

Bottom-Up School Reform:

The Stars Are Aligned For It

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Our theme in this edition, about considering local reform efforts, contends that:

- The federal government has been an obstacle to school reform.
- Unionized teachers have been a hindrance of major proportion.
- Obedient school management has little freedom to innovate.
- **Relaxed parents have not been vigilant and informed customers.**
- Students aren't working hard enough to master their subjects.
- Religious organizations often don't see the harm K-12 schools do to them.
- Many pro-education volunteer and civic organizations are not helpful.
- Educational services firms fear the educational establishment

Of these factors, Asora believes the parents of school children can be the most important agents of change. For that reason, we have developed guidebooks to schools that parents can use to help manage their children's education providers. Once parents understand the basic fact that K-12 education is not what they think, they will react by making better choices, both individually and politically.

This Asora update has two related documents you can download:

- Our theme essay,

Bottom-Up School Reform: The Stars Are Aligned For It

To obtain the downloadable file, **BottomUp.pdf**, please go to ASORA's *Reports on Reform* page at <http://asoraeducation.com/page35/page35.html>.

- Our prototypical private and public school guidebook that we have recently completed for the two states of Rhode Island and Massachusetts,

Parents' Guide To Schools & Services In Rhode Island & Massachusetts:

A Guide to Private and Public Schools & Other Educational Resources

To obtain a copy of this 89-page book please go to ASORA's **Regional Guidebook** page <http://asoraeducation.com/page59/page59> where you can download **RIMA-Guide-01.pdf**.

On Bottom-Up School Reform

The general concept of "Bottom-Up" carries with it two aspects:

- That an activity starting at the individual or small group level can accomplish desired goals.
- That its opposite kind of activity, Top-Down, is often unable, is too inefficient, or simply refuses to work towards those goals.

We listed eight contentions above. Let's now discuss each one of them in turn.

The federal government has been an obstacle to school reform.

While most of the efforts in the United States to involve the federal government in K-12 education have been arguably well intended they have ignored two important considerations in making these kinds of policies:

- They ignore the United States Constitution's 10th Amendment that allows no role for a federal department in this area. Why do they ignore and disobey this fundamental law?
- They ignore the economics involved by outlawing or discouraging the very kinds of frameworks that would incentivize desired improvements in education.

Previous administrations have imposed onerous regulations required for the states receiving various federal grants associated with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. As we saw, recently, the Ed department was even dictating restroom policies to schools across the country. Through its infamous Race to the Top program, it imposed coercive incentives on the states to impose the politically progressive Common Core State Standards on most public schools in the nation.

Bottom-Up obstacle removal.

We at ASORA believe that the best policy for education would result from closing the Department of Education. It would remove the federal harness from the 51 plus state and territorial jurisdictions that would free them to compete with the others. Economies of scale that advocates of the federal department might cite are not really relevant when that scale is accompanied by intrusive regulations. Economics favors education operating more locally.

President Trump could do this on his own. Legislation is not needed. He only needs to defend the Constitution that according to its 10th Amendment has no provision for such a department. He could simply give its employees notice and terminate all its grant making programs. Were he to do this, the courts would probably handle lawsuits seeking reinstatement. Just as some previous Presidents have done, President Trump could simply ignore the courts on the basis that his oath of office and the terms of the Constitution make him a co-equal interpreter of this founding document.

We doubt, however, that he will close the department. But there are indications that under its new Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, it will be transformed into a minimally restrictive grant making organization. Where conditions are placed on its grants, we have reason to believe that they will be used to incentivize more parental choice in education.

Based on President Trump's campaign speeches we believe that Common Core will die at the federal level. No longer will there be any coercion on the states to adopt it. There will likely be no active effort to kill it and some left-leaning states will probably keep it or aspects of it. Unwise as these states may be, they should have the freedom to develop their own policies.

Also based on his campaign's promise to greatly facilitate the use of vouchers, charter schools and other policies supportive of school choice we expect legislation and regulations to accomplish those goals- including an order-of-magnitude increase in voucher financing. That means ten times the current level- as was promised during the campaign.

Unionized teachers have been a hindrance of major proportion.

At every level of government, teachers' unions have been active- some would say hyperactive- in supporting the incomes and oftentimes the politics of their members. They not only support the usual collective bargaining activities typical of unions but they also interfere with the proper management of public schools. These unions often control local school boards, county school boards, state school boards and legislatures. When it's the local school board they effectively control the management with whom they negotiate wages, working conditions, and other aspects of school operations. Even the Curricula have not been immune from their meddling. We like to say that such unions do not "negotiate" with management. Rather they "negotiate" because they are the management- at least indirectly- in control. These are arguably **corrupt** practices.

