A Personal Report from the Education Summit: What Does It Mean for Education Reform?

By Denis P. Doyle
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By Denis P. Doyle
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Allow me to share with you my impressions of the recent Education Summit, sponsored jointly by IBM and the nation’s governors. As an invited guest representing The Heritage Foundation, I was impressed by the tone and temper of the meeting. There was a clear reaffirmation of the principle that the job of public education is a state and local task; it is not the job of the federal government. And while the governors and the representatives of corporate America have a direct interest in the best education of America’s children, including real standards, tests, and results, the ultimate engine of reform is dedicated parents. They are most interested in their children’s education. While school choice, the most vigorous and far-reaching education reform measure available to us, was not on the summit agenda, we all know that market-based reform like school choice enforces accountability to parents. It is the natural ally of high academic standards.

It was an extraordinary first. Forty-three governors encamped to the IBM Palisades, New York, conference center March 26 and 27, 1996, to talk about — and act on— education standards. A gathering of eagles, each governor was accompanied by a home-state CEO of his or her choosing. To round out the invitation list, IBM CEO Louis V. Gerstner and co-host Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson invited 30 education “resource people.” More than the usual suspects, the resource people were a motley crew of special-interest pleaders, state education leaders, foundation executives, think tank intellectuals, and policy analysts. Indeed, the most distinctive resource person was Secretary Riley, invited neither as a participant nor as a speaker. His silence spoke volumes.

Governor Thompson and CEO Gerstner jointly presided over the two-day meeting, and were joined at the head table by a bipartisan steering committee made up of Governors Terry Branstad (R-IA), John Engler (R-MI), Jim Hunt (D-NC), incoming NGA head Bob Miller (D-NV), and Roy Romer (D-CO). CEOs Robert E. Allen (AT&T), John L. Clendenin (BellSouth Corporation), George Fisher (Kodak), John Pepper (P&G), and Frank Shrontz (Boeing) shared the spotlight.

While the meeting’s larger purpose was to reinvigorate the standards movement and highlight education technology, its real function was to solemnize the fact that the federal role in education is virtually at an end. Governor Thompson made one thing crystal clear in his opening remarks: The meeting was addressing a problem that was national in scope but that did not call for a federal government solution. The governors and CEOs could handle it themselves.

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

The harmonious picture was completed when President Clinton addressed the group just before lunch on Wednesday, the second day of the conference. Even seasoned Washington watchers were impressed by the security; in addition to the usual complement of Secret Service agents and countless members of the New York highway patrol, each governor was
accompanied by a phalanx of plainclothes officers. There were many more people with ear-pieces and distinctive lapel pins than there were participants.

Because the putative purpose of the meeting was to get the education standards train back on track, the first afternoon’s plenary session was followed by small group meetings with no press present, chaired jointly by a governor and a CEO; resource people were present but largely seen, not heard. Cocktails and dinner were followed by a six-person panel featuring Al Shanker of the American Federation of teachers (AFT); Governor Jim Hunt of North Carolina; Checker Finn and Lynn Cheney, conservative appointees and education specialists in the Reagan and Bush Administrations; and Governors John Engler of Michigan and Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin. The next morning, small groups of governors, CEOs, and resource people were moved at a forced march through more than a dozen technology exhibits (ten minutes per exhibit). The technology exhibits were carefully scripted and were a great success, not least because of a striking example of enlightened despotism: The majority of the technology displays were running on Apple software. Moreover, the CEO of Apple was at the summit as the guest of the governor of North Dakota.

PRIVATE INITIATIVE

Two things stand out. First, the original idea was Lou Gerstner’s. As Chief Executive Officer of IBM, he has had a long-standing interest in education. It was not a government conclave, and it certainly was not a typical business meeting. One of the nation’s most vigorous business leaders, Gerstner gained the confidence of Tommy Thompson (concurrently the head of National Governors’ Association and Education Commission of the States, the first governor to chair both organizations since Bill Clinton) and Roy Romer, Governor of Colorado and as liberal as Thompson is conservative. While no summit could escape political overtones, this one was neither politically conceived nor politically motivated. It achieved a status often talked about but only infrequently realized: It was bipartisan. (The issue of school choice was not on the table; had it been, the bipartisan aura would have evaporated quickly, as a brief public colloquy between Governors George Allen of Virginia and Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin revealed as the summit was wrapping up. Even more was apparently said in private.)

