

# Pretending Not to Know What We Know

The first task of restructuring—confronting our own professional knowledge—is not easy, but it is likely to produce the courage to improve, at least in a few good schools.

*Photograph by Edward A. Wynne*



*Effective teachers are students of their own work—observing, contemplating, and adapting their instruction continually, as each need arises, in order for their students to become skilled learners.*

... [we] can't pretend to not know what is known ...

—Joyce Carol Oates (1989)

**C**alls for the "restructuring" of schools raise questions as to what knowledge should guide our efforts. I've become aware, as a participant in an effort known as The League of Professional Schools, that restructuring needs to begin with confrontation of our own professional

knowledge. For too long, professionals have gone about the business of teaching and operating schools in ways they privately admit are not in the best interests of students. The reasons for doing so are plentiful—we all live with district policies, state regulations, traditional school structures, mandated curriculum alignment, community pressures, and limited resources. Then, too, we can, by pre-

tending not to know what is known, live with dissonance between our internal values and our behavior (Festinger 1957).

Today, as we answer the calls for restructuring, school faculties can begin by opening up their suppressed knowledge, thus creating debate and fostering their own value-driven enthusiasm for "doing the right thing" for students rather than simply for

"doing things right" (Sergiovanni 1991). We have the opportunity to stop pretending not to know.

Let us spend the rest of this essay describing what we know, summarized in 11 statements in 3 categories. (I admit of no higher enlightenment than other educators, and I'm confident that there will be disagreement with my claims.) I will conclude with a discussion about the need for "elite" schools to pioneer a new era of intellectual confrontation. If we don't confront what we know, the rhetoric of innovation-for-its-own-sake will drive the underlying values away; and this reform movement will become another fad to endure for a few years, to be replaced by the next (Slavin 1989).

### Teaching and Learning

Let's begin by looking at what we know about teaching and learning.

1. *Tracking students does not help students.* We know that the evidence shows no benefits are gained by tracking students into ability groups, as shown by Oakes (1985), Slavin (1987, 1990), George (1987), and Garmoran and Berends (1987). Higher-achieving students do not do better when together, and lower-achieving students do much worse when together. Tracking clearly discriminates and clearly perpetuates inequities among students; higher-track students tend to be white, wealthy, and from highly educated families; and lower-track students tend to be black and Hispanic, poor, and from poorly educated families. Students tend to be put into ability groups less on their academic abilities and more as a result of their socioeconomic status. Once assigned to a low track, very few move into higher tracks; and their performance as low achievers becomes self-perpetuating. Consequently, tracking often results in resegregation of students by socioeconomic status and/or race. That may not be the intent, but it is the result.

In responding to these findings, some schools have eliminated or dramatically reduced homogeneous grouping and have eliminated separate classroom programs such as Gifted and Chapter 1. The San Diego schools, for example, no longer have

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remedial education. In British Columbia, a phased-in elimination of tracking or "streaming" (through the 11th year of schooling) has begun, leaving tracking for the last two years, when students will specialize in vocational or college-bound programs.

But in many places tracking continues even when the evidence is overwhelmingly against it. Perhaps it benefits a few individual students and placates some parents; but more often tracking continues because it's easier to manage classrooms and schools when the range of abilities is restricted rather than if they are expansive and students need to be taught in multiple ways. Recently, the National Education Association (1990) and the Quality Education for Minorities Network (Henry 1990), as well as the National Governors' Association (1990), have asked for the elimination of ability grouping in the United States.

2. *Retention does not help students.* Thomas Holmes (1990, p. 28), in an update of his classic meta-analysis of studies comparing the education of students who were retained with students of comparable achievement and maturity who were promoted, concluded that in longitudinal studies "... retained students were no better off in relation to their younger at-risk controls who went on immediately to the next grade."

In the past 15 years, study after study has shown rather conclusively that there is little benefit of retention (Shepard and Smith 1989). Students retained one year have only a 50 percent chance of graduating, and students retained twice

have little if any chance to graduate (Gastright 1989). It stands to reason that a student who starts high school at the age of 16 is not going to stay in school until he or she is 20.

As Holmes (1990) concluded, "Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so *despite* [italics mine] the cumulative research evidence" (p. 78). The task of schools is not to sort and thwart students but instead to assist them to move along from year to year with the knowledge, concepts, and skills which allow them to graduate in 12 years with the prerequisites to be productive citizens.

