

Taking Stock of a Decade of Reform

School reformers have made forward strides in the last ten years, and public debate has acquired a bipartisan cast. But just how successful have reform efforts been?

The editors of Education Next assess the movement's victories and challenges.

A Battle Begun, Not Won

By PAUL E. PETERSON,
CHESTER E. FINN, JR., and
MARC KANSTOROOM

Many education reformers are feeling optimistic these days, willing to claim that they have won the war of ideas and that all that remains is mopping up a few leftover messes and working out the details of the new education regime that already exists in their minds. Arkansas professor Jay Greene has declared flat-out victory, claiming the teachers unions have become indistinguishable from the tobacco industry, determined to defend turf that is now utterly indefensible.

Giving credit where it's due, the reform campaign has had successes. Prodded by Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and other veteran private-sector reformers, the Obama administration has lent unexpectedly forceful support to such causes as common standards, better assessments, charter schools, merit pay, refurbished teacher preparation, and the removal of ineffective instructors. A left-leaning celebrity filmmaker has entreated viewers of *Waiting for "Superman"* to ponder the sad reality that poor students cannot attend good schools without winning a lottery in which the odds are stacked overwhelmingly against them.

The new federal initiative, Race to the Top, inspired statutory changes in a dozen states. Hundreds of millions of philanthropic

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Pyrrhic Victories?

FREDERICK M. HESS,
MICHAEL J. PETRILLI, and
MARTIN R. WEST

On a range of issues, education "reformers" have made great progress in the last decade, certainly among policy elites, but also among the general public. Interviewed in October on the *Today Show*, President Obama seemed to be channeling a generation of conservative education analysts in stating bluntly that more money absent reform won't do much to improve public schools. *Waiting for "Superman,"* a documentary chronicling the travails of five students seeking spots in heavily oversubscribed charter schools, drew rave reviews, star-studded premieres, and breathless talk of a new era of reform. While the American Federation of Teachers and a handful of liberal publications tut-tutted the film's sharply critical portrayal of teachers unions, its clarion call for change has been embraced by opinion leaders across the political spectrum. Even zeitgeist queen Oprah Winfrey.

Poll numbers show the broader public, too, increasingly supports efforts to create new schooling options, overhaul teacher pay and evaluation systems, and provide strong incentives for improvement. Ideas such as charter schools,

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and federal dollars are flooding toward such national organizations as KIPP and Teach For America as well as to local and state-specific ventures in a hundred places. A brigade of governors, led by New Jersey's Chris Christie and Indiana's Mitch Daniels, has pressed a wide school-reform agenda and many state legislators—including Democrats in places like Colorado—are participating in the process. In New York City, the mayor is replacing one reform-minded outsider, Joel Klein, with another, Cathleen Black, despite strenuous union maneuvers to block the appointment. Even the defeat of District of Columbia mayor Adrian Fenty, who backed schools chancellor Michelle Rhee's dramatic efforts to reboot public education in the nation's capital, has not proven too dispiriting. Rhee was too strident, it is said; a subtler, more sophisticated approach may still work. Meanwhile, she negotiated a path-breaking contract.

In state after state, the teachers unions are indeed besieged on multiple fronts. The momentum is with the reformers. So say some.

The Arsenal

Alas, we're not so sanguine. It's way, way too early to declare victory. Atop the cliffs and bastions that reformers are attacking, the opposition has plenty of weapons with which to hold its territory.

For this is no single war and nothing can be done at the national level to win it. Most of the crucial decisions about how U.S. schools run and who teaches what to whom in which classrooms are still made in 14,000 semi-autonomous school districts, nearly all of them run by locally elected school boards, often with campaign dollars supplied by those with whom they negotiate collectively, and managed by professional superintendents, trained in colleges of education and socialized over the years into the prevailing culture of public education.

That culture is in no way reform-minded. It believes that educators know best, that elected school boards are the embodiment of democracy in action, that colleges of education are the path to true professionalism, that collective bargaining is necessary to protect teacher rights, and that any failings visible in today's schools, teachers, and students are either the fault of heedless parents or the consequence of incompetent administrators and stingy taxpayers.

Nor is it just at the local level that vested interests are entrenched. In corridors and committee rooms of state legislatures, lobbyists and campaign contributors also safeguard the interests of employees and vendors. Teachers unions are still the number-one source of political contributions and, in places like California and Minnesota, they appear stronger



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than either political party. Statewide tenure laws remain largely intact, as do laws that require a specific set of education-school courses before a teacher can be certified, despite the paucity of evidence that such courses (or certification) yield benefits in the classroom. Most states have set their student proficiency bars at a low level, and no state—not even Florida, which came the closest—has been able to mandate that teacher pay be calibrated to classroom performance. Few jurisdictions have passed significant voucher and tax-credit legislation, and most have hedged charter laws with one or another of a multiplicity of provisos—that charters are limited in number, can only be authorized by school districts (their natural enemies), cannot enroll more than a fixed number of students, get less money per pupil than district-

run schools, and so on. Thus, the (in)famous lottery that propels the *Superman* story forward.

