

# We Can Shape Our Destiny

It is time for educators to join with outside critics in working for needed changes, such as providing better working conditions for teachers and giving more autonomy to schools that perform satisfactorily.

The education reform movement sweeping across the United States for the past several years has consisted mainly of noneducators trying to change the ways of educators and the institutions in which they work. Such changes are instrumental, not ends in themselves. The real goal of all these reform efforts is to improve what children learn. If the reformers thought they could accomplish this through pills, implants, revamped television programming, or other such unconventional means, they might not bother tinkering with the structures, practices, and personnel that make up the formal education system. Instead they have chosen, for the most part, to work through that system, primarily by yanking and shoving and regulating and tempting the people and institutions that compose it to operate differently.

The education profession, by and large, has not welcomed these changes and in many places has resisted them. The reasons are many, some grounded in principle and philosophy, others in self-interest or self-righteousness, still others in simple stodginess and institutionalized inertia.

The situation is changing, however, and in the months ahead will likely change some more. The education profession is becoming better able to shape its own destiny, to influence future reforms, and to demonstrate its bona fides to a public that has had some reason to doubt them.



Photograph by Thomas W. Stack, Jr.

## Leadership from Within

Internal educational leadership has two major sources. First, a number of the boldest reform schemes initiated by laymen are entering into complex implementation phases during which leadership tends to shift from those who decree to those who do: second-generation problems emerge that need to be solved—if at all—by specialists rather than generalists, and a lot of patient hard work must be elicited from many diligent workers in the trenches. This situation, in and of itself, produces a powerful temptation toward footdragging, backsliding, and second-guessing, and here and there one can see efforts by educators to undo major reforms enacted by legislators only a year or two earlier. But the opportunity is certainly at hand for educators to prove that they can—and want to—carry out some important changes with vigor, creativity, and persistence.

The second development suggests to me that the aforementioned opportunity will not be wasted. We're finally beginning to see a surge of reform leadership *within* the education profession. It's no tidal wave as yet, but it's more than a ripple. I have in mind such things as the report of the "Holmes Group," the recommendations of the Carnegie panel on the teaching profession, efforts under way within both of the national principals' associations to strengthen and renew the principalship, some serious self-examination by the subject matter teachers in several fields, even a historic decision by the chief state school officers to embark upon the long-overdue collection of comparative performance information.

Let me not overstate these changes. The profession still tends to assume that most problems can be solved by "more of the same": more money, more years of teacher preparation, more inservice education, and so on. It tends to take systems, structures, procedures, and power relationships for granted; to define problems and failings as quantitative rather than qualitative in origin; and to stress inputs and processes rather than results. But at least we're seeing some willingness to acknowledge problems rather than to stonewall them, and to work on solutions rather than shun the en-

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tire excellence movement. In return, I sense mounting public willingness to accept leadership from the education profession and to consider some of the reforms that the profession itself would like to make.

## Some Recommendations for Reform

Let me now suggest ten reform elements by which the education profession could make common cause with the outsiders who have been spearheading the excellence movement during its first three years. None is a detailed plan or program; none is without controversy inside the education profession; none could be adopted without major shifts in certain time-honored practices and cherished assumptions. On the other hand, none is original with me or unfamiliar to people already in the field, and some ideas that seemed like pipedreams a year or two ago are beginning to be legitimate objects of serious discussion by responsible people.

1. *Greater autonomy should be given to schools that perform satisfactorily.* The school team needs to be able to earn control over more of the means, tactics, and procedures of education by demonstrating its ability to achieve the goals and meet the performance standards that policymakers set. This requires a sort of treaty that does not yet exist in many places, but that could be started via a simple provision of state law permitting individual dis-

tricts—even individual schools—to waive other laws and regulations as long as their students do not fall below minimum performance levels.

2. *The working conditions within schools should be markedly improved.* I have in mind order and discipline—which teachers want at least as much as parents—as well as simple amenities such as a place for teachers to eat lunch in peace, to make personal phone calls, to work quietly during free periods. But just as important is a marked increase in collegial and professional opportunities within the school. I know no rule that says teachers may not observe one another's classes, take part in seminars, and obtain constructive feedback from the principal. This is the kind of thing the profession can do for itself and shouldn't wait to be cajoled by others into doing.

