



Redesigning America's Schools: Saving a Nation At Risk

An Essay

In the spring of 1787, a Constitutional Convention was convened in Independence Hall in Philadelphia with a mandate from the Congress, which had been established by the Articles of Confederation, to amend the Articles so that the young government could operate more effectively. The members of Congress at that time realized that the fate of the young nation depended upon making changes in the government's organization and operation. So they authorized the Constitutional Convention to meet and amend the Articles of Confederation.

It did not take the delegates long to realize that simply "tinkering with" the Articles of Confederation by amending them was not going to work. They knew that what was needed to save the young nation was a redesign of the government, a new plan. So they set about their work that summer of drafting what is now the Constitution of the United States.

Today, an old nation is at risk because its schools are not meeting the needs of the nation. America's schools need to be redesigned.

It may seem a bit brash of us to compare the need to redesign the schools of America in 2006 with the need to redesign the government of America in 1787. But think about it for a minute. It has been almost 25 years since the nation was declared to be "at risk" because of the inadequate performance of schools.

Since 1983, reforms have been proposed and many implemented, but most amount to mere "tinkering around the edges." The fact is that the level of learning needed for the 21st century has not been achieved. The high school dropout rate stands at about 30 percent. Higher

education and employers lament the poor quality of candidates coming out of high schools. It can be argued that children are being left behind, not only in reading and math, but also in science, civics, health, personal financial stewardship, and career preparation. And, we should not forget the fine arts, technology, and second languages where children are also being left behind. Reform over the last several decades simply has not had enough impact in the school where improvement is needed—between teachers and students.

So a redesign of schools in America is urgently needed. And, by the way, we, the education community, know how to do this. There is a solid research base and the collective thinking and wisdom of educational experts and organizations that point the way. Then what is missing? Why isn't it happening?

The answer is leadership. Schools don't seem to have bold leadership with a vision of what schools can, should, and need to be. The old design won't "cut it." The system must be redesigned. The organization of teachers, students, and the time in the school day must be restructured from rigid isolation to flexible collaboration. Instruction must be redesigned using what we know about how children learn and what works for teaching the various subject areas. Curriculum must be redesigned to align with content standards that describe what people need to know and be able to do in the 21st century global social and work environments. And assessment needs to be redesigned so that we have frequent measures of student progress toward the performance standards of courses, and teachers are able to keep children on track.

As preparers of educational leaders, we have a critical role and special obligation to help current and future school leaders to be bold and take the actions and risks necessary to save an old nation that continues to be at great risk.

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