Any proposed reform that would change a teacher's role would almost certainly fail. Innovations, such as online self-paced instruction, are often dead on arrival. Given this union resistance, few public systems have been successful in developing promising improvements.

There are many teachers, albeit a minority of them, who would embrace sensible reforms. There is no place where they could go to find supportive school officials when the latter are under the thumbs of the unions. A number of teachers have either left working in the public system or never chose to work there initially. Instead they have chosen to work in private schools where they have somewhat more freedom to act professionally.

Bottom-Up opportunities from union decline.

The good news is that as more and more states have become "right-to-work" states, the power

of unions has been falling significantly. As more schools become charters the number of unionized teachers will further decrease. As vouchers become more commonly used, private schools will grow at the expense of public schools and the unions will lose even more members. Their decline in membership will reduce their political power and many school boards will regain their independence from union intimidation and control.

Once school boards and teachers regain some independence from union favored nostrums, they will be able to research, develop and implement new ideas for school reform.

At the state level, where unions also have had much clout there is the prospect of reducing the “one-size fits all” policies imposed on local communities. That will foster more freedom for further innovations.

Obedient school management has had little freedom to innovate

A good question to ask public school officials is that of who is in charge? The unfortunate answer, as we alluded to in the previous section, is “the teachers’ union.” Where the union dominates school board elections, their candidates win. In turn, their captive school board members hire and fire school superintendents, principals and others.

When parents and other stakeholders want certain reforms, they can’t really ask the school managers to implement them because they don’t answer to such concerned parties. Yes, the parents can approach the school board but if that governing body is under the sway of the unions, there is little that can be accomplished.

You want to end social promotion? You want official testing to be independent of the schools? You want incompetent teachers removed? Good luck getting these leaders interested. They’d rather collect their hefty salaries, which in part pay them to “look the other way,” rather than work to end these- again- arguably **corrupt** practices.

For these administrators and the teachers, there is no economic incentive for them to please the parents. They are not directly paid by the parents and worse many parents have been deceived into thinking the schools are good. So there is little pressure on them from their customers.

Bottom-Up roles for school management.

The good news here is that school management will have greater freedom enabled by the reductions in federal regulations, the decline of union interference, and the introduction of more parental choices among schools and service providers.

This doesn’t mean that management in the public or private schools will have the freedom to impose their ideas. Rather they will have the freedom to respond to market forces as they develop the structure and policies for school operations that will best keep their revenues flowing.

In some sense these school administrators are at the nexus within the public system where competition is engaged. Their policies will depend significantly on what their competitors are doing if they are to maintain or grow their market share.

Relaxed parents have not been vigilant and informed customers

Most parents and many stakeholders have positive views of the schools around them. They know, or more accurately think they know, that many public schools are good. They generally think that private schools are better. We at ASORA know they are wrong.

Some of the more supportive parents participate in PTO or PTA organizations where friendly faces of teachers and other parents lull them into a false sense of appreciation for the school's qualities. Oh, "look at our long honor role," they might say while not telling the parent that the school's testing is easy enough that being on the honor roll is no great achievement.

Our studies of reported performance levels of various kinds of schools have shown that public school systems routinely exaggerate the skill and knowledge levels of their students. Nationally, the average public school system deems twice as many students performing at or above grade level as what the well-respected Nation's Report Card measures. So the typical public system lies.

Then we have the private schools that hide behind their unearned reputations of being much better than public schools. Again, a close review of the Nation's Report Card shows a rough parity between public and private schools when the comparison is done fairly. That is, when these schools are compared for a demographic that is difficult to educate, there is a tie in performance. The specific demographic used is the one of economically disadvantaged students that is defined by eligibility for the Free and Reduced Price meals of the National School Lunch program of the US Department of Agriculture.

The rejoinder to this assertion will likely be that the private school students performed better on the SAT or the ACT. And that a higher percentage was accepted in prestigious colleges. Superficially, these claims are correct. Private schools benefit from the many children who come from families of some means. Those children often learn a great deal in their homes from their usually better than average educated parents.

