I first want to thank Rick Hess and the staff at AEI for this extraordinarily kind invitation. You may notice that my accent is not authentic Cajun. As it happens, I grew up about two miles from here, in a day and age when 11-5 was a bad season for Coach Joe Gibbs and the Washington Redskins.

I still bleed burgundy and gold. And when I left town in the early 90s, all hell broke loose. So first and foremost, I’m here to ask, “What in the wide world of sports have you people done with my Skins?”

It really is living proof you can’t trust the people in Washington, D.C.

The great blessing in my life in the time since Riggo, Art Monk, and the Hogs, has been a life of public service and, more specifically, working in and around America’s public schools. Over the last 15 years, I have been blessed to work in New Jersey, Chicago, New York City, and across Louisiana. Perhaps more meaningful than that, I have been small part of a swell of energy my generation – our generation – has dedicated toward righting the wrong of inequity in the education opportunities enjoyed by Americans today.

I am proud to call myself an education reformer.

It is no secret that the politics of our day are particularly polarized. An aggressive form of populism has asserted itself in the rhetoric of our day. You see this in Washington. I see it in my former hometown of New York City, set to put a man with no management experience in charge of a $25 billion education system in spite of an outward resentment of the nation’s most successful charter schools. I see it in my current home of Louisiana, near last in the nation in education outcomes, but still struggling with the idea that measuring student achievement alongside other states is not commensurate with an outside takeover of public education.
I see it in an increasingly accepted, pandering fatalism about the education prospects of the poor.

I see it in the mainstream media portrayal of those who insist on change in public education as elites accruing power in an endless tit-for-tat with working people.

Most of all, I see it in a tone that is skeptical of reformers in the same populist way our country today is skeptical of authority generally. This is, I believe, greatly damaging for an education reform effort that has done good in America and that needs to be sustained. And it needs to be addressed, lest this generational effort wash out with the tide of the next administration, its allies and its opponents.

That really is what I want to talk with you about today: how in a changing America, in a populist America, we sustain this effective and critical push for excellence and opportunity in public education, and how you in Washington can help those of us in the states ensure this happens.

Education reformers oppose the unaccountable. We dislike jargon and empty rhetoric. We take issue with monopoly operators that treat educating kids as a right and not a privilege.

Years ago we issued proclamations to hold adults accountable for the welfare of children. We launched organizations to recruit and train educators from within and without traditional education. We created independent public charter schools to compete for the choices of taxpaying families.

Isolated success stories emerged in places like Harlem and Houston. Poor families in open-enrollment schools were seeing greater successes because of this mix of talent and accountability and empowerment.

Our ideas found champions on both sides of the aisle: first a conservative Republican President from Texas and later a liberal Democrat President from Illinois. Along the way, mayors and governors seeking opportunity for their citizens adopted our platform.
Our ideas were working at greater scale. Literacy rates improved in reform states like Florida. Graduation rates grew in reform cities like New York and New Orleans.

Over a decade, we reformers went from small-time advocacy to seeing our ideas through the halls of Congress. We now oversee not just classrooms but entire state education systems. Charitable foundations back our efforts. Federal programs bear our slogans.

How we manage our newfound authority in a populist time prone to resenting authority is a critical and tenuous question. Our most important responsibility as reformers is no longer just to clamor for change but to sustain and expand the positive direction of our nation’s education system. The greatest risk we face in doing this is not the validity of our ideas but the pitfalls of authority itself.

For it is a risk when foundations and governments adopt your ideas as doctrine. Grants are the currency of unaccountable institutions and clunky implementation.

It is a risk when policy gains are paid more attention than thoughtful implementation, while the challenges of implementation are so obvious and so immense.

And it is a risk when reform leaders speak to an easy sympathy for the poor rather than difficult answers for the nation as a whole. Those leaders soon become crusader characters in a play written by the media and soon forgotten by the people.

