
The Evolving Effort to Improve Schools: Pseudo-Reform, Incremental Reform, and Restructuring

While it is too early to tell whether Kentucky and Chicago are signs of things to come, it is possible to explore the reform road that has already been trod and try to understand why so much of the journey has proved so disappointing. Ms. Raywid leads the way.

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BY MARY ANNE RAYWID

A NATIONWIDE effort to reform the public schools has been under way for a decade or more. Predictable shifts in public interest make its longevity alone remarkable.¹ But perhaps even more remarkable is the way the effort seems to be evolving and adapting to failure. It appears that the stubborn resistance of educational problems to reform may have caused some of the would-be reformers to redouble their efforts.

Undoubtedly there are some reformers who have given up. But perhaps because of the urgency of the need for school improvement, the reform movement continues. Indeed, there is evidence that it is taking on renewed intensity and ferocity in the face of resistance. Illinois and Kentucky offer examples of what may be in the offing and of what can result. In both states, usually uninvolved govern-

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ment agencies overrode education officials and normal policy-making channels and simply took control of the schools. The Kentucky case, which began with a state supreme court finding that the entire system of education in Kentucky was unconstitutional, has been well-documented in the press.²

The experience in Illinois may be a harbinger of the new arrangements. There, after would-be reformers had endured years of fruitless struggle to improve Chicago's schools, the state legislature imposed a sweeping decentralization plan on the city. Each public school is now governed by an elected council of eight parents and community residents, two teachers, and the principal. The council hires the principal under a four-year contract, allocates budgetary resources, and frames long-term plans for school improvement. The principal hires teachers from among certified applicants, irrespective of seniority, and can dismiss teachers following a brief period of probation and remediation. Each school district in Chicago also has an elected council that selects a district superintendent. Like principals, superintendents sign four-year performance contracts. One key function of the superintendent is to identify schools in which improvement is not taking place and to develop a plan for bringing that about. The arrangement in Chicago transfers a great deal of authority to the school level, but it also imposes some specific goals on all schools, including reducing dropout rates and the total number of unsuccessful students.³

As these examples show, a new mood appears to have surfaced among reformers — a resolve to take control away from officials who are unable or unwilling to accomplish school reform. While it is too early to tell whether Kentucky and Chicago really are signs of things to come, it is possible to explore the reform road that has already been trod and to try to understand why so much of the journey has proved so disappointing.

As we do so, bear in mind that not all would-be reformers share the same goals. Some seek largely to restore credibility to an institution under siege; others seek to change particular features of the system; still others target the system itself as what must be changed. The typology that follows assumes that, if significant improvement is to occur in education, then the goal must be nothing less than

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the widespread transformation of "business as usual" in schools and in classrooms. With this in mind, we can identify three fairly distinct types of school reform proposals: pseudo-reform, incremental reform, and reform by restructuring.

PSEUDO-REFORM

Pseudo-reforms are not all bad, and I do not intend the label to be pejorative. In fact, some pseudo-reforms are greatly needed and desirable. A large appropriation for the repair of school buildings is a clear illustration: necessary and important, yes — but reform, no. Fixing buildings may be essential, but it is a far cry from transforming what takes place in classrooms. No one explicitly denies this. Yet unfortunately, some seem to assume that the needs of schools have been met when substantial sums have been invested in them.

Other pseudo-reforms are perhaps less desirable in that they divert attention from more substantial reforms, and they risk raising false hopes. In Hawaii, where I was a visiting professor in 1989, I would judge the 2.0 rule, the expansion of district exceptions, the lengthening of the school day, and the proposal to deny driver's licenses to dropouts to be pseudo-reforms in this sense. Not one of them is likely to have much effect on the quality of instruction, yet each of them lulls us into believing that we're doing something to promote higher standards, to be more responsive, or to improve achievement. Such reforms deflect public attention from what matters in education.

Sheer rhetoric is perhaps the most

common type of pseudo-reform. As analysts have noted, a great deal of political capital can be made by calling attention to school problems and by urging school reform.⁴ School officials and board members, as well as legislators and governors, readily amass such capital. Espousing particular policies, however, is likely to be less rewarding and a lot riskier than merely mouthing platitudes about the need for reform, because when it comes down to the nitty-gritty there is apt to be squabbling among competing constituencies.

