

An Assessment by  
Hoover Institution's  
Koret Task Force  
on K-12 Education

# American Education in 2030



**What Can Happen in  
Twenty Years?**

**Chester E. Finn Jr.**

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Are “education years” more like “dog years” or “people years”? Is twenty of them a long time or a short time? How much can happen in education in two decades? More, it seems, than one might suppose.

Yes, the K-12 enterprise is slow to change, full of inertia and sameness. Yes, much about today’s schools resembles the schools attended by their pupils’ parents, even grandparents. Few can rebut the familiar comment that if Rip Van Winkle awoke in America today after a snooze of twenty years or longer, the two institutions he would find most like those that existed when he fell asleep would be our churches and our schools.

At the same time, primary and secondary education is so awash in fads, nostrums, and innovations that it sometimes resembles a ping-pong game or pool table on which the instructional ball bounces off one notion, then caroms on to the next new thing.

Indeed, part of what keeps our educational system more dysfunctional and less effective than it ought to be is its weird blend of timeless and trendy, static and fluid, rigid and random.

Despite all that, much that’s significant can change in this system over twenty years, both for better and for worse. Some developments are straightforward and predictable, like the phases of the moon. During a two-decade period, an entire generation of children matures from infancy to college. Some sixty million Americans earn high school diplomas—and maybe twenty million more drop out. Those who entered kindergarten at the beginning of the period will possess graduate degrees at the end of it—well, some of them will. Millions of teachers and tens of thousands of principals will be replaced by people not currently employed in those positions. Urban school districts will run through a half dozen superintendents each. States will elect up to five governors.

Yet more profound changes can also occur during such a time span, changes that alter the norms, ground rules, or operating arrangements of the system itself. They may not all be positive, and they surely won’t have the same impacts everywhere at the same time. But they may still be fundamental.

One way to gauge what could occur in American K-12 education between 2010 and 2030 is to recall some of what *did* occur over the previous two decades, that is, between 1990 and 2010. Here I recount ten such developments. All were in some sense national, but only three engaged the federal government to an appreciable degree. The others seeped, slithered, morphed, and metastasized from place to place via mechanisms that have more to do with the culture of education than with its formal governance.

First, observe the extraordinary traction that was gained by standards-based reform at both state and national levels. One could fairly say this began with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983—and I'll note with some satisfaction that Diane Ravitch and I were embarked on such a mission via the Educational Excellence Network as early as 1981. (One could also argue that James Coleman sowed the seeds in 1966.) But the enterprise really took off after the 1989 Charlottesville education summit attended by President Clinton and the governors, and it gained momentum when America's first-ever national education goals were announced in early 1990. The development of academic goals, standards, assessments, tracking metrics, and accountability systems began to be a big deal across the land—and this shows no sign of abating. We now judge schools (and districts, states, etc.) primarily by their results, not by their inputs, services, or intentions. That certainly wasn't true two decades ago.

Second, the era of standards-based reform has wrought big-time changes in federal policy. In 1990, for the most part Washington's aid to education was just that—additional money to state and local school systems so they could provide added services of various sorts, primarily to needy and disabled youngsters. Strings were attached, to be sure, but these had more to do with the distribution and use of dollars than with reforming the schools. Beginning in a big way in 1994, however, with the passage of both the Goals 2000 Act and the Improving America's Schools Act, the federal government began deploying its funds in efforts to transform the performance of U.S. schools, primarily by setting goals and standards and measuring the progress toward them. During this twenty-year period, Uncle Sam shifted from "help" to "implore" to "push" to "require," and although the money continued to flow, indeed in ever-larger amounts, the strings attached to it were now very different. This process reached its apogee—some would say nadir—with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Race to the Top portion of the 2009 economic stimulus package.

Third, besides fundamental alterations in the nature of education aid, Washington transformed its key monitoring system, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), aka the "Nation's Report Card." The reauthorization of NAEP in 1988—which took effect around 1990—changed what had been a poky and obscure testing program that yielded only general information into a modern performance-monitoring system that includes semi-independent governance, more frequent testing of more subjects at key grade levels, far greater transparency in reporting results and trends, bona fide state-by-state comparisons, and a semblance of uniform national standards by which to track *and judge* the academic prowess of young Americans and the performance of their education system.

Fourth, charter schools were invented, spread across the land, and won a measure of legitimacy. These independent public schools of choice are operated by myriad private entities rather than traditional districts, yet (unlike private schools) are financed by taxpayers, open to all comers, and accountable for their results to public authorities. Although they bear some resemblance to private schools, magnet schools,

alternative schools, and other earlier arrangements, they are also something fundamentally new under the education sun. The first one opened in Minnesota in 1992; by 2010 they numbered some five thousand schools serving 1.5 million youngsters in thirty-nine states. Hundreds were run by statewide, regional, even national management organizations (some of which were starting to reach overseas), and the United States was seeing the emergence of chains of “brand-name” schools (e.g., KIPP, Achievement First, High Tech High, K12) that crossed traditional district and even state borders.

