Focus on Teachers Newsletter

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Editor's Musings

As I consider both the necessity and the means for transforming education, ideas seem to come from everywhere. This month's newsletter takes us from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Browning, Montana to a government sponsored study of education in Scotland.

In recent weeks, there have been an increasing number of media reports about the increasing problems for many schools caused by the *No Child Left Behind Education Act*. In fact, some states are now taking action to remove themselves from the jurisdiction of the Act. That's a very significant action considering that they are risking the loss of significant funding provided by the federal government. Their arguments are basically that, while the government has mandated huge and costly programs, it has provided only a small portion of the funding necessary to implement those programs. The bottom line is that the states just don't have the money to implement those changes on their own.

I doubt that many would disagree with the stated goals of NCLB—to provide equal educational opportunity to all students, regardless of background or socioeconomic status (although there are significant disagreements about the meaning of the word "equal"). What many fail to realize is that one can agree wholeheartedly with a goal while vehemently disagreeing with the methods chosen to meet that goal. This logical flaw has been used to accuse those who criticize NCLB of dastardly deeds, such as not caring about disadvantaged students or simply being too lazy to carry out challenging mandates.

Recently, there have been commentaries by everyone from newspaper editors, education media "experts," and the general public suggesting that the reason teachers are complaining about NCLB is that they don't want to be "held accountable" for their work.

One possible reason for this perception is that teachers haven't adequately communicated their concerns to the public. Many teachers still grumble among themselves rather than taking opportunities to explain to parents and their communities how NCLB and its obsession with standardized assessment impacts their ability to teach students in ways that have been shown effective.

Here is one example from my home state of Montana. For the sake of our international readers, Montana is the fourth largest state in the United States, covering an area larger than Germany or Ecuador. It is a mountainous and largely rural state with less than 1 million people. Only five other states have a lower average income.

Darrell Kipp grew up on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwest Montana. It is an area where unemployment reaches 85% during the winter, and where ¾ of the children live in single family homes. Kipp was one of the determined ones. He not only graduated from high school, but went on to get a master's degree from Harvard.

Kipp returned to the reservation and, in 1994, started a private, nonprofit school. There, K-8 students learn their lessons in the native Blackfeet tongue. The school has no administrators, no superintendent, no school board, and no principal. It also has no standardized tests. Yet when its graduates enter high school, they are well above students who attended the 'standardized' public schools.

Kipp suggests that the present U.S. public school standards and testing requirements are an "assimilation policy" similar to what the federal government did from the 1880s to the 1920s when it attempted to "civilize" Native Americans. The government forced American Indian students to attend white boarding schools and punished them for speaking their language. The present policy doesn't resort to corporal punishment. But it now affects not only Native Americans, but Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and any other group whose English is "non-standard."

Whether this is intentional or unintentional is another issue. But the result is that NCLB mediates against the very students it claims to be trying to help. The tests themselves are what is leaving "non-standard" students behind.

Rather than recognizing and addressing poverty as a major factor in the learning of students, NCLB ignores it, insisting that teachers are accountable for making up any deficits with which students enter school. Proponents of NCLB would argue that education is the way out of poverty, but isn't that the same as saying that wellness is the way out of illness? Obvious, yes! But if one is ill, can one mandate wellness and hold doctors accountable for that wellness without dealing with the causes of the illness itself?

Kipp argues that "*'Equality' by itself is a very strong and beautiful word, but it has been changed to mean 'sameness,' or 'uniformity.' It's about control. The*

more uniform a thing is, the easier it is to control. Standardized testing focuses on conformity. In doing so, they take away the ingenuity that comes with diversity... If you go the other way...then you enliven diversity, and diversity is where creativity comes from. Sameness produces dullness. Diversity produces vibrancy and life. That's why we need true equality—education that's equal, but different."

