

# A Choice: Bureaucracy or Curricular Renaissance?

THOMAS A. SHAHEEN\*

"DAMN the bureaucracy." "The bureaucracy must go!"—these are the cries of many who see in the bureaucracy an agency that is inimical to the achievement of school and professional goals.

Yet, as these desires are voiced to commit the bureaucracy to oblivion, we must recognize what the price, what the concurrent obligations of the commitment are for us.

Hardly a voice is raised to support the bureaucracy unless it comes from the bureaucrats themselves, voices self-serving, interested in the power guaranteed through pyramidal, hierarchical control. Such speakers rationalize that the goals of education are achieved through the stability and efficiency of an authoritarian line of power "chiefs."

## Stability at a Cost

Do we really want the bureaucracy to go? The bureaucracy brings a stability to many a school system that may be needed by some in times when our institutions are under attack. When conflicting demands by multiple publics frighten staff and patrons, an

understandable response may be to strengthen the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy has an efficiency, an atmosphere of order, a knowledge of "who's boss," a security blanket—qualities wanted by many, some who openly "damn the bureaucracy."

There are certain advantages when the leader is competent—and/or *seen* as competent by the staff. Similarly, when the staff itself is not competent and not responsibly creative, there are advantages in bureaucracy. If there are precise measures of success for the system, effective technology, known and available resources for reaching objectives, then a bureaucratic form of organization should not be deplored. A productive bureaucracy, however, is only possible when the pace of change is slow, when individual differences in staff and patrons do not necessitate differences in settings, resources, and behavior. When there is a need for all to move in concert, then the bureaucracy can be mission-effective.

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Within the bureaucratic palace, the manager dispenses rewards and punishments, secure that from his vantage point he is able to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, the facilitating from the obstructing. He will patronize those who are like him, condemn those who are not. The telephone, the computer, and the instant copy machine can guarantee that the manager can impersonally administer the system, walled off from real attempts by those in the field to share in the decisions of the schools.

To those, few or many, who prefer the role of subordinate, there is security in the authority of another. The bureaucrat serves a purpose. The bureaucracy may, indeed, be welcomed by those who have a job to do and who want no confusion of authority in getting it done.

Under the bureaucratic system there are conditions that have the favor and approval of many: It is orderly, cautious, less anxiety-producing, controlling, and controllable. In its ability to reward some and to withhold favors, status, and esteem from others, it can assure the perpetuation of the system. The bureaucracy carries with it the opportunities for recognition, for specialization, for promotion, for salary levels geared to the successive steps on the hierarchical ladder. For many it is only through a leap over these bureaucratic hurdles that rewards of stature, rank, and money are possible.

A true bureaucratic system seeks to promote impartially from the ranks, making education a more promising profession for those who aspire to the greater rewards of supervisory and administrative roles. Both the staff members promoted and the bureaucracy benefit from this arrangement. The appointments from within the staff aid and strengthen the perpetuation of the status quo and the entrenchment of existing programs. The bureaucracy applauds these promotional policies which result in structural resistance to new ideas and to innovative practices.

The bureaucratic ritualistic distinctions of responsibility, power, authority, leadership, and followership will restrain staff. The assignment and the acceptance of responsibility without authority and without control of

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resources will disperse responsibility and, in subtle ways, give an appearance of undivided loyalty to the manager. He will protect the interests of his followers as long as they take his orders. Yet, he will need to be ready to sacrifice the individual follower to strengthen the organization.

In summary, for some staff members—because of their perceptions of the needs of the system and their own personal needs, the bureaucracy has genius.

Yet, there are others who see the bureaucracy as inappropriate—as incongruous—as disruptive of professional behavior and of the true education of students.

### **Needed: A Curricular Rebirth**

The press of constant societal changes and of the quickening complexity of technology renders the professional staff incapable of success within bureaucratic restraints. The bureaucracy must discredit or envelop in its own survival goals the most creative and inventive, the most compassionate and enlightened students, teachers, and administrators. These are the people who understand that there are problems to be solved for which there are no bureaucratic stock answers: to educate *all* children, to meet the increasing maturity of staff members who seek autonomy and a sense of accomplishment; to educate for a post-industrial society in which the challenges are of the mind and of the will.

There must be a curricular renaissance. This demands that *managers* become *leaders* to facilitate problem-solving activities—leaders who encourage differences of opinion and of independence of action, who nurture responsible creativity. These leaders will leave the palace and the palace guards behind, becoming personally involved in the field. They will seek out the bold and enterpris-

ing—those with drive and initiative, the enlightened and responsible questioners—and will provide the power of freedom so that they may be stretched to their full stature as educators.

