

Rethinking Schools *Online*

RSR Book Intro

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The journal *Rethinking Schools* was started by Milwaukee -area classroom teachers in the mid-1980s. It appeared soon after a commission appointed by then-President Ronald Reagan sparked a new national debate on education with a report entitled "A Nation at Risk."

That report opened two decades of high-profile school reform efforts that continue today. Throughout the period, corporate and elite political interests have dominated the debate. Governors have held numerous education summits, corporate leaders have organized countless roundtables and conferences, and the media have echoed a relentless critique of public schools and the people who work in them.

Rethinking Schools was originally formed so that Milwaukee teachers, parents, and students might have a voice in the debates that promised to reshape their daily lives. The journal soon grew beyond Milwaukee concerns, and over the past 17 years has established itself as a leading grassroots voice for teachers on educational issues of national concern. At a time when school reform is too often something done to teachers, rather than a productive response to their needs and daily experience, *Rethinking Schools* reaffirms that the "view from the classroom" is a key missing link in the process of reform.

In *Rethinking School Reform*, we have collected some of the journal's best writing. Taken together, these articles present a vision of schooling and reform quite different from the one emanating from official sources.

The organization of the book reflects our priorities as teachers and as education activists. It begins where too many school reform efforts never go: inside our classrooms.

We start in Chapter 1, "Critical Teaching", with a look at this "indispensable and much-neglected missing piece in the puzzle of school improvement." In defining what we consider good instructional practices, we present the kinds of curriculum choices and classroom values that we think schools in a democratic society should promote. Taken together these choices outline "a common social and pedagogical vision that . . . strives toward what we call a social justice classroom." We argue further that "unless our schools and classrooms are animated by broad visions of equity, democracy, and social justice, they will never be able to realize the widely proclaimed goal of raising educational achievement for all children." Other articles in this section offer specific examples of what such teaching looks like in social studies and language arts classes. Critical classroom practice is our point of departure because we believe it is the central element against which all reform efforts should be judged.

One major obstacle to sustaining democratic classrooms and schools is the accumulated baggage of history. When we go to school in the morning we bring with us our families, our cultures, our racial heritages, our class and gender experiences. Like the society they serve, schools have always struggled with these differences, sometimes pretending they don't exist, at other times imagining we can "celebrate diversity" without examining why some differences translate into access to privilege and power, while others become a source of oppression and injustice. In *Rethinking School Reform*, we maintain that the difficult and complicated issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation must be confronted head-on. They permeate every aspect of our educational experience, and public schools—which are perhaps the last place where an increasingly diverse and divided population still meets to a common purpose—cannot avoid them.

There are no easy answers to addressing these challenges, in school or out, but Chapter 2, "Taking

Bias Seriously", offers some examples of how these issues present themselves to teachers and students, and how we might respond in constructive and courageous ways.

While classrooms are at the center of our efforts to rethink school reform, they are not the only battleground. Chapter 3, "Education Policy and Politics", looks at how school issues have become hotly contested at the national, state, and district levels. Battles over vouchers, desegregation, privatization, and federal education policy reflect crucial political choices that will have a lasting impact not only on schools, but on public life as a whole, and on whether the United States will realize the promise of a pluralistic, multicultural democracy in the 21 st century or abandon it. We need to understand how decisions made in legislatures and courtrooms impact our classrooms and our schools, and how we, in turn, might impact those decisions.

Within schools, the clearest reflection of this larger struggle between multicultural, democratic values and privatized, corporate interests is the struggle over standards and testing. Today standardized curricula imposed through ever more suffocating layers of standardized testing constitute the primary agenda of anti-democratic schooling. Like all effective political strategies, this agenda speaks to real concerns held by large numbers of people, including concerns over low student achievement, the lack of institutional accountability, and the seemingly intractable school failure in low-income communities. These very real problems provide a platform for school reformers of all shapes and sizes to posture as champions of the underserved and underprivileged.

But most of the official remedies being offered would perpetuate and legitimize an inequitable status quo, while squeezing the life out of alternative reform efforts that hold much more promise of real progress. In Chapter 4, "Standards and Testing", we examine how the issues of academic achievement and assessment can promote or prevent the kind of schooling our children need. We consider the difference between "standards" and "standardization", and look at ways that equitable assessment practices can support schools in their efforts to serve all students well, instead of sorting and labeling them into new categories of failure.

Finally in Chapter 5, "Roads to Reform", we consider the challenges and possibilities involved in trying to promote positive change. Addressing such key elements as school funding, staff development, the role of teachers unions, untracking, and curriculum reform, we present a vision of reform that might start to measure up to the tasks at hand. These articles suggest how a social justice perspective can inform the many different components that are needed for successful school change.

Throughout *Rethinking School Reform* , we keep coming back to the view from the classroom. It is a common thread. What kinds of policies, resources, people, and purpose do we need in our nation's classrooms so that they might become not only places of individual academic achievement, but also "laboratories for a more just society"? Teachers do not have all the answers to the issues raised by school reform, and the view from the classroom is not always the clearest. But classrooms are where the core business of schooling takes place, and it's where the measure of all reform proposals must ultimately be taken. If a given initiative supports more effective critical teaching and creates more equitable and democratic classrooms, it is worth pursuing. If it retards or restricts such efforts, then it's part of the problem. In the final analysis, that is the test that every school reform needs to pass.

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