Review: Transformation in Perspective: Lawrence Cremin's Transformation of the School

Reviewed Work(s): Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Literature, 1876-1957 by Lawrence Cremin

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Retrospective

Transformation in Perspective: Lawrence Cremin's *Transformation of the School*

John L. Rury

Author's note: This essay, intended to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Transformation of the School* (New York, 1961), was nearly complete when news came of Lawrence Cremin's sudden, tragic death in early September 1990. I had written it in the present tense, as though Cremin were alive, and for that matter, as though *Transformation* represented his current views. I can see no good reason for changing it. For many—perhaps most—historians of education, Lawrence Cremin will continue to represent a vital intellectual force for years to come. I prefer to let this review stand in its original form as a tribute to the enduring quality of his contributions to our field.

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Perhaps the best way to convey the importance of a book such as Lawrence Cremin's *Transformation of the School* is to open with a personal recollection. I first read *Transformation* some eighteen years ago, as an undergraduate in a course on American intellectual history. Like countless other students, I found it at once informative, provocative, and inspirational. It opened a whole world of educational thought and practice to me, and offered a compelling framework for interpreting the development of American education in the twentieth century. In certain respects it represented a starting point for my career as a historian of education. It was, of course, one of the very first books I read in American educational history, but it was more than that. Cremin depicted educational history as exciting and meaningful, and as possibly even providing answers to contemporary dilemmas in education. In this regard it pre-

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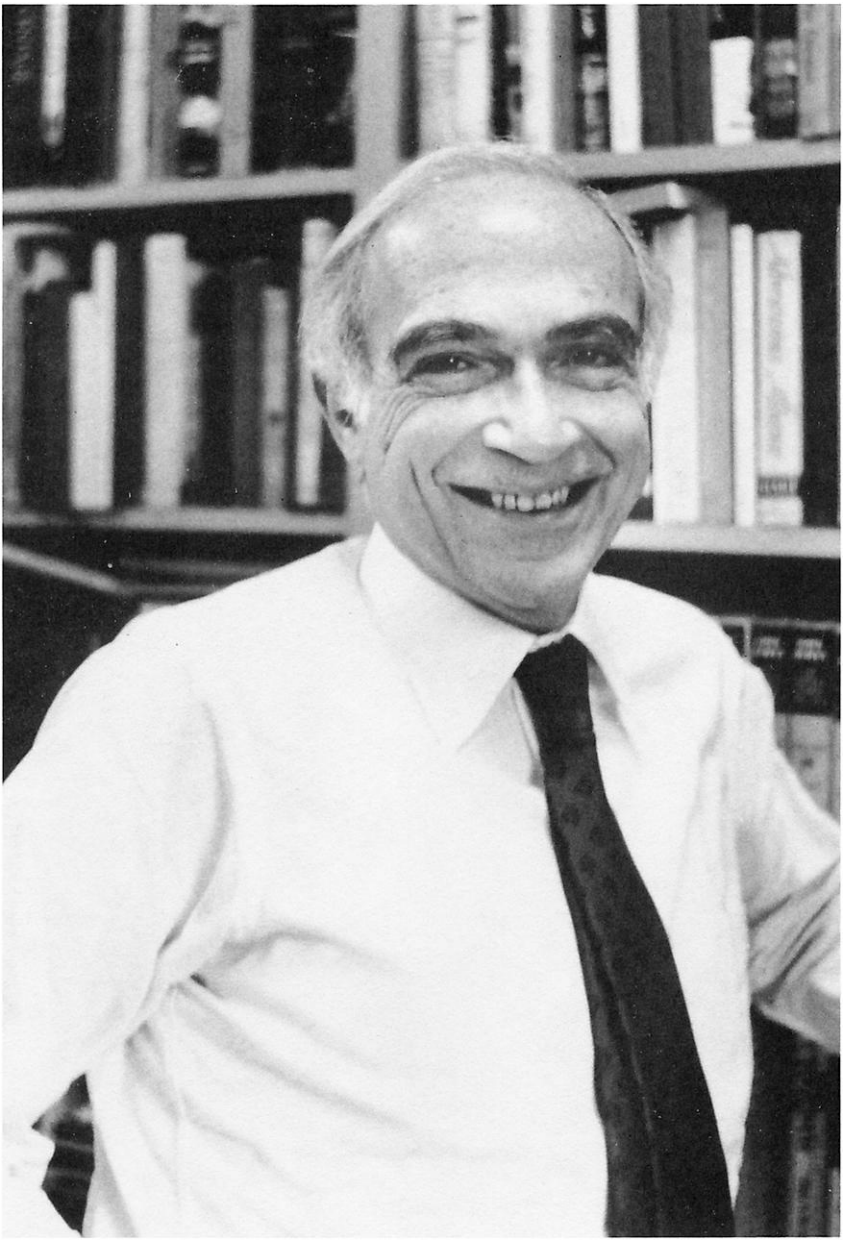

