

POLITICAL Leadership **AND** Educational **FAILURE**

SEYMOUR B. SARASON



Political Leadership and Educational Failure

Seymour B. Sarason



Jossey-Bass Publishers • San Francisco

Copyright © 1998 by Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, California 94104.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Copyright acknowledgments are on p. 161.

Substantial discounts on bulk quantities of Jossey-Bass books are available to corporations, professional associations, and other organizations. For details and discount information, contact the special sales department at Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers (415) 433-1740; Fax (800) 605-2665.

For sales outside the United States, please contact your local Simon & Schuster International Office.

Jossey-Bass Web address: <http://www.josseybass.com>

Manufactured in the United States of America using Lyons Falls D'Anthology paper, which is a special blend of non-tree fibers and totally chlorine-free wood pulp.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sarason, Seymour B.

Political leadership and educational failure / Seymour B. Sarason. — 1st ed.
p. cm.—(The Jossey-Bass education series)

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 0-7879-4061-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Politics and education—United States. 2. Political leadership—United States.
3. Education and state—United States. 4. Educational change—United States.
5. Education—United States—Evaluation. I. Title. II. Series.

LC89.S27 1998

379—dc21

97-38547

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Political Leadership and Educational Failure

The Jossey-Bass Education Series

To
Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz
Friend, Colleague, Mentor

Preface

This is a book about responsibility and accountability in regard to educational reform. Although that theme is a relevant one for diverse groups in the educational arena, I have, as the title of this book indicates, restricted myself to those in the political arena because they have escaped critical scrutiny. That scrutiny is long overdue, and my hope is that what I have written will motivate others to contribute their thoughts and experience. This book could have been much larger, but I decided that the most practical thing I could do would be to pose and discuss the issues—concrete issues of long standing—only in terms of errors of omission and commission by those in high political office. Some people—certainly those in the political arena—will regard the tone and substance of this book as unwarranted, off the mark, and polemical. Though I grant that I pull no punches, I wish to make it clear that I am not impugning or derogating the intelligence and good intentions of those I criticize. Political leaders have felt justified in directing their criticisms to nonpolitical groups for their failure to change and improve our schools. Some of those criticisms are justified, although almost all of them betray unfamiliarity with our system of education and the culture of schools. So, when political leaders feel justified, as they should, in voicing their criticisms, they provide me with justification for scrutinizing and criticizing their undeniably crucial role, their responsibility and accountability for educational reform. It is not an instance of tit for tat. There is too much at stake to play that game.

One of the themes of this book is that in regard to educational reform, presidents and others in high elective office expose their ignorance of the substance and history of the educational reform movement. A second theme is that they are not motivated to try to learn why past efforts at school change have had no impact; if they

were motivated they would not repeat what past political leaders have said and done. The third theme is that these leaders, especially presidents, have the authority, resources, and obligation to determine why the fruits of the reform movement have been so few. When you talk about school change, you are not talking about a circumscribed problem; you are talking about an institution that dynamically interacts with all major facets of society. And I say “dynamically” advisedly, because those interactions are never static; they may be slow, quiet, and unremarkable—but not for long. Since the end of World War II the pace and obtrusiveness of those interactions have increased as never before in our national history and, I predict, if we continue on our present course, the road ahead will become even more bumpy, especially in our urban areas.

Given the discouraging results of the educational reform movement over the past half century, one would expect that political leaders would have given us more than empty generalizations, or exhortations and proclamations, or statements of goals that confuse wish fulfillment with reality, or expectations that are as misleading as they are substantively unfounded. But, I found myself asking (about ten years ago), why is it that I expected so little from presidents and others in high elective offices? Why do we elect them to these positions of responsibility? When they are confronted with problems of health care, they seek both to appear and to be knowledgeable; we may not agree with them but we will not say they are abysmally ignorant of all the important issues and their complex interactions. When they are confronted with problems of environmental pollution and they have to act, they engage in a learning process; they cannot afford to remain rank amateurs. But when it comes to the inadequacies of our schools, the seriousness of which they say they know, the threat to the social fabric they say they fear, they say absolutely nothing to suggest they know whereof they speak.

