

Where Education Reform Goes from Here

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After two decades of mostly-forward movement and many big wins, the last few years have been a tough patch for education reform. The populist right has attacked standards, testing, and accountability, with particular emphasis on the Common Core, as well as testing itself. The election of Donald Trump and appointment of Betsy DeVos, meanwhile, have made school choice and charter schools toxic on much of the progressive left. And the 2017 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate a “lost decade” of academic achievement. All of these trends have left policymakers and philanthropists feeling glum about reform, given the growing narrative that, like so many efforts before it, the modern wave hasn’t worked or delivered the goods, yet has produced much friction, fractiousness, and furor.

But this is no time to declare defeat or embrace defeatism. It’s not just that America’s children, especially those growing up in poverty, depend on us to dramatically improve their schools, lest they be sentenced to a life of low-wage jobs and lagging social mobility. Or that the country will continue to suffer from political and socioeconomic divisions and dwindling global competitiveness if we don’t better prepare young people for bright futures. It’s also that we might be throwing in the towel prematurely. It’s quite possible that the current reform strategy is working better than we think, but is taking time to blossom, and is facing headwinds (especially from the Great Recession) that are about to recede. We should be mindful of lessons from previous reforms, including “small schools of choice” and No Child Left Behind. Both had been declared failures, too, until enough time had passed for data to demonstrate their positive impacts on student achievement.

Therefore, those of us in the education reform movement, and leaders in positions of authority and influence, must commit to a delicate balancing act. We should admit that some of our pet policies and stratagems are failing to achieve their intended effects, and should continue searching for approaches that work better. And we should recognize that much of the backlash to reform is understandable; there has been too much testing, too much narrowing of the curriculum, too little quality control in the school choice movement, etc. But we must also avoid discarding efforts that may look disappointing now but are likely to show long-term success.

That’s what I will attempt to do in this paper: Identify today’s reforms that need nurturing and defending; point to those that should be cast aside; and begin to mark the new territories that serious reformers must explore. I will argue that, when it comes to grades K–8, we need to stay the course and finish what we started. High schools, though, are a different matter, and need a complete reimagining.

I. What Reform is Aiming to Achieve

It's helpful to take Steven Covey's advice and begin with the end in mind. What's the whole point of our K–12 education system, and our decades-long effort to reform it?

The pithy answer is to prepare students for college, career, and citizenship. Arne Duncan and Margaret Spellings put it more eloquently in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed: “An educated populace, versed in civics, trained to reason and empowered to act is what safeguards our democracy. Equitable access to education—our greatest force for economic mobility, economic growth and a level playing field for all—is what underwrites the American meritocracy.”

Reform may never be “finished,” but we'll know that our K–12 system is succeeding when almost all parents are satisfied customers and when almost all graduates:

- Successfully complete some form of postsecondary education, whether it be a technical credential, two- or four-year degree, or military training;
- Become self-sufficient soon after completing their education, with a rewarding career that can support a family; and
- Participate as active and informed citizens in our democracy and civil society institutions.

Of course, those are all medium- to long-term targets. In the short term, we want to see students:

- Make at least a year's worth of progress in reading, writing, and math, every year, with low-performing students making greater gains;
- Develop a strong understanding of history, science, civics, and the arts; and
- Feel a sense of connection to their schools, as vital preparation for participation in civil society.

To be sure, our schools cannot be expected to solve all of the problems that plague our nation. Grinding poverty and the challenges associated with it take a harsh toll on children; kids raised by affluent, well-educated parents will always have a leg up on their less advantaged peers. Great schools can help to narrow the gap in opportunities and outcomes, but cannot erase them entirely.

