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In War of Words, 'Reform' a Potent Weapon

Key phrases provide powerful shorthand for those with specific policy bent

By Sean Cavanagh

The rhetoric of education today tends to divide the world in two: between those who favor "reform" and those who don't.

Many who consider themselves reformers say they stand in opposition to the "status quo." Some of them speak of the need to challenge the "education establishment," or the education bureaucracy. Many also describe their policies as putting the needs of children and students first, as opposed to the ideas favored by their critics, who by implication are focused mostly on the concerns of adults.

A set of stock phrases, sound bites, and buzzwords has come to dominate the public discourse on education, summoned reflexively, it often seems, by elected officials and advocates who speak a shared, accepted language.

The current lexicon groups one set of policies—which generally includes support for charter schools, tougher standards and testing, evaluating and paying teachers based on performance, and challenges to teachers' unions on traditional job protections—under the favorable heading of reform. Resistance to those ideas is often branded as misguided at best, and obstructionist at worst.

Using rhetoric to frame policies in a flattering or negative light is, of course, as old as politics itself.

But the pervasiveness of today's education language, often echoed uncritically in the media, is striking, and reflects the extent to which self-described supporters of reform have seized the rhetorical high ground in making their case.

References to "reform" and "status quo" fill policy papers churned out by advocacy groups and opinion pieces from newspaper editorial boards. They color the speeches of politicians in both parties, including President Barack Obama and his secretary of education, Arne Duncan, and Republicans like New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, as well as the remarks of forceful and charismatic advocates, such as former District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee.

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"It is both fortuitous and to some degree a matter of public relations design," Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, a former top federal education official, said of the phenomenon. Elected officials and policy proponents who identify themselves as reformers "know each other, and they have a shared set of goals," he said. "If one of them uses a phrase that packs a punch, everyone seems to pick it up."

Mr. Whitehurst, a senior fellow and the director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, served as the director of the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, during the second Bush administration. He believes some of today's policies dubbed "reforms" may have merit, though he considers the research supporting them weak, compared with the evidence supporting other approaches, such as improving curriculum.

He says that assigning labels, particularly those such as "status quo," to policies comes at a cost.

"That kind of labeling exercise hardens positions and makes people defensive," Mr. Whitehurst said. "We need to be able to consider anything out there, including what is considered 'the status quo.' "

Others say that using terms like "reform" and "status quo" is appropriate, because they aptly describe the challenges facing U.S. schools and the difficult work necessary to overcome obstacles to change.

The message is that "the present conditions in education aren't good enough," said Peter Cunningham, the Education Department's assistant secretary for communications and outreach. "It's about changing the way we do business."

"It's not language chosen to divide people, but to challenge everybody," added Mr. Cunningham, and to put a question to public and policymakers: "What are you willing to do differently?"

President's Megaphone

President Obama often turns to the language of reform to convey that message and to tout his education policies. One such occasion came in July, when he lamented the United States' mediocre showing on international tests and defended his administration's creation of the federal Race to the Top competition, a \$4.35 billion program that encouraged charter school growth, new approaches to paying and evaluating teachers, and common academic standards, among other policy prescriptions.

"We've tolerated a status quo where America lags behind other nations," Mr. Obama said. He added: "We've talked about it, we know about it, but we haven't done enough about it. And this status quo is morally inexcusable, it's economically

Persuasive Rhetoric?

Public officials and education advocates often rely on a common set of phrases to promote their ideas to the public. Here are some of the most popular.

CALLING FOR 'REFORM'

"We must end the myth that more money equals better achievement. ... The time for real reform is now."

—New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, in his 2011 State of the State address

"Real education reform will mean more community involvement, more parental involvement, buy-in from teachers, and less prescription from the federal level. ..."

—U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., in reaction to President Obama's State of the Union speech

"Simply stated, parental choice is a crucial element of this new era in education. It is a catalyst to help all other reform measures work more effectively."

—Florida Gov. Rick Scott, in a campaign education platform

"[W]e will apply the tools of science to school reform."

—Bill Gates, on the move toward common academic standards, in November 2010

indefensible, and all of us are going to have to roll up our sleeves to change it."

He lauded "states, educators, reformers" who supported the Race to the Top, and argued that criticism of the program partly "reflects a general resistance to change. We get comfortable with the status quo even when the status quo isn't good."