I do not call for these political leaders to become sophisticated educators, but I do assert that if they had the desire to learn more about the issues, if they began to ask the obvious questions, they would be fulfilling the major obligation of their office: to inform, to place that information in a moral-psychological tradition, to begin to see (and to help others see) the options and problems we will confront. Why has the expenditure of scores of billions of dollars had such disappointing consequences? Why does an

apparently successful educational innovation not spread to other schools within the same district, and often not even to other classrooms in that school? What have we learned about the features of contexts of productive and unproductive learning? Why is it that as students go from elementary to middle to high school they become increasingly bored with and disengaged from school learning? What do we know about the adequacy of the hundreds of programs that prepare educators for a career?

Is it expecting too much of a political leader for him or her to ask these and other relatively concrete questions, that is, to appoint commissions to deal with these questions and then for the leader to ensure that the answers—about which there will not be unanimity—get and remain on the societal agenda? For example, why is it that no president has seen fit to appoint a group of knowledgeable people to tell him and the country what are the most important issues in the development of better preparatory programs for educators? Do you have to be a savant, a sage, a deep thinker to suggest that if schools are far from what we want them to be, maybe we ought to look at how educators are selected, trained, credentialed? That question was addressed in 1996 by a nongovernmental group of which Linda Darling-Hammond was executive director. It is a report as disturbing as it is overdue. I predict that the report will have very limited circulation and then only in a special circle. From the standpoint of the general public, the report does not exist. And that is my point: it is a difference that would have made a world of difference if such an exemplary report had been commissioned and promoted by a president who, being able to read English, could not ignore the concrete answers to the concrete questions the report contains. From one standpoint the report is bad news: there is a lot wrong with preparatory programs for educators. From another standpoint the news is good: the bad news has been swept from under the rug, discussion can now begin, respect will be paid to the public's right to know. Unfortunately, the bad and the good news will, for all practical purposes, not be news at all, even though the report speaks to issues that go far beyond the encapsulated classroom in the encapsulated school. Contrast that realistic scenario with the manner in which the report of President Reagan's commission—the title of the report was *A Nation at Risk* (1983)—was promoted, Madison Avenue style,

on the front page of newspapers as well as on the evening news hour on TV. That report was a marvel of empty rhetoric; it asked no questions and it gave no answers; it told us we were in trouble but it never really defined the trouble or what its origins were; at its best its prescriptions were vague and elusive (obviously there was an allergy to concreteness); at its worst they were nonexistent.

From the reaction the report engendered you would predict that it would be followed by some kind of action. If the nation was at risk, should not steps be taken to minimize the risk? For all practical purposes nothing happened; the risk has increased, not decreased. President Reagan was no activist; he had not appointed a commission whose members' credentials indicated that they had firsthand knowledge of classrooms, schools, school systems, preparatory programs, and the recent history of educational reform. The president did not pose concrete questions that any thoughtful person might ask about a major and intractable social-institutional problem. Yes, I am saying that President Reagan was not thoughtful, a characterization already foreshadowed by what he said about education in the 1980 presidential campaign—that is, that eliminating the Department of Education would go a long way toward improving the quality of education. That made as much sense as President Carter's assertion that by creating a department to oversee education he was taking a necessary and bold step on the road to educational reform.

Obviously, I do not believe that commissioned reports by presidents and others in high office can be counted on to be productive. But there are enough instances to justify saying that when such political leaders ask concrete questions that require concrete answers, when asking reflects a sincere curiosity as well as a willingness to inform the public, when the seriousness of the problem is recognized despite the political uncertainties a report may create—when luck is on our side and there is a coincidence of these factors, we stand a chance of unimprisoning ourselves from mindless practice and those silent axioms we so take for granted that we can never examine them. But no president has seen fit to ask the likes of Darling-Hammond to do what she and her colleagues have done so well in regard to one aspect of educational reform that, if left undiscussed and unchanged, will defeat any effort at meaningful reform.

In the game of blame assignment for our educational ills only one stakeholder has been spared: the president. Is that not strange? After all, if concern for our schools is no longer a transient affair, is it not because our presidents and others in high office have told us we should be concerned, even though many people did not need to be told to be concerned? And, in addition, to those who reached adulthood in the post-World War II era, has it not been obvious that no president can claim that anything he has said and done was a difference that made a difference? I know it sounds harsh, but I feel justified in saying that the day is past when the failure of a president's policies—inaction and tepid actions are policies—should not be called just that: a failure cloaked in empty rhetoric about what we owe children and our societal traditions. At the same time it is obvious that the president does not know the difference between an assumption and a fact. What presidents have had to say about education exposes the cavernous depths of their ignorance. Their ignorance is so inexcusably vast as to guarantee that the more they seek to change things the more things will remain the same.

