

# The Politics of Change

By Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Our school system resembles a giant rubber band; when force is placed upon it, it will bend or stretch. But its every fiber yearns to resume its previous shape and, as soon as the force weakens, it snaps back to where it was.

Since the mid-1980's in the U.S., education reform has turned into a substantial industry in its own right, felling entire forests to print its studies and reports, consuming the energies of policy makers at every level, spawning a number of new organizations, and absorbing tens of millions of foundation dollars. What accounts for the meager results from all this money and effort?

Some believe that the reasons are essentially technical: that the main obstacles to improvement arise from our failure thus far to blend the right mix of reform ingredients or from inadequate resources. Others believe, as I do, that the principal impediments to successful reform are elements of the system itself, structural and political problems that block us from making the kinds of changes we most need. Here are some of those problems.

**The education governance system is substantially removed from conventional politics.** Ostensibly non-partisan school board elections, for example, which typically do not coincide with the days people go to the polls to pick presidents and governors, tend to draw few voters and to be easily swayed by stakeholder interests. Thus we see local school board elections dominated by candidates recruited (and financed) by teachers unions. Political decision-making over the past half century has evolved into the brokering of competing interests among the producers of the service. It's an ant colony with its own elaborate roles, protocols and power relationships — all buried where the sun seldom shines. Within that colony, factions and stakeholder groups — guidance counselors, school social workers, home economics

teachers, librarians, textbook publishers and hundreds of others — have worked out their own *modus vivendi*, dividing the resource pie (and banding together to demand that it be enlarged), accommodating each other's vital interests, and repelling intruders. The nearly universal requirement that public school teachers be certified by completing an approved program of training in a college of education exemplifies the machines that churn away within this sealed arena. Practically nobody outside the education professoriate believes that these programs do much good.

**Reform efforts are sorely handicapped by the widespread belief — eagerly nurtured by educators — that every stakeholder group must assent to any change before it can be made.**

This, of course, is a perfect prescription for maintaining the status quo, save for minor innovations on the margin that are lubricated by extra funding.

**Education stakeholders have mined the gateways to their policy arena, making it difficult and dangerous for anyone else to disrupt the intricate balance of power worked out among the factions.** Education interest groups are both ubiquitous and tireless. Parents and business leaders may have scant time to attend policy debates and strategy meetings, but one can always count on finding participants there from the teachers unions, the superintendents group and the school board association. They, after all, are paid — by public tax dollars, retrieved through member dues, often extracted involuntarily — to monitor all such gatherings, whereas consumers must ordinarily support themselves by working at other jobs. Patience is another asset of the status quo. Education reformers wax and wane, but established interests endure forever.

**So many cooks stirring the education broth mean that we have a system that is simultaneously grid-locked and unable to assign responsibility.** No one is really in charge; nobody is ultimately responsible, and everybody can blame someone else for whatever isn't working well.

**The education establishment cleverly manipulates Americans' strong affection for the concept of public education.** We are easily seduced by our innate and uncritical love for anything called public schools. In no other institutional domain, save perhaps libraries, does the adjective *public* trigger this warm, supportive feeling. Consider our response to phrases like "public housing" and "public lavatories."

**Public education has developed a finance system that channels almost all its money into salaries and yet manages to get an astonishingly small fraction of its dollars into the classroom itself.** A classroom of 24 children accounted for an average total public expenditure of about \$150,000 in 1995/96. Yet the average public school teacher, complete with fringe benefits, costs not quite \$50,000.

As should now be clear, most of the forces in American education work to keep it from changing and, the more radical the change, the harder those forces go about their work. Several promising reforms, such as charter schools, contracting out, choice and vouchers are underway. If the established interests are able to suppress these new reforms before they can prove themselves, we'll gradually revert to the familiar status quo.

Reform will not come easily. Changing American education, according to the late Admiral Hyman Rickover, is like moving a cemetery.

*(Adapted with permission from New Schools for a New Century — see OQE's review on page 3)*