

RUN
SCHOOL
RUN

Roland S. Barth

Run School Run

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Foreword

AS A WRITER on educational topics, Roland Barth is a rare bird. Indeed, he and a handful of others—Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Herbert Kohl, and Vivian Paley are three whose names jump to mind at once—come close to qualifying for the status of an endangered species. For they all are, or have recently been, practitioners. When they write on the inner workings of schools, they know whereof they speak.

To readers unfamiliar with textbooks in education and with the bulk of the writing that fills educational journals, the length and recency of Barth's immersion in the daily life of a school—eight years as an elementary-school principal—may not seem like unusual qualifications. The truth is that much of what passes for educational wisdom these days flows from the pens of people whose practical experience, if they ever had any at all, is both brief and remote. Barth suffers neither handicap: his tenure as a school administrator is sufficiently long and his knowledge up-to-date.

But practical experience is by no means the only qualification Barth brings to his work as an author. Though he is too modest to say so, it is evident from the contents of his book that he was an unusually able principal. Thus what he has to tell us about schools commands our attention, not simply because it is being said by someone who has been there for a time, and recently so, but also because that someone was obviously good at his job.

In seeking to summarize these observations about the use Barth makes of his first-hand knowledge of schools, I thought initially of the old admonition to practice what we preach. It seemed, in a nutshell, to epitomize

mize one of the book's major strengths. However, that idea was followed in short order by the realization that *Run School Run* was actually an instance of the ancient advice being played backward. In this book, my second thought informed me, Barth was in fact preaching what he practiced! A rather nice way of putting it, I said to myself; but a compulsion for accuracy quickly destroyed my self-congratulatory mood.

For there is nothing at all preachy about *Run School Run*, at least not in the usual holier-than-thou sense. As a matter of fact, Barth goes out of his way to make it clear that he is not trying to tell other principals and teachers how to run their schools. He confesses early on to being unsure about whether the ideas and practices he describes "can or should be applied to other schools, even very similar ones."

But if Barth is not out to sermonize, what is he trying to do? The answer to that question is crucial to a proper understanding of the book. "Rather than offering solutions for others to replicate," Barth explains in his preface, "my purpose in writing is to attempt to identify issues central to elementary education, to enlarge the universe of alternative solutions to problems, and to provoke others to think about their schools and ask themselves if their institutions are as they want them to be."

With these as criteria, how well might we say Barth succeeds in accomplishing what he sets out to do? Each reader is free to answer that question on his own, of course, but I for one would give him high marks in all three categories of his avowed purpose.

To begin with, he certainly seems to have put his finger on many if not all of the key issues that keep cropping up in elementary schools. In what classrooms should students be placed as they move from grade to grade? How, if at all, can parents have a say in the classroom placement of their children, without at the same time encroaching on the legitimate authority of teachers and administrators? How can teachers with diverse and often conflicting views of education, and with quite disparate teaching styles, work together harmoniously in the same school? How can teachers arrive at a way of evaluating their students in a manner that is at once thorough, honest, and constructive? How can a principal exercise authority without threatening the autonomy of the staff, yet also without abdicating responsibility for the overall functioning of the school? These are some of the perennial questions that confront practicing educators, as anyone who has been around schools for any length of time knows full well. As an identifier of the common woes that beset those who work in elementary schools, Barth is right on target.

There is more to this list of conundrums than its accuracy, however. One of the points Barth keeps repeating, and one that serves to explain his disavowal of the preacher's role, has to do with the generalizability of educational problems and the uniqueness of their solutions. In essence he asserts that what is common among schools is the set of problems they

face; what is unique to each institution is the set of solutions it devises. That assertion is not new, but in these days of magic formulas for the supposed cure of our educational ailments and in a time when the admirable goal of social equality finds its clearest expression in the demand for uniformity, an insistence on the uniqueness of each student, each teacher, each classroom, and each school deserves the emphasis Barth gives it.

This set of considerations stands behind Barth's warning that the particular arrangements he and his teachers have worked out are not to be looked upon as "solutions for others to replicate." Indeed, he remarks upon the impermanence of these homemade remedies even within his own school. Institutional repair work, whether or not undertaken by people who know what they are doing, has a way of becoming unglued when administrators' backs are turned. And Barth is well aware of this fact.

