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Common Sense School Reform

At a Pioneer Forum held March 18, 2004, ***Frederick (Rick) M. Hess****, the author of a new book titled* Common Sense School Reform*, outlined his prescriptions for making schools more effective. Respondents were* ***Mark Roosevelt****, managing director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education and an architect of the Commonwealth's 1993 Education Reform Act, and* ***David P. Driscoll****, Massachusetts' commissioner of education. The discussion was moderated by* ***Charles Glenn****, professor of educational policy at Boston University. Excerpts of each speaker's remarks follow.*

The speakers' remarks excerpted here are available in their entirety online at **www.pioneerinstitute.org/hess.cfm**.

A Brief Look at Education Reform Efforts in Massachusetts

Charles Glenn: It is useful to put the panelists' remarks into the context of the last 30 years of education reform efforts here in Massachusetts, with which many of us have been involved. From 1970 to 1991, I was the official at the Massachusetts Department of Education responsible for urban education and civil rights. I had extensive legal powers—beyond those in most states—and hundreds of millions of dollars of state funds to use with a fair amount of discretion in trying to make urban schools fair and effective. After those 21 years, I left government with a sense of defeat. I wrote an article in *The Public Interest* in 1991 calling for charter schools, out of my conviction that institutional reform of urban school districts was increasingly difficult to accomplish.

Unfortunately, we have not seen the kind of fundamental changes and reforms that we'd hoped for when the Reform Act passed. —Charles Glenn

It was therefore with enormous excitement that I saw the efforts that Mark Roosevelt and his colleagues made to develop the Massachusetts Education Reform Act because it built in the principle of accountability. Unfortunately, we have not seen the kind of fundamental changes and reforms that we'd hoped for when the Reform Act passed. There has been steady, good improvement. But American schools are not nearly as good as they should be. And the schools that serve poor and minority children are far less adequate than they have any right to be.

After a dozen years training educators, I've grown convinced that the status quo assumptions of marginal improvements, the refusal to challenge fundamental ways for understand-

www.pioneerinstitute.org
85 Devonshire St., 8th floor
Boston, MA 02109
617-723-2277 | Tel
617-723-1880 | Fax

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ing things, has been so powerful that I expect that when I retire in a year or two, it will probably be with the sense that we need to find alternative institutional forms for preparing effective teachers—perhaps on the model adopted 150 years ago in England and elsewhere, of having experienced teachers paid for having inexperienced ones work with them and, in doing so, learn how to become effective in the classroom.

A Measure of the Need for Reform

Frederick Hess: America's schools are in a state of crisis. Few of our schools are excellent, many are mediocre, and yet we, the adults responsible, are content to tinker and theorize. Demands for radical change are consistently met by protestations of good intentions, pleas for patience, and an endless stream of ineffectual reforms.

The dimensions of the problem are straightforward. Researchers have estimated that in 2001 just 32 percent of all 18-year-olds graduated from high school with basic literacy skills and having completed the courses needed to attend a four-year college. The figure was just 20 percent for African-American and 16 percent for Latino 18-year-olds.

The 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that just 31 percent of fourth graders and 32 percent of eighth graders were proficient in reading. Fully 37 percent of fourth graders and 26 percent of eighth graders scored below basic. We're not talking a high bar here, to suggest that children be able to read on grade level.

In 2002, three-quarters of employers expressed serious doubts about the basic skills of public school graduates in the areas of spelling, grammar, and writing clearly. More than 60 percent reported that public school graduates had fair or poor math skills. College professors teaching a self-selected group of the nation's graduates expressed similar concerns at almost identical rates.

Perhaps most distressing, our children lose ground during their years in school. While our 9-year-olds score above international norms, our 13-year-olds slip below average, and our 17-year-olds avoid the bottom only by eking past nations like South Africa, Cyprus, and Lithuania.

The common culprit blamed for our educational travails is a lack of spending. However, by any reasonable standard American schools are funded exceptionally well. In 2000, the most recent year for which international comparisons are available, the OECD reported that the U.S. spent significantly more per pupil than any other industrial democracy, including those famous for the generosity of their social programs. From 1995-96 to the current school year, U.S. education spending grew by more than 53 percent, from $287 billion to more than $440 billion.

