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ABSTRACT

Americans are solemn about schooling but seldom serious. School reformers routinely announce lofty goals but they seldom offer resources. These goals are counterproductive because expectations are created with little or no possibility of realization. Certainly, nonschool factors are relevant to educational reform, which cannot be properly planned for without analyzing all of its potential costs. To examine any reform act hatched since 1985 for seriousness, ask questions such as: Are goals stated in unambiguous language? Are actual organizational complexities considered? and Are all tasks for implementation outlined? It is not just school reform, but schooling in general and teacher education that are also afflicted by this chronic lack of seriousness. (9 References) (EJS)

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I think it was the late Paul Goodman who noted that Americans are solemn about schooling but seldom serious. One day when I was driving home from work I came to see how right he was. It was no epiphany such as St. Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. There was no blinding light. It happened matter of factly as I was tuning my car radio.

The first station I tried featured then Secretary of Education Bill Bennett discussing school reform. Such reform, he boldly asserted, does <u>not</u> require more resources. School improvement, he didactically declared is largely a matter of raising the expectations of educators. So far as teacher preparation was concerned, Bennett confided that the sooner we find ways around that roadblock the better.

I had already listened to sophomores discuss pedagogy for the better part of the day so I punched Bennett out and tuned in the all-sports station. Here a call-in show host was soliciting recommendations for improving the Philadelphia Phillies. The callers were knowledgeable, tough and demanding. Unlike Bennett, none of them offered slogans, panaceas or simplistic solutions. They assessed every ballplayer's contribution and no unproductive team member escaped their scrutiny.

I listened, fascinated, as fans laid out their prescriptions. They needed no reminders that benefits have costs. Those suggesting trades, for instance, knew that to get a first-rate fielder or pitcher you had to trade a first-rate something else. When one unrepresentative listener suggested trading a utility infielder for a starting pitcher it provoked nothing but derision. "Tell Bill from Narberth to get serious!" a subsequent caller sneered.

I switched back to the station I had started with to see if his interviewer was asking Bill Bennett to "get serious." Instead she was eating out of his hand. It was then I fully realized what Goodman had been talking about! The baseball discussion was serious. Bennett was merely being solemn. Had he been on the all sports

station advocating similarly unrealistic "reforms" for the Phillies he would have been hooted off the air.

The Persian Gulf War offers another example of the usefulness of the solemnity/seriousness distinction. Imagine President Bush telling the Joint Chiefs that to defeat Iraq they merely had to encourage this expectation in their subordinates. They would have thought that the President had taken leave of his senses. Similarly, no one had to tell General Schwarzkopf that Desert Storm required well-planned tasks and massive resources. Schwarzkopf and his staff took months in meticulous preparation putting into place their tactics, feeding, clothing, fueling, munitions, movement, medical and maintenance programs, schemes of maneuver, targeting intelligence and other efforts costing more than a billion dollars a day. Why? Because they were dead serious.

If anybody in the U.S. Department of Education or in the various state education agencies is equally serious about school reform, or reforming teacher education for that matter, I have yet to meet them. Yes, the Education President and the nation's governors have made solemn pronouncements about national school goals. The governors, for example, have declared that by the year 2000: All children will start school ready to learn; the high school graduation rate will increase to 90%; students will demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter; U.S. students will be the first in the world in science and mathematics achievement; every adult American will be able to read; and every school will be free of drugs and violence.[1] There are even plans to measure progress toward these goals.[2] But who is laying out the tasks that would support these goals and who will provide the resources required for their accomplishment ? (For instance, what should we as educators do to insure that <u>all</u> children will start school ready to learn and who will pay for it?)

Ironically, just before I sat down to write this I was watching CBS and they announced that "due to the recession" five southern states have <u>cut</u> educational spending a total of 1 billion dollars. Teacher layoffs are to follow.[3] One BILLION dollars is a lot of money. In fact a stack of thousand-dollar bills would reach 357 feet before you had that much money. But I'll bet educators in these states will still be held accountable for reaching our national educational goals.

