Standards, accountability and education reform ... from the president of a state board of education

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Despite what some said, there was no preordained agenda to fulfill, no axes to grind, no ideology to implement. And there were certainly no prejudices about the various actors in the field of public education I would encounter and work with for the next four years. When at my first meeting of the Virginia Board of Education I was elected president, I came with a clean slate and one primary mission: to make sense of Virginia’s educational reform, the Standards of Learning program (the “SOLs”), so it would work in theory and in application in our public schools.

I did not have all of the answers. The state board was operating in a political landscape akin to a minefield. Our job was to find answers and incorporate them into the SOL program. Although I was a citizen appointee (and a full-time partner in a law firm), this job became my job. It consumed my days and too many of my nights. There wasn’t a wedding reception or social event where someone didn’t engage me with opinions about public education (both good and bad). For my employer (and fortunately for me), my salary became the practical equivalent of a charity donation to public service.

I had a life before becoming president of the Board of Education. Still, ignorance was my bliss when I accepted the Governor’s appointment, which came with a tremendous amount of latitude. I was not instructed to serve as an ideological point man or salesman for a particular brand of education reform. I took it upon myself to constantly travel Virginia to meet dedicated educators and to spend time with the children whose futures are affected by the current standards-based accountability reform. These school visits had a tremendous influence on my thinking and actions as a board member.

In my journey, I constantly questioned what I was doing and sought out the harshest critics of the SOLs. I tried to distinguish between those who passionately liked the status quo (and had nothing constructive to offer on how to improve our schools) and those who had legitimate concerns that deserved the board’s attention. It was common for the board to promptly respond to the latter’s concerns, but such actions rarely satisfied critics of the SOLs.

I constantly worried about creating “slippery slopes” in critical policy decisions (give an inch today and tomorrow it will be a mile). And from time to time, I endured heavy doses of accusations from SOL supporters that I had gone “soft” and was “killing the reform” when I advocated a reform for our reform. People yelled at me for rules that I didn’t write and for some that I did. I learned that what looks great on paper does not always work in the classroom. Petty personal attacks on me and my board colleagues intensified when our reform began showing signs of success. I developed a thick skin (well, sort of). I even learned to smile whenever private words of support one day mysteriously became public opposition the next day.
While I devoted considerable time to many important issues affecting public education, none compared to the attention I gave to the SOL program. We were encouraged in Virginia (and the credit goes to Virginia's hard-working teachers) that, as we stayed the course with our reform, we continued to make significant gains on national assessments and on our state student achievement indicators. The data and results are very clear on this point. Without detailing every twist and turn of education reform in those four years in Virginia, I offer the following advice (in no particular order of preference) for policy-makers who are on a similar journey.

- Perception can quickly become reality.

In 1998, I was on the job for only a few months when Virginia administered its first set of SOL examinations. I took each of the 27 tests to get a first-hand feel for them. It took me a day and a half. It was an invaluable experience. When the first statewide results were reported, my jaw dropped. I was informed that only 2 percent of all our schools were “Fully Accredited,” the state’s highest rating for schools.

Almost overnight, I read and watched news accounts of how something was terribly wrong with our reform (because how could anyone fail 98 percent of their schools?) and/or the so-called “conspiracy” to humiliate public education, with me as a ringleader, was beginning to unfold. People were questioning the legitimacy of the entire SOL reform, especially its testing program. I spent hours examining test results. Our critics were certainly right about one thing: We had a problem — a big one.

Essentially, the design of the accountability component of our reform failed to communicate meaningful, constructive and fair ratings of our schools. Specifically, the schools in the 2 percent “Fully-Accredited” category were schools that already achieved, in that first year, the goal set for all Virginia schools to achieve by 2007. To make things worse, our remaining school rating categories did not provide a rating for schools that were meeting expectations by present-day benchmarks in relation to the nine-year goal. Also, there was no way to distinguish ratings between schools that were in crisis and those simply needing improvement. The perception was that the reform was failing all of Virginia’s schools when in fact that was not the case.

Thus, our reform became its own worst enemy. It was not fulfilling one of its basic purposes. As a result, the reform was being judged through a goal set nine years into the future instead of present-day standards toward that goal.

The solution: We did not tinker with the “Fully Accredited” rating; it was right on the mark. Instead, we reconfigured our other rating categories to provide for benchmarks to indicate schools that were on track to meeting the 2007 “Fully Accredited” goal and to distinguish between schools that needed improvement in core subject(s) and those that were in crisis (i.e., well below the present-day benchmarks).

