

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many people involved in restructuring have heard skeptics utter phrases such as “I know I’ve been in the business a long time when I see the same ideas coming around for the second and third time,” or “Here we go again,” or “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” The type of on-again, off-again approach to innovation that has characterized American education over the past thirty years has helped give rise to these attitudes. Educators who express them are not without some justification in being wary of committing their precious time and energy to a new program or approach when few have been sustained successfully during their careers.

However, this skepticism also masks the idea that if educators try a particular innovation once, they should either incorporate it into educational practice for all time or abandon it categorically. In reality, an educational innovation may come and go, not necessarily or solely because of its relative effectiveness, but at least in part because of the context into which the innovation is introduced. If it is a good match with the politics, culture, and economics of the school, district, or state, it has a greatly enhanced probability of becoming institutionalized. As the context changes, today’s failure becomes tomorrow’s success, and vice-versa.

This chapter explores the historical context of school restructuring over the past century. It also traces the values and goals that have driven change in public education at various times and explains how these shifting goals have led to periodic efforts to reshape schools. This brief treatment is not meant to serve as a substitute for a careful reading of the history of education generally or of educational reform specifically. Authors such as Tyack (1974), Cremin (1988), Cuban (1984a), and Callahan (1962) have chronicled these events in much greater depth and detail. My goal is to provide some perspective on current efforts to restructure schools, since the restructuring movement seems to lack a historical perspective.

Those engaged in efforts to redesign schooling generally possess little awareness that significant change has occurred at other periods, or that there is much to be learned from previous attempts to solve educational problems. Few of the spokespeople for today's reforms have identified the link restructuring seems to have with the Progressive school of thought in education, for example. And few analyses note how similar the concerns emanating from the business community today are to those voiced by the private sector nearly one hundred years ago.

Similarly, few of those who advocate basing curriculum and instruction on the needs of students acknowledge the link their thinking has with other reformers from previous eras. They do not seem to be aware that many of the changes they promote as original and even radical have already been examined by researchers, have been put into practice on a large scale, and have been found to improve student learning. One of the best examples is the Eight Year Study, which examined the success that students from "progressive" public schools of the 1930s had when they subsequently entered college. It demonstrated very clearly and powerfully the effectiveness of many techniques advocated by today's reformers. Ralph Tyler (1986/1987), the director of the study, describes several of its most significant outcomes:

The Progressive Education Association developed the Eight Year Study in which 30 schools and school systems from Boston to Los Angeles demonstrated the effectiveness of curriculums designed by each school to meet the needs of its own students....

Perhaps [the] most significant [outcome of the study] in terms of current practices in curriculum development was the widespread acceptance of the idea that schools could develop educational programs that would interest a large proportion of their students, help to meet some of the students' needs and, at the same time, provide students with the preparation essential for success in college. Because of that project, most state departments of education and most colleges and universities greatly reduced their specific requirements for the high school curriculum and relied more upon each school's taking responsibility—although recent trends have been in the opposite direction.

A second outcome of the study was the recognition by colleges and universities that they could find among high school graduates who had not met specific subject requirements many who would succeed in college work. They learned that they could select successful candidates for admission on the basis of their ability to read, write, solve quantitative problems, and show evidence of strong interest in further education. This led to the wider use of entrance examinations, such as the SAT, that did not test specific content but appraised general skills....

... [An additional] outcome was the wide acceptance of educational evaluation instead of testing.... The Eight Year Study... demonstrated that

it was possible to appraise the progress of students toward [achievement of course objectives] by using questionnaires, observations, and samples of products as well as tests. (p. 38)

Tyler's work on the Eight Year Study is just one example of the lessons that have been learned regarding educational practice, lessons that appear not to be acknowledged in many conversations about and programs of restructuring. The brief discussion of selected historical events that follows serves only to illustrate this point by suggesting other parallels that might be drawn between previous attempts at fundamental change in education and what is occurring now.

