Tinkering toward Utopia

A Century of Public School Reform

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This strategy for change is, of course, not new. It stems in part from Dewey’s pragmatic conception of constantly reassessing goals and results in the light of experience. Movements to improve learning have often been based on shared general principles and flexible implementation. But it would be unwise to underestimate the force of the “pedagogical past” and the difficulty of changing basic institutional forms, the grammar that organizes the central work of the school: instruction.

The basic grammar of schooling, like the shape of classrooms, has remained remarkably stable over the decades. Little has changed in the ways that schools divide time and space, classify students and allocate them to classrooms, splinter knowledge into “subjects,” and award grades and “credits” as evidence of learning. In 1902 John Dewey warned against dismissing the way schools are organized “as something comparatively external and indifferent to educational purposes and ideals.” In fact, he declared, “the manner in which the machinery of instruction bears upon the child . . . really controls the whole system.”

Continuity in the grammar of instruction has puzzled and frustrated generations of reformers who have sought to change these standardized organizational forms. In this chapter we ask how this grammar came about, why it was so tenacious, and why even vigorous and imaginative challenges to it tended to fade, leaving behind a few new practices here and there but not fundamentally altering the way schools are organized for instruction.

Practices such as age-graded classrooms structure schools in a manner analogous to the way grammar organizes meaning in verbal communication. Neither the grammar of schooling nor the grammar of speech needs to be consciously understood to operate smoothly. Indeed, much of the grammar of schooling has become taken for granted as just the way schools are. It is the departure from customary school practice that attracts attention (as when schools decide not to issue student report cards).

People are accustomed to elementary schools that are divided into self-contained classrooms called “grades.” In these rooms individual
teachers instruct pupils of about the same age in a variety of subjects. High schools are organized quite differently. Every hour, students shift from one subject to another, one teacher to another. Teachers belong to specialized departments and instruct about one hundred and fifty pupils a day—in five classes of perhaps thirty each—in their particular fields. When students complete these courses, they are rewarded with Carnegie units. In secondary schools, but generally not in elementary classes, students have some degree of choice of what to study.

Under these institutional arrangements, teachers have been expected to monitor and control students, assign tasks to them, and ensure that they have accomplished the work. Over the past century there has been a good deal of continuity in how teachers taught. We attend here, however, not so much to what happens in classrooms as to the organizational framework that shapes how teachers do their work.²

The grammar of schooling is a product of history, not some primordial creation. It results from the efforts of groups that mobilize to win support for their definitions of problems and their proposed solutions. The more powerful and prestigious the groups, the more likely it is that they will be able to buttress their reforms with laws, regulations, and accreditation requirements. The timing of innovations also has much to do with their implementation. Reforms that enter on the ground floor of major institutional changes, such as the rapid expansion of elementary education in the nineteenth century or the differentiation of secondary schools in the twentieth, have a good chance of becoming part of the standard institutional template.³

Once established, the grammar of schooling persisted in part because it enabled teachers to discharge their duties in a predictable fashion and to cope with the everyday tasks that school boards, principals, and parents expected them to perform: controlling student behavior, instructing heterogeneous pupils, and sorting people for future roles in school and later life. Habitus institutional patterns can be labor-saving devices, ways to organize complex duties. Teachers and students socialized to such routines often find it difficult to adapt to different structures and rules. Established institutional forms come to be understood by educators, students, and the public as necessary features of a "real school." They become fixed in place by everyday custom in schools and by outside forces, both legal mandates and cultural beliefs, until they are barely noticed. They become just the way schools are.³

Periodically, innovators have challenged the structures and rules that constitute the grammar of schooling, perceiving them not as the reforms they once were but as straitjackets preventing the schools from providing students with the best possible education. Over the years, innovators have often tried:

to create ungraded, not graded, schools;

to use time, space, and numbers of students as flexible resources and to diversify uniform class periods, same-sized rooms, and standard class sizes;

to merge specialized subjects into core courses in junior and senior high schools or, alternatively, to introduce departmental specialization into the elementary school;

and to encourage teachers to work in teams rather than to function as isolated individuals in separate classrooms.⁶

In the 1960s, for example, reforms in the grammar of schooling sprang up nationwide. Inspired by a vision of high schools of the future, reformers experimented with flexible scheduling and class sizes, variable-space classrooms, team teaching, independent study, and core courses. In earlier times, as well, innovators assaulted standard organizational arrangements, as in the Dalton Plan of individualized instruction or the progressive experiments of the Eight-Year Study. These reforms swept through educators' journals and conferences, seizing the attention of superintendents, teachers, school boards, parents, and professors.

Reformers who opposed the familiar grammar of schooling insisted that it was irrational, narrow in aim, antiquated in design, and harsh in effect. They found allies in foundations, associations of progressive educators, and cadres of enthusiastic teachers and principals. Various innovators blamed different groups for the persistence of the traditional grammar: administrators with perverse notions of efficiency, college officials who tried to dictate practice to high schools, or mostbacked teachers unwilling to try the new. Whatever the character of the "establishment" that supposedly inhibited changes in the grammar, confident reformers asserted that the logic and persuasiveness of their attack would undermine the foundations of the old order and provide the blueprint for a new order in the schools.⁷

But this did not happen. The standard grammar of schooling has proven remarkably durable. When new departures survived more or less intact, they typically took hold on the periphery of the system in specialized niches: industrial education, continuation schools, or special education for gifted or handicapped students—groups of pupils who 'did not
in the requirements for standard instruction. Here and there, teachers selectively incorporated some reform practices in regular classrooms, hybridizing the new with the old.

