

Hindrances to Educational Reform

A Teacher's Perspective

By Bruce Winter

Ontario today has the most highly-educated teachers ever, some with PhD's in their field; yet Ontario still has a hierarchical administrative structure established in the 50's and 60's. It is an anachronism in the 90's.

This administrative structure consisting of "educrats" (consultants, co-ordinators, vice-principals, and right up through to superintendents and the mandarins at the Ministry of Education and Training) has been and will continue to be a hindrance to true educational reform. These educrats, well-meaning and hard-working as they are, continue to use an antiquated, top-down decision-making process. It is this decision-making process that must be changed before educational reforms can be successfully carried out by the teachers of this province – especially if they are going to be held accountable.

Under the present structure, who receives the blame if a reform fails – the educrats or the teachers? One has only to read the popular press to see that it is the teachers. However, the blame should be placed squarely on the shoulders of the initiators of the reform. And who are the initiators of reform? Based on my experience as a secondary school teacher for more than 30 years, it is the educrats.

It is the teachers, however, who must implement the reforms, even if they had no participation in formulating the policy. By contrast, the educrats almost never have to carry out their ideas in an actual class environment.

In their article in this year's September edition of *Saturday Night*, Andrew Nikiforuk and Deborrah Howes state, "Young principals, language arts chairs, and consultants knew that if they wanted to climb the ranks, they had to promote whole language. People with no knowledge of how to teach kids how to read 'marginalized us as teachers,' says Verna Walker. 'We had no voice in this.'"

Or take the recent policy of destreaming. I vividly remember hearing in October 1992 an educrat from the Ministry of Education speaking to interested local educrats and teachers at my former board. He said the teachers and parents of the province had little if any say about destreaming. From what I could glean, those who formulated the policy had not been in a classroom in many years, nor were they likely ever to go into a classroom again to do what they were advocating for others.

In an article entitled “A Clean Slate” in *The Globe and Mail* on February 26, 1994 (which deal with destreaming at Danforth Technical School in Toronto), Toronto Superintendent Richard Kollins was quoted as saying, “Surprisingly, for all the controversy, the Ministry has undertaken no formal research on the impact of its new policy” and “I have no idea if kids will be more successful because of destreaming.”

Great! Doesn't this just inspire confidence in the leadership of the educrats of Ontario? The teachers I know who must implement destreaming all say that standards have dropped since the start of destreaming.

Destreaming is one example of a policy that teachers had virtually no participation in. Other policies, like Outcomes-Based Education, are on the near horizon, with similar participation by teachers and educrats.

The type of antiquated decision-making process which we have today creates an attitude of cynicism and skepticism in many career teachers. The result is that they are not fully committed to new policies and do not give 100% to implementation. Thus, any educational reform is doomed to less-than-complete success from the very beginning. It is my contention, and I believe many career teachers in Ontario today will agree, that as long as the educrats do not have to implement educational reforms themselves, any reform will have only modest success.

Is there a solution? Yes, but the educrats will give 1,001 reasons why it won't work. *All* educrats, local or Ministry, must be required to get back into the classroom for a realistic period of time and actually implement whatever they espouse as the latest panacea. In this way, the initiators will have to implement, interpret, and refine in an actual classroom environment, the theories that they proclaim.

The career teachers, and I can assure you that there are many excellent, hard-working, concerned teachers in Ontario, will not only give a lot more than they do now, but also the educrats might gain a little respect through true educational leadership. They must be required to practise what they preach. In addition, the initiation of educational reform must become more democratic. Otherwise, look for more of the same.

(Mr. Winter is a retired Ontario secondary school teacher.)