

# HORACE

## Educational Policy and the Essential School

***Do state and district policies actually block schools from bringing "student as worker" principles into the classroom? Surprisingly, the answer is often no—and even when obstacles occur, creative leadership can get around them.***

TWO TEACHERS ARE WORKING on integrating the government and earth science instruction at their high school, linking environmental concerns to their political ramifications. The principal has scheduled their classes back to back, and they are planning to meet the two groups together. But state regulations forbid the earth science teacher from doing so, because she is not certified to teach social studies. What should they do?

An English teacher is planning his ninth-grade course around essential questions having to do with the portrayal of heroes in literature. But the state requires all students to pass a standardized competency test in English, and the test is heavy on grammar and vocabulary. In addition, the district requires that he use the textbook they have chosen, which fits poorly with his approach. How can he proceed?

When a school commits itself to teaching students to use their minds well, it does not happen in a vacuum. From every quarter, objections will be raised. Perhaps the state requires that a certain number of minutes be devoted to a subject each year, or the district controls classroom procedures by making sure teachers are evaluated using a strict set of criteria. The school board wants to see standardized test scores go up every year, and holds the principal accountable

for it. The teachers' union won't let its members teach outside their disciplines, or use after-school time for joint planning sessions. The university's teacher-training program discourages interdisciplinary approaches by its credit requirements. If one listens to everyone, it seems hardly possible that anyone could succeed in turning students into workers, teachers into generalists, and schools into the kinds of learning places that the Coalition of Essential Schools supports.

And yet some do succeed. Weaving their way through the maze of existing policies, Essential schools are managing steadily to make changes within the existing educational establishment. How they do it—and especially how they deal with policies that would seem to block change—is a fascinating study in human and group dynamics, and a revealing lesson in pragmatic politics.

Dennis Littky, the principal of Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, tells the story of the district that sent three delegations to visit his small and thriving Essential school. First came the teachers, who loved Littky's program but assured him that their principal would never go for it. Next, the principal visited; a great idea, he said, but the school board would balk. Finally, the school board sent a visitor, and of course

he confided that change was impossible in his district, given the attitudes of the school people. "I called them all up at the end," Littky says. "I have a little secret for you," I said."

In fact, at every level of education, individuals will absolve themselves from any intention of blocking a school's change towards the Coalition's common principles. It is hard to find, these days, an educator or legislator or policy-maker who disavows an interest in critical thinking, for example. What obstacles often seem to boil down to is, instead, the kind of bureaucratic "standard operating procedures" that nobody quite has the nerve (or the perceived authority) to ignore, defy, or change.

To understand just what influence policy can have on attempts to change, it is interesting to look at this from the broadest level first. When the governors met at President Bush's national "education summit" in the fall of 1989, their hope was to coalesce the country around a common set of goals. "If you define 'policy' as setting a direction as well as establishing legal requirements," notes Beverly Anderson of the Re:Learning project of the

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Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the Coalition of Essential Schools, "then anything that comes out of this summit will definitely have a policy effect." It makes a difference, in other words, in what terms national goals are couched. If they focus on outcomes at the expense of process, they could encourage techniques that prevent rather than foster Essential School goals—an emphasis on rote learning, for example, rather than training students to solve problems and think critically.

The actions of Congress, too, affect schools considering fundamental classroom change. In 1988, for example, Congress passed the Audit Reform Act, amending federal auditing policies and procedures. State education agencies may now ask the U.S. Department of Education in advance whether certain programs they might operate will satisfy federal educational standards, and if the request is not denied within 45 days, it's safe to go ahead with no fear of a federal audit. The old system had effectively stifled many new ideas; under the new rules innovative programs using federal funds are expected to flourish.

One step down at the state level, the country has been swept throughout the 1980s by a rage for the legislation of educational excellence. Virtually every governor lists education as a top priority,

and state legislatures have tackled substantive educational issues with unprecedented speed and fiscal muscle. School reform is now fashionable across the political spectrum. On a practical level, this means that the state pays closer attention than it ever has to matters like course requirements for high school graduation, teacher and administrator compensation, and accountability measures like dropout rates and standardized tests. And it underlines that attention with money: state governments now pay an average of half the cost of public education, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

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One critical question, then, is what the state is looking for in the way of school change. If its focus is more on easily measurable outcomes than on questions of active learning, a school that has been academically thriving by conventional measures may face alarm and resistance if it tries to tinker with its academic processes.

