



Good ideas for school reform are easy to come by. The greater challenge lies in translating good ideas into practice and getting them to stick. In the summer of 1988, a group of teachers in the Bethlehem Central School District (a suburb of Albany, New York) met to deliberate on a body of then-current school reform literature to see how it might relate to our students. We developed plenty of good ideas and dreamed wistfully of transforming our schools. That was the easy part. Since then, a number of us have attempted to implement just some of those ideas and we have found that the institutional barriers are enormous. We have also found that, having surmounted some of the impediments, the rewards of working with students and their parents in new ways is tremendously beneficial to all involved.

What follows is a narrative of our efforts to bring about substantial change in our school and community. It dwells as much on political and institutional issues (building support, raising funds, addressing the needs of various interest groups, recruiting students) as on the philosophical and curricular ideas we have put into practice. Above

all it is a story about six teachers and the courageous families who joined with us to create an innovative high school.

Many have described their school of the future, but few explain how we get from the schools we have to that visionary ideal. The process for reaching that ideal is crucial. Indeed, the ways in which we attend to institutional and political issues will determine the success or failure of any innovative project.

In the spring of 1988 a group of teachers in the Bethlehem Central School District requested that the District fund a summer committee to review literature on school reform and develop a kind of think-tank report. A number of us, at the High School particularly, felt restless with the system. We had been watching the nascent efforts of the Coalition of Essential Schools and found the commonsense ideas at its core appealing: simplify schools, require students to clearly demonstrate their learning, place the teacher in the role of coach. We chafed against New York State's standardized testing regimen, the Regents Exams. I longed for a school with a strong sense of community where every student would be known well by the adults, where the kids felt as much of a stake in the ongoing life of the school as did the teachers.

The District funded our request, and we met for a week that summer to review the recent work of John Goodlad, TheodoreSizer, Ernest Boyer, Mortimer Adler, and others. The Bethlehem School system is generally regarded as excellent. The professional staff has built a reputation for quality instruction and programs that extends at least statewide. By all the usual measures of success, students perform very well. But deep in our hearts, those of us who joined the "Restructuring Committee" believed we could do much better. As part of our discussion that summer, we asked ourselves the question, What is it about my role that has led me to entertain the possibility of restructuring?

Following are the answers that each committee member gave. These testimonials speak powerfully to the frustrations and concerns felt by educators everywhere. They suggest strongly that the machine of public education, while not broken, may be running to design standards no longer relevant.

*I feel an ever building amount of frustration with my ability to interact with and therefore effectively teach my individual students. I have so many things in my mind I know I need to do with individual students, but over and over I ask myself, How? I see 127 kids every day—that's one and one-half minutes a day per student. In that time I must cover my content, which continues to expand, provide time to develop skills, coaching time to practice skills, and motivation time. Where is the time to develop relationships with my students or even to interact one to one with them? Where is the time to know them as people instead of a name with numbers after it? Their schedules and mine do not allow for that time. I want to be an outstanding teacher. I want to know I have influenced my students and have helped make time in school valuable. But I feel the frustration because within our present system that is nearly impossible.*

—A middle school science teacher

*As an educator, I embrace the principles of a reform movement aimed at narrowing the gap between what is and what could be—especially if it portends to allow us to more fully realize our capabilities as “shaper” of young minds. The energy that I derive from children and teachers coupled with promise will cut deeply into years of frustrations. I like to believe that I am a piece of the puzzle we call promise.*

—An elementary school principal

*Changes are constantly happening in education. A teacher must change direction often, according to needs of students, parents, administration, community. The system changes slowly, but the teacher needs to be flexible and able to change at a moment's notice. Frustration often is the result, as well as decreased morale and motivation. Often I have said, "Oh, well, I'll just go in my classroom, close the door, and be with my kids; that's the important thing anyway." For these reasons, I was interested in the concept of restructuring. As I sat on this committee, I grew in understanding of the whole picture, the concerns at every level of the system. Our concerns/problems were more similar than different. This gave me insight into possible resolutions that apply to all areas of education and have encouraging implications for the future.*

