IT’S STRANGE HOW A PHRASE THAT SHOULD UNITE EDUCATORS CAN BE SO DIVISIVE. Used by reformers and critics alike, “what’s best for kids” has a way of turning up the contrast in education debates, giving the illusion that one side is fully in the right, and that complicated problems have clear-cut solutions. Yet education’s most contentious topics—charters, teacher evaluation, unions, standardized tests—are full of gray areas that are in desperate need of respectful debate. *One Day* invited 10 contributors to take on some of the toughest issues in education reform and to shine a light on their complexities as well as some questions and hard truths. Through their voices, we hope to flesh out a less-polarized understanding of education reform—one that isn’t equated with a specific set of policies or dogma, but instead is committed to continually reflecting and evolving to meet the needs of students and families.
By Kaya Henderson (N.Y. ’92)

Time, we publicly shared all the data we had collected, and presented a proposal to the community. First, we spent countless hours in one-on-one and large group meetings explaining to our constituents what we were trying to do and hearing suggestions on how to do it better. We met with community members in their living rooms and churches. Sometimes the conversations were raucous and thoughtful. Sometimes they were angry and disruptive. Passion isn’t neat and tidy, but we have to respect the passion that our constituents bring as we ask them to make difficult decisions with us to do better for their students. Through it all, I reminded myself that even though it was probably quicker and easier to talk in my authority and with this handful of unilaterally decisions, we would come to better decisions if we made them with our stakeholders.

Based on what we heard, we made substantive changes to the proposal. We kept the under-enrolled middle school open—knowing it would never be filled to capacity—because keeping it open would prevent a group of rival neighborhoods from ending up in the same building. At the request of community members, we also combined a K-8 school that was proposed for closure with one of our high-performing high schools, creating a new K-12 campus that has reinvigorated the community around their neighborhood school. Finally, we made sure that the savings from the closures went directly to the priorities demanded by the community around their neighborhood school. Finally, we made sure that the district engaged in substantive conversations with community members and students be dismissed as soft or not urgent enough.

Unfortunately, too many reformers see our families as problems to solve, not as talented minds or partners with a wealth of experience to help develop solutions. We look past the communities that we serve, when in fact, many of the answers lie within the very people we serve, if only we’d engage them. There is no question that once we consider the impact of school closings, we ask them to make difficult decisions for their students together than we would have made on our own. The savings from the closures went directly to the priorities demanded by the community around their neighborhood school. Finally, we made sure that the district engaged in substantive conversations with community members and students be dismissed as soft or not urgent enough.

Prior to Common Core, most state tests measured basic proficiency in reading and math, with critical thinking or conceptual understanding. Students’ strength in one area gave us false security. Our long-term goal has always been to prepare students to graduate from college, but our de facto, short-term goal had become student mastery on low-level state tests. More in terms of student ownership, like Success Academy, YES Prep, and our own high schools—and those that expected more in terms of student ownership, like Summit Public Schools, and students and teachers, and high-quality Montessori programs. What we’ve learned is helping us chart a new path for our schools—one that we hope will broaden and deepen the scope of what our students should know and be able to do. It begins with accelerated academic expectations that embrace the rigor of the Common Core and Advanced Placement. It also requires cultivating the motivation, resilience, and independence that students need to drive their own success. We need to give students the chance to have “I can’t believe I got to do that” learning experiences—kindergartners extracting DNA from a strawberry, middle schoolers vying in national robotics competitions, and high school students taking MOOCs from top universities. At our schools and at many others, it’s time to acknowledge that our approach to teacher training—focused mostly on classroom management generic teaching techniques—is insufficient to take our students to the next level. We must invest significantly more in training and coach teaching leaders to facilitate a deeper intellectual engagement in the rigorous content they teach, so that they can then push students to do the same. For us, that meant doubling the amount of training for teachers and leaders and requiring all of our facilitators to practice internal and external quest to better understand what true excellence looks like in action. We have been fortunate to learn from powerful examples at schools that pushed to a higher academic bar—suitably reformers to stop going fast, alone, so we can then push students to do the same. For us, that meant doubling the amount of training for teachers and leaders and requiring all of our facilitators to practice and get feedback beforehand to make sure our assuages are high-quality. Finally, we need to take on issues of diversity and inclusiveness that have driven a wedge between education reformers and the communities we serve. It is not as simple as hiring more people of color at all levels of our organizations—although we need to do this. We must also commit to using diverse and inclusive strategies as a lens to strengthen our core work. We experienced this firsthand when school data revealed that we were relying far too heavily on suspension as a discipline tool, which then had real costs in terms of student identity, trust with families, and simply acting like the kind of organization we are. And we must then ask parents who left our program last year and were able to reduce suspension rates by a third, but we have more work to do.

