WASTING MINDS

WHY OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM IS FAILING AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

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| PREFACE |

When we launched *Education Week* in September 1981, I, like most Americans, knew virtually nothing about elementary and secondary education. I had spent the previous 20 years as a university administrator—a decade at Johns Hopkins and another at Brown—and I thought about schools only when I was seeking one for my kids.

I left Brown in 1978 to become president and editor of Editorial Projects in Education, which had founded *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1966. My task was to find the next "big project." After a year's consideration, we decided on a "chronicle of lower education" because we became convinced that the public education system was about to enter a period of unprecedented ferment and controversy.

Student test scores had been declining for 20 years; one out of four students was leaving school without graduating; attendance rates in many urban schools were as low as 60 percent; and colleges and businesses were reporting that high school graduates were coming to them poorly prepared and in need of remedial courses.

To get a sense of whether a weekly newspaper was needed, my cofounder, Martha Matzke, and I talked with hundreds of people in the field and studied all the educational periodicals we could find. We were not impressed by what we saw or heard. People we interviewed generally said three things: (1) there is not enough news in education to justify a weekly; (2) education is local, and people in one state don't care what is going on in another state; and (3) people in public schools don't read, so at best we should consider

a monthly newsletter that shunned charts and graphs in favor of cartoons.

We decided to publish *Education Week* despite the warnings because we believed that if the United States really was on the cusp of a revolution in public education, educators and policymakers would need comprehensive, accurate, objective, and timely information. No periodical was meeting that need at the time.

We soon discovered that the people we interviewed were wrong on two out of three claims. We found more than enough news, as well as a widespread and growing interest in education nationally. Unfortunately, the warning that too many people in public schools don't read—at least periodicals that deal with issues and policy, like *Education Week*—proved to be closer to the truth. Although there are more than 3 million teachers, more than 90,000 principals, about 14,000 superintendents, more than 100,000 school board members, and tens of thousands of people in administrative jobs throughout the system, *Education Week* subscriptions have hovered at just over 50,000 since the current school reform movement began in the early 1980s.

We were determined to make *Education Week* as independent, comprehensive, objective, and accurate as it is possible for a newspaper to be. We took no editorial positions but invited the opinions of others; I tried to keep my personal opinion to myself and, though that intention was sometimes frustrating, succeeded. Our only bias in publishing the new newspaper was the belief that public education is a social good.

Increasing Disillusionment

As the criticism of education mounted, I found myself feeling defensive. I have always believed that public schools play a vital role in a democratic society. And the criticism, it seemed to me, was unfair. After all, we were asking schools to fulfill a mission they were not designed for—educating all students to high levels, despite daunting socioeconomic and demographic challenges in a rapidly changing world.

With each passing year, as I came to understand the system and how it works, my sympathy for the plight of public schools eroded.

Schools, after all, are the institutions that society created to educate its young—not just white affluent kids, not just smart kids, but all children all the time. We have no adequate alternative system of public education and no alternative student body, so the schools we have must educate the children we have. And if schools can't transform themselves to carry out their mission successfully, then they should be replaced with new institutions that are designed for the task.

By the time I "retired" in 1997 and moved back to Rhode Island, I was so frustrated and disappointed that I fully expected to turn my attention to almost anything but education. Then, to my consternation, I was asked to serve on the board of Big Picture Learning. I'd never heard of it, but I agreed because the late Ted Sizer was chairman and I had admired him and his work for many years. I accepted, and that decision ended my brief retirement and set me on a new course in the reform of public education.

Big Picture was formed as a nonprofit organization in 1995 by Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor—two extraordinary and innovative leaders. They were senior fellows at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University when Rhode Island chief state school officer Peter McWalters asked them to design a new state high school based on their educational philosophy.