*—An elementary school teacher*

*I am concerned about how I'm asked to spend the math and reading money my classroom is allocated. I am also concerned about how much uninterrupted instructional time my students have each morning. If I am accountable for the quality of education in my classroom, I want more control over the purchase of first-grade instructional materials and the scheduling of my students' school day.*

*—An elementary school teacher*

*It is important to me to be able to participate to a greater degree in the decision-making processes that directly affect my student, my profession, and myself. To be valued as an individual and to be respected for my professional knowledge and experience is vital.*

*—A middle school social studies teacher and union leader*

*As a librarian, I have felt the frustration of working with my colleagues but feeling little collegiality. I feel committed to the goal of equal access to knowledge for all students, but I am frustrated by the constraints of planning time, student schedules, and the allocation of resources. This opportunity to explore ways to improve our school organization has proved to be professionally rewarding. I am excited about the prospects of “renewal” in our school through a process of “restructuring.”*

—A high school librarian

*So much of my time as superintendent is spent in seeking compromise and accommodation. Instead, I want to join with teachers and ignite the fire of our idealism. Together, we can be better than we ever imagined.*

—District superintendent

*I willingly volunteered to be a member of this committee because it would allow me to better understand the process and possibly the benefits of “restructuring.” My goal was to determine the possibilities for improving curriculum, teaching, and learning. There are many such possibilities, and I sincerely hope that we as professionals make every effort to work toward achieving them.*

—District math supervisor

*I feel fragmented trying to fill the role of administrator of a facility, teacher, resource person, advisor, and clerk. I feel the need for a balance to each day—a balance that will accommodate teaching classes, working individually with teachers and students, and maintaining the collection—the necessary adjustments of time, to administer a*

*facility with its component parts. Restructuring the elementary school day, in my opinion, offers the most viable means of change outside the realm of budget considerations.*

*—An elementary school librarian*

*The role of assistant superintendent and supervisor is incorrectly perceived in the district. The common perception is that of bureaucratic authority, deciding upon and directing program initiatives, evaluation processes, organization of staff, etc. These roles would more effectively work as change agents, i.e., facilitators of change, a resource for problem solving, a coordinator of people and ideas to determine need and possible effectiveness, to implement or not, plans for implementation, etc. I would hope restructuring provides more opportunities to share ideas and responsibilities for program areas and, in this way, staff can operate within and see the district and its program in a more holistic way.*

*—District assistant superintendent*

*I wanted to join our summer discussion seminar on the restructuring of school to determine the implications for our middle school. Since then I have formed the opinion that our school in Bethlehem can become a better place for all of our children. I feel that we—as teachers, parents, and administrators—can work together in the decision-making process to make the teaching/learning environment in our schools more effective and more exciting for our students.*

*—Middle school principal*

We felt confident that the concerns identified here were broadly shared because they were in close agreement with numerous scholarly studies that were broadly based. Three recent studies, in particu-

lar, all empirically based and all nationwide in scope, brought out the same concerns that we felt most deeply: John Goodlad's *A Place Called School*, Ernest Boyer's *High School*, and TheodoreSizer's, *Horace's Compromise*. A fourth study, less empirical and more philosophical, impressed us also: Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal*. Other studies and reports were useful too. Following are excerpted several of these which give a flavor for what the Committee read and underscore the close correlation between what we felt locally and what was emerging nationally.

