

Has Sam and Samantha's Time Come at Last?

Teachers have been treated as the problem of school reform for 20 years; isn't it time they were recognized as the *solution*?

Reunion with an old friend, arriving late afternoon, hurried discussions about shared events, catching up on family and lost acquaintances, tales about graduate school . . . and the two of us laughing as old pictures are brought out. Each picture spins more stories, more laughter, and more reminiscing about the two years when we had taught together and lived in the same community.

Then dinner is over, and the two of us remain seated in our chairs. I start thinking of how Sam and I began teaching together 20 years ago. We had both been bright-faced 22-year-olds eager to save the world. He had come from the Southwest from a large farming family; I had come from the Northeast from a suburban clan near a major city. That first year we had been joined by a third person, Samantha, from the West Coast, a former Peace Corps volunteer.

The three of us—beyond being new, being transplanted, and being eager to be teachers—had little common history. We were of different races, different religions, and different backgrounds. But from 1968 to 1970, we became fast friends, teaching in the

same school in a small rural community in the Southeast. We made naive and tactless blunders with school administrators and community officials, but we also made some heartfelt connections with our junior high school

students and parents. Twenty years ago, I could see Sam and Samantha were talented educators: students clamored to be with them, and their students learned! They taught in unconventional and boisterous ways, but everyone in the school—old-time teachers, administrators, students, and parents—concurred that these two could teach.

After dinner, Sam and I discussed the different paths taken by the three of us. Samantha had moved with her husband (and dogs) to upstate New York; she had become a career teacher in a village elementary school. On occasions when I've been to New York State, people who know Samantha have narrated to me that she's become almost legendary in her classroom exploits. As for Sam, he's still in the same community and teaching in the same school district where we all began. He switched to the high school in 1973 and has been there since. He also is a career teacher. As for me, I moved back to New England to teach, then became a school principal, and eventually went into university work, first in Ohio and now in Georgia.

Later that evening, in the living room with our feet up, Sam and I

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discussed education and the impact of reform. The tone of our conversation became quite serious. I was taken somewhat aback by his views.

I've been teaching for 20 years now, and I can't remember all the "reforms" I've been through. I'm not sure that I can take another one! It seems that every three years, someone—whether it's a new hotshot superintendent, the state department, the governor, or a university professor—comes up with some great new idea of how American education is to be saved. What happens is that my colleagues and I become the punching bag recipients of someone else's plan.

Why is it so hard for people outside the classroom, including you folks from the university, to understand that we teachers know at least as much about our students, teaching, and ways to improve as you do! To be blunt, I've seen these ideas come and go, and each reform dumps more work on us, and we're still left with our 125 students a day, working under the same work conditions that I had 20 years ago. Each new idea that comes down from on high doesn't improve my teaching, it often takes away from my teaching! Today I'm being forced to teach in ways that I know are not in the best interest of students.

I listened carefully because Sam was telling me almost verbatim the sentiments expressed by scores of other teachers that I highly respect. I had read surveys showing that teachers as a group have had it up to their ears with paperwork, lesson alignment, teaching to test objectives, and being monitored and evaluated according to how closely they follow a lockstep sequence of instruction (Boyer 1988). But hearing these remarks from Sam meant more to me than survey statistics. I knew him as a friend first, then as a teacher—he isn't a doomsayer, he isn't a radical. He's a sensible, sane, reserved person who cares about his students. He doesn't look for ways to make his job easier; instead, he looks for ways to do more for his students. When he spoke to me, friend to friend, I knew that his was not a union tactic or a special interest plea. If Samantha had been with us, I suspect she would have concurred with Sam's sentiments in language even more forceful and colorful.

It took me several months after our reunion—talking with teachers and administrators throughout the U.S.



"Now, fellas, what did we say about pushing in the balls?" On the third day of school, John Whelan, kindergarten teacher at Adamsville School, Bridgewater, N.J., carefully reinforces behavior expectations. ASCD is pleased to publish this photograph from the winning photo essay in our 1988 Photo Contest. Our thanks to the photographer, Erud Bloch, Bridgewater, N.J., whose complete essay will accompany a special feature on early childhood education in Educational Leadership in the fall.

and Canada, working with our demonstration school projects in Georgia, reading articles, and attending conferences with education policy analysts such as Arthur Wise (1988), Larry Cuban (1987), Susan Rosenholtz (1988), and Michael Kirst (1987)—to begin to understand the critical intersection of school reform now being played. This intersection has to do with whether, at last, it is Sam and Samantha's time. If so, supervision in schools will become the vehicle to bring Sam and Samantha into the process of decision making about teaching. If not, supervision will remain what it has "usually been about; status, authority, and the peculiar evil of silence" (Glickman 1988).

