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**Reforming Secondary Education**

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**Introduction**

This paper discusses a number of complex issues very briefly and thus inevitably oversimplifies. To keep the paper readable I have kept references in the text to a minimum; the reader will find a brief discussion of the relevant literature and a list of suggested readings at the end of the paper.

**A biographical note**

My thinking about secondary school reform has been influenced by twenty-five years of involvement with the issue. While I was in high school I was one of the organizers of a short-lived, city-wide high school students' union. Though gentle in its program, the union was received by school administrators and trustees at best with polite dismissal but more often with outright hostility. A few years later I was a school trustee, again interested in education change, when the system's idea of a big change in high schools was the trimester. While working in Ontario I watched their review of secondary education turn largely into new courses for university entrance students. A few years later Manitoba went through a similar review of high schools, where the biggest change seems to have been moving grade nine into high school (at just about the same time that Ontario was moving grade 9 out of high schools).

In recent years I have again become involved with secondary education - as a National Advisory Committee member for the Secondary School Change program of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, as organizer of a series of workshops on change in the secondary schools, and through the Canadian Education Association's exemplary secondary schools project. Finally, with my colleague J. A. Riffel, I have been exploring the ways in which schools and school trustees understand and respond to changes in the world around them.

All these experiences have led me to two conclusions which I develop in this paper. First, secondary education is badly in need of change, primarily because major aspects of the social context have changed. Second, there is not much sign that the required changes are occurring. So as not to be too pessimistic, I conclude with some suggestions about the kinds of changes we do need and the actions that might help to bring them about.

**The Changing Context**

Much of the rhetoric of educational reform begins with criticism of schools which, it is argued, are failing us. Critics say that quality has declined; standards have fallen, curricula are trivial, teachers are overpaid, faculties of education are irrelevant, and so on. If Canada wants to maintain its standard of living, we are told, we must change the education system.

I reject this line of thinking. Much of the emptiness of the criticism has been well-exposed by Robertson and Barlow (1994). I believe that our schools are, for the most part, better than they have ever been; teachers are better prepared and as dedicated, curricula more challenging, and so on.

The problems with schooling are not due to a decline in education, but to changes in the world around the schools - changes that are not well understood even though they pose fundamental challenges to schooling. These changes are particularly important to secondary schools. Although others may have different lists, four seem to me to be particularly important.

1) *The situation of students is changing in many ways.*

- Young people are a declining portion of the population, so more attention is being given to the elderly and their issues, such as health care, instead of education. Fewer and fewer people have children in schools and therefore do not have direct contact with the schools.

- Families are changing. Divorce rates are up, as are remarriages and blended families. Most families have all parents (whether there are one or two) working.

- Poverty is increasing and income gaps remain very large. Rates of child poverty in Canada are unconscionably high, and poverty is a strong and well established correlate of educational problems (Levin, 1994a).

- Relationships between young people and adults are changing (Magsino, 1991). Adults no longer have the unquestioned authority they used to have. Children and youth are seen and see themselves as more independent and autonomous - something that might well be regarded as a positive outcome of education.

- The ethnic composition of the country is changing. Aboriginal youth represent a growing portion of the population. Visible minorities are also a growing presence. The ethnic groups that were dominant in Canada are becoming less so.

- Moral issues and values are changing. The advent of AIDS and explosion of STDs have changed sexual relations as feminism has changed gender relations. Ideas of human rights have developed in important ways. Unquestioned authority is in decline, as is trust in traditional institutions.

2) *The technology of education has changed.* We are only starting to realize how much learning is being affected by developments such as television, video, computers, CAI, CD- ROMs, data bases, the internet. More knowledge is becoming more available, more widely and more interactively. This development shows no sign of abating. It means that we no longer need an education system that requires standardized mass production organization, where we require all students to do the same thing at the same time in the same place. Schools have struggled for years to find ways of individualizing instruction because teachers know that students are different and one setting won't work for all. Individualizing will not work well in a mass production system. Changing technology could allow much greater individualization but only if the basic approach to providing educational opportunities changes.

3) *It has long been recognized that secondary schools were dominated by preparation for post-secondary education, and especially for university*. Many studies and reports have made this point. Yet the nature and role of post-secondary and continuing education are changing, although the post-secondary institutions are only beginning to realize this. Post-secondary education used to be a route to economic and social status for a small number of well prepared people. It is increasingly a population-wide activity serving all kinds of people in many different ways. Students are older. More of them are part-time. They have a wide range of backgrounds and skills. Boundaries between universities, colleges, adult education and workforce training, are, despite considerable resistance, being blurred. Over the last twenty years or so colleges and universities have begun, slowly and grudgingly, to adjust to these new realities. Recent commissions in several provinces leave no doubt the universities will be under pressure to continue to do so.

