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THE REFORM OF AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLING: ISSUES, PROBLEMS, OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the efforts in the United States to reform public education at the primary and secondary level. School reform has a long history which predates the establishment of the American public school. The pace of school reform ebbs and flows. At present, there is widespread concern about the need for U.S. schools to make significant changes. In American society, however, there are very discrepant views on what the changes should be. In this paper the author presents his perspective on the school reform in the U.S. His perspective is based on working with school districts throughout the U.S. which are making efforts to transform their schools. His work with colleagues in other nations has given him reason to believe that the issues faced by U.S. schools have a degree of comparability to efforts to promote school reform in other nations.

Key words: public schooling, school reform, school district, knowledge, curriculum, Pedagogy, technology.

“How many of us there are who have left the schools and university with scarcely a notion of true learning. I unfortunate man that I am one of the many, thousands, who have miserably lost the sweetest of life and wasted the fresh years of youth on scholastic trifles....Some people are certain to be indignant that there are men who find imperfection in schools, books, and methods in use and who dare to promise something unusual and extraordinary but it is possible to reform schools.”

These are the words of a man who was born in 1592 in Nivnice, Moravia and who died in Amsterdam in 1670. He was a bishop of the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Moravian Church, and a contemporary of Galileo, Descartes, Rembrandt, and Milton. His name was Jan Amos Komensky but we know him best with his Latinized name of Comenius.

The quotation above is from his *Great Didactic*¹ that was completed in 1632. The *Great Didactic* contains Comenius' proposals for educational reform and involves ideas that have had enduring impact: universal schooling; group instruction; and a standardized and sequenced curriculum. The reader of the *Great*

Didactic who can transcend the antiquated style of the prose finds themes which have as much currency in 2004 as they did 372 years ago when they were written such as the need to engage students in the learning process, formal education for women, learning as a lifelong pursuit, learning as a natural process, and the reconciliation of school learning with everyday life.

School reform is an old topic. In America, the emergence of school reform in America was almost coincidental with the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620. Ten years after Comenius completed the *Great Didactic*, the Massachusetts Bay School Law of 1642 was enacted and that Law, the first school law in America, was an educational reform law. It was intended to respond to the negligence of parents and apprentice masters in teaching the youth of Massachusetts to read and to know the principles of religion and the laws of the Commonwealth.

Down through the years since Comenius there have been a progression of great figures in Europe who have argued that schools were failing to provide an effective education for the students in them: Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori. In the U.S. the two towering educational reformers were Horace Mann who died in the 1859 which was the same year that the other great American reformer John Dewey was born. None of these men were naive about the difficulty of accomplishing educational reform, but they were driven by their belief that schools could be, and needed to be, far better places for children than was typically the case. We are now in the midst of a period when many voices are being raised in the U.S. calling for school reform.

What Does Reform Mean and Why Is It Needed?

The term “reform,” when used in the professional educational discourse, seems to have three related but different meanings: change, improvement, transformation. The lack of adequate definitional clarity of the term “reform” bedevils discourse on the topic. I see the relationship among them in this way: Transformation implies change; change does not imply transformation; and, neither change nor transformation implies improvement.

In my use of the term “reform” I mean it as discontinuous change in the way that Nadler and his colleagues have written about it.² Discontinuous change represents a break with the way an organization has functioned in the past and the adoption of new organizational structures – policies, practices, roles, and rules. Discontinuous change is contrasted with incremental or evolutionary change. Discontinuous change occurs as a result of deliberate actions of people inside the organization, actions which will be disruptive and controversial. Those initiating the change will be seen as heroic to some and foolhardy to others. Discontinuous

change in organizations can also be a consequence of external cataclysmic events that impel the transformation of the organization.

Since reform can mean incremental change to some or discontinuous change to others, agreement among individuals about the need for school reform may be superficial and mask a quite different sense of the magnitude of needed change. Also, individuals who agree that school reform is necessary may have a very different conception of what schools should be after they are transformed. One person's agenda for reformation is another person's agenda for retrogression or folly.

