

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 228

EA 015 025

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TITLE The Kensington School Today: Sailing Stormy Straits. A View of Educational Policy.
INSTITUTION Washington Univ., St. Louis, Mo.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 20 Mar 82
GRANT NIE-G-78-0074
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982). For related documents, see EA 015 026-028.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Back to Basics; Curriculum Development; *Educational Change; *Educational Environment; Educational Methods; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Education; Experimental Schools; *Nontraditional Education; *Open Plan Schools; School Buildings
IDENTIFIERS *Kensington School MO

ABSTRACT

Kensington School is an elementary school in Milford (Missouri) School District built in 1966 with open classrooms and designed for team teaching and other innovative practices. A visit 15 years later reveals that the physical plant has deteriorated somewhat, most classrooms are walled off from each other, and innovative structures are not now used for their original purposes. Current staff members are humorous and stable and interact a great deal, but they are more rural and local than the original staff and are more oriented toward a traditional, back-to-basics educational philosophy. The curriculum too is more concerned with order, structured activities, and basic skills. The present principal is also a traditionalist, unlike the school's first principal. Changes in Kensington's social environment have contributed to the movement away from nontraditional approaches. Demographic shifts led to an increase in lower-achieving, inner-city children and an increase in disciplinary problems. These problems in turn contributed to the emphasis on order and basic skills. Further district problems over racial bias allegations and declining enrollments also strengthened the traditionalist turn. Educational policy-making results from complex influences, but the complexity of education's environments and problems needs to be addressed directly. (RW)

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The Kensington School Today: Sailing Stormy Straits
A View of Educational Policy^{1,2}

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¹Presented as part of the symposium "Innovation and Change in American Education, Kensington Revisited: A 15 Year Follow-up of an Innovative School and Its Faculty" AERA, New York, March 20, 1982.

²Supported in part by NIE Grant #G78-0074, Kensington Revisited. The perspective expressed does not represent the policy of NIE or of the Milford School District, and no inferences to that effect should be drawn.

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We recently succumbed to the call of Missouri's fall colors and mild temperatures, and floated a sparkling Ozark stream. We wished, for that one day, to leave thoughts of the Kensington School, research and writing behind. Somewhere along the stream, thoughts of Kensington re-emerged: Kensington, a public elementary school in contemporary America, carried by its own waters, subject to its own hazards of snags and sudden torrents.

A few days later, that metaphor returned. We realized it was far too simple to capture the complexity of the story we had found on our return to the Kensington School 15 years after its creation. The scope of that story would more aptly be compared to an oceangoing liner, berthed at a bustling pier and about to embark on a voyage across a dangerous channel. Thus cast, this paper will describe the Kensington School: its physical plant, current staff, curriculum and instruction, and the larger social environment of which it is part. From these interwoven images we can begin to understand the complexity of determining educational policy in today's turbulent environments.

The Ship, the Crew, the Waters They Sail

On our first return to Kensington in the Milford district, we commented on the tremendous change in the appearance of the community and the school, but in that moment, we had no comprehension of the extent of the changes we would find, nor an understanding of how these changes had interacted to fulfill our earlier prediction about Kensington's future: that it would return to the "old Milford type." In 1971 we wrote a brief introduction which described the building and the plans for the revolution in elementary education Kensington was to spawn. Today, that statement serves as a point from which we may measure Kensington's steady drift.

The setting was the Kensington School, a unique architectural structure with open-space laboratory suites, an instructional materials center, and a theatre....The program exemplified the new elementary education of team teaching, individualized instruction, and multi-aged groups. A broad strategy of innovation--the alternative of grandeur...was devised and implemented. The intended outcome was pupil development toward maturity--self-directed, internally motivated, and productive competence. (Smith & Keith, 1971, p.v)

Many of the changes we found and the waves of events they evidenced were visible in the building, the faculty and its work, and the community itself.

Stem to Stern, Design and Demise

Kensington the building still stirs lively debate. Some of the school's oldest staff and visitors who walked the halls when Kensington was new remember its heyday. They might compare it in terms of our metaphor with the Queen Elizabeth. Others, more recently working within Kensington's walls, might just as likely conjure images of the Titanic.

