

On Restructuring Schools: A Conversation with Al Shanker

From sit-ins in the South to marches with Lech Walesa and Solidarity, Al Shanker has championed justice and human rights around the world. Now, as President of the American Federation of Teachers and a member of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, he advocates fundamental changes in the way we as educators do business. Here he reasons why we must discard the status quo and cites shining examples of schools that are beginning to recreate themselves.

People mean different things by "restructuring." What do you mean when you use that term?

I mean that minor changes will not bring about the improvements we need in schools; that changes have to be major: the kinds of changes that take place in a factory when they move away from the assembly line model.

Why do you think such big changes are needed?

I'm convinced by the data from international comparisons. For example, our top group—students who are able to write well, to solve complex mathematical problems, to understand principles of science—is between 2.6 percent and 6 percent of our graduating 17-year-olds, while every other industrial country in the world does much better than that. It doesn't matter whether you look at British, French, or Dutch schools, there's absolutely no question that between 16 and 30 percent of their graduates function at that level. I point this out because some people might say, "Gee whiz, except for those black and Hispanic poor kids, our schools are doing fine." It's not true. The fact is that the most advantaged kids who ever walked the face of the earth aren't learning very much.

And that's of concern to the whole society.

It has a direct effect on the teaching profession. Look at it this way: everyone who becomes a teacher in other developed countries meets the same

standards as those who graduate from elite institutions in our country.

But 23 percent of our college graduates are preparing to become teachers, and a disproportionately small number of those are from our elite

Photograph by C.W. Griffin



institutions. Of the relatively small number of highly qualified people we produce, we want some to go on to medicine and dentistry and engineering and architecture and politics and the military and every other field. So that's one very important reason for restructuring: there is absolutely no way to fill 2.4 million classrooms with well-qualified people. Suppose that you were in industry. Ten years ago you were able to get engineers and tool and die makers and machinists, but now there's a shortage in these areas. Well, you'd have to change the way you do business.

So one reason for restructuring is that we need to use our personnel differently.

The second reason is from the students' point of view. The evidence is very strong that continuing to use the traditional methods, with 85-90 percent teacher talk, does not work for most students. It works better in some other countries than it works here—in Europe, Australia, and so on—because they have an abundant supply of high-quality people who go into teaching, and because they have a tracking system. If you're going to spend most of your time talking to kids, you'd better talk well, and you'd better make sure that you have grouped the kids in such a way that they understand the words you're using.

Now, I don't believe our country will, nor do I think we should, move to a more rigid system of tracking. So what changes do we make that take into account the facts that we do not, and will not, have 2.4 million well-qualified people to staff separate classrooms and that if we continue the same structure, we are dooming millions of youngsters to be locked in rooms with very unqualified people?

You've stated the problem very graphically, but what's the solution? What specific changes need to be made?

Well, the broad outlines are very easy to see. If you don't have enough people of the caliber you need, you've got to go to some kind of a differenti-

ated operation. If, at the time of the Flexner Report, the medical profession had decided that everybody who dealt with a patient had to be a doctor, we would have eight million doctors today instead of 500,000—and they would all be paid nurses' salaries. And there undoubtedly would be principal and superintendent doctors watching over the other doctors to make sure they did their jobs right.

What kind of differentiation do you have in mind?

Well, the specifics will have to be worked out through experimentation. Undoubtedly there will be a variety of successful models; some like hospitals, others like law firms, or architecture firms, or knowledge industries.

At any rate, one aspect of restructuring is differentiation of roles and functions of teachers.

The most advantaged kids who ever walked the face of the earth aren't learning very much.

That's right. Now on the student side, if you're not going to track students, you'll need to take individual differences into account in some other way, and obviously you cannot do that if you're lecturing. A teacher in a one-room schoolhouse would never lecture because there's not much the teacher could say to the 1st graders that the 8th graders would get anything out of. But take an 8th grade class—that has the same range in achievement as a one-room schoolhouse—and because the kids are about the same age, the teacher lectures.

Instead, the teacher needs to think of students as workers: to find different kinds of work the students can do to achieve the goal. For some, it could be an occasional lecture, but for the most part it should be cooperative learning, discussions, videotapes, audiotapes, computers, and so on. I think major parts of the school program could be something like the curriculum of the Scouts where kids, on their own or with two or three other kids, go through a series of tasks to earn merit badges.

