

THE RISING TIDE OF SCHOOL REFORM REPORTS

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If it is true that a rising tide lifts all boats, then the rising tide of school reform reports should prove uplifting to all schools. But the truth of the matter is that the benefits of the rising tide depend on where your boat is. If your boat is on the beach, the benefits may be less apparent than if your boat is out to sea. The rising tide will usually lift a beached boat temporarily and then abandon it to the ebb tide, which mires it ever deeper into the sands.

If our schools are beached, or worse yet mired, as many people seem to think, what are the chances that the rising tide of reform reports will lift education and gently float it on its way?

The history of school reform movements suggests that chances for long-lasting reform are not good. The rising tide of interest in school reform is inevitably followed by the ebb tide of indifference. But one of the more interesting historical threads that ties one cycle of school reform to the next is the inevitable optimism that accompanies each wave of harsh criticism: No matter how bad the schools are perceived to be,

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they are never considered hopeless. In fact, there is a tendency to think that there is never a more propitious time for school reform than the present. It was less than twenty years ago that John Gardner argued that the country had a unique opportunity to improve education because of the unprecedented political backing of the 1960s. Today, the Carnegie Foundation opens its report with the conviction that "America has the best opportunity it will have in this century to improve the schools." (Boyer, 1983, p. 1). As Fred Hechinger wryly observes, "Unprecedented opportunities have a way of knocking more than once." (New York Times, November 13, 1983). Well, okay, so another unprecedented opportunity is knocking, and many people are eager to open the door.

There were, at last count, some 30 national reports on educational reform, most of which concluded that excellence must be found and returned to the schools. In addition, the 50 states have appointed a total of 175 task forces and have sent them forth to look for excellence.

Education as a profession has a lot of accumulated experience in looking for excellence. Within the past 25 years, we have had James Bryant Conant's examination of the American High School Today. We had the full-scale curricular reform projects in the sciences and mathematics of the 1960s, in which distinguished university scientists worked with selected classroom teachers in new patterns of curriculum building. We had the extensive Coleman study looking for Equality of Educational Opportunity, followed by the Jencks conclusion that school reform is unlikely to reform society. In 1970 Charles

Silberman found A Crisis in the Classroom, and labeled the schools monolithic, mindless, joyless, and obsessed with order. Although best-remembered for his promotion of open schooling, there is a certain deja vu about Silberman's recommendations that excellence resides in the scholarly disciplines and that teacher education should be more firmly rooted in the liberal arts. Our collective memories are short, but we have only to look back one decade to find a school reform movement that almost parallels our own, with more than a dozen books and reports published between 1970 and 1976.

Why can't we find excellence in education and then hang on to it? The history of educational reform is that we generate a lot of enthusiasm, reform the curriculum, raise standards, restore prestige to teaching, and then somehow it is all swept away again by the rising tide of mediocrity.

Perhaps excellence requires constant vigilance or perhaps it means different things in different eras. If the latter, then we might expect a flurry of school reform reports at intervals in order to keep society and schools "in sync." Peters and Waterman, (1982) the authors of In Search of Excellence, subscribe to the latter theory when they assert that excellent companies are "especially adroit at continually responding to change of any sort in their environments" (p. 12). John Gardner's (1963) solution, you will remember, was to create self-renewing organizations. Probably most people would agree, but so far we seem to have been unable to establish and maintain the conditions that will nourish continuing excellence in education.

For the next 30 minutes or so, I would like to explore three questions that seem to have some bearing on these problems:

- 1) What are the hallmarks of excellence as people write and talk about it?
- 2) How can we attain excellence? More specifically, will implementation of the recommendations in the current educational reform reports bring it about?
- 3) Why can't we seem to maintain excellence?

John Gardner (1961) says that one of the "absurdly obvious truths of which we must continue to remind ourselves" is that there are many varieties of excellence.

"In the intellectual field alone," he says, "there is the kind of intellectual activity that leads to a new theory, and the kind that leads to a new machine. There is the mind that finds its most effective expression in teaching and the mind that is most at home in research. There is the mind that works best in quantitative terms, and the mind that luxuriates in poetic imagery.

... There is a way of measuring excellence that involves comparison between people ... and there is another that involves comparison between myself at my best and myself at my worst" (p. 152).