Together, education reformers must take those painful lessons and engage in the kind of aggressive, continuous improvement that defines our movement. At the same time, we also must seek out more disruptive innovation so that we are better positioned to take big leaps in the future. At Achievement First, we partnered with IDEO, a top design firm, to come up with an entirely new school approach—one that better leverages technology and all that we have learned about reenchanting our students’ families, and our colleagues across the country. Next fall, Achievement First will open two schools that draw from this design thinking. We are more humble than we were 15 years ago, but we are also more optimistic. Our students’ prospects and our country’s future depend on our collective ability to look in the mirror and tackle areas where we must improve—and to focus on the hard, immediate, and uncertain and invent new ways to get there. Achievement First is a charter network of 29 schools serving more than 3,000 K-12 students in five cities.
Let’s Stop Targeting Teachers
By Robert Jeffers (L.A. ’02)
Teacher, Los Angeles Unified School District

Let’s Stop Targeting Teachers with acknowledging the complex - classroom teachers. disturbingly lacks the voices of current outside and inside education, feel the call myself a reformer, as many, both believe in reform, but I hesitate to portantly, in the students. I also potential for change, and most im- ever in teaching as a profession, the primary source of dysfunction, on “reformers” as targeting teachers as issues—and essentially pitting teach- they were cast as being afraid of ac - tuation measures linked to test scores, teachers. If teachers didn’t back eval - uations. Opportunities like this help to break down the us vs. them mentality that can be symptomatic of the relationship between administra- tors and teachers, or even the divides among teachers as we struggle with our own belief systems in the face of complex issues.

Let’s seek and create, not di - vide and diamantine. “We” in educa- tion should always include students, families, administrators, community members, and, most definitely, teach- ers. Giving teachers a hand in policy creation and space for leadership in the reform movement is an important step to reconciliation and will ulti- mately empower one of the essential levers that determine student success: teachers.

Robert Jeffers teaches English and (film at Susan Miller Dorsey High School in Los Angeles. He was the 2010 LAUSD Teacher of the Year.

Testing is a Double-Edged Sword
By Michelle Berg (Houston ’93)
Principal, Excelencia School

I am the mother of two fantastic children who, at 5 and 7, are just beginning to make their way through the American educa- tional system. My daughter, a second grader, is vivacious, loves animals, and is an amazing artist. One day, as I picked her up from school, I asked about her day and how she did on her math test. She sighed, turned to a teacher standing nearby and said, “Tests kind of mean a lot to my mom.”

Her words unleashed in me a torrent of conflicting feelings about testing and the role it plays in our soci- ety. As a mother, I can relate to parents around the country who have joined “opt-out” movements or other protests against the overuse of standardized testing in schools. But as the princi- pal of a large, inner-city K-8 school in central Phoenix, I count myself among educators who know assessment is valuable to instruction, learning, and creating a more holistic understanding of student performance.

At the start of first grade, my daughter’s principal told me that a baseline math assessment indicated my daughter could not add. I knew this wasn’t true and eagerly explained that she could. My daughter was permitted to take another version of the test with some minor accommodations. It worked. In fact, it showed she knew how to add, and add well.

