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On Restructuring Schools: A Conversation with Mike Cohen

Formerly education program director of the National Governors Association and now with the National Center on Education and the Economy, Michael Cohen explains the work of the National Alliance for Restructuring Education.

Photograph by Mark Regan



You're director of an alliance established just a few months ago to assist in restructuring schools.

Yes. The Alliance is a network of five states—Arkansas, Vermont, New York, Washington, and North Carolina—and seven districts—New York City, Rochester, White Plains, Dade County, Pittsburgh, San Diego, and Edgewood, Texas. The leaders of these states and districts have been figuring out what to do as they go along—there are no blueprints or models to follow. They recognize they are working on the same restructuring agenda and share the same visions and assumptions. So they have decided to come together to help one another and to get additional help in addressing the common issues they face.

What sorts of issues?

At this point, members of the Alliance have identified three big concerns. One has to do with the development of new student performance *assessment* tools—new measures of what students know and are able to do—that are pegged to the higher standards we want students to achieve. We are beginning a major project with the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh to test out the idea of a national examination system.

You have a large grant for that.

That's right, from the MacArthur Foundation. And we're working hand in hand with the LRDC, which has a large grant from the Pew Charitable Trust.

The second issue is *accountability*. In order to have the kind of discretion and flexibility at the building and district level that educators need and

want, there's got to be some kind of accountability for results. I find general agreement about that—but not a lot of agreement on who ought to be held accountable and what the consequences of outstanding or poor performance ought to be . . .

Or even to whom local schools should be accountable.

Right. Those are issues that are causing a lot of conflict in a number of states and districts, both in the Alliance and elsewhere. We plan to get people together to discuss these things and begin to develop a variety of different models of accountability that will have two things in common: they will focus on accountability for results rather than for complying with rules and regulations, and there will be consequences attached to performance. We need to figure out how best to sustain high performance and turn around low performance. We think we can help states and districts design systems that will be workable politically and educationally.

Now, the third broad issue is *managing change*. States and districts that are at the forefront and have been at it for a while have learned that lots of different parts of the system have to be attended to simultaneously. For example, you're limited in how much progress you can make on site-based management unless the teachers are trained in problem analysis and decision making. It doesn't make much sense to have site-based management and train everyone in how to do it, if teachers are not also prepared to teach in different ways. So you need to deal with authority and decision-making responsibility, with preparation and staff development for teachers, with new forms of instruction, with new curriculum, with new assessment tools, new accountability systems, you need to change the culture of the system, and so on. The places we've been working with have discovered how hard it is to tackle all that at once, so they're asking us to help them figure out how to manage the whole change process.

Any ideas at this point?

One of the promising things we've started to do is work with people who've been involved in equally large, equally complicated change efforts in the private sector, in business and industry. For example, when most states and districts have begun pushing decision making down to the building level, they've recognized the need to provide training to people in the schools. But it's only been later on that they've dealt with people in the state education department or the local district central office.

In the private sector they've done it the other way, with what they call top-down training. Once they figured out the direction they wanted to go and the skills that people needed, they started training people from the top first and only later began to train those at lower levels. That meant that by the time the line workers got trained, those above were already prepared to operate in the new environment. That's very different from training the assembly line worker first and saying, "Now, you guys take control of the assembly line, and sometime down the road we'll tell middle management that things have changed."

Our problem in education may be that we've put so much emphasis on leadership at the local school level that we've acted as though other levels were irrelevant.

It's not that leaders really thought the other people weren't needed. But if you've got limited resources for training, and there aren't all that many people who know what the training ought to be anyway, it's only natural to start working with the people in schools first. But then you have to play catch up with the central office people and the state agency people, because their roles have to change, too.

It looks as if your third category has lots of subcategories.

Yes, and they're all interrelated. You can't think about assessment without thinking about accountability, and you can't do that without thinking about curriculum. You have to change the culture *inside* the system and the public's expectation for the system as well.

That's the problem, isn't it? Everything is related to everything else. You've got to do it all at once.

I don't think it's possible to do it all at once, although you clearly need to *think* about it all at once. In general I think I'd start first by defining outcome standards and then invest heavily in professional development; I'd want to get teachers focused on new curriculum, on new ways of teaching. And I'd want to develop new assessment tools. I'd work on these things because I'd want people to understand that we're not trying to change governance, make new arrangements for decision making, or even redesign the role of teachers just because we think it's a good thing to do. What we're about is changing what we teach and how we teach—in order to change what students know and are able to do.