All these things are in schools now in various places, but usually not in a single coordinated program.

And, of course, what I'm saying is not new. It was at the heart of the progressive education movement. But previous efforts to bring about reforms of this sort failed, largely because they demanded too much of the individual teacher.

So why should we expect restructuring to succeed this time?

What's different now is that we have technology. The technology not only makes it much easier for the teacher to have different youngsters doing different things; it also makes possible a national communications system for teachers. Teachers won't have to sit up the night before inventing all the activities and materials they'll use the next day, any more than the doctor has to invent all the pills.

Other people will do that, and they'll test them. For the first time, we can have sort of a national peer review

system for different types of learning activities. The teacher will go to that data base and say, "We're getting close to the time of year when I want the kids to learn about the Declaration of Independence." Out will pop a list of the best videotapes, some audiotapes, some questions for a cooperative education group, some readings, some puzzles, and so on.

That's exciting, but how do we get there?

I don't think these reforms can be put into place from on high. The problem with top-down answers is that people who are handed a solution feel that the people doing the handing are saying, "You guys are stupid. You don't understand this. We've thought it out for you. Here."

There's been a lot of that in education in the last 10 to 15 years.

The result is that, whether deliberately or not, the reforms get implemented in a way that ends up distorting them or sabotaging them. Besides, nobody has ever developed a new system that works perfectly the first time. In any organization—in industry, for example—when you change from one approach to another, there is constant trial and error, adjustment and readjustment. And it's the people doing the implementing who have to do that. So, I'm convinced that what we need is definition of goals along with a system of assessment—and then let people at the school level decide how to get it done.

And that will bring the right kinds of changes?

No, that's not enough. If all you do is give people the power to make changes, most of them will change very little. Change is painful.

Which means that there must be incentives. In other words, you need a system of self-renewal—which consists of, first, knowing where you want to go and ways to find out the extent to which you've gotten there. Second, giving people the power to reach the goal. And then, third, you need the fuel in the engine that will make them

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move. You need a broad range of incentives because there is no one incentive that motivates everybody. You need all sorts of things from the joy of doing the job right, to recognition by government and business and by your peers, to financial rewards—all kinds of things.

You meet frequently with people from many different elements of our society. Would the governors who've announced their intent to restructure schools, and would the heads of big corporations who've been very critical of public education, agree with your notions about restructuring, or do they have something quite different in mind?

Quite a few of the governors have some inkling of the kind of system that has to evolve over a period of time. And there are quite a few business people who do, too, because they've gone through huge and fundamental changes themselves—in the number

of staff people working for them, their locations, the kinds of technology they use, and so on. They've had to make a lot of changes over the last 20 or 25 years, and they continue to have to move very quickly. Politicians and business people may not know exactly what the substance of school change should be, but I think they do understand what has to happen.

I've talked with a lot of educators who feel they've been pushed around by state legislators mandating narrow-minded reforms. These educators want no part of whatever reforms the state people have in mind for them. But maybe we've been through that. Maybe the governors and state legislators now see that more required courses and a tighter testing program won't do it. Maybe they're ready for more far-reaching reforms.

I wouldn't go that far. I'd say we're at a crossroads, and we can go in one of two directions. First of all, let me say that the first wave of reform—which was almost all regulatory—was very understandable. I mean, why did legislatures have to pass laws saying that kids ought to take three or four years of English? Or that they need to take mathematics or science? Instead of screaming about interference by politicians, we educators ought to ask ourselves how we expected the American people to spend 200 billion dollars for schools in which kids could take all sorts of alternative courses just so they could have fun. If I had to side with the schools or the legislators in that first round, I'd side with the legislators.

But now things are different?

Well, maybe. I don't think that legislators have necessarily decided that top-down changes don't work. We're going to get some big changes. The question is how it will happen.

One possibility is that educators themselves will see that—even though a lot of kids are going to college and so on—schools are not functioning very well. It's a lot like the federal deficit. Not only doesn't it hurt while you're going through it—it feels good—but

you're living beyond your means, and eventually, you're going to pay for it. Lots and lots of kids are going to college—more than in any other country in the world—but they're entering with less, and they're leaving with less.

Educators may realize that and act on their own.

