

8. What to do with schools.

Institutions developed during the industrial era are being transformed to meet the requirements of our emerging post-industrial civilisation.

Workplaces, transport systems, and health and social institutions have all experienced restructuring to meet the new needs of a changing culture.

A recent local example is the transformation of libraries into learning and information centres (LINC's) to combine previously separate services and to reflect new ways of communicating and acquiring information via electronic systems.

The industrial era created a host of institutions to control and develop our lives. In keeping with industrial philosophy these institutions tended to be regimented, routine, and paternalistic in the delivery of services in order to achieve conformity and economies of scale.

The focus was on the supply side with the interests of governing authorities and administrators given priority over the needs of those being served.

Emerging post-industrial philosophies tend to favour flexibility, individualism and consensual relationships.

The changing focus emphasizes the demand side and the needs of consumers, customers and clients.

School systems are among some of our industrial institutions most resistant to change, perhaps because their clients (schoolchildren) have little say in how their recipient services are provided.

This is not to unfairly criticize those who administer our schools.

By and large, educational authorities, school principals and classroom teachers are conscientious, well trained and committed to the task of educating children for the opportunities and challenges they will face as they enter adult society.

The problems lie inherently with the institutions themselves.

Schools are still dominated by an industrial culture, even though individual teachers may adopt more of a consensual relationship with their students and school programs strive to become increasingly flexible and tailored to the needs of individual children.

Despite this, school education remains fundamentally based on rigid school hours divided into fixed lesson periods. Children spend most of their school time sitting at desks facing towards the teacher who directs the learning process.

Personal relationships in schools are formal and tend towards functional roles and group behaviour.

Children who otherwise may be well mannered and considerate are often guilty of physically and mentally bullying fellow students and of showing disrespect to teachers.

Teachers for their part tend to use the term “kids” to collectivize and disguise individual children.

Schools as isolated stand-alone 9-to-5 clusters of buildings are subject to vandalism and damage more so than other public institutions.

It is one thing, however, to identify problems. It is a more difficult task to propose solutions.

Schools are institutions of mass education and need economies of scale to share government and privately funded education budgets across relatively large groups of children.

They serve not only to educate children but also to house them in a mostly safe and accountable location while their parents are at work. If schools were to be abolished, what would happen to this child-minding function?

Schools also play an important role in the economic and social functioning of communities, as evidenced by the current controversies in depopulating areas to the threat of school closures.

Another problem is the issue of funding. Schools are unusual in that financial assistance for education is given to the supplying institution rather than directly to the clients for whom it is intended.

A rational policy would provide direct assistance to parents, with necessary strings attached as to how it can be spent, and allow parents to choose how best to fund the education of their children.

This would enable schools to compete with each other on the basis of their teaching assets and culture, including contracting and rewarding high performance teachers.

In our emerging post-industrial culture we need an open debate on the future of schools.

How will society educate its young children in, say 50 years time, given the developments likely to occur in electronic communications and knowledge?

If by then schools are still part of the process, how will they be organized and what will be their roles?

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