

The State of Texas is attempting to meet the daunting challenge of educating all our children to their maximum potential with a massive "top-down" accountability system. Texas has pinned its hopes on what is properly called "standards-based" reform. Standards-based reform consists of three steps: first, establishing standards; second, creating an assessment test to determine if the students know the standards; and third, holding the schools accountable for the results. This reform has been embraced by Texas Governors, State legislative leadership and the State educational bureaucracy. This paper will describe how standards-based reform has been implemented in Texas and critically examine its impact on our schools. It will especially focus on the unintended negative consequences. There have been many critiques of standards-based reform, so many in fact the phenomena has been give a name - "standards backlash". Many of these critiques have been about specifics parts and components of the reform but this analysis is about the big picture and about the total impact of what standards-based reform is doing to our schools. Standards-based reform has been praised for producing a miracle in our schools. Is this true?

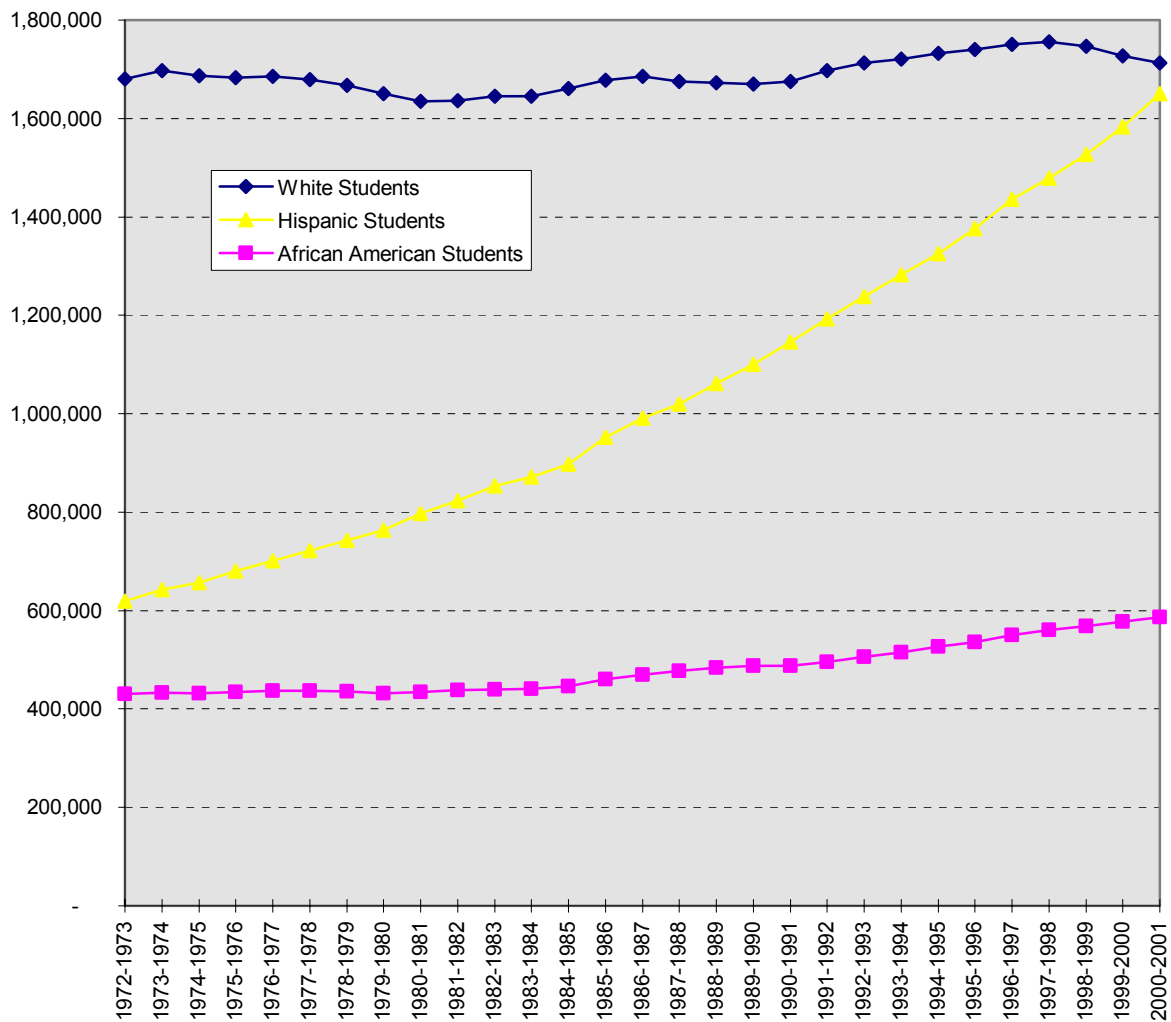
Dr. Lilian Katz, a leading expert on early childhood education, addressed the State Board of Education on November 7, 2001. When referring to the "outcomes" approach of standards-based reform she stated:

