

## Rethinking Education Reform

The thinking in education reform today represents a sea change from the world of reform in previous years. Today the field of reform is wider, more diverse and more encompassing of various viewpoints. Gone are the days when the media, or legislators, could dismiss the call for school choice and accountability as conservative or white-bred. With new constituencies built, and new thinking generated in many circles, the day is dawning for reformers nationwide.

While the situation is hopeful, mistakes in trying to secure victories for school reform continue to be made. With their eye on school choice, many reformers tend to want victory fast and easy, without stopping to take account of its history. Their enthusiasm, determination and freshness -- all assets and necessities in any campaign -- can dampen their insights and cause a muddling of what is possible. It is the age-old struggle between those who strive to attain the possible and those who wait only for the ideal. There is a middle ground, however, and it does not necessarily require one to sacrifice one's principles. It does require that the reformer look to the ideal, devise the best practical way to get there, then set their agenda accordingly.

### Lessons learned in 90s

The beginning of this decade saw five major high profile school choice initiatives defeated. Each drew national attention, and each was going to be the one that put the issue over the top.

- Oregonians for Choice in November, 1990, was first to put a school choice initiative on a state ballot since the 1970s. Had it passed, every citizen in the state would have been permitted a \$2500 tax-credit to use against tuition charged at the non-public school of choice. While early polls suggested a significant margin of victory, the measure failed by more than 2-1. ✓
- Pennsylvania's REACH Alliance attempted the legislative route in December, 1991, when it proposed spending \$900 per child to go toward tuition at a non-public school. It won in the State's Senate, but lost in the House when members decided to vote on whether they thought the bill was constitutional and thus avoid voting on the real question of whether they would support the bill. ✓
- The GI Bill would have allocated federal funds to help states given low- and middle-income families \$1,000 per child towards the ✓

school of their choice. President Bush unveiled it to choice supporters at a White House ceremony in April, 1992.

- Coloradans for School Choice organized a referendum similar to Oregon's in November, 1992, which would have provided a \$2,500 voucher to parents regardless of income. This effort also led in early polls, but lost by roughly the same margin as in Oregon. ✓
- California's November, 1993, ballot initiative was the culmination of at least two years of preparation, and brought national leaders into the battle in an effort to help an outspent campaign sell its message and win. It lost by roughly the same 70-30 margin that felled its predecessors. ✓

One of the reasons for such defeats, argue both the organizers of these efforts and leaders elsewhere, is the lack of awareness and understanding of the issue by the general public. The not-in-my-backyard syndrome is alive and well in American communities, as evidenced by poll after poll. The most recent Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools, reported in the fall of 1993, shows 47% of Americans giving their schools top grades, while giving all other communities' schools barely passing grades. This ignorance of the state of their own schools, coupled with complete misunderstanding in most cases of the consequences of choice, leads even many true believers to sit on the side-lines.

That is where history is doomed to repeat itself unless some important conclusions are acknowledged and brought to bear on subsequent reform efforts.

### **The Turning Tide - 1990**

Prior to 1990, reformers could point to only two successful, but modest, experiments in decentralizing schools, both of which were not at all of their own making. East Harlem diversified its schools and gave parents choice in 1974; Minnesota was the first state, in 1985, to experiment with statewide public school choice, and later expanded its program to colleges and private alternative schools for dropouts. The results of these two programs have given school reformers an enormous boost – and the critical evidence to demonstrate that decentralization, through school choice, does work to improve the schools.

Repeated efforts by school reform advocates in Congress to secure choice and restore local control to communities have failed, as have the dozens of reform bills introduced in state legislatures. But few have

passed. However, two dynamic events have changed the face of the education reform movement.

In the spring of 1990, Wisconsin State Representative Annette "Polly" Williams struck a deal with Republican Governor Tommy Thompson to enact a pilot program enabling one percent of the residents of Milwaukee to attend the private, non-religious school of their choice. Complementing this victory for reformers was the release by the Brookings Institution of its popular book on education reform, Politics, Markets and America's Schools, in which authors John Chubb and Terry Moe unveiled evidence that schools that respond directly to the consumers are the only schools that stand a chance of being effective. Thus, consumer choice is essential to any meaningful reform of the schools.

After decades of trying to reform public education, many reformers had long since conceded defeat. Chubb and Moe, coming from outside the reform movement, and Williams, through her legislation in Milwaukee, helped turn the tide. Their work reaffirmed that the tinkering of the 70s and 80s did nothing but increase spending in education, create more problems in inner cities and pushed the central authority for running the schools further from parents and teachers. Bolstered by these events, and fed up with business as usual, a variety of coalitions began laying the foundations for a resurgence in education reform.