We start our exploration of the stability of the grammar of schooling by examining how two practices, the graded school and the Carnegie unit, became institutionalized. We then ask how the grammar survived three vigorous challenges: the Dalton Plan, the Eight-Year Study, and the new-model flexible high school of the late 1960s and 1970s. And in our reflections on these case studies, we suggest that the "establishment" that has held the grammar in place is not so much a conscious conservatism as it is unexamined institutional habits and widespread cultural beliefs about what constitutes a "real school."

The Creation of Enduring Institutional Forms

The graded elementary school—in which the curriculum is divided into year-long batches, students are sorted according to academic proficiency and age, and individual teachers instruct them in self-contained classrooms—is now so familiar that it is hard to imagine a time when it did not exist or to conceive of alternatives. But once it was a deliberate invention that spread rapidly across the urban landscape and that promised to make schools efficient, equitable, and easily replicable.

Efficiency and standardization were also goals of an academic accounting system called the Carnegie unit. The reform had unlikely and now largely forgotten origins, but it rapidly became an established part of the grammar of schooling, influencing three fundamental resources in secondary education: instructional time, specialized subjects, and academic credits.

The Graded School

The one-room country school was nongraded, a place where students of different ages learned together and often taught each other. Its schedule was flexible and adapted to individual differences among pupils. Parents and school trustees often came to the classroom to see what the children had learned, and they frequently took an active part in making decisions about education.

Today many people regard such practices as desirable, but during most of the twentieth century, reformers in universities and state departments of education have done their best to eliminate the one-room school. They wanted to replace it by a larger, multigrade school because they regarded the one-room school as inefficient, unprofessional, meager in curriculum, and subordinated to lay control, the teacher being too much under the eye and thumb of the community. Most rural residents, however, wanted to keep their local schools and resisted their consolidation into graded schools. Well into the twentieth century, one-room schools numbered over a hundred thousand and sometimes existed in towns as well as in rural areas. Now, as we noted in Chapter 1, they have been consolidated and legislated practically out of existence, all in the name of progress.8

Before the Civil War, another type of classroom was common in cities. It mixed together masses of pupils of differing ages and academic attainment—often two hundred or more—under the direction of a "master" who was responsible, sometimes along with one or two assistant teachers, for hearing all children recite their lessons. Reformers like Henry Barnard thought this a pedagogical monstrosity, for the masters had to move quickly from child to child, each at different levels of achievement, while maintaining draconian discipline.9

Many advocates of the graded school, prominent among them city and state superintendents and school board leaders, were impressed with the division of labor and hierarchical supervision common in factories. Why could this tidy system not be adapted to public education? they asked. They did not question the age-old assumption that a classroom is a self-contained place where one teacher sets tasks for a group of students and evaluates their performance. But they did seek greater efficiency by concentrating the work of a teacher on one grade in which students could be grouped by academic proficiency and could learn a uniform curriculum. One teacher could then teach all children in the classroom the same subjects, in the same way, and at the same pace. A school thus "graded" seemed egalitarian to the reformers, for schooling was thus supposedly the same for everyone, boys and girls, rich and poor, immigrant and native-born. Administrators, most of them male, divided the traditional curriculum—reading, spelling, arithmetic, writing, and the rest—into required yearly sequences and supervised the teachers, mostly female, to make sure that they were following the courses of study. At the end of the year, the pupils took tests to determine whether they were ready to move to the next level: success meant moving up to the next grade; failure meant staying in place.10

By 1860 the graded school, with its prescribed curriculum, was common in large cities, and by 1870 it had spread almost everywhere there were enough pupils to classify into grades. In addition to its claims of pedagogical efficiency, the graded school had the virtue of being easily reproduced as the population of children mushroomed in cities, no small
Here and there educators experimented with more sweeping alternatives to the year-by-year system of grading, as in a "nongraded" primary system that treated the K-3 years not as separate grades but as a pedagogical continuum. For the most part, however, school districts made incremental rather than fundamental changes in the graded school. The graded school became firmly ensconced as part of the grammar of schooling, for it seemed to solve key organizational problems. Over the years, the public came to regard distinct grades as emblematic of a "real school."\(^\text{15}\)

**The Carnegie Unit**

Like the graded school, the Carnegie unit rapidly became part of the grammar of schooling. In 1906 the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Henry S. Pritchett, defined a "unit" as "a course of five periods weekly throughout an academic year" in secondary school subjects (by common custom, these "periods" came to be about fifty to fifty-five minutes long). So firmly has this academic accounting device—quickly labeled the Carnegie unit—been established in the operating routines of high schools that successive attempts to dislodge it have been unsuccessful, except in peripheral parts of the system, such as vocational training programs or continuation schools for potential drop-outs.\(^\text{16}\)