There are many kinds of excellence, and the schools cannot address them all. Indeed there is widespread agreement in the educational reform reports that schools have taken on too much and that the path to excellence lies in clarifying and narrowing purposes so that what is done is done well. It is hard to argue with that. There seems to be some agreement on what it is that needs to be done well but plenty of disagreement on how to do it.

I am not going to discuss the recommendations for reform in detail. One of the more absorbing tasks in education these days

is making charts of the various recommendations and then making summaries of summaries. There are so many reports out now and so many commentaries and analyses that practically every wise and foolish thing that can be said about the schools has been said. For that reason I am going to avoid commenting on controversies that have already gained high visibility such as those over merit pay for teachers or longer school days or years. I am also not going to dwell on the admittedly difficult implementation issues such as how we are going to pay for all this or the proper role for the Federal government. Instead, I am going to concentrate on the possible negative side effects of relatively popular recommendations on which there is enough agreement to permit implementation.

Many of the reports attribute the erosion of quality in education to the permissiveness of the 1960's and 70's and reason that the solution is to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, towards more control, more requirements, and tougher standards. These prescriptions call for simple corrections of perceived excesses of the past. Not enough homework? --assign more. Not enough testing? --require more. Too many electives? --insist on more requirements. These undimensional corrections might be labeled the swinging pendulum solution. A pendulum is in constant motion, but it never goes anywhere. It simply swings from one extreme to the other. Indeed, the momentum gained from a swing to the left provides the energy for the swing to the right. If we are not more thoughtful about the goal of quality and how to attain it, we will spend the 1980's correcting for the permissiveness of the 1960's and 1970's, and we will spend the

1990's correcting for the overregulation of the 1980's. We might, I suppose, recommend more modest corrections, but that would simply slow down the pendulum, eventually stopping all movement.

We know more about the characteristics of effective schools than swinging pendulum solutions suggest, and it is a disservice to imply that our options are limited to strategies that seemed to work in different times with different school populations. We know, for exmple, that effective schools are distinguished by the following characteristics: clear priorities about what must be learned, high expectations for students and teachers, uninterrupted time on task, positive discipline, support for teachers, and parental involvement, and strong school-level leadership (Anrig, 1984, p.2)

Unfortunately for those interested in gaining credibility as people of action, these qualities cannot be legislated as can the currently popular quantifiable reforms such as more time, more pay, more requirements, and more tests. They must be achieved by slower, more complex actions built up through community pressure and support, and leadership at the local level. (Anrig, 1984, p. 2).

In addition to more thoughtful analyses and more patience in reforms, we also need some fresh perspectives and perhaps some new metaphors. The spiral staircase is a more apt methaphor for school reform than the swinging pendulum. Whereas the swinging pendulum involves retracing old ground, the spiral staircase rises to new levels. We may circle back to look at old problems from new perspectives, but our motion is constantly upward to a

higher plane of action. Schools of the 1980s are operating in a different plane from those of the 1960s, and we need to find some new perspectives if we are to avoid educational faddism and swinging pendulum solutions.

One such perspective is offered in the best selling book, In Search of Excellence (Peters & Waterman, 1982), in which the authors describe the most successful corporations in America. Ironically, the conclusions about the environments which stimulate excellence in corporate America are frequently the opposite of what is recommended for excellence in our schools.

When Peters and Waterman set out to look for corporate excellence, they found it at both IBM and MacDonald's --in the production of the lowly hamburger as well as in the glamour of high tech. Their criteria for excellence seemed not to reside in the prestige of the thing produced, but rather in the attitude and enthusiasm of the workers. They concluded that one of the main clues to corporate excellence lay in "unusual effort on the part of apparently ordinary employees" (p. xvii). There is a lot to think about in that deceptively simple conclusion. What do the books and reports on school reform have to say about that? Are there recommendations that stimulate "apparently ordinary" people to unusual effort?

In the first place, there is surprisingly little attention given to "ordinary people" in the school reform reports. There is the clear implication that the rising tide of mediocrity is made up of embarrassing numbers of ordinary people, and if we want to return excellence to education, we better go out and find

more excellent people. Teachers colleges are advised to select better candidates; colleges are encouraged to raise admissions standards, and the Federal government is urged to offer scholarships to attract top high school graduates into teaching. There is not a lot said in the education reports about how to stimulate unusual effort on the part of the ordinary people that we seem to be faced with in the schools and in most colleges.

