

## **Yesterday and Today: Telling the Story of Renewing Education in a Democracy**

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I welcome this newly created on-line journal and applaud its hopes of reaching a wide audience regarding the ongoing work of the NNER. As I understand it, articles in this journal will address one or more of the following issues: fostering effective participation in a social and political democracy, ensuring access to the understandings and skills required for satisfying and responsible lives, developing and providing continuing support to educators who nurture the learning and well-being of every student, encouraging educators to be competent and committed stewards of their schools and communities, and informing readers about educational policy issues related to the agenda of the NNER. It is my hope that this journal can inform a broad audience regarding challenges continuing to face the country as efforts are made to bring to scale efforts to reshape the course of public education for our democratic society.

A discouraging characteristic of creative projects for school improvement is the difficulty of bringing them to scale. Indeed, this characteristic heads the frustration list of supporting philanthropic foundations and government agencies. Some of the reasons for this phenomenon are very much like those that explain the disappointing impact of university-based laboratory schools. But most arise out of the fact that the key players in the usual boutique of innovative

projects know one another. Scaling up, however, embraces the layered structure of whole school districts, usually involves people who hardly know one another, and is accompanied by communication complexities. The established ways of doing things prevail. Differing ideologies often prove to be more powerful in the decision-making process than the prospect of more money from funders.

One answer to this long-lasting dilemma is that the necessary renewal of the American school system requires planning and commitment, both conceptual and financial, for scaling up at the outset. We have learned a great deal about change from the billions of dollars spent on boutique programs of school improvement that have scarcely dented the deep structure and symbols of the system that hardened into place nearly a century ago.

The Institute for Educational Inquiry (IEI) and its companion nonprofit National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) have for years sustained a low profile of studying educational change and simultaneously “proofing” their findings and conclusions in practice. Two decades of research on the conduct of classrooms and the culture of schools conducted by me and carefully selected colleagues preceded my founding (with Roger Soder and Kenneth Sirotnik) of the Center for Educational Renewal (CER) at the University of Washington in 1983. In 1985, the CER created the NNER, a network of school-university partnerships devoted to the simultaneous renewal of schools and the education of educators. By 1990, scholars at the CER had added to the earlier research a comprehensive national study of the education of educators.

Then, through a competitive process supported by the Education Commission of the States and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, funded by the Exxon Education, Mertz-Gilmore, and Southwestern Bell Foundations, we forged a scaled-up collaboration of ten settings in ten states, each committed to a unique partnership for the renewal of schools and teacher education. Each consisted of the colleges of education and the arts and sciences in a major university and a nearby clutch of partner schools. The NNER was reborn with an increased focus on strengthening teacher education.

Given the discovery in our research that this highly important tripartite collaboration was virtually nonexistent in the education of educators, we realized that technical support would be necessary to its success. And so we created the IEI, a nonprofit entity located near the University of Washington, for this purpose. Again, foundation philanthropy provided the necessary financial resources—first for engaging a diverse array of highly qualified consultants to provide technical assistance and then for six years of developing and conducting a leadership program, now the responsibility of the NNER.

Today, the NNER is an independent nonprofit agency, slowly and carefully adding partnerships through invitation only. Now, self-sustaining as an organization, it consists of twenty-four partnerships in twenty states and one Canadian province, embracing forty universities, several hundred partner schools, and many additional schools interested in the ongoing work that is variously addressed in a host of publications. The story of the NNER is one of scaling up at the outset and then drawing upon funded knowledge in a steady process of expanding without loss of the necessary conditions pertaining to its mission of educating a democratic public.

But the story begs further elaboration, interpretation, and particularly development of a renewing mode in both the universities and the partner schools. We will never have the schools our democracy requires until more of their care is the responsibility of *local communities* and until residents become increasingly educated in the major issues of schooling that block significant improvement. And we will never have such schools until elected policymakers, educators and their organizations, and the diverse communities of which they are a part *share a public democratic educational purpose*.

Leaders in the NNER and many other participants in the work of renewal are aware of these needs and are taking steps to address them. For example, The IEI has brought together a group of NNER researchers and implementors for purposes of increasing awareness and understanding of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. They have identified four major issues that have for years blocked compelling proposals for educational innovation and are writing

a document intended for a wide audience that analyzes them and makes evidence-based recommendations for dealing with them.

