

COMMENTARY

Not all educators are alike. More and more of us find ourselves dissenting from the established positions of the past three decades, positions that emphasize more money, complex federal programs, top-down regulations, and policies that defer to the interests of those in charge rather than those they are supposed to benefit—the children.

That widening dissent across the nation gave rise to the Education Leaders Council. Founded last September by 11 senior education officials from Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, the ELC, admittedly, is not a typical education group. Organized to foster real education reform by pursuing an agenda that focuses on the needs of children and the rightful demands of parents, we are not obsessed with the goings-on of Washington. Neither are we enamored of its one-size-fits-all strategies for reform, nor confident in its silver-bullet solutions to our schools' problems, no matter how well-meaning those efforts might be. (See *Education Week*, Sept. 27, 1995.)

We are diverse and decentralized, and we don't agree on everything. But we do share the belief that education initiatives, policies, practices, and standards are strongest when generated from within individual communities and weakest when handed down from on high. We also believe that true education reforms are those that center on the needs and choices of families, empower parents and teachers to work in concert to chart the course of a child's education, increase accountability in America's schools, and restore local control over school policies and practices.

While all of that separates us from the education establishment, we believe it unites us with parents and the vast majority of American teachers and school administrators who share our exasperation with the nationalized business-as-usual approach to reform, and our fear that unless we act quickly and boldly to restore excellence to all schools our nation at risk will become a nation of ruin.

The establishment is a classic case of too many cooks spoiling the broth. While paying customers—the public—are starving for a simple, nutritious, home-cooked meal, by the time every administration, department, office, division, association, federation, organization, union, alliance, etc., etc., etc., has had its say, the establishment has opened a gourmet restaurant offering bad food at exorbitant prices with lousy service.

As much as any other, that is the reason we formed the Education Leaders Council. We have two constituencies: parents and children. We share their views on what they want and need, and we're anxious to serve them. It's not an exotic menu. As reported by Public Agenda, a public-opinion research organization in New York City, parents' priorities for education are: safety, discipline, high standards, and a focus on the basics. In fact, more than half of those surveyed by the group said that, if they could afford to, they'd send their children to

private schools because that is where they believed those priorities were being met. (See *Education Week*, Oct. 18, 1995.)

That is not an indictment of public schools—Americans overwhelmingly support public education but it is an indictment of the policies and programs that dictate the administration of our public schools.

That point is not lost on teachers' union chief Al-

That the Education Leaders Council is closer to the mark than many in the establishment are willing to concede. And that a change in the nature of American education reform is indeed taking place.

Voters have made plain which side they're on, having elected reform-minded state superintendents, state and local school board members, and governors in both 1994 and 1995, despite huge opposition from establishment-tied forces. So have the parents interviewed in Public Agenda's surveys. And so have the hundreds of ordinary people who, with valid concerns and valuable ideas, are stepping in to fill seats on state and local school boards in order to bring about change.

These are the men and women for whom the ELC was established. As state superintendents and state board of education members, we all agree that we should support one another in working to bring common-sense principles to bear on American education.

In return, we're ready to make more of the tough decisions. We don't, for example, need politically correct education standards set at the national level. It's our job to set standards and then to hold schools, educators, and students accountable for meeting them. In fact, our members in Virginia, Arizona, and Pennsylvania are already making significant progress in this direction.

Why We Formed the Education Leaders Council

By Lisa Graham Keegan
and John Root

bert Shanker. To his credit, he has been listening to the public, attending to the problems faced by teachers, and has become an articulate proponent of academic standards, classroom discipline, shrinking the bureaucracy, and even a measure of parental choice. But his union's state and local affiliates rarely follow his lead, and he is currently engaged in a battle royal with the ill-named Council of the Great City Schools (a clutch of urban superintendents whose schools include many of the nation's worst), which has ripped Mr. Shanker for insufficient obedience to educational "equity."

That he is right and they are wrong is valuable enough in making the point. But equally significant to the issue of education reform is the public break over fundamental issues of policy and priority that the fight represents.

It says that ours is not the only sign of dissent.

As schools must be held accountable for their results—both to public authorities and to students and parents—they must also be given the autonomy and budgetary authority to do what is best for their children. The fast-spreading charter school movement is one way to accomplish that. But it shouldn't be the only way. This is about kids, and we must give those vested with their education the right and responsibility to make decisions on the spot.

Teachers and parents should be freed from the rules and regulations that shackles them and their schools. We have confidence in them; the government should too.

And we would all be better off if Washington got out of the business of telling us how to spend federal money. It doesn't belong to a department or a bureaucracy, it belongs to the public, and no matter the howls of indignation from the education establishment when you say the words "block grants," they are certainly worth considering and probably worth adopting.

Current ELC members represent over 19 million children, too many of whom are stuck in failing schools. We haven't lost our zeal to free them. We are encouraged by the growing ranks of educators at all levels who share this zeal, and who are working daily, despite unbelievable odds in some cases, to bring common sense to bear in our schools. ■

Lisa Graham Keegan is the chairman of the Education Leaders Council and the state superintendent of public instruction for Arizona. John Root is the ELC's vice chairman and a member of the New Hampshire state school board. This Commentary is written on behalf of the ELC's 11-member board.

EDUCATION LEADERS COUNCIL

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EDUCATION LEADERS COUNCIL RELEASES STANDARDS PRIMER

The Education Leaders Council (ELC) today released *The Standards Primer: A Resource for Accelerating the Pace of Reform*.

Announcing the book's release, ELC Chairman, Lisa Graham Keegan, Arizona's Superintendent of Public Instruction, explained that the 150-page *Primer* is intended "to assist states in setting rigorous academic standards and to demystify a process that has become unnecessarily complex."

"*The Standards Primer* is the Council's effort to assist policy makers, parents and educators in their work to design effective academic standards," Graham Keegan said, "and to provide them with a direction for success in achieving what the public has known for a very long time: that the establishment of high academic standards is the fundamental first step towards improving schools."

The Primer is designed as a guide through the maze of confusion surrounding the standards-setting efforts of recent years. It reviews the history of standards, looks at states' successes and failures, and provides a resource directory to help standards-setters find the help and guidance they need.

The Education Leaders Council (ELC), is the national group of state and local education leaders who have joined forces to promote substantive education reforms in their states and communities. The Council's publication of *The Standards Primer* is one of the first of their efforts to help support one another in achieving reforms in their school systems.

"The education reform debate may be national, but the solutions are going to be found at the state and local levels," said John Root, ELC vice chairman and member of the New Hampshire State Board of Education. "That is why we formed the Council and why we've published the *Primer*."

"Council members work together and learn from each other -- from our failures as well as from our successes," Root continued. "We recognize that there is no single 'right way' of accomplishing the reforms that we each want for our states, and we also recognize that many of our children can no longer wait for reforms to be talked-out at the national level. *The Standards Primer* is an effort to expand and intensify the debate on education reform and to help those who want to move forward right now."

A limited number of draft copies of *The Standards Primer* were distributed in April at the national education summit where governors and business leaders convened to discuss how to reverse the declining achievement of American students.

"The summit was beneficial for focusing attention, at least momentarily, on the need for academic standards, but it was only a first step toward helping educators move that process forward," Graham Keegan said. Now that we've agreed on the need, *The Primer* provides a practical guide for those who are serious about making standards and assessments the foundation of their states' work on behalf of children.

To purchase *The Primer*, or if you would like to receive a complimentary copy of *Opportunity*, the magazine of the Education Leaders Council, please write to: Education Leaders Council, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 204, Washington, DC 20036, or phone 800-521-2118.

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