THE IMPORTANT DISTRICT ROLE IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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Background

The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education provides the most recent confirmation of a growing national uneasiness about the state of American public education. Describing the present public educational system as drowning in "a rising tide of mediocrity," the report implies that no one has been "attending the shop" and that we (eduators, parents, taxpayers, students) must now implement a series of reforms to ensure that our educational system will once again prosper. The Commission even gives us guidance in selecting the appropriate strategies to follow, including: upgrading text books, lengthening the school day and year, more homework, and higher teacher pay.

To those of us who have been working in education or observing the national education scene since its reaction to Sputnik in 1957, this has a familiar ring. As we recall, Sputnik supposedly shook the American educational establishment out of its "progressive educational" dream world and brought it back to the realities of upgraded textbooks, lengthened school days, more homework, and higher teacher pay. And if we continue to follow educational history through the 1960's and 1970's we find a continued emphasis on basic skills through such programs as Head Start and Follow-Through.

For the past 20 years America has indeed focused its attention on schools and has poured considerable amounts of material resources into its schooling system* even though the commitment may have lagged a bit in recent years due to runaway inflation and a sluggish economy.

*David Tyack states that from 1958 to 1975, the "Federal government's role in education grew to include 66 categorical programs while California alone initiated 58 reform initiatives" (Tyack, Krist, & Hansot, 1980, p. 259).

Our basic thesis can be stated thus: the American people have not been ignoring their schools nor have they or those who work in the schools ever abandoned their concern for a quality system. If the schools have not improved substantially in spite of continuous reform attempts, it is because many of the strategies designed to improve the schools have been unrealistic -- they have not adequately accounted for the complexities and dynamics of the schools as they actually function.

As we review educational reform efforts over the last few decades we can divide them into two categories. In one set are what we will call targeted reforms (focusing on one component of schooling); in the other set are what we will call school site reforms (focusing on schools as cultures, with linked sub-components). We argue that the targeted reforms, no matter what their specific content, have had very limited success in accomplishing the intended goal of improving the quality of education. The school-site reforms, we believe, have been more successful. However, their potential impact has been blunted because an essential supporting element -- the school district -- has not been adequately mobilized.

The point of view expressed in this article is that the school district, which we define to include the central office staff and the school board, has been a neglected actor in the school reform movement. We believe that the district structure has the potential for being an empowering agency for constructive system-wide change but in recent years has not been so recognized or encouraged. To support our thesis, we will first look at some targeted reforms that have had limited impact, then explore the relative strengths and weaknesses of school site solutions, and

finally, from our research, describe how well-managed districts can encourage and support good schools.

Targeted reforms include legislated and funded changes that attempt to improve schools by focusing on only one component of schooling, for example, teachers, curricula, school management, student outcomes. Examples of such targeted reforms include: changing teacher and administrator credential requirements, mandating more homework, requiring standardized testing, installing accountability schemes. The flaw with these well-intended target solutions, no matter how appealing they are to common sense or how well-supported by research, is that they do not begin to address the multi-faceted systemic characteristics of public schools. Over the years, many of these changes introduced into our vast, complex system have disappeared without a trace or they have been effectively sabotaged. Procedures that appear to be dynamic in conception have become symbolic bureaucratic exercises in operation. Perhaps an example of California's attempt to improve its teachers will help to illustrate our point.

In the early 1970's, with great fanfare, California introduced a teacher accountability scheme embodied in the Stull Act. The quality of classroom teaching was going to improve because each school district would be required to establish a procedure whereby principals or other teacher supervisors would meet periodically to evaluate each teacher. Unique to the Stull Act was the idea that teachers' evaluations should be based on student learning. No more would teacher evaluations be based on irrelevancies such as the neatness of their bulletin boards or the pleasantness of their personalities; or on the subjectivity of principals' judgments.

Teachers whose pupils did not make expected gains were, by definition, teachers in need of assistance. Presumably, if the teacher's pupils remained resistant to learning, he or she could be dismissed for incompetency.

