



A Geology of School Reform: The Successive Restructurings of a School District. Liane Brouillette. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. 251 pp.

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A Geology of School Reform: The Successive Restructurings of a School

District offers a rich description of the process of implementing reform in a school district, highlighting the many factors that facilitate and hinder the change process. The book is useful because it focuses on a school district, not just an individual school, and it provides a detailed account of the history of change in the district. We too rarely take a school's or a district's history into account when we examine the effectiveness of change efforts. We assume that when schools and districts do not embrace change eagerly, they are resistant, stubborn, and shortsighted. As *A Geology of School Reform* illustrates, this is not necessarily true. Many factors contribute to the willingness of schools and districts to embrace change, and one of the most important is that many people within a school or district are still committed to and comfortable with "yesterday's reform."

This book begins the story of a school district's growth and change in the 1950s when Cottonwood School District was small and rural. Everyone knew everybody, and it was easy to agree that "educational excellence meant effective, innovative teaching of the core academic curriculum" (p. 31). Within the homogeneous population of Cottonwood there was an agreement that schools should emphasize Western heritage and Christian values. The 1960s brought rapid growth to Cottonwood, and by 1972, the district grew from two small schoolhouses to 22 schools serving a much more diverse population. With a new superintendent came a curriculum and management emphasis on social efficiency. Although many teachers and administrators felt overwhelmed by paperwork and were concerned about the effect of criterion-referenced testing on student learning, the district's emphasis on management and learning by objectives brought national attention to Cottonwood. A change in leadership in 1982 moved the district in a radically different direction--toward shared decision making and a developmentalist emphasis in curriculum. The book focuses primarily on this generation of change in Cottonwood School District, placing considerable emphasis on how shared decision making was implemented in schools and in the district.

Liane Brouillette chose the geology metaphor for this book because it references the topography of the state in which Cottonwood School District resides and the fact that



life is built upon the strata of the past. As a reader with considerable experience working with schools engaged in school restructuring, I was initially concerned by the geology metaphor. (I am the director of the South Carolina Accelerated Schools Center, whose Accelerated Schools Project is a national school restructuring model currently being used by nearly 1,000 schools across the country.) With my limited understanding of geology, I imagined layers of clearly defined strata of school management and curriculum, one piled upon the other, each in its own geologic time. In this view, each of these strata is easily definable by the tenure of one of three superintendents, and there is no movement between them. This is definitely not what Brouillette describes in her book, so I searched for a more compelling metaphor. I thought an ecology of school reform might better describe the organic, interdependent nature of change Brouillette describes and which I have observed in schools. If we think of ecology as a pattern of relations between organisms and their environment, we allow for multiple influences on reform and see the past as a soil in which current reform grows. This soil contains both nutrients that feed the reform and rocks and pollutants that retard it. Although I think that ecology might be a more apt metaphor for the change Brouillette describes, she concludes with a powerful expansion of her meaning of geology:

Just as the solid outer crust of the earth, which is all we see from day to day, is but a thin, solid skin covering fluid, molten rock, our social institutions--including the public school system--form a thin veneer covering less stable cultural strata characterized by fluidity and ongoing change. At times molten rock escapes from beneath the earth's surface in the form of volcanic eruptions. Similarly, there are moments when social conflicts erupt through the seeming predictability of everyday life. However, from year to year, most alterations happen so gradually that we hardly notice the change. Continents drift inches each year. Attitudes toward schooling slowly change. Yet we only see the cumulative effect when something causes us to step back far enough to gain a sense of perspective. [p. 239]

This book would serve as a very useful case study in courses on school change or leadership. In particular, it would be valuable as a case in a problem-based learning course, especially for principals and superintendents. *A Geology of School Reform* provides rich, descriptive data for researchers interested in understanding the multiple factors influencing school change and an interesting frame for understanding how curricular and managerial emphases from the strata of past reforms mix with current emphases to create complex schools and districts.

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