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# Before the 'Either-Or' Era

## Reviving Bipartisanship to Improve America's Schools

By Richard W. Riley & Terry K. Peterson

*Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley and his longtime adviser Terry K. Peterson started their involvement in education on the ground. Mr. Riley was a PTA co-president with his wife, Ann “Tunky” Riley, at their children’s school. Mr. Peterson started as a teacher in Wisconsin, Brazil, and South Carolina. Then, for 30 years, they worked together and separately to improve policies, programs, and partnerships at the local, state, national, and international levels. They share in the following essay their reflections on those experiences, as seen through the prism of A Nation at Risk, the influential 1983 critique of American education.*

For the last 25 years, American education has been trying to reform itself. This effort has been noble but only partially successful, and too often it has been defined by an “either-or” dichotomy that has led to publicly defined “wars” over reading and math instruction, and even the very existence of the U.S. Department of Education.

There have been peaks and valleys in this effort, and all too often people have reached for the next new silver-bullet solution, from open classrooms to “new math” to a four-day school week, only to discover the reality that improving American education does not happen easily. All the while, our public schools have been caught in the middle of the larger cultural and values debate that continues unabated in our society.

Both of us have been deeply engaged, at both the state and the national level, in this effort to improve public education in the United States. We have been heartened by the fact that the American people have, through thick and thin, remained steadfast in their support for this reform effort. At the same time, we have been dismayed by the slow pace of reform and our inability to create curricula and teaching that fit the modern world.

Above all, we have been disappointed by the fraying of the traditional bipartisan spirit of working together to improve public education and improve our local community schools. It hasn’t always been that way.

Many years ago, in 1983 and ’84, we had the privilege of working with Terrel H. Bell, then the U.S. secretary of education under President Reagan. Ted Bell had ignited a national debate with the release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s seminal report, *A Nation at Risk*. It came at just the right moment for us in South Carolina. We were seeking to persuade a reluctant state legislature, Republicans and Democrats, to pass and finance a dramatic new education package that included a penny increase in the sales

tax. It was not an easy sale. Statewide education reform was a very new concept then and, even though the nation was at risk, the White House answer at the time was to propose closing down the U.S. Department of Education and to de-emphasize education.

Nevertheless, we saw Secretary Bell as a potential ally. We were determined to use *A Nation at Risk* to make our case. Through a mutual friend, we arranged for a secret and undisclosed meeting with the secretary when he came to South Carolina to speak at a Republican convention. We hoped to make our case to him, even though some Republican leaders assumed he would be critical of our reform package. Having a rarely used back door to the Statehouse has its merits on occasion.

To the dismay of some state Republican leaders, Secretary Bell put education before politics and came out in full support of our reform package and earned our lifelong trust and friendship. At the time, the reforms in the South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984 were labeled as one of the most successful large-scale statewide improvement efforts in the nation, and even earned the praise in 1988 of William J. Bennett, Bell's successor at the Education Department.

Several years later, in 1993, President Clinton brought us to Washington to lead the department. We set out to create a host of new initiatives, including Goals 2000, the Teacher Quality Initiative, reducing class size in the early grades, America Reads, the E-rate program, technology programs, HOPE Scholarships and lifetime-learning credits, GEAR UP, and direct lending for college costs, in response to the president's desire to move American education into the 21st century. We were eager to push forward on a wide range of issues, from teacher reform to international education. But the 1994 off-year elections changed the atmosphere in Washington, and some in the new Republican congressional majority revived the effort to eliminate the Education Department.

Once again, Ted Bell reached out and offered his help. Our team was all too happy to accept his support. He came to our second annual State of Education address in 1995, and made the case for bipartisan reform and the continued existence of the department. Over time, our professional relationships led to personal friendships, culminating in Secretary Riley's being asked to speak at Ted's funeral in 1996 in Salt Lake City.

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Now, in the year marking the 25th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, it is worth taking stock of where we are and what we have learned from two and a half decades of efforts and setbacks.

First, the country needs to put an end to the "either-or" dichotomy that too often frames state and national education debates. We have wasted too much energy, time, and political capital on fringe issues, from vouchers to whether or not the federal Education Department should exist. We must revive a spirit of bipartisanship and recognize that there is a very strong American consensus about what works and what needs to be done, from early-childhood education, to meeting high standards, to getting more young people on the path to two- and four-year colleges and increasing family involvement. We should focus on these essentials.