**States May Not Be a Problem**

Interestingly, that kind of resistance may not come from the state at all, but from closer to home. The state, after all, may monitor schools in trouble more closely than its high achievers; to schools that do it proud it grants the reward of benign inattention. Instead, the



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blocks to change may come from much more local sources: parents concerned with test scores and college admissions; teachers unwilling to bend contract clauses; school boards and superintendents complacent with the status quo or doing what they believe the state wants them to.

At this level, "policy" starts to be translatable as not a set of official regulations but an attitude loosely transcribed as "what's happening." Changing the way things are is complicated by the difficulty of clearly identifying just who in the system actually does hold the power to make or block change. At a certain point, it even stops mattering whether something is technically "policy" or not—the courts will regard as policy anything that has been practice in a system for some time.

Looked at from this angle, policy becomes a problem only when it is *perceived* to be a problem. When everybody acts as if student learning comes before any other priority, change can slip through any number of policy "obstacles." In some cases, a determined and creative administrator—be it principal, superintendent, or state board of education member—can actually use the conflicts and inconsistencies within a complicated policy environment to the advantage of the unorthodox school. It seems as though how one conceives and acts on one's role can have a lot to do with how much is "allowed."

In the maze of New York City's enormous and complex decentralized school system, that is exactly how Central Park East Secondary School has managed to survive and flourish. Enmeshed in four different sets of controls—the State Education Law, the City Charter, the Chancellor's Regulations, and the city board of education—an enterprising new superintendent cultivated a policy of "creative noncompliance." Slippage within the system allowed some innova-

tions to get through; as they started to show results, exemptions were granted for others. Central Park East established itself as an alternative high school, making possible departures from standard city high school policies. And principal Deborah Meier grew expert at reading contracts and policies to her school's advantage, either using loopholes to support her decisions or interpreting the intent of the policy as favorable to her own actions.

Though methods like this may be risky, they are widely used by some of the people who are moving most quickly towards change in large systems that are easily dragged down by their own sheer size and weight. They seem to work best in a school setting where parent choice is part of the system—parents who object to the school's priorities can go elsewhere, and those who like the changes soon line up to participate. For similar reasons, private schools run into far less official opposition; their policies can be set by a determined principal who has a free hand as long as the results please the governing board of trustees.

### Which Policies Block Change?

Still, people who talk about school change encounter the persistent objection that fundamental classroom change is ultimately blocked by state policies and regulations. Is this an excuse for passing the buck, or is it true? The answer became strikingly evident at the Coalition of Essential Schools' recent Fall Forum, where CES's Amy Gerstein and ECS's Judy Bray led a workshop on policy concerns and system change. Giving out summaries of various states' policies affecting learning goals, curriculum, and instruction, the two first asked participants to identify the intent of the policies as a whole. Then, working with a clear plan for school change towards Essential School principles, workshop members

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analyzed where state policies proved to be barriers to change. In almost every case, the barriers were very minor: if the policy's *intent* was kept in mind, schools could comply broadly while still introducing new pedagogy and structures. (See figure, pages 6 and 7.)

"What we're finding," says Judy Bray, "is that very few individual state policies actually get in the way of the Coalition's nine common principles. However, it seems that their *combined* effect can be an obstacle. Perhaps a state's assessment policy is open enough to school change, but when you combine that with curriculum requirements and textbook policies, it becomes a difficult maze to get through."

The situation is complicated by the fact that districts, not individual schools, usually apply for exemptions from state policies if they are needed. A school can run into

### **Write to us . . .**

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**Re:Learning is a "wonderful feminist system," says Joe Fitzpatrick, where power is exercised in a network of support rather than in a hierarchical power structure. "I call it 'kicking around in the cream to make butter.'"**

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big trouble, says Bray, if its district is not supportive of its move towards change. Even within a district that may give lip service to active learning goals, competing structures of policy—like teacher evaluation, testing, or mandated curricula—may get in their way. "In a situation like this, a school has to either proceed very quietly in a quiet community, or have friends in the system, at the district or the state level, to help move through the process," Bray says.

For the six states who belong to it, the Re:Learning initiative can function as that "friend in the system." The endeavor is subtitled "From Schoolhouse to Statehouse" because its goal is to enlist the efforts of policymakers, administrators, and school people at every level in changing the way students learn. In practice, this means that Essential schools in Re:Learning states are getting the time and the funds to plan their programs carefully, and the support they need to sidestep any problematic policies.

Still, "it's seldom policy that's the problem in terms of state laws," says Re:Learning's Beverly Anderson. "It's more a matter of persuading people." And many state education people say that the

district administrators are the key people to persuade. "I don't know why," says one former district administrator now at the state level, "but the psychology of districts is to blame the state for blocking change."

