

Introduction to the Second Edition

Schools are sites provided by society to pass on to its young its traditions, values, and history, as well as the skills they will require to assimilate and act appropriately in regard to those features. A society is conservative in that it seeks continuity between its present and future. Society is always changing, but there is change and there is change. The social change of the post-World War II era has been and is one of the most comprehensive social changes in our national history. Not only comprehensive but also marked by turmoil, divisiveness, puzzlement. Fault lines in the social fabric that had been long ignored or patched over became wider and more exposed as never before. Wars change everything and everybody, and World War II is as clear an instance as one will find. We are living with those consequences today, and we will live with them for decades to come. It was predicted—it should not have been surprising—that America will change and in some untoward ways as seen by some, and in liberating ways as seen by others.

Schools were one site where the social change was reflected. It is not my purpose here to indicate how issues of race, gender, poverty, civil rights, and more were affected by and in turn affected the social change. The fact is that society was made aware that the social change was bringing in its wake knotty (too weak a word) problems challenging their heretofore traditional role and purposes and criteria for judging their adequacy. Anyone today who is less than 50 years of age will have to make a major effort and a good deal of reading to begin to comprehend the sizzling sixties and the mis-named “silent fifties.” That is especially the obligation of those individuals concerned with educational reform because all the different

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strands comprising the social change were in one or another way in the debate about how to improve schools.

I decided to write the letters focusing on a problem unarticulated by any president or his advisors, and yet it is a problem fateful for the outcome of educational reform. The problem was and is that the modal American classroom reflects a conception of learning that ensures unproductive learning. What I wanted the president to know is that unless and until one can distinguish between contexts of productive and unproductive learning the outcomes of schooling will be puzzling, disappointing, and disillusioning. In my letters I am not contentious (I think), I do not blame the victim, I do not take potshots at this or that group, I take no sides on the contents and direction of the pervasive social change, and I try hard not to convey the impression that I have cornered the market on truth and wisdom. What I was asking the president and his advisors to do is to take the obvious seriously. Let me illustrate by analogy.

Two things were obvious during the constitutional convention of 1787. The first was how polarized the northern and southern states were on the issue of slavery. The polarization was bitter, rancorous, and divisive, to such an extent that it was obvious that unless there was a face-saving compromise there would be no United States of America; the southern states would go their different ways and the northern states their ways. The fact is that the compromise arrived and left no one in doubt—it was too obvious for doubt—that far from resolving the slavery issue it made it almost certain that the fledgling nation had a ticking time bomb in its midst. I need not say more about what happened.

For reasons I shall try to make clear in the following pages, educational reform over the decades was focused on an obvious problem heretofore neglected. I have no intention of downplaying the importance of most of these problems but rather to indicate that all of them failed to recognize what I consider an obvious problem of fundamental significance, a lack of recognition that would mammothly limit the degree of the desired general effects. The problem concerned the differences between contexts of productive and unproductive learning. It was not a problem I “discovered.” John Dewey wrote about it over a century ago. It is also implicit and explicit in the writings of Jean Piaget. What was obvious to Dewey and Piaget was not and is not obvious to educators who were influenced by his illuminations of the features and course of child development. I did

not appreciate their contributions until my interest in the culture of the school and the problem of change became an all-consuming venture for me, and the obvious could not be ignored.

Thirteen years ago the person to whom I was writing would be the first president of the 21st century. There were several reasons I decided to write to that president. The first was that the books on educational reform I had written made clear that I have concluded that the post-World War II reform movement would not achieve its purposes. Indeed, in 1965 I predicted, orally and in print, that failure. From that point on I wrote many books explaining why that prediction was not dreamed up in an academic's armchair and why in 1990 I wrote *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. The second reason was a confirmation of historical and political factors. The word *education* is nowhere to be found in our constitution. That was not happenstance but a reflection of a deeply held belief that education was the responsibility of parents, communities, and states; the federal government should never, but never, have formal power to intrude in any way into the schooling of children. The colonists had fought a war for independence from a central authority wielding power in insensitive, intrusive, power pressuring ways, to which its constituencies near and far had to conform. The founding fathers wanted no central government in any way to influence the education and minds of its youth. The first departure from that tradition occurred in the early years of the Eisenhower administration, and that departure was considered temporary. Far from being temporary, the role of the federal government increased steadily as each reform was clearly ineffective. When the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that the "separate but equal" doctrine and practice were unconstitutional, it guaranteed that the role of federal government would increase. The third reason I wrote my letter to a president had nothing to do with the issues surrounding a federal role in education. In the abstract I do not look kindly on an increasing federal role in matters educational but that is not because I think there is more wisdom about these matters in states and communities. What has troubled me—troubled is too weak a word—is that none of these players recognize what I have come to see as a basic problem, which if it stays unrecognized dooms the reform effort. That is not to say that if the problem is recognized the road ahead is clear and smooth. On the contrary, such recognition exposes how complex and difficult reform will have to be. No, the basic problem is not one which, if recognized, means we