Thus what some call "symbolic politics" has become a prominent variety of pseudo-reform. It appears to be extremely widespread, as a study of high school reform suggests. The investigators surveyed high school principals, asking whether school improvement projects were going on in their schools. Then they surveyed teachers in those same schools about the character of the projects reported. It seems that in more than half of the schools whose principals reported that improvement projects were under way, more than half of the teachers were unaware of their existence!⁵ In fact, in only 22% of these schools could as many as three-quarters of the teachers agree that a program did indeed exist.

One frequent example of this sort of symbolic reform is the naming of task forces. It sometimes seems that convening the task force *is* the reform. Cynics might even suggest that such efforts can be restricted from the start to symbolic reforms, depending on the way task forces are constituted. To include on a task force all interest groups with a stake in an issue virtually insures the continuation of the status quo. However, such cynics fail to understand the purpose and function of symbolic politics. The aim is not so much to bring about change *within* an institution as outside it. The purpose is to restore legitimacy and stability by demonstrating an institution's responsiveness to public sentiment and its concern about a problem. The appointment of a panel of respected leaders is a time-honored way of doing that.

INCREMENTAL REFORM

Incremental reform is more ambitious in that it aims to improve educational practice. Proposals for incremental reform typically represent serious efforts

to change classrooms for one group of youngsters or within one sphere of educational activity. Most reform proposals are of this type, aiming at a particular new arrangement for young adolescents or a new practice for early childhood programs or for the disadvantaged. Such recommendations often propose much-needed changes in an effort to revitalize schools.

But, as both experience and research have shown, incremental reforms often face an uphill struggle. One fine team-teaching proposal that finally began in Hawaii a year ago took four years to win the necessary approvals. By the time that happened, half of the staff members who had proposed it had changed jobs. Even after the necessary approvals are obtained, there can still be major problems in fitting a new program into the existing organization. The more innovative the program, the more difficult this problem will be. Ultimately, even after obstacles to adoption and implementation have been overcome, it will remain difficult to institutionalize a program — regardless of its success.

Schools are notoriously difficult to change. One major reason that this is so is their interconnectedness. Several reformers have noted that, in order to change almost anything of significance in schools, a great deal must be changed.⁶ Indeed, schools are very much like jigsaw puzzles; everything is connected to everything else. It is impossible to modify any one piece without also altering those pieces connected to it — which in turn can require changing successively larger rings of pieces increasingly farther from where one began.⁷

Let me cite two illustrations of the interconnectedness of the elements of schooling. There is abundant reason to require all prospective elementary teachers in Hawaii to study the most educationally relevant highlights of all the cultures that are strongly represented in the school population. Moreover, any educator assigned to a school or district in which one ethnic group predominates ought to be schooled in detail regarding that group.

Such a requirement appears to be a fairly simple and reasonable proposal. Yet to install it would undoubtedly prove enormously complicated. It would mean a required preservice course, and that would involve adding at least one de-

partment to the university's college of education. Since it would alter students' course requirements, both the college of education and the university would need to authorize the change and to allocate resources differently. (It might be necessary to hire more instructors, to reallocate present instructors' time, and so on.)

