Tradeoffs, Societal Values, And School Reform

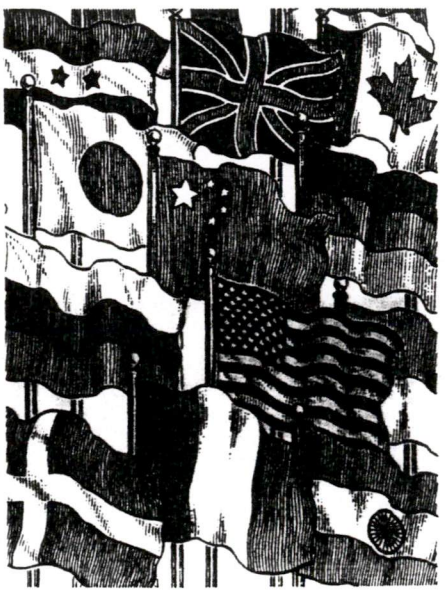
Ms. Rotberg looks at a constant of education reform: for every new approach, tradeoffs must be made. She reports on the choices that educators in various countries, often dealing with similar issues, have made in their efforts to bring about school improvement.

BY IRIS C. ROTBERG

THE POLITICAL rhetoric about school reform makes it sound easy. Apparently, whatever the proposed reform — testing, reduced class size, vouchers — there are no tradeoffs or "costs" to consider. Or the tradeoffs are judged to be so insignificant that they do not merit discussion. There is also an unspoken premise that countries with effective education systems (i.e., high test scores) have gotten it right without ever having had to make difficult choices or cope with negative consequences. The rest of us could do the same if we would only adopt some other country's system. Finally, the societal context of school reform is often ignored, despite the fact that a country's priorities, values, and economic status ultimately play a major role in determining whether reforms can be implemented as planned.

Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform, a book I recently edited on current education reforms in 16 countries, analyzes the trends in school reform and the fact that all countries' reforms require policy makers to choose among conflicting goals.[1] In every country, there are examples of tradeoffs, painful costs, and ironies. There are several benefits of knowing those tradeoffs.

- First, after identifying tradeoffs, policy makers may reconsider, or temper, the reform as not worth the negative consequences.
- Second, even if the reform is judged worthwhile, those negative consequences may be ameliorated by paying attention in advance to those disadvantaged by the change.
- Third, the very process of evaluating the reform and its probable consequences will help strengthen the implementation of the reform, even if some of the negative consequences remain.
- Fourth, we will be less likely to spin our wheels trying to implement a reform that is fundamentally at odds



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with deeply held value systems, financial capacity, or political structures.

• Finally, understanding the broader implications of education policies will help us make more realistic assessments of both the reforms proposed in the U.S. and the educational practices in other countries.

In this article, I focus on several key trends in global education reform: 1) strengthening educational equity, 2) reducing central control of education, 3) holding teachers accountable for student performance, 4) increasing the flexibility of learning environments, and 5) increasing access to education. I examine the tradeoffs countries faced as they attempted to implement each of these reforms, and I conclude with a discussion of the societal factors that both facilitate and constrain reform.

TRENDS AND TRADEOFFS

Strengthening educational equity. The most dramatic increases in educational equity in recent years have occurred in South Africa, where political and ideological changes in the past decade have led to a redistribution of educational resources that is among the most significant ever attempted. Under apartheid, per-pupil expenditures for whites were 10 times greater than those for blacks, who attended schools designed to perpetuate apartheid by providing students with only a minimal education and by employing a curriculum that advocated separatist policies. That system was considered intolerable; as a result, the education system has been transformed into one that distributes resources according to student enrollment rather than according to race and also provides additional funding to schools in high-poverty areas. But the redistribution, in turn, required the withdrawal of funds from affluent communities and schools — an action that many feared would cause middle-class families (now increasingly both black and white) to leave the public school system.

Systems that offer an elite academic track provide an incentive for affluent parents to keep their children in public school, but often at a "cost" to children in the lower tracks.

