
Common Sense

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School improvement cannot come about quickly nor can it be hurried by a rush of mandates. It requires a slow and determined effort, reflected in sound policies and patience.

How do we improve schools? Or, better put, how do we change schools to improve the learning of students? Slowly. Very carefully. And all at once.

About 15 years ago I had the good fortune to have a long talk with the then Commissioner of Education in New York, James E. Allen, Jr., about the Equal Educational Opportunity Study, the so-called "Coleman Report." Allen was an alumnus of the Harvard Graduate School of Education of which I was then Dean, and he consulted frankly and regularly with me on where he saw education moving and how an education school might position itself in that process. The school was then sponsoring an exhaustive reanalysis of Coleman's data. New York State had also run a thorough school survey of its own, and it was about this that the Commissioner spoke. Allen was somber that morning and agreed that, even given the limitations of the measures of achievement—the simple tests that each study used—the relationship of social class to performance was strikingly unavoidable. Poor kids scored poorly. Richer kids scored better.

But Allen's somberness was due less to this unsurprising finding than to a separate study of the exceptions to it. The New York survey, Allen told me, had shown several elementary schools to be bucking the class-bias trend; that

is, the low-income youngsters there were performing significantly better than they were "supposed" to. Allen himself spent some days visiting those schools, searching for their secrets. Their particular techniques differed, he found, but there was one constant: a charismatic, energetic principal, one able to sense the techniques appropriate to his or her community and endowed with the leadership to make them work.

So, I asked, why be so somber? Allen's answer: there was no sure way that state government, at its distance, could legislate or regulate the school system to attract and hold such powerful school leaders. There was no one best way to find and foster such talented educators. What was crucial was their attitudes—their high expectations, their mix of optimism and realism—and the infusion of those attitudes among teachers, students, parents, and the community. They knew what *their* communities needed and provided it. Morale, commitment, a sense of each special school community: these were the heart of it. The best the state could do was to work at long range, to support conditions for these human qualities to flourish—and then to pray.

Patience

Subsequent work by others, such as Ronald Edmonds, has reinforced Allen's view. At the core of good schools are common sense notions. The staff believes in its task, in the kids, that the youngsters *can* learn. The direction the school is going is clear to every-

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one. Conditions are such that the necessary work can proceed. The program is appropriate to the particular setting. Progress, or even the lack of it, can be exhibited. The people in authority *care* and infect others with that caring.

These notions may be obvious, but they are also very complicated ones to put into practice. It is easy to say that schools must have Instructional Leaders, and it is simple to run all sorts of seminars for such putative Leaders. To provoke new leadership in practice is, alas, a much subtler, more complicated business. Critical factors, such as the principal's personality and the development of his or her self-confidence and ability to communicate, require not only direction but flexibility and empathy. It takes time, with much testing of loyalties, much backing and filling, to create a climate of commitment, direction, security, and high expectations. To use a humble metaphor, a good school does not emerge like a prepackaged frozen dinner stuck for 15 seconds in a radar range; it develops from the slow simmering of carefully blended ingredients.

We all hear much, and happily, of schools that abruptly “have been turned around.” A spurt of new pride, shrinking truancy, and steady or even improving test scores are wonderful and make good newspaper copy. But turning a corner isn't the end, only the beginning. A new direction is set, but it needs to be absorbed, made instinctive in the school, even—in the best sense—routinized. That takes patience

and stability. Without these conditions, the “improvement” will be ephemeral.

The High School Problem

Allen, Edmonds, and others focused on elementary schools and their improvement. High schools are much more difficult to affect as they are structurally far more complex than are schools for younger children. Because of this fact, the temptation of those trying to improve high schools is to concentrate on one piece at a time—the curriculum, or some particular program, or staff development, or a testing program, or revising the schedule. But the historical record is clear: piecemeal efforts of this kind, however well intentioned and imaginative, almost always fail. The reason is obvious: every important aspect of high school operation is connected with every other one. Change one piece, and the others must change—or resist change, to prevent any alteration of the supposedly unchallenged pieces.

For example, say that one wants to change the mathematics program. The program and its textbook can be legislated, but are the teachers competent to teach it? Do they *want* to teach it? What will be their attitudes? Is there time for teachers to plan and consult on its implementation during the school year? If so, what is given up elsewhere to allow for it? What if the five 43-minute-period-a-week pattern ill serves this new program, and a new schedule is needed: what accommodation do other areas make? Do the students and parents trust this change? And so forth. . . . Thus, accommodating something even as straightforward as a modestly revised mathematics program can often send ripples well beyond the math department.

If one wishes a more ambitious improvement—say, allowing students to progress on the basis only of their exhibited mastery of the program—the ripples become waves. Age grading, the prime organizing foundation of the modern American high school, collapses, a domino that topples other dominos—scheduling, course patterns, school attendance projections. Given that ambitious improvements such as “individual progress” themselves rest on common sense (can anyone seriously argue any more that

mere “seat time” can properly remain the prime measure of school achievement?), waves will inevitably be necessary. How to prevent swamping the boat? The answer is as predictable as it is challenging. By accepting the need to undertake improvements in *deliberate combination*: individual progress with curricular change with schedule change and more. In the short range, such may well be more difficult to launch (as it has been in the past), but in the long run it will pay off. Partial efforts yield little fruit in high school improvement efforts.

Standards

Above all else, schools are concentrations of people and thus are very complex communities in constant, organic change. The most powerful spurs for students' learning—their motivation, the adaption of programs to their styles of learning, the expectations for each of them—are humanistic, not mechanistic or programmatic; they are subtle and changeable. School reform, especially high school reform, is thus inevitably complicated, not only because school structures are intricate, but because of the rich variety of individual talents in each school. Serious efforts at school improvement are, therefore, necessarily exercises of wide scope—taking all of importance into account—and of extended time, and thus patience.

Unfortunately, many today fail to see and respect this inevitable complexity, even if it is readily apparent. They confuse standardization with standards, and in the process sap the morale of the ablest teachers and principals who well know that children have to be schooled flexibly, even individually. We trivialize the process of learning by oversimplifying it, and by the oversimplification represented by mandated standardized practice, we lessen the potential of leaders such as those Jim Allen admired.

Sound public policy creates conditions that foster strong leadership, however inevitably idiosyncratic. It is patient and respectful of the reality that enduring change in education is likely to be slow a-coming. It accepts the complexity of schools, dealing with each as an organic whole.

This is not only good policy. It's common sense. □

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