



the  
**CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM**

LETTER TO FRIENDS OF  
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM  
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**A NATION AT RISK, A MOVEMENT AHEAD**  
The Future of CER

This sounds really old — and I'm not, but — I came of age during the hearings and deliberations that led to *A Nation at Risk*.

Educators, university professors and presidents, business leaders and authors, came together in 1981, after President Reagan through then Secretary of Education Terrell Bell, charged the National Commission on Educational Excellence with a mandate to review the state of American education and advise the president on its findings.

Tremendously well-written, non-partisan and defensible, the findings were — for a national effort, which is typically compromised by interests and muted in its conclusions — nothing short of bold and really quite shocking to most Americans, people like those in my family, who had been convinced their schools were great, world class and in fact, that most children were just ducky.

How many have even heard of the report these days?, a report which, while drawing the ire of many in the education establishment, was factual, clear, well-regarded by a majority of diverse lawmakers, and still relevant today.

These words from thirty years ago apply, sadly, to our conditions today<sup>1</sup>:

*History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.*

I was just out of college not even a year when the report was issued; an inexperienced, junior staffer on Capitol Hill; and I could relate to the report's assessment of education. I'd grown up in a beautiful, middle class, homogeneous community, with brand-spanking-new schools, lots of local control, in a community with involved and mostly educated parents, great teachers and what seemed to be, at the time, an excellent education. Oh, and I earned mostly As.

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<sup>1</sup> "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,"  
[http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/SOTW\\_A\\_Nation\\_at\\_Risk\\_1983.pdf](http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/SOTW_A_Nation_at_Risk_1983.pdf)

Then I went to college and was met by the cold reality that my education wasn't so great after all, that it had been shallow on many levels, lacked rigor and in short, prepared me little for my higher education.

There I was sitting at the seat of political power in the US, reading about a report that might as well have been talking about me, and able to do nothing about it. I did not want to be "an idler."

*Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses. Students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to 'general track' courses in large numbers. The proportion of students taking a general program of study has increased from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979. This curricular smorgasbord, combined with extensive student choice, explains a great deal about where we find ourselves today...*

Apparently, I had been stuffing myself at the education smorgasbord in high school, able to take "Golden Twenties" in place of "US History," photography instead of American Lit.

Had it not been for my own natural competitive drive, I would not have known I had to play catch up for my first two college years. I knew I had to run hard and fast though, because I saw a difference between what I had learned, and what others were doing and saying. (Later, I'd find out that even this great college experience couldn't give me what I'd missed — the knowledge I should have gained in primary and secondary schools, of Yeats and Butler, of thorough science, of other countries and how they function.) I immersed myself in political science and the founding of this country and that drew me to a vocation in Washington, DC as I realized that solving some level of this crisis lay before me.

By the time *Nation at Risk* was released in April '83, I was itching to do something meaty, something in education. Ironically, I'd soon get my chance and near the end of '84 I accepted an appointment in the US Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education, a place I thought would have something to do with ensuring and protecting higher education quality. Alas, I'd learn that it wasn't their role — another story altogether. And despite my being in an office that represented the "other" end of education, I was glued to the proposals being forwarded by the Reagan Administration to fix the problems identified in *Nation at Risk*, and appalled that most believed that the conclusions did not apply to them. Proposals to address the alarming findings would be summarily dismissed by House leaders, despite evidence that something had to give.

When William J. Bennett took over the post of Education Secretary, he led a major, renewed effort at addressing our national ills, and the declining conditions he had recognized as a professor, teacher and head of the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH). Emboldened by Reagan's second term and deeply interested in the actual business of education, Bennett visited schools frequently, talked to teachers, principals and parents, and studied the reports and the data.

He advocated for addressing three critical ingredients to address our problems, that would be coined, "The 3 Cs" — Content, Character and Choice. His ideas were considered radical. They were most often dismissed.

Many have written about this period in time and many of us watched it. A few of us remain engaged in what we then thought was the highest use of our God-given talents, getting our education system on the right footing. *A Nation at Risk* would be our driver for the journeys we would take:

*All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.*

Thirty years have now past, twenty since I started The Center for Education Reform. Much has changed, and progress, while steady, remains slower than necessary. And yet, those *Three Cs* are still the most relevant issues in education today:

**Content** — what we teach our children, how we teach it, who teaches it;

**Character** — what we expect of ourselves, our schools, our students, our society and the virtues that character, well-defined and taught, represent; and

**Choice** — creating opportunities to address content and character, and ensuring that parents, who are a child's first teacher, and educators, have the freedom to direct the education of their children, of their schools.

