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Reform: Purpose and Direction

by Michael Langley

Reform is often considered a process of modification to an existing institution. The modification is designed to improve the institution without destruction of its basic structure. Revolution is a more radical change, overthrowing the existing institution and theoretically building a superior, often entirely different, institutional structure. The key to both reform and revolution is that the end product should be better than what was in place. Often, we find that unintended consequences result from variables not considered or not within the control of the reformer or revolutionary. The more complex the institution, the more likely a change action will have an effect on areas not originally targeted. Additionally, the farther one moves along the continuum from reform toward revolution, the greater the change applied, the greater the effect on the institution, intended or not.

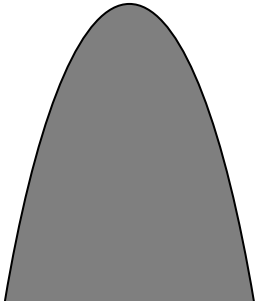


We seem to be in a whirlwind of education reform, or even an education revolution that has increased in velocity over time. Much of the pre-college education before the Twentieth Century was designed to teach basic literacy. Even in the schools designed to lead the students to higher education demanded a rote method for gaining knowledge of the classics. John Dewey fought against the static approach to education and set forth ideas of reform that required the students learn by a mix of participation and exposure to classical education. He posed the theory that children were naturally active and educators needed to use their students' inquisitive minds and perpetual restlessness as an asset in learning rather than classifying them as distractions to the "Veni, Vidi, Vici" educational approach. However, perceived consequences of his reforms included the disparity of educational quality and rigor from one school to another. This also highlights a danger in the movement for change. There often is the desire to target a single cause for a problem, which results in oversimplified solutions. The social, economic and political influences on our nation and the multi tiered treatment of our citizens for reasons of ethnicity, religion and gender were too complex and too ingrained in the power structure to allow reform or revolution to take place. Instead, post World War Two America used an industrial model of standardization to reduce local control and increase State and Federal influence on our schools. What was termed

Mt. Diablo Education Association
2255 Contra Costa Blvd
Suite 202
Pleasant Hill, CA 94523

(925) 676 - 4664

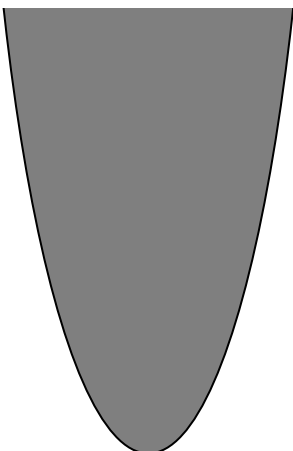
www.ourMDEA.org



And as the data driven revolution has slowly eroded the quality of a comprehensive education, it attracts those to leadership who find more comfort in numbers than relationships.



*Does your classroom need reform or revolution? Regardless, it must be **your** reform or **your** revolution.*



Administrative Progressivism had the goal of creating massive high school factories moving identically educated students along three parallel assembly lines: College Preparation, General High School Education, and Technical Training. This model was preeminent until the mid 1970's

The social upheavals of the late 1950's in civil rights, and the resulting brief uptick in activism during the 1960's regarding other social movements including the examination of institutional bias led to a reexamination of the educational model. The assembly lines were called tracking and the segregation by race and gender in assigning students to a particular finished product (skilled technical laborer, high school graduate or university student) were noted. The solution was to break down the administrative movement and blend fact based classical education with inquiry. It became important to take the facts, classify them to allow greater examination and question "Why?" in every field of endeavor. But did we need to dismantle the paths or did we really need a little more flexibility? Consider the counselors who were the quality control guides of the education factories. Was the flawed assignment of individuals due to the mere existence of the multi faceted education path system or was it the result of the gatekeepers simply reflecting the biases of the society in which they were immersed? The short lived movement that broke with standardization created the dilemma of how to maintain a curriculum required for an educated society when goals became hazy and students were encouraged to study whatever was of interest to individuals.

The report "A Nation at Risk" moved education reform back to a concept of cultural literacy. The report attempted to define what Americans should know based on an idealized past and the mistaken assumption that at one time all Americans held this basket of knowledge. This was an extremely complex undertaking and also partially a reaction rather than a reform. In the decade preceding the report, America had been shaken by military defeat, economic upheaval and demographic changes that threatened to redefine the very nature of our society. The return to a classical education which imprinted a common cultural history gave comfort to a population that was witness to the rapid changes in this nation. The solution of tasking the schools to be the responsible agents for this indoctrination was obvious and the method was almost inevitable. Instead of improving the rigor of all subjects and increasing the skills of the teachers in the depth and delivery models of effective curriculum, the solution was to return the focus to memorization of key facts. Instead of considering child development, individual learning strengths, or the effects of abandoning the broad spectrum of knowledge required so to be truly educated, the solution was to narrow, simplify and repeat. The term for this solution is "Drill and Kill."

This generated the next set of reforms. We had to measure the effectiveness of our efforts to be sure that every student benefited from this foundational requirement. There was a brief dalliance with Outcome Based Education (OBE) in the 1990's. A simple concept, it demanded a quantitative assessment that proved students could demonstrate knowledge or accomplish a task. The U.S. Army had actually tried this a decade before. A skills qualification test was devised. For example, instead of only taking a multiple choice test on how to treat a sucking chest wound, the soldier had to physically demonstrate the technique. For many of the Military Occupational Specialties, this was expensive and time consuming. Also, there was a very high failure rate. The logical result should have been to change the training to a performance based model. The expedient result was abandonment of the skills based hands on assessment and a return to rote memorization and response. This worked well until we actually had to deploy troops in large quantities to the Mideast conflict ten years later.