From the outside Kensington appears worn. Its cinder block construction is weathered and dirty. "Solar screens," cinder block lattices built to diffuse sunlight through large classroom windows, unintentionally provided ladders students use to climb to the roof. Barbed wire now tops these lattices in an ineffective effort to deter adventurous children. The unpleasant effect of the barbed wire is punctuated by heavy metal grills, anti-vandal screens, which further obliterate each window. Litter and broken glass spread over the playground add to a growing sense of disquiet.

Inside, a corridor leads to the administrative center, once called a "suite." Now, it is simply termed the "office." In the doorway, a grey plastic trash can catches dripping water from a badly stained and leaking ceiling. Another corner of the building houses a large rectangular room which serves as both gymnasium and lunchroom. Once a covered, outdoor play

shelter, it has been walled in to better meet the needs of the school and the demands of the climate. Cafeteria tables hang along one wall where they can be folded down for lunch and folded up for physical education classes.

Classrooms are uniquely arranged around the perimeter of the rest of the building, opening outwardly to the school's playground and inwardly to what was once called the "perception core." The classrooms are not elaborate or spectacular but adequate for the activities they house. They remain carpeted. The carpet, although worn, is still serviceable; it could not be termed attractive. Each room has its own sink and drinking fountain. Each contains the elementary school universals: teacher's desk, students' desks, wall clock, small American flag, and chalk board. All the rooms have a stacked and cluttered look owing to the lack of storage facilities designed in the original building. The most striking feature of the suites would not startle most visitors unfamiliar with Kensington's history. Returning guests, however, would be surprised at the number of walls separating the classrooms from one another. In 1965, no wall separated any two classrooms. Today, many are self-contained, but a few two-room suites and one three-room suite remain.

The building's core, earlier the perception core, is now simply the resource room. Rows of low book shelves and small tables fill the space. A small room nearby once carried the label "nerve center" and housed materials and a nest of wires and preparations for a grandly conceived audio-visual program. Currently, the room attractively houses remedial reading classes; all traces of its former purpose are gone. The remaining noteworthy feature is the children's theatre composed of a sunken, carpeted floor, an acting tower, and a rear projector viewing screen. The acting tower is stuffed with unused desks and chairs. The special screen displays only a ragged hole. The rear

projector room is now storage area for textbooks, clay, molds and a kiln.

Life on Board

Through the school's graffiti-etched front door, Kensington's faculty enters for the first day of school. Over one teacher's shoulder, a bag is slung which is decorated with an appliqued slogan: "The Three R's--1st Recess, 2nd Recess, 3rd Recess." They are an amiable group of 22 teachers, male and female, young and old, mostly White, one Black. They contrast sharply with Kensington's original crew of outsiders, cosmopolitans and educational visionaries.

As we greet this group for the first time, one commonality they share is immediately apparent--most have rural roots. The number of pickup trucks parked in front of the school each morning with campers attached and sporting decals of deer, pheasant and leaping bass suggests their origin. We also hear frequent references to county fairs or see staff trading photographs of prize livestock and nodding knowingly over them. They speak with an appealing down-home twang and punctuate their speech with colorful idioms. Another obvious characteristic of the group is its genuine warmth, extended both to students and one another. Towards us, they offered help trustingly and willingly.

Humor, either for fun or with a bite, is omnipresent with this staff. It flows through the staff lounge, runs through the classrooms and bubbles at staff parties. It functions to tie the staff into the school's history and socializes new members into the Kensington system. The extent of the staff humor somewhat surprised us, but we found an abundance of reason for the phenomenon. First, many of the teachers had taught together for a long time. More than one third of the faculty shared Kensington's legacy together since 1966. Four others worked at the school for 10 years. In short, the

staff is presently a very stable group. Second, in what we believe to be a somewhat unusual situation, the staff is bound together by extensive extra-school relationships. Consider the following: Two teachers attended elementary school together in the Milford district. The newest staff member had previously taught at Kensington. One teacher is married to another teacher's daughter. The secretary's son was one of the custodians. Two of the teachers were roommates for years. More broadly in the system, one teacher is married to another Milford principal's daughter. Finally, the staff joins together in weekend parties, holds staff breakfasts, attends theatre events, and sometimes gets together over the summers. One member said, "This is a really warm group." Thus, the extensive in-school and out-of-school interaction of faculty members breeds a cohesive and familiar teacher group at Kensington.