The problem that policymakers and education officials are loathe to address is a system of schooling seemingly designed to frustrate competence. Teachers are hired, essentially for life, through haphazard recruiting procedures. There is little systemic recognition for excellence. Compensation and desirable assignments are treated as rewards for longevity. Advances in technology and testing have made accountability and information available in a manner unimaginable even 15 years ago. Yet informing decisions with data is considered a novel, nifty idea, while the very words "efficiency" and "productivity" are derided as alien to education. The result is a culture of incompetence, in which educators learn to keep their heads down, avoid causing waves, and play defense.

Common sense reform seeks to construct a culture of competence in schools—a culture where success is expected, excellence is rewarded, and failure is not tolerated.

—Frederick Hess

Educational leaders routinely complain that they don't get the resources they need and therefore cannot reasonably be held responsible for educating all our children. Ken Baker, principal at the Wyoming High School in Cincinnati, told *Ed Week* last year, "We're supposed to drive all the kids toward success, and we have to do it with one hand behind our backs. The fact is, there are going to be children left behind." Cincinnati spent $10,328 per attending pupil in 2001-02.

In Buffalo, Marion Cañedo, the superintendent of a district spending well over $11,000 per pupil, opined, "I don't know how to make services multiply with decreased revenues. I don't know how that's humanly possible. Unless it's like the loaves and the fishes." In fact, one-quarter of the nation's superintendents told *Public Agenda* last year that a lack of funding means that, "only minimal progress can be made," in their schools.

A police officer charged with apprehending a serial murderer who warned, "Unless we get extra funding, don't expect us to catch the killer," would be dismissed or held up to ridicule. Yet in schooling we are so used to these justifications and excuses that they don't even phase us. We take them as the facts on the ground.

The leaders of all organizations, even worthy ones, must make hard choices and find ways to do more with less. Organizations transform themselves by refocusing on the essentials, by tackling contract language and staffing routines once viewed as untouchable, and finding ways to use new tech-

nological and management tools to rethink their work. Companies on the verge of bankruptcy cut salaries, find ways to make due with less, or find a way to scale back services in an intelligent fashion. Service sector organizations like law firms and newspapers have slashed a majority of the support positions that 40 years ago were required to maintain files, handle correspondence, and prepare documents. When pressed, educational leaders have largely rejected such steps.

Take the case of John Wilhelmi, a principal in Portland, Oregon. After No Child Left Behind enabled students to transfer out of his low-performing Marshall High School, he lost a lot of students and more than one-third of the incoming freshman class. How did Wilhelmi respond? By overhauling his school? No. He wrote an open letter to President Bush: "We can only do good things to the extent that we have the staff to do them. If we lose staff then we lose the capacity to do good things." Only in education are leaders allowed to imagine that there is no fat to cut and no employees to spare, to believe it is impossible to deliver new services without new resources, or to assume that existing inefficiencies are a natural state of being.

What Is Common Sense School Reform?

Confronting this grim reality, there are two paths to education reform. Status quo reformers believe that the nation's millions of teachers and administrators are already doing the best they can. Status quo reformers presume the way to improve America's schools is to provide more money, expertise, training, and support. They embrace new pedagogies, smaller schools, smaller classes, new assessment strategies, and any number of widely endorsed educational reforms, but steer away from radical changes to job security, accountability, compensation, competition, or work conditions.

The only substantive changes the status quo reformers embrace are those that would occur outside of the schoolhouse. Issues like economic inequality or racial division have a tremendous impact on children's opportunities and must be addressed by policymakers. But we should not allow musing on public housing or welfare reform to stand in for tough-minded attention to improving schools.

Common sense reform rests on two precepts: accountability and flexibility. Centuries of experience in fields from architecture to zoology tell us that people work harder, smarter, and more efficiently when they are rewarded for doing so. People do their best work when goals are clear and they know how they'll be evaluated. Smart, educated, motivated people will find ways to succeed.

Common sense reform seeks to construct a culture of competence in schools—a culture where success is expected, excellence is rewarded, and failure is not tolerated. Absent the pressure of markets or centralized accountability, it is not hard for mediocrity or inefficiency to seem the norm. Absent such pressure, even the best-intentioned educator may shy away from pursuing efficiencies when they require dislocation or wrenching adjustments.

The common sense reformer assumes that educators, like attorneys, journalists, doctors, professors and think tankers, will be more effective when held accountable for performance, when rewarded for excellence, and when given the opportunities to devise new paths to success. Accountability forces managers and leaders to rethink systems and practices. It relies on toothy testing systems and market competition working in tandem to compel educational leaders to make hard choices.

