



the
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

A NATION AT RISK NO MORE - BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

by Jeanne Allen

This Friday marks the 30th Anniversary of [*A Nation at Risk*](#), a report that fueled two generations of reform efforts, including milestones in school choice and accountability that have [proven](#) to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on the most disadvantaged youth and have succeeded in narrowing the equality gap. While commendable and necessary, these efforts have only begun to scratch the surface when one considers the enormous achievement problems we still have today.

So before we start the commemorations, the think tanking review, the movies and the punditry, let's recall where we were, where we still are, and what's left to do about it. We can talk all day long, and convene to discuss; indeed we can interview selected people who have attempted to change school systems, whole administrations, or who write incessantly about the problems, but the fact remains that action speaks much louder than words.

As I [shared](#) with CER's closest friends and supporters recently, I came of age during *A Nation at Risk*. Not many of us involved today can say that, but even as I date myself by making that statement, it is true. Not only was I there, but I joined the effort to challenge the status quo it called us to challenge, first at the US Department of Education, then at the Heritage Foundation, and eventually, because of my impatience at the results, by founding the Center for Education Reform.

During these decades, I have witnessed extraordinary battles waged by venerable Davids against the Goliaths of education. Some of these people were well-known commodities -- Wisconsin's Howard Fuller and State Rep. Polly Williams; Pennsylvania's Tom Ridge and State Rep. Dwight Evans, T. Willard Fair and Tom Feeney of Florida. Some were unknown then, and they are unknown still. State Senator Cooper Snyder of Ohio, California Activist Alan Bonsteel, New Jersey's Sara Tantillo, the late Sue Bragato of California, Jim Sneeringer of Texas, Lisa Keegan and Tom Patterson in Arizona, John Root in New Hampshire... the list is truly thousands long.

These people ran for school board or became state superintendents, and were immediately scorned for their outspokenness and reluctance to join the status quo. Others started schools or just made calls from their kitchen tables. They were angry about the condition of schools, they waited years for their lawmakers to do something about *A Nation at Risk's* call to action, and 10 years in, they had seen nothing dramatic that would change what they knew to be patent failure of our education system.

Those of us in Washington sitting near the halls of power watched and governed and challenged but not nearly with the muscle and passion that these folks on the ground did. Indeed, the real change came from those I mentioned -- individuals in states and local communities -- and CER was created to aid and abet them in their cause.

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I raise this now because I'm continually amazed at how many people today fail to recognize that the accomplishments they make are the result of their having followed in the footsteps of the [pioneers](#) in education reform. They get patted on the back and pat themselves when they open a school, take the helm of a school system or write in a major magazine about the successes going on daily. But the people who I first met and who we supported in the early 90s didn't have an infrastructure to rely upon to start their efforts. There were few funders willing to take a chance on them. There were no back room organizations, no large, focused CMOs; there were few national groups to support them. The media were hostile for the most part and the unions were strong. And yet, the first voucher programs were passed without today's ecosystem in place; the first charter laws were created and they were better than most that are crafted today, even with the largess of the reform movement.

Then Tennessee Governor, now Senator Lamar Alexander helped make performance pay real and challenged tenure laws, but not very many others were able to succeed until recently and we owe the "Michelle Rhee" of the world a great deal of gratitude for paving the way for something many of us pushed for years, with little progress. But it was the constant exposure of union lies and behaviors in the public eye that we boldly and repeatedly voiced that finally gave modern day policymakers the hand they needed to build a successful case about the union's exclusive power being way too much to result in any meaningful change. It was because of books by people like John Chubb and Terry Moe, Denis Doyle, Eric Hanushek, journalist Peter Brimelow and the late Myron Lieberman, to name a few -- and the media coverage that resulted from their underappreciated work -- that today's reformers were able to succeed and produce sunlight on teacher contract realities. Think tanks and others echoed their findings. There were dozens more who wrote persistently on this, of course. They've now faded from our collective memory (though they are one reason we now have the [Education Reform University library](#) and are now living or will soon live in perpetuity there so all can know and understand their roots!)

Genealogy lessons aside, the real story is that many leaders today believe that our problems can be solved through the traditional organizations of governors, state chiefs, and allegedly reform-focused collaboratives, cooperatives, confabs and coalitions.

Indeed this week -- the 30th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk* -- should have produced a revolution of innovation and refocus on what has worked, an internal assessment of what it will take to go from reaching 20 to 300 million people with real, actionable reform, and who's standing in the way -- on all sides. Instead, we have a few forums, and blogs, and most will go about their business as if everything is moving along swimmingly.

