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Evolution of New American Schools (Report)

By Jeffery Mirel, Ph.D., School of Education, University of Michigan

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Education Consumers Foundation

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209
www.education-consumers.org

The Evolution of the New American Schools: From Revolution to Mainstream

Jeffery Mirel, Ph.D.

What are the “New American Schools?” Unfortunately they are the latest educational reform to be identified as a failure. A variety of factors played a role in their demise, but the most obvious problem was their reliance on the “progressive” vision of schooling that has been tried unsuccessfully for decades.

Formed in 1991 under the auspices of President GHW Bush’s “America 2000” initiative, the New American Schools Development Corporation (eventually called New American Schools or NAS) was a private sector venture that aimed to reinvent public schools. The hope was that business and government working together would spur the creation of revolutionary approaches to schooling—ones that would eventually bring public schools up to “world-class” standards.

NAS began by soliciting “break-the-mold” school designs. Hundreds were submitted but the eleven that were selected came from established educational organizations and agencies. Not surprisingly, they were founded on concepts long favored by educators.

Fast forward to June 18, 2001. The new superintendent in Memphis, Tennessee announced that his district was withdrawing from involvement with NAS. Teachers and parents were complaining. An internal review showed that \$12 million had been spent over six years and that achievement scores were declining instead of increasing. Memphis had been an NAS showcase and its superintendent, Gerry House, had been named National Superintendent of the Year in 1999.

What Happened?

The short version of what happened is that the reformers ignored the past and predictably repeated it. They thought they were introducing revolutionary change but ended up reintroducing concepts that had failed decades earlier. The New American Schools became a rehash of old ideas.

The long version of what happened is that instead of making an independent assessment of the problem, NAS allowed the schools to diagnose themselves—a common misstep brought about by the politics of education reform. Instead of recognizing mistakes and learning from them, NAS developed a menu of “whole-school” reforms and permitted schools to choose. Not surprisingly, the schools selected reforms that fit their vision of teaching and learning.

The centerpiece of the education community’s worldview is that poor student achievement is the product of adverse social and economic conditions combined with insufficient funding and inadequate parental support. It is a view that enables schools to highlight legitimate impediments to learning while excusing themselves from responsibility. It is also a view that readily lends itself to calls for increased public school funding, e.g., “we must spend more on education to overcome social and economic disadvantage.”

Educators accept the notion that public education needs to improve but they reject the idea that they are responsible for its shortcomings. Instead they believe that schools are accomplishing all that can be accomplished under the circumstances. Criticism that suggests otherwise is presumed to be founded on ignorance or hostility to public education.

Certain facts support their indignation. Teaching is a challenging job and most teachers make a dedicated effort despite modest pay and trying conditions. Thus assessments of schooling failure that blame teachers do seem out-of-touch and unfair, if not malicious and insulting.

Sensitivity regarding this issue places an important restriction on what reformers can say about the causes of school failure. Anything that appears to malign teachers or to question their good intentions is avoided—especially by reformers who seek to collaborate with the schools. So instead of examining why schools fail to teach and pinpointing problems, NAS asserted that old ideas were not working, new ones were needed, and otherwise left the details up to the schools.

Presented with a vague and benign diagnosis and an offer of financial support, the NAS schools opted for reforms matched to their favorite assessment of the problem: Teaching that is excessively focused on measured student achievement. Instead of seeking proven teaching practices, they adopted reforms designed to discourage what most educators think of as a motivation-deadening overemphasis on facts, drill, and memorization and replaced it with an emphasis on concepts, authentic learning experiences, and thinking skills, i.e., an emphasis that they consider intrinsically motivating.

The Result

NAS asked for revolutionary ideas and for the most part got the “revolutionary” ideas that educators have been trying to implement since the nineteen twenties. Invited to diagnose and reform themselves, schools found the problem to be a misguided public policy emphasis on measurable knowledge and skills, not faulty ideas about teaching. The notion that their pedagogical ideals were at fault was-as E. D. Hirsch puts it-”unthinkable.”

Agencies and organizations that collaborate with schools to gain funding are not going to question education’s progressive vision of teaching and learning or anything else that brings in money. So long as reformers such as NAS follow their advice, their initiatives are apt to remain expensive exercises in frustration. School curricula and teaching practices are among the most obvious and directly manageable factors governing school effectiveness, but they are unlikely to be transformed by interventions that treat the education community’s ideals as sacrosanct.

Real reform must begin with an arm’s length examination of the problem, and the dissection of NAS’s downfall by the Fordham Foundation’s Jeffery Mirel is an excellent place to start.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com