were exaggerated, and our timeline was way off—most memorably the promise that No Child Left Behind would get 100 percent of students to proficiency in English and math by 2014.

This is not a rationale for abandoning the cause; quite the opposite. It’s the foundation for rededicating ourselves to the hard work that needs to be done one day at a time, by shifting our mindset from the visionary call to “change the world,” to a more pragmatic directive to “do your job” (as New England’s

own Coach Bill Belichick might say).

Education reform that had its beginnings in the 1980s and came into full bloom in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century had four basic components:

- Standards, assessment, and accountability, to set and raise expectations, along with measurement of school and student performance, to create a culture of data-driven decisionmaking and timely action to address systemic weaknesses
- Innovation in school models and instructional tools and systems, often tech-enabled, to shift the learning process from mass production to mass customization
- Robust teacher recruitment and practice-based training, to attract the best and the brightest and give them the skills they need to be highly effective, as measured by effects on student achievement
- Autonomous schools and parental choice, to provide front-line educators with real decisionmaking authority and to empower parents to vote with their feet when their children were stuck in low-performing neighborhood schools

What knit these elements together was a belief that applying the lessons of modern management and competitive

By **JAMES A. PEYSER**



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Education reformers believed that applying the lessons of modern management and competitive markets from both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors would yield significant improvement to K-12 education.

markets from both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors would yield significant improvement to K-12 education, specifically as measured by student achievement and other academic or career outcomes. More compelling was the commitment to employ these strategies to eliminate the persistent performance gaps between schools serving high-poverty communities of color and schools serving well-to-do, mostly white suburbs.

In the words of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, this remarkably bipartisan effort to raise student achievement and close gaps represented “the civil rights issue of our time.”

For a variety of reasons, the education-reform zeitgeist has shifted. Indeed, “education reform” is now considered to be a loaded term that is no longer spoken in polite company without risking a heated argument or losing the friendship of former allies. Although the Trump presidency accelerated the breakup, the coalition had begun to fray years before.

Loss of Consensus

The biggest sea change occurred with the loss of consensus that raising the level of academic achievement in historically underserved communities is essential to the pursuit of greater social equity. This is not just a matter of toning down the rhetoric around college-for-all to make room for career readiness; it’s also a reflection of a breakdown in the shared understanding of what educational excellence means and the purpose of schools in the first place.

The late Albert Shanker, legendary president of the American Federation of Teachers, once said, “The key is that unless there is accountability, we will never get the right system. As long as there are no consequences if kids or adults don’t perform, as long as the discussion is not about education and student outcomes, then we’re playing a game as to who has the power.”

At the August 2022 meeting of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, here’s what Max Page, the current head of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, said in opposition to the state’s student-assessment system:

It [strikes] me that we have a fundamental difference of views of what schools are for. The focus on income, on college and career readiness, speaks to a system that . . . is tied to the capitalist class and its needs for profit. We on the other hand have as a core belief that the purpose of schools must be to nurture thinking, caring, active and committed adults, parents, community members, activists, citizens.

How did we get here?

The general social and political environment certainly had a lot to do with it, but I think those of us in the education reform community, including state policymakers, need to reassess our own contributions.

To motivate people and mobilize resources to take on a big challenge, you need to tell a compelling story—about both the problem you’re trying to solve and your vision for the future. In the terminology of the day, you need a “burning platform” and a “theory of change.” For at least two decades, the messaging used by reformers worked to power a genuine national movement for education reform.



Albert Shanker

The rub is that creating excitement about dramatic change can eventually lead to overpromising and under-delivering—and when the results don’t keep pace with expectations, disappointment and disillusionment ensue. What’s more, the narrative of “transformation,” uplifting to many, can have a demoralizing effect on the people and organizations that are doing their best to get results within the existing “dysfunctional” system.

The Role of State Policy

Even under the best of circumstances, moving the needle on overall student achievement and closing gaps across communities and student subgroups at scale is a multi-generation task. It is certainly not something that can be achieved through policy reforms in one or two terms of a president or a governor.