Reports that questioned conventional wisdom began to run in the nation's top newspapers, on television shows from ABC with Peter Jennings to the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour. They showed students with a new zest for learning in East Harlem; satisfied children, parents and teachers in Milwaukee; Joe Clark, the embattled school principal in Paterson, New Jersey who restored discipline and self-esteem to youngsters, walking halls of his school with his famous baseball bat. On the heels of new reports of increased education spending, the media began to repeat what reformers had said for years — that more money is not the solution. Studies of spending in Milwaukee and New York City made front page headlines when they declared that less than \$.26 and \$.33 respectively of every dollar spent on education ever reached the classroom. This was the rotten core of the education apple, now recognized by even the staunchest defenders of the status quo.

Thanks to these incremental gains, 1990 was a watershed year. Reformers, who had remained on the sidelines began to move with determination to capitalize on the new momentum. The Oregon, Colorado and California efforts were kicked-off soon thereafter.

## A Closer Look

While Oregon and Colorado provided us with some valuable, insights into voter behavior, it was not until the defeat of California's school choice initiative that we would see the leaders begin a collective evaluation process: to look at their past failures to gain insights into constructing successful strategies for the future.

There are many reasons, general and specific, large and small, as to why the first three years of this decade have failed to make substantive gains in education reform. But three reasons, in particular, deserve a closer look.

First, too many people assume that what plays in Peoria will play in New York. The dynamics, politics and social taboos of each city, region or state vary greatly. There is no one best school choice bill. Some may need to be targeted more to a specific group or geographic area as in the case of Jersey City, where Mayor Bret Schundler has built an alliance with the state's new leadership and residents in his inner city. He is pushing a school voucher and charter school bill limited to Jersey City that would not only allow the residents there to send their children to the private or public school of their choice, but would allow teachers, principals and others to start their own public schools, and operate and control them free of unnecessary government rules and regulations. There was a time when many reformers would think this effort too narrow to gain their support. While that remains the case in some areas, the political wisdom of the Schundler coalition is that this choice proposal is the best for his constituents — and for his state — at this time.

Polls taken on attitudes toward specific school choice measures are misleading. In California, the writing of Proposition 174 was based on a poll that found that if the initiative were in any way limited to low-income children, people from higher incomes would not support it. As it turned out, they didn't support it anyway. The polls taken to measure voter attitudes towards initiatives have usually fallen in the 60-40 range, pro-con. But such favorable reviews quickly become 70-30 against in the wake of a campaign in which the public does not learn enough about the benefits of school choice to counterbalance its purported risks.

Second, an oft-made mistake is that many continue to compare initiatives on behalf of school choice with the successful efforts on term limits or tax reform. Neither is as potent an issue as school choice, nor as complex. The proponents of these initiatives tell us that it took four - or five - or six times until they won. In other words, their philosophy is that, with repetition and persistence, we will win. While there are good

models from those issues as to how to run an effective campaign, it is unwise to assume that the course of school choice will follow that of tax-limitation measures. Lower taxes are a concept that grows on people. Taxes affect everyone, and are commonly viewed as paying for bloated bureaucracies and ineffective governments. The school choice issue is not that clear cut. If a tax-limitation measure fails, the public outrage continues, with day after day reminders about tax and spend policies. After a school choice measure fails, it's still business as usual until another group comes along to stir up the pot.

Unlike the term limit or tax issues, which have been successful in their initiative and referenda efforts, school reform may be more successful in states by way of a legislative strategy. Pennsylvania, a state without initiative and referenda powers, made great strides by taking the issue directly to the legislature — making it an issue for the people by way of their representatives having to vote on it. School reformers there have pulled back after their loss to take stock of their situation, and have begun to systematically build their support before going back into the ring. In contrast, there are those who would rather see a new California effort tried as soon as this November, rather than following a more prudent course and learning from their mistakes in that state's last effort.

Third, the opportunities and successes we can look to in reform could very well be diminished if the battles become partisan. Like all hot issues, it is natural that political parties want to jump on the bandwagon. The school reform movement regained its strength when it became apparent that the coalition supporting reform is more diverse than that. The opponents in the education establishment — who predominantly support Democratic candidates and issues — would like nothing more than to cast school choice as a Republican issue. When Republicans and partisan groups start to claim and publicly promote an issue like school choice as a REPUBLICAN issue, more than momentum is lost: the idea is dismissed as another narrowly supported, "conservative" idea.