We might expect among this group a great deal of similarity in teacher goals and instructional styles. Indeed, the faculty's beliefs about schooling and children and the teacher's role in the instructional process does coalesce about a few basic tenets, and their instructional modes are very similar. But in these respects, we find a significant shift in purpose from the original Kensington mission. In sharp contrast to the 1964 goals which stressed self-realization, individualism, and the acquisition of broad, flexible skills, today's teachers declare their objectives in far less visionary terms, and align themselves with the current back-to-basics mood. Commonly, we heard such statements as: "I feel...you got to put discipline in front of anything else." "The emphasis is getting through the books: math, English and spelling." "Children are at school to learn. I think they have an obligation to obey the teacher and do what they are supposed to do."

Predictably, the curriculum of Kensington today is more akin to traditional mores about the content of schooling experiences than those offered in 1964. The

earlier students encountered a schooling program described in a bold manifesto which touted no "crutch such as a text," "no instructional curriculum," and proffered, instead, schooling "determined by the needs of the pupils." Today, students work from textbooks and move methodically through levels of reading, arithmetic, social studies, English and spelling. Physical education classes, music, and a minimal science program spice up the basic diet. Art experiences occur only at the out-of-pocket expense of teachers and provide one form of reward for students who behave correctly.

Although Kensington's staff and parents resonate to the currently popular and national back-to-basics movement, the school's programmatic retrenchment actually began before the movement's outset. Today, it provides a rationale for the kind of instruction that occurs in Kensington's classrooms, but we find an earlier menagerie of influential antecedents. These precursors include changing state and federal laws, legal opinions and court orders, political shifts in Milford's own Board of Education, and a succession of conservative school superintendents in which Kensington's progenitor was distinctly an aberration. Several years of ineffective leadership at the school due, in part, to the happenstance of seriously ill principals, declining enrollments and school revenues, and inflation plagued national and local economies added to the list of influences leading to the curtailment of Kensington's ambitious innovative plans. We even found a textbook company directly intervening in the selection of curricular materials at the school. But from the teachers' point of view, next to the poor leadership provided by ailing principals, the dramatic demographic shift in the Milford community was the most powerful explanation of Kensington's return to the "old Milford type."

On our first return to Milford we remarked on the very noticeable

buildup in the school's neighborhood. New highways, subdivisions, and apartment complexes replaced what was once golf course and farm land. The bulk of the construction of apartment complexes began in the mid 1960's. Ten years later, Milford qualified for a federal housing program which provided subsidies to families wishing to move into the area. Those benefits permitted an affordable alternative to minority families who sought better living conditions than those available in the deteriorating inner city. The resultant population shift left Kensington School 60% Black, when just a few years before, only a few isolated Black students had attended the school.

Kensington's teachers perceive that this shift requires a basic change in instructional strategy. Whether that perception is accurate or not is not in question here. We are making the statement that the staff's understanding of their new students' needs is an important cause of the shift away from more innovative instructional strategies. Typical comments from the staff follow.

I don't think we are doing a lot of extracurricular kinds of things. It seems like the kids are just having trouble getting through the basics.

Just the noise. Alright, six years ago, never would you have found this. If...I [was] sitting in the classroom where I was visible...our kids would not say a word....I never picked up a paddle until four years ago. That was not my way and I've taught kindergarten, first grade, you know, all the way through.

I didn't understand. I wanted somebody to help me. I wanted to know how I could keep teaching fifth grade reading when my kids were on first grade reading level. What do I do?

