
Let's Change The Schoolstructure: Teacher / Parent Management, Control and Accountability

By Deborah W. Meier

I. Introduction

Reform suggests novelty and change; but between intent and implementation, it creates, to a large degree, more uniformity-driven bureaucracies that impede change. In the interests of efficiency and integrity we lose both where it truly counts: in the daily interpersonal relations at the school level. Changes at the schoolhouse level are the hardest, and require qualities of trust and patience that were never the aim of our modern school structures.

From the teachers' and principals' viewpoint, reforms have a history of leaving behind a trail of new burdens. Each wave of reform has increased the amount of time, energy and resources directed away from the classroom while adding to the laundry list of "shoulds" and "musts."

The vast difference in scale between the bureaucracy needed to operate private and parochial schools vs. public ones, is not due to an inherent law of bureaucracy, but to a well-meaning public that seeks to hold public institutions to honest and accountable standards. In short: it's the result of past reforms! Ted Fiske reports in the New York Times that the New York City public school system has approximately one Central employee for every 150 students, compared to one for every 4,000 in the Catholic system. These comparative figures ignore an even vaster differential, because for every Central employee, schools must hire comparable personnel to respond to their forms, regulations, changes in codes and new curriculum mandates. Under such a system, uniformity comes to seem a blessing even to dyed-in-the-wool innovators.

In short, the difference between public and nonpublic bureaucracy is not a matter of efficiency and it won't be solved by tighter monitoring of expenses. At the heart is an

entirely different set of assumptions about the locus of control and the role of trust. To change, will require a "revolution" in our thinking, not simply another wave of reforms. Nothing less is likely to do the immense job being demanded of public education today - educating all children to the levels of excellence once dreamed of only for a small elite.

II. What are the alternative assumptions?

Teachers will not have a major impact on the way all children use their minds unless they can get to know how all their students minds actually work and what their students are thinking. They cannot help young people make sense of complex concepts if they do not know why it is that these ideas trouble them. They cannot improve a student's writing if they have no time to read children's work, and to meet with them individually to discuss and to edit. They cannot find ways to connect new ideas with old ones if they have no control over curriculum or pacing. Nor can they influence the values and aspirations of young people if they cannot shape the tone and value system of their classroom and school, the curriculum, the use of time

Deborah W. Meier . . .

Since 1974, Deborah W. Meier has been the Coordinator and creative force behind - three alternative public elementary schools in New York's District 4 in East Harlem. Students - mainly Black and Hispanic - are not chosen selectively but are enrolled on a "first-come, first serve" basis. She is currently Principal of the Central Park East Secondary School which she helped to create.

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and the allotment of resources at the school level. Surely they cannot model what being powerful adults in a democratic society might be like, if they are powerless adults in one that is autocratic.

They cannot accomplish this collective task without the support and trust of the student's family and community. Such trust is not a luxury. Occasional maverick children can negotiate a good education in a school their parents fear and distrust. They are the exceptions (about which autobiographies glowingly reminisce). Young people sent to school with a message of distrust for the motives and methods of the school are crippled. They must step warily, looking for hidden traps.

Teachers rate "parental indifference" as their number one complaint. Unless and until parents and teachers join together as advocates for the common good of the youngsters, we will not make the educational breakthroughs needed for precisely those students we are most concerned about.

"Changes at the schoolhouse level are the hardest . . ."

These two: maximum decision making power at the school site, and trust between school and family require a third prerequisite. The school must be small enough so that everyone can know each other enough to trust each other, and can talk over and carry out changes easily. Teachers, students and families who do not share a common geographic, ideological or historic community need optimum face-to-face contact over many years to build a strong school-based community with a coherent set of common understandings.

Even if these three hard won drastic changes occur, they, alone, will not do the trick. They are merely the groundwork for slow and steady changes in the daily work of teachers and students. Changes that over time, will effect the outcomes being instantly demanded by employers and the public. Some claim that we can't afford this kind of "slow and steady", school-by-school change. They are wrong.

