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Towards A New Education Ethic

Opinion by Barbara Vogl

Politics is really quite simple. It boils down to who has the power to make decisions. The practice of politics is another matter. It is the dance, the dynamic of the world we inhabit. No one escapes. It is the air we breathe and it is the hidden agenda in our public schools. Children learn their politics as participants in the organizational culture of schools.

Someone has predicted that the 1990s will make the '60s look the '50s. Certainly in educational circles, the move from the notion of school "reform" to that of "restructuring" has created a fundamental shift. Reform is built into the way we do schools. It is like the thermostat on the wall. When societal temperature changes, such as our present concern to improve our science and math instruction to more effectively compete in the world marketplace, the thermostat kicks on and money and attention pours into those programs.

Reform is what keeps the system going. Like a yo-yo, the more it goes around, the tighter the string must be held and we are left with the perplexing feeling that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Restructuring, on the other hand, changes the way we see and think about what we do. It changes the rhythm of the dance, the rules in the practice of politics.

Beneath the calls for educational restructuring lies the increasing tension created by the advancement in technological intelligence pulling us into a global society and a change-driven lifestyle. At the same time, our collective consciousness is still locked within outgrown boundaries; anthropocentric, ethnocentric, racial, and national borders. This mounting tension is felt in all our human activity systems; the family system, the socio-economic-ecological systems, cultural-value-spiritual systems, but perhaps more acutely, in our school systems which have historically been entrusted with the task of preparing future generations for entrance into a predictable, orderly, progress-oriented society.

That society has shifted in unpredictable ways. The tension in earthquake-prone California is reaching seismic proportions. As teachers strive to "educate" the one in six California students who speak little or no English and the one in four who struggle in poverty, state-controlled budgets and mandated reforms, fostered by national directives void of any monetary support appear to be addressing an entirely different reality.

Unified reform, such as changing standards of assessment, competency, and certification only serve to control and regulate teachers and local schools. This "state-mandated boredom," as Santa

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Cruz City Schools Board member Art Pearl calls it, adds to the tension. More responsibilities and less authority to do the work at the community, grass roots level, create a deepening rift in the time-encrusted, test-driven, hierarchical system with its obsolete method of financing.

With so much change and ferment in our daily lives, it is helpful to recognize that humanity has always been involved in two conflicting currents, one tending toward unification and top-down control, and the other towards decentralization and the maintenance or restoration of diversity. Change in schools comes about through the relationship between these currents.

As an example, competition for power between those at the top and those who do their bidding makes political power a limited commodity. Beginning with the 1987-88 school year, Santa Cruz was one of six California school districts chosen to participate in a "policy trust agreement" between the American Federation of Teachers Local 2030 and the local district. The pilot program was designed to shift communication between teachers and administration from an adversarial, top-down format of winners and losers, to an empowering, cooperative activity in which, ideally, everyone wins. This program creates the environment for restructuring which could change the pattern and processes of each individual school.

The power to evaluate another's performance is central to maintaining political dominance. By the 1989-90 school year, the pilot which initiated peer coaching among teachers in lieu of formal top-down evaluation was successful enough to be expanded to all schools in the district. As Marty Krovetz, Soquel High School principal, notes: "Sharing power increases power geometrically." Experience shows that if decision-making is controlled by a few, those decisions tend to be ignored or carried out with minimum commitment. Only empowered teachers can effectively teach respect and self-esteem. Only cooperative action within the system can foster cooperative learning. As with teachers, so also with students.

Let's hope empowered teachers realize their job is not to "motivate" students like so many engines being revved up to meet the demands of an unthinking, mechanistic society. To make a lasting difference, *all* participants in our educational system must know they are empowered to actively engage themselves in the school decision-making process.

Shared power diminishes the need for disciplinary action. This was the lesson learned by those of us involved in the free school movement of the '60s, and was probably the most threatening to the educational establishment. An unexamined myth is that inclusive societies create havoc because people have so many different ideologies, values, or purposes. The truth is that havoc is created by exclusive societies with too narrow a perspective on what is "good." Those who claim "Education" as their private domain of expertise might realize that

inclusive societies value expertise as long as it is not used to manipulate or oppress others no matter how well-meaning.

New images of public education are surfacing through actual "on the ground" work. It is a gradual process of experiential self-organization capable of appreciating our rich ethnic and racial diversity as an asset rather than a problem that must be solved. Our nation has wasted billions on generalized, politically popular reform movements since before the days of Sputnik. We need a national moratorium on reforms so that people at the local level can analyze their own situation, reflect cooperatively on their own organizational culture, goals, and values, and begin to rebuild a society that works. ■

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