4) *The labour force into which young people are moving has also changed in important ways (Levin, 1995)*. The rhetoric of a high-tech, high-skilled world of entrepreneurship and creative jobs is belied by the data. Jobs are harder to get and to keep. Real wages for young people are decreasing. There may be many years of part-time school and part-time work, or simply part-time work, looking for a more permanent place in the labour market. A good education no longer guarantees a good job, but lack of education makes desirable work quite unlikely. The traditional claim of schools, "Stay in School and Get a Good Job," is no longer convincing, leading students to question the value of schooling.

Educators in secondary schools are not unaware of these changes. Everybody realizes that things which were once taken for granted are no longer so. Indeed there is a great deal of unease among secondary educators precisely because they see changes but do not understand them very well or know what to do about them. A kind of general awareness of change is not matched by a sense of how to cope with change. In the face of a changing world, secondary schools themselves have no changing strategy. Let me try to make this point clearer.

First, secondary schools are largely alike. For example, the schools in the CEA Exemplary Schools study, located in very different communities across Canada, provide an interesting example. For the most part they offer similar sorts of courses, with similar teaching styles, in similar buildings, and with similar patterns of organization, despite enormous differences in their students and communities. To be sure, some secondary schools have vocational programs, some have International Baccalaureate, some have co-op education, and so on. But all schools have the same basic disciplines, all are organized around classes of 15-35 students in standard blocks of time, all are teacher-led, assign grades, have rules about attendance and behaviour, run from about 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and so on. They are similar in kind, different only in shading. One would expect that we would find many different kinds of secondary schools given differences in communities and the scale of the challenges. But I have looked, and I don't believe they are there. The exceptions to this pattern are so rare and the options so temporary as to prove the rule. There are other models, but they are not taken seriously.

There are various reasons for this homogeneity. Provincial regulations are one part of it, prescribing the curriculum, grading requirements and time allocations. Teacher training is another, typically sending into teaching those who most liked and worked well within the system. But the most important factor is history. All of us went to school, all of us know what school looks like. The net result is that schools continue to look much like factories even while factories themselves look less and less so. We largely lack the imagination to envisage something else.

Most importantly, and ironically, schools, institutions of learning, are not themselves organized as learning institutions. An institution committed to learning would have processes to collect information about its context and vehicles for processing that information. It would work actively to turn information into ideas and to study what the data meant for the institution's work. Schools and school systems do not devote very much effort to such processes. They do not ordinarily collect information about their environments, or even about their students. Most Canadian high schools do not have data on the SES composition of the student body or the community, the post-school activities of students, or the other factors outlined in the first part of this paper. Education itself is not part of what is studied in schools.

But even those school systems that do collect information typically do not have systematic ways of analyzing and using what they have gathered. Information, Gregory Bateson wrote, is a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972). This requires thought, discussion, analysis. Schools, like many other organizations, are so busy doing things that they have no time to think about what they are doing. In few schools are there many people who are thinking seriously about school-wide change.

I recognize that this critique does not give adequate recognition to the good intentions and efforts of many secondary school educators all across Canada, who are indeed struggling with the problems of secondary schools. But it seems to me that for all their work and good will, the scale of the change is entirely disproportionate to the need. Changes are too disconnected and too small. There is more concern about changing timetables or required credit patterns than there is for looking at secondary school provision as a whole. Schools end up with a whole series of one-at-a-time initiatives dependent on the energy of particular individuals, but with little lasting effect on the school as a whole. When the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation invited proposals for comprehensive, school-wide change, most proposals were for small, incremental changes. In the CEA study the schools that look most different from the norm were founded two decades ago during the heyday of alternative schools. Similarly, the literature on secondary schools gives few examples of fundamental change (Lee, Bryk & Smith, 1993), and those that have been attempted have run into considerable difficulty (Muncey & McQuillian, 1993).

Thus the current efforts of secondary schools to respond to perceived changes are quite inadequate. Faced with a changing world dimly perceived, administrators and policy-makers fall back on well-worn strategies. Do more of the same things and add special programs or target staff to meet newly seen needs. Blame problems on something else, such as families or governments. Make changes at the edge of the organization, leaving untouched the core of what has been done for so long - teachers instructing groups of students in closed settings on the standard secondary school subjects.

**Advice from the literature**

The scholarly work on educational change currently proposes two main strategies, called by Fullan (1991) "intensification," and "professionalization". Intensification describes the package of reforms such as external examinations, tougher curricular requirements, or external review and accreditation. Proposals for market mechanisms of various kinds also fall into this category. The argument is that changing the conditions around schooling will improve results. Professionalization, on the other hand, takes the view that school improvement depends on giving more authority and autonomy to teachers; the assumption is that by changing the conditions of teaching we will improve education.