In practical terms, influencing change at the district level means mobilizing the support of teachers, principals, unions, parents, school board, and superintendent. But if one of these key agents is missing, says Delaware's Re:Learning coordinator, Joe Fitzpatrick, the game is not up. "The assumption is that you need approval from above," he says. "But I like to think of Re:Learning as a wonderful feminist system," where power is exercised in a network of support rather than in a hierarchical power structure. "I call it 'kicking around in the cream to make butter,'" Fitzpatrick says. Policy changes can be as subtle, for example, as changes in attitude on the part of school board members who have been lobbied informally on educational issues. Or they can involve persuading teachers' unions that their work with students will be more productive and interesting once change is undertaken.

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**District policies can seem to exert a stranglehold on efforts to change. But if teachers and principals support a change in pedagogy, "none of this is absolute."**

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"Remember that unions grew up to match centralized management," says AFT representative William Harty, a restructuring advocate from the union's Washington offices who attended the CES Fall

Forum. "The key to change is to get both union and management to admit that things aren't going well in our schools, which is very hard for both groups. With the Lake Wobegon theory of testing, student performance measures have become a scam—all the children are above average. That's why business groups are confronting the school problems: they have to work with the products."

District policies can seem to exert a stranglehold on efforts to change when they dictate such matters as teacher evaluation forms, methods of instruction, or curriculum. But if teachers and principals support a change in pedagogy, "none of this is absolute," argues ECS policy analyst Rexford Brown. "In one classroom a teacher can say, 'Basic skills tests make XYZ impossible to do,' and in another classroom a teacher is doing it. Different schools, different teachers react differently to policy. New, young teachers might follow the rules more closely, while more experienced teachers have confidence that their students can do well on skills tests, for instance, even if they don't teach to the tests."

The key, then, is not necessarily changing policies but changing the culture of the school itself, says Brown. "That culture is a product not only of policy but of professional norms and experience," he says. "The practitioners—the teachers and principals—have to take responsibility for how they are going to teach, and to interpret the policy in ways that allow that."

*In the Next Issue:*

**EXHIBITIONS  
OF MASTERY  
What Do They Look Like,  
What Do They Mean?**

## What Can Be Done?

But that prescription is a tall order. From the bottom of the school system up, it means a new kind of creativity and action—both to bring change into schools despite policy obstacles, and to shape policies at every level to reflect the pedagogy Essential School people are trying to introduce. Especially in Essential schools in Re:Learning states, this is going on in a number of politically effective ways.

The first tactic such schools recommend is to involve all groups in a thoroughgoing analysis of their schools' needs and priorities. Especially important are district-level people: teachers unions, school board members, administrators, community groups, students—everyone who will be affected in some way by school change. At this point, it may be useful to ignore perceived policy obstacles altogether, and to concentrate instead on coming to agreement on what students should know and be able to do, and how they can best learn.

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**One key is to interpret a policy's intent as broadly as possible, and to press ahead strongly enough that results can be demonstrated.**

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Lobbying at the state level is another effective step. Each state board of education has just received from the National Association of State Boards of Education (1012 Cameron St., Alexandria, VA 22314) the results of that group's comprehensive study of school restructuring, called "Today's Children, Tomorrow's Survival." In no uncertain terms that report calls for a broad redefinition of the state's

role, encouraging Essential School-style active learning in the classroom and decentralized decisionmaking in districts and schools. It is a powerful document with which to change attitudes towards schooling at the top of the power structure.

If the governor and chief state school officer can be persuaded to join Re:Learning, districts will find the path to change smoothed considerably through funding, technical assistance, and increased understanding. But even if that route does not exist, exemptions and waivers are commonly granted by the state for districts that show a commitment to change. And creative administrators at both school and district level can go through the back door to accomplish their goals as well. One key is to interpret a policy's intent as broadly as possible, and to press ahead strongly enough that results can be demonstrated.

Keeping records of a school's results—and publicizing them as soon as possible—has already proved successful in Essential schools' mobilizing widespread support for change. The conventional assessment measures like standardized tests rarely show a drop and often rise when active learning is introduced, but Beverly Anderson urges schools to initiate the use of alternative measures instead, or in addition. Writing assessment tools and instruments to measure higher-order thinking do exist; schools that find and use them can build public confidence in new methods of learning, and educate the community at the same time. The same technique applies as dropout and attendance rates improve.