OBE was not popular with education policymakers. Pining for the standardization of the past, quixotically referred to as the golden years of American education, the definition of education was narrowed to the point of simple standards easily measured by a two dimensional assessment tool. The abandonment of music, art, science, social studies, critical thinking became the more common in our elementary schools and the

increasing reliance on test scores as the definition of education began before No Child Left Behind. The industries of consultants and creators of assessments have determined that education is the examination of discrete parts not related to the makeup of the whole. Teaching is now a field for technicians, supervised by technocrats, striving for higher numbers without an understanding of the purpose of education. One may be reminded of the Bolshevik Revolution, where the party leaders idealized the concept of the worker, but had no respect for the humans that worked. The flesh and blood worker was just a cog in the production machine, a replaceable part. If the reality of production did not coincide with the theoretical dogma, changing the reality was easier than abandoning the theory.

Our educational leaders are not trying to destroy education, but they are zealots who will not abandon their failing theories. And as the data driven revolution has slowly eroded the quality of a comprehensive education, it attracts

those to leadership who find more comfort in numbers than relationships. They are supported by cadres of well intentioned idealists, who want to make things better, but have either lost or never possessed the roadmap that leads us back to reform, and away from the box canyon of testing for the sake of testing.

I have been told that I was on an island and nobody was listening to me. It was better for me to join the mainland of educational revolution that would make the American public school a thing of the past. However, there is still a chance for reform. It won't come from the Federal or State Departments of Education. It won't come from the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the California Teachers Association, or the Mount Diablo Education Association. It most definitely will not come from Dent Center, nor will it come from the Mt. Diablo Unified School District Governing Board. This reform must come from you. Each individual teacher must refocus on the purpose of education. The false promise of a utopian educational system based on standardization must be shunned. The efforts each of you are expending on dictated pacing, test preparation and data analysis must be redirected to a deep curriculum with detailed, prepared lessons that meet the needs and spark the interests of your students. The time wasted on bubbling must be used in conversation as you build relationships. The boundaries set in your classrooms must be there because of the respect for students, not simply to control them. Teaching is hard work, and you must focus on that work. It is also an art. Take ideas from your peers, but do not try to be clones. There is no blueprint for a model school that can be replicated from Bangor, Maine to Bay Point. Grow each day in your craft. If something doesn't work, ask yourself "Why?" What can you do to make it successful? Does your classroom need reform or revolution? Regardless, it must be *your* reform or *your* revolution.

In the end, if you teach the young beings in your classroom, almost all of them will succeed. That will be your measure of teacher quality, scored not in AYP, but in lives that may blossom long after they leave your care, a part of you all the same.

Community Outreach

Food Bank Update: Teachers Continue with their Monthly Donations

By Linda Ortega
Executive Board Member/Food Bank Liaison

For the past 3 years our members have been collecting food items to donate to our local Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. During the monthly Representative Assemblies, site lead reps have been collecting specified food items and bringing them to the meetings. As of Monday, October 3, 2011, our membership has collected and donated over 1,800 pounds of food! It has been calculated that for every 1.25 pounds of food makes one meal. Therefore, MDEA teachers have donated and provided 1,440 meals to our community. "We welcome MDEA's donations. I always look forward to your monthly donations", says Joan Tomasini, Food Bank community coordinator. Here are some items, if you wish to participate in our monthly donations:
Peanut Butter, 100% Fruit Juice, Tuna, canned vegetables, dried beans and rice.

*Michael Langley, President
Mt. Diablo Education Association*

Goals for 2011- 2012

By Laurel Burns, MDEA Vice President

When one refers to “the union” or “MDEA”, he or she is referring to the almost 1700 members that make up the Mt. Diablo Education Association. MDEA is a member-driven democratic organization whose policy is determined by those at the sites. It is important to understand how this representative form of governing works. Ideally, members at each site express their desires and concerns to their elected representative(s). When the representative votes on an issue at the monthly Representative Assembly (R.A) meeting, his or her vote reflects the wishes of the majority of the staff. MDEA leadership is then directed by those votes along with communication items such

as member surveys regarding the path the union should take. Unfortunately, this process does not work when many of our schools have not elected site representatives to attend the meetings. As a result, there is a breakdown in communication, and rumors begin to circulate because no one is able to convey the factual information as stated at the previous R.A. meeting.

Each August, the MDEA Executive Board meets to discuss the upcoming school year. This year the Board spent an afternoon contemplating this ongoing issue of involvement. Our leadership would like to see an increase in participation among our members. One of our goals for 2011-2012 is to empower our members to take control of their union through personal connections. MDEA President Mike Langley has made it his goal to visit each of our over 50 sites before the December holiday break. He wants to meet with members, hear their concerns and cultivate relationships at the schools.



Again, it is up to the members to make time to meet with him. Many of his visits thus far have had disappointing turnouts. We hope this will change as we head into bargaining and questions begin to develop regarding the future. Unless members act collectively, we will not see positive changes.

Unity is a word that is often used in an attempt to bring members of an organization together. A few teachers with whom I have spoken have told me they do not wish to be associated with a union. That is understandable, but the reality is that we *are* part of a union as a result of the job we accepted. Member involvement demonstrates a commitment to our students, our

working environment and our occupation as a whole. Assuming that a small group of hardworking members will carry the load for the entire Association is unfair. That small group will eventually burn out or retire, and we will be left with no one. I became a site representative ten years ago simply because I wanted to be better informed. I did not volunteer for every event MDEA held, but I tried to choose one or two functions each year where I could lend some assistance. I encourage you to look at the 4 x 6 card your site representative distributed. Select one area where you can help this year. If you did not receive a card, please speak to your representative or call the MDEA office.

Thank you in advance for your time.

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Laurel Burns
Vice President

Mt. Diablo Education Association