Affecting student outcomes is only partially and indirectly a function of public policy. State policymakers, in particular, can help create the conditions within which improvement can occur by fairly and equitably allocating financial resources, establishing rigorous standards and aligned assessments, and providing meaningful and timely information to educators and local officials. Policy can also disrupt the status quo by authorizing the creation of new schools, allowing parental choice, and enabling state education agencies to intervene in the lowest-performing schools or districts.

The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act established the commonwealth’s version of the national standards-based

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reform movement, which culminated in the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. As documented by Harvard economist Thomas Kane, the impact of these reforms in Massachusetts and across the United States is arguably among the most successful social-policy stories of the past 50 years, notwithstanding more recent stagnation or decline. Massachusetts significantly expanded its investment in K–12 education through a progressive funding formula and at the same time developed rigorous curriculum frameworks along with high-quality and well-aligned student assessments. It also established a school accountability system tied to performance-based outcomes and authorized some of the country’s earliest and best charter schools. Through these measures, the commonwealth was able to raise its overall level of school quality and student achievement, especially during the first two decades of reform.

Student performance on the mathematics portion of the

National Assessment of Educational Progress provides a telling example. Between 1992, just before the Education Reform Act was passed, and 2011, Massachusetts saw an increase of more than 25 scaled-score points at both 4th and 8th grade, moving in the state rankings from ninth and twelfth place, respectively, to number one. Although progress on gap-closing has been mixed and inadequate, the scaled-score difference in mathematics on the NAEP between white and Black 4th graders in Massachusetts was reduced by one-third over the same period.

Getting the policies right is a challenge, and once they’re implemented, their effects take time to emerge. Lasting change requires sustaining those policies in the face of ongoing pressure to turn back the clock or to try something else.

Over the course of the last eight years, the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, largely appointed by



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President George W. Bush signs the No Child Left Behind Act into law on January 8, 2002, surrounded by students and lawmakers. Like many education reforms of the time, NCLB fell short of its ambition to ensure proficiency for all students in English and math.

Republican Governor Charlie Baker, took steps to update and reinforce many of these core elements of the 1993 reform by

- revising curriculum frameworks
- developing “next generation” student assessments for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)
- strengthening the accountability framework by broadening its performance metrics and sharpening its focus on improvement among the lowest-achieving students
- re-benchmarking and raising the “competency determination” for high school graduation based on MCAS

All of this took place in a political and legislative environment that has become at best ambivalent toward standards-based education reform, as the weaknesses that plagued the system prior to the Education Reform Act fade from memory and as student performance gains flatten or recede. Holding the line going forward will likely become an increasing challenge as Massachusetts state government transitions to full one-party (Democratic) rule.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Massachusetts Education Reform Act and similar laws in other states have played a crucial role in improving student outcomes, when all is said and done, the best policy environment only makes improvement possible; it doesn’t make it happen. That change can only occur at the ground level, in more than 100,000 schools and more than two million classrooms across the country.

So, if policy effects tend to diminish over time, what can state education officials do that might make a lasting difference?

Doing nothing is not an option, for at least two reasons. First, most state governments, including Massachusetts, have a constitutional obligation to ensure all students receive an adequate education. Municipalities operate schools as a delegated responsibility, so when things go wrong, the state is ultimately on the hook. Second, even though decentralization sounds like it would be fertile ground for innovation and continuous improvement, each school district in effect operates as a monopoly, typically at the toleration of its local teachers union. Throw in the outsized influence of graduate schools of education in teacher training and you have the “iron triangle” that holds public education in its grip. In this environment, only state government has the leverage to create space for real change.

In getting more directly involved in educational programs and practice, however, state policymakers need a heavy dose of

humility. From a teacher’s point of view, the only thing worse than having someone from the central office telling you what to do is having someone from the state department of education telling you what to do.

Governor Baker’s dictum throughout his administration was “Do more of what works.” That approach, ideally backed up by solid evidence, not only provides the greatest promise for positive near-term student impact but also offers the path of least resistance when it comes to adoption and effective implementation by educators.