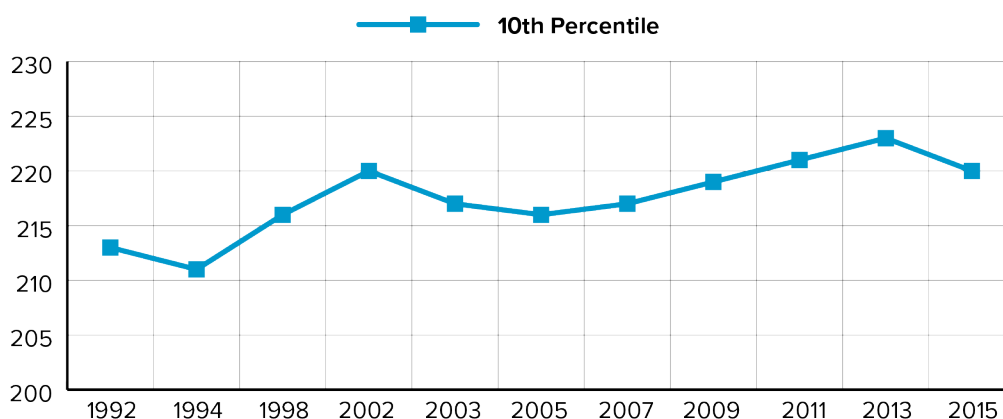
The question is not whether schools can do it all—but whether they are doing all they can.

II. The Reform Agenda for Grades K–8: Let’s Finish What We Started

More so than for high schools, the essential elements of a successful strategy for our elementary and middle schools are in sight. That’s because there is broad agreement about what Americans want these institutions to achieve: to send students into ninth grade with strong reading, writing, and math skills; with a storehouse of knowledge about the world and how it works; and with at least a basic understanding of what it means to be an active, engaged citizen in a democracy. Along the way, we want children to experience excellence every day. And we want our schools to model good character through their norms, rhythms, and rituals.

To be sure, we are a long distance from making this vision a reality. We made real progress from the late 1990s until about 2013, with eighth graders making huge gains in reading, writing, and math. Black and Hispanic students, and our lowest-performers, made especially large gains, outscoring their predecessors by two to three grade levels over this period. Unfortunately, that progress appears to have come to a halt.

Eighth Grade Reading, 10th Percentile (1992–2015)



Still, all over the nation, high quality elementary and middle schools are getting this job done. The challenge is to scale up their successful efforts and make them the rule instead of the exception. In particular, we need to accelerate students’ progress so that many more leave eighth grade ready for high school–level work, even those children who enter kindergarten far, far behind.

We have five major ways of doing that, which fall under the headings of school choice, accountability, instructional material, talent, and personalized pacing.

High Quality Schools of Choice

We must continue to expand high quality schools of choice and enable many more children to access them. Partly that’s to better match our schools to parents’

values and preferences. But mostly it's because the best schools of choice have demonstrated just how much progress is possible, especially for low-income children who start out far behind. These kids need excellent elementary and middle schools, not just good ones, if they are going to enter high school prepared for true college prep or high quality career and technical education (CTE) programs, and if they are to find success in postsecondary education and beyond. Sadly, few school districts have demonstrated an ability to deliver excellence at scale, especially for poor children. But several charter networks have done it (as have some Catholic and other private schools), and we need to help them to grow and thrive.

Here we've made a lot of progress in recent years, with charter quality improving at a rapid clip thanks to reforms in key states around charter oversight and authorizing, and we need to keep at it. We must also close the stark funding gap that continues to put charter schools at such a disadvantage, bringing in sixty cents on the dollar in some cities, and find ways to make facilities more affordable, including by opening up more district buildings to charter schools. Winning these political battles around charter financing and facilities is the most important thing we can do to bring life-changing opportunities to more disadvantaged students.

Accountability

The good news is that our school accountability systems are much stronger than they were a decade ago. Most states embraced significantly higher standards in English language arts and math in 2010, and even after the political battles surrounding the Common Core, those standards remain largely in place in forty-plus states. The annual assessments were also significantly upgraded, especially with 2015's introduction of PARCC and Smarter Balanced, still being used in almost half of the forty Common Core states. Other states, too, now use tests that have much higher standards for meeting the "proficient" bar, and that more accurately report results to parents.

The way that test scores are turned into annual school ratings has also improved, thanks to state implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Most states now rely heavily on growth measures rather than proficiency rates alone, rightly giving schools credit for helping students make progress from year to year. This is much fairer to high-poverty schools and also to children at the high and low ends of the performance spectrum, for it says that their progress counts, too. And the grades given to schools are dramatically clearer, with A–F, five-star, or 1–100 systems now dominating.