The emphasis on diversity—in using familiar student experiences rather than generic examples—has been successful in reservation schools. A typical science project might study the effects of heat loss and energy usage by comparing a tepee, a long house, a kiva, or a sweat lodge. Standardized test questions about the R-value of insulation in the walls and ceiling of a home make little sense to students who live in homes where metal roofs are held in place against the wind by bald tires. Yet because they can't pass what might well be termed culturally biased tests, these students are deemed failures and their schools are subject to penalties. The success these students have experienced using culturally diverse methods is now threatened because teachers are being pressured to "teach to the test."

The government argues that they have no say in what is included on the tests. According to their spokespeople, there's lots of flexibility in NCLB because states make up their own standardized tests to suit the needs of their population. But here's the Catch-22. Montana is one of several states that doesn't have the money to develop its own tests. They are forced to purchase "canned" tests from testing companies to meet government demands for standardized testing.

What if the government provided funds for the development of unique and culturally sensitive tests? The Montana State Superintendent of Education points out that, even if they could afford it, no single test would be fair to all of Montana's students who range from children of university professors and ranchers to the students on the Blackfeet and other Indian reservations. A "standard" Montana student enters school with an English vocabulary of about 30,000 words. Coming from bilingual homes, Blackfeet students might use only 2,500 English words—and even those are not the same words!

Kipp explains that, although his students are every bit as "smart" as their "standard" peers, they don't share the same knowledge base. They speak English, but it's not the same as that of a standardized test writer in Iowa or New Jersey. Here's an example. In preparing for a standardized vocabulary test, every 8th grade student missed the question on the word "awning." "Of course they missed it," the teacher said. "Nobody has an awning! The wind blows 70 miles an hour." If there ever had been an awning, she joked, it was flapping its way toward Iowa.

This country once prided itself on the diversity of cultures that created its unique perspectives. Yet now, the drive to "standardize" knowledge seems determined to wipe out that diversity. Rather than complaining that the government isn't providing enough money to do what they demand, perhaps we should be asking if it is really what we want education to do.

Is it any wonder that many teachers balk at being held accountable for teaching impersonal and often irrelevant facts at the expense of what one Blackfeet teacher describes as "helping develop the whole person?"

Supporters of NCLB insist that these are isolated instances...that the program is working. But working to do what? How does alienating non-standard students, which make up a growing segment of the school population, provide those students with "equal" opportunities? Aren't those "isolated instances" the very ones that NCLB is purported to prevent?

Each community is its own microcosm of culture and values within the larger society. Certainly, the values of that larger society plays a part in what is taught in schools. But they must be balanced with the needs and values of students within individual schools and communities.

Educators could take a large step in that direction by taking a step back and reassessing what is truly "essential" knowledge. The answer to that question will arise from a reevaluation of what kind of society we want and what role public education will play in developing that society.

One size will never fit all. Nor can schools limit their functions to the simplistic goals of the past. In this month's article, we will offer one idea for how educators themselves—at the level of school and community—can take the lead in transforming education for the well-being of students...and the future.

Transforming Education
Step One—Involving the Community

Sometimes, in order to go forward, we must first go back. In the challenging task of transforming education, we are unlikely to succeed unless we go back to the beginning...to the question, "What is education about?" "What is the purpose of public education?"

It's easy to suggest that this task is too big to consider...that it must be undertaken by the government. The problem is that, the larger the institution, the more difficult it is to mobilize it to action. The more people are involved...the more different perspectives must be weighed and accommodated, the less likely it is that the task will result in anything more than vague rhetoric. Where then, can we get answers that will lead to action...to meaningful change?

There is an old maxim that if an institution doesn't undertake its own self-analysis and reinvention, it risks inter-

vention from outside. We have seen that all too clearly in the case of education. If educators and school leaders don't embark on a meaningful and lasting self-examination—if that self-examination doesn't result in positive actions leading to recognizable improvement—we can expect more and more government intervention. Too often, that intervention is implemented by people who have much less understanding of the problems educators face than those educators themselves. As we have seen, simplistic solutions are proposed for extremely complex problems.