The result: People finally understood what was going on. For example, by 2002, that initial 2 percent pass rate had risen to 65 percent of schools being “Fully Accredited” (well ahead of the 2007 goal); 19 percent were in the category that meant they were right on track to meet the 2007 goal, 17 percent of Virginia’s schools needed significant improvement in one or more core subject areas and fewer than 5 percent were in our “crisis” category.
I offer this story to make one fundamental point. Education reform is full of important details. It is not enough to command such details. Policy-makers must also ensure that such details properly work in the practical application of the reform. Otherwise, the failure to do so may create an unfounded perception that can quickly become a reality that is difficult to overcome.

Are you prepared to act on what you hear?

Perhaps the most common error made by education policy-makers occurs when they adopt the mistaken belief that decisions made from the top routinely create the desired intent in the classroom. While this theory of causal-relationship policy-making may be true in other areas, it could not be further from the truth in K-12 public education. The further the education policy-maker is from the classroom, the greater the possibility of unintended consequences or failure to achieve the desired policy intent. I’m not suggesting that education policy-makers at state and federal levels cannot effectively govern public education. It’s just that the effort needed to assess all factors affecting the classroom rises the higher the level of policy-making.

That’s where listening comes in. The art of listening not only includes understanding what’s being communicated but, more importantly, a willingness to act if necessary. Too often, education policy-makers pushing reform trap themselves by failing to separate the buzzwords of reform — “accountability,” “high standards,” “no child left behind,” etc. — from the critical flexibility needed to make adjustments for the reform to work for all students. Two instances that I vividly remember illustrate this point.

When Virginia’s board was wrestling with the issue of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students and the SOL reform, I accepted an invitation to spend a day visiting the LEP classrooms in a school system.

My school visits were always with the understanding that I could go anywhere in the school. For this particular day of visiting Limited English Proficiency students, the first classroom I chose was in an elementary school. Practically every child there spoke a different native language. The best communication I could accomplish was through hand gestures (and smiling a lot). I left that day realizing that our reform policy also needed to be fair to those children by providing some accommodations for their circumstances and, yet, preserve the basic principles of our reform.

The second instance occurred in a special education classroom. There, I quickly came to the conclusion that there was no way I would ever support the proposition that a child of very limited intelligence would be forced to take Virginia’s SOL test like regular students in order to confirm the obvious. I strongly felt that such a policy was a cruel and unconscionable act to the child. In both instances, the board worked on rules to establish high realistic expectations and accountability for the students and schools in question. We had to step into the gray area between the buzzwords of our reform and the recognition that these children were in unique circumstances. However, to my surprise, when the board adopted accommodations for these students, there was virtually no criticism from either so-called “hard-liners” who insisted on one rule for all and critics who opposed most of the reforms.

What happened? As best I could tell, the board’s philosophy about implementing the reform was such that it never trapped itself into situations that made it politically (or otherwise) difficult to act when it listened to what was occurring in the classroom.
That doesn’t mean that the board acted on everything it heard. However, establishing this philosophy early on made it easier for the board to tackle tough issues.

- **Children are not widgets; education reform is not business reform.**

  This does *not* mean that concepts used in the business world cannot be used effectively in public school systems. It does mean that the rules regarding accountability for students and for schools must be carefully crafted to consider the needs of individual students while maintaining clear, meaningful and measurable expectations.

  For example, at one point in our implementation efforts, parents and educators were expressing the legitimate concern that children do not learn at the same pace. Thus, they contended certain state accountability rules were counterproductive in the classroom.

  Among our responses, two primary actions were taken to alleviate this concern:

  1. First, with the support of the Governor and General Assembly, we committed to the creation of an on-line testing program. The objective was to provide on-demand testing for students who need it — whenever they are ready and as often as necessary. Thus, the goal of Virginia’s SOL testing program is not a one-time, strike-you’re-out type of testing program. If a child needs a few weeks more to learn the curriculum than other students, the ability to demonstrate that knowledge when he or she is ready will be available as well. In this sense, Virginia’s state testing program can become an important remedial tool. Likewise, I believe (and hope) that the advent of technology for on-demand testing for students will force policy-makers to rethink the concepts of school and student accountability. This thinking will have to go beyond the current notion that accountability can only be measured as a snapshot in time. Who is to say that a school is less worthy of a favorable accountability rating because some of its students passed the applicable state exams a few weeks later than their peers, which is possible with on-demand testing?

