

## Toward a Redefinition of American Education

Mario D. Fantini

Photos: (left to right): The Library of Congress; staff; staff.

*This noted educator holds that: "A comprehensive educational system is required to replace the comprehensive school system which has been created and which is rooted to the needs of the past. We need a structure capable of coping with the future. Thinking about an educational rather than school system will necessitate not only a redefinition in function and delivery, but a realignment of the basic parties at interest. . . ."*

American education is proceeding through one of its most important historical periods. As we close in on the next century, the forces that have transformed our society from a stable agrarian culture to an industrial one have also started us on the road to a redefinition of the form and function of our public schools.

Since their inception during the colonial period, public schools have attempted to respond

to the needs and demands of the community that they serve. Thus, at the time of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, schools were instituted to provide a more responsive way of teaching the next generation to read so that they would possess the basic skills necessary for reading the Bible, thereby thwarting that "Olde Deluder Satan" who was contaminating the hearts and minds of the young. With the influx of immigrants to this country in the late nineteenth century, it became necessary for schools to expand their curricula to provide basic literacy and civic orientation to the new would-be citizens. Later, as the manpower necessities of society changed, the schools responded by establishing vocational education. As we became increasingly automotive, the schools responded with driver education. When the Russians launched the first sputnik, the focus of America's response was once again on the schools, insisting this time on more contemporary approaches to science and mathematics. When society declared war on poverty, the schools became

a front line. As our national leaders fell victim to ethical erosion, the schools were asked to emphasize moral development. And so, the interface between the needs and concerns of society and the schools continues. The schools remain the one institution, strategically placed, which has the capacity to influence future generations.

However, the requirements of a postindustrial, twenty-first century America are of such a qualitatively different order that the structure of public schools that has evolved thus far can no longer respond adequately, necessitating a redefinition in function and form.

In brief, as society has changed, so have the needs of its people. As in the past, we are all witnessing the profound social revolution surrounding us—international interaction, interdependence, conservation and conversion of sources of energy, global population explosions, speed-based transportation and communication systems, shifts in life styles and tastes, consumer awareness, scientific and technological advances, cultural pluralism, human rights, and so on. These revolutions have placed enormous continuing stress on the schools. In turn, these dynamics have affected the aspirations of the people who are trying to adapt to these profound alterations in their lives. Invariably, and as they often have in the past, the people as consumers and their elected officials as policy makers look to the schools for assistance. Only now, it seems the schools cannot keep pace. Why? What sort of societal necessities and demands are converging on the schools? Why are schools now not able to respond as they had in the past? Will the schools somehow be able to meet the new challenges, or will they shrivel and become a mere skeleton of what we now have? These are the kinds of issues to which we must turn our attention.

We have spent the past century developing a school system that has steadily moved toward reaching everyone. In 1900, the public schools graduated less than 10 percent of the population; while by 1970, the figure had reached closer to 70 to 75 percent.

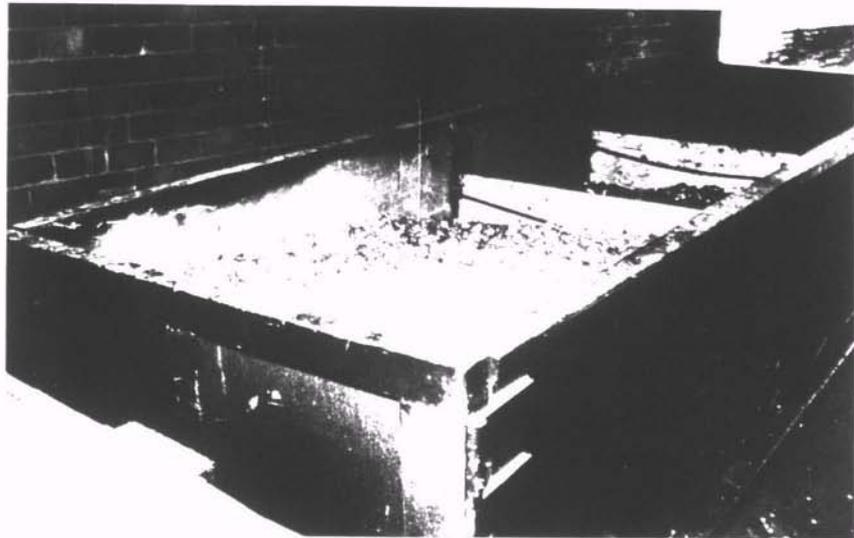
This universal system of public schools has accepted the missions ascribed to it over the past decades: providing the masses with basic literacy, acculturation of its plural population to normative mainstream values (especially during the great