To avoid being bogged down in bureaucracy and creating policies that do not serve every segment of our population, exploring change at the level of communities offers a much more likely scenario. And although this article describes a process that was instituted by a government, it might serve as a starting point for the kind of thing local educators might do in their communities.

The Scottish Model

In 2002, the government of Scotland took steps to move beyond piecemeal reform and quick fixes. In a program they called a "national debate on the purposes of education," they went back to square one and asked the question, "What is public education about?"

This approach can be used at the local level as a model for involving the public in redefining the role of public education. It would serve several purposes.

- Ideas that arise from people within the educational environment are often inbred and limited by traditional perspectives. Eliciting ideas from the public injects new blood into the discussion—new perspectives and the possibility of more effective approaches to long-standing problems.
- Opening a dialogue with the public will help people understand the problems of public education in a rapidly changing world in which people have very different needs. At present, many citizens know only what they see or hear in the media, which is often the government's "spin" on issues.
- By giving the public a real stake in their schools—a say in improvement efforts, people are more willing to provide resources and support.
- It would do much to alleviate the kinds of situations discussed in the first pages of this newsletter.

In this article, we'll explore some of the questions asked in the Scottish discussions and some of the conclusions they reached. Some of you may be thinking, "We don't have this kind of control over our schools...the government tells us what to do...not the people." I would suggest that, if educators actively enlist the aid of the public...if they engage in discussions about what is and isn't working and why...and if they demonstrate that they are genuinely making an effort to solve problems, it would not be in the best interest of elected officials to squelch those efforts.

We've already seen examples of states refusing government mandates over inadequate funding. How much more powerful could those refusals be if they were based on evidence that the mandates themselves are flawed and not in the best interest of students? How much more effective might they be if they were accompanied by concrete plans for local control of schools that would lead to the effectiveness of education we all seek?

As you read about the efforts made in Scotland, ask yourself how they might be modified to work in your own community.

The Basic Questions

A key question considered in Scotland's national debate on education was what kind of education students would need in the 21st century. It is unreasonable to assume that a form of education that came into existence centuries ago can remain relevant as society experiences rapid changes in values, lifestyle, and priorities. Thus, while acknowledging what was good in the present system, the Minister of Education asked the Scottish people to engage in a discussion on six key questions.

- Why? What is education for?
- What? The curriculum
- How? How should children learn?
- Who? Who should help children learn?
- When? When should learning take place?
- Where? Where should learning take place?

Open-ended questions such as this are useful in eliciting discussion that might not occur if respondents were limited to answering survey questions. Those who write such surveys are often restricted by their own assumptions or biases.

Initially, those assigned to implement the discussions weren't surprised to discover that many Scottish citizens didn't even know about the debate. This was particularly true of citizens who had no direct connection with education...who were uninvolved in the schools because they had no children, or who had dropped out of school themselves.

Secondly, many seemed unconvinced that pervasive change was possible. The practices of traditional education are so familiar and have been around for so long that they seem to many as unchanging as the sunrise.

Because of their intimate familiarity with education, teachers were both the most familiar with the study and the most open to discussing fundamental change, although they expressed some cynicism about the extent to which the government would pay attention to the results.

Once people overcame these initial obstacles, many seemed eager to express their opinions. As focus groups formed and individuals were interviewed, a wide variety of ideas emerged.

Once the data were collected, there was a period of reflection...what did it all mean and what changes might arise to address people's concerns? Ideas were summarized, reports were written, and the first tentative plans for implementation were devised.

Discussions were wide ranging and the analyses are interesting to read. For those who are interested in more detail, see www.scottish.parliament.uk/S1/official_report/ cttee/educ-02/edr02-discuss.htm

Depending on where such discussions are held and who is involved, the results might be quite different, but some of the conclusions reached by the Scottish study and the new questions they suggest would be a great way to begin developing one's own plan for community involvement.

Overall Key Question

Is there a need in a rapidly changing world for radical change in the education system?

A major conclusion reached after reflecting on the comments people made in these discussions is the following.

