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THE CHALLENGE OF SYSTEMIC REFORM:
LESSONS FROM THE NEW FUTURES INITIATIVE FOR THE CIJE

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A paper prepared for circulation within the
Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE).

January, 1992

**THE CHALLENGE OF SYSTEMIC REFORM:
LESSONS FROM THE NEW FUTURES INITIATIVE FOR THE CIJE**

In 1988, the Annie E. Casey Foundation committed about \$40 million over a five-year period to fund community-wide reforms in four mid-sized cities: Dayton, Ohio; Little Rock, Arkansas; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Savannah, Georgia.¹ The reforms were aimed at radically improving the life-chances of at-risk youth, and at the core of the agenda were changes in educational systems and in relations between schools and other social service agencies. Despite major investments, not only financial but in time, energy, and good will, from participants as well as the Foundation, the New Futures Initiative has made little headway in improving education. According to a three-year evaluation:

The programs, policies, and structures implemented as part of New Futures have not begun to stimulate a fundamental restructuring of schools. For the most part, interventions were supplemental, leaving most of the basic activities and practices of schools unaltered. At best, these interventions have yet to produce more than superficial change (Wehlage, Smith, and Lipman, 1991, p. 51).

This is not a matter of failing to allow time for programs to take effect, nor is it the problem that weak outcome indicators prevented recognition of the benefits of innovative programs. Rather, the programs themselves have been weakly conceived and poorly implemented.

There are striking similarities between the action plans of New Futures and the CIJE's lead communities project. Consideration of the struggles of New Futures therefore provides important lessons for the CIJE which may allow us to avoid the pitfalls that New Futures has encountered. In this paper, I will describe the design and implementation of New Futures, and show its similarities to the CIJE's agenda. Next, I will summarize New Futures' successes and frustrations.² Finally, I will explore the implications of the New Futures experience for the CIJE.

The Design of New Futures

Just as the CIJE was born out of dire concern for the fate of American Jewry, the New Futures Initiative emerged in response to a sense of crisis in urban America. Like the CIJE, New Futures is concentrating major assistance in a few locations, and emphasizing community-wide (or systemic) reform, rather than isolated improvements. At the heart of New Futures' organizational plan are community collaboratives: local boards created in each of the New Futures cities which are supposed to build consensus around goals and policies, coordinate the efforts of diverse agencies, and facilitate implementation of innovative programs. These collaboratives began with detailed self-studies which served both as part of their applications to become New Futures cities, and as the groundwork for the agendas they developed subsequently. Each city developed a management information system (MIS) that would gauge the welfare of youth and inform policy decisions. Like the CIJE, the Casey Foundation listed certain areas of reform that each city was required to address, and encouraged additional reforms that fit particular contexts.³

Another similarity between New Futures and the CIJE is the decision to play an active part in the development and implementation of reforms. Unlike the sideline role played by most grant-givers, New Futures provided policy guidelines, advice, and technical assistance. New Futures has a liaison for each city who visits frequently. According to the evaluators, "the Foundation attempted to walk a precarious line between prescribing and shaping New Futures efforts according to its own vision and encouraging local initiative and inventiveness" (Wehlage, Smith, and Lipman, 1991, p. 8).

The New Futures Initiative differed from the CIJE in that it began with clear ideas about what outcomes had to be changed. These included increased student attendance and achievement, better youth employment prospects, and reductions in suspensions, course failures, grade retentions, and teenage pregnancies. New Futures recognized, however, that these were

long-term goals, and they did not expect to see much change in these outcomes during the first few years. The three-year evaluation focused instead on intermediate goals, asking five main questions (Wehlage, Smith, and Lipman, 1991, p. 17):

1. Have the interventions stimulated school-wide changes that fundamentally affect all students' experiences, or have the interventions functioned more as "add-ons"...
2. Have the interventions contributed to...more supportive and positive social relations...throughout the school?
3. Have the interventions led to changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment...that generate higher levels of student engagement in academics, especially in problem solving and higher order thinking activities?
4. Have the interventions...give(n teachers and principals) more autonomy and responsibility...while also making them more accountable...?
5. Have the interventions brought to the schools additional material or human resources...?

Although Wehlage and his colleagues observed some successes, notably the establishment of management information systems, and exciting but isolated innovations in a few schools, by and large the intermediate goals were not met: interventions were supplemental rather than fundamental; social relations remained adversarial; there was virtually no change in curriculum and instruction; and autonomy, responsibility, and community resources evidenced but slight increases.

New Futures' Limited Success

New Futures' greatest achievement thus far may be the "improved capacity to gather data on youths" (Education Week, 9/25/91, p. 12). Prior to New Futures, the cities had little precise information on how the school systems were functioning. Basic data, such as dropout and achievement rates, were not calculated reliably. Establishing clear procedures for gathering information means that the cities will be able to identify key areas of need and keep track of progress. For example, the data pointed to sharp discrepancies between black and white

suspension rates, and this has made suspension policies an important issue. The outcome indicators showed little change over the first three years, but they were not expected to. New Futures participants anticipated that data-gathering will pay off in the future.

