

We Dare Our Children to Learn

We dare many of our children to learn in schools that were designed at the turn of the last century explicitly on the factory model—schools in which we put children on a conveyor belt and move them from one overloaded teacher to the next, from 45 minute class period to 45 minute class period, to be stamped with separate, disconnected lessons six or seven or eight times a day. We dare them to learn in schools where they have little opportunity to become well known over a sustained period of time by any adults who consider them as whole people or as developing intellects. We dare young people to learn when they are supposed to get “personal” advice and support from a counselor with a caseload of 500. We dare our students to learn to think when they work alone and passively, listening to lectures and memorizing facts and algorithms at separate desks in independent seatwork. We dare too many of our children to make it through huge warehouse institutions housing thousands of students and focused substantially on the control of behavior rather than the development of community, with a locker as students’ only stable point of contact. While these factory-model schools may have worked for the purposes they were asked to serve 50 years ago – when fewer than 50 percent of students were expected to graduate and only a handful were expected to learn to think – they do not meet most of our children’s needs today.

Institutional Structures Create Barriers

The problem with schools does not lie with the people in them, but with the institutional structures that organize their work. Just as we dare students to learn, we dare many of our teachers to teach, when they see 150 students or more every day, precluded by this structure from

A day in the life of a typical factory-model high school

Consider what it would be like if your job was organized like the work students do in a typical American high school: When you arrive at the office, you are seated at a desk and you start working; then, 45 minutes later somebody rings a bell and says “Jump up! You’ve got to go to your next job.” So you run to another desk in another part of the building with a new boss, who has different rules and different expectations—a whole different agenda for you to accomplish—and you sit down and try to figure out how to do the job for 45 minutes, and another bell rings. Then you jump up and run to another part of the building and do another job for another boss with different rules and expectations for 45 minutes. And you do this 7 or 8 times during the day. Some of the rules are explicit, but many of them are tacit. You are supposed to figure out for yourself what your boss cares about and what she will really care about when evaluating your work. Most of your bosses don’t know you well, because they see 30 or so employees every 45 minutes and rarely get to talk to any of them one-on-one. If you get confused, most of your bosses will say, “Don’t talk to your co-workers; that’s cheating. Do your own work.” Under these circumstances, how productive do you think you would be? We dare our teachers to teach when they work in isolation from one another with little time to plan together or share their knowledge. A California high school student put it well: “This place hurts my spirit.” An administrator in the same school voiced the dilemma of caring educators caught in the squeeze between students and the system: “[M]y spirit is hurt, too, when I have to do things I don’t believe in” (quoted in Poplin and Weeres, 1992, p. 11).