Yes, but there's another good possibility. We've got the Chelseas with John Silber, we've got Chicago with hundreds of school-level boards of education; we've got New York City rumbling about going to a much larger number of districts with parental control. We have new state educational bankruptcy procedures. We've had more talk lately about vouchers and tax credits, not at the federal level, but at state and local levels. So one good possibility is that the states will say, "All right, we can't force those school people down there to do anything, but we can put people in control at the local level and let the local people knock the stuffing out of them."

That's one way to get change if you can't get it more directly.

It's a nasty, negative version of accountability. It comes when legislators don't know what to do and they know they don't know what to do. The choice movement has an element of that: if you're really lousy, you lose all your customers, and we close up your place.

But what I think ought to happen is for the education profession to take hold of itself and say, "Our country will no longer tolerate the results we're getting." We've got to turn to the public, not with a set of answers and instant solutions, but with a self-renewal process. We should be saying, "Look, we're going to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit. We've got goals which are agreed upon and worthwhile. We've got a better way to measure them. And we're going to experiment with incentives—because we really don't know much about incentives."

Let me ask about that. You're convinced that incentives are an essen-

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tial ingredient in restructuring, but I think there's much more support for an incentives approach outside the profession than inside it. Educators tend to be very egalitarian in their orientation. Are AFT members as ready as you are to support the kinds of changes you're talking about?

Well, how many AFT members supported collective bargaining in 1960? That's a function of leadership. If you ask teachers—whether AFT members or not—how many would like to have a system where there are clearly defined goals, where local educators have the right to manage the school, where after four or five years there are rewards and perhaps punishments, very few of them would.

On the other hand, if you said, "Remember, things can't stay the same. You either get a system like that, or you get takeovers by John Silber in Massachusetts or parents in Chicago, or tax credits, or bankruptcy proceedings, or something else." Now, I've asked that question across

the country, and I find that about 50 percent are ready to go for an incentive system right away. It's not a question of maintaining the status quo. It's "What direction shall we move?"

But, without a forced choice like that, what kinds of changes do you find the most support for?

Well, all the polls show that not only teachers but lots of school board members and administrators still basically think in terms of smaller class size, higher salaries, and a little more time for professional development.

Let's turn to what restructuring means for relationships between teachers and principals. Does "teacher empowerment" mean less power for principals?

Not the way I use it. I'm a leader of an organization, and a fairly strong leader. I don't like chaos and anarchy, and I don't think that things happen by just turning them over to committees. In my view, teacher empowerment does not mean "You've got this power and I want it, so I'm going to take it from you." One example of empowerment I like to use is the Holweide School in Cologne, Germany,¹ where teachers function in teams of seven, and they stay with the kids for six years. Those teachers have the power to set the schedule (there are no bells). They have the power to re-group kids from class to class within that team of teachers. They have the power to select materials. In other words, they are empowered to make adjustments and changes for the students within their group that are necessary to reach their goals.

Now, have they taken power away from somebody else? Well, there may be principals who want each teacher to have to ask permission to move a kid from her authority to the authority of the teacher next door. So there are some shifts of that sort. It may well be that when we're finished—just as in business and other institutions—we'll have fewer people working in offices at some distance from kids. Does that mean that there'll be fewer people working in leadership and administra-

tive and professional positions? No—but they will be working closer to the scene of the action. As a matter of fact, the whole notion of differentiation means that, within each team, there will be some top-quality people who know about organization and materials and training of new people. Well, those are the people we now call principals, assistant principals, curriculum people, and so forth.

You're saying such people will continue to be needed?

Let's look at it this way. Suppose we had a national competition in which schools could win recognition and other things—maybe a huge sum of money—after five years for improving the functioning of their youngsters. And suppose we didn't tell them whether they had to have a principal or not. So they would sit down and say, "We're a team, and we're in competition for big stakes. Now, how do we organize ourselves?" Somebody says, "Let's all be equal." Somebody else says, "That would mean we'd have to come in here at six o'clock every morning and discuss every damn thing; I don't want to waste my time on that. We'd better designate some individual or group to make those decisions." In other words, if you didn't have the system we have right now, it would get reinvented.

The difference might be that the delegation of power would come not from above but from the group.

