

At two separate points in our history, the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American schools have been vocationalized. Among the civic, academic, and moral goals that have historically guided tax-supported public schools, one became primary: preparing students for the ever-changing workplace. Twice in the past, business-led coalitions forged political alliances among public officials, union leaders, educators, and parents. Fearing foreign competition for their share of the global market, they turned to schools to develop an efficient workforce that would give American international trade an edge and ultimately fuel prosperity. In both cases, these reformers believed that schools should be modeled after the corporation and the marketplace. In these two periods of reform, business involvement in U.S. public schools was sustained and influential in changing school goals, governance, management, organization, and curriculum. But, surprisingly, business support has done little to alter dominant classroom practices.

For corporate leaders so committed to enhancing their firms' profits, the "bottom line," classroom teaching and learning has become their educational bottom line. But it is precisely here that the impact of business-led coalitions has had little influence. How can that be?

Business interest in schools has largely involved private individuals and groups drawn from a variety of large, middle-sized, and small businesses. No monolithic business community, "Big Business," has shaped and steered U.S. public schools. Of course, corporate elites have existed (and continue to exist) in the United States. And, yes, private businesses are highly organized and possess political resources that many other interest groups lack. But the diversity of business involvement (multinational Fortune 500 companies, regional and national business associations, and local chambers of commerce) in a wide range of school reform activities has been far more typical than any narrowly based group of individual corporate leaders who have sought single-mindedly to change U.S. schools in the past or now.

Since the founding of tax-supported public schools in the mid-nineteenth century, educators, public officials, and a broad band of business leaders (but by no means all) have worked together to improve schooling. These political alliances saw schools as economically important in producing a literate workforce that could help companies compete in the marketplace. They believed

that more and better schooling would not only build citizens but also bolster the economy.

Over the past century, businesses have started schools, helped educators manage, donated cash and equipment, persuaded children and teachers of the importance of a market economy, and subsidized programs aimed at enhancing teacher knowledge and skills. In the policy arena, business leaders formed coalitions of like-minded executives to lobby state and federal legislators to enact particular education bills.

In the 1880s and 1890s, top industrialists expressed strong fears that U.S. products were losing ground to those made in Britain and Germany. When American business leaders traveled to Germany to determine how the country had so quickly become a world trade rival to Great Britain, they often pointed to the fact that German technical schools were graduating highly skilled workers.

In the years prior to World War I, an alliance evolved among American business leaders, top public officials, unions, and progressive educators who were highly critical of traditional schooling. Teachers talked most of the time; children listened, read the textbooks, and recited answers to their teachers. By contrast, progressive educators wanted teachers to involve students in planning what to study and to have students learn by working on real-life projects. Other reformers sought to copy the successes of German technical education. By 1910, different reformers came together in the vocational education movement. Yet progressive classroom reforms became subordinate to the larger goal of preparing workers for an industrial economy that could secure a larger share of global markets.

Fears of foreign economic competition and the belief that vocationally driven American schools could strengthen the domestic economy led business leaders to privately fund vocational schools and then coax school boards to take over their funding and operation. In 1917, the vocational education coalition for the first time succeeded in securing federal subsidies for industrial courses in American schools. But this introduction of vocational education into U.S. schools was far from the only influence that this business-led alliance had on schooling.

Many political and educational reformers, even while condemning business-

men as robber barons, admired their insistence on scientific efficiency and professional management. A new breed of reform-minded educators, attracted to the higher social status that corporate leaders had attained, saw strong parallels between running a business and a school system.

These school reformers borrowed heavily from the values, language, organization, and governance of corporate leaders and applied them to schools. "Administrative progressives," as these reformers have been called, detested the large, politically appointed school boards of fifty to one hundred members who put friends and relatives into teaching and principal positions and took company bribes to buy their textbooks. They wanted nonpartisan elections and smaller, appointed school boards that prized efficiency and professionally trained managers. They sought nonpolitical boards of directors just like those running corporations. By 1930, this wing of progressive reformers had converted most school boards into smaller, businesslike operations with modern managerial practices divorced from partisan politics.

