

# **SOME INSIGHTS INTO SCHOOL REFORM**

by

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Since 1985 I have studied various efforts at school reform, most from an ethnographic point of view. In practice, this means I spend extended periods of time working with schools, rather than trying to understand a school through survey research or conducting a short-term case study. (I have, for instance, worked with Manual High in Denver for nearly five years.) The research has also been holistic, in the sense that I seek to understand school life from multiple points of view, assuming teachers, administrators, students, and relevant others all have important insights to offer about their school. In general, my strength is the depth of my research. Moreover, most of the insights I offer are interrelated, which seems appropriate if one views education as a systemic phenomenon and assumes an interrelated series of propositions is most appropriate for addressing a systemic issue such as school reform. Overall, these insights are intended to be generic guides for reform, broadly applicable to schools attempting to alter their routines and structures.

### **Educational reform is political . . . as well as academic.**

Virtually all school reforms are initiated, at least in part, for academic reasons. But reform is also a political phenomenon, and this reality can't be ignored. To enact change, is to exercise power. And exercising power is a political act. While the academic dimensions of reform often take precedence over the political, a lack of attention to the political can undermine the best academic plans and leave a school in a worse condition than before any reforms were even attempted.

### **Conflict will accompany reform . . . and that's not necessarily bad.**

Because reform is political, enacting change will likely lead to some conflict. Well-intended educators may believe the value of a proposed reform is self-evident, but the impact of any reform often reverberates throughout a school with differing effects on different people, many being wholly unintended and unexpected. This can engender conflict. People will defend their self-interests. People will resist change seen as inappropriate. Disputes will arise. Typically, conflict is viewed as something to be avoided, a detriment to change. But since conflict can't be avoided, it should be accepted as a normal part of the change process and should be managed, not ignored or repressed. Indeed, conflict presents opportunities to identify and resolve differences, to clarify direction, to show respect, to build trust, to promote dialogue. If, however, educators continue to try and stifle or ignore conflict, at some point it will surface, most likely to the detriment of the overall reform.

### **Educational reform is about changing beliefs . . . as well as practices.**

A school may focus its reform on teaching styles, curriculum design, and assessment practices, but these are not merely technical changes. These practices embody values and beliefs, and for educational practices to truly change, for reform to

take root and endure, beliefs need to change. If you want teachers to use higher-order assessments, they must believe all students are capable of higher-order thinking. If you want students to embrace a more authentic curriculum, they must be convinced of its value. If administrators are to be educational leaders, they must reconceive their role. Moreover, beliefs will not change if people's experiences don't change. People will cling to tried and true practices as long as the nature of reform allows them to do so. A performance-based curriculum may seek to put students at the center of the curriculum, but teachers may still dominate classroom discourse. New governance committees may be created but faculty or students, having little time for additional work, may view such work more as an inconvenience than an opportunity. As perhaps the quintessential statement on this matter, one social studies teacher noted after the introduction of block scheduling at his school, "Now I can show the whole movie." School reform involves changing beliefs, and beliefs don't change if experiences don't change.

Moreover, when experiences do change, schools need to allow faculty, administrators, and students to process these experiences, to reflect on what these changes mean for them. Lacking systematic reflection, a changed experience may have no lasting impact as its importance and relevance may remain uncovered.

### **Trust is critical . . . and dependent on risk-taking.**

School reform involves risk. People must decide to try something they hadn't done previously (a new teaching strategy, for instance) or perhaps even riskier, let someone else try something they hadn't done previously (e.g., having teachers direct a new school program). Risk may also involve being open and honest in ways that normally might not occur, a teacher frankly sharing her opinion with an administrator, for instance. For such risks to occur, these persons must trust one another.

Yet in many schools trust—among faculty, and between faculty and students and faculty and administrators—is a limited commodity. To promote trust, people need to take risks, and these risks must be undertaken in supportive contexts so people know they can count on one another. Reform dominated by a cadre of administrators and a handful of teachers is unlikely to promote trust, except perhaps among that cadre. A classroom in which the teacher has most of the power and dominates most activities is unlikely to promote much trust. For reform to be successful, people must take risks and this means being given real responsibilities and provided the support necessary to help them realize positive outcomes. It also means encouraging people to be forthright and honest in assessing developments within a school. Such practices can generate trust. Otherwise, schools will have a distorted and incomplete understanding of what's happening with their reform efforts and little of substance will happen.

