

The Developmental Years: First Wave Reform

The first major milestone in the current generation of education reform appeared in 1983 with the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk*. The report outlined the poor state of affairs within the K-12 environment, from low basic comprehension rates to high dropout rates. *A Nation at Risk* became the call to arms for administrators and policy makers and ushered in what became known as the first wave of education reform.

One of the greatest changes initiated by first wave reform was that of standardization. Though the majority of states already required periodic standardized testing of students, the results of those tests did not always lead to direct assistance to the children who were scoring poorly. By the mid-1980s, though, 45 states had expanded their testing, including more strenuous graduation requirements, more regular testing and greater standardized test preparation.

Additionally, numerous states began to legislate merit pay programs for educators. By 1986, 46 states offered merit pay plans, an increase from 28 states in 1983. Teachers were evaluated on their educating ability and knowledge of their subjects in order to determine periodic raises and bonuses.

But despite the vast developments of first wave reform, research now suggests that this focus on standardization did little to affect student learning and comprehension (Fuhrman et al, 1988; Fuhrman and Elmore, 1990; Clune, 1989, Schwille et al, 1988, McCarthy, 1990). The studies suggested that changes in professionalism and administration did not always trickle down to effective education strategy implementation. Teaching guidelines became more complex and less coherent.

Recent Developments: Systemic Reform

The last five years of education reform have been dominated by what is broadly known as systemic reform. Systemic reform can be divided into two major concepts. First, it is seen as sweeping and across-the-board change in education, often occurring in the form of state or federal omnibus reform bills. Second, systemic reform suggests that education policy is integrated around a set of clear and definable outcomes. Systemic reforms usually involve some form of decentralization, empowering educators and leaders at the local level to make independent decisions in order to succeed in reaching mandated guidelines. Notable examples of systemic reform can be seen at the federal level with Goals 2000, which mandates distinct goals such as preparing pre-school children to be "ready to learn" and increasing national graduation rates by 90 percent. Another example may be found in the California Achievement Program, which mandates improvements in staff development and textbook review, as well as teacher evaluation and accountability.

Major Trends in Systemic Reform

Contract schools, charter schools and learning centers. Some communities have resorted to revamping the actual management structure and style of their local schools. This restructuring may be in the form of contracting, where a school district literally contracts a for-profit company to manage the schools. Though many of the teachers in a given school may remain, the contracted company retains the right to make all reform decisions, including textbook and technology purchases, class structure and curriculum.

For other schools which desire systemic reform yet do not wish to resort to bringing in corporate management, there is the option of charter schooling. A charter school answers directly to state-level education departments; the standard course of management by a district-level commission is bypassed entirely. If a school can prove to the state that they have the ability and the desire to reform their system, yet feel school district bureaucracy may get in the way of that reform, they may receive a charter to control all reform decisions. Charter schools become independent entities, yet must also face serious questions of accountability (see below).

A more radical form of school restructuring is that of the learning center. Learning centers are more than ordinary schools; they also provide assistance in vocational education, adult education/GEDs, social work and job training. In Gainesville, FL, for example, learning centers provide what some have called "holistic learning" and "full-family service." While teenage dropouts attempt to gain job skills, parents may enroll in GED classes or proper parenting seminars. Learning centers create a community environment within an educational setting. Life-long learning is inspired by giving people the skills to work, raise better families and become actively involved in the education reform process.

Peer Competition. The development of competition between teachers was one of the first methods of attempting systemic reform. Beginning as early as 1984 in South Carolina with Governor Richard Riley's successful push for the Education Improvement Act, competition policy was officially known as Cooperative Performance Incentives (CPI). CPI mandated controlled competition between schools in the quest for funding bonuses. The South Carolina CPI initiative evaluated schools in terms of gains in student achievement, as well as teacher and student attendance. How each school met these standards was left to their own policy making.

There are 12 states currently experimenting with CPI. Competition varies between school versus school, grade versus grade, even department versus department. Though very little research has been done to evaluate the success of CPI, proponents claim it fosters collegial and student partnership, experimentation, and school interaction.

Teacher Professionalization. Professionalization (sometimes known as teacher empowerment) is the general term attributed to policies which expand the teachers ability to control grading and evaluation policy, organizational decision making, staff development and peer assistance. The idea behind this method was to increase the status of the teacher from employee to educational professional. Additionally, as teachers take on more responsibilities, their salary increases as well, in the attempt of creating the sense of teaching as a "professional" vocation.

Professionalization proponents claim that the policy adds greater integrity, flexibility and authority to the educator. Yet many teachers have complained that it adds to an already complex and hectic schedule, requiring the educator to take on the roles of counselor, administrator and researcher. When teachers are given the authority to experiment with teaching and outreach methods yet are not given the time to prepare and evaluate the new methodology (training retreats, extra planning periods), professionalization may cause more problems than it solves. In Rochester, NY, for example, district-wide reforms increased salaries dramatically and mandated an expanded role for the educator as counselor and social worker. But no assistance was offered to the teachers they were expected to adjust to the changes on their own and determine how to add additional parent conferences and home visits to their already-hectic schedules. Many teachers responded that social work was not a part of their profession and refused, and student achievement continued to falter.