Now, after more than a decade, it is apparent that the Stull Act has not had its anticipated beneficial impact. In district after district the Act has been diverted into a routine set of *pro forma* paperwork exercises. Teachers talk about being "Stulled," a process to be endured if it cannot be avoided. With hindsight, several flaws in the Act's provisions are self-evident. Its modified Management By Objectives (MBO) approach carried only sanctions -- no rewards. If a teacher's students performed satisfactorily, everything stayed the same. If a teacher's students did not, he or she was ultimately subject to dismissal. The Act implied that student learning outcomes were primarily the result of adequate or inadequate classroom instruction. Teachers knew this to be an unfair assumption about the power of teaching and teachers. They knew that myriad influences outside the classroom, e.g., home life, peers, nutrition, language, transiency, affect each student's learning and the collective learning of the entire classroom. Finally, the legislation was based on an erroneous belief that there were valid, reliable measures that could accurately assess student learning. These major conceptual flaws were compounded by problems in execution. When the Stull Act became law, it became apparent that few principals or supervisors could provide instructional supervision and assistance to teachers in the different subjects taught. Is it any wonder that principals and teachers immediately began to subvert such an an unworkable reform, even one with honorable intentions?

While complying with the letter of the law, they violated the spirit. Teachers set instructional objectives knowing that their students would very likely achieve them. Principals tacitly went along with the charade. And, to no one's surprise, students for the most part achieved the objectives as they had been written. The prevailing perception among school people, then, is that the Stull Act has had little positive impact in improving California's schools. But everyone knows that it has generated an annual flurry of paperwork absorbant of time and energy which might be better spent elsewhere.

We could provide other examples of targeted reforms. Most of the educational fads of the 60's and '70's were of this type: e.g., the push for better curricular materials, the swing to open learning centers, the expectation that differentiated staffing might work. Our point is that targeted reforms haven't worked in the past and they are unlikely to work in the future because they do not take into account the realities of public schooling as complex, dynamic, decoupled systems.

School site solutions. Educators and legislators, stung by these failures, have begun to formulate more sophisticated approaches to educational reform based on the view that the school site is a culture whose subcomponents are linked to one another. Reform then becomes an ongoing annual process whereby the principal, teaching staff, and community work together towards assessing the school's needs, determining appropriate solutions, and implementing and evaluating the results.

Among the early research into this site-specific problem-solving process was the I/D/E/A study in educational change sponsored by the Kettering

Foundation. Between 1967 and 1972, 18 elementary schools formed a self-help "League of Cooperating Schools" (Bentzen, 1974). Each school, bolstered by a core group of League-affiliated university consultants and by support from one another, undertook self-initiated reform. Over a five-year period of time, some of those schools showed remarkable courage -- transforming themselves from dull routine places into dynamic, exciting learning environments alive with new ideas and programs.

Subsequently, several state and national educational programs have utilized a similar school site approach, e.g., ESEA Title I, PL 94-142, and California's School Improvement Program (SIP). California's 1977 SIP program required that schools organize school advisory councils to plan and implement educational programs based on documented assessments of need. SIP provided funding for start-up and for implementation. Recent studies have shown that, even allowing for the wide variations in how schools carried out the planning process and used the needs surveys, school improvement has indeed occurred (Berman, 1982).

School site action planning has been an attractive model for educational reform. It takes into account the unique characteristics of individual schools and gives major actors such as the principal, teachers, parents and, in secondary schools, students ownership of the process. It is a mechanism whereby schools address their own needs in their own ways. Thus, a school where children have reading problems can marshal its resources and energies to address that need; the school across town concerned about drug use can direct its attention and funds to that problem.

We applaud the various school site reform strategies. They are vastly more realistic than targeted reforms. But we believe that the school site model also has limitations. Our main concern is that it ignores the pressures on the school coming from the larger social and political environment. It assumes that schools need no buffering agency nor any ongoing support structure outside themselves. It assumes that they are in charge of the major aspects of their own governance.

But individual schools have limited control over the size of their enrollments and of their budgets. The former is influenced by population trends, the latter by legislative actions. School managers have only limited power to hire and fire their own personnel: they are constrained by pre-existing legislation, administrative rules, or union contracts. Publicly supported schools are subjected to nation-wide or state-wide legislative, judicial, social, and political forces many of whose mandates are misaligned with the instructional mission of an individual institution.