Together, today's standards, assessments, and accountability systems provide a clear message to our elementary and middle schools: Your job is to get students on track for college, career, and citizenship by building the knowledge and skills, year by year, they will need to succeed. And for students who come into your schools far behind, we expect you to help them make rapid gains.

That's not to say that accountability systems are perfect. Reading tests in particular continue to encourage a focus on "comprehension skills" over the acquisition of knowledge, without which there can be little true understanding. Louisiana's proposal to develop a content-based reading assessment under ESSA's innovative assessments pilot may prove to be a reform worth emulating. And interest continues

to grow in finding short-term indicators of school quality that aren't test scores; I'm particularly enthusiastic about those that relate to developing students' civic habits and attitudes.

We must also respond better to the signals coming from these accountability systems. We still don't have a proven approach for intervening in chronically low-performing schools, though some studies show that a true "turnaround" can work if it involves a new principal and at least some new teachers. Still, the best strategy might be to allow their families to vote with their feet and move to high quality schools of choice. We also don't see many states recognizing or rewarding *high-performing* schools; that is an opportunity for the taking.

Finally, we must improve how we translate the higher expectations of the standards into the real-world of classrooms, student assignments, and report cards. States are sending home "score reports" to parents that often include bleak news about their children being off track, based on their performance on new annual standardized exams. But most moms and dads continue to think their own kids are on grade level or above thanks to what they're hearing from their children's teachers and seeing on their report cards. Finding smart, supportive ways to debunk this "Lake Wobegon Delusion" is essential. Allowing students to move at their own pace through the grade levels (see "personalized pacing" below) would help, too.

Instructional Materials

A driving force for reform in recent years was the finding that individual teachers can make an enormous impact on students' learning, which can translate into real-world outcomes decades later. This led many advocates to focus on evaluating teachers in the hope that we might remove the most ineffective ones and reward and retain the best.

Yet with a few exceptions—the District of Columbia and Tennessee come to mind—teacher evaluation reform has mostly disappointed. Many teachers view it as unfair and punitive; most instructors continue to receive "satisfactory" or "outstanding" reviews despite the supposed rigor of the new systems; and almost nobody has actually been fired, or paid more, as a result of the reforms.

A better way to think about the finding that "teacher effectiveness differs dramatically" is to build a system whereby teacher effectiveness differs less. In other words, work to help average teachers become good or great. That brings us to the importance of high quality, teacher-friendly, standards-aligned instructional materials. The notion is straightforward: When we expect teachers to be both instructional designer and instructor, some will succeed wildly, but many will falter. If we redefine the role to focus solely on delivering instruction—with great tools developed by leading educators and in a constant state of improvement—many more can thrive. Professional development can finally be focused around what teachers are actually doing in the classroom. And teacher "evaluation" can morph into teacher "feedback," as school leaders, instructional coaches, and others provide actionable support and advice about how teachers can improve their craft.

The good news is that instructional materials are much stronger than they used to be, with several curricula receiving high ratings from the non-profit EdReports,

including some that are available online for free. The bad news is that the vast majority of teachers still aren't using these high quality products. Fixing that is low-hanging fruit with potentially enormous payoff.

Talent

Although teacher evaluation reform was mostly a bust, that doesn't mean that we should abandon all efforts to recruit and retain talented teachers (and principals). But we should be smarter about it, focusing on fixing the educator pipeline on the front end rather than trying to push mediocre teachers out of our classrooms on the back end.

We should start by setting high expectations for people who want to enroll in teacher preparation programs and enter our schools. We should ensure that they get exposed to evidence-based instructional practices that are tied to the actual standards and curriculum they will be teaching. And we should pay attention to the diversity of our teaching corps as well.

For reformers still itching to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom, the best chance to do that is before they attain tenured status. States and districts can work to change the tenure approval process from a rubber stamp to one that is appropriately rigorous, indicating true mastery and professionalism.

