

Improving the Place Called School: A Conversation with John Goodlad

NELSON QUINBY



John Goodlad, director of *A Study of Schooling* and author of *A Place Called School*, has long contended that efforts to change education should be centered not on the teacher or the district, but on the school.

What has been your experience in helping schools use the data from your *Study of Schooling*?

Well, actually, because my book came out in the context of the concern for schools generated by *A Nation at Risk*, I've been spending the bulk of my time working with state school board groups and other policymakers and have spent much less time working with people in individual schools.

I think, though, it is becoming clear to teachers and principals that we are in the midst of a struggle for ideas. I've been advising policymakers to be very cautious about implementing specific reforms, like a longer school day or a longer school year, because I am not convinced that the ideas that were the most visible in 1983 are going to be those that propel the reform movement in 1986.

If schools shouldn't necessarily follow national recommendations, can they be expected to come up with better ideas of their own?

For nearly two decades I have been espousing the idea that the individual school is the key unit for change. I have also noted, though, that individual schools can be very lonely, fragile places. So although the school is the unit for change, it cannot do everything by itself.

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A lot of my colleagues and I endorse the idea of networks. We believe that schools should reach out to join with other schools that are endeavoring to change; that for a school to become a renewing entity, it needs a great deal of help and assistance. Let's put it this way: schools that set out to be self-renewing by themselves will probably not get as far as schools that set out to be renewing within a context of support.

Besides networks, what are other sources of support?

The most important ones are within the district itself. For a school to become the key unit for educational change requires a substantially different stance at the district level than now exists. Improvement programs tend to be districtwide; they are usually an effort by all schools in a district to attack the same problem at once. In elementary schools, for example, it is typically the improvement of reading, or the improvement of math. These efforts have gone on repeatedly over the years, and we would have to conclude they haven't been very successful—so we need to be looking for something else.

The something else is for the district to encourage the individual school to come up with *its* plans based on its *own* analysis of that school's problems. The principal, teachers, students, and parents need to think their problems through and determine their priorities, using as much data as possible. Then the principal, representing that school, should sit down with the su-

perintendent and the superintendent's staff, saying "Here's what we would like to do. Here are our plans over a three-to-five-year period. Here are our priorities for the coming year." Then the resources of the district should be brought to bear on helping that individual school do what *it* has defined and received approval to do.

Now, frankly, many superintendents regard this idea as a threat to their authority and power. Actually, it can increase their influence, and in many instances it will make life much more pleasant for them.

Does the same principle apply to a teacher or group of teachers within a school who have something they would like to try?

Absolutely! We've had an extraordinary amount of rhetoric lately about the significance and importance of the principal. It's generally thought that a good principal produces a good school—although we don't have much evidence for that yet. We don't know how much a principal is the *causal* factor in school change, but the correlation is there: where you have a good school, you usually find a good principal.

What we have not delved into deeply enough is the question of the relationship between principals and teachers when teachers want to do something. If a principal is really good, he or she will have teachers bubbling with ideas they want to implement. This can be very threatening to principals if, in effect, all teachers

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want is approval—if they seem to be saying, "I need support and encouragement but I don't need your help." So one of the things principals need to understand is that what they want for their own schools in terms of autonomy and authority and responsibility is precisely what teachers want for themselves.

In your book,² you say that the core of education should be a common set of concepts, principles, skills, ways of knowing—not topics. Who should determine this common set of concepts and principles?

Whether or not youngsters will be taught a succession of topics that are not necessarily held together by any conceptual glue—or whether they will be introduced to concepts like time, space, energy, and the like—depends in the final analysis on the teacher. If the teacher doesn't understand a conceptual approach, or doesn't know how to do it, he or she will reduce everything to a series of objectives to be accomplished or a series of topics to be taught—and of course, the text-

books will support the teacher in that. Unfortunately, most teachers—elementary, middle, and secondary—are not deeply immersed in the concepts that provide structure to the fields of knowledge.

This is particularly difficult for elementary school teachers because they have to teach all or most of the subjects. But even at the high school level, teachers—most of whom have a master's degree at best—have themselves been exposed throughout their programs to a curriculum organized by topics. They have not been exposed to the structure of their own disciplines except in a very few instances. Indeed, that usually happens only at the doctoral level, and may not happen even there.

In *A Study of Schooling* we discovered that topics—in the textbooks and in the teacher's mind—are both the goals and the means of the curriculum. Topics should be only the means, not the goals, of instruction.

Now, since teacher preparation programs do not provide an understanding of concepts like energy, time, space, form, color, and the like, and since preparation in the subject fields rarely provides that understanding, I think that—even though in the final analysis teachers must be the ones who decide which concepts to teach their students—we need some kind of intermediate agency that will engage in analysis of the subject fields and clarification of what the concepts are.

Doesn't this sound like the 60s?

Yes, it does. At least it sounds like the original intent of the curriculum reform movement.

At the beginning, the focus of that movement was on teaching the structure of the subject fields to good teachers. The various curriculum projects in

mathematics, biology, chemistry, and so on selected first-rate high school teachers who were given a year's leave of absence in order to—yes—construct curriculum, but most of all to learn about this curricular approach. That was very expensive.

As the demand to get materials to place in the hands of large numbers of teachers rose and finally dominated the curriculum reform movement, then of course the emphasis on training teachers declined and the emphasis on preparing materials increased. Then it was discovered that the teachers in general to whom the materials were to be disseminated didn't understand the structures of their disciplines, and there was no money to train them. Training got reduced from a year to a summer to a couple of weeks and, finally, to a few days.

Then, since the training over a few days obviously did not do the job that had been done by a year's work, the curriculum developers said, "Well, we don't have the money, time, and re-

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sources to train the teachers, so let's produce teacher-proof materials." *That* was the corruption. There *were* those packages, unfortunately.

But what we now look back to as what happened in the 60s was not what was intended. It was what happened when we gave up on the idea that these understandings about the nature of curriculum design had to be developed in the *minds of teachers*.

How does that apply to the kinds

of changes needed in schools today?

The principle holds. Cosmetic changes can be legislated and mandated; the ways children and youth acquire knowledge and ways of knowing cannot. These depend on the knowledge and creativity of teachers. Better preparation of principals and teachers, along with help and time for designing school programs *at the site*, are necessary ingredients of school improve-

ment. This message is at best only at the rhetorical level of acceptance by policymakers seeking to improve schooling. Unless it becomes a guiding principle of action as well as faith, little more than peripheral changes in the central curricular and instructional functioning of schools are likely to occur. □

¹Goodlad, John I. *A Place Called School*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984.

²Goodlad, p. 287

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