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will have no need to take Prozac. But for as long as the problem goes unrecognized all efforts of reform will have minimal or no positive consequences. Therefore, the fourth reason I wrote the book was my way of stating the problem in a more focused way than I had done before. So, the reader rightly can ask, why do it in a book of letters to a president? Why not in a book for educators who teach, guide, influence students? After all, no matter how difficult reform policies and implementation may be, their goal is to change this or that feature in the classroom. Why write to a president? What do you expect him to do? Read your book, go on TV, and tell the country he knows what the root problem is? Well, yes. Is not the moral obligation of a president to inform and educate citizens about a problem of vital interest to them that if not confronted will continue negatively to impact on the society? Why has it become fashionable for newly elected presidents to want to be seen as a serious education president who has new ideas or programs that will cause the clouds to dissipate and the sun to shine? They sincerely want to be seen as a *serious education president*. And by serious they do not mean accepting the status quo or not using the bully pulpit to gain support. When I wrote the book I did not know, of course, that the first president of the 21st century would be President Bush II. Nor could I know that he would propose and get enacted a program that will, I predict, ultimately disappoint him and everyone. Some wit titled the program the No Bad Idea Left Behind Act.

In recent years I have posed a question to individuals and groups of educators, highly educated people in various fields, and elected public officials I happened to meet: *What do you mean by learning?* Now, you would think that these people would not have difficulty answering the question given the fact that the word *learning* probably has the highest word frequency count in the educational literature. With no exception, the response was by no means quick. A puzzled look frequently appeared as if they were surprised that they had no ready formulation. Then someone would say something like, "Learning involves a change from one point in time to another." Some said, "Learning takes place when you have absorbed knowledge or skills you did not have before." Without exception no one was satisfied with his or her response. A few said with embarrassment, "I'll have to think more about it." I would then be asked what I meant by learning. I always preceded my answer by saying that for years I thought I knew what learning means but for reasons I was not

clear about I realized that what I meant, what others meant, was an unintended caricature of the internal and external features of the context of learning. Let me list the features.

1. The word *learning* is not like the words *sticks and stones*, which you can see, touch, manipulate. In brief, learning is not a thing, it is a process.
2. Learning is a process that takes place in an interpersonal context; there is a teacher and a student or students. A student may have interpersonal relationships with other students, but he or she knows that the relationship with the teacher is more important and consequential for how the student will be judged and how that student will judge him- or herself.
3. The teacher is expected to come to know and understand how the *overt* behavior and performance of the student can be explained, intuited in terms of the strength and content of *covert*, non-visible thoughts and feelings experienced by the student. Those covert features are conventionally categorized under such labels as emotion, attitude, cognitive, motivating anxiety. *Those features are omnipresent; the strength of none of them is zero.* The dynamic relationships among these covert features vary dramatically among students who have the same teacher. For any one student the relationships among those features can be experienced differently with different teachers.
4. The learner does not use these labels. His or her thoughts and feelings have concreteness and immediacy he or she cannot or is reluctant to put into spoken words, depending on the degree to which his or her relationship to the teacher is one in which both feel safe with and trustful of each other.

I could have said the above in far fewer words. I could have said that the world of the teacher is not that of the student and that the teacher should never minimize that difference. Students do not minimize that difference. It falls to the teacher to know how to seek and employ ways by which two worlds do not collide or pass by each other but begin to intersect, to become known to the other to some degree that is productive to the goals of both.

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I can assure the reader that in my other books, especially the last one, I describe and discuss a variety of factors external to the classroom but that very much has impact on teachers and students. For my present purposes I want only to examine the implications of the obvious.

It is clear from my description that the task and obligation of the teacher are psychologically awesome and sensitive. Let us leave aside for the moment class size and even concede that at best the teacher (or anyone else) can only know and understand a student to a partial but nevertheless practically important extent. It is not a sin to fall short of the mark; it is a sin not to have a mark. Question: How well do teachers approximate that mark? Would you not expect that there has been vigorous and rigorous research to answer the question? The fact is that such research has been pitifully paltry over the decades, and what research has been done indicates that teachers do not come up smelling roses. Of course there are exceptional teachers, but they are just that: exceptions. That is precisely what I was telling the president who prides him- or herself as being serious about educational reform, and that is why I told him to take the time to sit in and observe classrooms from the standpoint of the conception of learning I described to him, a conception the contents of which he is perfectly able to identify in his schooling. In the post-World War II era every president leaves no doubt in the minds of citizens that he is in favor of ensuring that all classroom teachers should be qualified; he is in favor of motherhood, patriotism, and virtue. But not one president or presidential candidate has said what he meant by *qualified*. It is empty rhetoric to say “qualified” if it is not derived from a conception of the features comprising the context of learning that does justice to those obvious features, at the very least recognizing their omnipresence.

