

## 6

# The Politics of the Status Quo

Terry M. Moe

**T**wenty years ago, *A Nation at Risk* set off alarms about the quality of America's schools. Since then our country has been caught up in a frenzy of education reform that has left no state untouched, bringing change upon change to the laws, programs, and curricula that govern public education, more money to see these changes carried out, and greater involvement by the federal government. Every governor now wants to be the education governor, every president the education president.

In some sense, this frenzy of reform is a positive statement about our national resolve. America is tackling a difficult challenge and staying the course. But there is something else going on as well, and it is hardly cause for celebration: namely, that the nation continues to be embroiled in education reform because, after untold billions of dollars and lofty reform packages too numerous to list, very little has actually been achieved—and more reforms are always called for. The

frenzy continues because the reforms themselves are consistently ineffective.

Why have two decades of reform been so disappointing? No doubt many factors are responsible. But an important part of the answer rests with the political process by which our society makes its decisions about reform. The problem is that the politics of education is inherently biased toward the status quo. With rare exceptions, the only reforms that make it through the political process are those that are acceptable to the established interests and that leave the fundamentals—and the problems—of the current system intact. Most of what passes for reform, as a result, is really just more of the same and can't possibly provide the significant improvement people are looking for.

My aim in this essay is to shed light on the politics of education and its consequences for reform. A lot has happened since *A Nation at Risk*, and it is tempting to seek insight in blow-by-blow accounts of all the political actors, events, and conflicts that have brought us to where we are today. But this wouldn't tell us very much. To understand these developments, we need to get beyond most of the details to recognize that the politics of education has a deeper structure that explains much of what has happened—and not happened—over the last twenty years. That is what this analysis is about. It is about the structure of our nation's politics of education, and about how this structure has sabotaged the quest for true reform.

### **The Structure of Education Politics**

There have been two transformations of American education during the last century. The first began during the early 1900s as part of the broader Progressive reform of American government and politics. The Progressives acted to rid the schools of political patronage, organize them into a rational bureaucratic system, and put them in the hands of professionals. The education system that emerged from this era eventually became institutionalized, and in basic structure is much

the same as the one we have today: a bureaucratic system of top-down governance.

No one gives up power easily, and the political transition that accompanied reform was fractious, uneven, and took decades to be realized. Early on, business leaders, reform politicians, and educational administrators struggled to wrest power from political machines. And they ultimately did. But throughout all this, as well as after the defeat of the political machines, educational administrators were battling on a second front: they fought to take power from their erstwhile allies, the business and political leaders, and to achieve autonomous professional control over “their” education system. By mid-century, they had largely succeeded. The Progressive transformation of American education, then, probably took a good fifty years to unfold.<sup>1</sup>

Once this transformation was under way, the key defenders of the new education system were the administrative professionals charged with running it. The basis of their power was their expertise. The administrators were highly organized—the National Education Association, for example, was one of their major vehicles—and they did everything they could to make education a complex, technical business that only experts could possibly understand. They were the ones (to hear them tell it) who knew how to design, organize, and operate complex systems of schools; they were the ones who understood the mysteries of curriculum, testing, and teacher training; and they were the ones, as a result, that public officials and citizens should rely upon in all matters of public education.

This strategy worked well, yet the administrators also had an Achilles’ heel: their political power was rooted solely in their expertise and not in any ability to deliver the votes that so motivated their elected superiors. As long as there was no political movement to reform the education system against their will, however—and until recently there wasn’t—their expertise was enough to give them leverage over their elected bosses, to counter any political disruptions, and to keep their institution stable.

The second transformation occurred during the sixties and seventies. Until this point, teachers had been powerless within the hierarchy of education. But when states began changing their laws to permit (and promote) collective bargaining for public employees, and when the American Federation of Teachers began an aggressive campaign to organize teachers for that purpose, the NEA quickly morphed from a professional association into a labor union to meet the competition—and the system transformation was on. When the dust had cleared by 1980 or so, virtually all school districts of any size (outside the right-to-work states) had been organized, and collective bargaining and unionization had become the norm. In the process, the administrators lost control of the NEA as well as their leadership of the education establishment. The teacher unions reigned supreme.<sup>2</sup>

The result was essentially a new kind of education system: very similar in structure to the older one handed down by the Progressives, but different in its leadership and distribution of power. Today, this system defines the status quo of modern American education. Born of teacher revolution, it has been in equilibrium now for more than twenty years and is eminently stable, well entrenched and well protected.

Within it, the teacher unions are more powerful than the administrators ever were, because the sources of their power are perfectly suited to the hardball world of electoral politics. By gaining exclusive bargaining rights within school districts, the unions have been able to amass huge memberships—the NEA currently has more than two million members, the AFT more than one million—and tremendous financial resources, mostly from member dues. The money allows them to contribute generously to campaigns at all levels of government. More important, their members are located in virtually every political district in the country (wherever there are kids, there are teachers), and they regularly turn out armies of activists to ring doorbells, make telephone calls, distribute literature, and in countless other

ways campaign for union-endorsed candidates. No other group can claim such an awesome capacity for in-the-trenches political action.

Over the last several decades, this capacity has been developed to a fine organizational art and employed almost entirely to the benefit of Democrats, whose constituencies already incline them in the “right” directions and who, with union pressure, can be counted on to support most union demands on education policy. With so many friends in high places and so much clout to ensure that friends follow through, the teacher unions have made it to the top of the political hill. Indeed, a recent study of interest group systems in each of the fifty states concludes that the teacher unions are the single most powerful interest group in the entire country.<sup>3</sup>

Although the teacher unions stand out as unusually powerful, they are otherwise just like other interest groups: they use their power to promote their own interests. In the unions’ case, these interests arise from the primordial fact that, in order to survive and prosper as organizations, they need members and resources. This being so, their fundamental interests have to do with protecting and extending their collective bargaining arrangements, protecting member jobs, promoting member pay and working conditions, promoting member rights in the workplace, and increasing the demand for teachers. Note that these interests, and the behaviors they ultimately cause the unions to engage in, need have nothing to do with what is best for children, schools, or the public interest.