This sort of thing is sadly typical. School reformers routinely announce lofty goals but they seldom offer resources. Of equal importance, they rarely face

unpleasant facts. Consider the goal of raising the high school graduation rate to 90%. High school diplomas are positional rather than absolute benefits. For this reason an increase in the percentage of young people who get diplomas decreases their worth.[4] Did the nation's Governors consider this? Did the President? I doubt they were even aware of the distinction.

Lofty goals without such considerations appeal to Pollyannas everywhere, but they are they are also counterproductive because expectations are created which have little or no possibility of realization. That is what is wrong with President Bush's half-baked scheme to improve the nation's schools. Even he calls it "a crusade rather than a plan."

It seems that the mere mention of school reform encourages this sort of solemn silliness. Consider the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Their historic A Nation at Risk declared: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."[1] But if things really are this grave wny did Commission members fail to even consider the fundamental reality that schooling is a small part of a much larger educational system in which the family is the primary teacher?

For all Commission members know it isn't even the schools that are failing. Maybe schools are in trouble because of a massive failure of the nation's families and/or the misdirection of other aspects of the socio-educational system. For example, consider what kids are learning from M.T V. Is it reasonable to think that teachers can undo the "education" offered by Madonna or Ozzie Osborne? (Ozzie is the one who bites the heads off of live chickens.)

Why isn't this sort of thing brought up? Certainly non-school factors are relevant to educational reform. Perhaps public officials ignore this dimension because it is politically profitable to harass teachers and ridicule professors of education but it is political suicide to aknowledge that many of the nation's parents are doing a really lousy job. There is also the question of resources. What politico wants to take on the broadcast or recording industry even if they do feed our kids garbage?

Remember what James Coleman found in the mid-nineteen sixties when he conducted a massive survey of more than a half a million school kids nationwide:

> "One implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; ant that this very lack of independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school."[2]

And lets not forget Jencks' famous findings after similarly extensive research in the nineteen seventies:

> ...children seem to be far more influenced by what happens at home than what happens at school. It may also be more influenced by what happens on the streets and by what they see on television. Everything else — the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers — is either secondary or completely irrelevant.[3]

Could <u>any</u> really serious reform report ignore such findings? I don't think so.

Like most other reform recommendations, <u>A Nation at Risk</u> also offered recommendations without serious consideration of what they might cost. I'm not just talking dollars and cents here, although that is commonly overlooked, but costs in lost opportunities to do other things. The Commission on Excellence recommended, for instance, stiffer doses of mathematics, and science at the expense of things like driver education and home economics. But there isn't enough driver education and home economics to really make a difference. To substantially increase the time and resources available for science and math a lot more would have to be sacrificed. The Commission dodges this reality.

The Commission on Excellence in Education even failed to clarify what sort of "excellence" they were talking about. We were left to guess whether it is the <u>best effort</u> of individual students or the <u>distinctive achievements</u> of outstanding students? After all, one child's "personal best" can be a whole lot worse than anothers. Similarly, the Commission never said if they favored a "fair play" or "fair share" conception of educational equity. Yet this issue affects the promotion of "excellence."

Do these omissions constitute a flagrant failure of the collective imagination of Committee members? Perhaps, but I would like to think they were bright enough to know that there isn't enough home economics and driver education taught in high school to make a real difference in achievement in science and math. I hope they also knew that some kids personal best will never be good enough. Perhaps Committee members just wanted to avoid tallying up the real costs of their proposal for fear of loosing their own enthusiasm or public support. Unfortunately, you cannot properly plan school reform without adding up <u>all</u> of its potential costs. Otherwise there is no way of knowing whether the benefits will be worth the candle burnt out in achieving them. Seriousness required Commission members to face unpleasant facts. Solemnity only required the pontifical sloganeering that they published.

Thomas Huxley observed that one of the most valuable results of all education is to learn to face unpleasant facts and to gain sufficient mastery of yourself to do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not. This, he said, is the first lesson that ought to be learned and probably the last lesson we learn thoroughly.[5] By this standard the education of most school reformers seems very incomplete.