There are obvious risks and difficulties in this approach to leadership and to the system. It is demanding of both. It is also demanding of patrons. There are seldom pat answers, agreed-upon solutions. Decision making is complex, untidy, and time-consuming. Power struggles for leadership emerge as competent individuals at different times assume positions of responsibility.

Yet, those who prefer and advocate this type of leader find compensation for these greater difficulties and complexities: the utilization of their talents, the opportunities for creative thinking, the feelings of professional satisfaction and personal worth.

Why not needed curricular reform under a bureaucracy? Renaissance means rebirth: bureaucracy inevitably means standardized problems and conforming solutions.

The chances for reform are less and less the larger the system, the more complex the bureaucracy. The top leader is often overwhelmed by demands continually to redefine the chains of command and the procedures and regulations for working in a system that today is diverse, heterogeneous, and broadly specialized.

This article began with raising the validity of the question of whether the bureaucracy must go. Together we have looked at what some claim to be its strengths, and at what others insist are its weaknesses.

To walk this ideological tightrope with you has not been easy because the answer I bring to my own question has the clarity of the view of bureaucracies at very close range.

I have seen very competent, well-intentioned staff members and many of my colleagues trapped and overwhelmed by the bureaucracy. I have seen the stifling impact of bureaucracy on curriculum and instruction—local, state, and federally-mandated courses of studies, inflexible time schedules, textbooks selected by unrepresentative committees for a whole divergent community of students and teachers.

I have seen the exhaustingly difficult problems that teachers face in seeking to break the requisition lockstep, in expending countless hours in justifying minor purchases. I have seen their heartache in seeking deviously ways to help children in a system where “to do the right thing” often brings administrative displeasure.

I have seen how the bureaucracy makes bureaucrats, how starry-eyed educators move from the classroom to the bureaucracy, and after years of ineffective head-banging say as did an assistant superintendent, “I finally learned after three years that you cannot afford to have a creative idea if you want to survive in the central office.”

More important, my assessment of the value of the bureaucracy is clear because I have seen how the bureaucracy (there are some exceptions) dishonors the human spirit, how it fails to recognize the unique talents of people, how it does not understand the wonderful results that occur when a team of creative, cooperative staff members replaces the team of boss-controlled, top-directed, competitive group members.

## For the Unpredictable Tomorrows

How can the commitment of the bureaucracy to an administrative yesteryear be speeded? How can the built-in institutional and bureaucratic elements of despair, defeat, and disrespect be removed?

The bureaucracy was a system well suited to yesteryear's industrial society. Rapid changes; a world filled with unpredictable tomorrows; the desire for broader distribution of power; the integration of the conflicting needs of individuals, management, and the institution will shake the bureaucratic foundations. The bureaucracy collides directly with the psychological needs of the human personality and is doomed to inevitable demise.

Some staff members can continue to seek ways to perform their work oblivious to or not caring for the bureaucratic mandates from above. The teacher organizations can continue to apply their pressures and sanctions by nibbling away at the bureaucratic

controls. Some, regrettably, substitute a different bureaucracy for the one that has been weakened.

These are merely small steps, slow steps, when giant ones are needed.

The bureaucracy will find it difficult to survive in an atmosphere which establishes goals based on psychologically sound and research-proven criteria, in a school setting which determines and carefully evaluates measures of the education of its students and which honestly and completely presents to its citizens the degree of the success or failure of the educational programs.

The bureaucracy will totter, and in time crumble, in a school district committed to true participation of its citizens in decision-making which affects the education of students. Citizens, no longer content with scullery-maid roles in the schools, will assume greater responsibility for thorough information, will become partners in the improvement of the schools.

The bureaucracy will be weakened

rapidly if the move toward strengthening the role of citizens is followed by a decision to decentralize the unitary control into smaller units throughout the community, with a step to disperse central office personnel throughout the newly-formed decentralized units. Decentralization in and of itself is not a solution! Decentralization, to be effective, must grant the freedom of power and the control to each over resources and authority.

The bureaucracy will lose its stifling grip if the staff is encouraged and supported, as it shares in decision-making, is encouraged to innovate, and has its ideas honored and respected. The bureaucracy cannot long endure the challenge of others to the status quo, or to the close scrutiny of citizens and staff to its workings.

There is no doubt of my answer to my own question. Yes, if the education of today and tomorrow is to serve well the students, the citizens, the staff; and yes, even yesterday's bureaucrat, the bureaucracy must not only be "damned," it must go! □

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