The ecosystem of education reform is now an exciting and colorful tapestry of organizations with missions and visions that are exciting and among which exist many accomplishments. There are literally dozens more groups generously funded and anchored in helping facilitate the growth of new teachers, new leaders, new schools and in some cases, new policy battles. Most started after the majority of policy progress addressing *A Nation at Risk* had already occurred by 2003. Their extraordinary growth and passionate spokespeople should help us forge ahead with a new sense of urgency. But with that growth and incredible excitement we face an interesting set of challenges.

For one, there is a real complacency about the landscape, as if enough smart people and groups were already working on all the problems that we need not expand or grow further.

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Second, there is a high level of back-patting about what's being done, as if an incremental step or amendment in a state is cause for celebration, and that the hard work of waiting for long-term substantive change, is beneath us.

AEI's Rick Hess is so on-point in [explaining](#) there are now all these great, relatively new organizations. There are KIPP, Rocketship, Uncommon Schools, Teach For America, etc., making terrific contributions to our children, "but in the scope of things if you look at the relatively small part of the K-12 landscape these organizations constitute... it just feels that we've made a whole lot less progress" than we should have.

The very astute Hess gives the nation a solid C-minus for our progress in 30 years, given all that we're spending and the tools at our disposal. He agrees we should be much farther ahead in educational excellence given the environment that reformers now have, an environment very different from the one we had yesterday.

This week, one of education reform's most accomplished pioneers, William J. Bennett, will discuss the last 30 years at a [forum](#) organized by his good friend and an intellectual giant in education, Checker Finn. While we would have welcomed the opportunity to participate in building a similar forum given our history from the earliest days, we're delighted that Finn and Bennett will be giving a brief, but necessary, airing to this issue. Former Education Secretary Bennett, was, like Finn, one of CER's first board members. In fact, we will honor him at our 20th Anniversary event on October 9 for being an all-time classic in our movement, a standard bearer for the work we perform today.

Back in 1998, we organized "A Nation STILL at Risk," with Bennett and Finn and their respective organizations as our partners. We [convened](#) a meeting prompted by continuing evidence that American students still suffer from poor academic performance. We included many of the original signers of *A Nation at Risk*, brought in former governors and state lawmakers and engaged activists and real life practitioners.

We concluded in "[A Nation Still at Risk: An Education Manifesto](#)" that we had far to go and vowed to work together to solve the nation's education problems.

After [15 years](#) the problems were still prevalent. Today, after 30 years, we still face educational malaise that constitutes a national security threat.

One would expect that the way to solve that would be to muster the smartest people in one room, even if the room overflowed to a town, even if the town needed to overflow to a community, even if the community had to overflow over state lines. But sadly, many organizations find it more profitable to boast selectively than recognize the contributions of those who came before, or those who do the work quietly on the sidelines still. Many of our most brilliant thinkers and writers pick their teams the way they did in high school, and ignore those whose contributions may be immeasurable but don't have their name in print, or haven't scored the big grants, or haven't been recognized on the ideas or think tank circuit; maybe because they were simply doing the hard work behind the scenes.

It's that kind of selectivity, which led to the education crisis we have today, which *A Nation at Risk* decried, and which the education reform movement was built to challenge.

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So if you're one of those who find themselves happily being convened and invited to all the most "important" events of the day where your voice is heard, you might want to look at our history and how people in that same position became what is humorously known today as the [Blob](#), because you might be building your own Blob. But, if you're one of the many who fight daily to create new educational opportunities for kids but get ignored by those rooms, those people and those funders, know that you're on the side of history, the history that started the education reform movement. And know that no matter how hard you work, you won't be asked to comment in a video, or on a dais, because to those who run them, you are either invisible, or you are competition. Be proud, fight hard, and keep moving. The substance of our contributions will remain long after their applause and accolades have died down.

Most importantly, remember that those who forged the policies that now provide life-saving choices for children, which have eaten at the power of the education establishment and have given successful educators the power to dream and to create programs that matter, are the most important actors in education reform. Don't forget them. Or, if you don't know who they are, find out, because they deserve not only our respect for their quiet leadership in fighting the findings of *A Nation at Risk* and every [NAEP assessment](#) since its creation, but they deserve the public recognition that can keep them motivated to persevere in the face of hostility and uncertainty, the kind of environment we "insiders" on our well-meaning but selective pedestals will never know.

For no matter who you are, how many things you have written, how many offices you've occupied or how many millions you've raised, this education reform movement was launched to restore excellence to education, by FIRST empowering parents, moving policymakers to action, and ensuring accountability of the adults in the system; not brandishing your resume.

Let's not wring our hands anymore and let days go by while the education Blob restores its power. Let's get to work. And as the great Kevin Chavous is fond of quoting, let's do it "by any means necessary."

Jeanne Allen is founder and president of the Center for Education Reform, which since 1993 has been the leading voice and advocate for lasting structural and substantive change that can dramatically improve educational opportunities for decades to come. More information on Allen and the Center is available at www.edreform.com