ONE   *A Fresh Assessment:*
         Why Reform
         Initiatives Fail

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AS THE 1990S DAWNED, the outlook for genuine,
deep-rooted school reform had never looked better. Under the leadership
of President George H. W. Bush and Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas,
the nation's governors had adopted six impressive National Education
Goals. Business leaders, rallied by the Business Roundtable and the Na-
tional Alliance for Business, had thrown their weight behind the goals. A
coalition of corporate and philanthropic interests was busy cobbling to-
gether an ambitious effort to reshape schools, the New American Schools
Development Corporation. And a consensus was developing around "sys-
temic" reform, a catch-all educational buzzword emphasizing the "align-
ment" of standards, curriculum, assessment, textbooks and materials, and
teacher training. On balance, things looked pretty good.

This activity grew out of, and built on, a prior decade of reform, one
launched by the seminal report of the National Commission on Excel-
lence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*. Based on that document's startling
assertion that a "rising tide of mediocrity" in public and private schools
threatened the nation's educational foundations, federal and state leaders
chivied local educators into paying more attention to standards. Corpo-
rate America shouldered its part of the burden through thousands of "part-
nerships" with local schools. Philanthropists, ranging from the Carnegie
Foundation to the Twentieth Century Fund, financed impressive analyses
of what needed to be done or offered their own suggestions. And leaders
across the board agreed that education had finally assumed its rightful
spot at the top of the nation's domestic agenda.

As the United States moves into the first decade of a new millennium, the interest in school improvement remains high. President George W. Bush and his secretary of education, Rod Paige, have succeeded in enacting the No Child Left Behind program. Working with Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, they have produced legislation tying standards and annual assessments to federal aid to children in low-income schools. The business community, rallied by Louis V. Gerstner Jr., chairman and CEO of IBM, has worked with the nation's governors to create ACHIEVE, an organization dedicated to standards-based reform. And a new array of philanthropists, prominently featuring the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which did not exist when *A Nation at Risk* appeared, has set out to reshape school district administration and the American high school. Whenever the representatives of these interests gather together, they tend to agree that things are getting better, although the work is difficult and progress is slow, and that leaders must stay the course.

The truth is that, after two decades of well-publicized effort, public school systems in the United States remain about where they were in 1983, particularly those systems in urban areas. When progress can be discerned, it is fragmentary, fragile, and confined almost exclusively to the elementary school years. Middle schools have barely changed at all, and high schools have become the black hole of reform, into which good ideas are sucked, never to be seen again. Two enormous problems that have characterized big-city schools for years—a troubling achievement gap between minority and white students and high school dropout rates hovering around 50 percent for Hispanic and African American students—remain essentially unchanged.

The abysmally poor performance of urban schools led the Brookings Institution in 1997 to commit to a five-year initiative on big-city school reform. The initiative started with a simple question. "What could we say to mayors or civic leaders who asked how they could turn around a low-performing urban school district?" To this point, the initiative has produced two books. The first, *Fixing Urban Schools*, examined popular school reform proposals of the 1990s, critiqued their weaknesses, and suggested how different approaches could be combined into more potent strategies for whole-system change. The second, *It Takes a City,* drew on the experience of efforts in several cities to suggest how communities could build political support and implementation capacity for deep and lasting reform of public education.[1]

Near the end of *It Takes A City*, the authors argued that most school districts neglect activities that are necessary for powerful and long-lasting reform. The day-to-day imperatives facing school boards, the need to pay teachers, keep schools operating, and support the central office, lead to starving many activities essential to long-term improvement.[2] Moreover, the urge to avoid controversy and limit scrutiny discourages close tracking of performance, including checks on whether announced reforms have even been implemented, never mind succeeded.

This third and final book explores the need for such activities. It reflects on what the Brookings initiative has learned about the capacity of reformers to realize their ambitions. Unlike the first two books, this edited book of essays focuses on what is needed to ensure that the reform objectives defined by leaders are translated into real change.