The teacher unions exercise political power in two basic ways: to pressure for the policies that they want and to block the policies they don’t want. In the first role, they take the lead in pushing policy makers to support the existing system of public education—through higher spending, for example, or new programs and teacher protections. These sorts of policies bolster a system that works to the unions’ great advantage; they also tend to result in more teachers (and union members), better pay and benefits, more secure jobs, and the like and thus dovetail nicely with specific union interests. The unions’ second lead-

ership role involves a different kind of system support: they use their power to oppose any reforms that are at all threatening to the established system. Here too, they are acting to bolster a system that works to their great advantage. But their opposition also arises because almost any change of real consequence is likely to unsettle the jobs, security, autonomy, or working conditions of teachers.

In the practice of politics, these two applications of union power are not equally attractive as strategic options. The reason is that policy making takes place within a political system of checks and balances, the effect of which is to make new legislation very difficult to achieve. Typically, a bill must make it past subcommittees, committees, and floor votes in each house of the legislature; it must be approved in identical form by each; it is threatened along the way by various parliamentary roadblocks (such as filibusters, holds, and voting rules); and if it makes it past all these hurdles, it can still be vetoed by the executive. For a group to get a favored policy enacted into law, then, it must win political victories at each and every step along the way, which is quite difficult. For a group to block a policy it opposes, on the other hand, it needs to succeed at just *one* of the many veto points in order to win, a much easier challenge to meet. The American political system is literally designed, therefore, to make blocking—and thus preserving the status quo—far easier than taking positive action. The advantage always goes to interest groups that want to keep things the way they are.

And so it is in education. The teacher unions are extraordinarily powerful, but getting their own policy agendas enacted is difficult for them too. More often than not, especially when the policies they seek are consequential to opposing groups, the unions will either lose or find that much of what they want has to be compromised away. Their power is likely to be stunningly effective, on the other hand, when all they want to do is block the policy initiatives they dislike—because not only do all blockers have a decided advantage, but the unions' massive political power magnifies that advantage many times over,

making it quite likely that they can stop or thoroughly water down any reform proposals that threaten their interests.

Taken together, these basic elements coalesce to give a distinctive structure to the modern politics of education. For the first time in its history, the American education system has a powerful protector capable of shielding it from the unsettling forces of democratic politics. The teacher unions, now the unchallenged leaders of the education establishment, have amassed formidable power rooted in collective bargaining and electoral politics. They have fundamental interests that drive them to oppose almost all consequential changes in the educational status quo. And they operate in a political system that, by advantaging groups that seek to block change, makes it relatively easy to ensure that genuine reform doesn't happen.

### Mainstream Reforms

It is a fact of great importance—and great irony—that *A Nation at Risk* burst onto the scene at precisely the time that the teacher unions were consolidating their power over American education and its politics. What we always hear about this famous governmental report is that it set off a tidal wave of reform. Indeed, the first few years after its appearance have been called the “greatest and most concentrated surge of educational reform in the nation's history.”<sup>4</sup> What we don't hear is that, despite all the excitement and conflict that inevitably characterize such a monumental period of flux, it all took place within a tightly structured political process that constrained the outcomes and protected the status quo.

Were it up to the unions, there would have been no reform at all, save for massive increases in spending and taxing. But business groups saw it very differently. Acutely concerned about an economy plagued by high unemployment, high inflation, and low productivity, they saw the United States falling behind its international competitors and believed that the education system was a big part of the problem. The

nation's human capital was in a sorry state. Far too many workers were poor readers, unable to do simple arithmetic computations, and ill-equipped to think autonomously and creatively in a fast-changing economic world. Major education reforms were called for, they argued, and the need was urgent.<sup>5</sup>

They found allies in the nation's governors, who (along with presidents) became the key political leaders of the education reform movement. This was no accident. Governors, unlike legislators, have large, eclectic constituencies that drive them to think about the broader interests of their states, and they are held politically responsible—as legislators are not—for the well-being of their state economies. When the link between education and economic competitiveness was forged during the early eighties, then, governors were the ones who pushed aggressively for reform. Their incentives were all the greater because, in a federal system of free trade in which businesses can choose where to locate, the governors were unavoidably competing against each other: all wanted to create economic environments—and thus education reforms—that businesses would find attractive.

In the search for solutions, governors and business leaders set up literally hundreds of task forces to study the problem, and turned for advice to acknowledged experts within the education community: to the administrators who run the schools, but especially to the academics—almost all of them in schools of education—whose research gave them a (presumably scientific) basis for claiming to know which reforms would be effective. While the leaders themselves were looking for significant improvement, then, their ideas came from experts wedded to the existing system—whose advice, with some exceptions, was predictably mainstream.

The way to improve the schools, these experts argued, was to spend more money (lots of it), increase teacher salaries, toughen graduation requirements, improve academic coursework, and strengthen teacher certification and training, among other things: reforms that could easily be pursued without changing the basic structure of the system.

These were precisely the kinds of reforms, moreover, that had been recommended by the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, whose expert advice came from the same sorts of mainstream sources.

The tidal wave of reforms that swept across the American states, then, involved almost nothing that was threatening to the teacher unions. So there was no need for the unions to be aggressive opponents of these efforts. Indeed, they actually had much to cheer about, because the reform movement gave them golden opportunities to pressure hard for what they wanted anyway—more spending and taxing—and to claim that, far from opposing reform, they were actually dedicated reformers just like everyone else. Moreover, they could count on political support from a wide array of true reform proponents, including those—business groups and even staunch conservatives—who had long opposed higher taxes and spending (especially in the southern and border states), but who now agreed that more money was needed for education and were eager to throw their weight behind what amounted to the unions' old-line demands.

While mainstream reforms rarely worried the teacher unions, some proposals were troublesome. In *A Nation at Risk* and many other reports, for example, there was support for moving away from the traditional salary schedule toward some form of performance pay—via career ladders, for instance—as a means of giving teachers stronger incentives to promote student achievement. This idea resonated with business leaders and was included in reform proposals in a number of states and localities. But the teacher unions were opposed to performance pay, which, from their perspective, creates competition and jealousies among their members, undermines solidarity, and gives too much discretion to administrators. On occasion, the unions toyed with the idea of career ladders as a means of giving teachers more opportunities for advancement—and of pumping more money into teacher salaries—but the negatives outweighed the positives for union interests, and they typically used their power to snuff out any serious

departures from the traditional salary schedule. As a result, this line of reform made little headway.

