

# Re-Forming

## THE REFORMS:

How Total Leaders Face  
Education's Biggest Challenge

*True change in schools comes from discarding edcentric reform concepts that use what already exists to define what can be and re-forming education outside the traditional boxes.*

By WILLIAM G. SPADY

School reforms have reached the furthest corners of public education. Whether east or west, north or south, first grade or high school, standards-based reforms are everywhere, defining the very meaning of learning, achievement, performance, and quality—even education itself. And where you find standards, you find test scores to reinforce them.

These reforms represent a milestone in the history of educational change to those caught up in what Charles Schwahn and I describe in the December 2001 issue of *Principal Leadership* as an edcentric, closed-system, in-the-



box perspective of education: the way the system has always been organized is used to define how it should change.

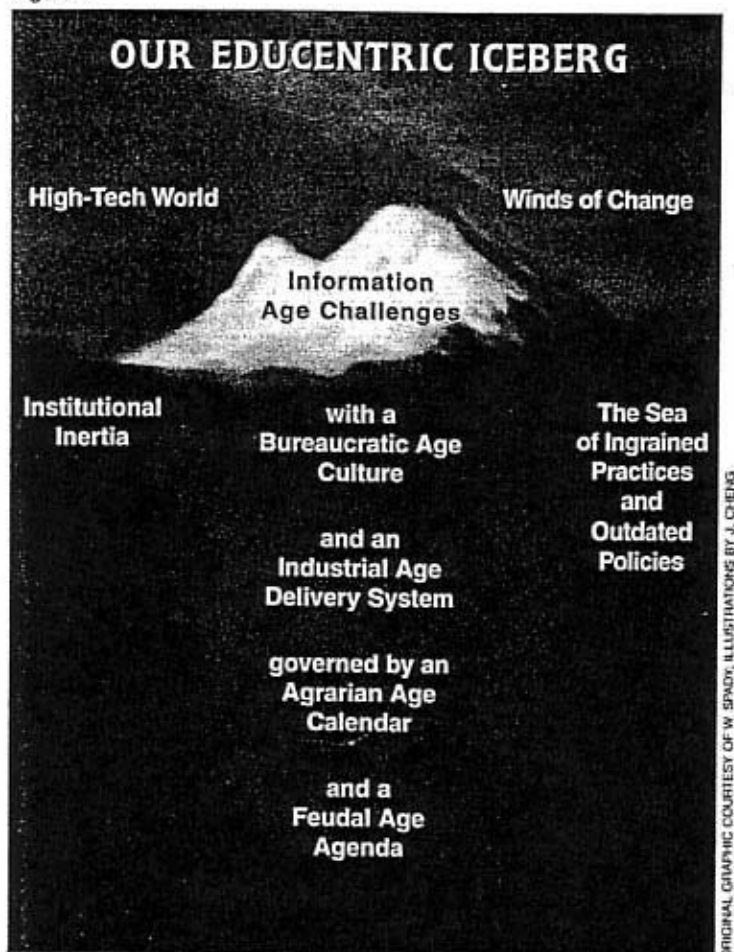
Today's edcentric reformers assert that education finally has rigorous, clearly defined, precisely measured standards on which system change can be grounded. Because these

standards give education focus and consistency it has not had, reformers view standards-based reforms as unqualified change for the better.

But for those whom Schwahn and I describe as Total Leaders, today's reforms are more of a millstone than a milestone. When Total Leaders look inside the box called "school" and examine its deeply entrenched systemic structures and operational character, there's no change in sight. What they see resembles the edcentric iceberg portrayed in figure 1, drifting in a sea of ingrained practices and outdated policies that embody the inertia of the past (see Spady, 2001). Ninety percent of the systemic actions of schools embody these counterproductive features:

- Bureaucratic Age Culture that is defined far more by time, roles, procedures, programs, precedents, and rituals than by

Figure 1



innovation, research, outcomes, and results.

