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America Y2K:
The Obsolescence of Educational Reforms

Sherman Dorn
University of South Florida

Abstract
The passing of the deadline for fulfillment of the national education goals in the United States (the beginning of 2000) reflects the frequently hyperbolic statements of objectives and the manic pace of school reform efforts over the past two decades. The domination by schools of child and family life has combined with a longstanding reliance on schools to solve social problems to make school reform a politically opportune as well as visible issue. Thus, even if the phrasing of national education goals in the U.S. changes to reflect the passing of the nominal deadline, those pressures will remain.

Yesterday, observers of educational reform in the United States woke up to the policy equivalent of the Y2K problem: what does a nation do when a set of official goals has become obsolete with the passage of time? A summit of the nation's governors and then-President George Bush in 1989 declared the first six national education goals as part of an "America 2000" strategy for highlighting key targets. (See the National Education Goals Panel website for more information.). "*By the year 2000*," each of the (now) eight goals has asserted, the nation would have kindergartners ready to learn, 90 percent graduation, solid academic achievement (including "first in the world" achievement in science and math), a literate adult population, safe and drug-free schools,

superb professional development for teachers, and committed parental involvement in schools. As those who are reading this article on computers (Y2K-compliant or not) can attest, we have reached the deadline for every goal. Yet we have apparently not reached the goals. Overall, of the 28 key indicators chosen by the National Education Goals Panel, 16 have shown either no improvement or declines. The most concrete goal, 90 percent graduation, was within striking distance in 1990 but has eluded our collective grasp: 86 percent of 18-24 year olds had high school diplomas or alternative credentials in 1990, while 85 percent had done so in 1998 (National Education Goals Panel,1999). Faced with the nominal obsolescence of specific national education goals in the U. S., perhaps we should rename the America 2000 strategy the America Y2K problem, for the goals self-destructed at midnight.

Curiously enough, the general conclusion of the most recent report of the National Education Goals Panel entirely eschews matters of outcomes:

> We believe that the National Education Goals have moved America forward and, on balance, encouraged greater progress in education. We are clearer about what appropriate Goals are and how to measure progress toward them at the national and state levels. There is no doubt that the National Education Goals have encouraged a broad spectrum of educators, parents, students, business and community leaders, policymakers, and the public to work toward their attainment. Reporting progress toward the Goals has provided valuable information to states and inspired them to reach higher. Can we do better? Of course we can. But we are convinced that our gains have been greater because we have had National Education Goals to guide our efforts. Ten years of progress have shown us that the Goals are working. (National Education Goals Panel, 1999, p. 6)

The singular discussion of process above seems to contradict the whole notion of evaluating policy using concrete outcomes. One may wonder whether such a conclusion constitutes denial. After all, with substantial evidence that a national effort to reform education has not met its putative goals, is such a paragraph mere hedging in the face of the panel's own data? I believe such a criticism is unfair, for two reasons. First, one should measure a policy discussion not only by the realities one can observe on the ground but also in the agenda it sets for the future. Whether one agrees with the specific goals or the notion of a national education agenda, the summit in 1989 did help frame the policy debate that has ensued. Second, the deadline itself was primarily an instrument of political rhetoric, in the eyes of its creators a useful goad for change. The focus on process in the report is a pedestrian rather than a weighty irony, in this instance. The more substantive criticism of federal policy should aim at the content and means of reform.

Still, the deadline reflects what the rest of the world often sees as prototypically optimistic boasting of the United States. Such optimism has some side effects, as Potter (1954) described almost half a century ago. We in the U.S. often feel pressured by the assumption of affluence to individual and collective acts of hype and disappointment. The New Year (whether one believes we are in a new millennium yet or not) should prompt some reflection on the workings of such an approach to social change. The failure to meet the national education goals was the result of a common dynamic in school reform. The problem with the national education goals was not that they set virtually unreachable goals but that they were not unusual in attempting to push change by setting impossible standards.