### **Elements of Success**

The truth is that school reform does not need to be embraced by politicians to gain currency. On the contrary, a politician gains currency by embracing school reforms, and articulating the benefits to his or her constituents. The service that supporters, in both political parties could provide to the cause of education reform is in articulating the truth about the breadth of its support and successes.

When the REACH Alliance launched its legislative effort late in 1991, it employed old-fashioned lobbying tactics; generating momentum at the grass roots level, and calling on many of the state's civic and religious leaders to help galvanize support. Offering a statewide bill that guaranteed all but the wealthiest a modest voucher, REACH came closest of any of the state efforts to date to claiming victory. Even the national attention and strong organization there failed to bring in decisive levels of support. Critics said the bill would bust the budget. Opponents also worked diligently to portray the effort as the work of the Catholic Church, and were successful in convincing many that school choice is an elitist concept. Unions threatened to bring down legislators who cast their vote for choice. Though the bill lost, none of those who supported it were defeated in their reelection efforts.

Regardless of the absurdity of opponents' allegations, organizers must be prepared to rebut such charges loudly and firmly, not just in tone but in deed. Such counter-offensives may mean changing the wording of an effort or expanding coalitions further to include other natural, but untapped supporters.

Consider that the overwhelming majority of children choosing to go to private schools in the worst inner cities are children of color. Across the country, large numbers of minorities - including Hispanics are working hard to create their own new schools through Charter legislation in eight states. Dozens of school choice programs in effect throughout the country are being credited with providing new hope to thousands of underprivileged children. The working-class, largely Democratic base of economically hard-hit areas are tired of battles over curriculum and want to have the same opportunities their elected officials have to decide what type of school and curriculum is best for their child.

Democrats and Republicans alike should continue to embrace and promote these issues. Like their friends in Pennsylvania, Texans seem to know how to strike when the iron is hot. The courts in the Lone Star state opened a Pandora's box two years ago by ordering the legislature to provide more equalized school funding among rich and poor districts. While finance measures were being considered, several savvy legislators took the opportunity to work real reform into the debate and introduced several amendments that would provide children in districts with lower property tax bases with a voucher to attend the public or private school of their choice. Hispanic Democrats joined Republicans to support the measures. In May of 1993, the final bill lost, on a motion to table consideration, by only two votes, with 70 house members for, and 70 against, and two abstaining. That vote, coupled with previous votes for the measure itself that came almost as close, has led legislators there to

conclude that they now have the necessary support, when they meet next, to enact a modest reform project.

With California grabbing the education reform spotlight in 1993, the Texas vote took place unbeknownst to most reformers. Yet Texas provides perhaps even better lessons than its west coast neighbor. Here was a legislative body that came within two votes of passing a bill, without benefit of any organized initiatives or national campaigns. They had only the strength of a group of legislators from both sides of the aisle, and many low-income constituents, fed up with being a political football for judicially active judges. With the help of more constituents, and greater awareness among Texans, the reformers are confident of success the next time around. The foundations critical to any future effort are now in place: an active, prominent state policy group arming legislators with factual information about the issues; two private scholarship programs with private dollars funding over 1000 kids attending the school of their choice; a supportive business community; and dedicated legislators who know the issue.

Signature gathering for initiative efforts and the introduction of legislation are the easiest parts of a reform effort. Building active, grass roots coalitions of support to persistently inform the public is the most vital component. Without existing home-grown, organizations to help build public support, no new effort will get very far.

Legislators in Arizona have known that for a long time. A number of attempts to implement school choice have been stymied in the past. The real effort came in early 1993 when several heroes of school reform emerged to carry the banner. Working closely with the Governor, the state's key business leaders, and a prominent think tank, Representatives Lisa Graham, Brenda Burns and Senator Tom Patterson began a methodical effort to win support for a modest measure that would provide low-income residents with school choice. Not entirely by chance, these Republicans then began to build a mutually beneficial, if unusual, alliance with several Democrats representing predominantly Hispanic areas. (Will have to be updated at press time): In early February, they were within one vote of the support needed to pass their bill. Working closely with business and public policy leaders and constituents, the Arizona effort is a blueprint for reform.

The same dynamics exist in Florida, Connecticut and elsewhere throughout the country. On February 15th in Connecticut, the state's Democratic Majority Leader Tom Luby joined his colleagues Representatives Eddie Garcia and Andrea Jackson-Brooks and Republican Tim Barth in introducing a reform bill that allows local districts the option of whether and how to implement school choice.

