

Rearranging the Deck Chairs

The world has changed, and education systems must change with it.

By Frederick M. Hess

I had been giving the director of a mid-sized school district a hard time about his school reform plan, as I'm wont to do. Finally, he said, "So what would you do if you were in my shoes?"

Being an academic, I did what any academic is trained to do. I waffled. "Well, it's tough to say," I hemmed. He wasn't having any of it. So I went ahead and said my piece.

I told him that all the pedagogical and curricular tweaking that so concerned him was nothing but a distraction, because his system itself was dysfunctional. I told him that the first steps in real improvement had little to do with instruction and a lot to do with sensible management.

I told him that his school system was engineered to foster and accept incompetence. No amount of new spending, professional development, or instructional refinement would suffice to change that.

Education reformers routinely approach school improvement as a matter of technical expertise rather than common sense – undermining their own best efforts while distracting public attention and energy from the larger, structural problems.

The problem that policymakers and education officials are loath to address is a system of schooling seemingly designed to frustrate competence.

- Teachers are hired, essentially for life, through drawn-out recruiting processes that pay little attention to merit and alienate many highly-qualified candidates.
- Little or nothing about teachers' or administrators' performance affects their career prospects or job security.
- Compensation and desirable assignments are distributed primarily on the basis of longevity.
- Making decisions on the basis of data is considered novel, while the very words "efficiency" and "productivity" are derided as alien.

The result is a culture of public schooling in which educators learn to keep their heads down, play defence, and avoid causing waves.

Our schools look this way because the structure once made sense. In a world where most students went on to work in factories or other blue-collar jobs, it was enough if schools kept children occupied and educated the privileged.

When schools had a captive teacher force of talented women, it made sense to limit entry to the profession and build compensation, seniority, and benefit systems that encouraged teachers to stay put for their entire careers.

When it was difficult to rapidly collect and analyze solid information on student learning, it was reasonable to compensate educators without regard to student performance and to protect them from being capriciously fired.

However, the world has changed, and schools must change with it.

- A changing economy requires that all students master skills once required only by an élite.
- The assurance that talented individuals will choose teaching due to a lack of viable options is long past.
- Schools compete for increasingly mobile workers in a labour market filled with millions of white-collar jobs that beckon to potential teachers.
- Advances in technology and testing have made accountability and information available in a manner unimaginable even 15 years ago.

There are two kinds of education reformers: "status quo reformers" and "common sense reformers". Status quo reformers believe that teachers and administrators are already doing the best they can, and the only way to improve schools is to provide more money, expertise, training and support.

Common sense reformers recognize the merit of many status quo suggestions. Many are reasonable and helpful, at least in some locales and for some students. Yet, these efforts are tangential to or distractions from the larger task of rooting out the culture of incompetence.

Common sense reform focuses on two precepts: accountability and flexibility. Centuries of experience in fields from architecture to zoology tell us that people work harder, smarter, and more efficiently when they are rewarded for doing so; that people do their best work when goals are clear and they know how they'll be evaluated; that smart, educated, motivated people will find ways to do better; and that professionalism flourishes only when professionals have the flexibility to use their judgment and skills.

Common sense reform seeks to construct a culture of competence in schools: a culture where success is expected, excellence is rewarded, failure is not tolerated, and professionals are accorded the respect they deserve.

Absent the pressure of markets or centralized accountability, it is not hard for mediocrity or inefficiency to seem the norm. Without such pressure, even the best-intentioned educator may shy away from pursuing efficiencies that require dislocation or wrenching adjustments. The wise reformer assumes that educators, for better or worse, are a lot like everybody else.

Some educators are passionately committed to their craft, highly-skilled, and will be so regardless of rewards or guidance, but most – like most attorneys and journalists and doctors – will be more effective when held accountable for performance, rewarded for excellence, and given the opportunity to devise new paths to success.

(Adapted from "Tough Love for School Reform" www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/746, with permission from WestEd.)