A brief survey of recent educational reform efforts in almost any city or state illustrates the impatience in modern reform dynamics. Chicago witnessed first the radical decentralization of control over schools in the 1988 reform legislation and then recentralization in the hands of Mayor Richard Daley in the years since 1995. Florida and California are two examples of rapid-fire reforms at the state level. In the last quarter-century, Florida schools have been the target of minimum competency tests, increased seat-time requirements for graduation, mandatory standardized testing for students, teacher competency tests, the removal of state mandates for universal standardized tests and their replacement with partly performance-based testing in several (but not all) grades, site-based management of schools, alternative credentialing procedures for teachers, the reinstallation of both criterion- and norm-referenced testing in the majority of grades, the public grading of schools on an A-F basis, and vouchers. California schools have witnessed many of these efforts as well as an aborted experiment in performance-based assessment for the whole state and a highly politicized battle over methods of teaching reading.

Larry Cuban argued that much of the educational reform dynamic begins with the unreasonable demands we have placed on schools to accomplish social reform in the U.S (Cuban, 1990). Historians can trace back almost two hundred years a chain of statements assuming the power of formal schooling to eliminate or ameliorate poverty, and the first legal decrees requiring education in British North America (albeit mandating family rather than formal schooling) were to promote morality in the seventeenth century. To the extent that we keep expecting schools to solve all our social problems, we are overestimating their power. Cuban's argument about how social reformers have used schools to avoid resolving broader political conflicts helps explain much of the rhetoric of school reform over the past twenty years. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) blamed schools for economic woes in the midst of a broad trend towards deindustrialization that we now call "economic globalization" (Harrison & Bluestone, 1988; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; *The Nation* (Dec. 6, 1999 issue)). The protesters at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization argued that key politicians around the world were hiding the social dislocation and other problems of international capital liquidity behind the platitudes of free trade. In the meantime, one of the alleged bromides for such dislocation in the United States has been, predictably, educational reform. Certainly no one could argue with "world-class" achievement for any child. But are there any world-class standards for family subsistence (on which, not incidentally, one must base a poor child's education)?

One must acknowledge, however, that the rhetoric of school reform is not merely a shadow-game. It has such political power because it resonates at some level with parents' and other citizens' experiences. Parents may not know much about the debates over globalization, but most want their children to be able to get and keep jobs as adults, and they may well perceive the quality of an education, or at least an educational credential, as important to that goal. Some of those parents and their neighbors purchased their homes in part on the reputation of local schools. In addition, parents do not have the luxury of waiting five to ten years for deeper school reform to affect their children; in the life of a child and her family, a year is a very long time.

Part of this impatience with and targeting of schools also comes from the expansion of schools' role within the daily routines of families. One hundred years ago, formal schooling was one of many ways that a child spent time. Far more seventeen-year-olds worked than studied in high schools. Even for younger children, attendance was sparse compared to the present. (That some children are regularly truant in contemporary schools is an exception that proves the rule; a century ago, attendance

was less regular for most students.) Today, by contrast, children's and parents' lives in the United States revolve around the school schedule. Schooling has become an institution that dominates time and consciousness, affecting our assumptions about what is important. One response to such dominating organizations is to target those key institutions for inspection, concern, and responsibility for solving broader problems. Thus, voters are willing to credit politicians with concern about schools, apparently legitimating expectatins that no school reform effort could meet.

Many observers have commented on the practical problems of trying to reform schools dramatically in a short time Sarason, 1990; Tyack and Cuban, 1995), and I do not wish to revisit those issues here. Rather, my assertion is that several factors, some longstanding in North American culture and others more recent, have encouraged and helped legitimate the obsession with speedy statewide and nationwide school reform. The foreseeable obsolescence of the national educational goals thus represents the culmination of the reform dynamic, not the exception. One may wonder, then, what shall be the fate of the outdated goals? Extensive sociological writings exist on how organizations change their goals. The first work commonly cited, Michels' *Political Parties* (1915/1959), describes what he called the "iron law of oligarchy," the way that the need to create a political apparatus to affect legislation shifted the emphasis of party organizations from the original ideals onto party maintenance and thus made those political structures conservative. The ensuing literature on organizational goals expanded this notion of shifted goals from goal displacement (such as the evolving goals of political organizations) to goal abandonment or, alternatively, goal succession with the achievement of explicit goals (Blau, 1956). The classic example of goal succession in the United States is the March of Dimes, originally organized to ameliorate the suffering of polio victims. Its leaders later sponsored the mass field tests of the Salk polio vaccine and realized with the success of the vaccine that it had worked itself out of a job. The national board quickly found another (in the field of birth defects) (Sills, 1958). The literature on the history of goals in organizations suggests that the internal needs of organizations help shape the specific future for written goals is automatic.