Lawrence A. Cremin

sented a new view of history, one which seemed to make the historian a party to the process of policy formation. It also extended a palpable vision of education as a humane and profoundly democratic enterprise, a full decade before Charles Silberman and others made such ideas briefly fashionable once again. In these respects Cremin's book was more than historical narrative—at least to my thinking at the time. It was also a call to action.

It is difficult to think of another book that has exerted as much influence on the field of educational history as *Transformation of the School*. While other historians may have initiated certain schools of interpretation (Bernard Bailyn and Michael Katz are often mentioned in this connection), few books have been as widely read both inside and outside of professional history of education circles as Cremin's *Transformation*.[1] In many respects its publication some thirty years ago signaled the beginning of the current period in the field, a time marked by a distinctively critical perspective on the development of public education in the United States. It was published immediately after Bailyn's prescriptive essay on colonial education (*Education in the Forming of American Society*), and just in time to influence a new generation of educational historians then finishing graduate school or beginning their professional careers. It has influenced succeeding generations of historians in the decades hence. *Transformation of the School*, in that case, represents an important factor in the recent history of our field. Indeed, a retrospective review of such a book tells us much about the direction of the historical study of education in the past three decades.

At the time of its publication *Transformation* offered what must have seemed a profound revision of American educational history. Although Lawrence Cremin is not often viewed as a critic of American education today (at least not in comparison to certain other historians), *Transformation of the School* presents a telling critique of educational practice, particularly in the years following World War II, and an indictment of the very movement it chronicles. In 1961 this represented a sharp break with the laudatory historiography of Ellwood Cubberley and his contemporaries, and opened new vistas of interpretation to historians of American education. As Cremin himself later noted in his essay on Cubberley, the development of public schooling in the United States was not a matter of continued improvement with growth. There was a good deal more to the story, including considerable diversity of opinion on

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[1] For acknowledgment of the influence of Bailyn and Katz, see B. Edward McClellan and William J. Reese, *The Social History of American Education* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), vii–ix.

key issues and even conflict over matters of policy. In his own highly interpretive and largely historiographical work on colonial education, Bernard Bailyn had suggested that the history of education could be an exciting field of study. Cremin, however, demonstrated how this could be done—with progressivism and twentieth-century American education as his subjects. With this, he breathed new life into the study of American educational history, and perhaps helped set the stage for the vigorous debates that marked the field in subsequent decades.[2]

Transformation of the School was widely acclaimed at the time of its appearance, by historians as well as the professional education community. It was awarded the Bancroft Prize, giving it added distinction in the eyes of academic historians. It was no accident, consequently, that I first encountered it in an advanced history course. The book's appearance did much to make educational history a credible subfield of American history, and one open to new research and interpretation. And because it was relatively well known among both academic historians and members of education faculties, *Transformation* was widely read by students both in and out of colleges of education. Exposure to such an impressionable audience, of course, magnifies the impact of any work, and this alone may account for much of the book's influence. Michael Katz has reported that his first encounter with *Transformation* suggested that educational history was both a potentially exciting and an intellectually "respectable" field to pursue. Other historians have informally described having had the same experience. Like me, for many such students it represented a key moment in their decision to enter the field.[3]

There is more to the impact of *Transformation* than accessibility and visibility, however. Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the quality of its narrative exposition. Simply put, Cremin is an excellent storyteller. He writes with unusual grace and eloquence, qualities appreciated by professional and lay readers alike (not to mention undergraduates). Of course, this is yet another aspect of the book's accessibility. It is fun to read, and its story line is so compelling that it is often difficult to put down.

The story Cremin tells is exciting, beginning with the efforts of Joseph Mayer Rice and other early educational reformers, extending

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[2] For Cremin's views on Cubberley, see Lawrence Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education* (New York, 1965). Also see Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the Formation of American Society* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1960).

