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**title:** Revisiting "The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change" Series On School Reform  
**author:** Sarason, Seymour Bernard.  
**publisher:** Teachers College Press  
**isbn10 | asin:**  
**print isbn13:** 9780807735435  
**ebook isbn13:** 9780585388489  
**language:** English  
**subject:** Sarason, Seymour Bernard,--1919---Culture of the school and the problem of change, Educational innovations--United States, Educational change--United States, School environment--United States, Education and state--United States, Special education--Law and  
**publication date:** 1996  
**lcc:** LA210.S34 1996eb  
**ddc:** 370.19/3/0973  
**subject:** Sarason, Seymour Bernard,--1919---Culture of the school and the problem of change, Educational innovations--United States, Educational change--United States, School environment--United States, Education and state--United States, Special education--Law and

## **REVISITING “The Culture of The School and The Problem of Change”**

Seymour B. Sarason



Teachers College • Columbia University  
New York and London

Published by Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10027

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Sarason, Seymour Bernard, 1919

Revisiting "The culture of the school and the problem of change" /

Seymour B. Sarason.

p. cm. — (The series on school reform)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Printed on acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

03 02 01 00 99 98 97 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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## **Foreword**

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First published in 1971, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* raised complicated and critical ideas in terms that were both insightful and accessible. Describing the importance of “behavioral and programmatic regularities” to defining a school culture, Seymour Sarason related these concepts to understanding the organization of a school and the attachments that school people have to their ways of working. His compelling argument—that both of these complex realities must be changed if real improvement is to take place—was radical at the time, and still is. Since then, as innovations of all kinds have been constantly pressed on schools, Sarason's book has helped us to understand some essentials: that schools are complicated places; that principals are isolated and often lonely in their positions; that teachers responsible for student learning often have little time to learn new ideas; and that innovative ideas must be worked on through the whole system of relationships and ways of working if they are to be effective in changing teacher and student practice. An immediate classic, the book taught a generation of educators that changing a school culture is tough work and must be done in a comprehensive way if it is to happen and be of any lasting significance.

Sarason has now written a sequel to the original landmark book which is incorporated in this edition as Part II. Describing the contemporary context for school change—where there is literally a struggle to maintain public education as we know it—Sarason deepens his work by attending to several new insights. He uses a 3-year study of school change by Pat Wasley and her colleagues that deals with the struggles of five high schools deeply committed to change, all of them members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a large national network. In all of these schools, teachers and principals try to make real the educational values “personalization” and solid academic work. But, as Sarason reminds us, they must still figure out how to support the learning of adults so that they in turn can facilitate active learning for their students. This school change study is carefully dissected under Sarason's analytic eye, and we learn once again that the “culture”—its regularities, values, practices, and people—is at the core of the problem and the process of change.

The power relationships that exist between principal and teacher and teacher and student—absent from most books about change and improvement—are an important part of this discussion. To change the way their students learn, teachers have to change the way they teach. By relinquishing their total control over students' opportunities to learn, teachers allow students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Easy to say, difficult to do—but necessary if we are to change the culture of the school and classroom.

Placing education within a broader context, Sarason involves us in a discussion of Kenneth Wilson's view that, in the final analysis, systems must create the mechanisms for improving themselves. This discussion provides theoretical support for the current attempts to create self-correcting and self-renewing schools. It expands our thinking and helps us understand what a system is, how it must think about change, and how the system itself must become its own best critic.

The difficulty of understanding schools and the process of improving them makes both a “Visit” and a “Revisit” to *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* an important

part of our learning, and an indispensable part of thinking about this most vexing and vital institution.

*Ann Lieberman, co-editor  
the series on school reform*

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## ***Preface to the Revisit***

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The payoff for a writer is when what he or she wrote has staying power. Frankly, the staying power of my book is of a degree that surprises as much as gratifies me. Consequently, when Teachers College Press offered me the opportunity to “revisit” the issues contained in the book, I jumped at it. There were several reasons, but at this point I wish only to mention one of them.

When we use the word *crisis* we ordinarily mean a point in time when a dangerous situation contains conflicting forces of an intensity or seriousness that in near term will be dramatically altered depending on which forces win out. If one force wins out, the other will view it as a disaster. The one that “wins,” of course, will feel otherwise. Social crises are a kind of turning point and only future historians will tell us whether the turn was for good or for bad.

When I wrote the book a quarter of a century ago, I did not regard our schools as in crisis. They were in trouble, deep trouble, but there was no reason to believe that their basic characteristics, let alone their existence, would be changed. The fact is that the thrust of the book *implied* that if the reform movement proceeded as it was, there would be a crisis sometime in the future. What I did not say in the book was that my intuition, my very personal opinion, was that a crisis would come sooner rather than later. It has, in my opinion, come.

Why did I feel that way? The brief answer is that for many reasons I had concluded that what happens in our cities and their schools will determine the fate of our society. Today I am convinced of that. There is a crisis. The competing forces in the reform arena are gaining strength, especially those who for diverse reasons would not be sorry to see the dismantling of the public school system. With the best of intentions those who seek to preserve the nation's schools do not, with a few exceptions, focus on what I consider to be the root problems. And by root I mean those few issues or problems which, if they do not become recognized, accepted, and a goal for action, rule out hope for improving our schools.

