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ABSTRACT

Several reforms recently proposed for secondary schools and their impact on students and schools are discussed. One type of reform being proposed for secondary schools is aimed at students and at the schools' power to make sorting judgments about students. Examples of these reforms are differentiated diplomas, minimal competency tests for graduation, reduced electives, and increased academic requirements. Such changes affect the students who will have to comply with these reforms and also affect the structure of the schools by giving them increased power to make judgments about students. Another type of proposed reform is aimed at the organizational aspects of schools. Such changes include curriculum reorganization, itemizing what is to be learned, what students are supposed to accomplish, and how teachers and learning are to be evaluated. These processes will increase the number and power of administrators and supervisors, decrease the discretion of teachers and students, and increase the level of bureaucracy in schools. A more hierarchial, bureaucratically-governed educational structure is emerging. In such a situation, an increased number of judgments about students will be made, and it may be difficult to avoid lodging the more pejorative judgments against the economically poorer students. (JD)

THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL REFORM ON THE EGALITARIANISM OF THE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper describes some of the reforms that are being proposed for secondary schools and discusses the likely impacts of these reforms on students and schools. The host of reforms being proposed fall into two categories. The first is composed of those aimed at students and at the schools' power to make sorting judgments about students. Some examples of these reforms are differentiated diplomas, minimal competency tests for graduation, reduced electives, increased academic requirements, etc. Such changes will affect the students who will have to comply with these reforms and they will also affect the structure of the schools by giving them increased power to make the judgments about students. But this group of reforms will encounter two problems. The first is it is that with the schools making sorting judgments it is likely to be the poorer and minority students about whom the more pejorative judgments will be made. The second is that increased power over students can run counter to the political, financial, and legal constraints under which schools operate.

The second general category of proposed reforms is composed of those aimed at the organizational aspects of schools. Such changes include curriculum reorganization, itemizing what is to be learned, what students are supposed to accomplish, how teachers and learning and are to be evaluated etc. Whether tightening school processes will result in a "better" educational system or increased learning is open to question. But what is not open to question is that these processes will increase the number of and the power of administrators and supervisors, will decrease the discretion of teachers and students, and increase the level of bureaucracy in schools.

This is not just a school or school district phenomenon. What is emerging from state departments to local school district is a more hierarchial, bureaucratically-governed educational structure. In such a situation, there will make an increased number of judgments about students and it may be difficult to avoid lodging the more pejorative judgments against the economically poorer students.

School Reform

For the past three years the American public secondary schools have been subject to a wide range of criticism asserting that their academic standards are inexcusably low relative to both their own past and to secondary schools in foreign countries. The accusations are not unjustified. According to virtually every objective and subjective criterion presented in the literature, high school students today achieve less academically than their predecessors of 20 years ago.[1] Roughly comparative measurements of subject matter involvement and performance have declined steadily since the mid-1960's. Students' scores on standardized tests have fallen (although there are segments of the population whose performance has apparently begun to improve). They enroll in fewer challenging academic courses and in more introductory, service, and personal development classes; they spend less time on homework and more time working and watching television. High school attendance rates have worsened. Over the past decade the U.S. graduation rate has declined in excess of four percent. Adolescents' higher order reasoning and interpretive skills have weakened. High school students appear to care less about their educational experience and have come to invest their time, effort, and attention elsewhere. Even Laurence C. Stedman and Marshall S. Smith, who caution against overreacting to the evidence of eroding standards, recognize that education demands immediate attention.[2]

> Certainly we cannot afford to be complacent at a time when half our high school graduates take no math or science after 10th grade, nearly 40 percent of the 17-year-olds cannot draw inferences from written material, and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps

An anaylsis of 8,800 high school transcripts presented to the National Commission on Excellence in Education indicated that current students were spending less time studying traditional academic subjects and more time on soft electives than the generation of students twenty years ago.[3] Another study indicated that half of current high school graduates take no math or science courses after the eighth grade (Id.). The National Center for Educational Statistics estimates that less than four percent of college-bound students and less than two percent of all students meet the recommended standard of the National Commission on Excellence.[4]

