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ABSTRACT

Noting that variety in education may be seen as a basic mechanism for change, this paper examines four important developments in public education: (1) site-based decision making; (2) charter schools; (3) whole school designs; and (4) parent choice. The paper maintains that site-based decision making should involve giving schools authority and responsibility for solving their own problems and then leading them to improve rather than just leaving schools alone to solve their problems. The paper further notes that although the growth of charter schools illustrates the potential for future entrepreneurs' efforts in education, there probably will not be any entirely new models of education invented. The paper advocates whole school programming, or comprehensive school reform, and describes examples of successful implementation of externally-developed and designed school programs. Also noted is the importance of careful evaluation to determine if such programs produce results, and concern that the leadership and support needed to successfully implement educational models may be underestimated. Finally, the paper suggests that some degree of choice is an essential part of the emerging model of schooling and that parent choice is necessary with greater variety of educational models. The paper also maintains that education can be successful only when parents and teachers share a common philosophy, and advocates the development of a model moderating individual choice by limiting available choices to those approved by a responsible public agency. A recommendation for working toward deliberate educational variety concludes the paper. (KB)

No One Best Way — But Many Very Good Ways

Ronald S. Brandt

My purpose this morning is quite simple, and it's reflected in my title. I want to persuade you, if you're not already persuaded, that there are lots of good ways to encourage people to learn, but no single best way. If we can agree on that, we can start acting in accord with it, and maybe can convince policy makers to do the same.

Even though I retired from ASCD almost two years ago, I have not retired from education, and hope I won't for awhile, because for me, education is an endlessly fascinating field. I started my career in 1957, which, looking back, was quite timely. I began teaching at Mitchell Junior High in Racine, Wisconsin in September and one month later, in October 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. As you know, things have never been quite the same since. All of a sudden, we Americans weren't quite so sure of ourselves. We began to recognize that maybe we weren't necessarily best in the world — and one of the things we began to worry about was the quality of our public schools.

Many things were different about schools in the 50s from the way they are now --- teachers and students went home at noon for lunch, we had no students with major disabilities. We didn't talk about technology, the personal computer was far in the future; we had audio-visual aids: movies and filmstrips. There was no pressure for accountability, no test scores in the newspapers.

So lots of things have changed --- but some things haven't. I've seen a lot of movements come and go through the years, most of them, I'm sorry to say, with minimal effect on actual practice. That should make me a bit skeptical about whatever is currently being touted as *the* solution to our problems. But I'm a perpetual optimist.

So this morning I want to talk about a few developments that I think point to where we should be headed. About half way through the hour I'll pause and ask you to talk for a few minutes with one or two people near you. I'd like to know what I might have said but didn't, and whether you agree or disagree with me, and why.

My subject is not so much technical and professional as political, but I've come to see that as unavoidable. As long as we're talking about *public* schools, we're necessarily talking politics. I hadn't thought much about that until one evening when I was speaking to a group of educators in Calgary, Alberta, and someone asked why everything about education had to be so political. I realized then that *of course* schools are political so long as they are funded and governed by a public democratic process. Some people --- libertarians, they're called — think that's the heart of the problem, but most of us probably think otherwise. Inefficient and maddening though the process may be, we think people should take some responsibility for one another. We believe, at least to some degree, in community. The question that intrigues me these days is: What is the right balance between community and individuality? We need both, but this morning I'll stay pretty much on the individuality side.

So what are these semi-political developments I'll be talking about? There are just four, all related: site-based decision making, charter schools, whole school designs, and parent choice. These ideas, combined in the right mix with community support for the entire system, are where I think we should be headed in the 21st century.

I want to start with site-based decision making. The need for it varies, because rural schools, like those where I grew up, aren't separated that much from their local communities. It's

the huge urban school systems that most need local decision making, but some of them are in such bad shape that --- as in Chicago --- site councils and other mechanisms imposed on them by outside agencies may be helpful but in many cases aren't enough in themselves to change everything that needs to be changed. Even so, it's the right direction. And it makes a lot of sense in districts that aren't as big as Chicago but are big enough to have more than six or eight schools.

