

# Once a Hedgehog, Now a Fox

*Ten lessons from six decades in the struggle to improve schools*



**I**N 1953, the Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin published one of the 20th century's most celebrated essays, titled "The Hedgehog and the Fox." He was riffing on the Greek poet Archilochus, who wrote that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." In this essay, Sir Isaiah divided people—well, writers and thinkers, those sorts of people—into two categories. As summarized in Wikipedia, they are:

hedgehogs, who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea (examples given include Plato, Lucretius, Blaise Pascal, Marcel Proust, and Fernand Braudel), and foxes, who draw on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to a single idea (examples given include Aristotle, Desiderius Erasmus, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe).

Reflecting on my own engagement with education over the past 60 years, beginning just a dozen years after Berlin wrote, I find that I started as a hedgehog but have turned into a fox. My hedgehog self, I should add, was young, optimistic, probably naive. Becoming a fox has meant growing skeptical, wary, perhaps jaded, though still determined.

Once upon a time—college senior time, LBJ time—I pretty much agreed with President Johnson that the way to end poverty in America while achieving other worthy ends was to beef up the

education system, particularly the parts that served poor kids, and that the way to do that was to ramp up its funding, such as via the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the War on Poverty, both of which he pushed through Congress.

When he signed ESEA in the one-room schoolhouse of his childhood in Johnson City, Texas, the president declared that:

By passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than 5 million educationally deprived children. We put into the hands of our youth more than 30 million new books, and into many of our schools their first libraries. We reduce the terrible time lag in bringing new teaching techniques into the Nation's classrooms. We strengthen State and local agencies which bear the burden and the challenge of better education. And we rekindle the revolution—the revolution of the spirit against the tyranny of ignorance.

This one measure, as LBJ saw it, sending federal dollars into the schools attended by "deprived" children, would transform their lives. Call it a moon shot, a silver bullet, a cure-all—it was something JFK had not been able to do and something Johnson almost certainly believed would make a big difference.

As did I. Much taken with Michael Harrington's *The Other America* and thinking myself a budding social reformer, I spent much of college doing volunteer work: settlement house and

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*The author's transformation from an idealist hedgehog to a realist fox was shaped by encounters with hard truths and wise leaders while working to improve America's schools.*



tutoring efforts with poor kids who lived in public housing, and with their families. Then I helped launch one of the country's first Upward Bound programs—another battalion in the War on Poverty. I was a true believer, so much so that it drew me into the field of education itself, right out of college. (I also wasn't keen to return to the family law firm in Dayton.) The "one big thing" I knew was that I could and should join the fight against ignorance and disadvantage by enlisting in the poverty war. I'm sure I expected to fire only silver bullets.

Then a bunch of things happened that took some spines off the hedgehog.

Those Upward Bound kids mostly had a good experience, but it didn't alter their lives. To my knowledge, it didn't propel them into college. Meanwhile, early evaluations of Head Start indicated that the boost it offered little ones didn't last once they hit school, and James Coleman reported that just adding to the inputs of schools was not a reliable way to strengthen their achievement. Johnson, it seemed, had overpromised: the simple beefing-up approach wasn't working very well at ending poverty, transforming lives, or closing gaps. More or different ammunition had to be added to the armory.

While taking in these disappointments, I was also falling under the spell of the late Pat Moynihan, my graduate school adviser, and his colleagues—people like Nathan Glazer, James Q. Wilson, Irving Kristol, and others, soon to be dubbed neo-conservatives, who were looking at a range of Great Society programs and concluding that, while they were fine things to do in response to generous impulses, they weren't very effective. Worse, such programs typically directed resources to middle-class professionals and their institutions while disrupting traditional neighborhoods and social and governmental structures that had been important to people—often the poor folks whom these reforms were supposed to be helping.

Kristol jibed that neo-cons were liberals who had been mugged by reality. That's pretty much what happened to me, even more so when I went to Washington with Moynihan and was immersed in both the challenges of education and the limits of government policy to address them.

As the decades passed and I've learned still more, almost all my spines have fallen off (though some still think me prickly). I've come to resemble Berlin's version of a fox. I'm as keen as ever to overhaul and revitalize American education and have spent a lot of years giving it my best. Today, however, I "know many things" about that enterprise and must report that they've made me more of a wary realist regarding its difficulty.

## Lessons on School Reform

Let me unpack the 10 lessons that have struck me hardest.