Thus, between 1880 and 1930 major domestic economic changes and U.S. expansion into world markets had much influence on public schooling. Corporate leaders and business associations viewed schools as crucial in producing a trained workforce that would strengthen American international competitiveness. They started private vocational schools and secured federal funding for vocational courses in secondary schools. By 1930, most urban secondary schools had vocational guidance counselors and a separate vocational track; many cities had separate vocational high schools. Instruction in these classes differed distinctly from that of academic courses. Teachers had students actively involved in designing, making, repairing, and completing real-life work projects that had apparent cash value outside of school.

Moreover, school reformers had adopted the corporate model of efficient school governance. They moved from large, politically appointed school boards and untrained administrators to small, elected boards filled with business and civic-minded laypersons who hired professionally trained experts to run their schools. This pattern continued into the late twentieth century when the second major instance of business involvement in schools occurred.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the decline of U.S. workplace productivity, rising unemployment, losses in market share to Japan and Germany, and swift

changes in technologies led corporate leaders and public officials to try to determine reasons for the poor performance of the American economy. Within a few years, a crescendo of criticism over high school graduates unprepared for the workplace, poor scores on national tests, violence in urban schools, and the flight of white middle-class families from cities to suburbs fixed blame on American public schools. Corporate and public officials organized political action groups called Business Roundtables to attack the problem of inefficient and ineffective schools.

By 1983, a presidential commission of corporate and public leaders and educators had reported their assessment of public schools in "A Nation At Risk." This report crystallized the growing sense of unease with public schooling in the business community by tightly coupling mediocre student performance on national and international tests to mediocre economic performance in the global marketplace.

Following publication of "A Nation At Risk," state after state increased high school graduation requirements, lengthened the school year, and added more tests. In 1989, in an unprecedented act President George Bush convened the fifty governors to discuss education. They called for six national goals (later expanded to eight), one of which asked American students to rank first on international tests in math and science by the year 2000. Throughout the 1990s, states mandated curricular and performance standards, new tests, and accountability of principals, teachers, and students for test scores. Instead of seeking high school graduates with industrial and craft skills that an earlier generation of business-led reformers wanted, the agenda now called for tougher academic courses and higher test scores on national and international tests for all students, not just those going on to college.

Three key assumptions drove this alliance of public officials, corporate leaders, and educators. The first held that in the same way the economy becomes more efficient and prosperous when businesses compete freely in the marketplace and consumers make choices among varied products, public schools would become more efficient and effective if they competed with one another and gave parents choices of where to send their children. The second maintained that in an information-based economy, students will perform better in the workplace if they have taken rigorous academic subjects, especially math

and science. The final assumption was that although schools, unlike businesses, show no profits and losses—no bottom line—at the end of the year, standardized test scores measure what has been learned and can roughly predict how future employees will perform in the workplace.

Given these assumptions, reformers designed solutions that essentially copied business practices. The corporate formula for success was crisp: set clear goals and high standards for employees. Restructure operations so that managers and employees who actually make the product decide how it is to be done efficiently and effectively. Then hold those managers and employees responsible for the quality of the product by rewarding those who meet or exceed their goals and punishing those who fail.

Top corporate leaders and Business Roundtables claimed that these strategies had worked for Ford Motor Company, IBM, Xerox, Hewlett-Packard, and scores of other firms. If schools pursued these changes, they could revolutionize public schooling.

How does this corporate model of success fit nearly fifteen thousand school boards where lay citizens—not experts—make policy in public sessions, tell professionals what they must do, and declare no dividend to stockholders at the end of the fiscal quarter? Despite the substantial differences between public school governance and businesses, a number of measures recommended by business alliances are now common in schools today: establish clear national goals and high academic standards; give parents choices among schools; let schools compete for students; test students often; tell parents and taxpayers exactly how their children and schools are doing on these tests by issuing periodic report cards; recognize and reward those staff members, students, and schools that meet goals; shame and punish those that fail to meet the standards; and reduce costs by contracting out certain tasks to private firms.

Borrowing heavily from the private sector, this formula for public school improvement crossed political party lines. Since the early 1980s, both Republican and Democratic presidents have endorsed this strategy and directed federal education officials to support it. State governors and legislatures have moved swiftly to establish curricular standards, measure performance through standardized tests, and hold teachers and administrators responsible for student

outcomes on these tests with such devices as cash payments and takeovers of failing schools and districts.

Parents' choices in selecting their children's schools have also expanded dramatically in recent years. Private companies now run public schools. More than two thousand independent charter schools exist. A few state-designed experiments give vouchers or checks to parents for use in private schools. In short, the corporate model of market competition, choice, and accountability has been largely copied by districts and states and has spread swiftly.

