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## Books Review of Schools Change: The Personal Development of a Point of View

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**Review: Seymour B. Sarason's *School Change:  
The Personal Development of a Point of View***

by

**Edith Klausner**

Seymour Sarason's statement about the time and patience necessary for school reform also describes his new book: "... as wondrously complicated as the atom, and far less harnessable ..." (p. 89). Sarason has captured the essence of fifty prolific years of published work in *School Change: The Personal Development of a Point of View* (Teachers College Press, New York, 1995). The book, part of an NCREST series on school reform, is well described in the foreword as "... a kind of Sarason reader. Essays from a variety of the books he's written are collected together into one volume that represents his most important understandings about school change" (Foreword, p. ix).

*School Change* is, by turns, humble and forceful, humorous and scholarly. Sarason makes a compelling case for the serious consideration of the purpose of schooling and for changing the governance of schools to better support that purpose. He points to the difference between the rhetoric of education, which endorses his view—that the mission of schools is to give students pleasure in learning, and that schools therefore should respect and nurture children's individuality, interests, and concerns—and the reality that schools for almost all students are places of boredom and alienation. We are as far from such student centered schools today as ever and for exactly the same reasons that Sarason identified in papers and books written in 1966, 1973, and 1985. He points out that schools are simply not organized around their oft-stated beliefs in students' individual strengths and intellects. Everything about large urban schools works against such beliefs. Yet, Sarason continues to publish and to make recommendations for change—three books in 1993, *School Change* and a second book in 1995—and readers continue to agree and to hope.

An Emeritus Professor at Yale University, Sarason is a social psychologist. His impressive range of work and research in schools and clinical settings and on large group testing and curriculum innovation informs his rich tapestry of ideas about school reform. At different times and in the myriad of publications identified and quoted in this volume, he has specifically addressed the education establishment, teachers and prospective teachers, parents and community members, and the "Education President" of the United States. Extensive quotes and whole chapters from those publications are included in *School Change*. Over the years, Sarason appears to have been ever in search of the hearing ear; in each era and with each new theme revealed in this composite book the reader senses mission and conviction, as if the author might be saying, "This time and with all of this documentary evidence, they will surely listen." Simultaneously, Sarason takes a humble and self effacing stance, worrying at times that he may seem too harsh. Does he mean too honest? That stance and his humor come forward in a story originally included in his book *Parent Involvement and the Political Principle: Why the Existing Governance Structure of Schools Should be Abolished* (Jossey-Bass, 1995):

Dr. Emory Cowen, whose research in schools is like an oasis in the desert, found the following in his mailbox at the University of Rochester. The unknown author summarizes almost all of the major points I have made in several books; it obviously says a good deal about professorial longwindedness.

## Horse Story

Common advice from knowledgeable horse trainers includes the adage, “if the horse you’re riding dies, get off.” Seems simple enough, yet in the education business we don’t always follow that advice. Instead we often choose from an array of alternatives which include:

1. Buying a stronger whip.
2. Trying a new bit or bridle.
3. Switching riders.
4. Moving the horse to a new location.
5. Riding the horse for longer periods of time.
6. Saying things like, “This is the way we’ve always ridden this horse.”
7. Appointing a committee to study the horse.
8. Arranging to visit other sites where they ride dead horses more efficiently.
9. Increasing the standards for riding dead horses.
10. Creating a test for measuring our riding ability.
11. Comparing how we’re riding now with how we did ten or twenty years ago.
12. Complaining about the state of horses these days.
13. Coming up with new styles of riding.
14. Blaming the horse’s parents. The problem is often in the breeding.
15. Tightening the cinch. (pp. 41-42)

In addition to an outstanding array of insights on school change, which show no sign of diminishing, *School Change* is unique in tracing the development of Professor Sarason’s personal perspective on reform. The earliest work quoted in *School Change* dates from the sixties when he observed the introduction of the “New Math” curriculum in several schools. It was originally delivered as part of the Brechbill Lecture, University of Maryland in 1966. He speaks with authority identifying the emergence of a central element of his views about change. “I believe that a comprehensive understanding of the culture of the school is absolutely essential for anyone who wants to introduce change into the school” (p. 69).

Sarason explores questions of relationships within a public school culture—the principal’s role in matters of housekeeping, resource allocation, and educational leadership; the isolation of teachers “[a] candid and meaningful relationship with professional colleagues is distinctive by its absence” (p. 77); and the school setting which he identifies as “a highly complicated and highly organized social system which we are far from understanding” (p. 78). Finally, he examines directly the process of change in the light of such school culture.

