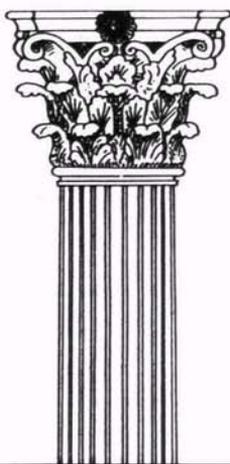
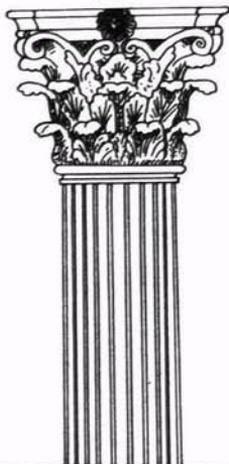


Open Accountability for the '90s: Between the Pillars



From excessive freedom
to excessive control, the
pendulum has swung,
but it's possible to create
a new, balanced
center of change.

Those of us who've been involved with public education for more than two decades have seen significant shifts in the agenda of school reform. We now stand in the midst of two apparently contradictory movements—one entitled "legislative reform" and the other, "empowering reform" (Wise 1988). What appear to be polar opposites, however, under closer scrutiny become complementary frames to guide a new center of change.

A Bounded Center

In an earlier period, school reform legislation was mainly enabling rather than controlling. States gave schools the autonomy to develop their own instructional programs, curriculums, teaching methods, and evaluation systems. Which student data would be reported by schools was largely a local matter. Local control was a sacred cow, not to be tampered with by politicians. In the mid '60s and early '70s, the banner of reform used the operant word *open* to refer to project- and student-centered education. *Diversity, uniqueness, and innovation* were words embedded in school reform. The more recent school reform movement has been categorized as the

era of legislated learning. The banner *academic excellence* has been translated into blue-ribbon commissions, supported by "education" governors who establish laws and regulations about school standards, uniform curriculums, teacher evaluation, promotion and retention policies, and standardized

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data on student achievement. *Accountability* has been the operant word for justifying increased funds for schools and staff. State legislators and state department officials have increasingly controlled both the ends (what data will be used to evaluate schools, teachers, and students) and the means (the curriculums and programs of instruction) of school improvement (Wise 1988).

These two different eras represent educational reforms reflecting either the political left or the political right. As in most generalizations, these characterizations are more nearly true than false; still, there are exceptions to the rule. What is more significant, however, is to acknowledge the successes and failures of both reform movements and to suggest that combining the successes of each period into two fixed frames will create a new balanced movement of the 1990s.

By establishing the two pillars, policymakers might alter the proverbial pendulum swing from one extreme to the other into a new, improved—and wiser—center. Without such a bounded center, reform will continue to swing first toward and then away from excessive freedom and excessive control. The

prior excesses of the open education movement propelled the later emphasis on accountability, and the recent excesses of the accountability movement have propelled a new emphasis on restructuring the schools. It's no accident that the current language of school reform (with words such as *empowerment*, *site-based management*, *career ladders*, and *integrated curriculum*) has hauntingly familiar refrains for those who taught in schools during the open education movement. At that time, the words were *shared governance*, *the school as the center of inquiry*, *differentiated staffing*, and *spiral curriculum*. Further, it's no accident that the language of future reform efforts can be predicted to include such words as *outcome-based instruction*, *mastery teaching*, and *performance appraisal systems*, which re-echo the recent accountability movement that began with *management by objectives*, *behavioral objectives*, and *performance contracting*.

The Signs

Open education arrived in the United States, freely (and a bit enviously) borrowed from the British primary schools, at a time when our federal government was appealing to the social involvement of the baby-boom generation of young adults. Teachers with a social activist bent were actively recruited into education (e.g., from the Teacher Corps, VISTA, the Peace Corps). Schools addressed issues of freedom, relevance, elimination of racial discrimination, and winning the war on poverty. Experimentation with school practice that differed from the conventions of 30 seats, 6 rows, and self-contained classrooms was encouraged. A wave of the politically left youth generation (those who rode the freedom buses, marched against the Vietnam War, and openly questioned the values of the previous generation) made inroads in the schools. The result was a young teaching force that was reshaping schools. In fact, some schools no longer looked like schools: students roamed from room to room and sprawled on the floors, discussing controversial topics with their teachers. Often teachers taught in teams, and many classrooms were without walls. Grades

were eliminated. To the previous generations of adults who remembered schools from their childhood, these new schools had the appearance of chaos.

When schools provided the resources and support to hardworking, committed, and knowledgeable teachers, open education was an operation of awesome beauty. Behind the noise and activity was a purposeful commitment to educating students in the fullest manner of thinking and acting in knowledgeable and ethical ways. The results of student success in some schools were quite remarkable (see Jennings and Nathan 1977). Yet when schools gave teachers autonomy to improvise without support and planning or when teachers were told to innovate with neither the commitment nor the knowledge to study and apply the principles of open education, such operations were disastrous. They resulted in the miseducation of students in its fullest sense—activities without rhyme or reason other than that they were new or fun (Lawrence Cremin [1964] noted that the demise of progressive education schools in the 1930s happened in a similar manner).