**Second, we must get deadly serious about dramatically increasing the high school graduation rate, which now hovers at 70 percent. One telling fact should put this education dilemma in stark perspective: The annual number of high school dropouts, 1.2 million, is more than twice the size of the active-duty U.S. Army. These young people make up an unseen and unwanted “army of dropouts,” and they are the real casualties of a tyranny of low expectations that still bedevils the American education system.**

**Increasing the high school graduation rate is, in our opinion, America’s greatest education challenge in the coming decade, and especially so in South Carolina and in a number of other states and communities. Young people who fail to graduate from high school face a bleak economic future, and each dropout costs this nation \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity. If these young people don’t get decent-paying jobs, who is going to prop up Social Security as millions of baby boomers begin to retire? This “dropout army” is also, according to retired Gen. Colin L. Powell, the former U.S. secretary of state, a national-security issue. How are we to maintain the best army in the world when, year in and year out, more than a million young people can’t even meet its minimum standards?**

**This is why we believe that America should create a \$10 billion, targeted High School Investment Fund, a combination of private and federal money, to expand proven intervention strategies starting in middle school, in addition to expanding successful alternative pathways to graduation. Large college and university endowments also could contribute to this effort by defraying costs for those university faculty and students who commit to tutoring, mentoring, and other programs to help keep middle and high school students on track to stay in school and prepare academically for college.**

**The core of this effort must be a commitment to helping students take rigorous and advanced courses, which continues to be the best predictor of a student’s going on to postsecondary education, especially among low- and middle-income students. *A Nation at Risk* recommended this approach, and it seems that many forgot its importance. States should heed this advice even more today by changing their policies and financing of middle and high schools to provide the necessary support, time, and opportunities for many more young people to enroll and succeed in challenging courses.**

**Third, we must look to the future and transform the teaching profession, which is about to face an enormous structural dilemma. *A Nation at Risk* included recommendations for high standards, professional salaries, and career ladders for teaching, but we have done very little to implement these recommendations. As a result, new teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate—50 percent in the first five years of teaching, by some estimates. The tumult in the profession will only get worse as 1.7 million baby boomers, who currently represent 53 percent of the nation’s teaching force, retire in growing numbers over the next 10 years.**

**We can head off this demographic tsunami if we transform our public schools into learning organizations by retaining high-quality veteran teachers in new and flexible roles that engage their experience and skills in a new way. Those not interested in 21st-century**

teaching can retire. We also have the opportunity to reach out to a new source of support - the millions of retiring baby boomers who want to give back to society.

A recent survey by MetLife and Civic Ventures found that 30 percent of retiring baby boomers expect to work after retirement and are interested in working in education. Many young people are interested in teaching as well, but not for a lifetime. If we could engage even a modest fraction of this pool in cross-generational learning teams in schools, we would strengthen our education system, boost student learning, and blur the lines that too often lead to generational battles over scarce public dollars.

Fourth, *A Nation at Risk* recognized that children need more time for learning. With information doubling every few years and with education standards increasing, we need a new day for learning, including after-school and summer opportunities. We have little chance of closing the achievement gap if our students remain locked into a six-hour school day and a 175- to 180-day school year.

The two of us, with the strong support of President and Mrs. Clinton, worked hard in the 1990s to respond to this obvious reality by creating the federal [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#). This program and others like it can make a powerful difference in providing extra learning time and forging community partnerships. The program should be doubled or tripled in size, regardless of who wins the White House in November. States' school finance formulas also need to be updated to provide for after-school and summer learning time and community partnerships.

In South Carolina, we are working with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future on a new effort to develop "Inside Out Learning Centers," which will wrest the traditional school model out of the factory era. These new centers will introduce an extended day, week, and year; flexible schedules for students and teachers; cross-generational teaching teams; student achievement based on mastery; and virtual programs. These efforts will be combined with community services that address conditions that often prevent children from learning, such as inadequate medical, mental-health, and dental care. Such centers can transform public schools into community learning centers that are open later, longer, and for more people, and for a minimum of six days a week.

Fifth, the demand for high standards should not be reduced to standardization. Education cannot be boiled down to a single test on a narrow set of skills. We need to encourage innovation, creativity, and imagination in our students through the arts, technology, the sciences, and environmental literacy. Our children need to learn new skills and new ways of thinking to meet the multiple challenges we face at a global level, including climate change. And if we wish to remain an international leader, we must expand our commitment to teaching foreign languages, beginning in elementary schools.

Finally, we need to reclaim the spirit of bipartisanship that defined education progress at the national level for so many years. Ted Bell would not have it any other way. The next president of the United States must elevate the public debate about how to improve public education and college access, and encourage the American people to recognize that

**education excellence in their local community's public schools is at the very foundation of our economic revival and, in fact, our long-term national security.**

**This does not necessarily mean top-down reform from Washington. In developing a new national consensus, we should work from the bottom up and build on the work now being done by schools, communities, and states that are coming together on their own to develop working partnerships. America's strength is our innovation, diversity, competitiveness, and willingness to offer multiple pathways to success. High expectations for all students, combined with high-quality educational opportunities for all students, no matter where they live, promote these core American values.**

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**Terry K. Peterson is a senior fellow at the College of Charleston, chairs the Afterschool Alliance, and advises the National Center for Summer Learning, the National School Boards Association, and the Alliance for Excellent Education. Formerly, he was the counselor to the U.S. secretary of education and to the governor of South Carolina, and directed the South Carolina Business-Education Oversight Committee.**

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