Even in Washington, where reformers place much hope for change, the push is pretty much limited to Race to the Top, an executive-branch initiative lacking a clear legislative mandate. Congress has not been able to repair and reauthorize No Child Left Behind, despite some thoughtful recommendations from the White House. All this might change with the incoming Congress, but many pundits think the odds are against it. More Republicans than ever are worshipping before the false god of local control, and too many Democrats have learned from their union friends that local control ain't so bad after all, especially when free money flows to local districts and teacher paychecks arrive courtesy of the U. S. Treasury. In any case, neither party sees more to be gained politically from compromise than from deadlock.

As if this weren't enough to force reformers to haul victory flags back down the cliffs, the U.S. education system is structured in such a way that initiatives undertaken at any

performance pay, and consequential accountability are much more widely accepted—and acceptable—today than they were a decade ago. Furthermore, advocates are no longer considered right-wing kooks for casting the teachers unions as a big part of the problem. Even a Democratic president or secretary of education can say so. Indeed, the influential Democrats for Education Reform expends much of its efforts spreading that very message.

Though support for these notions may be a mile wide, it appears to be little more than an inch deep—and to rest as much on pleasing sentiments and newfound conventional wisdom as on informed conviction. The 2010 *Education Next* poll reported that charter school supporters outnumber opponents by a 44-to-19 margin, but the vast majority of respondents don't really know what charter schools are. Fewer than one in five know that charter schools cannot charge tuition, can't hold religious services, and can't selectively admit students. Charters sport a well-regarded brand, but their popularity rests on a shaky foundation.

And while virtually all Americans embrace accountability in the abstract, most remain reluctant to impose tough sanctions on schools, and especially on individuals, whose performance is found wanting. The 2010 PDK/Gallup poll reported that, when asked whether they preferred to keep a low-performing school in their community open with the existing

teachers and principal and provide comprehensive support, to temporarily close the school and reopen it with a new principal or as a charter school, or to shutter the school, 54 percent chose to leave the school open. The *EdNext* survey asked respondents, "If a teacher has been performing poorly for several years, what action should be taken by those in charge?" Among the general public, just 45 percent thought the teacher should be removed.

Still, reformers have won some major battles over the past decade. The center of gravity in public debates has moved in important ways. But these successes have come with two big caveats. First, reform "support" resides with a mostly uninformed, unengaged public—one that isn't especially sold on their ideas and that, in any event, is often outmatched by well-organized, well-funded, and motivated special interests. And second, and more unfortunately, many reformers are eagerly overreaching the evidence and touting simplistic, slipshod proposals that are likely to end in spectacular failures. In short, some forces of reform are busy marching into the sea and turning notable victories into Pyrrhic ones. To quote that wizened observer of politics and policy, Pogo: We've met the enemy, and he is us.

The Icarus Problem

Advocates drive good ideas to extremes when they oversell their promise and undermine their integrity. Unfortunately, this pattern is all too common.

Problem One: Measures that are overly ambitious or poorly designed risk undermining popular support for sound and necessary reforms. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) took near-universal backing for tenets of accountability and deployed them in an overwritten federal statute that poisoned the NCLB brand. Indeed, *EdNext* polling in 2007 showed that describing the key precepts of NCLB without using its name drew 71 percent support, but the addition of the phrase "No Child Left Behind" reduced that figure by 14 points.

To be sure, reliable evidence (see "Evaluating NCLB," *research*, Summer 2010) shows that NCLB has improved math achievement in states that did not previously have accountability systems in place. The data generated as a by-product of the law's testing requirements have been a boon to the research community—and may ultimately yield a new body of evidence to inform education policy and practice. Yet the law's "my way or the highway"

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level can be stymied, blocked, or derailed at the other levels. Some analysts have used the term “loosely coupled” to characterize the connections among the various levels of government. Even when the policy train’s engine is chugging mightily, no movement occurs in the caboose. A crusading local superintendent’s effort to change his district’s teacher recruitment and retention practices can be brought to a halt by the state’s seniority law, tenure law, and collective-bargaining statutes. A governor who enacts a charter law may find that no school board will actually authorize such schools or allow them access to empty buildings owned by the district. (Such problems have long frustrated charter advocates in Maryland, Florida, Colorado, and California.) A U.S. secretary of education who puts billions on the table for teacher evaluations to be tied to pupil achievement is apt to find that states and districts do better at promising than at delivering cooperation.