Vast changes have swept over education in recent decades, and yet the structure of schools remains much the same. Over the years, a host of innovations have been introduced: open classrooms, modular scheduling, off-campus learning, to name a few. Some new programs were successful. Others were marred by poor planning or by excess. The basic pattern of public schools may make bureaucratic sense—but does it make educational sense? (Ernest Boyer, *High School*, Harper and Row, 1983, p. 230)

What we are proposing is not an effort to mend, repair, or polish up the structure now in place. What worked fifty years ago for a society with limited expectations no longer works today. Rather, we are sounding a call for a basic restructuring of our schools. ("Report on the Commissioner's Task Force on the Teaching Profession: A Blueprint for Teaching and Learning," New York State, 1988)

Basic schooling—the schooling compulsory for all—must do something other than prepare some young people for more

schooling at advanced levels. It must prepare ALL of them for the continuation of learning in adult life. . . . The failure to serve all in this essential respect is one strike against schooling in its present deplorable condition. The reform we advocate seeks to remedy that condition. (Mortimer Adler et al. *The Paideia Proposal*, Macmillan, 1982)

As part of its finding “A Study of High Schools” identified five “imperatives” for better schools:

- Give room to teachers and students to work and learn in their own appropriate ways.
- Insist that student clearly exhibit mastery of their school work.
  - Get the incentives right for students and teachers.
  - Focus the students’ work on the use of their minds.
  - Keep the structure simple and flexible.

Simple though they may at first sound, these commitments, if addressed seriously, have significant consequences for many schools, affecting both their organization and the attitudes of those who work within them. (Theodore R.Sizer, “Coalition of Essential Schools, Prospectus 1984 to 1994,” Education Department, Brown University)

Our Restructuring Committee produced a report that was distributed to all district staff members. The week of deliberations and the development of the report were stimulating exercises and there was some limited follow-up discussion around the district, but neither the report nor its discussion resulted in any changes in school practice. Nonetheless, a seed had been planted.

In the spring of 1989, a number of us decided to act, in a small



way, to begin to change our practices. We developed a team-teaching pilot project that paired an English class with a social studies class in a double block of time. We hoped to give the students an interdisciplinary focus and allow for greater scheduling flexibility by the teachers involved. When the program was formally announced in June, some members of the faculty showed resistance. Why hadn't they been asked for their ideas? How would this affect class size for teachers not involved in the project? These were questions that made us pause and that were to influence our later undertakings. When we returned in September to begin the project and were given our class lists, we found that the paired classes were not perfectly paired. Some students were in one class but not the other. Attempts to remedy this inconsistency during the first two weeks of the school year caused only more irritation among the faculty, and we feared it might adversely affect the students. We scuttled the project.

After some months of reflection, I began to think that the problem with the team-teaching project was that it interfered with other people's programs. We needed an experiment that would be completely separated from the high school so that existing programs would not be threatened. In the fall of 1989 I went to the district superintendent with a proposal to look into the development of a laboratory high school—a kind of alternative school with an experimental focus open to all students and programmatically separate from the larger high school. The idea of a lab school harked back to John Dewey (there was a strong progressive impulse to our work), and it was reminiscent of the professional development “lab schools” connected with schools of education. An “alternative school” it was not, not in the sense of the alternative schools spawned in the late 1960s and sadly dismissed as too “radical” for the mainstream. Even while radical change is what we sought, we needed to be in the midst of the mainstream

and could not afford to be dismissed because of popular misconceptions of what we would be about. The superintendent was interested but said he needed evidence of support before he could launch such a project. I decided then that I would approach the teachers' union with the idea. Union and faculty support was crucial, as I had learned from the failed team-teaching project.

I began to promote the idea at union meetings, conducted an informal interest survey among the high school faculty, and brought the results (which were favorable) back to the superintendent. The faculty interest was tempered by an important caveat. The faculty wanted to vote on the project before implementation. The administrative team and the school board did not give the idea of a faculty vote a warm reception, but the Board of Education approved it and we began work knowing that the union and the faculty were behind the project. It was now October 1990.