Mr. Duncan frames his arguments similarly, as was evident during a Nov. 16 speech to the **National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education**, in which he praised a report commissioned by that group that called for higher standards in teacher training.

The organization had shown "tremendous leadership and resolve in taking on the status quo," Mr. Duncan said, by producing a document that "captures this emerging spirit of reform."

The next day, the secretary stayed on the theme in a speech in Washington urging school officials to take bold and potentially controversial steps—such as raising class sizes and paring back nonessential costs—to control spending during a financially difficult era.

"Challenging the status quo will take courage," Mr. Duncan said at the free-market-oriented American Enterprise Institute, adding: "I am convinced that we have a special window for reform that will shape the education system for the next 20 to 30 years."

In using such language, the president and the education secretary were following a tradition that has an indelible place in American politics and policymaking.

The term "reform" is often associated with the Progressive movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which gave rise to efforts to battle political corruption, promote worker safety and fair business practices, and establish women's suffrage, among other causes.

Politicians from many eras routinely lay claim to the reform mantle. President Obama described his efforts to change the nation's health-care system as health-care reform. President George W. Bush called for immigration reform and Social Security reform, and joined congressional Democrats in

CHALLENGING THE 'STATUS QUO'

"We are making progress toward excellence for every child in America. But the status quo always has defenders. Some want to undermine the No Child Left Behind Act by weakening standards and accountability."
—President George W. Bush, in his 2004 State of the Union address

"The defenders of the status quo will always be out there ... because the status quo serves a lot of adult needs in public education: lifetime pensions, lockstep pay."
—Joel I. Klein, former New York City Schools chancellor, in a November 2010 interview with Jeffrey Brown

"If we fail to take action to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we are sentencing our students to the status quo. I've been fighting too long to let that happen."
—Rep. Miller, in response to President Obama's State of the Union speech

"Secretary Duncan deserves great credit for his bipartisan approach to reform. His willingness to take on the special interests and shake up the status quo are vital first steps to producing meaningful school improvement."
—U.S. Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., in a March 2010 statement

"[T]hat work has to get done collaboratively. School systems by and large do not work collaboratively. They basically work on conflict. Conflict is the status quo in education. ... [In some districts,] you see a culture of working together to make these changes."

—Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, discussing the need for union-management cooperation in evaluating teachers, in *Newsweek* in 2010

PUTTING 'STUDENTS/CHILDREN FIRST'

"My fellow New Mexicans, we face many

Security reform, and joined congressional Democrats in describing the No Child Left Behind Act as education reform. President Bill Clinton and congressional Republicans cooperated on welfare reform.

But education policy, in particular, has been a magnet for the reform brand. Many of the efforts during the standards and accountability movement of the 1980s and 1990s, following the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*—itself a potent phrasemaker—were labeled reforms.

The term has very different meaning in mathematics education, where supporters of moving away from what they see as rote teaching by memorization describe their efforts as reform—while opponents use the term to denigrate those efforts.



What's Implied

The word "reform" has a positive and even somewhat magical connotation, observes Thomas W. Benson, a professor of rhetoric at Pennsylvania State University, in University Park, Pa.

While many advocates of changes in education use the term to convey the image of sweeping policy overhauls, the term's appeal to politicians and the public is more complicated, he suggests. "Reform" evokes images of substantive change—yet change that is gradual enough not to be disruptive, argues Mr. Benson, a widely published scholar who has studied the uses of rhetoric in politics and culture.

The word is, in fact, "a benign sort of term," he said. "It has a suggestive aura." Throughout recent American history, Mr. Benson said, "reform" has connoted a "middle way, that preserved the institution while inching it in the way of progress. ... It's reassuring, isn't it?"

A sharper-edged variation on that language is used to great effect by Ms. Rhee, the former schools chief in Washington, who has emerged as perhaps the nation's most recognizable champion of improving teacher

challenges. Times are tough. But while the challenges are daunting, the opportunities are real. The opportunity to put aside our partisan differences. ... [T]o put our financial house in order. The opportunity to truly reform education by putting students first."
—New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez, in her 2011 State of the State address

"The time has come. We can no longer rely on Band-Aids and tourniquets. We must hit the reset button, we must create a customer-driven education system—a system where students come first."

—Tom Luna, Idaho superintendent of public instruction, in introducing a school proposal to state lawmakers in January 2011

TARGETING THE 'EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT'

"The education establishment is back in school again. I think this is the reverse of the forward progression that we have witnessed."

