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## EDUCATION REFORM: *Before it Was Cool*

Two decades ago, Education Reform was not cool. If you weren't about reducing class size and advocating for more money, you were nobody.

The media was gaga over the education Blob. They had dozens of alliances and confabs that seemed to be always "happening". People waited to get a glimpse of the Blob going in and out of the White House, the Departments of Education, the *New York Times* building! It was a big fat party, that education Blob, and some of us were fighting to get past the bouncers so we can shake up that party.

It shouldn't have been that way. After all, the nation was issued a wake-up call in 1983. The research showed that even our best students had an education that was mediocre at best. For poor children, we were simply failing. A *Nation at Risk* forewarned that if our leaders failed to address education's rising tide of mediocrity, the world's economic and social outlook was bleak.

Hundreds of "in-system" efforts ensued after the public outrage died down, to no avail. And then in 1990, a modern day Harriet Tubman pushed through a voucher bill in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Polly Williams became Tommy Thompson's best friend on school choice. In 1991, Minnesota passed the first charter school law, led by the Democrat Farm Labor party. In 1992, Bill Clinton appealed to centrists to embrace public school choice. In 1993, Michigan's John Engler challenged his state's establishment and enacted a far-reaching charter school law with university authorizers at the helm. The floodgates flew open, despite enormous union opposition that targeted supporters at every level. They were a paper tiger.

The Republican governors took reform on with gusto and began a decade of strong charter laws, rigorous standards, high stakes testing and even vouchers. Democrat legislators joined them. Companies joined the movement to manage schools, organic parent groups took on the establishment and started schools, and by 2000 the education reform movement was in full adolescence and booming. It became cool to be a reformer, and soon those rope lines in all the hot places were filled with people who knew that talking money and class size was passé. Choice and accountability were here to stay. And the unions were so much on the defensive they started writing "secret" PR plans to get back into the "in-crowd."

Lots of new people joined the reform party, but they didn't know the history, the struggles, the reality of the opposition. They were cool, and that was enough. For a while. Reform efforts began sliding, meeting growing resistance from the Blob. But rather than fight them, as their predecessors did, many modern day reformers started talking about collaboration... again. Talk about in-system reform, getting along with unions, "measured" choice and regulated chartering have stymied the rapid growth of new laws that guided the early reformers. Being cool now means getting along... again. Go figure.

The best intentions and most high level coalitions won't deliver American kids from less than 40 percent proficiency in the basics, restore rigor to their schools or ensure college and career readiness. Only hard, smart decisions and substantive efforts will. As The Center for Education Reform turns 20 and looks back at the history it has had a bird's eye view of seeing and carrying, we invite you to join us for an intensive conversation about at the original stories of reform, their founders, the lessons of the past, the battle lines, the missteps, and the victories. And help plan the next generation of reform efforts.

We're 20 years in. Embrace the *New* cool.

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# EDUCATION REFORM: *Before it Was Cool*

## CER AT 20 CONFERENCE AGENDA

October 9, 2013  
10:00 am - 3:30 pm  
The Washington Hilton

### **ANNENBERG REDUX: CAN'T WE JUST GET ALONG?**

In 1995, then-attorney Barack Obama was one of eight members of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, one of nine city collaboratives granted multi-million dollar grants by Walter Annenberg to improve the worst schools in America. Seven years, thousands of people, additional local, state and federal funds combined to result in, well, nothing. The final evaluation said, "The Challenge had little impact on school improvement and student outcomes, with no statistically significant differences between Annenberg and non-Annenberg schools in rates of achievement gain, classroom behavior, student self-efficacy, and social competence." Some think it was years wasted on fixing the public school system. Yet meanwhile, today, in cities nationwide, including Chicago, there seems to be a resurgence of the "fix-the-system-without-changing-the-contracts" mentality. From Philly to Denver, folks are getting together happily singing from the same song sheet. And to what end? How exactly do big city school districts get reformed without legal, statutory changes in contract and labor law? Does anyone remember the Annenberg Challenge? If not, it's about time to learn.

### **HOW CHARTER SCHOOL LAWS REALLY GOT STARTED.**

Long before there was a DFER, a SFER, a STAND a CAN or New Schools, individuals launched a movement with strategy and resolve. Who were they, what did they do differently, and what can we learn from their overwhelming early success?

### **WILL THE REAL GRASSROOTS PLEASE STAND UP?**

It used to be that the "grassroots" were the organic groups of volunteers who coalesced to initiate change in their backyard, so to speak, and in the statehouse. They were aided by numerous organizations, but rarely spoken for. They were the real "Avengers," and as soon as they were done with their quest -- even if it took years -- they were back to their jobs and homes and some often went into obscurity. They were not interested in creating wholly new organizations with staff and financial statement. They just wanted to make schools better for their kids. Some of them continued to do so in other positions. But in their heart, they are still the grassroots.

### **CHANGING THE COMPLEXION OF THE ROOM.**

Fifteen years ago, reformers were working merrily along to change how schools work, and despite many advocates of color working for reform at the state and local level, the board rooms were almost all white. Howard Fuller cautioned us in 1998 that to understand the impact of bad schools on the poor and children of color, they must be represented in state halls, in board rooms, on decision trees, and in the forefront of reform. Learn how Fuller and others have changed the complexion of the room, and by so doing, made the cause of equity and choice for kids real.

### **BEFORE CHIEFS FOR CHANGE THERE WAS THE EDUCATION LEADERS COUNCIL.**

In 1995, a group of reform-minded state education chiefs got together to form a network of education leaders to develop and advance substantive education reforms that were parent-driven, child-oriented, educator-supportive, community-based and decentralized. Many don't realize who the first leaders of state-based reform were, and why they remain pivotal to what started a generation ago.