We reformers, no different from anyone else with authority, risk becoming part of the establishment we resist: well funded, doctrinaire, and more focused on policy than action. If we let this happen – if we allow grants and government jargon to justify our strategies; if we take greater stock in the short-term cleverness of our policies than in our long-term ability to implement them; if we anchor our agenda in self-righteousness rather than in solutions for all Americans – we will have become a special interest group, of and limited to our small moment in history, out of step and unable to endure the populist swell. And we will have let our country down in a time when it needs us.
But if we are attuned to this risk, we can adopt a mindset appropriate to our authority and can sustain the positive direction in American education. This is a reframing of our challenge, a mode of thinking, talking, and implementing that will carry our influence through another generation of education policy making.

It requires three important steps.

First, if we are to sustain our positive impact on the future of American education, reform policy leaders will shift their focus to *national responsibility over self-righteous sympathy*.

The reform fight was catalyzed in cities like Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and Oakland. Here Teach For America alumni, other highly educated entrepreneurs, and philanthropists came together to start charter schools, run school board campaigns, and advocate against entrenched interests. The ingredients blended well: the resources of the wealthy, the cause of the poor, and the flagrant ineptness of so many urban school boards.

The idea that quality education is a long denied civil right for poor Black and Latino Americans, especially those living in large cities, has fueled the reform movement. It has been the flying banner in fights over equitable funding, school choice, and labor contracts. It has called tens of thousands of talented college graduates to a profession rarely considered by the nation’s elite.

It is a powerful rallying cry and needs to endure. But if reformers lean on it too heavily, they risk their relevance to the future of American education.

Reform leaders are attractive characters for their brazenness and their earnestness. But an over-reliance on the rhetoric of sympathy for the urban poor – and the self-righteousness that comes with it – has too often in recent years made the reform story more about the character than about the cause.

My first read each morning isn’t Politico or the Post. I wake up to local papers in cities like New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Shreveport, Monroe, and Lake Charles, each one looking for its place in the national populist versus reformer education narrative.
They take their cues from bigger media, and as with national outlets, they tell the education reform story through caricatures and allegories, role players in a recyclable populist story. “More teachers retiring.” “Letter grade ratings hurt community.” “State takes local tax dollars.” Reform versus local. Powerful versus populist.

It’s a tiresome story.

Also important: most Americans don’t live in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and Oakland. Most Americans don’t reside amidst staggering contrasts between rich and poor, and most don’t have hip neighborhoods nearby to attract recent college graduates.

Inequity tears at the fabric of our entire nation. You can feel it everywhere. An activist reformer may burrow into the challenge of urban poverty and fight all of its injustices with due outrage. But a national leader must see inequity as a sickness with much broader symptoms and implications.

A national reform leader would eschew an adherence to the reform playbook and would start thinking very hard about this question: What must we do to sustain this as a land of opportunity for all Americans?

If you don’t have an answer, that’s a problem. It’s a problem because it means we reformers have broad authority in places like Lake Charles and Monroe without having broad relevance to the lives of most people who live there.

That is not a paradigm that will sustain our influence on the direction of American education. Reform leaders will adopt a perspective of national responsibility rather than easy sympathy if we are to sustain.

It’s a problem because sustained leadership needs a sustained story to tell. Second on my list of three: the reform narrative must be refreshed.

In our time, we reformers have learned so much about children and the miracle of their development. We have run schools and school districts. We are now parents ourselves, many of us. We are more humble, but we have more tools. And we have the authority to use them to great effect on behalf of our nation’s children.

In the mainstream media, however, we are often crusaders and ideologues.
And all the while, the real establishment bureaucracy sits comfortably behind
the walls of the fortress.

IDEA and Carl Perkins. Every Title I office in every school board. Our
impenetrable schools of education. The cost of higher education. The opaqueness of
Head Start. It goes on and on.

These establishment bureaucracies run our education system. But reform
leadership has little to say about them.

We defined ourselves through opposing the unaccountable monopoly too
often represented by unions in urban school districts. Now we have national
responsibility. So what fight defines us today?

In my state, half of our students show up in kindergarten able to count to 20
and recognize 26 letters. But the federal government sent $120 million to
organizations to run Head Start programs in Louisiana last year with no
accountability for getting kids ready for kindergarten. Who’s fighting?

