

## CHAPTER 4



### CORPORATE SUPERSTARS AND AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Under the Reagan administration, deregulated free markets were removing the shackles from corporate tycoons on a crusade to save the free world from what, they believed, was the tyranny of big government and high taxes. In 1987, the U.S. Congress, under President Reagan, passed the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act as a way to recognize preeminent public or private organizations that exemplified excellence and quality.<sup>1</sup> Education would soon be caught up in the headiness of corporate “heroism” and corporate superstars would be looked upon as the big minds with the big ideas about how to systemically reform public education in the United States. The path to the Common Core State Standards would, in large part, be carved by these corporate superstars.

In November 1989, Xerox was presented the Baldrige Award, largely based on the efforts of its CEO, David T. Kearns, in turning around the corporation since assuming leadership in 1977. Kearns’ career in big business began with IBM before he became the CEO of a troubled Xerox corporation as it was languishing and losing its battle for profits to Japanese companies that, quite simply, were making better copy machines. For the next decade Kearns worked tirelessly reinventing Xerox, making it a corporation worthy of the Baldrige Award. Kearns was presented the award at a White House ceremony by President George H. W. Bush who commented on the Xerox CEO’s “can-do, no-excuse attitude” and “aggressive impatience with the status quo.”<sup>2</sup> Within two and half years, Bush would call on corporate superstar David Kearns to apply his can-do, no-excuse attitude

and aggressive impatience with the status quo to education policy, appointing him deputy secretary of the U.S. DOE in 1991.

According to Kearns, the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) were the keys to his success as CEO of Xerox. These same principles, Kearns asserted, if applied to public schools, would yield the same results. In much the same way he reinvented Xerox, Kearns vigorously promoted the reinvention of America's public education system using a business model to promote quality, customer satisfaction, and system-wide restructuring. TQM quickly became a buzzword among educational leaders in the United States. For example, the November 1992 issue of *Improving School Quality* featured an article by John Jay Bonstingl about the impact of TQM on public schools entitled "The Quality Revolution in Education."<sup>3</sup> Other such articles were soon to follow.

The concept of TQM originated with W. Edwards Deming and a team of researchers working in Japan in the decade following WWII. Deming's mission was to assist Japanese business leaders to "reverse their well-established reputation for shoddy, cheap goods by designing quality into their work systems."<sup>4</sup> Still recovering from the devastation of the war and desperately trying to recover economically, Japan eagerly adopted Deming's suggestions. Japan was so successful in reinventing its manufacturing sector that by the 1970s, Japan had overtaken the United States as a preferred source for many manufactured goods like automobiles and copy machines.

Although Deming's ideas had been largely ignored by U.S. manufacturers in the decades following WWII, his principles would be resurrected in a 1980 television documentary entitled, "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?"<sup>5</sup> Education leaders jumped onboard the TQM bandwagon, confident that if schools were run according to the principles of successful businesses, the result would be successful schools with high quality "output" that would translate into high test scores. In 1992, Bonstingl described the Four Pillars of Total Quality as:

1. The organization must focus, first and foremost, on its suppliers and customers;
2. Everyone in the organization must be dedicated to continuous improvement, personally and collectively;
3. The organization must be viewed as a system, and the work people do within the system must be seen as ongoing processes; and
4. The success of TQM is the responsibility of top management.<sup>6</sup>

The implementation of TQM required a complete reinvention of the very notion of public schools. Students were no longer merely

learners, but they were the school's "primary customers" as well as "workers" whose product is their own continuous improvement and growth measured by test scores within a TQM model. Within this model, teachers don't simply teach but rather "deliver educational services" to children.<sup>7</sup>

In order for TQM principles to be successful in American schools, however, required the underlying belief that: (1) American schools were in peril, much like manufacturers in Japan after WWII, and in need of complete restructuring; and (2) schools were nothing more than businesses. The concept of TQM, however, begins to break down when thinking of public schools as mere businesses. In one sense students were considered consumers, in that they "consumed" the education provided at a particular school. But according to TQM principles, these students were also considered workers, in that they were engaged in the production of learning, test scores, and the creation of *themselves* as learned individuals. So to make this comparison more bizarre, these same students were also the product of the company, i.e., schools! This process was very different than when a worker produces a car for Ford or a hamburger for McDonald's. At least one thing that most Americans can agree upon is that children are not hamburgers—nor are they cars!

The education of any child is just too complex to simply reduce this process in terms of a simplistic TQM business approach. The effectiveness of the tidal wave of TQM models that swept the education landscape throughout the 1980s and 1990s continues to be widely debated. Nevertheless, what has remained is the concept that schools are nothing more than businesses in which a product results in the form of student learning that can only be validly measured through standardized testing, which, in essence, ultimately becomes a school's measurable profit.

