

CHAPTER • ONE

The Problem

Americans have burdened themselves, however unintentionally, with a high school design that is inefficient and runs counter to an abundance of solid research about how formal learning in fact takes place. What were dogged improvements made by educators more than one hundred years ago clearly do not serve us well today.

This happy burden represents a paradox. We admire our national commitment to mass, inclusive secondary education, but at the same time we know that the current vehicles to deliver such an education do not function effectively. We persist with a head-in-the-sand attitude odd for a nation that is driven by a competitive economy. We are *for* the public schools (and nonpublic schools as well), but we appear to be *against* much of what they are doing. That is, we love the people in the schools, and the idea of schooling, even as we know that the places we have do not work all that well. We

have lost our belief in what we think we believe. Many of us are embarrassed about that, but we keep our embarrassment to ourselves.

It's survival of the fittest out there in the American capitalist tradition. However, public education is meant to serve all children, including those who find both learning and schooling difficult. Some political critics call this commitment socialism, top-down control by bureaucrats. Despite our schools' readily identifiable shortcomings, accompanied by noisy mocking and criticizing of the schools, we carry on.

We have long believed that every American teenager deserves an education that will equip him or her for a lifetime of constructive activity. We responded over a century ago by creating a locally controlled system of secondary schools. The word *system*, itself, is instructive; it was not imposed by federal or state authorities; instead, it largely evolved in its details if not its structure. In community after community, citizens at the grassroots—the parents of the school-age children—organized their schools along lines that they felt were universally endorsed and thus could be considered the “best.”

The process was at first hit or miss; a high school was started here but not there; one high school offered a rich program of offerings, another only the bare bones. The schools took root most quickly in the Northeast and Midwest in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as these areas of the country, especially in urban areas, had excess tax-raised money that could be used to erect a building and gather a principal and staff. In the early twentieth century, southern states were still recovering from the dislocations and costs of the Civil War, and their populations included many African

American citizens for whom schooling had to be provided from scratch. The notion of a mass, universally inclusive national education system took decades to establish and is still in motion, as witnessed by a surge in Latino populations from Mexico and elsewhere, carrying with them a mix of languages, customs, and expectations. There is energy in this, but the constantly differing demands challenge us—and should.

Over a century ago, our elected officials, with the citizens' blessing, decided to design the high schools on the basis of students' ages. ("If you are sixteen, you are most likely to be in eleventh grade.") A late-nineteenth-century nation dominated by farmers arranged for school to take place only during the nine months when teenagers were not needed in the fields. These predecessors organized the work of students and teachers into subjects, each occupying a block or two of designated time, each to be covered as prescribed by a common plan. By the 1920s, high school had come to be a kind of secular religion, and criticizing its basic design was therefore, in some quarters, a form of blasphemy.

Today, however, many of us no longer look at the secondary schools through such a loving, trusting lens. For example, even as we recognize that chronological age tells us something—but hardly everything—about a particular adolescent, we still adhere to "age grading." We see that all knowledge (however thoughtfully defined) is not easily "packaged," structurally conformed for familiar teaching and learning; it is more evolutionary than that. The high schools' academic curriculum of what we have come to call *courses* is familiar, each course covering a "subject" that, in its design and justification, would have been familiar to our great-grandparents—the

staples of English, mathematics, science, history and social science, music and art. What thoughtful contemporary educators know, however, is that scholarly and educational tastes and habits are in constant motion, as experience, research, and changed social and political circumstances suggest new structures and procedures. Times change, even for guardians of tradition. Even some schools change, but many don't.

We are also stuck with yesterday's ideas of what a school's physical structure should be: a collection of rooms of equal size and shape under one roof, in which teaching and learning are expected to proceed, an egg crate of predictable places. Teachers in well-run modern schools can move, say, from room 2B to room 14C with the expectation that they would find all the conventionally accepted equipment that teachers need, such as sturdy wall-mounted blackboards, maps, charts, science equipment, and a well-stocked and relevant classroom library.