In my state – a natural-resources, industrial state – 81 percent of students
don’t end up with a four-year college degree. That needs to improve, but we’re not
going to graduate 50 percent or 75 percent any time soon. More than half of our
state’s jobs are technical, requiring an education after high school not a university
degree. But Carl Perkins funds a scattered set of activities for high school kids, not a
workforce engine for the 21st century. Two thirds of the career certificates it funds
go toward teaching kids Microsoft Office and customer service skills. Who’s fighting?

And in my state, 29 percent of students with disabilities graduated on time
last year. But IDEA keeps on calling for report after report, form after form, without
really demanding we find a better way. Who’s fighting?

Because without reform leaders taking up a new fight, what we have right
now is an old story. We are letting the populist story of reformer versus working
person tell itself. And as we do that, we let every parent in middle class America,
every family in rural America, every mom looking for a good pre-k, every kid looking
for work on an oil rig, every debt-ridden undergrad feel like we’ve got nothing in it
for them.
Reform leaders can seek new fights with bureaucrats and establishment apologists in new corners. We don’t have to start at age 5 and stop at age 18. We can move beyond urban centers. We can acknowledge not every person can and should attend a four-year college, but that all Americans deserve a shot at the middle class.

This is particularly important here in Washington, where the ESEA debate still centers on arguments over teacher evaluation and AYP. I’m here to tell you: many states are way, way ahead of you. We’re doing that stuff. We need you to break out of the populist box, show some courage, and tell a new story about the things that matter to parents and their kids: about opportunity in America.

In a populist age, in a time of growing inequality, reform leaders – nationally responsible leaders – can tell a new story that speaks to the broad swath of Americans concerned there is no longer a place for them in our nation’s middle class.

Third, and most important: reform leaders have to recognize that we are not the first to try to modernize the clunky machinery of public education, and that if we are to sustain our influence, we have to have a viable strategy for implementing our ideas.

There’s a lot to say about this, obviously. I could touch on pensions and the need to re-engineer the base compensation of our educator workforce. I could discuss the manner in which we prepare educators, or the way we regulate the profession. Or I could discuss governance, and the sad fact that 13,500 elected school boards for the most part aren’t focused on real issues of student achievement day in and day out.

But because we’re in Washington, and because I think you have so much to say about this, I want to focus instead on what I’ll call the plumbing of public education and the deep deficit in capacity to change that exists within local school systems.

Hobbled by the stale politics of school boards, hemmed in by confusing state and federal regulations, most school district central offices remain loosely conjoined
collections of professional fiefdoms rather than managed organizations. Most are not ready to implement the revolution in technology, labor, and curriculum reformers envision because they do not have a unified strategy and an organization to support one.

I need you to understand this: this is an existential threat to any hope of reform.

I understand the debate in Washington is about pace of change over the next several years and waivers and which state is giving which breaks on accountability. But please understand that the real risk is long-term, not in the next couple years. The real risk is that in our haste to achieve reform, we will layer on our own set of rules and requirements, defining administrators’ jobs once again as following the dictates of disparate government mandates rather than having a plan the educators actually created and believe in.

The real risk is that in telling people to do a bunch of stuff, we won’t pay attention to the basic things good managers do to help people do it well.

The most disabling condition in public education is not incompetence but learned passivity. It is taught to educators through a distant, fragmented system of governance that exercises power downward, crushing the flow of authentic ideas upward.

In this time of such massive implementation, reform leaders need to focus on replacing the leaky, duct-taped plumbing of our passive education system. Absent this focus, educators will have no time to learn and to grow. They’ll continue to be by the white noise we policy makers have created above them. Worst of all, we’ll continue to numb their creative energies with the morphine drip of programs and grants and jargon.

To not focus on this is to fall victim to the hubris of past reformers, who failed to see that legacies are made through great people and great organizations rather than great policies and programs.

You in Washington can help.
Academic buildings are named after important, influential, and wealthy people.

Two months ago, I was invited to lunch in a school district office building in rural Louisiana. The name of the building was the “Title I Building.”

“Who is this Title I?” I thought. “And what did Mr. One do to deserve this honor?”

But if you think about it, he did what all benefactors do. He gave money, and he gave meaning.