First, nothing changes quickly in K-12 (or higher) education. This vast enterprise is sluggish and slow to move. Efforts to change it have legitimately been compared to "turning an aircraft carrier" and (by Admiral Rickover) to "moving a graveyard." After a career that included building a giant company, rescuing hostages from Iran, and running for president, Ross Perot told Lamar Alexander that trying to reform Texas schools was the "meanest, bloodiest, and most difficult thing I've ever been into" (whereupon he rebuffed Alexander's suggestion that he take on a national role in education reform).

Second, besides being big and sluggish, American K-12 education is leaderless. Nobody's really in charge of this undertaking, which is not really a system, though it gets called that. It's been plausibly compared to a loosely coupled train, where the engine may head down the track, but the caboose doesn't move.

Third, in a land this big and diverse, decentralization of schooling is a necessary evil—both necessary and evil. It's necessary because "local control" is a historical fact and a sacred mantra, because a big chunk of school funding comes from local property taxes, and because educational priorities and emphases really do differ from place to place. Springfield, Massachusetts; Springfield, Ohio; Springfield, Missouri; and Springfield, Oregon, are very dissimilar communities—and people are hypersensitive to what their kids' schools teach and what values they communicate. But decentralization is

also a problem. K-12 schooling is a time to forge Americans, to toss the salads of diversity, to establish shared values, and to absorb knowledge and skills that benefit oneself, one's immediate community, and the larger society. Greater unity in the enterprise would make that easier to do.

Fourth, besides being enormous, sluggish, decentralized, loosely coupled, and leaderless, this enterprise—like most—is populated by millions of adults who don't like to change their ways. It's widely noted that, when the classroom door is closed, every teacher is pretty much free to do as she thinks best, which

most often means doing what she's always done. Connect these realities and you see why U.S. education resembles a giant rubber band. Elements can be stretched when enough force is applied, but as soon as the tension is released, it snaps (or drifts) back into its previous shape. That's why the reform efforts that have had the greatest traction in improving student outcomes are those that have endured over a significant period, not changing



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or ceasing when there's a new face in the superintendent's or governor's office. A few, like charter schools, have lasted long enough to begin to benefit from the biases against change that permeate our political institutions. (In federal personnel lingo, we'd say they've "careered in.") But that's also why the "spinning wheels" of so many initiatives have not left much of a legacy.

The fifth reason that efforts to boost educational performance by reforming K–12 schooling have little impact is because American kids spend so little of their lives going to school—and that was true even before today's epidemic of chronic absenteeism. Perhaps the most original piece of education research I ever did was around 1990 when it occurred to me to calculate the portion of young Americans' lives that they're actually in school. It's an astonishingly small 9 percent! If you don't believe me, calculate it yourself. Give the kids credit for full-day kindergarten and perfect attendance. In the numerator, multiply 13 years of schooling by 180 days in the typical school year by 6 hours in the typical day. In the denominator, put 18 years on Earth times 365 days per year times 24 hours a day. See what *you* come up with. As to the rejoinder that kids "also have to sleep," change the denominator to 16 hours a day instead of 24 and your quotient will still be a startlingly small number. Then ask yourself how much leverage that humble percentage has competing against all the other forces at play during the much larger portion of kids' lives that are spent outside school.

Sixth, though we always say we do things in education to benefit those kids, most actual decisions are based on adult preferences, satisfying adult demands, avoiding adult displeasure, and navigating among rival adult interests. Kids really don't have lobbyists, but the six million or so adult employees of K–12 education have plenty of them, and it's grownups who vote for school boards, local levies, legislators, and more. How many times have would-be reformers—including school principals and superintendents—been flummoxed when told that, sorry, your plan is incompatible with the seniority requirements of the collective bargaining agreement? But it's not just teachers. Extended days and weeks conflict with all manner of contracts (custodians, food service workers, bus drivers, etc.). Voters without kids in school may reject tax levies. Aggrieved parents—"Let's hold onto traditional summer vacations. Let's not change school attendance zone boundaries. Let's not raise taxes to install more

technology."—can defeat candidates, referenda, levies, and more. Kids don't vote. And—sorry—what parents want or will tolerate isn't always what would cause their children to learn more, or it may be something that could work for their own kids but won't enable other parents' children to learn more.

