

# Overview

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## Time to Re-Form Schools

An ASCD policy analysis group has issued a report (p. 17) indirectly critical of many current education reforms. The group of scholars and practitioners selected for their acquaintance with current reform issues said that even the sponsors of a given policy may not be fully aware of the assumptions on which it is based, and may have little evidence that it will accomplish its intended purpose.

A lot of educators are uneasy about the direction of recent reforms, many of which attempt to strengthen traditional practices and curtail the search for more imaginative solutions. Even reforms that are clearly warranted are often launched so precipitously that their long-term impact is blunted from the start.

There is, of course, much to improve within the present framework, but if we want the renaissance in learning envisioned in the national reports, we must reconsider the structural factors that make schools so maddeningly inefficient.

For example, as James Raffini (p. 53) explains, the competitive grading system used in most schools practically guarantees that large numbers of students will do less than their best. Genuine reform requires that we redesign the evaluation system to recognize students for what they have learned rather than humiliating them for what they have not learned.

Of course, the grading system is only an element of the larger pattern of schooling which, with its assignments and examinations, forces students and teachers into adversary roles. Fundamental reforms would put teachers and students on the same side and emphasize outcomes achieved rather than time spent and credits accumulated. Equally important is the quality of experiences students have day after day and the relevance of those experiences to the outcomes we seek.

In that regard we must be open to the possibility that conventional school organization is an impediment

to providing such activities. Leslie Hart (1983), author and interpreter of brain research, declares the conventional class-and-grade system, with its restrictions on student speech and movement, to be "brain antagonistic." The results achieved by the Perry L. Drew School in East Windsor, New Jersey, (Della Neve 1985), where staff members have tried Hart's ideas, and by other schools with similar well-conceived programs, show that this form of education can be very effective.

I am suggesting an agenda somewhat different from current reform efforts because it seems unlikely that we can motivate all students to do their best within a framework designed to sort out winners from losers, which was clearly the function of schools in an earlier era. "Fine," you may reply, "but few people in my community think schools need restructuring, and fewer still want me to experiment with their children." Probably true. But if educational leaders expect to play a larger role in reform, we must decide what changes are most needed and be able to make a convincing case for them. Then, unlike those issuing ultimatums from state capitals, we had better, as Karen Seashore Louis (p. 33) advises, make sensible use of what we know about making changes successfully.

Nancy Lee and Gary Obermeyer (p. 64) and Albert Shanker (p. 12) say that teachers will help bring about a different structure, and David Seeley (p. 82) suggests two strategies—one gradual and one bolder—for enlisting parents and community members in a partnership for change. This may be the time to truly re-form our schools.



### References

- Hart, Leslie. *Human Brain and Human Learning*. New York: Longman Inc., 1983.
- Neve, Charmaine Della. "Brain-Compatible Learning Succeeds." *Educational Leadership* 43 (October 1985): 83-85.

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