Introduction

Terry M. Moe

Education is at the top of the nation's policy agenda, and has been for many years. The sheer tenacity of the issue is an interesting phenomenon in itself. During the normal course of events, political issues rise and fall in salience, and few capture the attention of policymakers or the broader public over an extended period of time. One year it's health care. The next it's welfare or social security. But since *A Nation at Risk* first warned (in 1983) of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the schools, education reform has consistently commanded the nation's attention and occupied its political leaders. Every president vows to become the education president, every governor the education governor.

In some parts of the country, mediocrity only begins to suggest the true depth of the problems that plague public education. The evidence is plain that many urban school districts are in crisis, often failing to graduate even half of their students, and turning out graduates who in many cases can barely read, write, or do basic arithmetic. This is a crisis of quality. But it is also a crisis of social equity: the children who most desperately need educational opportunity—children who are mainly poor and minority—are

1. National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk (Washington, D.C., 1983).

xvi Terry M. Moe

the ones trapped in our nation's worst schools. They are without hope in the absence of major reform.

In much of the rest of the country, the schools are not in crisis. But neither are they doing an effective job of educating the nation's children (although there are obvious exceptions, usually in the suburbs).² There is widespread recognition that, in a fast-paced world of international competition, the nation's well-being turns on a trained, flexible, well-educated workforce—which the schools are failing to provide. In critical fields such as math and science, American twelfth-graders routinely score well below comparable students in most other industrialized countries.³ Our public schools are simply not preparing them for the rigors of the twenty-first century. In fact, evidence from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that American children are not learning any more than comparable kids in this country learned *thirty years ago.*⁴

Policymakers have been trying to do something about this. Since the early 1980s, the nation has been caught up in a whirlwind of education reform that has left no state untouched, bringing change upon change to the laws, programs, structures, and curricula that govern their public education systems, as well as more money to see that these changes are carried out.⁵ In an important sense, all

- 2. For an overview of relevant data and studies, see Herbert J. Walberg, "Achievement in American Schools," this volume, and Andrew J. Coulson, *Market Education: The Unknown History* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), especially chapter 6.
- 3. See, for example, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), which is discussed in a number of reports available online at *www.timss.bc.edu* (as of March 15, 2001).
- 4. See, for example, Jay R. Campbell, Clyde M. Reese, Christine O'Sullivan, and John A. Dossey, *NAEP 1994 Trends in Academic Progress* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1996), and Jay R. Campbell, Kristin E. Voelkl, and Patricia Donahue, *NAEP 1996 Trends in Academic Progress* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).
- 5. See, for example, Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999); and Richard F. Elmore, "The Paradox of Innovation in Education: Cycles of Reform and the Resilience of Teaching," in Alan A. Altshuler and Robert D. Behn, eds.,

Introduction xvii

this effort is a very good sign: for a democracy is functioning well when it recognizes social problems and dedicates itself to solving them. The nation deserves to be proud of its track record of tackling education problems with such persistence.

But there is a dark side to its persistence as well. The dark side is that the countless reforms of the last two decades, pursued with much fanfare and sky-high expectations, have not worked very well.⁶ The nation is constantly busy with education reforms not simply because it is responsibly taking action to address important problems, but because it is never very successful at solving them, and the problems never go away. The modern history of American education reform is a history of dashed hopes—and continuing demands, as a result, for "real" reforms that will bring significant improvements. This is what keeps the process going and the issue salient: not democracy, not responsibility, but failure.

How can America get off the treadmill of perpetual reform and succeed in improving its schools? There is no easy answer. But one requirement is surely fundamental: policymakers must know what to do. They must have good ideas that are well supported by theory and evidence, and they must know how to put these ideas into action.

As things now stand, this requirement has not been met. In the practice of school reform, the ideas that find their way into policy—about lowering class size, for instance, or putting teachers through a more rigorous credentialing process, or spending more money—are popular for reasons that have nothing to do with their true efficacy. Typically, there is no solid evidence that they will actually work. Indeed, to the extent there is a body of serious research on popular reform idea, it often suggests that they will not work, or that any improvements will be so modest—and so

Innovation in American Government (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1997).