A new model for reforming public schools would be created by another corporate superstar. In 1989, Lou Gerstner, then CEO of RJR Nabisco facilitated the creation of the company's Next Century Schools (NCS) program. This program provided \$30 million in grants over three years for education leaders who were willing to radically restructure individual public schools that would serve as models of market reform in education. Governor Bill Clinton served on the original NCS Advisory Board along with President George H. W. Bush's secretary of education, Lamar Alexander, and soon to be appointed deputy secretary of education, corporate superstar David Kearns.<sup>8</sup>

According to Leanna Landsmann and Mary Harbaugh, the NCS project represented a shift in education reform from one of



restructuring to revolt, quoting President George H. W. Bush as declaring, "There will be no renaissance without revolution." Gerstner was quoted as stating that Nabisco's money should go toward "arming the insurgents" and "guerrilla educators." Gerstner's NCS conferences would be called "China Breakers"—a metaphor for what one might do with an inferior set of dinnerware.<sup>9</sup>

As the NCS's three-year program began to wind down, the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) was formed to further infuse corporate dollars into education reform initiatives. This time, however, the federal government would provide some of the money, thanks to President George H. W. Bush. Gerstner would play an important role in the NASDC. Larry Cuban, explaining the influence of the NASDC and its corporate dollars on federal education policy, quotes James Jones, chairman of the American Stock Exchange. Jones rationalized, "Privately financed federal initiatives to transform schools would 'take the shackles off' and would 'think big to make education something that improves the productivity, the competitiveness, the quality of all students going through the system.'"<sup>10</sup>

Gerstner would go on to become one of the enduring corporate superstars in the 1990s and well into the twenty-first century. In much the same way that Kearns is credited with saving Xerox, Gerstner is credited with saving IBM, when he left RJR Nabisco to assume leadership of the floundering technology giant in 1993.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, IBM and Xerox needed saving and there was plenty of empirical evidence that these businesses were failing due to the inferior products they were manufacturing. Rescuing these failing businesses through systemic change, however, did not mean that Kearns and Gerstner were charged with completely restructuring the United States' business system writ large, nor were these two individuals claiming that *all* businesses were failing. They were engaged in restructuring one business by improving the business practices and the quality of the manufactured goods produced by that business.

Far from being satisfied with being corporate giants, however, Gerstner and Kearns extended their corporate lives to engage in a messianic-like mission of saving what they saw as a failed public school system. And far from saving one school or one school district, they envisioned their role in a more grandiose way—saving an entire American school system on a national basis. Of course, these efforts were predicated on the assumption that all schools were failing and in need of rescue as if all schools were producing inferior products, or as if the entire public school system in America was merely a business and comparable in any way to a major corporation such as IBM or Xerox.

## THE FALLACY OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AS A BUSINESS

In 2013, IBM employed 434,246 employees worldwide. To be sure, that's a lot of people to manage. However, that's really "small potatoes" when compared with the number of people "employed" by public schools in the United States. If, indeed, as the TQM model proposes, students are considered workers, customers, and products of public schools, then the 50.1 million students enrolled in public schools in 2013 would be counted as employees of this vast education system in addition to being customers and products. Then add to that the 3.3 million full-time teachers employed within American schools. In addition, according to the Department of Education and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, public schools also employ 231,500 principals, superintendents, and other school administrators.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, if the public school system in the United States is to be treated like a business, then any proposal for reforming public schools in the same way that a large corporation is restructured must take into consideration the need to manage over 53.5 million employees (not counting other staff positions such as secretaries, maintenance workers, bus drivers, or substitute and part-time teachers)—all with diverse backgrounds, needs, strengths, and weaknesses and serving very diverse communities in inner-cities, in addition to rural and suburban areas in all 50 states within America. And of course, all of these schools, people, and locales have profound social and economic infrastructure needs that must also be met in order to become successful.

Free marketers would no doubt assert that the essential strength of America's business system rests with a competitive market that forces businesses to improve or perish. Likewise, they assert that competition is exactly what the public school system needs in order to force schools to either improve or perish. What free market school reformers ignore is that the "system" of public schools has always felt the sting of competition. School districts have always competed for tax dollars—dollars that were often increasingly scarce in urban areas that experienced "white flight" and shrinking tax bases. As a result, students attending urban schools, situated within deteriorating urban neighborhoods and communities where high unemployment and crime are a consistent reality, have always felt the sting of reductions in funding for the programs and buildings that would make their schools competitive with more affluent suburban communities, in which schools benefit from expanding tax bases, better neighborhoods, and

higher parental incomes. The same is true of students in rural areas across the United States.