EDUCATIONAL RESTRUCTURING IN THE 1890S

Change in public education is nothing new. However, observing change in education can be difficult, since events unfold from year to year. The process may be likened to a time-lapse sequence of a flower opening: as each frame is recorded, little change is noted; but when the clip is played back, the flower is observed to burst forth into glorious bloom on a moment's notice. In fact, the educational system has been evolving since the arrival of the Pilgrims. What has been difficult to discern are the occasions when education has undergone fundamental change in relatively short periods. For example, during the period from the early 1890s through roughly 1920, changes of virtually unimaginable proportion washed over the system with regularity. These changes shaped the system that exists to the present.

The combined forces of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration put tremendous pressure on education during this period. High school enrollments increased twenty-fold from 1875 to 1900 as the right to finance public education through broad tax support was established (*Stuart and others v. School District No. 1 of Kalamazoo* 1874). The legitimization of public funding enabled schools to develop new programs and serve more students.

And more students there were. The tidal wave of immigration peaked at roughly eight million in the 1890s and continued during the next two decades. This influx created pressure for standardization of an educational system that had truly been community controlled and decentralized. While educators took the lead in designing and implementing the reforms of the era, they were clearly influenced by the values, philosophies, and techniques prevalent in the private sector. In addition, higher education exerted a powerful influence in the direction of standardizing educational practice. It was during this period that grade-level organization, the Carnegie unit, the notion of intelligence and of IQ

tests, the use of standardized achievement tests, the content and structure of the high school curriculum, the junior high school, and the professional superintendent and principal, among other major reforms, were implemented.

The notion that the purpose of an education was to prepare youth for the labor force in addition to attaining the traditional goals of the liberal-arts curriculum also gained respectability and credence. High schools were to be *comprehensive* institutions; they would educate *all* the youth, though in different ways and toward different ends. Previously public education had been viewed primarily as a way to enable students to read the Bible, as a form of socialization necessary in a democratic society, and as a vehicle for the transmission of local community values. A grade school education was generally sufficient to serve these purposes.

It was around this same period that the Progressive movement in American education was born. Although the roots of Progressivism can be traced back at least to Rousseau, it was John Dewey who did more than any other individual to give voice to the thinking of the Progressive movement and bring it into the public eye.

The Progressives believed not only in the involvement of the learner in the construction of knowledge through structured experience, but in the use of public education as a tool for social reform (Sewall 1983). Public education came to be seen as the means by which classes of students who would otherwise have little hope of advancing themselves might improve their lot in life in comparison with their parents.

The last state to pass a compulsory school attendance law, Mississippi, did so in 1918. At the same time, many other states were increasing the minimum "leaving age," thereby increasing the number of students going on to higher grades and the challenges associated with instructing them. Public education was to be the key for new immigrants and other city dwellers to establish the foothold that would allow them to climb the social and economic ladder.

Two forces, the Progressive educators and the business community, while not necessarily in agreement on the general goals of school restructuring, ended up being able to advocate or support many reforms that blended together in practice. Progressives favored reform to humanize education and use it as a tool for social reform and economic opportunity for the less advantaged. The business community supported fundamental change in education designed to prepare young people to enter the labor force with the proper attitudes and habits necessary for factory work. For very different reasons, these two groups, one internal to the educational community and the other external to it, supported a series of reforms that served to rationalize and systematize public

education and strengthen its links to the economic system. Neither necessarily saw the other as an ally; however, they combined to increase the pressure for systemic educational reform at just the time when the system was most vulnerable to change.

It is clear, based on Callahan's (1962) interpretation, that the business community was clearly the more powerful of the two forces. However, it is worth remembering today that strong voices advocating change from both within and outside the educational community had powerful effects, even if their messages were not always the same, in large measure because social, political, economic, demographic, and even technological forces all converged on the educational system more or less simultaneously to create an almost irresistible tide of change in education.

