Goodlad on school reform: Are we ignoring lessons of last 50 years?

By Valerie Strauss

This is the first of three articles by influential education theorist and reformer John I. Goodlad.

Goodlad, author of more than three dozen books, is president of the Institute for Educational Inquiry in Seattle and has held professorships at Emory University, the University of Chicago, the University of Washington and UCLA, where he was dean of the Graduate School of Education from 1967-1983. His 1984 book “A Place Called School,” is often credited with launching research efforts on school improvement.

This is long for a blog post, full of reflections by Goodlad about his own life, educational history and schools today, but it is worth your time. Goodlad always is.

By John I. Goodlad

Each year the child is coming to belong more to the State and less and less to the parent.
—Ellwood Cubberley, 1909

In autumn 2008, I was at the end of a four-year metamorphosis that embraced a life-threatening illness and the loss of my wife of sixty years. Coming out of it was akin to a teeter-totter ride, with a measure of hope when my end was going up and a measure of despair when it was on the way down.

During the last three years of this semi-spiritual turning, I read a lot and then began to write a little again, a process that yielded one page worth keeping for every four that went into my wastebasket.

As autumn advanced, I became increasingly aware that some of what I had been reading about—the nation’s cultural readiness for a long-overdue great turning—might come to pass.

At least it was being much talked about in my little domain of human behavior.

The prospect of sweeping change was gaining attention and conversation. Of course, as philosopher Hannah Arendt makes clear in her classic book “The Human Condition,” there is a considerable distinction between behavior and action. To act takes courage, risks failure, and often stirs contrary views and actions.

Perhaps this is a reason why schooling, a very large part of my long professional career, has been so shy of having even modest turnings. Perhaps it is also why researchers David Tyack and Larry Cuban found so little change in their study of schooling over the past hundred years and titled their book on the subject “Tinkering Toward Utopia.”

A few years before the onslaught of illness, I had joined with several other educators in creating the Forum for Education and Democracy, a nonprofit agency for stemming the tide of miseducation that has been steadily rising since Sputnik I and II circled the globe in 1957. The Soviet Union’s success in space had frightened the populace, increased expectations for our schools, and expanded the role of the federal government in their conduct.

Just a quarter century later, the solidification of these expectations and the federal role were at the core of the presidentially commissioned report “A Nation at Risk,” which offered this stunning rebuke of our schools in 1983: “If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war.”

As always with reform era reports, those who are to implement the recommendations do not get to participate in their formulation. The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that “citizens across the nation hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership to achieve these reforms.”

But with the passage and subsequent implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, the founders of the Forum for Education and Democracy realized that Congress and the president [George W. Bush] had sharply limited the role of “citizens across the nation” in both determining and implementing their expectations for schooling.

And so, in 2008, the Forum published Democracy at Risk, a call for a new federal policy in public education. Half of the first paragraph reads as follows:

“As Thomas Jefferson once said, ‘If Americans desire to be both ignorant and free, they want what never has been and what will never be.’ Indeed, it is our democratic system of governing, based upon the twin pillars of equal rights and responsibilities, which requires we have a system of public education.”

I was deep in both illness and grief when colleagues in the Forum wrote this powerful document that has gained at least modest attention in the Washington, D.C., Beltway. I was able to comment on the manuscript when it was still a work in progress.
By the time of its publication in April 2008, I was beginning to catch up with the growing discourse that linked with my earlier reading regarding the coming of a great turning in the well-being of the moral ecology that holds us together as a people. A healthy, thinking people sustained by this culture is essential to the good society.

It was clear a year later that health care and schooling were high on President Obama’s action agenda, as they had been in his campaign rhetoric.

But, as 2009 merged into 2010, the expectations for a new dawning in schooling were slipping away. The good news was that the No Child Left Behind Act soon would be history. But the proposals for “reform” were déjà vu all over again—been there, done that.

I suddenly awakened to the realization that we were tinkering, one more time, toward an ill-defined utopia.