### **Good leadership is vital to success . . . but it can't reside with one person.**

Despite the publicity accorded Joe Clarke--a Patterson, New Jersey principal who patrolled his school hallways with a bull horn in one hand and a Louisville slugger in the other, waging a one-man war on school chaos--the John Wayne model of school

reform is not effective. Leadership should be shared among a broad base of school personnel. The reasons for doing so are compelling. First, reform typically entails so much work that leadership must be broadly distributed. One person cannot effectively direct everything that needs to happen. Second, sharing leadership distributes commitment to and understanding of whatever reforms are enacted. Two common criticisms that arise in the course of school reform are, "Who chose this direction?" and "Where are we supposed to be going?" A distributed model of leadership should help address both these concerns. Third, reforms often falter when a key administrator leaves a school. Distributing leadership is a way to maintain continuity of reform, as the loss of one person is less likely to undermine that reform since many people understand the reform and are committed to its enactment. Fourth, one source of professional disaffection for U.S. teachers is the amount of time they spend teaching, which is notably more than in many other countries. A shared leadership model allows teachers to assume new responsibilities and to shift some work they do from teaching to areas of leadership. And fifth, locating leadership, and implicitly power, with a small cadre of school personnel is undemocratic and makes this cadre a lightning rod for student, faculty, and parental disaffection.

### **Outside assistance can be helpful . . . but it's not enough.**

Often schools research various reform initiatives to decide the best for them. They can also spend considerable sums on consultants who work with these initiatives. This is fine, but outsiders can only do so much and school budgets can only afford so many consultants. Ultimately, you and your school must direct your reform. Otherwise, nothing substantial will happen. Indeed, schools should consider how to use any funds they may have that are earmarked for reform to build capacity among their personnel, rather than investing solely in outside consultants who may be here today but gone tomorrow (and if they aren't gone tomorrow, they'll certainly not be available every time you need assistance). Rather than only bringing in outside experts, provide faculty and staff with opportunities to educate themselves. They know their school and should be able to adapt a reform program more aptly to the school's circumstances. And again, doing so offers teachers an opportunity to diversify their professional work, allowing them to assume something other than instructional responsibilities.

### **Make teachers lives more humane . . . not just busier.**

In too many cases, teachers committed to reform find their good will and commitment wane as reform becomes an add-on to what they were doing previously. Eventually, too many teachers end up exhausted or they sacrifice their personal lives for the school. Neither choice is satisfying. If administrators expect teachers to embrace and perhaps even help direct change (I'd advise them to do so), they can't expect them to make unreasonable sacrifices. While I have found teachers to be both willing and capable of helping to direct change, too many administrators seem to assume they can

do this on top of everything else they do. They can't, or at least they can't do this and have a life outside of school. Bring teachers into leadership roles and take advantage of their knowledge of and commitment to their school, but do so in a way that respects reality. Many teachers enjoy some diversity in their professional lives. While they may enjoy teaching, working with five classes a day and facing 120 or more students can be overwhelming. Diversifying what teachers do allows them to put some of their effort in other satisfying directions.

### **Students should have more power . . . and more responsibility.**

Just as with teachers, for reform to take root and endure, students need to both understand and be committed to reform. This means students should be involved in directing their education, rather than being passive bystanders. Their voice should be present in new and different contexts. They should have a say in shaping reform and assessing its implementation. There is a striking irony to the student role in most schools. They are the most numerous persons, yet they often have the least formal input into influencing school life. When they are accorded formal power, it is often token and an add-on. Of course, empowering students and bringing them into the change process will require that values change. Everyone involved with schools--students, teachers, and administrators--will need to view students differently. But if students don't embrace reform, it's unlikely to endure.

### **Create public, collaborative forms of assessment . . . not private ones.**

Typically, most assessments in schools are private and individual. Making high-stakes assessments collaborative gives those involved--including students and teachers--a sense of common purpose. You might, for instance, require a final "exhibition of learning" in which students must explain some of their course work, outline their future plans, and defend an essay they have written. Students could work together to prepare for their exhibition or this work can even be done in teams. Furthermore, making these assessments public and inviting parents and community members creates a sense of authenticity and commitment that is often reserved for athletics, theater, and music. Instead, think like a coach or musical director and give students a common challenge and let them perform in front of people who matter. In contrast to standardized exams, such practices can create a sense of accountability that makes sense for all community members--students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

### **And finding time is critical. . . .**

This is the big one. Without time, few of the preceding proposals will be realized, at least not institutionalized. If schools are to be systematic about change, those people involved with change will need time. In an ironic and revealing twist, most efforts at school reform have led to one consistent development: more work for teachers. That won't lead to long-term school improvement. If schools are going to

implement reform that endures, it can't be merely an add-on to what faculty and administrators are already doing.