My daughter had no problem keep- ing up with her classmates, but she struggled in test-taking situations. As educators, my husband and I knew we had to advocate for our daughter to ensure that she was not defined solely by her exam scores. Knowing first- hand the high stakes for schools when it comes to student performance, we counted ourselves lucky that her teachers and the school administra- tion were more than willing to work with us to make sure we all had a comprehensive picture of her abilities.

As a principal, I know that for schools, testing is critically impor- tant. Unfortunately, most people see standardized testing as an end-of-year accountability piece to measure the effectiveness of a school. Personally, I see assessment as a starting point rather than a bottom line. At our school, the most productive and ef- fective discussions about instruction begin with assessment data. Particu- larly in high-poverty schools like the one I run, having an objective measure of our students’ learning as compared to their peers across all demograph- ics helps us identify trends and gaps so that we can make strategic choices for differentiation, remediation, and enrichment opportunities tailored to their needs. For us, assessment is one component of a robust instructional cy- cle, not a metric that stands on its own. Yet given how high the stakes are for student performance on standard- ized assessments, it’s not surprising that some schools end up focusing myopically on test scores. When this happens, our kids are the ones who lose out. Doing well on a standardized test should not be conflated with readiness for high school and beyond. The exams are narrow and too specific to give us a comprehensive understanding of a child’s learning, or for that matter, what a child should ultimately know and do.

In my school, where parents and guardians may not have the background or understanding to advocate for their child’s education, it’s my duty to support our teachers in judiciously using assess- ment data in conjunction with a variety of authentic means of monitoring prog- ress to create a well-rounded learner profile for each student.

When my daughter said that test- ing means a lot to me, she’s right. I keenly aware of the importance soci- ety places on standardized testing as well as the instructional value that assessment data can provide. I also recognize that, at least for the foresee- able future, standardized testing, including my own, will most likely be measured by standardized tests throughout their academic careers, and possibly beyond. That means it’s our job—whether we are parents, educators, or both—to rec- ognize that tests are just one piece of a complex puzzle and that every child deserves to be defined by more than just a score.

Excelencia School in Phoenix was honored as an A+ School of Excellence in 2011.
EULER HATCHETT grew up in the North Lawndale section of Chicago, where a decline in population and the growth of charter schools have contributed to dwindling enrollment for many neighborhood schools. Hatchett cares for her nephew, a seventh grader, who is now enrolled in his fourth school in seven years, the result of two school closings and a transfer out of a charter school where she felt unmotivated. Her nephew’s last school, Henson Elementary, was led by Demetrius Hobson (Chicago ’02) and closed in 2013 due to under-enrollment, despite community protests to save the school. After Common Core implementation, only 11 percent of Henson Elementary’s students met or exceeded standards on the state test, but Hobson says the school community was working hard to turn things around. Henson’s 242 students—all black and almost entirely low-income—were diverted to “receiving schools.” Hatchett’s nephew now attends Herzl around. Henson’s 242 students—all black and almost entirely low-income—had to adjust to different children, different teachers. His grades dropped. He had trouble with the

children in the new school because they were messing with him.

He’s not a problem child, but I’ve seen his attitude change. I’ve seen him cry. He said, “Why do we have to change to another school?” I just got used to my teachers. I just finally made some friends.”

Some days he gets this attitude where “I’m not going to do nothing.” He shuts down. We just got him to open back up at Henson, and now he’s shut down again. He’s just tired. Tired of going through this every time he has to move. I was very angry about the closings—very angry. They say it’s the parents who don’t want the change, but it’s not that we don’t want the change. It’s about the children what they have to go through. You’re messing with these children. You’re pushing us from neighborhood to neighborhood. I want my children stable in one school.

Herald is far. Now it’s 30 minutes to get there. It’s hard—a lot of us walk our children to school. Some parents can’t because they work and they don’t have nobody to take them to school. They’ve got to do Safe Passage [a city-sponsored program that puts trained adults along dangerous school routes for added security] because our kids live no-where near these schools. We’re trying to find a place to put them into schools closer to our homes, but the district won’t listen to us. It’s very frustrating.

They’re moving our children so far away because they want to “improve the city.”

