Educational Administration Quarterly
Vol. 24, Number 3 (August 1988) 319-328

Recent State Education Reform in the United States: Looking Backward and Forward

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The first wave of school reform has crashed upon the education beach, but are other waves now forming out at sea?

The year 1983 is generally regarded as the beginning of the current cycle of state education reform. The *Nation At Risk* report was released that year, but many states had sponsored education legislation before the report came out. The last states to engage in legislation on education—Washington, Indiana, and Iowa—joined in 1987. The spread of this reform is very impressive, and its consistency in concept qualifies it as one of the hallmarks in state policymaking. The 1986 report of the National Governors' Association demonstrates the reform's impressive diffusion and breadth. It is now appropriate to look backward and forward because states have completed their initial statutes based on the 1983 reform concepts. Will there be a second wave or is the momentum spent?

ASSUMPTIONS OF REFORM

Some key assumptions underlie the first wave. There is a presumed linkage between international and interstate economic competition and education. An educated work force is considered crucial to higher productivity and adaptability to rapidly changing markets. Economic competition includes both highly technical personnel and the average

Author's Note: I acknowledge the assistance of Allan Odden, USC, and James Guthrie, UC Berkeley, in the middle portions of the paper. They created sections on the PACE/ACE and reform strategies as part of our mutual work on PACE.

worker who could once get by with repetitive manufacturing routines. For example, the Japanese are reputed to have the best bottom academic quartile in the world. The education linkage with economic growth maintains its hold on public opinion in 1988, and "competitiveness" is a cliché in Washington and state capitals. This continued interest in education by top-level politicians augurs well for a second round of reform after 1987.

A second key assumption underlying state statutes from 1983 to 1987 is that education does not need to be fundamentally changed, but the existing delivery system can be intensified to meet the economic challenge. The proposal by Ted Sizer (1984) to drastically reorganize secondary schools or the one by Coons and Sugarman (1983) favoring vouchers found scant support in state capitals. Rather, the key variable in 1983 was thought to be a more rigorous curriculum. As one legislator told me, "Let's make the little buggars work harder."

This assumption posits that more time on more difficult academic content is beneficial and that *all* students can meet the increased academic expectations. The curriculum can be narrowed and vocational education pruned without much increase in dropouts, the reformers contend. Values can be taught through direct instruction but need to be woven throughout the curricular subjects. Both states and localities have centralized and aligned curriculum for greater uniformity but also to emphasize somewhat higher-order skills. Politicians assume that students learn the subject they study in school; for example, students who take French know more French than those who do not. The high school was top priority because achievement scores had not increased at the secondary level commensurate with elementary test gains in the 1975-1983 period.

A start has been made on improving teachers through some traditional devices, such as increased teacher preparation and university entrance requirements, as well as recycling differentiated staffing in a new guise of career ladders. There is real concern in many states about their ability to attract and retain teachers and numerous attempts to increase staff development as well as pay. But before the first wave of reform was half over, a 1986 forum sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation termed the 1983-1986 changes "cosmetic" and called for a drastically "restructured" and "professionalized" work force. The Carnegie Forum recommended a new national standards board, with a completely new concept of teacher assessments, a greater voice for teachers in running schools, and "lead teachers" who are similar to British headmasters.

OUTCOMES FROM THE FIRST WAVE

In many ways, state politicians got what they wanted, because the quantities of education increased substantially:

(1) Expenditures after inflation increased by 25% in three years. Not all of this money went to new reforms because many states needed to restore cutbacks made during the recession of the early 1980s. Moreover, reform did not cause all or most of the expenditure increase because the crucial influence was the 1983-1986 national economic growth (Odden, 1987).
(2) Entry-level teacher salaries increased by an equivalent amount. For example, California's minimum increased from $15,000 to almost $22,000 in 1987, and more teachers reentered the work force after stopping out for a while.
(3) High school course-taking patterns changed significantly, with much more emphasis on math, science, foreign language, and world history and much less enrollment in vocational education and electives such as photography. These changes were particularly dramatic in California, where vocational education enrollments declined by 30% and science and math enrollments increased by 30% in four years.
(4) There was a slight extension of school time in states that had five- or six-period days, but no major change in the summer vacation. The 180-day school year and summer vacation appear deeply embedded in the American culture.
(5) There was no measurable increase in dropouts, in part, because the dropout statistics are so unreliable. At this juncture, state politicians cannot be convinced of an increasing dropout rate based on any hard evidence.
(6) Teacher career ladders are in place in a few states and have created a constituency of teachers who benefit from the higher pay that will prevent major surgery in the ladder concept in the short run.
(7) Curricular alignment has produced new state course content guides and matching tests that are having an impact on local policy.
(8) Many state achievement tests are up slightly, although this may be unrelated to reform.