3. *Corporal punishment does not help students.* As one who spent his earlier years as a researcher on the effects of various discipline approaches and continues to keep up on this literature, I find no research that shows any long-term benefits from paddling students. In fact, there is research (The Fifteen Thousand Hours Study, Rutter et al. 1979) that shows the least successful schools are the most punitive. At its best, what corporal punishment does is make students comply out of fear, become subversive in their misbehavior, and learn the lesson that physical might is the way to resolve problems. At the worst, the students who are big enough simply rebel and physically attack back.

Schools and states that eliminate corporal punishment are helping students to learn self-control. Still, 31 states allow corporal punishment, and more than 1.1 million paddlings are administered in a year (White 1990). The United States is one of the few countries remaining in the world where corporal punishment is still practiced.

4. *Students learn from real activities.* In a century of public schools, little structural change has occurred in classroom teaching (Cuban 1984). The majority of classroom time is spent on teachers lecturing, students listening, students reading textbooks, or students filling out work sheets. To observe classrooms now is to observe them 50 years ago: a teacher standing and talking, students sitting and daydreaming (Goodlad 1984, p. 105). Perhaps the last real structural change occurred when the desks were unbolted.

Yet we know that real projects, with primary sources, real problems to solve, and real discussions show dramatic and significant gains in student achievement and motivation (see Slavin and Madden's [1989] summary of instructional approaches and Brophy 1987). Teachers need to learn multiple ways of teaching students that engage their minds, their bodies, and their souls (Joyce 1990). Teachers need to think about how students think, listen to students describe what helps them learn, and share with their colleagues activities and methods that get closer to active learning.

**5. Effective teaching is not a set of generic practices, but instead is a set of context-driven decisions about teaching.** Effective teachers do not use the same set of practices for every lesson (Porter and Brophy 1988). They do not—as mindless automatons—review the previous day's lessons, state their objectives, present, demonstrate, model, check for understanding, provide guided practice, and use closure. Instead, what effective teachers do is constantly reflect about their work, observe whether students are learning or not, and then adjust their practices accordingly.

Effective teaching, then, is a set of decisions about the use of a variety of classroom materials and methods used to achieve certain learning goals. Researchers and theorists from Madeline Hunter, to Barak Rosenshine, to David Berliner, to Jere Brophy have disclaimed any responsibility for the application of their own research as simple-minded prescriptions of uniform criteria for monitoring and evaluating teachers. Such prescriptions are driven by psychometricians looking for objectivity and reliability. The problem is that such concepts of teaching are divorced from reality, simply not valid (see Darling-Hammond, in press).

**6. There is nothing inherently sacred about Carnegie units, classroom size, and grade levels!** A leading school reformer, Phil Schlechty (1990a), has expressed what we know about this eloquently, as follows:

There are, at present, a number of structural elements in schools that preclude flexibility in the allocation of human resources. Chief among these are the concepts of *school class*,

*grade level*, and the *Carnegie unit* in high school. . . . Arranging schools in classes and classrooms, and grouping children by age or ability or sex or any other characteristic, represents only a few of the possibilities for grouping children for schoolwork. One could just as well group children according to the tasks that must be performed to carry out a particular piece of schoolwork or according to any of a number of other grouping arrangements one might conceive. The Carnegie unit is another convention. Invented primarily as a means of satisfying the interest of higher education in having a basis for judging college preparedness among youth, the Carnegie unit became a standard measure in American education just as the pound, the quart, and the inch are standard measures in American commerce.

The problem with these conventions is not that they exist. . . . The problem arises when upholding the convention becomes an end in itself (pp. 64–65).

Slechty explains that alternatives to these conventions are not necessarily better but they might be. The point is we'll never know unless we try.

### Teachers and Work Conditions

Now let's move on to what we know about teachers.

**7. Outstanding teachers do not teach for external incentives but for the pleasure of seeing the effects of their decisions on students.** Incentives, career ladders, and merit pay plans are not inducements for great teachers. Garret Keizer (1988) wrote about receiving the Star Teacher of the Year:

Last year my freshman student Jessica Davis took a first prize of a thousand dollars in the Honors Competition for Excellence in Writing. I taught composition in Jessica's English class, and when we learned of her candidacy, I gave her extra coaching outside of class, which she graciously acknowledged in the newspaper articles about her. But the fact is, I did not make Jessica Davis a good writer. Somewhere on the scale of merit between me and God are at least eight elementary and middle school teachers. . . .