Schools are not businesses. If they were, then few corporate CEOs would even consider opening a school in many of the destitute communities in which public schools exist. After all, corporations are often very selective when it comes to where they locate their business offices and factories. They certainly don't expect their employees to walk through drug-infested, gang-ridden, and squalor-filled neighborhoods to go to work. Businesses, and in particular corporations, look to the local and state governments, who court the CEOs, to invest in infrastructure that would make a community worthy of the business's presence. For example, deals are made to ensure adequate roads, good sources of water and power, and tax incentives. Businesses want to ensure that the employees they relocate to an area have good schools for their families and nice neighborhoods. In other words, CEOs of corporations envision the community as a source for ensuring the profitability of their business.

If schools were businesses like those based on a corporate model, then citizens would be empowered to do the same thing, demanding, for example, that city officials clean up the neighborhoods before requiring students to navigate the drug-infested, gang-ridden streets between their homes and the school. Parents could demand that state and city governments repair decaying school buildings before the first day of school. And parents could demand programs that would enrich their children's educational lives, such as music and the arts, before they subject their children to an endless stream of mandated standardized tests.

Nevertheless, schools are not businesses. Public schools serve children, their families, and their communities. They serve a different system—not the system of public schools as governed by Washington or the state departments of education, but the system of the community in which they are located. At the very least, systemic reform, therefore, must simultaneously include reforming the community. Until that occurs, public schools within economically disadvantaged and socially troubled communities cannot be held accountable to the same standard as their more affluent and socially stable counterparts in suburban areas. By demanding this, public school supporters are asking no more than what corporations require before their factories or corporate headquarters are built in a particular community.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as an essential component of President Johnson's War on Poverty, acknowledged that schools exist within community systems. Therefore, reforming

education and improving educational outcomes could only be effective within a comprehensive approach to providing equity for all children, families, and communities. According to Alain Jehlen, writing for *NEA Today*, public schools made substantial gains in closing the achievement gap in the years directly following the implementation of War on Poverty programs. Perhaps, as noted by Jehlen, the defunding or underfunding of War on Poverty programs over the decades since 1970 can be cited as a reason for the stagnation in student achievement for students living in impoverished communities.<sup>13</sup>

As an important aside, as we will see, charter school operators employ some of the same tactics as business CEOs when opening new schools. It's common practice, for example, for new businesses to request—and receive—certain tax breaks from state and local governments in order to ensure their profitability. Charter schools, too, would be given all kinds of concessions. While public schools serve all students, regardless of ability, disability, or any social, emotional, or physical factor that might impact education achievement, charter schools are permitted to operate with policies that enable them to select students who will increase their profitability (in terms of higher test scores). Students with special needs are often counseled away from charter schools and students and parents who violate their contracts are conveniently eliminated before high-stakes tests are administered.<sup>14</sup> And, in the case of New York City, private charter schools are provided rent-free space within public school buildings and operate concomitantly as both public and private entities, using tax dollars to provide profits for the business owners while receiving rent-free space in public buildings.

In 1994, Gerstner published his book *Reinventing Education: Entrepreneurship in America's Public Schools* with coauthors Roger D. Semerad, former senior vice president of RJR Nabisco, Denis Philip Doyle, senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, and William B. Johnston, executive vice president of the global public relations company Burson-Marsteller and senior fellow of the Hudson Institute. The authors described themselves as “venture capitalists,”<sup>15</sup> willing to provide financing for bold ideas for educational entrepreneurs who have the ability to radically restructure the American school system which was, according to the authors, in “deep trouble.”<sup>16</sup> In the book's foreword, Gerstner explained that his involvement in education reform was not “just philanthropic” but was “fueled by intense anger” and frustration over “the slowness and indifference our country brings to the crisis in public education reform.”<sup>17</sup> He further explained: “The Chinese character *crisis* is made up of two characters,



one for *danger*, and the other for *opportunity*. Our schools are in trouble, yet we know enough to act." Gerstner and his coauthors provided the blueprint for success for public education by invoking the language of TQM and business reform. Interestingly, they employed some of the same language as other free market reformers, such as Milton Friedman, while promoting school choice as a reform initiative, when they proclaimed, "Public elementary and secondary schools are a protected monopoly, owned and operated by government and enjoying captive clientele."<sup>18</sup>

### AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH: THE SANDIA REPORT

In the decade following *A Nation at Risk*, its findings went largely unchallenged, and, therefore, education reform efforts were predicated on the highly suspect findings of that report and fueled by its alarmist tone. Corporate superstars and government officials routinely referred to *ANAR* in their public pronouncements of a failing public school system and the need for systemic reform. What if, however, a government report surfaced that called into question the validity of the findings in *ANAR*? It was one thing for liberal university professors to challenge the notion that schools were failing and publish articles that only university intelligentsia would read in academic journals. It was another thing entirely for the U.S. government to issue a report that challenged the findings issued by the DOE in 1983.

