Reforming America's Schools: Where Things Stand in 2011

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

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We've been trying to reform U.S. schools since at least 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared America to be a "nation at risk" due to the weak performance and lackluster achievement of our primary-secondary education system.

Dayton has been struggling for even longer to reform this city's schools. The reasons are obvious, both locally and nationally, beginning with concerns about economic competitiveness, recovery and prosperity on a shrinking globe amid changing technology and demographics.

The overriding goal of America's education-reform efforts of the past several decades has been to boost academic achievement. A key secondary goal has been to narrow the learning gaps between haves and have nots. An important third goal has been helping poor and disadvantaged youngsters escape from truly dreadful schools into better alternatives.

I'm not saying every education reformer has bought in to every bit of that, but I do suggest that those priorities have given rise to a tsunami of standards-based reform, including statewide academic standards, assessment and accountability systems, as well as considerable federal aid and pressure in this direction via Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind, and much more, including, most recently, the Common Core or "national" academic standards for reading and math and the Race to the Top portion of the economic stimulus act.

Those same priorities have also given rise to a remarkable marketplace of school choice that now includes more than 5000 charter schools—with 30 or so of them here in Dayton, not counting virtual schools, both local and statewide—a growing battalion of entrepreneurs including for-profit and non-profit organizations that command small fleets of charters—several of these here, too—as well as vouchers in this state and several other places and, almost everywhere, scads of other options from home schooling to on-line schooling, from magnet schools to statewide public-school choice to mini-high schools, early-college high schools, International Baccalaureate programs and dual enrollment schemes whereby one can take college and high-school courses at the same time.

Lots of ancillary activity has accompanied these twin reform strategies, including better data, school report cards, new ways of thinking about school finance, mayoral control of schools in some cities, unconventional leaders at the building, district and state levels, and a plethora of alternative personnel pathways for teachers, principals, superintendents and more.

Key elements of that "reform consensus" and the changes it has spawned have entered the U.S. education mainstream in lasting forms. Certainly the overriding goal of boosting achievement is here to stay. We now judge schools mainly in terms of pupil achievement rather than expenditures, intentions or services. We now expect far greater transparency about student, school, district and state performance—and we want that transparency to extend to sub-groups of students, not just overall averages. We no longer take for granted that kids will routinely attend the district-operated public schools in their neighborhoods and that the only exceptions to that rule are rich families and Catholics. We no longer assume that superintendents must be life-long education professionals or

that governance belongs exclusively to elected local school boards. We no longer assume that face-to-face contact with a flesh-and-blood teacher inside a building called "school" is the only possible circumstance in which instruction and learning can fruitfully occur.

These are profound changes and they've gotten traction in the U.S. psyche and on our lawbooks. I don't mean this noon to diminish them one bit. Indeed, I applaud them and spend much of my time trying to strengthen them.

But they haven't gotten us yet to where we need to get—and I think the consensus that produced them is fraying at the edges. Whether you're looking at domestic or international test results or high school graduation rates, you find our educational outcomes essentially flat—save for a smallish upward blip in math in the earlier grades—and you find other countries outpacing us on a number of key indicators. You also find mounting anxiety on the part of employers about finding competent U.S.-educated workers and on the part of college professors about the academic preparedness of those entering their classrooms.

This city, unfortunately, offers a vivid example of the falterings of the reform movement as well as the depth of the underlying education problems, particularly in urban America. I don't need to rehearse many specifics for this audience because you're well acquainted with declining enrollments, problematic governance, change-averse unions, lofty drop out rate combined with meager test scores, and more. Suffice to say that last year no student in Dayton attended a public school—whether operated by the district or as a charter—that was rated "excellent" by the state—and two-thirds of them were in schools that the state rated "D" or "F". Only 57 percent of

Dayton's 8th graders met Ohio's definition of "proficient" in reading, as did just 36 percent in math.

It isn't for lack of trying, lack of money, or lack of hard-working people doing their best. But it's evident, here and across the nation, that we haven't licked the problem yet—and it isn't going to get easier in upcoming years because of the slow economy, whopping federal and state deficits, and the shaky fiscal condition of most communities, including their education systems. Though President Obama has again called for additional federal investment in realms that he believes would boost our competitiveness, including education, this isn't likely to happen in Washington. A lot of states aren't much better off. When we see Governor Kasich's budget for the next biennium—due out next week—everyone is anticipating big reductions in funding for public education along with just about everything else this state does.

In any case, it's pretty clear by now that, while some reforms worth making surely cost money, additional money itself is no formula for improved educational performance. Nor is greater activism by the federal government. I give Arne Duncan a lot of credit. I think Race to the Top turned out surprisingly well, and I find much merit in the Obama plan for overhauling No Child Left Behind. Duncan pictures an education system with high standards, plenty of data, lots of choices for students, results-based accountability for schools, districts and states, teachers evaluated and paid according to their classroom effectiveness, serious steps taken to close or overhaul persistently failing schools, but not much red tape dictating how states and districts and individual schools should operate. That would be a far better situation than we have today in American education and I don't have any trouble getting enthusiastic about it and cheering Duncan onward.

But the tools available to Washington aren't sufficient to repair a broken education system even if there were greater consensus than we find there today about what exactly Uncle Sam should and shouldn't do. And No Child Left Behind is also evidence that even the best-intended and most consensual of reform plans can do some harm as well as good.