In 1905 Andrew Carnegie established the foundation with an endowment of ten million dollars for the purpose of providing pensions for retired college professors. What connection could this possibly have had with the time allotted to subjects in high schools? From the first, the leaders of the foundation, and especially Pritchett, were not content simply to distribute money to retired professors. The trustees who gathered at Carnegie's mansion in New York on November 15, 1905, were a stellar cast of university presidents, including such luminaries as Charles William Eliot of Harvard, Woodrow Wilson of Princeton, Arthur Hadley of Yale, and David Starr Jordan of Stanford. These elite educators, confident that they had the answers to improving American education, were determined to reform from the top down, beginning with the colleges, a system of schooling that they regarded as chaotic and ineffective. They saw Carnegie's grant as an opportunity to raise standards in American secondary and higher education through unifying and centralizing academic practice. They had no doubt that what was good for the elite colleges was also good for the country. The prestige of the presidents ensured that their proposals would carry weight.\(^\text{17}\)
First the trustees had to decide what a college was, no easy task in a country in which over six hundred institutions of “higher education” ranged in character and quality from struggling small academies (sometimes bearing the title of “university”) to major research institutions like Columbia, Cornell, and Chicago. How could they distinguish work that was genuinely of college grade from teaching that was barely on a secondary level? “To be ranked as a college,” the trustees agreed, an institution must have at least six full-time professors, offer “a course of four full years in the liberal arts and sciences,” and require for admission “not less than the usual four years of academic or high school preparation.” The foundation also decided not to include sectarian or state institutions. They judged that only fifty-two colleges met their criteria.\(^{18}\)

It was not enough simply to prescribe four years of secondary instruction, Pritchett warned. They should also develop a standard measurement of time and credit for each subject—the Carnegie unit—and demand that a college require at least fourteen of these units. The foundation officials did not stop there: they also wrote eight pages specifying in great detail the content of units in subjects such as English, mathematics, Latin, Greek, foreign languages, history, and science. Thus they not only standardized time and credits but also gave pride of place to traditional academic disciplines. In addition, they put the weight of their influence behind the departmentalization of high school subjects, based partly on practice in higher education. The creation of departments became another key element in the grammar of secondary schooling.\(^{19}\)

Pritchett and his colleagues in the foundation did not invent from whole cloth either the Carnegie unit system of academic credits or the specifics of academic courses. The latter they largely copied from the curriculum advocated by the College Education Examination Board. The unit system had slowly evolved from the work of two college-dominated committees of the National Education Association in the 1890s, the Committee of Ten and the Committee on College Entrance Requirements. What the foundation did do, however, was to give a more precise definition to the unit as an accounting device and to put its prestige behind the notion that a “standard” high school was one that organized time and subjects in Carnegie units.\(^{20}\)

Pritchett regarded the educational system as a pyramid in which those on the top—the experts in the universities—should set the standards for those below. He agreed with Eliot of Harvard that secondary education was a mishmash. The best way to reform it—and to solve the problem of preparing students better for rapidly expanding colleges—was to use the most prestigious schools as the template for the rest. “The better high schools,” he wrote in 1907, “require pupils to recite . . . studies daily five times a week.” If that practice was good for the “better” schools, it must be good for all.\(^{21}\)

Pritchett and the Carnegie trustees were seeking to impose a reform that was feasible at that time in only a minority of high schools. The colleges wanted what the run-of-the-mill secondary school could not provide. In cities with populations under eight thousand, the average high school had fifty-two pupils and two teachers in 1902. In such a school there was no way that students could study all the college preparatory subjects by reciting in standard-sized classes for an hour a day to gain the required fourteen Carnegie units. There were neither enough students to form classes in the necessary subjects nor enough teachers to teach them, yet the basic calculus of the Carnegie unit was hours spent in class recitation.\(^{22}\)

Increasingly, regional associations of colleges and secondary schools required the use of Carnegie units for accreditation of high schools. High schools sought this seal of approval because their graduates could thereby be admitted to college by certificate and usually without examination. The North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, for example, demanded in the 1920s that schools require fifteen Carnegie units for graduation, class periods of at least forty minutes, and a school year of at least thirty-six weeks. State laws also built the Carnegie unit system of credits into the template of the “standard” high school. Although originally intended to improve preparation for college, the Carnegie unit system of accounting and the division of teachers into separate departments also provided a tidy framework for the differentiation of curriculum as the high school expanded.\(^{23}\)

A system of academic bookkeeping that originally was patterned on “the better high schools” and designed to upgrade preparation for college admissions and to standardize the credit system eventually became part of the grammar of schooling in nearly all high schools, thus affecting students in non-college-bound tracks as well as those headed for higher education. Critics of the Carnegie unit argued that it had frozen schedules, separated knowledge into discrete boxes, and created an accounting mentality better suited to a bank than to a school. Learning was becoming institutionally defined as serving seat time, progressives claimed, while the reward at the end of the rigid progression was merely a “credit.” It was time, thought some reformers, to end what they saw as the domination of the high school by the colleges.
Challenges to the Standard Grammar of Schooling

Although the graded school and the Carnegie unit rapidly became standard practice in moderate- to large-sized school districts, were incorporated into state school standards and accreditation requirements, and increasingly became part of the cultural definition of a "real school," they did not go unchallenged. The major critics of the standard grammar of schooling, like the originators of that system, were influential educators who worked through their associations and reform networks to bring about change. It proved far harder to alter that entrenched system, however, than to create it.

