

# New Assumptions For Educational Reform

After many unsuccessful attempts to improve our institutions, it's time we began focusing on people, not methods, and encouraging experimentation at the local level rather than imposing more edicts from on high.

For many years, all sorts of people have been trying to change education, mostly without success. We keep hoping that one or another attempt will save us, but, despite our best efforts, results continue to fall far short of expectations.

Here are a few things we have tried over the past 30 years: phonics, teaching machines, psychological testing, audiovisual gadgets, open schools and open classrooms, team teaching, "New Math," "New Science," behavior modification—and, more recently, behavioral objectives, competency-based instruction, voucher systems, computer technology, and "back to the basics." Each attempt in its heyday was vigorously advocated by educators, parents, school boards, or legislatures who hoped that it would prove to be the key to educational reform.

How is it that so many good ideas have proven so disappointing? I believe there are three primary reasons.

1. *They concentrate on things rather than people.* Each effort just mentioned was focused on *things*—on gadgets, gimmicks, methods, subjects, ways of organizing or administering.

Photograph by Tony Wu



Arthur W. Combs reminds us that reforms are likely to misfire unless they are based on ideas important to the people who carry them out.

But education is a *people* business made up of 100 million students and at least 10 million professional educators. Assuming that vital changes can be brought about in such a colossus by administrative fiat or by tinkering with methods and organization is flirting with futility. Truly effective change in so complex an institution can only be accomplished by effecting changes in people—especially through teachers, those men and women in closest touch with students.

2. *Traditional efforts are based on partly right assumptions.* Whatever action we take to bring about change depends upon the assumptions from which we begin. Beginning from partly right assumptions results in partly right answers, which encourage us to keep trying in the same direction in the vain hope that, if we just try harder or do it more often or with greater vigor, then, surely, it will produce the changes we hope for. The consequence of this vicious circle is that educational reform gets locked into a closed system; we are forever seeking solutions from the same tired old as-

sumptions instead of searching for new and more accurate bases for action.

3. *Laid-on solutions rarely achieve their anticipated results.* The traditional pattern for thinking about reform goes like this: determine the objectives to be accomplished, plan a program to achieve them, put the plan in action, and then evaluate whether it worked. Because that strategy sounds so straightforward, so logical, so businesslike, few people ever question it. Unfortunately, people don't always behave according to logic; they have a maddening habit of making up their own minds about events and acting in terms of how things seem from their points of view.

I believe there are more accurate assumptions from which to begin. Here are a few that seem more promising to me.

### **Concentrate on Changing People's Beliefs**

The behavior we observe in ourselves or in the people around us at any moment is only the external expression of what is going on inside. Thus, to change behavior effectively, educational reform must concentrate not on external things like information, gadgets, and methods, but rather on altering the belief systems of the people who make the decisions and do the work.

The causes of behavior lie in people's perceptions or personal meanings—especially in the beliefs we hold about ourselves, the situations we find ourselves in, and the goals and values we seek to fulfill.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies have demonstrated that what makes good teachers is not their knowledge or methods, but the beliefs teachers hold about students, themselves, their goals, purposes, and the teaching task.<sup>2</sup> No matter how promising a strategy for reform, if it is not incorporated into teachers' personal belief systems, it will be unlikely to affect behavior in the desired directions.

### **Emphasize Processes, Not Preconceived Outcomes**

Changing people's beliefs is seldom

accomplished by force or coercion. Neither is it generally achieved by lecturing, exhorting, ordering, legislation, administrative mandate, or techniques of reward and punishment. To change people's beliefs requires creating conditions for change rather than imposing reforms. It calls for open systems of thinking rather than the closed systems most reformers are accustomed to.

Closed system thinking follows the pattern noted earlier: establish an objective, concoct a strategy to achieve it, put it into operation, and then test whether it was achieved. This is a valid, useful approach to dealing with problems: (1) that have to do with things, (2) whose goals are simple and clear, and (3) where control of events is securely in the hands of the leader. Despite the fact that few problems in education meet closed system criteria, most reform efforts have approached the matter from closed system orientations.

Open systems work best for problems: (1) that deal with people, (2) whose objectives are broad and complex, and (3) whose outcomes cannot be precisely defined in advance. Common examples may be seen in a legislature seeking solutions to a social problem or in a class deciding upon a group project. While the majority of problems in education meet the criteria for open systems, few reformers understand open systems or have the skills to put them in action.

In recent years social scientists and educators have explored the question of changing beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Their findings provide insights into the change process and point to more effective strategies. For example, people must first become aware of their existing beliefs and see a need for changing them. Next, an environment conducive to change must be established. In such an atmosphere, relationships are friendly, individuals feel important, and their participation is encouraged and valued. Third, people must have opportunities to:

- confront ideas, problems, beliefs, values, goals, objectives, and possible alternatives;

- discover and explore new ways of seeing and thinking in interaction with others; and

- experiment, make mistakes, modify positions, and try again, preferably with others of like mind.

To provide such conditions for successful change, would-be innovators need an understanding of open systems, a belief in their importance, and the skills to set them in operation.