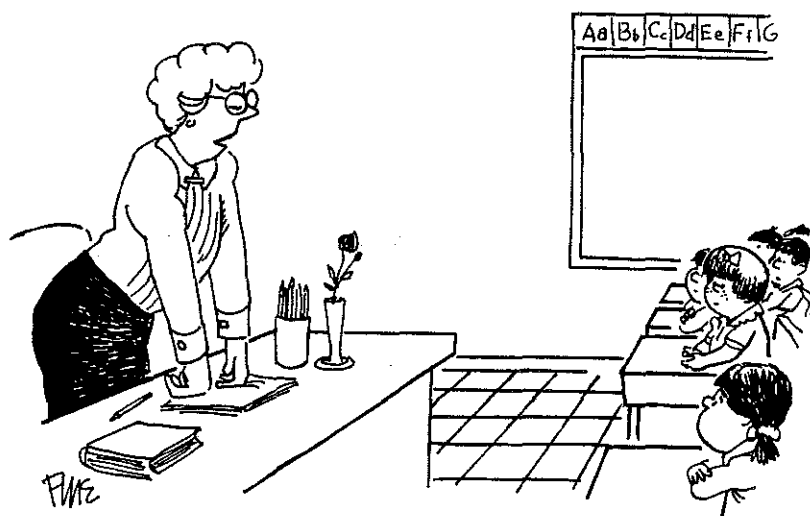
Moreover, teacher certification standards would need to reflect the new requirement, and arrangements would have to be made to extend the necessary instruction to those teacher applicants who do not come from the University of Hawaii. Appointment criteria for being named to a particular school might also reflect the new requirement, and inservice education requirements would need to change. The ramifications for contracts would proliferate, and the list could go on.

Changing high schools is no less complicated. Consider the reasonable response to the widespread public interest in improving youngsters' ability to write clearly and correctly. The only way to bring this about is to have students write and to have teachers respond to their writing. Two brief pieces of written work per week seem a modest enough requirement. But multiply these two assignments by the absolutely minimal five minutes it would take for a teacher to give a meaningful response to each paper, and multiply this figure by the 150 students for whom many high school teachers are responsible. We have just added a stag-

gering 25 hours to the high school English teacher's workweek.⁸

Because this kind of increase in workload is totally impracticable, what are the alternatives for implementing what appears to be a modest and reasonable proposal? We would have to shift and reallocate the responsibilities of a large number of teachers, adjust class sizes and/or student loads, change curricula, and so on. Hence the conclusion on the part of a growing number of people that any school change of any import — no matter how minor it may initially appear — will require major changes. And hence the conclusion that, when such reasonable and desirable changes appear totally unworkable, perhaps we need to look at the fundamental arrangements that render them so.

This conclusion suggests several of the reasons why a growing number of people have become interested in school restructuring. An additional reason is that many people have become convinced that schools are simply put together in the wrong way and that we must rethink such basic matters as the way we group youngsters for instruction, the way we divide and package material for presentation, and the way we decide when a youngster has learned and grown enough to move from one level to another.⁹ Others have argued that, while the present organization and structure of schooling made sense for the early years of the 20th century, they have proved inefficient for its



"I'm your teacher, Mrs. Gridley. Learn to read, write, and do arithmetic, and nobody will get hurt."

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closing years and will be totally inadequate for the 21st century.¹⁰

Still others, sold on the need for school restructuring, simply point to our lack of success in reforming schools incrementally. They argue that, even after a dozen years of serious effort at improving the quality of schools, one still hears exactly the same sort of horror stories that drew us to excellence in the first place: falling test scores, rising dropout rates, and the discovery that one more set of schools is a disaster.

For these and other reasons, beginning in 1986 the excellence movement took a noticeable turn away from "reform" and toward "restructuring."¹¹ Both the language and the emphasis changed, and we have since heard a great deal about restructuring. Proponents generally propose one or both of two changes: fundamental and pervasive alterations in the way we organize and institutionalize education and alterations in the way in which public schools are governed and held accountable to the public.

The supporters of restructuring do not necessarily agree on just what needs changing most or on the particular changes to



"Truancy is up 20% . . . and that's just among the teachers."

be installed. But two broad strategies have emerged for setting these changes in motion: site-based management and choice. The two share some common ingredients; both stand for some degree of decentralization in decision making, both seek to broaden the current base of educational decision making, and both talk of changed accountability structures. But they recommend quite different strategies for arriving at restructured schools.

Site-based management is a plan for improving schools by altering the ways in which they are governed. It proposes two key moves for accomplishing this end. First, the power to make decisions regarding budget, staffing, and instruction is shifted from central offices to individual schools. Second, the decisions made at the school level are shared among the school's several constituencies: administrators and staff, teachers, parents, and the community. As a school improvement strategy, site-based management assumes that the new decision makers will make more relevant and more appropriate decisions and that collectively these decisions will improve school practice. The logic of site-based management requires that each school decide for itself which sorts of changes it will undertake.