Every school reform proposal is based on a diagnosis of what is wrong with schools. It is important to carefully examine or uncover the "facts", assumptions, and beliefs that are embodied in the diagnosis. The formulation of the diagnosis is important since the diagnosis shapes the prescription. Most of the diagnoses fall into five categories.

In the U.S. pro-reform politicians and policy makers who are pro-reform generally base the need for reform on the following two problems:

- The performance of large numbers of students particularly as measured by standardized achievement tests is sub-standard, particularly in basic skills such as reading, mathematics, and science.
- Students do not have the competencies needed in order for the nation to compete successfully in the global marketplace.

Members of the information and communications technology (ICT) community often support their contention that reform is needed on this problem.

- Schools are not making adequate use of ICT. ICT is a fact of life in our world and our young people need to be able to use it effectively. ICT provides wonderful opportunities for learning and schools should take full advantage of these opportunities.

There is one other constituency for reform that is the least publicly conspicuous voice among those who are pro-reform: teachers and other school personnel. One often hears those in this constituency who believe reform is necessary diagnosis the problem in this way:

- Students are not engaged in their schoolwork and are not deriving benefit from their schooling.

Although I agree – more or less – with each of those assertions, I do not think they get at the heart of the matter. I offer my own diagnosis: Human culture is being transformed as a consequence of the use of information and communications technologies but the way in which we provide schooling is generally incongruous with the ways in which information and communications technologies have transformed human culture outside of schools.

We live in one of the great seams of history. The ways and means for creating, disseminating, and participating in human culture – the totality of the

content of civilization – is undergoing fundamental changes. Stability, tradition, and status quo are hardly characteristics of our times. There is a Chinese proverb which says, “It is better to be a dog in a peaceful time than to be a man in a chaotic period.” Yet, living in these times bestows on us the opportunity to play a part in creating a new and better era of the education of our children. It is a good time to be here if one is comfortable with the role of a pioneer.

If we view educational reform as a task to be undertaken and accomplished – “once and for all” - then we might conclude that school reform is not possible which is a conclusion that some have reached. Anyone who studies the history of education will be inclined to conclude that while the pressure for school reform ebbs and flows it is an ever on-going process. In the U.S. we are in the midst of time where many are calling for transformation change of public education. However, there is considerable discrepancy among those calling for reform with both the diagnosis of the problem and the cure. In what follows I will share my perspective on this.

ICT has had a huge impact on how we use our leisure time – TV, movies, World Wide Web activities – and on learning what is happening in the world at the international, national, and local levels. Another venue which has been transformed by information technology is business and commerce. Thomas Friedman’s book, “The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century”³ details the ways in which information technology has transformed the way in which we produce goods and services. The ten forces Friedman identifies that have been instrumental in the generation of a new world of commerce all pertain to information technology. The various anecdotes in the book are not about ways in which business people have made use of IT to automate their existing practices.

Information technology has had no less significant impact on matters that are at the heart of the mission of schools: the production and dissemination of knowledge and the nature and relevance of new and traditional cognitive skills. The most obvious implication of the information revolution in this regard is the expansion of knowledge. Walter Ong estimated that at the beginning of human history knowledge took from 10,000 to 100,000 years to double. Later it took from 500 to 1000 years to double. Currently, it is doubling in 15 years or less.⁴

Yet the significance of information technology is not just that knowledge is being produced at a more rapid rate, it is also that our conception of the nature of knowledge is being changed. The literary tradition, and particularly the technology of the book, profoundly influenced the way in which people have thought about knowledge for several centuries. Print tends to make knowledge seem like a historic product. In this formulation, knowledge is something that comes from the past work of scholars and scientists. The structure of the book was a dominant metaphor for the structure of knowledge. The book is linear. It is divided into chapters, each of which contains a cohesive segment of the whole of it. The order

of the presentation is governed by a logic that has a semblance of immutability. The book has heft and the words printed on a page have durability and permanence. The nature of the book as the vehicle for disseminating knowledge has had strong influence on how we think of the nature of knowledge. The characteristics of the book become the characteristics of knowledge.

Information technology permeates the contemporary conception of knowledge. What we as humans need to know and be able to do to be productive members of society has been affected in deeply pervasive ways by ICT.

