Schools Our Teachers Deserve: A Proposal for Teacher-Centered Reform

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By improving the morale of even a handful of a school's faculty, the "teacher-centered" reforms that Ms. Cohen suggests cannot help but benefit students. And best of all, many of them cost nothing.

It seems that a spate of recent books has appeared on the old, familiar subject of school reform. As always, some of these works have focused on the curriculum and call for more progressive approaches and an end to standardized testing.[1] Others have addressed the issues of low standards or parent involvement or the moral culture of the schools.[2] However, not one has focused its arguments on the one indispensable element in all successful schools—the one variable always given short shrift, it seems, whenever reformers think about school change—the teacher.

For more than five decades now, warehouses of writing on school reform have focused on the needs of the students, calling for the creation of "child-centered classrooms" and "learner-centered schools." Every administrator in America intones, "It's all about the kids!" And those words echo through every disaffected, demoralized student-centered high school building in the land. The whole failed history of modern education reform—from the prescriptive lesson-plan formats of the 1970s to the restructuring plans in the 1980s to the state testing and curriculum of the 1990s—has addressed the "needs of the child." It has paid hardly any attention to the work of the teacher, the one critical player in the school who makes the biggest difference.

"In this school, the teacher comes first." I would wager there isn't a public school in the land with such a motto. School reform efforts most frequently proceed despite, not because of, the teacher. When states impose new curricular mandates or introduce new statewide standardized tests, teachers are often viewed as stumbling blocks to implementation. Administrators try to "get the teachers on board," as if they were prisoners diving seaward to escape the shackles and whip. Even "bottom-up" reform is rarely that. In most districts that tried site-based management, it came and went a decade ago with hardly a teacher mourning its passing. Frequently, such "teacher-centered" strategies simply burdened faculty members with the minutiae of daily governance without relieving them of any other responsibilities. The teacher's job was not redefined; rather, it was extended and expanded. Newly "empowered" teachers were burdened with clerical work and logistical concerns about building maintenance and scheduling—the very concerns that many teachers enter teaching to avoid. Indeed, such teacher-empowering reforms seemed calculated, in advance, to fail.

Everyone knows that teachers resist change.[3] Why shouldn't they? Any teacher who has spent more than a decade in the profession has already intuited what school reformers haven't gleaned in a century of tinkering: lasting and meaningful change doesn't come from fiats, whether external or internal. It doesn't have anything to do with long blocks or short blocks, cooperative learning or direct instruction. It has to do with how an individual teacher feels about his or her work and how the school perceives that teacher. If the teacher is perceived as a hero, the school will flourish. If the teacher is perceived as a pain in the ass, the

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school is going downhill—long blocks, cooperative learning, and all. For a school to be an intellectual center, for it to have the ethos, the sense of community, and the "spirit" that so many parents and administrators seek, it must celebrate the work of its teachers in a way that is rarely seen in public schools. It must attend to the needs of teachers, it must accommodate their sensibilities, and it must treat the teachers' contributions with as much genuine concern as it does those of any other constituency—maybe more.

WHY FOCUS ON THE TEACHER?

One good reason to focus on the teacher has to do with the nature of healthy institutions. Almost 20 years ago Sara Lawrence Lightfoot told us that successful high schools are those that possess powerful traditions and embedded norms. In the best schools (or hospitals or corporations), values are consistent and known; they are embodied in the experiences of everyday life.[4] How do those traditions get transferred to young people? Not by administrators. Principals have little direct contact with students and certainly not enough to transmit the subtleties of an institution's culture and beliefs. If a school is to have a powerful ethos, it is the teachers who must communicate it, embody it, transmit it. Indeed, teachers are the one stable influence on a culture that is, by definition, always in flux. Students seldom stay in a school longer than four years; many teachers remain in the system for 30 years or more. Because they are the fixed and tenured bearers of the school's values and ethos, it is critical that teachers feel good about the institution they are charged with representing.

This argument is even borne out in recent corporate management theory. Education policy makers have long been influenced by the models put forward by business and industry. In the 1980s, for example, corporate downsizing and bottom-line accountability certainly inspired education policy reforms in the areas of testing and teacher accountability. Cooperative learning and goals-based performance standards also have their roots in management theory.

What then is the most recent thinking about corporate competitiveness and productivity? Many of the most influential books that have been published on this subject in the last five years have shifted their primary focus away from concerns with markets and economies of scale. Instead, employee morale has become a central priority. Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University, reflects the new thinking in his field when he argues that a loyal, intelligent work force is the key factor in corporate competitiveness—more critical than technology or protected and regulated markets.[5] When workers are disgruntled, distracted, or poorly trained, no brilliant strategy for expanding market share will compensate for that liability. Why should it be any different for schools?

