

## Moving to the Margins

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*by Gary R. Galluzzo*

**B**oth the promises and the inadequacies of standards-based education bring us Ron Wolk’s expansively “bold undertaking” on behalf of thoughtful educators. His essay asks school reformers to consider educating children more important than sending them to school. He encourages educators to take the ideas they exchange with peers in casual conversations about teaching, learning, children, and schools, and to transform those ideas into public statements and actions demonstrating that teachers are at the center of education reform.

Publicly demonstrating such imagination has been difficult—almost paradoxical—for lifelong educators. Once they admit that the culture of education is wanting, they feel they must protect their culture from the influences of outside reformers, even if the ideas are similar. In the end, it is much easier to settle for implementing an imaginative lesson in the isolation of one classroom than it is to help reshape the very ground rules of the system. Yet the two most visible studies of the public’s attitudes toward education, the Public Agenda’s national survey (2002) and the annual Phi Delta Kappa surveys (Rose and Gallup 2003), concur that the public does not want teachers who merely teach to a standardized test—as codified in the definitions found in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The public’s view is shared by a majority of teachers (Public Agenda 2002).

We all know at least one of Wolk’s representative children—Jesse, Tiffany, Michelle, or Maria. They and many others like them make us think there must be better ways to reach all children. They should be the first beneficiaries of new practices in schooling and learning rather than four more casualties of the “one-size-fits-all” schools of which Wolk writes.

### **Those closest to the challenge . . .**

I begin with a simple premise: those closest to the problems of student achievement should be those closest to the solutions. In today’s auto industry, a line worker can stop the assembly line upon identifying a problem that might prevent producing the highest-quality vehicle pos-

sible. The supervisor and the board of directors are not close enough to know. If we apply that simple premise to school reform, then those closest to the problems of student achievement are the teachers and the principals at building sites, in partnership with students' families.

Wolk calls for further deregulation of education in order to form charter school *districts*, not just one or more charter school *buildings*. Such new ways of practicing education could foster further outcomes: work ethic, resourcefulness, time management, honesty and integrity, creativity and imagination, and other personal characteristics associated with educated and productive members of society.

Wolk demonstrates that federal and state regulations—including the intrusive No Child Left Behind Act—can actually obscure the success of local schools. Under his model, charter schools and charter school districts would be freed from state regulation and enabled to experiment with new ideas. Why not deregulate all schools rather than charter some schools? Why not deregulate all school districts rather than designate some as charter school districts?

Unfortunately, if anything, we are witnessing increased regulatory efforts to make schools more alike. Leaving the job to traditional political decisionmakers will only result in incremental, marginal change. Nonetheless, most current state regulations do allow for new forms of schools. Charter school laws best highlight the shortcomings of our current arbitrary educational system. If those closest to the problem should be central to the solution, the freedom to create a charter school is the freedom for teachers to strike out on their own with their philosophies proudly displayed. The alternative is to keep educators locked up behind the closed classroom door, limited by regulations that prevent them from acting faithfully on their values and convictions.

## **A School as a School of Thought**

Reconceiving the structure, organization, and regulation of education practice makes it easier to imagine how teachers, principals, and parents could lead the way to the schools of the future.

To demonstrate that teachers could lead the way, I offer a second premise about creating and planning a school: "A school is a school of thought." That deceptively simple aphorism can mean, for instance, that a school is a place where everyone thinks, or a deliberative place where there is community. In its most encompassing interpretation, however, it means that a school is grounded in an accepted set of beliefs about children, learning, teachers, teaching, and the organization itself—in other words, a place with a consensus about its basic and fundamental assumptions. The assumptions define the school's culture; their multiple manifestations range from the ways in which people interact with one

another to how they hold themselves accountable for embodying such assumptions. In that interpretation, teachers, learners, and leaders think about their contributions to the school's purpose and seek a deliberative school environment where the assumptions have the power of legal precedent. The school becomes a "professional learning community" (Barth 1990), where educators collaborate as a team within and across grade levels to fulfill the assumptions of the school. The school becomes a school of thought, held together by that thought.

*Schools on the margins.* The nature and practices of exemplary "schools on the margins" best embody such assumptions. In that category, I include the best examples of charter schools, magnet schools, residential and nonresidential private schools, and even parochial schools. Each bases itself upon a set of fundamental values that guide decision-making. Each aspires to maintain a culture that keeps adults and students alike mindful of its fundamental assumptions. With little effort, one can find the assumptions underlying the school's approaches to curriculum and instruction.

*Traditional public schools.* In contrast, public schools—the "common" schools—lack the consistency of such precise, fundamental assumptions. Public schools reflect the diverse, local effects of "government of the people and by the people"—the values the entire community shares, rather than a set of fundamental, if narrower, assumptions. Beyond our system of education's essential purpose—preparing children to perpetuate our democracy—there are many paths, however, and schools that can articulate theirs most clearly should prevail.

*Parents in a "School of Thought."* While the research on the effects of charter schools predictably reveals mixed results, charter schools and the choices they represent are now fixtures of educational reform. But again, the lesson we need to learn involves the reasons parents might choose a non-local public school over the common school down the street. Limited research evidence suggests that the reasons include parental beliefs in a school's philosophical outlook and, moreover, expectations that the curriculum and the teaching will embody that outlook as a kind of social contract. The act of choosing gives parents the opportunity to invest more actively in their children and in the school on multiple levels. The schooling climate that Wolk asks us to consider would add that critical dimension to traditional public education.