immigration periods), and catering to the manpower needs of an industrial, capitalistic economy. The schools have attempted to deal with the intellectual development of those learners who were considered "academically able" and who were expected to progress through the schools, and have created streams for those who were perceived to be noncollege-bound and suitable for job entry. The structure designed to reach the masses revolved mainly around the schoolhouse, age group norms, standardization in curriculum and construction, courses of study, specially prepared professional and licensed personnel, and a pattern of reporting that ranked the learner in relation to others. To this structure was attached a secondary system of add-ons that attempted to keep pace with new societal demands: Adult Education, Special Education, Vocational Education, Early Childhood Education, Compensatory Education, and so on. While the school-age population expanded, so did this structure and the additional resources necessary to approach the tasks.

### Symptoms of a Transforming Society

During the seventies, we began to experience the limits of growth in both the school-age population and our resources. The dramatic symptoms of a transforming society began to surface: intergenerational splits, moral and ethical decay, economic instability, energy shortages, environmental pollution, proliferation of mass weapons of destruction, population explosion, global starvation, familial and community deterioration, powerlessness, anxiety and stress, violence, "rip offs." These symptoms point to a society under severe strain, whose needs now fall clearly beyond any one institution and schooling. What is at stake is what statespersons have long forecast: humanity is in a race between education and catastrophe—between mere human existence and human potential. Societal forces seem to control us rather than the other way around. Education can help humanity regain its sense of fate control.

We therefore need educated people who can begin to correct the wrongs surrounding us all—if it's not too late; educated persons who not only care deeply about the negative conditions that thwart the development of human beings, but who have the competence to act in ameliorative ways. Fully educated persons have a disciplined



*Symptoms of a transforming society began to surface during the 1970s including inter-generational splits, familial and community deterioration, and environmental pollution. Photo: Staff; Joe di Dio, NEA; Staff.*



sense of caring and possess the expertise to perform the major societal responsibilities because they have learned the political, economic, and social roles required for constructive problem-solving. In sum, the educated person is someone who is in control of his/her fate in behalf of humanity and who is guided by the values of love, justice, and knowledge. Stated more directly, unless we are capable of delivering such quality education to every citizen as a matter of *right* not privilege, human and societal *survival* will be in clear and present danger. Education must become a process by which people and their society are renewed. These comprehensive goals for American education mandate that the traditional basics—the three “R’s”—be acquired because they increase the learner’s ability to control his/her own destiny. Surely, if a person cannot read and write, he or she is placed in a difficult, dependent position, restricted in seeking options that promote societal and personal expansion.

Similarly, if a learner does not have an opportunity to nurture a talent, his/her creative potential has not been fostered. Without cultivating talent, the learner’s fundamental psychic need to be personally validated is seriously impaired. Utilizing a talent as a basis for a career is more desirable educationally than learning the skills to perform a job.

Further, unless each person is provided with the expertise to perform the so-called societal roles—for example, parent, citizen, consumer—then once more the tendency is to become dependent on others who can. The point must therefore be stressed that the educated individual is one who possesses the competencies for controlling his/her own development in a humane, responsible way. The educational system must then develop a delivery capacity to foster in each person those skills, attributes, and talents to be fully educated and truly verified as a distinctive person.

