

Preface

IF YOU'VE SPENT MORE THAN five minutes around schools, you've probably got a reflexive reaction to the term *education reformer*. The very phrase tends to spark either cheers or catcalls. You've seen the effusive profiles of heroic charter school leaders who are working wonders. And you've perused the bitter blogs attacking those same leaders as "deformers" bent on destroying public education.

If you're like me, it can all get a little confusing.

In truth, for all the passion, I'm not sure that most of us have all that clear a notion of what it means to be a "reformer." For example, a few years ago, the education advocacy group StudentsFirst leaked a strategy memo. The big takeaway? "Pro-education reform messages resonate strongly with voters and move voter sentiment significantly in favor of pro-reform candidates."¹

To this day, I don't know what they meant by "pro-education reform" messages or "pro-reform" candidates. I don't think they did, either.

Does a "reformer" have to support charter schools, the Common Core, and the use of test scores to evaluate teachers? Are you a "reformer" if you went through Teach For America or work for a certain kind of advocacy group? Are you "anti-reform" if you have concerns about mayoral control or test-based accountability, or if you fear that some ambitious reforms have done more harm than good?

These questions come up a lot when I'm teaching, talking to educators, or engaging with would-be reformers. For our purposes, I don't care how

you answer them. In fact, I don't care about your politics and I'm not interested in telling you *what* to think of this or that reform. This is a book about *how* to think about schooling, policy, and change. It's for anyone who thinks schools can and should do better, in the hope that it will help you work more effectively for the changes that you believe in.

You may champion charter schools or oppose them. You may support test-based accountability or think it's an awful idea. You may want schools to devote far more attention to social and emotional learning or to racial equity, LGBT issues, or children with special needs. Your passion may be teacher empowerment, expanding parental choice, improving gifted education, or overhauling school finance.

Education is brimming with passionate people who see schooling as a way to make a difference. Most of the time, passion is a wonderful thing. It lends us energy and gives our work meaning. In school reform, though, I sometimes think we suffer from a curious malady: too much passion.

The thing about passion is that it tends to make us true believers. It leaves little room for uncertainty. It can make things seem simpler than they are and us more confident in our answers than we should be. It can cause reformers to brush aside second thoughts and to be less than fully honest with ourselves about mistakes and setbacks. Over the years, I've watched impassioned reformers of every stripe stumble in these ways time and again. This is bad for kids, teachers, schools—and frequently, even for reformers' own agendas.

Now, you may be wondering, "Wait a minute! Why should I read on if you're not even going to try to tell me which reforms are the right ones?"

Well, after a quarter-century in education, it seems to me that the notion of the "right" reform is frequently a phantasm. Whether reform is good for kids is often more a matter of what is *actually done* than what policy is officially adopted. Similar-sounding proposals to reform school governance, assessment, discipline, or instruction may turn out to be "right" or "wrong" depending on how they're designed and executed. Reform often disappoints not because the ideas are necessarily "wrong" but because they're pursued in hurried, half-baked ways.

Plus, let's be real. Lots of people are eager to tell you which reforms to support; yet, when I teach, I've found that students have a much harder

time finding guidance on how to make sense of reform, why it succeeds or fails, and what lessons reformers might take. Such advice is especially relevant, I think, given that most of us who opine on what needs to be done have unimpressive track records of actually being right.

So my aim is to share some advice on *how* to think about school reform. In the letters that follow, I hope you can benefit from my missteps, frustrations, and realizations. And believe me, I've made my share of mistakes.

In *The Beggar King and the Secret of Happiness*, Joel Ben Izzy tells the tale of Nasrudin's advice to an eager student:

The student asked, "What is the secret to attaining happiness?"

Nasrudin thought for a time, then responded. "The secret of happiness is good judgment."

"Ah," said the student. "But how do we attain good judgment?"

"From experience," answered Nasrudin.

"Yes," said the student. "But how do we attain experience?"

"Bad judgment."²

I've always liked that. We're all going to make bad decisions. But we do ourselves a big favor if we draw what wisdom we can from the experiences and bad judgment of others.

And I've got plenty of both to share. During a quarter century in and around school reform, I've spent a lot of time with legislators, philanthropists, federal officials, researchers, and reporters. I've had too many cocktails with two decades' worth of school reform leaders. I've taught at a handful of universities and trained teachers and school and system leaders. I've advised superintendents and start-ups. I've been around for the Annenberg Challenge, the emergence of KIPP and Teach For America, No Child Left Behind, Reading First, the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences, the chancellorships of Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee, *Waiting for Superman*, Race to the Top, the Common Core, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and much else. These letters are my attempt to pass along some of the insights I've gleaned and lessons I've learned.

Before we move on, I want to say a few words about why I wrote this book the way I did.

Why a series of letters? First, many of the topics get personal and pretty subjective. I felt more comfortable sharing my thoughts as a genial

correspondent than in a more authoritative voice. Second, in these pages, I'm less interested in making an argument than in exploring the many facets of reform. The casual, open-ended tenor of a correspondence seemed right for the job.

Why are these letters addressed to “young” reformers in particular? Well, most of what follows was inspired by conversations with twenty- and thirty-somethings, in classroom discussions with students at places like Harvard, Rice, and the University of Pennsylvania or in exchanges with educators, philanthropists, advocates, researchers, and reporters.

I've found that young reformers wrestle with certain common dilemmas. They struggle with the political dimension of reform, how to ensure that policies work as intended, and the democratic implications of big philanthropy and school choice. They're interested in figuring out “what works” and can have little patience for opposition or obstacles. The thoughts that follow are intended to help with all of this.

Now, while these letters have been sparked by young reformers, every word applies equally to us not-so-young reformers—as long as we're inclined to confront our biases, blind spots, and bad habits. Over time, we all settle into comfortable assumptions and habits of mind. That can make it tough to dust off our beliefs and revisit our dogmas, but it's extraordinarily healthy to do so.

If you're like the grad students who ask why I'm skeptical of research claiming to prove that merit pay does or doesn't “work,” these letters are for you. If you're like the advocates who wonder why their sensible ideas encounter fierce resistance, these letters are for you. If you're like the reporters who wonder why I'm reluctant to name the nation's best school systems, they're for you. If you're like the state and district leaders who wondered why I was lukewarm on *Waiting for Superman*, the *Vergara* lawsuit, or the Common Core, they're for you. If you're like the razor-sharp research assistants I've mentored over the years, these are the riffs you'd hear from me on topics like education history, the importance of listening to those who disagree, and education technology.

Even if you consider yourself a “far-from-young” reformer, I hope you'll find what follows to be well worth your while.