Personalized Pacing

The best elementary and middle schools have always known that they are in a race against time. That's not to say they try to whip their teachers and students into a frenzy; that is rarely an effective strategy. But it does mean that they maintain a high sense of urgency because they understand that students who enter high school well below grade level are unlikely to succeed there or in postsecondary settings. With so many poor kids and kids of color still entering grade school at a major disadvantage, even in places with high quality preschool programs, the name of the game is catching up fast. And all kids deserve to be challenged and learn as much as they possibly can every day at school.

Enter "personalized learning." This much-banded and oft-maligned term has no set definition, but its most appealing aspect, in my view, is the notion of "personalized pacing." It says that rather than march kids of the same age through the curriculum at the exact same pace, let's allow them to go faster or slower depending on their mastery of the material. Technology can sometimes help, as it allows educators to move away from the whole-classroom model of instruction. But changing our approach to grouping students is probably even more important—allowing students to learn next to kids who are at their same level, regardless of how old they are.

This is particularly critical for higher-achieving low-income students, who often attend schools where most of their peers are far below grade level. If they are forced to learn at the same pace as their classmates, we will squander their learning potential and leave them feeling bored and frustrated. Personalized pacing can allow them to zoom ahead and close the gap with their more advantaged peers.

Schools and districts should embrace this approach, even if it means moving to multi-age classrooms and upsetting other norms and practices. And states need to find ways to encourage it, especially by allowing students to be assessed by accountability exams that are matched to their current level of ability instead of the “grade” they are supposedly enrolled in. In other words, let fourth graders who are learning at a sixth grade level take the sixth grade test, and let those who are learning at the third grade level take the third grade test, rather than force everyone into a Procrustean bed of “grade level content.”

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Let me summarize the (sizable) reform agenda for our elementary and middle schools.

For Policymakers:

- Close the charter school funding and facilities gaps.
- Defend the higher standards, tougher tests, and smarter accountability systems in place today.
- Reform the tenure-approval process to be much more than a rubber stamp.
- Allow students to be tested above or below their official grade levels for accountability purposes.
- Continue to look for valid and reliable ways to measure school quality beyond test scores, especially around civics and citizenship.
- Celebrate and reward high-performing schools.
- Move to content-based reading tests, as Louisiana intends to do.

For Local Practitioners:

- Identify and adopt high quality instructional materials, especially those with top ratings from EdReports.
- Provide extensive support and professional learning opportunities to teachers around implementing these high quality, aligned instructional materials, with a particular focus on raising their expectations around what their students can achieve.
- Find ways to disrupt the “Lake Wobegon Delusion,” including by experimenting with reader-friendly report cards and better approaches to the parent-teacher conference.
- Embrace personalized pacing by moving to multi-age classrooms, competency-based promotion policies, and the thoughtful use of digital instruction.

Nothing on this list is easy, but these tasks aren't unfamiliar or incomprehensible. For grades K–8, the challenge is to push the pedal to the metal, win the political battles, and “get ‘er done.”

Not so when it comes to high schools.

III. What Ails the American High School

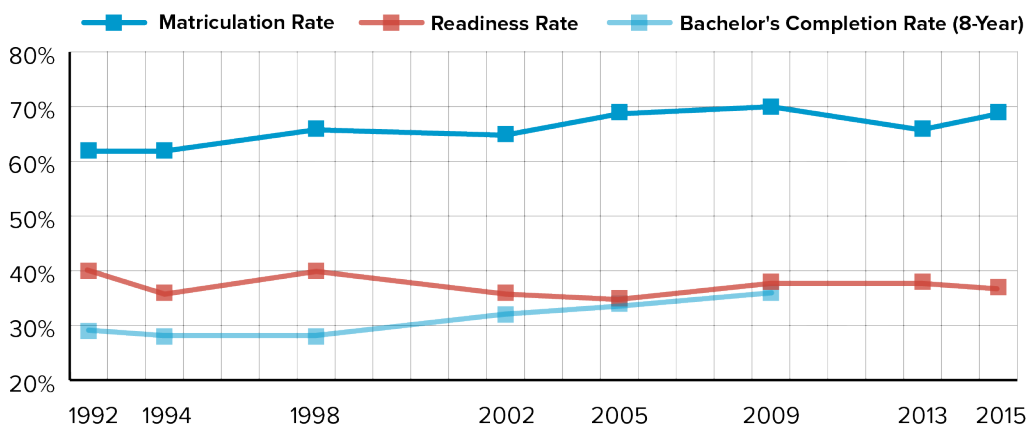
With some exceptions, the typical American high school is broken, and has been for a long time. These institutions are supposed to prepare students for “what’s next”—but they are failing at this task with alarming regularity.