I was dumbfounded. How could we so ignore the lessons of 50 years of failed school reform and the learning and strategies of those hundreds of innovative boutique projects, funded over these years by billions of dollars from philanthropic foundations, that excited and changed thousands of teachers nationwide? How could we simply set aside the conclusions and recommendations of those many behavioral and social scientists in the fields of economics, history, psychology, sociology, child development, psychometrics, philosophy, education, and more, who have from their inquiries provided so much of the knowledge necessary for those whose work it is to guide the becoming of a wise people? And what about the knowledge of those experienced practitioners, thoughtful parents, and others? Is there any major field of endeavor other than schooling that has so little agency for its own mission, conduct, and well-being?

Given this reality, it is not surprising that the schooling enterprise is so rife with evidence-free ideology regarding its functioning. We will never have the schools we need until local communities, educators and their organizations, and policymakers share a common mission for them. And we will never have the world-class schools we seek until the people closest to them and best prepared for their agency are their designated stewards.

Now that the state is getting seriously into another era of school reform, it makes sense for us to study and learn from those of the past half-century. There are peculiarities that require considerable thinking if one tries to connect them with both reality and major patterns of human behavior. Significant change in most organizations, corporations included, comes from inside. Reform, however, is commonly regarded as coming from the outside, imposed, and frequently regarded on the inside as noxious.

In the dictionary in front of me, reform as a verb is “to put an end to [an evil] by enforcing or introducing a better method or course of action.” The far less palatable definition of the noun is “amendment of what is defective, vicious, corrupt, or depraved.”

Because, early in my career, I taught in and directed the education component of the British Columbia Industrial School for Boys (a.k.a. reform school), I always cringe with our careless use of “school reform,” which I have endeavored, unsuccessfully, to get at least school principals and teachers to eschew.

In what probably were researcher Gerald Bracey’s last published words, he wrote the following: “Americans never hear anything positive about the nation’s schools and haven’t since the years just before Sputnik in 1957.”

In this same piece, Bracey notes that Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said repeatedly that we are in an educational crisis. In dozens of books and magazines I have read over the past year, writers have simply taken it for granted that the public views today’s schools as a disaster.

It is rare for stewards of our supposedly malfunctioning schools to be left out of the blame. Yet, those who teach in them have for years been near or at the top in polls of the public’s trust.

This combination of realities is more than passing strange. The 41st Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitude Toward the Public Schools, reported in September 2009 that more than 50 percent of the public gave either an A or a B to schools in their communities, the highest rating since 2001.

Seventy-five percent of parents gave the schools their oldest child attends an A or a B, the highest recorded. The people polled gave much lower marks to all those malfunctioning schools “out there.”

After all, for half a century, we have been taught that our poor-performing system of schooling is failing us and steadily getting worse. There has been during these years a peculiar duality of two widely separated themes in school reform, whatever the driving force might have been.

There is initial rhetoric of deep concern. How much deeper can this be than the comment in A Nation at Risk that the imposition of our system of schooling upon us would be akin to an act of war? But the course of subsequent interest and action is like the month of March: it comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb.

The agenda for addressing initial deep concern is set aside as tomorrow’s business. The agenda for today is the grammar of schooling: the what and how of teaching, assessment, discipline, teacher evaluation, etc., and the ideas driving them. It would appear that these are precisely the components of schools that the Founding Fathers believed to be the responsibility of local schools and communities. Interestingly, they constitute a large part of the symbols of schooling that the middle class in particular equates with the good old days of schooling and does not want changed.

The agenda for tomorrow that creeps in its petty pace from day to day pertains primarily to the cultural context of schooling that cries out for federal attention and sweeping change. Between the grammar and the cultural context of schools lies a domain of necessary collaboration and agreement among local communities, states, and the federal government.

A century has passed since the prescient educational historian Ellwood Cubberley wrote the epigraph with which this writing began: “Each year the child is coming to belong more to the State and less and less to the parent.”