RESULTS FROM A CALIFORNIA STUDY

Beneath these quantitative changes, there is little evaluation of whether qualitative changes have resulted. However, Allan Odden led a California PACE study of a group of schools with large increases in test scores and student enrollment in academic courses. Though not a representative sample, their achievement suggests the qualitative changes that can occur in schools that improved dramatically in

quantitative indicators. Each researcher spent about 15 days at a school site or at district headquarters tracing the aggregate and cumulative impact of the 1983 reform law (Odden & Marsh, 1987).

In these 17 California schools, districts increased high school graduation requirements, upgraded curriculum standards, lengthened the school day and year, purchased new and better textbooks, administered new and tougher state tests, created a new cadre of mentor teachers, raised teacher salaries, and expanded accountability by developing quality indicators—all between 1983 and 1987. These actions constitute the core of education reform implementation using the intensification strategy. The near-term effect of SB 813 is that students are taking more academically demanding courses.

Districts generally are involved in upgrading course content. None of the schools studied had "watered down" the overall content in the courses. The local perception is that new state money had significant impact in providing resources for implementing the more rigorous, academic program; but given how California's law was financed, it is difficult to trace precise financial impacts. However, the strategy of linking new state money to local reform has helped. Local educators feel that the funding increases of the past four years have been positive, have improved teacher morale, and have helped school districts to do things they wanted to do. Continued funding, and perhaps continued funding increases by the state, are required to continue reform and improvement momentum, they feel.

Improving schools as institutions is definitely on the local agenda, and considerable progress has been made. The state—through statewide Model Curriculum Standards, State Curriculum Frameworks, and CAP tests—and local districts—through a variety of efforts generally called "curriculum alignment"—have played a key role in defining the "technical core" of curriculum at the school site. There is both a complementarity among state, district, and school roles and strong interrelationships between appropriate top-down and bottom-up roles and functions.

State tests do "drive" local curriculum. While the old state tests produced a curriculum focused on basic skills, the new tests, especially the eighth-grade test, are stimulating a local curriculum with more subjects (e.g., science), and greater attention to problem solving.

The district is also an important actor in local school reform. While education improvement occurs school by school, the appropriate unit for analyzing the local site improvement process is the school district, since the district can play several crucial and important roles in the site

improvement process. This study, fortunately, includes data on both district and school roles as well as state roles and actions.

Reform tended to be initiated in a district office top-down manner, but initial unhappiness with this aspect of the process has waned. There is more district centralization of curriculum development and textbook selection, but site teachers and administrators participate intensively. Districts and schools seem to be "teaming" in ongoing reform development and implementation. Instruction-oriented superintendents are principal players in reform initiation in most districts and schools.

Most secondary schools can change old course offerings and implement more traditional, academic courses fairly easily and quickly; such changes seem to be the initial response to California's reform law and other recent stimuli for reform. Some reasons are that these changes require few new skills for teachers. Furthermore, most secondary school teachers would prefer to teach more academic courses than "general track" courses or even many of the electives. They have been trained to teach academic courses and do not need additional training or help to begin teaching more of them.

It is much more difficult to change the nature of pedagogy or the general nature of the curriculum—for example, introducing the problem-solving skills proposed in the new state mathematics and science curriculum frameworks. It is even more difficult to get a greater degree of new types of pedagogical emphases into the curriculum such as higher-level thinking skills, critical thinking skills, and statistical inference. Odden and Marsh found less progress on these types of improvements because of inadequate resources and assistance for teachers.

Very few states have appropriated significant money to evaluate omnibus reform bills that include as many as 80 separate initiatives that interact with each other in complex ways. Consequently, we must speculate about a second wave without a clear grasp of what happened in the first, beyond some obvious quantitative changes. More in-depth case studies are needed that include representative samples of schools.