The best evidence for this comes from the college-completion crisis. Consider:

- One-third of high school graduates who matriculate to four-year universities do not complete a degree or credential of any kind within six years;
- Almost two-thirds of high school students who matriculate to two-year colleges do not complete a degree or credential of any kind within six years;
- Sixty percent of black high school graduates who matriculate to college (either two-year or four-year) do not complete a degree or credential of any kind within six years; and
- An astounding 90 percent of low-income students who start college in remedial course do not complete a degree or credential of any kind within six years.

Some of the blame for this completion crisis can be laid at the feet of higher education institutions, due to a lack of support for first-generation college students, exorbitant costs, etc. But there is little doubt that much of it stems from inadequate preparation at the K–12 level. Consider just student readiness (or lack thereof) in reading, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

NAEP's Assessment of Student Readiness, Grade 12



So when measured by their outcomes, high schools are a mess. But we shouldn't be surprised because the whole logic of the American high school is nonsensical. In 2018 it goes something like this:

1. Virtually any student can matriculate from middle school to high school, regardless of their level of academic preparedness. That's because of our aversion to ending social promotion, especially for older students, and our worries that if we do hold students back, they will disrupt other middle schoolers and/or drop out.
2. As a result, the ninth graders at a typical high school are many grade levels apart in terms of their reading, writing, and mathematics skills, not to mention their content knowledge. Some are still struggling to read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* while others are ready to take and pass Advanced Placement (AP) exams.
3. However, thanks to the anti-tracking movement, high schools are increasingly bashful about grouping students by their current abilities and/or prior achievement. Schools have reduced the number of "tracks" from three to two or eliminated them entirely.
4. Meanwhile, states have set course requirements with the assumption that the default path for most students is to march through college-prep courses and then matriculate to a four-year liberal arts program. And that's what at least 80 percent of students do; only 20 percent "concentrate" in career and technical education pathways, a low bar itself in most places (perhaps three courses in the same area).
5. The college-prep route works OK for 35 to 40 percent of American students, as illustrated by the graph above. But another 35 to 40 percent trudge through so-called college-prep courses, even though they are reading, writing, and doing math several grade levels behind. Most meet states' low graduation standards (which are usually based on Carnegie units, not competency), matriculate to college (mostly community colleges), end up in remedial education, and drop out with nothing but debt and regret.
6. Unlike almost every other advanced nation, very few of our students—maybe 5 percent—spend any of their time in high school doing real career training, including preparing for technical programs at the postsecondary level.

As crazy as this system is, it's easy to see how we got here. In particular, our discomfort with tracking is understandable, given the racist and classist history of twentieth-century America's "voc-tech," which regularly sent children of color to low-level programs so they could learn to "work with their hands." As recently as a decade ago, when Michelle Rhee's team stormed D.C., they found a high school in Anacostia still teaching shoe shining. It's no surprise that tracking is a third rail.

Nor should we be shocked that policymakers and educators are resistant to keeping unprepared students out of high schools in the first place, or to making them meet a high standard to graduate.

Yet it's also undeniable that the needs and interests of high-school-age kids vary dramatically, and meeting those needs will require significantly different educational offerings. That's true on the front end—the achievement level of students as they enter high school—and it's true on the back end—their postsecondary plans and what they need to be ready for them.

Though career and technical education has staged a partial reputational comeback in recent years—including among reformers and politicians—it remains controversial to imply that, at some point in the life of a high schooler, it's appropriate to ask her to choose to follow either a traditional college-prep route or a technical-training route. Instead, we now say that students should be ready for “college and career” not “college or career,” and we continue to make everyone take more or less the same courses and rack up the same Carnegie units.

The U.S. is an outlier among advanced nations in this respect, and it results in a system whereby millions of teenagers sleepwalk through so-called college-prep classes, graduate (sometimes without earning it), get pushed into college (often into remedial courses), and quickly drop out. It's “bachelor's degree or bust,” and for the majority of kids, the result is bust.