My only disagreement with his observation pertains to the implication of our owning children. We parents do not own our children; we just rent them for a while. Given the extent to which what he was troubled about has expanded, however, his reference to state ownership may well be appropriate.
The gap between the narrative of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 and its implementation as the No Child Left Behind Act is a model of the duality in school reform described above. Its comprehensiveness was ignored in implementation. We do not yet know how wide the inevitable gap will be between the reauthorized Act and its implementation. But it does begin to appear that we could have Cubberley’s worry in spades.

So far, in the planning, there has been little sign of the transparency promised in the Obama election campaign. Where are the people who will be most affected by and involved in the consequences of the reauthorization: children and youths, teachers, school administrators, school board members, teachers of teachers, scholars of many stripes, PARENTS?

As a critic who has for decades conducted comprehensive studies of educational change, schooling, and the education of educators and worked with schools in replacing the sterility of the longstanding deep structure of schooling with strategies of renewal instead of reform, I find myself troubled with what I am writing.

It reads as though I am against change. Thousands of school people with whom I have worked over the years would chuckle at the thought. Many of the changes we have sought together are sweeping ones that we thought would be part of a new day. I tend to be hopeful until overwhelmed by discouraging data. And so I have to believe that the "Race to the Top," taking place at about the same time as the race to the Sweet Sixteen of the NCAA, is simply a federal ploy to stir the interest of the populace in the comprehensive agenda put out by the U.S. Department of Education in "A Blueprint for Reform."

The words “blueprint” and “reform” give me the chills, however. I will feel more comfortable when local communities nationwide with long-term needs not included in the four domains approved for the Race to the Top are funded. What is completely missing are data regarding the potential for an agenda that embraces a mission of schooling in addition to academic development of the young and then more academic development to ensure good work in the global age.

We need to be aware that recent decades of research on cognition reveal hardly any correlation of standardized test scores with a wide range of desired behavioral characteristics such as dependability, ability to work alone and with others, and planning, or with an array of virtues such as honesty, decency, compassion, etc. Employers dissatisfied with employees who studied mathematics and the physical sciences in first-rate universities often call for higher test scores.

Is academic development the totality of the purpose of schooling?

A comprehensive study asked 8,354 parents and 1,330 teachers to rank intellectual, personal, social, and vocational development of the young as purposes of our schools. About half of both groups selected intellectual development as first choice and variously ranked the other three. Interestingly, the choice of 68.9 percent of the parents for the intellectual at the elementary school level dropped to 56.3 percent for junior high/middle schools and 43.1 percent for high schools. Teachers ranked the intellectual at about the same for all three—a little under 50 percent.

There is an irony here in regard to school reform eras, especially No Child Left Behind. Not only was its implementation confined to the academic realm, but it also reduced academic assessment of students and schools to a very narrow curriculum. The consequence, of course, was the substantial narrowing of pedagogy to simply drilling for tests. We do not need schools for this. It is training, not education, and access to it can be obtained almost anywhere at any time in this increasingly technological age. That would leave the opportunity to turn schools, whose prime function has long been child care, into centers of pedagogy with the mission of guiding what education is: the process of becoming a unique human being whose responsibility it is to make the most of oneself. Surely the formulation of standards for schooling makes no sense until we agree on a mission for schooling. In what was probably his last interview, behavioral scientist Ralph Tyler, arguably one of the most highly regarded and influential educators of the second half of the twentieth century, was asked what his long life told him about what schools are for. Without hesitating he said: they are to provide whatever educational is not being taken care of in the rest of our society.

Clearly, there must be a great turning in schooling. The new will not evolve out of what we have now or try to fix. It is not broken. Indeed, it is very stable and solid, guided by ideologies that will not be disturbed, no matter what the evidence to their contrary. What we must do now nationwide is begin the 20-or-more-year process of creating a new tomorrow. But we have millions of children and youths who should have the best schools possible under present and future circumstances. Consequently, there must be a close linkage between these schools and the new so that the former move steadily toward the latter in their processes of renewal. What we have now is an enterprise of starts and stops that always is vulnerable to reform eras that change nothing fundamental but tinker once again with the grammar of schooling.

Schools of the new turning will begin to learn the processes of continuous renewal from the beginning. They will vary widely in their agendas of change, just as they vary in their cultural settings.