We haven't time to examine other examples. You can supply your own Simply examine any of the dozens of reform reports hatched since 1985 and to see if they faced unpleasant facts just ask the following:

1. Is the present situation adequately analyzed — particularly in terms of allocations of costs and benefits? (For instance, do they face the inescapable fact that schooling is only one part, probably a small part, of a child's total education or the equally fundamental reality that people have different, often competing, expectations for schools?)
2. Are reform goals stated in clear, unambiguous language or does the report rely on slogans to generate a broad yet shallow consensus?
3 If slogans were eliminated would a broad and deep consensus still support the steps necessary for implementation? (Goals are one thing, implementation another.)

4. Does the report assume that orders at the top ineluctably lead to desired outcomes or are actual organizational complexities and tensions considered?
5 Does the report outline most if not all the tasks required for actual implementation?
6 Is it reasonable to assume that adequate resources would or could be provided to support these tasks?[6]

Few reform reports do well when evaluated in this way because they were never serious to begin with.

It is not just school reform but schooling in general that is afflicted by this chronic lack of seriousness. This encourages an Alice in Wonderland absurdity that often leaves discerning educators angry, cynical and disheartened. Here is an actual example. A friend recently told me of a faculty meeting he attended in a big city middle school. The principal reported to all assembled that he was terribly troubled by a sudden increase in absenteeism. It seemed that large numbers of kids were skipping school. This, he declared, required immediate action.

Solemnly he asked what the faculty recommended. A long discussion ensued during which my friend became distracted. Noticing his inattention the Principal asked in patronizing tone, "Well Mr. ---, what do you suggest?" My friend responded that he needed to know which kids were cutting before making a recommendation. Quickly the Principal tried to move on, but not before an over-eager Vice-Principal volunteered the answer. The absentees, the Vice-Principal explained, were mostly kids who had already flunked their present grade once. It seems the district's central administration had recently decided that no child would be retained in grade for more than a year. The kids had gotten wind of this and decided it was no longer necessary to come to school.

Despite this unwanted revelation the Principal pressed on; and the teachers, accustomed as they were to absurdity, pressed on with him. Eventually a consensus was reached that monthly pizza parties would be conducted for kids with perfect attendance records.

Predictably, absentees regarded a month of perfect attendance too high a price to pay for a slice or two of pizza and the parties had no impact on school attendance. But the Principal was able to report to his superiors that steps had been

taken to deal with the crises. These superiors, in turn, could continue their new policy secure in their belief that its real consequences would be ignored. If this isn't a pedagogical Wonderland I don't know what is.

This faculty meeting scripted by Lewis Carroll is not unusual. I used to teach in a junior high school with major problems. These problems were never discussed during faculty meetings. Instead we received tedious lectures on how to prevent pencil sharpeners from becoming overly-full (apparently regurgitated shavings dull the blades), how to regulate properly the opening from window shade to sill and how to insure that attendance registers were filled in uniformly. The Principal even passed out detailed notes on these matters before reading them to us in a monotone. (Remarkably, the toadies were able to maintain the appearance of interest!) We sacrificed an hour of instructional time a week to participate in this farce. Does that suggest serious purpose to you?

Sometimes the absurdity spawned by the widespread lack of seriousness in schooling is really too dumb for words. Unfortunately, the solemnity that is its constant companion dulls our capacity for criticality. Sometimes it even sucks us into making serious responses. Examples abound. Consider the Winter 1991 issue of Educational Horizons. Here a high school English teacher, offers persuasion and formulaic calculations intended to convince the reader that a teacher's time "is a key variable in any calculation of the costs of education."[7]

In any serious context reminders that time is a resource would be silly — even absurd. However, educators like this English teacher feel compelled to repeatedly point out the obvious. Why? Because in the solemn but unserious world of the schools, such "reminders" seem urgently necessary. Sadly, those with power already know a teacher's time is limited. It is just that many of them are not serious enough about what the teacher is doing to care.