^{6.} See the sources in note 5. See also Eric A. Hanushek, *Making Schools Work: Improving Performance and Controlling Costs* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994); Coulson, *Market Education*; and Walberg, "Achievement in American Education."

xviii Terry M. Moe

costly for the little gain they bring—that they are destined to disappoint.⁷

The only "justification" for most reforms, truth be told, is that they have a certain commonsense appeal, both to policymakers and the broader public, and that they are politically acceptable to the established education groups—particularly the teachers unions—that find real change to be threatening. Such criteria, needless to say, can hardly be reliable guides for effective reform. They drastically restrict the range of possible action, and they channel reforms down familiar, well-worn paths that have long been unproductive. What they give us is more of the same, when what we need is something different. Something that works.

This, then, is the fundamental challenge of American education reform. The nation must demand genuine knowledge and productive ideas about how to improve its schools—and be courageous enough, both intellectually and politically, to make a break from the past.

THE KORET TASK FORCE

It was this challenge that prompted John Raisian, director of the Hoover Institution, to propose the creation of a new task force for the study and reform of American education. His approach was novel: to bring together a select set of experts who are respected for their knowledge of America's schools and actively engaged in education research, but who are not wedded to the existing system and are recognized for thinking outside the box about problems and solutions. Once these experts were recruited, they would become a continuously functioning group, meeting regularly to determine their own projects and goals, and directing their collective

7. See, for example, Eric A. Hanushek, "The Economics of Schooling: Production and Efficiency in the Public Schools," *Journal of Economic Literature* 24 no. 3 (1986): pp. 1141–77; Eric A. Hanushek, "The Evidence on Class Size," in Susan E. Mayer and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *Earnings and Learning: How Schools Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999); Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky, "Teacher Training and Licensure: A Layman's Guide," in Marci Kanstoroom and Chester E. Finn, eds., *Better Teachers, Better Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999).

Introduction xix

efforts—now coordinated, rather than separate—toward the kinds of knowledge and ideas that promise major improvements.

With financial support from the Koret Foundation, as well as other contributors, Raisian's proposal came to fruition. The Koret Task Force on K–12 Education was assembled in early 1999, and had its inaugural meeting in September of that year. Here is a list of its members:

- —John Chubb, founding partner of Edison Schools, formerly a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and professor of political science at Stanford University.
- —Williamson Evers, research fellow at the Hoover Institution, formerly a commissioner of the California State Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards.
- —Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, formerly professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University and Assistant Secretary of Education.
- —Eric Hanushek, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, formerly professor of economics at the University of Rochester.
- —Paul Hill, research professor in the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs and director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, both at the University of Washington, formerly a researcher at the Rand Corporation.
- —E. D. Hirsch, professor of English at the University of Virginia.
- —Caroline Hoxby, professor of economics at Harvard University.
- —Terry Moe, professor of political science at Stanford University and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.
- —Paul Peterson, professor of government and director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, both at Harvard University, and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.
- —Diane Ravitch, research professor at New York University and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, formerly Assistant Secretary of Education.

xx Terry M. Moe

—Herbert Walberg, formerly research professor of education and psychology and now university scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

A core purpose of the Koret Task Force is to encourage a stronger connection between policymaking and good social science. As things now stand, the connection is weak indeed. This is partly because the research and expertise available to policymakers is often simply inadequate, and incapable of giving good guidance. But it is also because policymakers themselves do not always care what social science has to offer, and are far more motivated by considerations of popularity, special interest, and political power. A key job of the task force is to identify inadequate social science for what it is, to spotlight and help produce the kind of social science that policymakers can rightly have confidence in—and to promote reform ideas that, with the weight of science behind them, can attract important political groups to their side. The reality is that good ideas can generate political power. And when they do, policymakers will listen.

Another core purpose of the task force has to do with which experts the policymakers are going to listen to. The nation's community of education experts has long been remarkably homogeneous in its approach to reform, at least on fundamental issues related to the structure of the system itself. Most experts are professors at education schools: where teachers and administrators are trained, and where programs, funding, and personnel are heavily dependent on the existing public school system. It is fair to say that virtually all research coming out of the education schools, and more generally, virtually all their ideas about schools and school reform, take the traditional structure of the existing system as a given. Ideas that argue for fundamentally different approaches for example, through greater choice and competition—tend to be denigrated and opposed. Aspects of public education that are clearly relevant to school performance, but that touch on powerful established interests—notably, the effects of teachers unions on school organization and student achievement—are assiduously avoided as topics of research, and conspicuously absent from expert discussions of problems and solutions.

