

# The "Drop-Out Problem" in Educational Innovation

**Harold G. Shane**

ONE of education's unpublicized difficulties is a drop-out problem—a tendency for good ideas and innovations to drop out of sight before they have made a lasting difference in practice. In other words, while a number of good proposals for change and innovation have appeared in the past 20 years, they simply have not resulted in the kinds of major educational reformation that contemporary revolutionary social change demands.

To make matters worse, good ideas sometimes have been trivialized, diluted, or corrupted even while they were in the process of being adopted. For instance, "team teaching," in some school districts, has become a mask for 1930-type departmentalization. Or, to use another example, the idea of behavioral objectives has, in actual practice, sometimes deteriorated into a thinly disguised version of the minimum essentials movement that was in fashion two generations ago. When innovation is debased in this way it is placed in double jeopardy. First, nothing is *really* changed. Second, schools and their patrons *think* they have made progress when they've merely institutionalized the status quo under a new label.

Why is it that so many organizational and curriculum innovations are resisted?

Why is resistance as strong as or stronger than it was a decade ago? Why do exemplary programs flourish briefly, at least as described in our educational journals, then quietly become dropouts? Some thoughtful speculation on these questions seems very much in order.

## Sources of Resistance

For purposes of discussion, the reasons underlying the drop-out problem can be divided into two categories at the present time: (a) external sources—those that are associated with the community environment of the school, and (b) internal sources that must be attacked within the school itself.

### The Community Environment

At least six factors in the environment have worked against innovation in recent years:

1. A heretofore largely unsuspected *lack of public support* for educators' goals, their stress on social reform, their minority education programs, and so on.
2. Once a grant has played out, a *lack of public or institutional commitment* to follow

up on curriculum projects originally funded by foundations or by federal agencies.

3. During a period of continuing inflation, there is a conspicuous *absence of enthusiasm for school tax increases* to support innovations, regardless of the merit of the changes to which higher taxes are a prerequisite.

4. Since campus confrontations became commonplace in the mid-1960's, there has been *resentment on the part of the "8-to-5" blue collar worker* toward what he labels "... a generation of freeloaders who have chosen ... to riot ... rather than pursue the purely educational goals he never had an opportunity to achieve."<sup>1</sup>

5. As a carry-over from the 1950's, a *mistrust of contemporary educational methods*. Bestor, Rickover, *et al.* have not been entirely forgotten.

6. A growing *social and political conservatism* which the futurist, Herman Kahn, recently called "the squaring of America"; a *counter-counter-culture* movement. Conservatism, by definition, is status quo rather than change oriented.

It gives one pause to realize that the so-called "silent majority of middle America" in rejecting Lyndon B. Johnson also gave us Richard M. Nixon in 1968 and overwhelmingly reaffirmed him as their choice in 1972! As we contemplate the high mortality rate for educational innovation, perhaps we also need to reexamine emergent public attitudes and more accurately determine whether some of our ideas may not have failed because of a backlash against upper-middle class concepts of "good" curriculum reforms. If so, it should help to explain how the innovative curriculum reform forces of the 1950's that began to end educational lag in the early 1960's slowed to a crawl in the past four or five years because of the negative community environment factors previously identified.

### **The Internal Environment of the School**

What does conjecture suggest about in-school forces that retard change? Several impediments come to mind:

<sup>1</sup> Harry Evans. "To Drop Out, Or Not To." *Intellectual Digest* 3: 20; September 1972.

1. *Innovations sometimes create insecurity*. The teacher who has long been recognized for his classroom craftsmanship quickly becomes threatened by new role demands. The task of preparing or using new materials to replace his entrenched ones is alarming.

2. *New programs frequently increase teacher load*—at least temporarily. Longer hours of planning and of putting theory into practice turn many teachers off, especially when a grant supporting an innovation provides little or nothing for additional help, supplies, and so forth.

3. *Lack of sustained top-level leadership*. Funded projects in particular may be run by imported personnel or first-class second-raters who happen to be available in the local faculty. A particularly sad development here is the loss of a leader in mid-innovation because an irresistible job offer comes along.

4. Every school of any size has *disgruntled (and sometimes disturbed!) personnel*. It is not unusual for such persons to become the center of a cluster of "resisting teachers"—especially when they are not part of an innovative program.

5. Bruised by the *dissent that may have surrounded past ventures* initiated by local change agents, some teachers tend to be reluctant to participate in novel programs.

6. *The impact of future shock*—the arrival of tomorrow while many teachers were adjusting to yesterday—has unsettled many teachers. Old values have been torn apart, but new transcendent goals have not yet fully taken form. Lacking "value-direction" it is tempting to reject all significant change, to say that all the newness is in the oldness.

### **What Does the Future Hold?**

*No one can certify the future*. The best we can do is to consider alternatives and try to make wise choices among them. If the preceding speculations have any validity, they have some important implications for planning change; for designing tomorrow more rapidly and more successfully than we designed the present.

Look back at the dozen impediments that are listed here. Note that they draw their annoying power of interference predominantly from inept human relations and from faulty communication. Perhaps we

have talked about community involvement and settled for tokenism. Perhaps we have tried to increase the *voltage* of education through innovation without recognizing the even greater need to distribute educational *energy* through greater genuine participation and through communicating with greater precision.

On the one hand, as I look back over my typescript, I find the task of reading what I have said about resistance to innovation a distasteful one. It is more pleasant to project one's dreams rather than to evaluate realities. But we *do* need to recast our tactics and our strategies to make educational changes occur more quickly and to give them greater permanence and continuity of influence when they prove beneficial. The problem of unimplemented ideas is as virulent as pneumonia and, with such a diagnosis, it would be dishonest and foolish to prescribe pedagogical aspirin instead of penicillin!

Also let us be humble and recognize that perhaps we have sometimes been too arbitrary or too hasty in deciding what is "good" for the majority of the school's clients and patrons who constitute an interwoven pattern

of ethnic-minority groups in which every American has membership and loyalties that parallel his loyalties as a citizen.

On the other hand, as I look ahead to the articles that follow, I am greatly encouraged. Here one finds refreshing and recent evidence of our growing professional maturity, insights, and humaneness. This is accompanied by an awareness of the need for, and belief in, innovation despite a slowdown in recent years. Most important, I sense—both in this issue and in the total educational scene—a growing perception of the meaning of *real* involvement, and of increased sensitivity to interpersonal relations and better communication.

Perhaps at last we are on the threshold of the major and enduring reformations that schooling and other forms of education need. Let us hope so, for the threats to our poorly maintained planet leave us precious little time.

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## **Educational Leadership Announces Themes for 1973-74**

Manuscripts relevant to the proposed themes for the 1973-74 issues of *Educational Leadership* are now being solicited from the readers by the editor.

Planning for the upcoming publication year of the journal will be completed by the ASCD Publications Committee at meetings during the 1973 Annual Conference in Minneapolis, March 17-21. Tentative topics, and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts for examination, are the following:

*October:* "Taboos in Education: New Realities" (June 1, 1973)

*November:* "Women and Education" (June 1)

*December:* "Middle School in the Making?" (July 1)

*January:* "Competency-Based Education: For Whom?" (August 1)

*February:* "Technology: Use and Abuse?" (September 1)

*March:* "Helping Professionals To Grow" (October 1)

*April:* "Curriculum for Economic & Ethnic Diversity" (November 1)

*May:* "Rights, Responsibilities, and Curriculum" (December 1)

Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1400 words (about five pages), typed double-spaced. General style should conform to that of the journal. Photographs and other illustrative materials are requested.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope for return of unused manuscripts. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials should be addressed to: Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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