EDUCATIONAL RESTRUCTURING IN THE 1990S

How do the events of the past century and those from earlier in this century help us understand the forces that favor fundamental change in education today? Once again, two distinctly different groups, for very different reasons, are advocating radical transformation of public education. On the one hand, educational reformers such as TheodoreSizer and John Goodlad promote changes that can be viewed as consistent with the Progressive tradition of education. These reformers emphasize active construction of knowledge by students, demonstration of skills through exhibitions rather than tests, allocation of time based on the needs of the learner rather than on the needs of the school schedule, and alteration of the student-teacher relationship to student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach.

A teacher in a school that is a member of Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools describes this change in emphasis:

Since I've moved to this school, my teaching has really changed. I used to feel as if I were the quarterback in the classroom. I carried the ball and made touchdowns with my best lectures. Somewhere along the line, I realized that I was doing all the work. Now I stand off to the side, and the kids do the running. (Wasley 1991, p. 35)

The influence of present-day educational reformers should not be underestimated. They are highly visible within the educational community; their articles appear in journals that practitioners read; and they speak regularly at large educational conferences and conventions. They also have had the ear of many state legislators who have significant power to implement educational reform.

At the same time, a possibly stronger force for change has emerged—the business community. As business has been forced to redesign the

traditional factory model in the face of a rapidly evolving world economy, its needs for workers have changed. It is clear that the American economic system has been remaking itself over the past decade to adapt quickly to its changing place in the international economic system, from Goliath to partner. The United States will likely never again dominate the world economy as it did in the period immediately following World War II. Its new role is still being defined (Reich 1988 and 1990). Business is viewing a well-educated work force as more important than ever before to its success. The public school system continues to be seen, at least for the time being, as a critical partner in the eventual success and profitability of American business.

Another way to compare and contrast restructuring is to examine the high school, which was a focal point for fundamental change at the turn of the century and appears to be in such a position once again. The next section takes a closer look at this process.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL

One clear trend in the restructuring movement is that high schools appear to be quite difficult to change, and at the same time appear to be the level of education more in need of change than any other. At the turn of the twentieth century, the high school adopted the factory model of organization, with its reliance on standardization, efficiency, task specialization, and batch processing, more completely than any other level of education. Ironically, the high school's success in adapting to the last wave of systemic change has made it the level facing the greatest challenge today. The high school also finds itself being the institution where the largest proportion of children fail. A high dropout rate has been acceptable until now for a variety of reasons. However, as will be argued later, it may no longer be acceptable for one of every four or five students to leave school without a diploma. The pressure on high schools to change radically and fundamentally continues to increase.

Why is the high school under such pressure to change? A brief examination of its evolution will help put into perspective its philosophical assumptions and historical role.

The intellectual roots of the American high school can be traced back at least to the 1700s and the Renaissance, and, for some elements, to the ancient Greeks. The study of knowledge organized by time-honored disciplines still is present in high schools in slightly altered form and comprises the intellectual core of the high school. History, science, mathematics, English, and, to a certain extent, foreign lan-

guages (formerly Latin) are still identified as the “core” subjects in nearly every high school in America.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, these were the topics of interest to a landed aristocracy and, more importantly, members of a newly emerging business class. Reese (1995) points out that many public high schools did undergo a transition from the “classic” curriculum (Latin, Greek, philosophy, the Classics) to an adaptation of the “English” curriculum (modern languages, history, geography, science, advanced mathematics, and English literature) and that public high schools emphasized both preparation for work and college (pp. 91-93). However, even this transition created an “academic” core that has been passed down with relatively few changes to the present. What was labeled “preparation for business” in the 1800s passes for preparation for college in today’s high school.

In the 1890s, enrollments increased sharply as schools became the primary means to socialize immigrant children, public taxes were used to fund universal education, and new laws held young people out of the work force. Only then did the role of the secondary school come under examination.