Introduction xxi

When America's policymakers pay attention to experts at all, then, it is to the education schools that they typically turn for research, knowledge, and ideas; and what they get is a highly constrained, mainstream set of responses that are very much inside the box. The Koret Task Force is an explicit attempt to offer the nation an *alternative* source of expertise, built around scholars who are not part of the nexus that binds education schools to the status quo—and who are quite willing, when social science justifies it, to say that the system is flawed in fundamental ways, that traditional approaches and solutions haven't worked, and that something different needs to be done.

A PRIMER ON AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

Any effort to think seriously about school reform must begin at the beginning, by simply describing and assessing the current state of American education. That is the purpose of this book, which is the first project of the Koret Task Force, and the logical first step in what we hope will be a long and productive process of collaboration.

Our aim here, more specifically, is to provide a broad overview of the American education system—by pulling together basic facts and research findings about its most essential features (and thus summarizing, as best we can, what is currently known), identifying central problems that stand in the way of better performance, and explaining why these problems seem to exist. In some of the chapters, the analysis naturally leads to discussions of reform and specific proposals for improvement. But reform is not the focus. This is mainly an effort to set out the facts of American education in a clear, simple, straightforward way, and to offer insight and perspective on what they mean.

That is why we call the book a primer. Our hope is that anyone who wants to know about American education—whether policy-maker or academic, political activist or ordinary citizen—can turn to this volume for basic information and find a discussion that is useful and enlightening. It is impossible to be truly comprehensive in surveying a system as complex as this one, and we have no

xxii Terry M. Moe

pretensions in this regard. But we have tried to cover a broad range of topics that are important in their own right and, when considered together, convey a strong sense of the bigger picture of American education.

Each chapter is written by a task force member who is an expert on that subject. The chapter on the traditions and ideals of public education, for example, is written by Diane Ravitch, who is one of this country's leading educational historians. The chapter on educational costs is written by Eric Hanushek, who is one of the nation's best-known experts on the economics of schooling. The chapter on curriculum is written by E. D. Hirsch, who is celebrated for his work on what children should know and how they should be taught. And so on. In each case, task force members have been asked to take responsibility for subjects they have been studying for many years, to cut through all the complexities (and often, the unwarranted assumptions and unfounded assertions), and to convey—in simple language devoid of the usual academic jargon—the basic facts that people need to know about these aspects of American education.

They also do more, of course, than just report the facts. All experts do. Indeed, it is in going beyond the facts that experts have the most to contribute. For the challenge they face is not simply to collect a mass of evidence, but to make sense of it by offering coherent, supportable interpretations of its meaning and consequences. Without such interpretations, true knowledge is inherently limited, and there can be little foundation for understanding why the facts are as they are, or what needs to be done (via specific reforms) to solve problems and improve the schools. In each chapter, then, task force members lay out the facts of their respective subjects, but they also offer their own perspectives on what those facts mean and what their consequences are. In the grander scheme of things, this is the greater measure of their contributions—and the source of valuable ideas, persuasive arguments, and proposals for change.

These perspectives, I should emphasize, reflect their judgments as individual scholars. There is no party line at work here. The fact is, we come from different academic disciplines (political science,

Introduction xxiii

economics, history, psychology). We have different backgrounds in theory and methodology. We have different career experiences. And if we were asked to come up with a single vision of how education reform should be pursued, it is doubtful that we could achieve total agreement. This said, what we have in common far outweighs our differences; and the differences, we find, are a source of healthy debate that help us challenge our unstated assumptions, avoid group-think, and respect and learn from alternative views.

We offer this primer, then, not as a unified statement of the Koret Task Force, but as a collection of separate statements by separate scholars who see themselves as part of the same team—a team critical of the existing system, willing to look at fundamental ways of transforming it, and dedicated to the kinds of clear-eyed, factual assessments that can help identify what works. Our goal is to get this nation off the treadmill of failed reforms, and to provide ideas and analysis that can promote the cause of progress. Real progress. This primer is our first attempt, as a group, to construct a useful basis for moving ahead. There will be more to come.