So now, all of a sudden, you had this whole bunch...you had to revamp your whole thinking, you know, and you couldn't teach them as a whole group. You had to revamp completely. Those kids needed more help.

More and more teachers requested walls. That was the first thing they thought...."If I have two walls, one on each side, it will be better."

One teacher regretted not being able to institute an instructional strategy for which she had already developed a number of materials and "stations."

We had worked on games for them to play...stations. We were really enthused about this and kind of got the wind knocked out of our sails....We had a spelling station, a math station, and a language arts station. We even hoped to have an art station. We hoped, maybe we could do this if we ever got [the students] under control....It worked really well once, you see. When I came here 10 years ago, it worked really well....I think you are finding children are more outgoing, squirming, many are not taught manners or how to deal with the outside world...Their attention spans were longer. They had self-discipline....You read a lot of articles, and I find that they are true, in my opinion. Too much sugar in their diets....Too much television.... Too much freedom....They are left alone too much of the time. It's hard to compete with all that in the classroom.

An earlier Kensington principal reiterated this perspective, summarizing what he felt teachers at Kensington had learned over the years of transition.

We learned a great deal about what we had to do....I think they learned that they were going to have to put up with what we were getting, which were more or less pretty much lower achieving children than we had been working with....[We have] to take them where they are and go from there.

In a school where children could once choose to skip math class, pick up a fishing pole and head for a nearby pond, such freedom or self-determination is a scant memory. Instruction, now, involves predominantly seatwork, recitation, and lecture, a retrenchment spurred by the multiple and intertwined issues we have just outlined.

The staff's increased concern for order, structured activities and basic instruction developed through a period of transition involving not only students but also principals. According to one interim principal, student misbehavior had reached crisis proportions when he was pulled from his classroom elsewhere in the Milford District and was sent by the superintendent to Kensington to settle what he perceived as major discipline

problems. Thus, we found ample reason for the love affair brewing between Kensington's recently appointed principal, Dr. Wales, and the staff. They express their collective relief and hope for a man who promises to support his teachers and maintain building discipline.

Dr. Wales' beliefs about schooling fit well the tone of the times at the Kensington School and the Milford District. His background includes 24 years in the classroom--mostly secondary math, administrative credentials and Ph. D., and several years as a principal in two other schools. But he feels ill prepared for supervising elementary instruction, believing his teachers to be the real experts. His tactic, then, is to concentrate on building-wide order, to follow the policies of his superior, and pass those charges on to his teachers. Finally, he believes children are at school to learn. Dr. Wales stated all this in a few words:

Teachers are to teach and my job as principal is to coordinate that and to alleviate any problem that interferes with that and to support [teachers] in any way...in their teaching job....I've always been of the mind that a superintendent sets the tone for a district and the principal sets the tone for the building and the teacher sets the tone in the way he's going to run the classroom....The students....It makes no difference to me whether they're Black or White, they're students and we educate them.

Dr. Wales is openly a product of the "old Milford type" of school, labeling himself a "traditionalist." He is also an active agent of that approach to schooling: aware that he was chosen for his job because he believes in the "central office philosophy" and recruiting and hiring teachers who hold the same values. He carries out his promises to the staff by patrolling the lunch room with a paddle protruding from his rear pants pocket, laying down the law to students through stern talks and suspensions, and personally dealing with parents whose children disrupt classes. He is not,

however, insensitive to his charges. After one encounter with a difficult student Dr. Wales said:

We had a youngster yesterday who got suspended for not coming to detention and he came walking in here at 3:35 and sat down there and he was so upset he couldn't talk. He said his mother was going to beat him and send him back to his father in Mississippi. So I gave him another chance. So I'm wishy washy.

By way of comparison and again charting Kensington's changes, Eugene Shelby, the first principal at the school, was viewed during his stay as a "deviant outsider" by his administrator colleagues. He was never able to obtain the kind of support a good-ol'-boy network can provide. In our earlier report we characterized him as "intensely analytical" and "passionate in the pursuit of rationality." Other views of Shelby included his apparently uncanny ability to "sell" his school. The image left behind was of a man filled with true belief. When he left the Milford district, he left, in his own words, "to pursue the holy grail" in education.