Perhaps most important, as a school moves towards change surrounded by confusing and conflicting policies, is a strong leader who can guide it on its path. Though leadership anywhere in the system is helpful, it may be most crucial at the district level. That is

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**The idea is not to create new policy, but to reconfigure policy so it becomes a reaction to what schools want to do.**

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where imagination and flexibility, "creative noncompliance" and power sharing, can have the most far-reaching effects on system change.

"We've got a lot of policy on the books already," says Warren Chapman, a consultant with the Illinois State Board of Education and a Re:Learning coordinator for the Chicago area. "We don't need to create more of it. What we want is to reconfigure policy so it becomes a reaction to what schools want to do. The state board has to act different, which means eventually legislators will have to act different. Instead of responding to special interest groups, for the first time in recent history they will have to listen to and work with the people in the trenches, and create a policy environment that allows schools to be creative. Policy doesn't have to be an action; it can be an attitude." □

### CORRECTION

Because of a proofreading error in the November 1989 HORACE, the preliminary figures presented for Hope High School's performance "in pursuit of higher education" were inaccurate. They should have read as follows:

Hope Essential graduates, 1988-89: 90% went on to higher education.

Hope "regular" High School graduates, 1988-89: 45% went on to higher education.

HORACE regrets the error.

## How Can Essential Schools Approach State and District Policies?

- Course Requirements.** Identifying specific courses that high schools must offer.  
**Approach:** An Essential school could incorporate a required course (such as U.S. History) into an interdisciplinary offering (such as 11th grade Humanities).
- Textbook Selection.** Requiring that state- or district-selected textbooks be used by schools.  
**Approach:** An Essential school could approach the text as one of several resources available as students explore essential questions posed by the course.
- Teacher certification.** Requiring state certification in a specific subject before a teacher may cover it in class.  
**Approach:** Could impede interdisciplinary course development and "teacher as generalist" approach in Essential schools. May require teaming with certified teachers, or special status.
- State-specified student outcomes or performance objectives.** Establishing what students should know and be able to do at particular points in their schooling.  
**Approach:** Does not necessarily dictate pedagogical means; Essential school students can be expected to meet or exceed these standards, assuming the outcomes include their learning to think well.
- Statewide performance assessments.** Measuring established outcome expectations through large-scale standardized tests.  
**Approach:** Essential school students can be expected to meet or exceed these standards. Essential schools may propose alternative or additional assessment measures such as portfolios if the tests do not adequately cover the school's learning goals.
- Competency testing.** Assessing students for achievement of basic skills.  
**Approach:** Does not necessarily dictate pedagogical means; Essential school students can be expected to meet or exceed these standards. Schools should be careful not to emphasize tests in a way that undermines emphasis on thinking, problem solving, and communication.
- Graduation requirements.** Course requirements and exit examinations for graduation from high school.  
**Approach:** Essential school courses satisfy such requirements even if they are presented in an interdisciplinary context. Desirable to shift state or district toward exhibitions as a basis for graduation.
- Requirements for special honors at graduation.** Course and grade requirements above and beyond those required for graduation.  
**Approach:** Essential school courses and evaluations satisfy such requirements even if they are presented in an unorthodox context.
- Curriculum frameworks.** Course outlines or guides; may be accompanied by suggested instructional materials, teacher resource lists, and/or instructional approaches.  
**Approach:** May impede active learning if curriculum prescribed is too long and detailed; Essential schools may require exemptions. Frameworks supporting active learning enhance Essential school efforts.
- Student promotion specifications.** Promotion from one grade to another tied to test scores or level of mastery based on statewide instruments or procedures.  
**Approach:** Does not necessarily dictate pedagogical means; Essential school students can be expected to meet or exceed these standards. If tests emphasize coverage at the expense of critical thinking, Essential schools may propose alternative assessment measures such as portfolios.
- Scheduling requirements.** Specification of how long, or how often, classes must meet.  
**Approach:** Essential schools offering interdisciplinary classes can broadly calculate time allotted to individual subjects within those classes to meet this requirement; or exemption may be requested.

- Pupil-teacher ratios and loads.** Identifying maximum number of students a teacher may be responsible for in a day.

**Approach:** In Essential schools student load figures should fall below such maximums; if team-taught classes exceed limits, two teachers can be classified as responsible for the group.

- Instructional management system.** Identifying particular approaches to instruction.

**Approach:** Essential schools may require special status to promote active learning, although such pedagogy can be construed to fit adequately into some other approaches.

- State-level requirements for assigning grades.** Providing a standardized grading system to be used in schools.

**Approach:** Could be construed to fit Essential schools grading standards. If not, may require special status for alternative grading system.