A second reason for shifting the reformers' emphasis from the student to the teacher concerns the nature of the teaching force itself. Demographics within the profession have in recent years put schools in an unusual position. In general, the teacher population across the country is aging. In certain states, particularly in the Northeast, the average teacher's age is 40 or above. As teachers continue to age and then retire, schools will be faced with two very different challenges. First, they will have to attract excellent new people into the field. Second, they will have to figure out ways to help large numbers of older teachers stay invested in and committed to their work.

In the case of the hiring of new faculty members, schools will be confronted with the problem of incentives. What can a school offer a high-achieving college graduate to lure him or her away from business or law school? Obviously, schools will never be able to compete in terms of salary and other material benefits. But teaching holds a natural attraction for many idealistic, intelligent young people. Many students at competitive academic institutions are willing to consider teaching as a career.

Our introductory education classes at Smith College have some of the largest enrollments on campus. However, too many students are chased away from the field after their initial observations in local high schools that are part of their pre-practicum experiences. What they see when they visit schools is often demoralizing for them. Teachers work in isolation, and they work with too many students. They rarely interact with other faculty members, except over rushed lunches. They teach from books that they sometimes do not like themselves and that—to judge by their condition—seem to have been used by generations of students. By the time students at Smith become seniors, less than a handful each year are interested in becoming certified to teach high school. If schools are going to attract good new teachers, then they need to figure out ways to make the profession look better from the outside.

In terms of the burgeoning ranks of veteran teachers, the problem is even more complex. If good new teachers are hard to attract, it is even harder to reenergize those who have been victims of the system for decades. Some of these teachers, particularly those in their forties and fifties, have almost half a career ahead of them. With salaries front-loaded and no vertical advancement in the field, such teachers have little incentive to grow. As any high school student will tell you, the sullenness and exhaustion of these teachers and their cynicism and contempt for the system are the real root causes of bad schooling. Poorly written curricula, scheduling, and structural concerns are of so much lesser importance than teacher morale that they might as well not be factors at all.

Finally, the most obvious reason to focus on the teacher has to do with the nature of good teaching itself. Good teaching (as any good teacher will tell you) is not only about content and curriculum. It is also about the intersection of that content with the individual who is presenting it. For better or worse, teachers teach themselves, and any teacher who denies it is either lying or is out of touch with his or her effect on a class. School reformers almost always think in terms of what should be taught, how, when, and with what materials. And yet to a great extent teachers are the curriculum: affect, attitude, and persona have a much more powerful impact on classes than do the books they use or the pedagogical techniques they employ. One need only recall one's own best high school teachers to know how true this is. We remember the human beings and their passion or energy. The texts and techniques are secondary.

TEACHER-CENTERED REFORM

How then can a school nurture and promote the kind of teacher energy and enthusiasm that will "reform" schools? Forget the workshops on cooperative learning, the curriculum revision committees, the endless tinkering with the schedule. Focus instead on what can be done to make teachers feel better about their work. In other words, ask yourself, How can schools be made into adult-friendly places?

To answer that question, it seems logical to look to those schools that have succeeded in making teachers feel valuable: the best private schools and the best colleges. In both of these settings, money has little to do with job satisfaction. Private schools, as we all know, pay teachers less than public schools. And the salaries of assistant and even associate professors on many campuses fall below those of suburban public school teachers. Nor is workload necessarily the key. Some of the most competitive teaching jobs in the country can be found in private schools that require enormous service from their faculty members, including 24-hour, on-call availability in dormitories, extracurricular work, and lengthy written evaluations of students.

Why is it then that the best college graduates interested in teaching so often compete for the scarce jobs at Exeter and Andover, eschewing public schools even in the most affluent communities? I believe it is because these institutions hold out for bright graduates the promise of a truly intellectual life. Smart college students who choose to teach high school most frequently do so because they hope to continue to read and practice the subjects they love. Public schools, partly because of the very student-centered policies they persist in defending, fail to convey to these aspiring teachers the promise of such a life.

Similarly, many of the most passionately intellectual students at our college overlook the notion of high school teaching altogether. Their ambitions are set, from the start, on teaching at the college level. These students are not choosing college teaching because of a smaller workload or an easier life. Any freshman at Smith can see that introductory classes can be as large as 80 students and that the pressures to publish and the tensions associated with tenure complicate the lives of young professors. But in college teaching, these students do envision themselves respected as intellectuals, rewarded for using their minds in original ways, and capable of choosing and changing what they will teach. Good liberal arts colleges, like good private schools, really are "teacher-centered" institutions. Both seem to recognize that the way to foster excellence in students is to foster excellence in teachers. Good high schools need to prize young teachers who love their disciplines, and they need to celebrate book knowledge as an important, core value in the institutional culture.