- Industrial Age Delivery System that is structured to operate as a factory assembly line as with curriculum and people moving at an unrelenting uniform pace on a standardized schedule.
- Agrarian Age Calendar that defines, organizes, and drives virtually everything the system does around nine-month blocks of time and opportunity.
- Feudal Age Agenda that obsessively grades, labels, ranks, sorts, and selects students into separate tracks, or "castes," and pathways to the future.

Today's reforms assume that schools will retain all four of these features, yet will change and improve by implementing them better, harder, and longer than before. From their strategic perspective, however, Total Leaders believe that these educentric reforms will have the opposite effect, leaving us in a huge quandary. Their view can be summed up in a few words: the more schools embrace and implement today's standards-based reforms, the more change-proof they become.

#### Today's Educentric Road Map to Reform

Total Leaders view today's standards-based reforms as the

direct outgrowth of the template established in 1893 by the Committee of Ten—a group of 10 university presidents who were charged with modernizing U.S. high schools. At the dawn of the Industrial Age in the United States, the committee gave us four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, and four years of social studies as the core definition of the "modern" high school. And education in the United States has operated within this framework ever since. To this day, both learning and education are defined by subjects that are structured around the university's academic disciplines, its four grade-level descriptors (freshman, sophomore, and so on), and its nine-month Agrarian Age calendar. This subjects/courses/grade levels/bell-curve grades/credits/class rank/iceberg paradigm of high school has been so institutionalized by educators, legalized by policy-makers, internalized by the public, and reinforced by the media over the past century that it has attained a sacred status within our society.

The inertia of this deeply entrenched model was further reinforced 20 years ago when U.S. Secretary of Education Terrell Bell established the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) to address the systemic reform of U.S. schools. The commission's work resulted in the widely heralded and disseminated report *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983). Its recommendations centered on what the commission called the "New Basics": four years of English, three years of mathematics, and so forth—yes, exactly the same things recommended by the Committee of Ten 90 years earlier when it was addressing the realities of the rapidly emerging Industrial Age.

Sadly, the overwhelming majority of U.S. educators and educational policymakers chose the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* road map to reform. It kept everyone focused on the Committee of Ten's subject areas, grade levels, and calendar years, and it left us with a closed system of reform and change. It is no wonder that today's standards-based reforms embody this same paradigm.

Consequently, 100 years after the Committee of Ten's proposals were made, new committees composed of content experts in those very same subjects areas were busy developing standards on which to base 21st-century reforms. Because they were operating from inside the familiar curriculum and subject boxes, they understandably wrote standards about what they felt students should be able to know and do to be called "successful achievers" in those subjects (see Spady, 2001).

#### Four Fatal Flaws

Despite their inherent appeal and widespread endorsement and impact, there are four fatal flaws in these standards-based reforms. These flaws deserve focused attention

because they expose the serious limitations of the standards-based juggernaut.

First, the standards are artificial because they are fundamentally about what people do in schools to pass courses, not what they do in life. They address content and tasks that are central to how educators think about their curriculum and how schools operate, but most people rarely, if ever, encounter most of this content again in their lives after leaving school. In short, the standards are about school achievement, not about the broad range of competence that constitutes the essence of real-world, life-role functioning and performance.

Second, the standards are unrealistic. Almost no adults anywhere can meet *all* of them because they were written by content specialists for specialists, and very few of us are specialists at everything. The professors and teachers who wrote some of them can't pass all of them, and neither can the legislators who mandated them or the business leaders who claim their personnel can't function without knowing them. Whether you call this flaw illusion, hypocrisy, fantasy, or absurdity, it should be ringing alarm bells everywhere.

Third, today's standards define learning and achievement with a narrow range of standardized performance on extremely limited and limiting standardized tests. Paper-pencil tests encourage a one-dimensional approach to learning and performance—one that assumes that learning is no more than the mental processing of content and concepts. But real performance is three-dimensional: it involves the ability to mentally process content, the ability to operationally do something with the content, and the ability to do it in settings and situations filled with demanding conditions and challenges. The overemphasis on one-dimensional content testing in today's reforms deprives learners of the three-dimensional experiences needed in authentic life performances.