These professionals need time to plan, time to reflect on their work, time to grow, and time to know how their students learn. They need time to meet individually with students, or at least with smaller-than-class-size groups of students. They need time to collaborate with colleagues and establish a vision for their school. They need to be involved with school governance. These developments lead to lasting change. The issue then becomes: So how do you create time?

If additional funding can be found, time could be made for teachers by extending the school year. The 180-day school year has been an accepted practice for nearly a century and it was adopted to meet the needs of an American society quite different from today's. In an international context, we have one of the shorter school years. But I do not offer this recommendation so schools can do more of the same. Rather, a longer school year could lessen teachers' concern with coverage and make it easier to implement active research, learning outside the classroom, project-based instruction, and work that is collaborative and multidisciplinary. Teachers would have time to work as teams, departments, and as an entire faculty to develop curriculum, establish school-wide standards, and set school policies. This would increase teachers' workload, but it would occur within a more humane context and would include a salary increase (at least in my conception).

A second way to make time for teachers would be to set up work students would do outside the classroom or school, internships or apprenticeships, for example. I am familiar with various secondary schools that have created community service programs in which students worked in community settings for most of one school day. The schools then used this time for other priorities.

Other options will seem more radical, in great part because we as a society do not trust adolescents. Thus, we are preoccupied with keeping them in controlled environments as much as possible. However, to create time, schools could simply lower their graduation requirements. Or they could have teachers teach fewer classes. For instance, students could take the same number of courses but have fewer classes, meeting three rather than five times a week--thereby freeing teachers to develop richer lessons that shift greater responsibility for learning onto students. What other strategy could so directly influence instruction? The present system of inundating teachers with students and responsibilities does little but exhaust some and force others to compromise their ideals.

But to do either, beliefs must shift. People cannot assume, "a teacher not teaching is a teacher not working." A related corollary must also be challenged: "Students only learn when a teacher is present." Altering our views of teaching and learning in this fashion could translate into a more stimulating and satisfying environment for teachers and greater achievement and autonomy for students, a highly desirable development if schools are to help create informed and responsible citizens capable of educating themselves. Yet in too many secondary schools, other people think for students, a

development promoted by the extensive amount of time students spend in teacher-dominated classrooms.

## **Some final thoughts . . . on an endless process**

### **Continually ask yourself, "What is the mechanism for change?"**

This question should regularly be at the forefront of any school reform. If the answer is, "People doing more work than they had previously," or "Someone from outside the school," or "Temporary funding," you may be in trouble. These are common strategies for enacting reform, but in the long-term they are unlikely to lead to real change.

### **Don't ignore the affective side of education.**

Perhaps because the present political climate promotes a view of school reform that seems to assume change can occur most effectively by state-mandated forms of positive and/or negative sanctions, too often schools seem to ignore the affective side of education. But to get the best work out of their students, teachers need to know these students as learners as well as people. Schools should therefore seek to create a respectful, supportive, and personalized learning community, a place where students are known, not where they can get lost when the challenges become too great. This is not to advocate a process-over-content approach to learning, nor a curriculum focused on the affective to the disadvantage of the academic. Quite the contrary, it is to acknowledge that too many secondary schools ignore the fact that one's learning environment has a critical effect on academic growth and that for many students meaningful interaction is a precursor to academic growth.

### **Integration vs. add-on**

When educators encounter an effective practice, they often think about how they can add this practice to their existing school routines. Thus, we end up with programs in career education, gifted and talented learning, and student government--all having been added to the school structure. But I have found reforms that last to be those that are integrated into a school's existing routines. To my experience it has proven more effective for schools to empower students through their normal classes rather than creating a course on leadership that seeks the same end. Likewise, if schools really want students to be part of school governance, build it into the curriculum. Or, if teachers are going to be assessed according to specific guidelines, why not let them develop the rubric by which they will be judged? This will create a form of assessment that reflects their priorities and is understood by the teachers. Why try to foist a whole new form of assessment on faculty? And even if schools want to assess the effects of their reform efforts, why bring in an outside expert, or ask a willing faculty member? Why not build the evaluation into a sociology, or related, course? School personnel need to stop seeing good ideas as discrete entities. Instead, they need to think about how they can be fit into the school's existing structure and practices.