

# How to Improve Professional Practice

Katherine C. Boles and Vivian Troen

Elevating teachers from isolated assembly-line workers to collaborative professionals requires a major change in today's school culture.

For more than 30 years, we have been studying just about every idea for improving professional practice and what we can confidently predict is this: No education reform is ever going to be long-lasting unless it becomes institutionalized, and none is going to become institutionalized until we first change the culture of schools and schooling.

## The Impact of School Culture

Public education as we know it was developed in the middle of the 19th century, based on an industrial model incorporating the best management methods of the times (Tyack, 1995). In this model, teachers are assembly-line workers, adding value to their product before they pass it on to the next worker on the line. All workers must be interchangeable, and each must work alone (even while giving the appearance of working in a team) at his or her workstation. Isolation and egalitarianism combine powerfully to perpetuate a culture that, in the long run, defeats all reform initiatives.

## Attempts to Improve Practice

To understand how deeply embedded are the chronic obstacles to long-term success, we need only evaluate critically a few of the most popular education reforms.

**Team Teaching.** In the late 1960s and early 1970s, teachers were supposed to teach in teams. But team teaching quickly became “You teach social stud-

ies, I'll do English, then we'll meet once a week (maybe) to see how we're doing.” Teaming regressed to parallel play—what small children do in the same sandbox, each building his or her sand structure without collaboration. Now team teaching is back in vogue and six models have been identified by Maroney (1995) and Robinson and Schaible (1995):

- In the *traditional* model, co-teachers actively share the instruction of content and skills to all students;
- In a more *collaborative* model, teachers work together by exchanging and discussing ideas and theories in front of the learners;
- The *complementary* model has one teacher responsible for teaching the content to the students, while the other provides follow-up activities;
- With *parallel instruction*, a class is divided into two groups and each teacher is responsible for teaching the same material to a smaller group;
- *Differentiated, split-class* teaching involves dividing the class into small groups according to learning needs; and