### **Determine What Is Important**

A major drawback to effective innovation is the failure to determine what is truly important. The scenario goes like this: when I don't know what is important, everything is important. When everything is important, I have to do everything. Riding this merry-go-round, we cannot tell what really matters, everything is a crisis, and we become exhausted.

On the other hand, when folks are required to do what appears to them to be trivial, they do it grudgingly, halfheartedly, and so increase the likelihood of its misfiring. The resulting failure, in turn, proves what they thought in the first place—the idea was no good!

Efforts at reform must be based on ideas that are important to those who must carry them out. Otherwise, they are almost certain to misfire. Worse still, they will destroy morale.

### **Begin from Local Problems**

It has been said that our school curriculum is engaged in a desperate struggle to provide students answers to problems they don't have yet—and may never have. The same could be said of our traditional efforts at educational reform. We address the problems someone thinks we *should* have instead of the problems we *do* have. If people are going to be motivated to deal with it, they must own the problem. Teachers are often blamed for being apathetic. But apathy is not a cause; it is the consequence of being asked to do what does not seem important or worth the effort. Reforms imposed without acceptance or commitment by those who must implement them only add to frustration, resentment, and burnout.

One way to achieve commitment to reform is to concentrate on the problems teachers and principals confront in their everyday tasks. How problems are defined from the perspective of legislators, parents, school boards, educational theorists, or administrators is often very different from the way they are interpreted by those in classrooms. Consequently, problems and solutions defined from higher levels are regarded by teachers and principals as vexatious busywork, which only further complicates their already difficult jobs. On the other hand, reformers at upper levels of the hierarchy often regard local concerns as trivial or "foot dragging" attempts to avoid responsibility.

Concentrating on local problems is not a cop-out. Rather, confronting local problems and facilitating the discovery of appropriate solutions is the most likely road to effective reform. People-oriented institutions change in the same way people change: slowly, step by step, as a result of evolving beliefs, feelings, attitudes, values, and goals of individual persons. Indeed, the accumulation of solutions brought about by this process can transform an institution.

### **Eliminate Barriers to Reform**

Large institutions inevitably develop inertia, and our educational system is no exception. It takes no more than a cursory look at any level of the system to reveal innumerable real or psychological obstacles to reform. Physically, barriers exist in lack of resources and equipment; administratively, in regulations and procedures; philosophically, in differing opinions about desirable goals and objectives; and psychologically, in personal feelings, attitudes, and beliefs.

As a consultant, an administrator, and a teacher, I have made it a practice to search systematically for the barriers preventing people from becoming committed to whatever task we need to be involved in. Sometimes obstacles exist in the environment, sometimes in the definition of the problem,

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sometimes in goals or ways of operating; frequently, the barriers show up in me. From that data, I try, systematically, to remove the barriers from the situation. Once barriers have been removed or reduced, commitment is greater and innovations are more likely to be perceived as challenges rather than as threats or impositions.

### **Encourage Innovation and Change**

When people encounter problems they feel unable to deal with, they feel threatened. However, when they are confronted with problems that interest them and which they feel able to cope with successfully, they feel challenged. This basic psychological principle has implications for educational reform. Too often the well-intentioned efforts of reformers are seen as threatening by those who must carry them out. The usual pattern of reformers is to go "gung ho" for a promising notion, putting it into operation as quickly as possible. The result is resistance, hostility, and implicit or explicit sabotage. Consequently, in any fine idea dies aborning that, with a little more care and understanding, might have grown to effective action.

If educational reform is to occur from grass roots experimentation, as I have suggested, somehow we must find ways to help our profession believe that "it's all right to make mistakes," that *not trying* is the grievous sin. Teacher confidence to experiment must, once again, be seen as a necessary and desirable characteristic of the profession.

"Sometimes you can sell more papers by shouting louder on the same corner, but sometimes its better to find another corner." Old assumptions for educational reform have governed our strategies for over 40 years with disappointing results. It is time to plan our efforts from more promising basic beliefs. □

1. A. W. Combs, Anne C. Richards, and F. Richards, *Perceptual Psychology: A Humanistic Approach to the Study of Persons* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

2. See, for example, A. W. Combs, *A Personal Approach to Teaching* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982); A. W. Combs, *Florida Studies in the Helping Professions*, Social Science Monograph No. 39 (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1969); C. V. Dedrick, "The Relationship Between Perceptual Characteristics and Effective Teaching at the Junior College Level" (doctoral diss., University of Florida, 1972); and R. G. Koffman, "A Comparison of the Perceptual Organizations of Outstanding and Randomly Selected Teachers in Open and Traditional Classrooms" (doctoral diss., University of Massachusetts, 1975).

3. See, for example, C. R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn for the Eighties* (Columbus, Ohio: Chas. Merrill, 1985); and A. W. Combs and D. C. Avila, *Helping Relationships: Basic Concepts for the Helping Professions* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1985).

**Arthur W. Combs** is a Past President of ASCD and former Distinguished Professor at the University of Northern Colorado. Now a consultant with Community Counseling Associates of Greeley, Colorado, he resides at 2327 19th Ave., Greeley, CO 80631.

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