

"ON THE VIABILITY OF THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL:

A REPLY TO PROFESSOR WRAGA"

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ABSTRACT

A description is offered of the purpose and focus of the EAQ issue on "What Will Replace the Comprehensive High School?" That issue did not discuss the viability of the comprehensive high school, but three sets of reasons are summarized here as to why it is being questioned: the evidence of failure, its intractability, and its incompatibility with contemporary research-based recommendations. Questions are raised about criteria for determining the adequacy of today's comprehensive high school.

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Mary Anne Raywid

Mr. Wraga is upset that the authors of the special EAQ issue on "What Will Replace the Comprehensive High School?" "contrived a negative image" of the institution and then used it as a "straw man." He objects (three times) to the issue's a priori position and goes so far as to suggest that it raises "questions of balance and objectivity."

We must agree that there is a ring reminiscent of "When did you stop beating your wife?" in the issue's title. Had the collection been devoted to matters such as "Do we need to replace the comprehensive high school?" or "Should we replace the comprehensive high school?" then Mr. Wraga's concern would be appropriate: We did not offer an objective and balanced examination of those questions. Actually, we offered no examination of them of any sort. That is not what the issue was about. Mr. Wraga is correct in attributing to us an a priori position with respect to the comprehensive high school. But that is no shamefaced confession: we hoped to make it plain to all from the start, with the issue's title! -- And this, in order to get on to other questions.

The crux of his objections appears to be that we did not set out to examine the question Mr. Wraga thinks we should have examined -- which evidently would have read something like "What have been the aims of the comprehensive high school and how have reformers sought to change it over the years?" For purposes of the issue at least, we felt it safe to proceed as though the comprehensive high school has undergone enough thoroughgoing criticism that it would be interesting to ask how researchers might envision its successor institution. (Of course, one would not even have to think of it as *due* to be succeeded to inquire what

will supplant it, but probably several of the issue's authors would find replacement a positive step.)

But evidently Mr. Wraga is not convinced that the comprehensive high school's lack of viability has yet been demonstrated. In fact, he suggests, since the 1970s, the institution has not even been fundamentally challenged, its continuance having become "almost a non-issue in high profile discussions of educational reform." (I'm not sure, then, just what he makes of the small schools movement so prominent in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Antonio, and elsewhere -- or of the nature and extent of the changes in the high school proposed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1996).) But in any event, here are some of the reasons why many have concluded that the comprehensive high school needs replacing. They can be grouped into three sets of problems. First there is the evidence of failure. Second, there is the well-known and powerful resistance to change, which has made the high school largely impervious and unimproveable. And third, there is the growing list of features that have been linked to effectiveness and productivity that appear fundamentally incompatible with the comprehensive high school.

First, despite the claims of Mr. Wraga's two positive sources (Bracey, 1997, and Berliner & Biddle, 1995) there is a substantial record of failure associated with the comprehensive high school. While it is possible to locate successful examples in affluent suburbs, it is far more difficult to name any successes where the student population is poor or minority -- which are increasingly the demographics of urban high schools. It appears, in fact, that the comprehensive high school is a stratifying institution, broadening rather than narrowing the achievement gap that separates the fortunate from the disadvantaged. (Lee & Smith, 1995; Lee

Smith & Croninger, 1995) As one researcher put it, the comprehensive high school works on the principle stated in the Book of Matthew: "To him that hath shall be given, and to him that hath not shall be taken away." (Howley, 1995) The comprehensive high schools in urban areas often graduate fewer than half the youngsters who enroll in them (e.g., New York City's dropout/incompletion rate was 50% as of 1993-94 according to the official School Report Cards distributed by the Board of Education). And on the lists of failing schools which cities now maintain, there are comprehensive high schools which remain year after year after year. When one adds the barrage of negative testimony about high school graduates coming both from employers and from those more interested in academic preparation, there are grave causes for concern about the viability of the comprehensive high school which is what most American youngsters have attended. According to *Education Week*'s extensive 1998 report on education, "the majority of urban students in about half the states fail to meet even minimum national standards in mathematics, reading, and science."

A second set of difficulties associated with the comprehensive high school of today is that despite evidences of failure, it has proved highly intractable. Analysts have shown that size, and the departmentalized organization in particular, make it all but impossible to modify practice in the comprehensive high school, and at least as difficult to change the culture that determines the way in which people operate.

A number of researchers have documented both the unwieldiness of the comprehensive high school and its resistance to change. (e.g., Fullan, 1990; Louis & Miles, 1990; Wilson & Corcoran, 1988). Not all have given up on it, and some researchers are leaving it largely to others to draw the policy conclusions. Leslie Santee Siskin, for instance, who was one of the

authors in the EAQ issue which offended Mr. Wraga, has never, to my knowledge made a policy statement on the viability of the high school. But her analyses of the institution and its academic departments have led others to policy conclusions. For instance, her analysis of the strength of academic departments, and their centrality to teacher identification, have made possible a new understanding of the ability of comprehensive high schools to resist any efforts to change them. (1994)

Gary Wehlage's analysis of the disappointing outcomes of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative documented how comprehensive high schools address challenges and difficulties by adding special, targeted programs and personnel rather than by changing the school and fundamentally altering the behavior patterns of all involved. Thus, despite the addition of services and projects, aversive policies and practices remained unexamined and intact in the New Futures schools, and the way people looked at and interacted with one another changed not at all. (Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1992)

A third kind of challenge to the comprehensive high school rises today from the growing evidence as to what might change the school performance of adolescents. The list is extensive and it prominently includes small size, personalization, close association on the part of each student with at least one adult in the school, cross-disciplinary or integrated studies, a flexible schedule, collective teacher responsibility for student success, teacher collaboration and the development of professional community, an extended and diffused role for teachers, the substitution of community for bureaucracy as the school's organizational model and guiding metaphor, and the abolition of tracking in favor of an extensively common curriculum.