Limiting the agenda to issues about which bipartisan agreement could be achieved was no small feat. Indeed, two years ago, when the 103rd Congress was still sitting, there could not have been widespread agreement about standards. That such agreement is emerging is a commentary on the temper of the times. And while Gerstner is a political animal within the corporate world, he does not approach education as a political issue. It was his insight to take the issue to the governors. Gerstner is no newcomer to the issue; he has been worried about the quality of the nation’s schools for a very long time. I know about his interest first hand as the co-author of a book with him (and two other colleagues) several years ago: Re-inventing Education: Entrepreneurship in America’s Public Schools (New York, E. P. Dutton). Among other things, it tells the story of the RJR Nabisco Foundation’s Next Century Schools program, in which Gerstner oversaw the investment of $32 million in 43 schools across the country—not an insignificant amount, even by Washington standards.

Interestingly, governors, highly political in their own states, are strikingly nonpartisan with each other. They are as courtly with other governors as members of the U.S. Senate are with colleagues; but unlike Senators, their show of bipartisanship is real. In part this is because they do not see other governors as competitors. They have much in common and much to learn from each other, and they know it. They genuinely enjoy each other’s com-
pany as well, which is one of the reasons they gave former Governor Clinton such a warm welcome; regardless of party affiliation, he’s a member of the tribe.

President Clinton, for his part, gave a speech calculated to please—as it did—and demonstrated that what he is ideally suited to be is “governor” of the United States. The President, as many know, can charm the birds out of the trees. And if he believes what he says—or if he acts as though he does—American education could be in for a big change. This is always a challenge for those of us who tend to be skeptical of the President’s diplomatic relations between his language and his actions. In his 1996 State of the Union speech, Clinton had proclaimed that the era of big government was at an end. From his federal budget submissions, however, this is not at all clear to the rest of us. In his Palisades education policy speech, he repeated that promise. Not surprisingly, like much of his State of the Union Address, it was a speech 95 percent of which any Republican could have delivered with complete conviction.

The high points were few and memorable. Clinton opened with the claim that what matters in education is effort. Not talent or IQ or luck; effort. How quaint. And how on the mark. Nothing is more patronizing—or damaging—to poor or minority children than to tell them that nothing they do matters, that whatever might happen to them is the luck of the socioeconomic draw. About this point the President is right. He went on to say that standards are essential, just as state-developed assessments are. The pivotal point, however, was his use of the word “consequences.” Only one other public figure regularly uses that word, AFT President Al Shanker, and it is no accident that he has been heavily lobbying the President and his senior staff about this issue for months. Clinton gave “consequences” operational significance when he attached a liberal sacred cow: social promotion. No more, he intoned. Right again.

C-SPAN carried the full proceedings of the summit. President Clinton mentioned that he had watched the panel discussion from the comfort of the White House. His folksy references to panelists’ comments—particularly Al Shanker’s—offered another striking example of his command of the subject of his speech.

Clinton closed with a paean about discipline: No one can teach or learn in an undisciplined and unsafe environment. As Checker Finn noted, it was a speech which Ronald Reagan could have given. There was not a single reference to the federal government, no talk about federal standards, and nary a word about Goals 2000.

And what was true of Clinton’s comments was true of the governors and CEOs. The idea that standards are a state and local issue was supported unanimously, or at least with no public dissent. In the case of governors like Jim Hunt and Roy Romer, their willingness to go along may be simple political prudence. They know that the federal role will soon be de minimis, and they are reconciled to this new reality. They might wish that it were otherwise but made no public complaint or statement to that effect.

