

# If We Don't Watch Where We're Going, We Might Not Like Where We Go: School Reform at the Turn of the 21st Century

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American education appears to be fascinated with educational reform. The 20th century could be marked in school reform initiatives that would note the passing of time as well as any calendar. Cuban (1990) documented this obsession with reform before the most recent version, *No Child Left Behind*, was at full speed. At the turn of the 21st century, we have added a new twist, with the rhetorical claims that school reform must be about all children's success. Previously, success was defined as the right of all citizens to live and participate in the democratic process. Now success has become almost solely an economic narrative with little room left for preparation for civic discourse. While both are achievable (as might be evidenced by the following case study), tensions in the purpose of American public education are turning into fissures that are likely to become catastrophic cracks if not tended to soon and carefully. These tensions revolve around core questions about the purposes and processes of education: Can American public schools create a democratic society that includes a productive economy? Are we willing to give up the teaching and modeling of democratic principles in order to have a more productive economy? Can democracy survive if we do?

This article begins with a case study of a successful school renewal initiative driven by a commitment to the success of all learners through participatory cultures and democratic schooling. The case study highlights an initiative not driven by standardized test scores, as is currently the policy vogue. Along with democratic principles and learning for all, the example presented focuses on the problems tackled by many school renewal initiatives. Presentation of this case study will be followed by a discussion of what the threats are against it, how and why these threats are created and perpetrated, and what could be the potential for damaging effects to public education and civic life in our society if these threats are successful.

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## The Benedum Collaborative

The experiences in the Benedum Collaborative in West Virginia provide a case study of an innovation in education that has had positive results but that is not driven by the explicit goal of raising student achievement test scores. In 1983, John Goodlad visited the campus of West Virginia University to serve as a consultant to a campus-wide strategic planning process that, in part, focused on the preparation of teachers. The strategic planning report included Goodlad's notions of simultaneous renewal through school-university partnerships (Goodlad, 1994). According to Goodlad, the agenda should be an effort to rethink structures for educating teachers by redesigning the nature of relationships with K-12 schools. It made little sense to restructure schools if we did not educate teachers through intensive experiences in those schools; nor did it make sense to educate new teachers to work in old educational organizations.

Since its creation in 1990, the Benedum Collaborative at West Virginia University, a network of Professional Development Schools (PDSs), has been engaged in the process of building a professional culture through partnership. Professional Development Schools are complex entities, generally housed in public K-12 schools, yet organized as partnerships between public K-12 schools and higher education. The premise of our work is very simple: simultaneous renewal of public schooling and professional education programs. We are now one of the oldest school-university partnerships in the country and one of the most successful. Our partnership includes five West Virginia public school districts, 29 Professional Development Schools, and West Virginia University. The work is guided by five beliefs about learning and schooling:

- All in a PDS are learners.
- All in a PDS have the opportunity for success.
- The organization of a PDS encourages all to be empowered.
- A PDS fosters an environment of mutual respect.
- A PDS promotes curriculum and instruction that evolves from continual review and that reflects the school's vision.

The partnership is governed through a participatory process that includes all the partners, focuses on parity and democratic decision-making, and celebrates the ambiguity of grassroots participation and leadership. Partners in the Collaborative share three central ideals about the participation of all partners: PDSs serve as sites of best professional practice; PDSs foster cultures of inquiry where professionals study and critically examine the experimentation and innovation that occur in sites of best practice; and PDSs create empowered communities where all participants share in decision-making about the school and the learning process. The Collaborative strives to meet these ideals by providing resources and support to educators to engage in exemplary practice; respecting and trusting the autonomy of educators; providing meaningful accountability that feeds back into – rather than ends – the learning process; engaging the energy created when professionals build their capacity in partnership rather than in isolation; and balancing fluidity with structure to allow for optimal participation and investment of professional energy.