I was intrigued when I was editor of Educational Leadership to watch the growing interest in decentralization because I had been associate superintendent for eight years in a district that was seriously trying to do site-based management before anyone thought to call it that. In Lincoln, Nebraska, in the 1970s, I worked with an intelligent, sensitive superintendent — John Prasch — who pioneered what later came to be called SBM. He was passionately committed to the idea that, as he often said, "You can't run a school system out of the central office and you shouldn't try." Over a period of years, we gradually moved responsibility for various functions from the central office to the schools — equipment one year, staffing another, then supplies and textooks and staff development.

Another district that pioneered site-based decision making in the 1970s was Edmonton, Canada. I visited Edmonton when Michael Strembitsky, who now works with Marc Tucker at the National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington, DC, had been superintendent there for 20 years. At the time, Strembitsky was proud that he had reached the point at which 87 percent of district resources were controlled by the schools. More and more central office services, even consultant services, were actually being charged to schools as they used them.

For a few years, site-based decision making was policy makers' favorite reform. Districts and state legislatures all over the country were instituting various plans. But subsequent research found that SBM didn't necessarily lead to higher test scores, so we don't hear much about it any more. My view is: right! By itself, local decision making doesn't accomplish much. But part of the problem was misunderstanding. SBM is not leaving schools alone to solve their own problems; it's giving them authority and responsibility *and then* leading them --- *prodding* them, if necessary, to improve. And providing the support for it — time, consultation, professional development. We don't need a course in psychology to know that people invest more energy in plans they've made themselves than in what others tell them to do.

Which brings me my second topic, Charter Schools, which are the epitome of school-based decision making. That's because, as you know, Charter Schools must declare to the satisfaction of a designated public agency what they propose to be responsible for and how they propose to achieve it, but then are pretty much on their own to get it done. I spent last week visiting schools here in California, including five charter schools.

A couple of weeks ago I heard a report at the conference of the American Association of School Administrators in New Orleans from Jim Zaharis, superintendent in Mesa, Arizona, and Michael Flanagan, superintendent of the Wayne County, Michigan, Regional Service Agency. Both are busy proudly creating charter schools in their jurisdictions. Flanagan says of businesses and political groups that want to start charter schools, "We can beat them at their own game." When legislation was passed in Michigan allowing three types of agencies to approve charter schools: local districts, universities, and counties, Wayne County started approving applications, even though most superintendents of the 34 districts served by Wayne County objected. Now, Flanagan says, the local districts are with him. He's very proud, for example, of Henry Ford Academy, operated in conjunction with the Ford Museum in Dearborn. When the idea for such a

school was first floated, with a good possibility that it would be run by the university as an elitist school for future engineers, Flanagan stepped in and by taking charge made sure it became a school open to all interested students. He says, "Instead of kids making up speeches and giving them to their class one at a time, these kids escort visitors around the museum, talking about real things to real people." Wayne County has 48 charter schools now, and will probably have100 more a year from now.

Jim Zaharis said Mesa now has about 4% of their 70,000 students in charters of various sorts. Zaharis believes most parents still want their kids to attend strong neighborhood schools, so he expects 85% or more students will continue to go to the regular district schools — but those schools had better be good, because state and district policies say that parents can send their children to any school in the state that has available space. I asked Flanagan, from Michigan, whether he agreed that 85 - 90 percent of parents will continue to be satisfied with generic public schools. He doesn't think so, and I think that figure is high, myself.

In fact, futurists like Alvin and Heidi Toffler see education as a field offering one of the biggest opportunities of entrepreneurs in the years ahead. In a magazine article about entrepreneurship published this month, they're quoted as saying, "The current factory system [of schooling] is going to crack, no matter how strong the teachers unions, bureaucracies, and some parents resist, because it is so out of synch with what the emerging economy and society will require."

