

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

ABOUT REPLACING THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL

Mary Anne Raywid

This collection is not what I envisioned it would be. In proposing that an issue of *Educational Administration Quarterly* be devoted to the question "What Will Replace the Comprehensive High School?," I thought contributors would be examining and assessing some of the new models that are contenders, or would be dreaming up still newer ones to nominate. But few had such thoughts. Authors sent strong critiques of our existing secondary education structures, and there were accounts of failed efforts at changing particular comprehensive high schools, but very little about what might replace the way we have institutionalized secondary education to date. In fact, it began to appear that perhaps the issue might better be named "What -- *If Anything* -- Will Replace the Comprehensive High School?" Or perhaps, "If We Could Identify What *Should* Replace Today's Comprehensive High School, Can We Get There from Here?"

The nature of the manuscripts received gave me real pause. It is not as though we have failed to generate new models for a high school. There have long been innovative and successful alternative schools, and focus schools are a more recent and somewhat related genre. Moreover, if we count as a model any innovative variant that has spawned several others like itself, there are a number of them. We now have a popular career academy model combining college preparation with introduction to a career field, under the sponsorship of close school - business collaboration. There is also the somewhat similar but more targeted 'tech prep' model. And there is the 'expeditionary learning' model that appears the current manifestation of an experiential focus (earlier manifested in the school-without-walls and 'Walkabout' models of 25 years ago). There is also the model elaborated by the Center for Collaborative Education in New York -- the group of alternative school directors led by Debbie Meier and her Central Park East Elementary and Secondary schools -- which has established a dozen new small high schools in New York. They have differing priorities and emphases but emanate from essentially the same process and echo many of the same themes. Yet another model is the 'middle college high school' arrangement which has proved so successful with disadvantaged students, with its thematic learning and close community college affiliation. The Center for Research on Students Placed At Risk is developing a new model for succeeding with urban youngsters, and schools inspired by *The Paideia Proposal* of a decade ago have yielded yet another, and quite different one for what secondary education should look like.

Thus, it is not the case that no new designs for the heavily critiqued secondary school have been generated or implemented. Why were so few addressed by prospective *EAG* authors? Is it that few think the comprehensive high school *needs* to be replaced, and/or that it *should* be replaced? Or is it that none of these models -- nothing that's appeared to date -- appears a truly desirable alternative? Or, might it be that most of us are sufficiently entrenched in the assumptions of the dominant culture as to be unable to entertain alternatives? As Lynne Hannay and John Ross suggest, short of 'reculturation,' some of us would be simply unable to do so. Or, was the absence of manuscripts about replacements for the comprehensive high school due to the conviction that change of such magnitude is simply unthinkable, with the consequence that the comprehensive high school is here to stay?

Certainly these authors are not without criticism of present arrangements. Three of them (Siskin, and Hannay & Ross) lay the problems at the feet of what is perhaps most fundamental to the organizational structure of the comprehensive high school, the departmental system. Siskin concludes that it poses "powerful barriers to school-wide communication and community," even while it creates an entity more like "a 36-ring circus" than a unified organization or a single enterprise. The department orients the faculty, providing the identification point for each of its members and defining the subcultures which impede any unified vision of what the school stands for or is about. It is also the departments which provide the firmest obstacle to meaningful change of the high school organizational structure, since attempts are examined through departmental lenses with the result described by Siskin of the science teachers who literally moved their desks out of new offices and back into the departmental cluster dictated by their disciplinary backgrounds. Under such circumstances, the "reculturing" that these authors insist must accompany "restructuring" if significant change is to occur is totally thwarted. It cannot even begin.

If those wishing to contribute to this issue did not agree upon a model replacement for the comprehensive high school, neither do their studies reflect agreement upon a process for getting to where one wants to go. The authors describe several of the paths currently being pursued. Oxley writes of efforts to create a "sub-school" within an existing comprehensive high school. Brouillette writes of a new high school created by a principal who was given two years to design and create it. Hannay and Ross describe the results when eight existing schools set out to create within each one, new "Positions of Responsibility" to supplement the existing set of building administrators and department chairs. Otherwise, these authors are concerned with existing schools (or proposed guidelines for new ones in the case of McQuillan) and not with how we get from here to

there. The studies included represent the application of different change strategies, however -- and since the authors reflect concern with the difficulty of change, a more direct look at alternative processes and their advantages and disadvantages might have been expected. This did not absorb the authors of the papers included here, however, since virtually all of them started their studies with a situation not of their own making.

Yet there are now several models for creating schools that are restructured and recultured. One is the Center for Collaborative Education's model for phasing out a failing school and repopulating the building with newly created, separate, autonomous small schools. Another was the model created in Philadelphia for downsizing all 22 of the city's comprehensive high schools by dividing them into schools-within-schools. A third model is the focus school idea of generating individually themed small schools by inviting their prospective staffs to design them and then letting families select among them. Still another is the high school redesign process that has been pursued in New York, consisting of closing down a failing high school for redesign -- sometimes just by a central office official or team but more often recently by staff selected for the task. And there is the incipient "reconstitution" model recently proposed by Chicago officials as they discontinued all the staff affiliated with seven failing high schools. Although this list is not exhaustive, it does reflect what appears a latent but developing consensus to the effect that genuine restructuring is going to require starting over with a new school and/or staff, rather than trying to re-fashion an existing one.