Another teacher, who works in a local elementary school, starts her summer by tearing up every note, exercise, and handouts that she has used the preceding year. In the fall, she will begin from scratch. Just the thought that I might be forced by theft or fire to adopt this woman's standards makes me light-headed. How does one quantify that kind of integrity?

As I write, one of our 1st grade teachers is adjusting the last hem of the authentic Pilgrim costumes she has sewn for every student in her class. A girl so poor that she

has on occasion come to school without underwear stands smoothing down the folds of her long dress in wonderment. "See my dress!" she calls out to the visitor. It may be the cleanest, newest, handsomest thing she has ever worn—this garment of another age's austerity. How many hours this teacher must have spent at home behind a sewing machine—how many seconds will it take to punch her dedication into someone's business-model, performance-oriented, incentive-based, computerized version of how schools ought to run (pp. 117–119).

After interviewing and studying outstanding teachers of the past 50 years, Duval (1990) concluded that these teachers spent up to \$2,000 a year out of their own pockets for supplies, materials, and trips for students. He wrote:

This group of teachers spent their own money knowingly and for maximum effect . . . being able to secure materials, services, and other things of use . . . without having to go through a tiring, tedious bureaucratic process is something prized by all of the excellent teachers (p. 192).

Eliot Wigginton, past Teacher of the Year in Georgia and founder of the renowned Foxfire program, wrote this:

I am a public high school English teacher. Occasionally, on gloomy nights, my mood shifts in subtle ways, and familiar questions rise in my throat; in social situations, confronted by those whose lives seem somehow more dramatic, an implication in the air is that I will have little of interest to contribute to the conversation; many people with fewer years of formal education make more money. Then the mood passes, for I know that surface appearance is deceitful and salary is a bogus yardstick of worth.

Actually, if the truth be told, it is only rarely that I wonder why I am still teaching. I know why. I teach because it is something I do well; it is a craft I enjoy and am intrigued by; there is room within its certain boundaries for infinite variety and flexibility of approach, and so if I become bored or my work becomes routine, I have no one to blame but myself; and unlike other jobs I could have, I sometimes receive indications that I am making a difference in the quality of people's lives. That, and one more thing: I genuinely enjoy daily contact with the majority of the people with whom I work (Wigginton 1985, Intro.).

So what do we know about what motivates excellent teachers? We know that it has to do with discretion and control over resources, time, instructional materials, and teaching strate-

gies so as to make better educational decisions.

How have we responded to what we know, over the past 17 years? It is amazing that in 1991, with the technology available to us, most teachers have to wait in line in the school office to make a phone call to a parent. What other professional is left without a phone in his or her work station? At a time where personal computers are essential to almost every knowledgeable worker, teachers don't even have phones! Instead, 96 percent of teachers spend an average of \$250 per year of their own money on teaching supplies because they lack control over the teaching budget. What's more, the recent Carnegie Foundation study (1990) found more than 70 percent of all teachers in the U.S. are not involved deeply in decisions about curriculum, staff development, grouping of students, promotion and retention policies, or school budgets.

### School Improvement

Now let's look at what we know about improving schools.

8. *Teacher evaluation does not relate to schoolwide instructional improvement.* The evaluation boondoggle has been perhaps the greatest robbery of educational resources in our times. There is little research that establishes a clear link between the amount and type of teacher evaluation with the attainment of schoolwide priorities. Yet policymakers have poured millions of dollars into evaluation systems while ignoring the daily support needs of teachers.

Blankenship and Irvine (1985) found, for example, that a majority of all experienced teachers in Georgia had never been observed, given feedback, or had a conference focused on thinking critically about ways to improve teaching. Throughout their careers, all classroom visits by observers were for the purpose of being judged and rated. Furthermore, 90 percent of teachers had never had a chance to observe a peer teacher and discuss what they could learn from each other. The lack of helpful and supportive assistance has been underscored by conclusions of The Fifteen Thousand Hours Study:



*A steady diet of listening to lectures and filling in work sheets is an invitation for students to daydream, but real activities, lively discussions, and problems to solve can stimulate their minds and promote higher-level thinking and productive interaction among peers.*

It was striking, however, that in the less successful schools teachers were often left completely alone to plan what to teach, with little guidance or supervision from their . . . colleagues and little coordination with other teachers to ensure a coherent course from year to year (Rutter et al. 1979, p. 136).

Uniform systems of teacher evaluation have cost millions of dollars and millions of hours—and for what? To rid the profession of fewer than 2 percent of our teachers. Imagine what could happen if the bulk of that money and time were reshifted to help competent teachers become even more thoughtful and skillful in the craft and art of teaching through peer coaching, group problem-solving sessions, curriculum work, staff development, and clinical supervision.