Site-based management has not been in operation for very long in very many places. Thus there is little systematic evidence about its operation and impact. The evidence that does exist, however, suggests that there are major difficulties in realizing its benefits: central officials everywhere have proved highly resistant to shifting the necessary authority to the schools, and shared decision making all too often amounts to giving a teacher representative a voice in an advisory body, not a vote in a decision-making body. In the worst cases, representatives of the several constituencies in the all-important councils (teachers, parents, and so on) are not identified and elected by their peers but are instead named by the building principal.

Small wonder, then, that evidence on the impact of site-based management is not uniformly positive. The research to date suggests that a site-based management plan often turns out to be just one more committee, involving only a small percentage of a school's teachers. School governance is not altered, and the influence of various groups over decision

making remains unchanged. Nor do site-based management appear to have much effect on instruction, because of the long-standing tradition among teachers of leaving instructional matters to the discretion of individual practitioners. Not surprisingly, then, research to date shows little correlation between site-based management and student achievement.¹²

The record of the last two decades makes choice a more promising strategy. Although not all choice efforts have been effective in transforming instructional quality, enough of them have succeeded to suggest ways to maximize the likelihood of success. Some ventures have been spectacularly successful. The example most often cited is Manhattan's District 4 — in Spanish Harlem — where virtually all the students are minority and 80% come from families poor enough to make them eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches. All the junior high schools, a number of the elementary schools, and the two senior high schools all operate as schools of choice. Since the adoption of choice in District 4, achievement has improved remarkably, and so have attendance, attitudes toward school, and students' post-school plans.¹³

The success seems to lie in officials' freeing and supporting teachers to design and implement distinctive programs among which families can choose. Immediately upon acceptance of the invitation (not the assignment) to become designers and innovators and to share responsibility with colleagues rather than to work alone, the roles of all teachers change. The roles of families also change, as they choose from an array of programs.

The strategy of seeking school improvement through choice can be deflected, though, through such mechanisms of central control as the top-down assigning of teachers to particular programs or the constraining of innovations through central office mandates and prohibitions. A choice plan can also yield inequity unless it is designed to preclude this outcome. However, where the necessary planning has been done and the logic of choice has been given room to play itself out, organizational changes have ensued simultaneously with instructional changes, and there have been highly positive results.¹⁴

Those who are convinced of the need to restructure schools usually turn either

to choice or to site-based management as a means. They believe that extensive transformation is necessary, and most are in agreement that incremental changes are not apt to make this happen. Are they right? Will effective reform require such extensive changes that a transformation of the schools will be necessary?

Perhaps the typology offered here can help us to answer that question. We can use it to assess particular reforms and to come to grips with new recommendations. For example, discussion on whether Hawaii's version of site-based management represents pseudo-reform, incremental reform, or restructuring could yield important insights into the nature of the plan and its probable impacts.

Of the three types of reform we have identified, pseudo-reform is the maintenance position. It is not intended to change much within the institution, but rather to rally external support. Incremental reform has more ambitious aims, and its advocates often offer much-needed suggestions for school improvement. These are frequently the people who welcome innovation and seek to align practice with new knowledge; they are the optimists who, unfortunately, are all too often disappointed.

Those who seek to restructure schools believe that extensive improvement is imperative. They tend to be more aware than others of the shortcomings, failures, and inequities of schooling, and they are determined to bring about improvements. Hence they are impatient with pseudo-reform and its symbolic politics. They are apt to be in sympathy with a number of the particular changes proposed by incremental reformers — but they hold little hope of seeing such changes realized without broader, more extensive, and more fundamental change.

The restructurers are apt to point to such conditions as the precariousness of the life of school reform movements. (The current movement has already well outlived its expected life span.) They are also apt to see a great deal hanging in the balance as we assess the overall success of a dozen years of school reform. (The continuance of public education is by no means assured as we move toward the 21st century.) And they are likely to be fearful that each failed effort to change schools for the better makes the next effort that much less credible — and that much less likely to succeed. (False hope

is dangerous, for fewer people will be willing to work for school improvement the next time around.)

