

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

### Why Is School Reform So Hard?

**The dual character of schooling invariably generates contradictory impulses when it comes to reform.**

By **Linda Christensen & Stan Karp**

right The dual character of schooling invariably generates contradictory impulses when it comes to reform. [← Back to Story](#)

With districts across the nation reeling from the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act, which may put over 75 percent of the nation's schools on the "needs improvement" list, it's a good time to ask again why successful school reform is so hard.

Under the No Child Left Behind legislation, the federal government is using test scores to identify which schools will face an escalating series of mandatory "reforms," ranging from intervention by consultants to wholesale dismissal of school staffs to the imposition of private management on public schools.

Yet even according to a recent study by the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (an enthusiastic supporter of the legislation), the "reform interventions" mandated by the new law have a success rate of well below 50 percent. According to the study:

"Several lessons can be drawn from America's previous experience with state- and district-level interventions into failing schools: Some turnaround efforts have improved some schools, but success is not the norm. No particular intervention appears more successful than any other. Interventions are uneven in their implementation and always hard to sustain. It is nearly impossible to determine which interventions offer the most bang for the buck because they are attempted in very different situations."

These findings resonate with our own experience as classroom teachers and school reformers for over 25 years each in urban systems at opposite ends of the country: Portland, Ore., and Paterson, N.J. Together, we have been through state takeovers, school reconstitutions, site-based management, small-school restructuring, state standards and testing (and more testing), and "whole-school reform" initiatives of all kinds. We've learned the hard way that while there are many model schools, model classrooms, and model educators from which we can learn a great deal, there are no model districts, no model states, and no model systems that have

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put in place and sustained the policies and programs needed to deliver quality education and outcomes to all children. Why should this be so?

We think the reasons have less to do with the specifics of any reform strategy or intervention than with the dual character of schools in our society.

School reform, especially in urban districts, often invokes a common rhetoric: "all children can learn," "high standards for all," "no child should be left behind." These sentiments resonate with all who care about schools and children. But such rhetoric can also hide the historic reality that schools have always had a dual character.

On the one hand, public schools remain perhaps our most important democratic institution. They are the product of decades of effort to give substance to the nation's promises of equal opportunity, self-improvement, and success through hard work and achievement. Schools play a key role in American dreams of class mobility and generational progress, and their success or failure has a daily impact on the lives and prospects of millions of children and families.

**Schools historically have been instruments for reproducing class and race privilege as it exists in the larger society.**

At the same time, schools historically have been instruments for reproducing class and race privilege as it exists in the larger society. The low academic performance of schools in poor areas, the inadequate facilities, the endemic underfunding, the persistence of tracking and resegregation, the notorious administrative instability and shallow trendiness of reform efforts, the toleration of failure and disrespect for communities of color, all reflect real relations of inequality and injustice that permeate our society. Through ideology, gatekeeping, various forms of stratification, and bureaucratic, often authoritarian, administration, schools function as a large sifting-and-labeling operation that re-creates and justifies existing distributions of wealth and power. In many ways, schools reproduce the very inequality that American mythology professes they are designed to overcome.

authoritarian, administration, schools function as a large sifting-and-labeling operation that re-creates and justifies existing distributions of wealth and power. In many ways, schools reproduce the very inequality that American mythology professes they are designed to overcome.

This dual character of schooling—its democratic promise and its institutional service to a society based on class, race, and gender privilege—invariably generates contradictory impulses when it comes to reform. At every turn, the gap between the promise and practice of schooling creates a tension: Should the curriculum reflect a mainstream consensus or a multicultural pluralism? Should schools endorse traditional values or promote independent, critical thought? Are standards being raised to bar the door to some or assure better outcomes for all? Should parents and classroom teachers have as much to say about reform agendas as governors and corporate executives? Should schools be as concerned with promoting anti-racist attitudes as marketable skills? Will new forms of assessment provide better ways to report and improve student performance or more effective ways to sort and label kids for predetermined slots in society?

To be sure, answers to complicated questions of educational policy cannot be reduced to either/or propositions. But the debate over policy options inevitably takes place within this context of the dual nature of schooling. The choices made push schools in one direction or the other along a continuum from promoting social justice to reinforcing the status quo. Whether any particular reform initiative improves or impoverishes life in the classroom often depends on how it fits into this larger context.

The dual character of schooling suggests that reforms cannot be judged by their self-proclaimed goals, rhetorical promises, or short-term effect on test scores. Instead, they must be measured by their ability to deliver more democratic classroom experiences and more equitable results and outcomes across the system.

Take, for example, the current enthusiasm in reform circles for small- school experiments. Small schools show promise in large part because they attempt to change the social relations of schooling; that is, they create a more human scale and more supportive environment for collaborative, personalized interaction among students, teachers, and communities. They can nourish creativity and mutual accountability in powerful ways that large, traditional schools cannot. Small schools can also introduce elements of choice, pluralism, and innovation into historically bureaucratized and stagnant systems.

But like most reforms, small schools can also be developed in problematic ways. They can become specialized magnets that "cream" the best students and most committed parents. They can claim a disproportionate share of resources for a relatively small slice of the student population. Instead of providing models that promote systemwide reform, they can be insulated pockets of privilege, resegregation, and tracking. It all depends on which of the system's dual tendencies prevails.

This is one reason for keeping a sharp eye on the big picture and asking "who benefits and who does not?" whenever a reform proposal is put on the table. There are many educators, parents, and concerned advocates at all levels pushing the system to realize its most ambitious and democratic possibilities. These heroic efforts need encouragement in the face of hard choices and daunting problems. But they also need a healthy dose of realism about the nature of the system we're trying to move.

**Real school reform must be about challenging it.**

Unfortunate as it may be, schools have never been just about educating children. They are also about constructing social and political power. Real school reform must be about challenging it. Until we find the political will and vision to put social justice at the heart of the debate about public education, school reform will continue to be an exasperating tug of war with limited impact on the status quo.

*Linda Christensen, a high school language arts teacher in Portland, Ore., for more than 20 years, is now the language arts coordinator for the Portland public school system and the director of the Portland Writing Project. Stan Karp has taught high school English and journalism in Paterson, N.J., for more than 25 years, and is an editor of the Milwaukee-based publication Rethinking Schools. The two co-edited the recently published Rethinking School Reform: Views From the Classroom (Rethinking Schools Ltd., 2003). They can be reached, respectively, at [lchrist@aol.com](mailto:lchrist@aol.com) and [stankarp@aol.com](mailto:stankarp@aol.com) .*

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