Teacher evaluation may be a necessary control function of an organization; but it improves a school *only* when the majority of people border on incompetence—they either shape up or get out. Most of our schools do not employ a majority of incompetent people; rather, we employ people who could use more help and assistance to think through the long-term and short-term decisions they are making on behalf of students.

9. *The principal of a successful school is not the instructional leader but the coordinator of teachers as instructional leaders.* The arrogance by which the education community has embraced the concept of "principal as instructional leader" is mind-boggling. We really want to believe—as my friend Ed Pajak (1985) suggests—in the principal as Rambo, leading a school up the path of glory. This concept—the principal as all knowing, all wise, and transcendent in vision, who can lead the staff development council and the curriculum council, be an expert on group facilitation and organizational change, can spend 50 percent of his or her time in classrooms with uncanny analytical and conferencing abilities, deal with all manner of students, staff, parents, and communities, plus fill out all necessary forms, run all the schedules, and take care of the maintaining the air conditioner and furnace—this is an incomprehensible idea for supporting school reform.

Let me express what we all know about powerful, successful schools. In such schools, the people who are seen as most credible with the greatest expertise about teaching and learning

Photograph by Harriet Sutherland

are the teachers themselves. There are teachers in our schools who are beyond those of us in formal leadership positions in their knowledge, skills, and applications of curriculum and instruction. In successful schools, principals aren't threatened by the wisdom of others; instead, they cherish it by distributing leadership. The principal of successful schools is not the instructional leader but the educational leader who mobilizes the expertise, talent, and care of others. He or she is the person who symbolizes, supports, distributes, and coordinates the work of teachers as instructional leaders (see Chubb and Moe 1990, p. 86).

*10. Successful schools don't work off prescriptive lists; they work off professional judgments!* Roland Barth, in his 1990 book *Improving Schools from Within*, says that:

Our public schools have come to be dominated and driven by a conception of educational improvement that might be called *list logic*. The assumption of many outside of schools seems to be that if they can create lists of desirable school characteristics, if they can only be clear enough about directives and regulations, then these things will happen in schools. . . . The vivid lack of congruence between the way schools are and the way others' lists would have them be cause most school people to feel overwhelmed, insulted, and inadequate—hardly building blocks for improving schools or professional relationships. . . . Moreover, I doubt that we would find that many teachers, principals, and students in high-achieving schools comply closely with anybody's list. As Ronald Edmonds often said, we know far more about the features that characterize an effective school than we know about how a school becomes effective in the first place. Why, then, do we try to force schools we do not like to resemble those we do like by employing means that have little to do with the evolution of the kind of schools we like? (Barth 1990, pp. 37-40).

*11. The measure of school worth is not how students score on standardized achievement tests but rather the learning they can display in authentic or real settings.* The fixation with test scores has recently come under a storm of criticism. George Hanford, past president of the College Board (which is the developer of the Scholastic Aptitude Test), wrote that the scores produced by tests exude "an aura of precision out of proportion to their significance, which in turn fos-

ters an unsuitable reliance on them, to the exclusion or neglect of other indicators that are equally important and useful" (Hanford 1986, p. 9).

It is not that standardized tests are useless. They do provide a source of information about what groups of students know. How much weight should be put on that source of knowledge, rather than other sources of knowledge, is the issue of dispute. Wise (1988) warns, "Many schools no longer teach reading, they teach reading skills; no longer do they teach important reading skills; instead, they teach only reading skills measured on the achievement tests."

The task force on education of the National Governors' Association states that:

The present system requires too many teachers who focus "largely on the mastery of discrete, low-level skills and isolated facts. . . . By doing so. . . the system denies opportunities for students to master subject matter in depth, learn more complex problem solving skills, or apply the skills they do learn. (Henry 1990, IE, p. IA).

The task force goes on to say that top priority needs to be given "to developing new tools for assessing student performance" and "that portfolios, essays, or other open-ended problems that require students to synthesize, integrate, and apply knowledge and data need to be developed as alternatives to the exclusive use of conventional multiple-choice tests" (Henry 1990, 8A).

This indeed is the rationale for why such states and provinces as California, Connecticut, Utah, Vermont, and British Columbia, and such school districts as Dade County, Florida, and Rochester, New York, have employed teams of teachers to develop alternative assessments (Wiggins 1989) and have moved to eliminate or severely reduce the use of standardized tests. This also is the reason that, as part of the Coalition of Essential Schools, many public high schools are developing new performance exhibits to replace Carnegie units and basic skill tests for graduation requirements.

