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Read This First

I never let my schooling interfere with my education.

—Mark Twain

Our Shared Legacy

A book about school reform—and teacher teaming is indeed a major and vital reform—should not plunge into an explanation of how to successfully implement that reform without a nod to the historical context that compels it. We need to know something about the forces that made schools and teaching what they are today.

If you were to visit classrooms all over the world, as we have, you might be surprised to see the same model of an American classroom replicated in a remote village along the Amazon River as exists in Paris, and in Shanghai, and in a thatched-roof schoolhouse in Botswana. How did that happen? Where did that model come from, and what does it tell us about how we teach children?

The schooling of American citizens began with the revolutionary idea that a democratic society and the economic engine that makes it possible to thrive are built on the foundation of an educated populace. Reading. Writing. Arithmetic. How best to distribute those skills among a widespread and mostly agricultural populace? In the 18th century the answer was the one-room schoolhouse. A bunch of children of all ages were squeezed into small, drafty, poorly heated buildings and taught by an unregulated corps of almost exclusively male

schoolmasters, many of whom were only a few steps ahead of their students. And yet, to a certain extent, it worked. For a brief period in our country's history, this model fulfilled its purpose. The American genius for innovation had proven itself, almost overnight.

And then, almost overnight, a confluence of related events radically transformed America and with it the landscape of education. In the mid-19th century the powerful forces of rapid industrialization combined with waves of arriving immigrants to result in major population shifts and explosions. New cities erupted where before there were only small towns or villages. Established cities like New York, Chicago, Boston, and Baltimore overflowed, challenging their capacity to house, feed, employ, and educate the swelling masses.

Advances in technology meant fewer hands were needed on the farm. While successful farmers whose lives were made easier by agricultural technology stayed on the farms, droves of farmers and other workers from rural areas moved to the cities, attracted by the burgeoning number of jobs in factories and mills. But this new stream of rural and foreign workers caused problems for industrialists; the arriving workers were mostly unskilled, semi-literate at best, and unaccustomed to the kind of work demanded by industry. What was good enough for the farm was not good enough to meet the needs of the new economy.



One-Room Schoolhouse

Urgently needed to transform this human resource into a well-prepared workforce were a whole new form of schools and a different cadre of teachers along with them. Already at hand were two factors that made this transformation possible. One was the ready availability of young women who could both read and write and were no longer needed for farm work. The other was the innovation introduced by Horace Mann in Boston, Massachusetts, of the graded-classroom school building, created on the industrial model of mass production. The era of the one-room schoolhouse was essentially over.

Quickly, large school buildings were constructed—graded classrooms, where children of the same age were grouped together, greatly simplifying both instruction and discipline. The large number of women who arrived to teach were pleased to enter this newly feminized profession, and teaching was transformed from a male-dominated enterprise to a “woman’s ‘true’ profession.”¹ The assembly line, used so successfully in industry, was easily transported to this new model of schools and teaching. School boards, which were committees of business and professional elites, were modeled after corporate boards of directors. The power to administer school systems was put into the hands of professionally trained school *superintendents* (a term borrowed from the railroads, which were considered to be the acme of efficient industrial organization).



Early Graded Classroom

A Culture of Isolation and Egalitarianism

And thus, although teaching was the entryway to a meaningful and respected vocation for women, this newfound “profession” brought with it an inescapable resemblance to factory work. Factory workers were interchangeable employees, hired to do an assembly-line piece of work, laboring alone at looms or workstations, receiving a product in an unfinished state, improving it, and passing it on to the next worker along the line. So it was with teachers, solo practitioners of their craft, self-reliant and autonomous, working in isolation with minimal supervision.

What evolved from this worklife condition was a powerful school culture in which teachers neither sought advice nor offered to give one another counsel or support. Seeking help was considered an admission of incompetence. This led to the evolution of a cultural norm that held all teachers to be equally accomplished—no teacher could risk appearing to be smarter or more skilled without subtle (and sometimes overt) rebuke from fellow workers. In turn, this culture made true accountability all but impossible.

Over the years, professional development for teachers has been partly an attempt to correct some of the deleterious effects of this culture, but much of what passes for professional development has been shown to be ineffective. Sent to workshops to compensate for the drawbacks of their isolation and to “correct” the inadequacies of their teaching, teachers might return to the classrooms energized with new knowledge and ideas, but school culture soon defeats what they may have learned on their own. Without school-based support and reinforcement, teachers’ attempts at self-improvement have often proved futile.

The Move Toward Collaboration

The pervasive view that public education in America is in trouble dates back at least to 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*,² which described American education as a system “being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity.” Thereupon followed a flurry—one could even call it a landslide—of proposed reforms to remedy the problems laid out in the report. It has taken quite a while, however, for educators, administrators, policy-makers, and other would-be reformers to come around, and warm to, the idea of teacher teaming. Yes, they now acknowledge, the old

solo-practitioner model is out of step in a world in which doctors work in teams and rely heavily on current and meaningful professional development to improve their practice, where novice attorneys are routinely assigned mentors, where computers and automobiles are designed by collaborators in highly skilled work groups, and where even the tradition-bound military has embraced teamwork as the key to battlefield success.

Conceptually, at least, the notion of teachers collaborating in teams has arrived. But in the words of an old English proverb, “there’s many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip.” In practice, creating successful teacher teams is much harder than it looks. It is complex and difficult work for those not knowledgeable about the process. Even the definition of what constitutes “success” is not universally agreed upon.

Yet we must have teacher teams. More and more states, districts, and individual schools—both public and private—are insisting on it as the way toward improved teaching and learning. The educational model of teachers collaborating in teams, if it has not already arrived in your school, is certainly the wave of the future.

This book is designed to help you surf rather than paddle.