

WHERE WE STAND



By Albert Shanker, President
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New Choices For Reform

Opting Out of the Old Stuff

It's been 5 years since *A Nation at Risk* appeared—a good time to ask how the school reform movement is doing. In one sense, it's doing very well. Education Secretary William Bennett was dead wrong when he said that the reform movement has been "hijacked." All across the U.S., as a result of the reforms of the last five years, teacher applicants are being tested and students are getting more math, science and homework. And students who fail are no longer promoted automatically. No school reform movement in recent memory has been implemented as widely as this one.

But what are the results? It's still too early for a final verdict, but here's a pretty good interim judgment: The reforms are very good for the 15 to 25% of the kids who always did well in traditional schools. They're the ones who are able to sit still, listen attentively, remember much of what the teacher says, read the textbook and work on their own. These students are doing better than their counterparts in the late 60's and 70's because they're now required to take rigorous academic subjects instead of soft electives and face the consequences if they don't do the work. More and better of the same old thing works for them.

However, the same is not true for those kids who never could sit still and listen for five or six hours or for those who can't cope with the textbook. Nor did all the reforms give any help to the children who can't do the work without all kinds of special help. And that's not because all of them are stupid. They just don't fit into the standard system.

There is another reform movement in the U.S., one that's trying to reach the 75 to 80% who can't seem to make it in the same way that the "top" 20% can. Unlike the big reform movement, whose implementation is documented in a fat Education Department book, *The Nation Responds*, this reform effort is small and fragile, a relative handful of districts and schools. Dade County (Fla.); Hammond (Ind.); Rochester, New York City, Syracuse (N.Y.); Pittsburgh (Pa.); Toledo and Cincinnati (Ohio) and a few others are the districts that are part of this movement. And let's add the Coalition of Essential Schools guided by Ted Sizer and another group inspired by John Goodlad, and let's even count the Key School, schools-without-walls, city-as-schools programs and other alternatives. The point is that they can be listed on one or two pages.

Why aren't there more such efforts to try to reach the 80% of students who can't seem to learn in traditional school settings? It's hard to bring about change. Our schools have been basically unchanged for 100 years. There have been periodic waves of reform, but the schools have successfully withstood change efforts. The few places where basic changes are taking place are unique. They have strong collective bargaining relationships. While bread and butter issues are always subjects of dispute, these are places where teachers feel that the school system is trying to do well by them. They have exceptional leaders on both the union and management side and other charismatic risk-takers in the system. And, in many cases, they have the support of the business community and/or foundations to help them bend, twist and change the rules of the game.

Unfortunately, it will take a long time before we have hundreds or thousands of districts which bring together such a rare combination of favorable factors. When you try to make big changes in a whole school system there will be various objections and fears. By the time each is dealt with, changes are compromised. What often starts as a daring plan gets so watered down it may hardly be worth doing. Even in schools where most of the faculty would like to bring about some changes, the majority is usually reluctant to adopt them if they offend a minority in the school. That's human, but the result is often paralysis.

In view of these obstacles to change, why not try a different approach? Why not allow any group of 6, 7, 12 or more teachers to submit a proposal to run their own school within their building? Only teachers who want such an option would work in it, and parents would have the choice of enrolling their children or not. The teaching team would need to have enough of a spread of talent to cover all subjects and the student body would need to reflect a cross section of the school so that it's not a special "creaming" project. And since the teachers would be working harder to build a new system, they would need guarantees that as long as the parents want to enroll their children and nothing "bad" happens, the program would not be cut just because a new principal, superintendent, school board or union leader comes on the scene.

Such schools would get their appropriate share of the school budget and make their own decisions. Their initial creation would be subject to the consent of the union and management, the school principal and the rest of the faculty. Permission would be granted if the plan for the school seems sound and worth trying, is voluntary and if others in the school or system would not be hurt. These schools would need no additional operating money but would need some additional funds for teacher planning time, networking, conferences, special materials and technology. These could be given on a competitive grant basis with the federal and state governments, local districts and even private businesses and foundations providing modest additional start-up funds.

The New York State Commission on the Teaching Profession, appointed by Commissioner Sobol, has recommended such a program for New York. Gordon Ambach, Executive Director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, informed me that there are already provisions in the NYS Regents plan to allow such schools or sub-units to be created. It has been done, so it can be done. So why not create this new "opt-for" policy mechanism and remove the great obstacles to doing more?

Over the next few years we need to move from the handful of innovative, bottom-up reform sites to thousands. At first there may only be a few more. But as more parents and teachers find merit in them, they'll mushroom. As in other fields, the key to successful reform may be in getting away from trying to get everybody to do the same thing at the same time and, instead, allow small groups to opt for something different. There's no reason why that can't happen in public schools.

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