- Teacher evaluation forms.** Checklists for evaluation including factors such as "control over class," number of minutes spent on specific activities, lectures, use of textbook, etc.

**Approach:** Not useful as evaluative tool for Essential School pedagogy, where active and collaborative learning is given priority. Alternative forms of assessment might be required.

- Union contracts.** Often stipulate matters such as specific duties teachers may not fulfill.

**Approach:** Could hamper Essential school efforts towards interdisciplinary teaching, joint planning, and student advising. May require cooperation and support of local union leadership in waiving requirements.

- Court-ordered monitoring.** District may be under orders to raise standards in areas requiring remediation.

**Approach:** Basic skills testing may be required, but does not necessarily dictate pedagogical means; Essential school students can be expected to meet or exceed these standards.

- Innovation grants for teachers and schools.** Competitive funds available to teachers and schools that submit proposals for innovative projects or approaches.

**Approach:** Could help Essential Schools meet planning and other expenses.

- Experimentation status.** Pilot school or district efforts granted special status allowing opportunities to try new approaches.

**Approach:** Could help Essential schools obtain exemptions from state or district requirements.

- Enlisting community resources.** School site councils that may aid in setting goals or devising plans to improve curriculum and instruction.

**Approach:** Could help muster community support for and involvement in Essential schools.

- Business partnerships.** May provide extra funding or support for innovative programs.

**Approach:** Could help Essential schools with funds and counsel for planning and programs.

- Waivers and exemptions from requirements.** Agreements with the state that certain provisions of law will not apply to a particular school or program.

**Approach:** Helpful to Essential schools.

- Recognition and/or rewards for high achievement or improved performance.** Based on increased test scores, usually in conjunction with other measures of performance, either for superior achievement compared with other systems or for achievement gains over time.

**Approach:** Could help Essential schools gain recognition for effectiveness of active learning approach.

*Many of these categories and their descriptions are from Judy Bray, policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States.*

**RE-LEARNING: From Schoolhouse to Statehouse** is the joint initiative of the Education Commission of the States and the Coalition of Essential Schools. Its aim is to help the whole spectrum of educators—from schoolhouse to statehouse—rethink the purpose of education, the pedagogies and curricula in light of that purpose, and the structures and environments supporting that purpose.

For more information on Re-learning, contact either of the following:

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## The State as Partner: One Policy-Maker's Story

"WHEN A LETTER FROM ECS came across my desk inviting states to participate in Re:Learning I thought, 'What a shame; I have seventeen other projects going and one more is just impossible,'" says Donna Wall, until recently the Commissioner of Schools for Pennsylvania and its Re:Learning coordinator. "Two days later, I got a copy of a letter from our secretary of education to Beverly Anderson at ECS, saying Pennsylvania would be delighted to participate and that I would be in charge! All it took was the governor's confirmation and we were started."

With such a dramatic move towards school reform handed to her from above, Wall—a former high school teacher herself—knew she had to muster support from the ranks of educators to succeed. "I called the state principals' organization, because I believed so strongly that if a school is going to change the principal has to be excited about it," she says. "Then I asked the Academy of Learning, which is part of our state system of higher educa-

tion, to be involved. The principals invited Bob McCarthy of CES to give a presentation at the statewide meeting of secondary principals, and we invited as observers representatives of the state school boards association, the two teachers unions, and the superintendents group—about fifty people were there."

Many questions remained after that brief presentation, of course. "We asked those who were interested to go back to their districts," Wall says, "and talk to their superintendent, representatives from their teachers union, their school board, and their parents group. Then we planned a series of meetings over the year where they could come together at our expense and talk about what Essential Schools are all about. For the nine schools who expressed interest, we asked their commitment for a full year of planning before they decided to become an Essential School. We gave them \$3,000 planning grants that first year. Then, for those who could

make a written commitment to a year of formal planning approved by their board of education and signed off on by the principal, the superintendent, and the teachers union, we gave \$25,000 for four teachers to have release time. In addition, the state reserved \$50,000 for activities and presentations that could help all the schools involved to plan. This year, as those schools start up their programs, we'll open it to another group of schools for the planning stage." Each school is linked with the closest university in our state system, and a professor from the education department there works with them throughout the process, supported by a grant from the Academy for Teaching.

The state's main role, as Wall sees it, is as partner to Re:Learning schools in overcoming any road-blocks state regulations pose. "Leadership and regulation are the state's two main functions in education," she says. "The leadership is in getting schools involved; and in this case regulation means subtracting rather than adding." □



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