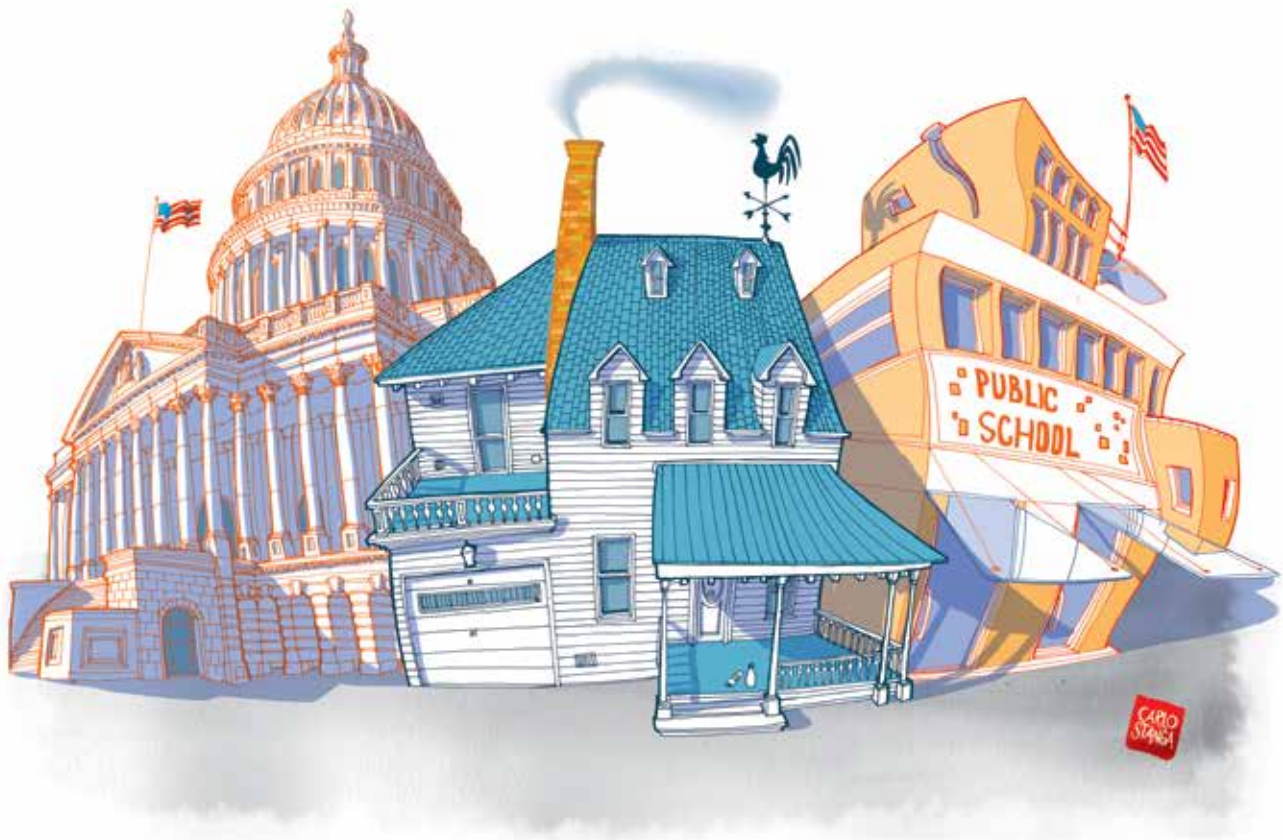


# Lessons Learned in School Reform

## Of Policy, Parents, and Practice



BY FREDERICK M. HESS

It's been three decades since I started substitute teaching for beer money in Waltham, Massachusetts, back in the 1980s. It's been a quarter century since I stopped teaching high school social studies in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It's been two decades since I first started teaching education policy at the University of Virginia. And it's been 15 years since I became a scholar of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

In other words, I've been in and around schooling for a long time. And, while I'm not the quickest study, like anyone who's spent more than five minutes in education, I've got a gut reaction to the term "school reformer." For some, it summons images of heroic

charter school leaders. For others, it brings to mind "deformers" bent on destroying public education.

For me? It's something a bit different: I find myself wondering why the handiwork of passionate, well-meaning people so often disappoints. And, in the spirit of full disclosure, I say all this as someone who, for many long years, has been labeled a school reformer.

Now, a few reformers will deny that reform has disappointed. They'll argue that dozens of new teacher-evaluation systems have delivered, never mind the growing piles of paperwork, dubious scoring systems, or lack of evidence that they've led to any changes in how many teachers are deemed effective or in need of improvement. They'll insist that the conception and rollout of the Common Core State Standards went swimmingly, never mind the politicized mess, half-baked implementation, or fractured testing regime. They'll tell you it doesn't matter that the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grants

didn't move test scores or that *Education Next* reports that charter schools are less popular today than they've been in 15 years.