So what do aspiring presidential candidates mean by *qualified*? Well, if you listen long enough to their speeches—which is by no means easy—there is one thing they say: Teachers must have a firm grasp of the subject matters they teach, and the firmer the grasp the better they can convey it to students. That injunction has a long history in education. Its origins derive from the university, not from the legendary 2-year “normal” school where teachers were prepared to be teachers. That explains why universities were more than reluctant to recognize teaching as a profession.

Public universities were required by legislative action to have preparatory programs in order to have enough teachers for public

schools confronted with a burgeoning population largely due to massive waves of immigration. It also explains why almost immediately after World War II the university required that these programs be embedded in a 4-year undergraduate liberal arts and science program, as a way of reducing the emphasis on oversimplified, or seemingly dumbed-down courses on pedagogical methods. It was and still is the case that in the university the department or school of education is the low man on the totem pole in terms of status, respect, and support (Sarason, 2001).

This cleavage reflects a truly fundamental difference between education departments and the rest of the university. Undergirding this cleavage and considered self-evident is that the university will select faculty who because of their firm grasp of their subject will be effective teachers, period. They do not need special training in pedagogy. In contrast, schools of education are based on the belief that a classroom teacher will need to know more than subject matter if that subject matter is to be properly understood and assimilated by their young students.

The difference in the two views is as stark as that between night and day. What evidence is there for either assumption? There is not a shred of evidence that would pass muster in a court of evidence that the firmer the grasp the more effective the teaching. My experience suggests that the correlation is by no means robustly high. Let me relate the following, told to me by a friend who is a professor of physics and very knowledgeable about the history of education and educational reform:

If I went to the Julliard School of Music and said that I wanted to enroll and learn to play the violin, they would listen politely, then take me by the hand, walk me to the door and tell me that if I came back at some future time and demonstrated some talent in playing the violin, they would consider the possibility of admitting me. If I then went to every teacher training program and told them that I wanted to become a high school teacher of physics and science, they would sign me up, even if I had not told them I was a Nobel Laureate in physics.

When I said to Dr. Wilson that he would be a catastrophe as a high school teacher, he said, "Of course." It goes without saying that a teacher should have a secure grasp of subject matter, no ifs, ands, and buts. And knowing subject matter, like love, is not enough.

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What does that mean? Faculty in a school of education will say that you need to know about the pace, course, and vicissitudes of the cognitive, personality, physical, social-interpersonal growth of children and how they may vary as a function of age and cultural background, and more. This “more” is obtained by readings, usually in no more than three courses. In addition, education students will do their practice teaching, which can vary considerably in weeks and months. In some universities the preparatory program admits only those individuals who have already graduated from college.

Beginning after World War II the criticism of preparatory programs, often scathing, was directed at these programs by critics in the university, legislatures, and by well-known public figures concerned with the year-by-year downhill slide of educational outcomes of schools as reflected in achievement scores, graduation rates, dropouts, and escalating strife between school and community, especially in regard to racial issues. Changes were instituted to improve matters, but it is beyond the purposes of the present book to discuss them here. At the end of this introduction I append a list of some of my books where they are discussed in detail. What I will do here is present some answers relevant to this question: What has been the effect of these changes on educational outcomes? Have they produced more “qualified” teachers? What greater understanding of the learning context has been demonstrated?

1. For two decades after World War II, changes in preparatory programs were little or no different than what they had been before the war. The major changes began in the mid-1960s as a response to serious public criticism of schools. So, in the 45 years that followed, one would expect that these changes would have demonstrated better educational outcomes, not here and there but generally. There is no such evidence.

2. As students go from elementary to middle to high school their interest in and respect for school learning steadily decreases. No middle or high school teacher has ever denied to me that most of their students are not intrinsically motivated to learn and that teaching them is like pulling teeth. Students ask few or no questions suggestive of intellectual curiosity.

3. After the first 2 or 3 years of teaching, approximately half of the beginners leave teaching. There are several reasons for

this—there is never one and only one reason—and one of them is disillusionment with a school culture that is not supportive or that does not provide the time and help or some form of mentoring by which they can acquire increased understanding and interpersonal skills in their relationships with parents and students. A major factor is the feeling of guilt that they are unable to “reach” their students. In brief, they were unprepared for what they encountered; they do not want to pursue a career in which burnout is frequent.

4. The single best example of the inadequacies of preparatory programs concerns a function teachers are expected to and do perform. It is a function that in the past several decades the public and the educational community agree is vital for the classroom context of learning. The function can be put in the form of a question: How well does a teacher talk to and relate to parents? Teacher-parent relationships have been described as one of the longest cold wars on record. In their preparation for teaching, teachers receive no, and I mean no training in regard to the issues. That is unexplainable unless you believe that those who go into teaching have by some unknown self-selection process a gene that flowers when a teacher meets parents. If so, it is a defective gene.