Fourth, today's standards and reforms promote a standardized view of both learners and learning. Inflexible curriculum content and structures, predefined time blocks and opportunities, and uniform rates and methods of learning are all being standardized within age-bound grade levels. When combined, these structures foster a uniform, mechanistic, assembly-line approach to education in which boxes constrain boxes constrain boxes—all in the name of "reform." Moreover, this mechanistic model of reform is being

imposed on profoundly unstandardized learners who have profoundly unstandardized aptitudes, skills, learning rates, and interests, come from profoundly unstandardized families and communities, and face a profoundly unstandardized future.

If this sounds as if reform is about forcing millions of big round pegs into a very few tiny square holes, it is. But Total Leaders know that it's not our only alternative.

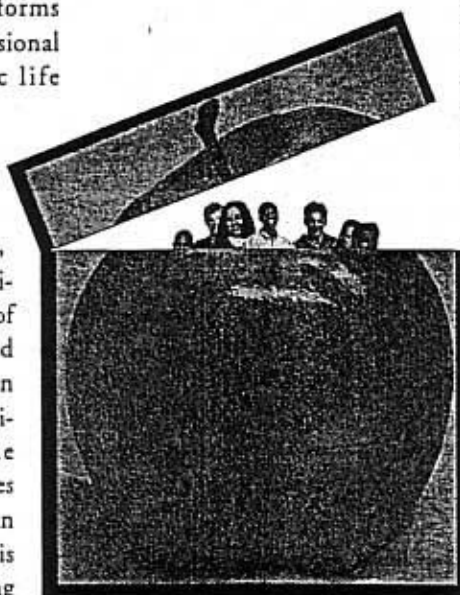
### Re-Forming Education Through Strategic Design

Happily, another road to the future was open to educators in 1983, and a few brave souls chose it. Their source of inspiration was Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's (1982) remarkably insightful book, *In Search of Excellence*, which had already stood atop the New York Times best-seller list for several months prior to the release of *A Nation at Risk*. Peters and Waterman describe the new and emerging organizational attributes needed for surviving and flourishing in the fast-paced world we've come to call the "Information Age," as well as the operating principles that underlie these new realities.

Peters and Waterman drew the principles from intensive case studies of organizations that had successfully met the challenge of fundamental change, and those principles introduced leaders to a whole new paradigm of organizational functioning. This new paradigm embraced focusing on the future; personal empowerment; purpose-driven action; and flexible structures, role assignments, and procedures. Moreover, it represented a radical departure from the command-control hierarchies, operating assumptions, and inflexible features of Industrial Age enterprises, and it placed a premium on tapping the inherent intelligence, creativity, and motivation of all employees—an approach wholly consistent with the Total Leaders model (Schwahn & Spady, 1998).

*In Search of Excellence's* key message for educators was overwhelmingly direct and compelling: if education is to remain viable, it must fundamentally "re-form" itself around a new set of realities—realities about learners and life that are completely ignored in *A Nation at Risk* and today's standards-based reforms.

The road to re-forming education is strategic design. The full strategic design process is outlined in the concluding chapter of *Total Leaders* and





described in detail in *Paradigm Lost* (Spady, 1998) and *Beyond Counterfeit Reforms* (Spady, 2001).

### The Key Criteria for Being Strategic

When Total Leaders carry out a full strategic design, they undertake two broad sets of actions: one involves setting a strategic direction for their organization. It taps the particular skills of authentic, visionary, and cultural leaders. The other is strategic alignment: getting what the organization does to directly match and embody the strategic direction it has defined for itself. It taps the particular skills of cultural, quality, and service leaders. Think of strategic direction as the rationale for what the organization will do by asking, On what are we basing our design? Then think of strategic alignment as the implementation of the design. It's what we're going to do, based on the rationale we've developed.