Two Reform Movements

In the early 1970s the first reform movement, entitled *legislated learning* (Wise 1987), began as part of school accountability, competency-

based education, performance contracting, and the neo-scientific view that research could uncover scientific principles and factors of effective schools and effective teaching. If students were not learning and if schools were not improving, it was because educators were not following the best available scientific evidence.

Therefore, the spate of early 1980 reports, which painted a bleak picture of public education and student achievement, added fuel to the scientific reductionist view of reform: the need for installing "best practice" in the schools. In 1983 *A Nation at Risk* deplored the mediocrity of education and stated unequivocally that schools as they exist have done a ruinous job on the economy and society: an "unfriendly nation" who wished to undermine the United States could not have done a better job than what we have done in our schools. Such inflammatory language transformed legislative

initiatives into an array of requirements enacted through the prodding of governors throughout the land. The banner words for legislative learning were *academic excellence* (Kirst 1987). We were to become schools of excellence, centers of excellence, and have excellent education. The way this was to be accomplished was that the states (via their respective departments of education) were to take control over local schools with "standards" and "requirements." Legislative mandates of statewide curriculum, statewide tests, statewide teacher evaluation, statewide promotion and retention policies, and statewide mentor career ladder plans were enacted (Cornett 1987).

To be sure, such renewed interest in education created benefits: more equitable funding formulas for schools, improved salaries, scholarships and career incentives, facility upgrades, and the like. But the legislated learning and academic excellence reform was primarily a top-down (philosophically essentialist) movement that viewed teachers and administrators as *the problem* of poor schools. The feeling was that schools left to local educators and local boards could not be trusted.

Since the early 1970s, there have been nearly two decades of increased regulations and tightened external controls over school operations. The typical action for determining solutions to school improvement has been to appoint a state "blue ribbon commission" of political and corporate leaders with token representation from educators. The commissions then listen to research experts, develop a list of requirements for schools, and have the list revised and approved by the state legislatures, signed by the governor, and enforced by the state department. Every three to five years, when education results are publicized as still unsatisfactory, the *next* blue ribbon commission is impanelled, and another round of legislated learning occurs.

The second, more recent reform movement is entitled *empowerment*, and the banner that flies over it reads

restructuring schools (Pipho 1988). For various reasons—increased dissatisfaction with the results of legislated learning, less state money then expected to fund legislated mandates, and a political climate shifting to domestic issues of poverty and disenfranchisement—there is now a different, experimental and pragmatic view of school reform. That view is that local teachers and administrators are *the solution to*, rather than the source of, school problems. Therefore, to provide local educators maximum flexibility to address the particular educational and instructional concerns of their students and community, schools must be deregulated.

This bottom-up view of school reform—where the district and the state provide resources, monies, and knowledge to the local schools in facilitating their own instructional decisions—is an attempt to promote variety rather than uniformity of practices across schools and districts. The premise is that there do not (and never will) exist scientifically validated best practices of supervision and teaching. Rather, best practice means what is best for students by those teachers closest to them. Reports by the Carnegie Forum (1986) and the Holmes Group (1986) have stimulated much discussion about this grass roots approach to school improvement, whereby teachers are the primary instructional decision makers in the school. The principal is not seen as the sole instructional leader but rather as the leader of instructional leaders. Teachers are jointly responsible for the supervision of instructional tasks in a school, direct assistance, staff development, curriculum development, group development, and action research.

The tension in education, at the moment of this writing, is that two totally contradictory reform movements are going on at the same time. Educators are hearing two different messages. One says, "You have district and state requirements you must comply with." The other says, "You are the professionals, what you think is best, we'll work with you." It's no wonder

that educators feel a bit schizophrenic at this time.

Whether or not education reform will remain primarily legislative (although in some states, there simply isn't much more than *can* be legislated short of hiring full-time inspectors for each school) or tilt more toward empowerment has much to do with the initiative and preparation of those in instructional leadership roles. Empowerment sounds the overwhelming bell of approval with most educators; but if it is to succeed, many issues, nuisances, and perils must be personally and professionally faced up to and resolved. If the function of supervision is to empower rather than to enforce compliance of teachers, we must be fully aware of the revolutionary changes necessary in the ways we think about ourselves, teachers, and schools. We also need to consider the transition steps in moving from external control and uniformity of practice to internal control and divergence of practice.