In the Dalton Plan, advocates of individualized instruction assaulted what they regarded as lockstep instruction in high schools. In the Eight-Year Study, sponsored by the Progressive Education Association and foundations, innovators challenged the sort of top-down domination of secondary education represented by Pritchett and his colleagues in colleges and universities. And in the 1960s, individual reformers, activists in the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and foundation officials questioned the conventions governing space, time, grouping, and the self-contained classroom with its one teacher of departmentalized subjects.

The Dalton Plan

Helen Parkhurst developed the Dalton Plan in the early 1920s (it was named after the Massachusetts town where the innovation was first introduced in the high school). A teacher, trainer of teachers, and founder of a private school, Parkhurst challenged essential components of the graded school in which teachers sought to instruct pupils en masse in a prescribed curriculum.

Heavily influenced by child-centered progressives and Maria Montessori, Parkhurst was aware of earlier attempts to break the standardized movement of students in graded classrooms. Superintendent Preston Search in Pueblo, Colorado, and Frederick Burk in the San Francisco Normal School had pioneered methods of tailoring instruction to individual students and small groups rather than the whole class (Parkhurst visited Burk's model school and adapted some of his ideas, as did Carleton Washburne, who designed a system similar to Parkhurst's in the Winnetka, Illinois, public schools). The Dalton Plan was only one episode in a long series of efforts to correct the defects of the graded school.
Why the Grammar of Schooling Persists

few schools adopted Parkhurst’s reforms wholesale. Many more adopted features piecemeal. By 1930, 162 (2 percent) of 8,600 secondary schools surveyed in a national study reported that they had completely reorganized their schools to conform with the Dalton Plan. Another 486 (6 percent) of the secondary schools reported that they had introduced a modified version of the plan in their buildings.29

If the 162 secondary schools really did institute the whole Dalton Plan, they would have made drastic alterations in business as usual. In the 486 secondary schools that adopted some features of the plan, it is difficult to verify to what degree classrooms were converted into laboratories, fifty-minute periods had been eliminated, promotion practices altered, and contracts and progress charts used. Not counted in the survey of secondary schools were the many elementary schools that also incorporated portions of the Dalton Plan into their upper grades.

However appealing the Dalton Plan may have been in theory and successful in practice when carried out by skilled and energetic educators, it influenced policy talk far more than practice. By 1949 a researcher could find only one school that continued to follow the Dalton Plan—the private school Parkhurst herself had founded in New York City. At Dalton High School itself, the plan lasted only one year in unmodified form and then was dropped entirely after a decade. It did leave at least a modest legacy, as did the Dalton superintendent two decades later: “even in this conservative New England town we are privileged to try little experiments in educational procedure.”30

From attempted revolution in education to a few “little experiments in educational procedure” might be regarded as a considerable come-down. Habituated to the traditional organizational practices and either taking them for granted or seeing them as institutionally and socially functional, educators, school boards, and parents resisted fundamental change. The hold of the standard grammar of schooling was tenacious.

Resistance came from several quarters. Many teachers objected to the massive amount of paperwork and time for individualization that the plan required. Parents and educators protested that motivation and discipline of pupils deteriorated under the Dalton Plan; it was too easy to cheat or goof off, they said. Pupils sometimes complained that fulfilling solitary contracts was more boring than regular classwork. Some educators criticized the plan for not giving students enough social stimulus and training. A New York teacher saw it as yet another example of the method mania in public schools: “Last year it was the socialized recitation, or the Gary Plan, or dramatization or correlation; this year it is motivation, silent reading, or the Dalton Plan. Each is taken up in turn, indiscriminately adopted, presently elbowed out to make room for the next newcomer; and yet we are not saved. The old problems remain.”31

Individual teachers, however, did “try little experiments in educational procedure” by using certain features of the reform in their self-contained classrooms. The Dalton Plan gave teachers optional strategies that they could adapt to classrooms organized in traditional ways. Components of the Dalton Plan also continued to appear in programs catering to potential drop-outs, low achievers in need of remedial work, disabled students, or creative pupils unmotivated by traditional instruction. Self-paced materials, contracts, flexibility in the amount of time students take to complete their work, periodic checks to determine whether content and skills have been mastered, and the use of teachers as coaches—these practices are common in such programs. Some vocational classes incorporated parts of the Dalton Plan and divided time in segments different from the traditional Carnegie unit. The notion of “laboratories” has reappeared from time to time as learning centers in progressive elementary classrooms.32

Convinced that the traditional grammar of schooling made no sense, Parkhurst wanted high schools to embrace her plan all at once in all of its details. This rarely happened, for it would have fundamentally changed the standard grammar of secondary schools and required school boards, parents, educators, and pupils to alter their cultural beliefs about the character of a “real school.” But many of her ideas reappeared as hybrids in an evolving system of public education.

The Eight-Year Study

Other challenges to the standard grammar of schooling cropped up across the country. Innovative educators sought to blend subjects and to experiment with curricula, time, space, and numbers of students. They regarded departmental specialization, the Carnegie unit, and the graded school as straitjackets.