You're saying that site-based decision making, for example, may not have much effect on instruction and curriculum.

It won't necessarily do that unless you do some other things to help it. So I think the place to start is with a focus on curriculum and assessment that emphasizes student outcomes.

But another thing that must be done is to help the professionals in the system, as well as the public, to understand the need for change and the direction of change: to be able to see the big picture. One of the things you see in states and districts where they've been working on assessment, curriculum frameworks, site-based management, and so on is that educators in schools may not see how they're all tied together.

Did you come to that conclusion from your work at the National Governors Association?

Yes. The governors realize that radical changes are needed, but we haven't yet convinced most of the public and many educators of that. It's easier for governors to see it; they're outside the system, so they don't have the same investment in the status quo. They're informed about demographic and economic changes sooner than most, because of the position they're in. So we've got a set of leaders who understand, but lots of other folks—includ-

ing much of the public and many educators—who don't.

I've found lots of different ideas of what restructuring is about. Some people think it's about choice; some think it's site-based management; for some, it's professionalizing teaching. Because of that, I've come to see two things. First, if you don't anchor changes to the student outcomes you want, there's no point in doing them. They are all just tools to bring about the outcomes. But second, if the tools don't achieve their purpose, you need to discard them. If it turns out that site-based management isn't getting us where we need to go, there's no point fixating on site-based management. I'm not personally prepared to throw it out, but . . .

It has to stand or fall on whether it gets results.
Exactly.

That helps explain why you put so much emphasis on assessment. With today's tests, it's hard to know what results we're actually getting.
That became more and more evident over the last several years at NGA, where the governors' report was called *Time for Results*. There's been greater and greater emphasis on performance—and the more weight we give to that, the more we need to be confident that we're measuring what we really want.

At NGA, we looked at how states set goals and how they determine what assessment tools to use, and we realized that few states really did a very good job of it. That, in part, was why the governors wanted the president to work with them on setting national education goals—because it would help them push similar efforts in their states. They knew that most states hadn't adequately defined what they wanted students to know and be able to do.

It wasn't just that we wanted more kids to acquire the basic skills; there're a whole new set of skills, as well as a different way of thinking about knowledge, and about how people apply these in the real world—and they couldn't assess these new expectations. Well, you can't say you're going to hold people accountable for results unless you have good ways to measure those results.

That's a refreshing approach. You said earlier that governors are determined to make educators more accountable. A lot of educators feel that, in some states at least, governors and other state officials shouldn't expect to hold schools accountable because, rather than giving educators responsibility, they've been making decisions about what schools should do.
I wouldn't describe it that way. I don't want to defend every state education reform bill in the early 80's, but I think it's important to keep a couple of things in mind. First, without those centralizing reforms, we would not have had the considerable additional resources that were added to the education system. Second, in a lot of cases, what local districts were being told to do by states was what many of them were already doing and what every one of them should have been doing—like offering more academic courses.

What's more, the educators themselves were not then and still aren't enthusiastic about having states focus on results, at least not if they're to be held accountable for achieving them. By and large, the message from educators has often been, "We don't like your reforms. We do like your money. Send money, but don't judge whether schools get better—or at least don't hold us accountable for it." The politicians don't buy that, and neither does the public.

What about the 90's? Are educators and governors and business people getting any closer?
Yes, I think so. There's a growing consensus that we need to focus more on higher-order skills. There's growing agreement that we need new assessment tools, that we need to provide more discretion and flexibility at the school site level, that we need to invest more in professional development of educators. There's widespread agreement that we need to invest far more in preschool programs. But there is not yet consensus on some other critical issues, including accountability arrangements and choice. I expect we'll also continue to see conflict around resources in education, especially when so many states are facing revenue shortfalls and therefore are slashing budgets.

Yes, that's very scary.
And it puts even more pressure on schools to restructure—without a lot of extra money to do it. If I'm a governor or a legislator, I care about education, but I'm also going to realize that we haven't invested much in preschool, child health, or adult education, and we know that these programs pay off handsomely. So there are lots of areas where it makes sense to invest scarce additional dollars. Over the last decade, we've already invested a significant amount of additional new money in K-12 education. This is going to lead many policymakers, I think, to a view that most new money should be invested in parts of the human resource development system other than K-12, that what we need to do in K-12 is figure out how to make the best use of the dollars we are already spending.