Dr. Jonas Wales on the other hand proffers no particular pedagogy and holds more modest hopes for his future. In his words:

After this year I'll be 50 years old and I can retire in 10 years. At this point...I would probably stay as an elementary principal until I retire. I enjoy working with teachers and the kids.

At the end of Wales' first year as principal of Kensington, one of the other elementary schools in the district was closed. Wales and his staff were briefly worried that he would be replaced by the displaced and more senior principal. But, today, Wales remains at Kensington. His staff breathes a continuing sigh of relief, the love affair remains. Apparently, Jonas Wales has found a home.

Kensington, then, seems to be sailing a steady course. We can accurately predict from day to day the kinds of activities in progress in classrooms. The staff changes little from year to year. The principal sees no reason for drastic changes in any phase of the program other than a need for more control over a special education project within his building. His style is fully synchronous with the viewpoints of the Milford Board of Education and the district superintendent. Wales meets the needs of his staff. Most parents are happy that the building by and large remains a quiet, orderly environment in which their children attend classes.

Turbulent Waters

Thus far we have discussed many of the changes which occurred at the Kensington School during our 15-year absence and described the relative stability of life at the school today. This calm aboard belies the turbulence which surrounds Kensington, its stormy straits. Recent headlines about schooling in and around the Milford district--Kensington's district--reveal dismayed obstacles through which the school must be navigated. A brief sample reads:

January, 1980	Milford Again Faces Shrinkage Problems
February, 1980	Handicapped Denied Rights to Basics Parents Want Back-to-Basics
March, 1980	Patrons Pressure Milford Board, Inject Racial Issues Federal Project for Disadvantaged Students Explained 2 Seeking School Posts in Milford Charge [Racial] Bias
April, 1980	Two Black Board Candidates Ask U.S. Justice Department to Investigate Allegations of Racial Discrimination Racial Mix, Enrollment Drop Vie for Milford Priorities School Closing, Boundaries Change

- May, 1980 Midwest City Students Protest Desegregation Plan
 Reverend Wants to Start Private School
 School Security Workshop Success at Milford
 Milford Still Reeling from Test Scores [report on
 drastic drop]
 Milford Students Stage Day of Concern [over tax hike
 defeats]
- June, 1980 Parents Protest [over staff changes]
 District Enrollment Drops, Deficit Spending, Fewer
 Jobs for Teachers
 School Desegregation Becomes Topic in [National Senate]
 Political Races
 State's Role in School Desegregation Disputed
- July, 1980 New Milford Budget Will Tap Tax Reserves
 Milford Board Will Resubmit Tax Levy
- August, 1980 Strike Threat Hangs Over Milford
 Milford Asked to Ban "White-Flight" Pupils
 School Closes, Enrollment Drops 358 Students
- September, 1980 School Tax Increase Defeated

This list illustrates that integration, declining enrollments, education for the handicapped, limited resources, school closings, union disputes, unpassed tax levies, declining test scores, the back-to-basics movement, and issues over the legitimacy of state and federal agendas for local schools are all part of the contemporary sea upon which Kensington floats. In short, it epitomizes the problems facing today's public schools.

The contrast between the doldrums of Kensington's day-to-day operations and the vortex of external events leaves us uneasy, anticipating a storm. The comparison also reveals the reactive rather than proactive course the

school and district leaders choose to sail. Their policy is one of riding out the crosscurrents they encounter, rather than plotting a determined course through them. Facing the elements, these teachers and administrators retrench to old ways, strengthen their bulwarks with new walls, and as Dr. Wales stated, "pray that the kids learn."