Time after time, teachers have experimented with merging high school subjects into core programs—fusing, say, American history and American literature—to permit greater intellectual integration and flexible use of time and class sizes. In the 1930s in the Canton, Mississippi, High School three teachers created what they called “the integrated work program” in which they and a group of first-year pupils spent five periods a day studying such topics as “Ethiopia, Her Friends and Enemies.” They used social science, English, and mathematics to answer the questions generated by the students.33
in the experiment. It was not difficult to enlist the colleges, for they were having trouble attracting students in the Great Depression and the twenty-nine schools were chosen as "institutions of the highest character and excellence and established reputation" from over two hundred nominated for the project. Among these model schools were ten innovative public high schools, including all the high schools in Denver, six model high schools in universities, and thirteen prestigious independent schools.16

Freed from such college requirements as Carnegie units in specific subjects, the schools came up with highly individual responses. Philosophically, the commission was determined not to tell local schools what to do with their newfound freedom, but it did provide curriculum consultants and a sophisticated group of evaluators to help them plan and appraise their programs. Often local reformers chose to experiment in mini-schools within a larger secondary school, which was the case in Denver.37

As time went by, reforms in the schools settled into certain common patterns. Teachers developed core programs that crossed departmental boundaries and varied the time periods and sizes of their classes. Students spent less time on mainline academic subjects and more on art, music, and drama. The distinction between the formal and informal curriculum began to dissolve as students participated in community service, artistic productions, publications, and decision making in school affairs. Teachers spent much time with each other and students in planning these activities. In short, the grammar of instruction became more individualized and student-centered, deemphasizing batch-processing.38

When evaluators compared the college grades of graduates of the twenty-nine schools in the Eight-Year Study with a matched set of graduates of more traditional secondary schools, they discovered that the former performed about as well as the latter in their courses and were more active in collegiate social, artistic, and political life. They also found that the graduates of the most progressive schools did the best in college. Given the high social-class background of most of the students and the quality of the selected schools, the success in college of the graduates of the twenty-nine schools does not seem surprising. The chief message of the experiment, said Frederick L. Rederfer, the director of the PEA at the time of the study, "was that there is no single course of preparation for success in college." In theory, then, the high schools should have been free to alter the traditional departmentalization of subjects and other features of the grammar of schooling.39
If any schools should have been able to break the mold, to install a lasting new set of institutional practices, these should have been. They had originally been selected because they appeared to be outstanding schools, well financed and with staffs hospitable to reform. For the most part, they served prosperous student bodies. The sponsorship of the PEA, the enormous foundation grants, the curriculum consultants and evaluators, the summer workshops for planning, the favorable professional and popular publicity given to the project—these were assets not available to the average reformers of the time.

In 1950 Redefin and twenty-nine other participants in the Eight-Year Study—including representatives of fifteen of the private and public schools—gathered to assess the results of the study eight years after the official sponsorship ended. It is likely that these participants were more committed to the reforms than the average staff member. Redefin asked the group what was happening to the educational experiments as they aged: “Do they effect any permanent change in education? Do they leave any appreciable residue the year after? ... Five years later? ... Ten? How does educational change take place? Is education a carousel with widely heralded experiments slowly fading from the educational scene as some new attraction takes the spotlight and the music goes round and round?”

The participants mostly agreed that the reforms had faded, and this judgment was confirmed when Redefin later visited sixteen schools. One of the participants at the conference captured the consensus of his colleagues when he said “the strong breeze of the Eight-Year Study has passed and now we are getting back to fundamentals. Our students write fewer articles in English and social science but they are better spellers.” Core courses had dropped away, the Carnegie unit with its uniform periods had reappeared, and departments had reasserted their control of the curriculum. Students spent less time on the arts and extracurricular activities and more on conventional college preparatory subjects. Most schools had returned to the old grammar of schooling, though some evidence of the experiments remained.

Redefin asked why this was the case. The participants pinpointed a number of external reasons: World War II and the Cold War produced a “concern for security [that] tended to strengthen conservatism and authoritarianism” in the school as well as in the society; in such times “everything connected with ‘progressive education’ was under fire” (some at the meeting suggested dropping the name “progressive”). Having more applicants, the colleges could be more selective than in the 1930s or early 1940s and either did not know about or disagreed with the finding that progressive programs produced good results. The experiment had been “too intramural,” said one, and failed to anticipate resistance from parents and trustees.

Internally, the experiment faded in part because the committed teachers became “exhausted by the demands made on them, [since] challenges came too thick and fast for the faculty to digest them.” Collaborative progressive teaching was highly labor-intensive and potentially unstable because of turnover of teachers. In many schools, traditionalists had opposed the reforms from the start and were happy to reassert the authority of the departments, standard schedules, and the academic disciplines when a more conservative climate reappeared. In some cases, as Redefin found when he visited individual sites, the “model schools” had not been progressive to begin with and had been more interested in the prestige of belonging to the elect than in experimenting. High turnover of teachers and administrators frustrated continuity. Where reforms stuck, typically the schools had been progressive even before the study and had continued to experiment afterward.

The story of the Eight-Year Study and its aftermath reveals that substantial changes in the grammar of secondary schools were possible under highly favorable conditions. Colleges were eager to attract students and thus willing to suspend some requirements (as for Carnegie units in traditional subjects). Liberal ideologies attracted both teachers and families. Powerful support came from foundations and professional associations.

