

Governing American Education: An American Answer

By Victoria M. Young

Introduction

In a paper titled “**Governing American Education: Why This Dry Subject May Hold the Key to Advances in American Education**” by Marc Tucker president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, the author invites readers to come up with solutions of their own if they are not satisfied with his.

I don’t agree that this is a dry subject while I do agree that getting *this* right is key to our progress as a nation both educationally and economically.

Mr. Tucker rightly describes himself as an education policy specialist; my proposals have evolved over time from having been a parent at the receiving end of practices driven by education law that directly affected my children and my community of children. So what you will find written here is based on a quarter century of observations in a low-income community along with far too many years of reading the work of others while lacking the power of political clout to influence changes to education law. Now, all I can do is hope to be taken seriously on this most serious of subjects.

The reader must be clear as to what this response and Mr. Tucker’s paper is all about; “it is a strategy to change the core structure of the system...” Education “reformers” of the past and present have made policy changes but failed to change systems. And as Richard Hofstadter pointed out through the writings of William Allen White, “the only *permanent cure* was in *changing the system*.” In my view, that defines what a revolutionary change accomplishes — a change in the way we govern.

While we come from very different perspectives, Mr. Tucker and I have come to some similar conclusions that we both think have great significance in the effort to improve public education. On our common ground, I won’t explain my reasoning; Mr. Tucker’s explanations are acceptable and I hope others will read his entire paper as well as mine. But let me start with some differences.

Where We Differ in Beliefs:

Tucker wrote about “...a naïve belief that it is possible to get education out of politics,...” while I hold the conviction that we must take the political influence out of the service of educating children and have written that “...time and again, politics has proven itself to be an irresponsible driver of educational progress.” However I will cede my firm stance on taking politics out of education because after reading Tucker’s paper, I now have a different view of this statement by Seymour Sarason, “Governance issues are political and moral—political in the sense that they involve the *allocation of power* and moral in the sense that they rest on ‘*shoulds and oughts*’.”

Although I appreciate and am drawn into Mr. Tucker’s observations, analysis, and recommendations based on successful education systems abroad, I continue to come back to a

reality — we are the United States of America. Our founding fathers wrote the Constitution based on *a balance of powers* within the federal government and *a well-defined federal role* that respected state and individual freedoms. I believe we can use those same American concepts — *a balance of powers* and *well-defined roles* — to fulfill the duties that a typical ministry of education does in other countries without having to reinvent any new governing bodies.

While Tucker expresses what I also believe is a truism — that local control is “the single-greatest obstacle” to ensuring that students from all backgrounds are receiving a good education — we come to very, very different solutions to this problem. He has much more faith than I in “the capacity and authority” of all state education agencies, governors, and mayors to govern schools responsibly. My lack of faith probably stems from my direct experiences and observations in a state that ranks at the bottom of the economic spectrum as well as at the bottom of per pupil spending. In my 23 years here in Idaho, there has been no demonstration of a systemic ability to improve. Unequal educational opportunity abounds as a direct result of state and local officials failing to meet their duty to all public school children. And state lawmakers here, like others across the country, have been too easily influenced by lobbyist, organizations, and associations while excluding the voice of citizens.

Mr. Tucker proposes “to greatly strengthen the role of the state education agencies in education governance, at the expense of ‘local control,’ and of the federal government” which is in line with proposals currently before Congress in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) presently called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While I agree with improving state agencies, I do not agree with the need to lessen local authority.

So with that in mind, I ask you to consider the words of Francis Keppel, architect of the original 1965 ESEA, as he spoke of “The decision to work out a new federal, state, and local partnership, with checks against the danger of undue power in the hands of any one authority.” And as you consider how we should govern our schools and why, please think about the American principle of balance of power and contemplate where all true authority originates.

My summary of our common views is this:

Our lack of any nationally cohesive, coordinated governing structure for public education has led to duplication of services, unacceptable and detrimental power struggles, and has become a barrier to progress.

To improve our education system, we must address the fact that we are neglecting to provide the same high-quality learning experiences to all students and the way we fund education has added fuel to that destructive fire. Properly educating what Tucker termed the “hardest to educate,” those traditionally most neglected in our country, is the biggest problem we must solve.

The roles of each level in the governing structure of American public schools must be clearly defined for the public. It is the first step in a true “accountability system” and as Mr. Tucker stated, the roles must be “complimentary, not competing.”

A national conversation about how our schools are governed and should be governed is essential.