South Africa, therefore, was faced with the difficult choice between permitting families to make private contributions to their public schools — thereby enabling those schools to have facilities and services not available in less affluent neighborhoods — and taking the risk that large numbers of middle-class families would move to private schools if they were not permitted to increase the resources in their public schools. The public schools would then lose both the participation of these families and their advocacy for increased spending on public education. The decision, therefore, to permit affluent families to make private contributions to public schools was based on the expectation that the loss of the middle-class constituency from the public school system would inevitably have adverse consequences for the education of all children.

The type of decision that South Africa faced is repeated in different guises in countries throughout the world. The choice is often painful because it requires tradeoffs between deeply held value systems.

In the United States, for example, affluent parents in some communities wish to make substantial private contributions to their children's public schools in order to provide services or equipment that would not be available otherwise. As in South Africa, school superintendents are faced with a difficult choice between maintaining an equitable distribution of resources across schools and encouraging middle-class families to remain in the public school system by permitting them to contribute extra resources to their schools.

Both school choice plans and student-tracking plans raise similar issues. School systems that offer an elite academic track, for example, provide an incentive for affluent parents to keep their children in the public school system, but often at a "cost" to children in the lower tracks.

There are variations on this theme. Over the past generation, England has moved to a nonselective school system in place of its earlier reliance on selective "grammar schools," which served high-achieving children from both middle- and working-class families and were successful in sending their students to prestigious universities. These selective schools, however, were abolished in an attempt to make the education system less stratified. But the expectation was not fulfilled, as middle-class families left the nonselective state schools and chose private schools. As a result, the proportion of children from state schools attending prestigious universities has declined since the 1970s. The point is that well-intentioned "solutions" to perceived problems sometimes provide incentives (in this case, the in-

centive for increased private school attendance) that undermine the reform's initial purpose.

The tradeoffs implicit in the South African and English examples are repeated in other countries. Cities in the U.S., as in England, have education systems that are polarized, with many middle- and upper-class students from all racial and ethnic groups attending private schools, charter schools, schools that are part of voucher programs, or schools that select by achievement levels or special interests. Moreover, even students attending comprehensive schools are often tracked into different courses or programs within the school, depending on their level of achievement. Some of these approaches have been developed in order to prevent an exodus to private schools. But whatever the reason they were adopted, these approaches do create the potential for relegating the children "left behind" to mediocre schools and tracks and for increasing social stratification.

Germany also provides an interesting example. A country in which most students attend public schools, Germany tracks children into three separate types of schools beginning in grade 5: an academic track (*Gymnasium*), which is the major route to the university; a middle track (*Realschule*), which provides a less intensive education and generally leads to technical or vocational training and sometimes to the university; and a third track (*Hauptschule*) for the lowest-achieving students, which is intended to lead to vocational training but has high dropout rates, with many of its students unable to find either vocational training or employment.

Because socioeconomic status (SES) is highly correlated with academic achievement, middle- and upper-class students are disproportionately represented in the academic track, with the *Hauptschule* enrolling the highest proportion of children of migrant workers. The tracking system, therefore, magnifies the effects of SES and is consistent with the finding that the performance of German students correlates more strongly with SES than the performance of students in most other countries.[2]

Reducing central control. There has been a trend toward decentralization in many countries, often for quite different reasons. France and Sweden, for example, have attempted to reduce central control in order to respond more effectively to increased student diversity; Israel, because of disappointment in the failure of its well-intentioned central plans to close the achievement gap between children of high and low SES; Turkey, because of general disillusionment about cumbersome bureaucracies. The U.S. has responded to a concern about the quality of public schools by encouraging decentralization through school choice, even as it tightens central control through testing requirements — which apply only to public schools.

Countries also reduce central control in the aftermath of political or economic upheaval, often at a time when national resources are scarce. Perhaps the most dramatic examples are Russia and China, which in less than a generation have decentralized their previously highly uniform education systems. As a result, both countries now have increasing inequalities in educational resources, a consequence of the economic disparities within each country.