The reasons for this situation are probably quite complex but a fairly simple analysis is being given and generally accepted.[5] As the synthesized explanation goes...in the early sixties, with encouragement from the federal government which was anxious to use education as a "transfer of income" to the poor, schools made extensive programmatic and curriculum changes to assure "all" adolescents a chance at social, political and economic equality, particularly those from poorer and minority families who up to that time might not have been attending and/or completing school. Education was thought to be a solution to the problem of poverty. If poorer people could be educated, then they would develop salable skills, obtain jobs and would no longer be in poverty, on welfare, prey to criminal tendencies, etc. But all of that was dependent on the school attracting and holding "all" students and it was to that end schools undertook the programmatic and curriculum changes. The changes included expanding and diversifying the curriculum to find ways to appeal to students,

whom it was feared would otherwise not have come to or stayed in school and simultaneously easing away from academic standards that would discourage these students.

Schools reduced tracking (because it was the poor who wound up in the lower tracks), implemented an elective curriculum, (to make sure that "all" students had equal access), adopted liberal attendance and discipline policies (because they didn't want to be accused of discriminating against those less willing to come and comply), hired teachers who were "student oriented" (we don't teach English, we teach kids), and lessened the emphasis on academic excellence (because it was a subtle form of discrimination against the less able). But according to the conventional wisdom, these changes went too far. In the process of expanding their efforts to attract and retain marginal (many of whom were the poor and minority) students, the schools abandoned academic standards for almost all students. In effect, the criteria of school success was a high attendance rate and peace and quiet in the corridors and classrooms. The schools "bent over backward" to achieve those ends but in the process ignored academic ends.

While these changes were going on inside the school, political, economic, and legal constraints under which schools op[illegible]e were undergoing changes that reinforced the schools' commitment to "everyone". State financial support of schools was increased relative to local support and since state money is all allocated on a "per pupil basis," it became imperative for schools to pick up and retain as many students as possible. At the same time education was clearly being helped by the courts as a property right.

> A student's legitimate entitlement to public education is property interest which is protected by the due process clause (of the 14th Admendment) and which may not be taken away without adherence to the minimum procedures required thereunder.[6]

One can be deprived of a property right but it has to be a matter of some seriousness and actions taken to deprive him of that right have to follow the rules of due process. Hence political, financial, legal and ideological events encouraged schools to make program and organizational changes to accommodate "everyone", even those who might not have wished to come and those who might not have stayed had not the changes been made. Of course as it is reasoned, it is not just the students' fault. While the schools were accommodating larger numbers of reluctant students, they lowered their expectations for all students and consequently for teachers and the system as a whole lost sight of its academic ends. As the logic goes, more and more students responded by not bothering to extend themselves academically, and the overall result is a poor system of secondary education. In effect, the schools sacrificed quality for equality.

There are some alternative explanations for the situation. It can be argued as does Sedlak et al., that American secondary schools have never done a very good job of teaching academics and that the prime attractions of secondary schools have traditionally been extracurricular activities, social life and athletics.[7] Callahan and Tyack argue that the schools with their liberal interpretation of progressive education and their need to respond to immediate public pressures have always sacrificed academic standards to the more immediate pressures for trained workers, politically sensitive curricula or keeping students away from competition with adults for jobs.[8] Or it can be argued as it is by Weick, by Meyer and Rowan and by Kamens that the schools serve a variety of social functions, and the imparting of academic knowledge is only one and not necessarily the most important of those.[9] Those authors argue that standards, content, teacher behavior, and instruction and learning are left purposely undefined and unexamined and the institution in general left loosley coupled