The Metropolitan Career and Technical Academy ("The Met") opened in 1996 with a freshman class of 50 students. It was like no other high school in America—no classes, no courses, no grades, no common curriculum. Teachers are not traditional instructors but rather "advisors." An advisor stays with the same 15 students for the entire four years of high school. Students design their own individual education plan, which is anchored in an internship that takes them into the workplace two days a week to pursue something they are deeply interested in. In planning their personal curriculum, students work closely with their advisors, workplace mentors, and parents.

The Met was so successful in its first four years that it attracted international attention. Most of its students were disadvantaged minority students, many of whom were on the path to dropping out. All but a couple of students earned a diploma—they were often the first in their families to graduate from high school—and

virtually every graduate entered a college or some other postsecondary program.

Tom Vander Ark, then education director of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was so impressed with The Met that he called it his "favorite high school in America" (Macris, 2000, p. 1C). Subsequently, a series of grants from Gates, beginning in 2000, has funded the creation of nearly 70 Big Picture schools in 18 states and several foreign countries.

Big Picture Learning restored my hope that we can create public schools that work. I had visited successful innovative public schools during my time at *Education Week*, like the Urban Academy and Beacon School in New York City, El Puente in Milwaukee, and Oyster School in Washington, D.C. But they were outliers—the exceptions that proved the rule. My involvement with Big Picture and the farsighted generosity of Gates convinced me that a movement to establish new, small, innovative schools that are different from each other and very different from conventional schools could well be the savior of public education in this country.

Increasing Frustration

So my journey did not end in 1997 as I had expected. It has just followed a radically different course. Consequently, my opinions have evolved and changed during the past decade, and, I hope, my understanding has deepened. It is customary for people to become more conservative as they age; I've become much more liberal—perhaps even radical. The more I learned about our system of public education, the more frustrated and angry I became. Then, when I joined Big Picture, I got a glimpse of what the future might be like if we had the wisdom, inventiveness, and courage to create it.

In 1999, I wrote a piece calling for the creation of a parallel system of public schools. I tried to get foundation support to create an organization to promote the idea. No takers. But my belief in the need for a new system of public schools has grown stronger.

This book is based on what I've learned about the public education system over the past 30 years. It is mostly a compendium of my opinions, but they are informed opinions that come from reading

hundreds of books, papers, and reports (as well as almost every word in *Education Week* for more than 20 years), attending hundreds of meetings (often with the smartest people in the field), and visiting more than 120 schools (a few so good they literally made me weep and some so bad they literally made me weep). In short, I spent most of my waking hours for two decades thinking, reading, writing, and talking about public education.

I decided to write this book because I am appalled that so few people in society—from high-level policymakers to education leaders to parents and the public—understand the critical issues in education and the urgent need to put aside their preconceptions and challenge the conventional wisdom.

Eminent scholar and researcher John Goodlad recently put it this way:

> Over a period of sixty years, I have taught in a one-room school and school for delinquent boys, taught in every grade from the first through graduate school, been a dean for sixteen years, and studied in depth and breadth educational change, schooling, the education of educators, and more. I now look back in wonderment, anger, and near-despair at the stark reality of "we the people" scarcely murmuring for eight years over the imposition of the No Child Left Behind Act on our public schools. No powerful intellect is required for coming to the conclusion that we the people are grossly undereducated in what education is and negligent in the informed care of our irreplaceable asset, the public school. . . .
>
> I have concluded that we will never have the schools our democracy requires until their well-being is a major priority of local communities. *And we will not have them until policymakers, business roundtables, educational organizations, teacher-preparing institutions, and community leaders agree on what all schools are for.* The challenges are enormous, and unless we take them seriously and begin the necessary learning now, our century-old tinkering with schooling will continue. (Goodlad, 2009, para. 6, 7, emphasis added)

I have written this book because I share Goodlad's "wonderment, anger, and near-despair" and because the overriding purpose of my life is to help try to change the way Americans think about schools and education.

I realize that those who labor in the cause of better schools—many of them friends and colleagues—already know all this stuff, and most of them reject it. I don't expect to convert them, but I hope that the questions and arguments I raise at least give them pause. I also hope some of what I've written here finds its way into the public debate over education.