Next, we organized a design team of teachers and administrators. The team's immediate goal was to develop a grant proposal. This turned out to be an important exercise not only for raising some needed money, but also for clarifying our concept of the emerging "lab school." We wanted the school to (1) maintain an interdisciplinary focus; (2) emphasize fewer topics of study in greater depth than the traditional program; (3) maintain a project orientation in which students would be mentored in self-designed courses of study; (4) actively build a community spirit with democratic governance; and (5) do all of this at existing per-pupil expenditures. Our grant proposal was ready in April 1991, and we began circulating it immediately to a limited number of foundations where we had some sort of entree. In June, the Klingenstein Fund in New York made a generous contribution. On the strength of that, the superintendent and I took the grant proposal door to door at area corporations and made a personal appeal.

Owens-Corning, Roure Corporation, and General Electric provided generous donations. We now had our funding. It was September 1991.

It was time to reassemble the design team, which we did with several new additions as we decided to recruit members of departments not already represented. We were eighteen in all and faced the daunting task of designing within a year's time a lab school that was both visionary and practical—all in addition to our regular responsibilities as teachers and school administrators. For a couple of weeks we fumbled around, not sure how to organize, but a plan emerged. We decided to divide the team into three small groups. The small groups were then given identical assignments: design a lab school with the guidelines outlined in the grant proposal by March of the following year. The grant money was used to pay teachers for released time from the classroom (five days each), planning sessions, and visits to exemplary schools. Our plan was to bring together the three groups with their completed designs in March for a series of intensive meetings from which we hoped a master design might emerge that would incorporate the best ideas from all three.

We hoped that by dividing into three smaller teams we could capitalize on everybody's best thinking. Also, from a logistical standpoint small groups are easier to coordinate than larger groups, especially in finding common dates for meetings. Finally, we hoped a spirit of friendly competition might push us to a higher level of excellence.

We went to work. The small groups began meeting, often at people's homes. An esprit de corps developed. Every other week the entire team would meet to update each other on progress in the small groups. We also set up several visits to exemplary schools around the Northeast. Typically, teams of three persons—one person from each small group—would go on a trip. We visited Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire (then under the principalship of Dennis

Littky), the Scarsdale Alternative School in Scarsdale, New York (Tony Aranella), and Central Park East Secondary School in Manhattan (Deborah Meier). Also, one member of the design team who was touring in Germany visited the Holweide Gesamtschule in Cologne.

Halfway through this portion of our work, I became fearful that the small groups might become territorial about their designs and that, by March, it would be impossible to overcome their small-group loyalty in order to blend the three designs into one. Nothing about any of the personalities fed this concern, only a hunch that the dynamics of the process might cause such a problem. I mentioned this concern to the team, and we decided to hold the first of our intensive meetings in January to review, over the course of a half day, our work in progress. At this meeting I stressed that the work of the small groups should not be viewed as a competition where one design will win out over others, and everyone agreed that it should be seen as a collaborative effort. In that spirit we presented our work and encouraged all to freely raid ideas in other groups' designs that looked promising. This meeting also served to remind us of the impending March deadline and spurred us to get our work done.

Running simultaneous to the work of the design team were the efforts of another group. We had determined in the fall that community ideas and support would be essential to the project. We therefore established a community advisory group and invited our school's parent-teacher organization to select eight parents to join. We invited the student senate to do likewise with eight students, and a local banker agreed to serve as a representative of the town Chamber of Commerce. We held three dinner meetings with the Lab School Community Advisory Group during the winter months. We solicited their ideas for the lab school design and had them critique work in progress from the small groups.

By March, all three designs had been submitted. We gave ourselves a week before the first meeting to review each other's work. During this week, the designs were farmed out to colleagues not on the design team who offered for a small honorarium to critique our work. These critiques were circulated among design team members. We then held three half-day meetings to build the master design. We were able to obtain the services of Harold Williams of the nearby Rensselaerville Institute who served as facilitator of these meetings. His skillful guidance was essential in bringing us to consensus. We held the three meetings at five-day intervals to allow time for conversations and reflection between meetings. At the end of the third meeting we were largely in agreement on a master design. Then disaster struck.