Thus far much of what I have said I did not say to my unknowable future president. That was not happenstance. In a context of productive learning you start where the learner is psychologically: attitudinally, motivationally, cognitively, emotionally. You know where you would like to take-lead him or her but you start where you feel secure in a judgment about where the learner is and is coming from. There was a good deal I wanted him to know but I had no doubt that the worst thing I could do was to overwhelm him with what I have learned over the decades about the history and failures of the reform movement. If I did, he would probably conclude that I was another academic who could transform a complicated problem into an impossible one at worst and an incomprehensible one at best.

I suggested to him three concrete things he should do. First, review his own schooling and life experiences from the standpoint of this question: In all of your school learning contexts, what was the frequency of those contexts in which you became aware that you had just learned something you never knew before and which stimulated you to want to learn more? What do these experiences have in

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common? The second suggestion was that the president should take the time—make the time—to sit in classrooms and see what conclusions he would draw. The third suggestion was that he should arrange to fund a study of two types of teachers: those who are regarded as superior teachers and those who are regarded as undistinguished teachers. The classrooms would be filmed every day from the start to the end of the school year. What would a group of diverse professionals who know nothing about why these teachers were chosen conclude about the similarities, the quality, and effectiveness of these teachers? I did not tell him anything about research design for the study and the very thorny issues surrounding selection of teachers, grade levels to be used, comparability of their schools, socio-economic background of students, and much more. The message I was trying to convey to the president was that the history of judgments about the intended changes in the classroom contains opinion and related anecdotes, not systematic analysis of uncontaminated, observable behavioral data.

I thought long and hard about the wisdom of the suggestion of a study. I am not opposed to the use of achievement tests. *For certain purposes they can be useful provided you never forget they tell you absolutely nothing about the context of learning in the classroom.* An example I like to use to illustrate that point is one in which your neighbor's child strangles your dog to death. If it happens that the boy is mentally retarded with an IQ of 60, it is likely that explanation of the act will put emphasis on the IQ score even though you may or may not know that such an act is extraordinarily rare for boys who have an IQ of 60 (or below). The IQ is given an explanatory power that is totally unwarranted. But what if your neighbor's son had an IQ of 180? Would one be justified in "blaming" the IQ? When a school system proudly informs its residents that students in fourth grade have gained an average of two or three points on the state's achievement tests, and goes on to say that "we have turned the corner" even though the results for the school system are still very significantly lower than the state average, are we supposed to applaud because the gain of a few points must be a direct result of the reforms the school system had made? If you have a normal body temperature, does that mean you are not ill, you are healthy, you have no cause to worry, nothing to explain?

It used to be that when I met people for the first time and they would ask me what kind of work I did, I would tell them I was a

psychologist interested in educational reform. They would ply me with questions that I was too glad to answer at length. The result was that it did not take long before they ceased asking questions and their body and facial language reflected a diminution in their curiosity. With the best of youthful intentions I, so to speak, threw at them generalizations, abstract ideas for which they had no basis to understand personally. I probably came across as critical, as not having a central focus, as an academic, an Ivy League one no less, who was not very practical.

In the last two decades of a long life I responded very differently in such encounters. I would answer their question by asking two questions, although sometimes I never get to ask the second question. The first question is: In a social studies 50-minute classroom in *suburban* schools, how many questions on average do students ask and how many questions do teachers ask? They are both surprised and puzzled by my question, as if I am setting a trap to expose their ignorance. They become reflective and then in a very tentative way give their answers. The highest number anyone has ever given is five, and by that was meant that five different students each asked one substantive question. For the rate of question asking by teachers the range was from "I don't want to guess but the number would be much higher than it is for students" to a "high of 20 questions." The most frequent number given was 15. I then tell them that in the past century there were no more than 15 studies on question asking in the classroom; the last and the most rigorous was done in 1969. Then I tell them that although the last study was by far the most rigorous the results of all the studies were very similar. For students the average number of questions was two, and in some cases it was one student who had asked the questions. For teachers the rate varied from 40 to somewhat over 100. I would give them no time to respond to the results and I would ask, "How would you explain it, defend it?" Without exception each respondent was aghast by the results. Almost without exception they knew there was something unacceptable about the findings. The give and take between us was stimulating to them, they began to want to know more, to ask questions, to talk about how to change such classroom regularities.

The second question I asked was: Why is it that as students go from elementary to middle to high school their interest in and respect for school learning steadily go downhill? Their reaction to this question was as dysphoric as to the first question but with one

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difference. Some of these respondents had children in middle or high school and my question brought forth what they themselves had already been vaguely disturbed by: how their children felt about school learning *even though they said their children were doing well in school, they got good grades*. All of the respondents were upper middle class, highly educated people.