Very few parents are aware of this poor performance of private schools. So we suspect that private schools keep their performance numbers secret whenever the numbers are modest. It's a silent yet **corrupt** practice whereby many parents of means are separated from their money with little academic benefit going to their children. In the prototypical school guidebook (mentioned above) being made available for your review, we discovered an interesting correlation in studying the estimated student proficiency levels of private schools. For private high schools reporting SAT scores we noticed that their estimated performance levels on the Nation's Report Card were significantly higher than other private high schools not reporting them. It reminds us of the old adage about dirty linen: Don't show it in public. But if your linen is clean or your SAT scores are high then by all means display them publicly.

Bottom-Up roles for concerned parents

Our guidebook project is intended to provide parents and others the information they need to make intelligent choices among schools. We often think of the information provided as the second element of a school voucher program. There should be two components to parental choice in education:

1. Provide the parent the financial means to make a choice of schools for their children.
2. Provide the parent with consumer information allowing them to make an intelligent choice. We call this informational choice. It does not yet exist except as our prototype.

Our studies suggest that almost all school voucher programs, whether funded publicly or privately, suffer from parents making uninformed choices. Research on the effectiveness of school vouchers has shown minor benefits and only black children benefited in a statistically significant way. Think of it this way: The parent takes the voucher to enroll the child in a private school that they think is better than the public school attended before. But, as we know, the private school is, on average, no better than the public school. So the child is moved to a school where there is little additional benefit.

If this 2nd component of parental choice is provided then the parent can seek out those private schools that actually perform better than the previous school. That should not only help the parent but it should introduce more energetic competition among the schools. That competition would likely lead to improvements in both the private and public schools. Now that would be a real “race to the top!”

Not every parent will have a voucher to use. But when parents know about school quality they can put political pressure on the public schools when they see poor performance.

Probably more important than choosing a different school is the option for a student to receive some external independent testing followed by supplemental instruction when that student needs help to achieve grade level performance.

Parents will probably make good choices once they are aware of the degradation in their schools. They will be more active in the educational management of their children. We think every parent of a school child should regard themselves as a homeschooling parent. But not necessarily in the sense of doing homeschooling in their home. Rather they can become the managers of each child’s education by taking an active role in monitoring their skill levels and then seeking remedial help when it is needed.

Students aren’t working hard enough to master their subjects.

Shouldn’t the students act responsibly as they work to acquire the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed after high school graduation? Gauging the culpability of students for the lackluster schools they attend is difficult because they are the most innocent of the participants in K-12 education.

But there are things students can be encouraged to do. Playing educational games, particularly ones that are competitive, can help them acquire skills. Some students like the idea of showing off their skills in various areas. Why not consider academic contests that would help them acquire mastery of skills? The more competitive students might realize that their school is not challenging them enough. They could complain.

Bottom-Up roles for students

In the end, students can't really do much to improve the schools. But they can become aware of some of the problems and maybe "push" the system at the margins in the right directions. They can be partners with their parents keeping track of the events at school and giving valuable feedback to their parents who are the ones really in charge or should be in that role.

Such as the true story from the 1970's in a California 2nd grade classroom where a boy came home and complained to the parents that the teacher told them $3 + 4 = 8$ when he knew the answer was wrong. In that case the teacher was eventually fired.

Religious organizations often don't see the harm K-12 schools do to them.

Churches and other religious organizations in our communities generally support American traditions and culture. As such they frequently have positive attitudes towards the schools in their communities. They obviously play a role in the education of their members' children.

Historically, some denominations developed their own schools to ensure their children received academic, religious and ethical instruction consistent with their beliefs. Catholics have done this more than the others though Episcopalians, Lutherans, Baptists and many independent churches have also run their own schools. Some, such as Methodists and Presbyterians, rarely if ever operate schools at the K-12 levels. Overall, the number of schools operated by religious organizations is small. In Rhode Island and Massachusetts we count approximately 100 high schools with a religious affiliation out of approximately 3000 religious congregations. That's about 3%. Why so small?

Part of the explanation comes from the fact that public schools were essentially protestant Christian schools in their early history. Over their existence in the United States, now getting close to 200 years, public schools have evolved to become more secular. No longer are prayers recited in them. Some have even abandoned the Pledge of Allegiance. Given that the public schools traditionally taught ethical and moral principles consistent with many of the various churches' teachings, churches felt comfortable with their members' children attending them. But that was then.

Now the public schools have been pushed into the politically progressive and agnostic realm to such an extent that their teachings often contradict what the religious beliefs hold to be true. As many churches and other religious organizations are losing membership, part of the explanation may be related to their loss of children and young adults to other creeds and philosophies.