Reform One: The Answers Reform Two: The Questions

Most reform efforts do not fundamentally alter the prevailing organization, scheduling, curriculum, or structure of teaching (Cuban 1987). For 20 years, legislative learning reforms have applied certain answers by adding more to what is already taking place. Certain and uniform answers to reform are readily proposed by laypersons and embraced by the public because they fit into the public notions of teaching and schools. Therefore, the practices that are proposed, passed, and regulated to improve schools are characterized as "scientifically derived," "research based," and "proven answers" that will work if local schools only implement them correctly. However, the answers themselves largely call for doing more of what is already being done. Most legislated reforms enact:

- more direct teacher-centered instruction,
- more homework,
- more standardization and restrictions of the curriculum,

- more testing of students,
- more alignment of lesson plans with test objectives,
- more uniform lockstep retention policies,
- more and tighter evaluation of teachers.

As such practices are implemented, if noticeable improvements in student achievement, success, and attitude are not forthcoming, the next blue ribbon commission, state superintendent, or district superintendent comes forth with a further plan to tighten, standardize, and demand more of what has previously not worked. As Plank (1987) observed, legislative reform answers tend to

reinforce rather than challenge the present structure . . . have ensured that the main consequence has been further homogenization . . . among schools both across and within states (pp. 16,17).

The troublesome point is that as such practices fail to improve learning for students, the answer has been to enforce more of what is not working. For example, there have been only slight gains in basic skills achievement in the past decade, as reported in a national survey (Boyer 1988). Further, Educational Testing Services (1987), in reviewing three National Assessment of Educational Progress Surveys, reports that

evidence is mounting that Americans are not learning to read and write with more than "surface understanding" whether . . . fourth-grade . . . or young adults, their ability to dissect ideas and defend positions is limited.

Furthermore, 700,000 functionally illiterate adults continue to graduate each year, and another 700,000 students drop out of school. The dropout rate in the U.S. remains alarmingly high. According to Hodgkinson (1985), "Since 1980, the national figure for all students has declined from 76 percent high school graduation to 73 percent. The unintended fall-out from . . . excellence state reforms undoubtedly will cut the number even further" (p. 13). Nearly every month, a new national study reports the poor performance of U.S. students in an-

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other academic area (see Rothman 1989).

Why has legislated reform based on applying "more of the same" persisted at a time when evidence indicates little progress and when recent research indicates that successful schools are not a template of homogeneous, standardized, and conventional practice? Legislative top-down reform revolves around authorities' having scientific certainty to improvements, getting Sam and Samantha to do it right.

Empowerment reform raises questions of uncertainty with school practitioners and allows them to work through difficulties toward their own answers. Empowerment reform asks questions that defy the conventional norms, structures, and pat answers of schools:

- Why have grade levels?
- Why have grades?
- What is the best curriculum?
- What are the best locations for education in and out of schools?
- Why teach in 50-minute time pe-

riods, 6-1/2 hours a day, 5 days a week?

- Why have subjects—why not integrated projects?
- Why not evaluate portfolios of students' work?
- Why rely on textbooks?
- Why have one teacher, one classroom?
- Why use Carnegie units?

Such questions of uncertainty challenge the fundamental structure of schools.

Shanker, commenting on the reason for poor higher-order thinking skills of students, says that "it is the way schools are pretty universally structured now, that not all kids can sit still and listen to somebody for five or six hours each day" (O'Neil 1988, p. 6). What Shanker was echoing is a conception of education that has been largely lost in the legislated reform of our schools. According to Piaget (1973):

The goal of intellectual education is not to know how to repeat or retain ready-made truths . . . It is in learning to master the truth by oneself at the risk of losing a lot of time and going through all the roundabout ways that are inherent in real activity (p. 106).

Some readers may take such question posing as heresy, while others may already work in schools where such questions are raised and answered routinely. The questions are not meant to shock, simply to indicate that empowerment reform opens the boundaries of acceptable practice, and with excitement comes discomfort, dissent, controversy, challenge, and at times fear.