The work of the Benedum Collaborative is centered on enhancing educator quality. Each of the partner sites spends professional energy analyzing the learning needs of educators to meet the learning needs of children. Educators organize and engage in professional development that builds their capacity to meet the needs of their students. Each of the partners organizes its resources and professional energy in ways

that are unique to the needs and interests of the school. Professional development resources are then focused on addressing those needs by building the educators' capacity to meet them. Accountability begins at the school level with assessment of what children need to know. This assessment is a complex process. However, reduced to its simplest terms, assessment includes determining what children should know and be able to do, ensuring that teachers are capable of creating that learning context and have adequate resources to accomplish this, and then assessing in a meaningful way the impact of this process on the learners.

This focus is essential to the work of the Benedum Collaborative, to what it offers for school renewal in general, and to how it represents a contrary perspective to status quo school reform where educators have, for the most part, been subjects of change rather than agents of change, and the quality of learning and the quality of the profession are marginalized in the process. Renewing the profession does not lend itself to quick-fix strategies and superficial policy maneuvers. Intense, long term renewal efforts, such as school-university partnerships, are innovations that are definitely driven into existence by "courageous patience" (Peters & Austin, 1985). The success of the Collaborative, and many other school renewal initiatives like it, suggests that we take seriously how we support the profession in a public and policy sense. Additionally, it requires us to acknowledge that strategies for renewal must come from the profession itself – from educators who participate in creating their own standards of practice and are then rewarded for exemplary service. Any other course of action is likely to recreate the structures and policies we already have that questionably serve the interest of our children, our schools, and the teaching profession.

In the broadest and deepest sense, the work of the Benedum Collaborative is guided by principles that are not new to education and certainly are not articulated in the "leave no child behind" rhetoric currently in vogue. John Dewey (1916) asserted the maxim nearly a century ago: "That which we want for any child we should want for every child." This element of Dewey's work, so central to his philosophy of American education, begins and ends for all educators and policymakers with two questions: (1) Is this the kind of practice or standard that I would support where my child is learning? and (2) Is this the form of assessment and accountability to which my child should be subjected to generate judgments about the best education? Given Dewey's belief that the fundamental agenda for American public schools is the democratic agenda, and all others spring from that, the fundamental practices of all schools should be to do for every child what we can do for the most privileged child.

### **Leaving No Child Behind**

The point of "leave no child behind" rhetorical claims is admirable, particularly when considered in light of the experiences of many poor and minority children in American public schools. According to a report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Darling-Hammond, 1999):

If you are a child who lives in a community where 50% or more of the children are in poverty, you are four times as likely not to have a teacher certified in the field they are teaching than your wealthier counterparts.

If you live in a community where 50% or more of the children are of color, you are over five times more likely not to have a teacher

certified in the area they are teaching than your counterpart in a majority white community.

Children in poverty are 60% less likely to have a teacher with a masters degree.

Children who have a teacher certified in the content area of mathematics score 62% higher on general math achievement test scores and 210% higher in algebra.

The critical challenge that emerges from such data, and what has likely driven the policy machinery behind current federal legislation, is how we maximize our potential to be aggressive agents in the transformation of school for everybody. The agenda for all school renewal efforts – local, state, and national – has to ensure the success of every child in every school. Such is necessary for the sake of our democracy and our economy. School renewal efforts that authentically and successfully pursue this agenda do so when they are focused on the agenda, direct resources to it, and are committed for the long haul. This kind of renewal (over "reform") is slow work, and it takes careful maneuvering and careful decision-making. It also involves risk-taking and pushes the edge of possibilities rather than focusing only on the status quo.

Schools must be engaged in meaningful change before they are ready for meaningful accountability. Deeply rooted issues and problems have to be addressed for such change to be on the radar screen and for these change efforts to be successfully negotiated. Partnerships have required that the institutions of public schools and higher education cross over into each other's space and disrupt the routine – but not necessarily beneficial – practices of both camps. Rather than focus on superficial change with thin results, such initiatives ask tough questions as part of the work: Can public schools and higher education really form a new culture of schooling and learning? Can we change the way we think about the autonomy of educators, leaders, and change agents? Can these be classroom teachers?

