

Teachers Must

For genuine reform, schools should be restructured. Teachers have hard-won professional wisdom that can no longer be ignored.

When educators talk about reform, but often we only tinker here and there with the system that's currently in place. What we need is a revolution, a radical departure from the way we structure our schools and think about teaching, if we are to attack a problem too serious for mere tinkering. The professional ideals that draw women and men into teaching—intensive and individual work with students, personal intellectual challenge, cooperation with colleagues, and control over one's work, to name a few—are everywhere thwarted.

A series of obstacles—from the isolated, cellular organization of classrooms to the whole top-down, egg-crate structure of the typical public school—impedes effective teaching and learning. Present classroom arrangements force teachers to spend most of their time lecturing and maintaining order. Sometimes—when faced with the problem of holding the attention of excessive numbers of students—they must entertain rather than teach. If a group of experienced educators were given the opportunity to structure a school from scratch, the chances of their reaffirming the present design would be remote.

Limiting Teachers Cramps Learning

The constraints teachers feel take their toll on student learning. Batch-processing of students ignores that individual students learn differently from subject to subject. Some need intensive help from a variety of sources to attain mastery, while others can function almost independently. Other students who could forge ahead may be held

back to the average expectations for their class or grade. Others, who encounter difficulties that might be easily detected and corrected under a more flexible structure, are left back to become tomorrow's dropouts.

Teachers have very few ways to incorporate the wisdom gleaned from classroom experience into solutions to school problems. The top-down command structure of American schools subjects them—regardless of their credentials or classroom success—to regulation by higher authorities. Frequently, teachers must respond to administrative fiat that merely reflect a knee-jerk reaction to the latest crisis. Too often they must follow rules and regulations that run contrary to wisdom that can be acquired only through classroom experience. They are told what and how to teach and what materials to use.

In spite of this, most teachers try to do what experience and good sense tell them is best for students. Thus they practice selective obedience and sometimes outright resistance. Other teachers, who are perhaps less secure, try to implement curriculum or teaching strategies that are handed down to them even though they know that the strategies are fatally flawed.

Evidence of School Failure

The impaired nature of the present structure has become increasingly apparent to the American Federation of Teachers. We know it is not good for teachers or administrators, and it is certainly not good for education. It is difficult for even the most enlightened school administrators to enable teachers to function as full professionals. The evidence is seen in the massive

defections of women and men from the teaching ranks and heard in the criticisms of those who remain. It is evident in the staggering dropout and failure rates among students, particularly among those who are disadvantaged. And it is evident in the low performance—compared with their counterparts in other developed nations—of average and even gifted American students. It is time to develop a more rational system of school governance.

A number of studies over the years have asked teachers to indicate their chief resource for professional advice. Consistently, the largest number choose their teacher colleagues over supervisors or outside specialists. What this shows is that teachers have faith in themselves and in the experience they and their colleagues have gained in the classroom. Yet, because of our top-down, factory-like management system, this experiential resource remains almost entirely untapped.

Learning from Teachers

In *The Schools We Deserve* (1985), Diane Ravitch observes that "educational reform movements have taken teachers for granted and treated them as classroom furniture rather than as thinking, possibly disputatious human beings" (p. 19). This blindness, she charges, is at the root of many of the ill-conceived panaceas of the past.

Fortunately, there are signs that a different attitude is beginning to take hold. Not long ago, after a conference with a group of teachers, New Jersey Governor Tom Kean said, "What I learned today was that I was right. The way to make schools better is to ask

Take Charge

the teachers." School systems like those in Toledo, Ohio, and Dade County, Florida, have worked out agreements with teachers' organizations to give their members a greater voice in various decision-making processes. And a number of high schools around the country, inspired by Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Compromise*, have joined with Brown University in the Coalition of Essential Schools to work out ways to allow teachers to map out their own approaches to learning.

Obviously I am a strong advocate of increased teacher responsibility and authority! I recognize, nevertheless, that simply to say, "Turn the schools over to the teachers," and leave it at that would be irresponsible. Moreover, demographic projections show that half of today's teachers will be gone by the end of the decade. Many will have retired; others will have bailed out and moved into other careers. We have a massive recruitment task ahead of us, so we had better make certain that we can attract the kind of candidates who can handle professional responsibility and authority. The next generation of teachers will have to come from among the most highly qualified of our college graduates. To fulfill our schools' mission, we need a staff superior to any we have had before.

Developing Teaching Professionals

It is essential that teachers have the opportunity to become full professionals, with the same challenges, responsibilities, and rewards as other professionals in our society. In the words of *A Nation Prepared* (1986):

Organizing Schools for Teaching Professionals

A Nation Prepared is an important document because it offers a realistic blueprint for schools. It recognizes that if we are to create a professional environment for learning, we must reorganize schools and enable teachers to function as professionals in all areas of schooling.

Staff Decision Making

- Teachers would decide on the curriculums in their disciplines and arrange appropriate programs for students.
- Teachers would have the opportunity to focus on developing higher-level skills in their students, coaching them in thinking and expression, and providing more individual attention and feedback.
- Teachers would have discretion in spending to ensure adequate materials for students.

Staff Development

- Lead teachers—senior staff members—would coach and advise new teachers and have a voice in hiring and retention.
- A support staff would free teachers from nonprofessional duties.
- Flexible programs would give individuals time for reflection. Collegial relationships would foster communication about professional material and ways to improve teaching.

—By Albert Shanker.

"Professionals are presumed to know what they are doing, and are paid to exercise their judgment." American education needs that knowledge and judgment.

A Nation Prepared recognizes that there is no one way to lead schools. But the new breed of teacher it envisions—a highly skilled, board-certified professional—clearly must have a decisive voice in the areas of his or her expertise. The old top-down management system and the new teacher-professional are incompatible.

At the same time, it is unrealistic to expect that teachers can achieve this status, gain public confidence, and command professional-level salaries without a major overhaul of certification standards. We need a rigorous, national, nongovernment examination, comparable to those in other professions. The test would demonstrate that candidates have mastered their subject areas and have wide

knowledge of the time-tested and most recent developments in pedagogical techniques and theories. Coupled with an extensive, supervised internship and residency, such an examination would convince prospective candidates, as well as the public, that teaching is a serious, challenging profession.

The public interest will be served only when we recognize the folly of trying to turn schools around without significant involvement of teachers. □

References

- Ravitch, Diane. *The Schools We Deserve*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985, 19.
- Report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. New York: The Carnegie Corporation, 1986.

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