In any case, power has to have legitimacy, or it doesn't work. So right now the principal may have substantial power to do certain things. But any principal worth his or her salt immediately asks, "If I do that, what are the consequences?" I don't see what I'm suggesting as being much different. I like to think of the empowerment thing as similar to what's happened to me since I started as a teacher: I'd go down to the union office in the afternoon to run the mimeograph machine and stuff envelopes. Well, in the course of my career, lots of people have taken over the jobs I used to do, and I've gone on to do things that are more interesting. The same thing can happen to all the

people who are now in leadership positions in schools and who have valuable qualities that the school needs.

From what you've said, I gather you're in favor of the current trend to school-based management.

I'm in favor of school-based management the way I'm in favor of choice. If you really have different schools, then it makes sense to give parents a choice among them. But choice, in and of itself, is not going to create a new system. And school-based management can result in having exactly the same schools we have right now. It's a necessary but not sufficient condition for change. If you deregulate the center, you take the brakes off the vehicle. But that doesn't move the vehicle; for propulsion you've got to have incentives.

Speaking of rules as brakes on a vehicle, schools in some parts of the country are restricted from making changes at least as much by provisions of negotiated contracts as they are by district bureaucracy. If union contracts impede flexibility at the local level, will unions be willing to give them up?

You need a broad range of incentives because there is no one incentive that motivates everybody.

Well, a contract is a reflection of a system that's already based on rules and hierarchy. With collective bargaining, we're simply saying, "If you're going to impose regulations, we're going to make sure they're jointly arrived at and fairly enforced. However, as you move toward a system where faculties and schools have greater power, you not only have to lift the school board regulations, you also have to lift union regulations."

Do you see a trend toward contracts that remove such regulations?

No, but I do see a trend toward contracts with procedures that enable teachers in a school to remove them. And I think that's a good step.

You're saying the rules remain in effect in other schools, but in this school, because it's trying something new, we dispense with them?

Yes, it might be that if a school wants to lift a certain regulation, the principal goes to the school board and the union building rep goes to the union to ask that it be lifted. There's still a lot of fear that if we get rid of the union contract provisions—or the district regulations—who knows what the next school board, or the next principal, or the next superintendent, or the next union leader—will do. So everybody is careful about what they're willing permanently to give up.

You have a vision of what a restructured school might be like; not a detailed blueprint, but at least some general outlines. But individuals working in schools—teachers and principals—are blocked by so many obstacles that they may not know where to start. What do you suggest?

As long as the current system exists, in which there are no incentives for the overwhelming majority of educators to put in the time and effort and struggle and conflict that's necessary, I would say that if you've got some ideas, pull together a group of like-minded people. Ask for a corner of the school. See if you can sell the idea to some parents and some students. Do

not announce that you have a magic bullet which is the answer to everything because, one, you don't, so you'll probably be disappointed. Two, you'll get everybody against you—because if you do have the magic bullet, it means they're doing things wrong. View yourselves as a group that's experimenting with something different. View the experiment as something that's likely to fail. And look for support on that basis.

Let's talk about you for just a minute. Through the years, you've been a fighter for bread-and-butter issues, but now many people see you as an idealist, a thinker, a statesman of education. How did that happen?

Well, I've always been an idealist. I was a follower of Norman Thomas in

the Social Democratic movement in the United States. I was a charter member of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. I joined CORE at the University of Illinois in the 1940s and engaged in interracial sit-ins in movie houses and restaurants. I was at Selma and Montgomery and at every major civil rights march. That's why I became active in the teachers' union—sure, I wanted to improve the lot of teachers, but I also wanted to change the world a little bit.

So it's always been there. It's just that in the '50s and '60s I felt that as long as teachers didn't have a voice and a strong organization, the country and the schools were missing something. There was a second reason, too: seeing the way I was treated when I started teaching, I wondered how any self-respecting person could work in an institution that treated people like that.

But as we've succeeded in bringing more power and status and additional remuneration to teachers, it has become quite clear to me that what I had believed—which is that all you had to do was raise salaries, reduce class size, and reduce authoritarianism—was not the case. I had faith in schools as they are, but now I see they need to be very different. So I don't think my ideals have changed, but I have changed my ideas as to how those ideals can be realized. □

¹See A. Ratzki and A. Fisher, (December 1989/January 1990), "Life in a Restructured School," *Educational Leadership* 47:46-51.

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