Sirotnik (2002) asserts the following beliefs about the moral dimensions of public education that should be "accounted for" in a responsible way. These echo in many ways the reasons why "courageous patience" is necessary for meaningful school renewal and help to explain why the focus for school renewal policy should be as deep as it is broad:

1. Public education plays a vital role in our pluralistic and democratic society.
2. The functions of public education must be construed broadly to encompass the character and competencies of fully educated human beings, capable of filling multiple roles in our social and political democracy.
3. Government and the public have a right to know how well children are faring in our public education systems.
4. Just as educators need to be held accountable, so do policy makers and the public as a whole – for both the validity of the educational accountability systems they establish and the impact these systems have on equity and excellence in teaching and learning.
5. A responsible approach to "being called into account" assumes that public school educators, parents, government officials, and

others want to do the right things for our children, even though they may not always know how and are often overwhelmed by the problems they face.

6. The distribution of resources in response to school – and community-based needs is not a fiscally or morally neutral event.
7. Accountability and responsibility must go hand in hand (pp. 664-665).

We believe many school renewal initiatives, such as the partnership described above, reflect this kind of work and promise in improving public education. Central to the success of our case study is great strides we have made in building school university partnerships by recognizing the "cultural divide" between higher education and K-12. There are tremendous divides within our own camps, and there are divides that can only be seen in the context of the work, such as:

- Negotiating the borders between K-12 and higher education, including merging theory and practice and crossing between the "ivory tower" and the "real world of practice";
- Negotiating the borders within higher education by looking at relationships between four year and graduate institutions; and the cultures of teaching, and publishing or perishing; traditions of teacher education at regional vs. state colleges/universities; professional education as a professional enterprise rather than as a "cash cow";
- Negotiating the borders between elementary and secondary education including the organizational differences and the differences in the treatment of the content-process debate;
- Negotiating the borders between the state vs. the district vs. the school, including areas of curricular change, leadership, assessment and accountability;
- Negotiating the borders of governance and equity, including maintaining parity between public schools and higher education, and respecting the autonomy of each;
- Negotiating the borders of expertise, including questions such as: Who are the experts? At what? Is expertise the right construct for partnership work? Do we have an appropriate form of scholarship for the education profession? How can we wrap the knowledge base around the politics of practice?;
- Getting serious about assessment. Paint-by-numbers assessment is going to produce paint-by-numbers teaching. Is this the "artistry" of teaching we want? If not, how do we assess learning in such a way that reflects the complexity of accomplished teaching and learning?

## **What are the Challenges We Face in Authentic School Renewal?**

One characteristic of American public education in the early part of the 21st century is that the best, most authentic, and change-producing initiatives are not necessarily the ones to emerge from policy mandates or to survive in routine practices. Those in particular that focus on democratic principles, participatory processes, and broadening the agenda and the invitation to success are in particular peril. Sites of best practice can easily become sites of isolation and limited practice when external pressures create low-risk, low creativity drill-and-kill teacher practice. Cultures of inquiry can too readily become cultures of isolation and retraction when they are under constant threat and punitively oriented scrutiny. Empowered communities can quickly revert to status quo when the focus is on professional disempowerment, the elimination of autonomy and professional judgment, creating places where educators are in retreat.

### **Three Key Issues**

Public education today faces at least three key issues that critics exploit to unfairly bash it. These should be spotlighted because they represent the worst of what public education can be, provide the most damaging offenses against children, educators, and our social makeup, and are a serious threat to the best work of partnerships, simultaneous renewal, and school renewal initiatives of any kind.

The first issue is related to the essential role of public schools in a democracy. We are currently witnessing a destructively empty civic discourse about public education. There is an almost complete lack of reference to public education as a foundation and safeguard for democracy. This discourse is leading to increasing distance between citizens and schools, and a subsequent decay of the "public-ness" of public education. It has also helped to propel the centralization of decision-making about what is to be taught and how it will be assessed. Increasingly, these decisions have been taken away from the local level and given to people who have the least civic attachment to the places in which children are educated and in which educators do their work. While government has a constitutional responsibility to provide free public education, it does not have a responsibility to micromanage teaching and learning processes.