I understand what you're saying, but I find it hard to agree. Go into a school any place in this country, and you won't see a lot of money being wasted. The teachers aren't being paid very well in comparison with other workers, and somebody's got to cover all those classes. Maybe they should be teaching different things or teaching in different ways, but I don't know how we could run schools at a lower cost.
I wouldn't expect it to be done at a lower cost, but I would expect educators to help figure out how to make better use of the money they've already got. One possibility, for example, might be school incentive programs that provide additional money to schools where there are substantial gains in student performance levels.

You mentioned the widespread conviction that we need better as-

sessment tools. How, at this point, do you envision the system that the Alliance will help develop?

We call this the New Standards Project. Our objective is to create a national examination system in which states would voluntarily participate. There are several key features to this. First is to establish a broad consensus on a framework for student achievement *standards*, standards that are pegged to the performance levels of other countries with which we compete. These standards would be much higher than those currently in place in any state or district. And they would reflect thinking skills, problem solving and the application of knowledge to the sorts of situations kids will encounter in real life. And all students would be expected to meet the same high standards.

Now, these standards would be linked with a variety of *assessment tools*—projects, portfolios, performance tests—a whole range of things people in the assessment community have been talking about and beginning to develop. We're working to find the best of these already available, so we can build on what already exists or is under development. And the standards would be embedded in curriculum frameworks that can guide but not dictate classroom instruction. The whole idea here is to have standards that students can study for and teachers can teach to.

We also want to build flexibility into this system for states and districts; they shouldn't each have to use the same test. We will be working to develop a procedure by which results on differing state and local assessment tools can be *calibrated*.

That way, Vermont might use portfolios while Arkansas uses something different, but we'll have the capacity to tell whether the kids in those states are meeting the same standard or not. We believe that such a calibration system is possible, but we know it will be very difficult to develop. At this point we're just beginning to explore it.

The prospect of a national examination system like that raises a lot of questions.

Yes, and some very thorny issues, including especially a whole set of issues related to equity and the impact of the examination system on minority and low-income students. Some predict that the effect of higher standards is that an even larger proportion of disadvantaged students will fail, and the consequences for them will be even more disastrous than they are now.

A lot of educators would make that prediction, yes.

This is always a danger. What we've got to do is figure out how to prevent that from happening. We're beginning to do this now, and there are some important features of our proposal that we think will address this. Most importantly, we are really committed to establishing a common standard for all students, and providing multiple opportunities and a flexible time frame in which to reach the standard. The assessment tasks, particularly projects and portfolios, are not timed, one-shot events. They are things students work on over time, cumulatively.

The important point here is getting kids to the desired performance levels, not the amount of time it takes them to get there. And this is very different from other proposals to establish a national test, and from virtually every standardized testing system currently in place where a test is administered at one point in time and students are labeled with different competency or performance levels. These are ways of sorting students, of giving some more opportunities to learn than others. We're trying to create a system in which all kids are expected to learn at the same high levels, and trying to make the changes in the system so that can really occur.

Beyond this broad commitment, there are some other very concrete steps we can take, both with respect to aspects of the assessment tools themselves and to how they are embedded in the education system.

So it's more than just trying to be sure the tests aren't discriminatory.

It's far more than that. It's making sure that while there is consensus about the core knowledge and skills to be incorporated in the standards, we also provide diversity and choices about the context and content of the specific tasks students perform and the timing of when they undertake certain assessment tasks; it's recognizing a number of diverse bodies of knowledge that students can draw upon, so that varied cultures and perspectives are acknowledged; it's emphasizing the application of knowledge in varied ways, rather than just standard book learning.

But it's not just a matter of getting the testing procedures and questions right. That's not enough. It's also a matter of embedding the examinations in an education system that's capable of high performance. This means investing more, and more effectively, in continuing professional development for teachers, and giving them the tools and the conditions they need to teach effectively. It means giving kids incentives to do well, by linking future opportunities to what they learn, whether it's preparation for college or access to the job market. Right now, with very few exceptions—mainly for those going to selective colleges—for most kids, how well they do in school is of no consequence for what they will do later. No wonder most kids just skate by! We also have to make sure that the kinds of student performance levels we're aiming for are widely known to all students and their parents. That way they'll know clearly what's expected and can work to achieve it.