There are two long overdue things we must do now to begin the process of linking the schools we have with those we should and can have. I address one of these in part two and the other in part three of my trilogy.
My father’s father was the wisest man I ever knew.  
Sixty years of education and seven years of school.

Goodlad: Straight Talk About Schools, Part 2

In their book, “Tinkering Toward Utopia,” to which I referred in the first of these three articles, scholars David Tyack and Larry Cuban neatly referred to the detailed ways and means of providing schooling (curricula, pedagogy, classroom management, etc.) as the “grammar” of schooling. It is the near totality of this grammar being the whole of schooling that causes it to be a much weaker player in the education of the young than it could and should be.

Ironically, given the core of this grammar over recent years, it has, unwittingly, been providing strong support for both doing away with school and for prioritizing it. If the grammar of schooling and schooling are one and the same, then the message to reasonably observant parents of children in public school is that schools’ major function—not mission, purpose, or goal—is child care.

Several acquaintances of mine have made this observation, expressing relief that their children attend private schools after learning about what their friends’ children are doing in public schools.

The fact that it took so long for major concern over No Child Left Behind to surface is both disturbing and indicative of the need for the daily functioning of our schools to get back to local communities.

As I wrote in the first article, given the Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitude Toward the Public Schools over several years, and given that there has been little to no good news about our schools for half a century, it is not surprising that the public believes there to be many thousands of bad schools “out there.”

But most Americans give the schools they know and the ones their children attend surprisingly high marks. Consequently, those schools do not need reform. And, furthermore, since such a large percentage of us have these highly rated schools, WE do not want to hear any more about eliminating or privatizing them. What is needed is to improve those bad schools “out there.”

Go ahead and fix them, Mr. Secretary. And, dear reader, let’s stop thinking, reading, or writing about the fact that there is about the same percentage of parents and their neighbors “out there,” polled or not polled, who gave or would have given high ratings to the schools they know or their children attend. Let’s keep it a secret and then we will not have to worry about the feds monkeying around with OUR schools.

Furthermore, Mr. Secretary, we know that many of these schools really are in bad shape, and so you might need to go deeper than the grammar into the deep structure and cultural context of schooling.

When one considers in its length and breadth the importance of the nation’s young, the broken lives, the defeated hopes, the national failures, which result from the frivolous inertia with which [education] is treated, it is difficult to restrain within oneself a savage rage.

Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education, 1929

Alfred North Whitehead was one of the leading philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. The sentence above is one of the harshest he ever wrote; it is not about the grammar of schooling. He was writing about what education is, our failure even to try to understand what it is, and the resulting consequences.

His contemporary, philosopher John Dewey, agreed that education has no ends beyond itself; it is an individual process of becoming a unique self—not, for example, preparing for kindergarten or college. As British philosopher R. S. Peters wrote later, such preparation is training, not education.
When addressing various audiences a few years ago, I usually opened with a little word game. I asked people to speak the first word that came into their minds when I said “education.”

Almost always they responded “school,” and others nodded. I then said the word “school.” The responses were all on the “soft and caring” side, with frequent references to “the whole child”—three words that became almost taboo back in the intellectual wars over “progressive education” and have remained so since.

I said the word “schooling,” and almost all the responses were bureaucratic, hierarchical, and impersonal in character.

Over a century ago, at the beginning of the twentieth century, philosopher William James cautioned us to maintain a balance between the soft and tender and the hard and tough fabric of the American culture. The clash between the two always surfaces in eras of school reform.

Even though most of us go too far in equating education with schooling, we have an awareness that education is somehow more encompassing than schooling. There is something both spiritual and moral in the ecology of education that holds us together and makes for the strong and good society. I like philosopher Mortimer Adler’s idea of education’s preparing everyone to discharge the moral obligation to lead a good life and make as much of one’s self as possible (in We Hold These Truths, 1987, p. 20). But he notes that our schools do not serve this mission very well. Should they? Can they?