Some may argue that a call to nurture "intellectual" teachers is a luxury in a public school system filled with so many students performing below grade level. Quite the contrary. Schools have for generations placed their least academically inclined teachers in classrooms with the lowest-ability students. No one would argue that such a strategy has raised levels of achievement among those students. If anything, a situation in which weak teachers teach weak students creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and helps perpetuate the very problems schools are trying to reverse. Teachers with intelligence, with passion and enthusiasm for their subjects, are every bit as important for at-risk students as they are for high-achieving students—and probably more so. For some low-achieving students, teachers are the one plausible role model for a life of literacy and reflection, a life in which intellect matters.

A TEACHER-CENTERED REFORM AGENDA

What would a teacher-centered public high school look like? How could it be created? What follow are suggested reforms that I contend would have a powerful effect on the morale of any public high school. Many of these reforms are commonsensical. Many of them cost nothing. None of them require radical restructuring or retraining, expensive testing, or additional personnel.

Offer sabbaticals. The notion of a sabbatical, a paid period of leave in which a scholar can pursue scholarly ideas, stands as a key characteristic of intellectual teaching. Good colleges, of course, build periodic sabbaticals into the compensation packages for their faculty members. Many private schools also offer sabbatical leaves to faculty members on a competitive basis. Budgeting a single sabbatical leave

(for which teachers would compete) into the yearly expenses of a public high school would not bankrupt any school system. Knowing that such a leave exists, however, would have an immensely salutary effect on the intellectual life of a staff. It would allow teachers to think in terms of ambitious scholarly projects; it would give them incentive to develop proposals for new classes or to outline for themselves lists of new readings they want to do—not only to enrich their curricula, but also for their own personal growth. For many years, the National Endowment for the Humanities has offered summer stipends for teachers to study literary or historical topics presented by college and university faculty. NEH studies show that teachers who take these seminars return to their classrooms energized and stimulated. The same good would emerge from the semester-long or yearlong sabbatical. It would reinforce the idea, too often ignored, that teaching is essentially an intellectual activity. Finally, the sabbatical would serve as another excellent lure for teacher candidates.

Reallocate budgets so that more money is available for books; let teachers choose what they teach. In many good private schools and in most colleges, teachers design their own classes and choose their own books. This is rarely true in public high schools, where teachers inherit curricula and use whatever books are available—regardless of their age or the teacher's interest in a particular work. Common sense suggests that one would teach better—with more passion and enthusiasm—a class that one has had a hand in designing. Clearly, teachers must work within certain inevitable constraints: states have curricular mandates, and certain texts are not appropriate for younger students. But within those obvious boundaries there could be a good deal more creative freedom than now exists in most public schools. Book ordering needs to be a high priority for school districts, and teachers need to have a much greater say in what books get bought, how many get bought, and when.

Involve teachers in the evaluation process. In no other profession do outsiders, individuals with no direct contact with the work of the professional, routinely evaluate and hire individuals within the profession. In law, for example, it would seem absurd for an outsider (one not even a practicing lawyer) to pass judgment on the work of a new lawyer in the firm. And yet this is precisely what happens in many schools and districts in which new teachers are hired without any input from faculty members in the departments in which they will teach. Teachers, too, are routinely evaluated by administrators who have not taught for decades, have never taught the particular subject under scrutiny, or have no larger context (What did the class do yesterday? Last week?) for the brief evaluation. States like Texas hire supervisors who don't even work in the school itself; they arrive unannounced from a central office and then proceed, without any firsthand knowledge of the school's culture, to evaluate its teachers.

For teaching to gain real professional status, teachers need to control hiring and firing, they need to lay out their own criteria for acceptable practice, and they need to do their own evaluating. This is certainly not a new idea; unions have supported such practice for decades. But too few school systems go to the trouble of acting on the concept, either out of laziness or out of fear that, once so empowered, teachers will become less dependent on them and so less tractable.

Change hiring practices. Several years ago, a gifted teacher I know, a 35-year veteran, an Advanced Placement history teacher, informed the school district in May that she was intending to retire. Then she waited to see advertisements for her position posted in professional journals or in newspapers in the two neighboring cities near her home. Nothing happened. It was not until the last week of August that the job was listed under the heading "Teacher, H.S. History" in the local newspaper, sandwiched between ads for "Tag Sale Coordinator" and "Truckdriver, Part Time."