The wholesale application of a business model for success is only part of the private-sector influence on public schools. Other administrative influences are apparent as well. Managerial strategies derived from business include contracting school functions to private firms and importing "Total Quality Management" from the private sector. Schools now use technology for improved communication, resource management, and to aid teaching and learning. The rapid spread of computers in public schools in less than two decades has reduced the national number of students per computer from over 125 in the early 1980s to about 9 in 1998. Commercialization of curriculum and instruction has expanded. Channel One television, which is now in one-quarter of all high schools, displays ads in exchange for supplying free equipment; schools receive funds for signing exclusive contracts on selling soft drinks and for selling advertising space.

Missing from this inventory of business influences is teaching and learning. Have business approaches altered what routinely occurs in classrooms between teachers and students? Apart from the commercialization of some instructional materials, Channel One television, and other business influences, it is difficult to determine whether teachers now teach differently than they did before the early 1980s, when private-sector involvement in America's public schools began to build.

The few studies that have been done about teaching and learning in actual classrooms before the 1980s and since confirm that dominant patterns of teacher-centered instruction in both elementary and secondary schools have remained stable. If anything, the impact of standards-based performance and accountability for test score improvement has hardened these traditional

teaching practices. Once-flourishing progressive classroom approaches such as portfolios, project-based teaching, and performance-based testing that blossomed between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for example, have since shriveled under the unrelenting pressure for higher test scores.

As a consequence of almost two decades of business involvement through philanthropy, partnerships, and imitation of corporate practices, public schools have become more businesslike in governance, management, and organization. As school districts have come to prize business savvy, big-city school boards have abandoned educators and chosen from the ranks of former CEOs, top military officers, and high government officials. More competition exists among public schools. Parents have far more choices among schools than they did a quarter century ago.

Moreover, in the last twenty years, the political alliance of business leaders, public officials, and educators has succeeded in standardizing the academic curriculum and requiring it of all students. Vocational courses aimed at equipping students to move directly into the workplace have largely withered away, replaced by a trend toward vocationalizing all academic subjects—that is, every student must take so many years of English, social studies, math, and science to prepare for the workplace. The one exception to all of these changes is in classroom teaching itself; if anything, reformers have ended up strengthening traditional instructional practices while weakening progressive ones.

Kindergartens have become increasingly more academic to prepare children for the first grade; middle schools have become increasingly more like high schools; and vocational education courses have steadily declined as high schools have become increasingly college preparatory. Ensuring that American schools produce fully prepared graduates who can perform well in the workplace has led to an intense concentration on achieving high test scores in academic skills and subjects and a hardening of already dominant patterns of teacher-centered instruction. In effect, a single model of good teaching and good schools has emerged as a political orthodoxy from this concentration on harnessing public schools to the economy.

Finally, the ironies of corporate influence have become visible. A century ago, popular support for major reforms in school governance, organization, curriculum, and instruction made business leaders into administrative and

pedagogical progressives. In those decades, corporate leaders promoted more vocational courses and fewer academic courses, more hands-on learning than reading from books, and more real-life experiences rather than listening to teachers. That political coalition succeeded in adding vocational education to the curriculum. Although learning-by-doing classroom practices were limited, business leaders maintained that there was more than one version of good teaching and good schools.

Now, a century later, the coalition of business leaders, public officials, and educators say that more and tougher academic subjects equip graduates with essential knowledge and skills not only to perform well in an information-based workplace but also to secure America's global economic supremacy. Reformers called for and got a uniform academic curriculum that all students take at the price of eliminating vocational subjects. Reformers demanded and received more tests; now teachers, using traditional methods of teaching, spend more time with students preparing for tests, and students who fail these tests are left back for another year or don't graduate. Some teachers who were following progressive practices in their classrooms continue to use them, but many have forsaken their beliefs, and others have adopted practices they find distasteful.

What business minded reformers sought in the school curriculum, tests, and accountability has largely been achieved in current state and local policies and programs at the cost of freezing the very teaching practices that an earlier generation of business-led reformers severely criticized.