The intermediate outcomes, which were expected to show improvement from 1988 to 1991, have been the source of frustration. None of the five areas examined by Wehlage's team showed major improvement. For example, the most extensive structural change was the rearrangement of some Little Rock and Dayton middle schools into clusters of teachers and students. This plan was adopted to personalize the schooling experience for students, and to offer opportunities for collaboration among teachers. Yet no new curricula or instructional approaches resulted from this restructuring, and it has not led to more supportive teacher-student relations.

Observers reported:

(A)t cluster meetings teachers address either administrative details or individual students. When students are discussed, teachers tend to focus on personal problems and attempt to find idiosyncratic solutions to individual needs. They commonly perceive students' problems to be the result of personal character defects or the products of dysfunctional homes. "Problems" are usually seen as "inside" the student and his/her family; prescriptions or plans are designed to "fix" the student. Clusters have not been used as opportunities for collaboration and reflection in developing broad educational strategies that could potentially address institutional sources of student failure (Wehlage, Smith, and Lipman, 1991, p. 22).

The failure to take advantage of possibilities offered by clustering is symptomatic of what the Wehlage team saw as the fundamental reason for lack of progress: the absence of change in the culture of educational institutions in the New Futures cities. Educators continue to see the sources of failure as within the students; their ideas about improvement still refer to students' buckling down and doing the work. The notion that schools might change their practices to meet the needs of a changed student population has yet to permeate the school culture.

Another example of unchanged culture was manifested in strategies for dealing with the suspension problem. As New Futures began, it was not uncommon for a third of the student

body in a junior high school to receive suspensions during a given school year. In some cases, suspended students could not make up work they missed; this led them to fall further behind and increased their likelihood of failure. In response, several schools began programs of in-school suspensions. However, out-of-school suspensions remained common, and in-school suspensions were served in a harsh and punitive atmosphere that contradicted the goal of improving the schools' learning environments.

The newspaper account of New Futures' progress focused on a different source of frustration: the complexity of coordinating efforts among diverse social agencies, schools, and the Foundation. This task turned out to be much more difficult than anticipated. The article quotes James Van Vleck, chair of the collaborative in Dayton: "As we've sobered up and faced the issues, we have found that getting collaboration between those players is a much more complicated and difficult game than we expected" (p. 12). Part of the difficulty lay in not spending enough time and energy building coalitions and consensus at the outset. Otis Johnson, who leads the Savannah collaborative, is quoted as saying: "If we had used at least the first six months to plan and to do a lot of bridge-building and coordination that we had to struggle with through the first year, I think it would have been much smoother" (p. 13).

The push to get started led to an appearance of a top-down project, though that was not the intention. Teachers, principals, and social workers--those who have contact with the youth--were not heavily involved in generating programs. Both the news account and the evaluation report describe little progress in encouraging teachers and principals to develop new programs, and school staff appeared suspicious about whether their supposed empowerment was as real as it was made out to be (see Wehlage, Smith, and Lipman, 1991, p. 31).

Inherent tensions in an outside intervention contributed to these difficulties. The use of policy evaluation has made some participants feel "whip-sawed around" (Education Week, 9/25/91,

p. 15). A Dayton principal explained, "We were always responding to...either the collaborative or the foundation. It was very frustrating for teachers who were not understanding why the changes were occurring" (Education Week, 9/25/91, p. 15). Another tension emerged in the use of technical assistance: While some participants objected to top-down reforms, others complained that staff development efforts have been brief and limited, rather than sustained.

According to the evaluation team, the New Futures projects in the four cities have suffered from the lack of an overall vision of what needs to be changed. How, exactly, should students' and teachers' daily lives be different? There seem to be no answers to this question.

Implications: How Can the CIJE Avoid Similar Frustration?

The New Futures experience offers four critical lessons for the CIJE: (1) the need for a vision about the content of educational and community reforms; (2) the need to modify the culture of schools and other institutions along with their structures; (3) the importance of balancing enthusiasm and momentum with coalition-building and careful thinking about programs; and (4) the need for awareness of inherent tensions in an intervention stimulated in part by external sources.

Sound like 4, not 1
 ① *(1) bottom-up + Teacher training*

The importance of content. Although New Futures provided general guidelines, no particular programs were specified. This plan may well have been appropriate in light of concerns about top-down reform. Yet the community collaboratives also failed to enact visions of educational restructuring, and most new programs were minor "add-ons" to existing structures. Wehlage and his colleagues concluded that reforms would remain isolated and ineffective without a clear vision of overall educational reform. Such a vision must be informed by current knowledge about education, yet at the same time emerge from participation of "street-level" educators--those who deal directly with youth.