But when conditions changed—when elite colleges changed their tune in admissions, when the political and pedagogical climate turned conservative, and when the initial energy and enthusiasm for change dissipated—most of the schools reverted to the traditional grammar of instruction, understood by most parents and teachers as standard features of a “real school.” Progressives were often only a fraction of the total faculties of the participating schools, and the changes they introduced probably penetrated their institutions only to a limited extent. In some schools, the traditional grammar of schooling was challenged only in experimental classes within the larger institution, and a decade later traditional forms of organization reasserted themselves even in these interstices of innovation. The familiar division of subjects into departments typically reemerged where core courses had thrived for a time. Herbert M. Kliebard observes that “if the success of the 65-year effort to reform the American curriculum is to be judged by the extent to which
English, mathematics, science, history, geography and the like simply survived the assault against them, then the effort must be counted a failure.

In retrospect, the participants in the Eight-Year Study did not regard the experiment as a waste of time. They agreed that the effort “had been eminently worthwhile.” It had energized both teachers and students. As a reform, the Eight-Year Study had a short, and largely happy, life. Teachers learned to plan together. “Much of the camaraderie developed between administrators and classroom teachers has continued . . . The part of the Study that has persisted is that which grows out of the thinking and philosophy of individuals.” The major influence of the Eight-Year Study came not from creating a durable new grammar of schooling but from its impact—then and later—on participants who engaged in building a new pedagogical order.

High Schools of Tomorrow

In the 1960s, years of innovation when rebels were questioning the conventional wisdom in education, reformers proposed another rethinking of time, subjects, space, and class size. They believed that they could and should change institutional forms when they no longer served humane goals. Typically they regarded the old grammar of schooling as rigid, hierarchical, and based on a constricted view of human nature. Students, the old system implicitly announced, were young workers who needed to be compelled to learn a desiccated curriculum by their supervisors—teachers—in standardize classes. Instead, the young should be seen as active, intellectually curious, and capable of taking charge of their own learning. Starting from that premise, reformers argued, the existing grammar of schooling made no sense.

Reinventing the Rousseauean notion that people are born free but are everywhere in chains, some radical reformers rejected the institutional form of the public school outright, advocating “free schools” and “schools without walls” to take the place of conventional classrooms, preset curricula, and traditional teacher roles. A few followed the lead of Ivan Illich in calling for the “deschooling” of society. Although “free schools” briefly became a hot topic in the popular media and won influential advocates, they flourished for only a short time. Adventurous “schools without walls,” where students became actively engaged in their communities, were tamed in practice into more traditional off-campus activities such as vocational programs offering academic credit to students working as salespeople in stores.

Other reformers, more moderate in outlook and aspiration than the free schoolers or the deschoolers, proposed major organizational changes within the walls of the public schools. They called for ungraded and “open” elementary schools. They developed blueprints of high schools in which

time was a flexible resource (a system often called “modular scheduling”);

year-long courses in established fields were often chopped into “mini-courses” to match the current interests of students and teachers;

teachers worked in teams rather than alone and taught students in large, medium-sized, and small classes;

classrooms were transformed into resource centers for independent study, split into rooms of different size for different teaching styles, and made into social centers where students could meet during time “modules” when they did not have a class.

Architectural and pedagogical forms should follow new functions, they argued, and new conceptions of education demanded a new grammar of instruction as well as open buildings.

In the 1960s a coalition of influential organizations and individuals agreed that it was time to overthrow the Carnegie unit, the eggcrate classroom, the teacher-dominated traditional curriculum, passive styles of learning, and the isolation of teachers from each other. Beginning in 1961, the Ford Foundation poured millions of dollars into “lighthouse” high schools to demonstrate the value of comprehensive attacks on the pedagogical status quo. In 1968 the Danforth Foundation gave a grant of more than a million dollars to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) for a Model Schools Project designed to create the “Schools of Tomorrow” incorporating these new ideas. Universities entered the reform partnership, developing computerized scheduling programs and training teachers and administrators for the new system.

The experiment took place under favorable auspices, then, just like the Eight-Year Study. The decade of the 1960s was a time of optimism and urgency when innovation was the watchword among the enterprising principals in the NASSP. Foundations and the federal government (under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965)
provided large amounts of seed money for schools deemed most likely to succeed. And changes did come rapidly. In Oregon, to which the Ford Foundation gave a statewide grant of $3.5 million in 1962, many educators decided to transform their high schools.  

At Marshall High School in Portland, Oregon, the principal and staff shifted to a flexible schedule, altered the building to house resource centers and classes of different sizes, and created teams of teachers assisted by aides who worked in the resource centers and performed other tasks. When the new plan started in September 1963, students no longer faced the familiar routine of six periods a day with the same teacher in the same subject at the same hour. The two thousand students met in eleven hundred separate class sessions, some in large groups, some medium-sized, and some small discussion groups of fifteen people. One-third of a student's time was unscheduled and free for conferences with teachers, working in the library or resource room, or lounging in the cafeteria. By holding the content of the curriculum more or less constant—preserving the departmental system and more or less traditional subject matter—Marshall High School avoided reinventing the entire program from scratch. For the motivated pupil the system worked well; it helped to individualize instruction and gave breathing space. But the unmotivated or alienated student tended to fall through the cracks or to cause disruption. "We still have discipline problems at Marshall," said the vice principal, "but we are trying to find ways to interest students who are convinced they hate school."  