Therefore, we believe that individual schools are not large enough or strong enough to initiate and sustain improved instructional functioning by themselves, even when they make heroic efforts in this direction. They need continuing financial and technical and psychological support from some larger entity in order to sustain their own renewal efforts.

I/D/E/A's League of Cooperating Schools is a good example of what happens when an _ad hoc_ support system assembled for the specific purpose of providing such financial, technical, and psychological support disappears. For five years, League consultants and staff played a critical role in

encouraging each school to identify problem areas needing attention. The League provided services on request, e.g.: training for principals and teachers, coaching in group dynamics and problem solving, intellectual stimulation and provision of ideas. With these enabling and empowering services, many schools developed and improved remarkably. However, when I/D/E/A funding ended, the League disbanded. And schools slowly began to transmute back into what they had been before the project began. When principals and teachers who had been leaders in the reform effort left, they were replaced by others without their training or commitment to change. There was no external support system which could sustain the innovations and counterbalance the personnel changes. If one were to visit those eighteen schools today, one would find most to be rather ordinary elementary schools, mere shells of their earlier innovative selves.

From our experience with the I/D/E/A project and from research on school change (Herriott & Gross, 1979; Lehming & Kane, 1981; Rosenblum & Lowis, 1981), we derive an important insight. Missing in both the targeted reform and the school site approach is ongoing support coming from a stable, sanctioned, organizational entity of which the individual school is but a part. In the I/D/E/A project the larger structure was, temporarily, the League itself. In the everyday world of schools that permanent entity should be the school district.

A common reaction by those teachers, parents, and community groups interested in school improvement is that the district office is an obstacle to be overcome, a bureaucratic morass where good ideas get buried or subverted. When budgets must be reduced, central office administrators are

often seen as an easy target. We argue, in contrast, that urgent consideration be given to adding onto any school site reform strategy a role for school districts. Academic, popular, and political attention should be turned to a most obvious locale for initiating, coordinating, and sustaining education change -- the school district.

The School District Role in Educational Reform

The recent history of programmatic change in education gives insight into the current school district role in educational reform. At the turn of the twentieth century, a key political goal of educational administrators was to centralize control of urban schools, to standardize public education, and to vest most decision making in appointed expert superintendents. As these progressive administrators redefined the concept of democracy, the school systems they constructed were literally hierarchical and shielded from lay influence (Tyack, et al., 1980). Many of the ideals and achievements of the progressive administrators came under sharp attack during the 1960's and 70's. The reform generation, starting with Sputnik in 1958 and lasting until the mid 1970's, increased the federal government's role in education to include 66 categorical programs. This created a climate of heightened factionalism over which schooling functions are most important.

Despite the reform rhetoric, regulations by the state, strictures of accrediting bodies, the influence of testing agencies, and bureaucratic inertia often inhibited change. One result of the new politics of educational reform, however, was an increase in regulation of local districts and new pressures for lay participation at the local level (Tyack, et al.,

1980). Federal and state laws mandated school site councils. Large school districts experimented with decentralization and community control. Teacher unions grew in number and influence and adversarial relationships became common in school systems.

In the 1980's, the educational reform picture is changing again. Issues such as declining enrollment and tax revolts have surfaced. Current strategies used by school districts to improve instructional programs require the ability to coordinate complex subsystems within the educational organization.

It is clear that districts differ substantially from one another not only in terms of size and level of resources, but also in their administrative philosophy in regard to instruction. Some hands-off districts regard classroom teaching as the responsibility of the teacher subject only to whatever supervision the principal wishes or is able to provide. Other districts centralize scope and sequences of major subject areas, limit schools to one or several options for texts, test all students on their achievement on milestone objectives, and have district-wide mechanisms for creating strategies to remediate student deficiencies. Such a highly coordinated approach to instruction is rare, takes a long time to develop, and is likely to be appropriate only in districts where particular conditions are extant (Williams & Bank, 1982). These include the presence of "idea champions" who work with a stable core of staff in a community environment which is not embroiled in turmoil or rapid change.

We are not suggesting such a centralized system as the way for all districts to perform. Neither are we advocating the hands-off approach.

