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CHASING THE WOLVES FROM THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR

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By Theodore Kowalski

Since the early 1980s, school leaders have been bombarded with reports concluding that America's public schools are in a state of crisis. The criticisms advanced in these documents have often evoked emotional reactions from educators that ranged from denial to anger. But in 1989 a study published by the Education Writers Association titled *Wolves at the Schoolhouse Door* received a very different response.¹ This report exposed the sorry state of public school facilities in America, and a good many superintendents, principals, and teachers readily concurred with its findings. The publication concluded with the warnings that nearly one out of every two public school buildings in America was obsolete and that an almost equal number contained environmental hazards. In 1992 the American Association of School Administrators published its own study on school facilities, titled *Schoolhouses in the Red*. Reaffirming most of the findings of the 1989 report, the authors of this 1992 document noted, "Replacement of 74 percent of our nation's school buildings is long overdue."²

Interestingly, warnings about the deterioration of America's schoolhouses have generated only limited public reaction. State legislators, governors, federal officials, and corporate executives — all of whom were exceedingly eager to react to earlier education reports such as *A Nation at Risk*— have been amazingly silent. Where are the legislative proposals to eradicate this problem? Where are the creative ideas from managers in private industry? Where are the calls for establishing a national commission to address this crisis? The most likely response to these questions is that the cost of solving the problem is simply too great. Accordingly, neither those who pass tax bills nor those who pay a large portion of the resultant taxes are anxious to discuss it. However, it is also possible that the apathy toward this issue stems from a limited comprehension of the impact of the physical environment on teaching and learning — and thus on school reform. Both reasons for apathy — the obvious one of cost and the less obvious one, lack of understanding — merit consideration.

Financial Considerations

Laws and regulations governing the financing of capital projects vary among the states; however, the personal property tax remains the most common source of funds.³ This option prevails even though its unpopularity, limitations, and inequities have been well-documented by researchers over the past few decades.⁴ Three primary objections to a local property tax are common: 1) it affects large property owners (e.g., farmers, business owners) disproportionately; 2) it is unfair to the poor; and 3) a reliance on local taxes makes financial support for education a factor of local rather than statewide wealth. And, since school districts across a state usually differ significantly in their ratios of taxable property to enrollment— i.e., the amount of taxable property per student — making the funding of public education dependent on the wealth of school districts almost always results in inequities.

Moreover, state funding formulas for public education are highly political matters. Elected officials at the state level have been extremely reluctant to shift the financial burden of improving school facilities to their governmental agencies, knowing that this move would be both costly and politically precarious. (As school administrators and school board members who have led battles to generate revenues to improve facilities know all too well, the responsibility of allocating resources can lead to a number of unpleasant outcomes.)

Inequities in state-based funding formulas continue to be a matter of legal dispute, and hope persists that litigation will produce incremental revisions that will eventually lead to more generous and more equitable access to fiscal resources. Many observers thought that cases such as *Serrano v. Priest* and *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, both litigated during the 1970s, would permanently resolve school funding inequities. Although important principles emerged from those decisions, causing many states to revise their funding formulas, disparities were not eradicated. Loopholes and carefully crafted legislation often made it possible for state legislatures and agencies to circumvent the intentions of the courts. The court decisions in the 1970s, for instance, mandated equity in school districts' operating

expenditures but merely implied that equity should also be established in school districts' capital-outlay expenditures.' This objective, however, was not accomplished in many states.

Therefore, school district officials are forced to raise massive amounts of capital to pay for maintaining or renovating school facilities — and they often must do so largely or exclusively at the local level because of state laws that are neither fair nor realistic. In addition, they shoulder this responsibility at a time when competition for scarce resources is weighing heavily on taxpayers. Given these conditions, realistic financial solutions are more likely to be developed if the public has an understanding of why school reform is necessary and why school buildings have become increasingly important in the education equation.

Understanding the Importance of Environments in Restructuring

Reform efforts in the 1980s proved that mere dissatisfaction with the status quo is insufficient to bring about meaningful change. Yet, although we repeatedly hear and read about an information-based society and a global economy, it is doubtful that the general public has given ample consideration to the educational implications of these conditions. For instance, many outside the education profession continue to believe that intensification of long-standing practices constitutes an adequate agenda for school improvement.

Those who seek to reshape our schools are confronted with the reality that as many myths as truths are circulating regarding change in education.⁶In large measure, the failure to redefine and reconceptualize education is associated with beliefs that emerged during an industrial era that spanned nearly a century. These misguided beliefs contributed to the conclusion that sufficient improvement could be achieved by simply making students and teachers do more of what they were already doing. In pursuing such improvement efforts, reformers gave little or no thought to redefining the purposes of public schooling in a rapidly changing world. Recognizing this dilemma, reformers within the education profession have recently attempted to direct attention to foundational matters such as the philosophy, the mission, and the organization of public schooling. Terrence Deal has noted, "In order to transform schools successfully, educators need to navigate the difficult space between letting go of old patterns and grabbing on to new ones."⁷

Clearly, restructuring involves more than fine-tuning what already exists; it entails new definitions of learning and a reconceptualization of roles for teachers and students.' When these efforts are carried out, the new importance of educational environments begins to emerge.