  2. We instituted what we refer to as the “remediation recovery” program in our school accountability rules for reading, writing and math. The program’s concept is simple. In Virginia, our law is clear that state tests cannot be the sole basis for denying student promotion to the next grade. We rewrote our school accountability formula to give schools an incentive to keep attention on children who were previously unsuccessful in passing SOL exams and who were likely to be promoted to the next grade level. Instead of just promoting the child to the next grade level, this program rewards schools with a bonus point toward the school rating for each child who passes that same reading, writing or math test by the end of the next grade level. It does not penalize the school if the child is still unsuccessful, so there are no excuses for not trying again and again with a child. *This rule applies even if the child is promoted to another school. It has been a powerful incentive to get schools to focus on every child regardless of the likelihood of passing a state exam. This is one way the SOL reform guards against leaving any child behind.*

  The board also recognized that yearly fluctuations in student achievement are not necessarily a reflection of the quality of a school’s teachers or instructional program. The characteristics of a specific cohort of students are also a factor.
Virginia's school accreditation formula allows for the use of a three-year average of student pass rates if it benefits the school. This allows a school to benefit from a year of dramatic success while not creating undue pressure on a particular cohort of students.

■ One size does not fit all, so don't use one size.

In Virginia, we use end-of-course tests in high school and separate SOL tests in each core subject area at the elementary and middle school levels. Like any state, we have a broad spectrum of students performing from the low end to the high end of achievement levels. With standards that represent minimum benchmarks, many high-achieving and gifted students felt their studies were being limited. Many schools with very high pass rates on SOL exams saw the assessments as a nuisance. This was in sharp contrast to criticism from opponents that we set the bar too high.

Likewise, some students were less motivated to take Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and college dual-enrollment courses in order to focus on courses tied to state exams. Also, students in vocational and career/technical courses felt the test program did not give them an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.

Basically, the system was ready to implode on one-size-fits-all approach. However, it was evident that multiple assessments could still meet the intent of Virginia's reform.

*With this in mind, we developed strict criteria to accept into Virginia's student and school accountability formulas other types of tests (coupled with the appropriate course work) that met or exceeded our state standards in the applicable subject areas.*

This policy allowed for a state-determined passing mark on Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, certain college dual-enrollment classes, SAT2, certain vocational and licensure examinations, scientific and computer-related certification exams, and other tests to substitute for the equivalent SOL test. For example, although a score of 3 or higher is typically required to receive college credit on an Advanced Placement exam, a 2 or higher on such an exam allows the student to substitute it for an equivalent SOL test (assuming that the corresponding course work is completed).

Thus, in Virginia there are options for students to meet state minimum standards and schools get credit for these options as well. Besides allowing the system to breathe, one of the many positive results of this policy is that Virginia leads the nation in the percentage of students taking Advanced Placement courses. This reform policy actually encourages students to take higher-level course work.

■ Student accountability and *school* accountability are not the same.

States must be careful that *student* accountability rules do not conflict with *school* accountability rules. It is easy to think they are the same, but they are not. The rules must complement one another for the benefit of students. If there are unintended or intended incentives in school accountability rules, many school systems will be tempted to take advantage of them even if such actions may be detrimental to students.

The first step to determine whether this is a problem is to examine timetables for student consequences and school consequences. When I joined the Virginia board, rules had already been written
to start test-related student graduation consequences in 2004 and school accreditation consequences in 2007.

However, it was clear that students due to graduate in 2004 would not have had the benefit of a full kindergarten through 12th grade education under the SOL program. Also, an argument could be made that school consequences should come first or at least at the same time as student consequences.

To address this issue, we identified so-called “transition” classes and made adjustments in their graduation requirements to be fair and reasonable in our expectations. These students were in the second, third and fourth grades when the Virginia Board of Education adopted the initial SOL reforms in 1995. While the number of credits for graduation remains the same for these students, they may lean heavily on their strongest subjects in choosing four of the six tests they must pass in order to graduate.

However, the board did not change the requirement that these students pass reading and writing tests in order to graduate from high school in 2004.

Reform that inherently distrusts all educators is doomed.

Let’s face it: Education is a very local event. As the federal government may realize in its implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, education does not happen at the federal level. It does not happen at the state level. It also does not happen at the local school board level. It happens primarily in the school building but, most of all, it happens in a classroom.

The further you are away from this very local event of education, the trickier and more complicated it becomes to mandate and implement successful reform.

The two biggest pitfalls in this area occur when first, state (and now federal) reformers attempt to micromanage what happens in the classroom and, second, when reformers take on the public school system itself, instead of defining its policies around students and their needs. Let me explain this last point first.

There is a distinct difference between standards-based accountability reform aimed at overhauling the public education system or breaking it down and reconfiguring it, versus reform policies that establish goals based on the needs of students and hold schools accountable for meeting those goals. In the latter, changes in the system will likely occur to meet the ultimate goal of helping students. In the former, changes may occur (and students might benefit from those changes) but the only certain goal achieved is a systemic restructuring of how education services are delivered. And that does not automatically create better results for students.