NEW, NEW FEDERALISM

For my part, I am convinced that whatever their private reservations or reluctance might be now, they will grow to like their new role. Governors actually enjoy governing, and education is typically the biggest single item in their budgets. While they know that freedom from Washington will have a price (federal spending reductions), they are likely to find that life is both simpler and more interesting without Uncle Sam looking over their shoulders.
Presidents from Nixon to Clinton, of course, have flirted with the idea of "new federalism." Indeed, it is a Nixon coinage, but has made little substantive headway over the years. It is one of those ideas that is good in principle but very difficult to put into practice. Part of the problem is the sheer weight of habit, part is fear of the unknown, part is the heavy lifting required to change the contours of massive programs. Changing what Washington does is hard work, just as changing what the states do is.

The creation of the U.S. Department of Education in 1978 by Jimmy Carter is a case in point; it was a major Democratic campaign promise to the NEA, but Carter could barely marshal the votes to get the bill out of the House of Representatives. It was a "ho-hum" issue in Congress, eliciting only weak support and unenthusiastic opposition. Undoing the department falls in the same category, as President Reagan discovered to his chagrin: He couldn't find an author to carry his promised legislation to abolish the department in his first term in office.

In any case, the real strength of "new federalism" will depend precisely on the extent to which its practitioners prefer it to the old federalism. And the assembled governors gave every indication that they will actually welcome it. Time will tell.

A second noteworthy point is that the summit was not dominated by the otherwise ubiquitous special interests. True, many of the resource people were members of the special-interest crowd; the AFT's Al Shanker and NEA President Keith Geiger were both there, but they were among a silent throng at the back of the hall.

In an era overwhelmingly dominated by politics—indeed, in an era in which "politics" has become a dirty word—it is hard to overestimate the importance of the simple fact that the summit was the product of private, not public, interest. That may account for the relative isolation of the special-interest groups at the summit itself. Ironically, there was concern in some conservative circles that the summit was no more than a new generation of "robber barons" working their will on a malleable and hapless populace. Perhaps, but a more realistic analysis is to take Gerstner of IBM and his fellow CEOs at face value. They are genuinely worried about the future of America and are convinced that, left to their own devices, schools will not spontaneously reform. If not CEO pressure, then whose? If not now, when? To suspect them of sinister motives is a bit much, particularly when their professed motives are manifestly reasonable. Parents, whose children have the most to lose in a failing educational system, need their help and should enlist them as allies.

The fact is that CEOs are interested parties, not parties-at-interest, and they come as close to being disinterested as any reformers can. They are the ultimate consumers of the schools' product and have a real stake in school performance. Equally important, they don't want problems; they want solutions and have no desire to tell anyone how to do it or what to do. They just want results. The CEO point of view is captured in David Kearns's comment when he was head of Xerox before joining the U.S. Department of Education as former Secretary Lamar Alexander's Deputy Secretary: "If the schools educate, business will train."

MANY A SLIP BETWIXT CUP AND LIP

What is the ostensible and what is the likely outcome of the summit? In this case, they are likely to be the same. There is actually reason to believe that something will happen as a result of the summit. No one in America is more results-oriented than CEOs; they are serious, and about this they mean business. The governors too; they are now in it so deep that it
would be hard to pull back. Indeed, the issue is not withdrawing, but just what it is they will do and when they will do it.

The communiqué produced by the summit was reasonably clear about the next step: the creation by the governors of a national—not federal—clearinghouse (or “war room,” as Governor Thompson called it) that would be going full-bore within two years. Designed to serve the states, it would keep everyone up to date on standards, but its more important function would be to set the stage for meaningful comparisons among states. Then we—and the governors—would know who is “world-class” and who is not. Discussions about the clearinghouse have already begun; to be sure, there are numerous practical decisions to be made, not least who will pay for it and will “it” be a new or existing organization? While logic would suggest that an existing organization should assume that role, candidates are not so obvious as they might at first appear.