## **Many Paths Toward the Same Goal**

During the days when reformers were focused on Colorado and California, another sleeping giant began to waken. The Charter Schools movement, dismissed prior to the California defeat by most school choice proponents, created a friendly climate for the much needed autonomy in public education that researchers have always recognized as vital to reform. Since 1991, legislation has been enacted in California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, and Wisconsin that makes it possible for groups of parents, teachers and communities to create their own public schools, free from cumbersome rules and regulations.

People in nine states, many of them teachers, unconnected to any movement or official campaign, have begun the important work of reform. Concerned with the quality of their schools, and the threat to their children's safety, they want control over their school and employment choices. These charter school troops are mainly working- and middle-class people, who with the help of a variety of organizations (and state leaders) in their areas have learned of the charter opportunities, rallied support, organized their schools and are winning approval for them. They are constantly in an uphill climb against the unions and others who would prefer them to be part of the sprawling public system that most other public schools belong to. But they prevail, and should be nurtured and supported by reformers, just as the parents of Milwaukee have been since they opted into the reform effort.

Leaders must realize that the great mileage gained by Milwaukee and the Chubb-Moe research came about precisely because the two efforts came from atypical places. Suddenly, a leader in the African-American community and the purveyors of traditionally liberal thought were coming together from two divergent points to achieve the same goal.

The three initiatives that have sought to build upon the momentum of 1990 did not fully recognize these distinctions.

From Texas and Arizona choice efforts to Charter Schools, to more than a dozen new private scholarship programs across the country, strides are being made that don't resemble the choice efforts of days gone by, but certainly represent the same goals and changes that so many in the reform movement have long supported.

These new concepts are illustrative and helpful in a number of ways to future efforts of school reformers. First, all of these successes



come from outside of the so-called movement. They are much more modest in scope than the efforts in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Colorado and California. They attempt, essentially to provide relief to children, but in smaller doses, and through more modest means.

First and foremost, they attempt to provide relief, to children most in need. This one issue leaves many choice advocates in a quandary. While all believe in school choice, there is a philosophical split. Many believe that the only school choice measure worthy of support is one that provides vouchers for all parents at all income levels. An increasing majority recognize that this approach is one that continues to fail, and thus believe that future proposals must target a specific income group or a specific city to make the plan more palatable.

Until the public truly understands what school choice is, how it works, and what it does for students and schools, they will not support what has been characterized again and again as a radical departure from the norm. Incremental and circumscribed measures will be much easier to swallow.

Take for example the mythical town of Fair City, USA, whose people by and large view education (as born out by the latest polls) in general as a mess, but their own schools are fine, thank you. Nearby, Inner City, USA is unsafe, devastated by crime, with many of its children relying on public assistance. Save for one or two unique public schools, and several Catholic or African-American private schools, its schools are atrocious.

The residents of Fair City believe that choice means that Inner City residents will pour into their wonderful schools. While they concede that Inner City's schools are below par, even the staunchest theoretical supporters aren't going to push for dramatic school choice reform. Inner City USA, however, has hundreds of single parents who are fed up with their options and want to be empowered. They like school choice, and have heard wonders about it through their favorite talk show hosts. They believe their children should have the opportunity to attend schools like those enjoyed by the residents of Fair City.

Now suppose that the effort in question was limited to Inner City only. Supporters could well make the argument to Fair City that the quality of life in nearby Inner City would improve, and that choice in other cities has shown an immediate reduction in behavior problems and dropout rates, a rise in achievement and increased parental involvement. As Fair City residents, including the elderly, all pay their fair share of taxes that go to Inner City services, they could be shown not

only the monetary advantages of school reform, but that, by improving the quality of life next door, like a rising tide, it will raise all boats. Like any issue that doesn't effect a voter personally, the residents of Fair City would be educated and made to realize that this was one of the best things they could do for the less advantaged.

That is an argument that sells, and one that has rarely been used by choice proponents. It does not mean, as perhaps the counter argument might be fashioned, that choice limited to an area is an entitlement. On the contrary, it is a pilot -- meaning that before it can be appreciated by all, it must be tested. And who better to start with than those who are most in need? Once in place, the residents of Fair City would see a number of commentaries and documentaries about the program. As it succeeds, many of these residents might even become envious that they don't enjoy the same privilege. This reform could make education a widely discussed issue in these communities, usually ignored by the media and community groups, except for back-to-school time.

Approaching reform incrementally can mean the difference between continued failure and success. Until choice supporters become reformers in the truest sense and follow trends and alterations such as charter schools, private management of schools and other efforts, there will be no meaningful progress. The good news is that reformers are coming to this conclusion. It will take a lot of hard work and a willingness to acknowledge and learn from previous mistakes, but the effort expended will be well worth it.

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