

Bursting the Dam:

Why the Next 24 Months Are Critical
for Education Reform Politics

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DEMOCRATS
for **EDUCATION REFORM**

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Why the Next 24 Months Are Critical for Education Reform Politics

It is no secret that most of the efforts to reform K-12 public education systems in the last quarter century have been stymied by political gridlock. Although education pioneers like Teach For America and KIPP have demonstrated the tremendous potential impact of innovation, special interests (primarily but not limited to teachers unions) have built up symbiotic relationships with elected officials to the point that they are able to assert de facto veto power over the kinds of changes which could fundamentally alter the way education is delivered in our communities.

Teachers unions and other interests were wise to build this powerbase. Their leaders understood long ago that the \$500 billion public education industry is inherently political and that the ability to impact political decisions at all levels of government is the most efficient way to control their destiny.

Education reformers were slow to realize that politics mattered so much, but have aggressively moved to change the political calculation. In the last three years, Democrats for Education Reform alone has pumped more than \$17 million into political advocacy at the federal, state and local levels. Alumni of programs like Teach For America are beginning to run for office. Reformers have assumed positions of influence at the federal and state levels of government.

We're closer than we've ever been to bursting the dam that has prevented progress in K-12 education. To be sure, since the 1983 release of the federal report *A Nation At Risk*, there have been small but valuable political fissures in the dam. Some school boards have tipped briefly in favor of reformers, some governors have made progress with raising standards, etc. but the dam itself has remained strong enough to stop widespread reform.

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama created unprecedented political conditions, which now make fundamental reform of public education a possibility. The first-ever Democratic president elected without significant support of teachers unions (the American Federation of Teachers, which backed Hillary Clinton early on, spent millions trying to knock Obama off the ballot), Obama has governed with unusual credibility and freedom.

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan's federal *Race To The Top* (RTTT) competition produced more simultaneous fissures in the dam than we've ever seen. Cash-strapped state legislatures, hoping to win a chunk of nearly \$5 billion in federal prizes, passed more education reform legislation in eight months than they had in the previous eight years. Reform in exchange for dollars became the new mantra, and the status quo –

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desperate to avoid widespread teacher layoffs – found itself uncharacteristically nullified in the political process. (Union leaders were forced to choose whether they wanted layoffs or not – with these changes being the price of additional federal funding.)

Each of these fissures in the dam is having an impact locally. Collectively, they are starting to swing the balance of power in education. For the first time, dam is weak and ready to burst.

In the aftermath of some of these 2010 reform battles, elections will determine whether this wave of reform is politically sustainable. **Leaders who supported reform must be protected, or the old (and highly effective) storyline will emerge once again: Promote education reform at your own political peril.** Recent Democratic primaries have proven that defenders of the status quo still have considerable firepower. In Washington DC, these interests unseated Mayor Adrian Fenty, one of the country’s most outspoken reformers. And, of the countless individual legislators targeted because they helped to negotiate their states’ RTTT applications, way too many were felled.

These losses don’t spell the end for education reform; the movement has way too much momentum. But if we can’t continue to build momentum and push through this era when political martyrdom is all too commonplace, there’s a real risk that all our public policy gains will simply roll back.

Whether or not the modern era of education reform is ultimately successful will, in large part, come down to whether or not we can continue to influence the political power structure. Continued success in the political arena in 2010 and 2011 – at a time when difficult local and state budgets will continue to force some tough discussions on education policy – have the potential to burst the dam once and for all.

This is it. By working together to clear the political obstruction that has slowed education reform so predictably over the last 25 years, we can make way for the pragmatic educators who are doing the hard work toward closing the achievement gap.

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How You Can Help

"The gap isn't quite closed ... Still, the donation numbers posted by education reformers have heightened [the teachers union's] concern." -The Wall Street Journal, July 20, 2010

Getting past the old storyline, where supporting reform begets political martyrdom, will require a broad and deep coalition of active supporters who are ready to dive into races throughout the country. It requires that we protect incumbent reformers, challenge defenders of the status quo, and support new political leadership drawn from the ranks of education reform's best.