When the decline of student performance on nationally standardized tests, particularly SAT scores, began to appear in the media, critics of open education had a field day casting the blame on this new type of experimental schooling. The argument went like this: open education had neglected the basics, was too permissive, and had sacrificed the essential values of Western civilization to meaningless relativism. Simultaneously, in the 1970s, the agenda of the nation was shifting from a predominantly liberal and social agenda to a predominantly conservative and economic one. Once more, the economic downturn in the United States was traced to the schools. Because of open education, the argument went, students lacked the basic skills and knowledge to work, thus the United States had lost its economic competitiveness in the world (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983).

Accountability thus became the central tenet for a return to a traditional conception of schools. Now schools were to show improvement in basic

skills, stop fooling around with course electives and projects, and get back to drill, practice, homework, direct instruction, and serious "time-on-task" schooling. Leaving schools to educators, the reasoning went, had resulted in loss of rigor; the task now was to shape the curriculum and schools through legislated policies. A common core of knowledge was to be taught to all students, and uniform programs and teacher evaluations were to be enforced by state officials. As states mandated via legislation, departments of education became enforcers. At first, teachers and principals screamed about the straitjacket of standardization and top-down control. Later, these screams became whimpers, as it was clear that state legislators, powerful business leaders, and citizens were not sympathetic. Legislation piled upon prior legislation, swamping schools in a pool of regulations. Teachers and principals became passive workers following someone else's orders. Morale among educators plummeted; the loss of flexibility and the loss of respect for the profession were seen as part and parcel of the same problem (Boyer 1988).

In the mid-1980s, reformers had begun to talk seriously and visibly about making teaching a better recognized and remunerated profession in order to attract and keep the best and brightest teachers. At the same time, these reformers were squeezing out any discretionary decision making about curriculum and instruction by those they wished to attract and keep. Finally, in the late 1980s, a turnaround began to occur. The National Governors Association (1988), composed of the majority of "education" governors, said that legislation had gone too far, that it was time to return more decisions to local schools. The National Association of State Boards of Education (1988) issued a report that urged the loosening of state policies, procedures, and curriculum for schools. One of the most heavily legislated states, Florida, released a report about the emerging consensus of state legislators, business leaders, and educators that "state and district policies should reflect greater freedom and accountability at the local

and school level for decision making" (Office on Policy Research and Improvement 1988).

The Two Pillars

We've witnessed two decades of school reform, each characterized by a major pillar undergirding the change efforts within it. We could probably agree that both pillars are essential to guiding the future of public education. In the next decade, choice and responsibility should rest between these pillars.

The decade of social activism and civil rights advocated that education should be built on a foundation of equal access to knowledge. Open education was in large part a delivery system of flexible instruction for adapting to the individual and group needs of students. In its best form, open education provided continuous progress, active interest, and steady achievement for an eclectic, heterogeneous body of students. In its worst form, it became a rationale for depriving some students (those classi-

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fied as "slow," "poor," or "disadvantaged") of equal access and, therefore, teaching them differently, translated as "less." Now, in the 1990s, we can all agree that the concept of *equal access* should be a fundamental pillar—all students will acquire a core body of knowledge basic to citizens of the United States. This goal does not translate into a

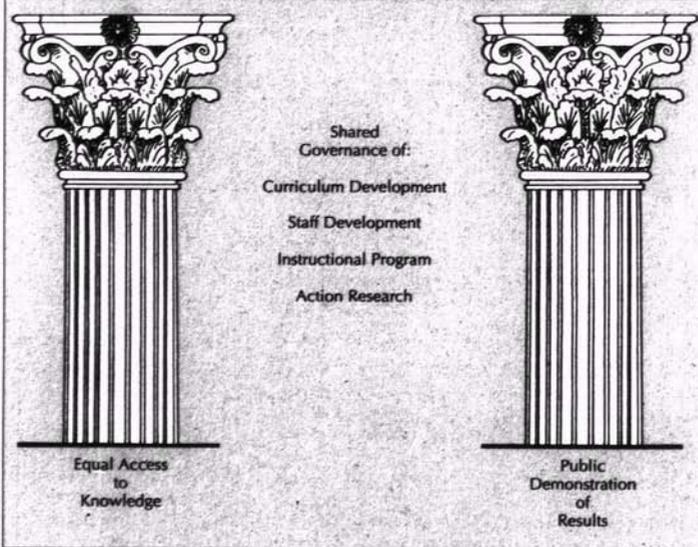
set curriculum of detailed objectives, competencies, materials, and activities but, rather, a core group of understandings that an educated citizen should acquire, encompassing language, communication, literacy, mathematics, science, technology, history, and values.