Seventh, structural reforms are important but don't directly bear on what is taught and learned, nor do those charged with implementing structural reforms always possess the capacity to succeed with them. Reformers (me included) have expended enormous energy over the past three or four decades trying to alter the structures and ground rules of K–12 education: put in choices, different kinds of schools, alternative certification paths, statewide standards, assessments and accountability schemes, different schedules, calendars, staffing arrangements, and more. Virtually all of these have been well intentioned, many have been carefully considered, and most (in my judgment) have been good ideas. Yet few have had much to do with where the education rubber meets the student road—what the late Richard Elmore termed the "instructional core," i.e., the content of what's taught and how (and how well) it's taught. We've focused lots on assessing whether things have been learned but precious little on ensuring that the requisite curricula and pedagogy are in place—nor on whether teachers themselves ever learned what they're now supposed to teach, whether their schools and those running them have the organizational, intellectual, and fiscal

resources to implement changes, or whether anybody has the capacity much less the authority to supply what's missing and remedy what's done wrong. So many of our reforms resemble blueprints for new structures that ought to be built, but they don't come with the necessary materials, tools, and competent foremen and construction workers.

Eighth, a huge proportion of our recent ed-reform debates has hinged on whether one views education—in economist talk—as fundamentally a private or a public good. If private, it should be done to benefit the individual receiving it, and many policy decisions follow. If public, it should be done to benefit society, whereupon very different policy choices make sense. The reality is that it's both—but the ensuing policy decisions make that duality fraught with tension, tradeoffs, conflict, and the need to compromise. It's also fraught with antagonism between adherents to two quite different sets of beliefs.



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Ninth, in parallel to this tension is the tug-of-war between school choice on one hand and the standards-assessment-accountability trinity on the other, and the sense that we must line up behind one and push back against aficionados of the other. As it turns out, effective education reform depends on *both* school choice and standards-driven accountability. Properly understood, they're codependent because neither is sufficient unto itself. Giving choices to families is essential, but that doesn't reliably lead to putting kids into effective schools where they'll learn all they should. For choice to work well, there must also be reliable third-party comparative information on school performance along multiple dimensions—information that mostly comes from standards and assessments plus the “school report cards” that follow under a well-designed accountability regime. Conversely, those accountability regimes are pretty good at identifying bad schools but mostly fail when it comes to turning them around or shutting them down. So, families need alternatives—choices—lest their children be stuck forever in dire schools.

Tenth, and finally: accountability does matter, but nobody likes it. I've come to believe that's a generalizable truth about both institutions and individuals. Companies need auditors. Restaurants need health inspectors and reviewers. Universities need accreditors. People do their best work if someone is watching and providing feedback. If you're racing, you need someone to time you and make sure you don't cheat. If you want to drive a car, you need to pass a test. If you want to be a surgeon, you need to pass the surgical boards (otherwise, please don't operate on me). Similarly, schools—and the educators and students in them—need to be held to account for whether the requisite skills and knowledge are getting acquired. We have ample evidence that schools work better and kids learn more when content standards are joined by testing and accountability. Yet the pushback against accountability is relentless—nobody really likes to be audited, evaluated, or judged by their results—and today it's yielding ground.

### Complicated Problems Demand Multifaceted Solutions

I might still prefer to be a hedgehog. Spines or not, they look cute and cuddly. They've been called Britain's favorite

mammal. They have few enemies. Because they need only to hold one idea in their heads, their lives are less confusing. I don't know whether they're as single minded as Isaiah Berlin's essay suggested, but I do know a lot of education reformers who tend in that direction—toward the proverbial silver bullet, the one thing we must do that will cause many good things to happen. Sixty years ago, that's the direction I was tending. Fifty-five years ago, however, the education world—indeed the world itself—began to appear more complicated to me. Perhaps I was just growing up, grappling with reality. In any case, I was on the way to becoming a fox.

That's not so very great. Foxes do move faster and cover a lot more ground, but they also steal stuff. People tend not to like them. And foxes have so much to think about that their lives aren't simple. I'd rather Sir Isaiah—and Archilochus before him—had contrasted hedgehogs with pandas, koalas, or golden retrievers. It would be good to revise his terminology. (Plato vs. Aristotle would be especially welcome!) But I can't escape the larger distinction he was making. Do we view the world through the lens of one defining idea, or do we draw upon many experiences and conclude that the world that matters to us—education in my case—is indeed complex and changing and calls for more than a silver bullet?

In retrospect, the “single defining idea” that animated me—and

President Johnson—back in the 1960s was naive, as would be any single prescription for a complex malady. A good education surely helps fend off poverty in individuals, and a well-educated society is more prosperous than an ignorant one. Yet successfully combating multigenerational poverty in a disadvantaged population takes more than beefing up the schools their kids attend. It needs schools in which children actually learn. But that's just the start. And simply adding resources to schools doesn't get us even there, especially not when all those other factors endure.

Complicated, intractable problems call for multifaceted solutions. In American K–12 education, however, as in dealing with poverty, the cures we've tried so far haven't overcome the underlying maladies.

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