3. *More of the school dollar should go to teachers and other key professionals, and less should go to overhead expenditures.* As a society, we're investing almost \$4,000 per pupil per year in public education—far more than most private schools charge in tuition. This translates to \$100,000 for a classroom of 25 children. Yet the classroom teacher earns barely a quarter of that sum in salary, perhaps a

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third when benefits are considered. Where is the rest of the money going, and why do teachers receive a smaller percentage every year? I submit that this is a matter of priorities within the school system as much as the result of mandates imposed from outside. Why can't the priorities be altered?

4. *The unions need to change, too, and to begin acting like professional associations.* Teacher organizations should apply as much energy to professional standards, school quality, and self-policing as they commit to bread-and-butter issues, grievance procedures, and mutual protection. Ample evidence from other fields and nations suggests that this *can* happen, and mounting literature shows that unionism and professionalism are not inherently incompatible. Moreover, plenty of rhetoric from national union leaders boosts the importance of this kind of change. But it is not yet manifest in many of the state-, local-, and building-level negotiations and practices, where unions show their true colors.

5. *Rank, status, responsibility, and pay within the education profession should no longer hinge on possession of "paper credentials" having to do with degrees earned, courses taken, and years of seniority.* The education profession (I have in mind teachers, administrators, supervisors, and specialists of every sort) needs to develop and enforce real performance standards for its members: codes of ethical conduct, gauges of professional competence, and procedures for peer evaluation. No one outside the profession is keeping this from happening, and I suspect that a lot of policymakers would cheerfully cede a lot of personnel decisions to the profession just as soon as they saw signs that the profession wasn't avoiding them.

6. *Similarly, initial entry into the education profession needs to be opened to all comers, without regard to formal preparation.* Individuals who can demonstrate the necessary intellect, knowledge, motivation, and character should be allowed to enter the profession, and retention, promotion, and compensation should hinge on demonstrated performance. This would give us a reasonable chance of solving the dual problems of personnel quantity and quality that together beset American education.

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7. *Once in this line of work, those who want to should be able to find some variety without leaping to another occupation.* Some individuals are content to repeat themselves—as teacher, principal, counselor, librarian, department head—year after year. But others believe that their professional lives should hold more diversity, fresh challenges, new problems, and novel experiences. This is a complicated matter, for we also need people with specialties and authentic expertise in various parts of the education field—not just three million indistinguishable and interchangeable souls. A suitable mix of “career ladders,” mid-career renewal opportunities, sabbaticals, exchange programs, and more flexible staffing patterns within schools and school systems could yield a lot more variety than we have today.

8. *Educators could do a great deal to enlist parents as partners in the education of their children.* It is commonplace to say that parents are their children's first and most important teachers. It is also true. Yet a lot of parents are lazy and irresponsible with respect to their children's education. Fortunately, proven techniques exist for motivating parents, communicating with them, joining with them in formal and informal arrangements by which their children's education becomes a shared responsibility, and making plain which parents are and are not being conscientious. Why don't more educators use these techniques?

9. *Technology holds great potential not only for simplifying the lives and lightening the burdens of educators,*

*but also for enhancing their effectiveness.* Much drill-and-practice can be done on computers; many lessons can be individualized with the help of the right software; much record-keeping can be saved on floppy disks; great lessons delivered in one school or classroom can be videotaped and shown in other buildings, kept on file in the library, and viewed by the child who was sick that day or who wants to review for the exam. The technology has already been invented, and in many places the hardware has been purchased. How many educators know how to make optimal use of it? How many will change their customary routines to accommodate it?

10. *Finally, and perhaps least within the control of the profession (but not entirely beyond its influence either), we need to enhance the status of education as a field of endeavor.* Its successes as well as its shortcomings should be known to the public; high-status individuals should be thrilled rather than appalled when their children and grandchildren contemplate teaching school; influential community groups and boards should routinely include practicing educators, and not just the school superintendent, as members.

### **Increased Visibility Helps Implement Change**

How can these changes be encouraged? By knocking on doors, phoning up reporters and editors, applying for membership or participation, hectoring community leaders into feeling ashamed when they don't think of including educators, writing op-ed pieces for the newspaper, hosting a variety of community events, turning up at public meetings, seeking appointment to powerful committees, and making lots of noise when ignored or spurned. Noisemakers don't automatically achieve higher status, but in time they gain access to decision-making processes that can confer status on their peers, celebrity on their profession, and respect on the nature of their work.

What are we waiting for? □

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