Mostly, I wrote this book for teachers, administrators, and opinion leaders who influence important decisions in society in all walks of life. I hope to reach some of those who shape education policy.

As I see it, Americans today face two overriding questions about education:

- *Can we get the schools we need simply by improving the ones we have?* Reluctantly, I have concluded that we can't.
- *How do we get from the schools we have to the schools we need?* I've written this book in the hope of providing at least a partial answer.

The old cliché is that pessimists see the glass half empty and optimists see the glass half full. I am neither. Regarding public education, I am an idealist: I see the glass as it is and can't accept the fact that it is not full.

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| INTRODUCTION |

At best, actions based on incorrect assumptions lead to ineffectiveness; at worst, they lead to failure.

We have known for a long time that our schools are in trouble. When the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik* half a century ago, politicians and educators declared that the United States was losing the race for space and called for immediate efforts to improve public schools. Laws were passed. Programs were funded. Curricula were revised. But no significant positive changes from that era have endured in public schools. The alarms, along with the so-called reform efforts they triggered, subsided as the United States quickly trumped the Soviets in space.

Some 25 years later, the alarms sounded again. Student test scores had been steadily declining for two decades, and dropout rates were unacceptably high. Japan was capturing the auto market and buying some of the nation's most prestigious office towers, like the Exxon Building in New York, Citicorp Center in San Francisco, and ARCO Plaza in Los Angeles, as well as the fabled Pebble Beach golf resort. Politicians and business leaders fretted about America's decline in the global economy, credited Japan's highly regimented and rigorous education for its success, and once again demanded better schools to make us more competitive.

The school reform movement that began in the early 1980s continues unabated to this day. It is driven mainly by the same rhetoric—that the United States must have the best schools in the

world to win in the global economic competition—even though Japan long since entered a prolonged economic slump and U.S. business recovered without the aid of a rejuvenated education system.

Consequently, the United States, for a quarter-century, has been engaged in the most intensive effort in history to improve public education. Hundreds of blue-ribbon committees at every level of government and in the private sector have proposed solutions; policymakers have enacted thousands of laws and regulations; hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent on school reforms. Yet, despite this extraordinary effort, schools are not much better today than they were when we started.

Much Effort, Few Results

A nonprofit national security agency released a report in the fall of 2009 finding that 75 percent of Americans ages 17 through 24 (about 20 million people) are ineligible for military service—mainly because they didn't graduate from high school, have a criminal record, or are mentally or physically unfit (Davenport & Brown, 2009). Although the undeniable litany of failure is too long and too well known to repeat here, it can be captured in a few simple statistics:

- Approximately 25 of every 100 students drop out before graduating (Stillwell, 2010).
- In its latest report (2010), ACT found that only 24 percent of high schoolers who took the ACT were college-ready in all subject areas.
- In fall 2000, 28 percent of entering college freshmen enrolled in one or more remedial reading, writing, or mathematics courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2003).
- According to data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2008, only 55.9 percent of first-time full-time bachelor's degree–seeking students earned a degree within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b).

The message of those few statistics is that the majority of the young people who enroll in our public schools are poorly served—they

either drop out or get a diploma but are not adequately prepared for college or work.

The cost of this failure in human and financial terms is staggering. Indeed, a business with such a record would go bankrupt, and it amazes me that millions of parents don't roar with outrage. One might even argue that this dismal situation exists because there is no outrage.

Why, despite great effort, have we made so little progress? Why does the problem even seem to get worse, no matter what we do? I believe it is because Americans, especially the decision makers and opinion leaders, cannot or will not set aside their special interests and deeply held biases about education to confront reality.