—Gloria Romero, California state director of Democrats for Education Reform, criticizing Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed appointments to the state board of education to *Education Week*

"The president deserves credit for his willingness to take on the education establishment, something too few in his party have been willing to do."

—U.S. Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., responding to a 2009 education speech by President Obama

"Democrats have shown their true priorities, jumping at the chance to discard education reform to salvage an unpopular bailout for the education establishment."

—Rep. Kline, criticizing a proposed \$10 billion education spending measure, in June 2010

SOURCE: *Education Week*

quality through steps such as restricting tenure, financially rewarding teachers deemed most effective, and firing poor-performing ones.

Ms. Rhee recently founded an advocacy organization called **StudentsFirst**, which seeks to lend political and financial support to candidates for office who back the group's agenda. The idea that the organization's policy priorities reflect the needs of children—and that opposition reflects the interests of adults—is one that Ms. Rhee regularly puts forward in her public appearances.

Her organization's website urges visitors: "Challenge the bureaucracy. Put students first."

Ms. Rhee delivered that message during a Feb. 9 appearance before a legislative subcommittee in Florida, during which she was greeted as "the utmost talent in the education reform movement" by state Rep. Erik Fresen, the Republican who chairs the panel.

"As you know, being among the first to challenge the status quo will not make your lives easy," Ms. Rhee said in prepared remarks.

She went on to praise Florida legislation that seeks to limit teacher tenure and change teacher pay and evaluation, saying that "all of these reforms together are a strong part [of] putting students first in Florida." The state's existing tenure policy, Ms. Rhee argued, "just does not put students first."

In a speech the next day in Georgia, Ms. Rhee used much the same language, telling state lawmakers that her organization was created to counterbalance the influence of powerful interest groups, such as teachers' unions and the textbook industry.

Ms. Rhee urged Georgia legislators to do away with policies that lead school districts to protect teachers from layoffs on the basis of seniority, rather than their performance.

"The defenders of the status quo are very strong, they're very organized, they're very strategic," said Ms. Rhee, who did not respond to requests from *Education Week* for comment.

Of protecting teachers from job losses based on seniority, she said: "If we think about students first, what is in the best interest of children, then we would have to, necessarily, change the way that we're doing those policies."

Bipartisan Usage

Just as many of the "reform" ideas put forward on charter schools, merit pay, improved data systems, and other subjects are bipartisan, so is the rhetoric used to promote those policies.

Gov. Christie called improving education a "transformational issue" during an appearance on ABC's "Good Morning America" in January. He said it could "bring both parties together, if we just rise above the interests, the special interests that want to protect the failed status quo."

U.S. Rep. George Miller of California, the leading House Democrat on education issues, responded to President Obama's recent State of the Union speech by saying: "If we fail to take action to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we are sentencing our students to the status quo. I've been fighting too long to let that happen."

The phrase "education establishment," something of a catch-all descriptor often used to refer to teachers' unions and general administrative and bureaucratic stasis, is also used by both parties.

"Democrats have shown their true priorities, jumping at the chance to discard education reform to salvage an unpopular bailout for the education establishment," U.S. Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., said last year in a statement criticizing a \$10 billion federal spending measure designed to prevent school layoffs. Mr. Kline is now the chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

The California state director of Democrats for Education Reform, Gloria Romero, described the same forces at work in criticizing Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown's appointments to the state board of education. She voiced worries that they would not support policies in areas such as new approaches to teacher evaluation and allowing parents to petition for leadership and structural changes to schools. "The education establishment is back in school again," she told *Education Week*.

'Narrowing the Discourse'

Describing policies, particularly those that challenge teachers' unions, as pro-student has become popular in some state capitals.

In Indiana, state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett and Gov. Mitch Daniels, both Republicans, have put forward a broad legislative and policy agenda titled **"Putting Students First,"** which includes calls to expand charter schools and evaluate and pay teachers and administrators based on performance measures, including student test scores.

In Idaho, Republican state schools chief Tom Luna, with the backing of Republican Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, in January unveiled **"Students Come First,"** a broad proposal to support merit pay and virtual education, raise class sizes, and limit teachers' collective bargaining rights.

It's hardly unusual for advocates to try to define their goals and those of their opponents, Mr. Whitehurst said, noting that members of George W. Bush's administration were just as determined to do so as they promoted the federal No Child Left Behind Act and other policies.