There is nothing faster. The longer we delay such needed structural first steps, the longer it will take us to begin putting into practice the kind of knowledge we already have about how we can help all children learn. Knowledge that can only be useful to teachers with professional power and responsibility, backed by supportive families.

III. What would such new school arrangements be like?

(1) They would be schools of choice. Choice offers a way of providing the increased professional decision-making authority needed, without pitting parents and professionals against each other in a power struggle. Joint governing boards with parent and teacher representatives is another route to trust. It requires a degree of both time, participation and sophistication that is hard to maintain. It means a complex system of committees, delegated bodies and communication networks that make professionally responsive teaching problematic. Complex accountability schemes, tied to measurable outcomes, is a third route, which is subject to trivialization of goals, manipulation of data, and skewing of curriculum. The experiences of Manhattan's District 4 over the past 15 years suggests that choice can be a powerful tool, serving all children and all families. Such schools of choice can be enhanced by community advisory boards and by the publication of annual data, as well as by greatly increased opportunities for parents, teachers and students to meet together. The latter practice should be insured by legislation, mandating employers to provide time-off for parents to attend school meetings.

(2) Smaller schools are needed to make democratic governance feasible. It sounds unwieldy only because we're always thinking of our big urban school buildings with huge staffs. The Empire State Building is also huge, but it is broken down into many small companies, each with its own mission and its own governing bodies. Our current school buildings could also become sites for many smaller schools, sharing a limited number of facilities - the gym, lunchroom, etc. They might share a building manager, but the educational life of each school would be distinct and independent. Simple changes that would be nearly impossible to make in a megaschool, could now be decided one day and implemented the next.

(3) Schools of choice that are small in size could, finally, offer maximum freedom over their budget, curriculum, staffing, examinations and assessment procedures. Only the most parsimonious general rules should be imposed - rules that would prevent racial segregation, creaming off of "easier-to-teach" students, political, religious or racial bias and basic safety standards.

IV. Summary

We are wasting resources in expensive research and costly innovations, trying to find ways to "motivate" or to "coerce" students and teachers to do better. The new "motivators" always presume the need for outside carrots and sticks: imposed merit pay schemes, endless student testing, automatic test-triggered hold-over schemes. Schools of choice, small and highly personal environments, close family/school collaboration and maximum professional control over the important school variants, deal with motivation in a completely different way. Such professionals devise their own rewards and their own career ladders. While financial abuses and irregularities would no doubt continue to exist, both teachers and parents in such small schools would be eagle-eyed protectors over their own budgets and resources. Parents with a voice in both choosing a school and in the life of their school will be the best monitors of its financial and personnel integrity. A school small enough for everyone to know each other is harder to "hide" in. Abuses will exist, but our current system of adding layers upon layers of new bureaucracies in response to new scandals is surely an even less likely guarantor of integrity.

We can insist upon annual accounting of local books, plus an in-depth public inspectorate that spends quality time in each school on a periodic basis. Such an inspection team would be a significant innovation and might produce clear written reports that would make both the public and the profession take notice.

Vandalism, assault, truancy and apathy - these cannot be eliminated by more of the same anonymity. Metal detectors, ID cards, automatized lateness calls, and automatic expulsions are an understandable response to emergency conditions. As a regular practice they lead to an increase in precisely the conditions that create bad schooling as well as an infringement of our standards for fundamental civil

and democratic rights. They cannot be allowed to become the new norms.

A solution requires an assault on precisely this culture of anonymity that permeates our youngsters' lives in our big cities. Our children need stable personal relationships more than ever, and our schools offer less than ever. Parents love their children just the way they once did, and teachers are as committed as ever. But parents become apathetic and unresponsive if they cannot find better ways to be effective, much as teachers develop lower expectations as a means of survival in face of an unwieldy system.

***"We need a revolutionary
reorganization of schools."***

We need a "revolutionary" reorganization of schools. Then we need to stand aside, providing the parties to schooling - parents, students and teachers - with as much help and advice as we can, as they work out ways to educate their children. It's a tall order, but no less ambitious than the dream that lies behind it - that all our children can become the kind of thoughtful citizens our society needs.

