Overview

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Guest Editor

Toward a Healthy Educational Ecology

In the third of three lectures published in 1989, Lawrence Cremin examined the longstanding tendency of Americans to try to solve many of their problems indirectly through education, rather than directly through political action. This, he said, places enormous burdens on schools and colleges. The burden is exacerbated when we fail—as usually is the case—to take into account the role and contribution of all those agencies and institutions comprising the entire educative ecology.

Not long ago, this omission was much less serious than is today's situation. In smaller, more intimate communities, home, school, and religious institution—each relatively stable and intact—joined in watching over and educating the young. The economic benefits of a common school education appeared to most immigrants to be worth the trade-off—the melting of certain unique cultural traits in the simmering pot of Americanization. The nation's conscience was little troubled by the omission of native Americans and involuntary immigrants already here.

The situation today is profoundly different. We are slowly awakening to the realization that this nation of minorities must rethink the meaning of democracy and the necessary processes of critical socialization into our evolving cultural context. The debate over what constitutes a necessary core of learning for all—now creating some sharp divisions on university campuses—is intensified by the issue of who should participate in determining it. Intimate communities are overshadowed by impersonal ones. Home, school, and religious institution share no common mission, and each is beset with its own share of problems.

The nation is slowly awakening not only to these realities, but also to the realization that schools alone cannot provide the comprehensive educating that is necessary, let alone be the driving force behind revitalizing the economy. Healthy communities have healthy educational ecologies in which each institution or agency plays a significant part. Whereas universities traditionally have perceived themselves to be aloof from and independent of their immediate communities in identifying with a worldwide academic community, a noticeable shift is beginning to occur. Increasingly, some see themselves not only linked to the surrounding community, but also dependent upon strengthening this linkage in the future.

This sense of responsibility and interdependence is at last turning university attention not just to studying the K–12 system, but to working with it for mutual understanding and improvement. The most natural and obvious common ground, one might think, pertains to the education of educators. Colleges and universities currently produce from their undergraduate programs over ninety thousand prospective teachers a year. Part of their preparation is in the classrooms of nearby schools. One would expect these schools and the college or university sending student teachers to them to be joined closely in planning and conducting coherent programs. Such has been, and rarely is, the case.

What appears to be common ground is sharply divided turf. Not only is the logically obvious not commonly perceived, but also pulling aside the tarpaulin to reveal ground on which to engage in school-university collaborative activities does not produce universal celebration. School people are suspicious of the motives of university people who seek to study or even help them. University people occasionally seek the views of school people, but are more accustomed to "doing to them" than to working with them as equal partners. Although professors of education have taken to writing a good deal about school reform in recent years, most have been on the sidelines with respect to participating in it. University expectations for research and publication loom as an obstacle or an excuse or both. And the traditional orientation to the individual as the unit of selection and analysis—for both research and action—leaves professors in most fields feeling inadequate in the face of expectations to deal with the whole of schools.

Some Near-Agreements Regarding Educational Reform

The decade of the 1980s was a bumpy period for schools. They were faced with a call to reform, but no clear directions for it. Indeed, many of the most touted proposals were contradictory and, if implemented, would have cancelled out the effects of others. Nonetheless, the nation has come into the 1990s with some promising near-agreements regarding educational improvement destined to make unique demands on colleges and universities. Dealing with these—if only to reject them—is likely to cause this decade to be a bumpy one for institutions of higher education.

The school as the center of change. Policy makers speak of restructuring schools; grass-roots reformers speak more of renewing them. Both perceive the need for principals and teachers to be responsible stewards closely engaged with parents and others of the community in maintaining excellent schools. Some even see the need for excellence and equity to go hand in hand. What does this mean for the professors of education and the arts and sciences engaged in preparing teachers for the nation's schools?

Simultaneously renewing schools and the education of educators. There has not been, until now, any connecting of reform in schooling and in teacher education. Even James B. Conant, in addressing a book to the reform of high schools in 1959 and another to the reform of teacher education just four years later, did not connect the two. But suddenly, recognition of the need is growing—and will continue both to grow and to produce collaboration between schools and universities throughout the decade.