The computer screen and the Internet are replacing the book and library in where and how knowledge resides in our culture. The dissemination of knowledge using print has obscured the dynamic and even disorderly nature of the process by which it is created. Knowledge becomes a network of concepts with many connective pathways with more recognition of the dynamism and non-linearity of knowledge. The electronic tradition, like the oral tradition, is much more congenial to a communal approach to the construction of knowledge than is the print tradition.

At the heart of the difference between a literate and an electronic culture is the shift from a contemplative to an experiential method of acquiring information about our world. In a writing culture, human beings learn by pulling away from what is happening around them and reading about events, concepts, facts which another person has abstracted and structured. An electronic culture, on the other hand, puts the person in the midst of the experiences that often are raw, unprocessed and, to use computer lingo, real-time. The orderliness and “one step back” character of reading is in contrast to the untidy and “plunge into it” nature of electronic experiences. In the following pages I will explore briefly the issues, problems, and opportunities of four critical elements of schooling: Curriculum, pedagogy, organizational structure, and technology.

I have neither the ability nor the inclination to predict the future. As J.B. Priestly’s observed: “Solemn prophesy is obviously a futile proceeding, except insofar as it makes our descendants laugh.” There is less to be gained by trying to guess what the future will be than there is from learning from the past and understanding the present as we work to make schooling a better experience for our young people. If we learn from the past and contend with the present the future will take care of itself.

Curriculum

The framework for the curriculum in U.S. schools originated in three committees established by the National Education Association in the last decade of the 19th century: the Committee of Fifteen on Elementary Education; the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies; and the Committee on College

Entrance Requirements. All three committees were dominated by subject matter specialists and they focused on administrative aspects of the curriculum such as the subjects to be studied, the duration of the courses of study, the age at which each study should begin, and the gradation of content according to the age of the student.

The result of those three important committees was, in effect, to provide an answer in the form of a curriculum framework to the question posed by Herbert Spencer's in his famous education essay: "What knowledge is of most worth?"⁵ Subject matter specialists bring both their expertise and their biases to their answer to Spencer's question. Decisions made by subject matter specialists about which facts, concepts, and skills should be included in the curriculum, the relative importance of the various aspects of the content, and the proper sequencing of the facts, concepts, and skills, those decisions are based on the conventional and presumptive (at least for subject matter specialists) logical structure of the disciplines. However, it does not follow that the structure of the curriculum should have a one-to-one correspondence with the conception of subject matter specialists about the structure of the disciplines. A subject matter curriculum framework may be adequate when the purpose of the school is to challenge students to achieve the content of the curriculum as a means of gaining credentials that are awarded based on scholastic achievement. This approach is far less useful when the task of the school is to enable students to have knowledge, skills, and dispositions whose functionality is external to schools.

Thus, the starting point for school reform is curriculum reform and Andrew Sutton summarizes the curriculum change that is needed:

There is growing consensus that education must extend its traditional goal of student mastery of subject-centered scholastic knowledge, to include the development of individuals who can prosper in complex and changing social, cultural and economic worlds. The 'inner intent' of reform efforts being made and advocated widely, could be characterized by these key principles: (1) emphasis on exit outcomes (prospering in the real world); (2) active learning for intellectual quality (constructivism); (3) personal responsibility for own learning and behavior (genuine engagement); (4) individual meaning and relevance (not one size-fits-all); (5) real-life purposes, roles and contexts (integrated curriculum); (6) links with community for mutual capacity building (productive partnerships in a learning community)....⁶

Rejection of the subject matter framework for the curriculum is not *per se* the rejection of subject matter. The worry of some that a curriculum such as that which conforms to the specifications in the Sutton quote may be vacuous and may coddle and entertain more than educate is legitimate. It even may be that a subject

matter curriculum may do less harm than a constructivist and integrated curriculum that focuses on outcomes when it is badly designed or executed.

