

Still in the Dark

Instead of large-scale school reform, we should be upgrading individual teachers' skills.

By Peter Temes

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has stopped giving grants to support school reform. Why? Because the foundation has come to the reluctant conclusion that large-scale school reform might not work.

The foundation's president commented as follows. "Talk about something that's hard to do — try to change a system. Even under the best of circumstances, it can absorb or co-opt the energy of the reformers."

These observations point to wasted effort on a stunning scale by the tens of thousands of people, professionals and parents, young and old, who have dedicated their time, their money, and their spirits to large-scale school reform.

The good news is that it matters relatively little whether we can craft great institutions out of our existing schools. Schools, after all, are only institutions. Education is the work of educators, not the work of schools, which only enable but do not deliver education.

It is important not to confuse treatment with cure. In the long run, how hard schools try, how elegantly they are structured or restructured, matters not at all. What matters is the experience of the student. To say that a school is wonderful but the students aren't learning is obviously silly.

The old joke about the man who looks for his lost watch in the kitchen, though he lost it in his living room, has special relevance here. Why look in the kitchen? Because the light is better there.

And, for better or worse, the task of fixing a school is concrete enough to be measured and controlled far more easily than one can measure and control the reformation of something as elusive and abstract as a student's personal experience of learning.

That clarity of process attracts the work of school reformers just as the good light attracts the hunter of lost watches. It is simply easier to treat the institution than it is to treat the student experience, because working with the concrete is so much easier than working with the abstract.

Cartoon by Cindy Koelsch



Never in my life have I heard a friend or colleague say, "That school changed my life." Hundreds of times I have heard people say, "That teacher changed my life." So let us work at the particulate level of helping teachers teach better, and let us succeed at that task before we take up the next one.

That in fact is the work of my foundation. We engage in school reform teacher by teacher, and we have trained more than 150,000 teachers in the past decade. Teachers we've trained have become principals, superintendents, even secretaries of education.

I've tried an unscientific experiment with a few dozen of these teachers in recent days. "What's the very best thing a new program at your school can do?" I've asked. Again and

again, these teachers told me that what they really hoped for was to become better teachers.

These people know that the bigger challenge of fixing schools is important, but it is far less real — for themselves and for their students — than the daily human impact they have as teachers.

A recently-retired superintendent said essentially the same thing to me. "The very best thing you can do for a superintendent is not to give him more money, more buildings, or a better contract. Instead, give him a tool to make his average teachers just a little bit better, and you'll see a much greater impact on the district than any model school or blue-ribbon program will ever bring."

Thinking as a parent, I recognize how right these educators are. Far too often, I've counseled one of my children to find the personal patience

to wait out a weak teacher — a wait that generally takes a full school year, even within the best district in the country.

It does not matter at all to my daughter that her school wins awards and is brilliantly managed by a dedicated and intelligent principal when she's stuck for a year with a teacher who is simply mediocre. But help that teacher to become a better teacher — perhaps even a great teacher — and, no matter where that teacher teaches, there will be hope.

(Adapted with permission from "The End of School Reform," Education Week, April 4, 2001. Mr. Temes is the president of the Great Books Foundation, and the author of Against School Reform — and in Praise of Great Teaching.)