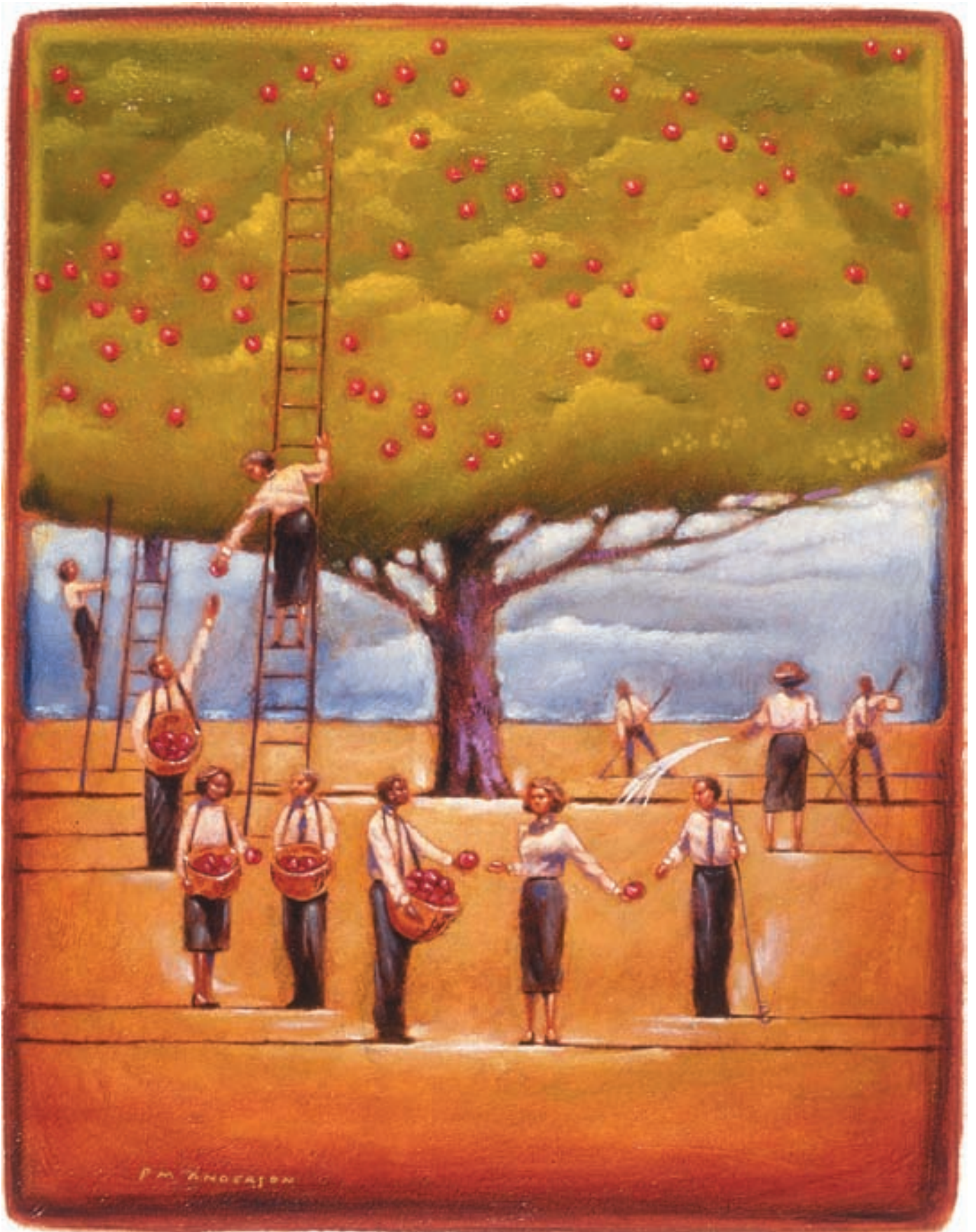
## IN BRIEF

The authors examine how a public school culture that has resisted a number of promising reform initiatives could be transformed by a Millennium School model based on four basic principles: a multitiered career path for teachers; teaching in teams; performance-based accountability; and ongoing professional development.

- The *monitoring teacher* model has one teacher assuming responsibility for instructing the entire class, while the other monitors student understanding and behavior.

While each of these models has merit, they all run the danger of turning into variations of parallel play. Since the teachers rarely observe each other or work together collaboratively, the improvements in practice that should accompany teaming rarely occur.

**Mentoring.** Another strategy understood to be an effective tool in supporting teachers and improving practice is mentoring. But just having a mentoring program doesn't guarantee its effectiveness. Extensive research (Kardos *et al.*, 2001) reveals that in many mentoring programs, mentors aren't given adequate training, supervision, or support; are not paid or otherwise rewarded for their efforts; and are not given regular times built into the



# The Millennium School Career Ladder

school schedule to meet with their mentees.

**Professional Development.** Most professional development as currently practiced is a mixed bag of assorted schemes intended to “fix” a teacher’s inadequate knowledge or skills; implement a new curriculum or methodology; accelerate a raise in pay through accrued academic credits; or fulfill state-mandated requirements.

**Merit Pay.** The idea of merit pay, sometimes called pay for performance, was born in England around 1710 (Wilms & Chapleau, 1999). Teachers’ salaries were based on their students’ test scores on examinations in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Today, merit pay continues to exist in many forms, including bonuses for student achievement gains, satisfactory evaluations by principals or committees, acquisition of new skills or knowledge, and serving in hard-to-staff schools. We’ve looked at dozens of such plans and none of them has ever had a successful track record. Any gains have been minimal, short-lived, and costly (Troen & Boles, 2005).

**Career Ladders.** Career ladders, like models of team teaching, come in several shapes. The National Association of State Boards of Education (2005) has identified four current models:

- *Performance-based ladders* are designed to compensate teachers for increasing levels of competence;
- *Job-enlargement ladders* provide opportunities for teachers to participate in certain professional activities outside the classroom;
- *Professional development ladders* provide compensation for acquiring academic credits, engaging in staff development activities, and obtaining advanced degrees or National Board certification; and
- *Paraprofessional advancement ladders*, which support the transition of paraprofessionals into fully licensed teachers, are typically aimed at ameliorating teacher shortages in hard-to-staff schools and in subjects such as bilingual or special education.

**Chief instructors** supervise teams comprising of professional teachers, teachers, associate teachers, interns, and instructional aides. The chief instructor’s license is gained only after several years’ experience as a professional teacher, plus intensive study, and represents the highest grade in pay and the highest level of achievement in the teaching profession. A chief instructor must be an expert in content, curriculum development, student learning, and assessment, and must demonstrate the ability to translate relevant and proven research into practice.

