

# A Nation at Risk +40

## Education Reform Self-Assessment

*In the four decades since the release of the landmark report A Nation at Risk (1983), countless efforts have been undertaken to reform and improve the nation's schools. Recent research by the Hoover Institution found an uneven record of reform. There have been successes, but broad, systemic changes that improve student outcomes at scale have proven elusive.*

*The research does suggest that there are specific actions policymakers can take to better ensure the success of their education reform efforts. Specifically, policymakers can improve their odds by proactively addressing the small set of challenges related to planning, engagement, consensus building, and implementation.*

*The following self-assessment tool is designed to help policymakers determine how well positioned they are to advance their policy ideas. By evaluating how well they are tackling a series of six key reform challenges, they can plan their next steps and be better positioned for policy success.*

**Using the tool:** For each of the challenges in the six sections of the tool, policymakers are asked to review the self-assessment questions and then grade themselves on how well they have addressed them. Space is provided to cite evidence in support of the grade selected. Policymakers are also provided with space at the end of the tool to map out their next steps.

Importantly, the tool is *not* designed to help policymakers decide on a reform approach. Rather, it is intended to help policymakers check their own thinking as it relates to the reform solution they intend to propose. Is there evidence that it works where it has been tried and that it will work where it is most needed? What will it take to ensure success on the ground, and how can you be sure those resources are in place? How will you know it is working? Perhaps most importantly, if it isn't working, what will you do then?

Policymakers are encouraged to use this tool in collaboration with their teams and colleagues in order to facilitate discussion around areas of relative strength and areas for improvement. It is meant to provide a status check on reform efforts, helping policy teams hone their reform strategies for greatest impact.

## Challenge 1: Overcoming Impulsiveness

State policymakers can be inclined to bring new policies to their state (and adopt them full scale across the entire state) if those policies are perceived as having been successful elsewhere. In our analysis we found that policymakers often fail to analyze whether an “imported” reform is a good fit for local context or assess whether adaptations to a current effort might be a better approach.

### How well are you doing?

- You have evidence or research demonstrating that the proposed reform will address the targeted issue.
- You have identified existing or past efforts to address this same issue and have fully evaluated why they didn’t work or have proved insufficient.
- If you are bringing in a reform strategy that was successful elsewhere (in another state, for example), you have a clear sense of why it was successful in that other setting and are confident that you can replicate locally the conditions that led to its success.

### How would you grade yourself?

- Excellent  Satisfactory
- Needs Improvement  Unsatisfactory

### Evidence to support your self-assessment?

## Challenge 2: Moving beyond the Margins

Policymakers can often focus on small-scale changes, thinking more marginal reforms can address a discrete issue without being overly burdensome to administer. Incremental reforms, though, create their own problems. Their marginal nature and narrow focus can leave larger, more systemic issues untouched, and in their sheer volume—so many efforts in so many areas—they can lead to reform fatigue and resistance.

### How well are you doing?

- You have investigated whether an existing policy or practice (one that is already in place but may be of limited reach or effectiveness), could be adapted or scaled to address the targeted issue.
- You have used a “root cause” analysis to explore whether underlying issues mean a more systemic approach to tackling this problem is warranted.
- If your proposal is of limited scope by design, you have a clear sense of how (and at what point) it will either be scaled to expand its reach or shut down to free up resources for other initiatives.

### How would you grade yourself?

- Excellent  Satisfactory
- Needs Improvement  Unsatisfactory

### Evidence to support your self-assessment?

### Challenge 3: Creating Coherence

Change efforts are often launched without an understanding of the ways these reforms might interact with one another and with the rest of the K–12 system. Reforms are frequently “bolted on,” one after another, without regard for how they fit together, with each added initiative diluting the impact of the others. This resulting lack of coherence can lead to unintended consequences that were never even considered, much less planned for.

#### How well are you doing?

- You have conducted an “initiative inventory” of reform efforts currently in place and have a good sense of the existing demands they have already placed on schools and districts.
- You have engaged stakeholders to better understand the ways the proposed reform will interact with or impact existing reform efforts at both the state and local level.
- As part of your planning, you have explored how you might increase coherence and free up capacity by “sunsetting” or significantly reforming existing initiatives that are no longer meeting their objectives.

#### How would you grade yourself?

- Excellent  Satisfactory
- Needs Improvement  Unsatisfactory

#### Evidence to support your self-assessment?

### Challenge 4: Addressing Impatience

There is an (often unstated) expectation that reform efforts will produce demonstrable results almost immediately and without regard to the time requirements of the specific change being made. As a result, new initiatives often lack the time they might need to achieve desired outcomes, with the result that system actors learn to wait out proposed reforms, hoping (and likely confident) that “this, too, shall pass.”

#### How well are you doing?

- Measured in terms of improved student outcomes, you have clearly defined what success will look like for the initiative, both in the near term and over time.
- You have a realistic, evidence-based sense of how long it will take the planned initiative to demonstrably achieve its goals.
- You have built broad, bipartisan support for the initiative at both the state and local levels, helping ensure it will receive the time and resources its successful implementation will require.

#### How would you grade yourself?

- Excellent  Satisfactory
- Needs Improvement  Unsatisfactory

#### Evidence to support your self-assessment?

## Challenge 5: Prioritizing Implementation

System actors can become resistant to reform when they are subject to an endless “churn” of top-down proposals. Cynicism and burnout can result when new policies or practices are introduced each year, with short time windows for deployment and little, if any, support for the important work of implementation.

### How well are you doing?

- You have ensured the reform strategy includes a clear theory of action, detailing which actors at which level will need to take which steps for the reform to be effective.
- To help identify potential implementation roadblocks, you have conducted small-scale tests of the approach in a broadly representative sample of school settings.
- You have created “feedback loops” through which key system actors (particularly at the school and district levels) can report on implementation progress and challenges.

### How would you grade yourself?

- Excellent  Satisfactory
- Needs Improvement  Unsatisfactory

### Evidence to support your self-assessment?

## Challenge 6: Ensuring Effectiveness

Apart from formal pilots, most reforms launch without any consideration of how to learn from them. They are rarely accompanied by a detailed plan for research and analysis, and policymakers seldom make time for program evaluation and review. Successful execution requires measuring reform effectiveness and responding accordingly.

### How well are you doing?

- You have identified the key metrics (and related data sources) that will be used to regularly track progress toward program goals.
- You have identified the relevant actors whose job it will be to regularly gather and report on identified metrics.
- You have established a process by which key stakeholders, at all levels, review progress and determine next steps for continuous improvement.

### How would you grade yourself?

- Excellent  Satisfactory
- Needs Improvement  Unsatisfactory

### Evidence to support your self-assessment?

## Next steps

**Based on your self-assessment, what are the key next steps you and your team should take to advance your reform agenda?**

**Who will be responsible for taking these steps and by when?**

**At what point will you reconvene in order to review your progress and update your strategy?**

### **A Nation at Risk +40**

A Nation at Risk + 40 is a research initiative designed to better understand the impact of the key K–12 reform efforts that followed the 1983 release of the landmark *A Nation at Risk* report. The complete research series, including guidance for policymakers, can be found at <https://www.hoover.org/nation-risk-40-review-progress-us-public-education>.