Although high schools had also prepared students for opportunities in the burgeoning mercantile economy that was developing on the Eastern seaboard throughout the 1800s, there was little consistency to the programs offered for preparation in business. The universities, however, did have relatively clear expectations for students. They were, then as now, a powerful influence on the high school program.

Beginning in the 1890s, the colleges launched a series of reforms designed to (1) make high school programs more uniform through the use of common course titles; (2) enforce some form of quality control through the imposition of the Carnegie unit*, which set standards for the amount of credit to be granted based on the amount of “seat time” in a course; (3) admit students on merit and achievement, not just religious background, parental ability to pay, or other extraneous measures, which resulted in the creation of The College Entrance Examination Board (now the College Board) and knowledge-based entrance examinations; and (4) standardize grading procedures through the use of grade point averages and official transcripts. The recommendations of the Committee of Ten, convened in 1892, resulted in a much closer

* The leader in this movement was the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which offered a pension plan (today known as TIAA-CREF) for professors, who had few retirement benefits. High school teachers were not allowed to participate in the program unless their high school agreed to measure its courses in year-length “Carnegie units.”

alignment between high schools and colleges and a standardization of the high school curriculum around an academic “core.”

By 1911, pressures for the high school to change were increasing rapidly. That was the year the committee on the articulation of high school and college submitted its report to the National Education Association. A direct outgrowth of that report was the appointment by the NEA of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, which went on to develop the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education. An excerpt from the commission’s report provides insight into the perceived need for change in public education:

Secondary education should be determined by the needs of the society to be served, the character of the individuals to be educated, and the knowledge of educational theory and practice available. These factors are by no means static. Society is always in process of development; the character of the secondary-school population undergoes modification; and the sciences on which educational theory and practice depend constantly furnish new information.... Failure to make adjustments when the need arises leads to the necessity for extensive reorganization at irregular intervals. The evidence is strong that such a comprehensive reorganization of secondary education is imperative at the present time.

1. *Changes in society*—Within the past few decades changes have taken place in American life profoundly affecting the activities of the individual. As a citizen, he must to a greater extent and in a more direct way cope with problems of community life, State and National Governments, and international relationships. As a worker, he must adjust himself to a more complex economic order. As a relatively independent personality, he has more leisure....

The responsibility of the secondary school is still further increased because many social agencies other than the school afford less stimulus for education than heretofore.... In connection with home and family life have frequently come lessened responsibility on the part of the children; the withdrawal of the father and sometimes the mother from home occupations to the factory or store; and increased urbanization, resulting in less unified family life. Similarly, many important changes have taken place in community life, in the church, in the State, and in other institutions. These changes in American life call for extensive modifications in secondary education....

3. *Changes in educational theory*—The sciences on which educational theory depends have within recent years made significant contributions. In particular, educational psychology emphasizes the following factors:
 - a) *Individual differences in capacities and aptitudes among secondary-school pupils....*

- b) *The reexamination and reinterpretation of subject values and the teaching methods with reference to “general discipline”....*
- c) *Importance of applying knowledge....*
- d) *Continuity in the development of children....*

The foregoing changes in society, in the character of the secondary school population, and in educational theory, together with many other considerations, call for extensive modifications of secondary education. Such modifications have already begun in part. The present need is for the formulation of a comprehensive program of reorganization, and its adoption, with suitable adjustments, in all the secondary schools in the Nation. Hence it is appropriate for a representative body like the National Education Association to outline such a program. This is the task entrusted by that association to the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education 1928)

The commission recommended changes that began moving the high school toward meeting the needs of a much broader range of students. It recommended the inclusion of vocational courses, the provision of guidance for students, and attention to the education of the “whole child” through subjects such as health, ethics, the worthy use of leisure time, and citizenship. The high school had now moved from one central mission, college preparation, to three: college prep, vocational education, and general education.