So what's the answer? Should we expect more educators to be inventing brand new models of schooling? Well, it might be wonderful, and I'm glad some are doing it, but I don't think everyone can or should try. The history of New American Schools offers interesting evidence. You recall that when Lamar Alexander was secretary of education, the Bush administration solicited support from big corporations for a project to create "break the mold" schools. Everybody seemed to agree at that time that public schools had to be "restructured" if they were to produce the levels of learning needed for the future. So anybody, anywhere, who had an idea for what schools should be like was invited to submit a plan for a whole new design. Well, after years of sorting and funding and evaluating and eliminating, all eight models now being exported by New American Schools are variations of what leading educators were already advocating ten years ago. None of them is based on a really new idea. I say this not in criticism of the New American designs, but as evidence that inventing totally new schools is very difficult, next to impossible.

That probably applies to charter schools. Although there are many different styles of charter schools, I think that what makes them successful, to the extent they are successful, is that they bring together relatively like-minded parents and educators who have both responsibility and authority for results. In other words, if satisfaction is your measure of success, most of them are successful almost by definition.

But isn't there any way to spread good ideas more widely? Must everybody reinvent the wheel? Well, yes and no. We know from constructivism that each student has to construct a concept to make it his or her own, but the knowledge is basically the same concept others have also constructed; it's not necessarily new to others. The same is true of good schooling.

That's the idea behind New American Schools, which brings me to my third topic: "whole school" programming. That term wasn't acceptable to Congress when the Obey-Porter legislation was being debated, because it sounded too much like "whole language," which of course is an awful idea thought up by foolish educators. So the official name of this effort is

Comprehensive School Reform, which could mean a lot of other things, but in this case means implementation of externally-developed and tested designs. I sponsored a session yesterday morning at this conference on design adoption. If you missed it, you might want to get a recording from session 2145, because I thought it was informative. Much more was said at that session than we have time for this morning, but after visiting schools in Clover Park, Washington; San Antonio, Texas; and Memphis, Tennessee, I am enthusiastic about the idea. To some it may appear to be in opposition to the concept of Charter Schools, but I believe it is not. I stumbled on the concept by accident when I visited Clover Park a year ago. I was so intrigued that I went back for a couple of days in June. Superintendent Hugh Burkett had hit the ground running when he came to Clover Park in 1995. Thoroughly familiar with the new provisions in Title I legislation for whole-school programming in schools with more than 50% Title I students, he asked qualifying schools to conduct year-long studies. Local study teams of teachers and parents collected data about their schools and, based on the data, were to prepare a research-based whole school design. Most of the Clover Park schools, after analyzing their data and checking the research, decided to go with an existing, proven model rather than trying to come up with one of their own.

Memphis and San Antonio have also done a superb job of implementing designs, mostly New American Schools models in those cities. In schools I visited, I saw lots of children, almost entirely African-American in Memphis and mostly Hispanic in San Antonio, who were learning to read and write and do mathematics very well. Not yet quite as well as middle class kids in the suburbs, but amazingly well in comparison with those in some urban schools. The schools I saw were clean and warm. They were orderly, businesslike, happy places. I wish some of the critics who are so sure urban public schools can't be saved would go to those schools. Because as Ronald Edmonds used to say, "These are urban schools where poor children are learning. How many schools do I have to show you to convince you it can be done?"

But most of the educators who come to conferences like this are not from large urban districts. That's why I talk about Clover Park, which has just 24 schools --- and by this time almost all of them have chosen a model and are engaged in implementing it.
I haven't been to all the Clover Park schools — and in every district I've visited, the level of implementation varies a lot, as does the enthusiasm for the whole idea — but it's very exciting to go to a school where the teachers and principal and parents are bursting with pride for their Accelerated School or their Paideia School, while a couple of miles away in the same school district other teachers and parents are just as pleased with Success for All or their Expeditionary Learning school. Naturally, everybody wants to know which model is best. A recent report commissioned by some of the education organizations — including AASA, Elementary Principals, Secondary Principals, and the NEA, found that three programs — Success for All, Direct Instruction, and High Schools That Work — have the best data so far, but that's partly because some models are too new at this point, and partly because models like Success for All and Direct Instruction are most compatible with current modes of evaluation.