They don’t value our neighborhood or our children. I don’t feel I have any choices. They do what they want to do. That’s how it seems to me. Every time we fought for our schools, they acted like they were concerned but then turned around and did the same things. It’s like they haven’t heard us. They’re not listening to the problems our kids and we are going through.

I want to say to them. Be concerned about the people in the neighborhood; be concerned about our children.

IN HER WORDS

Why I Fought A School Closing

After Frazier closed down, my son went to Henson. He was there for a year, and he was doing better. He liked the principal, Mr. Hobson, and the teachers really worked with me to bring his grades back up. Before, he had trouble with reading, but at Henson he started reading out loud and comprehending better.

Henson had a resource center for parents: a food pantry, where I volunteered; and a [health] clinic for kids and their families. There were children with heart problems and a lot who had asthma, and they could treat them right there. It was a big thing for our children, so we didn’t have to worry about them in school.

Then they said Henson was closing. They told us there was no air conditioning; the children were down in their grades; it didn’t have enough children; there were no labs in the school. But I didn’t see why they couldn’t keep the school open. When we had meetings with the district, we arrived with the parents and parents showing them that the school was doing better and what they were saying about it was not true. But they didn’t listen to anything. Henson closed, and now my child’s at Herzl. He was there a year and did the same things. It’s very frustrating.

We had just gotten him settled in the new school because they didn’t listen to us. Herzl is farther. Now it’s 30 minutes to get there. It’s hard—a lot of us walk our children to school. Some parents can’t because they work and they don’t have nobody to take them to school. They’ve got to do Safe Passage [a city-sponsored program that puts trained adults along dangerous school routes for added security] because our kids live nowhere near these schools. We’re trying to find a place to put them into schools closer to our homes, but the district won’t listen to us. They’re moving our children so far away because they want to “improve the city.”

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Teachers Unions as Champions of Social Justice

By Ben Spielberg (Bay Area ’10) Executive board member, San Jose Teachers Association

D uring my second year in the corps, I became involved in the San Jose Teachers Association (SJTA). My two years on SJTA’s Executive Board have helped me understand why unions are generally the most credible, important advocates driving change for low-income communities.

Many reformers perceive unions differently. They argue that SJTA’s forward-thinking approach to education reform is an anomaly and that unions who oppose reform ideas put “adult interests” ahead of student learning. Those claims, however, are divisive and inaccurate; unionized teachers often spend the entirety of their professional lives putting student needs ahead of their own. To understand why unions sometimes appear intransigent, it’s important to understand what makes the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) context unique.

SJUSD leadership clearly demonstrates their belief in the importance of organized labor; fair compensation, and collaborative policy development. Our district doesn’t point fingers or blame the opportunity gap on teachers. SJUSD management asks what they can do to help staff support students and invests in systems that empower staff to successfully execute their jobs.

Unfortunately, teachers and their unions are frequently attacked elsewhere. School administrators misconstrued their character, denigrated, and their voices ignored. As a result, unions who would otherwise pursue a social justice agenda must frequently handle immediate crises. Vergara v. California, for instance, has forced the California Teachers Association to spend its time correcting misconceptions about teacher employment law instead of concentrating on its preferred priorities: improving teacher evaluation and support, raising California’s minimum wage, protecting immigrants’ rights, and other in-school and out-of-school causes that benefit students.

Reformers and districts thus shoulder the majority of the responsibility to show good faith and create the conditions—transparency, openness to union ideas, respect for union membership, and a willingness to work together—that help unions execute a social justice approach. At the same time, unions must make the effort to move beyond reflexively defensive postures and actively try to understand people with whom we disagree. Even when we use reform ideas implemented counterproductively, unions must keep an open mind and engage in solution-oriented conversations about topics ranging from merit pay to standardized testing.

Teachers unions can also consider following SJTA’s example by proactively defining themselves as social justice organizations in two main ways. First, unions should clearly define a positive mission statement and orient their work toward their mission. SJTA’s mission is to “empower teachers to educate, inspire, and change lives through public education.” SJTA advocates for sustainable working conditions and fair labor practices, for example, not just because our hard-working educators deserve them, but also because students with happy, well-rested teachers and adequate classroom resources learn more.