With mainstream reforms doing little to change the system and with more serious reforms like pay-for-performance unable to gain adoption, it is hardly surprising that, by the late eighties, reformers generally agreed that reform efforts were not having the desired effects. The notion spread that this first wave of reforms had failed because it had restricted itself to incremental changes within the existing system, and that what the nation needed was a second wave that sought to restructure the system itself.

This shift in perspective led to a surge of support for two major movements that actually do have the potential to change the fundamentals of American education: the choice movement and the accountability movement (discussed below). But aside from these two movements, the newfound concern for restructuring didn't amount to much. Intellectually it was almost entirely lacking in coherence and served as little more than a big tent under which a hodgepodge of ideas—from decentralization to professional development to the teaching of higher-order thinking—could be packaged as exciting new exercises in break-the-mold reform. Which they weren't. There was no grand vision of how the system should be changed, and indeed no real sense of what it might mean to restructure the system. The word "restructuring" became a linchpin of reform rhetoric, but there was not much substance to it.

There were, of course, a few exceptions. The most notable (aside from choice and accountability) were various types of school-based management, which created school-site councils—usually of parents, teachers, and administrators—and granted them substantial authority to govern their own affairs. This idea was threatening to administrators, as it sapped their own authority. But it was far less problematic for the teacher unions, which, although faced with uncertainties they sought to avoid, also had opportunities to control the local governance bodies and their policies. In an environment of growing hostility to-

ward bureaucracy and growing demand for parental participation, then, there was in some states and communities a real interest in seeking reform through decentralized decision making—and with the unions often willing to go along, no powerful political force to stop it. As a result, such restructurings have been adopted in the years since by several big-city school systems, including Chicago, Miami, and Rochester. And a number of states—Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Texas—have mandated certain forms of shared decision making in all their schools. There is no evidence that these reforms have led to higher achievement. But they did, at least, make an attempt at fundamental change.<sup>6</sup>

For the most part, though, the second wave of reforms was just a continuation of the first, its content firmly embedded in the educational mainstream—indeed, often consisting of exactly the same reforms. This entrenched tradition of reform-as-tinkering, moreover, was maintained throughout the nineties and is alive and well today. The states are still seeking to improve their schools through more spending, stricter requirements, new course content, more teacher training, and the like—all with great fanfare, as though this time around these recycled efforts will pay off.

Some “new” reforms have gained support and attention along the way. Perhaps the most notable of these is class-size reduction, which was heavily promoted by President Clinton via his effort to fund 100,000 new teachers for the public schools, and aggressively pursued in a number of states as well—particularly in California, which since 1996 has been spending more than \$1 billion per year to reduce class sizes in the early grades. Needless to say, this is a reform the teacher unions strongly support, because it directly increases their membership and power. But the fact is, class-size reduction, like the other reforms, does nothing to restructure the system, and there is no evidence—nor has there ever been—that it works to bring about substantial improvement in student learning. Worse, it is hugely expensive.<sup>7</sup>

So why are the states investing so heavily in mainstream reforms? Because, despite their ineffectiveness in improving the schools, these reforms are political winners. They are popular with the public and appeal to common sense. The education-school experts make scientific claims on their behalf. The business community tends to believe these claims. And the teacher unions, whose power is usually sufficient to block anything they oppose, either support them or find them innocuous. From a political standpoint, then, mainstream reforms are all pluses and no minuses. For governors under constant pressure to “do something” in pursuit of better schools, therefore, these mainstream reforms are extremely attractive. They are all, at any rate, that the prevailing structure of politics usually allows them to do.

### **The School Accountability Movement**

The greatest achievement of *A Nation at Risk* is not that it gave rise to countless education reforms. Most of them have been a waste of time and money. Its greatest achievement is that it directed attention to the problems of public education, brought political power to bear on the side of reform, and gave impetus to two political movements—one for accountability, the other for choice—that do have the capacity to transform American education for the better. Both are fighting against long odds, challenging a status quo that is heavily protected. But both are making progress.

To most anyone who knows about organization and management, the ideas behind school accountability have obvious merit. If the school system is to be effective in promoting academic excellence, then it must be clear about what its standards of academic achievement are, it must devise and implement tests that measure how well the standards are being met, and it must hold students, teachers, and administrators accountable for results—and give them incentives to do their very best—by attaching consequences to outcomes.

For business leaders, the general guidelines for effective manage-

ment—setting goals, measuring performance, attaching consequences and incentives to performance—are an integral part of their everyday lives. So once these leaders got involved in education reform, it was only a matter of time before they realized that America’s educators had never in history been held accountable for their performance, and only a matter of time before they began demanding that something be done about it. Governors, moreover, were sympathetic. They were the executive leaders of their state school systems, they were held responsible for getting results, and an accountability system offered them an organizational means of gaining control and taking action.<sup>8</sup>

With governors and business leaders embracing its ideals and with polls showing stratospheric levels of public support for standards and testing, the requisites of a political movement were in place. And when it became clear that the first wave of reform was not having the desired effect, the movement began to take off. What made accountability so attractive was that, unlike the other reforms (aside from choice), it offered a coherent way of thinking about the problems plaguing the system and a coherent plan for righting them. Moreover, because it was a top-down approach that sought only to make the existing top-down system function more effectively, it came across as a natural extension of mainstream reform efforts—and not nearly as radical or threatening as contemporaneous proposals for school choice. It was a reform that everyone could agree was desirable.<sup>9</sup>

Well, almost everyone. The teacher unions and their education allies had a very different view. For the goal of the movement was to hold *them* accountable, and that was something they wanted to avoid. This may sound slanderous to say, but in fact it is a simple reflection of their own interests. Historically, teachers and administrators have been granted substantial autonomy, and their pay and jobs have been almost totally secure regardless of their performance. A very cushy arrangement. Indeed, it is quite likely that these properties were part of what attracted many of them to the education system in the first place, and that those who have chosen to stay for more than several

years (rather than leaving for other careers) are people who have found these properties particularly to their liking. So in light of all this, why would they want to have specific goals thrust upon them that they are expected to meet, their performance evaluated in a truly serious manner, their pay linked to their performance, and their jobs made less secure? They wouldn't. In their view, the absence of accountability is a terrific deal—and they want to keep the deal they have.