**Professional teachers** are fully licensed, experienced, and highly qualified classroom teachers with master’s degrees and several years of experience. Their responsibilities include classroom teaching with one or more of the following options: supervising interns, mentoring associate teachers, and engaging in teacher research and/or curriculum development.

**Teachers** attain their licenses after two years of teaching experience, plus a master’s degree and a work portfolio of videotaped lessons, written evaluations, and samples of student work. Teachers may remain at this career level or prepare to become professional teachers.

**Associate teachers** are novices who must undergo an intensive two-year induction. They teach classes only part of the week while receiving constant supervision and mentoring. At the end of two years, they will become fully licensed and qualified to advance to the level of teacher.

**Teaching interns** are graduate or undergraduate students who work full time in classrooms as part of a degree-granting program with a nearby university. Their responsibilities include classroom teaching under the close supervision of professional teachers.

**Instructional aides** assume a number of support responsibilities during the school day, leading small groups, supervising children during lunch and recess, and providing curricular support for children and clerical assistance for teachers.

These kinds of career ladders are not designed to increase and measure teachers’ knowledge and skills. There can be no real career ladder in a school environment where “all teachers are equal” is the cultural norm.

**Teacher Certification.** The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) offers a rigorous program to certify that a teacher has attained a certain level of professional achievement. But it is purely optional and only about 1 percent of teachers in the United States have been NBPTS-certified.

## The Millennium School

Institutionalizing professional practice depends on changing school culture, which in turn depends on reinventing the job of teaching—transforming it into an open, collaborative culture that fosters excellence and accountability. Our proposal for accomplishing this is to adopt a model we call a Millennium School.

A Millennium School would restructure the school’s organization, giving teachers professional roles that would enrich their careers and eliminate the inefficient and long-outdated factory structure of schools.


How could this be accomplished? The first task is to create a career ladder with new jobs and responsibilities for teachers—a multitiered structure in which different teachers have different job descriptions and responsibilities (see box). In a Millennium School, the principal supervises a cadre of perhaps four chief instructors, depending on the size of the school. Each chief instructor, in turn, supervises and is responsible for the performance of perhaps two teams, each comprising professional teachers, teachers, associate teachers, teaching interns, and instructional aides.

Under the leadership of a principal schooled in this new form of power sharing, true teamwork and collaboration lead to shared decision-making and the improvement of individual

practice. Mentoring, supervision, and professional development are no longer add-ons but integral components of a teaching career, and a clearly defined career path provides tangible rewards for accomplishment and professional recognition.

There are 14,000 public school districts in the United States, and it is unrealistic to suggest that any one model could perfectly suit the needs of every one of them. However, there are four basic concepts underlying a Millennium School, all of which could be applied to any elementary school in the country:

- A multitiered career path for teachers;
- Teaching in teams instead of in isolation;
- Integrated, performance-based accountability; and
- Ongoing professional development for all teachers and principals.

Successful implementation of these concepts would require a major adjustment in attitudes and expectations—and the willingness to look beyond current perceptions of what is required to improve professional practice. 

**Katherine C. Boles** is a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her e-mail address is [katherine\\_boles@harvard.edu](mailto:katherine_boles@harvard.edu).

**Vivian Troen** is a lecturer at Brandeis University. Her e-mail address is [vtroen@brandeis.edu](mailto:vtroen@brandeis.edu).

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### WEB RESOURCES

Trilemma Solutions, established by authors Katherine C. Boles and Vivian Troen, provides consulting services focused on teacher improvement. [www.trilemmasolutions.com](http://www.trilemmasolutions.com)

Teachers Net provides the online text of "We're Still Leaving the Teachers Behind," by Katherine C. Boles and Vivian Troen. <http://teachers.net/gazette/APR03/troenboles.html>

The Harvard Graduate School of Education has posted an interview with Katherine C. Boles and Vivian Troen in which they discuss their book, *Why the Teacher Crisis Is Worse Than You Think and What Can Be Done About It*. [www.gse.harvard.edu/news/features/boles06012003.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/features/boles06012003.html)

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provides a sample career ladder plan for the state's school districts. <http://dese.mo.gov/divteachqual/careerladder>



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