- Education does not have a single purpose. It must have a variety of purposes in a multicultural society that is deeply affected by globalizing influences.

Assuming that people do indeed want education to fill a number of different roles, the present trend that creates the same standards for all would seem misdirected. Providing "equal opportunities" for all students to develop to their fullest capacity and to achieve their goals in life must be based on a careful analysis of needs rather than an easily administered and tested list of "things that *all* students must know and be able to do."

Beyond the development of literacy and numeracy, which one might assume will always be a primary function of schools, educators must begin to develop creative and workable ways to help each child grow and develop; to recognize and build on each child's strengths, while providing opportunities for them to use and strengthen areas in which they are less skilled. Those tasks cannot be accomplished in the present educational environment because of the pervasive assumptions about the way school is 'sposed to be.

Reflection on the Scottish discussions led to a variety of new questions clustered around six themes. Honest answers to these questions can arise only when people are willing to suspend existing beliefs and assumptions and take a fresh look at possibilities rather than invoking traditional limitations. Unless these questions are seriously examined, any proposed reforms will be superficial at best.

Imagine how these questions might apply to your own community or schools. Much of the following is directly quoted from the Scottish report. I've changed a few phrases to make the questions applicable on a broader level.

Theme 1: Coping with Change and Uncertainty

Key question

How can the education system help children and young people to cope with high levels of uncertainty and the rapid pace of change?

Context

Continuous rapid change is the defining circumstance of the moment. Its speed, profound impact, and global application are critical factors. Enabling people to cope with such change must be a major purpose of the education system. Coping with continuous change requires new learning strategies.

Some current issues

➢ People must be able to deal with problems that do not have definite answers and live with diversity without becoming unsettled. Coping with change is as much a cultural and psychological phenomenon as a matter of acquiring new skills to meet the needs of changing circumstances at work and in other aspects of life. How can education ensure that people have the cultural and personal resources to deal with change?

➢ Change affects education itself. It could be argued that education has not yet been much affected by the knowledge age, and yet is expected to prepare its students for living with change and uncertainty. While many students have fully entered the information age, their schools and teachers are playing catch up. Should and can education undergo large scale change in response to current technology or for other reasons?

➢ What are the possibilities for new means of funding, managing, and governing education? What should the roles of parents, teachers and the local community be in governing schools? How should their roles relate to the role of the elected local authority and to the national level?

➢ Education is itself a force for change in society. So the debate has to be as much about the kind of society we want as the changes we would like to see in education. What are the goals that society is now setting for itself, and how should education help to achieve these goals? Are the current links among education, industry, and commerce appropriate?

Theme 2: Engaging with Ideas

Key question

How far should education encourage children and young people to be capable of engaging with existing knowledge and developing innovative ideas as the basis for questioning authority and social conventions?

Context

Education is normally held to have a socializing role. This is most often stated in terms of promoting a strong, homogeneous society. It has also frequently been given an economic dimension:

education is seen as critical to national prosperity in the knowledge age. But education is also about promoting citizenship. This has to do with sustaining democratic society, and involves both challenge and dissent. It is essentially about promoting a critical dialogue between the individual good citizen and a listening society.

Some current issues

➢ The individual can contribute only on the basis of well-informed thoughts. Therefore education has to engage with ideas and values and has to develop intellectual capacity. Does the present educational system do this adequately? Are these objectives consistent with the current emphasis on assessment?

➢ Developing well-informed thinking requires depth of study as well as breadth. How can both of these be achieved?

➢ Should education be seen as an end in itself? Another way of putting this is to ask whether living the life of an educated person could be itself a key purpose in life.

➢ These views could challenge traditional institutions. Can and should our schools be more "democratic"? What are the implications for school management and curriculum?

➢ Equally, however, the idea of education for citizenship challenges extreme child-centeredness because it links the right to be heard to the possession of appropriate knowledge, understandings and personal qualities. In other words, this view tends to portray the period of initial education as a kind of apprenticeship to society. Is this an appropriate view of the role of education?