Foundation for Suggestions

Guiding Principles and Philosophies

We must use what we know, begin where we are, and focus on the children. The first and most important responsibility is to the children. That focus should stand above all else.

Quality education for all children will only happen when and where the *focus is on the student*. Any policy that interferes with a teacher being able to fulfill that responsibility is bad policy. Good policy supports the learning process by *improving the education and training of teachers, counselors, leaders, parents, and communities and providing the materials for those efforts*.

Words have multiple meanings and with an issue as important as how we govern public education, we should leave as little doubt as possible as to what is being proposed. Schools in America may be better served if we view “*governing*” as *guidance* rather than a form of control.

An *educational philosophy* is a statement of beliefs about teaching and learning. It serves to help us define our goals or objectives, and our beliefs do guide our actions. In developing education policies of any kind, knowing *the principles upon which we stand and make our decisions should help ensure that our actions support our goals*. To develop a true functioning system where federal, state, local, and higher education institutions work in concert to support student learning, *we must understand, develop, communicate, and follow principles and philosophies*. The universities and colleges that produce our teachers, counselors, and leaders need to clearly know what philosophies and principles the citizens of the United States believe will *best serve our children*. As Wilford Aikin pointed out in 1942, “The failure of schools and colleges to coordinate their work has resulted in enormous waste of time, effort, and money.”

Where schools are functioning well, we should not interfere with mandates to change what doesn’t need fixing. We must accept the fact that inequality exists because some state and local education agencies have not been able to improve themselves. *The children* in those districts need the support and protection of the federal government – in a way that is both effective for these disadvantaged learners and is efficient, responsible use of tax dollars; that is what I see as a proper role for the federal government.

And there are common problems among schools that struggle to improve that would best be addressed, as Gary Ratner states, by “a coordinated attack at the state and federal levels, it would be highly wasteful and inefficient to try to address these endemic problems through ad hoc remedies at individual schools. To develop these human resources nationwide, the federal government needs to lead the way so that state and local governments can focus coherently on actually carrying out the hard work of change in their own jurisdictions.” We need to face that reality and *the opportunity* it presents to our states and the nation. As mentioned previously as a point of agreement with Mr. Tucker, there is no doubt that *we need to strengthen the state education agencies* in need of reinforcing.

When localities and states lack the capacity to support and guide school improvement processes, *we need effective federal education law*. If governance is guidance, effective federal education law focused on children would serve to guide us down the path to solving the biggest problem we must face – unequal distribution of quality education.

Ron Edmonds, the lead examiner of Effective Schools Research, noted that one of the common characteristics of the *school improvement “programs”* that were used in the schools he deemed “effective”— defined by him as high-minority, high-poverty, high-achieving schools —was that they all saw *the local school as the focus of analysis and intervention*.

School improvement is a *local responsibility* shared between schools and their community and is best done through a democratic governing process structured to be inclusive of and responsive to the crucial local voice of the people. *States* must ensure *accountability* of their system through shared knowledge of measurable results and financial accountings of adequacy and equity. The *federal government* must return to its role of oversight, support, guidance, research and development, and dissemination of information, and serve when needed to *protect and provide* for the national interest. A system such as this is not unreasonable; it is one way to describe our *shared responsibility*.

Shared responsibility should be a guiding principle in deciding the governing of our schools.

Governance issues are “political in the sense that they involve the *allocation of power*.” And that is what must be decided at this moment in our development — who should be given the power to govern schools?

Conclusions and Recommendations

As stated in the executive summary of “Tough Choices or Tough Times”, “...the people who have the responsibility do not have the power, and the people who have the power do not have the responsibility” and that is what we must rectify as we form a governing structure that will work for America.

Teachers, counselors, and principals are the players in the education system most directly responsible for meeting the learning needs of students. Parents and the greater community are their life-long supporters.

The local community will always be the largest contributor to the experiences that will shape and determine the future of its schools’ students. School reform is a local responsibility that is only fully realized where the local people are included in the power structure of governing their local schools. Where schools are highly functional, the existing governing structure is working. By contrast, chronically low-performing schools are evidence that state and local officials have not met and are incapable of meeting their responsibilities.

The states are our first responders in meeting educational needs but can only realize their responsibility if they possess the *capacity* to identify their own states’ weaknesses and be responsive to them. The federal government can be a partner in developing capacity where

needed. When and where states fail to provide for the learning needs of all their children, it must become and remain the duty of the federal government to be at the ready with support, both informational and material, to ensure equal access to quality education.

It is our national representatives, our president, and the Supreme Court — the Constitutional balance of powers — that we can use to ensure equality while preserving state and individual rights.