"Excellent companies," say Peters and Waterman, "require and demand extraordinary performance from the average man" (p. xxii). Since the tips for getting such extraordinary performance are scattered throughout their book, let me select a few of them and measure them against the recommendations of the educational reform reports.

"We observed, time and again," wrote Peters and Waterman, "extraordinary energy exerted above and beyond the call of duty when the worker ... is given even a modicum of apparent control over his or her destiny" (p. xxiii).

With a few notable exceptions, there isn't much inclination to give workers in education more control over their own destinies. In fact, external top-down control is frequently recommended as the proper antidote to the permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s. Even the language of many of the recommendations implies an external authority who would regulate, control, and see that the proper check points are established and maintained. Ted Sizer, (1984) stands in contrast to many of the recommendations and actions taken today when he advises those who want excellent schools to "trust teachers and principals --and believe that the more trust one places in them, the more the

response will justify that trust" (p. 214). Sizer adds the further caution that "Proud people rarely join professions that heavily monitor them" (p. 219).

John Goodlad also bucks the tide of most of the reform movement when he resists the temptation to set forth a set of recommendations applicable to all schools. Peters and Waterman would support Goodlad's decision. They observed that the encouragement of individualistic entrepreneurial spirit was one of the hallmarks of excellent companies which tended, they observed "to create decentralization and autonomy, with its attendant overlap, messiness around the edges, lack of coordination, internal competition, and somewhat chaotic conditions in order to breed the entrepreneurial spirit." Excellent companies they found "had forsworn a measure of tidiness in order to achieve regular innovation" (p. 201).

It doesn't take much reading of the commission reports to conclude that schools, if they follow the recommendations, will do the reverse and forswear innovation in favor of tidiness. The curriculum, which we are told is in a shambles, will be tidied up, goals will be articulated, standardized tests will control transitions, teachers burdens will be lightened, but their hours will be scheduled, prospective teachers will pursue a core of common learning, and their curriculum will be tidied up to include certain courses and certain experiences in specified sequences. Whether our current mania for tidiness will result in orderly schools with students and teachers pursuing learning with the contagious enthusiasm so essential to excellence seems at best problematic.

Another suggestion from the corporate world for stimulating unusual effort on the part of ordinary people is to make people members of winning teams while also recognizing each individual as a star in his or her own right. "Each of us," observed Peters and Waterman, "needs to stick out --even or maybe particularly, in the winning institution" (p. xxiii).

Here I have to hand it to the reformers. I don't think there is one of them anywhere who does not want schools to be proud of their programs, proud of their teachers, and proud of their students. They sincerely, and even desperately, want education to field a winning team. It is also quite clear that they recommend rewarding outstanding achievement. There will be special encouragement for outstanding students; there will be master teachers, plus travel funds and extra bonuses. All of this recognition will be done on a competitive basis, with the appropriate reward going to the winners. So far, so good. Winning people on winning teams seems a sure-fire formula for success.

But that isn't really what Peters and Waterman observed in excellent companies. They found that excellent companies, "turn the average Joe and the average Jane into winners" (p. 239 emphasis added). That is a bit more difficult, it seems, than recognizing winners. The tough problem is not in identifying winners; it is in making winners out of ordinary people. That, after all, is the overwhelming purpose of education. Yet historically, in most of the periods emphasizing excellence, education has reverted to selecting winners rather than creating them.

In any era, colleges that are able to select winners among both students and faculty, are most likely to be perceived as quality institutions. Although "value added" is a sound educational concept and the ultimate educational challenge, it has not often been pursued with any vigor in education. Community colleges are frequently considered lower quality educational institutions than research universities, not on the basis of comparing the "value added" to their graduating classes, but by comparing the selectivity exercised in admitting their entering classes.

Peters and Waterman insist that there is no reason why organizations cannot design systems to support and create winners. Most excellent companies, they say, build systems "to reinforce degrees of winning rather than degrees of losing" (p. 57).

At IBM, for example, sales quotas are set so that 70-80 percent of its sales people meet their quotas. At a less successful company, only 40 percent of the sales force meets its quota during a typical year. "With this approach," say the researchers, "at least 60 percent of the salespeople think of themselves as losers. They resent it and that leads to dysfunctional, unpredictable, frenetic behavior. Label a man a loser and he'll start acting like one" (p. 57).