Consider the Detroit automakers who fell on hard times in the 1970s. Energetic new leadership rethought the product line, under duress; redesigned quality control, under duress; slashed middle management, under duress. They renegotiated contracts while cutting costs. And they weren't happy about any of it. The transformation was not about asking folks on the assembly line to work 60 hours rather than 40. It was about requiring those in charge to bite the bullet and make painful decisions and those below them to accept those changes.

Flexibility, the other half of common sense reform, is about empowering educators and educational leaders to serve their students more effectively and harness the forces of accountability. This requires rethinking how we hire, manage, and compensate educators, how we staff schools, how we select and compensate educational leaders, and how we utilize technology.

Beyond the general tenets of accountability and flexibility, the principles of common sense reform are straightforward. Schools must focus on doing a few crucial things well. Schools must ensure that all children master the gatekeeping skills of reading, writing, mathematics, and that children have a fundamental grasp of science and history.

School systems should relentlessly seek out talented and entrepreneurial teachers and leaders, and should strive to nurture these individuals. Licensure barriers that deter promising candidates from becoming teachers and leaders should be stricken. Educators who excel at serving children, who contribute in meaningful ways to their schools, or who take on the toughest assignments in terms of schools or coursework must be appropriately recognized and compensated.

Contractual relationships that stand in the way of this must be overturned. And it's not the union's job to overturn it, it's our job to overturn it. We're supposed to be saying, "Okay, you guys get to negotiate for that and nothing more." You have to push back. It's our job to stand up for the kids.

Contractual relationships should be modified so that ineffective educators can be identified and either remediated or readily fired. School districts should promote flexibility and accountability by decentralizing and using data management and information technology advances to inform decisions throughout the organization.

There is nothing uniquely businesslike about asking that organizations be accountable, flexible, or efficient. These are not business principles. These are sensible guidelines for motivating adults and ensuring that they will competently perform their chosen work. The travesty is that these are regarded as business principles because they are the norm in the private sector while we have permitted our most significant domestic institution, or nation's schools, to totter along with little more than good intentions as a guide. Common sense reform reflects the recognition that we should approach our children's education with at least the same degree of seriousness that we currently reserve for the production of breakfast cereal and designer jeans. The fact that we have not done so reflects an appalling lack of moral seriousness on our part.

Common sense reform is not a miracle cure. It will not solve all or even most of what ails American education. It is only a beginning, it is a foundation, it is the thing that we must do first before tackling the instructional and pedagogical and curricular challenges.

Visionary leadership requires a certain basic toolbox—that executives be able to assemble their own teams, reward excellence, remove the inept, measure performance, encourage entrepreneurial activity, access information, and reinvent operations as necessary.

Whether we will unflinchingly embrace common sense reform is the question of the era. In a world as complex as ours, it is easy for simple truths like responsibility, merit, and opportunity to get lost.

Hard Work and Intense Focus on Results

Mark Roosevelt: Trying to differentiate between status quo reform and common sense reform is an oversimplification. Accountability, flexibility, competition, work force improvement, and data management—every progressive school administrator or new superintendent believes in those things and is trying to implement them.

The status quo institutions are there, and unfortunately union leadership is often too much in that camp. School committees are as hostile to the MCAS standard as any other group in Massachusetts.

I'm going to make a couple of points. Then I want to talk about why I believe standards-based reform is the most important public sector movement of our time.

Trying to differentiate between status quo reform and common sense reform is an oversimplification.... All of us should be suspicious of anybody who says there is a silver bullet.

—Mark Roosevelt

• *Money.* No serious person says that money is the major woe affecting our public schools. But children coming from Boston, who are almost exclusively poor and from difficult families, are not awash in money at $11,000. Money is more of a factor here than we like to take into account.

• *Teachers.* We all know that there are problems in structuring the teacher force and incentives. We need to recognize that until we change whatever it is about the teaching profession—and I think it's complex and not simple—and attract some of our best and brightest into teaching, we have a very serious, long-term problem. We know that the quality of the teacher in a child's room is the single most important factor in whether they're going to be educated well. Right now the average Massachusetts teacher, for example, comes from the bottom quarter of his or her state college class.

• *Innovations.* I am on the Governor's Education Management Review Board, which looks at schools, and we just reviewed Chelsea. Chelsea is doing almost all the management things, over quite a consistent and long period of time, that we all believe will improve schools. And Chelsea's student performance has been a nice slightly upward line. But it's not the dramatic improvement that one would like.

