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How to end the education reform wars?

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak to you today. I know that some of you are wondering what the folks at the Council were thinking in inviting me. Certainly there are a lot of angry people on Twitter wondering that. I hope that by the end of my talk, it might make a little more sense.

The title of my talk is “How to End the Education Reform Wars.” But as I’ve thought more about it, I’ve decided that this isn’t exactly the right title. That’s because you, as superintendents, don’t have it within your control to end this war. That’s because it’s not really about you. Especially here in New York, it seems clear to me that it’s a war between the Governor and the unions, as well as between the reformers and the unions. It’s also a fight between the Governor and Mayor de Blasio.

So the real question is how can you navigate these wars? A better title for my speech might be, “How to Survive the Education Reform Wars?” And how can you do so in a way that allows you to do good work for kids?

With all due respect, let me suggest three principles that might guide your advocacy work—to stand up for what’s right for kids, while distancing yourself from the worst instincts of the unions:

1. Be the voice of the sane, sensible center.
2. Grab the ball—and run with it.
3. Demand charter-like freedoms

1. Be the voice of the sane and sensible center

Like so many debates in our politics today, we are witnessing a battle between two extreme ideological views. On the one side are the unions and some on the left, like my former comrade in arms Diane Ravitch. These folks are saying that there’s basically nothing schools can do in the face of America’s growing poverty. That schools are doing the best they can, given their challenges.

I don’t believe that. I don’t believe that you believe that. If it were true, why would the public invest in public education? If it’s hopeless? And do we really believe that every single public school system, every single public school, every single teacher is hitting it

out of the park every single day? We know we could be doing better. We know that there were years when we had desperately low standards in our hiring procedures—and some of those folks are still in our classrooms. We know that the textbook publishers have been peddling junk for decades. We know that the politics have kept us from always doing what's right for kids. We know this.

But on the other side, some of the reformers have equally extreme views. They say that public schools are failing unless each and every one of their graduates are college AND career ready. Each and every one.

Well.

Keep in mind that our highest performing state, Massachusetts, gets only fifty percent of students to that lofty standard. Should we aim to get more students college and career ready? Absolutely. Do I believe that the Common Core standards, if faithfully implemented, will help? Absolutely. Is a school failing if it doesn't get every single student to that lofty standard? Of course not.

Let me say a few words about this. As many of you know, I'm one of the strongest supporters of the Common Core out there. I'm the conservative they send to red states to testify and urge other Republicans not to drop these standards. And I support these standards because they are pegged to success for our young people—success in college or a good paying job.

That's important because our earlier standards were set so low that they were sending false signals to kids and to parents that all was well, when it wasn't. That kids were on track, when they weren't. You know this. Those old standards and tests were set at such a low level that you could be reading or doing math at the 20th or 30th percentile nationally and be considered proficient.

So we had all of these kids going through the system, passing their classes, getting good grades, and passing the state tests with flying colors, getting their diplomas. And then they'd get to a community college and only then did anyone have the guts to tell them they weren't ready for college. Had to take one or two or three math classes or writing classes before they could even start. And it was too late.

Most of those kids, especially low-income kids, never make it out of remedial education. They drop out. Now they are 20 years old, have no academic credential, weak academic skills, no job skills, no job experience, they've got nothing but debt. What a way to start your life as an adult.

So I think it's critical important—a moral imperative, really—to tell the truth to kids and parents about whether they are on track for college and career success.

But let me be clear: It's one thing to tell the truth. It's another thing to set a pollyanish goal, like we did with No Child Left Behind. We used to say that all kids would be “proficient” under NCLB. Now we're saying that all kids will be college and career ready.

No, they won't be. We're not going to go from 30 or 40 percent of the kids to 100 percent of the kids, at least not anytime soon.

More kids, yes. All kids, no.

What this means for policy is that we've got to stop grading schools primarily based on the percentage of

kids who hit the new standards. Because we know that penalizes schools whose kids are starting out way, way behind. Instead we've got to focus primarily on individual student growth over time. Your job as educators is to help students—all students—make as much progress as they can while under your care. That's what's in your control.

Now, here's the sobering part. Even when we look at growth instead of proficiency rates, we still find that there are plenty of failing schools out there, especially failing high poverty schools. In Ohio, where we at Fordham do on the ground work, we find that if you look at the so-called failing schools, based on proficiency rates, about 25 percent of them are actually doing a helluva job with student growth. And it's shameful for anyone to label those schools as failing. They are the opposite of failing. They deserve recognition and resources and our praise.

Still, that means that three quarters of the so called failing schools really are failing. They are low-proficiency and low growth schools. We can't put lipstick on that pig.

My suggestion for you: Advocate for measuring school performance based on growth. If the state won't do it right, ask your association to do it for you. Put out your own school report cards. Push back when some reformers claim that low-proficiency, high growth schools are failing. But don't shy from calling out the truly failing schools out there, and demanding that they be closed or turned around. You might find that you gain a lot of credibility.

Here's another example where you can seize the sensible center: Career and Technical Education. When did we decide that it was a good idea to let our CTE programs wither on the vine? To push all kids into quote "college prep"? As I said earlier, it's not working. We're shuffling lots of kids through so-called college prep classes in high school, and then warehousing them in remedial education in college. Not working.

Why aren't we willing to give our young people real options in high school—either a real college-prep program or a high quality CTE program? The best CTE programs, like Career Academies, tend to do a better job with both career skills and academic skills,

and create a glide path for students into postsecondary education of the technical variety. Long term outcomes are very promising, especially for low-income students and African American boys. Kids who go through these programs tend to get MORE postsecondary education, get paid more, and are even more likely to get married.