They say the best ideas are those that withstand the test of time. Principles are those untenable but lasting things that drive every generation. Those simple letters that had lawmakers accusing Bill Bennett of being out of touch, or anti-education, represent the very same issues upon which millions of people across diverse backgrounds have and do, agree.

It is the stuff that inspired the real odd-couples of education reform, who ignited a movement of choice and accountability to address the findings of the National Commission and subsequent panels and commissions throughout the 80s and 90s. Tommy Thompson and Polly Williams; Tom Ridge and Dwight Evans; Jeb Bush and T. Willard Fair; Rudy Perpich and Ember Reichgott-Junge... from state to state, Rs and Ds, black and white, came together to create the nation's first school choice programs, charter school laws, and standards!

I met them all, cheered them on, wrote about them, and often helped them solve a problem or challenge. But few knew what they were really doing or the impact they'd have, other than their opponents of course. The media was antagonistic, and Washington was out of touch. And in those days, ideology was everything. You were either conservative or liberal. There was no in between and you were treated only by your labels in the education arena, not your ideas.

There had to be a way to turn that around, cross-pollinate those efforts, spread them farther, faster and make reform mainstream. So we set out to do just that. I spoke at events, wrote letters (*Monthly Letters*, as they came to be called), and I added anyone I could find to the mailing list. And as I wrote, and spoke, and started doing press interviews, I'd point to my odd couples and argue that there was no ideological divide in education split on political lines. The ideology wasn't left or right — it was **Reform Versus The Status Quo**. It was we who changed the vernacular, who made it mainstream. Me, and my small staff.

That was the beginning of CER, in 1993. Today, there are hundreds of groups writing, outreaching and (e)mailing, and they are tweeting and changing how we all communicate about the issues. A new generation of technology, people, and groups are deploying the old ideas in dramatically more sophisticated ways.

But is it sticking? The answer is a bit more complex than yes or no and as it turns out, we all measure it differently. An eternal optimist, I always see progress, and its gains, big and small. I understand and see the

immense contributions a collective movement has made in ensuring that excellence be delivered to all children, no matter their zip code.

However, we must accept that at this rate, it will take another 30 years for NAEP scores to increase a few points, for graduation rates — with meaning — to advance, for college entrants to be truly prepared, for all those parents who most need it to have choices.

We must be honest, however. The pace of reform has slowed because too many of “us” confuse flurries of activity with snow every time a major shift in the wind occurs. When advocates and reformers begin to accept minor steps forward as major victories, they lower the bar and limit our sights, encouraging complacency and acceptance of measures and efforts that will not last and that have limited impact.

Today, when a governor stands up and embraces an issue we like, hundreds cheer and take credit for the words their group helped him to say.

Yesterday, when a governor embraced our ideas, we looked first at what else he had accomplished that could demonstrate sincerity, we pummeled his staff with questions, we cautiously applauded and urged immediate action, and we watched with vigilance. Often we were disappointed, but we nevertheless had a consistent measure of success.

Not anymore. Now, it’s hard to remove the praise that we were so quick to offer because it’s plastered on Twitter and You Tube. Besides, pulling back or changing our minds in public might look weak, or worse, like we were wrong, and especially bad to our donors, whose funds we desperately need.

Where once reform-leaning government leaders sought the support of education reformers and bent over backwards trying to demonstrate their pedigree on the issues, today it’s all but accepted that a leader who mimics the talk, gets accolades, before he ever does the walk.

Dozens of examples abound... 20 years in, CER documents them, to many’s chagrin. But it’s no different than what we did in the 90s when, for example, we sparred with our friends in Michigan as Governor Engler, one of our true heroes, was negotiating away from the real goal. We pointed out the flaw in the approach, called reformers to action to convince him otherwise, and watched, in the end, the very significant accomplishment of enacting a charter school law that is now a national exemplar for its impact on achievement. It wasn’t easy getting calls at midnight from colleagues asking us to stand down, or from lawmakers before dawn asking us if we’d help them convince “our people” to accept compromises they felt they just “had” to make.

We were the standard bearers for the first generation of reform leaders and we have kept those standards in place for all who claim to be reformers, regardless of who they work for, who funds them, and how they might feel when it’s all over.

