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Answer Sheet

Educating kids isn't rocket science. It's harder.



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By **Valerie Strauss** October 10

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(AP Photo, Craig Bailey, Florida Today)

Many school reformers blame unions and entrenched bureaucracy for blocking school reforms that, they say, would have worked beautifully if they had been implemented as designed. Actually, as Jack Schneider explains in this post, most school reforms imposed over decades have been implemented but they never turn out to be as effective as promised. [Schneider](#) is an assistant professor of education at the [College of the Holy Cross](#), the author of two books, and the father of a pre-K public school student. He tweets [@Edu_Historian](#).

By Jack Schneider

For the past two decades, self-styled education reformers—the newest of whom is journalist Campbell Brown, whose [Partnership for Educational Justice](#) seeks to “reform” teacher tenure—have been inundating the public schools with

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ineffective programs and imprudent policies. They've spent billions of dollars and millions of hours on their pet projects. And the simple truth is that they don't have much to show for it.

Ask reformers about this and they're likely to blame unions and bureaucracy. Reform fails, they would argue, because it gets blocked.

But most reform *isn't* blocked. Just ask a teacher; reform has been raining down on the schools as long as most can remember.

The real question, then, is why does so much reform produce so little change?

The answer is that education doesn't seem very complicated. To most observers, fixing schools seems more like baking [brownies](#) than like launching a rocket. Mix one good teacher with a solid curriculum; stir in a few books; add a pinch of snazzy technology; and bake for [180 days](#).

After all, what could be so hard? We've all been to school—most of us for at least 13 years—and we've watched teachers and administrators do their work. It just doesn't seem that hard. Make sure the bells ring on time. Keep the kids quiet. Get some teachers who know the material.

By contrast, most of us have never been to a [NASA center](#). And we'd be hard-pressed to guess what goes on inside one. Are they doing equations? Practicing maneuvers in zero-gravity simulators? Mixing up rocket fuel?

As a result, most of us—reformers, particularly—think we know what's best for the public schools. But we would never presume to have answers about where to look for [sources of Gamma-rays](#) or about the importance of [measuring Jupiter's atmosphere](#).

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Imagine Congress exerting control over NASA through a bill like [No Child Left Behind](#), or coercing policy shifts through a program like [Race to the Top](#). Or well-intended organizations like [Teach For America](#) jumping into the fray—recruiting talented college graduates and placing them on the job as rocket scientists. Or philanthropists deciding to apply lessons from their successes in domains like [DVD](#) rentals to “disrupt” the NASA “[monopoly](#).”

How long would any of this be taken seriously?

The point here is not that various groups involved in school reform should disengage from the field. Their energy and financial support can play a critical role in supporting communities and their schools. And for all their arrogance and errors, reformers have helped turn the nation’s attention to the importance of public education. NASA should be so lucky.

But the egotism and ignorance of the so-called education reform movement are all too often on display. Because the work of improving schools isn’t as simple as reformers believe.

Reformers would know this if they spent their days in schools. But most do not. Unlike working educators, most leaders in the reform movement have never taught a five-period day, felt the joy of an unquantifiable classroom victory, lost instructional time to a standardized test, or been evaluated by a computer. And unlike the vulnerable students targeted by so much reform, most policy elites have not gone to school hungry, struggled to understand standard English, battled low expectations, or feared for their personal safety on the walk home.

Sure reformers may visit schools occasionally. But they see only what can be immediately observed and miss everything beneath the surface. Consequently, as I documented in my

book [Excellence For All](#), they tend to ground their decisions in anecdotal evidence and personal experience.

Because they believe that school reform is simple, reformers are also untroubled by their lack of familiarity with educational research. Most do not know much about test construction, cut scores, or measurement error. Most are not steeped in the literature on cognition, memory, or motivation. And most have never understood schools from an anthropological perspective or picked up an educational history.

At its core, education can be quite simple. To quote the ever-eloquent [Mike Rose](#): “It’s the experience of democracy itself. The free play of inquiry. The affirmation of human ability. The young person guided to the magnifying lens, the map, the notepad, the book.” Intuitively, we all get that.

But bringing about the conditions that foster this vision of education? That’s among the greatest challenges I know of. As anyone who spends time in schools knows, good schools are thriving [ecosystems](#)—the product of strong relationships, high levels of trust, robust systems for knowledge-sharing, and a collective pursuit of personal growth. And those things simply can’t be mandated from on high or plucked off a shelf.

Schooling—our primary mechanism for promoting education in the United States—is plagued by a number of challenges. Some are relatively straightforward; schools need adequate funding, for instance. But most of these issues are [dilemmas rather than problems](#). The difference being that whereas problems can be solved, dilemmas can only be managed. What, for instance, do you do about student engagement? That’s a question not easily solved by introducing [new gadgets](#) or by [paying students](#) to stay focused.

Want to put a rocket into space? No problem. Just get enough brains working on the task.

Want to educate 50 million students in a powerful, relevant, and relatively equal way? Now that's a challenge.

As it turns out, educating kids isn't rocket science. It's harder.

And until reformers take that message to heart, it's our job—as citizens—to speak truth to the simplistic answers pushed by the powerful.

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.