It's very important that the various designs be carefully evaluated to find out whether they actually produce results, but I don't believe there is a single best model. I've read materials and visited schools using most of the programs. And frankly, they're all good in one way or another. What I like about Design Adoption is its celebration of variety, plus, of course, that it makes everyone more conscious of results.

I mentioned that Clover Park is a data-driven school district. Teacher and parent study

groups gathered data to make their initial decision and they're expected to monitor the data as they implement programs. When I asked a teacher whether her school will be using Success for All five years from now, she didn't hesitate a minute. "It depends on the data. If we're still successful, yes. If not, we'll have to look for something else."

I admit I was a reluctant convert to the idea of model adoption. I was a little uneasy about the idea of outside experts creating a model and testing it out, and then expecting teachers to follow it. Now that I've seen the programs in action, though, I think differently.

Most teachers don't write their own textbooks or produce their own videos. Most educators and parents don't have the time, resources, or inspiration to come up with a totally new model of schooling, nor do they have the expertise to research its effectiveness. And even if they did, most parents don't want to gamble the future of their children on untried programs. Models like Success for All, that have been carefully refined and tested, are much more appealing to parents. But the main point is that research-based designs offer a reliable way to significantly improve student learning.

I do worry that people may underestimate the leadership and the support needed by central office people, principals, and others to successfully implement the models. If the idea works, it's not only because most of the designs are better than traditional practices — although that's obviously important — but also because implementation involves extensive professional development, including lots of personal supervision and mentoring. That's absolutely necessary if teachers are to learn new skills and procedures. And consistent with what I said earlier, there's another essential ingredient: the process of self-study and consensus by which people make the decision to adopt the model in the first place. Most designs require 70 percent, or even 80 or 90 percent, of teachers to vote "yes" before the school can adopt. That's why it's similar in some ways to Charter Schools in that it's not imposed; it's a local decision — certainly for the staff. And sometimes parents, especially at the time the design is adopted.

Which brings me to my fourth point, schools of choice. In my view, some degree of choice is an essential part of the over-all model of schooling I see emerging. If you're going to have the variety I'm advocating, you must have parent choice. Otherwise you'll have the indefensible situation of educators doing whatever they think is best, with great differences from school to school, but with parents expected to accept whatever their school has decided to do. In too many cases, that's what we have now.

As Michael Flanagan pointed out in his talk at AASA, when he was growing up there were three television networks, now we have hundreds of channels. My parents could choose among Ford, Chevy, and Plymouth. Now we have dozens of cars to choose from. When I was growing up in Nebraska, we didn't go out to eat — ever — but if we had, we could have chosen between roast beef, meat loaf, and chicken-fried steak. Now in most communities we have our choice of the cuisines of the world: French, Chinese, even Spanish, Moroccan, and Thai. People expect variety, and the opportunity to choose what appeals to them.

But that for me is not the best argument for variety in education. What convinces me is discussions I've had with traditionalists who adamantly reject what I believe is good education. They dislike cooperative learning, performance assessment, constructivism, and projects. They want order, discipline, and direct instruction. And though I don't agree with their ideas, I think education can be successful only when parents and teachers share a common philosophy. We also know from many surveys that in fact many teachers agree with those parents. They, too, say traditional ways are best, especially when classes are large and resources short. So I'd like to start

sorting things out, getting parents and teachers together in schools that are clear about what they stand for.

As I understand it, that's what has happened in Edmonton, Alberta. I last visited Edmonton about four years ago, and was there for only a few hours, but I'm going again in May when Edmonton is hosting an international conference to show off what they're doing. What I know so far is that after many years of site-based management, Edmonton took the next step to begin differentiated programming and offering parents a choice of schools. The last time I was there I talked to an elementary principal who had two schools in one building, one a contemporary school and the other traditional. She said she had no problem working with both models.