There are a variety of proven programmatic initiatives that state policymakers might pursue (although unfortunately it’s not a terribly long list). During the Baker administration, our priorities were:

Early literacy. In fall 2022, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted regulations requiring all children in grades K–3 to receive semi-annual literacy screening to determine whether they are on track toward reading proficiency. For students who are below benchmark, schools must



The administration of Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker attempted to reinforce the state’s standards-based 1993 Education Reform Act with stronger accountability.

inform parents and develop individual reading-improvement plans grounded in evidence-based instructional practices.

High school pathways. Starting in 2017, the Baker administration launched two parallel initiatives to establish early-college and early-career pathways, providing integrated courses of study for student cohorts in more than 100 high schools to deepen learning and engagement while strengthening college and career readiness. Both options are focused on improving outcomes for students who are underrepresented in higher education or high-demand industries.

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Vocational and technical education. An interagency Workforce Skills Cabinet committed more than \$200 million to upgrade equipment and technical lab spaces in vocational schools, comprehensive high schools, community colleges, and nonprofit training centers. In addition to creating new “reskilling and upskilling” capacity for workers and adult learners, these investments also enabled vocational enrollment to grow by close to 8,000 students (about 15 percent) since 2015, even though overall high school enrollment was flat.

Educator diversity. A central focus of the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is the recruitment, support, and retention of teachers of color. With the support of targeted grant programs and state-local partnerships, the number of Black and Latino teachers has increased by more than 30 percent since 2015, even as the total number of teachers has remained constant.

Unlike the earlier generation of policy reforms, these programmatic initiatives are not perceived as threatening to local autonomy and are generally met with enthusiasm by educators, students, and parents—as well as legislators on both sides of the aisle. Strategies like high-dosage tutoring, vacation and summer learning opportunities, and incentives for adoption of evidence-based curriculum and professional development could probably be added to this list. Equally important is the identification of other initiatives that could make an impact. Federal and state education agencies should partner with researchers to independently and rigorously evaluate promising programs and interventions.

Hope and Pragmatism

Execution, of course, is always the challenge, especially on a large scale, but these strategies offer hope for meaningful change at the classroom level, promising to move us closer to universal reading proficiency by 4th grade, create more equitable and inclusive classrooms, and provide a more engaging and purposeful high school experience.

If efforts like these prove successful and continue to gather momentum—especially across two gubernatorial administrations representing both major political parties—there is hope that they can be sustained over time to achieve statewide scale.

This is not an argument for abandoning other approaches to reform that operate closer to the margins of the dominant system, including charter schools, parental choice, and tech-enabled innovation. Any long-term school improvement plan, if it is to succeed, must include a robust outside strategy

that can work collaboratively and competitively with school districts—challenging and enabling them to accelerate change and providing alternatives when they don’t. State policymakers must ensure that education entrepreneurs are supported and encouraged to play an ever-larger role in the public education ecosystem, especially for communities and student populations that have long been underserved or ignored.

By regaining traction on overall student performance and making progress on stubborn inequities, the programmatic initiatives described above, and others like them, might also help reinforce the value of the underlying standards-based reform architecture, helping to demonstrate its relevance, three decades after being enshrined in statute.

Perhaps just as important, renewed educational progress might help refocus politicians, media, and the broader public on the day-to-day work of schools, which has been overshadowed lately by the din of the culture wars. There is no way for schools to be fully insulated from these increasingly vitriolic and often hyperbolic ideological clashes; after all, schools play a central role in raising our children. But what gives these issues oxygen at school board meetings, state houses, and on social media is the growing sense on both the right and the left that schools are part of the problem and therefore not to be trusted.

From the left, schools are charged with being the perpetrator of the school-to-prison pipeline. From the right, schools are seen as a training ground for social justice warriors. Unfortunately, the “silent majority” in the middle mostly sits on the sidelines, in part out of fear of being ostracized by their angry neighbors and in part because many of them have lost confidence in the ability of our school system to deliver on its core educational mission—a perspective that was exacerbated by remote learning during the pandemic.

Over the past 30 years or more, education reformers have tried to “fix” a “broken” system of public schools. Although real progress has been made, the work is not even close to being done. By making the bold promise to “leave no child behind,” we helped to turn what should have been a positive story into a narrative of failure. Without a new, more pragmatic plan to achieve meaningful and sustainable improvement that both students and parents can recognize in their own schools, we risk losing the gains that we’ve made.

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