Your commitment, at any level, to bursting the dam will help create a new narrative for education reformers. There are a number of ways to invest in reforms, each of which is critical as we try to deepen our coalition. Contact us today (see below), and we'll talk about how you can make every dollar count:

- ◆ For a commitment of **just \$25 per month**, you can join hundreds of other education reformers in supporting DFER's twelve "[Education Reformers of the Month](#)." Each month, when DFER announces our endorsed reformer, visit [dfer.org](#) and contribute \$25 to his or her campaign. We're happy to remind you every month or to help you figure out which months are especially important; just ask.

DFER supporters throughout the country have already committed various amounts to this critical program. If you can commit to \$50 a month or more, we will push the needle even further. The monthly flood of campaign dollars (we're aiming for \$100,000 per month in 2011), will speak volumes about the state of the dam.

- ◆ For a commitment of **\$500 per year** to DFER's federal political action committee, you can send two reform-minded teachers or charter school parents to prominent politicians' political fundraising events to let their voices be heard. This tactic has proven highly effective; these on-the-ground stakeholders are the ultimate messengers, and there's no more captive audience in politics than at a fundraising event.
- ◆ For a commitment to **give \$2,000** to DFER or our non-partisan partner Education Reform Now, you can help establish a DFER branch in a new state. DFER has official branches in seven states, which have already propelled unheard-of change (take New York, where raising the charter cap was a fantasy less than a year ago). Bursting the dam requires that we enter new states strategically located throughout the country.
- ◆ For a commitment of **\$25,000 this fall**, you will help us support a slate of game-changing political races throughout the country. You could commit more than \$80,000, just to DFER's top fifteen races of 2010. Reach out today and we'll work with you to strategically target your \$25,000 commitment, so that you support high-impact candidates in communities that will help move the needle nationwide.

Commitments of any amount, to DFER or our non-partisan partner Education Reform Now, will help us make the most of this political opportunity to usher in a new balance of power. **Please contact Andrew Flamang at andrew@dfer.org to discuss tailoring your commitment.**

How much will you invest in bursting the dam?

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The *Updated* DFER Hot List - Fall 2010 (the Funky Fifteen)

For an always-updated look at the DFER Hot List, please visit <http://www.actblue.com/page/dferhotlist>.

Campaign	Office	Key Date	Max
Sen. Michael Bennet	US Senate (Colorado)	Nov. 2 (General)	\$2,400
Frank Caprio	Rhode Island Governor	Nov. 2 (General)	\$1,000
Colorado House/Sen 527s	SB 191 'Yes' Votes	Nov. 2 (General)	None
Chris Coons	US Senate (Delaware)	Nov. 2 (General)	\$2,400
Andrea Corso	Sacramento School Board	Nov. 2 (General)	None
Judith Cruz	Houston School Board	Nov. 2 (General)	None
Andrew Cuomo	New York Governor	Nov. 2 (General)	\$42,800
Bill Ferguson	Maryland Senate	Nov. 2 (General)	\$4,000
John Hickenlooper	Colorado Governor	Nov. 2 (General)	\$525
Rep. Sam Hoyt	New York Assembly	Nov. 2 (General)	\$3,800
Sen. Craig Johnson	New York Senate	Nov. 2 (General)	\$9,500
Mayor Dan McKee	Cumberland, RI Mayor	Nov. 2 (General)	\$1,000
Rep. Tom Perriello	US House (Virginia)	Nov. 2 (General)	\$2,400
Gina Raimondo	Rhode Island Treasurer	Nov. 2 (General)	\$1,000
Dan Seals	US House (Illinois)	Nov. 2 (General)	\$2,400
Angel Taveras	Providence Mayor	Nov. 2 (General)	\$1,000

Thumbnail Sketches of the Hot List

Sen. Michael Bennet – This former Superintendent of Denver Schools was appointed to the US Senate in early 2008, instantly increasing the collective IQ/classiness of the upper house. He has emerged as one of President Obama’s go-to guys on education issues. Having survived a tough primary, he now needs to close the deal.