This explains why my letters to the president were not abstract generalizations, contained no jargon, and posed questions or offered suggestions they would find hard to dismiss out loud. I assumed the president was serious and well intentioned, that he wanted to improve educational outcomes and the quality of the learning context, that he wanted to avoid going down in the history books as one who, like past presidents, failed with a task that had the potential to change schools. I tried to convey that I knew he would have many problems and burdens, that politics is the art of the possible and that there are no quick fixes for any of them. I do not criticize him, I offer ideas. I want to be helpful. The poet Yeats once said that education is not about filling empty vessels but about lighting fires. I was trying to light a fire. That is what a context of productive learning is all about.

There is one message in my letters that I hope the reader will keep in mind and also ponder its implications for educational reform. Nowhere in the letters do I blame teachers for the present state of affairs, as if they have willingly conspired to be barriers on the road to school change. That educators would resist non-cosmetic change is true of all individuals and institutions, and that is, has been, and will be true in human affairs. What I have always made clear in my writings is that they are not villains but victims of preparatory programs which ill equip them for the realities of teaching and learning, and no one factor has been more fateful than a stultifying, self-defeating conception of the learning context. School personnel come to the school culture, which reinforces such a conception, which is why so many new teachers soon leave the field and older teachers experience burnout. Bear in mind that school administrators are products of teacher preparatory programs and who later are credentialed for administration by taking another preparatory program in a college of education. The deficiency of the teacher program was in no way "repaired" by the later program.

So, the reader may rightly ask, "Are you not shifting blame unjustifiably to college and university preparatory programs, implying

they should know better, that they should and perhaps often do know that what they do is not what they should do? My answer is yes because the university justifies its existence and public support on the grounds that the most important obligation is to contribute to new and better knowledge, which, among other things, changes and/or improves the welfare of a society. It is an open secret that the university community of scholars and researchers judges its college of education as falling far short of contributing to new knowledge and, therefore, practice. The university deserves no special credit for making that judgment, which is practically never expressed openly. I say that because having made that judgment, its obligation is to determine what they must do about it. If a university judges that its law school or medical school or engineering school is weak and an embarrassment, it does not eliminate any of them, it will seek ways and means to rebuild such a school in accord with its mission to contribute new knowledge and understandings. However, in the case of the school of education, neither university administrative leadership nor the faculty in other parts of the university have anything resembling a clear idea of how to go about the rebuilding process. Schooling is an arena that is truly foreign to them: its history, culture, organization, criteria for selection of personnel, and the undergirding assumptions about learning, school-community relationships and problems, their embeddedness in a system that is literally political from start to finish.

Yale created in the early 1930s a graduate department of education despite the fact that the faculty deplored the president's action. In the 1950s another president by fiat abolished the department, an action the faculty applauded. In the late 1990s the University of Chicago terminated its programs in education, an action the faculty heartily endorsed. Yale and Chicago are private universities. The actions they took would be impossible in public universities because governors and legislatures would never support such action because there has to be a source that trains teachers for the state's public schools.

If you lived through the presidential campaigns of the post-World War II era, you will not find a single candidate who even alluded to the possibility that the university is not part of the solution but a very important part of the problem. I am not, believe it or not, being harsh or hypercritical and enjoying *ad hominem*s. I am trying to describe the situation as it is; you cannot think and begin to develop a strategy for a problem you have not articulated or diagnosed.

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The problem of non-cosmetic educational reform is a staggeringly complicated array of interrelated issues and players. That statement may well be deserving of the judgment that it is the grossest indulgence of understatement of the past century. There are and will be no simple answers; I certainly do not have a simple answer. For example, because there are, I assume, different starting points for reform and you realistically cannot start with all of them at the same time, the question to be confronted is: Which starting point will have the most percolating effect? My experience over half a century has led me to the opinion that such a starting point is the selection and training of teachers, and that opinion is the major theme in my letters to the president. It is a starting point that will quickly, clearly, inevitably make evident how many different groups will feel their oxen are being gored. Institutional change cannot occur without conflict. A leader of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 is purported to have said in regard to its opponents, "You have to break eggs to make an omelette." Sadly, it soon became clear that breaking eggs led to executions and a network of concentration camps. When I say that my starting point will arouse all kinds of attempts to maintain the status quo in which people understandably have had status, influence, and a sense of worthiness, I expect there will be turmoil. To expect otherwise flies in the face of recorded history. Humans may be at the apex of the evolutionary saga, but do not confuse being at the apex with being perfect. The unpredictable factor is the quality of leadership. Can you imagine a peaceful elimination of apartheid in South Africa without a Nelson Mandela and a Bishop Tutu? Contrast South Africa with nearby Zimbabwe and its leader Mugabe.