All of us should be suspicious of anybody who says there is a silver bullet remedy. I favor charter schools, I favor competition. Charter schools have found out how hard this is. The nice thing is that this is a better conversation than it was in the past. There is less status quo talk in most places. There is more willingness to try to think out of the box and creatively.

• *No Child Left Behind.* For the first time that I know of in American public policy history, we have a law that says that no school can be judged to be doing its job if it's not improving the performance of all of its students, including subgroups, including African Americans, including Latino children. It's a good thing that we are saying that, but the law fails in a whole variety of other ways.

When school systems get better, it is by intense focus on results. It is through extraordinary labors of extremely well motivated folks. We need to remember how hard this work is. Substantively, we're together. We can make common sense reform work. But I think standards-based reform is more of a revolutionary change than Rick credits it to be.

The change from norm-based testing to standards-based testing has within it the seeds of the most important intellectual shift in American school policymaking. We can no longer hide behind comparing Suzy in Detroit to Johnny in Boston. Having a standards-based test can, if we allow it to, catalyze better discussions, better action, and better change.

On Educational Funding and External Factors

David Driscoll: First, let me talk about this issue of being well-funded. The cost of public education has to do with a) the cost of living in America, and b) the cost of special education and other services, but particularly special education. In the first six years of Ed Reform, at least $300 million of extra money went into the budget every year, bringing everybody up to foundation and even giving money to those districts above foundation—a remarkable period of time with a tremendous infusion of money. Yet two-thirds of the communities had special ed increases that were larger than all of the money they received in increased state aid.

People say, "Look, the money keeps going up and the results stay steady." The real cost, however, is both for special education, which is billions and billions of new dollars, and just the cost of salaries, which is 80 to 85 percent of any budget. Teachers today cannot, in most instances in Massachusetts, afford to buy a house in the communities in which they teach.

We have no money for after school programs, we have very little money for early childhood education. We have no money for health protection, as it used to be called. Notice the recent studies that show smoking is now on the increase. I agree that you don't solve the problems of education by throwing money at them. But we are not spending as much as we should. Families are paying hundreds of dollars, in some cases thousands, to play a sport, play a flute, and ride a bus. Before we say, "Look at all the money we're spending in public education," and just walk away, an argument can be made that we are shortchanging schools to some extent. It's not the priority it ought to be.

The other issue I'd like to highlight is the effect of external factors on schools. I happen to take the "no excuse" mantra. Look at the districts down in Texas along the Mexican border that have high percentages of poor kids, and look at the results they're getting. So there should be no excuses. On the other hand, I think there are plenty of excuses, frankly, if you've been in today's schools. I have a daughter who's a kindergarten teacher. She has six children who have come to her since the beginning of the year who speak not one word of English.

This decline from the fifth grade to the ninth grade—it's pretty easy to get the attention of a kindergarten kid. It's easier to get them actively involved in learning than it is older kids. Students are moving in and out of the schools. The *Globe* did a terrific analysis of the Boston public schools in which the paper found the MCAS passing rate for kids who start in the ninth grade and stay in that high school for four years is every bit as good as the state average. It's higher than the state average. If you take out the transients, it makes a huge difference.

I've dealt with MCAS for seven years, and I've heard every argument against it in the book. My favorite is, "You're taking away valuable time from teaching by testing the kids." And I respond, "You know, I have to call Bill Belichick of the Patriots and convince him to stop playing games on Sundays. He's losing all that time playing games when the team could be practicing and getting that much better."

I agree you don't solve the problems of education by throwing money at them. But we are not spending as much as we should.... It's not the priority it ought to be. *—David Driscoll*

Let me tell you the two areas where I think Rick is absolutely right. One is in the area of personnel. We in public education don't have a clue: we don't have human resources skills, we don't have recruiting skills, we don't have training skills, we don't have evaluation skills; it's a mess. And there's no excuse for it because there are ways to implement good personnel processes.

Education is finally going from an art to a science. How do we teach reading, how do we teach mathematics, etc.? What we all have to do is figure out how to work together. Mark is absolutely right—anybody who thinks this is easy work is crazy. It's excruciatingly hard work to do it right. When you talk about opening up the avenues, as we have in Massachusetts, for alternatively certified people, smart people who don't have a teaching background but want to come into the field, that's all very good. Wait till they get there, as we found out with our programs. Many of them left, because it's not easy.

There have to be some fundamental changes in what we do. I think we have to find a way to do it from within—the status quo to some extent is going to be there. How do you fundamentally reform the status quo?