There is much in the present educational reform movement that should frighten us if, in fact, winning is important for ordinary people. The investigators on corporate excellence observed that less-than-excellent organizations take a negative view of their workers. "They verbally berate participants for poor performance

... They want innovation but kill the spirit of the champion ... They design systems that seem calculated to tear down their workers' self-image" (p. 57).

That sounds a lot like what we are doing in the educational reform movement of the 1980's. We are telling teachers that they are a sorry lot, scoring lower on the SAT than their fellow students in college. We are proclaiming that the deplorable state of the schools is an embarrassment to us internationally and a risk to our nation. We are telling students that they are losers and threatening them with loss of further educational opportunity if they don't shape up. It is very hard to feel like a winner anywhere in the educational system today. But, the critics will object, how can you improve the educational system if you don't face the facts? Fair question.

The "facts" seem to be that there are some excellent schools out there, that there are some exceptional teachers, that we do know something about making teaching and learning more effective, that high expectations are important to performance, and that financial support is absolutely essential. We also know that test scores have been falling, that expectations for students are not high enough to demand their best performance, and that until students experience success as a result of their own efforts, it will be hard for them to feel like winners. Even very young children know when they are learning and when they are not. It does no good to tell students of any age that they are doing fine if they are not. Thus, learning tasks must be realistic, and every student must have an opportunity to succeed at a learning task that is important. At the same time, we must provide the

challenges that push good students to do their best. It is not an easy task, and throughout history it has been made ever more difficult by the growing diversity of our student populations.

In some two decades of trying to find answers to the question of how to provide education for all the people, I have reached the conclusion, that it is our commitment to the lock-step time-defined structures of education that stand in the way of lasting progress (Cross, 1976). It is simply unrealistic to think that all students can learn the same material, to the same standards of performance, in the same amount of time, taught by the same method. We continue to talk about individual differences. We know they exist; we have reliable measures of them. We even cherish them, but we fail to provide for them in our educational systems. Most experiments in individualization are soon abandoned because they require too much work on the part of teachers who are faced with individualizing instruction in addition to their obligation to handle all of their traditional tasks.

Strangely enough our solution has never been to change the system to accommodate individual talents. Rather it has been to try in some way to reduce the diversity --through selection, through narrowing curricular choices, and through proclaiming that we expect too much of our schools and that they must be allowed to get back to basis.

Those are the familiar planks in the platforms of the school reform movement of the 1980s. We want to find some reasonably humane way to lop off the problem learners, to reduce the

obligations of the schools, and to restrict the curricular options.

There are serious proposals to deny the losers in the educational race a high school diploma or entrance to a community college. There is not much doubt that the easiest way for an educational institution to raise its own quality is to get rid of problem learners. Don't accept them and don't certify them. Test scores will rise, faculty morale will improve, and the institution will be perceived as a quality place for serious learning.

The problem is that the society that supports this superficially excellent educational institution now has on its hands the educational rejects. Whose responsibility is it to convert them from a drag on society to productive members of that society? The chances are high that an illiterate mother or father in this generation will produce three or four more problem learners in the next generation. Clearly, we cannot afford to "improve" educational institutions at the expense of society. But it is distressing to see how many well-meaning but short-sighted legislators and educators are taking advantage of the current mandates for excellence by supporting proposals that can have the effect of eliminating from local high schools and colleges the very students who need their services most. Some years ago, one wag devised a motto for Admiral Rickovers' elitist recommendations, "Save the best; shoot the rest".

Selection is the easy route to quality -- but it is a swinging pendulum solution that fails to address the underlying problems with curriculum, instruction, and teacher training. For

better or for worse, our schools have to be concerned with maximizing the performance of "ordinary people."

One of the perennial problems with universal education is the diversity in achievement that it brings into the average classroom. Many of the reports call for a core curriculum, frequently on the grounds that it will abolish the evils of tracking. I think I can assure you, however, that a common core curriculum, without provisions for individualization, will simply replace parallel tracks with vertical ones. Instead of lower achieving students being shunted into vocational or general education curricula, they will occupy the lowest ranks of the academic core curriculum. There is ample research evidence to show that students who start school in the bottom third of the class will remain there throughout their dreary journey through the American school system (Cross, 1971).