The impetus for this volume rests on three streams of thought. It began with a sense that existing systems needed more bells and whistles if reform were to succeed. So the first stream of thought was simply that reform will not happen if left to school systems themselves to implement. But that concept changed over time as the authors became convinced that the system of schooling in the United States rejects change in much the same way that the human body fights transplants. Just as hospitals administer medicines and powerful agents to suppress the body's natural immune system, so too schools need independent institutions to help fight off rejection of change, maintain the environment for reform, and provide support at critical moments. These institutions should be friendly to the public schools and sympathetic to their aims but separate from them. Only then can the public be sure that important reforms will be developed, will be implemented deeply and thoroughly, and will survive long enough to make a difference.

The second stream of thought was the authors' realization that public schools in the United States have never been subjected to the structured and structural scrutiny routinely applied in the private sector and even in government. Regardless of what one thinks of the "quality improvement movement" in American industry or the "reinventing government" initiative of the Clinton administration, the fact remains that, in the context of respecting the broad missions of their respective sectors, these activities set out to improve important private and public capabilities. The quality improvement gurus never questioned the profit motive, just as the reinventing government initiatives did not take issue with the function of the

government as a provider and guarantor of services. Each sought to improve the likelihood that these missions would be accomplished.

What was novel about them was that each set out to explore whether clarifying goals or modifying existing ways of doing business would accomplish the mission better. Is the goal of employment training simply to help people find work? Support family well-being? Or strengthen local communities? If reformers are required to focus on just one of those goals, what would that mean for how the local Office of Employment Security operates? Does Ford Motor Company exist to compete with General Motors? To protect market share from foreign imports? Or to ensure customer satisfaction? If one focuses on competition with General Motors, does that necessarily protect market share or improve customer satisfaction? Although much public comment about quality improvement has focused on statistical process controls and measuring progress, the initial step always requires clarifying purpose.

The reality is that purposes are never singular but always plural. Job training provides jobs, supports families, and generates wealth and economic development. An automobile manufacturer is simultaneously intent on competing with domestic rivals, fending off imports, and satisfying customers. A one-purpose approach invites mistakes, something Joseph Chamberlain Wilson, a former president of the Haloid Company that turned into Xerox, understood intuitively. When Wilson died in 1971, a tattered index card was found in his wallet summarizing his goals in life to include: "to attain serenity . . . through leadership of a business which brings happiness to its workers, serves well its customers and brings prosperity to its owners."[3] The Haloid Xerox approach, like that of Ford Motor Company or the federal government, accepted several purposes as legitimate, understanding that the art of leadership lies in clarifying the purposes and their comparative significance and relationship to one another.

Schools too have many purposes. And the tension among them is not resolved by focusing on one and ignoring the others. Parents (and citizens) maintain an unspoken bottom line about schools. Children should be safe in them. A standards-based reform movement cannot afford to be seen as cavalierly ignoring that concern. Parents also want schools to help their students develop as children and mature through adolescence. Assessment advocates cannot turn a deaf ear to that anxiety. And parents and community leaders want students to achieve at the highest possible levels. School leaders must pay more than lip service to this purpose, re-

sisting the temptation to point to dysfunctional urban neighborhoods and chaotic home situations to explain students' poor performance or high dropout rates.

So the question naturally arises, how should traditional school governance practice be modified in light of various school purposes, new demands for performance, and the accelerating pace of change of recent decades? This is an age, for example, in which more than two-thirds of high school graduates continue their education immediately out of high school. Recently, college women have enjoyed unlimited access to entry-level employment in business and the professions. Employment security in the private sector (and often the public) has become a thing of the past. And most college-educated workers can be expected to cycle through up to seven different occupations in their careers. In this environment, do school personnel practices inherited from the past still make sense? Is a teacher training system invented a century ago so that rural white girls could find work within a few miles of their parents' home good enough?[4] Or do we need something more? Should schools be thinking of new ways of training, hiring, and replacing teachers, not because there is anything pernicious about the inheritance, but because times have changed and schools need to change with them?