Nearly two decades ago, colleagues and I created a nonprofit entity, the Institute for Educational Inquiry, to address questions like these that pertain to the relationship between education and democracy and the implications of this relationship for schooling. We already had created a kind of “proofing” ground of school–university partnerships for testing hypotheses gleaned from three decades of research on educational change, schooling, and the education of educators.

More recently, we put together a small network of elementary and secondary schools that were and still are struggling both to teach democracy and to demonstrate what it is. Both networks are still alive but severely daunted by the near-counter agenda of No Child Left Behind.

A few years ago, we identified and brought together a group of scholars variously engaged in the education–democracy relationship. It soon became evident to us that the traction, both substantive and political, necessary to creating and sustaining the schools we should and can have is far more likely to be found outside of schooling than within.

No matter what the fixing and reforming of today or tomorrow, it is our seriously addressing the agendas put aside over reform eras of the last fifty years that promises a new day for our schools.

These unfulfilled agendas are beyond those of the grammar of schooling, but our failure to take action regarding them accounts in large measure for the tinkering that has and still does characterize so-called school reform. Colleagues and I chose four domains that have powerful implications for schooling, on one hand, and the well-being of our democracy, on the other. What Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, and R. S. Peters saw education to be tells me that constructive action regarding these four domains would not only advance the obviously necessary changes in our schools but also bring them closer to what education is.

I need to make clear that the realities of the context of schooling and both its conduct and deep structure are not my primary topics in what follows below. They need to be addressed, but my purpose in article three of this Washington Post trilogy will be to describe some changes in schools that would significantly reduce the present negative impact of the realities I will now briefly describe. Not to do so would arouse, I think, the ire of the gentle Professor Whitehead.

I draw extensively from the documents of my colleagues and thank them for their good work. (Please see AED Scholars’ critical issues papers at http://www.ieiseattle.org/AEDScholarsCriticalIssuesPapers.htm.)

**Domain One: Inequities**

The necessary conditions of a strong and good society are wise and healthy people and a culture that sustains both wisdom and health. These have been widely believed to be part of the promise of The American Dream. This belief does not, however, extend to the expectation that initial inequities will be righted to the point that everyone has an equal start. But there is widespread belief that the opportunity to attain equity and beyond is available to all. The unfortunate consequence is that non-attainment is too commonly viewed as failure, even by the individual or group who tried.

The irony is that many of the necessary conditions for a strong and good individual are embedded in our culture but not equally distributed. Not to worry—education is the great equalizer. Unfortunately, in policy, family, community, the marketplace, institutions, and more, it turns out not to be. Compulsory schooling is both a mockery and a challenging opportunity for equity. At little financial cost, this mockery need not be.

**Domain Two: The Educative Surround**

I began this writing with the statement that schools are not our major educator. Yet we behave as if they are. Also, most of us regard education as a good thing. Actually, it is a neutral concept; if we want it to be good, we must make it so. Philosopher Jane Roland Martin does a wonderful job in her book Educational Metamorphoses (2007) of showing us not only how ubiquitous education is but also how powerful an educator our surround is. The child’s journey from nature to the non-intentional educating of culture to the intentional educating of school, whether good or bad, is astonishing from the time he or she became a problem solver during the first hour after birth.
During the preschool years, children are well on their way to developing the cognitive styles (and many other behaviors) they will have by the age of eighteen when college looms. Some of them will have what they need to get into college and graduate, but that does not ensure that they will do well in their later work. Our schools will get a large part of the blame for young men and women not having the credentials for college admission. While excellence in elementary and secondary school teaching makes a positive difference, it is dwarfed by the economic, social, and educational capital of the school’s educative surround.

Domain Three: Humankind
Perhaps it is because the United States of America became a major player in the world so quickly and recently that we have not managed as a nation to become as well educated as we have become much schooled. This is in part because we are so ready to stereotype in such a wide array of domains—especially humankind. My dictionary provides precisely what I am trying to say about stereotyping: a standardized mental picture held in common by members of a group and representing an over-simplified opinion, affective attitude, or uncritical judgment. People more qualified than I express concern over what they view as a serious and growing problem.

