

**Education Reform:  
Drawing to an Inside Straight**  
By Nom D. Pedagog

Author's note: Names, dates, locations, and other data which might serve to identify either the author or anyone else have been changed. As will be obvious to those reading this article, this is out of a desire on the writer's part to continue in education for several more years. All other information is factual. All events, except where noted, were observed directly by the author, and while the author would not represent them as being common occurrences in all schools, nearly thirty years in education as a teacher and administrator and close association with a large number of people in the teaching profession would lead her to believe they are more prevalent than not.

If the signs are correct, it looks like we are in for another round of educational reform, and, while the experts debate what exact form the reform should take, one thing is certain; little will actually change.

Some would say that pronouncement makes me a cynic. Nope, I am merely a realist. I have seen mastery learning, outcome based education, teaching to objectives, tracking, eliminating tracking, instructional theory into practice, flexible scheduling, the open concept, team teaching, schools within schools, increasing electives, decreasing electives, making content relevant, schools without failure, alternative assessment, and cooperative learning come and go, leaving little behind except a smattering of new jargon.

If a horse finishes last ten races in a row, please, do not ask me to bet my home on it in the next race.

There is one basic reason why education changes so little, but before going to that point, I wish to clarify a misconception; that is that education has been on a down-hill slide ever since 1960. This perception is based on SAT scores and a generic belief expressed by every generation that things were "better in the good old days." What is usually not taken into account is that the population of people taking the SAT has changed radically since 1960. At one time taking the SAT was almost exclusively in the domain of those in the top half of their class and largely of those in the top-fifth. Today, proportionately fewer taking the SAT are in these ranges, while more are in the bottom fifty percent of their classes. When this is figured into the equation, we find that SAT scores have changed very little.

This is not to say that nothing is wrong with education, but the sky is not falling, and exaggerating problems is as bad as brushing them aside.

The truth is that traditional education in public schools does not do as well as it could because most people in education have become institutionalized in their thinking in the same way that Congress has become institutionalized in its thinking. This is a survival trait for teachers and administrators. It avoids the pain of feeling like hypocrites every time a decision is made based on conflict-avoidance rather than educational concerns.

Ask administrators to rank classes offered in their schools in order of value to students. Most non-educators, when given this task, would think awhile and then start listing, making occasional adjustments. On the other hand, most principals would not even get started. They would freeze. Instead, they would tell you about how all classes are of value. Producing such a list would imply that more time and resources should be devoted to some classes than to others. In public education, every course is a valuable course. Anything else would cause conflict.

As a favor to a friend, I once attempted to find out why two of our junior high schools required only one class of vocational exploration while the third required two. I first went to the principal. I thought I had known him long enough that he would give a straight answer. I was wrong. He went into a five minute monologue on how good the class was and how students benefited from taking it. I thanked him for his time. I did not bother to point out that my question had nothing to do with the quality of the class but the discrepancy in requirements between programs.

I took my query to another person who has since left administration. This second administrator had a reputation for bluntness that was rumored to have prevented his further advancement within the district. He told me that building "X" was over-staffed with vocationally certified teachers and that if they were used to teach regular classes, math for example, then the building would not draw extra funds that vocational classes generated. I was chagrined not to have seen the obvious myself. The answer was financial, not educational.

Administrators do not like to make value judgements; these are almost always conflict producing. They would rather "follow the path of least resistance." A high school I know of changed from a six to a four period day, with two-semester classes becoming two-trimester classes. Not everyone was happy with the decision, but after several faculty meetings devoted to extolling the virtues of the four period day, the faculty could read the handwriting on the wall and "voted" to try the new schedule.

Two departments in particular remained adamantly opposed to this -- music and foreign

language. They both pointed out that continuous, sequential programs, requiring much drill for mastery, would be cut into segments with three month gaps in instruction. (This argument could be made for many other classes as well, but never mind.)

As a result, music was allowed to "split" several classes with English. The exact mechanics of this is unimportant, but it involved shorter classes taught before and after the regular school day. Three English teachers volunteered for this schedule. At the end of the first trimester, all three English teachers said that the schedule had hurt their classes, the absenteeism had increased, that tardiness had become a chronic problem, and that students often seemed fatigued. They felt that this was reflected in poor student performance.

Now, the point of this is that the split schedule continued. None of the three English teachers was willing to teach the schedule a second time, but administration goodwill and additional pay insured that there were people who would carry on with the split. Why did this continue when it seemed to hurt a basic program like English? One; no administrator was willing to say that English is more important than music. Two; English did not put on concerts which are viewed as public relation devices by administrators. Three; English did not have a parent booster club willing to call and complain. The classes continued not because they are good for students but because they avoid conflict for administrators.

It might be noted that these reasons explain why a split schedule was not attempted with foreign language even though this class is either a requirement or recommendation for most colleges. In public schools, academics often sit at the back of the bus.

Another area where priorities are often inverted in order for administrators to avoid conflict is in hiring. Generally, administrators go out of their way to insure getting a qualified staff. After all, it is in their best interest as well as the school's; however, there is one situation where this concern is, if not tossed out the window, at least shoved close to an outside wall. This is when a head-coach is needed for a major sport.

As soon as the word "coach" is mentioned, many will accuse me of stereotyping. Well, it is my observation that too often the stereotype fits. I know of several people who went into teaching in order to be coaches. I have never met anyone who went into coaching in order to teach. I have seen many coaches work on game plays during classes. I have never seen a coach work on lesson plans during a game. I know it is possible for a good coach to be a good teacher; I just do not think it is probable.