It certainly does not follow that practitioners should hesitate to try variations of Barth's *modus operandi* in their own schools. Where it seems appropriate, they may even wish to adopt in their entirety the procedures he describes. This experimentation is what Barth hopes for, I'm sure, when he tells us that he is out "to enlarge the universe of alternative solutions to problems." If we understand alternative solutions to mean alternative ways of responding to recurring problems, some of which may turn out to be solutions (even though temporary) in some school settings, then I think we have to acknowledge that *Run School Run* does quite well in this second category of its author's striving.

How close Barth comes to his third goal, "to provoke others to think about their schools and ask themselves if their institutions are as they want them to be," is difficult for me to say. Like Barth himself I no longer am a practicing school administrator. I no longer have a particular school to think about and question whether it is as I want it to be. I do remember vividly that when I did have a real school to worry about, I certainly did not need a book to provoke me into thinking about it—nor did I need anyone prodding me into asking myself whether I was doing all I could to make the school in which I worked a better place to learn.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Whenever possible, which as I recall wasn't too often, I turned to books to escape from such worries! So with due respect for Barth's candor about his reasons for writing *Run School Run*, I suspect his talk about encouraging practicing educators to think about their work may describe a superfluous task. Indeed, I would hope that his book might give such readers the opportunity to forget the nitty-gritty of their own school situations for a few restful hours.

Although I do not buy the "provoking them to think" goal in the general way Barth states it, I think I do understand what he was driving at in more specific terms and, measured by these more refined standards, I

suspect his book stands an excellent chance of achieving this goal as well. As I would phrase it, the third purpose served by *Run School Run* is that of showing its readers how far it is possible to go in the direction of liberalizing and democratizing the inner workings of a school without having the institution come apart at the seams. This demonstration is of great importance and is particularly timely given today's rising spirit of neo-conservatism. The oldest excuse of all for hanging onto outmoded and authoritarian practices on the part of administrators and teachers alike is the fear that any move to relinquish authority or to increase the sharing of responsibility is to place the school on a slippery slope whose downward path ends in chaos and anarchy. The experiences related in this volume show convincingly that such an outcome is by no means inevitable and may thereby encourage those among its readers who have been holding the reins a bit too tightly to loosen up.

So I wind up giving the book you are about to read straight A's on the checklist of its author's avowed intentions. But these three high marks do not complete my evaluation. I would append a fourth category of purpose to those the author mentions, though I acknowledge that he comes close to adding it on his own at several points. This unstated function of *Run School Run*—its hidden message, so to speak—has to do with strengthening our faith in schools as institutions.

Many readers, I predict, will feel better about our nation's schools and what can be accomplished in them when they finish this book than they did when they began it. For practitioners, this alteration should translate into a deepened sense of pride in their profession and a renewed vigor in carrying out their work. For readers who are not themselves educational practitioners, it should nurture the conviction that well-run and educationally sound schools, like the one Barth describes, are neither as rare nor as difficult to create as many recent critics of our educational system would have it seem.

What it takes, as Barth demonstrates, is a reasonably well-trained and dedicated staff, willing to work together, to try out new ideas, and to learn from mistakes. That may sound like a tall order, but I suspect that many schools in our nation are already blessed with these essentials. All they need to launch out in the direction of an improved educational program is the kind of encouragement waiting for them in the pages of this book.

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Preface

I AM A COLLECTOR. In my barn in Maine I hoard, revel in, and trip over an assortment of stuff that in most households would long ago have found its way to the dump. From rain, sun, and snow I protect abandoned trucks, mowing machines, wheels, boards, and baling wire. I even have a rusty old hog scalded rescued from a neighbor's field. And a moth-eaten bearskin robe. Like the New England dowager who carefully maintains a shoe box labeled "string too short to use for anything," my dump is empty, my cupboard full. When asked why I so painstakingly and unselectively retain what appear to be pieces of junk, I can only respond, "You never know when you might need them."

So it has been with my experience as an educator. For twenty years, first as a teacher of third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and California, then as a principal in urban Connecticut and suburban Massachusetts, I have collected. Whenever something especially noteworthy or satisfying or problematic occurred in the classroom or the school—a particularly successful meeting, a remarkable change in a child, a heated letter from a parent, a sudden insight from a teacher—I jotted it down and added it to the sedimentary deposit forming in the bottom drawer of a desk. I never knew when I might need it.

In the winter of 1978 I set out for the Maine farm with a leave of absence, my family, and an auto trunk filled with three bushel baskets of those recorded anecdotes and incidents. For two months I played card-sorting games: I placed each item in a variety of shifting categories until some piles persisted and each piece of paper came to rest in an accommodating category—or in the wastebasket. (I had to rationalize throwing

away by using the discards to kindle the fire on chilly mornings.) Each of the enduring piles became the basis for a chapter in this book.