Although I am convinced along with Ben Bloom, Jerome Bruner, and others that almost any child can learn the basic school curriculum, given enough time and appropriate help, I am not convinced that the core curriculum imposed on existing time-bound structures will abolish the evils of tracking. Why do we think that a D student in the academic curriculum has more life choices than an A student in the vocational curriculum?

As to the recommendations that schools should get back to defining their educational mission, there is always the assumption that the mission is to provide for the cognitive development of students. No one can quarrel with that. What some people are wondering is what organizations in our society should assume responsibility for moral development, common

courtesy, civility, and yes, even driver training. The choice seems to be between adding these so-called frills to the schools or ignoring them in the hope that churches, families, and neighborhoods, will reorganize and reassert themselves to deal with them. The inevitable result, I should think, is the swinging pendulum. Schools restrict their responsibilities to intellectual and cognitive tasks until society feels that citizenship and morality need attention, and then there is no place to turn except to the schools.

I believe that we must begin to question whether the ancient structures of education can cope with the diversity that is inherent in universal education. We need structures that are built, not only on the acceptance of individual differences, but on explicit recognition of their value to our society. To use Alvin Toffler's phrase, it is time to de-massify education.

A significant aspect of Alvin Toffler's Third Wave (1980), you will remember, is the customization of products and services. Whereas the industrial revolution of the Second Wave emphasized mass production, the arrival of the Third Wave makes possible customized production. In the manufacture of clothing, for example, Second Wave production methods required the worker to place one layer of cloth on top of another, lay the pattern on top, and then with an electric cutting knife cut out the pattern and produce multiple identical cutouts of the cloth. These were then subjected to common processing and came out identical in size, shape, and color to be purchased by the masses at reasonable prices "off the rack".

The Third Wave laser machine operates on a radically

different principle. Laser machines can be programmed to fill an order for one garment economically, and soon it may be possible "to read one's measurements into a telephone, or point a video camera at oneself, thus feeding data directly into a computer, which in turn will instruct the machine to produce a single garment, cut exactly to one's personal, individualized dimensions". (Toffler 1980, p. 184).

De-massification is also occurring in the mass media. The mass messages that were a product of Second Wave communications are giving way now to highly specialized media audiences. There are, for example, magazines which cater to populations as diverse as antique collectors, joggers, car buffs, and people in the million dollar housing market. Radio stations specialize, not just in music, but in hard rock, soft rock, punkrock, country rock or folk rock. In the Boston area, a new cable TV station announced its intention last week to specialize in "neighborhood news," and newspapers are doing the same thing. A tabloid newspaper is customized to provide news and advertisements targeted to each separate suburb of the metropolitan Boston area. The Cambridge Tab has some items in common with the Newton Tab, but apparently the publisher thinks it makes good economic sense to publish customized versions for each community.

Although instructional programs appear generally oblivious to the potential power of the computer to custom-design education, we are already beginning to customize testing. Second Wave testing called for identical machine-scorable answer sheets, batched by the thousands, and scored by the overlay of common patterns of right answers. Third Wave testing calls for

branching, customization, and diagnosis of individual learning problems. Student personnel work too has become more customized and more individualized. There are more special interest clubs and groups custom-designed to serve special needs populations, such as reentry women, parents without partners, Black student organizations, and the like. At the same time, computerized guidance systems are providing individualized career-guidance services that would be impossible without interactive computer programs. Despite such changes before our very eyes, most of the school reform recommendations of the 1980s propose Second Wave solutions in a Third Wave world. They suggest re-massifying rather than de-massifying education.

It is surprising how little attention is given to both the promises and the demands of the future. Although no one, I think, fails to mention that computer literacy will be a demand of the future, not much is said about preparing people to live in a world in which the pace of change is escalating with each generation. Indeed, arguments about what constitutes the common core of knowledge that everyone should know seem almost quaint in the face of the knowledge explosion. Between 6000 and 7000 scientific articles are produced each day, and information doubles every 5 1/2 years. By the time the average physician completes his or her training, half of all the knowledge and skills acquired in medical school are obsolete.

How do we educate people to live in a world in which entire industries are created and wiped out in a single decade? The most important lessons that we can teach our children are the skills and the attitudes that will be required of lifelong