[3] See Michael Katz's comments in a forum, titled "The Metropolitan Experience in American Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 29 (Fall 1989): 426–27. This view has been echoed by more than a half dozen other educational historians in personal conversations over the past two months.

through the exploits of George Counts and his contemporaries, and on to the rise of life-adjustment education and the demise of the Progressive Education Association. The account is sprinkled liberally with interesting sketches of important people and their ideas, often revealing an interlocking directorate of progressive educators which developed in the early days of the movement. The implied goal of these pioneers is a virtual revolution in American education, to sweep away the lifeless, stultifying, corrupt, and backward qualities of American schools and replace them with humane, democratic, and scientific principles of education. Cremin paints in broad strokes, evoking images of Rice, Francis Parker, Calvin Woodward, John Dewey, Jane Addams, and a host of other progressive reformers working "ceaselessly" to change the schools. The very force of the narrative creates an impression of general movement in American education at the time, a movement marked by experimentation and commitment to reform. Indeed, because the reformers are presented in such glowing terms (Cremin, for instance, offers the image of a Christ-like Francis Parker blessing the children in his school), it is difficult not to identify with them.[4]

Cremin balances his portraits with criticism of progressive reformers, of course, but the thrust of his narrative is overwhelmingly partisan. The progressives are clearly heroes in this account. Cremin depicts progressive reform in education as essentially compassionate and democratic (qualities beyond reproach to most Americans), and he goes to great lengths to present examples of educational reform which embody them. The result is a somewhat intimate history of progressive thinking about education, and a series of examples (some rather detailed) of how such ideas found expression in practice. The cumulative effect of this—and a fundamental strength of the book—is that Cremin delivers something of the *feeling* of progressivism for his reader. It is history with a clear set of values, and for readers who agree with its humane morality (as most clearly should) it is downright invigorating.

The impact of such history lies in its power to yield insight into the sentiments and sociocultural factors that motivated progressive reformers in the past. But along the way Cremin also presents an enormous amount of information about the development of American educational thought. Besides the progressive reformers who occupy center stage, attention is given to a wide range of other figures as well, from Horace Mann and William Torrey Harris to Arthur Bestor. The book thus offers a broad frame of reference for interpreting the development of American edu-

[4] For the account of Parker, see Lawrence Cremin, *Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York, 1961), 132.

cation from the Civil War to the sixties, no small feat for a volume on progressivism. And it does this in a way that engages the reader with basic questions in what used to be called educational theory: should schools be child-centered? what should a democratic curriculum entail? how can schools foster individual growth while remaining socially responsible? These were issues debated by progressive reformers, but they are perennial questions in education as well. For this reason, Cremin's *Transformation* remains an excellent text for students of educational history and philosophy. Its partisan and evocative analysis of progressive ideas continues to instill excitement. The intervening thirty years have done little to diminish the book's importance—or the relevance of its arguments—in this regard.

Despite the force of Cremin's writing, however, certain elements of his interpretation have not gone undisputed. The appearance of *Transformation of the School* proved an enormous stimulant to interest in progressive educational reform, and in the years that followed a wide range of studies elaborated on themes Cremin had not explored. To a very large extent, the historiographical movement that was eventually labeled revisionism was defined by studies that either implicitly or explicitly challenged certain aspects of his interpretation.

Perhaps the central point of contention is Cremin's characterization of progressivism as a fundamentally humane and democratic impulse in educational reform. As a number of critics have noted, throughout *Transformation*, educators with a wide diversity of views—some of them in stark conflict—are lumped together under the banner of progressivism. G. Stanley Hall and Edward Thorndike are depicted as part of the same general movement as John Dewey and Jane Addams. Other historians have argued that progressivism was a complex and contradictory movement (characterizations Cremin himself uses), and that progressive reformers can be divided into at least two general categories: conservative (sometimes called "administrative") and liberal (or "pedagogical") progressives—distinctions that Cremin does not make. Liberal progressives, such as Dewey, Addams, and perhaps such later figures as George Counts, did indeed represent the sort of democratic and benevolent sentiments Cremin associated with progressivism. But other progressives were preoccupied with applying scientific principles to education (often rigidly), devising new ways of classifying and measuring students' abilities, and designing curricula to meet presumed social needs. Revisionist historians have argued that impulses such as these were not democratic, and hardly accommodated schools to the needs and interests of children. Rather, these reforms constituted a starting point for many of the most troubling developments in twentieth-century education: the development of large-scale administrative bureaucracies, ability grouping and other forms of

"tracking," and standardized testing. As historians would have it today, the legacy of progressivism is a mixed one, in that case, and certainly not the unmitigated commitment to equity and humanitarianism suggested by Cremin.[5]