I don't believe either of these strategies by themselves can be successful, because both of them make assumptions about cause and effect that cannot be justified. We might note first that neither intensification nor professionalization pays much attention to the kinds of external changes discussed in the early part of this paper. Both are "within the system" strategies, when what is needed to my mind is to ask how the schools relate to the larger society. Though they are different in many ways, both approaches also assume a linear model of education, in which policy causes teaching which causes learning (Levin, 1994b & c). This seems to me self-evidently wrong. Every teacher knows that policy may or may not influence teaching, and we certainly know that teaching may or may not lead to learning. But our focus is backwards. We should begin with learning, and pay attention to factors that influence learning. This means, clearly, paying more attention to what students think and do, since they are the learners. There may be good reasons for increasing teacher autonomy, or for more testing, but to argue a direct link between either strategy and learning outcomes is problematic indeed.

**What might be done?**

If secondary schools are to remain relevant institutions in a changing world, then changes are needed both in schools and in the systems in which they are embedded. These changes must be linked to the wider social context; our approach to school reform will not work if it proceeds solely from an analysis of the school's internal workings.

This is not to say that schools must respond in some mindless way to social and economic forces. Educators are responsible for knowing and thinking about how the world is changing, and for working through what these changes might mean for the way we conduct secondary schooling.

Let me briefly suggest four areas which are particularly important for the reform of secondary education. The points which follow are only sketched, partly because of space limitations but even more because we are only at the beginning of learning about how these strategies might work in schools; there are few models to look to.

1. *Active learning.* We have abundant evidence that secondary school classrooms continue to be dominated by teachers talking to passive learners. If there is any one essential change to be made it is to move towards active learning. Many ways exist to do so, including through more independent work by students, more collaborative and group activities, longer-term assignments, public exhibitions of work, portfolios, out-of-school learning activities, community service projects, and others. But we cannot have self-motivated, independent learners if the work to be done and the way in which it is to be done is largely dictated by others.

Active learning also requires respect for learners. Schools are structured to see students as deficient beings in need primarily of direction and control. A philosophy of active learning sees learners as people with skills and interests to be encouraged and developed. Active learning is inconsistent with schools oriented to obedience and externally-dictated behaviour. It is also inconsistent with schools in which students have little or no role in making important decisions about what will be learned and how.

Good examples of active learning are relatively easy to find - in adult education settings, in many workplace education programs, and in people's learning outside of formal institutions. Bringing these practices into secondary schools is feasible, if not simple.

2. *Working with and in the community.* Twenty-five years ago we had the first experiments with 'schools without walls' and education in the community. These efforts have had little impact on the mainstream of schooling, yet they remain vitally important. Learning can and does take place in many settings, only one of which is a classroom. Providing learning opportunities in homes, workplaces, and other community settings is essential if schools are to be connected to their community (and I leave aside here the difficult issue of what we mean by 'community'). Using people in the community to work with students is another oft-mentioned but little-used possibility. The advantages of parent involvement particularly in students' instructional program are well known but particularly rarely practiced in secondary schools. Partnership arrangements are now being developed in many schools, and do show some promise but need to be extended so that they are not what is done after all the so-called important work is finished. Nor are businesses the only potential partners. Community organizations, labour unions and other social service agencies could be useful partners. Partnerships with post- secondary institutions - for example to offer post-secondary programs in high schools - are quite badly developed in Canada, yet have much potential.

3. *Using information technology.* As already mentioned, information technology offers enormous possibilities for individualizing learning and for giving students more responsibility and autonomy. Although all schools have made investments in information technology in recent years, it continues to be peripheral to most of what schools value and has not yet resulted in significant changes in the operation of secondary schools. The definition of technology remains relatively narrow, focusing on computers and giving inadequate attention to the implications of various technologies for creating, storing and retrieving information of all kinds. As well, technology continues to be largely an add-on, something to be used for reinforcement or enrichment, but not a central focus of school programming. We are only beginning the discussion of how technology can and should change teaching and learning. For example, technology has the potential to change dramatically teacher-student relationships by giving learners much more control over what and how they learn. Are secondary schools ready for this change?

