



*Changing the Schools Can Change the World...*

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***“EXPLODING THE PARADIGM:  
Five Ways Schools Must Change  
to Rescue the American Dream”***

***A Report on Public Education  
by Patricia Kokinos***

As we watch the economy teeter and gas prices continue to climb, or consider the cost of a war that is, by current estimates, averaging \$12 billion a month, it is difficult to focus on our more daily concerns, such as the education of our children. **Yet this very issue, the structure and conduct of our public education system, is central to questions of America's future.** The original American Dream, the one that gave impetus to the American Revolution--life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness--is the core belief system that is at stake now as we rush into a new millennium. We are beginning to realize that our most beloved institutions need a transformation to meet the challenges of a new era.

That is the great cry for CHANGE that we feel welling up all across the country and **nowhere is progressive, constructive change more urgently needed than in our schools.** The causes and immediacy of the current school problem are well documented in the media and on the internet, and in roughly 450,000 non-fiction books about education--failings and solutions. Billionaires have devoted huge sums of money to create new schools and to advocate for school change. Yet the system itself remains inert, impervious to our efforts, unresponsive to our needs--a bureaucracy of rigid barriers.

“Transformation” is exactly the right term for what needs to happen, because it implies peaceful and positive means, but it is no less revolutionary in its intent. Those of us in education used to talk timidly of a “paradigm shift” as a way of meeting the needs of a new generation of students, but that really never happened either. Now, it's going to take **a great explosion of our current paradigm**--the philosophical framework within which we conduct school--to help public education move forward. To allow change on that grand scale to occur, **We the People, in precisely that capitalized meaning, need to change our minds about what school can be.**

The **quantum leap** that our schools need to take is from the traditional structure that everyone in America has passed through over the past century to **a new vision of schooling that incorporates what we have learned from school change research**, experiments, and demonstrations over the past 40 years.

Here are **five critical areas where change must happen** in order to move public education forward for the good of every child and for America's future:

1. **Concept--how we view the purpose of school and what we want kids to get out of it.**
2. **Size--what a change of concept would require as optimum.**
3. **Structure--how we can organize learning to support kids.**
4. **Training--how we can help teachers learn and grow.**
5. **Philosophy--how we demonstrate our values in the kind of school experience we create.**

There are reams of research to read, thousands of debates, millions of personal experiences with the overburdened bureaucracy that public education has become. We know from 40 years of school reform efforts that **piecemeal solutions won't work**. The change needs to be conceptual and all-encompassing, **creating a new model of education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. The following summary offers only the highlights of what we all need to know to demand large-scale reinvention of our public education system:

### **1. Concept**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American Century, during the peak of this country's **industrial development**, we set up a system of schooling designed to "manufacture" citizens to meet the nation's needs. That meant "mass production" and **the economy of scale**: large schools, large classes, large districts and state organizations with political clout and buying power. Inevitably, that concept led to an **entrenched bureaucracy** set up to meet the needs of the **growing "industry" of school**: textbook companies, testing companies, school supply companies, school construction companies, et al. In that same industrial concept, we moved on to "standards" and narrowly conceived tests that bounced kids off the conveyor belt when they didn't measure up. Now we are wrangling over how to make things better, blaming everyone involved for the mess, bemoaning the decline of American culture--**yet the solution is right before us**.

Downsizing, the same movement that redesigned numerous corporations, needs to be applied to the school industry, **flattening the bureaucratic hierarchy and moving more people into direct contact with kids, every day**. The added requirement to this new concept is that we **move from "factory-style" to "family-style" schools**, from "mass production" to human-sized interaction, and from indoctrinating our kids in the way things have always been done to **empowering them to use their talents to make positive change in the world**. Those of us who have already been through it all still want to "make a difference"

in the world; our students want no less and we must give them the tools and the inspiration to do that. Isn't empowerment what we want for all of our kids?

## 2. Size

A change of concept, from "factory-style" to "family-style" schools, implies much smaller and more personal school environments. The most successful school-change developments of the past 40 years have all been shaped around this key idea: **Students respond, learn better, and feel more involved and supported when they are part of small, personalized school environments.** As astonishingly obvious as such an idea might be, enormous amounts of money have been spent on research into school size and student performance and just as much on research to disprove this link. Regrettably, all of this research has had no effect on the industrial model under which the public school system currently operates, despite numerous demonstration schools that prove the value of small, personalized settings. Nor have the reports of school dropouts or students who "perform" badly been taken seriously, e.g. "I don't think anyone cares whether I show up or not"; "What does any of this have to do with me?" etc. Thus, **what is missing in the current system is the human factor of belonging**, which any coach will admit is the key to successful team performance. Common sense tells us that smaller schools allow for more personal interaction between students and teachers and more attention to individual students, a factor that private schools understand very well and that the public system has all but ignored.