The most logical is the Education Commission of the States (ECS), created three decades ago by then North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford and James Bryant Conant, former Harvard president and author of _The American High School Today_. ECS’s mission was to keep Washington at bay, a task at which, to no one’s surprise, it failed utterly. A sort of _estates general_, its membership included governors, chief state school officers, state legislators, and sundry interested citizens. ECS quickly became a part of the establishment and today is a flaccid institution. If ECS was too broadly conceived to maintain any focus, the National Governors’ Association (NGA) suffers from the opposite problem.

In any case, the summiters seemed to have no interest in passing the standards baton to either ECS or NGA. In the closing comments at least, the governors asserted their interest in a wholly new organization, one that would exist for the sole purpose of promulgating standards and comparisons. Time will tell.

While the communiqué did not call for a state “wall chart,” it is hard to imagine state comparisons without one, and we may soon witness states actually participating in comparisons, the one with the other.

**THE DOG THAT DIDN’T BARK**

What was missing at the summit? Ironically, two points of view were virtually absent. One is the national (not federal) perspective that Diane Ravitch, a sensible conservative reformer, ably represents. In her post-summit wrap-up, she laments the absence of this view. Who needs fifty sets of standards? Diane asks. Who indeed? For better or worse, it is my strongly held view that we do need state, even local, standards and that the issue of “fifty standards” is moot. We will not have Nevada math and Maryland math, Oregon English and Florida English; Americans in each state and locality will quite naturally gravitate to similar standards, and insofar as differences may emerge, they will probably emerge for good reason.

The real danger of national (not federal) or state (not local) standards is that they will be forced to a lowest common denominator by political pressures. True, the absence of national or state standards would permit lackadosical school districts to continue in their feckless manner, but the presence of high standards in neighboring districts will have a salutary effect. It may put some starch in slackers.

Be that as it may, the most important point of view not represented at the summit (except in a brief reference by Lynn Cheney) was old-fashioned localism or, as it is characterized in education circles, local control. That governors and CEOs would not be naturally drawn to this point of view is no surprise; modern CEOs are as likely to think in global as local terms,
and governors by virtue of their jobs, think in statewide terms. This is not to say that either
is opposed to local control, just that the terms of the discussion were cast as state-level con-
cerns.

To be sure, there is a powerful statewide dimension; in all the states, education is a state
constitutional responsibility, and education typically consumes more than half the state
budget. Only in a few outliers like New Hampshire is the state role tiny; less than ten per-
cent of New Hampshire’s education spending comes from state sources. At the other end of
the scale is Hawaii, the nation’s only statewide school system (though, thanks to the interac-
tion effects between Proposition 13 and the Serrano school finance case, California is
virtually a statewide system). Even in these situations, however, education is quintessen-
tially a school-based (even schoolroom-based) enterprise, and the role of the state in
standard setting should be approached with the utmost circumspection. The obvious danger
is standardization, a fate to be avoided at all costs.

School districts and school buildings must be on the front lines of standard setting for sev-
eral reasons, not least because they must live with them. Governors, chief state school
officers, and state legislators have an understandable interest in setting standards, but they
should resist the temptation to impose them on school districts. Standards cannot be para-
chuted in; schools must “own” them if they are to have any lasting effect. Equally
important, the process of setting standards at the local level is a powerful trainer and com-
munity builder. If teachers and parents are involved in setting standards from the
beginning, they both learn about them and support them. Knowing what they are and how
they are to be put in place lends reality to the idea that standards will have consequences.

The most powerful and useful role for the state will be in developing standards “adviso-
ries”: model standards, templates even, for local school districts to use as they engage in the
standard setting process.

The logic of local standard setting is not “let a thousand flowers bloom,” though there
will be some of that. The logic is ownership, because as each community works through the
standard setting process, each community’s standards will be substantially like each other’s.
So too, each state’s set of “advisories” will be like every other’s. There are two reasons for
this. First, there exists among Americans a high degree of social consensus about what
young people should know and be able to do. For example, most Americans would agree
that to earn a diploma, all students should be able to read and understand a news story in a
national news magazine, a national newspaper, and their local paper. They should be able to
count and compute; understand plane geometry and algebra; read, write, and speak stand-
ard American English; and so on.