The major difference between the problems of organizational goals and the national education goals is that the education goals were the putative objectives not of a specific institution but of an entire country. The dynamics of a single organization are simply not an issue in educational politics or public policy in general. Nonetheless, one can draw the lesson from organizational sociology that a larger version of institutional dynamics, specifically how people have built their lives around the existence of routines, strongly influences what happens to explicit objectives. The course of political goals (and here I mean nothing pejorative by calling them political) depends on partisan struggle and also on how the structure of people's experiences (in this case, the organization and practices of schooling) help define what people see as important. To be specific, schools have evolved a complex set of goals that have a complicated, interdependent relationship with how individuals become active in educational politics. In the nineteenth century, Katznelson and Weir (1985) have argued, public education became tied to the franchise as both universal white male franchise and free elementary schooling spread through the United States. Since then, those active in educational politics have become involved in many ways depending on their interests and whether they define schooling as a matter of concern for them as residents of a neighborhood, as workers in an economy, (more recently) as consumers of various markets, or in some other way tied to some aspect of their identities. Schools have accrued these purposes and associated identities as they have become well-established in the United States, and these agglomerated interests are unlikely to disappear.

One caveat to this general argument about the intransigence of speedy reform is important. The new theme of choice in educational politics over the past ten or fifteen years in the United States is likely to complicate the reformulation of educational reform, possibly at the expense of achievement goals (See note below.) Not all parents believe that measurable achievement is the most important purpose of schooling, and arguments in favor of parents' power over schooling is likely to undermine arguments in power of the state's interest in improving test scores and other measures of achievement. What is less likely is for the notion of choice in schooling (whether public or private) to affect the momentum of high-stakes reforms. The shape of those reforms may change, but until schools become far less important to the everyday lives and concerns of families, the reasons for political opportunity in education reform will remain. Voters will remain concerned about formal education for a variety of reasons, and officeholders and candidates will demand reform as a way of establishing political credentials.

One can thus predict, with some accuracy, that the national education goals will undergo some amendment in the near future, but in a way to keep some implicit pressure on schools and public policy to change. I suspect that the National Education Goals Panel will not simply replace "2000" with "2010" or some such formulation that will invite ridicule. Instead, a more vague phrasing is likely to appear, suggesting the imperative nature of change without specifying another deadline. The essential dynamic will remain, though, of demands for change that occasionally shift in emphasis. The "waves" of reform will keep pounding on our political shores. A recent report on deaths caused by medical errors in the United States provides an unusual and sad reason for comparing educational and medical systems in this imperative for action: for once, observers of school reform can tell medical reformers what to expect from attempted systemic change. The paper, by the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Quality of Health Care of America, estimated that medical mistakes cause more than 40,000 deaths annually in the U.S. It recommended a vigorous accountability system to report all medical mistakes, a center for patient safety to set safety goals and monitor progress towards them, and a reassessment of such progress at the end of five years, by which time the committee hopes such deaths would fall by half (Corrigan, Kohn, & Donaldson, 1999). One can examine this report as an example of attempted reform and analyze the factors that may affect its success. Cutting mortality from any cause in half within five years is desirable, but this result would require the type of fundamental change in health care that the creation of a center is unlikely to stimulate. If, as the report indicates, overworked staff members in poorly-funded and -supplied institutes are more likely to make mistakes than others, then the stingy characteristics of the managed care system in the U.S. are likely to thwart much of the power of reporting, tracking, and analysis of a center on the ultimate medical accountability—life. In this respect, the report on fatal medical mistakes is eerily similar to attempts to improve education through statistics-gathering and accountability mechanisms.

