No Pain, No Gain

Challenging long-held assumptions, negotiating compromises, being decisive about what's truly important—these and other exacting processes are the seeds out of which can grow fundamental, lasting improvement of our schools.

Photograph by Dierdre Griesinger



The business of rethinking and redesigning schools is exacting work, no doubt about it, but when we consider the rewards for our students and our society, there's no question that it's worth all the effort.

In a school, everything important touches everything else of importance. Change one consequential aspect of that school and all others will be affected. Failure to take account of the synergistic character of a school either delivers its faculty into the frustration of institutional paralysis or smothers the change which had been introduced, however sensible and obviously important it might have been.

This natural synergy becomes virtually inescapable in an era when most school budgets are very tight. Today, adding something means dropping something, emphasizing one program means deemphasizing another. Reform-by-addition, a tactic possible in earlier decades, is no longer an option. We are stuck with a school reform game in which any change affects all, where everyone must change if anything is to change.

Simply, significant school change requires attending to all the consequential parts of a school at once: reexamining assumptions, renegotiating compromises, and being decisive with priorities. Such is painful stuff.

To pretend that serious restructuring can be done without honest confrontation is a cruel illusion.

Kids Differ

Avoiding pain means avoiding reform. Even commonsense reforms provoke difficult choices. For example, a student not known is a student ill-taught. Kids differ—no two students learn in precisely the same ways or fail to learn for the same reasons. Accordingly, to serve them well, a teacher needs to know each youngster's mind and heart, at least well enough to decide intelligently on how to shape not only appropriate instruction but the ways to reach his or her interest, commitment, and motivation.

How many students can I, as a high school teacher, get to know that well and at once? Surely not 120 or 145 or 175—familiar loads in many typical middle and high schools. With such numbers today, I must process them in groups, and I know pretty well only a particular minority of them. Would I like to teach but 80 or 70 or 60? Indeed I would, for my benefit and even more for the students' benefit. The devastating costs of the anonymity of kids in secondary schools have been clearly documented.

How to achieve such loads within existing budgets? Only by a combination of team teaching, a sharply focused curriculum, and simplification of the administrative system. Any one of these remedies alone will barely touch the problem; all three are usually necessary.

Is such possible? Certainly. There are schools which have made the shift. Was it easy for them? No. Everyone had to change. There was pain. The kids, however, gained. Eventually, so did the teachers, exchanging their pain for exhilaration.

Intensity

Another example: humans of all ages learn best when they are engaged, when the object of their study attracts and holds their attention and commitment. Most of us are more attracted by questions than by answers, by challenges to our ingenuity than by matters to which we are merely exposed. Effective schools work hard to engage students, to make them focus on questions, to expect them to do the work necessary to answer these questions.

Today, most of the teachers, rather than the students, "do the work." We present material and expect merely that the students will display back to us that to which they had been exposed. Not surprisingly, the kids forget much of what they learned in a matter of months. They were not engaged. They did not have to invent on their own. They saw little meaning to their work.

So, we decide, we must change the curriculum from display-of-content to questions-that-ultimately-provoke-content. Press the kids to do the work, to solve the problems presented. The cost? It takes longer to provoke kids to learn for themselves than it does to deliver content to them. The differences among the students become glaringly manifest when each is made to perform. A teacher cannot, thus, easily plan to "finish Mao Tse-tung by Friday"; the kids don't all master the matter at precisely the same rate. Further, many of the existing tests used to hold us all accountable reward mere display of recently presented knowledge. Few emphasize autonomous learning or serious habits of thinking or thoroughness.

What to do? Narrow the curriculum. Raise the expectations for each student. Proceed largely at the paces of the students rather than wholly by an externally imposed calendar—this step absolutely requires that we know each student well. Devise tests that reward serious, deep, and original work. All must be done simultaneously. Pain results: we have to teach differently; we have to rethink testing, the shape of the curriculum, the schedule; we have to demand more of our students. But so does greater student effectiveness result, as some of the schools that have forthrightly tackled this matter are finding.