For an education system's direction (i.e., path to the future) to be genuinely strategic, it must be:

- Learner centered—What are the rich capacities, interests, and motivations of the clients we serve?
- Future focused—What are the challenges and conditions students face following the completion of their formal education?
- Research based—What are the best knowledge and insights available about our learners and the future they face around which we can design and implement empowering learning experiences for them?

Together these three criteria enable Total Leaders to take their people completely outside the educentric boxes of schooling and into the fresh air where the winds of change blow on the very tip of the iceberg. Note that in explicitly and consistently using these three criteria, leaders are re-forming the foundation on which their design will ultimately rest by focusing on learners rather than curriculum, life rather than test performance, and research rather than past practice.

The essence of this re-formation strategy is a learner-centered, future-focused vision called a *total learning community* (TLC) (Spady, 2001). This vision is the product of four powerful, mutually reinforcing defining elements: the model's deep purpose for existing; the paradigm thinking that underlies its design and operation; the knowledge base that informs its design; and the ethos, or values and principles, that guide its design and implementation. Total Leaders deliberately, strategically, and systematically use these four re-form essentials to melt the educentric iceberg.

### Re-Forming Education's Fundamental Purpose

The educentric reforms of 1983 and today reflect a clear and powerful intent: to prepare high-achieving students for more education. The better they do on existing standards in

traditional programs, the better equipped they are for more education in those same programs—making the programs ends in themselves.

The re-formation purpose of education, however, is fundamentally different. Total Leaders use the three strategic criteria to help their people consider a more visionary reason for operating that typically focuses on empowering all learners to shape and enrich their changing world.

This dramatically expanded purpose explicitly embraces all learners, not just academic high achievers, and its intention is to equip them with the skills and orientations that will make them active contributors to the complex future they will encounter. This purpose compels re-formers to focus on the continuously changing conditions in the real world our young people ultimately face and to the life performance abilities they will need in proactively shaping and enriching that world. More education is not the goal; life beyond education is.

### Re-Forming Education's Defining Paradigm

The re-formation paradigm reflects a profoundly out-of-the-box perspective on education. Consequently, Total Leaders work continuously with their people to develop a non-educentric, empowerment-oriented view of learning and its development. For example, they consistently encourage their people to view education from the future, rather than the past; to look at education's possibilities, rather than its precedents; to link education to life and life performance, rather than to institutional structures; to emphasize learning and competence development, rather than teaching and curriculum coverage; to create time-flexible learning experiences, rather than time-defined grade levels and courses; to envision education as adventure and exploration, rather than standards and requirements; to focus on continuous development, rather than lock-step promotion; to evaluate with authentic self-assessment, rather than standardized paper-pencil tests; to maximize potential, rather than achievement—and dozens of other noneducentric/educentric contrasts.

Grounded in this perspective, Total Leaders are free to ask fundamentally different research questions when designing and implementing total learning communities—questions that lead them to bodies of research and thinking that lie far beyond the narrow focus of standards-based reforms.

### Re-Forming Education's Explicit Knowledge Base

Total Leaders use an evolving knowledge base, culled from major bodies of inquiry, to focus educational thinking and design on five key areas:

*Human potential*—the broad range of talents, capacities,

aptitudes, and intelligences that learners bring to their learning experiences. Despite the current focus on Howard Gardner's (1983) 8 or 9 intelligences, I identify 25 that are merely a starter set of the range of talents humans possess. Most standardized testing programs tap fewer than 5 of the 25. Re-forming education requires that we explicitly honor and develop the 20 currently being ignored or suppressed.

**Human learning**—the natural processes by which people learn before they enter school and after they finish. Those processes include learners' continuous self-assessment of three key things: new input, new experience (what they do, explore, and perform), and the meaning and understanding they derive from their experiences. Human learning is inherently exploratory and active, and little of it involves memorizing content that has no grounding in life experience. Re-forming education requires that we explicitly honor and develop learning as an active, self-directed, self-assessing process.