I once argued this point with a principal. I didn't want to hire a math teacher who was a head football coach, but that was the academic position we had open at the time. My principal said we would hire a person who could do both well. I attempted to point out that by requiring our next math hire also be a head football coach, we probably eliminated over ninety percent of the pool of qualified math teachers. The principal told me I was being unrealistic. I suppose I was -- in the world of education. Somehow, I doubt that Bill Gates makes playing on the company softball team a requirement for working at Microsoft.

Some districts do not bother to rationalize their hiring practices but list such positions as "Wanted: head football coach, teaching duties to be assigned later." The message here is pretty clear about what comes first. The fact is, coaches, especially if on a winning streak, get special consideration on extra duty assignments, attendance at various meetings, preparation periods, and special classes. I even know of one coach who was hired by a district after he stipulated he would take the job only if his present assistant coach also be hired by the district. Try pulling off that sort of power-play if you are only a physics teacher.

If you think athletic considerations do not win out over academic concerns almost every time, you have not kicked around in the American public school system very much. I have never seen a school-board chairperson sit in on the hiring of a mere teacher and seldom on the hiring of a vice-principal, but when a head coaching position is up for grabs, it is entirely another matter.

Administrators also have an inability to make objective educational decisions when athletics is not involved. For example, they do not like to admit even partial failure, a real conflict producer. As a result, programs are evaluated in a shoddy manner at best. Take the earlier mentioned change to a four period day. After a three month trial (hardly long enough for even a well-structured evaluation), the principal of the school involved declared the change a success, noting that the median GPA had been raised from the previous year by seven-tenths of a percent. Ignoring the fact that this change might be accounted for by other factors such as the increased drop-out rate or an increase in the number of lower level classes in proportion to higher level classes, the figure proves nothing. No one computed the level of significance for the change. This is necessary when comparing figures, otherwise we do not know if a fluctuation is within normal variation. I asked why the median had been used instead of the

mean. My answer was that it was easier to find. This hardly spoke of rigorous academic research principles.

Despite the dubious nature of the results and the lack of long term experience with the program, the four period day is now being touted as an education panacea. I have been told the principal is being invited to speak at other schools as an expert on this particular innovation. In some cases, he is being flown to other parts of the country. This is typical of the education community. Try the latest fad, cook up some statistics, declare a revelation in teaching, and go on tour (it is much more fun than dealing with the daily problems of running a school). Seldom do you hear of someone being invited to speak about how a program had been tried and failed. Administrators know how to go with the flow, particularly a cash flow.

The trouble with such experts is that they never give the entire picture. What people hear from this principal is a glowing story of unqualified success. He will ignore anything that hints of the negative. This, too, is pretty common. My district has spent many thousands of dollars flying out and paying for "experts" from back East to tell us about their particular school. These experts assured us that their program was virtually without failure. This sounded almost too good to be true.

It was. After several meetings, one of the experts let slip (over coffee) that they had a "sister school" where students who did not fit into their program went. Apparently seeing the look of sudden insight on our faces, he was quick to add they did not think this skewed their results. Not much it didn't. Any teacher, using any method of instruction, would have pretty impressive results if he worked only with those who did well in class while those who "didn't fit it" took other classes.

When I think about it, I realize that conflict avoidance is not just an administrative survival trait, it is the key to advancement. A good lecture tour is not only fun, but it also provides ample opportunity for networking. (By the way, it is rare, indeed, to see one of the travelling gurus employ the teaching technique being espoused.)

Some administrators are governed by conflict avoidance even in the area of discipline. At one school, almost the entire teaching staff volunteered to use part of their preparation time to patrol halls and send students who were not in their classes to a supervised room. It was assumed that administration would take over from there. This worked well for the first half of the year, and there seemed a noticeable change in the halls. About half as many teachers volunteered the second semester, and practically none volunteered the following year. Why?


Many teachers kept seeing the same students skipping the same classes. The administration policy was to have the students stay in a "detention room" for the remainder of the class period in which they were found. Little effort was made to correct students who were repeat offenders. After a while, students realized that nothing would be done other than that they would be allowed to sit out the classes they were already skipping.

Teachers saw their efforts going for naught and simply gave up. Administrators apparently did not want to contact parents and deal with conflict. I checked the files of a student who had been given after-school detention as a result of repeated skipping. The student failed to show up for detention something like a dozen times. Seemingly, the administrator dealing with the student kept tacking on additional detentions but never contacted a parent and asked them to get the student to school. Suspension was an alternative but this sometimes cause conflict.

Such avoidance is not uncommon. The same administrator once reprimanded a teacher who had stopped a student from throwing a snowball by grabbing the student's arm at the elbow. A reprimand was easier than defending the teacher when the student complained. As a result, the teacher told me that he would no longer help enforce such safety policies as "no snowball throwing." It became easier to follow a policy of "look the other way." Other teachers, no doubt, followed suit when they learned of the incident.

It would be nice to believe that the sort of things I have written about were isolated cases. It does not take much investigative research to dispel this idea. The fact is that schools may talk about academics coming first, or have slogans like "education excellence starts here," or say they stress student responsibility, but as long as deeds don't match words, the words are hollow.

What does this mean as far as educational reform? It means that what is done is more important than what is said. It means academics will not improve as long as it is not the priority. It means that students will not learn responsibility as long as administrators choose to avoid conflict. It means that we can make all the cosmetic changes in education we want, but, as long as the system is dominated by the kind of thinking that permeates it now, there is little chance for meaningful change.



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