A postindustrial, democratic society such as ours requires an educated citizenry for political, economic, and social reasons. Therefore, a comprehensive *educational* system is required to replace the comprehensive *school* system that has been created and that is rooted to the needs of the past. We need a structure capable of coping with the future. Thinking about an educational rather than a school system will necessitate not

only a redefinition in function and delivery, but a realignment of the basic parties at interest: the recipients of educational services—parents and students, other taxpayers—and the deliverers of these services—professional educators, other community units including business and industry, labor, government, and the cultural and scientific agencies.

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It is becoming clearer that the old ways of updating our schools through add-ons, appendages, and remediation will no longer be appropriate. Our present school system has not only spread itself thin but has surely developed unnecessary duplication. As society has become more complex, it has delegated increased responsibility to the schools; but the schools are designed for schooling, not for education. We therefore need to convert a school system into an educational system. To accomplish this goal, the school cannot go it alone. A much broader conception of resource utilization will have to be considered. The new educational system will systematically link a complex of institutions and agencies. The school will be linked to the strengthened family; to the multicultural neighborhoods; and to the cultural, scientific, and recreational agencies in the communities.

In one sense, we are at a point of asking each agency to perform certain functions contributing to the comprehensive educational system, thereby returning to first principles of social organization. That is to say, we are returning to a structure in which the family and parents are expected to perform certain “key” educational responsibilities—perhaps this time with the help of parenting support opportunities that are appropriate to the kind of diverse society we now have. Certainly, commerce and the arts can be expected, through their updated resources, to provide learning contexts that appeal to talent identification and nurturing of our citizenry. Similarly, spiritual leaders can join in providing sensitive formats for

the development of moral and ethical attitudes that enhance the noblest values of a free and just society. The mass media can use their considerable power to reach all learners on a number of crucial issues affecting our lives. This will enable the superheroes who have entertained and inspired us in the past to use their appeal for more serious educational ends.

### Schools Cannot Go It Alone

The point is that the schools cannot be expected to do it all within the confines of the schoolhouse. Expecting the schools to go it alone is to continue on a path that can only lead to greater frustration among all the parties at interest. Clearly, we have learned that the quality of life in our great metropolitan areas cannot be maintained or even developed without excellent education. Yet, the overburdening of the schoolhouse has had precisely such a destructive effect. It is time to utilize the rich learning environments and talents in the cities themselves through a new and more dynamic linkage of the schools to the other educational units affecting the growth of each person.

Therefore, just as in earlier times when the schools, the family, and the churches shared the responsibilities for learning and teaching, so will it be under an educational system. Only now, these fundamental units will be joined by other agencies such as business, industry, human service, and government, to form a new educational network—all under the coordination of primary development specialists, educators, and boards of education.

This means, in part, continuing to tap the rich educational resources in the communities surrounding our schools. As we face restrictions in direct allocation of additional resources to the schools, as we presently are, and as our school-age population levels off, as it presently is, then the search for priorities and resources commences, as it has. We now appear to be in the initial stages of converting from a school to an educational system. One important development that has arisen relative to this conversion concerns the orchestration of multiple resources within and without the schools as a basic means for continuing our advance on achieving a new effectiveness in quality during a period of conversion for reliance on

school-based services to community-based services that include schools. Linking the schools to the business and industrial environment for talent development, to the health agencies for nutritional awareness and drug education, to insurance companies for driver training, to the artistic network for cultural and aesthetic literacy, and to the spiritual leaders for moral and ethical actualization are but a few of the activities that need to be coordinated. Such expertise can be delivered by a reformed educational system and under the direction and supervision of educators who continue to be accountable to the public for promoting the growth of each learner.