There will be differences, to be sure. The citizens of Los Alamos, New Mexico, for ex-
ample, may want their graduates to know solid geometry and trigonometry, not just algebra.
The citizens of Seattle, Washington, may want their graduates to master marine biology and
vulcanology, while their counterparts in Arizona may be more interested in desert ecosy-
systems. Citizens in Texas will want graduates to know Texas history and geography to a level
of detail that other communities will not. And so on. So much the better. This is not a differ-
ence to be ignored or suppressed, but one that should be applauded.

Second, even insofar as there are regional differences in subjects like history and litera-
ture, the foundations are much the same. A high standard requiring mastery of historical
material and methodology can be satisfied using very different content. The study of litera-
ture is made richer and more rewarding by attending to local writers. So too with science
standards. It would be altogether sensible for each area of the country to emphasize its
strengths; Arizonans might master the scientific method and meet high science standards by emphasizing Canyon geology and water erosion, just as residents around the Great Lakes might emphasize the impact of glaciation. Finally, there is no California algebra or Illinois chemistry.

TEACHING TO THE TEST

If the assessment and consequences parts of the standards agenda are attended to with enthusiasm, the issue of who sets the standards is less important than who asks the test questions. Ultimately, that is what standards are all about. If the tests and measures are carefully crafted and calibrated, they will do a world of good, for the assessments actually set the standard. Indeed, that is what the old bromide about “teaching to the test” is all about: If it is a bad test, so much the worse; if it is a good test, so much the better. One way to think about it is this: The test is the interrogatory form of the standard; the statement of the standard is the declarative form. What this means in practice is that the test must be a solid instrument, because many people—employers, school board members, taxpayers, students, teachers—will come to rely on it.

The questions must seek and measure “world-class” knowledge and skills, and they must do so in a world-class way. Which is to say, the tests must de-emphasize the true-and-false, multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blanks format. The only reason for such a format is low-cost, high-speed scoring—administrative convenience. It is noteworthy that adults are not tested this way in the real world. The tests we must meet are performance-based: Do we measure up?

Schools—and the institutions that test them and their students—will need to reintroduce the written and spoken word: essays, declamations, auditions, performances. Again, that is how we are measured after school. School measures should be no different.

BENCHMARKING

The issue of assessment raises the most important aspect of standards—seeing that they are met, holding people accountable. To do this sensibly requires tests and measures that are reliable. Put simply, standards and the tests used to measure them must permit comparisons, both among schools in a district and among districts in a state as well as among schools in different states and between states. Governors must be able to boast (or complain) about their states’ academic standings as readily as they do state university football scores. Without the capacity to compare each other with some precision, the whole standard setting exercise will be worse than moot; it will be an exercise in futility.

Interestingly, the German Republic provides an example of this in action. A federal system, the German states, or Länder, are entirely free of federal control, and federal funding as well. Like their American counterparts, who have a Council of Chief State School Officers housed in Washington, D.C., the Germans have a similar council housed in Bonn (soon to move to Berlin). But there the similarity ends. The German council meets and confers to keep the national government at arm’s length; they will not tolerate national intrusion in Land affairs. At the same time, the German council members use their forum to compare themselves to each other, which they do with gusto. America’s governors can—and should—take a page from the German book. At the turn of the old century, we borrowed kindergarten from the Germans; as the new century approaches, it is time for another learned borrowing.
What remains is for the governors to push hard on the assessment front. Their task, difficult but within reach, is to see that state assessments permit both intrastate and interstate comparisons. Without the capacity to do so, standard setting will be for naught. Ironically, the place for them to turn is the federal government and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Overseen by the National Assessment Governing Board, the operation has gained the respect of most observers of the passing scene. It has been genuinely bipartisan, and its members have acted responsibly and prudently. The NAEP is almost all we have to go on as a nation, and it would be wise both to strengthen it—for national-level data and analysis—and to permit states and school districts to tap into the data stream so they can learn more about themselves.