The second pillar is the legacy of the accountability movement of the 1980s. We may disagree on the importance, validity, or priority of particular data, but who would argue that the schools and the public shouldn't know how their students are doing? To refuse to collect, disseminate, and use data about students' attitudes, achievements, and performances would be irresponsible. So, the second pillar to bound reform in the 1990s is *public demonstration and display of student performance* (see fig. 1).

The Open-Accountable School of the '90s

The two pillars—equal access to knowledge and public demonstration of results—will define the boundaries for the decentralization of decisions about curriculum, delivery of instruction, staff development, and evaluation. Schools operating within these poles have already sprung up across the country; for example, the NEA project (Mastery in Learning), the AFT Project (Research Into Practice Network), The National Network for Educational Renewal, The Coalition of Essential Schools, The Massachusetts Carnegie Commission of Schools, The Georgia Program for School Improvement, Dade County (Fla.) Schools, and Jefferson County (Ky.) Schools. These schools have implemented such ideas as team teaching, teaching less content in a deeper manner, integrating curriculum across discipline areas, portfolio evaluations of students, and nongraded continuous progress. In these settings, the view of professionalism as involving teachers in decisions about their collective work has been embraced through the establishment of shared governance operations and school councils. State departments not only tolerate these schools but encourage them because they operate between the two frames of access and documentation. The states are will-

Fig. 1. School Reform Between the Pillars



ing to lessen control over the means *and* the ends of education for schools that can document their operations between the pillars.

Where We Sit Now

The foundations of the next phase of school reform are set. The state has a vested interest in a common curriculum and in student results. However, as long as a school or a district can demonstrate that it provides equal (nondiscriminatory) access to a common body of knowledge and can demonstrate the results of such efforts in regard to student learning (through, e.g., a narrowing of disparate achievement gains among various groups of students, improved student attitudes, improved attendance, fewer disciplinary actions, reduction in dropout rates, etc.), the state's role will move toward greater freedom and local discretion. Without such demonstrated efforts and results, the state's role will shift toward greater control and centralization.

Of course, there are competing notions of what constitutes a common body of knowledge (Brandt 1988) and of what appropriate results are. These definitions will continue to fuel reform debates as they are negotiated between local districts and state departments. For example, in Vermont, accountability is being defined, in part, as each school's holding a public meeting in the spring to answer questions of townspeople about their schools. In other states, accountability is defined uniformly and narrowly as students' performance on state, criterion-referenced, and nationally normed tests. Similarly, definitions of a common body of knowledge vary from detailed K-12 core curriculums (including the textbooks and materials to use) in some states to broad goals and objectives in others. Hirsch, the author of *Cultural Literacy*, recently suggested that a common curriculum should be taught 50 percent of a school's instructional day (Hitt 1989). Two examples of our northern neighbors are illuminating. In British Columbia, the provincial government requires that at least 25 percent of a school's curriculum be locally developed by teachers. In Nova Scotia, the ministry of education re-



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quires that language and literacy programs *not* be based on basal readers but on real books and magazines and other teacher-chosen materials.

Definitions of common knowledge and important student results are profoundly influential, and each school or district will have to negotiate an agreement with the higher authorities. But, the point is: discretionary activity between the negotiated definitions are allowing for the creation of a new reform movement. "Restructuring" connotes a movement toward open *and* accountable education. Decision making in schools is being released from top-down control and from conventional structures of grouping and teaching students. Curriculum is being expanded from textbook-centered to project-centered. Instructional activities of drill, practice, and competition are being opened to exploration and cooperative learning. Learning within

the traditional four walls of the classroom is being enlarged to learning outside the school walls in community and field sites. The typical arrangement of one teacher with 25 students is being opened to concepts of team teaching, flexible grouping, and lead teachers. *If* we are to take the best from the most recent reform efforts, *then* we could have the best of accountability without the excess of prescriptive legislation and the best of open education without the excesses of laissez-faire attitudes toward student performance.

To Policymakers: Learning from Reform

The improvement of schools must come through the motivation of professionals, which is premised on two dimensions: (1) having the *choice* to make knowledgeable decisions about one's collective work (teaching), and (2) taking the *responsibility* for implementing and accepting the consequences of one's choices (Deci 1975). The open education movement gave educators choice with little responsibility. The accountability movement gave educators responsibility without choice. Earlier, we had freedom without control; recently, we have had control without freedom. The effect of both eras has been to shortchange students.

The message to policymakers (at district, state, and federal levels) is to hold schools accountable for achieving negotiated goals but not to legislate how they are to achieve such results. The first assumption should be that people in schools know and care about their students, their programs, and future possibilities for improvement. Policymakers should ease uniform standards, statewide teacher evaluation systems, and prescriptive curriculum but should not ease equal access to knowledge and documented achievement of goals. Those schools that can't document success should reap the consequences of the use of external systems by higher authorities to ensure high-quality education for students. Those schools that *can* achieve success between the two pillars should be allowed to fly! Only then, in



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the '90s, will we learn about the capabilities of public schools to be truly educative institutions. □

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