because to alter or "correct" those elements would be to disturb public faith in and support of the schools. As their reasoning goes, the schools are able to define certain people as credentialed regardless of whether they actually know anything. Furthermore, they would argue that there are recent "decline in standards" is not that at all, it is an attempt to impose some very different criteria on the schools which have traditionally ignored academic elements in favor of political adaptability and economic health. If one were to subscribe to the critical theory school, he might see the "standards" raising and standards lowering business as really being of no consequence and quite unable to break the power of state capitalism on the school.[10] The schools in our society cannot seriously commit themselves to egalitarianism or even of raising the education level of working classes because to do so would upset the capitalist state which is primarily interested in keeping the workers in their place. In sum, there are a number of very plausible, alternative explanations to the "problem" of secondary schools. But those explanations, however plausible, have not altered the general impression that the "problem" is of fairly recent e.g., 25 year origin, that schools are far less demanding of students than they need be and that the "problem" needs to be rectified.

Inegalitarian Reforms and Their Effects

The efforts to improve secondary schools are taking a number of different forms and for purposes of this paper, those efforts will be divided into two categories. Under the first category, will be placed those reforms aimed at students. The reforms include minimal competency tests, increased academic requirements, increased numbers of hours in school, differentiated diplomas, and reduced numbers of electives. In the second category are those aimed at the organizations. These efforts to improve schools by teacher competency tests, increased funding, administrative retraining, tighter administrative

policies, increased hierarchy, increased evaluation procedures and more stringent supervision.

What differentiates the first set of reforms, e.g., those aimed at students, from the second, those aimed at organization and structure is the approach to egalitarianism. By egalitarianism is meant the belief that there are no fundamental diffrences among people; all are equal. There are differences of birth, race, social class, and economic advantage, but these are not endemic to individuals or groups; they are ascribed by social and economic conditions. The first set of reforms, those aimed at tightening academic standards, raising expectations and having a more controlled curriculum, respect this principal but their advocates are quite willing to have a meritocratic form of egalitarianism wherein each student is given an equal chance to attain the expectations but those who fail will suffer some consequences. They may be placed in lower tracks, denied a diploma or even ejected from school.

While the proposed reforms are fairly simple, e.g., increasing hours, increased required academic subjects, differentiated diplomas and competency tests, they propose "sorting standards" that run counter the way the schools are organized and have been operated for several years. A number of authors, Cusick, McNeil, Powell et.al. have concluded that today's secondary schools are characterized by an absence of academic norms.[11] Cusick spoke of the way teachers in the schools he studied were under pressure by administrators to "like and get along with the kids and their tax paying parents." He saw teachers respond by placing a great deal of emphasis on "getting along" with the students; in effect, they cast about for material students liked and would do and when those things were found it was proclaimed their students "educational needs" were being met. Powell used the term "treaty" to describe

the way students and teachers set up agreements about how much the teacher expects and how much the students would do. There were no abstracted and commonly understood norms, only these individually worked out treaties. McNeil found that students were allowed and encouraged to "bargain" over the scope and content of the curriculum. In fact, there was no "curriculum" in the sence of there being some common understandings about what is to be taught and what is to be learned. Instead, each teacher was allowed to "sub-contract" his work and each student allowed, with a breadth of possibilities, to select and define his education. Sedlak et al., after reviewing the major field studies of schools concluded that "this subcontracting, bargaining and treaty making" is not limited to the lower achieving students in poorer schools, it is endemic to our system of secondary education at all levels.[12] And in fact is an elaboration of these systems is exactly what many define as the lowered school standards. Lowered standards means allowing teachers to do what they wish, as long as they get along with students and do not antagonize parents, and allowing students to set their own level of learning and effort.

The proposed reforms are intended to counter this system. If students are forced to spend increased time in school, take more required academic courses, (hence fewer electives) if curricula are "set," and if students are obligated to demonstrate that they are reasonably literate and well informed before being allowed to graduate, then students will be judged according to agreed upon norms or expectations. So such reforms would give the schools the right to make judgments about students.