Teacher education is not taken any more seriously. Consider, for example, the alternative certification that sprang up weed-like in the Garden State. Concerned that future teachers were required to take too many education courses, New Jersey's former governor Tom Kean pushed through legislation enabling novices to avoid the professional preparation that state officials themselves regulate (Remember Lewis Carroll's Duchess sprinkling pepper into her child's face and then punishing him for sneezing?) Following this "reform" aspiring teachers without sufficient commitment for adequate preparation could now take charge of

their own classrooms after only a short summer survival course. Then they are, at least in theory, observed once a week for the first ten weeks then once a month for twenty weeks. If they survive this "demanding" regimen they are certified for life. Reports coming out of New Jersey suggest that the requisite observations are not even being done. Is anyone surprised?

New Jersey is not unique. Legislators in more than half the states have also weakened teacher education in order to improve it. (Remember the village in Vietnam that had to be destroyed in order to save it?) None, however, have outdone the sovereign state of Texas. Here the self-made millionaire and self-annointed pedagogical prophet H. Ross Perot inspired the total elimination of undergraduate majors in education. He also persuaded Texas legislators to put an 18 credit hour maximum on professional preparation in teaching — and that includes student teaching — for good measure. Even a future special educator is not permitted to learn more.

In contrast a Texas podiatrist must have at least three years of undergraduate preparation, survive four-years of professional schooling and then pass both national and state board examinations. (I wonder if Mr. Perot and Texas legislators are also concerned that podiatrists spend too much time studying feet?)

Does anyone really think that Texas lawmakers enacted these restrictions because they take teaching seriously? Show me someone who does and I have a bridge in Brooklyn I would like to sell them.

At this point I should note that although these reforms themselves are not serious, they probably reflect a serious purpose not included in the rhetoric. I think some state officials just want a steady supply of cheap and compliant semi-skilled workers to staff their factory-like schools.

Don't get me wrong. I know that many teacher education programs need improvement. I am prepared to aknowledge that some professors of education are jargon merchants, some education courses are irrelevant and some teacher preparation programs are solemn nonsense. I am even willing to provide an example. Consider the experience of a colleague who took a part-time job in teacher preparation at a large state university in a nearbye state. An inner-city school teacher as well as a scholar he incorporated his experience in the trenches into his course. Accustomed to a steady diet of treacle, a couple of students

complained to the Dean that their idealism was being damaged. Alarmed, the Dean called in my colleague and told him to tone down his realism. The reason, he solemnly explained, was, "We don't want you to scare them. We have to keep up their enthusiasm."

Imagine the Dean of a school of medicine asking a faculty member to downplay inner city emergency room conditions because it might dampen the enthusiasm of future practitioners. Ridiculous? Of course. Medical school is serious business.

Even the most conscientious education professor risks getting caught up in this sort of thing. The solemn nonsense that surrounds schooling sucks them in and they find themselves willy-nilly preparing Pollyannas or pre-lobotomized automatons — faddish celebrations of "the reflective educator" notwithstanding. Is that because the education professoriate has nothing to offer or that there is nothing to know about schooling that cannot also be mastered by way of mere imitation and unreflective experience? Of course not.

In the final analysis solemn but unserious educational reform proposals feed, rather than correct, the institutional absurdities afflicting schooling. All too often educators are forced to spend the last of their patience and endurance trying to cope with sloganeering and irresponsible promises while real life problems go begging. Our schools can be improved. So can teacher education. But it will require the same sort of tough-mindedness that any other serious business requires. Nothing less will do.

[1]Robert Rothman, Panel Unveils Proposed Assessments To Measure Progress Toward Goals, Education Week, Vol X., Number 28, April 3., 1991, pp. 1 and 16.
[2]Idem.
[3]"Morning" on CBS, April 2, 1991.
[4]Gary Clabaugh and Edward Rozycki, Understanding Schools (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 16-17.
[1] The National Commission on Excellence in Education. A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. Washington. D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office. 1985, p. 5.
[2] J.S. Coleman, et al., Equality of Educational Opportunity (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 325/.
[3] Christopher Jencks, Inequality: A Re-assessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 255-56.
[5]Thomas Huxley, quoted in the Barnes and Noble Book of Quotations (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 112.
[6]Clabaugh and Rozycki, op. cit., pp. 213-233.

[7]"A Teacher's Total Work Time," Micky Bolmer, Educational Horizons, Vol 79, No. 2, Winter 1991, pp. 68-71.