The evidence amassed over the past decade in support of these

fundamental changes is overwhelming. Are they compatible with the comprehensive high school? Mr. Wraga might say yes. And in fact, most or all of these arrangements are recommended by the National Association of Secondary School Principals among its eighty-plus recommendations for changing today's high schools (1996). Virtually every one, however, poses challenges to arrangements and practices that have come to represent core elements in secondary education and its primary institutional embodiment, the comprehensive high school. I doubt that many of these proposals will prove acceptable to those in a position to try to act on them -- and the evidence cited above as to the difficulty of changing the high school would support such doubts.

It is, then, these three kinds of evidence that have led many to conclude that the comprehensive high school is no longer viable. And it is not that the three sets of challenges have gone unnoticed. Over the last decade, thoughtful, sympathetic, and supportive critics of considerable credibility have collectively built quite an indictment. John Goodlad has underscored the boredom and flatness prevailing in classrooms, and his recommendations, as Mr. Wraga says, "would in effect eliminate comprehensive high schools." Ted Sizer has deplored the mindlessness that seems to mark school practice and student engagement with it. (1984) Ernest Boyer called the comprehensive high school "a troubled institution," noted the dropout rates approaching 50% regularly anticipated at some schools, and discussed at length the decline in academic performance. (1983) And Michael Sedlak and his colleagues came up with the shattering conclusion that more than two-thirds of the students in high school are simply disengaged from academic learning (1986). They care little about it and deny it their attention. What is more, these authors add, this is not a recent phenomenon. High schools

"have never done an admirable job of educating the vast majority of adolescents." (p. 15) Thus, as these illustrations show, the nature and extent of the criticism, and the experience and standing of those voicing it, add to the three sorts of evidence highlighted above, in questioning the potential of our present arrangements.

The evidence and the criticism have led many to conclude that the comprehensive high school simply fails to represent a viable way to organize secondary education for today. It isn't clear, however, that any of this is the sort of evidence that might persuade Mr. Wraga. He faults EAQ issue contributors for being "uninformed by a historical perspective" and for ignoring or misrepresenting a half-century of proposals for the comprehensive high school. For him, intentions and recommendations appear the crux of the matter in judging the institution. That has to strike some of us as a strange test of adequacy. One might dismiss it with the time-tested adage that "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." But certainly intentions are not irrelevant. And most of us who know the history tend to look back on the Dewey-Snedden debates that helped shape the comprehensive high school as a struggle not unlike St. George and the dragon, where the good prevailed. Dewey triumphed as the democratic voice urging a genuine education for all, versus Snedden who just wanted vocational training for the masses.

The big question though is, *Did* the good prevail? To what extent was the verbal triumph actually implemented in practice? And how did it work out when implemented? I fear that much of what Mr. Wraga tells us -- half his pages, in fact -- consist not of accounts of actual school practice and its effects, but instead of the *recommendations* of would-be reformers of the comprehensive high school who by his own tacit admission never prevailed! It is the reality, not the hopes and suggestions

for modifying it, which leads a number of us to the conclusion that today's high school needs to be replaced as a model. Mr. Wraga concedes that "the comprehensive high school model remains at best half-implemented." One wonders why. The reason certainly can't be that it hasn't been given enough time for a test. What is it, then? Are there inherent problems that stand as obstacles -- such as the conflict between the bureaucratic organizational model and the needs of adolescents? Or is it that the implementation of the idea produces the need for arrangements like tracking, which mean negative and inequitable consequences for so many? Or is it that today's circumstances seem inadequately served by a model designed for quite a different context?

Whatever explanations one chooses, and whatever sort of evidence one accepts as compelling -- be it contemporary empirical or historical reform proposals -- one must agree with Mr. Wraga's suggestion that there is much to be learned from history. For instance, one insightful historian warns us about the costs of human error -- and the persistence with which it is sometimes pursued, despite warnings and criticism and despite viable alternatives. Barbara Tuchman, in *The March of Folly* (1984), traces how institutions sometimes pursue policies contrary to their own self-interest -- due, in the cases she examines, to pride, or the abandonment of purpose, or to incompetence. The common thread is the persistence in futile efforts long after their failure or destructiveness has become clear, at least to some. Have we reached such a point with the way we have institutionalized secondary education? Is the championing of the comprehensive high school the taking up of the good fight, as Mr. Wraga sees it? Or is it, instead, officialdom stubbornly trodding one more "march of folly"?

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