In 1990, Admiral James Watkins, the Department of Energy secretary, instructed Sandia National Laboratories to undertake a study of American education, although he did not foresee the firestorm this study would create.<sup>19</sup> Watkins was a protégé of Admiral Hyman Rickover who was a staunch critic of America's public schools; and although Watkins was not the rabid education critic of Rickover's caliber, he readily accepted the opportunity to join in the assault on America's public schools. Watkins proclaimed, "We have to pick up our society by its bootstraps and find a new mechanism to obtain science and math literacy."<sup>20</sup> Sandia National Laboratories seemed like the perfect entity to undertake an investigation into public schools with its long history as a highly respected research center.<sup>21</sup>

Daniel Tanner, writing in 1993, explained that "the basis for undertaking the study was to provide Sandia a foundation for planning its activities in education."<sup>22</sup> The key to assessing the importance of Sandia's evaluation of education is the fact that it was begun with no previous premises about education that needed to be proved. In other words, the researchers began their investigation with no preconceived

notion that schools were failing. Sandia researchers presented their report, originally titled "Perspectives on Education in America" in spring 1991. The report would later simply be known as the Sandia Report.<sup>23</sup>

Sandia researchers knew that their report would not be well received by education policy makers. An early version of the report stated, "Unfortunately, much of the current [education] reform agenda, though well intentioned, is misguided."<sup>24</sup> They further went on to assert, "Based on a 'crisis' mentality, many proposed reforms do not properly focus on actual problems."<sup>25</sup> However, the researchers were also concerned that their report would be, at best, suppressed by the DOE, and, at worst, their federal research funds would be cut as a result of the report's findings. Their concerns seem to have been well founded.

In an attempt to circumvent critics and ensure the accuracy of their report, Sandia researchers began circulating annotated drafts to educators and researchers in late 1990, amid rumors that the administration intended to "kill the report."<sup>26</sup> When the Sandia researchers first presented their report to the DOE in the spring of 1991, they were met with angry reactions, particularly from former CEO of Xerox and then deputy education secretary David T. Kearns. According to Gerald Bracey, Kearns told the researchers, "You bury this or I'll bury you."<sup>27</sup> Julie A. Miller, writing for *Education Week*, reported in October 1991 that Washington sources told her that the researchers "were told it [the report] would never see the light of day, that they had better be quiet." Her source further commented, "I fear for their careers."<sup>28</sup>

After presenting the Sandia Report to the DOE in spring 1991, the findings of the report became the subject of a congressional hearing. The findings of the briefings, however, were not immediately released to the American public. Tanner explains, "The briefings had prompted strong demands [from DOE officials] that the report not be issued in its present form [summer 1991] and that it be subjected to review by officials of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the DOE's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)."<sup>29</sup> According to Tanner, this was an "unprecedented agreement" that "effectively held the report from being officially released" to the media and American citizens. While one of the goals of the extended evaluation was supposedly to judge the validity of the report's findings about education in America, this extended process "helped neutralize its potential impact."<sup>30</sup> Most telling is that in July 1991, the NCES, after evaluating the report, commented that the report was rather unique in

that it presented “a balanced view” of American education.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Emerson Eliot, a member of the NCES, was rather complimentary when he stated,

I applaud the attempt represented here to present a balanced view of education since that is frequently not the approach analysts take. (This report presents both positive and negative aspects of the condition of education in the nation, and there are certainly trends that support both perspectives.) This is an important aspect of the report, and balance should be sought throughout the revision process. In addition, the report covers a great deal of ground in attempting to address a full range of issues in education. This provides a comprehensive and intriguing compilation of information. Still the report needs much work before it is published or is widely disseminated.<sup>32</sup>

What is of key importance is that while Eliot also went on to explain that the “much work” he was talking about had to do with supposed flaws in the report, the flaws still did not invalidate the report’s findings and conclusions. Throughout the extensive revision process, according to Tanner, “the Sandia Report remained virtually intact in every major respect.”<sup>33</sup> One of the Sandia researchers asserted that the DOE and NSF reviewers could not invalidate the data because most of it was actually “compiled by these very same agencies.”<sup>34</sup> As a matter of fact, on the final draft of the report, in April 1992, one frustrated reviewer of the report simply wrote “Nuts” without further commenting upon or challenging its findings. The final version of the Sandia Report included a statement that the peer reviews by the DOE and NSF would be included in an appendix. The Sandia researchers were confident that the appendix would further strengthen the credibility of their report.<sup>35</sup> And it was these findings and conclusions that were causing consternation among DOE officials and other critics of American public schools who had jumped on board the education reform bandwagon of *A Nation at Risk* and *America 2000*, the frame of this wagon resting on wheels that spun the tale that America’s public schools were failing except for a very few—plain and simple.

