

The Rhetoric of Reform

by [Ethan L. Hutt](#) & [Jack Schneider](#) – December 14, 2012

This piece explores the use of rhetoric in educational policy making, particularly examining the influence of current reform rhetoric on public perception.

Rhetoric is commonly perceived as window dressing for action—mere words that reveal little about policy and affect only the credulous. “Actions,” we are told, “speak louder than words.” The implication is that rhetoric can and probably should be ignored.

The significance of action, at its great volume, is obvious: it changes the shape of the world. Yet the impact of rhetoric is hardly negligible. It changes the way people see that world. In a sense, then, the power of words lies not only in convincing people to support a specific policy proposal, but also in transferring a particular worldview.

Policy elites in education have long used rhetoric to promote among the American public a school reformer’s point of view. In the Progressive Era, for instance, the language of efficiency made projects like school consolidation and curricular tracking seem perfectly reasonable. In the 1950s, the rhetoric of conflict and competition normalized policies that would benefit only a small minority of high achievers. In the 1970s, reformers used the language of accountability and outcomes to give the nascent testing movement a gloss of practicality. And reformers in the 1980s lyrically bemoaned the “rising tide of mediocrity,” which helped frame the evolution of curricular standards as a completely natural policy response.

Such rhetoric has always had consequences. But those consequences, of course, depend on the words being used. So what is the language of the early twenty first century? What is the rhetoric of today’s reformers when they talk publically about education policy?

In the absence of a single galvanizing report like *A Nation at Risk* to examine, we decided to take a more holistic approach to this question by collecting as much published rhetoric as we could from a set of ten prominent education reformers: Eli Broad, Geoffrey Canada, Arne Duncan, Bill Gates, Joel Klein, Wendy Kopp, David Levin, Michelle Rhee, Jon Schnur, and Paul Vallas. In compiling their words, we selected web-searchable documents in which each individual was either the sole speaker or author, or in which their words comprised a large portion of the text. And though we cannot say that we found every single document that fit our criteria, we are reasonably confident that our roughly 70,000 word sample is representative of both the education rhetoric of our speakers and of the current state of education reform.

So what did our analysis of the data reveal? Two dominant patterns leap out at us.

First, the language used by our reformers emphasizes centralized authority and top-down action. State and local dollars and control still constitute the bulk of educational funding and influence. But that would be hard to tell based on the rhetoric used by reformers, in which federal action has pride of place. And though there is the predictable discussion of the tradition and importance of local control in our book-length sample, it is quite clear that reformers see the federal government as a key lever for driving policy. Indicative of this was the fact that the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” competition was the most common four word phrase in the entire sample.

Another sign of this top-down approach indicated by our data is how infrequently reformers talk about the need to debate education policy. The word “dialogue,” for instance, only appears once in the entire sample, while “discuss” and “discussion” are used only twice in the context of policy. “Debate” appears three times, but is framed as something antithetical to the cause of meaningful education reform. These reformers see no need for tough conversations about the nature of the underlying issue. Instead, they cast themselves as chief protagonists and idea generators, framing those inside the system not as co-creators or intellectual sparring partners, but as actors to be prodded, incentivized, or overpowered.

And just what do these reformers see as the path to good schools? Here a second pattern can be seen in our data

set: reformers discuss educational improvement almost exclusively as a challenge requiring *political will*. Though many of our reformers cited the achievement gap and racial inequality as the greatest injustice in America, that statement alone frequently constituted the most extended mention of race in their rhetoric. Indeed, discussion of race and class is almost entirely absent. The word “race,” for instance, was more frequently invoked to denote competition (e.g. Race to the Top; Space Race; “winning the race”) than it was to discuss the serious social issues that confront our nation. Joel Klein, who discussed race, poverty, and the achievement gap more frequently than the other reformers in our sample, often raised the point to explain that discussion of these issues is merely an excuse for inaction. As he put it: “America will never fix education until it first fixes poverty—or so the argument goes. In fact, the skeptics of urban schools have got the diagnosis exactly backward. The truth is that America will never fix poverty until it fixes its urban schools.”

In this view, policy solutions that consider issues of poverty and race, like dialogue and debate more generally, are a distraction. The real task, reformers maintain, is building the political will necessary to implement ostensibly proven “solutions” that can be funneled through to schools in a top-down manner. The merits of these solutions, they argue, are self-evident. In fact, the word “doubt” was used only four times in our entire 70,000 word sample, with reformers drawing on the word only to complete phrases of certitude like “without a doubt” and “no doubt.” They frame education reform as a simple and straightforward technical process, encumbered only by self-interested adults. And using the language of “we” and “they,” reformers depict themselves as a set of rational protagonists pitted against recalcitrant classroom educators intent on maintaining an unacceptable status quo.

Rank	Common 3-Word Phrases	Count	Frequently Mentioned Policies	Count
1	we need to	41	Standards	84
2	Teach For America	40	Charter Schools	79
3	a lot of	31	Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)	76
4	we want to	24	Teach For America	44
5	they want to	23	Teacher evaluation systems	24
7	in the classroom	22	Achievement gap	24
8	the federal government	20	Teacher preparation	23
10	they need to	19	Reliance on data	20
11	we're going to	19	Test scores	12
16	the status quo	16	Race to the Top	11

The impact of all this rhetoric is a subtle transformation of the world. To those casually interested in educational improvement, all of this talk about schools doesn't seem like rhetoric at all. It seems like straight talk about the state of American schools and the nature of educational change—incontrovertible facts that exist separate from any particular policy proposals. Yet these statements *are* rhetoric, and the effect of them is precisely the one desired by any seasoned rhetorician: the transformation of points of argument into accepted premises.

Once the bounds of policy are established, public perspective is narrowed and certain solutions become “obvious.” Thus, the public comes to see questions of educational policy *exactly as reformers do*. No wonder, then, that so many people perceive the parade of reforms frequently mentioned in our sample—charter schools (79 mentions), Teach for America (44 mentions), new teacher evaluation systems (24), reliance on data (20), and test scores (12)—as proven solutions for schools. Never mind the fact that educational research consistently raises serious questions about all of these approaches to school reform; polling data shows that public support for such efforts is growing.

Such rhetoric is deeply troubling. First, because it attempts to undermine the legitimacy of so-called “insiders,” and particularly those who might question the value of certain education reforms. Far from harmless speechifying, it represents the most insidious part of the current attack on the teaching profession. Increasingly, the public is coming to see educators who question or oppose such policies as self-interested and misguided.

Second, and equally important, policy elites appear to have it exactly backwards. According to today's leading reformers, improving schools is a simple task: experts have the answers and need only overcome the opposition of the recalcitrant and the self-interested. Yet as any experienced educator knows, school reform is quite complex, and any sustainable improvement effort is dependent on local knowledge, cooperation, and buy-in. Any policy that

doesn't recognize this will fail; and when it does, it will only make the lives of teachers and students harder.

But whatever the weaknesses of today's leading reforms, argument and evidence are hardly enough to keep them outside of the classroom door. If those who know schools best have any intention of directing educational change in the twenty-first century, they are going to need to combat more than just a set of simplistic reforms. They will need to begin using language that restores the value of nuance, experience, collaboration, and teacher know-how. Only then will the public begin to imagine the kind of policy action our schools need.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: December 14, 2012
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 16972, Date Accessed: 12/14/2012 2:37:13 PM

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