#### **What Do We Do With What We Know?**

These 11 statements are my views of what we know—schools might de-

velop different statements. My point is that we must confront our knowledge and use it to guide our efforts; then we must operate our schools in different ways, using our knowledge. We ask our districts and states to pilot new teacher evaluation and supervision systems. We ask to develop new assessment measures, create new curriculum, new grading and grouping organizations, new discipline and management systems, and our own staff development plans. We ask that teachers be given equal voice in all decisions about teaching and learning, and we include parents and students as participants in such discussions. Above all, we ask that the school be the center for professional decisions where teachers and administrators control the priorities and means of helping students to learn.

Beginning now, we ask that existing resources be reallocated to the school level to assist us. In those districts and states where schools are being given the power to change themselves, most of the money that previously went into centralized and controlling functions are now being reallocated to the local school. Instead of having curriculum specialists at the central office, teachers are given extended contracts to do curriculum work. Instead of having central office supervisors, teachers are given released time to function in master, mentor, and coaching roles. Instead of staff developers, teachers and administrators are given time to plan their own staff development. Instead of following a state or district formula of funding per classroom size, faculties are rethinking the roles of teachers, counselors, administrators, and specialists. (For example, rather than hire another teacher for 25 students, a school might hire three paraprofessionals; rather than replace an assistant principal, a school might use the money for a part-time bookkeeper and use the balance for specialized group work for students.)

Basically, the idea is to flatten and streamline centralized bureaucracies and redistribute the curriculum, staff development, personnel, and administrative budgets to the schools. In Dade County, as site-based management and shared governance increased to more

than 100 schools in 3 years, the central office has been dramatically reduced, with the salaries and budgets reallocated to the local schools. Thus, decentralized school-based initiatives can expect to expend no greater amount of money but to increase the amount of state and district monies going directly into schools to support instructional services to faculty and students.

In many cases where districts are small, we are not going to reduce our central office positions. Instead, the monies that central office controls will need to be rethought. The point is, if we are serious about the school's being the unit of change and if we are serious that the time has come for teachers to make decisions about their professional work of teaching and learning, then the current organizations of centralized control, monitoring, and distribution of money need to be changed. And this is why, initially we need to think of this reform movement as one dealing with elite schools only.

### The Elite—A Few Good Schools

The decentralization, deregulation, site-based, empowerment movement is on the right track because it uses what we know. But ultimately it will be right only if the quality of education improves, and the quality of education will not improve if we don't first move with "elite" schools.

By *elite*, I don't mean schools that are necessarily rich or poor, suburban, urban, or rural. I don't mean schools where all students have high IQs or all teachers have advanced degrees. Instead, elite schools are places where central office people, building administrators, and teachers trust each other to share in decisions about teaching and learning. Elite schools are places where those with formal leadership responsibilities know, as Schlechy has remarked, "In democratic environments power is achieved by giving it away rather than struggling for more" (1990b).

So, elite schools are those where the faculty wants to share in the choice and responsibilities of schoolwide decisions and where administrators

and supervisors likewise want them to share—my caution is that there are few such schools in the nation, perhaps 10 to 20 percent. In most places, each party is suspicious of the other, and people fight to protect their own domains. The leaders think that to empower teachers will lead to anarchy and evil, and most of the teachers think that administrators and supervisors who talk about empowerment are giving paternalistic lip service to listening to their suggestions rather than truly sitting with them as co-equals in real decisions.

So for teachers, schools, and central offices who don't see this chance to deregulate and decentralize as an opportunity for students but instead see it as a threat to current jobs—and it is a threat to many of our jobs as we currently function—they should not get involved, nor should they be forced to operate in such a manner. All of our current legislation and centralized monitoring should continue to direct them. These schools and districts should sit on the sidelines and watch what elite schools can do for and with kids. Only then will we discover whether those schools willing to use what they know can usher in a far better future for students, educators, and public education. □

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*Author's note:* This article is an adaptation of two previous presentations: the 1990 Johnyee V. Cox Distinguished Lecture (Athens, Ga.) and a 1991 ASCD Annual Conference Assembly (San Francisco, Calif.).

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**Graduate Credit: \$150 for 3 graduate quarter credits.** Make payment directly to Antioch University at Atlanta Hills, n. \$45 daily, single or double room (404) 639-2000

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