Let's take such a mundane convention as school lunchrooms as an example. Students wait in line with their trays, receive their food, and sit at institutional tables. Why? There are a few schools where lunch is an aesthetic, pleasant learning experience, with piped-in music, tablecloths, and family-style serving. Most summer camps operate this way—why not more schools? In the same manner, there are a few high schools in the country that don't use Carnegie units or 50-minute class periods—why

aren't there more? There are elementary programs that don't use basal readers, don't have grade levels, don't use standardized texts; and they are very successful. Why aren't there more? There are successful school districts that don't evaluate teachers according to six or seven elements of effective instruction; some evaluate according to three elements: "due regard," "due process," and "due diligence" (Swift Current, Saskatchewan, 1985). Why aren't there more?

The reason there aren't more is that we are rarely challenged to raise questions about conventional practices for new possibilities to emerge. The point of empowerment reform is not that conventional answers should be rejected and that all schools should innovate; the point is that when schools are not regulated by the outside, all instructional practices are fair game for discussion and action. When we open schools to questions, we also open schools to responsibility for answers.

Are we willing to identify, ask, and act upon such questions? Do we want the power to do so? Not an idle question—because in doing so, the locus of accountability, responsibility, and comfort changes.

Rhetoric or Reality of Restructuring

Educators think of empowerment as the heady nectar of fragrance, beauty, and strength—but when states begin to give districts the opportunity to restructure their schools, will we do it? That some schools fight for restructuring in their districts and states while others passively complain about external mandates is an indication that when schools are given more freedom, many will probably "talk a good game" but stay within the same conventions. Regrettably, if history is our guide, most people in controlling positions in schools and districts would rather complain about education than do something about it (Cuban 1984, Reid 1987).

Teachers are the heart of teaching. Without choice and responsibility, they will comply, subvert, or flee.

To put ourselves "at risk" by taking responsibility for change is another matter altogether. What will it mean to prepare ourselves to truly improve schools? I say *truly* because schools will not improve until those people closest to students—teachers—are given the choice and responsibility to make collective informed decisions about teaching practice. The arena of choice, responsibility, and decision making may be small and restrictive for some staffs to begin with, but the direction should be to enlarge choice, responsibility, and decision making over time.

Supervision must shift decision making about instruction from external authority to internal control. This is the *only* way, on a large and long-term scale, that supervision will improve instruction. As long as decisions come down from authorities far away from those who teach, we will have dormant, unattractive work environments that will stymie the intellectual growth of teachers and the intellectual life of students.

Teachers are the heart of teaching. Without choice and responsibility, they will comply, subvert, or flee; and motivation, growth, and collective purpose will remain absent. What moti-

vates people to work harder and smarter is not money but a work environment "that lets [professionals] make decisions and nurtures a free exchange of ideas and information" (Harris Survey 1988).

Transcendent Wisdom, Unleashed Potential

Sam and Samantha taught with me 20 years ago. They have stayed in the classroom, and I have left. I don't come close to possessing the wisdom they have gained about their teaching, their schools, their students, and their communities. Their wisdom is not less than that of their supervisors, principals, central office directors, and state officials. All things considered, it is amazing that they have persevered for so long in schools where they are viewed as workers—not as competent professionals capable of participating in decisions about teaching and learning.

Sam and Samantha represent most teachers: caring and wise with unleashed potential for making schools what they truly can be: educative communities. Can we acknowledge that teachers possess expertise, knowledge, and concern and will demonstrate a far greater sense of purpose or "a cause beyond oneself" when decisions are made with, rather than for, them?

Now that the rhetoric of restructuring schools is upon us, the next decade will tell if we are only flirting with change or ready to make a profound commitment to improving schools. At last, is it time for teachers to be equals, rather than perfunctory advisers, in the remaking of education? Is it Sam and Samantha's time? □

1. Examples of second wave reform can be found in the Washington State Schools for the Twenty-First Century Program, the Massachusetts Carnegie School Program, the National Coalition of Essential Schools, the National Network for Educational Renewal, the Georgia Program for School Improvement, the National Education Association's Mastery in Learning Project, the American Federation

of Teachers' Research-into-Practice Practitioners Network, and ASCD's Consortium of Restructured Schools.

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Author's note: This article is adapted from the concluding chapter of the forthcoming second edition of *Supervision of Instruction: A Developmental Approach* (Allyn and Bacon 1989). The author is indebted to the writings of and conversations with Arthur Wise for clarifying the current state of education reform.

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