And all of this is before you even get to the fundamental fact that, when 3.5 million classroom doors swing shut on a Tuesday morning, those teachers are pretty much free to teach (or not teach) whatever they like, regardless of thunderous commands, incentives, pleadings, and resources from district, state, or Uncle Sam. Such freedom gives scope to thousands of brilliant, dedicated teachers in schools across the country, yet the mechanisms for separating out weak performers are not in place. And with the exit of Michelle Rhee, who made the design of such a system her primary objective, brave will be the superintendent who heads down that path. As a result, No Child Left Behind holds schools accountable but, when a school fails, tenure and seniority assured by statute and/or collective bargaining agreements allow lemons to dance on to the school down the street.

In Search of Allies

The unions show no genuine evidence of endorsing reform measures, however much their leaders may pose as agents of change. For all the artful dodging around tenure and performance pay by American Federation of Teachers president (AFT) Randi Weingarten, local union affiliates almost always kill any but the mildest changes. They oppose the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind, they everywhere resist the formation of charter schools (and let us not even speak of vouchers), and they can be relied upon to muster their vast electoral strength and whopping campaign contributions behind whichever candidates promise not to cause them any grief. This is not new. The late Albert Shanker, president of the AFT, was a towering figure in the national



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standards and school accountability debates of the late 20th century, yet nearly all of the AFT’s state and local affiliates refused to buy what their own leader was selling.

Often, too, reform is just one passenger in a crowded vehicle. Although the Obama administration put \$4 billion into its reform-minded Race to the Top contest, the bulk of its new education funding—more than \$100 billion handed out in two rounds of stimulus packages—financed the status quo. If one looks strictly at the flow of federal dollars rather than the flow of talk, one sees that in 2010 maintaining jobs for teachers trumped fixing schools for kids.

Nor have Republicans shown much inclination to carry the reform torch forward. The 2010 elections were dominated by jobs, taxes, and deficits. Yet it’s hard to see how good jobs can be lastingly restored to the American economy without boosting the quality of the U.S. workforce. Jobs and education are complementary issues, not competitive ones. In November 2009, Republican gubernatorial candidates won office in New Jersey and Virginia in part by making education a top issue. Still the GOP leadership has not crafted a comprehensible education agenda from that success.

It’s early days yet for the 2012 presidential race, to be sure, but apart from Mitch Daniels, the likely

GOP candidates have barely mentioned the topic. Other than former Florida governor Jeb Bush, who heads the Foundation for Excellence in Education and seems even more committed to reform than his brother was, and Lamar Alexander, another former governor who “gets” this issue and cares deeply about it, party leaders seem uncertain as to what needs to be done or how to go about it. Even on issues that conform closely to the larger Republican agenda, such as freedom of choice, teaching the talented, and creating a workforce that will preserve the nation’s role in the world economy, ideas and conviction are scarce.

Perhaps it’s unfair to ask politicians to reform schools if the public is not demanding it of them. Unfortunately,

approach in areas where best practices were (and remain) far from certain has arguably slowed the development of accountability systems that would provide a more refined view of school performance. In fact, the most convincing criticism of NCLB has come not from accountability skeptics but from states like Florida that were in a position to go beyond what the law requires but were forced to simplify their approach to comply with the law's mandates. More than nine years after the law's enactment, and four years after its scheduled reauthorization, the shortcomings of an accountability system organized around the utopian goal of universal student proficiency rather than continuous improvement are all too apparent.

We're in danger of repeating this same mistake with the Race to the Top agenda. By demanding that states embrace a very prescriptive set of policy reforms in order to win federal funding, policymakers locked in the "best thinking" circa 2010. Just as definitions of Adequate Yearly Progress, Highly Qualified Teachers, and other core elements of NCLB, circa 2001, soon grew obsolete and problematic, so too will today's conventional wisdom around teacher evaluations, charter caps, and all the rest. Rather than encouraging problem solving and policy tinkering, these "shoot the moon" initiatives freeze reform in one moment in time. And they run the risk of backlash if and when early results prove disappointing. A better means of driving reform would be to reward states and districts based not on unenforceable promises but on specific, concrete steps to overhaul anachronistic policies like teacher tenure, now granted in most states as a matter of course after just a couple of years in the classroom.