I postponed writing this book because I felt that what I had to say required that I go over ground covered in my books of recent years. The prospect of doing that was too daunting. What helped change my mind was the realization that nobody with whom I talked regarded schools generally with anything like approval. Also, in recent years I have asked people whom I meet the following question: If you were starting from scratch, would you come up with the kind of system we now have? Nobody answered in the affirmative. What came to mystify me was that nobody blamed political leaders (even in small measure) for the inadequacies of our schools and for failure of the expenditure of billions upon billions of dollars to have a desirable effect. Was it that people thought the substantive problems were so arcane and complex that we should not expect, say, a president to comprehend them sufficiently to be able to say or do anything appropriate, informative, provocative? Finally I realized that whenever a president said something about education, the need for sleep would overtake me. I expected absolutely nothing from presidents, although in regard to other major social problems I and others expect, at the least, evidence that a president was engaged in learning something. A president

who does not learn or lead should not be exempt from criticism, however caustic. In regard to educational reform our recent presidents have neither learned nor led. Posterity will not treat them kindly.

After this book was completed and in production, there appeared in all the mass media the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, involving large samples of fourth and eighth graders in a variety of countries. Two findings were emphasized:

- American fourth-grade students outperformed all but Korean and Japanese students in science. The Korean average was 597, the Japanese average 574, and the American 565. The average for all countries was 524.
- American fourth-grade students were outperformed by seven countries in math. Singapore scored best with 625. The overall average was 529; the United States average was 565.

From the president on down the political hierarchy, these results were greeted with enthusiastic gratification. President Clinton said, "The report proves that we don't have to settle for second-class expectations or second-class goals." Secretary Riley said, "Our elementary schools are getting better at teaching the basics."

What about eighth graders? As the *New York Times* (June 11, 1997) described it, there was "a mysterious sag in [American] students' relative skills by eighth grade." President Clinton noted that the American students did not sustain their early success, which, he said, means "we are doing a very good job in the early grades but we have got a lot more work to do in the later ones."

Is it being overly critical to say that the president should have known, or should have been told by his educational advisers, that waxing enthusiastic about one test given at one point in time may be somewhat premature, that there have been previous instances where early gains (or what appeared to be gains) did not hold up over time—as in the case of Head Start, where early findings became less and less robust. (Ed Zigler, one of Head Start's founders, was more than bothered by political leaders who did not want to listen to his advice about caution.) And as I emphasize in this book and previous ones, is it not noteworthy that as students go from

elementary to middle to high school their level of boredom and disinterest increases? Is that unrelated to the sag in eighth-grade results?

Is it also hypercritical to expect that political leaders should have learned the difference between a longitudinal study, where you follow the same students over time, as in the case of many Head Start studies, and a cross-sectional study, where at each point of testing the students are different? Yes, I expect that a political leader who is seriously interested in improving schools will have made it his or her business to learn, among other things, that conclusions drawn from longitudinal studies have a practical importance, both for policy and practice, that cross-sectional studies do not have. Many political leaders grasp this point in relation to understanding health-medical problems; they have strongly supported such longitudinal studies as the Framingham health project, which has paid handsome dividends. No, I do not expect political leaders to become scholars or experts on education. But if those leaders unanimously agree that improving the quality of our schools is crucial, a must, a number one national priority, they should feel obligated to learn more than they do. As I indicate in this book, the last serious education president this country has had was Thomas Jefferson, and I devote many pages to the personal attention he gave to education. He did not limit himself to focusing on what others said or did or did not do. On his own, he thought, probed, and acted. In the post-World War II era, when education steadily became a source of national concern, no president or other political leader in high office has even remotely shown such interest in and knowledge of education.

The response to the recent International Mathematics and Science Study is but one example of what I critique in this book. I can assure the reader that I know that the arena of education is a very complex one, to indulge understatement. But as I said earlier, I find it strange that in the fruitless game of blame assignment, the roles and obligations of political leaders have hardly been examined. In fact, some leaders have made blame assignment fashionable, a point I discuss in the pages of this book. No one in or out of the educational community has willed the present situation. There are no villains. But we have yet to take seriously the possibility that our educational system is one incapable of reforming

itself, a system whose undergirding axioms, organizational style, and practices are self-defeating of its purposes. That possibility is, as I will discuss later, implied (it is never explicit) in the call for charter schools by presidents and governors. But those and other political leaders stop short of recognizing that in calling for charter schools they are suggesting that the present system is unrescuable—that school change cannot take place within the system, only outside it. But, as I will relate, the outcome of the charter school movement is very iffy, and we will never know why some charter schools achieve some of their goals and others (a majority) do not.