I'm going to set such claims aside. Having spent a *lot* of time with reformers over the past 25 years, I can confidently report that most will privately concede that much didn't work out as hoped or as they'd anticipated. If you think I'm wrong, that things are working out splendidly and just as advertised, then feel free to skip this article and my recent book, *Letters to a Young Education Reformer*.

Now, at this point, there are those who will sigh, "Of course those reforms didn't work! They were never supposed to!! They've all been part of an ideological crusade to undermine democratic schooling and privatize public education." They'll argue that two decades of school reform, from No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top, was never really intended to be about improving schools. If this is how you see things, you too will probably want to skip this article. Because, after long experience, I've found that the lion's share of reformers—whatever they get right

---

*Frederick M. Hess is a resident scholar and the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. A former high school social studies teacher, he has authored numerous articles and books on K-12 and higher education.*

or wrong—are passionate and sincere about wanting to make schools better.

But, if we can agree to set aside hyperbolic claims that reform has “worked” and avoid suggesting that missteps are just part of an evil scheme, we can get to the question I want to discuss: Why have good intentions and energetic efforts so often disappointed? What exactly have we learned from all of this?

## What I’ve Learned

On this count, I think I have something useful to share. I want to talk about three lessons I’ve learned along the way.

### The Role of Policy

Policy turns out to be a pretty lousy tool for improving education because policy can make people do things, but it can’t make them do them *well*. And, when it comes to improving schools, doing things well is pretty much the whole ball game. As a policy wonk with a PhD in political science, this realization pained me to no end. Now, don’t get me wrong. I still think policy has an important role to play. Our schools and systems were never designed for what we’re asking them to do today—to rigorously educate every child in a diverse nation. Making that possible will indeed require big changes to policies governing staffing, spending, and much else. That’s why I’m a school reformer. But policy is better at facilitating that kind of rethinking than at forcing it.

Reformers, for instance, have attempted time and again to devise policies that would “turn around” low-performing schools.

There was the 1990s-era Comprehensive School

Reform Program, the interventions mandated by No Child Left Behind, and the Obama administration’s \$7 billion School Improvement Grants program. Unfortunately, the research has found no evidence that any of this worked consistently. Indeed, a recent federal evaluation of the School Improvement Grants program couldn’t unearth any significant effects on learning, no matter how the data were diced. Schools can turn around—we just don’t have a clue about how to make this happen via policy.

Policy is a blunt tool, one that works best when simply making people do things is enough. In schooling, it’s most likely to work as intended when it comes to straightfor-

Educators are deeply versed in the fabric of schooling and experience the unintended consequences of reforms.

ward directives—like mandating testing or the length of a school year. Policy tends to stumble when it comes to more complex questions—when *how* things are done matters more than *whether* they’re done.

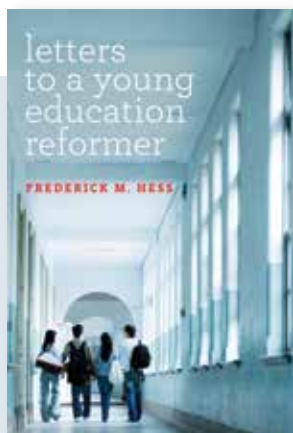
Here’s what I mean: Say a governor wants to mandate that all schools offer teacher induction based on a terrific program she’s seen. Her concern is that if the directive is too flexible, some schools will do it enthusiastically and well, but those she’s most concerned about will not. So, she wants to require schools to assign a mentor to each new teacher. But then she worries that the “problem schools” will treat the mentoring as busy-work. So, she also wants to require that mentors meet weekly with their charges and document that they’ve addressed 11 key topics in each session. But this still can’t ensure that mentors will treat their

duties as more than box-checking, so she wants to require...

You see the problem. Then it gets worse. Far too often, in fact, policy unfolds like a children’s game of telephone. In Washington, D.C., federal officials have a clear vision of what they think a change in guidance on Title I spending should mean. But when officials in 50 states read that new guidance, they don’t all understand it the same way. Those officials have to explain it to thousands of district Title I coordinators, who then provide direction to school leaders and teachers. By that point, bureaucracy, confusion, and nervous compliance can start to become the law of the land. Now, multiply that a hundredfold for the deluge of state and federal rules that rain down. When all this doesn’t work out as hoped, there’s a tendency for those responsible to insist that the policy is sound and any issues are just “implementation problems.” I’ll put this bluntly: there’s no such thing as an implementation problem. It took a while, but I eventually learned that what matters in schooling is what actually happens to 50 million kids in 100,000 schools. That’s *all* implementation. Calling something an implementation problem is a fancy way to avoid saying that we didn’t realize how a new policy would really work.

### We Can’t Patronize Parents... or Give Them a Free Pass

We’ve mucked up the relationship between parents and educators. We’ve lost the confidence to insist that parents have to do their part. Now, it’s important here to remember that the conviction that every child can learn—and that schools should be expected to teach every child—was not always the norm. It represents a tectonic shift and a hard-won victory. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, American education paid a lot of attention to the quality of parenting and far too little to the quality of teaching and schooling. Complaints that parents weren’t doing their part too often seemed to be an excuse for leaving kids behind. I taught and mentored student teachers in that era, in a number of schools across several states, and can testify that it wasn’t unusual to hear educators declare that certain students were unteachable and that it was their parents’ fault.