Theme 3: Keeping Everyone Involved with Learning

Key question

Is what we are currently doing in schools an adequate proxy for what we think education ought to do?

Context

Many individuals and groups feel alienated from society, including from the democratic process itself. Large minorities of young people are alienated specifically from learning and education. Children from poor families and deprived communities continue to face greater obstacles to educational success.

Such obstacles and alienation exist alongside the successes of [present] education: while a majority now makes significant progress through education, the minority which does not make that progress feels increasingly isolated.

Even for the successful students, an unstimulating curriculum, the pressure of competition and the need to concentrate on gaining qualifications that may lead to worthwhile employment can leave little time for less structured or less academic types of learning or, indeed, for those intellectual pursuits that are not formally assessed.

Some current issues

➢ Despite some attempts to match resources to needs, poverty and disadvantage remain strongly correlated with educational failure. Is this a problem that education can tackle on its own? What other measures should society take to try and ensure comparability of outcome for young people from all backgrounds? How can schools work with other agencies to address these issues?

➢ How can the disadvantages that continue to be faced by some women in technical fields be overcome?

➢ Some adolescents are deeply alienated from school. How can this be challenged?

➢ Some of this alienation underpins the pervasive drug culture. How can the promotion of well-being—including health—be incorporated into formal education?

➢ The full variety of a multicultural society is not yet being addressed, and thus many schools alienate young people who are not part of the majority cultures. The extreme form of this is racism. How can education help students to appreciate and live with diversity?

➢ The reasons for these many different kinds of alienation perhaps lie in a failure of attitudes to keep pace with social change (which is obviously an instance of failure to cope with change in general) and, in the case of adolescence, the failure of an ever-extending period of education to inspire and engage. How can education be made appealing to young people in worthwhile ways?

➢ Confidence and autonomy provide part of the motivation to learn, and are promoted best by a system which is responsive to individual needs. How can learners be encouraged to develop self-confidence and to exercise choice in a mature way?

Theme 4: Promoting a Sense of Identity

Key question

Is there something distinctive and special about the way that a particular school in a particular community should respond to change?

Context

Acceptance of an identity is a beginning point for personal development, and so promoting a sense of identity is an important role for education. A strong sense of community identity is also essential to building cultural capital—the reservoir of knowledge and capacities that can be passed on between the generations. In a multi-cultural society, the notion of 'coherent variety', or managing diversity in a respectful and inclusive manner, is crucial. This involves community, regional, state, country, and global dimensions, but the exact balance among all of these is not easy to find.

Some current issues

➢ Culture is partly about shared heritage. What is that heritage? Does education have a responsibility for passing it on? How is the heritage changed by the inclusion of new cultures from outside the region or country, and by the adaptation of old cultures to a changing world?

➢ How should the education system relate to the country's inheritance? Is national culture weakening, is it taking on new forms, and what should the role of education be in developing that culture?

➢ Is multiculturalism different in this region, state, or nation than elsewhere? What, if any, different accommodations would this require in schools?

➢ Culture is also about accommodating initiative. How can dissent and critical thinking be built into a shared heritage? What does education have to do to encourage the valuing of critical thinking throughout society?

➢ The global questions about educational purpose need to be expressed in contemporary and local terms. What are the key national traditions that allow us to respond to global change?

➢ How does contemporary society need to change to support an appropriate education system? What traditions impede our responding adequately? Are some of these traditions difficult for us to give up?

Theme 5: Developing Necessary Skills

Key question

What skills are needed to make sense of large amounts of information, and to bring them together into a coherent response to change?

Context

Despite different views on the overall purposes of education, there is a large measure of consensus on necessary skills and the importance of establishing the highest of standards. What is often lacking is a coherent explanation of how these skills relate to educational purposes.

Some current issues

➢ Basic skills are usually seen as literacy, numeracy, and increasingly, information technology. But to insure that the selected skills are truly "essential," consideration of the nature of these skills must be revisited.