How much should a president know about educational reform, its history, major issues, and rationale for past federal initiatives? It goes without saying that we do not expect him to be or become an expert. But we do expect him to know *something* about why schools have been intractable to change for well over a century. And before the president has taken the oath of office he has been bombarded by diverse groups about the policies and actions he should adapt and take. To help him in this task he appoints an "expert" to advise and bring him up to speed. Should not the president know that past secretaries of education do not come up smelling roses in regard to their advisory and pedagogical obligations? How will the president avoid undue dependence on what the secretary recommends or, worse yet, avoid appointing a secretary fearful of opposing or criticizing what

the president decides to do? The problems high on the national agenda are complicated and none of them has one and only one “solution”; there is a universe of alternatives from which one has to choose. If the president proceeds as if there is no such universe of alternatives, the odds are high he will end up rediscovering not the wheel but the flat tire, a rediscovery made by every president in the post–World War II era. That is not a judgment but a brute fact.

That brings me to the President Bush II No Child Left Behind program. In the presidential campaign of 2000 he addressed (shown on C-SPAN) an organization of California businessmen. Here are the points he made:

1. Beginning at the age of 3, children in Head Start will begin their ascent to literacy by learning the alphabet and the rudiments of phonics. It was hard for me to avoid the conclusion that the president believed that Head Start had not succeeded, or succeeded minimally, in improving later school learning. He was right on that score but he never even hinted at the possibility that many of these children had parents who were barely literate and that attention should be given to how to increase their literacy so that they could read to and stimulate their children to want to learn to read. There is a Head Start program in Bridgeport, Connecticut, that began to expose the children to the computer and in the process learned that parents wanted to learn the computer, which none of them had in their home. As a result, that Head Start site had parallel programs for both parents and children, the former experiencing a sense of growth and competence that was remarkable, enabling the mothers not only to read to and with their children but to enjoy it immensely. I cannot tell the whole story here. An initial paper has been published by Dr. Judy Primavera (2001) of the Department of Psychology at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut. She is in the process of writing the full account of this decade-old program. The point here is that children’s literacy is correlated with parental literacy, and that correlation is sufficiently low to predict that unless you improve parental literacy you have to lower your expectations of children’s school performance. The goal is to create the conditions in which parents and children *want to learn*. Absent that wanting, learning is a sometime thing. Obviously, what I have just said derives from what I mean by learning. The president has no expressed conception of learning, unless it is that he truly believes that creating the conditions in which wanting to learn

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gains strength was an idea dreamed up by bleeding heart do-gooders unable to be firm and directive, ever eager to come up with touchy-feely approaches.

2. The president emphasizes accountability as the linchpin of his reform. And by accountability he means that schools will be judged by the criterion of the degree of students' achievement test scores year by year. That is to say, test scores must show that at the end of each school year students have learned what they were supposed to learn. If not, the school is a failing school. If the school does not meet that criterion for 2 successive years, it is put on notice, and if that continues, parents will be free to put their child in another school or receive a voucher that they can use in a private school. The details are too many to go into here, but the message to schools is unambiguous: shape up or ship out. Although the president never says so explicitly, his program is the strongest indictment ever of the educational community who are to blame for not having or adhering to standards and considering themselves not responsible for the educational outcomes of their schools. And how strictly are the new standards to be enforced? If, for example, the test scores of students do not meet the standard in *one* subject, theirs is judged to be a failing school even though in all other subjects the test scores far exceed the standard. Similarly, if the test scores are very respectable in all subjects except in the case of special classes for mentally retarded and other handicapped students, the school will be judged a failing school.

What has happened since the law was enacted? The briefest answer is all hell broke loose in the states, including those where governors were fervent supporters of the president. The criticisms were many: The standards were unrealistically high, the time perspective for meeting the standards was unrealistic, to carry out the program required states to spend more money beyond what the government would provide, the mammoth increase in testing would require an emphasis on drill and rote learning and decrease the time accorded all subject matter, and so on.

There is an irony in what happened that has escaped notice. If anything has been learned about a proposed reform, it is that a sincere effort should be made to acquaint and discuss the features of the reform with personnel who will need to change their accustomed

ways of thinking and practicing. If that is not done by a school system's policymakers and is instead presented to the relevant personnel at the bottom of the apex of power, it explains a lot about the failures of educational reforms. It fuels a combination of anger, resentment, and plummeting morale. To a limited extent the private sector has learned this lesson. It has hardly been learned by those who formulate and implement an educational reform. There are two assumptions undergirding this self-defeating stance, although they are never publicly expressed. The first is that a reform initiative is the prerogative and obligation of those who are at the apex of authority, knowledge, and wisdom—the Papa knows best stance. The second assumption, implied in the first, is that people in the trenches have nothing to contribute in the process of formulation, their vision is narrow, they do not comprehend the big picture. There really is a third assumption operative in leaders, any leader anywhere. It is an occupational distance: They do not want to hear criticisms or even suggestions about their cherished ideas and plans.