The solution for a rigid overloaded subject matter curriculum is not a fuzzy, loose process curriculum. Domain specific or content knowledge is a critical aspect in intellectual development. So the answer to the curriculum framework reform question does not lie in either the subject matter camp or the process camp but in a hybrid of them that is consistent with what is now understood about the constructive intersect of domain specific and general or metacognitive strategies.¹¹

The disinclination to “take on” the issue of curriculum in school reform is not difficult to understand. Curriculum reform involves the consideration of the totality of knowledge and skills, all of the arts, sciences, and technologies of the culture and what from that totality is to be included or excluded in the curriculum, and how and when over the school years the student will encounter all that is included. Since the decision about what not to include is more difficult than the decision about what to include, the curriculum is generally bloated. Alfred North Whitehead’s two “educational commandments” would serve us well, “Do not teach too many subjects, and again, what you teach, teach thoroughly.”⁷

What we as humans need to know and be able to do to be productive members of society has been affected in deeply pervasive ways by ICT. The pace at which knowledge is created, the way that those who create knowledge create knowledge, and the way that knowledge is diffused through the culture have been affected in deeply significant ways by information and communications technologies. It would indeed be perverse if schools are the one place in our society which are bypassed by the transformation impact of ICT on the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Pedagogy

“From sage on the stage to guide by the side” is the often-quoted characterization of the way in which the process of teaching and learning in our schools needs to change. This expression means that the teacher should not give lectures but should be available to assist the student when she or he needs help. The statement also implies a conception of the relationship between teacher and student (albeit in a rather vague fashion) but, it really offers little that is useful in defining a conception of pedagogy.

The critical pedagogical question for schools is: Why do so many children who are able to learn out of school fail to learn in school and what can be done about it? Some of the answer to this question lies in the disconnect between the student and the curriculum however, that is not all of it. Just as the curriculum is based on assumptions, frequently tacit and unexamined, about the nature of

knowledge, so also is the pedagogy based on assumptions about human learning which are just as buried and frequently just as dysfunctional.

The ability to learn is not an acquired but is a natural capability of humans. The human being is a learner from birth until death unless such is precluded by some significant brain abnormality. Early in life the baby learns to discriminate his/her mother's face from other faces. The child learns motor skills such as eating with table utensils, playing with toys, and cognitive skills such as a language or two, and social skills such as acceptable and non-acceptable ways of dealing with others as well as distinctions in behavior appropriate for the different people with whom he or she comes into contact. Much of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions which are functional in our lives are acquired as a result of learning experiences embedded in day-to-day life rather than as a result of any formal teaching. Children are continuously engaged in learning, and even though the learning which occurs in their life outside of school is less conspicuous than that which occurs inside schools, it is learning that affects their lives.

In thinking about the human as a natural learner it is important to keep three things in mind. First, "learning" is not an honorific but a descriptive term. To say that the human being is a learner is not *per se* to pay a compliment. People learn bad things as well as good things. Children learn language, mathematics, how to play the piano, etc., but they can also learn prejudice, how to hot wire and steal cars, and even, given the sad state of our world, how to be effective terrorists, among other anti-social skills and dispositions. Learning the wrong things is not necessarily a less impressive task when judged from the complexity of the learning task. It is easier to learn the occupation of a sales person in a fast food restaurant than to learn the occupation of a successful car thief. Second, to say that individuals are natural learners is not to imply that all demonstrate this capability to the same extent. People can learn how to learn and can become more or less interested in learning and more or less effective at the process. Third, it is possible to hold this position in non-romanticized manner. We need not take Rousseau's position and content that all would be well with the child were he or she unfettered from a repressive society. Children may not feel like learning when they should or need to do so. They will exhibit boredom, disinterest, a lack of motivation at times in any instructional environment no matter how well it is devised.

John Dewey, who had the misfortune of having his work become popular mainly in the form of interpretations developed by his disciples, recognized that "school learning" is a form of learning that varies from the way learning occurs in setting outside of school:

What is learned in school is at best only a small part of education, a relatively superficial part of education; and yet what is learned in school makes artificial distinctions in society and marks

persons off from one another. Consequently we exaggerate school learning compared to what is gained in the ordinary course of living. We are, however, to correct this exaggeration, not by despising school learning, but by looking into that extensive and more efficient training given by the ordinary course of events for light upon the best ways of teaching within school walls. The first years of learning proceed rapidly and securely before children go to school, because that learning is so closely related with the motives that are furnished by their own powers and the needs that are dictated by their own conditions.⁸

In the past century there have been thousands of studies of human learning. The preponderance of these studies have focused on learning in schools or formal learning, and since a substantial proportion of school-aged children have problems learning in schools a considerable amount of research has been focused on learning pathologies. Much less attention has been devoted to understanding natural or informal learning, learning in those instances when the process is not structured and regulated by others but is woven into the life situation of the person. In these situations, learning occurs even though there is not someone formally designated as teacher directing the process.