With accountability so popular, however, the unions and their allies were in something of a political bind. They were opposed to true accountability, but full-fledged opposition would have pegged them as self-interested defenders of the status quo. This being so, they chose a more sophisticated course of action: to provide rhetorical support for accountability, participate in the design of actual accountability plans, and block any components that are truly threatening. In this way, the unions could appear dedicated to system change, while ensuring that teachers and administrators would not really be held accountable.

In following this strategy over the years, they have been aided by the accountability issue's fortuitous fit with union interests: most aspects of the typical accountability plan are rather harmless and can be "supported" at little cost, especially if the unions can shape their design. After all, there is nothing about curriculum standards that is inherently threatening to union interests. The same thing can be said for tests of student achievement. They only become threatening when they are backed by consequences, particularly if teachers are to be sanctioned for poor performance. Thus, it is the consequences the unions most want to prevent and to which their blocking power is mainly directed. If they can do this successfully—and they almost always can—they can be reasonably content with the reforms that result: benign systems of standards and tests that, while impressive to the voting public, are weak as mechanisms of top-down control.

It oversimplifies, of course, to suggest that the unions aren't threatened at all by standards and testing. For even if there are no real

teeth in the legislation (which is the norm), the states have often required—in moves the unions could hardly afford to oppose—that test scores and pass rates be made public. This in itself is a consequence because it subjects teachers and administrators to public pressure if their students fail to meet the standards. The unions want to avoid this, naturally, and have been active in trying to shape the standards and the tests in ways that take the pressure off.<sup>10</sup>

While both the NEA and the AFT tout themselves as supporters of rigorous standards, their state affiliates regularly use their political clout to push for standards that are easily met and easily taught and that will give the impression (through high pass rates) that teachers are doing a great job. When test results are disappointing, moreover, the unions are quick to argue that the tests are flawed, need revision, and cannot provide valid measures of performance. They “favor” tests, but they have almost never seen a test they actually like. What they want instead is for student performance to be evaluated using broader criteria—course grades, portfolios of student work, assessments of effort—based on the subjective judgments of teachers. This way, teachers would be controlling pass rates and public perceptions. And indirectly, they would be in charge of evaluating their own performance.

The unions’ prime goal, however, is to block any formal system of consequences that might facilitate true accountability. Their highest priority is to ensure that there are no sanctions for poor performance and, above all, that *no one ever loses a job* and there is *no weeding-out process* by which the school system rids itself of mediocre or incompetent teachers. Other kinds of economic sanctions—pay cuts, school closings—are verboten as well. And so are commonsense policies that might lead to some of these sanctions: for example, the testing of veteran teachers to ensure that they meet minimal standards.

Another union bugaboo, for reasons I outlined earlier, is pay for performance: which in a genuine system of accountability would typically be the key means by which productive behavior is rewarded,

unproductive behavior discouraged, and proper incentives introduced. The unions employ their power to see that these crucial functions cannot possibly be carried out. They demand that pay be determined by formal criteria—seniority, education, advanced certification—that are not measures of how much students learn (and not causes of student learning either, the research literature suggests) and that any teacher can potentially satisfy. Bad teachers and good teachers get paid the same. No one has an economic incentive to perform.

When consequences are actually adopted (against their wishes), the unions do everything they can to ensure that consequences take the form of rewards, and rewards only. Under duress, for example, they might reluctantly go along with bonuses for high-performing teachers. Or preferably, because they induce less competition among members, the unions might support bonuses for high-performing schools as a whole, especially if the unions are able to decide how the rewards are distributed among the teachers within each school (because typically they would distribute them equally, eliminating competition and jealousy). The idea is that, if there must be consequences, accountability should be a system of positive inducements—and more money (for the rewards)—in which there would only be winners. No losers.

This same logic applies to the problem of low-performing schools, a focus of most accountability reforms. State intervention and reconstitution are common proposals for dealing with persistently inadequate performance, but both are sanction-like approaches that threaten union interests. The unions prefer that low-performing schools be given greater funding, more assistance with programs, and more training for teachers: consequences that are essentially rewards for school personnel, and indeed the kinds of things the unions are always lobbying for anyway. Having them labeled as “consequences” in an accountability system is really just a back-door way of directing more resources to these schools. And making sure that no one is really held accountable.

The teacher unions are not the only groups that have fought to weaken school accountability. They are joined by a whole range of groups representing members of the education community, none of them happy about the new requirements being imposed from above. They are also joined on occasion by civil rights groups, concerned that high-stakes testing will lead to high failure and dropout rates among minorities; sometimes by groups of disaffected parents, who think their kids are being overtested and that too much time is taken away from important schoolwork; and almost always by a small army of academic and think-tank experts, who claim tests are misleading and can't be used as the basis for accountability. Even so, the unions are the 800-pound gorillas of the antiaccountability coalition, and their power is the key to the coalition's success in undermining the efficacy of reform.<sup>11</sup>

The extent of their success varies state by state, depending on how conducive the circumstances are to union power. Obviously, these circumstances may be quite complicated. But other things being equal (and I emphasize that), the teacher unions tend to be most successful—and accountability systems weaker—in states where Democrats (their staunch allies) are in control of the machinery of government, where collective bargaining laws are strong, and where the performance of the public schools is considered acceptable by business or the public. It is no accident that two states often singled out as having (relatively) strong accountability systems—states that acted early and aggressively—are Texas and North Carolina, which are right-to-work states where the teacher unions are at a disadvantage and where upgrading the education system has been given top priority. And it is also no accident that the federal government's first aggressive, broadly based attempt to hold the public schools accountable—the No Child Left Behind act, passed in 2001—was conceived and relentlessly promoted by George W. Bush, a southern Republican.<sup>12</sup>

The norm, however, is that accountability systems are substantially weakened by union influence and crafted in such a way that the

requirements of effective top-down management—all of them having to do with consequences—are thoroughly violated. In particular, the typical accountability system includes

- no serious attempt to pay teachers based on their performance.
- no mechanisms to weed out mediocre or incompetent teachers.
- no real sanctions for poor performance.