That makes eminently good sense until one is reminded that some of the judgments will be pejorative and the more pejorative judgments will be lodged against the poor, the black, hispanic, and the children from one parent homes. Failure in schools and dropping out of schools is not randomly distributed

across the population but is heavily correlated with background characteristics. If the school is obligated and enabled to make pejorative judgments about students who are doing poorly, it is likely that the economically poorest among the students will bear the brunt of those judgments. Virtually "every study that has included social class as an independent variable has indicated that youngsters from the lower socioeconomic strata are more likely to do poorly and to drop out of school than their more economically priviledged peers. Dropouts are more likely to come from families characterized by (a) many children (b) the absence of one parent (c) fewer material possessions and reading material in the home".[13]

No one is talking about excluding those students from school but there are ways to make pejorative judgments without excluding from school. They may be placed in lower tracks, denied diplomas and told quite overtly, in any number of ways, that they are among the "failures". There are ways to discourage those students from coming rather than simply excluding them. But the effect will be the same. When these "sorting reforms" are in place it is the poorer student who's more likely to be "sorted out". (In fact, this may be already happening. The high school dropout rate has increased from 24 to 28 percent in the last five years.)

There is a question in whether these reforms will effect more than the "poorer students". According to Sedlak, et.al., it is not only the lowest 10% of the students who are affected, doing poorly in school, and failing to involve themselves in academic endeavors.[14] The evidence is that the majority of students are marginally involved in school, spend few hours in school relative to hours spent working and socializing, place their time and energy in social activities or outside jobs and avoid the "harder" classes. The question is whether the student oriented reforms will effect the greater

majority. There are a number of reasons why this is unlikely. The imposition of a fairly rigorous academic education (which according to Sedlak, et al., one would have to go back to the 19th century to find in America) would disturb three basic principles adhered to by Americans about their schools, that they are popular, e.g., controlled by local boards and local funding, that they are egalitarian, e.g., committed to maintaining the opportunities for social, political, and economic equality, and that they are universal, e.g., that they are designed for "everyone." Should the schools implement reforms that interfere with more than a few marginal students, should they lodge pejorative judgments against the greater number who, according to the evidence, are disaffiliated from schools, should they for instance threaten two thirds of the seniors and half the juniors whom Cusick found leaving school early to get to their paying jobs, then they could be judged unpopular, elitist, and inegalitarian, and subsequently denied the level of support and confidence they presently enjoy.[15] It is a very sensitive thing for a school to deny a child access or even appear to deny a child access to equality. There are laws against it; there are parents whose support is school funding, there are popularly elected school boards in 16,000 school districts who hire school administrators and teachers, there is money to be gotten from the state which allocate it on the child's attendance and there is the deeply embedded ideal stating that schools are for everyone.

In implementing the reforms, the schools may go only as far as they can without violating those principles, or even appearing to violate those principles. Should the standards be set independently of what the students will take or the expectations exceed what they will do or the time demanded in excess of what they (with their families support) will give, so the renewed expectations may have to retreat. Each of the reforms by itself has to be

implemented within those principles, and that is why they have not, to date, and may not be phrased to interfere with more than the marginal (who tend to be the financially poorer) students.

While this analysis may appear cynical, it is not all; it is simply cognizant of the political, financial, and legal realities of public schooling in the United States. What may be greeted as cynical, however, is the schools' imposition of standards that to make the poorest and least able students, e.g., those with the fewest ascriptive advantages, pay the price of a "renewed" public confidence in the schools. The reforms may be seen by some that the schools can, with impunity, implement reforms which will make pejorative judgments about those who are doing the least academically because they are the least able financially to resist the school imposed judgments about their children. It is that view that will be taken by the critical theorists who already see the schools as hostile to the lower classes and will be able to say that the "return to standards" is the schools admitting publically that they were never really serious about egalitarianism and that they really are bound up with middle class conformity and middle class views about "making something of oneself" in a capitalistic economy. The further accusation will be that the schools between 1965 - 1985 made only a half-hearted attempt to overcome their own middle class bias which favors children imbued with conformity to and acceptance of dominant economic themes before the pressures of those dominent themes were applied and schools were forced to reverse their attempt and return to a system which sorted children on a basis which is plainly discriminatory toward the poorer children from lower classes. This will emerge as the major criticism of the proposed and in part implemented reforms.

