

Education Reform: America's Third Rail

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Way back in 1991, Roger Altman, a prominent businessman who became Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department, set up a meeting for me with then long shot presidential candidate Bill Clinton at a Manhattan office. The Community Service Society at that time had been conducting research and testifying before congressional, state and City Council hearings on public school funding. Our reports showed that within the City of New York, schools in places like Brownsville and the South Bronx received substantially less money per pupil than children in more affluent neighborhoods like Riverdale and Forest Hills.

So the main topic of our hour long discussion with candidate Clinton was on the national issue of equity in education. Clinton was at his best. It was a policy wonk's dream conversation. Clinton knew the issue backward and forward, about Arkansas and states across the nation. Moreover, Clinton agreed with me that the issue was of significant national importance. I was even more naïve then than I am now, and with a great deal of excitement I asked the governor whether he would make the issue a priority if he was elected. I got a firm Clinton handshake, a pat on the back, and resounding "no."

"Look what happened to Governor Jim Florio when he tried to equalize school funding," Clinton explained, referring to New Jersey's chief executive. But if advocates like me could get it on the national agenda, he'd be there to support it.

Now, 20 years later, despite "No Child Left Behind" and "Race to the Top," among other reforms, America's public education system still trails the rest of the developed world, and the situation for poor children and most children of color hasn't improved.

In my view, the reason why not is precisely what Clinton was telling me - elected officials take on serious education reform at their peril. If health reform is difficult if not impossible, the notion of equal access to education dollars and resources may be intellectually appealing, but when it comes down to individual parents with political and economic power being asked to share with the poor, look out. The closer to the local level you go, the harder the fight.

The big turning point in my view was a 1973 Supreme Court 5-4 decision in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (No. 71-1332 Supreme Court of the United States, 411 U.S. 1; 93 S. Ct. 1278), which held that reliance on property taxes to fund public schools

does not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, even if it causes inter-district expenditure disparities.

The decision basically allows the United States to be virtually alone in the developed world to allow public education funding to rely on how wealthy your community is rather than providing an equal allocation of funding for each child. Thurgood Marshall wrote one of his strongest dissents, which in hindsight captures just how far we went wrong: "The majority's holding can only be seen as a retreat from our historic commitment to equality of educational opportunity."

So why am I harping on such old news? I guess it's because the current debate on educational excellence and public school improvement doesn't require any leadership or risk by elected officials. The debate has been boiled down to more charter schools, more vouchers, less unions, but nothing about creating a funding structure for national public education, far less a meaningful national curriculum that can create uniform expectations for every high school graduate in the country, or setting high standards along with higher pay for teachers and administrators.

I see this through the lens of poor kids of color in New York City, but it's plain to me that we face serious challenges to American dominance and "exceptionalism" (sic) because large numbers of citizens of other countries are being better educated than many of their American counterparts and the scores show it. Our rather tepid attempts at "reform" aren't going to cut it in a global economy. The overwhelming majority of our students of all colors aren't well enough prepared by this "no stress" effort at national education policy, where charter schools are seen as a universal panacea that involves no one giving up anything and no elected official having to ever really lead on the issue, far less take any political risk.