Within each pile I shuffled, arranged, and rearranged until I was able to find, or impose, some meaning and organization. I have a dreadful memory, which seldom allows me to recall names and events, let alone details. But I found each item I had squirreled away gave rise to a train of associations and rich reminiscences with which I was able to recall the details of long-forgotten incidents. Without the frayed, dusty notes scribbled on the backs of envelopes and interoffice memos, even noteworthy occurrences would have vanished. "You never know when you might need them."

Effective writing is usually reflective, clear, rational, well-organized, and linear. I hope that this account of a school will be so. But the reader should not be deluded. Schools and the lives of schoolpeople, despite our best efforts, can seldom be characterized by these adjectives. Existence in even the best of schools is by nature unpredictable, hurried, agitated, disjointed, occasionally even chaotic. The medium of the written word here, no matter how carefully groomed, should not be allowed to distort the frequently untidy message.

Whereas my previous book, *Open Education and the American School*, was the product of a doctoral student making use of the resources of a great library, what follows here is the product of a school practitioner and makes full use of the resources of another great institution—American public schools. This is a work that, quite literally, has emerged from my experience as teacher and principal.

No matter how many years one spends in how many schools collecting how much information, one can experience, observe, and convey only a mere slice of public elementary education. I find the contexts of the individual school, particular teacher, and specific principal probably the largest units I can fully examine, comprehend, and compare. Generalizing from these particulars to other settings is often unwarranted and dangerous, leading only to the discovery of an extraordinary variability among classrooms, schools, and school districts. Indeed, as I look back I find that much of what I have written here, based largely upon one suburban school, is not applicable to other settings in which I have worked. Some of what follows is no longer applicable even to the school about which it is written.

It is important, at the same time, not to be too parsimonious about generalizing. We educators seem to have the remarkable characteristic of being fascinated with what others are doing in other schools—and at the same time the capacity to generate inventive reasons why many of the innovations of others are impossible in our particular setting. The informal classrooms in many British primary schools are all well and good—but

the British are another culture, with much greater self-control and respect for authority; the exciting program in an inner-city school is commendable—but they have all that Title I money and a teacher aide in every classroom; the careful, individualized instruction students receive in an independent school is noteworthy—but they have classes of fifteen pupils and selective admission; the methods of an innovative suburban school are impressive—but inappropriate for us because, well, we all know what suburban kids are like; and the dynamic program in a consolidated rural school system is great, but it wouldn't work for us because they have that fancy new open-space building. In short, promising educational practices elsewhere provide an occasion to dismiss the practice of others and perhaps to excuse our own. Often with good reason. Often not. There is a reluctance among educators to generalize from anything about anything, adding to the extraordinary momentum to preserve the status quo in our schools. I find this unfortunate.

As different as schools and their settings are, it seems to me that many of the issues and *problems* of education—pupil evaluation, discipline, staff development, principal effectiveness—are indeed endemic and generalizable from one setting to another, whether it be Massachusetts or California; public or private; urban, suburban, or the rural elementary school my daughters attended for a year. It is the *solutions*, if there are solutions, that tend to be idiosyncratic and particularistic, and much less generalizable from context to context.

This book, then, is an account by one principal about one school at one time in one district in one part of the country. It offers neither an idealized prescription for a principal nor a model for school reform. I am not sure whether the developmental stages I observe are universal. I am even less sure if the ideas and practices I describe here can or should be applied to other schools, even very similar ones. Rather than offering solutions for others to replicate, my purpose in writing is to attempt to identify issues central to elementary education, to enlarge the universe of alternative solutions to problems, and to provoke others to think about their schools and ask themselves if their institutions are as they want them to be. Ultimately, it remains for the readers to make their own generalizations and draw their own conclusions on the basis of their own experiences.

Schools are among the most studied, least understood, most critical, and most criticized institutions in American society. Three out of ten citizens are engaged in education. Yet surveys show dissatisfaction with discipline, curriculum, teachers, administrators, and integration, and less than a third of the public reporting confidence in American education. We have passed through a decade or two of policy debates conducted at the macro level about schools. We have learned a great deal about the

effects of race, social class, poverty, and inequality upon children's lives. There is much about American education that is debilitating and deplorable. Macro analysis tells us a lot about *what* to change, but precious little about *how* to change or where to begin. The crucial micro realm of individual practitioners in individual schools has been sorely neglected.