Egalitarian Reforms and Their Effects

The second type of reforms are those which also advocate an egalitarianism, but which take that latter point into consideration and hence are phrased in ways that will not make the poorer students bear the burden. Roughly phrased this set too is phrased in terms of egalitarianism, but instead of "blaming" students for school failure, the blame is placed on the schools, e.g., teacher training, organizational structure, principal leadership ability, evaluation procedures or finance. The assumption behind those reforms is that while there is a problem, it is a problem of pedagogy and organization, and if those elements are attended to, then the problem of standards can be solved without making pejorative judgments about students. If schools avoid making the pejorative judgments, then we can be assured that they are not denying social, political, and economic equality to anyone or violating the principles of popularity - universalism and egalitarism. In fact with such reasoning the school is obligated only to make pejorative judgments about some of its own processes, an activity that school people are never loath to engage in.

These reforms do not threaten the way that schools relate to the public, include merit pay, competency or entrance tests for teachers, administrative retraining, more precise teaching, renewable and/or alternative certifications, increased inservice, a more powerful management structure, more testing and increased delineation and supervision of the curriculum. The positive side of such reforms is that teachers themselves seem to support them. They report that they are quite willing to take academic learning more seriously, upgrade the curriculum and, be tested and graded on the basis of their ability to transmit content knowledge.[16]

But that may be misleading. It may be they support this trend only because they have not yet tried it. Many of the proposed reforms advocate a tighter oranization and give more control of school processes to administrators, they

are quite akin to school reforms of the 60's in which school districts tried to implement rational management models such as MBO, PERT, PPBS which at the time were being touted by the United States Department of Defense. Studies of such programs that were implemented revealed a great deal of teacher resistance and in fact in many cases teachers were successful in reversing the attempts.[17]

There are some problems with this approach to standards raising. The first is that most of the elements are undertaken without reference to either the students or the relations between school and society. Most students have disengaged themselves from school for some very good reasons. They feel quite rightly that the time and effort needed to engage in academic endeavors does not "pay". It pays for those at the higher end of the achievement scale who aspire to elite universities and envision for themselves plans at the top of society. But with the lessened entrace requirements of most universities, the majority of students are quite accurate in their assessment that they do not have to work very hard in high school to get into college, even a decent college. And low end achieving students also know they do not have to work hard to acquire a basic job. Hence, all three groups, upper, middle and lower achieving have made an accurate assessment of the worth of academic endeavors. The question is whether a more imposing and bureaucratic organization will force them to reassess that situation. Will the proposed reforms convince most students that the investment in school (as opposed to the investment in work and social life) will "pay off". Perhaps, if they are accompanied by changes in college entrance and job entry requirements. Perhaps not if they are not accompanied by those changes.

Also one may ask whether the tightened and toughened curriculum be able to alter the conditions of student-teacher bargaining which was described? Will teachers get rewarded for imposing academic standards on students? If as

Lortie suggests, the rewards of teachers remain the affective relations they build with students, and if as Cusick suggests, administrators continue to value most those teachers who "like, and get along with" the students, then the imposition of strict academic norms amd evaluation processes may be an unwanted intrusion into decent and cordial relations between teachers and students and administrators.[18] The fact is that there is no assurance that the toughening of the curriculum and tightening of the organization will be greeted with compliance by either students or teachers or administrators. Unless students see some increased benefits to be had from the increased effort, they may not take energy they are presently expending in other directions and put it into academic endeavors. And unless teachers feel that they will begin to be rewarded and evaluated for enforcing higher standards, then they will continue to place the major efforts in "getting along with" and seeking affective relations with their students. (An element that is even more important for the marginal students.) And unless administrators find they get rewarded for seeing that students learn some prescribed set of material as opposed to seeing that they come, stay and behave in an orderly manner, then they too may resist the reforms. The participants in the schooling process have to see some advantages for themselves if they are to comply with the reforms.