Setting Course: Educational Policy Making at Kensington

We can back away a bit from the Kensington story and seek a perspective that might reveal some clear understanding of how Kensington and Milford set their course. As our narrative has demonstrated, the school and district experienced multiple pressures from multiple sources. Each source sought to influence to some degree Milford's and Kensington's school policy. We can organize these dimensions of educational policy along the lines developed by Bailey and Mosher (1968). Their typology sets out levels of policy sources: local, state and federal. They also categorize types of influence: legislative, judicial, administrative, professional and private interest. The resultant table of policy dimensions neatly presents the tangle of antecedents described in our story. The table is included as Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Our figure illustrates the complexity of setting policy at Kensington or any public school today. Conflict, fragmentation and confusion are inherent in this amalgam of orders, opinions, laws, doctrines, private interest pressures, beliefs and attitudes. The totality provides a wide variety of implications for educational decision makers rather than any coherent guide which might serve teachers and administrators in their daily

Figure 1: Dimensions of Kensington's Educational Policy

	JUDICIAL	LEGISLATIVE	ADMINI- STRATIVE	PROFESSIONAL	PRIVATE INTEREST GROUPS
LOCAL	Federal or State District Courts	County or Municipal Government	Local Bd. of Ed. Superin- tendent	NEA AFT	Religious Racial Textbook
STATE	State Supreme Court	State Legislature	State Bd. of Ed.	State Teacher Organization	Religious Racial Parent
FEDERAL	Supreme Court	U.S. Congress	Dept. of Ed. OE, NIE	Local Teacher Organization	Parents Parent Groups

duties. Bailey and Mosher, writing of this "pluralism of educational policy making" (p. 233), find in the conflict of discrepant elements, the consolation that no single entity can entirely control the process of policy formation. They write:

In American education, as in the policy generally, "pluribus" is the condition of a viable "unum." (p.233)

School administrators with little training in the resolution of complex and often antagonistic constituencies may take less heart from this observation. For most, such an array may be an overwhelming barrier to decision making. For school leaders who seek sustained change, defeat may seem inevitable. If observers and analysts are correct, the number of sources and the intensity of environmental turbulence for schools is increasing, and no reduction in that complexity is apparent in the near future. (e.g., Finn, 1981; Iannaccone, 1981; Lieberman, 1977; Wirt, 1976)

Such observations have led those who consider change and policy making to issue various admonitions and recommendations. Sarason (1972) warns against the naivete of leaders who believe the world is subject to their manipulations. Lindblom (1972) finds organizational environments too complex to expect success from a priori plans for action and argues that leaders must "muddle through" their day-to-day worlds aware of reactions to their decisions and cognizant always of their goals. He compares talented muddlers to shrewd street fighters, not bumbling incompetents. Cohen, March and Olson (1972) find the leaders of organizations afloat in "garbage can[s]" of problems and decision options, grasping at solutions in a largely capricious manner. In short, dealing with the whole of a modern organization's complex environment may exceed the capacity of human means.

March and Simon (1958) state:

Because of the limits of human intellectual capacities in comparison with the complexities of the problems that individuals and organizations face, rational behavior calls for simplified models that capture the main features of a problem without capturing all its complexities. (p.169)

The common tendency in complexity reduction, then, is to segment the turbulent field and deal with a limited number of constituencies. Emery and Trist (1975) indicate that this predilection is most often a maladaptive response.

We appear poised over the horns of a dilemma. On one extreme we recognize that policy is an extremely complex construct in today's schools. The number and insistence of groups demanding attention in policy considerations continue to grow. From the other extreme, we realize pragmatically that humans have a limited capacity to deal with complexity and must reduce some aspect of environmental turbulence before any policy can be generated.

The resolution of this dilemma implies the creation of new forms of policy making groups which strive to utilize multiple constituencies--not through competition or cooptation, but through genuine collaboration. The matrix organizations of several European enterprises (e.g., Emery & Trist, 1975) or the recently fashionable Japanese management models (e.g., Ouchi, 1981) offer glimpses of such new forms. These models synthesize our two apparently opposite truths: one, that the complex conception of policy offers strength through diversity, and two, that effective policy derives from a single, strong voice.

In our view, if schools such as Kensington wish to sail effectively through the turbulent straits of public schooling, they must learn to steer rather than drift. They must dare to set creative courses that resolve their debilitating issues through the implementation of new forms of policy determination.

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