Problem Two: Overpromising. When they insist that ideas like school choice, performance pay, and teacher evaluations based on value-added measures will themselves boost student achievement, would-be reformers stifle creativity, encourage their allies to lock elbows and march forward rather

than engage in useful debate and reflection, turn every reform proposal into an us-against-them steel-cage match, and push researchers into the awkward position of studying whether reforms "work" rather than when, why, and how they make it easier to improve schooling.

Consider performance pay. Just recently a three-year randomized evaluation of a Tennessee merit-pay experiment funded by the federal government's Teacher Incentive Fund found that bonuses tied to test scores didn't lead to higher performance in middle-school math. "Study Casts Cold Water on Bonus Pay," read *Education Week's* headline, and the news was widely interpreted as a setback for attempts to link teacher compensation to classroom performance. Yet the most compelling rationale for merit pay is not any short-term bump in test scores, but rather its potential for making the profession more attractive to talented candidates, more amenable to specialization, more rewarding for accomplished professionals, and a better fit for the 21st-century labor market. Whether or not bonuses linked to test scores had any effect on measured achievement in the short run says absolutely nothing on this score. Yet, the lust for simple answers and for research that "proves" those answers right has led many would-be reformers to adopt and defend half-baked versions of pay reform.

The primary goal of reform efforts should be to make it easier for problem solvers to gain access to and traction in the system, coupled with thoughtful public oversight of results. The impatient rush to "fix" teacher quality in one furious burst of legislating may instead lead to a situation in which promising efforts to uproot outdated and stifling arrangements become enveloped in crudely drawn and potentially destructive mandates. Rushing forward with statewide mandates to incorporate value-added assessments into teacher evaluation systems, for example, may wind up stifling innovation. Systems built around individual value-added calculations can stymie the smart use of personnel that reformers should encourage. Principals who rotate their faculty by strength during the year, or augment classroom teachers with online lessons, will find their staffing models a poor fit for evaluation systems predicated on linking each student's annual test scores to a single teacher.

Uprooting the old, intrusive superstructure, not imposing a new one, must be the first order of business. And unwinding a century's worth of accumulated detritus and replacing it with a functioning system will take time. Only after a few years of stripped-down tenure and evaluations focused on

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there is little sign that the U.S. public has embraced education reform with gusto. In the latest *Education Next* poll (published in November 2010), support for vouchers slipped. Charter and merit-pay supporters outnumbered opponents by 2:1, but a near plurality of the public refused to take a position on either issue, revealing just how much further into the public consciousness reform ideas need to penetrate. Similarly, only a quarter of those surveyed think teachers should have tenure, but more—nearly 40 percent—have no opinion on the matter. Support for holding students accountable slipped somewhat and opinion on extending No Child Left Behind remained split. As many people saw teachers unions as a positive force as thought that their role had been negative.

It's true that the public thinks the country's schools are doing poorly. Only 18 percent gave them an A or a B grade. Yet a clear majority thought *their own* elementary and middle schools were doing quite well, with 65 percent conferring honors grades on their elementary school and 55 percent awarding such marks to their middle school. The prevailing view seems to be that "schools are bad except for those in my neighborhood. These do not need changing—and they are the schools I really care about." That provides little basis for comprehensive education reform.

If the public, the political parties, and the most powerful interest groups are either apathetic about or hostile to education reform, how can the reformers prevail? In the case of the tobacco industry, the courts did much of the heavy lifting, giving cancer victims standing to sue and allowing juries to award billions of dollars in punitive damages.

It doesn't work that way in education. With the important exception of school desegregation, judges have more often retarded than advanced the reform agenda. When the courts declared state education systems inadequate, the only relief they provided was a pile of taxpayer cash—to be spent by the same bureaucracy that was said to be inefficient and inadequate. The Supreme Court found in the Constitution student rights to protest and to lengthy legal procedures before they could be suspended, but it has never discovered a constitutional right to a choice of school. And when it finally declared that vouchers do not violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment, state courts began to discover that they violate various provisions of state constitutions. Charter schools and tax credits have also suffered setbacks in state courts from Florida to Arizona. Union contracts and tenure provisions fare well in court proceedings, forcing superintendents to rehire teachers that they tried to fire and reopen schools that they tried to close. Meanwhile, today's schools



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remain almost as segregated as they were in the 1970s.

Victory Signs

What will be the first sign that reformers are truly winning? It was clear the tobacco industry had met its match when the surgeon general made smoking a national health issue, when the mass media and entertainment industry abandoned the Marlboro man, when juries discovered that companies were responsible for the lungs of their consumers, and when powerful figures on Capitol Hill eschewed donations from tobacco magnates in favor of those contributed by trial lawyers who made billions from suing them.