Time weighs much more heavily on school learning than it does in informal learning situations where the demands of keeping the class moving forward sets rather strict parameters in the time any individual child can be allotted to accomplish the learning. Also, “passing the test” is the basis for determining if the learning has occurred. If the student answers the test questions correctly or solves the problem, the student will be considered to have the requisite understanding but, as Gardner points out, “No one asks the further question ‘But do you **really** understand?’”⁹

The percentages of children who fail in our schools is unacceptably high and when added to those who are “just getting by” and those who are passing though schools mainly because the schools need to move them along despite what they are or are not learning, it is clear that we have a critical educational problem. The crux of the pedagogy issue for schools is to reduce the dissonance between the way learning happens within the school with the way learning occurs the everyday world. While this is needed even if ICT plays no part in school reform, there is particular relevance for ICT since ICT has the potential to make the school walls more permeable to the outside world than has ever been possible.

Organizational Structure

The conception of “system” was of central importance to the school reformers of the 19th century. While it is not unusual to hear current critics of public schooling refer to the factory as a metaphor for the framework used by the reformers, such was not the way the reformers thought of it. In fact, the educational reformers adopted the machine which was the popular metaphor of the time. The reformers saw the invention of the system of schooling in much the same way as they saw machines with parts working in harmony to accomplish the purpose for which the machine was invented. The power of the newly invented machines which emerged in the 19th century demonstrated how the use of an approach similar to that which was embodied in the invention of machines could enable the creation of a system of schooling which could function with predictable success in accomplishing the standardized objectives of the school.

People who build skyscrapers and bridges understand that the way to ensure their structure will stand in the face of environmental factors such as high winds or earthquakes is not to make it rigid but to allow it to be flexible. Loose coupling of the school as an organization provides the flexibility and ambiguity that serve a useful function in an environment with many diverse and conflicting perspectives and demands. To say that the formal structure of the school is decoupled from the day-to-day work in classrooms is, however, not to say that the formal structures are irrelevant. As Cuban²⁴ shows, a number of curriculum and pedagogical practices of schools such as age grading, the fifty-minute class period in secondary schools, the self-contained classroom in elementary schools, Carnegie units, have been generated in response to the way schools have been organized. Policies and established system procedures can inhibit or facilitate actions of organization members but, the implication of understanding schools as loosely coupled systems is that making some changes in the formal structure of the school – changing some policies or adopting new system procedures may provide some benefits to individuals who are attempting to make good use of ICT but it is not likely to transform the school.

Thus, the reform challenge as it pertains to the school organization goes beyond making some changes in the organization as it exists but to create a different organizational structure of organization. The type of organization that is needed would entail low formalization, participation, relationships, and a flat hierarchical structure rather than the rigid, bureaucratic and steep hierarchical structure that now exists.

The Technology

It is clear that putting computers into schools will not, in and of itself, cause reform. When computers emerged in U.S. schools in the early 80s there was much talk about the way in which the computers in schools would cause a revolution in the nature and process of teaching and learning. That did not occur. To a considerable extent computers have been used as just another way to do “business as usual.” Yet, as we look beyond the schools to other sectors of society, it is clear that ICT has caused deep and fundamental changes in what and how the organization or agency functions. For example, the use of computer technology in business has provoked profound changes in the production of goods and services. So it is not old wine in new bottles, but new wine in new bottles!

It is a foregone conclusion that the use of ITC as a resource for learning - outside of schools - will become ever more powerful and pervasive in the next few years. The continuation of public education is assured if only because of the important role it plays for custodial care of children during the day. The learning applications available on the Internet at present will become very primitive in the eyes of those seeking to learn, either inside schools or outside of schools. Even credentialing, which has been an important role performed by schools, will be challenged as other means of providing credentials such as portfolios and badges¹¹ become more prominent and accessible outside of schools. So the choice for our schools is to continue slow and deliberate pace and become increasingly irrelevant or take the challenge and move forward to become a key element in the way our society transfers the culture to a new generation.