The truth is, today's widely touted accountability systems aren't really designed to hold teachers and other school employees accountable. They look like accountability systems. And they are called accountability systems. But they can't do their jobs very well, because they literally aren't designed to.

The future may be brighter. We can't forget that the teacher unions are forced to fight these battles because there *is* genuine power behind the accountability movement. The movement, moreover, has notched political victories over the past two decades and become a tidal wave of reform in its own right. Thus far, there is more symbol than substance to all this. But the unions are clearly on the defensive, and the incremental gains of reformers may yet give rise (over many years) to accountability systems that do a much better job than the ones currently in place.

How might this happen? Why won't the unions just continue to eviscerate whatever the reformers propose? It has a lot to do with the second political movement that followed on the heels of *A Nation at Risk*: the movement for school choice.

### **The School Choice Movement**

School choice has provoked the most tempestuous political conflicts over education in the last twenty years. On the surface, the idea couldn't be simpler: that parents should be able to choose where their children go to school. But its simplicity is deceptive, because if choice were seriously enacted it could generate a far-reaching transformation

of the American education system. That is why its adherents are so fervent in their support. And that is why the teacher unions and their allies are so vehemently opposed.

A true choice system would do three things. First, by allowing families to choose, it would enable them to leave schools that aren't serving them well, particularly schools that are flat-out bad. In this way, families could take immediate action to improve their situations, and their children needn't be trapped in bad schools for years waiting for the promises of mainstream reformers to come to fruition (which is unlikely to happen anyway). Second, precisely because families would be empowered to leave inadequate schools, all schools would be put on notice that unless they perform at high levels they will lose children and resources. This would give schools strong incentives that they don't have under the current system—incentives to perform and innovate—and these incentives would energize (and potentially reshape) every aspect of educational behavior and organization. Third, all of this would generate a redistribution of power within the education system. Parents, of course, would gain power relative to administrators and teachers. But much more would happen too. The regular public school system would become smaller as (some) kids and money go to private or to charter schools, leaving the establishment with fewer resources to control. The unions would lose members, as the number of public school teachers falls; and they would find the growing number of private and charter school teachers much harder to organize. The pressures of competition would force the regular public schools to embrace performance-enhancing reforms—like the rejection of cumbersome collective bargaining requirements—that undermine union power. And more.

There is no mystery, then, why the teacher unions are so intensely opposed to school choice. For when choice is seriously pursued, it threatens their most fundamental interests, far more so than any other type of reform, including accountability. Accountability, at least, leaves the traditional top-down system intact. But choice unleashes

new forces that work from the bottom up to redistribute power, children, and resources; to give schools and teachers strong incentives to perform; and to hold them accountable—through automatically invoked consequences (the loss of children and resources)—if they don't do a good job. In effect, choice is a bottom-up form of accountability that does *not* fit neatly within the Progressive top-down structure and, indeed, virtually ensures that the structure will change dramatically in response to performance-based pressures from below. Just what the unions and their allies don't want.

The teacher unions, moreover, are not alone in their opposition to choice. They are the ones who spend the big money and mobilize the troops, but they also have important allies in the broader liberal coalition that add force and legitimacy to their war effort. Much of this liberal opposition (unlike the unions') derives from a genuine concern for basic principles, values, and deserving constituencies. The NAACP, for example, fears that vouchers and most other forms of choice would promote segregation. The ACLU is concerned about the separation of church and state, as well as issues of equal access and discrimination. Liberals in general tend to be supportive of government and the public schools, suspicious of markets, and worried that a shift toward choice would hurt the poor. And then, of course, there are Democratic public officials, who have an abiding self-interest in reelection and are heavily dependent on the teacher unions for campaign support. They don't get it for nothing. They earn the unions' much-valued support by doing their bidding on important educational issues, and school choice is right at the top of the list.<sup>13</sup>

Choice was first proposed in the mid-fifties by economist Milton Friedman, who argued for a full-blown voucher system. While the idea attracted attention over the next few decades, and while more muted versions of choice—magnet schools, for example—made their appearance during the seventies, the movement didn't pick up steam until the eighties when *A Nation at Risk* highlighted the need for major improvements in the schools, the first wave of reforms proved

a disappointment, and more far-reaching reforms were suddenly given serious consideration. Other factors were at work too. This was a time when top-down approaches to government were falling into disrepute worldwide for their heavy bureaucracy and inefficiency, and when policy makers everywhere—from the United States to Western and Eastern Europe to South America to China—began turning aggressively to markets in reforming their approaches to economic and social policy. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration held power in Washington, and its commitment to market-based reforms—along with its willingness to cross swords with the teacher unions—led it to promote tuition tax credits and other forms of school choice, and to nurture the development of a nationwide network of activists for the cause.

But conservatism alone is no match for the blocking power of the union-led coalition. Nor, stereotypes aside, can school choice count on the support and political clout of business to even the balance. For while a number of business leaders have played prominent roles in the movement over the years—among them John Walton, Theodore Forstmann, Peter Flanagan, and J. Patrick Rooney—the fact is that most business leaders tend to think about education reform in terms of management, because management is essentially what they do for a living and what they believe determines effective organization. They are naturally inclined to be ardent supporters of accountability, but not to be ardent supporters of choice, markets, and competition.

From the beginning, then, the choice movement has always lacked the kind of institutional power base that its opponents benefit from. While business was the driving force behind the post-*Nation at Risk* frenzy of reform, business leaders in general did not throw their political weight behind school choice. Throughout the eighties, as a result, the choice movement was largely made up of conservative activists, along with supporters among parents, (some) private schools, and (some) churches. But this was hardly a power base capable of challenging the opposition. To do that, it needed to broaden its constituency and its agenda.