Thirty years of historical scholarship have exposed yet other facets of progressivism left unexamined by Cremin. The book, for instance, contains very little discussion of black education. This is no small oversight, for black Americans were profoundly affected by progressive reforms in education. Of particular importance was the manual-industrial education movement, which came to dominate black schools in the opening decades of the twentieth century under the influence of Booker T. Washington. Blacks also contributed to the development of educational thinking, although admittedly most of their writings were focused on problems in black education. Washington and his arch-rival W. E. B. Du Bois generated a large body of educational writings over the years of their many disagreements, and Washington and other black educators conducted a wide range of experiments in alternative education. Cremin does note the interest that many white progressives displayed in southern education, but fails to consider how black education was affected by such attention. As James Anderson and others have made clear, northern philanthropies—themselves influenced by progressive educational ideas—exerted a telling influence on the development of black schooling in this period. Similarly, Cremin notes the importance of the Army IQ test in 1917, but fails to discuss what may have been its most important and insidious long-term effect: the suggestion that blacks were somehow naturally less intelligent than other groups (he also neglects to mention how test results affected thinking about immigrants and other groups). Progressivism left a peculiarly ambiguous legacy for black Americans, one which historians and other scholars still debate today. Cremin's failure to consider these questions in *Transformation* represents a major shortcoming of the book.[6]

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[5] For an excellent overview of the literature on progressive education, see Jeffrey E. Mirel, "Progressive School Reform in Comparative Perspective," in *Southern Cities, Southern Schools: Public Education in the Urban South*, ed. David N. Plank and Rick Ginsberg (New York, 1990), 151–74. For the revisionist perspective, see Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston, 1972); Clarence Karier, Paul Violas, and Joel Spring, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1973); and David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

Interestingly, there is evidence that Cremin was aware of this perspective when writing *Transformation*. In a footnote on page 158, he cites the work of Raymond Callahan, whose interpretation anticipated many of the studies of this period eventually labeled "revisionist."

[6] There is an extensive literature on these issues today. For a recent overview see Ronald

The absence of references to black education is only the most glaring set of omissions in *Transformation*. Other historically excluded social groups get little mention in the book as well. There are few references to how the reform efforts of progressives actually affected the schooling of such groups, a major issue among educational historians in recent years. While many women populate its pages (most of them educators), *Transformation* devotes little attention to the question of gender in education and ways in which women were affected by changes in educational policy. Likewise, immigrants are discussed principally in connection with Jane Addams's work at Hull House (and by implication at other settlements), but not in light of the work of Thorndike and other progressives who contributed to racialist policies of separation in education which may have discriminated against aliens. Progressivism, Cremin seems to suggest, was generally benign in its effect on such groups, but more recent historical scholarship has suggested that this was not entirely the case.[7]

Part of the problem, of course, is that Cremin was not writing social history in *Transformation*. Rather, the book stands as an outstanding example of what Daniel Rodgers has called "middle brow" intellectual history. Above all else, *Transformation of the School* is a history of ideas, and particularly the ideas of a rather narrow group of influential educational thinkers. Beyond this, it is also a history of certain educational practices, but the story always comes back to the ideas that informed them (indeed, Cremin's discussion of various experiments often seems

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Butchart, "'Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World': A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 28 (Fall 1988): 333–66. For particular studies see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1989); Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901* (New York, 1972); Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (New York, 1983); and Vincent Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of a Minority Community, 1900–1950* (Philadelphia, 1979). There was a substantial literature on these questions at the time that Cremin wrote *Transformation* as well. See Horace Mann Bond, *The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order* (New York, 1934); and Louis Harlan, *Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901–1915* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1958). On the 1917 Army IQ test, see Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), 192–233; or my own article, "Race, Region, and Education: An Analysis of Black-White Differences on the 1917 Army IQ Test," *Journal of Negro Education* 57 (Winter 1988): 51–65.

[7] On the impact of progressivism on women, see Jane Bernard Powers, "The Girl Question in Education: Vocational Training for Young Women in the Progressive Era" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1987); or John L. Rury, *Education and Women's Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870–1930* (Albany, forthcoming 1991). A recent assessment of the impact of progressive reform on other groups can be found in Paula Fass, *Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education* (New York, 1989), chs. 1 and 2.

designed to demonstrate how various ideas were expressed in practice). *Transformation*, in that case, is *not* a history of the impact of progressivism on American education, even though Cremin seems to have wanted to address the effects of reform. It is also not a comprehensive social history of American education in the twentieth century. Although such a history remains to be written, in the past several decades educational historians have acquired the tools and expertise to examine how such factors as ethnicity, social class, and gender have shaped educational experience. Attention has also been given to ways in which more general forces of social and economic development have shaped educational policy and practice. Evidence from recent studies suggests that progressive educational ideas and practices did not develop the same way in all areas of the country; nor did they affect all social groups equally. Cremin did not give much attention to issues such as these.[8]