Only recently have educational policy makers come to realize, for instance, that the school principal has an extraordinary influence over the quality of education and the quality of life under the roof of the schoolhouse. The principal stands at the intersection, mediating between the resources of the school system and the needs of children and their parents; between the school board and superintendent on the one side and teachers on the other; between theory and practice. The principal influences and is influenced by all the participants of the educational enterprise. The school principal has the opportunity to make it all work—or not.

Although principals are directly responsible for running schools, their voice is largely unheard in debates about education. This is not because principals have nothing to say, but because they have neither time nor opportunity to say it. I have found that my lenses as a school principal provide a remarkable window through which to view the world of education, and I have spent the past decade as participant-observer in that complex social institution called a public school. Unlike most principals I have also had the chance to step out of the consuming hustle and bustle for two years, to reflect and recollect. In a sense, then, this is a book written from the point of view of a practicing school principal about the principalship, an attempt to take a principal's look at schools and share what I see.

I argue that principals matter a great deal more to the health of schools than people outside the schools realize. At the same time, I don't believe principals can or should go it alone. To change schools we need to build grass-roots coalitions among the three key groups of adults concerned with schools: teachers, parents, and principals. So although this is a principal's view of things, I am eager for teachers and parents as well to read what I have to say. The interests of the three groups may not always overlap, especially in embattled schools and school systems where conflict is endemic, but all of us have an equal stake in developing good schools.

This is also a book about the relation of schools to society. Schools may be the last place in our society where people of different values, philosophies, backgrounds, races, and income levels are expected (and compelled by law) to work closely together for long periods of time. We can choose when and with whom to worship, travel, drink beer, or go to the movies. By and large, we cannot choose where and with whom our children will receive their schooling. Heterogeneity and compulsory at-

tendance laws taken together frequently transform schools into battlefields over race (With children of what color will my child attend school?), resources (Which school in the district will close?), philosophy (Which style of teaching will prevail in the school?), or politics (Who decides and controls major decisions?). These ingredients produce good schools and bad ones. Any attempt to sort it all out must come to grips with the question of uniformity and diversity. What follows is an account of one attempt to make the most of what we have: limited resources and unlimited diversity.

This book addresses a major problem in American education: how to create cooperative institutions, characterized by mutual respect and learning, in a pluralistic society where growing parent militancy, teacher power, student activism, and federal, state, and local regulation all threaten simultaneously to paralyze and inflame schools. There has been much talk about alternative schools within a district and alternative programs within a school. Personally, I am committed to an institution characterized by "alternative people"—where it is both possible and safe for teachers and students to be themselves, not actors in some elaborately constructed, monolithic program directed by others. I have explored the possibilities and drawbacks of a school where classrooms differ significantly in appearance, instructional style, and teaching philosophy. I have often found it possible to transform differences among children, teachers, parents, and administrators into powerful educational assets.

It is my firm belief that life within a public elementary school can reflect and celebrate the pluralism of our society and that schools can be productive, viable, and valuable. This is an account of what happens when a school community resists many of the institutional pressures toward uniformity and moves instead toward diversity. It is a description of one attempt by teachers, parents, and principal to achieve an acceptable diversity of program, personnel, and style on the one hand, and comply with important expectations for uniformity on the other. How this balance is determined and by whom is as complex and important a process as public education itself.

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R. S. B.

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CHAPTER ONE

Uniformity and Diversity

The search for diversity is never free from an element of risk.

– Amiya Chakravarty

AS I LOOK back over eight years as an elementary-school administrator in three different systems, it seems my greatest difficulties and most abiding satisfactions have been concerned with uniformity and diversity. Underlying most of the day-to-day problems, decisions, and conflicts I recall so vividly lies a fundamental question: on what occasions must all teachers and all children in a school behave in the same way, and when is it acceptable – even desirable – for them to differ? Of course, this dilemma is not unique to principals or to schools. It is a question posed, for instance, by state legislatures to their municipalities, by the federal government to the states, and by the United Nations to member countries. In short, the problem of maintaining both personal autonomy and collective membership is one that vexes our society.

Schools are especially vulnerable to this dilemma. They are expected to respect individual differences on the one hand and maintain standards and develop specified skills and competencies on the other. They are criticized for bland, even blind, uniformity – for their tendency to sacrifice individual expression to institutional norms – yet at the same time are attacked for their permissiveness and failure to teach the basics and respect for adult authority.