The teachers' association and the district had been deadlocked in negotiations for a new contract to replace one that would expire in June. Impasse was declared, and the union asked its membership to withhold all voluntary services until a new agreement was reached. The Lab School faced a crisis. We could forsake the union and carry on, or risk the project and show solidarity with our colleagues. Conscience demanded that we do the latter. For two months, the project languished. Our not-quite-completed design lay on a shelf. The many complex conversations already in progress that were needed to bring the work to completion were left hanging. And our financial sponsors . . . What would they think?

Just before school ended in June, an agreement was reached, and suddenly we had a contract. It was time to go back to work, but we were all scattering for the summer. During July and August, several of us stuck around to carry on the essential conversations among design team, administration, and board. Through correspondence we were able to check the final recommendations with our far-flung design

team. With cooperation by all, we were able to reach agreement on a blueprint to be presented to the faculty and board in September. Our sponsors provided no negative responses. In fact, one suggested it was wise that the design team had respected the bargaining process by suspending activity.

Briefly, the design consisted of a four-period day with ninety-minute periods. Rotating through this schedule were three interdisciplinary courses, each of which met three times weekly. Together, these courses (humanities, sciences, integrated arts) encompassed all the major disciplines taught in a comprehensive high school. In addition to these, students would conduct two projects, governed by a contract, each semester. Every Wednesday morning, there would be a special three-hour block set aside for a variety of activities such as field trips, student performances, guest lectures, and community service projects. The entire curriculum was to be guided by a schoolwide theme selected jointly by students and faculty each semester. All course work and projects would focus on the theme.

Shortly after returning to school, the just-completed blueprint was distributed to all faculty, members of the Board of Education, leaders in the teachers' association, and members of our community advisory group. We scheduled meetings with all parties to solicit questions and concerns and to consider possible changes in the document based on issues raised at these meetings. Members of the design team also agreed that each would present the blueprint to one of his or her classes to get a sample of student opinion. After this round of meetings, the design team held a work session to make final changes. In the course of these meetings, the board indicated its readiness to unanimously approve the program should the faculty vote go favorably.

At a regular faculty meeting in October 1992, the design team,

along with the superintendent, board president, and teachers' association president presented the final blueprint. The faculty voted on the following day—75 percent voted in favor of the program.

After four years of dogged effort, however, the real work of school reform still remained ahead of us, for it lay not in writing, presenting, or conducting research, but in putting into practice the ideas that were dancing in our heads.

School reform projects vary depending on the setting and the personalities involved, so it is difficult and unwise to make generalizations from one experience. Nevertheless, some noteworthy factors played a role in the development of the Lab School up to this point.

First, the talent, energy, and devotion of the team. Staying with this project required persistent hard work for more than a year on something that seemed at the outset to have little chance of success. Despite the odds, however, the design team brought its full powers to the effort as demonstrated in the resulting blueprint. Teachers and school administrators are the chief resources in the national effort to reinvent our schools. To the extent that the lab school project came to fruition, it was because of people who became the leaders in its design.

Second, the faculty vote. The most potent factor in winning collegial support was the promise that no program would go forward without a majority vote by the school faculty. Any veteran teacher has seen many education fads come and go, each one touted as "The True Way," and for each, teachers have been prodded to accept innovations by school leaders who too quickly jumped on the band wagon. "Innovation" in the lexicon of teachers has unfortunately become synonymous with nuisance. The vote, however, put teachers firmly in control. The fact that teachers were leading the change, also, won the

project favor in the eyes of many teachers. The vote also put pressure on the design team to include teachers in the process in every way possible. In short, the vote kept everyone honest. At the same time, the vote introduced an element of risk into the project. After all our work, the faculty could simply reject it and effectively end the project. The design document also stipulated a second faculty vote to take place three years after implementation of the program. This second vote would serve as a recommendation to the Board of Education regarding the continuance of the Lab School. While the second vote would not carry the decisive power of the first, it nonetheless was to have a similar effect of putting positive pressure on the Lab School teachers to keep in mind the concerns of faculty members not directly involved in the program