*"I always resist the term 'outcomes' because it is an industrial term. It is based on the factory model of education; a lot of what we do in education is based on the factory model of education. You get some raw material, you collect it, you put it through a standard set of procedures and you get a standardized product. That is what a factory is suppose to do."*

Is our standards-based reform in Texas "based on the factory model of education"? Are we creating the "standardized" student in Texas, or are we creating a miracle?

Good public policy must be based on what is true about society. The following graph and table reflect something that is true about our Texas public schools. They represent actual enrollment numbers for our schools broken down by ethnicity for as long as the records have been kept. It covers 29 years. A little reflection on the information represented by this graph will demonstrate some startling trends.

## 1972-2000 Texas Public School Ethnic Student Enrollment



Year	White Students	White % Increase	African American Students	African-American % Increase	Hispanic Students	Hispanic % Increase
1972-1973	1,680,894		430,154		618,986	
1973-1974	1,697,595	0.99%	433,058	0.68%	641,882	3.70%
1974-1975	1,687,231	-0.61%	431,389	-0.39%	657,123	2.37%
1975-1976	1,683,505	-0.22%	434,635	0.75%	680,820	3.61%
1976-1977	1,685,796	0.14%	436,948	0.53%	700,655	2.91%
1977-1978	1,678,828	-0.41%	437,560	0.14%	721,846	3.02%
1978-1979	1,667,978	-0.65%	435,400	-0.49%	741,981	2.79%
1979-1980	1,650,268	-1.06%	432,151	-0.75%	763,623	2.92%
1980-1981	1,634,355	-0.96%	434,667	0.58%	796,614	4.32%
1981-1982	1,636,133	0.11%	437,780	0.72%	823,775	3.41%
1982-1983	1,645,316	0.56%	439,586	0.41%	853,304	3.58%
1983-1984	1,645,345	0.00%	441,530	0.44%	871,794	2.17%
1984-1985	1,661,271	0.97%	446,559	1.14%	897,806	2.98%
1985-1986	1,677,566	0.98%	460,198	3.05%	952,148	6.05%
1986-1987	1,685,949	0.50%	469,351	1.99%	991,091	4.09%
1987-1988	1,675,361	-0.63%	476,857	1.60%	1,019,808	2.90%
1988-1989	1,671,905	-0.21%	483,363	1.36%	1,061,183	4.06%
1989-1990	1,670,215	-0.10%	488,034	0.97%	1,100,589	3.71%
1990-1991	1,675,027	0.29%	487,126	-0.19%	1,145,604	4.09%
1991-1992	1,697,869	1.36%	495,658	1.75%	1,192,063	4.06%
1992-1993	1,712,606	0.87%	506,386	2.16%	1,237,605	3.82%
1993-1994	1,721,277	0.51%	515,475	1.79%	1,282,849	3.66%
1994-1995	1,732,427	0.65%	526,757	2.19%	1,325,768	3.35%
1995-1996	1,739,613	0.41%	536,386	1.83%	1,375,896	3.78%
1996-1997	1,750,930	0.65%	549,667	2.48%	1,435,521	4.33%
1997-1998	1,755,385	0.25%	560,405	1.95%	1,478,984	3.03%
1998-1999	1,746,896	-0.48%	568,757	1.49%	1,526,713	3.23%
1999-2000	1,727,733	-1.10%	576,977	1.45%	1,582,538	3.66%
2000-2001	1,713,436	-0.83%	586,712	1.69%	1,650,560	4.30%
Total Increase		1.94%		36.40%		166.66%

The African-American enrollment in our schools shows a gradual steady rise with a total increase of 36.4 percent, pretty much mirroring a similar rise in the African-American general population. The Hispanic enrollment shows a meteoric rise of 166.7 percent, which will shortly surpass the White student population. It also mirrors the increase of the Hispanic population in our state. As drastic as the Hispanic increase is, it doesn't startle us that much because it is a well known and talked about phenomenon.