Indeed, that is the crux of the matter: When schools and school districts want to learn more about themselves, when they actively want to know how they compare where they are strong as well as weak, then the momentum for change will grow. Whether or not the summit will ignite that spark remains to be seen.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR GRASSROOTS REFORMERS?**

In the final analysis, the summit was wonderful theater, but the heavy lifting of school reform remains to be done. Who will do it and where will the work be carried out? It will be accomplished school-by-school, district-by-district, by involved citizens. They will make it happen. To be involved, they must know what is going on and what needs to be done. First, citizens across the country should welcome CEO and gubernatorial interest; it is genuine and may even be useful. Certainly, governors like Thompson, Romer, and Engler, who were central to the summit planning process, are serious about reform. So too were the CEOs. And while their perspectives will differ to some degree, all will respond to citizen interest and activity.

There are three things that should happen at the grass roots, then. Citizens everywhere should take the pledge to support:

- High academic standards;
- Realistic tests and measures to see that students are meeting those standards; and
- Consequences.

What does this mean in practice? Standards must be set and met locally. The state is not much better than Uncle Sam when it comes to local control. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty as regards both the state and federal governments. To be sure, states can play a more constructive role than Washington, but they should not engage in a command-and-control relationship with local school districts. It is not only bad politics; it is worse pedagogy. The freer schools are to do their own thing, the better off they are. Standards templates, or advisories, can be designed at the state level and made available to local districts but should not be imposed on them. If the standards are realistic and useful, local districts will flock to them. If they are not, they will not. And properly so. So too with tests and measures. To see that the standards are met, school districts must adopt tests that fit their standards.

In this connection, there are two interlocking issues. Local districts should adopt tests that are consistent with the standards they have adopted. Not every district will want to (or be able to) design and adopt tests unique to it. In this case, the state can offer technical assistance and advice but should not impose its will on local districts. Again, to do so would be bad politics and worse pedagogy. The state does, however, have a reasonable and proper interest in knowing how much its students know, and should support statewide testing to
provide both state and district information. Such tests should be developed cooperatively with local schools, but should permit the governor to brag about the state’s overall performance. Without such information, the cause of school reform will falter and eventually founder. And the information—one it is available—will be invaluable to local schools. If anything, they need it more than the state does. No business could do without high-quality performance data, and schools are no exception to this general rule.

There is one final note that everyone must attend to, and that is the one issue that was not on the table at the summit: education choice. Its absence was duly noted by several governors in attendance, but the ground rules made it impossible to bring it up. No such ground rule works at the local level. Bring choice up, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it is crucial to the standards debate. Indeed, without choice the standards debate is almost sure to become an empty exercise. There is simply no reason to believe that every school in every district in every state will hold itself to the same high standards; it can’t be done politically, and it can’t be done logistically, at least not in the next two decades. Only highly centralized school systems like those of France and Japan even attempt such an approach, and it is not clear that it works in those countries. And the American commitment to local control rules out any centralized solution.

THE BLESSINGS OF THE MARKET

The alternative to command and control is a market, whether it is purely private, as many of us would like it to be, or regulated, a mix of public and private providers. Markets have two overwhelmingly important characteristics. First, they are exquisitely calibrated communications systems, letting willing buyers and sellers know what good or service is available at what price in what quantity and quality, and letting each know what the other would like; second, as Schumpeter declared, they permit “creative destruction.” Inefficient, corrupt, and ineffectual organizations disappear. That’s what markets are all about. That is why in a market the consumer is sovereign. That is why cost doesn’t determine price.

To create a system of high academic standards, and schools which are safe and disciplined, there must be choice among schools. Schools themselves must be able to choose to have high standards and to deliver on them. Just so, parents and students must be able to select schools that measure up and select out of those that do not.

Attempting to push standards down from the top will not work any better than the endless skein of failed reforms that already litter the education landscape. But double-joining standards and choice can work. Indeed, it is the last, best hope of school reform.

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