In my letters to the president I tell some of my favorite jokes to illustrate a point. So let me tell one here that illustrates that leaders want good, not bad news. It is about Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt. The Egyptians are after them and intent on exterminating the slaves. They get to the Red Sea and they have no way to transverse it. Moses prays to the Lord for help and deliverance. No response. With mounting anxiety he prays again and again. Finally, he hears the voice of the Lord, “Moses, I hear you. I have good news and bad news for you.” Moses asks for the good news. “I will part the Red Sea, allow your people to pass safely and when the Egyptians arrive and start to pass through I will bring the waters over them and they will die.” Moses was ecstatic. “Lord, that is the best news you could have given me. But you said there was also bad news. What is it?” and the Lord replied, “You have to prepare an environmental impact report.” Leaders tend, so to speak, to be in love with their cherished ideas and plans. But as the maxim goes, love is not enough. It is a two-edged sword: One side is enjoyable and enlivening and the other distorts the realities of the object of your love.

The point is that the president made every mistake in the book, thus confirming the maxim that the more things change the more they remain the same. President Bush had a secretary of education who in turn had around him “experts” on education in general and

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educational reform in particular. They have little or no time for reading, they are too preoccupied with planning, they only seek advice from those they already know will support the president's reform plan, they divide the world into the good guys and the bad guys, and they have no desire whatsoever to talk to any of the bad guys, who by definition have absolutely nothing to contribute. What I am describing I have observed scores of times at the local and state level. I and others have written about this as have excellent researchers in business schools. President Bush may be a serious education president but I have no reason to assume that he, his cabinet secretary, and assorted professionals are serious readers. I predict that the president's program will fall far short of its mark, and I would not be surprised if one of its consequences will be that the situation becomes worse. It will be at least a decade from now before a comprehensive evaluation of the program will be conducted by researchers outside the political establishment. May I point out that the president has budgeted not one cent for a respectable ongoing evaluation, an omission no less true for charter school programs. In my book *Charter Schools: Another Flawed Educational Reform?* (1998a), I made two predictions. The first is that many charter schools, perhaps a majority of them, will fall short of expectations. The second is that in the case of those charter schools there will be no basis for understanding why some "succeeded" and others did not.

If I were writing my letters to a future president today their focus would be more integrated in that they would more tightly interrelate three factors that in the past decade have become more clear to me. That is to say, they are not independent factors but in my mind, at least, they are inextricably and conceptually enmeshed in each other. Start with any one of them and the other two come on stage; they become a triad to explain the dysphoric saga of educational reform and why glossing over or ignoring them will make rubble of future efforts.

I have discussed two of the three factors. The first was the conception and description of the learning process in terms of the omnipresent features experienced by the learner, which therefore have to be observed and intuited by the teacher. I say "have to" because I have never known an educator or anyone else who in the abstract denies the presence of those features or denies that a teacher is obligated to determine the strength of their presence. It is that obligation that requires the teacher to create and sustain the second factor:

a context of productive learning in which the learner *wants* to continue learning, not for extrinsic but for intrinsic reasons wants to learn more, to experience the sense of growth. Why is that so important? And that requires us to ask and answer the third factor in the triad: What is the purpose of schooling? Let me elaborate what I mean.

I have asked many people and groups this question: When your child graduates from high school, what is the one major characteristic you hope he or she will possess? There are, of course, several major characteristics you hope your child possesses, but is there one that is of overarching importance over the course of a lifetime?

People by no means find it easy to answer the question, whether they are educators or not. That is understandable, as there are several major characteristics; on what basis can you justify singling out one of them? It took me a long time until I arrived at my answer. I could count on the expectation that at some point in the discussion someone in the audience would ask me to give my answer. For the sake of brevity the guts of my answer go like this:

When my child graduates from high school, the one major characteristic I would hope she possesses is that she wants to continue to learn more about self, others, and the world she lives in. That is in no way downgrading other major characteristics but the one I chose will be more personally consequential for my child over her lifetime than any other major characteristic. I know that some of you will regard my answer as idealistic, hyperintellectual, what you would expect from an academic. The fact is that my choice is independent of but no less applicable to whatever choice of career the graduate makes. My choice is independent of the student's IQ, socioeconomic background, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and so on. Is my choice utopian and idealistic? Of course it is, in the sense that the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount are idealistic about how people should think and be. In human affairs we will always fall short of our ideals. But that is no reason for not having such a criterion.