The next line on the chart is the most startling line as it shows the White student population increasing only 1.9 percent in 28 years! The White population increase in the state of Texas over this time is not represented by a corresponding number of students in our public schools. It's also interesting to note that it is not a slow steady increase but fluctuates up and down, and presently it is on a three-year decline of 2.39 percent. In fact, the decline of the last two years is equal to the overall rise of the last 28 years! The line is basically flat. This trend of a flat White student population growth stands in stark contrast to the other two groups; its increase is 18 times less than the African-American student growth and 88 times less than the Hispanic student growth! While a large part of the flatness may be explained by family demographics, there may be other reasons for it as well.

What could be some of the non-demographic reasons for this barely perceptible increase of White students over 28 years? It may be from a general uneasiness of mixing with other races; it may be, in many places, a lack of orderliness and discipline in the schools; it may be from a lack of tolerance of the schools for the parent's religious values; but the position of this paper is that many parents have removed their children from our public schools primarily because of a fear that their children will receive a mediocre education and/or they will be subjected to faddish ideologies and educational trends. Even if children of these parents represent a small percentage of our public school students, they represent a very concerned, vital segment that is present in all of the ethnic groups. These are the students and parents who could play a key role, through their participation, in making our public schools better. A high-quality, non-biased education provided in an orderly setting would likely keep many of these children in our schools.

Student population figures, broken down by ethnicity, only go back to 1972 and the numbers in 1972 are nothing compared to the massive data that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) can provide about today's students. And herein lies a clue to unlocking the mystery of the White enrollment trends in our public schools. Why does the TEA have such excellent data today but not back thirty years ago? Just the very existence of these numbers shows that there have been some drastic changes in Texas public education over the last thirty years. The net result of these changes has been a massive increase in the power and influence at the State level, all at the expense of the local districts and local schools. It began in 1980 when Texas created its first State test – the *Texas Assessment of Basic Skills* (TABS). Since that first major intervention by the State there has been a continuous trend of ever increasing expansion of State mandates placed on the local districts and schools. The leveling trend of the White enrollment depicted in the graph parallels in time this increase in the power and influence of the State.

## THE RISE OF THE STATE

In 1984 the Texas legislature mandated its first statewide curriculum--the *Essential Elements*, before this time there had never been a statewide curriculum. In 1995 the legislature mandated a replacement-- the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills* (TEKS). How important is a statewide curriculum to teach students? It certainly was not very important for most of us reading this paper as most of us were in school before 1985. Also, students in private and home schools are being taught without it. Today it is uncritically assumed to be absolutely crucial. There is no debate about its necessity, only its content. Why is a state curriculum so important and necessary? The answer is found in the next major statewide initiative of the past 30 years and that is the assessment test.

The TABS of 1980 was the first statewide assessment test. It was followed by *the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills* (TEAMS). The TEAMS was the first Texas test that was aligned with a State curriculum—the *Essential Elements*. Today we are in the age of the *Texas Assessment of Academic Skills* (TAAS), and the TAAS is presently aligned with the TEKS. The State is now well under way with creating its newest assessment test, *the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills* (TAKS). Since the TEAMS and the TAAS were aligned with the state curriculum; it is now impossible to do away with the curriculum; a curriculum that was not very important for most of us reading this paper. In fact, most of us reading this paper were also educated just fine without a State assessment test. An assessment test, as first proposed, was to be used to "assess" an individual student's deficiencies so they can be corrected. But now the TAAS has quickly grown to dominate the structure and teaching of a local school. Why has a State test become so dominant in a local school? The answer can be found in what the State does with the TAAS results.