Such a comparison, however comforting it may be to cynical observers of school reform, is not likely to be a revelation to scholars of public health. Medical historians and sociologists are well aware of problems with technocratic approaches to public health concerns. For example, assumptions about the ability to conquer sexually-transmitted diseases by antibiotics have, in retrospect, hidden much of the moralizing aspects of the anti-venereal disease campaigns early in the century (Brandt, 1985). Few on the committee are likely to underestimate the difficulties involved in such broad goals. Instead, perhaps a more useful way of looking at the report is to see it as an example of an ambitious set of goals and deadlines that are impossible to meet. In that regard, the goal of halving mortality from medical mistakes is akin to the establishment

of national goals for education. All are certainly worthy ideals in an abstract sense. Yet what is driving the putative timetable for reform is not feasibility but the vulnerability many citizens feel in connection with both schools and hospitals. One consequence of setting such goals is having at some point to re-evaluate their attainment and, ultimately, legitimacy. Whether the United States will have such an open political debate on the national education goals or the appropriate pace of reform is unknown.

Note

Jurgen Herbst, professor emeritus from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is currently researching a comparison of school choice history in the United States and central Europe, and his work is likely to suggest, as Claire Smrekar's does, the diversity of private purposes for education in the context of choice.

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About the Author

Sherman Dorn

Email: dorn@typhoon.coedu.usf.edu

Sherman Dorn is Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychological and Social Foundations at the University of South Florida. He received his Ph.D. in history at the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 based on his work on the history of dropout policies. He is currently looking at the history of special education in Nashville, Tennessee, from 1940 to 1990.

EPAAcommentary

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Contributed Commentary on Volume 8 Number 2: *America Y2K: The Obsolescence of Educational Reforms,* Sherman Dorn

Patrick P. Persichilli
University of Michigan

I believe that Sherman Dorn's article, *America Y2K: The Obsolescence of Educational Reforms*, illustrated some significant barriers to successful education reform. I agree that political rhetoric, which frequently determines policy agendas and timelines, definitely impedes progress toward real reform. Too often policymakers and legislators set lofty, unattainable goals at the expense of quality programs and timely delivery.

The discussion of solid organizational goal changes is key to progress in the education reform debate. Ignoring the "fishbowl of publicity" model of public administration, there is much to be learned from private sector management of organizational change issues. Successful change must begin with the identification of attainable goals, and a plan to achieve them. Unrealistic goals and deadlines, as already evidenced, will accomplish little without an infrastructure or defined process to achieve them. The creation of education management "missions" and "values" will empower stakeholders at all levels to make value added decisions that will benefit the "customer." Implementation of total quality management (TQM) principles will enable bloated bureaucracies to lean out and focus on the delivery of quality services. Private sector prototyping is an interesting concept, which can be used to develop innovative approaches to organizational change. Initiatives such as "Six-Sigma" and ISO standards allow administrators to focus on value streams within their organizations enabling them to increase quality and manage cost. The recent ISO certification of a publicly funded school in Windsor, Ontario, Canada represents a new trend in school management to increase innovation in the delivery of education priorities. Innovation and conceptual mastery must be pre-requisites for organizational change, with tough issues like outsourcing being addressed to allow institutions to focus on their core business, providing quality education.

New reforms must enable administrators to provide quality education within an organizational context capable of responding to changing societal, economic, and technological factors. Performance measurement standards must be developed to gauge effectiveness of any new initiatives. Putting aside the debate on the success of past educational goal setting, it must be realized that unrealistic deadlines for educational objectives will not contribute any value-add to educational reform initiatives. Rather, success will come out of tangible goal changing initiatives. Progress will be slow, and will inevitably increase the "reform" impatience described by Dorn, but will hopefully lead to a stronger infrastructure to support much needed change.

About the Author

Patrick P. Persichilli is a Graduate Student in Public Administration at the University of Michigan.

Email: ppersich@ford.com