Choice. Possibly the most controversial systemic reform drive has come from the fight over school choice. Initially pushed by William Bennett and the Bush administration, school choice is most well known for its goal of allowing students and parents to choose which school to attend, and offering tuition vouchers to students who wish to enroll in private schools. But in reality, vouchers are only one small section of systemic reforms lumped under the broad title of choice. Other forms of choice include magnet schools, as exemplified in East Harlems District Four. School buildings in East Harlem were subdivided into mini-schools which emphasized a variety of subjects, as well as special high discipline schools for children considered incorrigible. Parents and children must "apply" to magnet schools, but they retain the right to consider all possible programs. One of the most widely experimented forms of choice is that of school-based management (SBM).. SBM (also known as democraticization, school empowerment, etc.) is a direct response to the overburdened, district-level beurocracy. Under SBM, the powers of reform-making and implimentation are relegated to the individual schools, uniting teachers and administrators, as well as parents and students, in the hope of fostering locally determined, majority mandated reform. In Chicago, for example, local school councils (LSCs) were formed within the schools in 1989. The LSCs were then given the prerogative of leading reform efforts within that community. In other words, decisions are made from the bottom up, with consensus assisting in the decision making process. Currently there are almost 550 groups with over 12,000 members. An evaluation by Hess (1994) reports that the LSCs successfully created add-on programs, such as after school music classes, increased multicultural planning, and expanded summer school offerings, with greater levels of

change occurring within lower-income schools.

One of the more radical aspects of choice is accountability. Until recently, teachers, administrators and politicians did their best to improve schools, but only politicians were openly accountable for failed efforts in the form of losing an election. Accountability mandates that educators, too, must be responsible for the actions (or inaction). Rewards and punishments are given to those as a response to changes in student achievement. In Kentucky, for example, the state supreme court mandated sweeping system change in the school system. One of the major components of the plan was to make educator accountable as of 1994. Because of this legislation, teachers and administrators may receive bonuses as high as 30% of their salaries when student achievement goes up. But if statistics show that achievement drops or remains the same, they are subject to a variety of punishments, from loss of tenure and bonuses to offering parents the right to transfer their children to more successful schools.

In sum, choice advocates an eclectic mix of reforms, many of which can be found in other policy methods. Overall, though, the main goals of choice remain simple: moving decision making from state bureaucracies to local leaders and from politicians to educators, as well as the accountability of teachers and the empowerment of parents.

Active Learning, Cooperative Learning and Outcome-Based Education. As the structure of K-12 education has evolved, the actual methods of teaching children have evolved with it. In general, reform-minded teachers are now emphasizing active learning over passive learning. Traditionally, a vast amount of the school day is spent listening to unidirectional lectures in large groups, completing workbooks and taking memorization-driven tests. Reformers and psychologist argue that this form of passive education is extremely inefficient, for it fails to engage the student within a given subject. Students may be taught the Civil War in terms of dates and actions, but they are unable to comprehend and articulate its nuances. This same problem holds true for all areas of education.

Active learning attempts to reform student achievement through a variety of methods. With collaborate learning, for instance, instead of focusing on lectures, teachers assign group projects to students. The groups are given the tools to research a given subject, solve any problems associated with that subject, and present it to their peers. Cooperative learning brings students into the material instead of leaving them on the outside as passive observers. Instead of relying on simple memorization skills, the students must engage in higher-order thinking and inquire into a problem to work out a variety of outcomes.

As methods of teaching change within a classroom, it becomes necessary to change the forms of assessment as well. In Kentucky, as part of its new

Education Reform Act, traditional standardized tests are transformed into collaborative group projects. Problem solving and writing ability are emphasized over rote memorization. And because students often learn at different speeds and at different levels, Kentucky reformers have eliminated grades one through three. Children are taught together within a large group, yet they are allowed to progress at individual paces. In order to move out of this general primary grade, they must prove they have mastered a set of educational outcomes, such as basic reading and math skills. How each student goes about doing this and at what pace is determined by all of those teaching that child.

The Kentucky non-grade initiative is a form of what is broadly known as outcome-based education (OBE), a theory which claims that education is more relevant when students are graded on what they know and how they demonstrate it, with less emphasis on standardization and memorization. OBE instruction allows students to work at different paces, as long as they strive to perform a set of predetermined outcomes. Other OBE methods include grading portfolios of a student's creative performance and the assessment of the student's ability to make decisions and theorize within an experimental process. Though the phrase "outcome-based education" has taken a rhetorical beating from many parts of the education community, its implementation in states such as Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio and Illinois have proven to be effective in many cases.