## 3. Structure

There are too many holes for kids to fall through in large, impersonal systems, and they primarily begin in middle school, when students move into **disconnected anonymous surroundings** at a critical time of personal development. While middle schools have worked hard to organize themselves into teams to provide a modest support structure for vulnerable and reactive preteens, **the numbers they deal with (150 students per teacher per day) make real support impossible.** The situation only worsens in high school, where team support is not even attempted and **disconnection is the natural by-product for students who attend five or six 50-minute classes a day, each in a different discipline.** High schools are typically organized around a departmental structure to serve particular areas of study (English department, history department, etc.) much as things were done when universities were founded in medieval Europe. Such traditions remind us that our schools are **organized to make the knowledge more important than the students**, a point that no student ever misses whether he/she can articulate the reality or not. To further emphasize **the industrial nature of the school system, teachers are expected to maintain conformity--in curriculum, in student behavior, in teaching methods--to agreed upon standards.** This engenders a subculture of rebel teachers who become cult heroes by doing what is good for kids regardless of expectation, and a counterbalance of teachers who close out public scrutiny by firmly shutting the classroom door and teaching in private as a means of self-

preservation. Both of these responses are **the direct result of a dysfunctional system that is structured as though we valued conformity over creativity** or indoctrination over individual thought. These are not the values America is supposed to stand for and these are certainly not part of the value system that the increasingly individualistic and personalized 21<sup>st</sup> century is all about. Thus, we are forced to consider whether students might be better served in small, personalized **school environments organized on the concept of small collaborative teams**, where teachers work with each other and with counselors and other school personnel to provide a **“safety net,” much as the concept of extended family used to do**. That sense of care and belonging would do a great deal to motivate active participation and student success, particularly since there would be “nowhere to hide,” for either students or teachers. **Consider how much more transparent and accountable the system would be** in such an arrangement and yet how much more fertile and creative, as well.

#### 4. Training

Teachers who feel a continual need to struggle with a bureaucratic system in order to preserve themselves and to serve their students do not have the time or energy to continue learning and growing. Study after study has shown that **teachers need TIME to create a collaborative, learning organization**. It cannot be mandated from the top down; it must arise from a common vision and commitment to improvement. Teachers cannot sustain such intensive work without **adequate training, systemic support, and public understanding of the complexity of the teaching-learning process**. If we are entrusting the future of our children and the future of our country to teachers, should we not support them, pay them, train them with the best resources we can offer? If we want to move beyond the medieval model of teacher-as-deliverer-of-information and **create a more stimulating and interactive classroom for every child**, are we not obligated to **invest in an infrastructure** that will produce that result? That means more teachers, better trained teachers, better schools of education for teachers and administrators, smaller schools, and collaborative models for teaching and governance. Most importantly, we need to **empower teachers to become coaches of the students who are thinking and working in their classrooms**. That means a change of mind for all of us: We can dismantle the “boss vs. worker” hierarchy that currently shapes the attitudes of school personnel and look upon teachers as professionals who team up with parents and administrators to create high-quality learning experiences for all of our students. Thus, **TIME, training, and the means and opportunity to create synergy must be our highest goals** for the people who run our schools.

#### 5. Philosophy

Children are not empty vessels to be filled with facts and set loose on the world. We know more than that about human potential now, but we have not yet created **a new system of education to match our new understanding**. In a time when information swirls around us in an unceasing barrage of soundbites, web

searches, blogs, social networking sites, tv commercials, cell phones, video games, ad infinitum, **it is imperative that we provide not more facts but more MEANING**, more connection, more comprehension, more ability to weigh and discern. Then we will have provided the most essential tool that education can offer: **the ability to use one's mind well, to think at advanced levels**, to analyze, synthesize, and apply learning to new situations, even to solve real-world problems as a demonstration of that learning. How can we complain about the superficiality of popular culture when we have created it by allowing a school culture of multiple choice and yes/no answers? Thinking cannot be only for the top 25% of students who appear to be able to learn the way that our current system teaches. **We must also be concerned about the other 75% of our youth**, including those gifted kids whose genius is turned off by the rigid structure of "school." If we really believe that each child can learn, then we need to build a system with **more flexibility, time for creativity, team support for teachers and students, and rewards for entrepreneurship**. If we really believe our own mission statements, that we want to help each child develop as a whole person-- **socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually**--then we have a moral obligation to create a public school system that will produce that growth for every child. Most of all, we need to match our ideas of school design to our deepest beliefs, particularly as they have evolved over the past half-century.

Nothing will happen until we change our minds and relinquish our narrow agendas so we can join together in **the larger purpose of reinventing education for all of our children**. For more information about organizational change, check out the Society for Organizational Learning ([www.solonline.org](http://www.solonline.org) ) and especially see <http://www.solonline.org/res/kr/transform.html> for a complete discussion on the importance of changing our minds.

If you're ready to speak up and to help establish a grassroots movement that will demand dramatic changes in our approach to public education, go to [www.changetheschools.com](http://www.changetheschools.com) and get involved!

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*Patricia Kokinos, a veteran educator and now a speaker and school change activist, is the author of **Angel Park**, a novel about the forces that are stifling our schools. **An innovative philosophical mystery**, the novel pits the heroine against a rigid system that makes her doubt her own beliefs. The suicide of her boss sets her on a trail of clues to her own transformation and to a startling vision of the ways school and the country need to change to rescue the American Dream. **Angel Park** is available online and through the author's website, [www.changetheschools.com](http://www.changetheschools.com).*