Washington doesn't run the schools and nobody wants it to. In recent years, it has supplied about 9% of the country's K-12 education budget—now well over half a trillion dollars total. Last year, thanks mostly to federal stimulus funding, Uncle Sam was up to about 15 percent—and the fiscal pain that states and districts are now feeling was averted for a year. I doubt we'll ever get back to 9 percent. I suspect the "new normal" will settle in around 12 percent or so. And with, say, 12 percent of the money comes maybe 20 percent of the regulation and decision making. Certainly Washington wields more than its share of that sort of control. But that still means that four fifths of the decisions remain in state and local hands as well as those of teachers and parents. And most Americans want it to stay that way.

Pumping more money from Washington into state and local education budgets can be harmful, too. By bailing out those budgets, it eases the pressure for them to become more efficient and effective. Hoover's Eric Hanushek reports that American test scores and economic prospects would improve if our school systems simply *fired* the least effective 5-10 percent of teachers and didn't replace them with anyone. The current budget crunch may yet produce some movement in that direction as well as other needed changes of the sort that can only happen when fiscal realities force them to be

considered. But the federal bail-out in education served mainly to preserve jobs, including the jobs of some teachers whom our kids would be better off without.

Then there's the problem of legislative gridlock. When the stimulus funding and Race to the Top are history, there will still be the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, and there will still be the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, also known as special ed, and a host of other programs that have been around seemingly forever. These all serve to buttress the current education system, not to reform it—and some of them clearly work against reform. They all need a makeover and if Duncan had his way they'd get one. But he isn't likely to have his way, especially with the new Congress. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act has been around since LBJ's day and with every reauthorization cycle it's grown longer and more complex to the point, now, of being totally unwieldy, with more than ten major "titles", over a hundred separate sections and a thousand-plus pages.

The last full-scale overhaul of that mega-statute was in 2001. It took a full year and consumed an enormous amount of legislative energy. Whether it would even have been accomplished absent the bipartisan spirit that followed 9/11 is unknowable. What is certain is that George W. Bush and the late Ted Kennedy and a few other key players managed to forge a high level of agreement on education policy that involved major concessions by both parties.

There's no such agreement today, despite some happy talk about education policy being one of the areas with the greatest potential for bipartisanship. Perhaps a compact can be forged and a full-dress reauthorization achieved, but there's at least an equal chance of legislative paralysis. But let

me come back to my core point. Even if Duncan had his way with Congress, he still couldn't reform American K-12 education because he doesn't have enough leverage, he doesn't have enough troops, he doesn't have enough anything.

Before freeing you to fight back, let me say a bit more about the fraying national consensus regarding the future of school reform. I see eight big developments contributing to its deterioration, separate and apart from developments in Washington.

First, extending far beyond No Child Left Behind is a backlash against testing across much of the American middle class.

Second, large segments of the education field itself—the unions, the ed school professoriate, school board associations, etc.—never quite bought into key elements of yesterday's reform consensus and continue to do their best to weaken, defy and exploit whatever fissures they spot in it. They surely don't like being held accountable for results, they prefer monopoly to competition and choice, and they, too, dislike testing.

Third, although the new Common Core standards for English and math turned out far better than I expected, and 44 states—including Ohio—have declared that they will replace their own academic standards with these, this is a venture into uncharted territory and the implementation challenges are enormous.

Fourth, the reforms that cluster together under "school choice" have been weakened by the mediocrity of far too many of the new schools, institutions that deliver weak academic results and often fall victim to organizational, political and financial woes. I have learned to my sorrow that, while putting a "charter" sign on a schoolhouse door certainly signals that school's opportunity to be different from other schools, it's no guarantee of quality or even an assurance of different-ness. That's certainly the case in Ohio, which has a handful of high performing charter schools but also far too many that simply are not getting the education done for kids in serious need.

Fifth, recent years have brought a principled critique by some serious folks—my friend and former colleague Diane Ravitch is perhaps the most prominent example—of both standards-based reform and school choice on grounds that these structural changes neglect what actually happens in classrooms and may also narrow the curriculum and weaken the common culture.

Sixth, perhaps because of all the reforming combined with such slender returns on that investment, a measure of exhaustion has set in with the American public—as well as policy elites and politicians—when it comes to further education reforms. I sense that people are weary of the topic, tired of unkept promises, fatigued by a seemingly endless parade of plans and schemes and initiatives that don't, in the end, solve the problem.

Seventh, where we don't find exhaustion we often find complacency, especially in our suburban communities, where people tend to think the schools are fine, the kids are learning enough and the reform challenges are somewhere on the other side of town. Not true—but widely believed.

Eighth, and finally, are what I'll call the structural and governance impediments to effective education reform, which have been on display in this city for some years but which are by no means confined to Dayton. Across the country, it's ever clearer that our traditional faith in "local control" by elected municipal school boards cannot cope with today's realities of metropolitanization, mobility, technological innovations, fiscal pressures, and interest-group politics, most especially the ability of teacher unions to take effective control—through elections, legislative lobbying, and collective bargaining—of school boards and policies. Moreover, our traditional modes of financing schools based on dramatically varying property values and income levels yield results that are neither equitable nor efficient—much less attuned to statewide and nationwide "virtual" schools and myriad forms of inter-district choice. And our "marble cake" policy structure of local, state, and national responsibility for schools has proven more adept at blocking or slowing needed change than at advancing it—a problem aggravated by our practice (in most places) of separating "education governance" from the regular leadership structures (and election cycles) of cities and states.

Taken together, those eight developments are weakening the former reform consensus while providing no clarity as to what should take its place. I have some thoughts as to what should—a more radical agenda for change than we've been pursuing—but I can't stand here and draw you a map that gets us from here to there. The image in my mind is probably not all that different from the one in Arne Duncan's mind. But just as he cannot get there from Washington, I cannot get you from the world of what looks good in theory to the world of political reality. I confess to a measure of frustration about this. But I do look forward to your questions and comments.