

# AN EDUCATION REFORMER'S NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

## *Ten Lies I'm Going To Resist*

BY ADAM URBANSKI

"THINGS ARE more like they are today than they have ever been before," said Dwight D. Eisenhower in another context (really, it wasn't Dan Quayle, like you think . . .). After nearly a decade of education reform rhetoric, not much has changed. Many kids are still not ready for school, and most schools are still not ready for kids.

While reforms are getting broader, they sure aren't getting deeper. The initiatives we have tried thus far seem necessary but not sufficient to significantly affect children's success.

As the New Year's cleansing winds blow in, it seems a good time to examine why this is so and to clear the deck of last year's debris. I've spent half of my life (22 1/2 years) in education, half of that time in full-time teaching. As a teacher, a representative of teachers, and an advocate for change in education, I've learned a lot; I have the lumps and scars to show for it.

I've learned that there are many formidable reasons why unexamined tradition is not yielding much to reflective practice: lack of resources, lack of support, lack of passion. But along the way, I've also noted that we often get ambushed by the lies about education and reform that we continue to tell ourselves. Here are my favorite top ten:

- *There is no problem here.* The nation's schools are in a big mess, but my school is doing just fine. Or, the problem exists only for poor children in urban schools. If that is so, why do America's children rank near the bottom compared to children of other industrialized countries? Why can only 30 percent of our seventeen-year-olds write an adequate paragraph and a staggeringly low 2.6 percent a good, persuasive letter? Why are fewer than 5 percent of our high school seniors prepared for entry-level college math? Not recognizing that a problem exists is the main reason reform is pursued casually. If you believe this first lie, read no further.

- *The problem with today's schools is that they are not as good as they once were.* The problem with today's schools is that they are precisely as they always were, but the needs of our students and the needs of society have changed significantly. Deep down, most people hold suspect any school that does not resemble the school they

remember. But schools that were designed for the needs of an earlier time are a mismatch with modern times. It is not enough to send half-literate children to the farms and factories. The farms aren't there, and the factories that remain have learned (the hard way) from the Japanese that they, too, need workers who can think. We romanticize our memory of the past. Many of our grandparents and great-grandparents never made it through the school door, and many of those who did make it through didn't stay for very long.

- *Change means doing harder or longer what we already do.* Not quite. Change means doing things differently. If we always do what we've always done, we will always get what we always got. Just more of the same won't help. If we reduce class size but then lecture to fifteen kids rather than thirty, nothing will change. Rather than merely buttressing the schools we now have, we must invent schools we've never had. That's tough because letting go is more difficult than adding on. Yet, switching from one version of passive learning to another is not meaningful change.

- *Restructuring can succeed without top-down support for bottom-up reform.* Reform is a search, and therefore can thrive best in an environment safe for innovation. Along the way there may be false starts, wrong turns, or negative findings. Such "failures" may be a natural part of the process. Winston Churchill defined success as "going from failure to failure with undiminished enthusiasm." However, it's not enough for school managers to just get out of the way. Central Headquarters must become a service center, not a center to service. Arbitrary and bureaucratic rules and regulations have to yield to the judgments of those who work with children.

