

Waiting for the Transformation

By **Arthur E. Levine**

A *Nation at Risk* formally launched the longest continuous school reform movement in American history. Today, more than 25 years later, that movement is divided into two camps: traditionalists, attempting to repair the existing public schools, and more-radical reformers, promoting such alternative practices and policies as charter schools, vouchers, non-university-based teacher preparation, pay for performance, and dismissal of failing tenured teachers.

Despite the split, the traditional and more radical approaches to school reform are actually more alike than different. And the changes sought by both may take longer to achieve than either side thinks. A quick look back and ahead may help explain why.

America's current education system, created during the industrial era, resembles an assembly line, the era's quintessential method of production. It puts all students through a common process tied to the clock; children progress based upon the amount of time they spend being taught in a classroom, with all students required to master the same body of knowledge in the same period of time. Beginning at age 5, they are educated in batches of from 25 to 30 students for a period of 180 days a year for 13 years. In high school, they study five major subjects a year, each in sessions lasting 40 to 60 minutes, meeting four or five times a week for 36 to 40 weeks per year, as recommended by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1906.

Given what we know today, this approach to education no longer makes sense. We now know that all students learn at different rates; the same individual even learns different subjects at different rates. It would make more sense, therefore, to have an education system that focuses on what students *learn*, rather than what they are taught, and sets common standards for what they must learn, rather than common amounts of time for them to learn those things.

Today's system would be unacceptable in other aspects of our lives. Imagine bringing dirty clothes to a laundry service and having the attendant ask, "How long do you want me to wash them—a half-hour or an hour?" We really don't care how long the attendant washes our clothes. We want them clean. We want a standard outcome, not a standard process. Our education system does the reverse.

Beyond this, current research shows that students are learning in new ways, relying more on interactive, self-paced digital technologies than traditional methods of instruction. While they continue to learn in schools through contact with teachers and textbooks, they are also learning after school, before school, on weekends, and during summers through social networks, contact

with online experts, interaction with software, and an inexhaustible supply of online resources.

For these reasons, in the years ahead, we can expect our education system to evolve from its current focus on time, teaching, and formal classrooms to an emphasis on outcomes, learning, and education in and out of school.

This revolutionary change will necessitate an individualized, time-variable system of education. In such a system, a student would progress by achieving prescribed learning outcomes. The teacher would serve as a diagnostician of how each student learns and what the student needs to learn, the prescriber of the program each student should follow, and the assessor of the student's progress. Pedagogy would be geared to a student's particular learning style and could include a raft of instructional possibilities such as formal classes, tutorials, mentoring, peer learning, digital learning, and much more. With so many pedagogies to choose from and a time-variable program, student progress would need to be measured based on competencies achieved, rather than on grades in classes taken, and a transcript would have to become a record of those competencies.

The nation is not yet ready to move in this direction. The learning outcomes that states currently set as graduation standards are spotty, and assessment of student performance is still in its infancy. Brain research teaches us more every day about how humans learn, but we do not yet have an adequate body of knowledge to build an education system based upon student learning styles, nor do we have the software to support it. We also are not yet preparing teachers to lead such an education system.

The new system of education will be introduced over the decades to come. We can already see the beginnings. People like Howard Gardner, Mel Levine, and Clayton Christensen are describing how people learn and what kind of school will be necessary to educate them. Philanthropies such as the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation are investing in research on and demonstrations of digital learning, asking how students are currently learning and examining the implications for schooling. Experiments such as the Quest to Learn School in New York City are creating prototypes of the outcome-based, learning-driven school.

These collective efforts to outline a new approach, support research toward it, and test models of it will expand. There will be models of the new school, improved by successive iterations. Over time, the number of new schools will grow, and the number of traditional schools will decline. In the end, government and educators will ratify the change by funding, regulation, and practice.

This brings us back to today's reformers and traditionalists. Both are actually in the same business of trying to sustain the existing school system. The traditionalists are the practitioners, policymakers, and researchers who are attempting to change public education from within. They head school systems; they are prominent university professors; they have major roles in government. Most of these people were born in the late 1940s through the mid-1950s.

In contrast, the reformers—mostly a generation younger than the traditionalists, born in the late 1960s and early 1970s—work outside the existing school systems. They have created laboratories for major redesign of specific practices in the nation's schools. For instance, Wendy Kopp at Teach For America is attempting to change how teachers are recruited and prepared. Jonathan Schnur has sought to do the same with school administrators at New Leaders for New Schools. Steve Barr at Green Dot, an organization specializing in charter schools, is working on school governance. And David Levin at the Knowledge Is Power Program has focused on teaching, learning, and time use.

In recent years, we also have seen the rise of crossovers or integrators, typified by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in his former role as head of the Chicago public schools, and Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of schools in Washington. Both of these leaders, also born in the 1960s, worked in the reform sector and are bringing the lessons they learned to large, urban public school systems.

Our world is changing rapidly—economically, demographically, technologically, and globally. The world that the traditionalists were born into is dying; a new world, inchoate and as yet unknowable, is replacing it. The reformers from the current generation have one foot planted in the old world and the other less firmly in the new. They may—like Moses and Martin Luther King Jr.—get to stand on the mountaintop, but they will not be the generation that enters the promised land. They will have an opportunity to write about the future and to launch the early experiments, but

creating the outcome-based, learning-driven school will fall to the next generation.

The point is this: The reformers and the traditionalists are working toward the same end. They are not rivals, but are taking different paths to same goal: sustaining our schools until we can replace them with the schools we need for the future. Neither the reformers nor the traditionalists will carry out the systemic change they desire.

Instead, they will do something equally important for our time: They will save lives. We continue to lose too many of our children in failing industrial-era schools. The reformers and the traditionalists are engaged in the same type of change as Oskar Schindler undertook in World War II. While he did not end the Holocaust, Schindler managed to save over a thousand of his factory workers. Today's education reformers will not remake our schools, but their work can save untold numbers of the children we are now losing.

The school reform movement that *A Nation at Risk* called for will continue. The current stage marks its infancy, with a focus on sustaining the existing model of public education, making it more effective, and enabling it to better serve more of our children. The next stage will be longer, produce more-profound changes, and—ultimately—transform schooling in America. ■

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