

The Superintendent

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Chaos and Opportunity

Any changes that have endured have largely been born of chaos. Enduring changes require the reformation of entire networks of interlocking elements, and chaos provides the most fertile source for new structures. Frequently, we try to initiate change gradually by adjusting one factor at a time, but such a process usually fails, because the weight of the unchanged network forces a return to the previous stable state. Change *can* occur gradually, but only if major sections of the cultural network change incrementally, until an entirely new network has been created. An easier way to make fundamental change, however, is to initiate it at a cusp in the organizational life—at a time when the former structure is collapsing in the face of a changed environment or from exhaustion of its own internal energies.

Chaos is a time of both challenge and opportunity. It is frightful to find long-trusted institutions inadequate. As creatures of habit and custom, we resent and resist the natural decay of rigid institutions. We even preserve them in our minds and affections long after they have ceased to be effective in reality. Ultimately, we endow them with the blessings created by nostalgia and pretend that they were more glorious than they ever were. Education is in a period of growing chaos, created by at least three relentless forces: scarce money, widespread dissatisfaction with quality, and public demand for options. As painful as the crisis is, it is a time of opportunity. Caught in the middle of a major problem with educational funding—as are so many districts—I was recently asked an excellent question by a town selectman: "If you had to begin again and build an educational program from the ground up, how would you do it to assure both quality and efficiency?" The ques-

tion is excellent—would that the answers were. The truth is, we've dodged such questions and avoided thinking about wholesale restructuring, preferring to tinker around the edges. I think the elements of possible answers are "out there," but not many of us are throwing a wide net, thinking broadly, and remembering, as Lewis Perelman notes, that "everything is connected to everything else."¹

I wouldn't pretend to offer comprehensive solutions, but I've thought a great deal about the probable criteria for ones that might last. Viable solutions must:

- be cost-effective and therefore likely involve differentiated staffing and extensive use of technologies;
- provide success and nurturing for all students and therefore be outcome-based, use varied strategies that engage

and keep their interest, and provide frequent interaction and remediation;

- address and accommodate changing family and personal needs in areas like day-care, child development, abuse prevention, parental education, flexible family work schedules, and high mobility;

- vitalize, professionalize, and compensate staff to be flexible problem solvers, who assess services and outcomes constantly and adjust them whenever needed;

- involve parents and the community at large as legitimate, constant participants in the decision-making, evaluation, and goal-setting processes;

- foster ongoing collaboration and support among and between educators and learners;

- conduct active, ongoing research on theory and practice and routinely disseminate significant information to internal and external constituents.

Don't look for the solutions to the crisis to come in convenient packages with titles, logos, and workbooks (or computer disks). They will come, if at all, in a metamorphosis of how we do business. Most educational reforms have been perturbations on the face of an unchanging educational sun—sunspots that disrupt the daily routine for a time, then disappear with minimal residue. This time—if we get it right—we may be in for the same kind of paradigm shift that has already restructured science, politics, and sociology—but that has not touched education since Horace Mann acted as its agent. □

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¹L.J. Perelman, (October 1987), *Technology and Transformation of Schools*. (Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association).

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