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COMMENTARY

Notes From the Revolution

By Eugene W. Hickok

Ten years ago this summer, a small but diverse group of state leaders gathered in Burlington, Vt., to plot a revolution. As the National Governors Association assembled for its annual summer session, these lesser-known men and women huddled in relative obscurity. Most were fairly new to their jobs, and were concerned about the challenges they confronted. As they talked, a sense of urgency grew. They left Vermont galvanized by a dedication to engage the residents of their states and the people of the nation in a spirited discussion of the need for fundamental, grassroots-driven reform in education.

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In the beginning, the Education Leaders Council was all about changing the terms of America's conversation about education. For too long, in the minds of these leaders, the discussion had been framed by and carried out among the education establishment. And it had gone nowhere. Student achievement was stagnant nationwide, and achievement gaps between population groups were evident everywhere. Yet, no one seemed aware of these facts (or willing to say they were). Many parents of public school children felt disenfranchised. School reform efforts were encountering strong opposition from those who felt threatened by emerging ideas such as charter schools, school choice, virtual education, and academic accountability. School board members seemed to be taking their direction from administrators, instead of providing the direction themselves. Teachers everywhere were under siege.

None of this was new at that time, of course. But what troubled those who formed the council was that the organizations whose purpose it was to improve public education seemed to be either ignorant of or blind to the problems. The national teachers' unions were pursuing political agendas that had little to do with improving America's schools. The organizations formed to address the needs of the nation's school boards and state boards of education were doing just that: looking out for the interests of their members. The Council of Chief State School Officers, long established in Washington as the "official" voice of state education leaders, was actively engaged in discussions on Capitol Hill. But its agenda, in the minds of these maverick state leaders, was irrelevant to what was actually going on in the schools and what needed to be.

The Education Leaders Council was formed in 1995 to tap a rising sentiment within the country for dramatic change in education. Taking its direction and strength from the grassroots—the men and women engaged every day in education, as well as the parents of kids in schools—the council advanced a number of reforms that at the time were seen as controversial. Today, these reforms have become almost commonplace.

Within the states represented by the council, public school accountability was the highest priority. This meant then, as it does today, maintaining high expectations for student and school achievement and providing solid ways of measuring that achievement. It also meant devising methods of rewarding success and confronting the lack of it. The seeds of the accountability provisions embraced in the federal No Child Left Behind Act were sown in the states during the 1990s, and were nourished by the council.

At the same time, council members recognized that something fundamental was missing in American public education that was needed if true reform was to take place: choices for parents. They embraced and advanced the charter school movement. Though hardly unanimous in their support for private school choice, they were eager to add vouchers to the discussion, recognizing that this option should be on the table for voters to consider. They also saw the transformative potential of technology in education and the advent of cyber schooling and distance learning as exciting new education frontiers. They didn't

view the for-profit, private sector as the enemy of American education. To the contrary, they recognized the potential the market has always had in improving schooling, and they encouraged entrepreneurship and emerging companies.

Embracing the importance of teacher quality for student achievement, the council members sought to transform the way teachers are trained and the profession itself. They mounted the common-sense argument that “you can’t teach what you don’t know” and called for more emphasis on academic content and rigor in teacher-preparation programs. Some leaders sought to revise state teacher-certification requirements to reflect that rigor. Others sought to change teacher-preparation programs in colleges and universities. All embraced “alternative certification,” recognizing that certification and qualification are hardly synonymous, and seeking to attract talented men and women to a profession that badly needs that talent.

Many of these ideas were controversial in the states where they were pursued. Many remain controversial today. But controversy aside, the reforms have become a fixed part of the American education lexicon. The challenge now, as it was 10 years ago, is to get beyond words. What brought that small group of leaders together in Vermont was their impatience with an endless conversation about school improvement that seemed aimed at stifling change by talking it to death.

The Education Leaders Council is a different organization today, but it remains engaged. Having successfully tapped the state and local energy that must be the source of any serious effort to improve education, the council now seeks to nationalize the movement, with a Washington presence and some recognition on Capitol Hill. During the Bush administration, as the education battleground has shifted, so too have the strategies of those in favor of and opposed to the proposals the president has advanced. But any strategy that loses touch with those who daily determine where education goes in this country will fall short.

America is on the verge of a true education revolution—the sort we envisioned 10 years ago, and one that has been years in the making. If it is to succeed, those most engaged in the struggle will need to demonstrate that they possess the character, courage, energy, and foresight found in true revolutionaries.

They must base their revolution on fundamental principles, and stick to those principles. They must be explicit about these principles and remain consistent and unflinching. Many a revolution has been defeated by exploiting the weak, uncommitted, and half-hearted. Fundamental change is never easy.

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As revolutions take hold and change takes root, more will sign up to advance the cause. Revolutionaries take their supporters where they find them. In the struggle to change education in America, strange alliances will form and old adversaries will become new advocates. Revolutions succeed when the power of their ideas becomes too compelling to ignore and opponents either cross over or slink away. This is a battle over ideas. The talk of money, regulations, unfunded mandates, and inflexibility is all a diversion—residue from past conversations. Revolutions change the character of the conversation, rather than repeating previous ones.

An American education revolution will render traditional politics irrelevant. The usual labels—conservative, liberal, Republican, Democrat—will give way as the old order’s most fervent defenders begin to see its damaging inadequacies and sense the potential for the future. Eradicating achievement gaps should not be seen as part of any party’s or politician’s agenda. It should be understood for what it is: making the promise of America real.

Those engaged in this revolution must embrace the struggle and gain nourishment from it. There can be no higher calling in a republic such as ours than ensuring that every child, every citizen receives an education worthy of our highest aspirations. Nor is there a more important task. Everything we care about, everything central to our future as a nation, is at stake. That should be enough to energize even the most wary.

We have come so far in the past decade. We have so far yet to go.

*Eugene W. **Hickok** served as the deputy U.S. secretary of education during President George W. Bush's first term. He had previously been the secretary of education for Pennsylvania.*

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

"Memoirs of a Deputy Secretary," May 25, 2005.

"Hickok, Deputy Secretary and 'Go-To' Guy, Steps Down," December 8, 2004.

"Education Dept.'s Exit Door May Open Soon," December 1, 2004.

"Doing the 'Right' Thing," April 16, 2003.

"Hickok Brings a Taste for Local Control to the No. 3 Washington Job," September 19, 2001.

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