It is that sense of urgency that made it easy for me to seize the opportunity to revisit the arena of educational change. And it was that sense of urgency that, after thinking that I had finished the revisiting, caused me to write a postscript. I do not want to be seen as a total pessimist, a prophet of doom and gloom. As I shall indicate, there are some signs that the root problems are being recognized. I cannot judge whether those signs will gain the kind of currency that is necessary for a general impact to occur. In any event, I have said it the way I think it. This is no time to be reticent or circumspect or indirect. The stakes are too high. If anything has changed since I wrote the book 25 years ago, it is the degree of disappointment and

disillusionment in regard to reform experienced by the public at large as well as in the educational community where public statements are at variance with private opinion.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful to a dear friend, Ann Lieberman, for encouraging me to revisit, and to Carole Saltz who is as good a person as she is a chief editor. As usual, Lisa Pagliaro graciously suffered my handwriting and other peculiarities.

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### ***Preface to the Second Edition***

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I was, of course, extremely grateful for the very positive reception of the first edition of this book. I am not indulging undue modesty when I say that the reception was more positive than my own judgment of the book. As I point out later, the culture of the school is too differentiated and complex, available knowledge and viewpoints too variegated, to be encompassed by one person. And when, in addition, one sets out to see that culture from the standpoint of efforts to change it, the difficulty of the task can overwhelm you to the point where you give up and look for more manageable problems to study and understand. But I have been directly involved with schools since 1942 and my interest in and concern for our schools were too strong to permit me to ignore what I came to see I had to do, however incomplete my effort would have to be. My experience forced on me the fact that there are no better ways to comprehend the culture of the school than either by looking at how it responds to pressures for change or how it responds to someone who is trying to be helpful to people within it. I have been in both roles and that undoubtedly influenced much that is this book. Those who have been in different roles inevitably will see things somewhat differently, but, as the published and personal response to the first edition indicates, there is an encouraging degree of overlap or agreement between their conclusions and mine.

I was quite aware when I completed the first edition that a set of problems with which I have long been associated, problems that later became crucially important in the educational setting, were deliberately excluded by me. I refer to mental retardation in particular, and handicapped children in general. I excluded these problems for two related reasons. For one thing, I was very sensitive to the possibility that the book would be read as an unsympathetic criticism of schools, a reading that was quite the opposite of what I intended. But it was obvious that there was little in the book that could serve as a basis for an optimistic view of schools' future. Now, in regard to mental retardation I have always had strong feelings, i.e., I was a partisan for retarded people and their teachers, both of whom were segregated, second- to third-class citizens in the school culture. If I included this set of problems in the first edition, I was not sure that I could be dispassionate because I had long felt that these aspects of the school culture contained morally reprehensible features. Besides, when the book was written in 1969–1970, I would have talked about special classes (which were on the rise) and their encapsulated, alien status in most schools. Then I would have gone into the legal-moral basis for special classes because I predicted then that the 1954 desegregation decision would some day serve as the basis for challenging special classes. But, I asked myself, would the reader understand? Would it appear as if I was critical and perhaps even nihilistic? Would the space I would have to devote to these problems appear as unexplainably disproportionate to their significance? So, I said little or nothing. A decade later it is a different ballgame and that is reflected in this second edition. Needless to say, I regret that early judgment because if that

first edition had spoken to the issues of handicapped children, it might have been more edifying than it was.

There was one other set of problems that suffered the same fate in the first edition and which occupies many pages in this edition. I refer to the increasing role of the federal government in seeking to improve and change the public schools. When I was writing the first edition, no one within the schools, and few from without, questioned the federal government's role, style, impact, and ultimate success. I saw the governmental effort as well intentioned and, to put it mildly, misguided. My perception did not stem from a matter of principle, but from my observations of government supported programs and from my experience as a consultant to government agencies. Here, too, if I included my conclusions I feared I would be seen as a gloomy pessimist. This was before the evaluations of these programs were initiated or published and so it was my personal experience versus scant empirical evidence. I take no satisfaction in having predicted the major conclusions of those evaluations.

At the time this book was finished the winds of policy change seemed to be changing directions, shifting from Washington to the state capitals. I say "seemed" because it is by no means clear the extent to which the federal role will become a minor factor in American education. But even if that were to happen, every issue that has cropped up in relation to federal efforts at educational change will reappear if and when state departments of education become powerful in matters of policy. On the stage and behind the scenes mammoth struggles are going on that have more to do with power than with substantive educational issues. This is not to say that these power struggles are unimportant and will have no influence on how substantive issues will be posed and implemented, but rather that we tend to confuse changes in power with changes in substance. It would be more correct to say that we have the tendency to *hope* that changes in power automatically lead to meaningful changes in the substance and understanding of issues. There is one other factor that makes predictions about the pace and direction of change a risky affair. I refer to the fact that court decisions have been the most potent factors in bringing about changes in educational policy, and that fact may well continue to be true in coming decades.

Perhaps the wisest thing I ever said was that two major problems in life are parking and secretaries and that if we could not deal effectively with them, we should not be optimistic about the outcomes of our efforts with other problems that beset us, e.g., poverty, loneliness, war, discrimination. Fortunately, this second edition was started when Marlene Twarowski became my secretary and it would not have been completed without her. The truth is that when I saw what a sterling human being she was I knew the second edition had better be written while she was on the scene. That was one of my wiser decisions because the book was finished only days before she left on maternity leave.

I am also grateful to Carl Milofsky (sociologist), Richard Murnane (economist), and Edward Pauly (political scientist) who, housed with me in Yale's Institute for Social and Policy Studies, shared with me, and allowed me to share with them, our deep interest and involvement in public education. I have indeed been fortunate in being able to experience meaningful interdisciplinary collegiality. I am grateful to Yale's Institute for Social and Policy Studies for making this possible.