The Federal government each year puts tens of billions of dollars into public education, sliced into dozens of programs managed by dozens of offices in Washington. Each office has its corresponding division within 50 state departments of education. Health, school food, transportation, English Language Learners, American Indian programs, early childhood literacy, and so on. States then raise hundreds of billions of dollars outside of these send them to districts, each of which is governed by a political board. The local board approves both the dedicated uses of funds raised locally and a budget that integrates those dollars with state dollars and the already dedicated federal dollars, overseen by local offices whose titles mirror those of their state and federal counterparts. Schools then sift through each mandate – federal, state, and local – to cobble together budgets for the purpose of educating children who show up fitting none of these boxes neatly, and they dedicate sometimes dozens of staff to addressing the dozens of visits, audits, and reports required each year in response to the mandates.

All of this is supposed to add up to something as simple and as universal as a better choice on behalf of a child.

It is no wonder that education in America has been so unresponsive to the changing world around it. Government has created a simple blueprint for administrators everywhere. Obey and ye shall be rewarded.

In our state, federal funding makes up about 10 percent of education spending. When I entered my position as State Superintendent, more than 50 percent of the jobs in our state agency existed with the “Federal Programs” office,
each with its own tie to Washington, and each with its own point of contact in every district’s central office in our state.

We recently tallied the annual reports required for submission by the federal government of our local school systems. The total? 103.

That’s not to mention the 175 annual statewide reports Louisiana each year in the consolidated state performance review. And it says nothing about program-specific reports for IDEA, Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, and on and on.

Understand: this is the currency of school systems. These are people’s jobs. This is what gives them meaning. This is how they accrue authority. And it has nothing to do with kids.

We have a crisis of education governance, and it starts with the federal role.

Even Al Shanker saw this, when he said that “It’s time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody’s role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It’s no surprise that our school system doesn’t improve; it more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy.”

That the father of teacher unions knew this 25 years ago presents both a substantive and political opportunity. But today’s debates ignore the issue. Advocates on both sides – the establishment and the reform side – have taken for granted that principals and teachers are supposed to weave their way through dictates from one level to the next, achieving a meaningful school organization in spite of layer upon layer of government dictating what the system is supposed to mean. When I talk to teachers, I don’t hear them consumed with the politics of charter schools and unions; more troublingly, they’re often trained on the idea that government does the thinking for them, whether it’s special education process, teacher evaluation data, textbook selection, and so on.

The American public education establishment has existed to make rules, to create limits, to hedge against any chance of risk – in a word, to say no. This is not a way to compete when demands are increasing.
I’ve not talked about New Orleans and the education renaissance taking place in that city today. But I’ll leave with you with one extraordinary fact about that school system: New Orleans public schools, 90 percent of them charter schools, receive 98 cents on the dollar in the form of a block grant from the state and local tax base. The central office manages on two cents on the dollar. The New Orleans reform is a central office governance reform as much as it is a school reform.

I share that with you because I believe in order for schools to change the central office has to change. And I believe the best way it can change is to trust educators to do their jobs. Hold them accountable, but trust them. No more strings, no more distractions, no condescension, no more reports, no more white noise. We reformers must create conditions of trust if our ideas are to work.

There is a lot to do, too much to be captured in any one book or article or speech. But we reformers have accomplished too much for America to be lost under the weight of our newfound authority and a national climate resentful of any authority.

This presents a great opportunity for leaders who understand the importance of sustaining our role in our country’s history.

Among other things, it means adopting a perspective of national responsibility over activist sympathy, relevant to the lives of millions of Americans not living in blighted communities but feeling the strain of inequity nonetheless.

It means telling refreshed story through new courage and old guards untouched.

And it means a strategy for implementation that for once acknowledges the absurdity and the travesty of the compliance regime and how it has defined American school systems. The most radical and long-lasting systemic reform that could be brought to American education is to reverse the flow of good ideas, from government down to the classroom up.

That will take the discipline of policy makers who see a long-term, national future and are willing to fight new fights.
I thank you greatly for your time and patience this afternoon, and for all of
your efforts on behalf of American’s children.