So I return to where I began. Fear of foreign competition and fiercely held beliefs that education harnessed to the economy will strengthen the nation's global competitive position prompted sustained and influential political involvement by a variety of business leaders twice in the past century. Although business-led alliances have been limited in what they could achieve, particularly in shaping what occurs in classrooms, many documented changes in public schooling can be attributed to the involvement of corporate leaders, especially the hammering of alternative versions of good teaching and good schools into one mold for all students.

And what do these changes amount to? Given the sparse evidence, very little. No one can say for sure whether increased choice and competition have improved students' academic performance. The scanty evidence available on

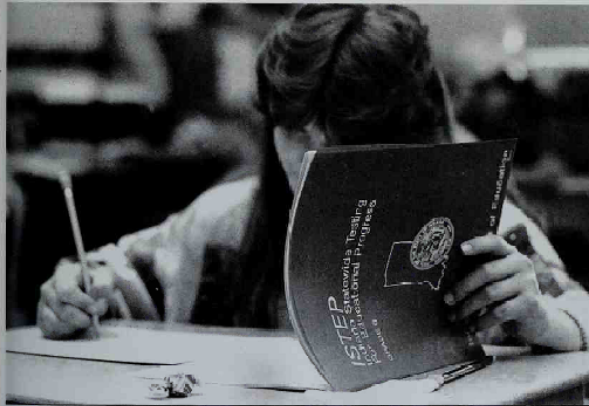
whether standardized test scores are connected to job performance suggests that they are not linked. The idea that businesses need high school graduates who have taken more math and science to perform effectively in work has not been studied much, and what evidence exists raises serious doubts about this popular connection. Finally, where the bottom line matters in schooling—the classroom—no one knows for certain whether all the testing, all the required courses, and all the penalties and rewards get teachers to teach better and students to learn more.

Even more damning are questions omitted from current political agendas for school reform. In what ways does turning schooling into a consumer product, no different from candy bars and cars, undermine the common good that tax-supported public schools historically served? Do schools geared to preparing workers also build literate, active, and morally sensitive citizens who carry out their civic duties? How can schools develop independently thinking citizens who earn their living in corporate workplaces? What happens when the economy hiccups, unemployment increases, and graduates have little money to secure higher education or find a job matched to their skills? Will public schools, now an arm of the economy, get blamed—as they have in the past—for creating the mismatch? These basic questions, unasked by business-inspired reform coalitions over the past century, go unanswered today.

A Nation at Risk?

You can't teach a child how to think unless
you have something for him to think about.

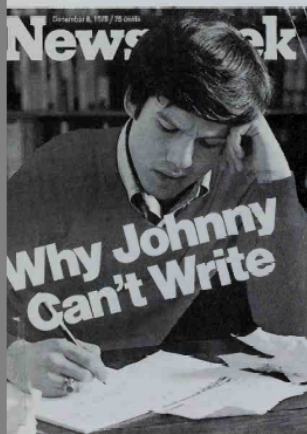
GEORGE H. MEYER



Indiana student takes statewide assessment exam, 1988.

By the 1980s, education in the United States had reached unprecedented levels. Almost the entire school-age population was enrolled. More than 71 percent of seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school, and the majority continued on to college. But to some, including President Ronald Reagan, these numbers masked widespread problems. "Our educational system is in the grips of a crisis caused by low standards, lack of purpose, and a failure to strive for excellence," Reagan said in 1981, as he launched a campaign for reform. "Our agenda is to restore quality to education by increasing competition and by strengthening parental choice and local control."

A "learning crisis" is declared by politicians and the press in the mid-1970s and early 1980s.



Reports of a "learning crisis" by politicians and the press would forever change the way Americans perceived their schools. And they would open the door to free-market reforms that challenged basic ideals of public education, while introducing concepts such as consumer choice and economic competition.

Traditionally, America's public schools had aimed to educate citizens to live in a democracy. They were the melting pot in which immigrants embraced the American dream. And they were at the forefront of the struggle for equality. In the 1980s and 1990s, schools were also asked to compete in a business-driven world where one thing mattered: the bottom line.