Third, administrative support. The Lab School was a risky venture from an administrative standpoint. It was highly visible and carried potential for controversy, it involved other people's money, it was subject to a faculty vote, it seemed to flout state regulations, and it challenged conventional attitudes about education. All of this behooved the innovators to provide evidence that it had a high probability of success. That the superintendent (Leslie G. Loomis) and the high school principal (Jon G. Hunter) supported and nurtured it was evidence of unusual courage.

Fourth, a knowledge base of professional experience. Our knowledge base in designing the Lab School was mainly the collective professional experience of design team members. We filtered everything we read, as well as all our observations at the schools we visited, through our own experience and judgment. The findings of published research were not the main determinant in rejecting or accepting ideas. For example, even though the literature suggested that heterogeneous grouping is superior to homogeneous grouping, our experience with



kids in school said such was not always the case and, accordingly the design of the Lab School allowed for either arrangement under varied circumstances. This was as it should be. If a program is to succeed, the people who carry it out must believe in it. The best way to ensure that they believe in it is for them to design it themselves.

People who work directly with students generally have the best instinct for what works. The mind of the practitioner is a crucible of academic learning and practical experience. Given the opportunity to reflect on all they know and enact their vision of the good school (opportunities so often denied by the system), public school teachers and school administrators will do great things.

Fifth, visits to exemplary schools. Much more potent than academic research in honing our ideas, were the innovative practices of colleagues we observed in exemplary schools. The observations we made and the conversations we held at these schools presented us with new ideas and forced us to question our own thinking.

Sixth, the competitive/cooperative nature of our design process. By dividing the design team into three small groups, we created a situation in which everyone's ideas could come forward. It is much harder to hide in a small group of five or six than in a committee of eighteen. At the same time, the understanding that no one of the three designs would be declared the winner and that all would get equal credit for the outcome was essential in generating a positive dynamic.

Seventh, a hook to get the attention of outsiders. The fact that I was a published author at the time this project began influenced its development. This advantage was instrumental in getting the attention of school administrators, the community, and foundations. This same advantage, however, was a double-edged sword because authorship made my motives suspect in the eyes of some colleagues who

perceived me as merely ambitious. It is important to remember that authorship is not the only possible attention getter, and every possible avenue should be explored.

Eighth, due attention to the ideal and the real. Many innovations in public schools flounder because they are either too idealistic or too pragmatic. Idealistic innovations may work in theory but have little concern for the setting in which they are intended to be implemented. Since a setting may include contentious personalities, labor/management issues, turf loyalty, and tradition-bound attitudes, innovations may never get started. Other ideas may be too pragmatic, designed to fit in smoothly within the existing array of personalities, professional roles, regulations, and traditions. They sometimes get adopted but eventually might run along the same tired tracks to the same tired destinations.

The Lab School design work tried to balance the ideal and the real. We kept our vision steadily before us and stretched to its limits the system's tolerance for change. Innovators will do well to ask continually two questions that run in opposite directions: Are we stretching the system far enough? and Can we make this happen in our setting?

Ninth, no gurus. The design team remained intellectually in charge of this project throughout. Our design was eclectic and was the product of our own reflection intended for our own school. We did not simply accept the program of any of the current education gurus because we feared that the demand for loyalty might supersede the need for a healthy skepticism and that matters of disagreement would be cast as issues of orthodoxy and heresy. We insisted on following our design because we recognized that schools and the people in them differ sufficiently from place to place such that no model, no program is suited to all. Nonetheless, we benefited from the work of the

best scholars and activists (such as those already mentioned). Three of the four schools we visited belonged to the Coalition of Essential Schools, an organization that wisely recognizes the importance of local differences and the crucial necessity that teachers and communities lead change for their schools.