In Russia, as certain regions or sectors of the society have become more affluent, they have invested in schools that specialize or innovate. Schools in less affluent communities face serious shortages of resources and have fallen further behind. The poorer communities are particularly vulnerable to inadequate and unpredictable funding from all levels of government as the issue of "who pays for what" and "who owes what to whom" remains unsettled.[3] The lowest-income communities and children are inevitably at the greatest disadvantage in the competition for scarce funds.

In China, although decentralization has "opened up" the school system to innovative educational practices, it has led at the same time to large funding inequalities from region to region. As economic differences within the country have grown, so too have gaps in innovation and in education funding, which now comes largely from local areas, many of which are extremely poor. Indeed, the central government has established different educational goals for each of the three economic development zones, with the richer economic zones expected

to achieve higher educational levels than the poorer ones.[4] As in Russia, equality of educational resources has given way to the increasing economic disparities in the broader society.

Holding teachers accountable for student performance. Some countries have placed increased emphasis on teacher accountability. The most visible method is through student testing requirements; the test scores, in turn, are used as indicators of school quality. Test-based accountability has become central to federal education policy in the U.S. as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act. A few other countries (e.g., England, Australia, and New Zealand) have also placed greater emphasis on testing, sometimes in combination with publicly disseminated school rankings and increased reporting requirements, although most countries do not administer tests for the purpose of evaluating teacher performance.

The requirements for test-based accountability involve difficult tradeoffs, sometimes between quite different educational values and objectives. Those who support the requirements argue that they increase the emphasis on basic skills instruction by providing the structure and uniformity needed to raise achievement, particularly for inexperienced teachers and low-achieving students. Those opposed argue that the testing requirements narrow the curriculum and make schools a less attractive place for teachers to work, thereby discouraging qualified educators from remaining in the profession or from choosing to teach in low-income communities. There is also a concern that using student test scores to judge school quality will lead to unfair evaluations because of the methodological problems in making that link.

Increasing the flexibility of learning environments. Many countries are attempting to move from a strict reliance on didactic teaching and rote learning to the cultivation of learning environments that encourage student participation, problem solving, and critical analysis. Turkey, for example, has attempted to modernize its curricula and teaching methods, but it has found that implementation is progressing slowly, both because of a huge bureaucracy that is unresponsive to change and because of resistance from those teachers, parents, and students who believe that the reform efforts are inconsistent with their values and beliefs.

Success in university entrance examinations has traditionally been the main route out of poverty in China.

In Singapore, reform is designed to link the goals of education with the perceived needs of the global economy by giving students the broad set of educational experiences that will allow the country to be competitive in that economy. Yet the reform "takes place in a society that exerts a level of political and social control unique among wealthy nations. That control might be inconsistent with an education environment that encourages critical thinking and flexibility."[5]

In Japan, the purpose of increased flexibility is described as "cultivating Japanese people with 'rich humanity' and 'rich creativity by letting individual abilities grow.'"[6] The difficulty is that encouraging children's individuality conflicts with the country's strong desire to maintain its traditional cultural and community values, which stress cooperation and consensus — a tradeoff that some feel will have a negative impact on the society as a whole.

The attempt to revise curricula and teaching methods is also limited because parents, students, and teachers do not accept changes that are perceived to be inconsistent with high test scores, particularly when the scores determine students' admission to universities. China, for example, which recently has been successful in implementing innovative education programs, has also revised its university entrance examinations to support changes in classroom practice that encourage students to integrate knowledge from diverse fields, rather than simply to memorize facts. A recent university entrance examination included a question on the increase of private cars in China; the response required students to draw on knowledge of statistics, comparative analysis, supply and production, urban traffic, pollution, and social studies.

Although a test like the new university entrance exam has clear substantive advantages over a test that relies primarily on rote memorization, many families and teachers fear serious adverse consequences in terms of social mobility. Success in university entrance examinations has traditionally been the main route out of poverty in China. High scores seem more attainable if they depend primarily on hard work and memorization. It is more difficult to prepare for test questions that require analysis — particularly when the new teaching approaches have not yet reached the majority of Chinese schools. And that fact, in turn, increases the gap between the affluent and the poor areas of the country.