What will be the equivalent signs of success for school reform? Will a big-time university president make K–12 education a personal cause—as Harvard presidents Charles Eliot and James Conant did decades ago? Will an election year come when Republican and Democratic candidates try to outbid one another with proposals for expanding charters, setting high standards, formulating tough accountability regimes, and curbing union power? Will a state supreme court, as part of its remedy in a fiscal equity lawsuit,

decree that all children be given a choice of any school, public or private, with the state paying the cost? Will the dean of education at a high-status university campaign for the end of state-mandated certification? Will a legislature—in a state with collective bargaining—require every school system to design and implement a merit-pay plan as a precondition for continued state aid?

Such signs would herald victory—at least in the war of ideas. Until that day arrives, however, keep in mind that if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. It's dangerous to think a battle is over when it has just begun.

Paul E. Peterson is editor-in-chief of Education Next. Chester E. Finn, Jr. is the journal's senior editor and Marci Kanstoroom an executive editor and senior web editor.

performance, and after a few locales craft some promising approaches, will it make sense for state legislatures to wade in more aggressively.

Problem Three: Obsession with “gap closing.” For the past decade, school reform has been primarily about “closing achievement gaps” by boosting math and reading proficiency and graduation rates, among black, Latino, and poor students. “Conservative” notions of accountability have been linked to old-school liberal conceptions of “social justice.” This is all admirable. At the same time, this emphasis signals to the vast majority of American parents that school reform isn’t about helping *their* kids. And, given that only about one household in five even contains school-age children, 80 percent of households are being told that extra dollars and energy should be redirected into urban centers simply because it’s the right thing to do.

Well, perhaps. But those policies that most often succeed in the U.S. are those that recall the Tocquevillian adage that Americans embrace the precept of “self-interest properly understood.” Policies that work are those that work for all families. Efforts to squeeze inefficiencies out of schooling or enrich instruction and improve services for all kids can command widespread support.

Like the architects of the Great Society nearly half a century ago, however, too many school reformers have an unfortunate habit of deriding apathy or opposition from middle-class families. They have blithely ignored lessons learned when the Great Society’s social engineers sought to sustain ambitious social programs on the backs of guilt-ridden white suburbanites, only to fail spectacularly. They dismiss concerns that their reforms do nothing for suburban schools or may adversely affect them. Until we enable suburban legislators to regard a vote for reform as a political winner, and not merely a vote they’re allowed as a display of political guilt, the underpinnings of reform will remain thin.

Looking Ahead

The latest silver bullet appears to be the lure of Hollywood. Since Teach For America and the KIPP Academies haven’t yet saved the world, 5,000 charter schools have not prompted the remaking of urban school systems, and we’re saddled with the disappointing legacy of NCLB, maybe what we’ve been

missing all along is a sufficiently sentimental, gut-wrenching presence in the nation’s cinemas. Perhaps with the arrival of documentaries like *The Lottery*, *The Cartel*, and, of course, *Waiting for “Superman,”* this is the moment when the public will finally awaken and make its voice heard, and resistance will come crumbling down.

Rather than taking a hard look at why NCLB proved to be such a gross distortion of accountability, why so many merit-pay schemes eschew sensible principles of professional compensation, or why the public has so little understanding of charter schooling, some reformers may decide after seeing these films that they’ve paid too little attention to marketing. The problem isn’t overreach, bad politics, or bad proposals; it’s the need to fuel a greater sense of urgency. As Davis Guggenheim, the director of “*Superman*,” put it: “we’ve cracked the code” on how to make high-poverty schools work. All that’s needed now is the political will to make change happen.

This is a story we’ve seen before. We saw it with *A Nation at Risk*. We saw it when the nation’s governors gathered in Charlottesville two decades ago. We saw it with the Annenberg Challenge. We saw it with No Child Left Behind. We saw it with “ED in ’08,” the expensive and ultimately futile foundation-backed effort to boost education’s salience among voters in an election dominated by other pressing issues. We know how it ends.

Instead of more cheerleading, what’s desperately needed is more humility. Our current education system is the product of multiple generations of previous reforms, also promoted by well-meaning activists and educators. Building on the best of what remains of their architecture—and sweeping the rest out of the way—will take time and patience. But that’s what’s called for. We’re not urging delay or half-measures, but merely a willingness to see ourselves as problem-solvers, solution-finders, and tool-builders rather than warriors going to battle with intransigent educators. Let us proudly declare: we *don’t* yet know what works, but we’re committed to figuring it out, the best we can, along the way.

Frederick M. Hess, Michael J. Petrilli, and Martin R. West are all executive editors of Education Next.

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