Ed Week Founder Talks School Reform

by Art Peterson

As the founder of Education Week, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Teacher Magazine, Ron Wolk has seen his share of efforts at school reform. But this time, he says, it’s different.

Wolk detailed this difference in an April 6 “conversation” he held with National Writing Project site directors and teacher-consultants at the NWP Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C.

Wolk has been a close observer of educational policy matters starting with Lyndon Johnson’s administration and Title I reform, through the “Nation at Risk” era when policy-making shifted to the states, to the Goals 2000 document generated during the elder George Bush administration.

But standards-based reform (SBR), Wolk says, is different than previous reform, because unlike these efforts, SBR “opens the black box of the classroom. It strikes directly at the core. It deals directly with teachers and classrooms.”

Wolk reminded his audience that standards-based reform really isn’t new; it’s been around in one form or another for 20 years. Has it made a difference? “Not yet,” Wolk is frank to admit. Why haven’t these reforms moved forward?

The problem, Wolk says, is that “State policy is a blunt instrument and the educational problems are fragile.” The political process becomes a kind of “meat grinder” that churns out specifics that are separated from what a policy is meant to do. But in an educational crisis, politicians cannot “choose the action of not acting.” So we are too often left with predictable, if unintended, consequences.

For instance, says Wolk, in order to counter the perceived problem of over-crowded classrooms, the governor of California decided to reduce class size. But he set this policy as the state faced an alarming shortage of classrooms and teachers, which, combined with the dictate to reduce class size, created a whole series of other problems. Politicians, says Wolk, are often left “having to choose among undesirable options.”
With standards-based reform, as with other reforms, Wolk argues it is often a case of too much too quickly. SBR has required "the teaching force to adjust to changes teachers did not understand and did not participate in generating."

Wolk wonders why we cannot commit ourselves to the concept of standards without overnight attempting to forge standards for every subject at every grade level. "Why can't we start with, say, standards in reading and math and see how that works? We need patience." Maybe what is required, he muses, is a "quasi-governmental body, a kind of educational Federal Reserve, a body outside looking in that will have the capacity to look at the long range."

On balance, however, Wolk sees the light that SBR shines on schools and classrooms as a positive development. In Rhode Island, where he lives, an enormous amount of data is being published about each school.

And it's not just test scores. Teams of teachers, administrators, parents, and other community representatives are going into schools, visiting classrooms, interviewing teachers, and shadowing students as they move through their school days. And all this data is published.

But Wolk asks, what do we do when we get this data? How, he asks, "do you transport the characteristics of an excellently performing school to a poorly performing one?"

A big part of the answer, Wolk believes, is in changing the way the work of teachers is organized. Standards-based reform may motivate teachers to voluntarily participate in the change process, "becoming more communal, working more together." Among schools with similar circumstances and similar populations, successful schools can often be distinguished from unsuccessful ones by the presence of a staff whose members share in a communal effort.

If this kind of community of teacher-learners is to emerge in schools, Wolk says, professional development for teachers must become something other than the "dog and pony show" it has too often become. Teachers, he believes, can be responsible for their own professional development. "We spend $19 billion a year for teachers to take courses to advance on the salary scale. Suppose that money were reallocated for teachers to work together?"

If communities of teacher-learners are to emerge within schools, teachers need time. A little bit of staff development is a useless thing.

"You don't get to be a cutting-edge teacher by going to a conference every year," Wolk says.

But if teachers can form school-based professional development communities, Wolk thinks, standards-based reform may work. He points to data that shows when teachers worked together on developing math texts, their students did better. When teachers design rubrics as a team, he says, "They are confronted by the questions: What is good teaching? What is good work?"

But, says Wolk, if standards-based reform is to advance in a direction healthy for schools, teachers, and students, it may be time for a "mid-course correction." This correction needs to be directed at the seeming disconnect between the standards and the means by which mastery of these standards is assessed. "When in life do you take a test?" Wolk asks. "If you play the violin, you demonstrate your competence by playing your instrument. You don't take a paper and pencil test."

How were Ron Wolk's remarks received by the NWP audience? Said one listener, "Part of the value of this conversation was that Wolk told us some things we did not especially want to hear. Many teachers get nervous when they hear talk about exposing their classrooms to close scrutiny. But how are we collectively to solve our problems when we don't look closely enough to understand what they are?" A more general take on Wolk's remarks seemed to be that, if this is where education reform should be going, the National Writing Project is in exactly the right place. "Teachers working together, sharing, creating community," said one site director, "this is what we do."

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