Fifth, charters turned out to be the tip of an iceberg of school choice that, when tallied in all its variety, touched roughly half of all students by 2010. That is, five in every ten pupils were enrolled in schools that they or their parents had played an active role in selecting rather than passively being assigned by a district bureaucracy with geographically based attendance zones. To be sure, the 50 percent estimate (some analysts say it's more like 60) includes the millions of families that exercise choice via the real estate market (i.e., kids attend neighborhood schools in neighborhoods that their parents moved into because of the schools). But more than one in three were being educated in bona fide schools of choice of many sorts—including learning at home from their parents or from a widening array of distance-learning and virtual education providers.

Some even attended private schools with the help of publicly financed vouchers, these having passed a key federal constitutional test with the Supreme Court's 2003 *Zelman* decision. (Voucher advocates continued, however, to face many hurdles in state constitutions and legislative chambers.) Although tens of millions of youngsters still had no viable options other than neighborhood-based and district-operated schools—which served some of them well but yielded educational tragedy for others—America by 2010 had changed a fundamental ground rule: school was now something you could expect to select for yourself rather than be assigned to by the system.

Sixth, the operation of individual schools was not the only core education function that witnessed the entry of unconventional and entrepreneurial providers. Although most teacher preparation still took place in traditional colleges of education and most of their graduates were still certified by states in familiar ways, many more alternatives were visible by 2010. Many states had pathways into public school teaching that did not pass through colleges of education, at least not in advance of one's first teaching assignment. A number of school systems ran their own preparation-and-certification programs as did at least one charter operator (California's High-Tech High). National nonprofit groups such as Teach for America and New Leaders for New Schools recruited, prepared, and placed talented individuals in classrooms and principals' offices who otherwise would not likely have gotten there. And dozens of for-profit firms (e.g., Kaplan, Wireless Generation, Tutor.com, SchoolNet) supplied schools with data systems, tutoring programs, curriculum packages, and more. Although traditional education groups continued to hold their enormous conclaves, anyone who set foot in

the annual summit organized by the New Schools Venture Fund might well think he had entered a different century if not an alternative universe.

Seventh, hoary patterns of governance and leadership also underwent revision—at least in some places. Governors asserted themselves in state-level K-12 policies and operations in ways that most had historically shunned. In several major cities, mayors assumed control of their school systems. And where formerly the title of district superintendent was invariably bestowed on a career-long educator who had climbed the well-worn ladder from teacher to principal to assistant superintendent, and so on, the leadership mantle in a handful of pioneering communities was now conferred on such heterodox characters as Joel Klein, Paul Vallas, Michelle Rhee, David Bennet, Arne Duncan, and Alan Bersin, none of whom is a career educator.. Some state superintendents, too, now hailed from the ranks of noneducators (e.g., California's Jack O'Connell, Texas's Robert Scott).

Eighth, as we might expect—because much the same thing was happening in nearly every other sector of our lives—technology wrought major changes in education delivery and management. Whether taken in school under the teacher's eye, at home under a parent's supervision or through organizational hybrids such as the Florida Virtual School or Ohio Virtual Academy, online courses spread far and wide, and management gurus such as Harvard's Clayton Christensen prophesied dramatic growth in the years ahead. Improved data systems made it possible to track pupil and classroom performance, to evaluate teacher effectiveness, to provide parents as well as teachers and principals with instant access to information about children's progress, and much more. E-mail enabled parents to communicate with teachers, and the Internet enabled teachers and students alike to access vast troves of information and materials. A vibrant market in both hardware and software meant that, at least for individuals and families that could afford it, teaching and learning of one kind or another could now occur anytime and anyplace.

Ninth, change even edged into how America *pays* for public education. Although school finance in most places remains an amalgam of federal, state, and local tax dollars channeled through innumerable formulas and programs, a few states (e.g., California, Michigan, Indiana) essentially shouldered full responsibility for paying for their public schools—not counting the federal parts—and several communities experimented with weighted funding that varied with children's educational needs. There was even a sea change in litigation over school finance, with the controversial concept of adequacy replacing the much-fought-over principle of equality as activist attorneys made their way into courtrooms in their ceaseless campaign to get the third branch of government to change the flow (and quantity) of dollars in ways they usually could not accomplish through the first and second branches.

Tenth, schooling began to lose its long-standing isolation, both from other levels of education and from other social services. Instead of viewing K-12 education as a

hermetically sealed function of government, state after state explored ways of integrating it more fully with preschool and postsecondary education as well as with other sectors such as health, housing, child welfare, and criminal justice. New data systems eased the isolation from other levels of education—it began to be possible to track individuals' educational progress from early childhood to graduate school—and altered governance arrangements simplified closer alignments with other social services. (Nothing like having all those agencies and programs under the governors' or mayors' aegis) Although it was premature in 2010 in most of the country to term these developments more than exploratory, the path to the future seemed reasonably clear.

Yes, a great deal of change can occur in two decades, even in so stodgy an enterprise as public education. That's why our prognostications for the year 2030 may not be so wild-eyed or blue-skied as readers may initially suspect.

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Chester E. Finn Jr. is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and chairman of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education. He is also president and trustee of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Previously, he was professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University, senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, founding partner with the Edison Project and legislative director for Senator Daniel P. Moynihan. He served as assistant U.S. education secretary for research and improvement from 1985 to 1988.

Author of more than 400 articles and 18 books, Finn's most recent books are *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut* and *Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform since Sputnik*.

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