In Conclusion

In this paper I have provided my beliefs about school reform and the approach that needs to be taken in order to accomplish the much needed school reform. My argument is that reform needs to take on the complexities of these four elements: curriculum, pedagogy, organizational structure, and technology. There is no reason to expect that providing training on how to use computer for teachers, continued campaigns to proselytize for ICT in schools, and continuing gradual expansions and improvements in the ICT we put in schools will do cause the needed reforms. It is also my very strong sense that dealing with any of these four issues in isolation from the other three will not yield significant school reform.

Formal education - schooling - ought to adopt the posture of the wise parent who realizes that the best she or he can do for their children is to provide them with constructive independence. In an age of where there are such abundant educational resources disbursed throughout the culture, the ultimate criterion for success of schooling will not be the scores on achievement tests but the number of students

who leave the school with a zest for learning, autonomy as learners, and the capability to use the rich and expanding resources of ICT for their own development as human beings.

There are many who have given up on the schools, who find the probability of the needed school reforms too low. To give up on schools and the possibility of school reform is to walk away from millions of children in our schools who deserve and need better than we are giving them at present. Yet, we must also come to grips with the hard issues of school reform and abandon any naive expectation of magical power in ICT to cause reform. In the U.S. the school reform that is needed will not happen at a national level, and I am not highly optimistic of it occurring at the state level. It can happen at the level of individual schools and even at the district level.

I write this as one who is deeply committed to the reform of the American Public School. Yet, I am often frustrated by the way we have dealt with the crisis in our schools. Too many of the conversations about school reform are littered with clichés and too few reflect the degree of maturity of understanding that several decades of experience should have produced. Moreover, I am not comforted by those who argue that we need to be patient because school reform is a slow process. While school personnel may be willing to proceed in a slow manner, the children in our schools today cannot wait for us to eventually get it right. I write this as one who believes that the familiar words written by H.G. Wells in 1920 in his *Outline of History* have never been more important than now to take to heart – “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” I write this as one who feels that at the moment catastrophe may be ahead in this race and as one who fervently believes that it behooves all of us who have any influence in any of the venues where education occurs to do everything in our power to put education in the lead.

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РЕФОРМУВАННЯ АМЕРИКАНСЬКОЇ ДЕРЖАВНОЇ ОСВІТИ: ПРОБЛЕМИ, ТРУДНОЦІ, МОЖЛИВОСТІ

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Проаналізовано дії Сполучених Штатів щодо реформування державної освіти на початковому й середньому рівнях. Шкільна реформа має довгу історію, їй передують заснування американської державної школи. Розвиток шкільної реформи визначається відступами й проривами. На сучасному етапі зростає потреба в школах для досягнення суттєвих змін. Однак погляди американського суспільства на те, які мають бути зміни, суперечливі. Подано власне бачення шкільної реформи в Сполучених Штатах, передбачено організацію взаємодії зі шкільними районами Америки, що докладають зусилля до модифікації їхніх шкіл.

Ключові слова: державна освіта, шкільна реформа, район школи, знання, навчальний план, педагогіка, технологія.

РЕФОРМИРОВАНИЕ АМЕРИКАНСКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ, ТРУДНОСТИ, ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ

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Проанализировано действия Соединенных Штатов относительно реформирования государственного образования на начальном и среднем уровнях. Школьная реформа имеет длинную историю, что предшествует образованию американской государственной школы. Развитие школьной реформы определяется отступлениями и прорывами. На современном этапе возрастает потребность в школах для достижения существенных изменений. Однако, взгляды американского общества на то, какими должны быть изменения, противоречивы. В статье автор подает собственное видение школьной реформы в Соединенных Штатах. Его позиция предусматривает организацию взаимодействия с школьными районами Америки, которые прилагают усилия к модификации их школ.

Ключевые слова: государственное образование, школьная реформа, район школы, знания, учебный план, педагогика, технология.

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