Professional development schools. Central to this recognition is growing belief in the necessity for school districts and universities to join in creating exemplary schools—variously called partner, clinical, or professional development schools—where neophyte teachers will be immersed with master teachers in site renewal. Today's student teaching and internship practices mostly perpetuate the very conditions school reform is intended to remediate. The prospect of school and university personnel working side by side in this shared endeavor is as exciting and challenging for those who hope to participate as it is intimidating for those who would rather not.

The need exists to view educational improvement comprehensively and from an ecological perspective.

Partnerships. Less visible during the 1980s than the wave of school-business partnerships was the hesitant courtship between clutches of schools or school districts and a neighboring university that resulted in some actual marriages. By 1990, the concept of school-university partnerships was part of the rhetoric of educational reform. What is not yet widely understood, however, is that the productive merging of these two cultures is fraught with all the problems and difficulties inherent in any effort to bring widely differing value systems and mores into mutually satisfying collaborations.

The educational ecosystem. The most fragile near-agreement takes us back to where this paper began—the need to view educational improvement comprehensively and from an ecological perspective. The prevailing model in the minds of both school and university people, as well as in the conventional wisdom, is linear and remedial or compensatory. When our frequent measures show the same or less water coming out of the spigot, we increase the pressure and, in renewed hope, the size of the tap and the ladle. Our dysfunctional world view remains fixed on causes and effects.

There are other ways to view the world. One that is particularly appropriate to education and educational institutions is essentially ecological and is comprised of conditions and relationships among conditions. Measures of outputs have value to the extent that they provide clues to the functioning of the ecosystem and its parts. Usually, however, the health of these can be determined only by direct scrutiny conditioned by a clear conception of their proper functioning. With respect to the educational ecosystem, this requires agreement on the norms that should prevail—agreement stemming from

rigorous, informed dialogue. As a society, we are not disciplined in what is required. Consequently, we rarely manage to get much beyond the exchange of opinions and resort, instead, to what we erroneously believe to be the hard data of test scores. And we continue to believe that ill-nourished schools can be prodded or enticed into achieving the desired educational outcomes and even a competitive economy. Healthy communities have healthy schools. To expect schools to create healthy communities is to expect the impossible.

What Follows

I anticipate that over time *Metropolitan Universities* will address all of the components of our educational ecosystem and the relationships among them. The papers of this issue primarily address one—the seemingly obvious, but obviously neglected, natural connections between schools and universities. And this focus is narrowed even more to include the potential attributes of a healthy symbiosis, wherein two essentially different cultures serve their mutual self-interests better through marriage. The literature of school-university collaboration is almost devoid of accounts depicting such symbiotic partnerships. This literature also reveals a plausible explanation: the lack of commitment commonly characteristic of failed marriages. Like marriages between consenting adults, successful ones must be worked at—very hard.

The first seven of the papers that follow probe the concepts, logistics, problems, and pitfalls of school-university partnerships. Taken as a group, they address the near-agreements on educational reform carried from the 1980s into the 1990s: the school as the center of change, the necessity of renewing schools and the education of educators simultaneously, the role of partner or professional development schools, and the potential power of school-university collaboration. The next three papers carry us at least partway into consideration of the larger educational ecology. The concluding one reminds us sharply of some chronic conditions deeply embedded in the existing ecosystem that impede efforts to improve its health.

A colleague and I in the Center for Educational Renewal, University of Washington, have been involved in the concepts and operations of school-university partnerships for more than a decade. The two of us, together with a third colleague in the Center and three colleagues located elsewhere, have been involved in nurturing thirteen school-university partnerships in thirteen states over the past several years. Throughout these years, we have learned much from our association not only with the executive directors, but also with hundreds of other educators embraced by the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER)—the umbrella organization to which these partnerships belong.

During these years, we have sought also to keep abreast of parallel developments through exchanging newsletters, responding to inquiries, perusing the relevant literature and, recently, surveying other programs and interviewing key players in them. Early on, we came across the SUNY Purchase Westchester School Partnership and the chair of its steering committee, Theodore L. Gross. Our simultaneous study of the education of educators revealed the importance (and the absence) of top-level university leadership in ensuring the school-university connections essential to exemplary teacher education programs. Theodore Gross's move to the presidency of Roosevelt University and his subsequent endorsement and support of the kind of partnership with the schools he had advanced while dean of arts and sciences on the Purchase campus of the State University of New York led me to invite him to write about the essential ingredients of presidential leadership.