The proportion of students completing high school increased steadily over the next fifty years, so that by 1953 half of all American youths were graduating. The high school struggled to provide a meaningful education for all of them. This massive increase in graduation was accomplished at least in part by an expansion of the general education track—less challenging, less focused courses that were designed primarily for those not necessarily going on to college nor preparing for a profession.

The Russians changed this in 1957 with the launching of Sputnik. Alarm bells sounded, particularly in Congress. A series of federal programs were legislated to improve the quality of American education, but with particular emphasis on math and science. James Conant, president of Harvard University, undertook a two-year study of the American high school. His report (Conant 1959) became “the most authoritative design for secondary education in the postwar era” (Sewall 1983). The report basically harkened back to the recommendations of turn-of-the-century university presidents, emphasizing traditional academics for nearly all students, minimum requirements in “core” subjects, and use of ability grouping with particular attention to the academically gifted.

These recommendations helped lead to the creation of a new track in high schools—the “Advanced Placement” track, initiated in 1956 and rapidly implemented in the late fifties and early sixties (Powell 1993). Now there was the college-bound student and the “truly college-bound.”

In the sixties issues of equity began to receive greater attention in response to the civil-rights movement and the school-desegregation process. The high school was under pressure to produce more world-class scientists to compete with the Russians; at the same time, it was expected to educate the less privileged to higher levels so that they might participate in the American Dream. The result was the gradual development of the “at-risk” track, which encompassed a broad array of strategies, including special tracks, alternative schools, and programs within high schools. This made five separate tracks, each with its own curriculum.

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1975 led to the creation of the most recent track, special education. Consisting of a bewildering array of acronyms, these programs function within and independently from the high school, sometimes overlapping the at-risk track, often not. Their relationship with the rest of the high school program is problematic at best in most schools, particularly in regard to determining the level of academic achievement special students must attain to earn a diploma. Special education, although often more like a school-within-a-school than another track, can be thought of as the sixth track in the high school.

What emerges is a picture of the high school in the 1990s as an institution that has struggled to adapt during the past hundred years through the sequential introduction of additional tracks to address both equity and excellence goals while accommodating an increasingly diverse student body. Its core, however, is still firmly rooted in intellectual traditions from a time when mass education was not the established practice. This heritage of adaptation creates a constant tension within high schools since some elements of the curriculum are deemed more “legitimate” than others. The tradition of a liberal-arts education as “discipline for the mind” confronts a school population that is not motivated to pursue activities simply as “disciplines” or mental exercises. Thus the debate over the role of a liberal education (Bloom 1987, Hirsch and others 1987) overlooks reality; if students are not and cannot be motivated to participate in this model, it matters little what ultimate virtues the model possesses in theory. If society wants all students to become educated to some relatively high level of intellectual functioning, a classical liberal education may not present the most promising

foundation if it cannot be adapted to reflect the much broader and differentially motivated student population it is now expected to serve.

This is not the same thing as saying there is no place in high schools for the best elements of liberal education; rather, as will be explored throughout the remainder of this book, new models are emerging that consider a variety of intellectual approaches and instructional strategies to be more or less equal and permit students to follow a variety of paths to meet common standards. This flexibility allows the transmission of a wider range of knowledge in a manner that helps more students to achieve higher degrees of success.

One effect of the restructuring movement has been to stimulate discussion of the role and purpose of high schools, particularly their ability to educate nearly all students to some relatively high level of functioning. It seems clear that the high school must be considered the new “common school,” the level of education that all children are expected to attain. This level of common education has risen consistently throughout the history of the country, from a primary education in the 1700s, to an upper-elementary education by the late 1800s, to a junior high school education by the late 1930s. In the postwar era, the expectation that nearly all students would obtain a high school education developed rapidly; this expectation is becoming firmly institutionalized in the postindustrial society of the 1990s. From this perspective, changes that must occur in high schools will need to be more fundamental than those in middle and elementary schools, though those levels face serious challenges as well.

A FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE

It is worth noting that many of the ideas being considered for restructuring in the 1990s were most recently attempted in the late sixties and early seventies. Innovations such as flexible scheduling, team teaching, integrated curriculum, individualized education, schools within schools, and many others were common twenty years ago. Many teachers who are old enough to remember this say, “Here we go again,” when they hear discussion of these ideas.

There is at least one major difference in the way these innovations might affect schools now versus then. In the sixties and seventies, various advocates for social change were attempting to use schools as a vehicle to remake society. Many of the people who entered teaching at this time agreed with the notion that schools could be vehicles for social change. The average age of teachers was much younger then, as school officials engaged in several years of frantic hiring to keep pace with the

arrival of the baby boom in schools. This younger, perhaps more idealistic, teaching staff tended to make more of a connection between education and issues of social justice. They tended to believe that schools could promote the ideals of democratic participation and individual self-worth that the civil-rights movement and the “counterculture” represented. These were times when freedom was emphasized and accountability downplayed.

The business community (and many, perhaps most, parents) never truly supported the type of changes that were occurring in schools. In addition to lack of fundamental support, there was lax accountability to determine if these reforms produced tangible improvement in student learning. By the late seventies, a more general repudiation of the idealism of the sixties helped contribute to a swing of the pendulum in the other direction, and the “back to basics” movement emerged.

The situation in the 1990s is quite different in many respects. It is the business community that is leading the call for basic reforms in education and the educators who, in many cases, are resisting. The roles have reversed. Rather than educators attempting to change school in order to change society, it is society (in the form of business and government) that is attempting to change schools. Teachers are the ones advising caution and urging that the pace of change be more deliberate. The teaching profession is now older, more experienced, and perhaps more cautious or wary (some might say cynical) in responding to calls for fundamental reform than it was two decades ago when the last wave of massive experimentation took place. Many from the current generation not only saw those reforms (and what became of them), but have subsequently spent the better part of their lives in public schools. It is difficult for adults at midcareer to be convinced that all they have done throughout their careers might have been wrong or ineffective.

Parents have once again been left on the sidelines by policy-makers and educators. The result has been opposition to restructuring based on both real and imagined concerns. In essence, parents have not been convinced of the need for change. Parents tend to be dissatisfied with education in the abstract and satisfied with it in the concrete; they generally rank their local schools highly, but do not rank the educational system nearly as highly (Elam, Rose, and Gallup 1994, Elam and Rose 1995).

The emphasis in the call for school restructuring is not primarily a social goal such as enhanced equity; rather, it is economic and societal survival. The emphasis is not on freedom, but on accountability. Restructuring, in this context, represents a reordering of society’s priorities for education. Because many educators are not enthusiastic about this

reordering of priorities and some parents are concerned about change in education generally, educational restructuring is likely to follow a course of fits and starts. However, the forces for change remain as strong as ever in the environment that surrounds schools. Some schools have begun adapting, but the most powerful and sustained calls for change in education will likely come from outside the education profession, at least in the immediate future.

One other important difference between the current era of reform and previous eras is the notable absence of higher education as a driving force. In the 1890s, for example, all the most important reports of the period were authored either by university personnel or by committees on which higher education was well represented. Similarly, in the wave of curriculum development that followed in the wake of Sputnik and the calls for high school reform in particular, higher education was the leading voice. Colleges and universities have been peculiarly silent to date on school restructuring, except to indicate concern that educational reform not result in the lowering of standards. In part this is a reflection of the fact that current reforms are not necessarily focused tightly on the college-bound, but on the total educational environment and on the improvement of the performance of all students.

Although this trend appears to be changing as a number of higher education systems launch efforts to modify admission criteria to accommodate students educated in restructured high schools, colleges and universities are taking these steps to accommodate, not to drive, changes occurring in high schools. This lack of leadership foreshadows tough times ahead for postsecondary education if it becomes the last bastion of the educational system developed at the turn of the century under its influence and guidance.