President Bush II is quite clear in what he considers an ideal to which school personnel should accept and achieve: At each grade level students will pass an achievement test (e.g., reading) at a level appropriate for each grade. How well they achieve that ideal will be

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decided by a number, a test score. The president does not appear to be concerned with obtaining other numbers. For example, how many students enjoy reading, seek out books that may interest them, go to a library, read a newspaper, use a dictionary to look up words that puzzle them—do these things not because they are required to do it but because they enjoy doing them. The president does not appear interested in how many questions students ask in the classroom or how often they say they find school interesting and stimulating. He is interested only in numbers in an educational thermometer. I use the analogy to a thermometer because no physician will ever say that in light of the fact that your body temperature is normal, you are healthy, all is well in your body, go home, do not worry, period. What would the president say if we provided him with numbers that clearly indicated that acceptable scores on a test of literacy produces little or no basis whatsoever for making statements about how much and why children read on their own?

I am being unfair to the president. The fact is that his program was heartily endorsed by both parties. It is not that he sold them and the public a bill of goods but rather that both parties are intellectually bankrupt, unable to face the fact that when a problem has been intractable to solutions, the odds are galactically high that something is radically wrong with your basic assumptions.

A word about the use of the adjective *serious* in the title of this book. I included it for two reasons. The first was to indicate that all of the problems a president confronts are mammothly complicated, they have a history, there are no painless solutions, there are certainly no quick solutions and, like all other people, the president will dismiss analyses which he will consider impractical because they will require a new way of thinking and goals that cannot be achieved except over a long period of time and accompanied by turmoil. Presidents, like the rest of us, want to be seen as practical people who get things done in the near future, say 5 or 10 years from now, after which the turmoil is minimal and the road ahead contains no dangerous potholes or unpredictable, unseen time bombs. How you justify your time perspective in the case of a major, long-standing social problem is the single, most important litmus test of how serious you are about analyzing and understanding the problem. For example, in 1954 the Supreme Court rendered its unanimous desegregation decision. They were fulfilling their sole obligation to determine if and why in each case a disputed issue would be deemed constitutional or

unconstitutional. Now, the justices were aware that the implications and consequences of the decision were not simple affairs. Besides, it is not the court's business to say how Congress and the president should deal with the consequences. The court only said that the goal of the decision should be carried out "with all deliberate speed." Congress and the president were prepared for implementation as well as the reader is prepared to go to the moon; each body felt pressure to act quickly. It is not being harsh to say that they had no understanding, no way of predicting, the enormous complexity of such an educational reform. It is fair to say that they proceeded as if it was a combination of engineering and logistics. If you had asked them how long it would take to achieve desegregation, they might have said 5 but certainly no more than 10 years. If like me you were to reply that this time perspective was ridiculously optimistic, you would be, as I was, seen as a doom and gloom, contentious personality not in touch with reality. In 2004 segregation had increased; schools were more segregated than ever. Because 2004 was the 50th anniversary of the decision there were various commemorations of the decision. In one of them the remaining members of the legal team who argued the case were part of a symposium. To a person they said that neither they nor anybody else in 1954 could in their wildest imagination envision the state of affairs in 2004.

It was not then or now that I believed desegregation could be achieved without turmoil. But it was and still is my position that policymakers have for all practical purposes no comprehension of how complex educational reform is conceptually, in implementation, and in its requirement that we scrutinize what we mean by education and learning and more. President Bush makes it all sound simple: Educators have not been accountable and they have dumbed down standards students are expected to achieve. He has identified the villains, read them the riot act, and leaves no one in doubt that a new game of educational reform is in town, a game played with test scores, zillions of them, which we know ahead of time cannot by themselves illuminate the classroom context of learning. *Learning occurs in a classroom, not while taking a test.* If all you have are test scores, what you can say about the context of learning in the classroom becomes a guessing game.

It took a catastrophe like 9/11, and a lot of public pressure on a reluctant president, to appoint a commission to identify and analyze the factors contributing to a massive failure of the intelligence

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agencies. The commission did its job extraordinarily well. Given the history of failures of educational reform, why has there never been a comparable commission? Granted, these failures were not catastrophes in the sense that 9/11 was. But on what grounds can one argue that these failures have not, are not, and will not negatively affect the American social fabric? That is a question I asked the president in one of my letters and why I suggested that he appoint such a commission. The first edition of this book was written when Bill Clinton was president and Bush II was not in the national scene. For all practical purposes Bill Clinton did nothing. I had no way of knowing that his successor would be someone who believed he had all the answers to the fecklessness of educational reform. I never fooled myself into believing that I had cornered the market on the truths of educational reform. But I never expected that the first president of the 21st century would be someone never in doubt that he had all the answers. If my predictions in the past have been on target, it does not mean that the prediction I make today will also be correct. If it should turn out that I am wrong, I and I alone will pay the price. If, as I predict, the president is wrong, the entire country pays the price.

There are two caveats I take seriously. The first is that it is hard to be completely wrong. The second is H. L. Mencken's caveat that for every major social problem there is a simple answer that is wrong. There is a third and much older caveat: The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

—Seymour B. Sarason, PhD

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