Ironically, the advancement of education and schooling has continued to suffer from racial prejudice even as the courts flattened the field. But the problems extend into subtleties arising out of a limited understanding of the world’s cultures and the extraordinary diversity in humankind.

Would-be school reformers, including practitioners, are too ready to credit their introduction of some innovation in pedagogy for the rapid academic progress of an “immigrant.” But where did the immigrant come from and when? If from Kenya, for example, the child will be speaking three languages, will probably have parents who hold university degrees, and might have plans to be a physician specializing in neurology.

Having world-class teachers and schools in the U.S. calls for much more than having producers of high standardized test scores.

Domain Four: Vision and Mission
In article one of the three, I wrote of the response of behavioral scientist Ralph Tyler, icon of educational leadership throughout the second half of the twentieth century, to the question of what schools are for. Without hesitating, he said that they are to provide whatever educational is not being taken care of in the rest of our society.

This means that there must be a vision that encompasses both what education is and what of it is necessary to the renewing well-being of our culture. There must also be a compass that warns us quickly when missions that claim fulfillment of the vision are off course. There was a period from the mid-1980s well into the mid-1990s when virtually all proposals for schools of the coming millennium claimed “it’s all for the children.” I could not find anything that was.

The need now is not for the federal government to tell us what our schools are for. Nor is there a need now or in the future for the president to appoint a representative commission for the development of a national mission of schooling for policymakers, educators, educational organizations, unions, and community leaders.

There is, however, a growing need to bypass the political establishment and bring together a small group of our most respected wise women and men to develop a self-renewing vision of education in a democratic society.

There is urgent need also for the federal government to fund regional centers that provide comprehensive renewing inventories to assist local schools and communities in selecting from the richness of this planet what is important and compelling for the educational trajectory of the young.

In the meantime, there are some things we can do to put aside repetitive school reform and advance our progress a little toward the myriad expectations for a new day in schooling. I will introduce you to a few of my expectations in the third article.
By John I. Goodlad

President Lyndon B. Johnson viewed our public schools as having a major role in creating the Great Society he envisioned. They would contribute to a moral agenda of addressing the nation’s problems of poverty, unemployment, urban decay, crime, violence, and racial discrimination.

In 1965, sociologist James Coleman was commissioned to select a research team and, in a year, come up with a blueprint to guide and strengthen the schooling enterprise. The president was stunned by the core conclusion of Coleman’s controversial report: What children bring from their homes and encounter in the classroom from other children, not teachers and their practices, is what contributes most to their academic attainments.

This report set off a bevy of studies and arguments that went on with vigor for over a decade regarding just what makes a difference to children’s learning in schools. England’s Michael Rutter and several colleagues did a magnificent job of reviewing these in preparing their own planned three-year study of 12 secondary schools in London. They neatly summarized the questions to be answered: “Do a child’s experiences in school have any effect; does it matter which school he goes to; and which are the features of school that matter?” (Fifteen Thousand Hours, 1979, a title based on hours spent in school from the age of five until graduation from high school).

The conclusions of Rutter et al. were very much like those of the researchers they summarized, one of them being that schools have accounted for far less of the variance in students’ scholastic attainments than have features of the family and home. But they noted that these results do not necessarily mean that schools’ influences are of little importance. Instead, they may be a consequence of the fact that there is a bigger difference between the “best” and “worst” home than between the “best and “worst” school.

They became curious to know if these worst schools might have characteristics that were much less apparent in the best schools. They hit pay dirt: They found large differences in attendance, delinquency, recidivism of delinquent behavior, and rates of referral to child psychiatric clinics and reform schools. There was a high correlation of these characteristics and poor academic performance.

Aha! Might there be impactful characteristics differentiating the worst and best schools just as there were characteristics differentiating their students: Formal and informal rules, internal organization, teachers’ distribution of praise, punishment of misbehaving students, ethos? Yes, indeed.

But does this sequence of situational and human decline need to be? The words and concept “reform school” give me chills. For four years early in my career, I was responsible for the schooling component of the British Columbia (Canada) Industrial School for Boys (a.k.a. reform school).