**Domains of living**—the major areas and spheres of human experience that constitute life as we know it. These arenas of life experience include such things as personal health and well-being, personal identity and fulfillment, work and productive endeavors, group and community involvement, close and important relationships, cultural and physical environment, and family roles and heritage. These are inherently "transdisciplinary" domains of human experience—meaning that they hardly match the disciplinary curriculum structures around which today's reforms are defined and structured. Because they are life as we experience it, they provide the richest and most highly relevant sources of significant issues and content for study imaginable.

**Future conditions**—the challenges, opportunity structures, problems, and circumstances that are redefining organizations, careers, and life in the new millennium. Those shifts, trends, and conditions are what our learners are likely to face in the foreseeable future, and it is for this world of continuous discovery and complex change that education must ultimately prepare them.

*The Future Is Now* (Schwahn &

Spady, 2000) identifies six overriding themes that encapsulate dozens of significant shifts and trends that learners will inevitably face: the high-quality, global marketplace; transformational technologies; adept, empowered employees in nimble organizations; the virtual workplace; transformational leadership; and a stressed society. The major themes emerging in their new work include our transforming social institutions, our biotechnology future, and our evolving consciousness as a species.

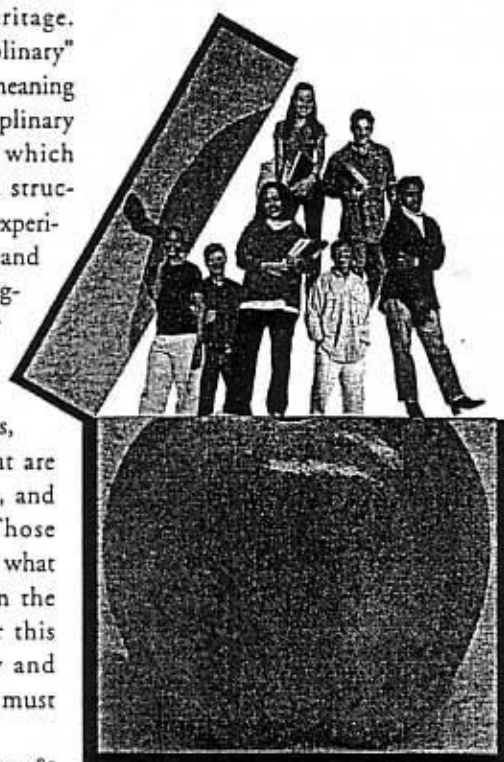
**Life performance**—the role performances that people carry out to function effectively in their various life roles. A useful framework of essential life performance abilities appears in figure 2.

The figure portrays 10 pairs of role performance abilities—configurations of complex skills and competence

needed for success as parent, citizen, entrepreneur, career professional, leader, or modern-day employee. Note that those above the dotted line in the figure are fundamentally interpersonal, and those below the line are more technical and strategic in nature. These role-performance abilities are the heart and soul of the re-form vision and lie miles beyond the focus of today's content standards. Note that they require years to develop, can't be learned from textbooks, and can't be measured by standardized tests.

With these five bodies of research and concepts in hand, Total Leaders can view learners, learning, and education from an inspiring out-of-the-box vantage point and directly assist their people in creating learning systems capable of accomplishing re-form's learner-centered, future-focused purpose.

**Re-formers focus on the continuously changing conditions in the real world our young people ultimately face and . . . the life performance abilities they will need. . . .**