The Bush administration never cleared the Sandia Report for publication. To date, the report has only been published in the *Journal of Educational Research* in its May–June 1993 edition, which devoted the entire issue to the report.<sup>36</sup> Although the researchers did not lose their jobs, they were reassigned and the Sandia Laboratories discontinued their proposed research and development program for education. This led Tanner to cynically state, “Obviously, nuclear weapons research is far safer than the maelstrom of politics that swirls

around our public schools.”<sup>37</sup> But even more troubling, according to Bracey, the researchers were “forbidden to leave the state of New Mexico to talk about the report.”<sup>38</sup> And while former Bush administrators to this day have continued to deny that the Sandia Report was suppressed, according to Bracey, Lee Bray, the Sandia vice president who oversaw the research, after his retirement admitted, “Yes, it was definitely suppressed.”<sup>39</sup>

So what did the Sandia Report conclude that caused such angst among education policy makers, prompting them to go to such extraordinary lengths to suppress its findings? For policy makers at the DOE, the Sandia Report, if released to the public, had the potential to derail efforts to systemically reform public education by demonstrating the America’s public schools were not failing.

Sandia researchers’ findings regarding SAT scores mirrored similar findings by the College Board in the mid-1970s. While there had been a decline in SAT scores since the 1960s, this decline arose from the fact that more students in the bottom half of the class were taking the SAT. With more people aspiring to achieve a college education, the national SAT average was lowered as more students in the third and fourth quartiles of their high school classes took the test.<sup>40</sup> It was the case that minorities continued to significantly lag behind their white counterparts on the SAT. However, they concluded that “this disparity may be better correlated with home setting or family variables than with race or ethnicity,” particularly for disadvantaged urban and rural students.<sup>41</sup> SAT scores for “traditional” test takers, according to the Sandia Report, had “actually improved over 30 points since 1975.” The researchers, therefore, concluded that “the issue of student performance on SAT is far too complex to be discussed in terms of decline or improvement in average scores.”<sup>42</sup>

When examining student performance on NAEP, Sandia researchers found that in the years leading up to 1990, there had not been “recent declines in performance on skills tests,” further stating, “if anything, today’s students are performing better than previous students.”<sup>43</sup> As was the case with SAT scores, the researchers found that there continued to be a discrepancy between the NAEP scores for minority students and those for their white counterparts. However, they noted that this was a result of the education system’s focus on “increased access and improved basic skills.”<sup>44</sup> Sandia researchers further stated, “Our investigation of the NAEP data revealed that performance has been steady or improving in nearly all subject areas tested, and that the greatest gains have been made in basic skills. Furthermore, these gains have not been at the expense of advanced skills.”<sup>45</sup>



According to the Sandia researchers, education reformers' claims about high dropout rates were misleading. While "dropout rates were not carefully calculated in many school districts" prior to the mid-1980s, census data revealed "an impressive increase in graduation rate from 1870 to the mid-1960s," and, "after 1965, the graduation rate from traditional schools has remained steady at about 75%." Furthermore, if GED completion was included, the high school completion rate was over 85 percent.<sup>46</sup> For black students, the decrease in dropout rate was particularly impressive in the 20 years leading up to their research, dropping from 28 percent to 15 percent. Dropout rates for Hispanic students, on the other hand, had not changed. Sandia researchers found, however, that Hispanic dropout rates were heavily influenced by immigration, with roughly 50 percent of the Hispanics reported as dropouts being first-generation immigrants who had in reality never enrolled in school in the United States. Sandia researchers asserted, "We believe that it is misleading to count adult immigrants as dropouts from the U.S. education system if they never attended a U.S. school."<sup>47</sup> And far from being an issue that required total systemic reform of the American education system, problems with dropouts were concentrated in inner cities where students, "regardless of race, tend to dropout at a higher rate than students in other community types."<sup>48</sup>

Sandia researchers further questioned the assertions of education reformers that the United States was not producing enough students capable of earning bachelor's degrees in the sciences (today generally referred to as STEM areas). The researchers found that between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of U.S. students earning degrees in the sciences was relatively stable at nearly 4 percent. And, interestingly, they found that engineering PhDs were "at or near an all-time high" and physical science PhDs were "within a few percent of an all-time high."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the Sandia researchers called into question claims by business leaders that the lack of skilled workers was a major problem. They noted that, in reality, only 15 percent of business leaders surveyed had difficulty filling skilled positions. After more closely examining claims of skilled-worker shortages, researchers concluded that "these positions existed in the chronically underpaid occupations such as nurses, skilled secretaries and clerks, and in craft apprentice trades." These shortages were, according to the researchers, attributable to "the fact that many people formerly filling these high-skilled, non-college jobs are now attending college and obtaining higher paying positions."<sup>50</sup> Additionally, Sandia researchers found that business leaders surveyed were "generally satisfied with the skills levels of their

employees" and any complaints they had with workers tended to be related to work ethic and social skills. The researchers concluded that any dissatisfaction with workers did not "point to the K-12 education system as the root cause."<sup>51</sup>