There was an internal contretemps that created two differing staff camps regarding juvenile delinquency. One, led by the senior officer in charge of the daytime activities of the boys other than those attending the academic school component I directed, believed that there were no routes to the metamorphoses of bad boys into good ones. The other, modeled by Hugh Christie, a younger senior officer in charge of almost everything else and a compassionate but firm scholar studying juvenile delinquency and criminology, believed strongly in rehabilitation and prevention.

By law, all boys up to the age of 16 were required to attend the “grade” school. In the past, few, if any, had continued beyond that age. With Hugh’s subtle help, we changed the pattern. I had replaced the lone teacher of what had been an eight-year elementary program. Later, I had to request an additional teacher to take care of all boys through the sixth grade, while I, with the assistance of a superb provincial correspondence school service, taught those older boys now going back to school.

But for most of them, already several years behind normal grade advancement, it was too late. I never saw Hugh Christie again after my departure, but I heard that he had succeeded in effecting a profound shift in provincial policy and action designed to turn youths around before their delinquency became a habit.

I return now to those much later years of ongoing intense scholarly study of what in schools makes significant differences in students’ academic performance and what makes differences within schools greater than those between schools. There was also great interest in the longstanding question of why schools have changed so little over time, even when there is considerable pressure for them to do so, as there was with federal money flowing to the several Titles of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Beginning in 1960, my professorial duties at UCLA included directing the famed laboratory school that had settled into its past following the retirement of the creative founder Corinne Seeds. We had updated its strengths, made some fundamental changes, recaptured the confidence of parents, and were endeavoring to cut back the number of visitors who showed up by the busload each year.
I met with a couple of groups a week. Most were intrigued with what we were doing but said that they could not implement what they had seen. I was shocked on learning from them that there were no ongoing structures for changing anything major in their home schools. Several members of the staff and I then visited an array of schools, finding little hesitation on the part of principals and teachers to list school problems but no agendas for fixing them. An invitation from the Kettering Foundation in the late 1960s, followed by the support of a clutch of other philanthropies, enabled me to add to my responsibilities at UCLA a quarter of a century of inquiring into and participating in the conduct of schools, the ecology of educational change, and other matters of interest to me and successive groups of colleagues. Our first venture was the creation of the League of Cooperating Schools comprising eighteen schools in 18 districts in the southern half of California—schools chosen by the superintendents at our request to be in the middle range of performance. The challenge to the schools was for them to design and implement, with our support, an agenda of comprehensive school improvement. Not to our surprise, none of the principals knew how to go about doing this. I will not go into details; however, during several months of a bumpy first year, we developed and taught the principals a process of total staff and smaller group dialogue, decision making, taking action, and evaluating progress (DDAE) that ultimately not only guided a renewing mode in the schools but also, with the leadership of several superintendents, penetrated other schools in their districts. Teams of teachers often got ahead of their principals in making changes not only in their classrooms but also in the ethos of their schools. Problems and issues that school personnel simply lived with and talked about before were now taken care of—with accompanying satisfaction.

It is one thing for those of us in major research universities to study schools and their practices and then turn our findings and conclusions back to practitioners in publications. We earn professorships that way. It is quite another for us to get seriously involved in the ecology of schools. The tangible rewards are thin, but once one gets involved, the near-spiritual ones fuel a lifetime passion. The accompanying epiphanies provide understandings that make the gruel of remotely conceived, externally imposed school reform hard to digest.

We left our story in a half-dozen upbeat books and rich memories of the many participants in the League who still speak of those deeply satisfying years, often with tears in their eyes. Several of my colleagues and I established a relationship with social psychologist Seymour Sarason that continued to his death a few months ago. His parallel work produced a classic book, "The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change."