*Teachers in a "School of Thought."* One of the most persistent questions about "a school as a school of thought" must be who will teach there. The question is important because our cultural framework says that anyone can teach in any school. Yet the more precise the vision of a "school of thought," the fewer adherents or teachers it will attract, and subscribing to a given school's fundamental assumptions is critical to

teaching there. It is a concept hard to imagine in our national tradition of common schools. It is much easier, however, to imagine in schools that remain faithful to their focus.

### **New Schools or Reformed Schools?**

Do we need new schools created from the ground up, or can we reform the schools we have? Volumes have already been written on the need to scrap the system and start over (Perelman 1992; Postman 1995). At least as much has been written about the need to start from within and transform existing schools (Goodlad 1984; Senge et al. 2000; Barth 2001). Of course, the answer is that we need both. We need brand-new schools, the types promoted by the New American School Development Corporation (NASDC; <http://www.nasdc.org>) and reviewed by a consortium of education associations (Education Research Service 1999). At the same time, traditional schools, such as many found among the initial membership of the Coalition of Essential Schools (<http://www.essentialschools.org>), also need to transform themselves.

The schools launched by those movements all established the “thoughts” or fundamental assumptions of viable schools, described in the work of Meier (1995, 2002), Barth (2001), Saphier and D’Auria (1993), and many others. How such schools develop that kind of internal consistency is as important as the goals they espouse. The writers have recognized that starting or changing a school and grounding it in a set of assumptions about teaching, learning, and children is a process that unfolds over time as each issue is discussed and debated. They acknowledge the obstacles that can break the avid dreamer’s morale. They encourage movement from the margins into the mainstream. As Hall and Hord (1987) note, “Change is a process, not an event,” and those who champion new conceptions of schools demonstrate that progress can occur at the local building site.

A primary reason it is so difficult to change a school into a school of thought is the consensus and commitment required to build a sense of community within the school. The observation that teachers tend to work in isolation from one another is as common as calls for them to work in professional learning communities (Little 1988). Transforming traditional schools into the kinds of schools that parents would choose for their children requires at a minimum:

- patience in identifying the fundamental assumptions
- the capacity of each individual to accept and advance those assumptions
- attentiveness to details, such as the curriculum, the nature of teaching, accountability, management and leadership, and establishing the culture

Once again, most educators have no experience with change on that grand a scale, yet it will become a more prominent part of the landscape with each passing year. At times, the work will be demanding. As Atchinstein (2002) writes, "I have found that active engagement in conflict, a dialogue of differences, is a normal and essential dimension of a functioning teacher community." In short, change demands an ability to embrace conflict until it gives rise to collaboration and commitment.

In the day-to-day world of schools, educators neglect the larger vision of what a school can become, which requires us to honor the process of change. They easily replace the long view with the quick fix—the immediate crisis, block scheduling, the new reading series, metal detectors. Then they return to the ways in which they've always behaved and wonder why things aren't much different from before.

The report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) challenged us to "create schools that are organized for teacher and student success." It challenged us not to create schools organized only for student *or* teacher success, but rather for student *and* teacher success. In doing so, the report highlighted one of the shortcomings of current national and federal reform efforts: the implicit assumption that students should succeed, but that whether the school is organized for adult learning matters less.

## Completely Committed Teachers

This article has advanced the notion that student success requires teachers who believe in the purpose of the school and have committed themselves to the perceived needs of the students. In a sense, it is a choice for teachers: "Do I want to teach in this building, and if so, can I wholeheartedly work to support and promote its fundamental principles?" "If I do, will I feel successful?" We quietly ask ourselves but seldom really answer such questions; they historically lie outside the cultural norms of teaching as a profession. I argue that "schools on the margins"—the kinds of schools that Wolk asks us to consider, and that Meier has demonstrated can be created—are about philosophical perspective, choice, and commitment to a set of ideals that create the school of thought.

Consider an analogy between shoe sizes and schools: the traditional system of public education, the "common school," represents the typical "size 9" school. Imagine having a size 12 or a size 6 foot and having to fit into a size 9 shoe. That is what we ask of thousands of teachers and millions of students, and it reduces the effectiveness of everything they do in school. Wolk's proposal would leave some size 9 schools in a world of other sizes. They can remain size 9 schools but they must become excellent at that. Regardless of the "size," the common school that can-

not express its fundamental assumptions will be left behind; it will be less able to estimate its effects than more focused schools.

In the end, it is the obligation of everyone in education to ask, "What is more important: supporting the children who inspired Wolk's whole inquiry into school reform and the ensuing bold proposal, or giving up on reform in favor of letting a more severe marketplace define American education?" In the "schools as schools of thought" envisioned here, the four children Ron Wolk singled out and the millions they represent will find "a home" in the school. They will not be left out or left behind, because the system will respond to their needs; it will create size 12 and size 6 schools. I do not believe it is too late for public education to redefine itself as the source of our nation's future success, and neither does Ron Wolk. The hard work begins there.

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