As many countries throughout the

world struggle to make a transition from rote learning to school environments that emphasize a broader set of skills, the United States, which has a reputation for flexible teaching practices, appears to be moving in the opposite direction. There is an increasing emphasis on testing, more pressure on schools to raise scores, and strong incentives to "teach to the test."

Increasing access to education. Countries throughout the world have increased their people's access to education. China, for example, has made major gains in the expansion of basic education and has also increased enrollment in lower secondary education. In Turkey, the extension of compulsory education from five to eight years has increased school attendance and reduced the gap in school enrollment between boys and girls, which has been a particularly serious problem in rural areas. In South Africa, the average grade-level achievement has increased from approximately seven grades to 10 grades in less than a generation.

Most countries have also made substantial progress in expanding access to upper secondary schools and universities. France, for example, has added a vocational *baccalauréat* (certificate of secondary school graduation) in order to increase the number of students eligible to attend universities. England, which formerly provided advanced academic education to only a small proportion of its young people, has now opened up its education system. The U.S., with relatively high attendance rates in higher education, has made major gains over the past 30 years in increasing the diversity of the student body.

Expansion, too, has involved tradeoffs. Some policy analysts have argued that the continued expansion of higher education in industrialized countries has neither reduced social inequities nor increased economic growth, but has instead created new problems.[7] Access to higher education has not always kept pace with rising expectations; the quality of education sometimes suffers because funding limitations make it difficult to support the faculty and infrastructure needed to serve the increased numbers of students; students from low-SES backgrounds continue to have very limited access to certain "elite" universities; and some countries' economies are unable to provide adequate jobs for university graduates. Despite these problems, however, increased access has provided opportunities for many students who would not otherwise have had them.

THE SOCIETAL CONTEXT

Societal constraints. The potential effectiveness of any education reform is seriously limited by poverty and by a broad range of other societal problems, such as poor health and inadequate resources for education — all factors that are outside the control of schools. No country has found that educational practices alone have solved the broader problems of society or eliminated the gap in educational performance between children of high- and low-SES families, although certain practices may contribute to reducing or magnifying that gap. Although this point seems obvious, it has apparently not led to realistic expectations about what an education system can and cannot accomplish. And it certainly hasn't reduced the level of disillusionment, blame, and rhetoric that occurs when unrealistic expectations are not met.

The incidence of poverty varies widely among the countries I've alluded to here. In a few of them, a large

proportion of children live in poverty. As shown by a wide array of evidence, poverty is a major predictor of low educational achievement, and differences in poverty levels account for a significant portion of the variance in achievement both within and between countries.[8] To a greater or lesser degree, all countries face an achievement gap based on SES, and many school reforms have been initiated in an attempt to reduce that gap.

Nonetheless, poverty's central role is often overlooked in interpretations of test-score rankings, which are assumed to indicate the "quality" of education. Whether nations or schools are compared, however, the test scores are strongly influenced by the SES of the children taking the test and are not simply a reflection of the impact of educational practices. The rhetoric surrounding test-score rankings ignores this reality and, in doing so, leads to the adoption of "quick fixes" that do nothing to address basic societal problems.

In addition to poverty, other societal problems constrain education reform. South Africa and Russia, for example, face serious health crises. In South Africa, the education system faces enormous human and financial problems arising from the high rates of HIV/AIDS among students, parents, and teachers. In Russia, chronic illness among children is a major contributor to low academic achievement; it is estimated that in some parts of the country as many as one-third to one-half of children in primary schools have "incapacitating" physical or mental conditions.[9]

The impact of poverty and poor health on achievement is magnified by inadequate educational resources. In some cases, resources are scarce because of low GDP or even temporary economic recessions; in others, the problem arises from the unequal distribution of resources. Moreover, these funding shortfalls are closely related to shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in low-income communities.