One reason why schools tend not to change is that they have climates that discourage shifts away from established practices. Cecil Miskel and Rodney Ogawa described climate as the expectations of work-related behavior that are produced by a school's atmosphere.⁹A critical element of this atmosphere is ecology- the physical and material features of the school. ¹⁰If teachers cannot reconfigure their work environments, if they cannot obtain or use technology, then they have little incentive to think about new ways of teaching. In inflexible schoolhouses, form inappropriately dictates function.

While many citizens demand school improvement, few understand how facilities present a barrier to this objective. Advocates of school reform often criticize educators for being unwilling to try new ideas and methods. Rarely do they consider (or mention) the fact that rigid and outdated facilities constitute an equally powerful roadblock to action.

Indeed, a sizable segment of the public continues to see buildings as a relatively unimportant factor in the education equation. Romantic references to one-room schoolhouses, for instance, perpetuate the myth that a good teacher and a disciplined student are the only requirements for effective education. Such narrow perceptions hark back to an era when schooling was largely a process in which teachers transmitted knowledge to students. In those days, affective domains, multiculturalism, and the social, physical, and emotional needs of students were lesser concerns. Not surprisingly, research conducted in traditional schools failed to show that the quality of the environment made a significant difference. Not until the end of World War II did educators and architects even begin to look at school buildings as anything but shelters. ¹¹

Three factors encourage educators to reconceptualize the purposes of schooling. The first is that new knowledge and skills are required by today's workplace. The second is that society will suffer if large numbers of students do not acquire

necessary knowledge and skills. The third is the realization that technology provides an opportunity for desired transformations. Redefinitions of learning for an information age are rapidly being perfected as we discover new information about student behavior and the needs of a changing world. The redefinitions often include such objectives as being able to find and use information, being able to identify problems, being capable of critical analysis, being able to make creative decisions, and possessing an understanding of and appreciation for diversity. In addition, a growing number of educators believe that schools should focus more directly on engaging all students in learning. ¹² This goal is to be accomplished by investing in teachers, administrators, and technology so that alternative teaching strategies and methods can be used.

Karen Sheingold notes that school improvement involves the interplay of three factors: "an emerging consensus about learning and teaching, a movement toward well-integrated uses of technology, and the push for restructuring." ¹¹ This view of institutional change also illuminates the ascending importance of physical resources in contemporary education. Technology neither replaces teachers nor requires students to learn less. Rather, it empowers educators to pursue purposes more congruent with the current and future needs of society. Phillip Schlechty wrote, "If schools are to serve the purpose that the emerging information-based society is asking them to fulfill — in brief to develop students as thinkers, problem solvers, and creators — then the structure of schools must be redefined to accommodate technologies appropriate to the task." ¹⁴ Computers, integrated video systems, and other forms of technology allow restructuring to occur. Even if schools have good teachers and motivated students, the inability to retrieve and use data on an immediate and continuous basis is a serious barrier to excellence.

Toward Improved Communication

Misperceptions about and lack of response to contemporary educational needs and processes have been nurtured in part by a separation of public education from community life. As schools became increasingly bureaucratic and as the number of taxpayers who did not have children enrolled escalated, the symbiotic relationship between the community and the neighborhood schools withered. Now there is a need to rebuild bridges, to ignite public interest once again, and to encourage two-way communication. In particular, educators ought to assume the responsibility of demonstrating to the public that school reform and school facilities have become inextricably linked.

Problems with America's schoolhouses constitute a major barrier to school restructuring. Antiquated, unsafe environments discourage educators from experimenting with new technologies, new curricula, and new teaching ideas. In describing the sorry state of urban school environments, Philip Piccigallo asked, "Should anyone realistically be expected to work, creatively and productively, under such wretched conditions?" ¹⁵

If the wolves are to be chased from the schoolhouse door, issues related to funding and to public opinion must be addressed simultaneously. Those who have strongly criticized the schools — business leaders, elected officials, and civic leaders — must confront and respond to the barriers that stymie reform. They should objectively assess the growing importance of school environments in an information-based society and a global economy, they should begin to think of education not as a privilege but as an investment in the country's future, and they should work together to create realistic funding solutions.

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2. *Schoolhouses in the Red* (Arlington, Va.: American Association of School Administrators, 1992), p. 8.

3. Theodore J. Kowalski, *Planning and Managing School Facilities* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

4. See, for example, James Guthrie, "Educational Finance: The Lower Schools," in Norman Boyan, ed., *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration* (New York: Longman, 1988); and Kenneth Quindry, "The State-Local Tax Picture," *Journal of Education Finance*, Summer 1979, pp. 19-35.

5. Percy Burrup, Vern Brimley, and Rulon Garfield, *Financing Education in a Climate of Change*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993).

6. Michael G. Fullan and Matthew B. Miles, "Getting Reform Right: What Works and What Doesn't," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1992, pp. 744-52.

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8. John O'Neil, "Piecing Together the Restructuring Puzzle," *Educational Leadership*, April 1990, pp. 4-10.
9. Cecil Miske! and Rodney Ogawa, "Work Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Climate," in Boyan, op. cit., pp. 279-304.
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12. See, for example, Phillip C. Schlechty, *Schools for the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
13. Karen Sheingold, "Restructuring for Learning with Technology: The Potential for Synergy," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1991, p. 17.
14. Schlechty, p. 41.
15. Philip R. Piccigallo, "Renovating Urban Schools Is Fundamental to Improving Them," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1989, p. 402.