But if the authors of the articles which follow are not examining new models for high schools or for change, they do offer some interesting perspectives and conclusions. Several deal with restructuring initiatives from the vantage point of several years into the effort and up to twelve years later. They pose several questions that have not yet received the attention that is needed. One is the problem of continuity. As Liane Brouillette suggests, new leadership can certainly weaken the resolve and diffuse the focus on change even if it does not explicitly re-institute traditional organizational structures. This is the case with both building and district leadership. Even without new board majorities that want to change directions, school administrators at both building and district levels are often chosen for their leadership potential, which means their transformative potential, which in turn calls for the transformation of prior changes. Thus, transformation even of what have proved successful reforms is always a strong possibility. Unless we find ways to assure teachers of some continuity, they will all surely learn what the cynics now tell them, that effort invested in innovation is foolish since the next administration is likely to revise if not reverse it. As Brouillette concludes, "a way must be found to create reforms that will be more enduring

than the tenure of the present school board members" -- or for that matter, of the present principal or superintendent.

A second puzzle emerging from these articles pertains to the growing insistence on "reculturing" and its asserted centrality to significant, enduring change. But Brouillette's article poses a question about it, as well as about that well-known threat to innovation, the tendency to 'regress to the mean.' If reculturation involves the changes in belief and values suggested in these pages, and if it is as important as these authors suggest it is, then how, even after a decade at Sagebrush High School, is the new culture's hold still so tenuous? How can the school have succeeded as well as it has, apparently without ever having become fully and successfully recultured? Or, alternatively why isn't a recultured school culture as formidable an obstacle to change as the prior one was -- effectively blocking, in fact, any invitations to regress to the mean?

In the pages to follow, Liane Brouillette offers an unusual perspective on a restructured high school, offering glimpses from the start, a year later, at age five, and again at age nine. Sagebrush High School was hailed as a successfully restructured school, and certainly appeared a recultured one so far as its faculty were concerned -- although it never seemed to totally capture its students' attention to the extent hoped. Brouillette tells the story of the changes occurring after the inspirational first principal left, and when a new superintendent and school board replaced the one that had launched Sagebrush.

The article by Lynne Hannay and John Ross warns that the restructuring rhetoric "ignores the inherent power of secondary school culture." The kind of secondary education currently proposed is not just new and different, they assert: it "runs contrary to the past experiences, beliefs, and practices of most secondary school educators." They report a study of eight Canadian high schools which, three years into a restructuring initiative were still divided among schools that had not really begun, others showing tentative beginnings, and a third group which was the only one where restructuring seemed genuinely under way. The initiative did not set out to end the departmental structure but rather to supplement it by establishing new "Positions of Responsibility" cutting across departmental boundaries. Hannay and Ross suggest that such restructuring moves may be an essential first step to letting the necessary reculturation occur. Moreover, they found that "the more sharply the new organizational model [the new positions created] departed from ... previous structures, the more substantial were the documented changes to practice."

Leslie Siskin's article highlights the challenge confronting a high school principal trying to forge a shared vision in a context likable to "a 36-ring circus." She identifies three different strategies adopted by three different principals in their attempts to penetrate the micro- cultures which departments represent: attempts to break down and replace

departments; to breach the barriers they pose; and to build bridges across them. Their limited success lends emphasis to the message of how difficult it is proving to realize the reform agenda -- or, indeed, *any* agenda -- under the circumstances departmental divisions yield.

Diana Oxley focuses on one key dimension of a new model for replacing the comprehensive high school. She identifies a set of school structures, processes, and goals implicit in the notion of *school community*, and she seeks to examine the extent to which these are experienced by the students and teachers in a particular "sub-school" or school-within-a-school. Her story also suggests one kind of process model for initiating and sustaining such sub-schools on a broad scale, with the help of researchers who aided with concept fidelity, stability in the face of faculty turnover, and help in dealing with the system.

Pat McQuillan makes a strong case for "Humanizing the Comprehensive High School..." He asserts how and why it is not and sets out to say what most needs doing. Along the way, he offers some interesting examples of specific teaching/learning activities and possibilities in suggesting how schools can stimulate students to enact the responsibilities they ought to be giving them. The directions for change he indicates, include "create time so that teachers can do their job, shrink school size, extend the school year, negotiate new conditions of power and responsibility with students..."

Together these essays confirm once again Adam Urbanski's maxim that "real change is real hard." But the collection gives us a chance to examine some illuminating efforts and possibilities along the way. And perhaps it may stimulate further pursuit of that set of questions connected to "What Can and Should Replace the Comprehensive High School -- and How?"