On the other hand, we may be witnessing a fundamental change in the organization and management of public schools and some fundamental changes in the definition of education as well as how education is delivered. Many of the proposed reforms such as increased supervision of teachers and evaluation of curriculum, a tighter and more overt authority structure and increased evaluation are indicative of a much more bureaucratized, hierarchial, and tightly managed organizations, a type of organization that for reasons of equity schools have thus far avoided. Following the most commonly accepted

line of thinking. That for schools equality was always more important than quality. The emphasis in schools was not on the transmission of knowledge as much as it is on the "taking and retaining of all students, even those not inclined to come." Hence whatever was offered to the students was done in the interest of attracting and keeping students and not in the interest of teaching a set curriculum. But when the critics insisted on making the state of the school curriculum public, when those countless accommodations to unwilling or unable students were made public, when National Commissions call for increased standards, then more intelligible curriculum and a more intelligible organization had to follow. That means a more bureaucratic, managed, supervised and evaluated, top down organizational structure in schools.

The top-down nature of the reforms is happening not only at the local but also at the state level. This is particularly noticable when one notes that many of the reforms being generated from state departments of education. In former times, the state's primary mission was equality and that mission was reflected in their catagorical programs for minorities, the language handicapped, special education or simply poorer students. But now using the bureaucracy they have developed over the years, and the increased power reflective of their increased funding role, they are generating curricular suggestions replete with the dictates on how the curricular suggestions will be implemented and evaluated.[19] Many states are mandating curriculum, electives, homework policies, class time as well as evaluation, procedures. From the state on down we are increasing the power and discretion of those higher up the organizational ladder (e.g., supervisors and administrators) is being increased at the expense of the discretion and power of those further down the organizational ladder (e.g., teachers and students). An increasingly bureaucratized and hierarchial school which itemizes what is to be learned and

what students are supposed to accomplish, how such learning is to be evaluated, and how teachers are supposed to teach is quite different from what presently exists.

The schools have to combine two elements; the one they need to be responsive to their diverse publics and to continually assure those publics that their children are being treated in a universal, egalitarian manner; they also need to demonstrate an intelligible curriculum. The schools will walk this line by increasing the size and scope of the bureaucracy, more testing, curriculum guides, increased surveillance of teachers and students which will result in a more segmented and differentiated internal system, which will result in the schools more rigidly sorting students. In other words, the egalitarian reforms, those aimed at the organization instead of the students, may have the same effect as the inegalitarian reforms. It will be difficult to avoid making sorting judgments with increased academic tracking. In effect, we may be segmenting the poorer students to the lower academic tracks.

In some initial findings from a study designed to examine some of the reform movement on secondary students, Cusick and Wheeler found that in the higher end of the academic offerings, in the Advanced placement and honors classes, the students, teachers paid little or no attention to the plethora of dictates from the state and the district.[20] But at the lower end of the curriculum in the remedial classes, or classes for poorer students, the curriculum was much more effected, teachers more careful to follow the state and local mandates, and more nervous about meeting the set objectives. One could say that the hierarchial structure is making sure that the poorer students at least learn something, or one could say that it is the poorer students (also from poorer parents) who are having their curriculum flattened and the creativity and options removed from their curriculum.

When bureaucratic reforms are implemented, and the organization is more segmented and the curriculum and the evaluation processes more intelligible, students from the poorer families may be sorted into the bottom of the curricula then the schools may be teaching different curricula to different kinds of students. Should this happen, it will be hard to avoid the criticisms voiced by critics during the sixties by who maintained that the schools were segregating the poor and minority students into the low achieving classes and denying them access to the education had by the more affluent students.

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