Bottom-Up roles for religious congregations

What can a congregation or denomination do to correct these trends? One obvious answer: start your own school. But that might not be feasible. There are measures that can help however. Add a component to the religious education that counters contradictory messages being taught in the secular schools. Teach some history when the schools are calling Thomas Jefferson's reputation into question, calling Columbus a murderer or even calling Lincoln a liar. And deal with political correctness- of whatever stripe- when it tries to impose one line of

political thinking to the exclusion of the others.

Or if that's is not possible, maybe just have a sermon or two alerting parents to the troubles? In that vein religious groups can also consult parents to help them understand the problems in their schools. Give them advice similar to what our planned guidebooks will suggest. If you are in Rhode Island or Massachusetts, buy one or more of our guidebooks for your church library! Depending on community details, the local schools may be your adversaries. Or they may be drifting in a politically unfriendly direction and may need a nudge or course correction. And when it comes to public schools, churches and other religious groups should consider becoming politically active in educational issues. Encourage someone to run for school board. Elect friendly faces to the town council or the legislature. Elect folks who will push public education in what you see as a healthy direction.

Many “pro-education” volunteer and civic groups are not helpful

Kiwanis and Chambers of Commerce come to mind. These are among a number of civic organizations, with chapters at the community level, that are friendly to private and public schools in their areas. Yet many of them remain unaware of the problems within the schools.

In an effort to be friendly to all sides, some of these organizations involve public school officials in their leadership, as is often the case among Chambers of Commerce. These organizations help their local schools usually according to the requests of those schools. They typically refrain from any kinds of investigations or research into problems within the schools.

When ASORA approached Chambers of Commerce about sponsoring a county level guidebook to schools for their areas, not one expressed interest or even curiosity. It is hoped that some of these organizations will take interest in such projects in the future. They may be inspired and encouraged by the new administration in Washington?

Bottom-Up roles for civic groups

Study the status quo in your communities. Get good data on school performance and characteristics for your local schools. If you are in Rhode Island or Massachusetts you can work with ASORA to produce its guidebooks like the prototypical one available now on this website. If you're elsewhere, hire us to help you produce a guidebook or perform related work.

Educational service firms fear the educational establishment.

ASORA has been offering its data and statistics to educational service firms that could use this information in contrast marketing. This data shows which schools are weaker and which are stronger. Surely that could be used by a tutoring service to advertise its offerings. Of the hundreds of firms contacted, not one expressed interest. Public relations experts told ASORA that most of these firms have contracts with public school systems and do not want to compete with those patrons. Nor do we know of any such firms using similar kinds of data to market themselves. This behavior has many descriptives among others: “Go along to get along,” “Don't bite the hand that feeds you,” “Play nice,” and “Don't rock the boat.”

For-profit schools are also education service firms. Like the others meekly going about their work, ASORA was met with silence when we proposed that an operator of for-profit schools use our data for purposes of contrast marketing.

Bottom-Up roles within the education industry

Individual companies providing educational services to K-12 education should try competition. Now that the educrats are losing power there is less chance that they will retaliate if you use aggressive but honest contrast marketing. If you are the only such firm advertising in such an energetic fashion, it is you who will be gaining market share. Soon the others will catch on.

Investors of all stripes should reconsider their reluctance to enter this economic sector. There are all kinds of business plans seeking investors but few if any have been funded. ASORA, for example, has one for franchising novel schools. No one has expressed interest in its proposals nor has hardly anyone invested in other novel plans.

What Is ASORA Doing About This?

ASORA has always been engaged in much pro bono work. In recent years the contract services we had been offering found little interest. In fact, we suspended our business activities in 2014 awaiting better circumstances.

Those better circumstances may be here. The many factors mentioned above will allow considerably more freedom for commercial activity in this sector.

We have decided to focus our attention in our own region here in New England. Pro bono work will be restricted to Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Our commercial efforts will be focused here as well. That is not to say that we are discouraging more remote collaborations, contracts and speaking engagements; we still solicit those.

The players in the education industry do not really need a national scale to be competitive. Working more locally can still be profitable. The United States Constitution, by its silence, also considers education activities something regional rather than national. When we work at, let's say, the state level we can compete against other states as well as against competitors in our own localities.

For example, ASORA's guidebook projects are state based or regional. If we succeed with our first publications, then we'll have the experience and resources to develop others. If we succeed, others will imitate and compete with us. If our guidebook projects prosper, the benefits will be profitable to us and profitable to K-12 education: A win-win situation.