Process / Input

- (1) bottom-up
- (2) Coalition bldg.
- (3) staff Devd
- (4) Vision
- (5) Planning

Outcome target

- (1) Modify culture of instit.
- (2) Joint vision



This finding places the CIJE's "best practices" project at the center of its operation. Through a deliberate and wide-ranging planning process, each lead community must develop a broad vision of its desired educational programs and outcomes. Specific programs can then be developed in collaboration with the CIJE, drawing on knowledge generated by the best practices project. In addition to information about "what works," the best practices project can provide access to technical support outside the community and the CIJE. This support must be sustained rather than limited to brief interventions, and it must be desired by local educators rather than foisted from above. In short, each lead community must be able to answer the question, "how should students' and educators' daily lives be different?"; and the best practices project must provide access to knowledge that will help generate the answers.

Changing culture as well as structure. Jewish educators are no less likely than staff in secular schools to find sources of failure outside their institutions. Indeed, the diminished (though not eradicated) threat of anti-semitism, the rise in mixed-marriage families, disillusion with Israel, and the general reduction of spirituality in American public and private life,⁴ all may lower the interests of youth in their Jewishness and raise the chances of failure for Jewish education. Thus, Jewish educators would be quite correct to claim that if North American youth fail to remain Jewish, it is largely due to circumstances beyond the educators' control. But this is besides the point. At issue is not external impediments, but how educational and social agencies can respond to changing external circumstances. In New Futures cities, educators have mainly attempted to get students to fit existing institutions. If CIJE communities do the same, their likelihood of failure is equally great. Instead, lead communities must consider changes in their organizational structures and underlying assumptions to meet the needs of a changing Jewish world.

How do CIJE plans address this concern? The intention to mobilize support for education, raising awareness of its centrality in all sectors of the community, is an important first step, particularly since it is expected to result in new lay leadership for education and community collaboration. New Futures' experience shows that this tactic is necessary but not sufficient. In New Futures cities, community collaboratives galvanized support and provided the moral authority under which change could take place. Yet little fundamental change occurred. Educators have not experimented much with new curricula, instructional methods, responsibilities or roles, because their basic beliefs about teaching and learning have not changed.

It is possible that the CIJE's strategy of building a profession of Jewish education address this problem. Perhaps unlike the secular educational world, where methods are well-entrenched, professionalization in Jewish education will carry with it an openness to alternatives, encouraging teachers to create and use new knowledge about effective programs. Professionalization may bring out the capacity to experiment with "best practices" and a willingness to adopt them when they appear to work.

Balance enthusiasm with careful planning. Those involved in New Futures believe they should have spent more time building coalitions and establishing strategies before introducing new programs. Douglas W. Nelson, executive director of the Casey Foundation, regrets that more time was not taken for planning. He observed: "We made it more difficult, in the interest of using the urgency of the moment and the excitement of commitment, to include and get ownership at more levels" (Education Week, 9/25/91, p. 13). Again, it is not just the structure that requires change--this can be mandated from above--but the unspoken assumptions and beliefs that guide everyday behavior which require redefinition. Institutional culture cannot be changed by fiat, but only through a slow process of mutual consultation and increasing commitment.

Lead communities also need a long planning period to develop new educational programs that are rich in content and far-reaching in impact. This process requires a thorough self-study, frank appraisal of current problems, discussions of goals with diverse members of the community, and careful consideration of existing knowledge. If "lead communities" is a twenty-year project, surely it is worth taking a year or more for preparation. Deliberation at the planning stage creates a risk that momentum will be lost, and it may be important to take steps to keep enthusiasm high, but the lesson of New Futures show that enthusiasm must not overtake careful planning. The current schedule for the lead communities project (as of January, 1992) appears to have taken account of these concerns.

Awareness of unavoidable tensions. New Futures' experience highlights tensions that are inherent to the process of an outside intervention, and the CIJE must be sensitive so the effects of such tensions can be mitigated. The CIJE must recognize the need for stability after dramatic initial changes take place. The CIJE's evaluation plan must be developed and agreed upon by all parties before the end of the lead communities' planning period. Technical support from the CIJE must be sustained, rather than haphazard. While the CIJE cannot hold back constructive criticism, it must balance criticism with support for honest efforts. Many of these tactics have been used by New Futures, and they may well account for the fact that New Futures is still ongoing and has hopes of eventual success, despite the frustrations of the early years.

Conclusion

The New Futures Initiative, the Casey Foundation's effort to improve the lot of at-risk youth in four American cities, has been limited by supplemental rather than fundamental change, the inability to modify underlying beliefs even where structural changes occur, and by the complexities of coordinating the work of diverse agencies. Although it will be difficult for the CIJE to overcome these challenges, awareness of their likely emergence may help forestall them

or mitigate their consequences. In particular, the CIJE should help lead communities develop their visions of new educational programs; think about cultural as well as structural change; ensure a thorough self-study, wide-ranging participation, and careful planning; and remain sensitive to tensions that are unavoidable when an outside agent is the stimulus of change.