The State uses the TAAS results to give each school and each district a label or rating: Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Low-Performing. These ratings have worked like "magic" in making the schools strive to attain them. Through tremendous effort, and TAAS pep rallies, and an inordinate focus on the "test", our districts and schools have made great progress in attaining higher labels. Here it should be asked, what have they actually attained? The answer is *an "Exemplary" school has taught 90 percent of their students in each ethnic group to jump over a bar, academically, that has to be kept low enough and easy enough for 90 percent of all school children to jump over with good effort.* This represents "the top 90<sup>th</sup> percentile" phenomenon. The labels were awarded to shame the schools into doing the hard work necessary to educate kids that they were leaving behind. The next question should be asked is, why should such incentives be necessary? Why wasn't this effort expended before? The simple answer is that the public schools were not self-motivated enough to do it or found too many excuses to not do it.

State leaders, faced with public schools that were not educating all children equitably to a minimum level, stepped in and created a State curriculum, a State test and State labels. Has it worked? Yes. Children that had been neglected by our public schools before are now being educated to a higher level than before. For this, the State can be congratulated, but in the process the State and its role in education has increased dramatically. Along with the sought out consequence of "Leaving No Child Behind", unintended consequences have also reared their ugly heads. Of these the most important is that a "blanket of mediocrity" is beginning to smother our schools. Milton Friedman in *Capitalism and Freedom*, states:

*"...government can never duplicate the variety and diversity of individual action. At any moment in time, by imposing uniform standards...government could undoubtedly improve the level of living of many individuals; by imposing uniform standards in schooling...central government could undoubtedly improve the level of performance....But in the process, government would replace progress by stagnation, it would substitute uniform mediocrity for the variety essential for that experimentation which can bring tomorrow's laggards above today's mean."p.4*

These words, penned in 1962, perfectly reflect the process just described about Texas education reform. with its State curriculum, assessment, and label systems. This reform has undoubtedly improved the level of education for many children, but it has led to a stupefying, "teach to the test", drab lifelessness in our schools.

## THE RISE of MEDIOCRITY

The mediocrity resulting from the big government statist approach first displays itself with the many students not being academically stimulated to their full potential. As our schools have changed under standards-based reform, they have committed large amounts of time to focus on the TAAS. This has resulted in "teaching to the test" and the "narrowing of the curriculum". Time

is a non-renewable resource in education and too many children arrive at school with a time deficit. The "advantaged" child is a child who arrives at school with their pre-school time richly filled with many experiences, books, travel, and stimulating conversation. The "disadvantaged" child is a child who arrives at school with their time poverishly void of many experiences, books, travel, and stimulating conversation. For these children, especially, it is imperative we do not waste their time. Every moment of the precious school day should be filled with stimulating their minds with facts, knowledge and experience, and reading, writing and arithmetic. We must close the deficiency of their knowledge and experience gap as quickly as possible.

Fortunately, this time before puberty is the great opportunity to fill a child's mind full of interesting facts, knowledge and experience. For example, it is at this time that a child who happens to live in different lands with different languages can learn them all, and without an accent! Their brains are different than our adult brains and we must use this opportunity in their education wisely. Unfortunately, in our Texas schools today, too much of the students precious time is spent on practicing for the TAAS.

A question we should ask is: what do we not see happening in our schools because of the time spent on TAAS practice? To illustrate the point, consider Frederic Bastiat's "broken window fallacy". A hoodlum throws a brick through a baker's window and as a crowd gathers they begin to do a little philosophical speculation. They realize the baker will spend \$200 with a glazier who will in turn spend \$200 with other merchants, and on and on. The hoodlum, they reason, has become a public benefactor not a menace. But what they do not know was that the baker was going to the tailor that afternoon to buy a suit for \$200. The crowd does not miss the suit because they never saw it because it was never made. The community is one suit poorer that day.

In our Texas schools, what are we not seeing because it was "never made"? What academic achievement are we not stimulating in our children's minds? It is at this crucial time when we need to "unleash" our schools to teach our children. But this is the time that we have "enslaved" them to a State curriculum, State test, State labels, and above all, State pressure. Many parents sense this and have risen in protest. This protest is the "backlash". Many in the discerning public, realize that their children's time and minds are not being challenged and have thus placed their children in other schools.

Ironically, the schools where the reformers think they have done their best job - the elementary schools that have attained the highest labels in the system - are the schools that many parents avoid with their children. The high schools, which the reformers think need the most work, still attract many students that have been on a private or home school track. Thus, the grades with the most standards-based reform, elementary and middle school, are the least appealing to these discriminating parents, while the least affected grades - the high school - are still seen as attractive.