We also co-designed an innovative new teacher evaluation system with SJUSD that uses several indicators of effectiveness and requires extensive training for multiple evaluators who conduct both formal and informal

A
The Great Corporate Reform Conspiracy

By Derrell Bradford
Executive director, NYCAN

Dr. Neil Ferguson’s latest book, “The Great Corporate Reform Conspiracy,” makes a case for why corporate reform fails. Ferguson, a well-respected economist, argues that corporate reform is a distraction from the real issues facing our schools. He believes that the focus on corporate solutions is misplaced and that real change requires a different approach.

Ferguson points out that corporate reform initiatives often promise quick wins but fail to deliver lasting results. They tend to focus on large-scale solutions that ignore the unique needs of individual schools and students. Ferguson argues that this approach is shortsighted and that real progress requires a more localized and personalized approach.

He also highlights the way in which corporate reform initiatives often push for privatization and competition in education. Ferguson argues that these policies are driven by profit motives and fail to consider the needs of students and communities. He believes that true educational reform must be grounded in a deep understanding of the social and cultural contexts of our schools.

Overall, Ferguson’s book offers a powerful critique of corporate reform and a clear vision for a different approach to educational policy. It is a must-read for anyone concerned about the future of our schools and the well-being of our children.
Despite his support for the original concept, Mark has told me he’s worried about all the challenges that come with implementation: Will schools have the money they need to do the training and provide the support? Will they have staff with the expertise to carry out the feedback? Will there be high-quality professional development available for those who need it? Will it be complicated or overwhelming enough to simultaneously roll out the Common Core standards and assessment?

Mark’s concerns are real, and in considering how to answer him, I’m faced with the limits of what policy can do. At the time of its passage, SH 191 represented a sea change in education policy. But at its heart, policy is only a blueprint, a statement of values and intent. Those goals can only be realized by a well-coordinated and deeply committed team of people who will build, maintain, and modify the real three-dimensional product that grows from that blueprint. The bills passage was a testament to its strongest champions, but its success will be contingent on its most honest critics.

As a teacher, I often felt like education policymakers and practitioners lived in two separate worlds and spoke different languages. One of the reasons I wanted to become a principal was to bridge the gap between the worlds of policy and practice.

Now, five years into my role as a policymaker, I have learned firsthand how truly vital it is to maintain constant communication between policymakers and practitioners. This communication is not only the most important way to elevate the voices of educators—it is the only way to ensure the long-term success of our education system.

Education reform has almost become synonymous with hot-button topics like teacher evaluation, and merit pay. Yet just beyond those well-worn and heated debates lies a discussion that few are talking about: how we develop our teachers at all stages of their careers. The good news is that we can learn so much through collaborative conversations. We can learn from the experiences of colleagues and from the students themselves. We can learn from the challenges they face as they try to make sense of their work. This fosters not only trust and ownership, but helps bring to the surface the issues that matter most to our students. And our teachers have risen to the challenge. Two years ago, we heard from our highest-performing teachers, “So I’m effective—now what?” In response, we launched the Expanded Initiative for Teachers, a career and compensation ladder designed to reward and motivate our best teachers. As a result, we’ve been able to retain 92 percent of our highly effective teachers.

I’m proud to be part of a system that helps our best teachers perform in every school and every classroom in the city, for the honor of our students. At the end of the day, having a strong teacher evaluation system serves our children by showing teachers how they can achieve greatness. We’re saying to teachers, “Here’s what excellent teaching looks like”—and making it as clear as possible. We can take that ball and slam dunk it.

Matthew Dennis supports principals and teachers as an instructional support partner for the Transformation Network in Denver Public Schools and was a founding fellow in the National Academy for Advanced Teacher Education. Previously, he taught English language arts and special education for seven years.

Matthew Dennis teaches for six years before joining DCPS as a master educator in 2009.