The 20th century witnessed the greatest strides in the democratization of our society and the parallel democratization of our schools. Through the first 75 years of the century, America had a clear – if not always well implemented agenda – for equity and democracy through public schooling. Public schools helped to bring down the barriers, but not without costs and frustrations and not without intermittent failure; but the pursuit of that agenda was as significant as the efficiency or inefficiency of the process. The public debate – though fraught with strife – was and is an important element of democracy. Schools that do not represent the hope of democratic life – even where it is difficult to attain – do a great disservice to a society that claims to be democratic and, in essence, contribute to society's demise.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, the educational agenda became almost totally economic, based on a belief that major sacrifices could be made in the democratic agenda of schooling if the economic agenda was intact. We have seen in that same time period a dramatic decrease in community participation in schools as centers of democratic life. Policymakers have been all too willing to compromise the process of participation and ownership in the drive to a false sense

of excellence and achievement. As a nation, we deserve better than a cheap fix with hollow results.

This leads to a second key issue: Standardized measures of achievement for children and practitioners have increasingly become the sole arbiter of quality and success. These are treated as a given now that standardized tests are here to stay and only the educationally naïve invest time envisioning an education world that would be different. If we do not invest heavily in a different kind of assessment of schools and learning, there will be an increasingly lower quality of life for adults and children in public schools. Standardized testing has become a stifling political force. As Sacks (1999) puts it:

How has the standardized testing paradigm managed to remain entrenched, despite the many criticisms against it? Like a drug addict who knows he should quit, America is hooked. We are a nation of standardized-testing junkies. (p. 6)

Sacks (1999) then goes on to cite the following statistics:

Between 1960 and 1989, sales of standardized tests to public schools doubled to \$100,000,000 per year. In the same period enrollment increased 10%. (p.6)

As of 1997, Americans spent \$200 million annually on testing in public schools (p. 12).

Between 1982 and 1994 standardized test sales grew faster than school and college texts, mass market paperbacks, and book clubs (p.12).

Americans take as many as 600,000 standardized tests each year in schools, colleges, and the workplace. (p. 12)

The nation's taxpayers are spending up to \$20 billion in direct payments to testing companies and through resources for taking tests and for teaching to tests. (p. 12)

We live in a time where we judge our educational success with children according to standardized test scores or some other crude indicator of the meaning of education that fails to tell much about children, learning, or educator work. Each year we observe a spring ritual where the most innovative teaching strategies go by the wayside as teachers stop doing what benefits children's learning most to do the things that get them ready for the tests.

A third critical issue is that public education is increasingly being criticized and exploited by politicians who have a tendency to act on superficial information and shallow ideas. This criticism and exploitation tends to: feed the lack of faith in public schools; demonize, demoralize and disenfranchise educators, particularly those closest to classrooms; and increase the shift from public education to other private markets through vouchers, charters, and privatization. These political responses have created concerns about public schools as much as they have been a response to any concerns, and in many ways they have become a major part of the problem. The overemphasis on test scores, a major element of this political ambush of schools, has created a false sense that schools are adrift and ineffective when, in fact, they are simply trying to survive in the crossfire.

Schools have become stuck in their own tracks without any direction to move that would not leave them blindsided. W. Edwards Deming, founder of the total quality management movement, described this distortion of direction setting and goal maintenance as follows:

"You can beat horses; they run faster for awhile. [Such] goals are like hay somebody ties in front of the horse's snout. The horse is smart enough to discover no matter whether he canters or gallops, trots or walks, he can't catch up with the hay. Might as well stand still." (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 117).

In the public eye, schools in many ways get the opposite treatment afforded other professions, particularly medicine. Imagine people on a mass scale going to the hospital overweight, under-exercised, and smoking. Even those without medical education know the chances of their leading healthy lives are remote. The public reaction when hospitals fail to heal them is never to take over the hospital, label them an "impaired hospital," talk about starting charter hospitals, voucher plans for hospitals, test patients on a yearly basis, test doctors on a yearly basis, or dramatically decrease the funds put into medicine because we have lost faith in hospitals. We take it as a given that hospitals work in a social context, and the general context of the person's life is as much an influence on their level of health as anything that goes on in the hospital. Hospitals are not held accountable for lifestyle. For public schools, it is quite the opposite. The public has become convinced that schools are ineffective. There is a belief by some that major segments of our population cannot be educated. This inequity will continue as long as we ignore the social and economic issues that create the inequities and fail to provide resources to schools to accommodate them instead of pulling resources from those schools and children who need them the most. Schools are held responsible for the "treatment" as well as the context for the treatment. Rather than support schools in their 150-year quest for equity and achievement, we hold them accountable for the social structures that have been created around them. Rather than believe that certain segments of our economy place communities, schools and children at risk, we argue that schools have put the economy at risk. In the end, we put teachers and other education professionals in high stakes contexts where we punish them for attempts to be innovative in the face of deviating from the prescribed agenda and likely miss chances to help children who need education the most.