LOOKING FOR THE SECOND WAVE OF REFORM

As of late 1987, the surf looks very flat despite a few ripples in major newspapers about restructuring, professionalism, and at-risk youth. About half the state economies are not growing because of depressed prices for oil, farming, and other commodities. Stagnant economies will

not provide the kind of fiscal dividends for state treasuries that helped in 1983 after the recovery from the 1980-1982 recession. Another problem is the lack of consensus, clarity, or enthusiasm for any new concept similar to the 1983 symbols of academic excellence and standards. The Carnegie Forum featured "teacher professionalism" as a rallying cry, but the teacher empowerment recommendations have frightened off the school boards and administrators. The concept of school "restructuring" is unclear to state politicians and not likely to provide a committed constituency or an emotive symbol. The Carnegie-backed national standards board for teacher certification faces a long period of test development (perhaps three more years) before any experienced teacher can even be considered.

Other contenders for the second wave, such as middle or elementary school reform, are not building support at the political grass-roots level. The concern about at-risk youth has resulted in a few token drop-out and preschool programs, but nothing very substantial or widespread has appeared yet. Indeed, the large expenditure built up from 1983-1986 (about 25% after inflation) cannot continue indefinitely. There are cycles to school finance that correlate roughly with periods of economic growth or recession. The slower growth in the U.S. economy during 1989 is not an optimal time for major new and costly reforms. But the at-risk youth issue remains linked in many state policymakers' minds with economic competitiveness and is building momentum.

STRATEGIES FOR FUTURE REFORM

When the time is propitious for a second wave of reform, several alternative strategies are possible.

Intensifying the existing service delivery system. More of the 1983 priorities would be emphasized such as academic courses, staff development, and a revamped curriculum that stresses higher-order skills. However, this approach leaves the basic structure of schooling unchanged, while curriculum alignment becomes even more centralized, the number of crossrole teams to help implementation increases, and long-term staff development to help teachers implement higher-order skills rises.

Professionalism. The recommendations of the Carnegie Task Force are encompassed here, including the "restructuring of schools" to include more teacher decision making, peer review of teacher effectiveness, and an end to the 50-minute, 6-period lockstep school day.

A subpart of professionalism is the *technology* strategy whereby major increases in computers, VCRs, and other electronic devices would

drastically revamp the teacher's role. Technology would also enable us to reconfigure the teaching force to use more aides with fewer, but much more highly paid, professionals to manage the technology.

Output performance strategy. This approach would stress state payment for results based on an index of indicators that includes tests plus several other relevant outcomes. Some feasibility issues concern the precision of the output measures and how to link financial aid formulas to increases or decreases of an index that included dropouts, achievement, attendance, course-taking patterns, and others. The output strategy would focus on the school site as the unit for financial aid distribution rather than the school district. Florida has a program entitled "merit schools" that allows local districts to establish different performance criteria.

An employer-driven strategy. This strategy would apply primarily to secondary education and would feature specialized vocational schools (e.g., Aviation High in New York) with close linkages to the needs of employers. The California experiment in Peninsula Academies is another manifestation of this philosophy combined with a revamped Regional Occupational Center approach. The key component is part-time work that involves business as a partner in the student's academic preparation at the work site.

A consumer-driven strategy. This potentially radical change includes a broad-based voucher system, vouchers only for particular groups such as the disadvantaged in low-performing schools, and expanded choice *within* the public system, including eliminating all boundaries between public school districts.

An analysis of these options should focus on which mix of strategies is optimal for which types of pupils. In general, the top two-thirds of the achievement band can benefit from the intensification strategy because changing the content that these pupils study can result in enhanced academic attainment. The technology strategy could be part of the intensification effort, as could a state-merit schools program that pays for results. Obviously, enhanced professionalism would help make any of these strategies more effective.

But the bottom one-third of the achievement band needs drastic change in the current delivery system and an overall attack on out-of-school influences that inhibit school attainment. Such approaches might include expanded choice and closer linkages with employers to impart work skills. Moreover, my forthcoming report on the conditions of children in California will highlight the need to improve and coordinate such things as children's health, attitudes, child-care, income support, and protective services if we are to make a major impact on

at-risk youth. The schools cannot provide all these integrated services, but they can do a better job at brokerage for individual children who are particularly at risk. Out-of-school influences are crucial to improving performance in school, and new integrated service delivery systems could be a part of this effort. Some Chief State School Officers have proposed an individualized teaching and learning plan (ITLP) for at-risk youth based on the IEP for special education students, including linkages among schools and other service delivery agencies.

