Reflections on 9/11:
Looking for a Homeland Security Game Changer
Samuel H. Clovis, Jr.

The public school is at once the symbol of our democracy and the most pervasive means for promoting our common destiny.
Felix Frankfurter, 1948

When invited to write an essay reflecting on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 I, like many of my colleagues I am sure, had mixed emotions. The events of that day still make me weak-kneed as I remember seeing so much destruction by resolute attackers who showed imagination and persistence. As a member of the military, I came into the service during the Viet Nam War, and was on active duty for the Iran hostage affair, the Beirut bombing, Grenada, Desert Storm, and operations in the Balkans. I was the quintessential Cold Warrior until my retirement from the service in 1996, but I had not experienced anything like what happened on that fateful day. I was a civilian teaching at a small college in the Midwest and happened to be taking my stepson to school when the first airplane hit the World Trade Center tower. I listened incredulously to radio reports, but as time moved on, so my thinking turned to experiences I had as a war game designer. I simply could not believe that individuals bent on our demise actually perpetrated events we had imagined in the comfort of a conference room. From that day forward, things have not been the same.

As fate would have it, I became involved in “homeland security” in the wake of the attacks. I left the intellectual protection of academia and returned to government contract work right after the Department of Homeland Security was established. My first task with my new employer was to learn as much about the new organization as I could. Contractors from all over the country were flocking to the new revenue troughs to feed on what appeared at the time to be a never-ending flow of funds to support the new mission space. The White House and the new department were issuing national documents like confetti at a ticker tape parade. We had strategies, goals, guidance, directives, lists and plans – all of which were focused on diminishing or eliminating terrorism as a threat to Americans at home or abroad. We jumped into a war in Afghanistan and then one in Iraq. We are still in both places.

Over time, state and local governments began to absorb “homeland security” mission space into their already robust public safety and emergency management operations. Their focus, for the most part, moved to all-hazards, of which terrorism was but one. At the national level, however, the central government maintained (as it does to this day) a primary focus on anti- and counter-terrorism. Playing nice with others dissolved into traditional institutional pathologies with the national government focusing on a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to homeland security while the state and local governments worked on improving inter-local cooperation and enhancing capacities to deal with higher probability events, usually the result of nature. Though the above might represent a skeptical outlook on how things stand today, there have been some measurable improvements in homeland security.

The current established state of homeland security “normal” offers some hope for a safer, more secure nation, but we are a long ways from where we might be. The nation’s economic woes have put a strain on homeland security resources at all levels and forecasts indicate these conditions are not likely to change in the near future. With resources so constrained, how are jurisdictions to maintain, let alone grow, responder capacities that enhance community resilience and the security of citizens? Are the precious resources of our cities, counties and states being spread too

thin because we are not addressing public policy reforms that would genuinely reduce the cost of governance? I submit that public education reform is the investment with the highest potential return.

Several years ago, I was asked by the Preparedness Division of DHS to examine possible alternatives for distributing state homeland security grant funds. One of the tasks was to determine if different formulae could be developed that would essentially lead to a more equitable distribution based on risk or other factors that might be appropriate. Specifically, I was asked to develop a method that would allow an “apples-to-apples” comparison of jurisdictions that might better inform the grant distribution process. As often happens in academic research, one often stumbles across something that was wholly unexpected. When comparing jurisdictions, the one attribute that seemed to influence all others was the level of educational attainment of residents in that jurisdiction. I have since been tinkering with developing mathematical models to help me validate my original findings, and I am making progress. I am convinced that a strong public education system could have the single largest impact on the security of the United States. Public education reform, then, could be a game changer for homeland security. Through more effective public education, the nation could lower the social costs that are now applied to welfare, income security programs, public safety, and health care. With every marginal improvement in public education, the nation reaps a geometric reduction in the cost of social programs, thus freeing those resources to be applied to other public goods and services.

