

# Whole School System Reform, Clarified

John Merrifield  
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Periodic false claims to having achieved and or sought “whole system reform” remind me that we need a firm grasp of what the term means; change in governance and funding that yields substantive change in the menu of schooling options. Of course, it’s not a black and white issue. There are shades of grey. For example, Sir [Michael Barber](#), a former teacher union official and domestic policy advisor to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, said that the Thatcher government made radical changes, and that during his time as a Blair Advisor, he had “lived and breathed whole-system reform.”

The UK system is better for the combined efforts of [mostly] Thatcher and Blair. But the difficulty achieving the changes, notwithstanding, the UK system is not fundamentally different from what preceded Thatcher. It is significantly different, but not fundamentally different. The first Thatcher Administration (1979) had designs on fundamental change, including a substantial leveling of the playing field between private and government-run schooling options, and price de-control. But Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher [abandoned](#) the universal voucher program that would have delivered true school system reform when they couldn’t find someone else that had tried it already to provide the politically necessary empirical proof that the proposed funding reform would work, as promised. The UK system remains a price-less, government-run, centrally planned system with a playing field sharply tilted against private sector education entrepreneurship. Post-Thatcher reforms of the smaller steps actually taken by Thatcher re-arranged the bureaucratic decision-making authority within and between different levels of government, including some politically difficult, useful changes, but not worthy of the “whole system reform” label.

Further proof of Barber's low standard for "whole system reform" is Barber's statement that Obama-Duncan are on the right track; that what they are aiming to do would amount to whole system reform. But nothing they were aiming for then, or are aiming for now, much less what they are likely to see put in practice, comes close to amounting to whole system reform. According to a February 18, 2015 *Education Week* [article](#), the Obama Administration's main priorities – alongside granting/rescinding No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) waivers – are policy reform for student testing, changing the nature of top-down accountability, and the inclusion of student progress data in teacher evaluation systems. We can discuss the usefulness of the proposed reforms, but none of those come close to fundamentally changing system governance, or the incentives that flow from how schooling is paid for. Those proposed reforms would leave the U.S. K-12 system still price-less (= a centrally planned pursuit of one size fits all) and still sharply tilted against much-needed private sector education entrepreneurship.