➢ Do the demands of new technology require advanced information handling and critical thinking skills as much as practical technological skills? Are there other skills which should be recognized as being of comparable importance?

➢ Information handling is a necessary basis for critical thinking, but that does not mean that developing the skills of critical thinking can or should be postponed until after basic skills are acquired. Is there a risk that the current

strong emphasis on the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills may be demotivating, particularly for low achievers? How can individual student interests form a matrix through which these skills can be learned?

➢ Critical thinking requires a range of higher order skills. These include problem solving skills, communication skills, and a range of inter-personal and cooperation skills. How can the higher order skills be developed without displacing the necessary attention to basic skills? Are the present divisions of knowledge and the order in which it is presented appropriate to present needs?

➢ The extent to which the higher order skills are genuinely transferable between contexts is open to debate. Learning has to be about something. How far should learning be about gaining factual knowledge? How far should it be about developing the skills needed to interpret that knowledge?

➢ In a changing world the skills of managing one's own further learning are obviously significant. How important is learning how to learn? How can these learning skills best be developed?

➢ There is always a risk that education is seen in terms that are too narrowly drawn. Is there a danger that in the pursuit of skills we pay insufficient attention to the artistic, emotional and imaginative aspects of individual development?

➢ What role should assessment play? What types of assessment(s) might be developed to more accurately reflect individual growth and learning?

Theme 6: Fitting Structure to Purpose

Key question

Are schools the right places for all young people?

Context

Part of the process of change involves challenges to deeply ingrained assumptions within the education service. Education is still largely undertaken in the period before working life and it is undertaken in three largely separate age-segregated types of institution (primary, secondary, tertiary). It is also managed in ways that are founded, perhaps unconsciously, on so-called "principles" culled from outmoded, industrial models. There is a need to articulate our management thought more clearly, comparing it critically with cutting-edge thought and practice at an international level.

Some current issues

➢ Challenging these assumptions involves a constructive reappraisal of the concept of the comprehensive school. What kind of reappraisal of the structure of comprehensive schooling should we undertake? What are some of the areas of organization that might need to change (eg. separating students by age or grade, separating knowledge into disciplines, students taking the same amount of time to progress through a grade...)?

➢ Can this reappraisal be undertaken while maintaining the principles of equity and social justice which underlie the principles of public education?
➢ There is also a questioning of the lack of continuity between primary and secondary, with particular attention to the dip in progress which some pupils experience in middle school. What can be done to overcome these problems?
➢ The development of specialist schools (magnet schools, faith-based schools, charter schools, etc) have been proposed as ways of tackling the perceived inadequacies of the comprehensive system. How should educators react to these ideas? What role, if any, can or should such forms of education play in the future? [There is also an increase in home-schooling.]
➢ More dramatically—and in the slightly longer term—structures may be revolutionized by the impact of on-line learning. Does this challenge the traditional concept of school? How might schools use this technology to the advantage of students?
➢ Are the purposes of education constant at all stages of education, or should they alter with the age of the learners?
➢ Should pre-school provision be seen as a preparation for primary in terms of social mixing and developing life skills rather than mainly a preparation for reading and number work?

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These questions may well have triggered other, more specific ones. Some may be irrelevant in your community. And there are certainly many more questions that could and should be asked.

Criteria for Change

After reflection on the discussions in the Scottish study, a number of recommendations were made about future reform efforts. Any reform proposal would have to be judged against these principles and would be rejected if it did not address these concerns.

➢ There should always be a broad view of the purposes of education: singling out any one purpose as the main aim of education is never adequate.
➢ There is a need for fundamental change in what happens inside schools, because in a rapidly changing world, education must change to meet new needs.
➢ There is a need to move away from the current overemphasis on an academic, subject-centered curriculum, memorizing of factual content, assessment, and examination.
➢ There must be a reduction in the external setting of goals for schools and for the system as a whole. Schools must be allowed much greater flexibility than at present in how they respond to the needs of individual students and their communities. [It is important to note that accountability is not ignored here. The study recommends that schools be required to publish information about their goals and how they are meeting those goals on a regular basis for use by parents and the wider community.]