The very things that the political rhetoric touts as a call to arms – excellence in schools – become casualties of the failed ideas that are created and implemented in the shallow backwaters of most educational policy making, done too far away from the context in which decisions must be implemented and made to work. Detached definitions of achievement, of what is important to learn, and how to assess it, break off vital links between schools and their communities. "One size fits all standards and measurements" becomes one size fits all decision making; leadership is weakened; school cultures are hollowed; and schools become less effective places. As Sirotnik (2002) claims:

Yes, the public has a right to know how well our public schools are educating future citizens, but, at the same time, those who fashion accountability systems for schooling must themselves be held accountable for doing it responsibly. It is essential that educators not let themselves off the hook when it comes to ensuring equity and excellence in our schools and closing the "achievement gap." Yet it is equally essential that the public not let our "educational politicians" off the hook with regard to closing the "rhetorical gap" – the gap between what politicians and policy makers say they want for public education and the actual mustering of the will, commitment and resources necessary to do something authentic about it (p. 671).

All of these pressures create schools where the institutional culture becomes increasingly destructive and toxic to the people who work in them, adults and children alike. Deal and Peterson (1999) highlight the characteristics of such schools:

They become focused on negative values; They become fragmented; Meaning is derived from anti-student sentiments, or life outside work; They become almost exclusively destructive; They become spiritually fractured. Education professionals, particularly teachers, spend much of their time and energy being not exemplary and innovative, but being "negaholics" as a matter of psychological survival (pp. 118-122).

The way out may be quite commonsensical and may exist already in most schools, communities, and school districts. I recently had a conversation with a state senator about the quality of schooling and the overemphasis the state places on standardized achievement test scores as an indicator of school quality. He said to me, "Van, without the test scores, how will we know if our schools are any good? How will we protect our children without this indicator?" I replied, "Do you remember what the mean percentiles of your graduating class were?" He, of course, said no. I asked if his parents remembered. He said no. I asked if they even knew at the time. He said no. I asked if he felt abused by his parents for sending him to a school without knowing how they stacked up against other schools on mean percentiles. He, of course, said no. I asked if his parents knew he was going to a good school. He said yes. I asked how he knew without test scores. He didn't say anything. Then we had a long conversation about how people in small towns, big towns, and rural schools know when schools are doing a good job of providing what is most important about learning. We know we can do a good job of creating and sustaining good schools when those schools are filled with talented and motivated educators and supported with adequate resources.

There is no question that most American public schools can be better places for learning, or at least continue striving to do so although they are already healthy learning communities. Even with the weaknesses in some schools, there is a greater threat to our democracy and way of life when the foundational mission of American public schools is challenged. The mission is historically weak at this point in time. Public schools must continue to be nurtured and protected for the democratic process to go on. Lessons about democracy and the struggle to create it are the real achievements of public schools. While we have become increasingly focused on schools as the engines of the economy – a worthy agenda – their paramount value is in their nurturing and sustaining of our democratic agenda. Economic success, and our focus on achievement that leads to it, has to be premised in a set of moral beliefs that are generated in democratic schools in democratic societies. We should see achievement as the outgrowth of nurturing, caring, and innovative schools, and it should be done in a way that promotes democracy first and a sound and equitable economy within that, rather than an "achievement at all cost" approach.

## **The Road Ahead**

All education leaders should consider major changes in the accountability and assessment systems for the nation's public schools. There is no question that moving aggressively forward on creating a more comprehensive and rigorous accountability system would make a major difference in how we support the highest quality schools.

