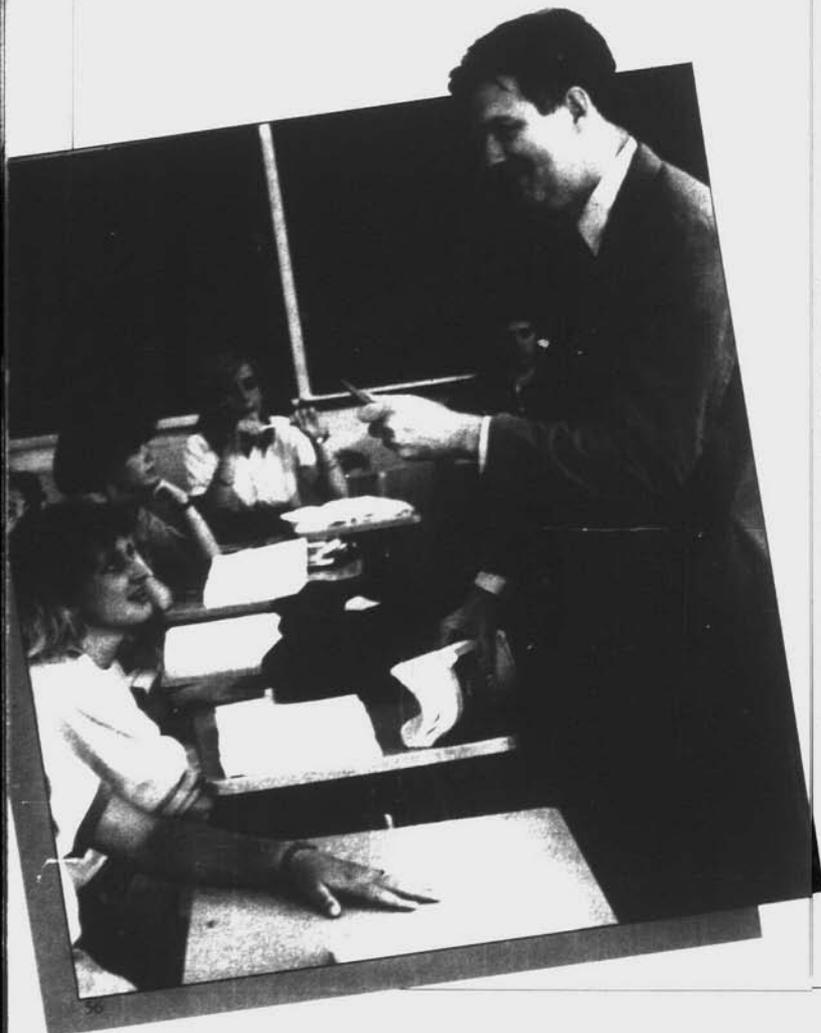


What Reform?

When reformers make schools more like families than factories, they will empower teachers to make schooling more equitable, challenging, and humane.



By 1985 T.C. Williams High School was beginning to feel the effects of the latest spree of "reform" to which politicians periodically subject American public schools. Virginia's legislature was passing new laws and the Department of Education was cranking out regulations affecting what we taught and how we taught it. The reforms continued an emphasis on measurement: the measurement of the performance of teachers as well as of students, usually with standardized tests.

The state's board of education decreed that new teachers would have to attain a minimum score on the National Teachers Examination. And, in the spring of 1985, an 18-member team from the state's department of education descended on Alexandria to determine whether we were complying with the Virginia Standards of Quality and Accreditation Standards. The team cited one principal for failing to fly the state flag in front of the school even though the requirement actually had been dropped from the Accreditation Standards in 1983.

Some requirements seemed just plain petty. Because of three snow days in the winter of 1984-85, T.C. had to call back 10th and 11th graders for one more day of classes after graduation to complete the 180 days of school required by state law. "School didn't end, it just kind of disintegrated," one official commented. Other interventions by state government were more fundamental. As I've already described, popular science electives were cut from the curriculum so that our science department's limited staff could comply with new Virginia requirements that all students take two full years of math and of a laboratory science instead of one. The state decreed that every student, including seniors, be in class for six hours a day, even if it meant signing up for "filler" courses such as "office management." There was no appeal from such rules. It was clear that power was shifting away from our local jurisdiction and that the state government intended to impose on us its concept of school reform.

Responding to Legislated Reform

New publication of the Virginia De-

Why can only 30 or so students enroll in Human Resources, the course at T.C. that works with handicapped kids? Why not open a dozen Human Resources classes? As I write this, there's a revolution in dance in this country, with Michael Jackson, break-dancing, and video-rock. But there is no dance program at T.C. It's not "traditional" to have one—and anyway, aren't such things only for high schools of the arts? But what better way to bring energy and excitement into school than through dance?

Finally, I do not believe that we give the hard-pressed families we serve all the support they need. I am not advocating that schools assume responsibilities that must be parental. But we have to acknowledge forthrightly that the American family has changed in the last 20 years, and so have its needs. It is a reality that a third of households with school children are headed by a single person. It is a reality that the majority of mothers now work, and must work to sustain family incomes.

And it is a reality that a youth culture with drugs, early sex, alcohol, and sophisticated electronics challenges the authority of parents and teachers. These developments are forcing schools and families to become closer partners than ever before. And like good partners, they need to define their expectations of each other, candidly and clearly. Only by working together can schools and families confront school absenteeism, cheating, alcoholism, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy.