But the problems show up in different ways. In the United States, for example, schools in high-poverty communities often have to resort to "out-of-field" teaching because of teacher shortages that result, in part, from high attrition rates. In Russia, young people are discouraged from entering the teaching profession because of extremely low salaries, payment of which is sometimes delayed as much as nine months to a year, as well as difficult working conditions in some regions — poor facilities, inadequate textbooks, and uncertainties about the availability of even basic amenities such as heat and electricity. France, which has a system of assigning teachers throughout the country, has been only partially successful in ensuring that the poorer communities have access to experienced teachers. The reason is that the assignment system conflicts with the seniority system, which permits the more experienced teachers to have choice with regard to where they teach. Not surprisingly, they choose the more affluent communities, like Paris or the Riviera.

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Each of these factors — poverty, societal problems, and inadequate resources — is a major constraint on education reform. Their effect in combination can be overwhelming. Some countries — China, Russia, South Africa, and Turkey, for example — have attempted to initiate complex school reforms while meeting the challenges arising from extensive child poverty and scarce resources for education. Often these challenges are exacerbated by large inequalities in resource distribution and extensive, competing societal needs.

Even in countries with a high GDP that invest heavily in education, there are large differences in the distribution of educational resources, in the income and wealth differential between rich and poor families, and in poverty rates. In comparison with many other industrialized countries, the U.S. has a high rate of "relative poverty" — defined as a low income compared with the country's average.[10] And the U.S. also has a highly unequal distribution of resources because most education funding comes from states and localities.[11] These gaps in family income and educational resources are exacerbated by the lack of social support systems that are often found in other industrialized countries, but they are mitigated by a wide range of options for higher education, along with second and third chances for students, which provide increased opportunities for low-income and minority students. The basic problem remains, however: the combined effects of poverty and inadequate resources in many of the schools serving low-income communities have led to a substantial gap in educational achievement.

Sweden provides a useful contrast with the United States because it has

a much flatter distribution of income, wealth, and educational resources, along with a significant social support system. Sweden also has a smaller achievement gap between affluent students and poor students.[12] Although causation cannot be established with certainty, Sweden's public policies appear to have made a difference. However, they have not eliminated the gap: SES remains the strongest predictor of academic achievement in Sweden.

Values and political structure. In every country, traditional values and political structures play a major role in determining whether education reforms can be implemented successfully. In some cases, these traditions serve as facilitators; in others, they limit or prevent the implementation of reform initiatives.

Some countries have been able to make rapid change, as demonstrated most vividly in South Africa, when dramatic transformations in political leadership and values have been supported by legislation and regulation:

> The system is attempting a set of reforms that is much larger in scope than what was attempted in, say, the desegregation of school systems in the United States, in that it is starting from a much greater level of inequality, where the poor and disadvantaged are the majority rather than the minority, where there is a simultaneous modernization and quality agenda at the same time as an equity and justice agenda, and while attempting to prevent, for the country as a whole, the sort of white-flight privatization of education common in American cities.[13]

Thus a nation that is still struggling with widespread poverty is also attempting to reform its education system to redress the past injustices suffered by a large majority of the population. At the same time, it must maintain the participation and support of all South Africans.

Major changes in educational practices have also occurred in China within an exceptionally short period. The rapid adoption of innovative teaching and examination practices has been attributed to the fact that the Chinese reforms have built on elements of traditional culture, among them the belief of Chinese teachers that there is a "best method"; the Chinese tradition of launching mass movements; and the high level of societal organization, which enables classroom changes to be supported by teacher training and development, curriculum changes, and far-reaching and consistent school inspections. Although the changes have not always gone smoothly, China appears to have been unusually successful in implementing change by building on traditional culture — or "holding new wine with the old bottle."[14]

England, too, has been able to make rapid change, although the reasons are quite different from those in China. England's highly centralized government is based on a system in which seats in Parliament go to the candidates who receive the most votes in their constituencies, even if those votes might represent only a minority of the total. Thus a single party tends to receive large majorities in Parliament, party members often vote as a bloc, and governments can quickly mandate radical changes based on the ideological principles of the party in power. In short, "a British government has been able to pass whatever laws it likes, provided the members of its own party will accept them."[15]

England's political structure is in sharp contrast to that of the United States, where change is much slower as a result of the "checks and balances" intrinsic to the three branches of the federal government and the fact that education is primarily a state and local responsibility. Moreover, unlike China, the U.S. does not easily translate a reform idea into practice because the system is not designed to encourage alignment between the reform and the support systems required to implement it. Indeed, the multiplicity of attempted reforms in the United States often results in reforms that conflict with one another. The outcome is that large-scale implementation of a new educational practice has proved to be a slow process, despite the fact that innovation is considered basic to the American system. Innovation in the U.S., more often than not, is local, at least initially. It is not easy to transfer a "best practice" across the country in the short term, although some reforms have been implemented nationally over a period of many years.