That's also the situation in Mesa, Arizona, where four of the district-approved charter schools are "basic." Officially they're known as Franklin schools, but Jim Zaharis calls them "charter fighters." If there are going to be such schools, he wants them to be chartered by his district rather than by somebody else.

In general, the pattern of schooling I'm referring to is partly a "market approach" because it assumes that we must treat parents as "customers." I say "partly" because a pure market economy has its drawbacks even in the world of commerce, so must be moderated somewhat for the general good. I hope we can avoid wholesale voucher programs, because they provide no public accountability. The model I'm describing always moderates individual choice by limiting available choices to those approved by a responsible public agency.

It may be regrettable that public schools of the future won't be like the comfortable, stable, relatively complacent places where I started teaching in the 50's, but we all know they won't. And though I don't buy the argument that all that's really needed to improve education is a little stiff competition --- although a little competition probably doesn't hurt --- the main idea is for particular schools to quit trying to be everything to everybody and get clearer about what they're willing to be accountable for.

I'll close with a clear example of what I want to escape from. In Virginia, where I live, a conservative state board of education has adopted a set of standards that are almost entirely concerned with subject matter knowledge and make no mention of other outcomes that some of us believe are important, such as learning how to learn and working well with others. They have a state testing program that, except for a writing sample, measures the standards using only multiple-choice tests. So what is else is new, you may be thinking; with minor variations that's the situation in most states these days. But there's one thing that may be different. Finally, Virginia has decided to allow the establishment of a few charter schools --- but charter schools must meet the same standards as other schools! In effect, that means that charter schools will have to offer pretty much the same curriculum as every other school, and the tests will certainly discourage all schools from any imaginative changes.

Now, I support teaching to standards. I'm very impressed with how some schools are implementing their version of standards-based education. In Douglas County, Colorado, for example, teachers are expected to teach toward performance-oriented standards, and to use a "body of evidence" to make professional judgments about how well individual students have mastered specific benchmarks — in Douglas County they're called "checkpoints." Teachers who've learned how to use performance tasks, and rubrics to score them, are in a much better position to make judgments about mastery of complex standards.

From what I've seen, Virginia's so-called standards program is just the opposite. And my point is

that Virginia is imposing that model of education on every single student in every single public school in the entire state.

Some years ago I heard a talk by a professor of agriculture at the University of Nebraska who specializes in beans. He looked back on what was called in the 1960s the "green revolution," when agriculturalists had the idea of planting a single variety of carefully chosen wheat or corn across a whole region. Then they realized what a huge mistake they had made, because if that type of wheat fell prey to a particular insect or disease, the entire crop would be wiped out. Now, agriculturalists are determined to promote genetic diversity; that's why the man I met has traveled to South America and other places, going from village to village to find different varieties of beans and taking them back to plant in his greenhouse. Variety is not only nature's way of protecting particular species, but the basic mechanism of change, because without random mutation humans and other animals would never have evolved to our present levels.

So I have nature on my side. There's more to be said, but I want to give you a chance to talk a bit. At this point I'll summarize and then invite you to discuss your reactions with one or two others. Here's what I've said:

I believe we should put less emphasis on doing things the same way at district and state levels and instead work for deliberate variation. The essence of this idea is site-based decision making. Some schools, like those I visited here in California last week, should be charters, meaning they will have declared their particular educational niche and have agreed with parents and their approving agency how they will be accountable for achieving it. Other schools, like those in Clover Park, Washington, should be operating in accord with an explicit research-based design and should be monitoring both their level of implementation and the results their students are achieving. Some schools might not be so independent as charters and might not be committed to an externally-developed design, but they should be expected to have a design, should have the necessary authority to develop and follow it, and should be accountable to the district for results. And as in Mesa and Edmonton, parents should be able to choose among all these schools, actively inquiring about what various schools have to offer, and selecting those they feel will serve their children best.

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