Simplify

A further example: a typical high school student's day is marked by rapid changes of subject—first period, math; second period, French; third period, English; and so forth. Usually each of these subjects has been planned by its teacher without any relation to any other subject. Each department has its own standards and style, its own internally logical discipline, which is, however well conceived, in practice unconnected with any other discipline. The result for the kids is intellectual chaos, rushes of ideas and facts and expected skills changing every 47 minutes. Any fair-minded adult who takes the time to shadow a youngster during a day or two of school is powerfully reminded of that fact and struck by the meaninglessness of the whole, the sum total of all those classes.

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What to do? We must think first of intellectual coherence for the students. What are the most important matters with which they should engage? How can these be put forward provocatively to engage their minds and attention? How do the disciplines relate to one another, reinforce one another, sequence themselves?

Grappling with such fundamental scholarly questions pains us. What is my subject anyhow? I have to be clear on that before I can relate it to other subjects—and I may not be. If it is the matters of general education that are ultimately most important for our kids, how does my subject fit in? Maybe it does not at all, or to a lesser degree than at present. What then?

Can schools tangle with these issues? Yes, albeit painfully. Clarity and compromise are essential. Seeing general education as a more important ultimate goal for kids than education in one's own specialty is new for most of us teachers. Such tests us and hurts.

A Diploma with Integrity

A final example: the diploma should mean more than merely attesting that a 17-year-old has shown up at school and gotten at least marginal grades. A diploma should be earned. Kids should display their cumulative grasp of the matters of the high school curriculum, should actively exhibit their powers, should gain their high school diplomas in the same way they gain respect in other parts of their lives, as student athletes and actors, as employees, as musicians. That is, they must ultimately meet a well-understood standard of performance.

What to do? Be clear on just what a student should have to show a faculty in order to receive a diploma. In essence, that means exit tests, with school being nothing more or less than teaching to the tests. Needless to say, this puts a special burden on the richness and quality and fairness and flexibility and rigor of those ultimate tests.

Such instruments—"leaving" tests, what the Coalition of Essential Schools calls *exhibitions*—are increasingly emerging both in policy discussions and in actual schools. Good tests provoke a wide range of fundamental issues. Just what do we most value in an education, and how is this to be most fairly expressed? How can it be best exhibited by students? How can these students be best prepared for these exhibitions? The pain comes with the recognition that the old ways of assigning quality—units of seat time, scores on simple (and thus usually trivial) tests, accretions of courses always construed as English-mathematics-science-social studies, and the rest—simply do not help very much at all.

Photograph by Jana Engelman



For teachers to know their students well enough to fashion instruction to meet their individual needs and interests is next to impossible under current conditions, but there are ways—albeit not painless ones—to decrease the high student loads teachers face and, with them, the damaging feelings of anonymity many students endure.

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Being clear on the target of a secondary education and on just how a student can best and most fairly exhibit his or her reaching of it tends to force central issues of educational policy long masked by the traditions of the routine inherited from the 1890s, the time-driven, segregated-course school years. It means that we have to think anew about old matters. Painful.

Biting Bullets

American education is stuck today, stuck on well-intentioned, deeply traditional, but flawed ideas about learning and teaching. Honestly—commonsensically—challenging these ideas leads us on to new and challenging ground. Replacing them with better ideas and then in due course with better practices requires seeing schools whole and accepting their powerful synergies. And to do so with no additional dollars sharpens the task.

Jake Bronk, one of the great high school athletic trainers, hung over his examining bench a sign that read, "If it hurts, it's good." That dictum is not always true, either in physiology or in school-keeping, but it is apt today. To get the needed gains for kids, we adults must expect and endure the pain that comes with ambitious rethinking and redesign of schools. To pretend that serious restructuring can be done without honest confrontation is a cruel illusion. No pain, no gain.□

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