Here and there one finds new school structures, ones that could make different sorts of teaching and learning more likely than what is provided by the traditional designs. Some of these exceptions are seen in old buildings whose original function has disappeared and that are now newly fitted for modern education. Even this modification can be awkward for many classes, where a bend in the room makes it impossible for some students to see the blackboard. Still, if a school today has all sorts of electronic devices for teachers' and students' use—laptop computers, for example—the course can be covered in individualized or common ways, whatever the teacher needs—assuming that the school's fuses do not blow from overload.

However, if one visits high schools or the conferences organized by their leaders, one finds that behind all the bricks and mortar, the old, familiar assumptions of how school should be designed stubbornly remain: age grading, separated subjects, the agrarian calendar, and hierarchical management. Furthermore, permeating the atmosphere is the feeling that children learn by accreting information and content—the fill-up-the-brain metaphor—with the student being the empty vessel and the curriculum the liquid to be poured in. This content usually reflects the traditional disciplines of the late-nineteenth-century course of study, one that may have well served the expectations of parents and educators in the 1890s, but, when viewed with a fresh eye, appear oddly old-fashioned, in the pejorative sense.

The coinage of most schools is found in the minutes assigned to each class session, with the school's bell system telling teachers and students alike what to do and where to go, the assumption being that a single, time-driven system is necessary. In most schools today, we need only to listen to the bells; we do not need watches. If some students are late to class or running truant in the hallways, an assistant principal will likely nab them and, taking each by a metaphorical earlobe, drag the miscreants back to where they were supposed to be and make a note of all this for the record. In vast buildings crying out for crowd control, time and place often seem to be valued more than learning. Still, it's hard to focus on the material—and that's *learning*, isn't it?—if you're not in class but are roaming the hallways with friends.

As far as time goes, in most schools there is lenience for me, the teacher. If on some morning I am a bit late in getting

to my classroom, I am rarely chided for my tardiness. However, if I am habitually late to class, I will be called to account. Our union representative will have an awkward case to build for my defense; habitual lateness on the part of teachers is unpopular in all quarters. Even if I do get to class on time, I cannot teach my students well if there is noisy chaos next door, arising from an unsupervised group of teenagers. Perhaps a certain deference to time and space is one old-fashioned assumption that has not lost its usefulness.



What is high school for in this day and age? For many children a century ago, high school, especially in rural areas, was one of the few places where they were confronted with unusual information and with abstractions—in the case of history and geography, with places and events that were wondrous to consider. Today's young people have the media close at hand—radio, television, a riot of options available on the Internet, some accurate and useful that any person can usefully pull up, others inaccurate and unwholesome. Our generation of adolescents, and surely those that will follow them far into the future, will inevitably be shaped by the largely for-profit media; the shows they watch on television and on the Internet will inevitably move them, excite them, amuse them—teach them. Some of these images will stick in their minds for years and will be more influential even than the neighborhoods in which they live. One purpose of a modern high school becomes to impart the ability to select wisely from among a cornucopia of alternatives.

Another purpose is to fill the teenagers' time. Many contemporary teenagers are prevented by law from working all but part-time jobs. Their parents, however, are mostly at work trying to provide for them. School is where kids can find each other and engage in extracurricular activities that may give them a sense of their own place in a serious, consequential community. They teach each other—for good or ill.

High school has traditionally been considered a relatively safe melting pot, the assumption embedded in school design being that each of us develops his or her personality and convictions in a predictable manner—rich kids, middle-class kids, poor kids all the same. The conventional wisdom is that good parents raise good kids. With whom our children play is a measure of how good we are. It affects the character of the schools to which we want them to go. Expectations in all sorts of places, from the richest to the poorest, are high: “These are my kids. Of course they will be good. I am good . . .” Parents will usually be advised to calm down: “Don’t worry; they will grow out of this silliness.” School can help them understand, accept, and properly raise their kids.