To be effective, the public and the education profession must see new accountability structures as a strategy for improving schools, for supporting the work of professional educators, and ultimately enhancing the quality of learning for children.

The use of standardized measures of achievement as the sole arbiter of quality has narrowed our understanding of achievement, suppressed what we offer as appropriate and meaningful curriculum, and constrained the autonomy – and the creativity, innovativeness, and energy – of teachers. The over-reliance on standardized test scores also has misinformed our understanding of what goes on in schools, led to a lack of public faith in schools, and demonized and demoralized educators. "One size fits all standardization and accountability" stifles rather than encourages the best work of educators.

A newly articulated direction may lead to other significant improvements in the quality of schools, but to do so will require that we think about doing more than changing forms of tests and accountability schemes. Accountability, school climate, and teacher quality are closely linked as factors in the overall quality of schooling, and it is important to look at the inter-relationships among the three as we develop new policies related to accountability. Broader conceptions of how we learn and heightened creativity and innovation in how we teach are vital, and they call for more comprehensive accountability structures and assessments. Such structures– including portfolios, student exhibitions, and student work projects – also give us a much more complete picture of what happens when learning does not occur and how to adjust teacher practice such that we can more successfully meet learners' needs. As Sirotnik (2002) suggests, we must begin to understand assessment as the process of using knowledge and information to judge and understand the learning process and accountability as what we do with those appraisals.

Standardized tests alone cannot do this. Accountability structures must focus on the activities in which children and teachers engage and must be based in the work that children produce on a consistent basis – not just at the end of the school year. Accountability is about how children learn, how we determine what children will learn, and how we support teachers in creating classrooms where children can learn effectively. It is also about providing teachers with the autonomy and the tools to do it and then holding the entire process accountable. Focusing on accountability cannot be used as a substitute for focusing on educator quality. We must be focused on promoting the quality of our educators' work and their professional development as part of our accounting.

In most schools, teachers' and the profession's performance are judged by relatively cheap-to-buy, cheap-to-administer, and cheap-to-score tests. Paint-by-numbers assessment results in paint-by-numbers art. The same is true for teaching. Reduce the art of teaching to aggregate performance on a numerical indicator, and one will get this quality of art.

Our shortsighted understanding of the complexity of teaching, driven by our shortsighted evaluation of it, feeds the public's lack of faith in schools and demonizes, demoralizes, and disenfranchises educators. We get little of value in return. If we were to invest heavily in a different kind of assessment of schools, learning, and teaching could result in an increasingly higher quality of life for adults and children in public schools. We need to know what children know, and what they can do with that knowledge. Children's exhibits demonstrating the use of their knowledge are the best assessment of teaching and learning.

If we continue to pursue the misguided agenda of "ensuring" quality through more standardized assessment, the national crisis in the teacher shortage will become a national tragedy. Fewer and fewer people will want to teach at a time when we need more highly qualified teachers than ever before. We will also tie the lowest common denominator in children's achievement with the lowest common denominator in teaching quality, and when we do, we will probably act surprised when we get the lowest common results.

If we want to tie teacher quality to something concise, let us tie it to the highest common denominator and importance of the job. Set standards high. Support teachers in getting there. Value the creativity and richness of practice that mark our best – and favorite – educators. We must help the ones who struggle, and if they do not improve, support our school leaders in removing them from the classroom in a timely fashion. If we truly want quality, we should use our best knowledge about schools and teaching to do our best work and create our best schools. Quality as an outcome requires quality as an input.

The fact that public schools are more complicated places than any policymaker recognizes does not release schools from the awesome responsibilities they hold in our society. Public schools must continue to be nurtured and protected as cornerstones of our democracy rather than as cornerstones of our economy. Lessons about democracy and the struggle to create it are the real achievements of public schools. While we have become increasingly focused on schools as the engines of the economy – a worthy agenda – the paramount value of schools is in nurturing and sustaining our democratic, community building agenda. Economic success, and our focus on the achievement that leads to it, has to be premised in a set of moral beliefs that are generated in democratic schools in democratic societies. We have already begun to see the damage that can be done when we stray too far from that course.

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