I did not write this book to blame political leaders but rather because they are part of the educational system—a very crucial part—and, therefore, have to be held accountable in the same way and for the same reasons they hold school personnel accountable—that is, what they do or do not do should be scrutinized and judged. We expect presidents and others to learn, to want to learn about issues for which they propose action. In regard to educational reform they have learned little, if anything. They are grossly ahistorical; their conception of the learning process is one of “shape up or ship out”; and their sense and knowledge of the culture of classrooms, schools, and school systems virtually nonexistent. That sounds harsh, I know, but I ask the reader to reserve judgment until after the book has been read.

Before concluding this preface, I wish to devote a few words to Albert Shanker, who died on February 22, 1997. Nothing I say in Chapters Five and Six should obscure the fact that he played a major, positive role in changing the power relations among teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Most people do not know or do not remember that teachers used to be regarded as servants. Indeed, they were treated as I have said too many students feel teachers treat them. Shanker’s militant, charismatic leadership—first in the New York local and then as national president—changed all that. But he did more than fight for higher salaries (which had been absurdly low) and better working conditions. Up until the past several years he used his office and *New York Times* column to identify and illuminate crucial professional-conceptual issues, and I came to respect him highly. No one more than he in the educational community in the post-World War II

era developed and sustained the attention of a national audience. We met several times, each time for several hours. Not only was he amazingly bright and knowledgeable—as intellectually quick as they come—but he truly understood education as a system. He knew far more about how the system works than was reflected in his speeches and writings. I am sure that when his biography is written—and it should be written—the dimensions of his contributions will be apparent. I always felt—and still feel—uncomfortable disagreeing with him, but I was always aware that he could take care of himself in any argument. He was formidable. He was also a nice guy.

Finally, I am indebted to the Bellagio Study and Conference Center of the Rockefeller Foundation for a month's stay in February 1997, during which time this book was finished. The unrivaled beauty of the center on Italy's Lake Como is initially an obstacle even to getting started on your work, but well-deserved feelings of guilt soon obtrude and dominate, and for several hours each day you willingly submit to the tyranny of such feelings so that you can truly enjoy for a few hours the loveliest scenes and vistas you have ever seen. As always, I express my deepest gratitude and enduring affection for Lisa Pagliaro, who makes sense of my handwriting. Why learn to use a word processor if it means that I will not have contact with the likes of Lisa?

Stratford, Connecticut
December 1997

SEYMOUR B. SARASON

The Author

Seymour B. Sarason is professor of psychology emeritus in the Department of Psychology and at the Institute for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University. He founded, in 1962, and directed, until 1970, the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic, one of the first research and training sites in community psychology. He received his Ph.D. (1942) from Clark University and holds honorary doctorates from Syracuse University, Queens College, Rhode Island College, and Lewis and Clark College. He has received an award for distinguished contributions to the public interest and several awards from the divisions of clinical and community psychology of the American Psychological Association, as well as two awards from the American Association on Mental Deficiency.

Sarason is the author of numerous books and articles. His more recent books include *The Making of an American Psychologist: An Autobiography* (1980); *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform: Can We Change Course Before It's Too Late?* (1990); *The Challenge of Art to Psychology* (1990); *You Are Thinking of Teaching? Opportunities, Problems, Realities* (1993); *The Case for Change: Rethinking the Preparation of Educators* (1993); *Letters to a Serious Education President* (1993); *Psychoanalysis, General Custer, and the Verdicts of History and Other Essays on Psychology in the Social Scene* (1994); *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle: Why the Existing Governance Structure of Schools Should Be Abolished* (1995); and *Barometers of Change: Individual, Educational, and Social Transformation* (1996).

Contents

Preface	xi
The Author	xxi
1 Presidential Leadership	1
2 What Politicians Know but Cannot Apply	16
3 America's Only Serious Education President	46
4 Test Scores: Sources of Confusion	67
5 The Context of Productive Learning	86
6 The Content and Style of Teaching	107
7 Charter Schools and the Creation of Settings	118
8 Our Expectations of Political Leaders	132
9 Race: What the Constitutional Convention Bypassed	145
References	155