School-university partnerships is an idea whose time has come.

The other six papers focused on school-university partnerships are the work of individuals who have been and are playing significant roles in the partnership of the NNER. Kenneth Sirotnik presents not only a candid account of how difficult it is to put the concepts to work with real people in real situations, but also a summary of some of the lessons we have learned and are still trying to learn. In spite of the difficulties, he believes now as he believed several years ago that school-university partnerships is an idea whose time has come.

The clutch of succeeding papers strengthens this assumption. Richard Clark has reviewed the literature and immersed himself in both the school-university partnership, of which his school district is a part, and others in and out of the NNER scattered across the United States. His observations parallel Sirotnik's and, in spite of the obstacles and setbacks, he too is upbeat regarding the potential of these collaboratives for the simultaneous renewal of schools and the education of those who work in them.

Nathalie Gehrke's paper appears at a time when the concepts of school-university partnerships and of professional development schools are both "in" and only superficially understood. Unless those exhorting the assumed attributes of these innovations take the next step and immerse themselves in the difficult collaboration required for them to succeed, we soon will be adding still more nonevents to the litany of failed educational reform. In peeling away successive layers of a deceptively complex onion, Gehrke reveals how essential it is to have the support described by Gross and to change the university culture that currently gives precious little support for the work she describes.

The pioneers—such as Nathalie Gehrke—who are widening the paths connecting schools and universities also are creating new roles and new

jobs even as they walk them. Richard Barnes and Lynne Miller remind us of the differences between the worlds encountered at each end of the paths and of some of the requirements of living in both successfully. And there are no handbooks to which to turn in seeking to learn beforehand what one needs to know and be able to do in order to serve effectively as the executive director of a school-university partnership. Nor are there any handbooks describing the hybrid role assumed by Carl Harris in serving simultaneously his professional functions at Brigham Young University and those of a teacher, teacher educator, and professor-in-residence in partner schools. The scariness of new demands is largely offset by the exhilaration of dealing with them and by the satisfactions inherent in positive feedback.

Juvenna Chang and Lynda Stone begin the transition from almost exclusive focus on the school-university connection to considerations inherent in the larger cultural context. We are reminded that no two school-university partnerships can be alike, not just because the participating institutions differ, but also because each exists in a cultural milieu that differs from all others. Each milieu brings into prominence problems and needs that shape the nature and structure of the collaboration. This fact is sharply etched in the linkages described by Larry Nucci and Mark Smylie that brought a university, public schools, homes, and various community agencies into a productive relationship focused on children and youths.

Those two authors also join Chang and Stone in reminding us of the changing demographics that both complicate the role of schools and force us into examination of the larger educative ecology. Papers by Valerie Pang and by John Harris, and Donna Ford, which will appear in a future issue of *Metropolitan Universities*, will carry us further into the expanding diversity of the American culture and the implications of the general failure of our system of education—defined almost always as only schools and universities—to embrace it. Yet, any consideration of a broader and more accurately comprehensive system of education cannot function as a truly healthy ecosystem if our schools and colleges are deficient.

And so we come back full circle to the symbiotic partnership necessary to the simultaneous renewal of both schools and universities. Although Roger Soder's concluding paper provides a sobering reminder of some of the obstacles cluttering the bridal paths of the school-university marriage, a clear message rises from the pages that follow: Tomorrow's universities ignore the health of the surrounding community at their peril. As Soder points out, the argument for fulfilling the exchange relationship with their communities is an ethical one that also happens to be eminently practical.

Suggested Readings

Cremin, Lawrence A. *Popular Education and Its Discontents*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

Goodlad, John I. *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

Lynton, Ernest A., and Sandra E. Elman. *New Priorities for the University: Meeting Society's Needs for Applied Knowledge and Competent Individuals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

Su, Zhixin. *Teacher Education Reform in the United States (1890-1986)*. Occasional Paper No. 3, Center for Educational Renewal. Seattle, WA: College of Education, University of Washington, 1986.

Eight occasional papers reporting and analyzing aspects of school-university collaborative efforts are available from the Center for Educational Renewal, Miller Hall, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195.