An important consideration in the coordination and interlinking of these resources, talents, and tasks is their cost effective potential. Surely, it is conceivable that the multi-billions of dollars spent by business and industry in their own training systems and the millions of dollars spent by our libraries, museums, and cultural agencies on lifelong learning opportunities could be harnessed in such a way as to avoid unnecessary duplication and to interlock services into a more comprehensive yet coordinated pattern of education to provide a fuller utilization of *existing* resources. Further, public policy can enable cooperation among these institutions through various incentive and tax benefit plans. The point is to provide a comprehensive system of education based on optional paths to quality education for each person. No one agency can be capable of being all things to all people. Thus, through a systematic orchestration of resources, beginning with the school and extending into the community, the total effect may be to increase our capability to educate each distinct person, which has been one of our most cherished ideals.

### Replacing the Present Structure

Politically, the educational system proposed is custom-tailored in that it is based on individual *choice*. Each person has the right to choose a range of optional learning environments. There is no attempt to have one right pattern to which all must adjust or be branded a failure.

The first signs of this conversion are already surfacing. In Dallas, Houston, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, and other

cities and towns, "schools" are being replaced by educational centers located in rich environments such as medical complexes, art centers, scientific laboratories, governmental institutions, international trade centers, and the like. Proposals for a classical and contemporary musical education environment in which prominent artists become part of the faculty joining teachers who formerly had been associated with the schoolhouse are no longer farfetched dreams. Linguistic environments for students talented in languages, food and agriculture stations for students pursuing careers in these fields, aviation and space complexes, executive internships in engineering, architecture, law, human services—the list can go on, but the central idea is to create powerful education contexts manned by both the formal educators of our present school system and the enormous wealth of talents and competencies residing in the broader community. Needless to say, the orchestration of these resources to the benefit of each distinct learner is a monumental task that will require a redefinition of the role of traditional educator—coordinator, facilitator, linker—the shifting of role from one of providing direct service to one of harnessing the diverse human and material resources to assure continuity and accountability. Educators and boards of education can continue to be the central agents who will be responsible for assuring that the best interests of each person are maintained under the redefined system.

The process of converting a school system to an educational one cannot occur by dropping the present structure and replacing it with a new one. Quantum leaps are seldom attempted or successful. The conversion of a school system to an educational system must take place in a different way. Decentralization of the monolithic structure of schooling through increased options and choices among the basic parties at interest—parents, teachers, students, and administrators—is a beginning step in this direction. This decentralization is promoting a new diversification within our schools—from matching teaching/learning styles to schools within schools to alternative schools without walls. Slowly, the emerging educational structure is redefining *who* the learner is, *when*, *where*, *how*, and *why* the learner learns. Increasingly, education will be a matter of choice. Thus, the seeds of the future educational system are

being nurtured today. This process is extremely significant, precisely because it is foundational in nature—a first phase. The process is important also because it embraces individual rights—the right of a teacher to choose a style of teaching, the right of a student and parent to select from different styles. The process gains political support because change is not by *imposition* but by *personal attraction*. People can begin to feel some sense of control over their own fate and over their constructive power to rebuild an institution critically tailored to nothing less than their hopes and aspirations.

Periods of transition are by their nature ambiguous, confusing, and uncertain. We need sensitive guidance from our leaders. We need to share a vision. We need to be inspired by leaders who have the capacity to rise above the immediate press of despair, illuminating for us the ingredients of a future marked by hope. This will mean also that enabling policies must be mounted by our elected officials. A tall task? Impossible? Perhaps, but what is the alternative? We seem to be in a period of reflection, rethinking existing policies, of admitting our past mistakes, of learning from our experiences. We are searching for a new flexible process of education. States are considering new legislation, making quality education a civil right for all—not just school-age children. We are now examining policies aimed at strengthening the American family, enhancing the effectiveness of parents as teachers.

Redefinitions are taking place in the basic building-block institutions such as the church and the family as they are in the fields of science, economics, and politics. It is not surprising that a redefinition of American education is forthcoming. The result will be no less than a monument to humankind. [47]



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