Such students were a major concern of the team of educators who established John Adams High School in Portland in 1970. Because of their "frustrations... in their previous teaching in public schools," said the head of the instructional division at Adams, the team was "generally sympathetic to the view of human nature and human learning espoused by such contemporary educators as John Holt, Paul Goodman, and Herbert Kohl. We took it as a matter of faith that all students learn best in a free, unstructured setting where comparative evaluation and other extrinsic pressures are kept to a minimum." The school had most of the flexible organizational forms of Marshall, but the staff were also determined to alter the curriculum and the mode of governance. They replaced departamentalized academic courses with a team-taught interdisciplinary "general education program" that focused on social problems, basing it on the conviction that the course "should be a means to learn about a society in flux, one in which the only constant is change." They struggled to create a participatory mode of decision making in which not only administrators and teachers collaborated but students as well.  

Again, for some students—especially those who were "highly individualistic and creative"—the new form of schooling worked well. Many who had learned to succeed in a more directive environment, however, became frustrated when teachers did not tell "the student what he is to do, what he is to learn, nor how." A third group—alienated students "who had been damaged by previous failure" and lacked basic skills—cut classes, roamed the halls, and ended up without the help they needed "to survive in the world of work." And as for the teachers, getting used to new schedules and groupings of students, inventing the multidisciplinary curriculum, being responsive to students, and sharing in decision making left the staff "in a state of near exhaustion."  

The self-critical and adventurous educators who had planned the high school recognized that they faced a clash between their goals as reformers and the values embedded in the community they served. Although writers in the popular media and in the educational profession praised the school as a model for reforming secondary schooling, many local people in the lower-middle-class neighborhood surrounding the school were outraged at Adams's departure from what they knew to be a proper school. Two months into the first year of the Adams experiment, some parents formed a critical group called Citizens for a Better Adams. One parent complained: "Adams High does not teach respect for authority, discipline, basic scholarship, or orderly use of time. The school teaches gross egotism, extreme self-centeredness, myopic self-delusion, and general anarchy."  

By coupling fundamental changes in curriculum and governance with flexibility in the use of time and space and other challenges to the familiar grammar of instruction, Adams High School went well beyond reforms in most other innovative high schools of the era. Was it in fact easier to try to change everything at once? Probably not.  

Few high school reformers went so far as to base learning on the libertarian philosophies of Holt and Goodman. But in a period when the bulge of youth from the baby boom began entering secondary schools, when the civil rights and feminist movements were attacking the educational status quo, when activists were protesting the war in Vietnam, and students were questioning traditional norms in unprecedented ways, educators in many high schools were seeking to individualize education, to stress inquiry and social betterment, and to give pupils more choice and initiative in their own learning.
In the innovative schools, many students appreciated the new forms of flexibility, such as modular scheduling, electives, classes of different sizes, and free time during the school day. Reactions of teachers tended to be mixed. Some applauded the opportunity to work together, to hold large or small classes for different periods of time, and to revise the curriculum and create electives. But other teachers felt that they lived in a goldfish bowl as visitors poured in to see the schools of tomorrow (or, alternatively, that they worked in a "zoo"—a favorite epithet used by conservatives). High turnover among principals in the Model Schools Project hurt continuity in reform, especially since administrators had been catalysts for change in most schools.54

Many communities grew tired of the reforms and instead wanted the comfort of the familiar grammar of schooling. Most of the high schools of tomorrow gradually reverted to the familiar grammar of schooling. A substantial proportion of the parents and other community members criticized the way students used their free time. When principals in flexible high schools were asked to identify problems encountered, 94 percent said that low-achieving students had trouble budgeting time, 84 percent claimed that more students cut classes, 78 percent found that teachers had fewer individual conferences with students than expected, 84 percent observed that teachers continued to dominate discussion even in small classes, and 72 percent said that parents of children who were not performing well in school tended to blame the modular schedule.55

An evaluator of the projects supported by the Ford Foundation observed that "without exception, questions of student autonomy and discipline were raised by granting free time. This, along with the perceived erosion of academic standards, resulted in pressure from the communities as well as within schools to revert to more traditional patterns of organization." He found that over half the schools had dropped modular scheduling by 1970, and others had substantially modified it (recall that these were specially selected schools that had received grants and technical assistance as well). Policy talk about the virtues of flexible scheduling rose sharply in the 1960s and then dropped just as abruptly in the 1970s when the troubles in the high schools of tomorrow became more evident.56

By the 1970s, people had begun to think that high schools were in decline and that the institutional innovations of the previous decade were partly to blame. Gallup polls revealed that Americans were concerned about lax discipline and lower academic standards. In this new policy outlook, flexibility was a fault, not a virtue. Students should be in a regular class for a regular period, supervised by their teachers. They should have fewer curricular choices, not more. Students need a "real school." Go back to the good old days was the theme. More criticism, summed up by a California legislator who said the purpose of new school laws was to make "the little buggers work harder." Although they would have used more decorous language, the urban educators of the nineteenth century would have approved the sentiment. The aim of schooling, wrote an advocate of the graded school in 1885, "is the imposition of tasks; if the pupil likes it, well; if not, the obligation is the same."57

A bold yet fragile challenge to the grammar of schooling, the "High Schools of Tomorrow" of the 1960s and early 1970s ebbed as "back to basics" and "excellence" became mottos of the next wave of reform. The experiment left behind here and there some new forms of flexibility and the memory that the grammar of schooling was malleable. But in most districts, the Carnegie unit, not the flexible schedule, remained the normal pattern.

