

THE FIELD GUIDE TO EDUCATION REFORM: HOW TO SPOT A *REAL* EDUCATION REFORMER

These days, everyone is “for” education reform. But when everyone claims to favor things like “choice” and “accountability,” how can you tell the real reformers (“the doers”) from the rest (“the talkers”)? The answer is, listen carefully to what they say and observe closely what they do! Grab your field glasses, and use these helpful guidelines:

1. When confronted with a teacher’s union, how does this so-called reformer behave? Does (s)he:

- a. Issue gobs of praise for the teaching profession, for teachers in general, and begin to obfuscate that the job is really much harder than most realize and never fully address what stands in their way?
- b. Discuss/propose or advocate having an honest conversation with the union leadership who (s)he sincerely believes wants what’s best for children?
- c. Boast of his/her own state’s enormous progress in building evaluations that got the union’s buy-in? OR,
- d. Acknowledge that teacher contracts are a disincentive to attract, retain or reward great teachers and that the key to quality teaching is to have performance-based evaluations with teeth and with which money follows success?

If the answer is a, b or c you are probably looking at a “talker.” If it’s **d**, (s)he could be the real deal!

2. When the so-called reformer talks about “school choices” pull out your binoculars for a close examination!

- a. What kind of charter laws does (s)he favor? One that guarantees fiscal equity for every child and ensures the creation of truly independent authorizers that do not need local or state board oversight to act, or one that simply vests the power with school boards? (See [Charter School Laws Across the States 2012](#))
- b. What about their position on full school choice? Do they believe that parents should have a say in where their tax dollars are allocated or do they quote supposed research that says there is no proof vouchers work and that they are “concerned” that choice creams the best students and leaves everyone else behind? (as they sip their Grande Skim Latte!)
- c. Not sure what you’re hearing? Here are some telltale signs of a wishy-washy reformer, or one in sheep’s clothing:
 - “Of course every parent needs access to great schools. But unlike private schools we take every student and work hard to make sure our district is providing everything a student needs for the 21st century.”
 - “I support charter schools, which is why I voted to lift the cap last session.” (Note: Be extra vigilant about this one. It’s a defense tactic used to camouflage themselves from the reality that their state has very few charter schools and that the ones they do have were created for the sole purpose of shifting the poorest performing students out of their schools).
 - “Every child deserves a great education. Let’s work to make every school great for every child.”
 - “I like charter schools and vouchers are fine too but they won’t work in my state because it’s (fill in the blank) ‘rural,’ ‘rich,’ ‘poor,’ ‘big,’ ‘small,’ or ‘doing great already!’” (Note: This is a favorite defense tactic of the faux reformer – the evasive maneuver).

3. **If this so-called reformer talks about “judging teachers based on student improvement,” ask this question: HOW MUCH?** Some so-called reformers back programs that base only a small percentage of a teacher’s salary or evaluation on such measures. Some states that have adopted so called teacher reforms leave it to districts to determine what comprises an evaluation (observation? Peer review? Student scores? - Rarely) and permit so much discretion at the local level that the evaluations may be meaningless.
4. **What’s this so-called reformer doing with Race to the Top (RTT) funds?** If his/her state is using it to pressure schools to close, inviting new providers in to turn around schools, growing charters and instituting real performance pay, you might be seeing a real reformer. If the question of how best to spend RTT funds is still a point of collaboration and discussion, or worse, if it’s being credited with path-breaking progress that has yet to yield any student achievement, take cover! You might be in the presence of a “talker.”
5. **Look out for the so-called reformers who unconditionally “favor the waiver.”** There have been 33 No Child Left Behind waivers granted, which means those states (and the District of Columbia) will now be able to pursue their own course without consequence of losing money or students regardless if they succeed or fail. While many recognize the unintended regulatory frenzy that resulted from NCLB (often a result of flawed implementation not flawed goals), and however imperfect that law, real reformers still know it is driving accountability. Real reformers believe that NCLB needs reform, that waivers should not go to any state that asks and that without a demonstrated pattern of success, waivers are a return back to the days of business as usual.
6. **What are this so-called reformer’s policies on digital learning and technology-based instructional delivery?** Does (s)he hide under the bushes when someone mentions online learning? Did you hear assurances of support that they will help advance it while at the same time, recommending that it be studied further? Or does (s)he recognize that technology and online learning are critical elements of a reformed K-12 education system? Is (s)he about online learning in districts only or do they favor a role for business, which has transformed a nation’s infrastructure, in the creation and delivery of online learning?
7. **When trying to separate real reformers from “talkers,” it helps to see how they behave in various habitats.** For example, how does this alleged reformer act when invited to participate in a forum where the education establishment may well be present? Does (s)he:
 - a. Change the word “choice” to “options”?
 - b. Use accountability fifteen different times but never define what it means?
 - c. Say there is no silver bullet and we simply have to “do it all.”
 - d. Advocate for “early childhood education” without mentioning that existing schools that don’t work can’t do a better job just by having the kids early and neglect to discuss how low-quality is an issue in most public pre-schools as well.
 - e. Banter on about the dropout rate, the state of joblessness, homelessness, foodlessness and more as excuses for poor performing schools?
 - f. Frequently use the words “non-profit solutions?”
8. **What about the standards-reformer who with a large grin and conviction of spirit says a new day is dawning with the advent of the common core?** Since the mere existence of standards at the state or national level doesn’t guarantee strong curricula, lessons, accountability or even a solution to the dropout crisis, it is worth finding out more before you start interviewing he-who-loves-standards most but neglects the rest of the conversation, or how 20 years of experience with standards has taught us that even the best ones slowly get weakened, undermined and assaulted.

9. What about what's taught, not just how it's taught? Does matter actually matter? Many reformers-in-waiting think it's about just the teacher, the approach, the infrastructure and not the materials. So watch out for these doozies:

- a. "The reading wars are over. Literacy is important and our children must be exposed to as many books as possible if they are to learn to read."
- b. "We know that most kids will never use math after they graduate so let's just make it fun for them."
- c. "We believe learning should be child-centered."
- d. "Technology in the classroom closes the gap for students."

10. And, finally, speaking of gaps. The achievement gap. Who's for it? No one in their right mind advocates a gap that separates the learned from the unlearned, the advantaged from disadvantaged. Got a reformer who says they are all "about the achievement gap?" What does that mean?

See numbers 1-9.

Have a good day.