Rather, we are advocating that the district office attend on a systematic and regularized basis to the development of situation-specific coordinated ways to improve student learning. It is our view that attempts by the district to do their own targeted reform -- such as adding teacher training programs, testing programs, buying new books -- will fail, just as similar reforms fail when mandated by state or federal agencies, because they address only a corner of the educational tapestry. Similarly, we believe that districts which only pay lip service to school site reform, without providing back-up encouragement, technical assistance, and training from the central office will also fail.

This implies that there are two crucial criteria for those in the central office who want to move their districts towards instructional excellence: they must consider the connection between all the parts of their complex educational organization; and they must think of their efforts as part of a long-term sustained effort -- to be modified in the light of changing conditions but not abandoned as soon as the public turns its gaze elsewhere.

We have come upon several districts which have such long-term strategies for supporting on-going, incremental improvement in their schools. These districts did not start with a blueprint or prescription for instructional improvement. Instead, although operationally quite different from one another, each started when one or several individuals -- who cared, and who had clout -- built a district constituency with a commitment to instructional excellence and had the confidence that they could move their system towards that vision.

Each of the four districts to which we are referring began by trying to understand what their current situation was at the moment. In both formal and informal ways -- that is, by looking at test data, program descriptions, instructional activities, teacher and parent surveys, needs assessments, corridor conversations -- those in the central office who had made a commitement to educational excellence first gathered information to identify strengths, resources, and energies as well as trouble areas in need of fixing.

In District A, this situation assessment led to the development over an eight-year period of time of a highly integrated criterion-referenced testing system linked to a district-wide scope and sequence in math, language arts, and reading. A district-funded professional development program provided teachers with methods to remedy student learning deficiencies. A learning specialist in each school helped with classroom management details, the principal in each school led the annual planning and feedback sessions and monitored classroom progress.

District B, with the same commitment to instructional excellence, used a different strategy. They vested decision making over instructional operations in the hands of a parent/teacher school site council. On an annual cycle, this council received information culled from questionnaires and test scores by the research and development office. The information was formatted so the council had a snapshot of their situation which they could compare with previous snapshots of their school. Problem-solving meetings in each school in April generated an annual plan to start in September which had target dates throughout the year for specific actions.

District monitoring of the target dates kept up the pressure on the schools to improve according to their own plan.

District C, a large district spread over many miles of urban and rural communities, used their situation analysis as the catalyst for generating district-wide consensus on both student outcome and teaching method goals for their entire system. Teachers, principals and central office administrators wrote their own job descriptions to reflect these goal positions and became willing to hold themselves and others accountable for performance.

District D, a medium size heterogeneous district with many minority groups, brought principals together to analyze their own schools' scores on a mandated state assessment test. This led to the proposing of individualized school remedies, some of which called for increased instructional time to be spent on a particular subject area, supplementary materials to be purchased, and additional staff training. The district stimulated the process, made available the funds, and organized the staff development. Not a one-shot deal, this process of taking stock goes on every year, supported by the district office (Bank & Williams, 1981; Williams & Bank, 1982).

We know of other districts who have created their own versions of coordinated instructional information/action systems to support their visions of instructional improvement (Bank & Williams, 1981). Such systems do appear to be within the capabilities of most district offices, especially as computer use is becoming more accessible.

We believe that the time is ripe to provide to those districts who have the will but don't quite see their way clearly, with support,

encouragement, and technical assistance from the larger educational environments of which they are a part. For example, as state departments of education put together reform packages in response to the renewed public call to excellence, as universities ponder the partnerships they might develop with school districts (Goodlad et al., 1983), as county offices provide their technical services, we believe there should be cognizance of the district office as a neglected resource. Research has suggested factors which characterize effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; Brookover, et al., 1979; Rutter, et al., 1979; Clark, et al., 1980, Murnane, 1980). We believe that effective schools, if they are not to be accidental and evanescent, must be supported and maintained by effective districts. It is essential that we learn more about the characteristics of effective districts and how to bring them into being. We call for heightened political, academic, and public awareness of the district as an important agent in educational excellence so that the process of creating effective districts can move forward.

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