This is the case not only in education, but in most of the major issues confronting the United States today, including energy, for example. The presidential campaign of 2008 (and $4-a-gallon gasoline prices) raised the public's awareness of America's energy crisis and the dire consequences of continuing on our same course. This was not news; the energy crisis has been building for decades. We were warned by leaders and events on numerous past occasions of the enormous costs to our environment, our economy, and our national security that would result if we did not act decisively to end our dependence on carbon fuels and on foreign sources. Nearly 40 years ago, these rising concerns triggered the environmental movement and led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency to address the issues of air and water pollution, toxic waste, and many other destructive effects of negligence and greed. But the Vietnam War ended and so did the spirit of protest that had, for a few short years, spoken "truth to power." Only in recent years have Americans come to realize that we absolutely must begin at once to change the way we think about energy. Now they need to realize that we must also begin at once to change the way we think about education.

Changing Our Thinking About Education

The energy crisis has reached the point that the dominant assumptions are now being questioned. We are beginning to understand

that new thinking and bold action are required and that almost everything we do involving energy has to be radically changed.

Similarly, we must understand that the educational challenges facing the nation are every bit as daunting as those in energy, even though they do not alarm the public to the same degree. Radical thinking and action are just as critical if we are to provide our children with the schools they and the society so desperately need.

The two crises have much in common. Both threaten our welfare because we failed to anticipate the future and make the changes necessary to adapt to it.

Decisions in energy policy have been based on major assumptions that are not valid—assumptions such as these: we will always have enough carbon fuel so we don't need to invest in alternative energy sources; market forces will take care of the problem; putting restrictions on the energy industry will wreck the economy; the climate is simply going through a phase in the natural cycle and the planet will heal itself.

The major assumptions on which education policy has been based are equally invalid. That may sound like an arrogant exaggeration. After all, most of the people running our public education systems and leading the reform movement are knowledgeable, dedicated, and experienced. The vast majority of them support standards-based accountability, which has been the national education reform strategy of the past 20 years; they obviously believe the assumptions they hold are valid. Indeed, these assumptions are the widely accepted conventional wisdom, taken as gospel by most national and state leaders. That, however, doesn't make them any more correct than the assumptions underlying energy policy that have been so widely accepted by smart people. "We simply assume that the way we see things is the way they really are or the way they should be," says Stephen R. Covey, international authority on leadership and acclaimed author and consultant, "and our attitudes and behaviors grow out of these assumptions" (2004, p. 24).

That set of assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors is at the root of our educational crisis, and therein also lies a solution if one is ever to be found.

A Misdiagnosis of the Problem

The dominant assumptions in education are invalid mainly because they result from a misdiagnosis of the problem. Many of our leaders believe the system is essentially sound and only needs to be ratcheted up. They reject the argument that the education system is so obsolete and out of synch with the rapidly changing world that nothing short of a substantial redesign can create the schools we need.

Most of our leaders at every level have been wrong on both energy and education. They resist and deny reality because it is so difficult to accept and frightening to contemplate. The issues are so complex and controversial that people find it more expedient to accept most of the system as a given and pursue reforms that are incremental and marginal. They are convinced that a major overhaul of the system would wreak political havoc and disrupt the education of millions of children. In the face of such dire possibilities, why take chances with radical change?

Finally, efforts to overhaul or redesign the education system are fiercely resisted because the status quo is so firmly entrenched and the culture of public schools is so deeply embedded. School boards, administrators, and teachers are not bad people who want schools to fail, but they feel compelled to protect their routines, their status, and their turf, and they weave a rationale to justify that.

Because the reform strategy has been based on flawed assumptions, it has been driving the education system in the wrong direction; and the further it goes, the more difficult it will be to get it on the right course—if that is even possible. And because the assumptions are so widely accepted, they represent an almost insurmountable obstacle to doing what must be done to improve the existing public schools, let alone create new and different ones.

That situation is unfortunate and dangerous. An effective education system is, in many ways, a prerequisite to finding solutions to all of the other formidable problems the nation faces. Without it, where will we get the people, the ideas, the creativity, and the technology needed to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of this new century?