Moreover, even when the federal government attempts to centralize control (e.g., by increasing testing requirements as has recently been done), the requirements are implemented in very different ways across the country. The curricula and tests differ, the definitions of a passing score differ, and the decisions about which students do and do not take the test differ. One commentator predicted the eventual outcome of No Child Left Behind this way:

> As the reforms of the past two decades pile up on the schools, as pressure from civil rights groups is brought to bear on what they regard as tests and standards that discriminate against minority children, as education funding is rolled back, and as terrorism, recession, oil shortages, and other issues overwhelm education in the nation's political debates and in the public mind, fatigue is likely to combine with backlash to produce, if not another swing of the pendulum, a rollback in the demands and standards. . . . None of this is likely to involve much conscious, systematic reexamination of the overall reform policies of the past generation, but it will produce a gradual attrition

toward a more pragmatic, less utopian mean. That, too, has always been the American way.[16]

The challenge of balancing education reform with long-standing traditions, exemplified in South Africa, China, England, and the United States, is faced by all countries that seek to change existing policies and practices.

Some countries that have experienced major political and ideological transitions continue their former education policies. Others struggle to reform their education systems but are constrained by conflicting values. Chile made a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic government but maintained the education policies — decentralization, vouchers, and testing — begun under the military regime. After initial attempts to reverse these policies with the establishment of democratic government in 1990, the teachers now generally accept them, perhaps in part because of the generous benefits they have received in recent years under a policy of *reivindicación* (reclaiming the right to be repaid) for human rights abuses they suffered during the military regime.

After reunification, Germany faced a conflict between two education systems that had grown out of different ideologies. The East German system, based on Communism, was centrally controlled, and students attended comprehensive schools. West Germany, on the other hand, was a pluralistic society with a decentralized education system, and schools were stratified by student achievement levels. The conflict between the two traditions was resolved by transferring the West German system to schools in the east. Russia, on the other hand, still copes with a conflict, rooted in practices from the Soviet era, between a highly intellectual academic tradition and a tradition that emphasizes rote learning and narrow vocational training. That conflict continues to constrain attempts to implement Russia's centers of academic excellence and innovation on a large scale.

Even countries that have not experienced major political and ideological change find that proposed reform initiatives sometimes conflict with the public's values and expectations. France currently attempts to balance the public's strong support for the "national character" of education with attempts to move toward decentralization in a system that for centuries has concentrated power in Paris. The decentralization process proceeds slowly: "It exists on paper; all the rules and regulations to implement it have been published. Yet in practice less has happened than was aimed for."[17] In Canada, the province of Quebec gives priority to maintaining the French language and culture — a position that, in practice, often conflicts with attempts to encourage large-scale immigration and to create a school environment that supports a multicultural student body.

Each of the countries I have discussed here has experienced similar types of tradeoffs. Although in most cases change is occurring, the translation of a reform proposal from theory into practice typically proceeds at a slower pace than was initially envisioned. But despite constraints, uncertainty about the efficacy of some reforms, and unintended consequences, there are positive developments. Countries are increasingly focusing on issues of equity, access, and the necessity of providing a broad-based education for diverse populations.

Educators know that achievement measures inevitably reflect factors that are far more powerful than any education reforms and that they will be held accountable for results over which they have only uncertain influence. They know too that schools, directly or indirectly, will be held accountable for societal and economic problems that are outside their control. Despite these challenges, however, educators throughout the world initiate reforms, consider tradeoffs, and make difficult choices — all in an effort to ensure equity, access, and a decent education for children.

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