Ironically, it is the lowest one-third of school achievers who are the most threatened by the impending changes in the labor market. According to the Department of Labor, the average level of education needed for the lowest-level jobs is rising. The labor market appears to be providing sufficient supplies of highly skilled labor and engineers. The at-risk youth are needed to fill many jobs that require more than repetitive low-skill operations. The inner city at-risk youth may need such approaches as residential schools or a coordinated service delivery system that exists almost nowhere today between public and private agencies.

Reforms that last usually involve (a) structural or organizational change, (b) easy monitoring, and (c) creation of a powerful and lasting constituency (Kirst & Meister, 1985). The academic excellence reformers, for example, generated more math and science courses and used media and emotional appeals to create a constituency (e.g., "rising tide of mediocrity"). The teacher professionalism strategy, so far, lacks a passionately committed constituency. The Carnegie Forum for a new national teacher standards board includes leaders from three crucial sectors—state government, industry, and teacher unions. But teachers are attracted to some parts of it, such as increased decision-making power, while feeling uncertain about national tests and peer review for tenure or dismissal. School boards and administrators want to change collective bargaining procedures and contracts as part of "professionalism."

State policymakers are not clear what "restructured" schools would look like or what the appropriate state role is in stimulating this type of second reform wave. In short, as of 1988, the teacher professionalism movement needs more clarity on concept and a more cohesive constituency before it can build up a great deal of momentum. The Carnegie National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, however, is a three-to-five year effort, and it is too early to predict its impact. Massachusetts will fund some experiments called "Carnegie schools" that may help define the concept, and the new teacher assessment

models being developed by the Carnegie Foundation promise to have a major impact on teacher education and teacher evaluation.

The Holmes Group of leading research universities, using a self-study approach, may also bring about significant changes in teacher preparation, but Holmes relies on the political influence of education deans and has no power base outside the schools of education. Not many deans are major players in state politics, nor do they have much influence over the liberal arts faculties. Some quotes from an *Education Week* article reveal why the National Education Association is cautious about "teacher professionalism," as articulated by reformers (Olson & Rodman, 1987, p. 1). Gary Sykes of Michigan State noted that, compared to AFT, the NEA is "a much larger, more bureaucratic, and more entrenched organization that has a whole set of complex procedures, and that relies much more on grassroots democratic decisionmaking" (p. 20).

John N. Dornan, president and executive director of the Public School Forum of North Carolina and a former state executive director within the NEA stressed that in the past "many of the NEA's fears about unworkable systems or systems that would start and not be funded have in fact been borne out" (p. 21).

An NEA staff member admitted, "Over all, the teachers' perspective on education reform is that it is teacher bashing" and conceded that the NEA's positions "are really reflective of the very defensive . . . besieged kind of attitude of a lot of teachers" (p. 21).

In sum, there is no major new initiative to change the status of most experienced teachers in the near term. The national election, however, may produce some new ideas because all candidates are giving a great deal of attention to education. So far the national presidential debates have not clarified what the specific federal role can and should be in the second wave of reform.

Vouchers have never been voted on in any state, and federal tuition tax credits were defeated during the Reagan presidency. Consequently, it is hard to see choice as a major reform at this juncture. The period of 1986-1988 appears to be one of digesting the reforms from an earlier era.

The future of education reform depends primarily on the growth of the American economy and how this growth is distributed among the various states. Without continued economic impetus, state governments will focus more on efficiency, performance incentives, and evaluation of the 1983-1987 changes. For instance, the National Governors' Association 1986 report states that "the governors are ready for some old-fashioned horse trading. We'll regulate less, if schools and school

districts will produce better results" (p. 3). But this new reform thrust by the governors will also be difficult. Chester Finn (1987) observes:

> To oversimplify just a bit, governors were asking educators for a commitment to results. What they got instead from most spokesmen, was "Thanks for noticing education; we're willing to sit down and talk with you about your ideas." (p. 315)

Consequently, education remains a priority issue for politicians, but they are searching for a specific set of initiatives that would be similar in scope to the 1983-1986 reform wave.

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