Despite the challenges each of us may have with other adults along the way in every facet of life, having the opportunity to advance the rights of all children and to allow them to experience what it means to have a truly exceptional education is like having the sun in your window every day.

Bright spots are constant, rays of hope and progress persist, and there’s nothing, absolutely nothing, like seeing those faces in a school that your efforts paved the way to open to them.

We must move beyond the paving, though, and find new ways to cross the roads that lie ahead.

I've asked myself often recently how we do this. How do leaders accelerate the pace of reform when so many are so fixed on the current paradigm of reform? How do we move past the 20 years of accomplishment and past the 20 million people that our work has attracted to participate, to scores more, in a shorter period of time?

It came to me one day last fall, and I realized it was easy to do. A leader must find ways to create new and dynamic opportunities for those around them to answer the calls and the challenges that any leader, no matter how good, may no longer be able to see and answer in the same way. A leader must challenge new players, new actors, to find the best solutions. And a leader must challenge herself to address the problems we face in wholly new ways.

And there is no more fitting time to do just that, than on the eve of the 20th Anniversary of The Center for Education Reform.

While remaining thoroughly engaged on the Board and while coaching those who come next, I'll step-down as president of CER, on November 1, 2013, and begin to seek a new path to effect the education of our children, and the continued education of our adults.

I will help CER launch Education Reform University, dedicated to educating the movement itself, built for those who wish to be part of education and know little about history, and targeted at those who understand that unless they know history, they'll repeat that which is not worth repeating and will overlook that which is.

And after several more months of days of sun rays beaming in my window as president of CER, on October 9<sup>th</sup>, I will help celebrate 20 years of extraordinary effort by countless individuals and supporters that have fueled CER and allowed us to fuel them back!

From my professional beginnings recognizing that *A Nation at Risk* was a reality for me and countless others, until now, I've been on an amazing full and rewarding journey. There is so much more to write, so much more to say, and so much history to fill in, that I've saved — every word of it — all these years! I will share it all, over time, and fill those pages of books I've envisioned with thoughts, reflections, recommendations and who knows? - maybe even a little gossip!

At this point in my life I'm only standing at about the sixth chapter of a very long book I plan to live out. So I invite you to send me your thoughts, and reflections, and your ideas:

What would you do? What BIG idea do you think needs to happen? How does one go from 20 to 50 in less than half the time? What does accelerated mean to you? Why are we struggling and what is there to do about it?

And, how do you think I should spend my 12-hour days going forward?

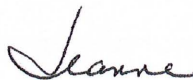
Finally, will you come to Washington, DC to help us celebrate 20 years on October 9<sup>th</sup>? It would be my honor to have you here, part of launching the next phase of CER, about which you will hear more in the coming months.

In the meantime, allow me to share one final conclusion from *A Nation at Risk* that speaks to the heart of why I believe the time is now for me to move on and engage differently:

*In a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever-greater danger, and of ever-larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them, educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society. At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes. Such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life...extending far beyond the traditional institutions of learning, our schools and colleges. They extend into homes and workplaces; into libraries, art galleries, museums, and science centers; indeed, into every place where the individual can develop and mature in work and life. In our view, formal schooling in youth is the essential foundation for learning throughout one's life.*

*But without life-long learning, one's skills will become rapidly dated. In contrast to the ideal of the Learning Society, however, we find that for too many people, education means doing the minimum work necessary for the moment, then coasting through life on what may have been learned in its first quarter. But this should not surprise us because we tend to express our educational standards and expectations largely in terms of "minimum requirements." ... Many individual, sometimes heroic, examples of schools and colleges of great merit do exist... but their very distinction stands out against a vast mass shaped by tensions and pressures that inhibit systematic academic and vocational achievement for the majority of students. In some metropolitan areas basic literacy has become the goal rather than the starting point. In some colleges maintaining enrollments is of greater day-to-day concern than maintaining rigorous academic standards. And the ideal of academic excellence as the primary goal of schooling seems to be fading across the board in American education. Thus, we issue this call to all who care about America and its future: to parents and students; to teachers, administrators, and school board members; to colleges and industry; to union members and military leaders; to governors and State legislators; to the President; to members of Congress and other public officials; to members of learned and scientific societies; to the print and electronic media; to concerned citizens everywhere. America is at risk.*

God bless you, and thank you for being part of my story.



Jeanne Allen  
President