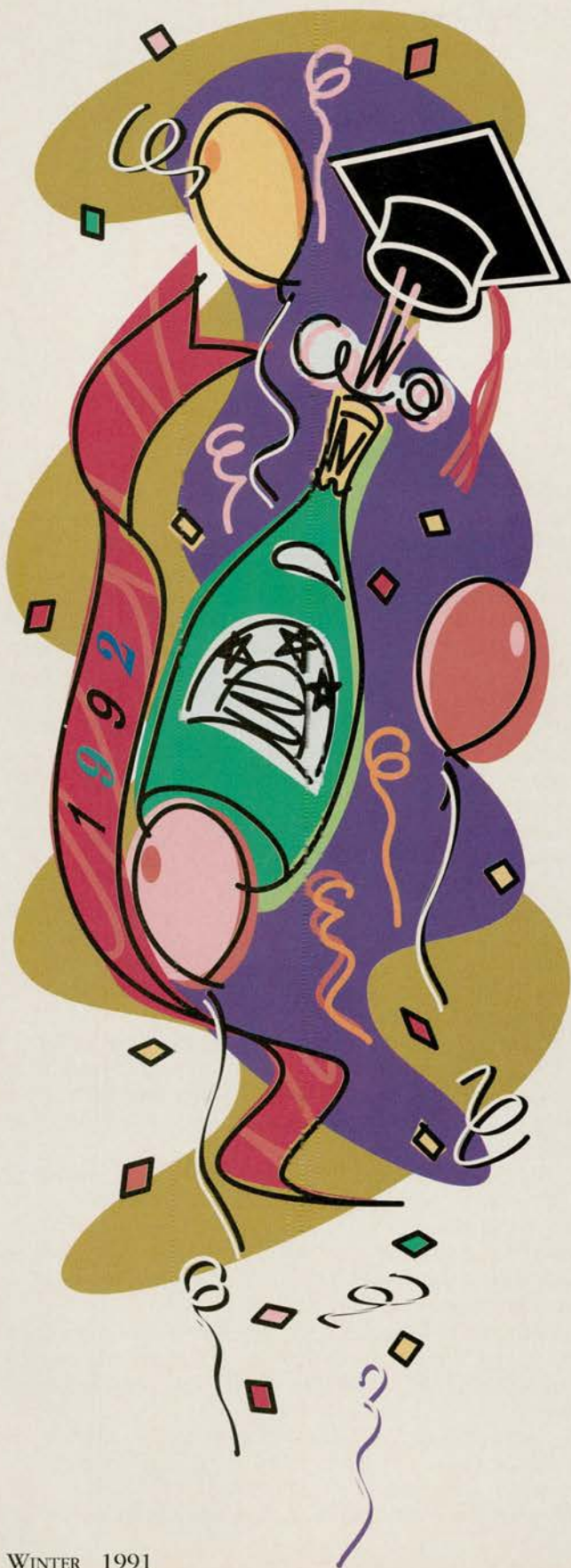
- *Real change doesn't have to take real time.* I still get stopped regularly by Rochester citizens: "What have you got to show for the big, fat contract you got the teachers, Urbanski?" "Well, real change is real hard," I defend myself. "That's real nice, but you took the money real quick," they retort skeptically.

Too bad nobody reads Plato much anymore. "Never discourage anyone who makes progress, no matter how slowly," he cautioned. As former *New York Times* education writer Fred Hechinger puts it, insisting on dramatic results too soon is like planting a young tree and then pulling it up once a week to see how the roots are taking to the soil.

- *Teaching is "telling" and knowledge is facts.* Neither

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is true. The new definition of knowledge is the ability to apply information in a useful way. The question is no longer just "What do students know?" but also "What are they able to do?" We already know that students retain approximately 5 percent to 15 percent of what they hear (lectures) and 75 percent to 90 percent of what they do (active learning). Yet, learning by doing is the exception, not the norm, in our schools. If schools were organized more for the needs of students than for the convenience of adults, learning would be structured to be more experiential, meaningful to the learner, engaging, real to life, productive, and cooperative. Ask children why they like school and they'll tell you it's because "we do stuff"; conversely they hate school because "it's boring" (not meaningful to me). Or read John Dewey—same difference.

- *Schools alone can fix the lot of children.* Unless we expect children to be naturally schizophrenic, we cannot ignore the non-school aspects of their lives. Schools won't be safe until the streets are; learning readiness cannot be divorced from the issue of children's poverty. Education reform is doomed unless and until it is accompanied by reform in health care, housing, social welfare, child care, job training, and juvenile justice. Indeed, schools cannot become oases of accountability in a desert of apathy and indifference.

- *Unionism and professionalism are mutually exclusive.* Dal Lawrence, the president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers, puts it best: "There is absolutely no reason why we shouldn't use the collective bargaining process to build a more genuine profession for teachers." Teachers must become the agents of reform, he argues, or they will remain the targets of reform. A teachers' union, therefore, should also be the voice of the profession and the guardian of professional standards of practice. Thus, unionism and professionalism are complementary; not two hats, but two aspects of one hat.

- *Common sense is common.* Wish it were so. Maybe then we would recognize that status quo is merely a euphemism for "the mess we're in"; that change is inevitable and only growth is optional; that radical problems require radical solutions; that we cannot teach what we do not model; and that because something sounds good doesn't necessarily mean it's good and sound. But then, George Bernard Shaw did warn us that "reformers have the [wrong] idea that change can be achieved by brute sanity."

- *George Bush is the education president.* In his dreams, maybe. □