And so, as we converse about the governing of our schools, we must understand where we are today—where we are left to begin. We are 50 years beyond where the civil rights movement had led us to the doorstep of what the writers of federal education law saw as *a revolution in equality*. Their hopes must have blinded them for they believed that the revolution in equality had almost brought that dream to a reality — for school children. Today, we are still not there. And at least Francis Keppel, if not many others involved with the writing of the 1965 ESEA, also believed that the *quality revolution* in education had to be the next step — it was, and is, *the necessary revolution* currently in progress. When a change in the governing structure of public education is in place, it will be complete. As Dr. Sarason had pointed out, “Whatever other characteristics societal and institutional revolutions may have, they share the characteristic of altering traditional power relationships.”

A fundamental change in the way we govern schools—the power relationships and how that power is used—is the endpoint of a successful revolution.

How Can the Change We Need Be Accomplished?

Simply put, instead of punishing schools and all school people, we need to assist “failing” schools in doing assessments of their school climate, governance issues, finances, student outcomes, unmet needs, and available community resources. This can be done by Quality Review Teams or Solution Teams, whatever we want to call them. Plus we need to educate the people who will be assisting in the improvement efforts in the schools and community thus *building the capacity* to enable them to successfully go through a *school improvement process* (self-assessments and improvements). This is a way to help them learn to help themselves

The flaw in the local “control” concept is that it is based on the vigilance of the people. It requires that people be watchful, informed, vocal, and actively participating in the governing and improvement processes. Since *effective local control* depends on an *informed public*, education is the answer to the problem of dysfunctional local control.

The only logical approach is the development of highly-skilled, extremely knowledgeable, and experienced leaders at all levels who clearly know and understand their roles and comprehend the importance of a cooperative sharing of power and responsibility. Where local boards have proven incapable of governing effectively, community councils might better serve the improvement process; communities should decide.

But first, it must be a political process that formalizes the governing of American education.

Unlike with No Child Left Behind which was passed without public understanding of the law, federal education law should be driven by people—the ultimate source of all legitimate authority—to create workable, practical, readable federal education law that can be used for guidance at all levels. And the place to start is to return to the touchstone of federal education law—the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Title I—*Education of Children of Low Income Families* to provide financial assistance to *local* education agencies in support of *children from low-income families*.

Title II—*School Library Resources, Textbooks, and Other Instructional Materials* to provide for access to educational materials *for all students* in the State.

Title III—*Supplementary Educational Centers and Services*, available to the *entire community*, to provide services not currently offered but deemed vital to educational improvement.

Title IV—*Educational Research and Training; Cooperative Research Act* to provide research, training, and dissemination of information *aimed* at improving the quality of teaching.

Title V—*State Departments of Education* “to stimulate and assist in strengthening the *leadership* resources of State educational agencies.”

When more is invested in the disadvantaged or hardest to teach (Title I & II), when teacher and leader quality is improved (Title IV & V), and when the public is better educated and involved (Title III), those most responsible for student outcomes can be trusted with the power to govern.

A Solution Unaddressed

It was President Reagan who is quoted in the findings of the commission to study excellence in education, *A Nation at Risk*, as saying, “Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity costs far more.” To accept mediocrity anywhere, to refuse to face the fact that inequality exists partially because of the way we fund schools, is to accept the cost of failures. Options exist and we can choose wisely by keeping adequacy and equity in the forefront of decision making. It is one more discussion the country has failed to have.

Final Thoughts to Consider

Ultimately, the change needed first is the way we view “governing” of our schools — is it control or guidance that we require and desire? And balance must be achieved and maintained by taking nothing away from the local influence but instead giving the local people the guidance they need to build the capacity within themselves and their community in order to serve the needs of their students well.

But remember, the *public education system exists to also serve our republic* through the necessary education of all its young citizens. The goal of that process is much larger than just preparing children for our future economic needs; it encompasses preparing them to be responsible citizens of our society with a view for what that means to the world.

Because of my personal faith in the ability of an informed people to properly govern themselves through duly elected representatives, it is presumptuous of me to put forth anything more in the way of “solutions.” People must decide.

What we need most right now is to have the public presented with opposing views, let them hear open debate, and let them make an informed decision. After all, the revolution in education reform that was brought on by the civil rights movement deserves a proper ending through formalization of the governing of our public schools — the place where all children will get an even start in life. We should and we ought to aim at getting this done through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The fulfillment of the purposes of the American education system will be done through the responsible actions of its people; where there is responsibility, therein should rest the power to govern.

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