Last fall, I started a lecture series on the Constitution, government, and governance in America today. Over the course of the nine part series, it became apparent that discussing education reform would be required in separate seminars. In the spring, I delivered two lectures on education reform that drew the largest crowds of the entire series. Because every American goes to school, all are familiar with the education system. What many citizens do not know, however, is the current state of public education in this country. Here are some highlights:

- Public education represents the highest outlay for state and local governments (25 percent of budgets), outstripping Medicaid (13 percent).¹
- Of the 62 million children between the ages of three and nineteen in this country, 11 percent go to private schools, 3 percent attend charter schools, and as many as 6 percent are now home schooled. The remaining 80 percent attend public schools. Of those children age three to seventeen, 94 percent are in school. Of those ages eighteen or nineteen, only 69 percent are still in school.²
- Over 31 million children are on some form of federally funded school meal program. These are means-tested programs for children from households that have incomes at 130 percent of the poverty level or below.³
- For the past forty years, overall academic performance in American schools has not improved. Forty years ago, the United States was number one in academic performance in the world. Today, the US ranks twenty-fourth in math and twenty-fifth in science.⁴
- Fewer than 35 percent of students achieve basic proficiency at grade level.⁵
- The overall high school graduation rate for the country is around 70 percent. Some 1.2 million children drop out of school during each academic year. Dropout rates among minorities is alarming, with Native Americans’ dropout rate at 49 percent, African Americans’ at 45 percent, and Hispanics’ at 44 percent. Of all individuals incarcerated in the country, 68 percent lack a high school education. No major city in the nation has a graduation rate above 64 percent. Detroit, Los Angeles, and San Antonio have graduation rates of 38 percent, 44 percent, and 47 percent, respectively.⁶
- Closing the performance gap between the US and other developed nations – between minorities and between similar schools – would add $2.31 trillion to the
gross domestic product of the nation. This would mean an additional $415 billion in revenue at the national level and $138 billion at the state and local level.

- Current unemployment rates for individuals with less than a high school education is 16 percent, nearly twice the national rate. Those with less than a high school education earn less than 6 percent of the national income and see no appreciable increase in earning ability for the first thirty years of their working lives.

- High school dropouts are more likely to have children out of wedlock (costing $110 billion annually), higher health costs (now nearly all on Medicaid), and are far more likely to be incarcerated.

In my research, I found that those jurisdictions with the highest educational attainment levels also had, for the most part, the lowest poverty rates, the lowest crime rates, and the highest volume of goods and services provided by government. How does this “discovery” impact homeland security and community resilience, however?

By using a simple mathematical model, I was able to compare jurisdictions of similar characteristics. I examined fifty cities across the country that had populations of between 100,000 and 500,000. I used an array of demographic and economic characteristics to build the comparisons. Of the fifty cities examined, thirteen had distinctly lower “scores” than the other thirty-seven. I then looked for a “test case” and decided to include New Orleans in my calculus. Having few examples of “failed” governments in times of crisis, I compared pre-Katrina New Orleans with two of the “at risk” jurisdictions that had nearly identical characteristics. When the model was applied to New Orleans, all three cities had nearly identical scores. New Orleans government and governance failed during that city’s crisis, and by extrapolation, the other cities might stumble during crisis as well. Each of the three cities had nearly identical low educational achievement levels and high poverty rates.

The above is by no means a validation of anything other than numbers being applied in a crude model. However, of the fifty cities to which I applied the model, those with the highest educational attainment scored the best. A lot of work needs to be done with the model, but it appears to be a good start.

In David Guggenheim’s compelling documentary, Waiting for Superman, he chronicles the experiences of several families from large cities as they go through the process of applying for opportunities to be part of lotteries to get into charter schools. These relatively new educational innovations – charter schools – show great promise in raising performance levels for those who attend. Unfortunately, school choice programs across the country offer asymmetrical educational opportunities. Of greatest concern is the seemingly irreversible decline in school performance in our largest cities. As Terry Moe of Stanford University has documented, the gap between minority student performance – with the notable exception of Asian-American students – and that of white students in large cities is continuing to expand.

This brief essay is not intended to argue the merits of school choice, school reform initiatives or the impact of public unions on educational outcomes. My intent is to call the attention of my homeland security colleagues to the idea that public education reform must be part of any serious discussion about national or homeland security. A better-educated citizenry will be less dependent on government and more independent in times of crisis. A better-educated citizenry will be more attentive to issues and challenges at the state and local level and more engaged at the national level. A better-educated citizenry will cost less in public funding and will contribute more to the public coffers. Ultimately, a better-educated citizenry will be the guarantor of security for the nation and liberty for the individual.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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8 These numbers are based on multiplying the overall increases in GDP by 18 percent to estimate federal income tax remittance and 6 percent for state and local income tax remittance.
13 Guggenheim, *Waiting for Superman*.