So what's the problem? Some reformers will accuse you of "tracking" students if you offer these programs. And no doubt, there's an ugly history of tracking in this country, of pushing kids into vocational programs based on their race or class. But let's not be held hostage to ideological concerns today. High quality CTE opens doors, it doesn't close them. Seize the sensible center.

Or on school discipline. We are watching our education system swing from the madness that is "zero tolerance" to the madness that is "zero tolerance for ever suspending or expelling students." Sure, let's keep suspensions and expulsions to a minimum. But let's not pretend that there are easy solutions for chronically disruptive students. Let's not ignore the needs of their peers, the kids who come to school every day wanting to learn. Let's not

pretend that there won't be significant costs to these students if teachers feel pressure to keep disruptive kids in their classrooms. Seize the sensible center.

Suggestion #2: Ask for the ball—and then run with it.

As I've indicated, you have plenty of reasons to be frustrated with reformers, especially the more ideologically strident among us.

But let me level with you: We're frustrated with you too. For sure, we understand that your hands are often tied by union contracts, state regulations, and more. I'll get to that in a bit. But we do see examples of areas where you are not taking advantage of the authority you DO have to do right by kids. My friend Rick Hess writes about Cage Busting Leaders. Some of those cages are of your own design.

The number-one example, of course, is around teacher evaluations. This whole national push for teacher evaluations came about because research showed that the vast majority of teachers were being given glowing evaluations. And it was clear that in many schools, those evaluations were not being treated seriously. Principals

did a couple of fly-by observations a year, and that was it. It wasn't enough to provide good feedback to teachers, and it sure wasn't enough to identify teachers who might need to be encouraged to leave the classroom.

Now, I have more sympathy for you than most reformers. As I see it, you'd have to be crazy as a principal in New York State to give your teachers bad evaluations. Because in New York State, it's damn near impossible to actually fire a teacher. So if that's the case, why make an enemy by giving a bad evaluation? It's better to work the system to send that teacher somewhere else. Until and unless lawmakers here in Albany decide they want to make it significantly easier to fire a teacher, they better get used to seeing reports of lots of glowing evaluations.

And the Governor's proposal? It's insane. It's moving in the exact opposite direction of teacher evaluation systems everywhere else, including in places with muscular reform leaders, like in Washington DC, where we've learned from experience that test scores should make up less, not more, of a teachers' evaluation.

But here's where you CAN take the ball and run with it. Here's where you CAN seize the sensible center: Evaluating probationary teachers, and moving the low performing ones out of the classroom.

It is completely within your authority today to refuse tenure to new teachers who aren't making the grade. And we know from rigorous research that most teachers who struggle as newbies will struggle as veterans. Move them out of the profession while you can. Joel Klein showed this was possible in New York City, and it's made a huge difference in teacher effectiveness and student achievement. You can do this too.

Yes, it's hard. You have to recruit more teachers. You have to have solid evaluation systems. You have to train your principals. You have to encourage them to have some guts. But there are no barriers from the unions or state policy that I know of. It's within your control. And it could make a huge difference.

Grab that ball and run with it.

Another example: How you manage your school leadership pipeline. All of this teacher evaluation craziness, in my opinion, is an attempt to principal proof

our schools. To go around our principals. Because many lawmakers, and teachers, and reformers agree that today's principals aren't up to the job of leading.

I think it's crazy to try to principal proof our schools. How are we possibly going to succeed at school reform if we try to go around the leaders of our schools?

But they do have a point that in many places, our approach to identifying and grooming future principals is laughable. We did a study on this last year, and found that in many urban districts at least, there basically was no process. Teachers, on their own, decided whether to go for their master's in educational leadership. These degrees were subsidized by the district but nobody went out of their way to encourage particular teachers to go for it. And then, when there was a principal opening, it was posted, and the district just waited for people to apply.

Folks, this is not how most sectors today do these things. In high performing organizations, leaders are on the lookout for junior folks with leadership potential. They build leadership development programs. They start grooming them years before positions open up. They build a real pipeline.

You could do this too. Grab the ball and run with it.

Point Number Three: On Charters: Don't Fight 'Em, Join 'Em

Finally, charter schools. Now, you know that I'm a fan of charter schools, and some of you think I shouldn't have been invited here today because of that. Fair enough.

But the reason I support charter schools is because they are a solution to the problem created by lawmakers here in Albany, and other state capitals, and by the unions. The problem is the Gordian Knot: the layer upon layer of red tape that makes life so hard for you, that makes it so hard to maneuver, to try new things, to innovate, to get the right people on your team, to get results.

Every year the problem seems to get worse and worse. Especially in New York. We at the Fordham Institute did a study on education regulations a few years ago, and New York had the most red tape of the five big states we studied. More than California! Now that's saying something.

The notion with charter schools is that the only way to cut this Gordian Knot is to start fresh, to opt out of the regulatory framework, and the union contract framework, entirely. And create a whole new paradigm.

And if you are frustrated by comparisons between your schools—your over regulated, hyper unionized schools, and the autonomous charter sector—you are right to be. But here's my advice: Don't fight em, join em. Ask for similar freedoms. Ask for similar autonomies. And if that fails, use chartering to advance your own goals. Stop fighting with one hand tied behind your back—tied up with red tape. Cut the ties. Come out swinging.

So there you have it.

Seize the sensible center.
Grab the ball and run with it.
And demand charter-like freedoms.

This may or may not end the Ed Reform Wars. But it will help you navigate them, and, most importantly, do right by your students.

Thank you.