Which is just what it did. The spark came in 1990, through an event that may someday be regarded as among the most significant developments in the history of American education. What happened was that parents in inner-city Milwaukee, organized and led by local advocates for the poor, rose up to demand vouchers as a means of escaping their failing public schools. And by entering into a coalition with conservatives, led by Republican governor Tommy Thompson, the urban poor won a surprising victory over the powerful defenders of the existing system. The concrete result was the nation's first public voucher program: a small pilot program reserved (at the time) for no more than 1,000 disadvantaged kids. But the victory did more than put vouchers on the map. It also set the movement on a far different and more promising path.<sup>14</sup>

Since 1990, most of the movement's efforts have focused on providing vouchers to poor and minority families in the inner cities: families that are concentrated in low-performing schools, trapped by the searing inequities of the current system, and value vouchers as a means of escape. The new arguments for vouchers have less to do with free markets than with social equity. And they have less to do with theory than with the common-sense notions that disadvantaged kids should be given immediate opportunities to get out of bad schools, and that experiments, pilot programs, and novel approaches are good ideas in failing urban systems for which the downside risk is virtually nil.

This shift has put the opponents of vouchers in an extremely awkward position. As liberals, they claim to be (and usually are) champions of the poor. But on the voucher issue, they refuse to represent their own constituents—and indeed, find themselves fighting *against* poor families, who are only trying to escape conditions that liberals agree are deplorable. In doing so, moreover, liberals have essentially pushed the urban poor into an educational alliance with conservatives. And this alliance, whose arguments for equity, practicality, and low risk have a much broader public appeal than the conservative mantra

of free markets, is sometimes powerful enough to bring about political victory—even in contexts heavily stacked against it.

This is the alliance that won in Milwaukee. It won again in creating the nation's second voucher program in Cleveland (1995), in vastly expanding the Milwaukee program (1995), in creating the first state-level voucher program in Florida (1999), and in making vouchers available to all of Florida's more than 350,000 children who qualify for special education (2000).<sup>15</sup> It also came close—which is saying a lot under the circumstances—in many state legislatures, as well as in the federal government, where Congress passed a low-income voucher program for Washington, D.C., only to have it vetoed by President Clinton. Outside of politics, this same alliance has also been responsible for creating a vast system of privately funded voucher programs—programs that opponents are powerless to block, and have put vouchers in the hands of more than 100,000 disadvantaged children.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the choice movement has also been fighting hard for two other kinds of market-based reforms: charter schools and privatization. Charter schools are public schools of choice that are granted substantial autonomy to pursue their own missions in their own ways. The choice movement sees them as desirable because, if charter plans are designed right, they create an important measure of choice and competition (and all the associated consequences) within the public sector. In the eyes of many advocates, they probably can't provide *as much* of these good things as choice plans that include vouchers. But vouchers are likely to be politically unattainable in most situations, at least for now—while battles for charter reform can often be won.<sup>17</sup>

For the teacher unions and their education allies, charters are a threat. While kids and money remain within the public sector—a major plus from the unions' standpoint—the regular public schools would still lose enrollments, jobs, and resources to the new charter schools; the unions would lose members and collective bargaining strength (because charters are usually nonunion and difficult to organize); there would be performance pressures to reduce bureaucracy

and union-imposed restrictions; and, in general, the foundation of establishment power would be weakened.

Nonetheless, while the unions have drawn a line in the sand over vouchers—a survival issue for them—they have found it wise to follow a more accommodating strategy with charters, much as they have done with accountability. They have chosen not to come out in full-force opposition, but instead to feign support. In this way, they have tried to forge a social compromise on choice—allowing a few new alternatives in the public sector, a little bit of competition—in hopes that modest steps in this direction will satisfy the demand for choice, stall the progress of their worst nightmare, and at the same time make them appear open to change and innovation. They also have an eye on their allies in the liberal coalition, Democrats and liberal interest groups, who have their own reasons for wanting to appear sympathetic to charters: there is a real demand among their urban constituents for new educational opportunities. By showing flexibility on charters, then, the teacher unions allow their allies to make politically beneficial moves of their own without fear of retribution, and the coalition is more likely to stay together.

But how to “support” charter schools without hurting union interests? As with accountability, the unions and their allies have essentially solved this problem through the politics of program design: they “support” charters in concept, but use their power to impose so many design restrictions that the programs cannot possibly generate much choice or competition. Among other things, they lobby to have low ceilings placed on the numbers of charter schools allowed by law, to require that charters be authorized by their local school districts (which have incentives to prevent new competitors from entering), to require that charters be unionized and part of the districtwide contract, and to require that charters be subject to as many rules and controls as possible. Their ideal is to design charter systems that don’t work.

Because charters have become the consensus approach to school

choice with few outright enemies, charter programs have spread like wildfire across the American states during the last decade. Since their humble beginning in 1991, when Minnesota adopted the nation's first charter program (allowing just eight charter schools in the entire state), well over half the states have adopted their own programs. Today, more than 500,000 children attend some 2,700 charter schools, and the numbers are climbing year by year. The choice movement has made a good deal of progress by pushing for this kind of choice-based reform—yet there is much less here than meets the eye. Most charter programs are burdened by designs that have been heavily influenced by the teacher unions and their allies, and that sharply restrict how much real choice and competition the new charter schools can bring. In California, for instance, there are currently about 450 charter schools in a state that has more than 1,000 school districts and 8,500 schools. The charters are a drop in a very large bucket and can't change things much. Yet California is regarded as having one of the stronger charter systems.