School may help with the *fear* that is so often present in most adolescents' lives and has been there for many decades. When our sons and daughters move from middle school to high school, a somewhat different set of standards are applied to each of them—and thereby to their parents. “What’ll I be when I grow up?” a youngster may ask herself. She may hear the familiar jibe, “Don’t be so *junior high*.” She knows that her older family members are wondering about all this too: “What will Emily become? Will she be successful?” with success

defined as financial and physical security, a warm family life full of her children, and a well-developed and respectable ego.

Adolescents fear conflict, not particularly that in competitive athletics, but beyond school. “Will I make enough money to be able to do what I want with my life?” “Will I get a job when I graduate? Or should I go to Iraq or Afghanistan or wherever is the next battleground to kill others and be killed by them?” Many adults have little awareness of these worries, or repress them when they emerge. What they see and hear are smiling kids and noisy chatter, activity that masks the young person’s feelings, sometimes even from themselves.

There is no quick fix for these matters, no dependable scheme that will accomplish what the society writ large expects of parents and adolescents. One can jiggle a school’s plans, one can test that scheme, one can inveigh against it, but the fact remains that there is no easily described plan ready to be put into place that can meet all the conventional expectations.

What will it take to compete with the popular media, particularly television and the Internet, that bottomless pit of information, misinformation, and distortion? These powerful and largely for-profit (“Somebody else’s profit, not mine!” the aware student will say) influences are not going away. The companies that sell messages are too powerful, too useful, and too profitable for contemporary cultures to ignore. We cannot return to the nineteenth century when silences, except the songs of birds and the thunder of an approaching storm, were the expected, unchallenged reality.

Politically, we teachers must try to persuade citizens that we all *do* have a problem, and that the puzzle is complex. No one likes to be told that he is not all that he could be. Save for

the morosely uncertain, most citizens say—or pretend—that they know what they need to know. If you, dear reader, do not believe this, go to the city council or town meeting in your community. All sorts of people there become experts on anything from the bus schedule to the efficiency of boilers for the gymnasium to the correct intake of calories at the school kitchen. It is democracy in action, with all its messiness, posturing, and endless absorption of time. It is not rule by self-appointed and formally credentialed experts.

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Do we need better teachers? What is meant by better? More demanding? Can we hire appealing persons who can draw a teenager into their own work? If a school had a retired star from the New England Patriots on its coaching staff, he could be a magnet. “Want to know what it is to train?” he might ask. “You have to know yourself, how tall or short you are, how ready you are to handle pain, how willing you are to make weekend and summer training camps. Still, after all this, you may fail to make the team, since a new student just arriving is a quicker, bigger halfback than you will ever be. However, a team’s reserves have responsibilities too.” Do we want our coaches and teachers to be inspirational? Is this wish unrealistic? Realistic? Both?

We have to think not just about teachers but the content and skills that they are to provide. Do schools need new curricula? Should we keep the framework of the existing courses, giving each a careful face-lift? Or should we develop some new programs, created by a committee that carefully gauges

the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the faculty and the needs, aspirations, and willingness to work hard of each of its students? Or should we offer a simple set of courses—domains, some would call them, or fields of study? If the higher-ups, such as the state leaders who are being prodded by the federal government and its No Child Left Behind Act, tell us what we must teach and threaten us with tests, is there still some wiggle room? Maybe we should have two courses of study: one test prep wholly focused on what we believe to be the upcoming, governmentally imposed examinations and the other one that makes sense to us, to our particular students, and accommodates the wishes of our community.

Do we need to divide the allotted classroom time differently than we do at present? If we stay with the idea of an extended summer vacation, can we usefully attach ourselves to kindred organizations and enterprises, such as working farms? Many such places need extra hands at harvesting time, even recruiting them from Mexico and paying them well on a piecework basis. (“The more bushels of firm, ripe apples you pick, the more you earn.”) Would such an example increase the motivation of a broad variety of students?