A major operational goal of the IEI and the NNER for the immediate future is that of adding parents and other members of the community cultures to the present tripartite strategy of renewal (the partner schools and the colleges of arts and sciences and of education in the universities). This is not an easy thing to do. Part of the research referred to earlier in this piece reveals that, although few community members want to be involved in the daily conduct of their schools, most want more information than they are getting and a closer relationship. Parents also want attention to the personal and social development of their children. The present meshing of these expectations and those of school personnel and policymakers is, at best, casual.

Two recent projects of the IEI and the NNER whetted an emerging desire to move beyond talk in the ongoing agenda of school renewal and, simultaneously, to bring both underrepresented voices and state and local policymakers into the process. The first, thanks to the support of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, was a journey into ten community sites with a goal to improve and strengthen the schooling of youths in at-risk situations, from which much was learned (reported in *Engaging with the Community: Developing Networks of Responsibility to Educate America's Youths*, published by the IEI in 2006). The second brought together in conversation and then writing a diverse group of believers in advancing the public democratic mission of schooling (reported in *Education and the Making of a Democratic People*, published by Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2008).

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, there was a heartening readiness and surge for innovative alternative ways for conducting schooling led by much-respected educators such as James Comer, Henry Levin, Deborah Meier, and TheodoreSizer (see Carl Glickman, editor, *Those Who Dared: Five Visionaries Who Changed American Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2008). In 1999, the IEI identified twenty-one programs nationwide that met criteria pertaining to program and influence and then invited lead-

ers to send delegates to share their work in a conference entitled “In Praise of Education.” As we look forward to the tenth anniversary of that meeting at the NNER annual conference in Bellevue, Washington, on October 15-17, 2009, we fear that much of that earlier work has disappeared.

The good news, however, is two-fold: first, the current widespread spirit of expectation and readiness for significant change in the very foundations of the nation’s well-being is palpable; second, there has been for several decades a considerable outpouring of thoughtful evidence-based analyses of what we must address in our troubled democracy and why. Much more than our system of schooling is at risk. One of the most comprehensive analyses is that of David Korten who teaches us that the growth and tenacity of our major problems have a long, long history. Joining other insightful observers, he explains convincingly that now is the opportune and necessary time for getting beyond the top-down, centuries-old, mechanistic model that still guides and controls human enterprises, including schooling. Like those others, he sees “the emergent outlines of a largely unrecognized consensus that the world most of us want to bequeath to our children is very different from the world in which we live” (in *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, San Francisco: Barrett-Kohler Publishers, 2006, p. 340).

The bad news is that the intellectual harvest of research and inquiry that supports this largely unrecognized consensus regarding the what and why of major cultural change has little to say about the how. Fortunately, however, a scattered harvest of knowledge about promising change processes exists, some of it in the education domain of study. The past half-century has given us systems, complexity, chaos, and deep ecological theories that have found niches in the corporate world, city planning, community development, and probably other domains of human endeavor. Books such as those by Fritjof Capra (*The Web of Life*), Stuart Kaufman (*At Home in the Universe*), Steven Johnson (*Emergence*), and Seymour Sarason (*The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*) have brought some awareness of these theories to a small group of educators, particularly scholars in the field. And Jim Collins (*Good to Great*) and

Dee Hock (*One from Many* and *Birth of the Chaordic Age*) have brought to school administrators in particular attention to the use of systems theories in the practical world of business. All of this brings us to the need for the present journal and the contributions I believe it can make to enriching the knowledge base for scaled-up school renewal.

We need to take advantage of every opportunity to get the word out. Thousands, probably millions, of us have heard or read the words of Bill Moyers: “the promise of America leaves no one out. Go now, and tell it on the mountains. From the rooftops, tell it... From the workplace and the bookstore, tell it. . . . Tell it where you can, when you can and while you can—to every candidate for office, to every talk-show host and pundit, to corporate executives and schoolchildren. Tell it—for America’s sake” (in “For America’s Sake: A New Story for America,” *The Nation*, 22 January 2007, p. 17).

Congratulations to the authors and editors whose contributions to this journal provide a new and important opportunity to “tell it where you can, when you can and while you can.” Your efforts carry on the work for the sake of the nation’s children.

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