It is, in my experience, characteristic that decisions frequently are made at the top of the administrative hierarchy without regard for two likely consequences: the reactions of individuals and groups to the *manner* or *means* by which decisions are made, announced and implemented, and equally as important, their reactions to the contents of the decision in light of prevailing attitudes, relationships and ongoing activities. (author’s emphasis) (p. 79)

As time passes, Professor Sarason appears to move from a position which naturally assumes that his ideas will be heeded, or at the least seriously considered, to current realizations that he is not being heard and that nothing has changed despite his best efforts over extended time. It is a realization that I suspect has come to more than a few readers of this journal. Despite efforts on



many fronts by progressive educators and others, significant changes in schools are consistently beyond reach. Sarason's realization is tinged with foreboding. In one of the later chapters he quotes a joke which first appeared in his 1993 book, *Letters to a Serious Education President*. Sarason introduces the story by saying, "To understand an important aspect of my current point of view ... I have to begin with my favorite Jewish joke." The joke is about an old Jew who is observed praying vigorously before the wailing wall in Jerusalem. The Jew describes to a journalist his prayers for peace, for eradication of illness and disease from the earth, and for the brotherhood of man, prayers which have continued daily for twenty or twenty-five years. When the journalist asks, "How does it feel to be praying all those years before the wall?" the Jew replies, "How does it feel? It's like talking to a wall."

Sarason continues

For all practical purposes, I have been talking to a wall. ... Although I have never been without hope that my concerns would be taken seriously sometime, somewhere by some of the people, I believed that for my ideas to be generally discussed, let alone acted on, would only occur [sic] after the policy makers had been, so to speak, hit over the head by social realities and disasters, forcing them to give up their self defeating, un verbalized assumptions about school change. The situation has to be seen as desperate and pressures far stronger and demanding than they now are. We are moving to such a situation but I venture no prediction about when the upheaval will occur. (p. 148)

As a further reflection of Professor Sarason's diminished hope, he tells of a call from a friend who had seen an "obviously handled and marked up" copy of one of Sarason's books on the table of the then Secretary of Education. Sarason describes his momentary joy that he might finally be "getting through" to those in a position to move in new directions." But he quickly realizes that "they will go on doing the same damned things they have done before." And he observes, "Two years after that call I have every reason to believe that the book is somewhere on a shelf gathering dust at the same time that the gathering storm is more ominous than two years ago. Unlike the old Jew at the wailing wall, I cannot even pray" (p. 149).

Sarason captures overarching themes in simple, revealing phrases. He originally published *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* in 1973. A second edition was published in 1983. He does not quote directly from that book, but he makes reference to it as he tells readers that in revising it for the second edition, he realized how unrealistic school change proponents are about timing. He calls their time perspectives "wish fulfillment more than reality" (p. 86). That image is immediately recognizable by educators, especially, I suspect, teachers who daily struggle in schools where the same old same old continues to be recycled. Different names, different window dressing, but little serious movement toward essential change.

A sad reality in every public setting where I have worked is described in a chapter called Governance, Power, and the Definition of Resources. Sarason describes the failure of relationships in top-down managed schools and insists that schools must be more democratically and sensitively structured if they are to be places of substantial teaching and learning. He refers to the rhetoric and tokenism of current site-based management schemas, "No one who has sought and obtained power is willing to share it in a meaningful way, especially if they are in a pyramidal organizational structure as schools and school systems are" (p. 165). He points perceptively to the dilemmas of administrators entangled in their own career aspirations, tensions created by the needs of schools and teachers, and the next higher level of district administration. He also sees those tensions

reflected in the classrooms of teachers who maintain hierarchical power relationships with their students. Ultimately, he describes teachers as effectively misunderstood and undervalued by their administrators, their students, and by society at large.

In the last chapter of *School Change, Reflections*, Professor Sarason underscores his belief that nothing can change in schools until basic governance structures change. "School systems will not change from within. They will only change in a truly meaningful way when dissatisfaction from within stimulates and coincides with pressures from without" (p. 216). He asks that school people think hard about and believe in what they wish to change, so that they will know what basic conditions are needed in order to achieve even minimal success. Sarason does not believe that replication works. Despite the rhetoric of replication built into virtually every grant application these days, we have all seen good intentions soon reduced to an outer shell, then gradually absorbed into the status quo. A promising exception may be the schools that are part of the Coalition of Essential Schools. The Coalition, its approach to change, and its Nine Common Principles embody much of Sarason's vision. However, its comparatively tiny membership is indicative of the inertia of public schools in the eighties and nineties. A somewhat more hopeful sign is that there are currently several hundred schools applying for full membership in the Coalition.

In a perfect educational world, or even a partially perfect one, Professor Sarason's writing over time might have been heeded; his historical record might even now awake the somnolent. We might have schools whose governance structures genuinely support an overarching purpose: to interest and inspire students. We might have schools that find creative ways to replace group testing. We might have teacher training programs that encourage teachers to rely upon their own strengths and those of their students. We might have schools that draw upon valuable resources in their school communities. We might have schools with manageable class sizes, where teachers and principals have warm collegial relationships, talk often together, respect one another and the students they care about. Sarason acknowledges that there are a few such schools but he dismisses them because the number is so small. I have personal experience of some fine schools, some activist teachers, some brave administrators. Though they are few, I cannot dismiss them. They remain for me tiny seeds of hope, evidence that humane and powerful education can happen. When the soil and sunlight are right, when the field is skillfully plowed, seedlings may yet grow.