

Caution: Second-Wave Reform Taking Place

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February 1988

Volume 45

Number 5

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ISSN 0013-1784
February 88/Stock No. 611-88010

First, the good news: The second wave of education reform is underway. Now the bad news: There is great danger that we will screw it up.

The first wave set out to raise standards, increase accountability, lengthen school days and years, and generally raise the rigor of American public education. It has brought to everyone's attention that all is not well with our schools and that preserving public education will take major investments of time, money, and effort. Unfortunately, it is based on a narrow conception of education. The Carnegie Report (1986) put it this way:

We are doing better on the old goals, often at the expense of making progress on the goals that count the most. Because we have defined the problem of schools in terms of decline from earlier standards, we have unwittingly chosen to face backwards when it is essential that we face forward (pp. 15, 20).

That brings us to the second wave, which is distinguished not by chronology, but by an exciting and markedly different agenda, including:

- the individual school as the unit of decision making;
- development of a collegial, participatory environment among both students and staff;
- flexible use of time;
- increased personalization of the school environment with a concurrent atmosphere of trust, high expectations, and sense of fairness;
- a curriculum that focuses on students' understanding what they learn—knowing "why" as well as "how";
- an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills for all students.

So why the ominous tone of my opening paragraph? Because it is entirely possible for a school to demonstrate, in some fashion, each of the items on this list without actually achieving significant change from the status quo. In the past, for example, schools added 10 minutes to the homeroom period and proclaimed

they had a flexible schedule; teachers took turns lecturing to large groups of students and called it team teaching; a one-week unit on basic set operations inserted into an algebra course made it "modern math." Tinkering with the external trappings of schooling will not result in the kinds of changes we need. The entries on my abbreviated list are not the *ends* of reform; they are the *means* we must use to create different models of schooling.

The clear message of second-wave reform is that we need to examine our basic philosophical beliefs about teaching, learning, the nature of human beings, and the kinds of environments that maximize growth for teachers and students alike. We need to sort out our values, develop new belief systems, and ultimately create schools that educate as well as train, schools that foster learning in all the ways it can occur. In fact, the primary task of the teacher should be to structure events and activities so as to bring young human beings to the threshold of commitment to learn.

Restructuring takes rethinking. We will have to take our eyes off the rearview mirror of first-wave reform and look carefully at the 21st century. Then we may yet come to understand that the real curriculum of any school is that which makes a difference in the life of the learner 5, 10, or 25 years hence. All the rest is excess baggage. Yet how are we to know what will make that difference? We have to live with uncertainty about that, but we can at least turn our faces forward. □

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Reference

Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986.

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