Many school leaders have responded by opting for homogeneity, seeking to minimize differences among classroom teachers, instructional styles, and programs. I have found many reasons for this. First, uniformity tends to reduce friction and competition among staff members. If everyone is doing the same thing in the same way, teachers get along. But if Miss Jones has three reading groups and Miss Brown across the hall has

an individualized program, tension is more likely to grow and, ultimately, to erupt into conflict. Faculty warfare is seldom good for teachers, students, or administrators.

Second, uniformity of teachers, classrooms, and programs conveys the reassuring appearance that the school has found the one best way to teach everything and everybody. "We use the Ginn reading series," a principal can say to a parent with the authority of a person who has found The Answer. Such assurance is not likely to come from the school leader committed to diversity. Uniformity makes school boards, superintendents, curriculum coordinators, parents, and even children feel secure that we educators know what we are doing, and that we know how to do it well.

Third, uniformity of teaching style and practice is the cornerstone of what we all refer to as "scope and sequence." We assume that children's cognitive development is predictable and sequential as they pass through school. The instruction each child receives, therefore, should also be predictable and sequential. If a child is taught subtraction by a third-grade teacher using Houghton Mifflin materials, it follows logically that the same child, as a fourth grader, should be taught multiplication using the same publisher's methods.

There is a powerful logic to this formulation, one that withstands parental scrutiny. I recall the questions our Parent-Teacher Association asked me to address one evening at a meeting on the English curriculum:

- (1) Are there language-arts guidelines for the system?
- (2) Are teachers required to comply with these guidelines?
- (3) Do we at Angier follow these guidelines?
- (4) Can you guarantee that my child will know all of the things included in the guidelines for his grade?
- (5) How do you (the principal) do this?

Many messages are implicit in these questions. One is that parents desire uniform, consistent curriculum guidelines. Another suggests that all children must achieve minimum competence levels at each grade. A third message is that the instructional program of each teacher must be part of a larger curriculum if children are to learn properly. Furthermore, in order to evaluate how much and how well teachers are teaching and children are learning, we must have uniform expectations. If teachers act autonomously, children may fall between the cracks in the floor; it becomes difficult to hold either child or teacher accountable for a year's work. Finally, whatever the minimum competencies may be, they must be uniform.

It is seldom clear just where desirable teacher variability stops and responsibility to continuity and consistency in curriculum begins. But it

is clear that diversity suggests whimsy and capriciousness, while uniformity of curriculum, teaching style, and methodology is defensible in PTA meetings. This in itself is a powerful pressure toward uniformity in the schools.

A fourth press toward uniformity comes from standardized tests. To the extent that parents and school people are concerned about pupils' scores, the curriculum is subtly, and sometimes blatantly, shaped to anticipate and prepare for these tests. Because the tests are "standardized" (that is, the same instruments are administered throughout the nation), the instructional programs of classes within schools, schools within districts, and districts within states become remarkably similar — and uniform.

Any principal who has to place children in classrooms each spring is familiar with a fifth impetus. Uniformity of teachers and classrooms makes the annual assignment of students to teachers a relatively easy administrative task. The principal can go home one evening and randomly put children's names into three equal piles, with balanced numbers of boys and girls, leaders and followers, bright and slow. The next day children, parents, and teachers are notified of the decisions and no one can complain (or I should say no one has any justification for a complaint) because, as they are told, "every child will have exactly the same program, the same kind of teacher, the same learning environment." Accordingly, the class into which a child is placed "does not matter."

A rapidly growing array of collective-bargaining agreements, while protecting the interests of teachers, also constitutes a strong force toward uniformity in schools: "All teachers shall leave the building at 3:30"; "No class shall exceed twenty-five pupils"; "No teacher may be asked to assume noninstructional responsibilities without compensation"; "Each teacher shall have thirty minutes for lunch each day."

Economies of scale create a final pressure toward uniformity. When a school or a school system buys in quantity, the unit cost is considerably smaller than when individual schools, or individual teachers, buy different things. Uniform "stuff" — instructional supplies, materials, books, equipment — is cheaper than differentiated "stuff." Given our present (and probably permanent) period of severe budgetary constraint, concern to save dollars and cents becomes another powerful push to uniformity.

Thus uniformity has interpersonal, pedagogical, political, administrative, legal, and economic survival value in schools — and survival is not to be taken lightly in these especially troubled times. Yet at the same time that schools and principals are dealing with strong pressures toward uniformity, equally strong forces are pushing them toward *diversity*. These pressures come from four sources: faculty, parents, children, and principals. Pressures toward multiformity, always in the