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want to
debates

Lo alecha ha-m'lacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben horin l'hibatcl mi-menah. Ha-yom katzar v'ha-m'lacha m'rubah, v'ha-poalim atzoylim, v'ha-sahar harbeh. U-va'al ha-bayit dohek --- Pirke Avot.

(It is not your responsibility to finish the task, but neither are you free to shirk it. The day is short and the task is large, the workers are lazy, and the reward is great. And the Master of the House is pressing --- Sayings of the Fathers.)

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Lawrence, Massachusetts, was originally included as well, with an additional \$10 million, but it was dropped during the second year after the community failed to reach consensus on how to proceed.
2. This account relies largely on two sources. One is an Education Week news report by Deborah L. Cohen, which appeared on Sept. 25, 1991. The second is an academic paper by the Casey Foundation's evaluation team: Gary G. Wehlage, Gregory Smith, and Pauline Lipman, "Restructuring Urban Schools: The New Futures Experience" (Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, May 1991).
3. The reforms required (or "strongly encouraged") by the Casey Foundation were site-based management, flexibility for teachers, individualized treatment of students, staff development, and community-wide collaboration. This list is longer than the CIJE's, whose required elements are building the educational profession and mobilizing community support.
4. On the decline of spirituality in America, see Robert N. Bellah et. al, Habits of the Heart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

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This finding places the CIJE's "best practices" project at the center of its operation.

Through a deliberate and wide-ranging planning process, each lead community must develop a broad vision of its desired educational programs and outcomes. Specific programs can then be developed in collaboration with the CIJE, drawing on knowledge generated by the best practices project. In addition to information about "what works," the best practices project can provide access to technical support outside the community and the CIJE. This support must be sustained rather than limited to brief interventions, and it must be desired by local educators rather than foisted from above. In short, each lead community must be able to answer the question, "how should students' and educators' daily lives be different?"; and the best practices project must provide access to knowledge that will help generate the answers.

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Awareness of unavoidable tensions. New Futures' experience highlights tensions that are inherent to the process of an outside intervention, and the CIJE must be sensitive so the effects of such tensions can be mitigated. The CIJE must recognize the need for stability after dramatic initial changes take place. The CIJE's evaluation plan must be developed and agreed upon by all parties before the end of the lead communities' planning period. Technical support from the CIJE must be sustained, rather than haphazard. While the CIJE cannot hold back constructive criticism, it must balance criticism with support for honest efforts. Many of these tactics have been used by New Futures, and they may well account for the fact that New Futures is still ongoing and has hopes of eventual success, despite the frustrations of the early years.

Conclusion

The New Futures Initiative, the Casey Foundation's effort to improve the lot of at-risk youth in four American cities, has been limited by supplemental rather than fundamental change, the inability to modify underlying beliefs even where structural changes occur, and by the complexities of coordinating the work of diverse agencies. Although it will be difficult for the CIJE to overcome these challenges, awareness of their likely emergence may help forestall them

or mitigate their consequences. In particular, the CIJE should help lead communities develop their visions of new educational programs; think about cultural as well as structural change; ensure a thorough self-study, wide-ranging participation, and careful planning; and remain sensitive to tensions that are unavoidable when an outside agent is the stimulus of change.

Lo alecha ha-m'lacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben horin l'hibatel mi-menah. Ha-yom katzar v'ha-m'lacha m'rubah, v'ha-poalim atzeylim, v'ha-sahar harbeh. U-va'al ha-bayit dohek --- Pirke Avot.

(It is not your responsibility to finish the task, but neither are you free to shirk it. The day is short and the task is large, the workers are lazy, and the reward is great. And the Master of the House is pressing --- Sayings of the Fathers.)

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Lawrence, Massachusetts, was originally included as well, with an additional \$10 million, but it was dropped during the second year after the community failed to reach consensus on how to proceed.
2. This account relies largely on two sources. One is an Education Week news report by Deborah L. Cohen, which appeared on Sept. 25, 1991. The second is an academic paper by the Casey Foundation's evaluation team: Gary G. Wehlage, Gregory Smith, and Pauline Lipman, "Restructuring Urban Schools: The New Futures Experience" (Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, May 1991).
3. The reforms required (or "strongly encouraged") by the Casey Foundation were site-based management, flexibility for teachers, individualized treatment of students, staff development, and community-wide collaboration. This list is longer than the CIJE's, whose required elements are building the educational profession and mobilizing community support.
4. On the decline of spirituality in America, see Robert N. Bellah et. al, Habits of the Heart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).