As to the other pitfall, unless we want to put video cameras in every classroom or pay people to watch every teacher, no reform policy will, once the classroom door is shut, make a teacher do what is best for students. Good teachers don’t operate that way and don’t need reform to make them good teachers. Bad teachers will go through whatever motions you require of them to survive in the system. Besides, the art of teaching is much more than something driven by accountability and standards.

Instead, standards-based accountability reform must focus on creating an environment where better teaching and learning is expected and can occur for all children.
Sometimes the obstacles to creating such an environment are great. They cannot be overcome by simply blaming the teacher in a classroom. In some cases, changing the teacher in the classroom might be part of the solution, but “weeding out bad teachers” should not be the primary goal or reason for imposing exams based on state standards.

This holds especially true for those children who live in very difficult social environments. Establishing expectations, measuring them, and committing resources to achieve them are what standards-based accountability reform offers “at risk” students and other children who have been left behind.

This is the primary reason I support such reform. Standards-based accountability reform shines a light on schools that are failing and forces political and education leaders to focus on the needs of children with the most challenges. Those schools in Virginia are receiving more assistance, through a variety of means, than they ever have in the past. However, closing the achievement gap and eliminating other educational disparities will require much more than personnel changes or systemic restructuring.

■ Accountability alone is not enough to help all students.

Accountability, by itself, can only draw undue attention and focus on areas where children are not getting what they need for an education. What we learn from accountability and what we do with the gained experience and knowledge are the key tests of the worthiness of standards-based accountability reform. Of course, this raises the issue of consequences for students and schools. Consequences may come in the form of a helping hand, a hand that takes corrective action, or both. All are appropriate and necessary. But it is important to allow them to occur on a case-by-case basis and in a very focused manner. This allows for more effective assistance and, when necessary, more drastic corrective action.

No school or school system wants its problems to stand out, even if the result is additional assistance. And while this may sound harsh, my four years in the trenches of school reform have taught me that there are teachers, principals and superintendents who prefer obstruction and disguised failure rather than constructive and effective systemic change. Unfortunately, some local public school systems are so broken from the top all the way down that one can't help but wonder if starting over in such systems is not the best reform for them.

A good system of standards-based accountability should trigger a review (and hopefully reform) in other areas of education policy such as school funding, school construction needs, teacher issues, etc.

If we expect more from public education, then we need to expect more from our policies that address public education. It is hard to preach the reform gospel of accountability if state and local policies that support and regulate public education do not complement the stated goals of such accountability — to leave no child behind.

In Virginia, this is especially true in the area of school funding. While the state is faced with the challenge, like all other states, of balancing its budget in difficult economic times, policy-makers are not backing off a review of the fundamental question of how schools are funded at the state and local levels. There is no doubt in my mind that Virginia's SOL program has prompted such a difficult and politically sensitive review. In fact, it has been a powerful argument for educators to insist on such a review.
Education reform is not an overnight process.

Implementing education reform successfully requires a “work in progress” attitude and approach. Several years ago, I sat on a public panel where one of the panel members was a chief education policy-maker from a major U.S. city. I chuckled to myself as this person spoke about implementing major education reform in this major city — to put it in his exact words — “on the fly.” Needless to say, I was not surprised when I read later how his city’s reform efforts failed and needed to be overhauled. Consequently, much time was wasted and no one was ever held accountable for meeting certain academic standards.

Patiently and methodically moving forward in the face of obstruction, personal attacks, and possible disappointing results at the start requires strong political will — and a sense of humor.

Reformers should resist becoming blinded by ideology or identifying opponents as the enemies of all that is good and sensible. Listen carefully: Sometimes the person blasting you from the podium may have a valid point. If it advances the cause, let someone else have the credit. Don’t confine your movements to the halls of the legislature or other power centers in the state capital. Visit as many schools as you can. Talk to parents and teachers. Listen to their concerns. It is difficult to respect education policy-makers who hide in their offices or behind staff and who are unwilling to face and listen to the constituencies impacted by their policies — even if listening means being yelled at all evening at a town meeting or at other gatherings.

And don’t forget to spend meaningful time with students on a regular basis. They will enlighten you and provide you valuable insight and information as to what you’re doing. Most of all, they will inspire you.

Finally, during my tenure I met many people involved in public education at the national, state and local levels and in academia, foundations, think tanks, advocacy groups and in many other capacities related to educating children. However, the most important observation that I made as a state school board president is that I never met anyone who knew everything about educating children. It was always interesting to watch those who also experienced the wisdom of this lesson and those who had not.