We certainly will not get the schools we need if we don't challenge the assumptions on which our education reform strategies and policy decisions have been based. The main purpose of this book is to do exactly that. In Part 1, I examine these major assumptions and try, using facts and logic, to show that they are invalid. In Part 2, I offer the assumptions on which an *effective* school system should be based.

The following assumptions, on which virtually all school reform efforts are based, are so flawed that they lead to action that is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst:

- Students are not performing adequately because they and their teachers don't work hard enough. The solution is a "get-tough" policy like No Child Left Behind.
- The key to improving student performance and closing the achievement gap is to establish rigorous content standards and a core curriculum for all schools—preferably on a national basis.
- Standardized test scores provide an accurate measure of student learning and should be used to determine promotion and graduation.
- The United States should require all students to take algebra in the 8th grade and higher-order math in high school largely in order to increase the number of scientists and engineers and thus make us more competitive in the global economy.
- We need to put a highly qualified teacher in every classroom to deliver an excellent education to every student and improve our schools.
- Having an effective principal in every school would make the difference between a school that works and one that doesn't.
- The student dropout rate can be reduced by dropout-prevention programs and by raising the mandatory attendance age from 16 to 18.
- Making the school day and school year longer will increase student learning.
- If we invest more money in public schools, we will be able to provide every student with an excellent education.

The statement that opened this Introduction bears repeating: At best, actions based on incorrect assumptions lead to ineffectiveness; at worst, they lead to failure.

Research: A Weak Reed

In education, we almost always cite research to buttress our opinions. I do that in this book, even though I know that one can find some research to support almost any opinion. In science, we demand empirical evidence to support our conclusions; in the social sciences, not so much. I once believed that education research would lead us to the promised land of successful schools and high student achievement. I no longer believe that.

Virtually all research on student achievement and school quality is based on standardized test scores. If test scores are not a fair, accurate, or reliable measure of student learning, then the research and its conclusions are flawed and unreliable.

Moreover, because there is so much room for subjective interpretation of data in education research, the findings often cancel each other out (especially for those who want to use them to justify decisions). For example, some research insists that money doesn't matter, but some concludes that it does. Vouchers work; no they don't. Learning is more likely in small classes; no it isn't. And on and on. This plethora of research and data provides cover for those who make policy or pronouncements, allowing them to choose the research that supports their preconceived notions.

In this book, I am compelled to cite research that embodies the very faults I just mentioned. That is because research based on test scores is the coin of the realm and is demanded as evidence for action. Equally important, that's about all there is. Would that we had longitudinal research to show effects over time of one approach versus another.

Lacking reliable research findings, much of what I argue is based on personal observations, logic, and common sense. For example, it makes sense, at least to me, that students will learn more if they are motivated to learn, and that they will be more motivated to learn if they have some freedom in deciding what they will learn. It makes

no sense, at least to me, that the dropout rate can be reduced by requiring students to stay in school for another year or two. If a failing student has decided when he turns 16 that staying in school is futile, then extending his sentence by another year or two is cruel and unusual punishment and only delays the inevitable.

As we try to evaluate contradictory assertions, we must also ask the following questions: Where should the burden of proof lie? Should those who question the conventional school model and propose significant change be required to prove in advance that their proposals will accomplish the desired goal?

It makes more sense, at least to me, that those who resist significant change and continue to pursue the current strategy of standards-based accountability be required to prove that it is accomplishing its goals. Instead, in the face of little or no real progress, they argue that doing the same, more intensively and on a national basis, will solve the problem.

I can't prove that the changes recommended in this book will produce the kinds of schools we need. But I can prove, using the metrics accepted by the architects and supporters of the current reform strategy, that the strategy has not worked after nearly two decades of effort. Indeed, the conventional school is obsolete and may very well be beyond repair. It doesn't work for a significant majority of the young people who are required to attend it and never really has. How else do we explain the fact that nearly one-third of the students flunk out or drop out and fewer than half of those who graduate are adequately prepared for either college or the modern workplace?