Secondly, the rise in mediocrity due to the standards-based reform also displays itself by an unmotivated and demoralized teacher workforce that either quits or drops out for early retirement. Most teachers, when surveyed, are frustrated by the time they have to spend on the TAAS. Many of the state's good and experienced teachers fondly recall the days when teaching was more fun and rewarding. Could it be that the current teacher shortage crisis is also a trend that parallels the rise and power of the State? It is unarguable that the rise in State standards, tests, and labels have reduced teacher prerogative and the freedom they have in the classroom. The teachers have not only sensed this but they have experienced it.

Finally, the rise in mediocrity has displayed itself in the behavior of the State itself. It is typical of big government to step in to fix something and in the end mess it up; undaunted and unaware of their role in creating the new problem they see themselves as the answer and the State keeps getting bigger and bigger in a never ending circle. Thus, whenever the State senses a problem like mediocrity, it will step in with another program. The very existence of new and special programs proves the State senses this mediocrity. Less than 15 years since the implementation

of State standards, Texas has begun a before unheard of series of initiatives. Our students cannot read so we now have a *Statewide Reading Initiative*; our students cannot do arithmetic so we now have a *Statewide Math Initiative*; our parents are not involved so we now have *Statewide Parental Involvement Annual Conferences*.

The clearest example of State behavior, which demonstrates the State's tacit acceptance of mediocrity, is their recent decision announced last week to join *The American Diploma Project*. Here mediocrity asserted itself in the fact that too many of our graduates are not prepared for college or the workplace. And here again the State, not seeing itself as the cause, asserts itself further by putting on a fast track a plan to include its TAKS test scores on college admissions forms and employment forms. Is this what employers want to know about their potential employee, that they have scored in the "top 90<sup>th</sup> percentile"? With implementation of this program we would then have a high-stakes, high pressure test from the third grade through graduation and into college and the job market. Don't you want to be a kid again? The amazing thing about the State's decision to participate in this project was the speed of its acceptance and the excitement to be a part of what is really "social engineering" the lives of many people.

As the State grows, there is no end to what it thinks it can accomplish, and how much damage it can cause. To summarize this section, mediocrity has arisen just as Milton Friedman predicted it would, and this mediocrity is sensed by the parents, by the teachers, and by the State itself.

#### THE RISE of the "ORTHODOXIES"

Not only has the rise of the State led to mediocrity in our schools, it has provided a base for monopolistic educational ideas, views and fads to gain a dogmatic hold over our entire State. It has stifled diversity, a trait that is so necessary in all fields of endeavor. If a single school district adopts a flawed pedagogy for teaching reading, the damage will be great for those students affected, but if an entire State adopts it the damage will be catastrophic. California and its experimentation in teaching reading is the classic example. It is helpful to view the myriad of network of educational agencies, organizations, associations and bureaucracy as a mighty "leviathan" that dominates expert opinion and establishes orthodoxies with a powerful dogmatism.

Historian Paul Johnson, in the conclusion of his book Intellectuals summarizes the dangers of these types of "expert" groups. For they,

*"...far from being highly individualistic and non-conformist people, follow certain regular patterns of behavior. Taken as a group, they are often ultra-conformist within the circles formed by those whose approval they seek and value. That is what makes them, en masse, so dangerous, for it enables them to create climates of opinion and prevailing orthodoxies." p.342*

This behavior is certainly seen by the rapid acceptance of our State to gain acceptance from its peers as being one of ten States to participate in *The American Diploma Project*. The problem is that these prevailing "orthodoxies" often conflict with parental concerns, but when propelled by the power of the State their dogmatic ideas and theories leave the parents left with only one choice--leave the public schools or submit to the prevailing orthodoxy.

These "orthodoxies take many forms; they can be teaching methodologies of "whole language" or "new-new math"; they can be political ideologies like "environmental extremism" or "anti-Americanism". While these orthodoxies have always been present, the rise of the State has magnified their power and potential for damage and made them near impossible to stop. The teaching of reading is still the best example. Even in Texas it took years of battle to establish "phonics" as the basis for the teaching of reading. And today it pays for parents and concerned citizens to remain extremely diligent about their school's reading program.