4. *Teacher renewal.* Secondary schools have a very high proportion of teachers with many years of teaching experience, usually in the same subject and often at the same school. Many advocates of change see this veteran staff as a major obstacle to change. We may see a significant turnover of teachers in the next five or ten years, but whether this happens may depend on funding levels. In any case, we cannot wait for turnover to happen, and it seems odd to assume that experienced teachers are a problem. Instead, we need to recognize that people in the middle or end of their careers may have different needs, interests and patterns of motivation than they did two decades earlier, and work with them accordingly. Hierarchical organization patterns will be less satisfactory with experienced staff, who want to be able to use what they have learned. Creating schools in which staff are involved in a real dialogue about teaching and learning is necessary. Building on people's strengths and interests, just as we would with students, is vital. Many teachers have ideas but see no way of having them recognized; others have withdrawn much of their commitment to teaching, and need support in rekindling it. Taking full advantage of the skills of teachers will require changes in the way school boards and school administrators structure and exercise authority.

**How do we do this?**

I have said that neither intensification nor professionalization is itself an adequate strategy for changing secondary schools. I believe that we need to focus on making schools educational places as well as places of education. That is, we need to look at ways of increasing the attention schools pay to their environment and activities, generating more analysis and discussion of what the school is doing, encouraging experimentation, and learning from our efforts at improvement in a sustained way. Since we do not know just what to do, we need to try various strategies, see how they work, and adjust accordingly. Moreover, since the world changes as we work in it, any strategy will need rethinking at some point, usually sooner rather than later.

To create this kind of climate in schools we will need more and better data about students, about communities, and about the social context. Gathering intelligence and then working with it must be an important part of what every school does, involving staff, students and community as well as administrators. The important issues of education need to be part of what is studied in schools. We should be encouraging debate and discussion about educational issues among all parties, and trying to make this debate as well-grounded in information as we can. In other words, we need to learn about education.

Moving in this direction will require both top-down and bottom-up strategies. It cannot be legislated by provincial departments of education, but equally it will not come simply from removing restraints on teachers. Provincial governments have a role to play in gathering and disseminating information about schooling (which may well include data on student achievement among many other kinds), in creating debate on important educational issues, and in pushing schools to develop plans and strategies and share these with the public. They have an important role to play in articulating public expectations and, of course, in setting resource levels. They can and should do these things in a way that promotes local adaptation and flexibility.

At the same time, school districts and school administrators also have important obligations in promoting a climate of learning about education. Coleman and LaRocque (1990) have described the ways in which some school districts promote an environment of experimentation, analysis and learning while others prevent it. An atmosphere that values evidence and ideas, that respects differences, that encourages various contributions according to people's abilities and inclinations, and that has high tolerance for ambiguity and diversity seems essential. There are no magic strategies for creating this kind of organization; one simply has to wade in, begin the work, and try to model the practices that others are being asked to adopt.

Teachers, both individually and collectively, also have opportunities and responsibilities for constructive change. Dynamic and committed teachers have always pushed the limits of what is possible, and often found those limits more elastic than they had thought. Although changes in administrative policies and practices are necessary for real and lasting school improvement, teachers do not have to wait for these to do things differently. More active learning can be encouraged in every classroom right now, and so can greater interaction with the community and deeper use of technology. Again, the revitalization of teaching is an important responsibility of administrators, but nobody can stop a teacher from revitalizing her or himself.

There isn't one right way to improve secondary schooling. We need to create a climate of experimentation, and even more a climate of learning, in which both current practices and proposed changes are subject to scrutiny and debate. The scale of the challenge will not permit us to do less.

**End Note**

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**Postscript: A Comment on the Literature**

The literature - both empirical and analytical - on change in secondary schools is already extensive and growing rapidly. A thorough review of recent US literature can be found in Lee, Bryk and Smith, 1993. Canadians have made some important contributions to the literature on secondary schools, including work by Andy Hargreaves (see Hargreaves & MacMillan, 1992, as one example), Ken Leithwood, and Michael Fullan. Peter Coleman's work on school districts (see Coleman & LaRocque below) and on parent involvement is very valuable. In my view the best source on change processes is Fullan (1991 and elsewhere), though he is not as strong on purposes for change. Many case studies of 'restructuring' schools are now being written, including the series and national overview report done (but not yet published as of this writing) by the Canadian Education Association, and many cases in the US of Essential Schools (Muncey & McQuillian, below) and others. On the specific strategies, good discussions include: on independent learning - the adult education literature; the work of Alan Thomas; on working with parents and the community - the work of Joyce Epstein, Don Davies, Nettles (1991, below); on technology in schools - Cohen (1988; below), Larry Cuban, and many advocates; on teacher renewal - the work of Ann Lieberman, the secondary school studies of Joan Talbert, Leslee Siskin and Milbrey McLaughlin, and work on PD by Judith Warren Little. Changing student assessment, a critical area not discussed in this paper, also appears to have a relatively weak research base as yet.

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Readers wishing a more complete set of readings are invited to e-mail the author.

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