Teaching will never be the most desirable profession in the land. In order to attract smart college graduates, districts have to work hard at it—devoting energy and ingenuity to the task. Hiring is by far the most important work of any school administrator, and it should be a high priority for the district superintendent as well. Administrators need to pound the pavement in search of top candidates; they need to visit college campuses, forge contacts with teacher education personnel in the best schools, track and follow potential teachers who have not yet graduated. Today, few districts do any of this. Hiring is perceived as a last minute catch-as-catch-can process in which having a credential is far more important than the quality of a transcript. Again, good colleges and private schools seem to understand the importance of hiring the best staff possible. They recruit actively and compete with one another for good teachers. Just knowing that you are pursued makes an enormous difference for a new teacher. It communicates the fact that the district values you. No last-minute hire—the product of an abstracted, impersonal interview—can begin his or her work with that same sense.

Make tenure mean something. As long as tenure exists, it is absurd not to use this mechanism to improve the quality of teaching. If the public school system is burdened by large numbers of uninspiring or incompetent teachers, it is partly because those individuals were not weeded out in the first years of their employment. While it is unfair to evaluate the long-term success of a teacher in the first year or two, it certainly becomes less difficult after three or four years. An insightful administrator (or better, a team of talented teachers) can certainly begin to see talent or its absence by then. It is critical that poor teachers not get

rehired, not slip through the cracks of an ineffectual system of supervision.

For real substantive evaluation before tenure to work, the period of probation for teachers needs to be extended. Currently, teachers have a three-year probationary period, after which time—barring grievous malfeasance—they are automatically tenured. Colleges generally require seven years before tenure, and tenure itself becomes a critical rite of passage, like the formal initiation into an exclusive club. Tenure in colleges really means something. While I'm not proposing that the criteria for high school tenure should change (I don't think high school teachers should be required to publish, for example), I do think that the quality of one's teaching should be much more carefully scrutinized—and by individuals who really know something about good teaching.

Reallocate the use of time to protect teachers. Long blocks, short blocks, whatever. There are good arguments for all kinds of different scheduling formats, and the students themselves don't much care. The decision on how best to structure the day should be left to the teachers, who will weigh the merits of any scheduling system according to how they feel they can best present the material. Schools that move summarily to one scheduling system or another, without prioritizing the needs and preferences of teachers, do nothing more than alienate that critical constituency.

Teachers, like any other professionals, also need opportunities to work and reflect with one another. Again, many private schools seem to understand this fact. They build large chunks of time into the weekly schedule for teacher curriculum work and consulting. While public schools cannot afford to have half-day Wednesdays, as many private institutions do, they can at least prioritize the scheduling of teachers' free periods to benefit those within a given department. Or they can schedule longer, common lunch periods (duty-free) to allow teachers time to have leisurely discussions with one another.

Administrators should teach. Of all the traits that characterize the very best schools, this one is perhaps the most important. Teachers have long noted a curious phenomenon: when teachers become full-time administrators, they quickly lose their capacity to empathize with their former colleagues. It is extraordinary how quickly one forgets the complex stresses and challenges of teaching once one is charged with implementing bureaucratic mandates or fielding parent complaints. The only way to avoid this sort of amnesia is for principals and assistant principals to continue to interact with students in a classroom. Even one class a day is enough to retain the flavor of the work and to maintain credibility with teachers—who often measure administrative effectiveness against what the principal seems to know about real teaching.

Finally, administrators who teach are far more likely to understand the importance of praising their teachers' best work. Teachers receive so little in the way of positive reinforcement. Unbelievable as it seems, a good teacher can spend years in the profession without hearing a single compliment about his or her work. Memos and reminders about tardy forms and report cards abound, but there is no mechanism in the profession for cataloguing and celebrating the good things that happen daily in the classroom. Teachers are just supposed to revel in the intrinsic rewards of their private successes. This lack of positive feedback from any adult peer can wear down even the most robust of spirits. And when the silence is compounded by other kinds of ego assaults (infantilizing inservice workshops or top-down mandates for reform), it is no wonder that so many teachers become cynical. When administrators teach, they remember to think about teaching; they remember how hard it is; they remember to value it.

Schools don't need large ranks of exceptional teachers, and it is unrealistic to expect they will ever attract so many. What they do need is a critical mass of impassioned, intellectual individuals—enough to influence the tone and character of the institution. By improving the morale of even a handful of a school's faculty, these "teacher-centered" reforms cannot help but benefit students. From any perspective, it just seems so obvious: if we can cre-ate the schools our teachers deserve, we will have created the schools our children deserve—and desperately need.

NOTES

1. Alfie Kohn, The Schools Our Children Deserve (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).
2. Martin Gross, The Conspiracy of Ignorance: The Failure of American Public Education (New York: HarperCollins, 1999); and Theodore Sizer and Nancy Faust Sizer, The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
3. Dan Lortie, Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
4. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture (Boston: Basic Books, 1983).
5. Jeffrey Pfeffer, Competitive Advantage Through People: Unleashing the Power of the Workforce (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994). See also Natalie J. Allen and John Meyer, Commitment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Application (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997); and Oliver E. Williamson, Organization Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).