The most amazing "orthodoxy" which dominates the "leviathan" today is the slighting of "facts and knowledge" for emphasis on problem-solving and critical thinking. Problem solving and

critical thinking are secondary skills. Before one can think and solve he must first have something to think about. Surgeons must be drilled and saturated in the facts of anatomy before they problem solve with the scalpel. Yet today there is a real bias in the public schools to de-emphasize knowledge and facts. Again, for a child, the years before puberty are the golden time to learn, to be exposed to myriads of facts, to be trained in arithmetic, grammar and spelling. Yet each of these has been a battleground at the State level where the dogmatic "orthodoxies" have been challenged by the "back-to-the-basics" advocates.

The same is true for the prevailing intellectual dogmatic views on environmentalism, on what is called tolerance, and on the family - especially marriage. The prevailing politically correct views have gained a strong foothold, through State imposed standards and State provided textbooks. This effect is just as powerful in what it rejects as in what it promotes. Religion, patriotism, and "intelligent design" are subjects that cannot cross the school's door. The amazing power of the educational "leviathan's" bias was demonstrated by the fact that the only controversy over the popularity of "God Bless America" after the terrorist attacks on September 11th was on public school marquees.

As the State grows, there is no end to what it thinks it can accomplish, and how much damage it can cause. To summarize this section, the prevailing fads of educational dogmatism play a dominant role in today's public schools. Paul Johnson is absolutely correct when he writes, "That is what en masse makes them so dangerous..."

## CONCLUSION

The greatest problem with Texas' standard-based reform is the uncritical eye given to it by the people implementing and legislating it. Many key assumptions are never questioned. These assumptions have been repeated so often that they are believed to be true. These include: "We have high standards for all students", and "We are constantly raising the bar." The truth is with our standardized system and its standardized students we have high standards for at best 30 percent of the students—they are high for the 10 percent that can not pass and for the 20 percent that had to give major effort to pass. Also, the bar can only be raised to the "top 90<sup>th</sup> percentile". This can be explained by the fact that our system is set up so that any school in Texas can be an "Exemplary" school and thus the limit of an individual school is the upper limit for the entire State. Remember, *an "Exemplary" school has taught 90 percent of their students in each ethnic group to jump over a bar, academically, that has to be kept low enough and easy enough for 90 percent of all school children to jump over with good effort.*

We need to give a critical look to our standards-based reform in Texas; we do not need to give pejorative labels to the TAAS critics as "TAAS bashers" but we need to listen a lot closer to what they have to say. These critics include some of our best teachers, parents and policy thinkers. Once we have applied our "critical thinking" skills to the problem, we can find a solution and the solution must solve the problem of the "Rise of the State" with its corollaries the "Rise of Mediocrity" and the "Rise of Orthodoxies".

An answer can be found in the answer our nation's founding fathers gave us when, to escape the stupefying regulations of big government of their former states, they established a new nation with a limited government. Our founders succeeded, and in the words of President Reagan in his first inaugural address;

*"If we look to the answer as to why, for so many years, we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on earth, it was because here, in this land, we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before".*

But we have not done that with our schools. In fact,

*"...the invasion of the field of education by tax supported state authority-itself based on ideas of a statist nature - was the first great breach in the concept of*

*government limited in power to the maintenance of internal and external order ."*  
(In Defense of Freedom, ,1962, Frank S. Meyer p.155-167)

Texas has committed itself to a statist, big government solution called standards-based reform. It is a belief in the power of "social engineering"; a belief that "society" is like a living organism that can be "engineered" to be better. Standards-based reform, like all other big government solutions, does not "unleash the energy and individual genius" needed to achieve so much.

Frank Meyer continues:

*"Yet, can there be any doubt that if the state had not intervened, there would have been as multifarious, diverse and brilliant a growth of educational opportunities, through the enterprise of private individuals and independent groups as hence taken place in other fields?" (ibid.)*

The "Rise of the State" in Texas education began when our State leadership took the responsibility to educate all our children equitably. The public schools at that time had failed to give all students the opportunity to reach their maximum potential. Too many children were being left behind and were falling to what President Bush calls "the soft bigotry of low expectations". State leaders at that time decided to head down the track of standards-based reform and we are headed full steam down that track. There are other options. We could change our reform strategy into one that could be described as the "Rise of the Parents". We could unleash the powerful energy of a parent's love for their child. It is the only one that will work.

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