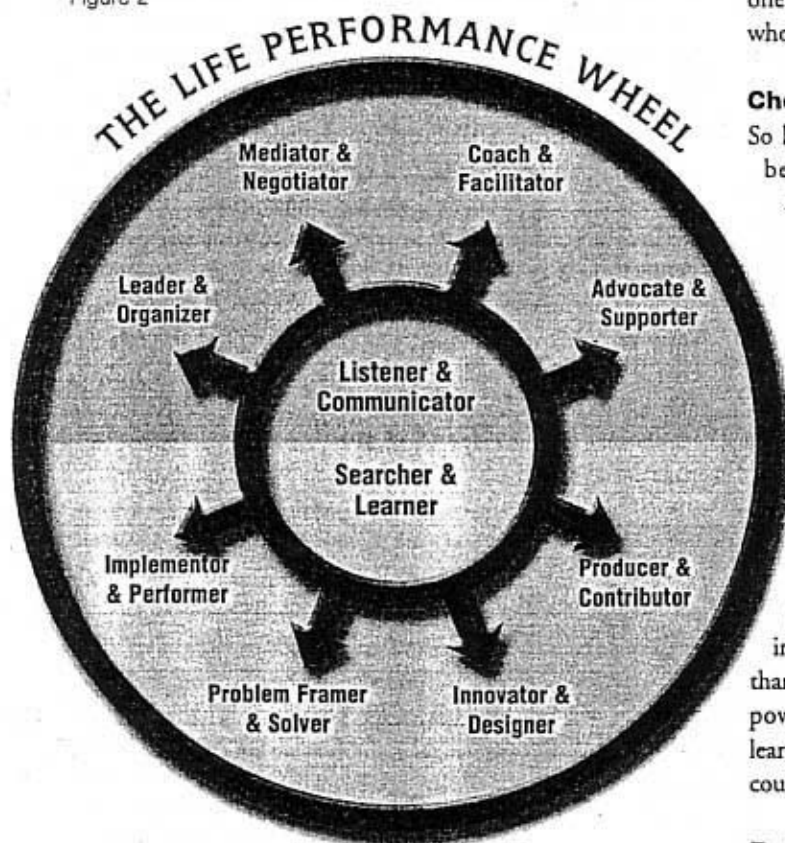


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### Re-Forming Education's Grounding Ethos

At the foundation level of the iceberg lies its Feudal Age agenda. That agenda is grounded in values and beliefs justifying the inherent superiority of some kinds of individuals over others and the ultimate right of the more-superior individuals to obtain/achieve/gain access to more status/privilege/goods/opportunities/honor than those deemed inferior. Traditional societies usually decided these things at birth, with sex,

Figure 2



skin color, and lineage as the major determiners of one's life chances.

But more modern and democratic societies use the educational system to do much of this sorting, and they do so under the pretext of fair and open competition for what are defined as scarce commodities: high grades, high class rank, and prestigious credentials. Today's standards-based reforms thoroughly embody and endorse this ethos of competition and selection, and they reinforce the twin realities that school is both a contest and a giant judgment factory.

In contests, the game is set up so some (the superior/good/worthy) will win, and some (the inferior/bad/unworthy) will lose. Because school attendance is compulsory, so is participation in this learning competition. Note that such a competitive system as this deems students to be inadequate or inferior or bad until they prove otherwise, either by meeting the standards or outperforming their peers on the standards.

So how does the re-form ethos relate to all of this? The answer is fairly clear. Total Leaders believe and treat all individuals as having both inherent worth and unique gifts, recognizing that learning can be a challenge, but it isn't inherently a competitive contest unless people make it one. Re-form educators don't. In a total learning community, no

one has to prove anything to anyone else to be accepted for who they are and what they can contribute

### Choosing to Re-Form the Reforms

So here we stand in 2002 at the same crossroad as our forebears in 1983, having the opportunity to choose our approach to educational change. The familiar and politically endorsed choice involves managing an educentric, in-the-box, selection-driven system that faces the future by implementing a better, harder, longer version of the past. The challenging strategic choice involves applying the skills and principles of Total Leaders to re-form education around an empowering purpose, visionary thinking, a transformational knowledge base, and an ethos of acceptance and inclusion.

Pursuing the latter choice will be the most challenging thing we do in our careers: reversing a century of institutionalized, legalized, internalized, and reinforced inertia. But to do less is to deny what we have discovered thanks to Peters and Waterman's insights from 1982: there's a powerful way of designing and implementing genuinely learner-centered, future-focused learning communities. What could be more stimulating and gratifying to a Total Leader? **PL**

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