One of three outcomes will very probably conclude the nation's extended quest for excellence. The first possibility is that reform efforts will be limited to pseudo-reforms that bring no instructional improvements and to well-intended but largely unsuccessful incremental reforms. In this event, the very existence of public education may be in real doubt.


The second possibility is that the displeasure of an irate public may be formally expressed in events similar to those now occurring in Kentucky and Illinois. New decision makers will take over, and authority will be extensively redistributed. In this event, school governance will be radically transformed, and we will begin to discover the particular assets and liabilities of a brand new system of operating and controlling schools.

The third possibility is that genuine restructuring will begin in a less extreme and less roughshod fashion. School policy makers will seriously explore ways to systematically decentralize authority in education; ways to give teachers, parents, and other citizens an appropriate voice in school control; and ways to better organize schools for instruction. The results could bring substantial change in school governance and operation, but they might well be accomplished, as President Bush would put it, in a kinder, gentler way.

Present needs, as well as the public's insistence, make a fourth possible outcome unlikely.

1. See Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology — The 'Issue-Attention' Cycle," *The Public Interest*, vol. 29, 1972, pp. 39-50.
2. See Chris Pipho, "Re-Forming Education in Kentucky," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1990, pp. 662-63.
3. The features of the Chicago plan are summarized in Evans Clinchy, "Chicago's Great Experiment Begins: Will Radical Decentralization Bring School Reform?," *Equity and Choice*, May 1989, pp. 40-44.
4. David N. Plank and Don Adams, "Death, Taxes, and School Reform: Educational Policy Change in Comparative Perspective," *Administrator's Notebook*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1989.
5. Stewart C. Purkey, Robert A. Rutter, and Fred M. Newmann, "U.S. High School Improvement Programs: A Profile from the High School and Beyond Supplemental Survey," *Metropolitan Education*, Winter 1986-87, pp. 59-91.
6. See H. Dean Evans, "We Must Begin Educational Reform 'Every Place at Once,'" *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1983, pp. 173-77; and Theodore R. Sizer, "High School Reform: The Need for

Engineering," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1983, pp. 679-83.

7. I borrow the jigsaw puzzle analogy from Jane L. David, "The Puzzle of Structural Change," paper presented at the Symposium on Structural Change in Secondary Education, June 1987.
8. This example comes from Theodore R. Sizer, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).
9. See, for example, *The Redesign of Education: A Collection of Papers Concerned with Comprehensive Educational Reform* (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1989).
10. David T. Kearns and Denis P. Doyle, *Winning the Brain Race: A Bold Plan to Make Our Schools Competitive* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1988).
11. Chris Pipho, "Restructuring the Schools: States Take on the Challenge," *Education Week*, 26 November 1986, p. 19.
12. William H. Clune and Paula A. White, *School Based Management: Institutional Variation, Implementation, and Issues for Further Research* (Madison, Wis.: Center for Policy Research in Education, December 1987); Betty Malen and Rodney Ogawa, "Professional-Patron Influence on Site-Based Governance Councils: A Confounding Case Study," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Winter 1988, pp. 251-70; Betty Malen, Rodney Ogawa, and Jennifer Kranz, "What Do We Know About School-Based Management? A Case Study of the Literature — A Call for Research," in William H. Clune and John F. Witte, eds., *Choice and Control in American Education* (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1990); and Mary Anne Raywid, "Rethinking School Governance," in Richard Elmore, ed., *Restructuring Schools: The Next Generation of School Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 152-205.
13. There have been a number of reports citing the supportive data. Perhaps the fullest account is found in Raymond Domanico, *Model for Choice: A Report on Manhattan's District 4* (New York: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 1989).
14. For a recent summary of these results, see Mary Anne Raywid, *The Case for Public Schools of Choice* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Fastback No. 283, 1989). 



"I wouldn't expect you to understand peer-group pressure — for you, as we all know, are peerless."