I became aware of his work as I was finishing my book "Dynamics of Educational Change," drawn in large part from our experiences with the League and amazingly in agreement with Sarason’s conclusions regarding the power of school culture, the folly of ignoring it, and the routine continuation of this folly in the history of schooling. The impact of this power on the school experience, personality, and psyche of principals, teachers, students, and parents is considerable and often profound. The consistency of scholarly research findings over the past half-century makes of this conclusion a fact, not a hypothesis. Limitations in space and time necessitate my leaving to you implications of the foregoing paragraph for effecting improvement in the schools we have and making changes in current strategies. To assist you, I suggest reading chapter eight, “The Same But Different,” in the 20th anniversary edition of my book "A Place Called School." For those of you who asked for sources of more information about public expectations for our schools, see chapters two and three of the above book and chapter eight of Gerald Bracey’s "Rhetoric vs. Reality."

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In my first article in this Washington Post series (April 27), I referred to a couple of long overdue things we must do now—not changes but additions to what we have—that I would address in articles two and three. Instead, in the second, I addressed long-term contextual issues that are far more appropriate for the work of the federal government than its tinkering with the grammar of schooling. The ongoing functioning of what I propose now is a state and local responsibility that needs a jumpstart from the Department of Education.

The first will keep far more young children from falling behind than did the No Child Left Behind Act. Five-year-olds begin kindergarten at a scheduled date following the summer vacation. But if they are not yet five when this date rolls around, they wait another year. For most parents of the middle class and beyond, this means the cost of a private school, which may result in a head start for the first grade or regular admission into it the following year. This inequity was partially addressed years ago by Head Start, but millions of children were left behind.

In "A Place Called School," I recommended moving the beginning of schooling down a year and admitting all children who had turned four prior to a specified date at the beginning of the school year. All children becoming four later would be invited to begin school with a party on a specified date in their month of birth. The medical and child development specialists I consulted did not agree on children’s beginning school at the age of three, but all were comfortable with the age of four. I got a positive response from parents; many were exuberant. Teachers were cautious; I was upsetting a longstanding symbol and custom of schooling. My proposal did not embrace the expectation that children would get an equal start at the gate. They already would have experienced three years of extraordinarily varying social capital in their educational surround. They would be leaving the gate with others having enormous difference in intellectual horsepower. But they all would get an additional year of intentional education in the culture of schooling. To think of them all fitting into the academic spread of a grade level, as we often do, is sheer nonsense. Don’t waste time trying to find me wrong; it’s a fact.

This brings me to my second recommendation: Get rid of grade promotion and nonpromotion. This is an idea that goes back many years; Robert Anderson and I updated it in our book "The Nongraded Elementary School."

During the early years of schooling, there is very little difference between the academic achievement of slowly progressing promoted and nonpromoted pupils.
Where there is a considerable difference is in how they feel about themselves, something to which we pay very little attention. Most slow-progressing children know that they are and do not like it. They do not need having this rubbed in by the reality and embarrassment of being “flunked.” This is what Michael Rutter and his colleagues found to be the first downward step in the sequence that differentiated the “human quality” in the culture of the schools in their sample.
And this is what significantly differentiates promoted and nonpromoted children in America’s school culture. Do we care?
There is no need to upset the longstanding symbols of schooling by getting rid of the word “grade.” We need only to refer to it as a symbol of a child’s year in school. But what nongrading accommodates is the necessity (currently often ignored) for pupils to understand the learning intended—that is having access to knowledge.
In the concluding study of my quarter-century of inquiry referred to earlier, 40 percent of students in the elementary grades answered “sometimes” when asked if they understood what their teachers said and set for them to do.
About 20 percent of high school students reported having trouble understanding what was expected of them. The year’s academic agenda simply does not accommodate well the range of individual differences of students in most classrooms.
There is a factor that complicates deliberate planning for anticipated differences in student progress through the grade year: vagaries in the trajectory of a student’s progress—sometimes to the degree that near nonpromotion this year is followed by leading the class the next. I was one of those. A year is too short a period for judging the intellectual competence of the young.
This is one of the reasons I recommended, a quarter century ago, a comprehensive reconstruction of the patched-together structure of schooling we have had for many years. The fate of my proposal was that of a lead balloon. I am not about to trot it out again.
If I am blessed with several more years, it will be part of the book I am writing about the places called school I would like to have seen years ago. But it has been a wonderful run with people believing education to be the lifelong becoming of wise and caring human beings.