One of the major reports calling for this kind of system says students will be expected to reach the standard by age 16. How could schools possibly get *all* kids to a very high standard of performance by 16—or any other age? I doubt that very many practicing educators think that is a realistic goal.

You're right, most educators don't think that way. There are a number of different issues to sort out here. One part, unfortunately, is that many educators don't have uniformly high ex-

pectations for all kids, and they organize instruction from the minute the student walks into kindergarten in a way that guarantees that many kids won't reach that standard by age 16—or age 26. Everything we know about ability grouping and tracking and other ways of labeling and sorting students tells us that we virtually guarantee that some students will never reach a high standard.

But another part has to do with how you would phase in a new and much higher performance standard. You can't just wave a magic wand and say, "Here are the new standards; everybody meet them!" It will take a while for the whole system to be prepared for this, and there's the danger that many students, especially from families and whole communities that are really chaotic, will be terribly disadvantaged in this situation. I'm not really sure yet how to handle this. We'll have to keep working at it.

I want to point out that decisions on major policy issues such as these will be made not by those of us at the National Center or LRDC, but by the states and districts that join with us.

Let me ask about your strategy of working with leading states and districts in the Alliance. We've known for a long time that centers of excellence can exist side-by-side with ordinary schools, and they don't necessarily influence one another.
Right.

But your project seems to be aimed at improving American education by working with systems that are already good and helping them get better. How will that affect all those other schools?
I think it's important to distinguish between model schools on the one hand and districts or states on the other. We're deliberately focused at the district and state level.

How does that make a difference?
Remember, you asked about restructuring schools, but we want to restructure the *education system*. I've been involved in helping any number of states develop small-scale demonstration programs around restructuring. When NGA did a survey in 1989, they reported two-thirds of the states had some kind of program in which a small number of schools were given a little bit of money, a little bit of technical assistance, and a lot of flexibility in order to restructure themselves. Well, when we know, as you said, that models of excellence seldom have much effect on the other 90 percent of schools, we have to ask what such programs are expected to accomplish.

The trick for states and for districts is to make a set of strategic moves and comprehensive policy changes that affect *all* schools. That's why making clear the need for change and developing accountability systems that provide the incentives for change are critical. That's why investing broadly in capacity building and staff development are critical. It's why having the mix of assessment tools, curriculum frameworks and teacher preparation programs—all of which would be systemwide—is critical.

But we do recognize we've got an obligation to go beyond the 12 current members of the Alliance. We're already talking about how we can begin to expand membership in the Alliance. We don't think we're responsible for changing the whole nation's education system, but we are responsible for helping—and we intend to do our part.

In the meantime, what would you say to teachers and principals at the building level who aren't currently involved in the Alliance—or any other restructuring effort?
It's really important to find some way of getting involved, though starting to restructure the education system is not something you can easily do in your school, without a lot of outside support.

I think in every district, and certainly in every state, there are people who are looking at these issues, or at least pieces of them. The first thing I would do is link up with them and begin to build a climate that supports very radical experimentation and change. Push for this to be on the agenda of the school board and the superintendent, even if it is to start by providing additional flexibility to a small number of "pilot" schools. And encourage the union leadership to make this their agenda as well—their support can be critical.

I'd spent a lot of time learning about what other places around the country are doing and seeing what could be tried in my own school or classroom. While there are a lot of state and district policies and regulations that hold things in place, there is also a lot of traditional thinking that prevents change. We've found that teachers and principals often believe that regulations prevent them from doing things differently, when in fact that isn't always the case. So I'd push against the limits of the system and not assume obstacles that might not be there.

Finally, I'd say that for most educators, all this talk about restructuring and change can be frustrating, especially when it comes from some "expert" in Washington like me! And it's easy to see it as just another fad that will pass, especially when budgets are being cut, programs eliminated. But something has got to give, because hardly anyone really believes that the system is working well for either the students or the professionals. And tough as it is, the teachers and other educators I know who are in the middle of these restructuring efforts are as committed and as professionally alive as anyone I've known.□

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