*Letters to a Young Education Reformer*, by Frederick M. Hess, is published by Harvard Education Press, which is offering *American Educator* readers a 20 percent discount off the purchase of the book through January 31, 2018. To order, visit [www.harvardeducationpress.org](http://www.harvardeducationpress.org) or call 888-437-1437 and use sales code AE17RH.

Today, that mindset is regarded as unacceptable. Teachers are expected to teach every child. That's a wonderful thing. I fear, though, that the insistence that parents do their part has been lost along the way. Talk of parental responsibility has come to be seen as little more than a case of blaming the victim. The result is that we just don't talk very much anymore, at least in public, about whether parents insist that their kids do their homework or respect their teachers. When students are truant, we hesitate to say anything that would imply parents are at fault. When only a handful of parents show up at parent-teacher meetings, reformers are conspicuously mum. If they do take note, it's usually only to lament that parents are overworked and overburdened.

Obviously, these are thorny questions. Parents frequently *are* overburdened. But there's a necessary balance here, and we've managed to tip from one extreme to the other. Education is always a handshake between families and schools. It can help to think about this in terms of healthcare. When we say people are good doctors, we mean that they're competent and responsible; we don't mean that they perform miracles. If a doctor tells you to reduce your cholesterol and you keep eating steak, we don't label the physician a "bad doctor." We hold the doctor responsible for doing her job, but expect patients to do their part, too. When the patient is a child, the relationship is the same—but the parents assume a crucial role. If a diabetic child ignores the doctor's instructions on monitoring blood sugar, we don't blame the doctor. And we don't blame the kid. We expect parents to take responsibility and make sure it gets done.

When it comes to the handshake between parents and educators, though, that same understanding has broken down. Talk of parental responsibility is greeted with resistance and even accusations of bias. Yet parents have an outsized impact on their children's academic future. Children whose parents read to them, talk to them, and teach them self-discipline are more likely to succeed academically.

The point is decidedly *not* to scapegoat parents or to judge them. I know all too well how tough and exhausting parenthood can be. The point is to clarify for parents what

they should be doing and help them do those things well. Today, we ask educators to accept responsibility for the success of all their students. Good. How students fare, though, is also a product of whether they do their work and take their studies seriously. Some of that truly is beyond the reach of educators. So, by all means, let's call teachers to account—let's just be sure to do it for parents, too.

### The Crucial Partnership between Talkers and Doers

School reform isn't about having good ideas—it's about how those ideas actually work for students and educators. This can be



hard for those gripped by a burning desire to make the world a better place in a hurry. Reformers need to sweat things like perverse incentives and paperwork burdens—even when they'd rather focus on larger issues like equity or injustice. They must consider how reforms will affect the day-to-day lives of students, families, and educators. It can seem like good ideas and good intentions should count for more than they do. They don't.

Most educators innately know all this, of course. After all, they spend their days working in schools. They tend to think granularly, in terms of individual students, curricular units, and instructional strategies. Educators are deeply versed in the fabric of schooling and experience the unintended consequences of reforms. This is why it's easy for them to get so frustrated with self-styled reformers.

Educators are right to be skeptical. Reformers and practitioners will inevitably see things differently. But what frustrated teachers can miss is that this is OK, even

healthy. Educators are looking from the inside out, and reformers from the outside in. In all walks of life, there are doers and there are talkers. Doers are the people who teach students, attend to patients, and fix plumbing. Talkers are free to survey the sweep of what's being done and explore ways to do it better.

Ultimately, serious and sustainable school reform needs to be profoundly pro-doer. When talkers wax eloquent about students trapped in dysfunctional systems, they often forget that many teachers feel equally stymied. The bureaucracy that reformers decry can also infuriate and demoralize the teachers who live with it every day. Educators see when policies misfire and where existing practices come up short. Talkers have the time to examine the big picture, learn from lots of locales, and forge relationships with policymakers. Talkers have the distance to raise hard truths that can be tough for educators to address simply because they strike so close to home. But it's ultimately the doers—the educators—who have to do the work, which means talkers need to pay close attention to what educators have to say. There's a crucial symbiosis here: teachers and talkers need each other.

### How I Hope to Do Better

Look, I'll offer a confession: I'm not an especially nice guy. When I suggest that talkers and doers need to listen to those who see things differently, that policymakers are well-served by humility, or that reform needs to work for teachers as well as students, it's not because I want everyone to get along. It's because education improvement is hard work. Doing it well is at least as much about discipline and precision as it is about passion. What I'm counseling is not niceness but *professionalism*. This means listening more deliberately and speaking more selectively. It's tough to listen, though, when we're constantly shouting at one another.

It may not fit the tenor of the times. But I've learned that, if we're to do better going forward, we all need to respect the limits of policy, ask more of parents, and appreciate the symbiosis of talkers and doers—while also always remembering that in schooling, it's the doing that counts. □