Aside from vouchers and charters, another reform actively pushed by the choice movement is privatization. The idea here is that school districts or chartering agencies can contract with private firms to operate public schools (or even entire districts), in order to take advantage of the greater flexibility, expertise, and potential for innovation that the marketplace might have to offer. The attraction to the choice movement is obvious. While privatization need not involve choice at all, it often does—many of the schools currently operated by private firms are charter schools of choice—and even if it doesn't, the commonality is that they both are attempts to improve education by bringing market forces into the structure and operation of the current system. Privatization is a natural adjunct to choice.<sup>18</sup>

And naturally, it is also a threat to union interests. One problem is that the unions have far less control over private firms than over school districts, and they may find that the firms' practices and procedures—longer hours, different teaching methods, different curric-

ula—could outperform and disrupt those of the regular public schools. But more important still, they worry that even small experiments in contracting to private firms could lead to far greater privatization in the future and to a flow of jobs, money, and control from the public to the private sector. The last thing the unions want is a demonstration that private firms can do a better job of educating children than the regular, unionized schools can do. Their political clout guarantees that many Democrats will go along with them in opposing privatization. And they are aided by the long-standing skepticism among liberal groups about the role of profits in provision of public services.

With such union-led opposition, only a small percentage of school districts—no more than a few hundred out of a total of almost 15,000 districts nationwide—have been willing to experiment with privatization, usually when they have been at the end of their rope: faced with failing schools that they have been unable to turn around, under intense pressure to improve, and not knowing what else to do. In these proportionately few cases, the unions have often licked their wounds and kept on fighting—making loud public claims about the firms' poor performance, inciting parent opposition, accusing firms of doctoring test scores, pursuing court cases to challenge the firms' authority and operating decisions, and otherwise making privatization a miserable, costly, and politically tumultuous experience for all concerned.

This is what they did to the first major firm to venture into the education management business—Education Alternatives, Inc. (EAI)—whose initial, nationally watched contracts in Baltimore and then Hartford in the early nineties ended when school authorities, overwhelmed by union-inspired political pressures, reneged on prior agreements and sent EAI packing (and nearly into bankruptcy). In the years since, other private firms have learned from EAI's experience and, among other things, been much more careful in choosing their districts and finding those rare local unions that, given dire circumstances, seem willing to work with them. Of these firms, the largest and most prominent is Edison Schools, which now runs about 150

public schools—including twenty-one in Philadelphia, whose public school system is currently under state takeover. But Edison too is up to its neck in troubles and is constantly forced to devote precious resources to defending itself from political attack. For these firms, simply being able to focus on the education of children is a luxury—which obviously makes success a difficult proposition. This is the way the unions want it. They want Edison and all the others to fail. They want privatization to fail. And they are using their power to bring these failures about.

Of course, the unions' success at playing defense needs to be appreciated in perspective. There is no denying that, since the Milwaukee breakthrough in 1990, the school choice movement has made real progress. Before then, choice was little more than a glimmer in Milton Friedman's eye, and the idea that markets should play an integral role in public education was regarded as some kind of heresy. But this is no longer the case. Choice, competition, and privatization are taken seriously in today's policy arenas, and they have clearly established a beachhead in American education, especially in inner-city areas where the public schools are in desperate need of reform.

As with accountability, however, there is more symbol than substance here. When a choice or privatization plan is adopted, which is the exception rather than the rule, it typically happens only after a bitterly fought political battle in which the unions and their allies, while accepting the outcome (or unable to prevent it), have played an influential role in the design of the program. They impose all manner of restrictions and limitations to ensure that there is actually very little choice, very little competition, very little reliance on market dynamics—and very little threat to their interests. What appear at the outset to be revolutionary reforms, therefore, are mostly gutted by the time they make it through the political process.

Not even the most avid supporter should expect these reforms to perform very well or to bring about significant improvements in American education. At least not yet. The hope has to be that these early

attempts, hobbled by their enemies, will ultimately lead to more comprehensive reforms that are actually designed to do the job. The question is: can we realistically believe that such a thing will happen?

### The Future

The politics of education hardly gives us much reason for optimism. Despite the pluralism that many observers seem to associate with it—the multiplicity of interest groups, the various levels and types of government officials, the never-ending clash of values—there is a very simple structure to it that renders most of the apparent pluralism irrelevant and misleading, at least when it comes to explaining the most basic policy outcomes. The structure of education politics arises from the fact that the teacher unions have vested interests in the existing system, from which they benefit enormously regardless of how poorly it performs; they have tremendous political power at all governmental levels; and in a political system of myriad checks and balances, they are able to use their power to block most reforms they do not like, and to water down or eviscerate virtually all of the rest by purposely imposing designs that prevent them from working effectively.

This is the politics of the status quo. And because it is what it is, “major” reforms of American education aren’t likely to amount to much. Anything that is truly major, that promises to initiate a fundamental transformation of the system, will simply be defeated. And anything that survives the political process will be so whittled down, twisted, and emaciated that it may bear little resemblance to the ideas that motivated it and will almost surely do little to bring about the significant improvements that were intended. It won’t be major anymore.

So are the aspirations of *A Nation at Risk* doomed to go unmet? The answer depends on whether the teacher unions can be dislodged from their roles as the supreme gatekeepers of education reform—

which in turn depends on whether their blocking power can be drastically reduced, so that genuine changes in the status quo can go forward. Obviously, there can be nothing easy about this. In the first place, there is a catch-22 at work: the unions are already powerful, and they will use that power to defeat any attempt to take their power away. The only way to reduce their power, it seems, is to be more powerful than they are. And in the politics of education, no other group or coalition is even close. In addition, the power of the teacher unions is reinforced by the power of their allies, Democratic office holders and liberal interest groups, which makes them even more difficult to dislodge.

Nonetheless, there is a power transition under way even now. It is almost imperceptible, and it may take many years to come to fruition, but it is happening. The main sources of the transition are the very reforms that the teacher unions have been fighting against over the last two decades: accountability and school choice. For the most part, the unions have been successful at stalling or weakening these efforts to bring about real change in the system. But they haven't prevented them from gaining a foothold—and because each is backed by a movement with genuine power, there is every reason to believe that they will expand their turf in the years ahead. As this happens, however slow and frustrating the process may be, it will take a toll on the teacher unions by eating away at the very roots of their power.