The Good School: A New Vision

In the future, good schools will, I think, resemble good families in their caring qualities. They will be more organized and active in their caring. English teachers routinely will be counselors as well as instructors. Faculties will share information about students. Math teachers will know which of their students are doing well in history and which are going through the stress of a parental separation or divorce. Schools will become bases for families to share experiences with other families and, if necessary, get help with their parenting. These kinds of schools will get better academic results than the often impersonal

schools we now have. When students feel that several teachers know them well, and also know their parents, the tendency is to work harder if for no other reason than to please all the adults concerned about them.

It goes without saying that good teachers and administrators hold the key to good schools. Recruiting and retaining these individuals requires, above all, providing good conditions in which they can work. No single step would improve the morale of teachers at my school more than really tackling the problems of our low-achieving, low-income students. We are professional people who care about results. Our failure to reach these kids is utterly demoralizing.

Improving the conditions of teaching also means leaving more time in school for things that are truly important: periods of quiet study, extended discussions with students, comparing notes with other teachers and counselors. The fixed, lock-step school day is based on the premise that, without it, a small number of incorrigible troublemakers would create mayhem in the halls. For the sake of teachers as well as students, we need to start from scratch in shaping a school day that will serve well-defined goals, instead of making it carry the load of a hundred different requirements.

It is up to us, the teachers, to bring about the changes we want. We cannot remain isolated in our classrooms. The closed classroom door can protect us from criticism, but it also shuts off feedback from other teachers, allows private grievances to fester and weakens us as a profession. As I was writing this book, T.C.'s faculty council instituted a voluntary program in which teachers from different departments are paired and observe each other teaching. I am a partner of a history teacher. And why not? We both feel we've learned more from each other than from all the evaluations we've had from administrators. When we offer criticisms of each other's moves, it never seems threatening. And the experience makes us think critically about what it is we do. As I was completing work on this book, the faculty council was planning to go further. It's discussing the possibility of having teachers swap a whole day's classes!

“A youth culture with drugs, early sex, alcohol, and sophisticated electronics challenges the authority of parents and teachers . . . forcing schools and families to become closer partners than ever before.”

Our department has many unused resources. I think of Jan Riviere, who grew up in William Faulkner's hometown of Oxford, Mississippi. Faulkner shopped in her father's jewelry store. She's an expert on Faulkner and his milieu. But in their concern about covering the material and sticking to the lesson plan, English teachers seldom ask Jan to share her observations about one of America's greatest novelists.

Once we start communicating better with each other, we may be able to recover some of the power we've lost over the educational direction of our schools. Why shouldn't teachers take over the hiring of new teachers? It wouldn't preclude having the principal or his representative involved; but it would put responsibility for the quality of teaching back where it belongs: with teachers themselves. Most school principals and superintendents would, I think, welcome a chance to share responsibilities of that kind. As things stand now, they are held accountable for the quality of education in their schools. In truth, they have little control over what happens in the classroom. Most of them are too caught up in the "government by cri-

sis" of running a big school. Some just aren't qualified to recognize or evaluate good teaching.

A New Teacher Empowerment

I am advocating "power to the teachers"—but not the kind that has become associated with teacher walkouts and strikes. The sort of empowerment I have in mind has at least some support in high places. Virginia's former Secretary of State for Education Casteen has noted that state regulation "has frequently withheld from teachers a legitimate measure of self-determination, insofar as most states exclude teachers from the licensure boards that set teaching standards." (The italics are mine.)

Casteen, a scholar of eighteenth-century literature and writer of short stories, was a rare Renaissance man in the Commonwealth's education establishment. And it seems to me that he was on the right track in pinpointing the problems facing the teaching profession as follows:

Apologists for the (recent) trends in regulation speak of concern for new (student) populations, enhanced managerial effectiveness, and clearer lines of accountability. The facts, though, are that such developments do not make the occupation of teaching more attractive, and that it is not all clear that the managerial authorities in whom greater control has been vested have the training or knowledge of academic subjects necessary to enhance teaching.

Tightening the regulatory controls over local school districts clearly has not succeeded in its "managerial" objectives for improving teaching. We still have bad teachers, still turn away qualified people, still lose good people to different lines of work. As teachers on a government payroll in a period of budget cuts and rising admiration for the private sector, we are increasingly suspect.

Yet thousands of truly superior individuals teach in public schools. They are the foundation on which the schools can build in the future. What should count in a teacher is knowledge and love of his or her academic subject, concern for kids, and ability to

motivate them. Courses on education methodology too often have little to do with the essence of teaching.

Over the next five years there will be an enormous demand for new teachers as enrollments start to reflect the baby boomlet of the late '70s. Now is the time for schools to seek out the lawyer who is turned off by the monotony of writing wills; the mathematician who is frustrated by work in a big corporation; the poet who needs money to support a family; the idealistic young college graduate who wants to help the disadvantaged. But finding and recruiting these people as teachers is not enough. We have to create conditions in the schools that will nurture and retain such people. This means making schools a new kind of institution that will embody the qualities of good, nurturing families as well as educational institutions of real excellence.

In talking to teachers, coaches, principals, parents, school board members, and state officials, I have not found as much resistance to new ideas as I had anticipated. In fact, I have found that many of these people share my own exasperation with the status quo and my own conviction that America should and can have better schools. I have come to the conclusion that the barriers between teachers and administrators, school board members and principals, English departments and science departments, coaches and drama instructors, and so on are not so formidable as they appear. In fact, they may exist mainly in our own minds.

American education may be an impregnable fortress that will always resist real change, but a local school system is not like that. It is made up of identifiable individuals who will respond if faced with facts, prevailed on with common sense, and provided with good ideas. Knowing this, I have to believe that we are closer to achieving better schools than we may realize. □

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