School leaders genuflect when the idea of modifying the way schools do their work is brought up, but change is almost never put on the table in a serious way. Schools continue, for the most part, to be seen as public institutions, staffed by public servants, overseen by public employees, in facilities owned and managed by public agencies. The political dynamics appear to require accepting current structures as the natural order of things. Reform in this framework is something that is welcome as long as it changes nothing of major consequence to the adults in the system.

The third stream was the authors' realization that it has become painfully obvious after two decades of reform that the system of schooling in the United States seems incapable of change even if the need for it is based on its experience and noted on its research and development agenda. American schools, like sick patients whose bodies reject the transplants that might save their lives, treat change as a foreign body. National and state leaders, public and private, join this conspiracy of silence about persistent failure. Whether through hubris or ignorance, generation after generation of public and private leaders enter the operating room apparently unaware that the procedure failed the last time it was tried—and the time before, as well.

In the face of the transparent abandonment of successful and functioning New American Schools models, as soon as the superintendents who had championed them moved on or were shoved out, for example, why not pretend that another round of model development would make the difference? And so, efforts to create small schools and reshape the high school took center stage as the new millennium dawned, despite the palpable failure of earlier school-model development efforts, dating back to the Experimental Schools and Model Schools programs developed in the heyday of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society.[5]

If earlier efforts have not worked out, they can be conveniently ignored. This helps explain why the National Education Goals, developed with great fanfare in 1989 and discussed enthusiastically by public and private leaders through the early 1990s, were put on a shelf as the decade grew to a close. Faced with troubling evidence about scandalously high minority dropout rates, the stagnation of reading scores in urban elementary schools, and low math and science achievement among high school students, why remind people of ten-year-old promises to fix dropout rates, make sure children entered school ready to read, and produce American graduates who would be first in the world in math and science? The goals were best consigned to the memory hole of school reform. And for the most part, they have been. Nobody talks about them anymore. The topic of conversation has changed to "leaving no child behind."

Drawing on these three streams of thought, therefore, this book, unlike the earlier two, relies less on analysis of what is than on imagining what might be. It explores some alternative ways public schools might pursue their mission.

This book outlines the shape of needed institutions that are not limited by conventional educators' willingness to change and defines two classes of institutions: community leadership structures and technical capacities. Community leadership structures can formulate and sustain reform strategies that are more ambitious and likely to benefit poor children than anything conventional school administrators are likely to formulate. And communities are likely to need technical capacities, which school districts cannot create or sustain, to improve their schools. Individual localities will inevitably find some of these ideas more attractive than others. However, the main message of this book is applicable everywhere: public education in big cities needs new community-based leadership, strategies, and investment. We have already tried investment without a coherent strategy (for example, compensatory education), and strategy without investment

(for example, national goals and statewide standards), and now the nation appears poised to emphasize the need for leadership largely without regard to strategy or investment. In all those cases the result is activity without deep or lasting benefits. Effective school reform requires putting the three elements together.

Notes

1. Paul T. Hill and Mary Beth Celio, *Fixing Urban Schools* (Brookings, 1998); and Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell, and James Harvey, *It Takes a City: Getting Serious about Urban School Reform* (Brookings, 2000).

2. In a series of confidential interviews conducted by the authors with school superintendents and chief financial officers, most said that efforts to improve instruction were constrained by the fact that funds are all tied up in salaries for incumbent teachers and compliance with mandates from courts and the federal and state governments.

3. David T. Kearns and David Nadler, *Prophets in the Dark: How Xerox Reinvented Itself and Beat Back the Japanese* (HarperCollins, 1992).

4. Martin Haberman, *Finding (and Keeping) Great Teachers*, Highlights of the Missouri Superintendents Forum, 2001 (Kansas City: Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, 2002).

5. The editors of this volume helped to shape and develop the New American Schools effort from the outset. They were also involved in selecting the "design teams" developing new school models. Although everyone vowed to avoid repeating the mistakes made earlier by the Experimental Schools and Model Schools programs, in fact, precisely the same mistakes were made.