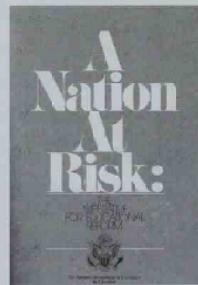
School: 1980-2090

The twentieth century's final wave of school reform began with a 1983 report to President Reagan titled "A Nation At Risk." Commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, the report said that the poor quality of America's schools posed a threat to the welfare of the country. Historian David Tyack summarizes: "It said, 'Look, we are going to hell in a handbasket. If some foreign power had done to us educationally what we have done to ourselves'—said the report—'then we would consider it an act of war.'" The language "built up and up and up," Tyack adds. "And that fit the mood of the Reagan years. . . . It was a text for the times."

The statistics compiled for the report seemed to indicate a shocking drop in test scores and student achievement. More than 40 percent of students, "A Nation At Risk" said, were unprepared either for work or for college. Yet many educators cried foul, citing other evidence that showed more students doing better academically.

Left: President Ronald Reagan meets at the White House with the National Commission on Excellence in Education, authors of "A Nation At Risk," in 1983.

Right: "A Nation At Risk," the 1983 report that launched the twentieth century's final wave of school reform.



A Nation at Risk?

cally than ever before. As author Nicholas Lemann notes, “The best source of data to counteract ‘A Nation At Risk’ is probably NAEP—the National Assessment of Education Progress—which goes back for at least a couple of decades before that and just doesn’t show this dire picture of steady decline. It shows things, you know, slowly rising.” Historian Carl Kaestle agrees, “Not only is it not true that there has been a great decline since that time,” he says, “but it is also true that we are educating a much wider proportion of our population now than we were in the 1950s.”

In addition, many educators disagreed with comments made by Reagan in 1983, in which he suggested that civil rights enforcement had hurt basic education over the previous two decades. “The schools were charged by the federal courts with leading in the correcting of long standing injustices in our society,” Reagan said. “Racial segregation. Sex discrimination. Lack of opportunity for the handicapped. Perhaps there was just too much to do in too little time.” In fact, says historian James Anderson, “groups that had lagged way behind and had not had access to good public education were making significant strides during the same time period. And so in some ways, our schools were doing a better job in important areas than they had ever done historically, and yet all of that was lost because of our concern over the economy, which we blamed on the schools.”

The U.S. economy faced new threats from global competitors. The auto industry, for example, had been losing ground to Japanese manufacturers since the 1970s. As had happened in the 1950s

after the Soviets beat the Americans into space, blame was placed on American schooling. The authors of "A Nation At Risk" claimed that economic security depended on education reform. They recommended higher standards for graduation, more courses in traditional subjects and in the new field of "computer science," a longer school day and school year, and more homework. At the same time, the federal government was scaling back its role in education and shifting the burden of these reforms to state and local authorities. They, in turn, cracked down on students. And to ensure that students were meeting these new standards, an era of high-stakes testing was born.

While many debated the dire conclusions of "A Nation At Risk," few argued that reform was needed in some schools. This was especially true in the nation's cities, where per-pupil spending might be as low as a third of what it was in nearby suburbs. But without additional funding, how could these schools improve? Some reformers believed that one solution was to apply business strategies, such as consumer choice and economic competition. "You want to improve public education?" says John Colle, founder and chairman of Education Alternatives, Inc., a for-profit company. "The way to do it is compete with them. Allow them the chance to compete with private enterprise, and vice versa. That's the way you're going to make public education better."

Injecting competition into America's urban school systems was the strategy behind an experiment already under way in East Harlem, a school district of 14,000 mostly low-income students in New



Deborah Meier, founder and former principal of Central Park East Schools in East Harlem, New York City, pioneered the idea of twenty students per class and twenty teachers per school.

York City. In the mid-1970s, East Harlem ranked last among New York's thirty-two school districts. "It was consistently thirty-second," notes Seymour Fliegel, a school administrator in East Harlem at the time. "It didn't move to thirty-one or thirty. So there was a tremendous advantage to being at the bottom. You can afford to be a risk taker."

In 1974, educators in East Harlem asked some of the district's best teachers to create small, alternative public schools, carving space as needed within existing buildings. "My first reaction was, 'You must be kidding,'" says Deborah Meier, founder and former principal of East Harlem's Central Park East Schools. "I had never heard of anybody offering to do that in the public system. And it was the beginning of a very bold and exciting experiment.