But the messages pushed along by proponents of today's reforms, he argued, carry more weight because they originate from so many different sources—not just the Obama administration, but also state and federal policymakers in both parties, advocacy groups, and well-funded foundations.

The overall effect is often to label skeptics of certain policies as belonging to the "establishment bucket"—even if those critics have spent years working for substantial changes to schools, Mr. Whitehurst said.

"It does them a disservice to say they're pushing for adults, and not for kids," he said.

The reform brand today is "very narrowly defined," said Pedro Noguera, a sociologist and professor of education at New York University, in New York City. Mr. Noguera supports some elements of the "reform" movement, such as charter school growth and innovation, but says he is skeptical of strategies in some areas, such as testing and teacher quality, which he believes policymakers are far too willing to accept uncritically.

"It's a simplistic message," Mr. Noguera said. "When you look at schools that are successful, it's never one thing. It's complex. But complexity frustrates policymakers."

Today's reformers "have been able to dominate the public discourse," he said. But "the narrowing of the discourse and the shutting down of alternate perspectives has the effect of limiting our ability to come up with creative solutions for our schools."

The education historian Diane Ravitch, a former assistant U.S. secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush, has emerged as a leading critic of many of the prevailing reform ideas. She said the language used to describe them is effective in marginalizing opposing views. That rhetoric, she argued, also creates gives the misleading impression that "reform" advocates are fighting an uphill battle, when in fact they dominate the current political, business, and media landscape.

"There's no interest in getting both sides," said Ms. Ravitch, who **co-writes a blog for *Education Week***. "These people are the 'status quo.' They have captured the language. ... There's no one to say, 'Whoa, wait a minute.' "

Yet others, like Mr. Bennett, of Indiana, said language such as "Putting Students First"—which he said was a product of a team of trying to come up with a way to define its policy goals—reflects the reality that many previous education policy changes have "terribly missed the mark" in not improving schools.

"It's not just the rhetoric," Mr. Bennett said. "It's a question of 'Let's show you what's behind these ideas.' ... More than the language, it's the concepts, which are seen by the vast majority of Hoosiers as common sense."

The Indiana official also noted that his critics are adept at assigning their own labels to his ideas, which he says falsely suggest he wants to privatize public schools, or weaken them.

"Do you think I want it on my headstone that I tried to kill public education?" Mr. Bennett said. The goal, he said, is to "preserve and enable public education to prosper."

Claiming High Ground

Michael J. Petrilli, the executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington think tank, notes that many critics of current proposals to improve teacher quality or expand charter schools are quick to brand those strategies "big-business" or "corporate-style reforms."

Advocates always reach for labels "to claim the moral high ground," Mr. Petrilli said. Doing so does not allow for much nuance, he said. "But it works on both sides."

Mr. Petrilli said he identifies today's reform movement mostly with efforts to challenge the influence of teachers' unions. But he agrees with others that the term "reform" is somewhat amorphous, and says that people within that camp often have very different opinions on school choice, testing, common standards, curriculum, and other matters.

While Mr. Petrilli, who served in the Education Department under the second President Bush, said he considers himself a member of that reform group, he added that the Fordham Institute sees part of its mission as challenging dubious ideas that emerge from the movement, on teacher evaluation and other issues.

"There's plenty of groupthink within the reform community," Mr. Petrilli said.

Robert M. Freeman, a social studies teacher in Los Altos, Calif., supports some aspects of the current movement, such as changing teacher-tenure rules to make it easier to remove ineffective teachers. But he is deeply skeptical of others, such as charter school expansion, which he believes is driven by private-sector profit motives. He says the education jargon of the day frustrates him.

"It's a completely false dichotomy," said Mr. Freeman, who became a teacher nine years ago after a career in the computer industry. He is also the founder of a nonprofit group, One Dollar for Life, that collects \$1 donations from students to support the construction of schools and other projects in the developing world.

"Just because I don't support charter schools doesn't mean I'm not in favor of improving education," he said. "It's not the case that 'reform' is necessarily virtuous. ... I just don't happen to believe in their version of reform."

Yet when a brand works its way into the education lexicon, it can be difficult to shake.

Mr. Whitehurst recalled his sense that he was on the losing end rhetorically when, during the 1990s, he argued in favor of introducing instructional approaches common in elementary school into prekindergarten.

But opponents of that strategy "called what they were doing 'developmentally appropriate practice,' " he said. "What did that leave me with?"

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