➢ Much more attention should be given to developing higher-order capacities.
➢ Education should seek a balance between cohesion and diversity.
➢ Students should learn to (be given the opportunity to) manage their own learning.
➢ Students should be more actively involved in decision-making within the school.
➢ Schooling should be a satisfactory experience in itself, and not just a preparation for later life.
➢ Schooling should lay the foundation for a lifelong process of education.

As you read these points, I ask you to consider whether any of them surprise you. If we truly consider what we know about student growth and development, and about the nature of our changing world, why haven't the factors on this list been our criteria all along? Why does it take the expenditure of considerable time and resources to "discover" what experienced educators have known to be true? And why do government policies so often run counter to these principles?

Ways to Begin

It is a sad fact that many schools not only fail to elicit opinions from parents and their communities, but actively work to avoid such contact. Where this is the case, the first step will be opening a meaningful dialogue and establishing an environment of trust.

Just as they did in Scotland, many people will initially perceive such a request for their input as simply a public relations ploy. Jaded by similar efforts in the past, they will assume that little will change. It will take time and effort to prove those perceptions incorrect.

When entering a discussion of topics with a long tradition—topics that many assume are immutable and fixed—I've found it useful to find a way to bypass "what is." For example, rather than looking at the schools as they are now and imagining how they might change, I've challenged teachers to imagine that they were in charge of developing a public education system on a new planet. I make it clear that there are no preconceptions and no limits on how they can structure the process. Even then, it is often necessary to reinforce the idea that no "sacred cow" is beyond discussion.

Initial discussion should be as open as possible. Use techniques of brainstorming in which no judgment is passed on ideas as they are suggested. No idea is ruled out as being "impossible."

It's important to withhold the need to quickly identify "answers." The purpose here is to create a new paradigm...in a sense, to decide the background against which issues will be seen. The more different perspectives that emerge, the richer the knowledge base from which solutions can be mined.

Rather than beginning with what is wrong, begin with what is right! Encourage people to identify what your schools are already doing that is achieving desired results?

Above all, do whatever it takes to insure that the "tone" of focus groups or other discussions is one of fact-finding... exploration...curiosity about possibilities, rather than about deciding what (or who) is right or wrong. Agree to consider the possibility that there may be several ways to achieve the same goal...all of which are necessary.

This is no small task. It requires constantly reminding one another that, at some level, everyone involves shares a common goal. It requires reminding ourselves to say, "Yes, and..." rather than "Yes, but...!" And it requires putting concern for children and the future above personal needs to "win."

Dialogue...not debate

A dialogue is a special kind of discussion with its own set of rules.

In a dialogue,

- You prefer a certain position but do not cling to it.
- You are ready to listen to others.
- Your mindset is not one of 'convincing others that your way is right' but of asking what you can learn from them.
- You recognize that other people's input will help you refine your own ideas or reveal your misconceptions.
- It is not argument or debate. It is not win-lose. In dialogue all sides win by coming up with a more appropriate solution than a single person could ever have.

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey speaks of *synergy*, which comes from the Greek word meaning cooperation. Synergy is often described as "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts." But it is more. Synergy occurs when people work together and produce something that is greater than any of them could have done individually.

According to Covey, "Many people have not really experienced even a moderate degree of synergy in their family life or in other interactions. They've been trained and scripted into defensive and protective communications or into believing that life and other people can't be trusted. This represents one of the great tragedies and wastes in life, because so much potential remains...completely undeveloped and unused...The essence of synergy is to value differences—to respect them, to build on strengths, to compensate for weaknesses."

As hopeless as it sometimes seems, it IS possible to change the face of education in our lifetime. But first, we must transform ourselves. We must move out of the shells that have limited our views of what is possible. Yes, those shells have also provided us with a sense of safety and security...but at what cost.

In the immortal words of C. S. Lewis, "It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at the present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

Until next time...Judy