School: 1980-2009

188



Within ten years, East Harlem went from having twenty schools to having fifty-two schools in the same buildings." Each school had its own focus and style, notes Fliegel. "So you had the open ed, progressive schools. We had some highly traditional schools; at the Frederick Douglass Academy they [wore] uniforms. We had three math and science schools. We had a maritime school, we had a sports school, we had a writing school, two performing-arts schools. Keep in mind, though, the goals were always the same: raising academic achievement. The themes were different ways to motivate the youngsters to get there."

By 1982, educators in East Harlem required that all junior high students choose a school, whether alternative or regular; no schools would be assigned. Any school that was failing would be

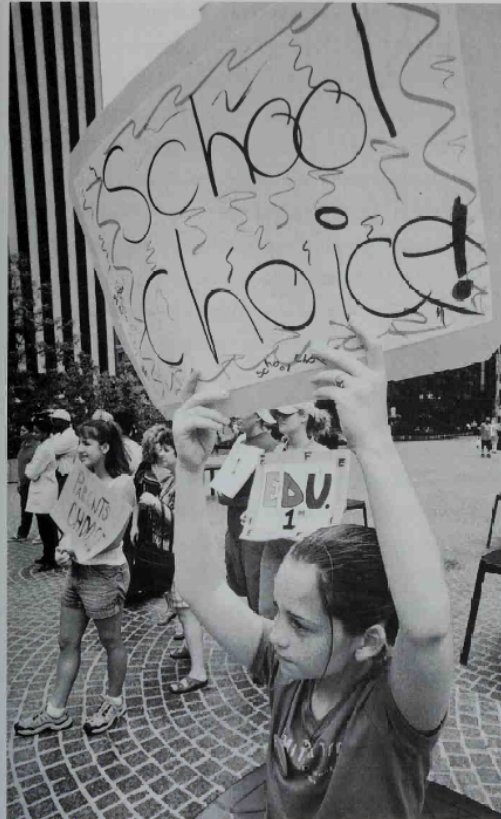
Students at Central Park East Secondary High School in East Harlem, New York.



shut down and reorganized, much like a failing business. “Well, what do you think happened in the regular schools?” asks Seymour Fliegel. “Do you think they said, ‘Look, isn’t that nice, in the alternative schools their kids are doing well. They get into good schools. And we just sit here?’ They started developing better schools. So in East Harlem, some of the regular schools were better than the alternative schools in their buildings. I was very happy about that.”

By 1987, East Harlem was outperforming half of the city’s school districts. Many attributed the turnaround to the smaller, more personalized schools. Most agreed that choice had also played a critical role. Deborah Meier states, “I think choice offers us the opportunity to rethink what we mean by a public institution and stop thinking of public institutions as dull, boring, mediocre buildings that house bureaucrats. Instead think of them as lively, coherent places that represent the very best and most excellent standards.”

In 1992, New York began allowing students to seek enrollment in any public school in the city. Yet there were so few alternative schools, and so few students willing or able to leave their regular schools, that little competition resulted. Nationwide, a small but growing number of parents went to great lengths to get their children enrolled in a small number of specialized and alternative public schools. These included magnet schools, designed to combat segregation by attracting high caliber students of diverse backgrounds. Magnet schools often received extra funding in



School choice rally in Cleveland, Ohio, June 20, 2000.

order to offer high-quality programs in the arts, science, and mathematics.

The interest in finding alternatives to local public schools, rather than working to improve those schools, has raised some concern. Historian Carl Kaestle comments, "I think that what is dominating the argument about choice is a very privatistic kind of mentality. Not that the schools will be private, but that the motives for going to school are more private. Getting your kid ahead ... making your kid's scores come out higher." Jonathan Kozol, an advocate for children in low-income communities, adds, "There is a tendency in many cities nowadays to develop a kind of lifeboat mentality where the politicians and some of the educators sort of sigh and say, well, we are not going to save most of these kids, let's at least start a number of very attractive, spectacular little schools. The trouble is, these types of schools tell us nothing about what's happening to the majority of children in that city."

One of the most controversial forms of public school choice is a program known as vouchers, which allows students to use public school funds to pay for private schools. Voucher supporters believe that competition from private schools will force public schools to improve. "It's just like anything else—a supermarket, a car dealership," says Annette Polly Williams, State Assemblywoman from Wisconsin. "You keep selling lemons, then you're going to wonder why nobody's coming to buy your cars. What you have to do is get you some good cars and people will come and buy it. So public school around this nation is selling something that nobody wants."

School: 1980-2000