Two other points raised in the Sandia Report bear mentioning as well. First, they found that "the average teacher in Japan earns almost 50% more than his/her American counterpart, relative to incomes in their respective nations" and that, "in constant dollars, beginning salaries [for teachers] in 1990 are the same as those of the 1970s."<sup>52</sup> Second, in response to public school critics complaining about increases in expenditures for education since the early 1980s, the Sandia researchers found that, while there had been an increase in total per-pupil spending, "much of the increase in expenditures . . . had been for special education." Roughly 25–30 percent of the expenditures were "directed to 10% of all students." Spending on "regular" education had remained steady.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, findings such as these, especially coming from this highly respected politically neutral group of scientific researchers at the Sandia National Laboratories, was something that needed to be tucked away in some inconspicuous place where the American public, and, in particular, the American media, would probably not consider looking. And what better place than a respected professional journal about education—the *Journal of Educational Research*! With the Sandia Report suppressed, the crusade could continue for the systemic reform of public schools.

### SYSTEMIC REFORM AND LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

Clearly the findings of the Sandia Report were an inconvenient truth that had the power to derail systemic education reform initiatives grounded in the belief that public schools were failing. However, with the Sandia Report sufficiently buried, critics of public schools could continue their campaign to radically reform America's public schools. Once critics of public schools had established that these schools were in crisis and therefore failing in total, the next step was to call for "systemic reform," which ended up being code for a total radical transformation of America's system of public education.

For these critics, it was to their advantage to never acknowledge that there are "many" public schools in America that were, indeed, performing well, as the Blue Ribbon Schools panel acknowledged even before *ANAR* was published.<sup>54</sup> To acknowledge this, at the very least, would have been an inconvenient truth for proponents of

a radical course of systemic education reform. Instead, one essential strategy for achieving systemic reform was to divert attention away from acknowledging that some schools were performing quite well by labeling these schools as an aberration. Nevertheless, the drive for total systemic reform in education would be the natural outcome of creating a crisis mentality among Americans when it came to their public schools. When it was established that achieving total systemic reform must be the primary goal of education reform, a Pandora's Box of corporate-driven free market educational initiatives and solutions became a real threat to the local control of public schools that have personified American democracy.

Locally controlled public schools have served American students quite well. As a matter of fact, far from being aberrations, there are many public schools in locally controlled school districts across the country that are sources of pride to their communities and states. It is widely acknowledged that inner-city schools have suffered for many years, laboring to ameliorate the negative impacts of poverty, crime, shrinking tax bases, unemployment, and social factors beyond the ability of schools and teachers to solve. Nonetheless, there are abundant examples of successful schools and school districts in the United States. Therefore, citizens in every state across America need to begin asking themselves why some public schools always seemed to be doing well, while others always seemed to be facing challenges that stand in the way of education success. Is their success or failure simply a matter of good versus bad teachers and administrators, or good versus bad school boards—or does the degree of success or failure among these schools also have to do with other factors that are beyond the control of teachers, school board members, and individual citizens?

For the critics of public schools, however, addressing questions such as these would have undoubtedly revealed a number of inconvenient truths that could have potentially distracted from the narrative that all public schools are in crisis and the only solution to this crisis is to systemically reform the entire public education system. This narrative, indeed, became the driving force behind public school reform, the result being, as Kathy Emery explains, to “transfer educational policy making from local school boards to the state government for the purposes of subordinating educational policy to the corporate agenda.”<sup>55</sup>

In the United States, local school boards have played an essential role in maintaining the proper relationship among diverse stakeholders concerned about public school education. Archie Carroll and Ann Buchholtz, in their book *Business and Society: Ethics and Stakeholder*

*Management*, explain the relationship between organizations such as school boards and the communities they serve.<sup>56</sup> Whether one is on the libertarian right or progressive left, it is essential to consider how the wishes of the individual citizen decision maker, as well as special interest groups such as the business community, become manifested in the United States.