In the later chapters of *Transformation* Cremin narrows his focus to the institutionalized expression of progressive education, the Progressive Education Association (PEA). He seems to suggest that the PEA's ultimate demise was largely the result of the organization's own lack of vision and imagination, a shortcoming that undoubtedly contributed to its dissolution. But he does not appear to have considered the alternative proposition that the impact of progressivism may have been limited to start with, and that it simply grew less popular after the twenties. Larry Cuban has suggested that progressive ideas about teaching made little impact in urban classrooms, and that teachers mainly taught the same way they were taught themselves. As many students of teaching have observed, innovation in instruction is especially difficult because most teachers model their behavior on the teachers they themselves have had.[9] Relatively few teachers, in that case, appear to have adopted the many instructional and curricular innovations described in *Transformation*. While it is true that such progressive reforms as standardized testing and vocational training became widespread, these features of the educational system did not represent the humane and democratic impulses that Cremin identified with progressive education. In his summary of progressivism's impact on the schools, Cremin offers little concrete evidence

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[8] Perhaps the best recent examples of this sort of research are Joel Perlmann, *Ethnic Differences: Schooling and Social Structure among the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Blacks in an American City, 1880–1935* (New York, 1988); and Reed Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (New York, 1987). On regional differences, see Rury, *Education and Women's Work*.

[9] Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980* (New York, 1984), conclusion. In the closing chapters of the book Cremin also seems to accept many of the criticisms of progressivism leveled by Arthur Bestor and other critics in the fifties.

of the extent to which particular reforms actually had been adopted. Indeed, nowhere in the book does he squarely address the question of just how widespread progressive educational reform became in the twentieth century. As a consequence, Cremin's ability to analyze reasons for the ultimate collapse of progressivism and a coherent movement is limited to a discussion of ideas voiced by its leading proponents and critics. In light of advances in historical explanation over the past several decades, this is hardly a fully satisfying account of such a monumental change.

In the end, the value of Cremin's work does not lie in its analytical strength. Unlike Richard Hofstadter, Robert Wiebe, or Robert Crunden, he has no general theory to explain progressivism or even to account for its sudden rise at around the turn of the century.[10] Instead, he simply tells the story in terms that are often unforgettable. This is no small accomplishment, and is a large part of what makes *Transformation* continue to stand today as a classic of historical exposition.

Of course, it is easy to criticize Cremin (or anyone else for that matter) for the book he did *not* write, particularly from the vantage point of some thirty years. The foregoing points notwithstanding, *Transformation* continues to represent a major contribution to our fund of historical knowledge. Its critiques of educational practice in the latter nineteenth century and the 1950s remain pointed and compelling thirty years later. Cremin's sketches of educational leaders, their ideas and experiments are stimulating and informative. He addresses timeless issues in education, at times with an almost lyrical quality of composition. Given the broad range of issues, personalities, and events covered in the book, along with its stirring style of presentation, it remains a tour de force. Three decades after its publication, *Transformation* is still an indispensable piece of any educational historian's library.

Transformation of the School stands today as a unique, partisan history of pedagogical progressivism, holding up the flag of humane innovation in education for readers who share its fundamentally democratic values. The principles of making education relevant to real-life issues, of designing classrooms to be participatory, and of valuing the ideas and interests of learners are influential in many corners of the educational world even today, and for today's progressives Cremin's work provides an important link with the past. The influence of progressive reform in education has enjoyed periodic resurgences, and con-

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[10] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967); and Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889–1920* (New York, 1982).

tinues to live in a variety of manifestations—from the Country-Day Schools in cities across the country, to the Francis Parker School in Chicago, to the alternative college for adults where I work at DePaul, and in the principles of reform in teacher education advocated by the Holmes Group.[11] Progressivism did indeed work a transformation of the schools, but the main thrust of its influence remains sadly confined in the closing decade of the twentieth century. With a little luck, the current reform movement in education will yet embrace certain of its principles. Whenever that happens, *Transformation* will gain new relevance, and perhaps begin to work its magic on a new generation of reformers in education.

Someday a comprehensive account of progressivism in education will be written that eclipses *Transformation of the School* as a general history of the movement. Whoever writes such a history of progressive education, of course, will owe much to Cremin, for he first illuminated the course of liberal reform in twentieth-century American schooling. But regardless of its lasting relevance as a work of scholarship, *Transformation* will continue to stand as a remarkable accomplishment in historical discourse, one that worked a transformation of its own on an entire field of study.

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[11] See the Holmes Group document, *Tomorrow's Schools: Principle for the Design of Professional Development Schools* (East Lansing, Mich., 1990).