Reflections

We have suggested a variety of interlocking reasons why some reforms become so institutionalized that they became the grammar of schooling. Political support for innovations like the graded school and the Carnegie unit came from powerful sponsors adept at persuading local school boards, state legislatures, state departments of education, and accrediting agencies to freeze their reforms into regulations and laws. The timing of these reforms was also crucial: the graded school arrived at the start of the rapid expansion of elementary education and the Carnegie unit on the threshold of a massive differentiation of the high school. The graded school and the departmentalized high school became building blocks in an interlocking and interdependent system; to change one part—say the accounting device of the Carnegie unit—disrupted familiar external controls such as standards for college admissions or accreditation.

Inside the schools, the grammar of schooling offered a standardized way to process large numbers of people. The grammar was easily replicable. The institutional design of graded schools produced a cookie-cutter sameness. The departmentalized high school had a greater variety of offerings but a uniform system of accounting, the Carnegie unit. Administrators, teachers, and students learned how to work in this system; indeed, the grammar of schooling became simply the way schools worked. Over time, the public, schooled in the system, came to assume that the grammar embodied the necessary features of a "real school."

Although laws, institutional custom, and cultural beliefs worked to-
gether to hold the grammar of schooling in place, from time to time reformers have argued that this grammar—its product of history—ill serves its purpose of educating students. Let us build instead, they have said, a new system based on sound educational principles. Although the challengers have conducted energetic experiments, for the most part their reforms did not last long. Trying to create major change in one part of the system—a classroom, a school within a school, or even a whole school or district—proved difficult in a broader interdependent system based on the standard grammar. If the reformers attracted funds and professional attention, jealousies from more traditional peers intruded. Turnover of administrators and teachers undermined complex innovations that depended on commitment and special talents. 60

Two serious problems recurred in the challenges we have examined. One was that the reforms were “too intramural,” Lawrence A. Cremin has observed that progressive education declined in part because leaders lost some of their political savvy and lost touch with the opinions of citizens who were not educators. Concentrating on convincing their professional peers, they did not cultivate the kind of broader social movement that might nourish educational and social change. Failure to enlist the support and ideas of the community was especially harmful to fundamental reforms that violated the public’s notions of a “real school,” as was apparent, for example, in public reactions against the “high schools of tomorrow” in the late 1960s. In the face of such opposition, particularly when the climate of opinion was conservative, it was difficult to retain the resources and enthusiasm that sustained change. 61

A second common problem was burnout among educational reformers. Changing basic organizational patterns created overload for teachers, for it did not simply add new tasks to familiar routines but required teachers to replace old behavior with new and to persuade pupils, colleagues, and parents and school boards to accept the new patterns as normal and desirable. Since evidence on outcomes of major structural reforms has been ambiguous, the practitioner “contemplating a change in classroom organization,” Milbrey W. McLaughlin writes, “might be confronting a complicated innovation that shows no clear advantage over existing practices—at least in the ways that often matter most to school boards, voters, and anxious parents.” 62

Despite the problems faced by those who challenged the standard grammar of instruction, reform episodes such as the Eight-Year Study or the revisions in instruction in Denver were hardly a zero-sum game. Even if the reforms gradually faded, participants questioned in basic ways what they were doing and were energized by collaboration with colleagues.

What they learned still remained part of their potential teaching repertoire when their schools returned to more conventional patterns.

What does the historical experience suggest about attempts today to refashion the grammar of schooling? Should one conclude that it is impossible to improve schooling in basic ways? We think not, though the task is much harder than many people suspect. We suggest that actual changes in schools will be more gradual and piecemeal than the usual either/or rhetoric of innovation might indicate. Almost any blueprint for basic reform will be altered during implementation, so powerful is the hold of the public’s cultural construction of what constitutes a “real school” and so common is the teachers’ habit of hybridizing reforms to fit local circumstances and public expectations.

One reason that changing the grammar is difficult is that reforms in one classroom or mini-school or school or district take place within a larger interdependent system. Teachers in an experimental school may agree that they should combine subjects and teach for depth of understanding, believing that “less is more,” yet college admissions officers may want applicants to have Carnegie units in specific academic subjects. State and district regulations and standard time schedules often impede change. Gaining the freedom to experiment demands political and organizational savvy and collective action.

Both in the past and in the present, reformers who have challenged the grammar of instruction have banded together for support and have often felt that they were part of a broad educational movement. They have embraced common goals, formed organizations to mobilize people, ideas, and funds, and worked collaboratively to lessen a sense of isolation and burnout and to encourage risk-taking and staff development. In this way, they have sought a middle course between the top-down mode of reform of the administrative progressives and the random approach of letting a thousand flowers bloom. 63

Lest they, like their predecessors, become “too intramural” and thereby neglect public understanding and participation, reformers who want to change the grammar of schooling today need to enlist the support of parents, school boards, and the community more generally. Participation of the public in school decision making can, of course, lead to conflict and seem to threaten professional autonomy. But in a democracy, fundamental reforms that seek to alter the cultural constructions of a “real school” cannot succeed without lengthy and searching public dialogue about the ends and means of schooling.