Frank Caprio – Electing Frank as governor of Rhode Island will send a critical message about our willingness to protect reformers. Deb Gist, the state’s ed commissioner, used the RTTT application to implement some of the most aggressive reforms in the country. Frank supports Gist and her reforms, while his opponent, Lincoln Chafee, says he’s “wary” of RTTT and wasn’t sure whether he’d keep Gist as commish.

Colorado House/Senate 527 Funds – Senator Mike Johnston’s teacher tenure reform law (SB 191) was the single-most important piece of education reform legislation passed in 2010. We worked hard with Mike and Rep. Christine Scanlan to support its passage, and now we need to close the deal.

Chris Coons – You’ve heard all about Chris’s more-than-occasionally wacky opponent Christine O’Donnell but you probably haven’t heard about his solid ed reform credentials. We’re excited for the opportunity to help elect another US Senator with a refined understanding of the federal government’s role in public education.

Andrea Corso – Andrea is a former classroom teacher who has worked closely with Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson to improve opportunities for Sacramento’s children. Johnson may not have mayoral control, but a friendlier school board will make his job much easier.

Judith Cruz – A TFA alum and mother of three young boys, Judith is running for Houston’s School Board on a platform of high standards for students and accountability for teachers. Having spent years in the classroom, she’s deeply passionate and well informed about closing the achievement gap.

Attorney General Andrew Cuomo – New York State government is an embarrassing cesspool of dysfunction but Andrew Cuomo has some ‘cojones.’ He has been great on our issues and represents a promising opportunity to tame the Albany beast.

Bill Ferguson – This young TFA alum took the Baltimore political establishment by storm by unseating a 27-year incumbent Maryland State Senator in the Democratic primary. Between the general election and then actually joining the legislature, he still has a lot of work ahead.

Mayor John Hickenlooper – The Mayor of Denver has a great chance of becoming Governor of Colorado on Nov. 2. A solid education reformer, he’s sort of like Gov. Bill Ritter... only better.

Rep. Sam Hoyt – This Buffalo Assemblyman has carried water for the New York charter school movement since it began. He’s been a good friend to DFER and faces another tough re-election bid. We simply can’t afford to lose this one.

Sen. Craig Johnson – Since his election to the New York Senate in 2007, Craig has emerged as one of the strongest supporters of education reform in Albany. He single-handedly saved charter schools from a terrible piece of legislation in January 2010 by refusing to follow the wishes of the Senate’s Democratic leaders. Craig represents a historically Republican district, so he’s always in danger of a GOP swing, especially in a bad year for incumbents.

Mayor Dan McKee – Dan is the creator of the Mayoral Academies system in Rhode Island, which enables mayors to sponsor public charter schools in their cities. Deeply passionate about education reform, he sponsored the first mayoral academy, Democracy Prep Blackstone Valley, in Cumberland.

Rep. Tom Perriello - He represents a new generation of progressives in the U.S. Congress, the ones who understand education in the context of civil rights. He’s a critical supporter of President Obama’s education agenda but is facing a tough re-election bid against a Republican state senator.

Gina Raimondo – The Democratic nominee for Rhode Island General Treasurer, Gina was a Rhodes Scholar, went to Yale Law, and founded the only venture capital firm in Rhode Island. She’s also an avid ed reformer with a deep understanding of the challenges facing Rhode Island schools.

Dan Seals – Dan is an independent business consultant who is running for congress outside Chicago. A product of Chicago Public Schools and a former high school teacher in Japan, his deep understanding of the challenges of American public education inform his strong support of education reform and charter schools.

Angel Taveras – This young, pragmatic leader won a crowded primary race for Mayor of Providence. Rhode Island has been a hotbed for education reform, but Providence needs to finally get in on it. Angel will make that happen.

To contribute, with other ed reformers, to these candidates, visit <http://www.actblue.com/page/dferhotlist>.
For more information, please contact Andrew Flamang at andrew@dfer.org.