According to Carroll and Buchholtz, “A society’s pluralistic nature makes for business and society relationships that are more dynamic and novel than those in some other societies.”<sup>57</sup> The authors explain that “pluralism refers to a diffusion of power among society’s groups and organizations,”<sup>58</sup> and “a pluralistic society is one in which there is a wide decentralization and diversity of power. . . . Power is dispersed among many groups and people. Power is not in the hands of any single institution such as business, government, labor, or the military or a small number of groups.”<sup>59</sup> According to the authors, one of the strengths of a pluralistic society is that it “prevents power from being concentrated in the hands of a few. It also maximizes freedom of expression and action. Pluralism provides for a built-in set of checks and balances so that no single group dominates.”<sup>60</sup>

Carroll and Buchholtz go on to point out that one weakness in a pluralistic society to keep in mind is that it can create “an environment in which diverse institutions pursue their own self-interests with the result being that there is no *unified direction* [emphasis added] to bring together individual pursuits.”<sup>61</sup> When it comes to America’s public schools, this is where the means to manifest public decision making within a democracy enters the picture. This has to do with the role, power, and responsibility of local school boards that act as both arbiter and decision maker as individual boards go about considering the ideas of certain groups regarding education, and the degree of impact these individuals and groups and their ideas need to have in the education of the children for which the board is responsible. It is the local school board that creates a unified direction when it comes to public schools. After this process takes place, the local school board is responsible for deciding a proper educational course of action.

For school boards, there is always a tension over which organizations or interest groups best serve the educational needs of children in preparation for their eventual multiple roles in society, both as workers and citizens. The local school board is therefore engaged in a dynamic process that constantly must assess and then reassess the ideas of multiple stakeholders in the education process, and then be flexible enough to adapt a school’s curriculum and environment to the social, economic, and political context in which the board’s local



schools exist. The major challenge and responsibility for any school board is deciding how to (1) create a positive learning environment that maintains high academic standards, which includes hiring quality teachers to help facilitate this process; (2) effectively deal with larger socioeconomic realities that impact students and their families; (3) democratically address the multicultural nature of American society; (4) create good citizens in a democratic republic; (5) meet the needs of the business sector; and (6) meet the needs of the individual parent, teacher, administrator, and, most important—the individual needs of every student. To accomplish all of this, school boards must be allowed to engage in a symbiotic, cooperative relationship with diverse education stakeholders by considering stakeholder needs and ideas while maintaining board autonomy.

Although certainly not a perfect system, in theory America's public schools rely on local school boards to reflect the wishes of a democratic pluralistic society. If the community does not like board decisions then solutions at minimum can be achieved through future elections or appointments. However, in more extreme cases of a school board's malfeasance, different individuals or groups can take legal action against a school board for violating laws that govern their action. Legally, no school board has complete dictatorial power, which is why, as Ruth Kolb and Robert Strauss pointed out, it is also essential to have strict laws in place that help "assure that our schools are served by local leaders who are, as much as possible, free from the distracting influence of self-interest."<sup>62</sup> Local public school boards are governed by laws while serving at the behest of the individual citizen, and membership within these boards becomes a democratic defense that prevents power from being concentrated in the hands of a few. This means, for example, that the business sector, federal and state governments, religious and multicultural groups, and yes—teachers' unions—can all represent centers of concentrated power.

#### THE BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE IN A DEMOCRATIC PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Since at least the 1980s, the business sector has been well represented in discussions of education reform in the United States. And since that time, a driving force behind the move for total systemic reform of public schools has been the Business Roundtable (BRT). As Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian explain, the BRT is "an association of chief executive officers who examine public issues that affect the economy

and develop positions which seek to reflect sound economic and social principles."<sup>63</sup> The BRT was established in 1972 through the merger of three existing organizations: the March Group, the Construction Users Anti-inflation Roundtable, and the Labor Law Study Committee. Notably, according to the BRT website, "These groups founded Business Roundtable on the belief that in a pluralistic society, the business sector should play an active and effective role in the formation of public policy."<sup>64</sup>

This statement is important. In one sense, the BRT is meeting its responsibility within a pluralistic society by having America's business sector play an active and effective role in the formation of—in this case—education policy. The BRT, in fact, has not only a right but also a responsibility to do that. This is, however, the same active and effective role other special interest groups like those mentioned above have a right and responsibility to play within America's democratic pluralistic society. And while the educational goals of these diverse special interest groups should overlap, the marginalization of one group over the other, or even worse, the eventual dominance of one group over all the rest cannot be allowed if a democratic pluralistic society is to exist. But most problematically, using the rationale that one has a right and responsibility to play an active and effective role in the formation of education policy, and then going about working to eliminate local school boards in order to achieve total domination, is an act of authoritarian subterfuge that cannot be allowed.