IV. The Way Forward for High Schools

So what might work better? Twelve years ago, the *Tough Choices or Tough Times* report made an intriguing set of recommendations that would make the American system more like those in Europe. It's time to dust them off again. Here's my spin on them.

1. In ninth or tenth grade (maybe earlier for advanced kids), all students should sit for a set of gateway exams. They would assess pupils on reading, writing, math, science, history, and civics—the essential content and skills that all students should be expected to know to be engaged and educated citizens. There would also be a component assessing students' career interests and aptitudes as best as these can be gauged for fifteen-year-olds.
2. Students who pass the exams would then choose among several programs for the remainder of their high school years—programs that all could (but need not) take place under the same roof. Some would be traditional “college-prep,” with lots of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual enrollment courses. Others would be high quality career and technical education offerings connected to degree or certificate programs at a technical college. All of the programs could set entrance requirements that ensure that students are ready to succeed in them. And their selectivity would make them prestigious and appealing to a wide range of students, as they are in other countries. At the end of high school, students would graduate with special designations on their diplomas indicating that they are ready for postsecondary education or training without the need for remediation. Students might receive cash bonuses when they pass AP exams or earn industry credentials, or might have access to paid apprenticeships.

3. Students who don't pass the exams would enter developmental programs specifically designed to help them catch up and pass the tests on their second or third (or fourth or fifth) tries. Those who catch up quickly can join their peers in the college-prep or CTE programs.

It should be obvious, but these would be *enormous* shifts in the way American high schools function. Yet most high school traditions could continue unscathed, especially if the coursework for these various pathways occur under one roof in comprehensive schools. The sports teams, the theater programs, the debate clubs—all of that could continue, as well it should, since it is incredibly valuable. But what students are actually doing between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. (or later) would change dramatically.

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Let me propose, then, a reform agenda for our high schools.

For State Policymakers:

- Create a set of high quality “gateway exams,” tied to tenth grade courses in ELA, math, science, history, geography, and citizenship. Also develop a career-exploration tool.
- Revise high school graduation requirements to focus on earning passing scores on these gateway end-of-course exams, with special designations for students who earn Advanced Placement or dual enrollment credits, or an industry-certified credential.
- Provide extra funding for tutoring and other supports for students who don't pass the exams on their first try.
- Fund AP/IB-fee-waiver programs for low-income students who have passed gateway exams, as well as cash-bonus initiatives (for students and teachers) for earning passing scores on the AP/IB exams.
- Develop and fund dual enrollment and/or early-college policies with a particular focus on high quality technical postsecondary routes. Allow these programs to set entrance requirements for participating high school students. The goal is for students to seamlessly move from K–12 to higher education without any interruption, and to finish with a one-year certificate or two-year degree, valuable workplace experience, and a job.

For Local Practitioners:

- Partner with local technical (or community) colleges to enable high school students to apply for admission into high quality technical-training pathways via dual enrollment or early-college initiatives. Ideally the technical college in partnership with local employers would develop these pathways, offer the coursework at the students' home high school and at the college, and provide participants with workplace experience.

- Develop a range of alternatives to comprehensive high schools, possibly in partnership with other school districts, including selective regional CTE high schools (modeled after those in Massachusetts), STEM schools, and early-college programs.
- Experiment with intensive efforts to help underprepared ninth graders catch up, either at their regular high school or in alternative settings.

The basic logic is straightforward, if hard to pull off. Start by recognizing that some high school graduates will matriculate into four-year liberal arts programs, and should be well prepared by doing college-level work while still in high school. Other high school graduates will matriculate into technical training programs at the postsecondary level, and should be well prepared by starting on those pathways while still in high school. By making all of these eleventh and twelfth grade experiences rigorous and selective, students will be capable of switching pathways if and when they decide they have changed their minds. And the tenth grade level gateway exams will ensure that nobody graduates from high school without the basic level of knowledge and skills needed for informed and engaged citizenship in a democracy.

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Education reform may be down, but it's surely not out. We have a long way to go until we have a K–12 system worthy of our great nation. Let's keep at it.