Can we insist that only the students we want are to be admitted to our school, on our teachers’ terms? There may be practical reasons for this—for example, a small, poorly financed school may be able to offer only a few courses at the depth the school expects. Admission may therefore turn on what a particular student wants and needs and on the interest of the faculty to address those needs and interests. Many small, private, and parochial (religious) schools make this decision

by necessity. Some schools by design admit students only on the basis of their apparent academic strength, this measured by formal examinations. The Boston Latin School, a public school founded in 1635, is an example of this. Yet others admit students on the basis of space available at grade level and stated interest on the part of the family to attend. Many public schools may say that they admit anyone without exception, but the obvious restraints—space in the school building, geography, existence of public transport, family preferences—apply nonetheless.

Can we open our doors to all and, ideally, varied students? Can we teachers offer courses that we want to offer and teach these courses in new ways that appeal to us? No, as the foregoing argument attests. Or at least, not completely. The world is never that simple. However, mindlessly accepting the existing historical constraints is no better an answer.

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Can we create a new American culture? The task seems formidable, considering the power of those who rule our current social order, which is dominated by the hard realities of capitalism. Capitalism has many flaws as a means to economic and social order and justice, but I believe that its political design—ideally, a responsiveness to consumers—can provide the flexibility that successful schools (and families) need. Capitalism indeed has many faults; it is just that other systems have more faults.

Paradoxically, perhaps, what is preferable and even practical in theory may be very difficult to achieve in practice. Board

members will suddenly become cautious. “Yes, we agreed that our district needs a face-lift, but how fast can we move—and still get reelected?” Some parents will get nervous, or at the least interested, even intrigued. Many of them will believe that they know what school is; they went to one, and many remember it fondly, warts and all.

Educational authorities, many of whom will talk a reform game, might get skittish when it is clear that there are some—even many—parents and teachers who are persuaded by these particular newfangled ideas, and they may yet slide off of the issue by suggesting that the proponents of something different start a new school or schools—charter, pilot, or other alternative approach—thereby keeping the critics so busy planning and arguing about a new venture that they may fade out of the public eye. This is likely a poor strategy for those who want to stem the tide of new schools; the press will pick up the story of the happy possibilities of some of these freshly designed places, thereby spreading the possibility of options. *Options!* And choice among them! In this lies a real revolution: what once may have seemed impossible in a land of monopolies is no longer as unthinkable today.

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This problem of discomfort with the status quo is not new. Americans have faced these problems head-on in an earlier time. Conditions some decades ago were quite similar. Families using the conventional schools gradually became disenchanted with them. Professionals working within them

were increasingly restless, even embarrassed by their familiar work at existing schools; they harbored a sense that something better was possible. In 1983, a nongovernmental commission gathered, including A. Bartlett Giamatti, the president of Yale University; Glenn T. Seaborg, Nobel laureate; and William O. Baker, chairman of the board of the Bell Laboratories. The commission's report was titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*; its recommendations were wise, a step forward. Although leaders during the 1980s failed to act, the current generation would benefit from pondering what those commissioners said, why they said it, and why it fizzled almost months after its release.

Those earlier misgivings and anxieties suggested that political conditions were ripe for action. Fortunately, the same conditions may apply today. Many families are restless. They want real choices from among strong schools for their children. This makes the task of school designers much easier, even compelling. We educators have more friends than we may realize. They must be organized. We and they must create schools that are familiar enough so as not to scare people away but bold enough to reflect the hopes and expectations of the parents of school-age children.

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Thus is the problem. The solution will be costly, especially in the time we have committed to the effort. We must go to work on practical remedies now with all speed. What should a truly *new* secondary school look like? What will make it

new? What from the past should remain supported and in place? I try here to answer some of these questions in an order that might make my case clear and thus persuasive. My arguments depend heavily on carefully chosen words: language drives action. And not all good ideas are new ideas. We must protect the best of the past and discard that which no longer serves our particular children well. It will take plenty of nerve on all our parts to find new, better ground.