This is especially true for school choice. In the first place, the unions cannot hold their liberal coalition together for very long on this issue. Their problem is that Democrats and civil rights groups do not have the same self-interest in the current education system that the unions do. Rather, they have constituents in the inner city who are trapped in inadequate schools and very supportive of vouchers and other forms of choice. Until now, the civil rights groups have opposed choice because their leaders, whose generation came up through the ranks during the Civil Rights Movement decades ago, have long seen choice as a subterfuge for segregation. But younger black leaders have

had very different life experiences, and they don't see it that way: they see choice as a means of empowering the poor. Soon they will be moving into positions of power, and as they do the civil rights groups will begin to take a much more positive stance toward school choice. Indeed, it could easily happen earlier, for the current leadership is under pressure from many of its own members—and competition from other groups (notably, the Black Alliance for Educational Options)—to shift sides. As this movement begins to happen, it will be much easier for Democrats to do what many of them would like to do anyway: represent their own constituents without regard for union retribution. The liberal coalition's battle against the poor is inherently out of sync with the political incentives and ideals of the liberals themselves, and it won't last. As it breaks down, the unions will increasingly be fighting their battles alone.

In the second place, whatever the politics may be, the very expansion of school choice has a corrosive effect on union power. So far, the teacher unions have been able to develop their organizations within a safe, secure environment of government regulation, insulated from competition and knowing that, whatever costs and rigidities they impose on the public schools, the kids and the resources and the union members would always be there. The conditions have been ideal for amassing power and exercising it with a vengeance. But school choice undercuts all this. By allowing kids and resources to leave the regular public schools for other alternatives and by forcing unionized schools to compete with nonunion schools, it ensures that the unions will lose members and resources—and thus become smaller and less politically powerful. It also ensures that they will have very different incentives in the exercise of what power they have: because to the extent they resist reforms that would make unionized schools less productive than nonunion schools, they will be slitting their own throats.

Accountability does not go for the jugular the way choice does, but it does make life more difficult for the unions. By insisting that performance be measured and made public, accountability systems

provide concrete information that puts the spotlight on people, schools, and districts that are not doing their jobs well. And inevitably, it puts the spotlight on unions as well—because unions are in the business of protecting mediocre and incompetent teachers, ensuring that pay cannot be linked to performance, and making the schools less flexible and more bureaucratic. Through evidence and publicity, then, accountability reforms help to generate political pressure on the unions to stop using their power as they do—and help to convince those who want better schools, including many of the unions' own allies, that the unions have to start behaving more “responsibly.” Even now, many liberals are openly embarrassed by the teacher unions' blatantly self-interested approach to the schools, and it is common to see editorials and op-ed pieces bashing them in major newspapers (such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) that are known for their liberal politics.

So far, accountability and choice have not gone far enough to make a real dent in union power. The unions have seen to it that, as things now stand, both reforms are hollow shells of what they might be. But time isn't standing still, and neither are the choice and accountability movements—which continue to fight for their causes, and continue step by step to create programs that are incrementally better and stronger than the ones that went before. As they do, the unions will be faced with more effective competition and with mounting organizational and political problems—and their power will slowly ebb. As that happens, they will be less able to defend the status quo from the relentless challenges of reformers, and there will be more and increasingly stronger reforms—which will undermine their power still further, leading to accelerating reforms. And so it will go.

This process may take decades, just as the Progressive transformation did during the early to mid-1900s. But the result is likely to be an education system that is far better than the one we have now. No system emerging from the pulling and hauling of the political process is likely to meet our highest expectations. But it will nonethe-

less embody changes that strike to the heart of some of the current system's most fundamental problems, combining top-down accountability with the energizing, bottom-up forces of choice and competition to put a premium on performance and drive out much of the stagnation and complacency that for so long has been the norm in American education. This, I think, will be the true legacy of *A Nation at Risk*. Not the tidal wave of mainstream reforms usually associated with it, but the far more significant achievements of choice and accountability—in changing our education system for the better, and in moving us beyond the politics of the status quo.

### Notes

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2. On the rise of the teacher unions, the sources of the political power, and their exercise of it, see Myron Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
3. Clive S. Thomas and Ronald J. Hrebmar, “Interest Groups in the American States,” in *Politics in the American States*, ed. Virginia Gray and Herbert Jacobs, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1999).
4. Denis P. Doyle and Terry W. Hartle, *Excellence in Education: The States Take Charge* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1985), 1.
5. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of the post-*Nation at Risk* reforms can be found in Thomas Toch, *In the Name of Excellence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). See also Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O’Day, “Systemic School Reform,” in *The Politics of Curriculum and Testing*, ed. Susan H. Fuhrman and Betty Malen (New York: Falmer Press, 1991); and William A. Firestone, Susan H. Fuhrman, and Michael Kirst, “State Educational Reform Since 1983: Appraisal and the Future,” *Educational Policy* 5, no. 3 (September 1991): 233–50.
6. For an empirical study, see Anthony Bryk, “No Child Left Behind, Chicago Style: What Has Really Been Accomplished?” (paper presented at

the conference on Taking Account of Accountability, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, June 2002).

7. See, for example, Eric Hanushek, "The Evidence on Class Size," in *Earning and Learning: How Schools Matter*, ed. Susan E. Mayer and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).
8. The following discussion of the politics of accountability relies upon Terry M. Moe, "Politics, Control, and the Future of Accountability," in *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of Accountability*, ed. Paul E. Peterson and Martin West (forthcoming).
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10. For empirical accounts that document how unions have acted to block or weaken serious accountability efforts in specific states, see Paul Hill and Robin J. Lake, "Standards and Accountability in Washington State," in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, ed. Diane Ravitch (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002); Frederick M. Hess, "Reform, Resistance . . . Retreat? The Predictable Politics of Accountability in Virginia," in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, ed. Ravitch; and Michele Kurtz, "Testing, Testing: School Accountability in Massachusetts" (working paper 1, Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2001).
11. On the role of groups other than unions in the politics of accountability, see especially Hess, "Reform, Resistance . . . Retreat," in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, ed. Ravitch.
12. For a description of accountability systems across states, see Education Week, *Quality Counts 2002* (Bethesda, Md.: Education Week, 2002).
13. For an overview of the politics and history of school choice, see Terry M. Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001). See also Hubert Morken and Jo Renee Formicola, *The Politics of School Choice* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).
14. For an overview of the politics, content, and history of the Milwaukee voucher plan, see Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*; and John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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