No individual or group should have complete autonomy when it comes to public school education. However, as we will see, in the case of the BRT, education reform initiatives on the path to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will end up being a quest for power and dominance over the wishes of citizens manifested through local school boards and other public school stakeholders such as teachers and parents. For a special interest group such as the BRT, through the guise of "systemic school reform," the ultimate goal of this approach will be the usurpation of local control of public schools. In this way systemic reform eliminates any real power to influence school reform by other stakeholders, unless these stakeholders are in lock step with the education agenda of the BRT and its ideological allies. In fact, local public school boards on America's path to the CCSS became viewed as an impediment to the educational agenda of the BRT and its allies. Local school boards have been marginalized in the era of systemic education reform. As Joseph Beckham and Barbara Klaymeier Wills point out,

Local school boards have been characterized as the largest losers in the reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s. State legislatures have generated educational policies and regulations directed to academic standards, professional certification and preparation, and curriculum development. Bypassing local school boards in the haste to reform public education, additional legislation has emphasized choice as well as quality, and encouraged the development of charter schools with limited regulatory ties to the local school system, school-based management, vouchers, tax credits, and home-schooling options.<sup>65</sup>

By 2008, corporate and political leaders, critical of not only America's public schools but also the local school boards that were given the democratic responsibility of representing the public, would become so emboldened that they would no longer even beat around the bush about their feelings. For example, in 2008, Matt Miller, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, an organization that labels itself as a center of "progressive ideas for a strong, just, and free America," would write an article in the *Atlantic* in which he proposed what he called "a modest proposal to fix the schools." And what was this modest proposal all about? As the title of his article made clear, "First, Kill All the School Boards!"<sup>66</sup> That same year, Lou Gerstner, in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, suggested this same course of action.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly, by 2008, America was continuing on its path to the CCSS and along the way democratic decision making was being taken out of the hands of the American citizen. Six years later on March 2, 2014, Diane Ravitch, in an empirically informed and impassioned speech about the assault on America's public schools, would proclaim, "I am absolutely furious that the Democratic Party has merged with the Republican Party around a bipartisan agenda that actually is a Republican agenda."<sup>68</sup> But how did this happen? How did the conservative right and the liberal left finally converge in an all-out unified assault on the democratic institution of America's public schools?

One organization would be essential in this convergence. The corporate financed American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) was formed in 1973. ALEC describes itself as:

a nonpartisan membership association for conservative state lawmakers who shared a common belief in limited government, free markets, federalism, and individual liberty. Their vision and initiative resulted in the creation of a voluntary membership association for people who believed that government closest to the people was fundamentally more effective, more just, and a better guarantor of freedom than the distant, bloated federal government in Washington, D.C.<sup>69</sup>

During the Reagan administration, ALEC's role within the policy arena was greatly expanded, as conservative legislators and ALEC staff members worked closely with the Reagan administration to promote a conservative political agenda. When Reagan formed a national Task Force on Federalism, ALEC followed suit by establishing task forces of their own in several areas including education. The publication of *ANAR* bolstered the organization's resolve to engage in and influence federal education policy and provided an opportunity for ALEC to promote their free market reform agenda for education. ALEC published a two-part report in response to *ANAR* in which the organization "laid the blame for the nation's educational decline squarely where it belonged - on centralization, declining values, and an increasingly liberal social agenda that had pervaded schools since the 1960s." As a result, ALEC "offered such 'radical' ideas as a voucher system, merit pay for teachers and higher academic and behavioral standards for students as possible solutions to the problems."<sup>70</sup>

In the first two decades of its existence, ALEC primarily served as a "clearinghouse of ideas" submitted by its members. However, at the end of the Reagan administration the organization's task forces shifted their role within the government policy arena, serving as "think tanks and model bill movers." Over the next three decades ALEC actively solicited input and financial support from the private sector. According to the organization, this shift enabled them to seize upon their "long-time philosophy that the private sector should be an ally rather than an adversary in developing sound public policy."<sup>71</sup> This shift also positioned ALEC as a major player in the systemic education reform arena.

With the power of corporate dollars behind them, ALEC has wielded a mighty hand in public policy. One of their most influential roles as conservative policy agents has been to craft model legislation for state legislatures. To date, according to their website, "ALEC's Task Forces have considered, written and approved hundreds of model bills on a wide range of issues, model legislation that will frame the debate today and far into the future. Each year, close to one thousand bills, based at least in part on ALEC Model Legislation, are introduced in the states. Of these, an average of 20 percent become law."<sup>72</sup>

The full impact of the convergence between the political left and right would begin to take place under the guidance of President Bill Clinton. During the Clinton era, the influence of corporate elites with massive amounts of money would profoundly impact education reform at the state and federal levels with the overt cooperation of individual state governors. Even ALEC's conservative small



government, states-rights agenda would bend under the pressure of corporate dollars to facilitate a free market of education initiatives. The organization's assertion that "government closest to the people was fundamentally more effective" would give way to government policies that yield the most profit for corporate power and distance citizens from public school policy.