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OVERVIEW

CHANGING SCHOOLS—BUT HOW?

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I sometimes wonder if the proponents of school "reform" realize how fervently some educators are working to change schools. Yes, we defend education from what we consider unfair attacks. Maybe that's because some of us are closer to schools than the critics are. We see for ourselves capable and happy students, caring teachers, and provisions for equity and diversity that were unthinkable a few decades ago. We know that American schools continue to initiate young people from many cultures into a variegated but functioning society. We believe any assessment of education should recognize these strengths.

And we also know full well the problems of schools. We recognize that some teachers seem unresponsive, some administrators pig-headed, some students unmotivated, some classrooms stultifying, some practices outmoded. And we welcome promising developments: cooperative learning, instructional technology, more effective teaching strategies, interdisciplinary curriculum, and so on.

I've been in favor of school improvement since my first year of teaching, when I changed seating arrangements in my classroom every five or six weeks, thinking, "There must be a better way." Later I came to realize that a substantially better way would require far more extensive modifications—and that I couldn't achieve them alone.

I have felt that way for some time, so I don't have to be convinced by the latest calls for innovation or restructuring or reform (although I oppose some proposed reforms because I think they are the opposite of what is needed). The question is not whether improvements are needed, but how to achieve them. Successful change in complex organizations depends on mutual trust and cooperation, which take time and patience to develop. If you push too hard or too fast, a good-idea goes down the drain. But as the articles in this issue demonstrate, leaders can, over time, create a culture in which the quest for improvement becomes the norm.

For example, Connie Goldman and Cindy O'Shea (p. 41) recount how a small school district in Maine used participation and goal setting to move—in six years—

from low expectations and even lower morale to active concern for student learning. Involving teachers and parents in setting goals, they say, gave them "the power of being able to explain to others what we wanted to do and what it would take."

Matthew Miles and Karen Seashore Louis (p. 57) agree, based on their four-year study of successful change efforts in urban high schools, that such efforts depend a great deal on *wanting* to do something ("will"). Equally important, though, is *knowing how* to do it ("skill"). Managers of successful change, they report, attend to both.

The really tricky part is that leaders must adapt to the very changes they help bring about, relating to their fellow workers in different ways as conditions change. Tom Sergiovanni (p. 23) traces the evolution of Eggers Middle School in Hammond, Indiana, where Principal Jane Kendrick began with *bartering* but progressed to *building* and then to *bonding*, which Sergiovanni describes as developmental stages of leadership for school improvement.

Terry Deal (p. 6) has another part of the answer. Focusing on that word *culture*, Deal reminds us that culture is concerned with basic values, stories, rituals, symbols. That suggests that leaders can do only so much through training and reorganizing. Deal suggests that we "reach back to our roots" to find perennial values and then "refocus and renegotiate" commitments responsive to today's and tomorrow's needs. "In large measure," Deal contends, "the core problems of schools are not technical but spiritual."

And, he might have said, they are social. Just as I could not remake my school by changing the seating chart, other lonesome educators cannot achieve school improvement all by themselves. A climate for growth depends upon healthy, fertile social relationships. That may explain why trendy managerial techniques sometimes fail: they succeed only when the organizational culture enables educators to break out of their isolation—which in turn releases and sustains their creative spirits. □

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